

## Mech 3651

### *Chapter 3651 Rekindled Fires*

"This is a historic day for all of us." Calsie Doornbos spoke in front of a construction site. "Before, we were like scattered sand. Each of us struggled to survive and operate in the Red Ocean. Those difficulties will end now that we have pooled our strength and resources together. With the Larkinson Clan along with Murphy & Sons as our core, we shall form a new gathering where every member shall cooperate when needed but never feel obligated to do more."

Hundreds of leaders and representatives sent by thirty different organizations attended the ceremony at this time. This was a momentous occasion for all of them. After so much time of trying to solve their challenges alone, they could finally share some of their burdens with other peers.

Ves originally wanted to make this announcement, but he was currently persona non grata on Davute VII. He had no choice but to attend by remote.

His physical projection currently sat in the front seat. At least Minister Shederin and Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson had no problems showing up in person. They would do a fine job hobnobbing with the dignitaries sent by the Larkinson Clan's new trade buddies.

"Chairwoman Calsie Doornbos is performing adequately at the moment." Minister Shederin quietly commented to Ves. "What made you choose her over the candidates that I have recommended?"

"Calsie and I go back a long way, which you probably already know." Ves whispered back. "I am aware that she might not be the most competent person to wrangle all of these consortium members, but I can always count on her to remain loyal to me. So long as she doesn't screw up, she will always hold my confidence."

Chief Minister Raymond had less qualms about Calsie. "I've worked with her in the past when she managed the LMC on the patriarch's behalf. She's a steady if conservative leader. She knows her limits and abides by them. She may not be as effective in dynamic situations, she will not allow our new trade consortium to decline under her watch."

"We shall see whether she has what it takes to keep its members happy." Shederin remarked.

Meanwhile, Calsie continued her speech.

"The Open Consortium of Krakatoa is the first collective of its kind. Its name includes the word 'open' because that is what characterizes this new initiative the most. Our

consortium is open, and we mean it. As long as we have space for members, other pioneering organizations may easily enter as long as they agree to our rules and pass our extensive vetting procedures."

This sounded as if any random pioneering organization could join the Open Consortium, which wasn't entirely true. Everyone was aware that a brand-new consortium needed to set everything up and get its bearings straight.

Once the consortium established a decent foundation, it would be ready to expand, but that might take months or years.

Calsie smiled. "Leaving the consortium is also easy. Unlike other groups, we do not insist on keeping members who are unwilling to work together anymore. You do not need to provide any reason to apply to withdraw from the Open Consortium. We shall always stay true to our name and make your departure as frictionless as possible. The only reason that the exit procedure can take months is because a significant amount of time is needed to smoothly wrap up any agreements, transactions, contracts and other entanglements. As soon as we have completed the final bureaucratic procedure, you may leave with our blessing."

This was by far the greatest attraction of the Open Consortium of Krakatoa. No one wanted to be bound by contracts that spanned for decades if they could help it. Many pioneers who arrived in the Red Ocean were arrogant people. Each of them harbored great ambitions about rising to the top in their respective fields.

The chances that they could succeed were drastically lower if they had to give up their independence and become a vassal to a more powerful influence.

No matter what kind of arrangement they made with their patrons, the nature of a relationship between a superior and a vassal meant that the weaker party always ended up surrendering more than initially agreed upon.

It was far too easy for the side that held all of the power to make increasingly more excessive demands.

Of course, not every alliance exhibited this phenomenon. Yet abuses were frequent enough in the Red Ocean that there was a justifiable fear towards getting taken advantage of. Why settle for 50 percent when you could easily take 100 percent? That was the thought process behind many 'voluntary' mergers and acquisitions.

The Open Consortium of Krakatoa offered those who were most worried about this issue a way out of this trap. They finally saw an opportunity to solve their supply problems without exposing themselves to getting exploited.

There was just one little complication, though.

Once Calsie neared the end of her speech, she unveiled a large, silver tome that was clearly modeled after the Larkinson Mandate.

Though it wasn't very original, Ves nonetheless felt it was the right tool for the job. It didn't take much effort from him to craft it with high-quality exotics that his clan extracted from the Titania.

He had also infused its pages with ground P-stone particles to strengthen its performance as a totem.

"In order to finalize our agreement and prove our commitment to cooperate in good faith with our fellow members, I invite each of you to sign your names in the Open Book. Our patriarch has already made the first move."

She opened the large tome to display the page where Ves had used an autopen to sign his name.

Everyone stood up and formed a line in order to sign their own names in turn.

Chairwoman Calsie, Minister Shederin and Chief Minister Raymond both added their names to the Open Book.

After that, the Murphies got their turn since their shipbuilding company permanently possessed 15 percent of the voting rights of the Open Consortium.

CEO Gelly Murphy did not look particularly enthused about signing her name at the tome. Even though the contracts had already been signed, taking part in this symbolic ritual just made her surrender all the more painful.

When she came close enough to feel the glow emanating from the Open Book, she became even more hesitant about this move.

Was she truly doing what was best for her family?

"Ahem." Ves' projection softly coughed. "There are many people waiting for their turn."

The old woman glared in his direction before she held the autopen and allowed it to flourish a name on a page. "Well played, Larkinsons."

"The game we played just happened to be more popular than yours, madame." Ves smiled back.

Once Gelly Murphy got out of the way, her two daughters approached the Open Book with considerably greater enthusiasm than their mother. Even its glow didn't deter them from completing their part in this ceremony.

Karina Murphy turned to Ves. "I have lived over 6 decades and I am already a mother. I thought my more adventurous days were already over, but you made me feel young again. I was quite taken with your speech the other day. I rediscovered the fire in my heart. I know how precious it is now. Without your reminder, my flames would have gone out. Thank you for helping me keep my dreams alive."

Ves responded with a genuine smile this time. "It is my pleasure. As one engineer to another, I understand your plight. I felt it was my duty to unshackle you. Our clan employs a ship designer as well and she has come up with a large amount of unorthodox designs over the years. Admittedly, most of them don't work out, but there are still a few that are actually interesting."

"We have already corresponded with each other." Karina revealed. "I would be glad to cooperate with Miss Tsai in realizing her inventive ship designs. I see my younger self in her. Though her qualifications and experience are lacking, her exuberant imagination and her fearlessness is exactly what I need to revive my own passion."

This sounded promising! The more the Murphies cooperated with the Larkinsons, the greater the likelihood that Murphy & Sons would stick with the Open Consortium for the long haul!

"I fully support your cooperative ventures. We may belong to two separate organizations, but we still share a number of goals. Our new Open Consortium partially exists to encourage internal cooperation. We all need more friends in this difficult region."

After Ves finished exchanging with Karina Murphy, her sister Melaia approached him with a question.

"Do you believe that starships can be turned into masterworks?"

His projection blinked. "That's a bit of an abrupt question. It's possible. There are Star Designers who have successfully managed the feat."

"They're mech designers. None of them have ever started working with space-faring vessels. Their heart is probably not truly in it." Melaia contemptuously answered. "Besides, none of their masterwork starships are over a kilometer long."

"...Your ambition is to be the first shipbuilder to construct a masterwork capital ship?"

"Hehe." The middle-aged woman chuckled. "You don't need to tell me how difficult it is to attain this dream. To be honest, I only kept this goal in mind when I just started out my career. Once I became more familiar with the crushing reality of building good ships, I quickly tempered my ambitions."

"What about now?" Ves asked.

"You have motivated me to chase after it again. I'm old enough to realize that the odds are far too great that I will never be able to fulfill this goal in my lifetime, but... at least I tried."

"Even if you fall short of your goal, you would have moved much further from your starting point than if you stuck to your path as an ordinary ship builder."

Melaia firmly nodded. "I agree. I am curious to see how far this new journey will take me. If I ever falter, I hope that the next generations of Murphies can pick up where I left off. As long as we keep working towards the same goal, we'll succeed sooner or later."

"I truly hope that you or your descendants will succeed. It will be a marathon, though."

"My engine will keep me on the move as long as its fire still keeps burning."

Other dignitaries came up to sign their names in the Open Book. They did so with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Much of the hesitation came from their reactions to the Open Book. The special nature of this totem made this symbolic act a lot more meaningful than they expected.

This was because Ves graced it with the presence of the Solemn Guardian.

Out of all of his design spirits, the Solemn Guardian was the most fitting entity for this particular role.

Ves had designed the Open Book in a way that caused everyone who sign their names in it to form a new spiritual connection to the Solemn Guardian.

The bond didn't do all that much. The Solemn Guardian exerted a faint influence over it that would hopefully make the signee more honest about working with the Open Consortium.

The connection also allowed the Solemn Guardian to exert mental restraint whenever the signee thought about betraying or clearly acting against the interests of the Open Consortium and its members.

Though anyone with sufficient will and determination was able to brush past this modest restraint, the Solemn Guardian would at least know that something was amiss as it happened.

This would give the Larkinsons and the other members of the Open Consortium advanced warning about any potential problems.

This bond was not permanent. Those who left the Open Consortium by following the proper procedures would find that they would no longer be tied to the Solemn Guardian in any way.

As for those who did not play by the rules, the Open Consortium actually included a fair amount of punishment clauses in its articles...

#### *Chapter 3652 Hazardous Operations*

Despite his concerns about people acting out because of the demand to sign their names in the Open Book, no incidents of any sort occurred.

The dignitaries that had shown up were all smart people. They had read up on the Larkinson Clan and its 'special technologies' and figured out that this was just part of the package.

Once they completed their part of the ritual, they weren't all that bothered by the faint new spiritual connections. The Solemn Guardian was a noble, single-minded design spirit that produced a positive effect on people's moods.

In fact, the Larkinsons had performed a careful selection in order to make sure that the different parties reacted well to the Solemn Guardian. The clansmen had to toss aside a lot of candidates whose personalities clashed with the duty-bound design spirit.

Ves and the other Larkinsons were happy enough with those that managed to pass all of their checks. The successful conclusion of the founding ceremony pretty much proved the thirty founding members of the Open Consortium of Krakatoa all harbored goodwill towards the new collective.

The members all knew that as well, so they quickly grew much friendlier towards each other. As of today, they were not only bound to each other by contract, but also by duty. So long as each of them remained a part of the Open Consortium, they were obliged to never plot against each other.

After the ceremony, the dignitaries all moved to a nearby hotel lounge where they all got to know each other further. Numerous members even made private business deals on the spot when they discovered that they could be of service to each other.

As anyone could imagine, the Murphy delegation was the most popular one of all. Almost any pioneering organization could use more ships, so much so that the other parties were all willing to pre-pay their orders.

The amount of people flocking to the Murphies was so great that they were forced to draw lots in order to determine their turns.

This was exactly what the Murphies wanted to see today. Promising to build starships in the future was not a big deal for them. What they truly valued was the hundreds of mech credits pouring into their coffers right away!

Although it would still be an ordeal for Murphy & Sons to restore its incomplete shipyard, at least the shipbuilding company no longer had to worry about becoming insolvent for a long time.

Though the Larkinsons were the last to meet with the Murphy delegation, they had actually made a prior agreement with the shipbuilders.

The first ship that would come out of the shipyard once it was repaired would belong to the Larkinson Clan.

The only question now was to determine what kind of ship the Larkinson Clan wanted to obtain.

"Have you made a decision yet, sir?" Vivian Tsai's projection asked. "Will you go for a new combat carrier or do you prefer a vessel that offers more utility?"

Ves' projection frowned in thought. "I don't suppose we can order a new capital ship, can we? It doesn't have to be as big as the Gorgoneion."

