

Mech 3541

Chapter 3541: Threat to the Status Quo

Ves expected the MTA to come calling eventually, but not this soon!

He had just started to draft the design for the Fearless Project and already Jovy called him over to the Simile Halifax in order to talk about his work!

Though many people would feel worried or intimidated when being put in this situation, Ves quickly pulled himself together and put on a calm facade.

There were several reasons why Ves did not panic when confronted by this issue.

First, Jovy was a friend and would not deliberately make things difficult. Perhaps he might not be the best person to approach Ves on this matter due to his bias, but perhaps the MTA didn't care too much.

Second, he and Jovy were aligned to the same faction, so Jovy also had a professional reason to bat on his side. Though Ves hadn't interacted much with the Survivalist Faction of the MTA since he became an associate, it should definitely not be staying idle!

Third, the MTA may have developed an expansive set of written and unwritten rules, but its people were anything but united on them. The existence of twelve major factions that each adhered to many different ideologies showed that the governance of the Association was not as absolute as everyone thought!

Fourth, Ves was confident in his own rationale. As long as the MTA was willing to hear him out, he could probably get away with any restrictions the mechers wanted to impose! He had succeeded in persuading Master Willix to give him a break once, which meant the MTA was still susceptible to the human element.

These reasons and more caused Ves to come across as a lot more composed than Jovy thought.

"You seem to be taking this in stride." The MTA Journeyman Mech Designer observed.

"Well, I had a feeling that my work might be controversial among you mechers." Ves shrugged. "It's not that difficult to infer. The MTA does so much to foster the emergence and development of high-ranking mech pilots over the years that it is clear you mechers value them a lot. Though you tolerate the killing of expert pilots in battle, that is because fighting actual battles is the best way to stimulate them into breaking through to higher ranks."

Jovy looked impressed. "You are remarkably aware of one of our Association's standing policies. That is good. I can skip the lengthy background story then. What I cannot comprehend is why you would go through with the Fearless Project knowing that it directly goes against our goals."

"I'm sure you know how much we've suffered at the hands of enemy expert mechs. We even got threatened by an ace mech that was absolutely unbeatable to us. So many of our people have died from these powerful threats that I refuse to stand by any longer. I've already tried this concept out on a smaller scale against the Vulcanites, and that attempt has shown me that it can work. As a mech designer, I feel compelled to translate this concept into a more effective product."

"Yet you do so knowing that our Association may not approve of your work."

Ves smiled at Jovy. "I am a contributor of restricted technology, I am not? As far as I recall, my clan and I have a special dispensation to make use of luminar crystal technology as long as we do not spread it further. Rest assured that I have no intention of spreading this new application of luminar crystal technology to the masses. The Fearless Project will remain exclusive to our clan, which means that it will not threaten the current status quo."

The MTA mech designer shook his head. "That's not good enough, Ves. It's true that you are a contributor of restricted technology. It's also true that we are willing to overlook small issues that will not disrupt the general trend of human society. There are limits to our forbearance, though."

"What's the problem?"

"You." Jovy said. "According to our predictive modeling, as long as you don't fall along the way, you and your Larkinson Clan will likely grow into a major influence on human society. Anyone who reads up on you can make this conclusion. While you and your clan are so insignificant at this time that whatever you do will not make any ripples, what about the future? What if you have advanced to Master while your clan occupies an entire state?"

"I'm sure we can come to a different arrangement. The main reason why I want to realize the Fearless Project is because my personal safety is at stake. Our clan is too new and isn't producing enough expert pilots, let alone ace pilots. I need a stopgap solution that can make up for this shortfall. In the future, our clan will probably have plenty of high-ranking expert pilots in our lineup. We managed to make three masterwork expert mechs, after all, and it's not impossible that we will make more. Once our clan has enough ace pilots, I am more than okay with phasing out the Fearless Project."

Ves thought this was a great argument, but unfortunately it wasn't enough.

"The damage will have already been done by this time!" Jovy grew a little impatient. "The usage of the Fearless Project at any scale will definitely be noticed by many more people! Many of them will question why your Larkinsons are the only ones that are allowed to utilize such an effective anti-expert mech solution."

"So what if people think it's unfair?" Ves frowned. "I'm a contributor of restricted technology! I already handed over a couple of my trade secrets to Master Willix! Don't I deserve a break?"

"Not when doing so has greater implications to human civilization. Some ambitious mech designers and weapon developers might even become inspired by your invention and will seek to create their own anti-expert mech armaments, thereby making such weapons a lot more accessible even if we do our best to prohibit them! Once any useful tech gains momentum, it becomes increasingly more costly for us to block its proliferation. Rather than allowing your new mech and powerful weapon system to build up steam, it is much more efficient to stop you in your tracks right now before your Fearless Project ever sees the light of day."

Ves grew a bit more concerned. Jovy was pushing harder than expected. Whether the MTA mech designer was being lenient or not, it was clear that the Fearless Project had touched a nerve.

He needed to play another card in order to win this game.

"I can understand the need to coddle and protect all of those vulnerable little expert pilots and ace pilots, but do you mechers really think that will help humanity out in the long run? Since I can develop this kind of weaponry, I bet that alien civilizations can do so as well. How will all of those high-ranking mech pilots be prepared to fight against enemies that can effectively negate their strongest defenses?"

"You do make a good point, but there are a lot of mechers who think this is an acceptable tradeoff as long as more high-ranking mech pilots remain alive and well. Whatever shortcomings they possess can easily be addressed through training and education. It is much harder for us to create additional expert pilots when our society has suddenly lost many of them due to alien ambushes."

The implication here was that the MTA would probably become a lot more lenient to Ves if it gained a means to produce a lot more expert pilots.

Ves actually doubted whether the mechers were as helpless on this issue as they appeared on the surface. There was no organization in the galaxy that understood mech pilots more than the MTA. Had they done nothing for four entire centuries?

Of course, it was highly counterproductive to bring up this argument in this conversation. Jovy probably didn't know much due to his youth and the MTA probably wasn't willing to divulge any information on such a sensitive matter.

"Is this truly a stance that the Survivalist Faction supports?" Ves asked in a critical tone. "I can't imagine a group of people who think it is important to guard any threats isn't doing the utmost to prepare ourselves against enemies that are able to employ powers similar to expert pilots. What if our current means are not enough?"

His latest argument finally interrupted Jovy's momentum. The MTA Journeyman slowly crossed his arms.

"I am speaking to you as a representative of the Mech Trade Association rather than an envoy of my faction. It's not appropriate to mix the two together."

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"That's not the point."

"I disagree! Surely you don't want to squash my Fearless Project, right? Surely you and your fellow Survivalists think that humanity is better off if a common mech is able to pose a real threat to the alien equivalent of expert mechs. The survival of the human race must be safeguarded to the highest degree!"

"Not if the CFA can use your invention as well!" Jovy exclaimed. "You aren't thinking this through, Ves! What you said is exactly right, but we don't exist in isolation! Our MTA is constantly competing against the CFA for hegemony of human space. While you probably aren't aware of it, the two organizations have constantly maintained a delicate peace based on many different factors. The invention of a technological weapon that is easily reproducible that could threaten our expert mechs, ace mechs and potentially even our god mechs may be a great boon for humanity, but also poses a serious threat to the continued existence of our Association!"

Ves widened his eyes. This was probably the true reason why Jovy and the MTA became so intractable on this issue!

The Survivalist Faction wished to benefit humanity, but if any initiative also came at the cost of letting the CFA gain the upper hand against the MTA, then that was a serious problem!

He gained a deeper understanding of the Survivalist Faction and how they operated today. It seemed that the mechers of this noble faction wasn't as selfless as he thought.

Of course, Ves also realized that the other MTA factions were even more opposed to the proliferation of heavy luminar crystal weapons. The existence of this weapon directly threatened one of the mech community's trump cards, which meant it certainly damaged the interests of the MTA as a whole!

Ves let out a tired breath as he rubbed his fingers against his face. All of this political nonsense was tiring him out. There were so many different interests that he needed to

take into account that he wondered how real politicians dealt with all of this bickering on a daily basis.

"I understand." Ves said as he took a step back. "We can't have the fleeters gaining supremacy over the supporters of mechs. If a battleship-grade luminar crystal cannon can pose a real threat against a god mech, then the CFA will definitely exploit its advantage. However, are you sure the fleeters haven't already managed to produce such a weapon already?"

Having stayed on a derelict CFA battleship before, Ves already understood that the fleeters were just as keen on research and development as the mechers. None of the Big Two were willing to rest on their laurels and constantly sought to push their technology superiority further.

Considering how much the MTA treated god mechs as a holy grail, there was no way the CFA had ever stopped finding new ways to neutralize powerful mechs!

"I don't know what the CFA is capable of. Perhaps someone else in our Association has a better idea, but I am not privy to that intelligence." Jovy shrugged. "Regardless, we should never make it easy for our rivals to develop effective weapons against us. On that, nearly the entirety of the MTA is in agreement with this principle. I'm sorry Ves, but I truly cannot allow you to proceed any further with the Fearless Project in its current trajectory. Either change its weapon system to one that poses less of a threat against high-ranking mechs, or suspend this design project entirely. Those are the only two choices that I can allow you to make."

"...That's not even a real choice."

Chapter 3542: Persuasive Attempt

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin as he considered everything that Jovy had told him earlier.

He had to admit that he underestimated the consequences of his actions. It turned out that he had not been paying attention to the dynamics between the MTA and CFA!

Sure, the two human organizations nominally belonged to the same side, but in the background they had never stopped competing for power!

The current consensus in the mech industry was that battleships still remained the most powerful and practical weapon platform to ensure humanity's dominance. Their immense scale and ability to mount enormous weapons that could crack entire planets made it easy for the human race to project power in space!

Yet the supporters of mechs still maintained hope that god mechs could break the dominance of destructive battleships one day. If not for the fact that it was insanely

difficult for any individual to advance all the way to god pilot, the MTA wouldn't have to resort to so many means to protect high-ranking mech pilots from premature deaths!

This was the downside to technology. Once a new technological innovation became available, other people tended to get their hands on it, either openly or covertly.

As a race that depended extremely heavily on technology to expand, there were many humans that were always keen to obtain the latest and most effective toys!

What Jovy had conveyed to Ves sounded so reasonable that there was hardly any way to refute it. To the MTA, anything that would give the CFA an advantage was clearly taboo!

The main issue that Ves had to overcome was how easy it would be for the CFA to reproduce luminar crystal weapons en masse. Whether it was alien technology or not, as long as it had enough value, there was no way the fleters would let this little complication prevent them from obtaining an effective solution against high-ranking mechs.

The solution that could give Ves a chance to realize the Fearless Project as intended was to tackle this issue directly.

"What if..." He started. "What if I can modify my heavy luminar crystal rifles so that they are only keyed to a select few Larkinson mech pilots?"

"Any tech can easily be reverse-engineered. It won't work." Jovy retorted.

"Don't be so quick to count me out. I have a few ideas that might bear fruit. If I succeed, will you give me a chance?"

The MTA Journeyman was a bit surprised by how much Ves insisted on pursuing his idea further. Many other mech designers with more respect for the MTA would have long backed off by now. Even if a particular project aligned with their passion, there was no way they would ever think about going against the will of one of the Big Two!

Not so for Ves! He showed a considerable lack of awe towards the MTA. This was both admirable and disturbing. If not for their friendship, he would have earned a rebuke for his continued attempts to fight against the MTA's rules.

"I don't think you can persuade anyone in the MTA to give you a chance." Jovy honestly said. "Even if you succeed, there are always loopholes that neither of us can think about. It only takes one ingenious person to unravel even the most perfect security measures."

Ves wasn't so sure about that. He had already hatched a few schemes such as making key luminar crystals alive and keying them to specific mechs and mech pilots.

