

Mech 3971

Chapter 3971: Pivotal Debate

The current topic provoked a lot of discussion among the Larkinsons in the conference room.

Everyone had an opinion on the important decision of where the Larkinson Clan should establish its first significant branch.

Ves heard a lot of familiar arguments as the proponents of different choices tried to sway the idea that the Larkinson Clan should place its first planetary compound in either the center or the periphery of Krakatoa!

While there was nothing preventing the Larkinson Clan from building its branches in both locations and more, the clansmen still had to choose carefully.

The current state of the clan only allowed for the construction of one major branch. This entailed building a complete manufacturing complex that was capable of producing thousands of mechs a day when operating at full capacity.

This was an essential step to developing the Living Mech Corporation on this side of the greater beyonder gate!

Due to the value and importance of such a massive industrial site, the Larkinson Clan had to make a major commitment and invest a lot of manpower and resources into the compound.

Abandoning a major outpost was not as costly as abandoning an entire colony, but it was still an outcome that the Larkinson Clan should prevent!

This meant that it was extremely important for the Larkinsons to get along with its neighbors and integrate in the local region.

Therefore, the choice of where to build their first outpost was of great significance and largely influenced the friends and rivals the clan would make in the future.

"Our clan is primarily engaged in the business of selling mechs." Minister Shederin Purnesse stated. "Building up relationships with different actors and stakeholders is an essential component to running a competitive business. We should not distance ourselves from the powers that control the markets that we depend upon to earn most of our revenue. Turning Davute into our focal point is the most effective decision we can make to expand our market reach. This port system not only possesses a large customer base, but is also a nexus of many shipping channels that help our mechs get sold in far-flung locations."

"We don't necessarily need to build a massive factory on an overcrowded and expensive planet." Commander Casella Ingvar retorted. "It is enough for us to build a branch office over there that can handle the sales, distribution and support functions of our mech company. Just like the LMC in the past, we can settle on a smaller planet where we can exert more control and deal with fewer rivalries."

"The fees and taxes in a rural star system are much lower as well."

"We won't actually save that much money because it is much more cumbersome to ship in raw materials while shipping out finished mechs. Just protecting the shipping convoys carrying trade goods worth thousands of MTA credits is a large and costly burden! If we center our production in Davute, we can skip all of these unnecessary steps and complete every shipment within hours instead of days or weeks."

Commander Melkor of the Avatars of Myth shook his head. "The price for all of that convenience will be higher than you think. I've visited enough unstable states to see where Krakatoa is going. All of these major colonies have already begun their struggle for regional hegemony. Once they have built up their settlements and infrastructure a bit more, it won't take long before they will start rubbing against each other. It will start with border skirmishes and it will end with total conflicts on the scale of the Komodo War back in our former home! It is much easier for us to pull out of this messy and dangerous power struggle if we are only sitting in the periphery of the zone."

As the Larkinsons continued to voice different arguments, Ves grew increasingly more conflicted. While he had made a preliminary decision, that did not mean he discounted the arguments in favor of the opposite choice.

Both sides raised valid points!

As Ves continued to weigh their options, an elbow struck his side.

He turned to face his angry-looking wife.

"Why aren't you settling for Davute yet?" Gloriana hissed. "It's clearly our best choice! Not only will it be easier for us to produce mechs and befriend other mech designers, we can stay in touch and enjoy all of the advantages of living on a developed planet! Think about what we talked about yesterday. Do you want our clansmen to get cut off from humanity, or do you want to make sure that we stay in touch with society?"

The dichotomy presented by Gloriana reminded Ves of the split between the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance.

Both of them adopted different approaches towards human society.

The MTA chose to establish more channels to it and maintained a more visible presence in the lives of ordinary humans. It was no surprise that the space peasants

showed a lot more support to the mechers, but they also depended more heavily on them as well for many problems.

The CFA isolated itself from much of humanity and created their own parallel society. This allowed them to remain unaffected by much of the petty squabbles and other forms of dirty business that went on in human space. However, the downside to that was that fleeters received less support from indigenous humans, which meant that they had to solve all of their problems by themselves!

It was difficult to say whether the MTA or CFA had adopted the better strategy. Both of them were led by extremely smart, wise and competent leaders, so they definitely had their own considerations for what was best for their respective superorganizations.