"Impossible." Chief Shipbuilder Melaia Murphy shook her head. "First, our shipyard can only build a ship that is up to 800 meters long and is not too tall or wide. Second, we will be restarting our shipbuilding operations with numerous upgrades to our shipyard as we seek to install new systems that are more easily available in Davute. This means that it is not advisable for us to work on an ambitious project."

That was not pleasant news. Ves was tempted to ask whether the Larkinson Clan could postpone its order until the Murphies sorted out their initial issues, but time was of the essence.

He would rather obtain a new ship sooner than wait another year and get a slightly better one. If a battle broke out in the meantime, then the addition of any hull would definitely save a lot of lives!

"We have enough auxiliary vessels for the moment." Ves stated. "Sure, we could always use more, but our need for carriers is much greater. What is the highest mech capacity that you can stuff in a single combat carrier?"

"The exact figure varies heavily depending on what you are willing to compromise upon." Karina Murphy answered. "If you want to maximize the carrying capacity of your vessel, then you can store 120 or even 150 mechs on an enlarged combat carrier. However, I highly advise against this course of action as the hull would simply be too weak to endure the rigors of combat. It would help if you tell us what your preferred



order's mission profile should be. Is she a pure mech conveyor? Will it be utilized for stealth operations? Or do you wish for her to become a specialized ordnance carrier that can continuously resupply ammunition-hungry mechs in combat?"

All of those options sounded compelling to Ves. He had been thinking about his options for an entire day, but he still couldn't make up his mind.

If he had a choice, he would have picked all of the available options, but that was clearly not possible.

He decided that he might as well ask for suggestions. He turned to his other advisors.

"What do you guys think? Raymond, you go first."

The old Larkinson didn't expect the patriarch to ask for his opinion. He had to spend a few moments to compose his thoughts.

"I understand the need for additional carriers, but if you ask me, I think we are neglecting the other needs of our fleet. One of our growing constraints is our increasing lack of cargo capacity. Ever since we have entered the Red Ocean, we have managed to obtain several dozen combat carriers, but we have not acquired any notable amount of logistical ships. This has led to an imbalance in our ship composition that makes it more difficult to run a fleet than it should."

"We have the Spirit of Bentheim, which is able to provide much more support than a dozen smaller vessels." Ves insisted.

"That is correct, but the ship also goes through raw materials at such a fast pace that our stockpiles run out too quickly. If we can supplement our fleet with the biggest possible cargo ship possible, we can carry significantly greater quantities of spare parts and resources. This will provide us with considerably more depth when our expedition has led us far away from Davute and any other planet where we can resupply. Aside from that, the addition of a cargo ship will also make our mining runs more lucrative."

Ves genuinely became tempted to adopt Raymond's suggestion, but then he realized the flaw in this decision.

Choosing to acquire a cargo vessel over a combat carrier would not help the Larkinsons out in any pitched battles.

A situation might occur in the future where bringing as many mechs as possible could mean the difference between survival and annihilation.

If his fleet brought more mechs than necessary, then no harm was done.



If his fleet happened to bring less machines, then Ves might not be alive long enough to regret his decision!

Ves looked at Raymond and sighed. "I understand your decision, but I don't like our chances at the moment. There are many human and alien threats out there. I'm still set on acquiring an additional combat carrier."

He shifted his gaze to Minister Shederin Purnesse. The foreign minister came up with his own suggestion.

"Our fleet currently possesses numerous majestic capital ships, but the combat carriers we obtained in Vulit are mostly generic in appearance. I believe it is important to show the prestige of our clan by ordering a carrier vessel that is suited to be employed in various official functions such as meeting with the leaders of a planet."

"You want us to acquire a diplomatic vessel?"

"Yes. The ship does not have to compromise her combat performance, but it would be greatly helpful if she is built for statecraft."

This was a more interesting proposal. Ves already understood the importance of making a good impression on other parties in the Red Ocean. Without the services of Shederin and the rest of the Purnesse Family, his clan would have never been able to form the Open Consortium or gain the allegiance of the Murphy Family.

"This sounds good. What about you, then, Vivian? You're our resident shipwright here, so you should know more about this topic than anyone else."

"I already have a slightly different suggestion in mind." Vivian Tsai responded. "One of my more recent draft designs centers around a combat carrier specialized in hazardous landing operations."

"What does that mean?"

"The vessel would be designed with extra resilience in mind. However, different from an armored vessel that is mainly designed to withstand enemy bombardment, my proposed ship will come with numerous accommodations that will allow her to resist extreme environments for an extended amount of time. Think about violent planetary environments such as sandstorms, heavy radioactivity or extreme temperatures."

"That sounds useful... if we actually bother to land on any planets." Ves remarked.

"I think we will. Many of the untapped resources of the Red Ocean are trapped on planets, not all of which are friendly enough towards life. The combat carriers that we have managed to win in several tournaments are all serviceable, but none of them are tough enough to survive hostile environments. My ship can do better because her hull

and structure are not only stronger than usual, but also because I intend to simply and harden her various systems. This will result in fewer points of failure which will massively increase the chances that such a vessel will survive the perils of a hostile planet."

She made a lot of good points. Though Ves understood that this kind of vessel would come with a lower mech capacity than usual, his fleet would gain a unique new capability.

"Let's go with that, then. Work your idea out with the Murphies. Once you have come up with a plan, bring it up to me. I want to go over the full details before I approve of her construction."

It will take at least three months for us to get our shipyard in basic working order." Melaia Murphy stated. "There is no hurry to begin construction. We can spend this time refining the design."

"How much will this cost?" Ves asked.

"That depends. The configuration will certainly demand additional hull plating and structural components. Given the relatively high price levels in Davute, the price may run up to 1000 MTA credits."

That was a massive amount for an up-sized combat carrier. However, the capabilities that Vivian's proposal provided was worth the additional charges.

"That sounds... acceptable. Please generate a more exact estimate. Our clan is already deep in debt so I need to know exactly how much more we'll be in the red."

The Larkinsons discussed a few other potential ship orders with the Murphies, but much of that would have to wait until every founding member of the Open Consortium had their turn.

Giving them the opportunity to place a ship order was one of the attractions the Larkinsons used to lure members into the Open Consortium. Murphy & Sons needed to fulfill them as soon as possible in order to show that everyone involved was serious.

"By the way, Shederin, have we managed to make any progress on establishing contact with any material suppliers?"

The foreign minister nodded. "We did. Director Calsie Doornbos has an appointment tomorrow. Our recent publicity stunt along with the addition of Murphy & Sons has made our consortium considerably more attractive to potential trading partners. However, any talks we hold with them will take at least several weeks to conclude. Our fleet is scheduled to depart much sooner than that, so we will need to find an interim solution in order to stock up on supplies. That should not be a problem as it has become much

easier for us to purchase goods through certain channels by paying above market price."

"Ugh."

### *Chapter 3653 Career Building*

The Golden Skull Alliance was ready to depart.

After a relatively brief stay in the Davute System, the Larkinson Clan and its allies completed most of their business.

The Open Consortium of Krakatoa officially went into operation. Even though the consortium was horribly understaffed and still had to wait until its headquarters was complete, Chairwoman Calsie was optimistic about the future.

Ves met with the woman in a rented office in one of the buildings of the Commercial District. The two Larkinsons discussed much of the work that the consortium needed to do in order to achieve stability.

"We are facing two challenges at the moment." Calsie explained. "First, we need to make sure we can retain our members. I get the feeling that many of them have much less reason to stay once Murphy & Sons delivered their ship order. They will have to wait years until they can receive another ship, and that may be too long of a wait for them. Our consortium needs to make sure that continued membership conveys other substantial benefits."

"Hm, that's disappointing to hear, but not surprising. The binding force on them is rather weak, after all. This is the downside of making it so easy to exit the consortium."

Ves and Calsie gained a better appreciation of long-term contracts that bound parties together more securely. They did not have to spend so much time and effort into keeping all of the members appeased.

"The second challenge is trying to establish a good working relationship with several major resource suppliers." She said. "As I've stated earlier, the prominence we've gained along with roping in Murphy & Sons has made this job much easier. That doesn't mean we are in the clear. Our negotiating power is still weak and only the fact that multiple companies see promise in us has made the offers more reasonable."

"Do you need any assistance?"

"I need manpower." She told him. "I need trusted managers to staff our offices. I need agents to track what our members are doing. I need financial wizards who can wrangle all of the money flowing in and out of our consortium."

Ves grimaced for a moment. "That... is a difficult request."

"It is not." Calsie spoke in a firm tone. "I've already talked to plenty of clansmen who are currently serving aboard our fleet. You may not realize it, but there are already clansmen who have never been able to adjust to life on starships."

"Don't we have the Vivacious Wal for that?"

"The Vivacious Wal is a pleasant place to live on, but she is still a ship. The skies above people's heads aren't real. There are no cities and towns aside from Dawn City and Twilight City. Even the air that people breathe isn't natural. This might not sound like a problem to you, but there are people who value their living environment more than the convenience of being able to flee hotspots. Besides, the fleet is about to head into dangerous regions, so the argument that it is safer for Larkinsons to be there is not valid. It is arguably safer for the clansmen to settle in Davute."

Though Ves wanted to object to her arguments, it was difficult for him to refute her logic. Given the amount of crises the Larkinsons dealt with during the short existence of the clan, the assumption that living in a mobile fleet would keep everyone safe was false!

Ves pressed his fingers against his forehead. "How many Larkinsons are willing to relocate to Davute?"

"Thousands, sir. We don't need that much, to be honest. Just a couple of hundred Larkinsons is enough to ensure a good start for the Open Consortium. If you give us your approval, we can ship them over right away."

Ves felt conflicted. He did not want to split the clan. It was already enough for Calsie and a handful of trusted assistants to settle on Davute VII for a few years.

Sending in 300 more clansmen was a much greater commitment. He would feel compelled to return and save his people if the Davute System ever came under threat.

Yet... having these Larkinsons over here would truly help. Not only would the clan become more in touch with the developments in Davute, but his people would also guarantee that the Open Consortium firmly remained in his grip.

There was another factor that caused him to waver. If there were clansmen who were truly unhappy about shipboard life, Ves did not want them to suffer for years on end. Maybe it was better for everyone involved if these ground lovers moved to a more comfortable environment.

"Fine." Ves decided. "Coordinate with Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse so that everything will be in order. Don't send down more than 300 clansmen. This is just a start."

"Thank you, sir. Your decision truly means a lot for the clansmen who can't bear to live on ships anymore."

After discussing a few other business matters, they began to discuss more personal matters.

"This is quite a drastic shift in your career for you." He said. "Do you truly want to do this?"

The new chairwoman nodded. "I do. I previously served as the director of the Living Stars Club, but there is only so much I can do when I am a galaxy away from the LMC's main market. Aside from that, you haven't released any new commercial models in a while, so the enthusiasm among our loyal customers has begun to fade."

"That's my fault. We'll remedy this problem in the next design round. I don't intend to abandon the Yeina Star Cluster. The problem right now is that we need to strengthen our forces in the short term in order to make sure that we don't get toppled. The new mech designs that we've completed and are about to complete will definitely help."

"You don't need to justify your decisions to me, sir. I've heard good things about our upcoming mechs."

"How long do you wish to stay on Davute VII and run the Open Consortium? Are you one of those folks who prefer to keep their distance from starships or are you treating this as a form of vacation?"

"More of the latter than the former." Calsie replied. "I do wish to return to the fleet one day. Whether it will take years or decades, I hope I can pass on the chair to another capable leader so that I can take over a different and hopefully more important function. Truth to be told, I see my current responsibilities as an opportunity to accrue experience and build up my qualifications for higher office."

"You want to become a politician?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"Not necessarily. Becoming an executive is also good enough. If possible, I would like to lead the clan as one of its chief ministers one day."