When a weapon gained enough consciousness and control to be able to choose its own wielder, then there was little the CFA could do! For all of its emphasis on reproducible technology, if the mechers failed to figure out his living mechs, then the fleeters shouldn't be any closer!

The problem was that the MTA was so busy with many other priorities that it didn't seem like Ves could even get his foot in the door!

"Is the MTA so bureaucratic that no one with sufficient authority can hear me out, Jovy?"

"Maybe you'll have a better chance if you are willing to exchange 100 million MTA merits to make your case."

100 million MTA merits! The mechers might as well rob all of the capital ships of the Larkinson Clan right away if they were that greedy!

Still, the way Jovy expressed the lack of personal interest in this matter gave Ves another idea.

Since it worked with Master Willix, why not try it out on Jovy?

He cleared his throat. "Mr. Armalon, I may have an interesting proposition to you that might persuade you to change your mind."

Jovy began to look upset. "Just stop it, Ves. Don't do anything you'll regret."

Ves ignored the warning. "As a mech designer who has constantly made developments in metaphysical man-machine symbiosis, I have constantly explored different ways to increase a person's affinity to other entities. To me, the definition of 'machine' is not strictly defined as a mech. Since I believe that mechs can be alive, my actual specialty can also be interpreted as a way to facilitate cooperation between man and other living entities. Over the years, I have developed solutions that enable symbiosis from human to human."

"We are aware of the existence of your so-called networks, but there are too many complications regarding their usage." Jovy replied. "If it is not safe and practical enough to allow for mass adoption, then it is not a technological development that is of interest to the MTA. There are many eccentric researchers and organizations in human space that have developed quirky tech, but few of their work ever gains mass adoption. Unless you have overcome this hurdle, your tech is not a viable concession in any negotiation."

That explained why the MTA wasn't in a hurry to understand the weirder capabilities of the Larkinson Clan such as its various spiritual networks. Though his various spiritual applications were undeniably powerful, they were still immature and vulnerable to

certain kinds of attacks. They were also far too difficult to work with if only Ves was able to reproduce them in their entirety!

Ves wasn't trying to appeal to the MTA as a whole for this reason. He needed to become a Master before the Association would take him seriously.

His real target was Jovy Armalon, a seemingly friendly and approachable Journeyman working for the Mech Trade Association.

Though Ves never really figured out Jovy's exact background, it was not difficult to imagine that this mech designer with an extremely promising design philosophy might have excellent connections.

For example, Jovy's ability to take over the 2-year escort mission was an indicator of the amount of sway he could exert within the massive Association.

After hesitating for a while, Ves decided to bring out one of his big guns.

"Would you like to obtain a unique advantage that can give you a massive boost in design capabilities?" He offered. "If you have been watching us as closely as I think you do, then you should have noticed that Gloriana, Ketis and myself are anything but usual. Each of us are substantially more effective Journeymen than our peers of the same age. Have you ever wondered how we gained so much success?"

The MTA mech designer briefly looked intrigued. "Our analysis of you indeed doesn't add up. There are numerous red flags in your record."

"I can tell you now that we aren't smarter than other excellent Journeymen such as yourself. The secret lies within my specialty. Rather than trying to achieve symbiosis between man and machine, one day I attempted to do something different! I successfully created symbiosis between man and himself, or to put it in clearer terms, me and me! By partitioning my own mind in half, I managed to create an extraordinary state where my sub-mind has not only gained an independent consciousness, but also acquired unique powers that are different from mine!"

"What?! Are you being serious?!"

This time, Ves had finally taken Jovy aback, thereby derailing this conversation!

"I can grant you a similar advantage if you want. It just depends on what you want. Gloriana is able to connect the minds of different mech designers in a single network during her work sessions. Ketis is able to progress as both a mech designer and a swordmaster. I can generate and manipulate psionic power to a level you can't imagine. Do any of these powers sound interesting to you, or should I tailor a solution that best suits your circumstances?"

Jovy did look taken in by Ves' bold suggestion. Instead, he looked as if his friend had just made a major faux pas!

"Are you bribing me, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves modestly coughed. "Master Willix asked me the same question, but that didn't stop her from making a deal with me. Look, as long as you can persuade the higher ups to give me a chance to proceed with the Fearless Project, I will make sure to address all of the concerns about the proliferation of anti-expert mech technology. As legitimate compensation for your willingness to act as an intermediary on my behalf, I am willing to grant you a personal reward in the form of a companion spirit that is designed to your specifications."

"In other words, you want me to persuade the Association to bend the rules for you in exchange for a bribe, is that correct?" Jovy asked as he began to look grim.

Damn, how hard was it to bribe people these days? Hardly any humans were saints. Even the mechers ought to be open to personal persuasion. Ves just had to try harder.

"Blinky, get out and introduce yourself to Jovy."

Mrow.

Much to Jovy's astonishment, a purple spiritual cat with a semi-intangible body emerged right out of Ves' head!

The playful cat hovered above Jovy's head before spiraling downwards until the surprised MTA mech designer hesitantly tried to touch the spiritual creature.

Of course, his hand passed right through the Star Cat's body without encountering any hindrance. Jovy at least managed to get a better sense of Blinky's unique presence.

Ves had carefully been observing the MTA mech designer while Blinky blatantly exposed his existence.

Much to his surprise, Jovy behaved as if he really didn't know about Blinky before. Even his emotions conveyed shock. It did not look as if he was putting up an act.

That was strange. Ves would have expected the MTA to gather at least some clues given how much they liked to monitor other people. Perhaps only a few people were privy to this data.

"What is this, Ves?" Jovy asked as he put down his airs as a representative of the MTA.

"Didn't I just tell you? It's another part of my mind that I have partitioned from my main consciousness through a special technique before shaping it into a cat. It doesn't have

to be a cat, but it's the most comfortable form for me. What really matters is how I augmented this companion spirit."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Let me show you his tricks. Blinky! Go ahead and show how much energy you can generate."

Mrow.

Blinky drew energy from a design spirit and began to convert it into a different form of spiritual energy that was more compatible to Ves.

Though Jovy wasn't able to appreciate this effect to the fullest, he could vaguely feel the changes in the compartment.

"Activate your design network."

Mrow.

The cat with the light trails streaking over his purple form extended a spiritual connection to Jovy's head.

"If you trust me, then don't resist. Open yourself up and see how my colleagues and I have been able to work so well together."

True understanding flowed between the two as Jovy reluctantly opened up his mind to the spiritual connection.

Even though it was just a shallow bond, the MTA mech designer only needed a brief moment to realize the massive implications of a design network!

"Alright, that's enough Blinky. Show him your final trick."

Blinky cut off the spiritual connection before Jovy could fully appreciate its features. The abrupt disconnection left him wanting for more! This was the first time that he truly managed to obtain a glimpse into another successful mech designer's perspective and thought process!

What Jovy might not realize at the moment was that the other person in the network had also managed to get a good glimpse!

Ves did not dare to pry too deep in his friend's surprisingly strong and structure mind, but he managed to come away with a decent haul!

This was not the time to think about it, though. Blinky was already preparing his final trick.

The Worclaw crystal on embedded on his forehead glowed increasingly brighter as Blinky charged up his attack!

"This demonstration is a little dangerous, so you better keep your energy shields ready."

"Huh? Okay."

Jovy activated a silent command that caused the compartment to project many different energy shields.

Once Ves saw that Jovy had taken enough precautions, he nodded towards his companion spirit.

"Show him what you can do, Blinky!"

MROW!

A blinding flash erupted from Blinky as a powerful beam fueled by Worclaw energy crashed into energy shield!

Chapter 3543: Poor Jovy

The demonstration successfully made an impact on Jovy.

Blinky's attack did not have a chance of overcoming the Simile Halifax's protective measures. His Alshyr energy attack might be sufficient to put a dent into a mech, but the power level of an MTA energy shield was much more formidable!

It didn't matter. Blinky successfully made his point. The companion spirit was able to unleash his exotic energy attack without relying on any tech or solid objects.

If he wanted to, Blinky could act like a lethal assassin that could phase through any obstacles and launch an energy beam right in the face of an unsuspecting victim!

One of the greater implications of Blinky's existence and capabilities was that he served as an inseparable companion to Ves. Wherever the mech designer traveled, he would always possess a means to protect himself.

Though Ves felt a bit conflicted by how much he revealed to Jovy and possibly other elements of the MTA, he believed it was an acceptable risk to take.

His use of spiritual applications had gradually increased over time. The changes to the Larkinson Clan were quite obvious and the expeditionary fleet even hosted a batch of guest pilots from the MTA!

There was no way to hide everything, so Ves decided to open up a bit and trust that at least certain mechers were deserving of his trust.

The biggest advantage of this was that Ves could direct attention away from his more sensitive secrets. He didn't mind exposing his companion spirits, but he definitely did not wish to expose his ties to the Mech Designer System!

Of course, even if he did claim to possess the Metal Scroll, the MTA wouldn't believe him. The damned System had gone dormant after swallowing a bunch of Timpala Steel and had yet to wake up after all these months!

Mrow...

After unleashing his impressive attack, both Blinky and Ves became a bit weary. Though the cat did not use up too much power this time, he still had to display enough strength to make a statement.

Seeing how Jovy fell silent after this demonstration, Ves figured that he had achieved his purpose this time!

"This is only what a single companion spirit can do." Ves said as he cradled Blinky in his arms as if he was holding a body. "Gloriana and Ketis possess their own unique companions that complement their own individual needs. I don't know what kind of capability serves you best, but together we can come up with a solution that can substantially ease the bottlenecks that can hinder you from realizing your difficult design philosophy. This is especially the case when I have designed the companion spirit to be able to grow over time and adapt even better to your needs."

Mrow~

Blinky cutely whipped his black-tipped tail around as he licked his intangible furry paw.

What Ves just said resonated to Jovy in a way that few other outsiders had accomplished.

One of the greatest challenges an ambitious mech designer had to overcome was to find a way to realize a design philosophy.

This was an intricate and difficult process that Ves did not fully understand but hindered a lot of Seniors from taking the crucial step.

Just seeing people like Professor Benedict agonize so much over his own stalled attempts to become a Master Mech Designer was a telling indicator how difficult it was to overcome this infamous hurdle!

It was generally known in the mech industry that a broader, more radical and more ambitious design philosophy was much more difficult to realize!

More modest design philosophies might not be so revolutionary, but mech designers stood a much higher chance of realizing them due to their limited scope and lower requirements.

If Ves had to classify Jovy's probability manipulation in one of those categories, then he would firmly place it in the bucket that corresponded to difficult and nearly impossible to realize!

Just getting started on it was impossible, and making progress was probably at least several times more difficult because there was nothing comparable in the mech industry.

Jovy was a pioneer in his own field and had to tread new ground by himself. The MTA might be able to provide a lot of convenience to him, but he still needed to rely on himself to achieve all of the important breakthroughs.

Even the MTA probably wasn't that optimistic about his chances. It was probably willing to give Jovy a try because it didn't cost much to encourage talented mech designers to pursue radical design philosophies with high potential.

As long as just 1 in 1000 of these human lottery tickets drew a prize, it was worth it in the end!

From what little Ves had managed to glimpse from Jovy's mind, the young man wasn't as complacent as he appeared on the surface.

Jovy was actually enduring a lot of pressure. His parents, his friends, his faction and the MTA itself held a lot of expectations towards him, but that was contingent on his good performance.

As long as Jovy continued to make progress, he would receive a lot of support in the form of tutoring, resources, augmentation and research assistance.

If he ever began to stall and stop making any further progress, then the MTA would eventually treat him as a lost cause and withhold much of the resources that Jovy needed to push his design philosophy to the next level!

This was why he was quite keen to travel around. Gaining inspiration from outside stimuli was an important way for innovators to develop new solutions. There was a strategic purpose behind his decision to accompany Ves for a time.