The Larkinson Clan was nowhere comparable to the MTA or CFA, but if Ves had to make a choice, he would rather move closer to the former than the latter.

Still... if he did so, then that meant that he would be moving further away from his original ideal of keeping his clan out of the dirty power struggles that constantly took place in human space.

He sighed as he swept his gaze around the conference room.

There was no clear majority for either of the options. Support was split down the middle.

Ves noticed that many of the civilians were in favor of settling in Davute while the more militant Larkinsons chose to settle in a rural star system.

It didn't take long for him to understand the division.

Davute was much more conducive to business. It was a commercial and industrial hub where all of the biggest and most ambitious companies chose to settle.

While the competition on this planet was great, as long as the Larkinson Clan overcame all of the challenges, it could become a major power in the region!

People like Minister Shederin Purnesse and Director Ranya Wodin would definitely thrive in such a bustling location!

In contrast, people such as General Verle and Commander Melkor were much more wary towards the authorities and rivals that could pose a great threat towards the Larkinson Clan.

By keeping to the periphery of a zone, the Larkinson Clan could avoid a lot of unfriendly attention and take on the role as bystanders to these regional conflicts.

As long as the Larkinsons kept a low profile, few if any of the powers based in Davute would bother to cast their gaze in the direction of the clan.

However, that would also mean that the Larkinson Clan would miss out on a lot of connections and access to more exclusive goods and services.

"I think the issue we are arguing about is a question of ambition." Ketis suddenly stood up, attracting everyone's attention towards the Swordmaster. "I think we can all agree that Davute is a more complex and dangerous environment, but it also provides a lot more opportunities for us. Moving far away from this port system will be safer for us, but it will be a lot more difficult for us to build our advantages over time. To me, the matter is simple. Do we want to hide in the corner like a coward or are we brave enough to occupy the center of attention?"

Ves almost snorted. Ketis made a pretty clear and impartial argument at first. Her last sentence revealed her bias, though. She was clearly in a fighting mood and viewed Davute as a massive arena!

Her clever argument caused a lot of Larkinsons to think back on the values and the motto of the Larkinson Clan.

Gloriana pounced on the opportunity!

"We entered the Red Ocean because we want to fight for a better life for ourselves." She declared. "Ever since our fleet arrived at the new frontier, we did just that. We exposed our strength in order to defeat rival pioneering organizations in the mech arenas of Chance Bay. We explored the Garimel System and boldly chose to invade an alien-occupied phase whale enclave in order to plunder their riches! Does that sound as if we are timid? We are not! We are Larkinsons! Our ambition has no limits! Davute is the perfect springboard to greatness in my eyes. We would be fools to choose an alternative!"

What a devious woman. Gloriana could be quite astute when she needed to be. She not only tied her stance to the values of the Larkinson Clan, but also framed the issue as a test of pride and courage!

It was clear which choice was correct for those that prided themselves on their strength and bravery.

"Let's go for Davute!" Venerable Vincent Ricklin shouted. "There's a lot more we can do in this star system!"

Dulo Voiken also threw in his support. "It is easier to exchange with our peers in the mech industry if we live next door to them."

"We can take our family and children on regular excursions to Kotor City."

"There are a lot more sparring partners that we can practice against. Sparring against the same Larkinsons over and over gets boring after a time."

The trend of the discussion quickly shifted in favor of Davute. Many of the doubters finally became swayed by the arguments in favor of putting the focus of the Larkinson Clan in the port system and its complicated environment.

Those that wanted the Larkinson Clan to settle in a more quiet star system were unable to present any convincing counterarguments.

Any arguments that were based on safety, neutrality or control sounded like cowardly excuses!

In the end, over two-thirds of the leaders in the conference room favored the decision to build a major outpost in Davute. It offered a lot of conveniences and also allowed the clan to stay in touch with many regional powers.

Though Ves could choose to disregard popular opinion and settle for a different choice, he did not wish to do so for this matter.

He was already leaning towards Davute in the first place and did not have any strong feelings for the alternative choice.

Besides, the Larkinson Clan was bound to become significantly stronger in the future. Ves did not believe that he and his fellow Larkinsons weren't competent enough to succeed in Davute!

Ves stood up in order to put an end to this debate.