"That's a bold ambition!"

He was happy to learn that she held a great ambition. Leading the clan was an honor and becoming a chief minister of an increasingly more powerful clan would definitely be the highlight of her career.

"It's an uphill struggle for me." She said. "I didn't attend any fancy second-class universities nor possess a lot of augmentations that would have allowed me to stand out early on. I have to spend a lot of time on supplementing my studies just so that I can

shrink the gap between myself and those Purnessers that we have absorbed into our clan. Accepting my current post is one of the best ways for me to prove that I am just as capable."

Her ambitions sounded trivial to Ves. Compared to all of his grand goals and ambitions, Calsie's perseverance in climbing up the hierarchy was a lot smaller in scope.

It didn't help that Ves was the patriarch and effective leader of the Larkinson Clan since its founding. He vaguely remembered what it was like to be a nobody in the old family, but those times were long gone.

"I wish you luck in your endeavor. For what it's worth, I truly want to see you succeed. I can't give you any unfair advantages since everyone in the clan must abide by its rules, but that doesn't mean that it is okay for others to screw you over. If you encounter any unfair hindrance over the course of your career, you can bring it up with me and I'll sort it out. I value a fellow Cloudy Curtainer such as you over any other adopted Larkinson. Those Purnessers are highly competent at their jobs, but they often give me the impression that they think they should be in charge because they know better."

"They're smooth political operators, that's for sure." Calsie chuckled.

Once Ves made sure that Calsie was well-prepared for her current assignment, he ended the call after saying goodbye.

He wouldn't be meeting her in person for quite some time.

As his focus returned to his office aboard the Spirit of Bentheim, he called over his assistant to discuss their upcoming departure.

"When do we leave?"

"It will probably take around a week to buy and ship all of the goods we can obtain on short notice. The more important question is whether you have a destination in mind."

Ves activated a projection that displayed a star map of Krakatoa.

"I've been considering that in the last few days. The local MTA colonization bureau offers plenty of missions for pioneers. Exploration missions are a gamble and extermination missions are distasteful. Given that we are one of the few fleets that possess a capital mining ship, I think it would be better for us to start with an ordinary mining mission."

He tapped the map, causing dozens of star systems to light up in red.

"These are the sites where there are outstanding missions that we can accept. Most of them simply entail heading to the designated site and mining specific resources that the MTA wants for some reason."

The materials requested by the MTA were usually oddities that humanity had never encountered before. They weren't necessarily special or powerful, but their properties were still different enough to make them interesting to researchers.

Most of the time, the missions took place in relatively minor and less attractive star systems. This made it difficult or cumbersome for pioneering fleets to mine the resources in sufficient quantities.

This gave the Larkinson Clan a competitive advantage. The Andrenidae had long been nothing while she formed a part of the core fleet. It was high time that Ves took advantage of her capabilities.

"Sounds good, boss. Do you have any preference?"

"I don't think we should pick a mission site that is too close to the frontlines of the ongoing invasion." Ves stated. "We aren't ready to duke it out against lost alien fleets. While there aren't as many missions in the rear of Krakatoa, we still have a few choices."

"Are they worth our time, though?" Gavin questioned.

"Probably, but I can accept that. This is the first time that we are truly venturing out in the unknown. Before this, our expeditionary fleet has always stuck to more familiar routes that threads through relatively pacified star systems. This will no longer be the case once we distance ourselves from Davute and other human colonies."

It would be the start of the Golden Skull Alliance's true adventure. Ves was well aware that they could encounter anything in the wild. The most Ves could do was to pick a mission further away from the frontlines so that the risk coefficient wouldn't be so high.

"I will inform the others to make sure that the Andrenidae is well-equipped for large-scale mining operations."

The crew of the Andrenidae had been waiting to become relevant for a long time. The mining vessel was already prepared and did not need any additional help to mine exotic materials.

Before the expeditionary fleet departed from the Davute System, Ves finally received a message from a long-awaited source.

"Jovy..."



The Survivalists wanted to talk with him about a matter that had lingered on for months.

"Welp, here I go. Make sure to hold down the fort while I'm gone, Lucky."

"Meow?" Lucky twitched his ears in confusion.

Ves' body shimmered out of existence as the MTA directly teleported him away from his ship.

#### *Chapter 3654 New Developments*

The MTA teleported him to a highly advanced facility. The mechers managed to take him away despite the fact that the Spirit of Bentheim was supposed to be protected against unauthorized teleportation attempts.

"Feh."

The anti-teleportation devices were originally developed by the MTA or a lesser company. Either way, there was no way the tech could hinder the mechers. Their grasp on technology was so great that defending against them was an exercise in futility.

Ves didn't bother to spend any further thought on this issue. He was much more interested in studying his new environment.

First-class multipurpose mechs lay dormant while others were being serviced by swarms of bots.

Remarkably few personnel were present in what appeared to be an underground hangar bay. A few mech pilots had gathered to discuss battle tactics while a couple of mech designers were inspecting a new model that had recently been added to the mech roster.

As always, Ves was impressed by the sight of the MTA's powerful machines. The mechers understandably fielded the most powerful mechs developed by humans, but there were still differences in power within their organization.

The first-class multipurpose mechs utilized by the branches in the galactic rim were generally a bit more basic and less extravagant.

That was not the case this time. The ones utilized by the local branch were much more ready for war. Even though they were too advanced for him to glean too many details, he could tell that they were tougher, faster and more deadly in every way.

It was fun to puzzle out their combat capabilities. No first-class multipurpose mech was simple as the sheer amount of miniaturized components stuffed inside their frames allowed them to come up with lots of different solutions.

"Are you having fun?"

"Jovy!" Ves smiled as he turned around. "I haven't heard from you in months! Where have you been all of this time?"

"I cannot say." The young MTA Journeyman replied. "I've been busy while the people above me deliberated on the proposal that you presented to me during our last meeting."

"I take it that my little offer sparked a lot of controversy." Ves guessed. "There's no other reason for you guys to stay quiet for so long."

Jovy nodded. "Partially, yes. The other reason why it took so long for the people above me to come to a resolution is because we were waiting for your fleet to arrive in Davute."

"Why?"

"Because it would be easier for you to meet with the person who is in charge of this matter. It took a bit longer for him to clear his schedule and make a detour to Davute, but he's here now and is ready to meet with you in person."

"Oh. Okay. How well is he inclined towards me?" Ves nervously asked.

"He has been keeping an eye on you. I hear he has grown especially... amused at your recent antics."

Ves thought of his recent actions in the past weeks and months. He winced when he thought how he must have appeared to the MTA when he formed the Creation Association and held the Vulcan Symposium.

He really didn't want to meet anyone important from the MTA, but there was no way to defy anyone from the Association.

At least Jovy was by his side. His presence and his friendly demeanor signaled that the mechers shouldn't be too upset.

They would have teleported Ves to a cell block if that was the case.

Before Jovy led him to wherever he would meet this important official, the MTA Journeyman first waved his arm towards all of the first-class mechs in the underground hangar bay.

"What do you think when you see all of these mechs?"

"They're powerful and expensive." Ves immediately answered. "Our clan would probably go bankrupt before we can even build a machine of their caliber. I think that any one of them can completely crush the forces at my disposal."

Jovy smirked. "True, but don't underestimate your own capabilities. Your expert mechs and your... unorthodox battle solutions can give anyone a surprise. I think the gap between these mechs and your own combat forces is not as exaggerated as you think."

"Are you kidding me? I've seen what your supermechs can do! Back in the LRA, it only took a single squad of first-class multipurpose mechs to subdue a rogue biojuggernaut."

"I will admit that our advanced machines can dismantle other powerful threats, but that doesn't mean they are omnipotent."

"...Are you sure you are allowed to say that to me? You're making it sound as if your Association is not as strong as everyone thinks."

Jovy sighs. "This mindset is the exact reason why so many of my fellow colleagues in the MTA are so complacent about the threats that we face today and in the future. They believe so much in our image of superiority that they think that our first-class multipurpose mechs can sweep aside every opposition."

Ves recalled that Jovy firmly aligned himself with the Survivalist cause.

"Ah. I see. While I can understand your worries, I don't think your mechs are that weak."

"We wouldn't be utilizing warships if we thought that they were strong enough. Anyway, that is a discussion for another day."

They turned around and exited the hangar bay. Jovy led Ves down a couple of white-walled corridors.

There was hardly any traffic. Ves saw more bots than people moving around him. It made him feel as if this place was largely deserted.

"Where's all the people?" He casually asked.

"Away." Jovy answered. "The Red Ocean is an active war front, after all. Many of our soldiers are trying their best to push our lines forward and complete the invasion of this dwarf galaxy."

"Are we doing well?"

Jovy's expression flickered. "Don't tell this to others, but the opposition is putting up a better fight as of late."

"Oh? Should pioneers like myself grow worried?"

"No. We're still making progress, just not as fast as before. The aliens have fully woken up to the threat that humanity represents and have increasingly begun to coordinate their defenses. In the past, it was hard for the major races to cooperate with each other, but that is no longer the case. What is especially damning to the war effort is that the puelmers have increased their mastery of human technology at a considerably faster rate than we initially expected. Whatever they managed to master will also fall into the hands of the other major races after a delay."

The puelmers might be a race of comical-looking flesh balls with numerous spindly limbs poking out of their bodies, but they possessed the greatest technological affinity out of all of the major races!

Ves frowned. "You mechers are usually good at studying others. How come you misjudged the puelmers?"

"Our estimates are wrong because we didn't account for the possibility of human traitors going out of their way to teach the puelmers how to master our high technology!" Jovy responded in a heated tone.

"WHAT?!"

This was an extremely shocking revelation! Who would be crazy enough to teach the enemies of humanity how to utilize more powerful tech? A lot more human fighters would get killed as a result!

"Do you know who is responsible? What are their motivations?"

"I don't have any definitive answers. I'm not that high up yet to handle affairs at this level." Jovy slumped.

"You have ideas, though, right?"

"I have numerous guesses. The most likely one is that certain powerful elements of humanity are opposed to the invasion of the Red Ocean. For whatever reason, they don't want us to succeed."

"Could it be the first-rate superstates?"

"No. I'm certain they are not responsible. As much as the former hegemon of humanity want to return to the old ways, they have too many reasons to support this invasion. The Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact have managed to claim a lot of territory in the Red Ocean."

"Then... could it be the dissenters within the MTA? The Dissolution Faction, for example?"

"It's... possible." Jovy slowly replied. "They are one of the few humans that have access to so much high technology. I do not think the Dissolutionists are the culprits, though. They are still mechers in their own way and know too well that they would never meet a good end if these treasonous deeds are traced back to them. What happened to the cosmopolitans in the past serves as a powerful example of how their cause will become rejected by anyone if they are driven to extremes."

There was obviously a lot that Jovy wasn't able or willing to say. The Association's internal politics were still frustratingly opaque to outsiders.

Given that Jovy ruled out a couple of the most obvious suggestions, Ves came up with a few guesses of his own.

Perhaps the remnants of the cosmopolitans were responsible. It not only fit with their ideology, but also conformed to their historical behavior.

Another likely suspect was the Five Scrolls Compact. Perhaps the insane cultists thought they could bleed and deplete the main combat forces of the Big Two by empowering the alien opposition.

Ves was disappointed that anyone would turn his back on his own race like this, but there was so much internal conflict among humans that it shouldn't have been a surprise.

"What are the consequences of this development?"

"There are many consequences, but I don't have the complete picture, Ves. There will be changes in the Red Ocean, that's for certain. We'll have to bring in additional warfleets from the old galaxy to hasten our conquest and give the aliens little time to apply the lessons taught by the traitors."