Ves sympathized with Jovy. The MTA mech designer was born and raised into a life where he constantly had to perform better, similar to Gloriana.

Though Jovy was handling his situation rather well, the fear of failure and the fear of wasting all of the extravagant effort and resources the MTA put into his development weighed heavily on his shoulders.

Now, an eccentric mech designer had come along and offered Jovy a potential way to substantially increase the probability of breaking through to Master. How could he not feel moved by this offer?

Though all of it sounded crazy at first, Ves showed that he wasn't kidding when he used Blinky to demonstrate the power of a companion spirit.

What actually convinced Jovy the most was the brief moment when Blinky's design network connected his mind to Ves for a brief moment.

Just as Ves gained a better insight in the person known as Jovy, the MTA mech designer also gained a relatively intimate view of what Ves thought about.

Sure, Blinky filtered out a lot of irrelevant details and Ves made sure to lock his truly sensitive secrets deep within the depths of his mind, but what he put on display showed that he was being absolutely sincere about augmenting Jovy in a metaphysical manner.

Of course, Ves didn't hide the selfish motivations behind his actions. He wasn't helping Jovy because he wanted to be a good friend. He wanted to perform a transaction where both sides could get what they needed from each other.

There was nothing disgusting or dishonest about it. This was simply an effective way to get things done.

After a time, Jovy suppressed his excitement. He faced Ves with a measured look.

"Let me be honest. I'm interested in what you have to offer. I can see how your so-called companion spirit can help me in several ways. I don't have a habit of making drastic, life-changing decisions on the spot, though. There is no hurry to proceed at the moment, so I will take my time to weigh my options, perform more research and consult with others. I also cannot promise that I can persuade the higher ups to give you special dispensation to continue with the Fearless Project. I need to sort this all out before I can make my decision."

"Ah. I'll be waiting for your answer, then." Ves replied. "If you need more clarification, feel free to ask. I can't tell you everything, but I'm willing to share a few more details provided you keep it confidential."

He did not assume that Jovy would keep this secret just to himself. That was impossible. Ves just hoped that his friend would not spread it out too much and only share it among the people he trusted.

This was a request that Jovy was more than willing to oblige. "You can rest assured. The MTA always handles trade secrets from mech designers such as you with utmost care and discretion. Word of it will not spread to the public."

Ves would have to be satisfied with that answer.

"Good. Please keep in mind that it is quite costly and resource-intensive to provide anyone with a companion spirit. Power doesn't come out of nowhere and relying on your own mind is not enough to create a strong mind partner. I'm only willing to do this favor for you but no one else. You'll also have to trust me as I will literally have to access your mind in order to make radical changes to it. If I want, I can mess up a lot of stuff, so you will have to take a leap of faith if you seriously wish to proceed with this course of action."

"Thank you... for being honest. I figured as much, but it is good to hear it from you." Jovy said.

The two chatted a bit further, but Jovy soon ordered the Simile Halifax to teleport Ves away from the frigate.

The young MTA mech designer had a lot to think about. The conversation about the Fearless Project did not proceed according to his expectations at all today.

Rather than accepting the will of the MTA, Ves brazenly offered Jovy a bribe that sounded so attractive that the issue of granting the Larkinson Clan permission to utilize heavy luminar crystal weapons no longer seemed so important!

Was Jovy attracted by the possibility of gaining a 'companion spirit' that was not only powerful from the start, but could also grow even further over time?

Yes!

He didn't think many mech designers would reject this possibility.

"It's still experimental, though." He reminded himself.

It did not escape his attention that this was an experimental procedure that was not yet proven to be safe. Aside from all of the immediate problems that might occur,

companion spirits may very well lead to repercussions that could hinder or even stop Jovy from advancing to Master!

Of course, the fact that Ves was confident enough to go through with it showed that he believed it was beneficial, but who knew whether he was right.

"It's a big gamble."

Jovy wasn't a stranger to gambles. As a specialist in probability manipulation, he gambled with reality whenever he designed his mechs. He had won and lost a lot of gambles over the years, and that gave him a lot of perspective on how to handle this kind of matter.

"I shouldn't be making a bet I can't afford to lose."

Anything that had to do with the human mind was profoundly dangerous. What Ves suggested was akin to implanting an extremely powerful but barely tested cranial implant.

Only the reckless or the desperate would agree to such a procedure!

Though Jovy did not consider himself to be a reckless mech designer, he was not so sure about the desperate part.

It all came down to an important question.

"Will I be able to realize my design philosophy if I proceed as always, or is the probability of success too low for me to bet on myself?" He asked himself.

He recalled the statistics. The MTA's success rate of nurturing Masters with higher grade design philosophies was abysmal! Even if he limited his selection to mech designers who successfully advanced to Journeyman, their odds were not good!

"Heh. I am just another gamble..." Jovy depreciatingly said. "The MTA may be able to afford losing on a lot of bets, but if I lose, my life's work will come to nothing!"

Chapter 3544: Co-Leader of the Survivalist Faction

A day passed by without a response. Ves figured as much. He presented Jovy with a massive but incredibly risky life-changing decision. Who would want to make a decision on the spot given how dangerous it was to operate on someone's mind?

"It's like installing a cranial implant."

Ves remembered that he agonized for years before he finally decided to implant the Archimedes Rubal bioimplant in his head. Even then, he asked his staff to perform

extensive updates and modifications on the highly-sophisticated device before he was willing to undergo the implantation procedure!

Although he didn't know how long it would take for Jovy to decide whether he wanted to accepted the offer, it might take weeks or even months for him to make up his mind.

Someone like Jovy had access to a lot of different opportunities. The MTA offered a dizzying array of augmentations, many of which were developed by huge, well-funded trans-galactic biotech enterprises with stellar reputations.

How could a single mech designer who didn't even possess any medical qualifications possibly claim to exceed the best efforts of the most brilliant biotech researchers employed by these megacorporations?

Still, the proof could not be denied. Ketis was the most obvious success case. Her ability to advance in two different extraordinary professions at once was clearly abnormal and unheard of, but if people found out that she had actually split her mind in two, this phenomenon made a lot more sense!

Ves and Gloriana's ability to form a seamless design network without any risky or dangerous interfacing was even more relevant to mech designers. Though Jovy only gained a short preview of this ability, what he managed to sense should be enough to haunt his dreams!

"He'll come around, I think. His chances of advancing to Master are too low even with plentiful support from the MTA. He needs to obtain more advantages for himself in order to stack the odds in his favor."

Ordinarily, Ves should have only been able to infer Jovy's situation, but the brief connection he established through Blinky allowed him to gain a much better understanding of his friend!

Although Ves only managed to lift Jovy's surface thoughts, they provided many important developments!

For example, Ves found that he was right when he suspected that Jovy's parents were genuine bigshots. No ordinary MTA mech designer could attract so much attention and resources even if he was talented.

He figured out that the Red Ocean was truly a trial ground set up by the Big Two. The MTA and CFA not only wanted to reinvigorate the human race, but also prepare everyone for an even greater initiative.

He even learned that multiple arms of the MTA were paying loose attention to Ves and the Larkinson Clan. Various research teams and research institutions of the Association kept tabs on him, but they kept their distance because of multiple reasons.

First, the MTA kept track of billions of persons of interest. Ves was not as special as he thought, and the fact that he was 'just' a Journeyman meant that he simply didn't warrant as much attention.

Second, Ves had become an associate to the Survivalist Faction. Before that, Master Willix's patron among the Survivalists had already 'claimed' Ves to a degree. He initially did not think these relationships were that important because he did not enjoy any tangible benefits from them, but they were actually highly useful in keeping the more pushy elements of the MTA at bay.

Every major faction of the Mech Trade Association developed an unofficial understanding amongst each other. They would not easily interfere with the people that had already associated with other factions.

"That's good to know." Ves muttered.

The more interesting part was the identity of the Star Designer that was backing Master Willix. Ves had already guessed that she was the most likely person to pay an interest to him, but now that he managed to confirm it through skimming Jovy's mind, he felt quite mixed about her identity.

"Of all of the possible Star Designers that could gain an interest in me and 'Mr. S.', why her of all people?"

The reason why he felt troubled was because Master Willix was actually in cahoots with the famed and brilliant Polymath!

As one of the younger Star Designers to come into power lately, the Polymath had quickly become the most prominent mech designers of this time!

Born with abnormal intelligence, she began to absorb a vast amount of knowledge at a young age. Though the official biographies of her life never clarified whether she was a designer baby who received the most luxurious augmentations during her growth, the fact that she used to be a citizen of a first-rate state meant this chance was high!

In any case, the biographies did mention that Clair Hamza originally started out a little slow. She did not graduate from a mech design university in record time, nor broke any records when she advanced to Journeyman.

The reason for that was because she constantly occupied her time with broadening her foundation to a monstrous degree.

The young Clair Hamza studied hundreds of different fields, from quantum mechanics to biomechanics, in order to become proficient in almost every conceivable aspect of mech design!

Once she finally completed her insane learning spree, she finally began to bring her prodigious knowledge to bear on her chosen profession.

"Master before 50, Star Designer at 100."

The speed in which she overcame the bottlenecks that tormented so many different mech designers seemed like a breeze to the Polymath!

She progressed so quickly that many different people, mostly jealous rivals and professional competitors, accused her of being a sentient AI, an alien in human skin, a sleeper agent of a dangerous organization and more.

Yet whenever the MTA investigated her in detail, no one found anything amiss. Her history was completely clear and none of her actions were alarming.

In the end, the Polymath not only managed to enter humanity's highest circle of power, but also became one of the co-leaders of the Survivalist Faction!

Ves became surprised when he learned that the Polymath chose to align with the Survivalist Faction rather than the Mech Supremacist Faction.

"Shouldn't she be a more natural fit for the latter?"

Everyone knew that the Polymath loved absorbing more knowledge, but she was even more famed for designing a lot of weird and quirky mechs!

Though not all of her designs met her expectations, the few that did often sent ripples throughout the mech industry! Many of her greatest innovations eventually trickled down to the mech industry after their principles fed back into future mech generations.

From what Ves had learned of the Polymath, the woman was crazy smart and never made any stupid decisions. She was probably the most successful rational mech designer to have existed up to this point, so her decisions were definitely driven by impeccable logic!

"If someone as smart as her has chosen to join the Survivalist Faction, then there has to be a good reason for that. Maybe it's not so bad that I defaulted to this faction as well."

Ves never really had a choice of which faction he could associate with. If Master Willix hadn't already ushered him to the Survivalists, perhaps he would have approached the Mech Supremacists like his wife.

After all, Ves didn't really like to get involved in messy politics and ideological struggles. He just wanted to design more mechs. There were plenty of other people who could take care of the difficult questions of governing humanity.

"Oh well."

The Survivalist Faction should not be shabby if it managed to gain the allegiance of the Polymath.

The only issue was that this woman was insanely smart, so much so that Ves worried whether she had figured out any of his deeper secrets!

It was a pity that there was nothing that he could do. Either the Polymath figured him out or not. He would just go on about his life if nothing happened.

Ves had a feeling that he would be meeting the Polymath in person one day. One of the many interesting details he obtained from skimming Jovy's mind was that the Star Designer had actually resided in the Red Ocean for over 20 years!

"What is she doing here? Is she poking around alien technology or something?"

There was no way that a junior like Jovy could know what any of the Star Designers were doing. He only vaguely knew that the Red Ocean had attracted many Star Designers.

None of this had anything to do with Ves. The chance of bumping into anyone was virtually zero. Even if they brushed past each other, there was no way these supreme figures would deign to pay attention to a random Journeyman.

Rather than worrying about all of that, Ves was better off if he went back to his work!

He frowned. "The future of the Fearless Project is in doubt, so it's best if put it in the backseat."

He could gamble on the hope that the MTA would eventually come to a new agreement with Ves, but he might have to make a lot of changes in order to comply with the new requirements.

The only feature that he truly needed to explore was to strengthen the exclusivity of his heavy luminar crystal rifles.

He had to make sure they could only be utilized by authorized personnel and no one else! Even if the Larkinsons lost a battle and had to leave a few mechs with rifles behind, the people who salvaged the valuable weapons from the battlefield shouldn't be able to utilize them, let alone reverse-engineer the alien tech!

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "I'll have to develop new locking and security measures that can't be defeated through ordinary means. It's best if even I can't break the locks of my own design."

He already figured a number of ways to create a spiritual lock, but it was not secure enough if he could break it with ease. He had to go even further and develop a real solution.

"This is going to take a substantial amount of time!"

For now, he still wanted to work on mechs rather than spiritual locks, so he shifted his attention to the other mech design projects.

Instead of starting work on his second solo mech design project, he decided to fulfill his leadership responsibilities and check up on the progress of the other lead designers of the Larkinson Clan.

He dropped by the workplaces of numerous different Journeyman mech Designers and either surveyed their progress or discussed their early design choices.

One of the more interesting design projects that he came across was the custom mech that Gloriana had envisioned for Vincent Ricklin.

"Wow, you're doing good work, ma'am!" Vincent exclaimed as he looked at the projection of Gloriana's draft design. "This mech is even bigger and cooler than my first custom mech! I love the sculpted contours. There's none of that cold and machine-like straight lines here. It truly looks like a metallic god! The only point I'm not sure about is the girth of the codpiece. Could you make it... bigger?"

Gloriana looked flatly at Vincent while she held her lively and adorable daughter in her arms.

"Uhh... I guess that means a no?" The expert candidate sheepishly guessed.

Ves stepped forward, thereby stopping this awkward exchange from going any further.

"This is quite an interesting draft design." He said as he reached out and softly rubbed his daughter's pristine little head. "This is like a reinvented version of the Adonis Colossus that we have developed in the past. Compared to that older third-class mech design, this draft just oozes masculinity!"

"Guuuuguu...waawhheewaaa..."

Gloriana smirked. "I told you I could do it. Did you really think I understand nothing about masculinity? I know exactly what Mr. Ricklin needs to excel as a mech pilot!"

Although Ves wasn't sure whether Gloriana was as smart as she thought she was, he had to admit that she put a serious effort into Vincent Ricklin's custom mech.

He initially worried whether her warped Hexer sensibilities might interfere with her professional obligations, but so far it appeared that his concerns were unfounded.

There were several aspects about the design that Ves found questionable, though. Chief among them was the armaments of the hybrid mech.

"Why are all of these ranged weapon modules physical in nature?"

Chapter 3545: New Man Project

Though Gloriana hadn't fully finalized the configuration of the weapon loadout of Vincent Ricklin's custom mech, she had already made a drastic design choice.

Instead of taking advantage of the Larkinson Clan's exclusive access to advanced luminar crystal technology, Gloriana decided to eschew it entirely and resort to kinetic weapons!

Gauss weapons, missiles and even melee weapons featured prominently in Gloriana's mech concept for Vincent's new personal machine.

Typical to a hybrid mech, the concept envisioned by Gloriana did not mount any huge and powerful weapons. It instead incorporated multiple smaller ones that could each inflict respectable damage under the right circumstances.

The mech was even able to fight up close, though not as good as dedicated melee mechs. The hybrid mech carried a rather thick but short tower shield along with a wicked sword that could deliver slow but powerful strikes without requiring too much finesse!

All in all, the upfront damage potential of this hybrid mech was quite good due to incorporating all of these physical weapons. It could accurately pound enemy targets at mid-range while whacking mechs into dented wrecks if they ever came close!

While it was possible for the hybrid mech to snipe targets at range, this was insanely difficult because Gloriana did not optimize its design for long-ranged combat. The lack of energy weapons was a tell-tale sign that she did not even bother to give Vincent a good means to fight against distant opponents!

The overall direction of this mech design already gave Ves a good idea of what Gloriana was thinking about, but he still found her design decisions to be perplexing.

"This is an unusual weapon loadout for a hybrid mech." He explained his thoughts to his wife. "These guns and missile launchers all look nice, but they take up a lot of capacity. It's not that bad if a mech only utilizes one kinetic weapon, but the issue here is that it integrates multiple of them across its frame! All of those weapons require ammunition in order to function, and that takes up even more space inside the mech."

Gloriana shook her head. "Not entirely. Haven't you noticed the external ammunition bins? The New Man Project does not have to have to rely on its internal magazines to keep the weapons fed. I'll design different ammunition feeding systems that will efficiently transfer the contents of these ammunition bins to the various integrated kinetic weapons. With this, Vincent's hybrid mech can sustain its firepower output for a considerably longer time."

This was a simple solution, but a good one. Though his wife hadn't put too much detail in the draft of the ammunition bins, Ves could see that they were designed as external modules that could easily be attached and detached whenever convenient.

On the battlefield, the New Man Project could easily eject its empty ammunition bins and allow bots or mechs to mount new ones in the same slots. The transition didn't not have to take much time at all, so as long as the hybrid mech did not sustain much damage, it could actually fire its weapons for a long time until the buildup of heat and the accumulated stress on its kinetic weapons had finally reached their limits!

Of course, this treatment was a little extravagant for a single mech. It wasn't worth it to field lots of mechs that needed to be accompanied by its own maids and babysitters in battle. It was only tolerable if this treatment was confined to individual machines such as custom mechs.

After studying the design schematics a bit further, he reluctantly put down his concerns about the New Man Project's overreliance on kinetic weapons.

Even if these weapon modules were not as powerful as his luminar crystal weapons, they offered a lot of much-needed diversity.

There was one element of uncertainty that caught his attention.

"This mech doesn't consume as much energy as our rifleman mechs, but I see you haven't channeled all of its excess power to its flight system. It's actually a bit slow for a medium mech. How are you planning to use all of that additional power?"

The draft design was still incomplete, so Ves couldn't figure out what Gloriana had in store.

His wife pointed towards the projected design. "Just like the Adonis Colossus, the New Man Project is a mech that is strong in both offense and defense. I've already taken care of the former in the form of its weapon loadout. I'm still working on the latter, but you should already be able to tell that my hybrid mech is covered by a substantial amount of armor. That's not enough, though. This mech is so eye-catching that it will doubtlessly attract a lot of enemy fire. In order to increase its survivability even further, I decided to mount it with a compact but premium shield generator."

Shield generator!

These were powerful but energy-hungry defensive modules that were mostly found in defensive mechs and high-end mechs.

Ves considered the effect of mounting one to the New Man Project. The mech had become so sluggish that it could certainly use a bit of help in fending off incoming attacks.

"Are you sure it's worth implementing in the design?" He questioned. "A shield generator is an intensive module. If you choose to integrate it in a knight mech, then I wouldn't have any doubts about your idea. The problem is that you're trying to stuff it in a hybrid mech that already carries a lot of integrated weapon and ammunition modules. You can't even mount it externally because you have already reserved that for the ammunition bins!"

Gloriana sighed. "You're right. It will be hard for me to integrate a good shield generator to the New Man Project. I still think it is worth implementing. Energy shields possess different defensive characteristics that can help my custom hybrid mech survive in different situations. It is also easy for us to upgrade it with a more powerful model in the future. Once we obtain access to superior and more higher-performing mech parts, it is not impossible for us to turn the New Man Project into a defensive powerhouse!"

"Guuwaahaaaaaaa...!"

"See? Even Aurelia agrees! She's such a smart and clever little cutie."

While Gloriana gave her daughter a bit of personal attention, Ves turned to the mech pilot who would eventually be making use of the New Man Project.

"What do you think of her work? Do you like it?" Ves asked.

"I don't like it. I love it!" Vincent beamed. "Just look at how manly it looks. Your wife sure has a good appreciation of the male form. She managed to translate my physique in the form of a mech but make it even bigger and manlier than I could imagine."

Ves grew irritated. "I'm not asking for your opinion about its appearance! I'm asking you about its performance! Are you fine with utilizing kinetic weapons?! Are you fine with piloting a slow but sturdy mech?!"

"Ah, that's all okay to me. I don't need to move quickly. I just want to be able to pound any enemies that come into my range with as much dominance as possible. With all of these guns and armor, not even those hardy dwarven mechs we fought back then can stand a chance against my custom mech!"

Well, it sounded that Vincent was fully okay with the configuration of the New Man Project. His own preferences were relatively simple, so his mech design also reflected

that. The custom hybrid mech was meant to become a blunt instrument in the hands of a blunt warrior.

"Are there any shortcomings that you are particularly concerned about?"

"Yeah, just look at the codpiece I requested. No matter how many times I asked, she won't make it any bigger!"

"That's because it is superfluous and will upset the balance of your hybrid mech!"

Gloriana responded after she had her fill of cuddling with her baby. "The lower waist of a mech does need protection, but there is a point where excess armor is not worth the tradeoff. The New Man Project has already crossed this line by a noticeable extent, so I need to figure out how to restore the balance of your custom mech. You are not going to make my job any easier by requesting even more padding!"

Ves left Gloriana and Vincent to decide among themselves how thick the codpiece of the New Man Project should be. It didn't appear this argument would end anytime soon.

"Mechs don't need codpieces."

As far as he was concerned, his wife was completely right. It could use a lot of downsizing. The only reason to include it at all was to satisfy Vincent's psychological needs.

Ves continued to drop by the workplaces of the other lead designers.

Everyone else was managing fine, but that did not surprise himself too much. Both the new and older Journeymen in the Design Department were all Journeymen who knew what they were doing. They did not require a lot of input from him while they were still in the drafting phase.

One of the more important projects in development at the moment was the Monster Slayer Project.

The landbound swordsman mech design was of great significance. It was part of a trade deal and could potentially become the first true income source of the Larkinson Clan that was based in the Red Ocean!

Although Ves had agreed that Ketis should design the Monster Slayer by herself in order to exercise her solo design capabilities, that didn't stop him from providing her with feedback.

"Your draft design is considerably more refined than I expected." He remarked as he crossed his arms in front of the projection. "It's cheaper than I thought as well. This is shaping up to be an affordable mid-range swordsman mech."

His former student nodded as she manipulated the controls. "The Wild Fighter Association has been helping me with figuring out what its members want. I've received a lot of advice and read a lot of market research reports."

"And what did you learn from all of that?"

"If I want to benefit as many mech pilots as possible, I should make my Monster Slayer more affordable. If I want to make my Monster Slayer more prestigious and win more impressive competitions, then I should raise its design budget."

"I take it you went for the first route."

"Yes." Ketis nodded. "I truly do want to turn my Monster Slayer into a mech that can win the most glorious tournaments held in the Red Ocean, but that does not really fit with my vision. For my first solo swordsman mech design, I want to spread my work and acquaint as many mech pilots to my design philosophy as possible."

The result of her deliberations was that she had set the design budget of her Monster Slayer to just 1.4 MTA credits.

This was around as much as a third the design budget of the Fearless Project!

Of course, Ves envisioned his Fearless Project as an elite specialist combat mech that was meant to fight against the toughest opponents.

The Monster Slayer was a landbound mech that could perform adequately in landbound battles but was actually meant to fight in arenas.

Since arena battles were costly and attrition was high, the mechs that participated in many standard tournaments should never be too expensive.

Although the price tag of the Monster Slayer was a bit higher than the most popular price category, it was still within a range that allowed for mass adoption.

The only question was whether it provided enough value to swordsman mech pilots to sell that well.

When Ves looked at the sword that Ketis had drafted for the Monster Slayer, he saw that it was a typical greatsword.