Ves frowned. He didn't like the sound of that. "Won't that weaken the Big Two's hold on the old galaxy? This looks like an obvious ploy to divert your military assets out of the Milky Way."

"If you can see this, so can we." Jovy replied. "The galactic mech councilors are well aware of this possibility, but we must do this regardless. Besides, even if someone thinks they can take advantage of these movements, our warfleets can easily transfer back to the Milky Way on short notice. We haven't been collecting all of that phasewater for nothing."

The mechers had the situation well in hand. Ves felt reassured by Jovy's confidence. It appeared that the intervention of human traitors didn't change the strategic picture too much.

"Should you really be telling me all of this?" Ves wondered. "I mean, don't get me wrong. It's nice to be informed for a change, but I get the feeling that you're being way too open."

"It's okay. I want you to be more informed so that you are better informed of the dangers of the Red Ocean. If you ever encounter a puelmer fleet, please don't think you stand a chance. Even a single puelmer vessel is more than you can take, especially if the alien ship has begun to incorporate human high technology."

"I'll be sure to take that into account." Ves promised. "Any other hazards I should know about?"

"Be even more vigilant towards suspicious humans. While I am sure that you will encounter the traitors responsible for transferring our tech to the aliens, you may cross paths with their agents or allies. Stay vigilant and never allow yourself to be deceived into acting against what is best for humanity."

"I'm not that stupid. I will do my best to avoid this situation."

"Humanity is in a precarious situation. Our policies towards the Red Ocean will soon be adjusted. Pioneers like you will most certainly be expected to shoulder a greater burden."

Ves grew nervous. "Ehh... that doesn't sound reassuring. I'm just a mech designer. What do you expect me to do? I came to the Red Ocean to further my design philosophy."

"You can do that while also contributing to humanity. That is why you are here today."

#### *Chapter 3655 He*

Ves gained a lot of information during his visit to the MTA underground facility so far. The mechers usually weren't forthcoming with matters of import, so he found it highly unusual that Jovy Armalon spilled so many details.

He grew especially wary by the fact that the details in question did not paint the MTA and the Big Two in a good light.

For as long as he remembered, the Big Two were the giants of humanity. They rose up after the end of the Age of Conquest and boldly took charge of a fractured and self-destructed society.

When the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance successfully glued the near-broken pieces of humanity back together, they managed to win the enduring support of the vast majority of humans alive.

Although it seemed that the Big Two had become the uncrowned rulers of the human race, Ves knew that supreme power and authority were not as impervious as they seemed. If the legitimacy of the two apex organizations ever came into question, then their hegemony of human civilization would quickly collapse like a house of cards!

This was why the Big Two always maintained an unassailable reputation. The mechers and fleeters didn't paint themselves as invincible because they were vain. There were real strategic reasons why they needed to inspire a huge amount of awe and dread among the common population.

Ves feared that the plot to arm the native alien species of the Red Ocean with advanced human tech sought to chip away at the foundation of this assumption.

The chances were still low that the aliens would actually be able to drive humanity away from the Red Ocean.

There was too little time for the puelmers and so on to properly master and propagate all of the new tech. High technology was called that way for a reason, and it was not because it was easy to learn.

Humanity was also so much greater than all of the native alien races of the Red Ocean combined. The dwarf galaxy was too small compared to the Milky Way. The Big Two only needed to put a moderately greater effort into their ongoing conquest to make up the difference.

What truly concerned Ves was figuring out the greater scheme behind these developments. Who was responsible and what did they seek to accomplish from messing around?

If this was just one of many steps to plot the downfall of the Big Two, then the culprits would definitely strike again. It took more than a simple dirty deed to permanently harm the MTA and CFA.

Not only would this be bad news for mechers and fleeters, many other humans would bear the brunt of ensuing chaos as well!

Like it or not, the Big Two was responsible for humanity's current prosperity.

Though wars and internal conflicts still took place, the slaughter was more constrained.



The predominant use of mechs in place of warships not only gave mech designers like Ves a huge market for their products, but also imposed hard limits on how much destruction a power could inflict.

Ves learned plenty of lessons about warfare in the Age of Conquest in his youth. He did not look forward to returning to the bad old days where a single warship could casually demolish half a continent!

"I see you comprehend the possible consequences of what our enemies in the dark may be trying to engender." Jovy cleverly remarked as he glanced towards Ves. "A part of me wants to keep you in your illusion. This should not be your business at all. Unfortunately, we don't get to choose our battles. One of the downsides of becoming one of the foremost powers of humanity is that we become the focal point of all enemies, both from within and without. Even the mighty can be felled by a swarm of ants."

As Jovy continued to paint the MTA in a more vulnerable light than usual, Ves found himself accepting everything he heard.

Yet Ves also began to entertain other suspicions.

Jovy's story was just a bit too targeted. The man spoke all of the right words that fit with Ves' own preconceptions.

Since when did MTA Journeymen reduce themselves to salesmen trying to market a new product?

As Ves thought about it more, he came up with a possible reason why Jovy was appealing so much to him. Were the Survivalists trying to rope him deeper into their camp?

It was working. Even if he knew he was being manipulated against, Ves recognized that it was in his best interest to align himself closer to the Survivalists.

After all, he was a human as well. He did not want to see the enemies of humanity end the current golden age. Though contemporary society had plenty of faults, all of the alternatives were worse. Ves really didn't think that the Terrans, Rubarthans or the Compact cultists would do a better job in governing the human race!

"We're here." Jovy stated as they stopped before an ornate silver blast door.

The entrance was carved with larger-than-life images of mechs battling against rogue warships and a myriad of alien threats.

"So why don't we go in?" Ves asked after they kept standing in place.

"Before you enter... make sure to be on your best behavior." Jovy said. "You are about to meet someone important. Very important. So much so that he had to come here in secret to avoid attracting the wrong kind of attention."

Ves grew a lot more nervous all of a sudden. "He came... just for me? Why? I'm just a mech designer. A Journeyman. Don't you mechers have better things to do with your time?"

The mecher gave him a pointed glance. "If I were you, I would not question the wisdom of people at this level. You will understand when you step inside, but try your best not to turn yourself into an idiot when you present yourself to him. He does not tolerate fools easily and has little patience for ambiguous statements. Be direct and succinct in your answers. You will regret it for the rest of your life if you leave a bad impression."

Jovy sounded so serious about this that Ves wisely smarted up. There was definitely a bigshot inside whose decisions could affect the lives of trillions of people!

Ves took a few moments to rein in his irreverent behavior. He employed a few minor spiritual tricks to assume a well-behaved side of himself.

Though Ves needed to be honest, there was no way that he was ready to spill all of his secrets to the MTA. He needed to be able to get away with speaking half-truths and diversions without generating suspicion.

Just to be sure, he also went a step further. He silently commanded Blinky to button down his mind and suppress any unusual spiritual fluctuations.

Once he made sure that he was ready to meet with whatever dignitary was waiting inside, he nodded.

"I'm ready, Mr. Armalon."

The blast doors slowly parted open. They moved quite slowly, as if it took a lot of effort to open a gap in the defenses of the chamber.

Strangely enough, Ves could not see what was inside. A white, obscuring mist blanketed his vision. He could already tell that this strange mist not only blocked his vision, but also all manner of electronic detection.

What was even more surprising to Ves was that his subtle attempt to extend his spiritual senses completely failed to yield any results!

His eyes widened. The only time that happened was when he entered the Saint Kingdom of an ace pilot!

Whether there was a hidden ace pilot nearby or not, Ves knew he had to be a lot more careful with his actions. Ace pilots were sharp and they could easily detect any foreign elements trying to pull something off in their domain fields.

Jovy gestured towards the entrance. "I can go no further, so you will have to go forward on your own. Remember what I said and be respectful at all times. You're lucky that the great person inside doesn't care too much for proper etiquette. Just be respectful."

Ves nodded. There had to be good reasons for the continual reminders.

"Thank you for your guidance. I hope to see you again."

He passed through the blast doors and continued to stride forward as the entrance slowly sealed again.

Ves had no clue what he should do next. He figured he should just keep walking forward. The only way for him to make sure that he kept walking straight forward was to use his implant to overlay a line in his vision.

A minute passed as he walked. Ves wondered whether he would bump into the other side of the chamber anytime soon. How large was this place?

As his patience slowly wore down, he grew increasingly more tempted to speak out. Whatever game this great dignitary was playing was not amusing!

Fortunately, the endless white mist finally parted a bit in front of his eyes. He observed a simple white table along with two different white chairs.

There was nothing else.

Ves didn't bother to overthink this scenario and simply headed over to the closest chair before sitting down.

Then, he waited.

Several minutes passed by as nothing happened. The white mist still obscured everything outside of his immediate environment.

It made him feel as if he had entered a form of afterlife.

Despite the circumstances, Ves truly tried his best to rein in his temper and frustration. If this was some sort of test, then he was determined not to make a fool of himself!

Fortunately, a mech designer always had plenty of matters to think about. Ves automatically turned his attention towards the Minerva Project which was already in its final phases.

The broad strokes of the expert command mech were already set. The mech designers working on the project only needed to refine their existing work before they could proceed with fabricating Commander Casella Ingvar's long-awaited battle partner.

As Ves put serious thought about how he could further improve the two-stage luminar crystal weapon wielded by the Minerva Project, he received a friendly suggestion.

"The transformation mechanism of your weapon design is prone to jamming under hectic battle situations. You should look into reducing the points of failure of this vulnerable feature."

"That's a good idea. You—, what?!"

Ves almost soared out of his chair! He had noticed the appearance of the woman sitting on the chair on the other side of the table.

The woman looked fairly ordinary at first. She wore a simple white lab coat that many researchers customarily wore.

Hers was a bit unusual though. The coat featured a few subtle but strangely elegant patterns.

The woman who wore it was also unusual now that Ves paid closer attention.

Her presence, while subtle, made Ves feel as if he had entered a bottomless ocean. There was so much hiding inside her mind that it made him feel as if he was completely insignificant!

His heart beat faster. He grew nervous as he rapidly blinked his eyes a few times.

It took an embarrassingly long time for him to remember that he had seen her face before.

Though he generally didn't pay attention to all of the great figures of humanity, he still read up on them. When he managed to match the woman's face to that of one of the people whose biography he read, his eyes widened to a comical size!

Why didn't Jovy tell him the truth?!

"... 'he' ...?"

The woman maintained an impassive face as she answered.

"A simple but effective form of misdirection. My current whereabouts must not be spread, hence the nature of this meeting."

Ves stiffly nodded even as he became gripped with panic.

The woman was not an ordinary bigshot. He never expected that he would meet with someone who essentially stood at the top of hierarchy!

"Mr. Larkinson." The woman spoke with a calm but undeniably authoritative voice. "You have successfully gained my interest. I believe you should know who I am. Correct?"

"Yes... I am aware of your identity. Every mech designer does. You are... the Polymath."

This was his first meeting with a Star Designer.

Hopefully, it wouldn't be his last.

### *Chapter 3656 Invasive Scanning*

Ever since the Age of Mechs commenced, an uncountable amount of humans sought to become mech designers.

While not all of them succeeded, an enormous amount of individuals successfully entered the mech industry over the centuries.

The vast majority of them never managed to move past the Novice and Apprentice stage. Competition was high and the difficulty of breaking through to Journeyman halted many ambitious mech designers.

As their youthful energies sputtered out after years and decades of marginal progress, they usually transitioned into lesser engineering careers.

Those that managed to pass all of the hurdles and become Journeymen were quite few.

Even less of this group managed to overcome the difficult hurdle that prevented them from realizing their design philosophy.