He frowned a bit. "I see you decided to pair the Monster Slayer with a greatsword instead of a smaller weapon. Don't you think this is a risky choice? Not every swordsman mech fights like the Swordmaidens."

Ves was afraid that Ketis might scare away too many customers if she insisted on this course of action!

Chapter 3546: The Meaning of the Monster Slayer

Though Ves questioned whether it was a good idea to pair the Monster Slayer design with a large, heavy and unwieldy greatsword, Ketis remained unmoved.

"I know what I'm doing, Ves. I planned out my Monster Slayer years ago. Every design choice I make is deliberate to a degree you can't imagine."

"You say that but you are still proceeding with a swordsman mech configuration that only a minority of mech pilots will adequately be able to pilot!"

Greatswords were difficult weapons to wield! Not only were they slow, heavy, and ponderous to move, they could also cause accidents because they were difficult to control!

The Swordmaidens may be able to wield them with great proficiency, but that was because they poured years or decades into mastering this difficult weapon!

Generally, mech cadets who trained in swordsmanship started off with familiarizing themselves in the use of one-handed blades. If they chose to specialize in this field, then they may train in other forms of swords, but rarely one as big and exaggerated as a greatsword!

This was why Ves grew concerned about Ketis' design direction for a mech she invested a lot of emotional attachment to. He knew that she treated the Monster Slayer Project as her baby and her passion project, so he did not want her to go down a path that led to a dead end.

Still, he underestimated her resolve.

She interrupted her work and turned to her former teacher. "I said I know what I'm doing. Do you think I don't know that most swordsman mech pilots aren't trained in greatswords? It's fine. My mech can handle a sword of this size and mass with greater control than other machines because it is the only weapon it is optimized to wield. Novices will find that it is easier to control the greatsword in battle as long as it is being wielded by my Monster Slayer."

"I can see how that works out, but that only addresses a part of the issue. All of that mechanical control won't mean anything if the mech pilot doesn't know what he is doing!"

"Are you sure about that?" Ketis smirked.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on, Ves. Have you already forgotten what I did with the Heart of Victor? It doesn't matter if my customers can't wield greatswords as good as my fellow sisters. As long as I employ my own techniques, I can embed the Monster Slayer design with a shadow of my swordsmanship skills!"

Ves widened his eyes. "Will this actually work? Instilling a whole new sword style to a mech pilot shouldn't be easy. Can your mech truly teach generic mech pilots to wield a greatsword as proficient as a Swordmaiden?"

Ketis shook her head. "I'm not that ambitious yet. The Swordmaiden swordsmanship style is too demanding and intricate to the uninitiated. Even if my Monster Slayer can act as the most direct instructor to its mech pilots, it will still take years before they actually master it in depth. This is why I plan to instill my mech design with a more simple and condensed set of techniques. The foundational greatsword style that I have constructed for my Monster Slayer is easier to learn and faster to achieve results. Even those who are already trained in wielding greatswords will receive a lot of help in shoring up their fundamentals."

This sounded a lot more reasonable. Ves realized that she had truly put serious thought in her passion project.

Still, Ketis was taking a major risk here. The Heart of Victor may have worked out, but that was with considerable support from his own design philosophy.

He wasn't sure whether the Monster Slayer could truly 'teach' its mech pilots how to wield a greatsword to the point where they could confidently fight in actual battles.

It all depended on whether Ketis had sufficiently developed her design philosophy and more importantly her techniques. If she was overestimating her current capabilities, then she was heading straight towards disappointment if she proceeded on her current course!

Yet when Ves observed Ketis, he did not see a hint of worry, regret or uncertainty. She was so confident in her design direction that she did not think she was wrong in any of her assumptions!

In the end, he decided to trust her judgment. Ketis was a Journeyman who was not as ignorant about herself as before.

Even if she fell flat on her face, she would learn a valuable lesson about overestimating her capabilities and making promises that she couldn't deliver.

"What's the reason why you want to go down this route?" He asked.

Her eyes turned wistful. "I want to design a mech that can recapture the brilliance I experienced when I fought a duel against a monstrosity in the past. That life-and-death

battle was one of the best fights in my life. I truly felt alive and inspired in a way that I can't replicate. The Monster Slayer is a way for me to commemorate and revisit this brilliant battle. Not only that, I hope to share at least a portion of what I experienced back then to my customers. I hope that they too can find meaning in their lives by fighting the most thrilling battles with my Monster Slayer. I can realize this effect a lot more effectively if I arm my mech with a greatsword than a weapon with better handling. Every move you make is risky. That makes every action more meaningful."

He understood what she was referring to. A light mech that was able to dart in and out did not need to commit to a confrontation. Its superior mobility along with its fast attack speed meant that it could launch a lot of careless attacks without suffering too many consequences as long as the techniques weren't too poor.

The Monster Slayer was more deliberate. Its margin of error was lower because a bad sword swing could easily expose a lot of openings that an enemy mech could exploit in order to inflict crippling damage!

"If you go through with this mech concept, you're going to make a lot of customers frustrated at first." Ves pointed out. "While I recognize that your mech has value, it takes time and constant piloting in order to see substantial improvements. All of those mech pilots who quickly try to make a name for themselves with the Monster Slayer will probably embarrass themselves and get defeated with ease. This will build resentment among your early adopters and will definitely reduce the perceived value of your first commercial mech design!"

This was a highly undesirable consequence because the Monster Slayer had to be profitable enough to be worth the effort of selling it. If it received too many negative reviews and if the word of mouth surrounding it was bad, then the mech market would quickly turn to more practical alternatives!

This could make a good product sink into the dark pretty quickly. Even if a small number of mech pilots gained a lot of benefits from piloting the Monster Slayer model, the overwhelming amount of negative word of mouth would make it difficult for the mech community to acknowledge the positive feedback!

Ketis finally showed a bit of uncertainty, though she soon steeled herself again. "You might have a point, but I believe in my vision. My Monster Slayer will be exactly what it needs to be. It will be my debut commercial mech design, so I want to send a message and turn it into a representative example of my future work."

"What message are you trying to convey, exactly?"

"That the customers of my mechs can learn new sword styles or master their existing ones as long as they use my products." She stated. "The effect of my message will be stronger if I start off with a swordsman mech configuration that is well outside the mainstream configurations. Think about it. If my Monster Slayer wields an average

arming sword that is familiar to all melee mech pilots, how can my customer see a clear improvement in their skills? They will only grow a bit more skilled under the guidance of their mechs. Perhaps they won't even notice any difference!"

"I see."

By deliberately going out of her way to focus on greatswords, the Monster Slayer should be able to create a much bigger contrast between an uninitiated mech pilot and one that has piloted it for several months!

Once people repeatedly encountered instances where mech pilots who had no history with greatswords suddenly became deadly with them, then the mech market would fully realize the Monster Slayer's actual value.

Not only that, but a lot of mech pilots would also look forward to piloting the next swordsman mech published by Ketis!

This was actually quite a deep and intricate scheme. Though the failure points that Ves had pointed out were still concerning, the payout was immense as long as Ketis succeeded!

Ves had a misconception about the Monster Slayer. Ketis didn't intend to design an arena mech.

Her real purpose was to design a training mech!

By using its potent arena fighting capabilities as a disguise, Ketis sought to lure a lot of mech pilots into utilizing a mech that could turn them into mini-Swordmaidens over time!

Certainly, her ambition was light, but he liked that. As long as Ketis knew the risks, then he was okay with her plan!

"I like it." He said. "Your Monster Slayer will not only have a lot of value, but it will probably be utterly unique. No other mech will be able to do what you have accomplished. If everything goes right, your debut commercial mech design might even make history!"

Ketis grinned at his praise. "Hehe. I'm glad you think so. I've been thinking hard on what my work should be. While I will be making sure my Monster Slayer will be wielding a sharp blade, that is not enough to make my work stand out from yours. I want to prove to myself and to you that I can design a bestseller of my own design that is not any weaker or less useful than your Desolate Soldiers, Ferocious Piranhas or Valkyrie Redeemers!"

Though her Monster Slayer Project was still in its early stages, Ves was inclined to believe that she would succeed.

She was completely right. If the Monster Slayer became exactly as she envisioned, then it would truly be able to stand equal to his own bestsellers!

This would be the point where the student had truly caught up to the teacher. Ves would not be able to look down on Ketis as much as he did before.

Sure, Ketis cheated a bit by limiting her scope to swordsman mechs, but it was still a great accomplishment for her to be able to design mechs at this level so soon.

Ves was much less certain whether the other Journeymen of the Design Department could achieve this level of success.

Maybe Gloriana might be able to give him a surprise, but the rest were relatively ordinary mech designers with normal design philosophies. The chance that they would be able to design anything special without his assistance was low.

The two mech designers continued to discuss the other design characteristics of the Monster Slayer.

Ves mostly pointed out various specific design choices and challenged Ketis to provide him with reasonable justifications.

He was testing whether she had truly thought out all of the consequences of her decisions.

There were very few areas which she had failed to consider every variable. She knew swordsman mechs like the back of her hand and she only faltered when Ves brought up certain elements that were not a part of her core interests such as power reactors and sensor systems.

Aside from that, Ketis had already developed great ideas on how to design the proportions and the mechanical layout of the Monster Slayer.

"If you look closely, the Monster Slayer is actually modeled after my physique." Ketis pointed out. "I know my own body the best, so I can be absolutely sure that my mech will be able to wield its greatsword as well as possible!"

"That's... quite impressive." Ves remarked.

This was a design choice that only an anomalous mech designer like Ketis could make!

Chapter 3547: Minerva Project

Ves gazed happily at his daughter as she grew a tiny bit larger and livelier than before.

So far, her growth proceeded a little faster than normal. Her designer baby genes along with her highly nutritious customized diet allowed her mental and physical development to accelerate to a pace that was close to the safe limit of human infants.

In fact, Aurelia actually needed to consume 20 percent more nutrients than was typical of a product derived from Formula S-635006-CIN. The biotech researchers over at Witshaw & Yeneca were surprised that such a deviation had occurred!

Only Ves knew for certain why his little daughter needed to raise her energy consumption in order to keep her tiny body healthy and growing. Her spiritual augmentations were growing more powerful by the day.

Though little Mana was able to derive sustenance from other close relatives such as Alexandria and Goldie, Aurelia still had another burden that needed to be fed with additional energy.

Her spiritually-enhanced body was quite a substantial energy sink. What Ves found remarkable was that these same enhancements allowed his baby to generate a small amount of spiritual energy by digesting human food!

"How remarkable!"

"Guuuguubabawooooo..."

If Aurelia wasn't his own baby, he would actually be tempted to surgically separate her digestion system from her body and put it into a vat so that he could cultivate it into a gigantic spiritual energy generator!

Sadly, there was no way it could work. He knew that whenever the doctors came to take blood samples and tissue samples of his baby, any biological matter that separated from the body instantly lost its remarkable nature. It devolved into mundane biomass that did not contain any special spiritual qualities.

Ves didn't exactly know why this was the case, but he guessed that Aurelia's special spiritually-blessed body had something to do with her mind. The two were closely connected in a way that suggested that their boundaries might get blurred if his daughter grew strong enough one day.

"You're such a special little girl." Ves leaned over and kissed the top of her head.

"Daddy is so proud of you, do you know that? Daddy will do his best to facilitate your growth so that no mech, monster or alien can threaten you. Doesn't that sound great?"

"Mwaaaaa...!"

"What naughty lessons are you teaching our daughter this time?" Gloriana asked as she stepped out of the bathroom.

"Oh, nothing. Isn't that right, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"Miaow."

Their two cats were casually lounging a short distance away. They looked cutely at Aurelia and Ves.

"Whuuaaaa... Guewaaaooowweaaa..."