Of the exalted Masters that succeeded in fulfilling their ambitions, only an exceedingly tiny proportion of them managed to pass through whatever hurdle lay beyond.

Every single Master Mech Designer was either extremely talented, capable, lucky, hard-working or a combination of these traits. None of them were incompetent fools who were incapable of solving complex problems.

Yet despite all of their design and research prowess, only a scant amount of Masters successfully advanced once again.

There were so few Star Designers in human society that they were outliers rather than the norm!

Each of them had overcome immensely difficult challenges in order to surpass the limits that hindered most humans from going any further.

Their greatness was so immense that Ves generated all kinds of ideas about what Star Designers were like.

He had met numerous Master Mech Designers in person. Each of them still possessed human forms but their minds and spiritualities were like burning suns. They were so spiritually potent and energetic that Ves would probably light himself on fire if he came too close!

Since Masters were already so powerful from a spiritual perspective, Ves imagined that Star Designers would definitely be so much greater.

It wouldn't be a stretch to equate them as gods given all of the wonders they could design!

Yet as Ves came face to face with the first Star Designer in his life, he became decidedly underwhelmed.

Was this it? Ves could hardly sense any obvious signs of power, spiritual or otherwise. The Polymath, despite her monstrous reputation and list of feats, looked like an ordinary middle-aged woman.

She looked much less impressive than in any of her public appearances. Her simpler outfit along with her unassuming demeanor made her look like a boring librarian instead of the smartest and most intelligent mech designer in human space!

For a moment, Ves doubted his own judgment. A Star Designer couldn't be this average, right? Did the MTA engage in another form of deception? Was he meeting with a clone or a remote puppet of the Polymath?

No. These were stupid notions.

Ves recalled that she wasn't supposed to be here. Perhaps her underwhelming guise was another form of security. People with average appearances would never cause anyone to think they were Star Designers!

Besides, there were other signs that reinforced his impressions that he was talking to the real deal.

First, his intuition screamed in alarm. The woman sitting on the other side of the plain white table was both extremely powerful and posed a massive threat to his safety!

Second, just because she did not generate any significant spiritual fluctuations did not mean she was ordinary.

He increasingly believed that it was a function of her extremely powerful capabilities. Power alone was not scary. What truly made it fearsome was when its wielder exerted total control over it. The Polymath was like a blank sheet to his passive senses. He could not pick up any details of the power she contained in her body.

For now, it was best to assume that the Polymath had truly appeared in the flesh. To think otherwise would no doubt end poorly for him. Jovy had continually reminded him to be respectful.

As Ves slowly managed to sort out his racing thoughts, the Polymath seemed content to study him in turn.

Her deep blue eyes didn't appear to be augmented, but he instinctively felt that her gaze pierced straight through his body.

As he humbly and respectfully looked up at her face, which was framed with black hair in a pixie cut, he briefly wondered what she did to make her skin so young and smooth despite being over a hundred years old.

The Polymath finally resumed the conversation.

"Before we proceed any further, I will be performing an examination on your person."

"I... take it that this is not a regular scan." Ves said.

He was under no illusion that the MTA respected his privacy. His body and all of the articles on his body were probably scanned a trillion times with thousands of different sensors.

Why would the Polymath go out of the way to notify him about another examination?

"This particular examination is vastly more invasive than our more ordinary measures. You will feel great discomfort which cannot be avoided. As a fellow human and mech designer, you deserve the courtesy of a warning."

Despite her friendly words, there was no doubt in his mind that she would never take 'no' for an answer.

Ves bent his head. "Please proceed."

The Polymath did not do anything right away. Instead, she sat as she did something to increase the density of the surrounding mist. Whatever she was doing truly had to be kept a secret from others.



Once she was satisfied with these measures, she looked down at one of her hands.

The silver ring that adorned her finger automatically slid out and floated above the middle of the table.

Though the ring looked as plain as the rest of the Polymath, Ves instincts completely went bonkers when he noticed its existence.

This was not a normal silver ring!

"The examination will commence in three, two, one..."

The ring suddenly exploded in power as an unidentifiable form of energy surged out of its tiny shape!

The energy did not spread out. Instead, it poured straight into Ves' body, completely enveloping his entire body, mind and Spirituality in an instant!

"Ahhh!"

Though Ves had experienced worse forms of pain, it was not that easy for him to endure this powerful sensation!

The foreign energy that was coursing through body was powerful and unlike anything he had ever experienced!

Strangely enough, the energy did not clash with the Worclaw energy and spiritual energy that he possessed. It was as if the foreign energy existed in a different phase from the rest.

Even so, the potency of it was so high that his body and mind unavoidably became scorched by the faint proximity!

Dozens of seconds passed by as the energy bounced inside his body like waves trapped in a pool.

This was the most invasive 'scan' that he had ever gone through! The energy waves were so powerful and penetrating that he felt it could dig up even the tiniest particle that was out of place!

Yet as Ves gradually adjusted to the scouring sensations, he slowly started to pick up a few crucial details.

The energy that was coursing through his body may be unfamiliar, but it possessed a faint signature that made him feel as if he had encountered it before.

He honestly couldn't recall if he had ever come in touch with this signature, but as he opened his eyes and stared at the glowing ring that was responsible for his agony, his intuition suddenly connected the dots.

Shock coursed through his mind!

If not for the fact that the unknown energy was already causing a lot of distress to his body, he would have grown worried about giving away his reaction.

Even so, it was still difficult for him to suppress and keep his roiling emotions from fluctuating any further.

How could he possibly remain in control of himself when he deduced the true nature of the silver ring?

Though he didn't have any solid proof, his intuition was so certain about his judgment that it completely left out the possibility that he was wrong.

If his guess was right... then the ring was actually a fragment of the Metal Scroll!

Ves did not dare to direct his eyes towards the Polymath at all. Once he recognized that he came face to face with a different fragment of the mythical Metal Scroll, then so much of the Polymath's amazing ascent to power made sense.

Master in less than 50 years.

Star Designer in less than 100 years.

This was an inhuman rate of progress for even the most talented mech designers in existence!

There was no way that the Polymath could have achieved this extreme rate without a powerful advantage!

Though many people puzzled why the Polymath broke the mold, it made complete sense to Ves.

Whether her version of Metal Scroll adopted the guise of Mech Designer System or not, there was no doubt in his mind that she had enlisted its aid in accelerating her progression!

The Polymath wasn't just a random Star Designer to him anymore. If his assumptions were truly right, then she was actually a Holy Daughter!

This was an enormous piece of news that could definitely rupture human society if exposed!

Did the MTA as a whole know about her possession of the Metal Scroll?

If not, then what about the Survivalists?

Was the Five Scrolls Compact aware that a fragment of one of their most holiest relics was in the hands of one of their archenemies?

It shouldn't be. The cultists would have stormed the gates in order to retrieve a piece of the Sacred Scroll!

Plenty more theories formed in his mind, though he tried his best to ignore the ridiculous possibilities.

In one moment, he suspected that the Polymath was a high-level infiltrator whose true loyalty lay in the Compact.

In another moment, he figured that the Polymath secretly hailed from another organization that was not with the MTA, CFA or Compact.

He had no proof of any of these assertions. Given the extremely delicate nature of this meeting, Ves thought it best to put them aside and focus on surviving this day first!

This was because he developed another suspicion why the Polymath was using her ring to scan his body.

He feared that the Polymath had taken a good look at his record and found a few parallels to her own accelerated progress. Ves had many other red flags in his highly unusual and eventful career that someone as smart as a Star Designer would never be able to miss!

It would have been reasonable for her to suspect that Ves Larkinson may actually possess another lost fragment of the Metal Scroll.

Was this the principal reason why a vaunted Star Designer absconded from her extremely important duties and secretly traveled all the way to the Davute System to meet with a mere Journeyman Mech Designer?

This was the only explanation that made sense!

Unfortunately for the youngest and most talented Star Designer in existence, the invasive scanning probably wasn't returning the results she anticipated.

Now that he figured all of this out, Ves deeply suspected that the Polymath was looking for his piece of the Metal Scroll.

The same Mech Designer System that was currently missing in action for some time.

Ever since Ves completed one of his Supply Missions by supplying the System with Timpala Steel, it told him that it would undergo an upgrade.

Then, it fell silent, thereby depriving him of its many benefits.

Though this was quite a frustrating condition, right now he was extremely grateful that the System had made itself scarce at the moment!

Whether it had temporarily gone to another place or became so inactive that its presence became undetectable, he was certain that the mystical ring failed to find its lost brother!

Though this denied Ves the opportunity to recognize the Polymath as kin, it also prevented a potentially fatal outcome for himself!

It was not difficult to think what might happen if the Star Designer fulfilled her current objective.

She would have ripped the Metal Designer System out from Ves straight away before attempting to merge it with 'her' fragment of the Metal Scroll.

After that, she would immediately wipe Ves out of existence straight away because he formed a liability to the secret of what she possessed.

If she was more humane or merciful than that, then she might opt to 'invite' him to work for the MTA on a permanent basis.

Perhaps she might dress her compulsion up as an honor, but Ves would never be able to get out of her thumb for the rest of life if that was the case!

This was what Ves would have done if he was in her shoes. This was also why he was immensely relieved about the current circumstances.

Ves was truly not a Holy Son at the moment!

He was unable to call upon the System and even lost the System sight that allowed him to call up the stats of certain objects and people.

Hopefully, the System's dormancy also flushed his body of the unique biological markers that were only present in Holy Sons and Daughters.

Finally, the invasive scanning wound down. The energies left his strained body while the ring no longer radiated power.

The silver jewel slowly floated back to the Polymath's feminine hand and slipped back onto her finger like nothing happened.

As Ves made sure to calm himself, he finally dared to glimpse at her face.

Though the Polymath did not exhibit any emotional fluctuations, he couldn't help but get the sense that was disappointed. Her control over her emotions was extremely good, but she was so powerful that particularly powerful mood changes were nonetheless capable of bleeding through her mental barrier.

She quickly controlled herself though. In truth, Ves would have missed this little nuance if he wasn't already good at sensing people's emotions.

"Our scans have found no issue." The Polymath said as if she had just used an ordinary multiscanner on him. "We may proceed with our discussion."

Ves responded with a brittle smile. "I'm all ears."

### *Chapter 3657 Happy Admission*

Ves felt that he had just gone through one of the most dangerous and significant checkpoints of his life!

All kinds of awful outcomes could have happened if the Polymath discovered that he possessed the Mech Designer System.

Though Ves deeply wanted to believe in the Polymath's stellar reputation and noble sentiments, he would be a fool to think that anyone could remain truly selfless.

Anything that was related to the Metal Scroll was immensely powerful. Leaving it in the hands of a mere Journeyman was a huge waste when it could do so much more in the hands of a Star Designer.

If there was ever a boundary beyond the rank of Star Designer, then humanity as a whole would gain a lot more if the Polymath gained a better chance of breaking through it with the help of a more complete piece of the Metal Scroll!

This was all of the justification that the leader of the Survivalist needed to rob Ves of his System and silence him in a permanent fashion.

The situation hadn't come to that, though. Ves was 90 percent certain that the Polymath's ring did not yield any fruitful results.

Whatever else the ring might have detected in his body and mind were completely trivial compared to the possible presence of another Metal Scroll fragment.

Ever since the MTA and CFA secretly rebelled from the Five Scrolls Compact, the Metal Scroll had broken into pieces and became lost.

That was what Ves really knew about it. He did not know how many fragments existed and where they were located.

Given the immense size of human space, he thought that the odds of actually encountering another fragment of the Metal Scroll was so statistically low that it was practically impossible for him to meet with one in his lifetime.

He hadn't accounted for the possibility that another fragment holder would proactively seek him out, though!

Ves maintained his nervous smile as he awaited what the Polymath might say next.

There was no need to disguise any of his apprehension. Any random person that had just undergone such a violent scanning process would react the same way!

Showing weakness and vulnerability was natural. Ves was grateful for that as it made it easier for him to process all of his realizations.

Then, the Polymath spoke again.

"Let us drop with the pretense, Mr. Larkinson. You are a mech designer, but that is not your sole identity. My scans have detected numerous anomalies that should not be present in normal Journeyman Mech Designers."

Uh oh.

Had Ves failed to maintain his secret? Had he given himself away by worrying so much about his System?!

"You are not only aware of the existence of the secret organization that is known as the Five Scrolls Compact, but you are also making use of its heritage to further your own career."

"That..."

The look on the Polymath's face showed that she was not receptive to false denials.

Ves recalled that Jovy warned him that he should never lie or make excuses about himself in front of this great personality.

Though he felt highly conflicted about what he was about to say next, it was a much better alternative than admitting that he was a System holder.

"I... yes." Ves lowered his head as he tried his best to exaggerate his defeated reaction. "You are correct, Your Excellency. I don't know any details, but my mother... had relations with the Compact. Over the course of my life, I have also managed to cross

paths with agents and members of this cult. These encounters weren't pleasant for me. I barely survived them. One of the reasons why I was so eager to move to the Red Ocean was to get away from those deranged and murderous cultists."

He revealed more to one of the most powerful individuals of human space than he had ever done before, and he felt utterly vulnerable because of it. He did not share his secrets easily and being put in a position where he had no choice but to do so was awful.

It also made him feel liberated. For too long, he had been dancing around the truth even knowing that the MTA had kept him under observation for a long amount of time.

The problem was that Ves couldn't restrain himself. Even knowing that the Simile Halifax had quietly studied him and his clan for several months, he did not stop with creating new design spirits or performing other spiritual shenanigans.

Though he made a decent effort to obfuscate his actions, there was no way the MTA was stupid.

Right now, one of the smartest humans in existence happened to be sitting on the other side of the table!

He knew that if he didn't feed her information that conformed to her own analysis on him, she would continue to press him until he coughed up his secrets anyway.

By being forthcoming on his own accord, he could at least massage the information that he exposed on his own accord.

Earlier, he chose his words carefully. They put a definite separation between him and the Compact. He made it clear that even if he was using some of the methods and techniques that were commonly associated with the Five Scrolls Compact, he was one of its enemies rather than its allies!

The Polymath expressly relaxed her posture to a tiny degree. "Thank you for being honest. We have already made this conclusion since Moira Willix repeatedly came into contact with you, but it is good that you have not resorted to your usual routine of evasions."

Ves helplessly chuckled. "I had a feeling that it wouldn't work against someone of your caliber."

"You would be surprised by those who believe they can outsmart a Star Designer." She spoke in a bland tone that nonetheless conveyed a lot of pride and arrogance. "What do you know of the Compact, in brief?"



"Not much." Ves admitted. "My mother did not pass on much after she died. I... used the advantages that she provided me to help my development as a mech designer. That is all I wanted, actually. I never asked to get entangled by this whole Compact business. I later learned that there are supposedly Five Sacred Scrolls, of which a few are lost and others... have fallen into various hands."

The Polymath didn't look surprised at what he knew. "Although this is shallow information, it is nonetheless dangerous. I trust you have not been divulging it any further."

"Definitely! I kept my mouth shut even though I sometimes had to make difficult decisions that do not make sense if people are not aware of the full picture."

"Good mindset. Letting them know about the cult will not do them any good. Maintain this discipline or bear the consequences of having a loose tongue."

"I will never say anything!" Ves promised.

The Polymath scrutinized Ves for a moment. "Let us move on. Now that you have admitted your connection to the Compact, we need to hear what mechs mean to you. Please describe your goals and ambitions."

Shouldn't the MTA know about this already?

Ves didn't hesitate, though. He knew that this was another test, so he made sure to rouse his full passion.

"I love mechs." He began. "I grew up with mechs. My entire life has revolved around mechs. Though there were times that I didn't like them, I did my best to dedicate my lives to them in my own way. Even though I really wanted to be a mech pilot like my fellow Larkinson family members, I have grown to embrace my current career path. Mechs are the alpha and the omega to my life. No goal is more important to me than achieving greatness by developing the best and strongest mechs."

"What of your increasingly versatile and growing psionic capabilities?" The powerful woman asked. "You say that you wish to dedicate yourself to designing mechs, but your activities do not entirely match up with your assertions. You have not only begun to consort with immensely powerful psionic beings, you have also invested a great amount of energy and thought with creating them by your own hand. These are impressive feats that have much greater potential than what you can ever do as a Journeyman Mech Designer."

Ves took a deep breath and placed his hand on his chest. "I am a mech designer. Designing mechs is the basis of my passion and ambitions. While it is true that I have dabbled in fields that my mother has enabled me to pursue, I think it is clear that my efforts have only ever gone on to better my mech design-related work. Living mechs,

glows, totems, companion spirits and so on only exist because I want to serve mech pilots better. Given the effectiveness of my mech designs and the great satisfaction of all my users, I believe that I have done a good job at that."

The Star Designer remained silent for a moment before she slowly nodded a single time.

"Spoken like a true mech designer. We are greatly reassured by your statement. You may possess additional powers, but your unequivocal declaration leaves little doubt where your passion truly lies. The Five Scrolls Compact abhor mechs and do not look at them in favor. In the perspective of the cultists that you rightfully fear, mechs are a perversion of what is right."

That was an interesting detail to know about! Ves already had plenty of reasons to dread and hate the Five Scrolls Compact, but this was certainly another one. He would never be able to get along with an organization that wanted to get rid of mechs!

The atmosphere between them grew a little warmer. Both of them recognized each other as mech designers at heart. No matter how far they branched out over the course of their lives, they always valued their root in mech design the most!

This common bond transcended much of the extreme difference in status between the two. Though Ves still reminded himself that the Polymath was not to be trifled with, as long as they were on good terms with each other, it was unlikely that anything bad would happen.

The Polymath briefly closed her eyes. "Mr. Armalon has previously enlightened you about the latest developments in the Red Ocean. What is your opinion?"

"There's a chance that the Five Scrolls Compact are the traitors that Armalon referred to. Are they?"

"That remains to be seen. We are still investigating. We have only recently made this discovery."

Ves adopted a concerned expression. "Should I be worried about the Compact in the Red Ocean, Your Excellency? If the cultists have already extended their presence here, I am wondering whether I should run any further."

"We are keeping a greater watch over the conquered territories of the Red Ocean." The powerful woman revealed. "The Milky Way is too old, complex and expansive for us to properly track the members and agents of the Compact, but that is not the case here. We are controlling the rate of migration to make sure that they cannot mingle with the masses so easily. We are determined to never grant the Compact a foothold in another galaxy. Since we hold the only greater beyonder gates that facilitate intergalactic travel, we already hold an immense advantage."

He grew more reassured when he heard this. She was completely right. While well-hidden Compact agents could still sneak through in small groups, it was impossible for entire cells and more to migrate to the Red Ocean all at once. Their power base in the new frontier would always be far behind in comparison to the MTA and CFA!

"I am glad to hear that, Your Excellency. Without the Compact chasing after my back, I can concentrate on furthering my design philosophy in relative peace."

"I would not relax so soon if I were you. The Compact's influence is still far and wide, and there are more immediate threats in the Red Ocean."

"Are you... referring to the major alien races?"

"No." The Polymath shook her head. "I am referring to the Common Fleet Alliance."

"..."

### *Chapter 3658 Changing Society*

Ves froze and thought for a moment.

Why would the Polymath, one of the smartest and most powerful mech designers of human civilization, state that the CFA was an immediate threat?

Ever since the invasion of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy commenced, Ves thought that the MTA was at its height.

After all, with half of the Milky Way still in the hands of old enemies, why would the mechers support the opening of a completely different front?

The major alien races of the Red Ocean could not possibly pose a threat to human civilization. While their phasewater-derived technology granted them unique technological possibilities, their population base and resource base were wholly inadequate.

Advanced technology or not, Ves did not think the native races of the Red Ocean could halt the onslaught of humanity.

As the principal actors of this invasion, the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance both stood to gain huge benefits.

Not only would humanity's domain expand for the first time in centuries, but they could also harvest much of the phasewater that was particularly abundant in this specific corner of the cosmos.

Ves suddenly jerked.

"Phasewater." He uttered.

This was the key element to the greater picture. Phasewater not only enabled new forms of superluminal travel, but also enhanced the travel capabilities of existing starfaring technology.

"The development of the superdrives that essentially combined the advantages of Red Ocean-style warp drives with Milky Way-style FTL drives absolutely revolutionized human space travel." He continued when the Polymath did not say anything. "This has a profound impact on the speed and reach of our starships, both in realspace and in the higher dimensions. Although phasewater is too scarce to be popularized at the moment, the CFA will most definitely be retrofitting their battleships and other major warships with this new tech. Once their mobility is amplified by a wide degree, their force projection capabilities will become a lot scarier! At the very least, the warfleets stationed in different star clusters won't be as isolated anymore. Their new superdrives enable them to reinforce or reposition themselves in a matter of days instead of weeks!"

The Polymath faintly nodded. "You are correct, Mr. Larkinson. The drastic changes that widespread availability of phasewater has engendered has many implications for humanity. The Common Fleet Alliance benefits most of all as phasewater grants much greater benefits to starships as opposed to mechs. Even if we can make our most powerful battle machines traverse the stars, it is still a relatively inefficient mode of travel and force projection."

"The balance of power will shift." Ves realized. "Both the MTA and CFA will grow stronger after digesting the spoils of the Red Ocean, but your rival will gain most of all. This might cause the fleeters to push for concessions.

He raised his head and looked into the Polymath's eyes.

He never thought it would be possible for him to get so close to an actual living legend, let alone hold a discussion with such a great figure. This entire meeting was still surreal to him. Pretty much every mech designer alive would become incredibly envious if they learned that a young Journeyman of all people had obtained a Star Designer's personal attention!

Of course, Ves did not have any illusions that someone as high up as the Polymath actually cared about his opinions. He already figured that her primary goal was to follow up on a lead of a fragment of the Metal Scroll.

Now that it seemed she would not be able to fulfill her dream, there wasn't much of a reason for her to stay here anymore.

It would be a waste for her to leave straight away. Since Ves still held value outside the Metal Scroll, she might as well stick for a while longer and offer guidance.

"The Common Fleet Alliance will change. Humanity will also change as a result." The Polymath stated. "Our Association will do its best to stand in the way against any changes we deem undesirable, but if our right to speak becomes compromised, then we may not be able to block every change."

"If I may ask, Your Excellency, what sort of changes do the fleeters have in store?"

The Polymath looked away for a moment.

"The fleeters have always been dissatisfied with how humanity is run. In the beginning, they rightfully took possession of the warships formerly in control of human star empires. However, as the Common Fleet Alliance continues to grow more isolated and detached from human society, dangerous undercurrents have appeared. One faction advocates for the limited allowance of the use of warships by lesser human forces. It is well-known that most pioneers in the Red Ocean are outmatched by alien remnant forces."

Ves grew concerned. "Will anyone be able to operate an armed warship?"

"That is the stated goal of this faction. I do not have to tell you how much this measure will negatively impact the mech industry and your own prospects. We are of the opinion that humanity is not ready for the reintroduction of warships as mechs have yet to achieve parity with humanity's premier weapon platform."