Aurelia began to babble a lot more actively all of a sudden. Gloriana quickly closed in and picked up her baby.

"You're such a beautiful and perfect baby, aren't you? Don't listen to daddy, my dear. Only I know how to raise a woman in this family."

Gloriana played and cuddled with Aurelia until the baby grew tired. She gently tucked the little girl in the advanced floating stroller before she turned to her husband.

"Are you ready?"

"I should have asked you that. You're the lead designer of this project, remember?"

"I know."

"This project won't be the same as the last ones. We're working with new partners now, one of which has a noticeably strong ego. Whatever you do, try to maintain respect. We cannot afford to let you clash against one of the pivotal mech designers of one of our key future designs."

"I'm aware of the stakes." She spoke in a serious tone. "I've been preparing this project for weeks. I've taken every angle into consideration. The cooperation of every mech designer assigned to this project is crucial to its success!"

Considering their past accomplishments, it would take a lot of effort to equal their best results. Gloriana clearly wouldn't be satisfied unless their project fully reflected the gains they recently made.

Once the couple got ready, they departed their stateroom and headed down to the design labs before entering a meeting room.

Two other Journeymen had already arrived a short time ago. Juliet and Sara engaged in an interesting discussion on the optimal balance between mass and mobility.

Given their respective specialties, they had a lot of disagreements on how to strike the right balance!

Still, they quickly ended their discussion once the main mech designers of the Larkinson Clan arrived.

"Good morning."

"How is Aurelia doing?"

As Ves and Gloriana took their seats, they all chatted a bit. Each of them had made decent progress on their respective projects, and they weren't afraid to share their current results.

Meanwhile, Clixie hopped onto the table and sat as close as possible to Aurelia's hovering stroller. The cat could spend hours just staring at the little baby.

"Miaow~"

Lucky on the other hand floated over to Sara and begged for pets by motioning with his paws.

"Meow."

"Wow. Your shape and material composition is highly unusual. Who constructed you?" The defensive specialist asked as she grabbed a hold of the mechanical pet in order to get a better feel of his unique exterior alloy.

Even the newcomer couldn't resist playing with the lovely gem cat!

The four Journeymen continued to chat like a group of friends until the hatch leading into the meeting room slid open once again.

An older and more distinguished gentleman stepped into the meeting room. Though he was garbed in a typical white lab coat, his stern gaze and his guarded posture made it clear that he was not as gentle as he initially appeared!

Everyone else immediately fell silent as they beheld the new arrival.

"Larkinsons." Professor Benedict Cortez nodded at the four Journeymen. "Interesting ship. I'd like to talk about what I have seen, but I am a busy mech designer. Let us proceed onto business."

"Very well, sir. Please take a seat and we can begin." Gloriana spoke up as she assumed the role of a host and a project leader.

Fortunately, Professor Benedict did not play any power games this time. Ves feared the Senior Mech Designer might chafe at having to answer to a young and lowly Journeyman, but that did not happen.

Professor Benedict seemed to know what Ves was thinking. He smirked at the Larkinson patriarch.

"I recognize that this project is designed for your clan. Though I will not hesitate to give my own opinions whenever I believe my input is useful, your decisions are final as you are the clients in this case."

Gloriana and the rest looked relieved. "Thank you for your understanding, professor. We will do our best to respect your advice."

This was a good start as far as Ves was concerned, but whether they could remain amicable over the course of this design project was another matter.

His wife began to activate a projection that displayed a rudimentary draft design.

"Let us commence our first meeting. The purpose of our gathering is to decide and agree on the basic parameters and configuration of the Minerva Project. As you all know, Commander Casella Ingvar of the Living Sentinels has recently broken through and displayed potential as an extraordinary commander. In order to make full use of her rare and valuable abilities, we must design a suitable mech that can turn her into the most effective force multiplier among the Larkinson expert pilots."

She pointed towards the projected draft design.

"I have taken the liberty of putting together a mech concept that aligns with my overall vision for the Minerva Project. As you can see, its primary armament is a powerful luminar crystal rifle, but unlike the Amaranto that is not its main focus. What this expert mech revolves around instead is its many potent command, sensor and communication modules."

From the outside, the draft design of the Minerva Project did not look much different from a typical ranged expert mech. It only looked a little thicker and voluminous, much like the Fearless Project that Ves had recently worked upon.

What truly caught everyone's attention was the mech components that Gloriana loosely stuffed inside its frame.

"An effective command platform needed to be strong in three aspects." She continued. "First, it needs to be able to gain a good overview of its area of responsibility. Although the Minerva Project can rely on sensor data gathered by other mechs to expand its awareness of the battlefield, I think it is important to increase its independent detection

abilities as well. This is why I plan to install excellent sensors in the Minerva Project. Do you have any opinions regarding this design choice?"

Professor Benedict immediately spoke up. "Command platforms indeed come equipped with better-than-average sensors, but you shouldn't go overboard with this choice. Surveying the battlefield is a job that is best left to dedicated scout units. The main purpose of equipping them with better sensors is to be able to detect friendly mechs and capture garbled signals under heavy jamming conditions. A command mech is not supposed to sweep an expansive battlefield by itself. It will expend so much power that it will inevitably generate a large amount of waste heat. This makes it easier for distant opponents to attack the command platform from a distance."

The Senior made such a good argument that Ves no longer felt the need to give his own input.

"Do any of you have any other ideas?" Gloriana asked.

No one responded.

"Alright then. We will still put emphasis on the sensor system, but not too much. Let's move on to the next priority. A command platform must be able to communicate with distant mechs. Although it is able to rely on other mechs to relay its commands in a chain, all of you know that this won't always work in the middle of a hectic battle. It is best if the Minerva Project is equipped with multiple robust communication systems to ensure Commander Casella can always contact distant elements. What is your opinion?"

"The Minerva Project will attract a lot of attention if it transmits many powerful signals during battle." Sara observed. "It will be dangerous for it to operate in the open. It should either hide behind solid cover or come equipped with thicker armor."

Juliet frowned. "We can't make this mech too thick. A command platform should be mobile enough to move where it is needed, and sometimes that means going forward. It may also be targeted by powerful melee expert mechs that can assuredly defeat it when they come into range. No defense is good enough against these killer and assassin units. It's much safer if the Minerva Project can keep its distance."

"The Minerva Project is not a pure auxiliary mech. It's armed with a luminar crystal rifle. Don't forget that Commander Casella is also a specialist in ranged weapons. We shouldn't neglect her respectable dueling capabilities."

Everyone agreed that a command platform should come with powerful communication systems, but the question was how much. These modules could quickly take up a lot of capacity, which meant the Minerva Project would have less room for other features!

Gloriana did not look good as the argument progressed. Everyone had a different opinion about this matter!

"Alright, enough." She spoke, causing everyone to fall silent. "I do not want to compromise too much on the communication systems, but we can determine the specifics later once we expand the details of the design department. Communication is absolutely important for Commander Casella. Even if she has shown the ability to maintain contact with other Larkinson mech pilots without relying on traditional communication channels, we should not assume this will work in any circumstance. Equipping our expert mech with strong communication systems will not only allow it to remain in contact with friendly units under heavy jamming, but it can also reach out to third-party units that are allied or neutral towards the Larkinson Clan."

Not everyone was connected to the Larkinson Network. Also, Commander Casella's ability to reach out to Larkinson mech pilots might have a range limit. It was best not to depend too much on it alone.

"Your command platform doesn't have to shoulder this burden by itself. There are other mechs or better yet starships that can pass on the relevant signals." Professor Benedict noted.

"That is true as long as our mechs fight in the vicinity of our fleet, but what if they are deployed on a planet? We cannot assume that our mech units will be able to maintain contact with our command centers and headquarters at any time." Gloriana retorted.

"That is true."

Chapter 3548: Two-Mode Weapon

Gloriana believed that the Minerva Project must come with clear and stable communication capabilities.

It had to be a powerful communicator so that it could reach out to friendly, neutral and possibly even hostile units even in highly chaotic battlefields where heavy jamming, energetic weapons fire and powerful explosions could affect the integrity of even the strongest signals!

The true power of Commander Casella Ingvar lay not in her marksmanship ability, but her command ability!

While many people might argue whether Casella was actually better at commanding a large number of friendly units than dedicated officers, none of them were expert pilots like her! With her extraordinary identity, she was able to instill much more confidence in her own men.

The ability to raise the morale of friendly units to an insane height was a precious advantage that could definitely make a substantial difference in battle!

Even if soldiers were fighting for a good cause, they could still get lost or demoralized if they weren't adequately led. The Larkinsons did not have to worry about this problem if Commander Casella was in charge. She had repeatedly shown that she cared for her men. The work she did for the Living Sentinels more than proved her empathy.

This was why giving Casella the best possible means to stay in contact with her own men was so important. The Minerva Project had to be able to reach the most distant parts of the battlefield in order to make sure that no one felt abandoned!

Still, a balance had to be struck. Too many communication modules would obviously detract from the Minerva Project's other attributes.

Ves looked uncomfortable with the current direction of the Minerva Project. "I understand the importance of good communication capabilities, but there won't be much capacity left for the mech's other functions such as its ranged combat capabilities. Don't forget that our expert mechs are mainly needed to resist against other expert mechs. It would be a waste for us to turn it into a pure auxiliary mech."

"Are you sure about that?" Gloriana challengingly raised her eyebrow.

"What are you thinking?"

"I am thinking that Commander Casella might be more capable of defeating enemy expert mechs than you think. Do you recall Venerable Ghanso and his Charlemagne?"

Ves quickly understood what his wife was hinting at. "That's an entirely different case! Ghanso is not a commander at all! It's the mech that is doing all of the work! If we want to reproduce the means that Master Huron employed to create his Scarra, then we need the expertise of a neural interface specialist which we don't have."

"Why are you being so pessimistic?" Gloriana frowned. "Haven't you seen the footage of Commander Casella's breakthrough event? Her forced resonance manifestation directly elevated the mech pilots under her command into pseudo-expert candidates!"

"I know that, but that doesn't mean it is easy for us to reproduce! Besides, the Larkinson mechs that fought alongside Commander Casella after her breakthrough fell short of performing as good as the Scarra. We need the right solutions to enable Commander Casella to channel her powers in this special way, and I'm not sure whether we can reproduce the effect that Master Huron once achieved. Don't forget that both the master and slave units were specifically designed to facilitate this process!"

The implication here was that Gloriana's dream of creating an expert mech that could replicate this powerful effect required the design of a companion mech!

This was not something that Ves wanted to do at this time. Although he favored bold ambitions, that didn't mean that mech designers should pursue them right away. He was afraid that Gloriana wanted to bite way more than she could chew with this ambitious goal!

Ves turned to the oldest man in the room. "What do you think, professor?"

Professor Benedict looked relaxed as he had watched the argument play out. It didn't appear he was invested in the matter, so he shouldn't be too biased.

"Despite your expanded capabilities, it is best to take it slow. While the end user of your expert mech has shown an impressive capability to empower friendly mechs, she might not be strong enough to reproduce this effect. The first expert mech of any newly-ascended demigod should focus on the basics first because we can clearly model the pilot's fundamental performance characteristics. It is more difficult to determine the more advanced capabilities of the expert pilots, especially at an early stage where she is still developing her own powers."

Everyone else nodded. He brought up an important point. Perhaps Commander Casella might become a powerful battlefield commander one day, but that would certainly take a lot of time.

There was a limit to what newly-ascended expert pilots could do. Even if she was equipped with a more powerful expert mech, Commander Casella might not be able to utilize more than 30 percent of its potential!

In that case, rather than aim too high, it was easier and more economical to settle for a more modest expert mech design that Casella could utilize 80 percent of its potential at the start.

This provided her with enough room to grow in without unnecessarily adding too much bloat to the mech design.