He agreed with her. The mech industry needed more time. The gap between mechs and warships was closing with each generation that passed, but he estimated that it would still take a lot of centuries before mechs gained a decisive advantage!

"From the perspective of average people such as myself, warships are considerably more convenient to use, especially in space warfare." He added his opinion. "A single decently-equipped destroyer can wipe out hundreds of mechs before they can even get close. Manning the warships is also a lot less complicated because there is no demand for genetic aptitude. Mechs are smaller and more flexible, but they are also fragile and less efficient in these kinds of engagements. If humans really get the chance to make use of warships, I bet there will be tons of forces that will dump most of their mechs or only reserve them for planetary occupation missions or something."

A heavyweight lingered in the mist-filled air. No matter whether they were Journeymen or Star Designers, both of them would suffer substantial setbacks if the CFA had its way!

"This is not the most frightening threat from the Common Fleet Alliance." The Star Designer ominously said. "There are fleeters that harbor more radical intentions. I shall not burden you with them, but know that while the CFA consists of fellow humans such as ourselves, they are anything but allies of human civilization. They are more akin to leeches that seek to drain our society of all of its value so that they can pursue their own

ideals by themselves. It is the job of the MTA to safeguard the true human race and protect it against any threats that seek to weaken it in any fashion."

Ves felt overwhelmed by what the Star Designer said. Her vision and concerns were so much greater and broader than his own. Though he felt concerned by what she said as well, he was not a fellow Star Designer who could hold his own against the Polymath!

His doubts must have been obvious to her because she gave him a small smile.

"It is never too early for mech designers to concern themselves about the future of their profession, Mr. Larkinson. Your rank and status may be low, but your capabilities are anything but. What we have learned from monitoring you and your work gives us hope that you may one day be able to contribute to the victory of mechs against warships."

Ves felt flattered. It wasn't every day that a genuine Star Designer complimented his work!

"That... is a highly optimistic judgment of myself, Your Excellence." He humbly bent his head. "While I have great ambitions, I do not feel I have made enough accomplishments to merit your kind words."

The Polymath adopted an intrigued expression. "There is no need for you to engage in unnecessary modesty. You are far beyond any Journeyman and you know it. Your success in developing both your design philosophy and your more esoteric abilities has turned you into a unique mech designer that may very well transform our entire society."

Ves floated on clouds by now. Though he was a bit frightened by the fact his attempts to downplay his capabilities failed, he did not think that the Polymath had any hostile intentions at this time.

"The premise here is that you will be able to advance to Master. Do not grow complacent. Many talented and special mech designers wished to transform our society as well. I worked and lived alongside many of them. As of now, they are still Journeymen or Seniors while I have long become a Star Designer."

That was because the Polymath advanced way too quickly! She wasn't even two centuries old! All of her old buddies should still have a lot of life left in them. Perhaps they might truly get close one day.

"I understand, Your Excellency. I have never rested on my laurels and I do not intend to do so anytime soon. While I am happy with the strength of my living mechs, I know that they can be so much more."

"What do you know about Mr. S, the individual we presume to be your benefactor?" The Polymath suddenly asked as she gained a sharper intensity.

Ves jerked again.

One moment, the Polymath praised his accomplishments. The next moment, she adopted the persona of an interrogator!

The switch was too abrupt and Ves was caught off-guard. Though he expected the MTA to bring up Mr. S.

"Uhm..."

"Answer me this instant!"

The Polymath had rapidly pushed him into a corner. Ves had to give her an answer quickly, but that left him with little time to come up with a way to maintain the fiction that he had built up in his prior talks with Master Willix.

He had to strain his verbal skill more than any other time in his life!

"Uh, Mr. S. is an extremely skilled mech designer. He's much better than anyone else that I have ever met, though I'm not sure how well he measures up against you. From what little I have seen of his design skills, he's either an extremely skilled Master or..."

All of this was technically true, though Ves deliberately played word games by confusing the meaning of some of his words.

Though he completely believed he told the truth, what the Polymath did not know was that Mr. S. stood for the Mech Designer System instead of an actual human being.

When he appraised Mr. S.'s design skill, he solely based his judgment on the output of the Superpublish function.

Naturally, Ves did not go out of his way to expose his word games.

Ves was glad that he already had practice with employing this means of deception. Would his performance be able to pass muster in front of a Star Designer? That was not something that he could afford to worry about at this moment. Just thinking about it might give his thoughts away, so he resolutely embraced his lies as much as possible!

"What is your means of contact with Mr.S?" The Polymath quickly asked. "Can you initiate communication with him at this time?"

Ves did his best to look helpless as he offered her a response.

"I have only ever contacted him through my comm, Your Excellency. As for your request, I am afraid I cannot meet your demand. Mr. S. has been out of contact with me for a while. I'm on my own, not that we have ever contacted each other too much



anyway. I may have benefited significantly from his help and guidance in the early years of my career, but I am a Journeyman now. I am wholly capable of progressing my design philosophy on my own. I do not necessarily want his help anymore."

He spoke all of these words with his true conviction, which would hopefully sell the impression that he was speaking the truth.

The Polymath showed more emotion than before this time. She did not hide her disappointment, which was odd since she was always in control since they began their conversation!

"I owe a debt to Mr. S." She was freely exposed. "To be more exact, I must pay back a sum of 890,000,000 MTA credits or substantially more if we account for inflation."

"What...?"

Ves was gobsmacked!

#### *Chapter 3659 Past-Future Debt*

Ves learned a couple of facts in a short amount of time.

First, the Polymath had previous dealings with Mr. S., who technically wasn't supposed to exist!

Second, their relations had developed to such a degree that she somehow came to believe she had to pay back 890,000,000 MTA credits to Mr. S!

There was no need to hide his utter befuddlement at this revelation. 890,000,000 MTA credits was an unimaginably huge sum to him. He could not imagine getting his hands on that much money in the next decade or even five decades.

The Polymath's debt was equivalent to 7,416,666 Hoenbach handbags! Gloriana would drown in puelmer leather articles before she could enjoy all of them. In fact, Ves seriously doubted that Hoenbach employed enough craftsmen to make all of those bags in a timely manner. Even if it could, the prices would definitely fluctuate based on supply and demand!

If he was able to get his hands on 890,000,000 MTA credits, then he would instantly command the expeditionary fleet to head straight back to the nearest first-class central star node.

Once he returned to one of the Big Two's public strongholds, he would instantly splurge all of that money on first-class starships and mechs.

Though he wouldn't be able to gain as much as he wanted, he could at least form the nucleus of a first-class force. This would make him qualified to enter the Upper Zones where there were much more riches and fortune available!

The Upper Zones was where the major alien races that had long dominated the Red Ocean truly obtained their prosperity from. The dangerous zones was where most of the phasewater in this dwarf galaxy could be found.

Although the danger coefficient in these places was much higher, there was no faster way for him to uplift his clan into a first-class organization!

This course of action would allow him to skip decades of long and steady growth and development. Ves would not have to waste so much time playing with inferior second-class goods when he could quickly achieve parity with Jovy Armalon!

As he entertained more and more fantasies about what he could do with so much money, he carefully offered the Polymath a suggestion.

"If you want, I could hold your repayment on your behalf. When Mr. S. comes into contact again, I can transfer the funds to him straight away."

Once the System finished its lengthy upgrade cycle, Ves planned to do exactly that. Naturally, there was no way that it would take a liking for human money.

When the System inevitably rejected the money, Ves could make an excuse about how Mr. S. didn't need the MTA credits and just threw the sum to his pupil!

This simple but ingenious plan would allow Ves to rightfully claim the 890,000,000 MTA credits!

Unfortunately for him, the Polymath's expression did not show any indication that she was receptive towards his 'helpful' proposal.

"I am burdened with this debt for many years." She calmly responded. "I do not enjoy the fact that this small sum has been weighing on my mind for longer than is necessary, yet I will not choose convenience over what is right. I will pay him back in person when I have the opportunity to meet with him. You can pass my message on to Mr. S."

"Uh... I will, Your Excellency."

Damn. His plan to enrich himself with an immense fortune had failed. It might be a 'small sum' to her current self, but it was an absolute fortune to him and his clan.

A Star Designer was not that easy to manipulate!

Knowing that the Polymath supposedly had relations with Mr. S. was a huge revelation to Ves.

At first, it should be impossible. Ves did not recall ever meeting with the Polymath.

There were three realistic possibilities why the Star Designer made this claim.

First, she was lying about owing a debt to Mr. S. This was the simplest and most realistic possibility.

Though Ves didn't think that someone like the Polymath deigned to speak any lies, Ves knew that she already engaged in a form of misdirection in order to keep her presence in the Davute System a secret.

Perhaps this was her way of trying to persuade Ves to get into contact with Mr. S.

Second, she was telling the truth, but she mistook the identity of the creditor.

This was not an implausible case. Maybe the Polymath hung out with someone who kept his identity a secret and subsequently guessed that this individual was Mr. S.

Third, maybe her claim was literally true. The Polymath truly owed a debt to Mr. S., or actually Ves!

The only way that this could be true was that Ves used the System to go on another Mastery experience at some point in the future. This would subsequently propel his consciousness to the past where he would somehow get into contact with a past version of the Polymath!

He already began to get headaches as he thought about all of the convoluted actions that he would make in the future but had already transpired in the past!

If this third possibility was true, then Ves obtained a definitive answer on how the System's time travel shenanigans affected his reality.

All of the Mastery experiences that he would undertake in the future had already made its mark to the 'current' timeline!

Of course, this wasn't actually helpful information. He had no idea how many Master experiences he would go through and how he altered the normal progression of history.

All he knew was that the System would definitely return at a point in the future and that Ves would live long enough to use it at least one more time.

"We are related to each other." The Polymath stated.

"What?!"

Was the Polymath a Larkinson?! How could she possibly make such a shocking revelation all of a sudden!

"Mr. S. and I are... acquainted with each other." She calmly continued. "I do not know how much he has taught you, but according to our standards you are qualified to be his disciple. Whether this status is official or not is of no concern. What is important is that you are one of the mech designers that is carrying on a part of his legacy. In fact, you are doing more than that. You have successfully branched out and found your own direction."

Was Ves misinterpreting her earlier statement?"

"Uhm, what does this have to do with what you said earlier?" Ves carefully asked.

"The mech design community can be a small world, especially at the top. There are not that many Star Designers in existence and most of us are in frequent contact with each other. We occasionally teach lessons or provide assistance to the disciples of our peers whenever it can help."

Ves inwardly sighed in relief. He didn't know what he would think if he was actually blood-related to the legendary Polymath.

"Then... are you offering to provide assistance to me?" He asked with a hopeful expression.

"As I have stated earlier, you are doing well. You do not require any further assistance. This may be why Mr. S. is not in contact with you anymore. Continued reliance on a greater authority will only distort your progression, which is not helpful to your chances of advancing to Master."

He became disappointed. Any form of aid from someone as powerful as a woman who could stand on an equal level to a galactic mech councilor would be of immense value!

"However..." The Polymath smiled. "I do not think highly of all of the decisions that Mr. S. has made. With his proven capabilities, he can be of immense service to the Mech Trade Association and humanity as a whole. He does not need to hide in the shadows and make himself elusive to the point where our best trackers have failed to find his trace. This is a troubling pattern of behavior. Whether he disagrees with our policies or not, the Mech Trade Association is diverse enough to accommodate all opinions, even those that advocate for its dissolution."

Ves made a slightly risky remark. "I heard from Master Vendar Patricus Bouderein that the cosmopolitans aren't welcome in the MTA."

The powerful woman sneered. This was the first time he saw so much naked contempt from the Star Designer!