"If we do this, then we should revisit our expert mech and upgrade or replace it in the future." Juliet Stamos remarked.

Ves nodded. "That is already the case with our other expert mechs. There is nothing unusual about doing this. The premise is that Commander Casella will remain active at that time."

In the end, Gloriana agreed to pare back her ambitions a bit and skip the inclusion of any excessive communication modules.

While the Minerva Project still possessed much superior communication tech than the other expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan, it still offered enough room for other functions!

On the subject of that, the meeting finally addressed the offensive capabilities of the expert mech.

"I know you all have opinions on how to arm the Minerva Project. We can make multiple arguments on whether to arm it with a rifle or a cannon, whether to make the weapon big or small, whether to focus on long-range or medium-range combat and so on. Here is what I think."

She tapped the project, causing it to switch to a vague draft of a luminar crystal rifle.

Ves leaned forward as he studied her work.

The weapon immediately stood out to Ves because of the unusual break in its body. As he studied the weapon further, he understood what his wife was thinking.

"This is a transformable weapon." He said.

"Yes." She nodded. "Our clan currently enjoys the services of Venerable Stark, who has proven to be an extremely potent ranged combatant when piloting the Amaranto. However, as the Battle of Fordilla Zentra has proved, once she is suppressed by powerful enemies, it is hard for her to leverage her full power. If she had the assistance of a second expert ranged mech, then she wouldn't have been trapped for so long."

"So you intend the Minerva Project to be the machine that can also bail out troubled mechs in the future."

"Exactly. The Minerva Project should have a great overview of the battlefield. While its firepower will never match that of the Amaranto, Commander Casella will always be able to know where to employ her firepower the best. In order to ensure we can maximize her value as a literal troubleshooter, we need to make sure the weapon is accurate and powerful enough to pick out targets at longer ranges."

"That's going to require a large and substantial rifle. I'm not entirely familiar with this alien tech, but to me it looks too slender to inspire much confidence." Sara Voiken remarked.

"It is not meant to down enemy expert mechs in one or two shots." Gloriana said. "That is the Amaranto's purview. The Minerva Project only needs enough ranged firepower to pose a moderate threat to distant expert mechs and relieve troubled friendly units that way. Other expert mechs will still be needed to do the bulk of the fighting."

"I take it that's not the only way to use the weapon." Ves spoke up. "That break in the weapon is quite noticeable. Is it supposed to break in half?"

His wife nodded and tapped the projection to cause the weapon to transform. "That's right. As you can see, when you detach its forward section from the body, the weapon

effectively turns into a more compact submachine gun. Its lighter mass and shorter length results makes it considerably easier to handle, which is perfect for short-ranged combat."

The expected performance characteristics of this shorter weapon was different from its previous mode. According to Gloriana, the submachine gun had to possess a high firing rate. This was a much better choice for short-ranged combat where there was no opportunity to aim and land a powerful strike with a much more cumbersome longer weapon.

Even so, several mech designers had questions about the usefulness of this weapon mode.

"Isn't this submachine gun too weak against most expert melee mechs?" Ves frowned. "While this weapon is better than nothing, I cannot imagine that Commander Casella can defeat any armored expert mechs that manage to get close."

Juliet had a different view on the weapon. "It is effective against expert light mechs, which are the most likely assassination threats that Commander Casella will face on the battlefield. The Minerva Project doesn't necessarily need more striking power. Instead, the lower energy consumption and higher firing rate of this compact weapon mode is much more useful against lighter targets."

"Armored mechs will just laugh at the plinky energy beams it shoots." Sara said. "Sure, the submachine gun can probably cripple a mech through sustained fire, but that will take a lot of time. The Minerva Project might not even be able to last that long as its frame doesn't look particularly maneuverable."

Gloriana took in all of the feedback but remained true to her vision.

"Each of you has a point, but I think this is still the right course of action to take. The Minerva Project is different from an expert rifleman mech and its design should reflect that. Don't forget that it is solely meant to fight against enemy expert mechs. While the firepower of this submachine gun is not great against powerful mechs, it is more than sufficient to cripple or destroy any standard mech that gets close. It can neutralize hundreds of mechs if it is allowed to fire its weapon with impunity."

The submachine gun mode made more sense now. Gloriana was accounting for multiple different situations, including action on land where the environment may be a lot more confined.

Although the luminar crystal weapon's transformation mode added a lot of complexity to its design, Ves did not consider it to be a particularly difficult challenge. He already had numerous ideas on how to realize this two-mode weapon.

"The humble submachine gun does not enjoy a stellar reputation in mech combat, but it is a good weapon at closer ranges." Professor Benedict said his own piece. "It also doesn't have to be as weak as you think. As long as you implement enough quality solutions in the weapon, it can perform close to that of a full-sized rifle. It all depends on how much you are willing to invest in its construction."

Ves shook his head. "Let's not go overboard. As you have already said, this will be Commander Casella's first expert mech. We don't know whether she can make good use of a more powerful weapon. Let us design something more modest and see what she can do with that. If she happens to possess abilities that can substantially empower her own attacks like Venerable Stark, then it is worth investing more in the Minerva Project's offensive capabilities. If not, then we should mainly treat the gun as a self-defense tool."

Was the Minerva Project a rifleman mech or a command mech? For now, the Larkinsons wanted to make it function as both, but it was questionable whether this was the right choice.

Chapter 3549: Natural Allies

The meeting concerning the Minerva Project lasted several hours. The gathered mech designers addressed a lot of additional topics such as the defenses of the expert command mech and the budget allocation to all of its major parts and systems.

There was a lot to discuss about and they hadn't even addressed how they would integrate the resonating materials to the mech design!

For that, the Journeyman had to delegate much of the crucial work to Professor Benedict. He was the only one among them that could make the resonating materials sync with the expert mech and the expert pilot.

"I am not familiar with the Talasmir and the Pecker Carbon that you have acquired from Vultit." The Senior Mech Designer said as the conversation turned to the extraordinary capabilities of the Minerva Project. "I must examine the samples and perform experiments on them in order to determine their usage. I will also have to obtain Casella Ingvar's cooperation in order to achieve the best results. This will take time and I will not be able to provide any specific solutions until the design project has passed a certain stage."

Ves and Gloriana didn't look too surprised. Master Willix also took her time to perform her responsibilities in the previous Larkinson expert mech design projects. Of course, she didn't need to perform a lot of work in person, but she possessed much greater capabilities than a Senior who didn't have access to the latest tech.

"We understand, professor." Gloriana replied. "The pace of the Minerva Project is not high because we are currently on many different projects at this time. Nonetheless, the

Minerva Project is not the most complicated expert mech design that we have worked on, so it should not slow us down too much."

They discussed a bit more about how to proceed from here. Everyone needed to work together to select the right parts and flesh out the draft design further. Gloriana was also open to new suggestions as long as they were good.

Once the meeting ended, Ves and Professor Benedict stayed together in order to hold a more private talk among themselves.

The two hadn't spoken to each other in private for a long time, so neither of them were in a hurry to talk business.

They calmly walked around the design labs and looked at the hundreds of assistant mech designers performing their own individual tasks. Much of them were doing typical assisting functions such as researching different tech and materials that the lead designers might choose to implement in their different mech designs.

Others were already solving basic design problems that the lead designers had thrown at them. While Journeymen such as Ves could easily solve these problems in time, it was better to delegate them to others so that they could concentrate on more difficult matters.

Since the Larkinson Clan had recruited so many assistant mech designers, it would be a waste not to make use of all of the manpower!

The industrious and harmonious sight put a smile on Professor Benedict's face.

"You chose well, Ves. These young mech designers are all motivated and capable. None of them are slacking off by my judgment."

"A good incentive system helps a lot with that. My wife is also a hard taskmaster. None of the assistants dare to take their assignments lightly with her around."

"I can see how that helps." Benedict said.

The two resumed the little tour. Although the Larkinsons were all working on sensitive matters, there were sufficient privacy screens in place to prevent unwanted leakage of sensitive materials.

Even if Professor Benedict was able to circumvent this precaution, Ves didn't really care. None of the design projects had reached an advanced stage so there was nothing specific to leak at this time.

The two mech designers eventually retired to another private workplace before they began their true discussion.

"I should not tell you that Patriarch Reginald Cross is paying close attention to this design project. His patience is wearing thin after he has seen the results of your previous expert mech design projects. He knows that there is a large chance that he will be able to obtain the mech of his dreams."

"We can't guarantee that his future expert mech will become a masterwork." Ves cautioned.

"I am aware of that, but Reginald is... obsessed." The professor admitted.

That was a pretty strong verdict coming from a mech designer who had once allowed his obsession to ruin his first career!

"Well, we won't have to keep him waiting for long. Once we successfully complete the Minerva Project and develop a good basis of cooperation between us, we can proceed to design Reginald's expert mech with plenty of experience under our belt."

The Minerva Project was an important precursor to this crucial job because it was a lengthy practice run for Professor Benedict and the Larkinson mech designers.

Although each of them were good at their jobs, they were unaccustomed to working together. They needed to spend the following months solving all of the teething problems that would inevitably crop up due to several unfamiliar mech designers working together for the first time.

Ves not only had to make sure that he could cooperate with Professor Benedict, he also had to pay attention to Sara Voiken who he had yet to collaborate with either.

Though all of it was new to Ves, he looked forward to building up more experience in this regard. In the future, he would probably collaborate with many different mech designers, and it would be handy if he was already accustomed to working with complete strangers.

"Do you think that Gloriana has chosen a good direction for the Minerva Project?" Ves asked. "Please give me your honest thoughts."

The Senior Mech Designer chuckled at his request. "I do not have a strong opinion about her choices. Miss Gloriana is a competent mech designer, and some of the questionable decisions may not be her fault. Perhaps the end user has issued a number of special requests. It would explain the decision to implement a submachine gun mode to the weapon."

"Ah. Yeah, she would never design a mech that reduced its fit to its mech pilot."

"It is fine for expert mechs to possess distinct vulnerabilities. No mech can guard against any threat. The Minerva Project is an expert mech that is inherently meant to

operate alongside allies. It must rely on friendly elements rather than itself to address its greatest concerns."

Ves sighed. "I guess we'll have to leave it at that."

He still wanted to pair the Minerva Project with a bigger and more powerful gun, but he understood why Gloriana wanted to keep the weapon more restrained. The command mech needed powerful commanding capabilities in order to make full use of Commander Casella's abilities.

"Your current expert mechs are all powerful, but that is because Master Willix has provided you a great degree of convenience. Do not expect the same level of results from me. I am still inferior to a Master of her caliber." Professor Benedict warned.

"We understand. We're already happy if you can grant our expert mech decent resonating abilities. Over time, we'll be able to handle this matter ourselves."

It would probably take a few decades for that to happen. Ves had many many strides as of late, but becoming a Senior required a lot more accumulation that simply couldn't be done in a short amount of time.

While it was true that exceptional mech designers such as the famed Polymath managed to advance a lot faster than that, she was an outlier who operated differently from every other mech designer. Ves did not think he could come close to challenging her illustrious speed records.

"Don't obsess too much about expert mechs, Ves. You are still a Journeyman. You should be cutting your teeth into more reasonable mech designs."

"I'm doing that as well, but I cannot stand aside when our clan needs another mech design. My design philosophy plays a crucial role in making them stand out from other expert mechs."

"I'm aware of that, or else my friend Reginald wouldn't have waited for you for so long." Professor Benedict smiled. "To some mech designers such as your spouse, expert mechs and even more powerful machines may be their ultimate dream. I do not think you are one of them. You have done good work with your expert mechs, but you have made an even greater impact on the mech community with your standard mech designs. This is where your real strength lies."

Ves nodded in agreement. "I do like to affect as many people with my work as possible, but expert mechs are interesting as well. The lessons I learn from designing these high-end mechs can also be applied to lower-end projects."

He didn't want to talk too much about his own mech design trajectory, so he soon attempted to change the topic.

"Professor, if I may ask, my clan and I couldn't help but notice that the Cross Clan gained a lot of new combat carriers all of a sudden. We've tracked the tournaments that your Crosser mech pilots have participated in and they didn't win enough ships to account for the numbers. How did your clan obtain the other half of combat carriers?"

The Senior Mech Designer directed a coy smile at the Journeyman.

"Curious, aren't you? I'm not surprised. Combat carriers don't appear out of the blue, especially in the Red Ocean where the shipbuilding industry is too limited. I won't keep you in suspense. Just as you and your fellow Larkinsons have aligned yourselves with different MTA Factions, so have I. Unlike you, I have much more to offer to them, and I am much closer to advancing to Master as well. Finding a willing partner to exchange a few dozen combat carriers to me is not an insurmountable problem. I merely had to offer enough compensation."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Did you promise your new 'partner' anything that might compromise our alliance?"

"No." Professor Benedict shook his head. "I would have brought it up with you if that is the case. My promise is very simple. If and when I advance to Master and settle into my new rank, I am obliged to participate in several future advanced design projects for free. That is all. That doesn't sound so nefarious, right?"

Ves inwardly sighed in relief. He had come up with many ludicrous possibilities why the Cross Clan was able to gain so many starships with ease. It turned out that Professor Benedict merely indebted himself to another party.

As far as obligations went, designing a few mechs was one of the least worrisome possibilities. Mech designers existed to design mechs. Professor Benedict would still do his work as normal. The only difference was that he had to work for a different client.

"I can't help but notice that you haven't mentioned the faction you are cooperating with. Which one did you get into cahoots with?" Ves asked as he recalled he almost missed this little detail.

"Do you truly want to know?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I am suggesting that you may feel better if you are kept in the dark."

Ves began to grow concerned again. "I would rather shine a light in the monster's face than have it lurking around me for years on end. The more you act mysteriously, the more I need to know the answer. Just give it to me, please."

"Well, you asked for it." The Senior shrugged as if he didn't care about the consequences. "I have always developed an affinity to the Unbound Humanity Faction of the MTA."

The Unbounders!

Ves looked shocked at the professor. Although he was glad that Professor Benedict didn't get into bed with the Dissolutionists, the Unbounders were barely any better!

One group of people wanted to dissolve the MTA while the other wanted to get rid of all of its rules. The actual differences between them weren't that big!

"...Why?"

"Don't you think that we are constrained by too many rules these days?" Professor Benedict smirked. "Not many people are able to realize how we have confined yourselves in too many artificial boundaries. My... personal beliefs have turned me into a natural ally of the Unbounders. After we came into touch with each other, we found that there is a good basis of cooperation between us. Since this faction is not particularly popular within the MTA, it was fairly easy for me to become valued by them... This is also how I have managed to gain a large concession soon after entering the Red Ocean."

Chapter 3550: Opportunist

Professor Benedict Cortez hooked up with the Unbound Humanity Faction.

The truth should have been obvious to Ves. Out of the twelve major factions of the Mech Trade Association, only two of them advocated for the removal of the rules and taboos that heavily constrained the behavior of mech designers and other humans for that matter.

On the whole, many of those restrictions such as the prohibition against using warships had been a godsend to a human population that had almost made itself extinct by recklessly employing weapons of mass destruction.

Many humans had proven with their deeds that they lacked too much restraint and responsibility to govern their own conduct. When people turned bad, the amount of destruction they could unleash with an armed battleship in their control was apocalyptic!

Yet... as human society recovered and people sobered up over the centuries, certain voices began to voice doubts whether these restrictions were still needed.

The longer most of humanity operated under its own shackles, the more it became unaccustomed to waging war at its highest level!

For obvious reasons, the Big Two did not want to lift the restrictions. Why should they? They were the most powerful organizations of human civilization. They were the de-facto sovereigns of humanity. The most valuable resources, talents, knowledge and other products of humanity fell into their hands, which not only empowered them, but also enriched them beyond anything the first-rate superstates had enjoyed.

With so many interests at stake, almost every member of the MTA sought to keep most of humanity in their cages.

Only a small number of radical or principled mechers had the courage to resist this distorted order.

Some of them believed that humanity had 'grown up' to a point where it could responsibly make use of stronger weapons. They believed that the human race must go back to the glory days of the Age of Stars and the Age of Conquest in order to maximize its potential.

Others just had more selfish reasons for lifting the restrictions. Mechs themselves were heavily restricted in what they could do. There were lots of mech designers like Professor Benedict who harbored wild dreams but found themselves unable to execute them because there were too many rules in the way!

Ves figured that Professor Benedict fell into the latter category. Ves hadn't interacted with the former Skull Architect a lot of times, but from what he could judge, the Senior obviously wanted to be able to do more in the open.

To be honest, Ves was also sympathetic towards this stance. He wouldn't have to hide so many illicit experiments if the MTA didn't impose so many rules on what mech designers were allowed to do in order to develop their mechs.

However, the more rational part of him actually supported the current order. He couldn't count the amount of times he had witnessed people going mad with power and acting completely without regard for the harm they caused to others.

If the MTA no longer enforced its admittedly patronizing rules over humanity, Ves easily predicted that half of the Milky Way would soon explode from all of the maddened people flinging nuclear bombs and antimatter bombs at each other!

After decades or centuries of restraining each other's hatred against each other, there were lots of states that wanted nothing more than to blow up their enemies!

Even the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire might start a titanic clash that might very well break human civilization in half in their pursuit to achieve absolute hegemony over the Milky Way!

Ves understood that many humans could easily transform into monsters when they let their greed and baser desires get the better of them. Though he didn't like the Big Two's heavy-handed policies that effectively trapped most space peasants in weak and mostly inconsequential states, he understood that most of the alternatives were much worse.

Therefore, he did not have a good opinion of the Unbound Humanity Faction.

From what he had learned of its ideology and stances after discovering its existence, the controversial faction did not really present a clear answer on what should happen next after lifting all of the laws and taboos that shackled humanity.

Should the MTA, which had lost most of its legitimacy and enforcement power, just sit back and watch the brush fires erupt all over human space?

There was no way that things would go well if humanity did not receive any subsequent guidance! However, the Unbounders were made up of a lot of different people who each had different reasons and motivations to support their common cause.

While they could all agree on lifting most of the rules, they were less united on what should happen next!

This was their biggest and also another reason why every other human hated them. Even Ves regarded Professor Benedict with a bit more vigilance than before.

Throughout their subsequent talks, the Senior clearly noticed the effect his revelation had on the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan.

"I wouldn't worry too much if I were you, Ves." The professor gave him a reassuring smile. "Although these MTA factions all dream big, in practice they are constantly held back to their many rivals. Compromise is the name of the game here. Only by setting aside their more radical desires can they find enough common ground with each other. This is crucial to gain support for major initiatives."

"I am already aware of that dynamic, professor."

"Then you should know that as long as the balance of power within the Galactic Mech Council continues to remain fractured, the MTA's policies will always follow a middle ground. There are hardly any opportunities for radicals such as the Unbounders to get taken seriously. They are essentially powerless to enact their own proposals."

"And you decided to join them knowing that the Unbounders are a joke in the MTA?"

Professor Benedict grinned. "The Unbound Humanity Faction is still a genuine major MTA faction. It enjoys the support of at least several Star Designers and galactic mech councilors. The wealth, resources, power and authority it has at its disposal is far beyond what you can imagine. Even if it is among the smallest and least attractive

among the twelve major factions, that is only relative to the MTA's own standards. To indigenous mech designers such as us, even the junk they throw in the trash chutes is worth a fortune!"

"I see."

Ves understood Professor Benedict's game a bit more. The man did not join the Unbound Humanity Faction because he was a true believer. It was more likely that he just wanted to take advantage of a faction and the Unbounders were the best ones that he could align with considering his own stances.

The fact that the Unbound Humanity Faction was so marginalized within the MTA made people who wished to associate it even more valuable! Professor Benedict was definitely trying to milk this relationship to the utmost, as evidenced by all of the extra combat carriers he secured for the Cross Clan.

However, there was one flaw to this plan.

"Are you sure the Unbounders will remain toothless? The balance of power can change. What if the faction you have joined has gained real power or support? What if it demands more cooperation from associates such as you? You might get pulled into a power struggle that is much more dangerous and consequential than you imagined."

"Hahaha! Doesn't that sound great?!" Professor Benedict grew excited at the thought. "I think you are mistaken about something, Ves. I don't necessarily dislike a disruption to the current order. It's the opposite. I like shakeups! Only by interrupting the status quo will ambitious people like you and I be able to find greater opportunities to climb up and pull down the established powers that get in our way."

"That sounds dangerous, professor."

"Dangers will come regardless of what we do. What is important is our ability to cope with them. The Crown Uprising, the opening of the Red Ocean, the popularization of phasewater and just a few of the disruptive events that are already changing human civilizations in ways that we cannot predict. Rather than fear these changes, we should embrace them if they come! This is one of the key lessons that I have learned throughout my career. Whether our society is stable or undergoing great upheaval, only the best will be able to adapt to multiple situations. No matter what will happen in the future, the ability to survive and thrive in different scenarios will be key to our ultimate success!"

Ves looked shocked at the older mech designer!

Although the man presented a rather extreme argument, it also contained many elements that he agreed with! Ves too prized the ability to adapt to changing

circumstances. His Larkinson Clan certainly had to exercise this capability multiple times over its short existence.

That didn't mean he wanted the current order to start imploding. He would much rather live in a more stable and civilized society where he didn't need to watch out for lethal threats behind his back all the time. He wanted to design mechs and sell them to a prosperous market that was highly efficient and highly interconnected.

The current model of humanity might have many flaws, but it generated one of the best possible market circumstances for mech companies. Ves didn't think that he would be able to profit as much from his business activities if warships started to become popular again!

After Professor Benedict made his opinions clear, the two switched to lighter topics. They no longer talked about any heavy matters and instead discussed more modest subjects such as the growth of their clans and the future business activities of Professor Benedict's newly-founded equipment development company.

"How much progress have you made so far?" Ves asked. "When will your new company release its first component designs?"

"Not soon." Benedict shook his head. "We must start from scratch. We do not have any existing products to build upon. We must continue to hire more researchers and engineers and give them time to complete their projects. It will take years before we can release our first products. Our output will not be high at first as we will still be working out our approach. I estimate that we will only be able to pick up steam after we have passed our first decade."

"That's... a long time, especially in a place like the Red Ocean where everything moves quickly."

"I'm aware of the challenges. The competition is already formidable here and it is unlikely for our equipment development company to gain any traction in the local market. Nonetheless, it is important for our alliance to be able to develop and produce our own mech components and potentially other machines. Relying too much on external developers and suppliers is a vulnerability that might ruin us if the markets collapse."

Ves agreed with the Senior, but that did not necessarily mean he was willing to invest in a solution. What Professor Benedict was doing was extremely expensive and time-consuming. The Cross Clan might not even be able to pull it off in the end.

He was more than happy to let the Crossers take over this particular niche. The Larkinson Clan already had enough work on its hands.

"By the way, I heard you recruited a bunch of Journeymen back in Vulit. I haven't met with them yet. It would be nice if you could introduce them to me one day. We're all colleagues and we might even work alongside each other one day."

Professor Benedict grunted. "I just recruited them because I need extra hands. They are not particularly brilliant and can never compare to the likes of you. I will bring them along when it is convenient, but do not hold too many expectations. Not every Journeyman shines brightly after they have advanced. It takes great passion and motivation for us to keep working hard. You are still young, so it is not that difficult for you to push yourself to improve. Those that are older find it much more difficult to sustain their drive."

"I understand."