"As undesirable as the Unbound Humanity Faction, the Dissolution Faction and even the factions aligned to the first-rate superstates may be, their hearts are ultimately in the right place." She stated. "Each of their members have their own visions on what will make humanity and the mech industry stronger. That is why their radical ideas are tolerated in our Association. The past adherents of cosmopolitanism have proven that their ideology is not deserving of this treatment."

The Polymath truly did not think highly of cosmopolitanism!

This made sense as she was one of the leading figures of the MTA Survivalist Faction, a group that was highly concerned with the survival and the continuation of the human race.

The people in the past who believed that humanity should engage with their alien neighbors eventually served the interests of their inhuman masters. Even after several millennia had gone by, the hatred and ill feelings towards this group had yet to fade!

"Do you suspect that Mr. S. is a cosmopolitan?"

"He is a cosmopolitan." She immediately answered as if to show there was no shadow of a doubt of her judgment. "It is a great regret that a mech designer of his stature has aligned himself to a lost and discredited cause. For what it is worth, I believe he truly means well. There are still a large number of sympathetic human beings who believe that human civilization can not only exist alongside alien civilizations, but that we can also befriend or even merge with them. These romantic ideals are painfully misguided, but even the best of us have fallen for them, as evidenced by your teacher."

"I... see."

"What is your stance towards cosmopolitanism?" She asked.

He didn't need to look in her eyes to know that she was paying careful attention to his answers.

"I don't know much about it to be honest." He admitted. "It's so rare that everything I've heard about it comes from a limited number of sources. While I can understand why people support it, I am realistic enough to know that humanity has long burned that bridge. We will never gain the trust of the aliens that we have attacked and we do not even need to make these attempts. Perhaps this may be a viable way for humanity to survive during the Age of Stars, but we have become much more powerful now that we can easily take care of ourselves. Given this condition, it is logical to eliminate the sentient alien races in our vicinity in order to eliminate as many hidden dangers as possible."

The Polymath softened a bit and smiled. "That is a proper, logical argument. I am relieved to see that you have not inherited your teacher's cosmopolitan ideals."

"I do not want to get kicked out of human society. I like it here. Even though I may dabble with intelligent life forms, I never want them to supplant the human race or anything. I support the MTA and don't want the good times we have to end."

Unlike Joshua who previously struggled against the idea of invading the Red Ocean, Ves had no qualms about it.

He would kill a trillion aliens if he could profit from the act!

Life was precious but it had better be on his side. If not, he had no obligations to care about others.

The Polymath approved. "Your views are good. I am glad to hear that you are not conflicted in any way. The longer you stay in the Red Ocean, the more it will challenge your views. Do not falter. The aliens deserve no sympathy."

She really hated aliens.

#### *Chapter 3660 Revised Terms*

Ves and the Polymath grew significantly closer over the course of their discussion.

Her acknowledgement that they were 'related' in a professional manner along with Ves proving that he was not a filthy alien lover did not put them in the same camp, but they at least had more in common.

He didn't know what Star Designers were like and never imagined that one would be so friendly and approachable.

Of course, his identity and relations were a bit special so the Polymath might find it worth it to make an extra effort this time.

As much as Ves wanted to keep chatting with this friendly Star Designer who occasionally revealed high-level news as if they were random gossip, a person of her stature didn't have all day to chat with Journeyman.

"I cannot remain present here for an extended amount of time." She stated. "Let us discuss the proposal that you have initially offered to Mr. Armalon."

Ves blinked for a moment. It took several seconds for him to recall how he attracted so much attention from the MTA to begin with. Several months went by since he last worked on the Fearless Project.

"I offered an... exchange to him, yes." He carefully said. "If the MTA approves of my attempt to arm my mechs with larger and heavier luminar crystal rifles, I agreed to... contribute to the Association by sharing one of my latest and most useful innovations."

The Polymath smiled and slightly leaned forward. "Indeed. Your sense of duty is admirable, but I presume your application is not thoroughly tested as of yet, am I correct?"

"I've used on a couple of people and they are all fine. Ketis managed to become the first Journeyman who is also a Swordmaster due to the advantage that I bestowed. I am so confident in this invention that I have even applied it to myself and my immediate family."

"Those are reckless actions, but it appears this is your standard modus operandi."

"I do not always have a choice, Your Excellency." Ves gently pushed back. "Life outside the protective umbrella of the Mech Trade Association is much more perilous. I don't have the time and luxury to take it slow. Sometimes, I am already under threat and am desperate enough to require an immediate boost of power. Many of my successful innovations have gone on to tilt the balance and allowed me to survive numerous different crises."

"I am not adminishing you, Mr. Larkinson. I am only making an observation. However, outside of emergency situations, it is better to control the risks to a greater degree. There are good reasons why proper research projects can take years, decades or even centuries to conclude. You should consider my words."

This was quite an impactful message considering its source. The Polymath was famed as a research-mad Star Designer. She branched out in so many different fields but still managed to generate a huge amount of successful advances in every discipline!

Yet Ves did not give in to her advice. Her words may be appropriate in most cases, but he was not a nerd who holed himself up in one of the most secure research institutions in human space.

He had already embarked on a grand expedition and was just about to lead his clan into untamed space. How could he possibly apply proper research methodologies when mechs and aliens were attacking him left and right?

Ves wanted to move on from this topic.

"Does the MTA approve of my companion spirits?"

"Generally, no, and not because this invention of yours is untested." She stated. "Your qualifications as a psionic manipulator are highly dubious. The long-term consequences of your various creations are unknown. Rightfully speaking, it will take at least half a



century of observation for us to obtain preliminary confidence in the safety of your companion spirits. Even then, we will never put our full trust in them if we are not able to break them down and reverse engineer their principles."

This was not good news to Ves. "This is the same way you treat alien technology like luminar crystal technology."

"Indeed." The Star Designer nodded. "I hope you can see the parallels here. The only technology that humanity is allowed to use in a widespread manner is technology that is fully understood and replicable."

"Doesn't that mean that innovations like mine can still be used at a smaller scale, Your Excellency? I mean, I understand why your Association holds this stance. You don't want alien technology to be used as a trojan horse for hostile entities. However, it should be fine if we only keep companion spirits to ourselves and maybe a few other people, right?"

"You are correct. We have held extensive discussions on this matter. To be honest, if Mr. Armalon himself did not indicate that he is eager to receive this augmentation, we would not allow you to apply it to any mecher. You are fortunate that he is willing to brave the risks and bear the consequences."

It sounded as if Jovy truly helped Ves out this time.

"I am grateful for his confidence in my work. I will not betray his trust."

The Polymath shook her head. "That is not enough, Mr. Larkinson. I not only need you to sign a secret contract, I also need you to make a more extensive promise to me. I do not want to leave open any possibility that you can manipulate, tamper or threaten a mech designer who may one day occupy a high position."

Her concerns were understandable. If Ves truly wanted to, he could turn the companion spirit he intended to bestow to Jovy into a trojan horse. With his spiritual engineering capabilities, he could think of several ways to accomplish this feat, hopefully without anyone growing wiser.

Ves would never do that, though. Not only would he be acting against the best interests of his clients, he also didn't screw over someone he considered a friend. Jovy had helped him out numerous times and it would be a profound betrayal if he sought to exploit the MTA Journeyman.

He just needed to convey his seriousness to the Polymath.

"I promise that if I bestow a companion spirit to Mr. Jovy Armalon, I will provide what we have agreed upon and nothing more. The companion spirit will belong solely to Mr. Armalon and I or anyone else will not possess any relations or means of spying or

control with either of them. Regardless of what I can do to Jovy or his companion spirit, I will never exploit either of them to obtain confidential secrets related to the Mech Trade Association and its members in any way."

He had to recite a lot more sentences which encompassed all kinds of scenarios before he was done.

The Polymath paid careful attention to him all this time for anything amiss. It didn't matter though because he did not attempt to fudge his promise.

"Very well." The woman leaned back with a satisfied look. "After this meeting, you may converse with Mr. Armalon about the details of your upcoming service. This will largely be a personal matter between yourself and him, so we will not pose any further demands with regards to the companion spirit."

That sounded nice, but bestowing Jovy with his own little companion spirit was supposed to be a bribe. How could he provide such a valuable boon without getting anything in return?!

"Uhm, Your Excellency, about my heavy luminar weapons..."

"Earlier, we briefly discussed the threat posed by the Common Fleet Alliance." She said. "I did not bring it up without cause. The CFA already stands to grow stronger when it has successfully incorporated phasewater technology in its battleships. If these enormous vessels are armed with luminar crystal weapons that can be scaled to a cataclysmic level, our ace mechs and god mechs may lose their advantages that we have relied upon to hold our ground against the CFA."

Uh oh. That did not sound so good.

"However... if you can truly deliver upon your promise to secure your tech with unbreakable security measures, then we may be persuaded to grant you an exemption."

"Really, ma'am?!" Ves became enthusiastic again.

This was great news! He could finally resume his work on the Fearless Project if the MTA no longer stood in his way. Even though the project was horribly behind compared to his other ones, at least he would have a more effective answer against expert mechs in future battles!"

"I am not finished yet." She stated as she pinned him with a serious gaze. "You must secure all of your luminar crystal weapons with this protective safeguard, even the ones that you have already made such as the main weapon of your Amaranto. If you cannot accomplish this task within a year, then I shall order Mr. Armalon to confiscate your clan's existing luminar crystal weapons and seize all of your existing research files on this tech. We will also insist that you never conduct any research and development

activities on any form of luminar technology again unless you have our express authorization."

This was too much! Ves almost wanted to rise from his seat!

"I cannot accept these terms, Your Excellency. This does not conform to my prior agreement with Master Willix."

The Polymath did not accept this excuse. "I believe she has explicitly mentioned to you that the agreement that you are referring to is subject to change. Well, I am changing it right now. We have a much more thorough estimation of the potential of luminar crystal technology and what it can do. The Common Fleet Alliance has shown more worrying signs as of late so the possibility that the fleeters can exploit your tech is of much greater concern."

He had no choice but to abide by these revised terms. The MTA was in charge here and everyone knew it. He bowed his head.

"As you say, then. I will endeavor to come up with a protective measure as soon as possible. Can you tell me how secure it will have to be? I would be able to work more effectively if I become aware of the standard that you wish to apply."

The Star Designer paused for a second. "We will approve of your security measure if I am unable to crack it. That should be an appropriate standard."

Ves gulped. This was quite a huge demand! He had no idea how powerful she was, let alone her capables in the spiritual arena.

Even though most mech designers were fairly inept when it came to spiritual manipulation and spiritual perception, he had a feeling that Star Designers were quite different from the norm!

"I... do not have a good impression of this standard of yours. Could you... give me a demonstration?"

It was a presumptuous request, but the Polymath appeared to be in a good enough mood to assent.

"If that is what you wish. Get ready. Please summon your companion spirit."

"Blinky, come out. It's safe." Ves called.

Mrow...

The intangible purple Star Cat carefully emerged out of his head. Even though the Polymath contained herself so well that not even a cat as sensitive as Blinky could figure out her depth, the companion spirit was still frightened!

The Polymath raised her hand and somehow exerted an effect that caused Blinky to uncontrollably fly to her hand!

Ves was shocked and frightened at this seemingly casual display of power!

If she could do something like this without breaking a sweat, then what could she truly do if she got serious?

Mrow! Mrow!

Though Blinky squirmed in the Polymath's grip, she did not treat him harshly.

"Interesting. This is an interesting specimen. I can see that it is truly a part of yourself that you have turned into another facet. I have encountered many fascinating inventions in my life. I made many of them in fact. I have never created anything comparable to this, however. Fascinating."

Though Ves was glad to receive the praise of someone of her stature, he also grew worried about what she might do next.