"Alright, everyone. Our choice is clear. As Larkinsons, our ambitions are not limited to Krakatoa. This is only a small corner of the Red Ocean. Our greater goal is to turn our clan into a first-class organization and gain entry into the highest level of human civilization! Our journey will be long and difficult. As my wife has already stated, Davute can be a springboard that we can use to reach our destination faster! Since that is the case, let us turn this port system into our second home and do our best to turn our clan into a household name in this region!"

"Our clan shall rise!"

"Davute will be ours!"

"For the Larkinson Clan!"

"For the Golden Cat!"

Chapter 3972 The Burden of Advanced Technology

As Ves sat back down, he felt that he had changed the course of the Larkinson Clan forever.

The decision to build a major compound and manufacturing complex in Davute locked the Larkinsons into a course that undoubtedly led to collisions against other people in the future.

Ves did not look forward to getting dragged in different fights. However, he was cognizant enough to recognize that most of those fights revolved around profit and power.

The more the Larkinson Clan fought against others, the more it profited from defeating others!

Of course, the premise to succeeding in all of this was that the Larkinsons became strong enough to get ahead in every conflict.

Ves along with many Larkinsons did not believe that their clan was weak. The last expedition only lasted for a couple of months, but it had successfully bonded the Larkinsons together while boosting their esteem!

In short, expanding the clan's presence in Davute was not a suicidal choice. The Larkinsons possessed sufficient wealth and business potential to find a place in the booming port system.

His other clansmen evidently agreed. After Ves announced his final decision, none of them voiced any strong objections. It appeared that those who preferred to settle in a more quiet star system were not adamantly opposed to the other choice.

This made it easier for Ves to feel as if he made the right decision.

The topics that followed after this issue were not as impactful or exciting. The conference room quickly calmed down as the leaders of the clan argued about other matters.

Once they settled the last few points on the agenda, the outline of the Larkinson Clan's course became clear.

Ves picked up the Larkinson Mandate and held it close to his body as he stood up once again.

After many hours of debate, the leaders and administrators of the Larkinson Clan had all grown tired.

"Fellow clansmen. Today, we have set our targets and clarified our future. We have chosen to take a bolder course, one that puts us right in the middle of the Davute

System. Since we are about to establish a substantial presence in a port system, it is inevitable that our interests will be anchored in its rise and fall. With our choices, we have chosen to become active participants of the trends sweeping through Krakatoa and beyond. We shall either be able to rise faster than anyone else or get driven out just as quickly!"

"If we do get booted out, then good riddance! We don't need them anyway!" Venerable Vincent claimed!

That provoked laughter from other clansmen.

"It's better to try and fail than to not make the attempt at all! We didn't travel to the Red Ocean just to bury our heads in the sand!"

The mood among the Larkinson leaders was good. No one showed any regret for the course that their clan had charted.

Ves raised his hand. The noise quickly subsided as everyone directed their attention back to the patriarch of their clan.

"Since the founding of our clan, we have experienced many changes. Our growth can be described as rapid and meteoric. An entire generation hasn't even passed and we have already beat up several alien forces, stolen several tons of phasewater and earned the respect of the MTA! We don't need to match the same pace as now. As long as we continue to remain proactive, we will surely surpass our previous results!"

A strong wave of confidence and optimism sprung from the minds of all of the Larkinsons. They had all become inspired by his words and the earlier discussions.

While it remained to be seen whether the Larkinsons could back up their confidence with actual results, Ves was happy to see that his subordinates showed plenty of fighting spirit.

Having a bunch of eager and motivated minions at his beck and call was much more preferable to leading a bunch of timid cowards!

The only problem was that he feared that they were being way too optimistic about the future. There were many undercurrents in the Red Ocean and the clan could easily get affected by events beyond their control.

Once Ves wrapped up his speech, the first planning session had finally come to an end. Many Larkinsons left the conference room in order to get back to their own offices and work out all of the changes they needed to make.

Ves and his fellow mech designers were no exception. They all moved down to the design labs before entering a smaller meeting room in order to hold a more intimate discussion.

When everyone took their seats, Ves glanced at everyone's expressions.

"You have all heard what we have decided. Our clan will get involved in numerous different affairs in the future, so we must make sure that we are capable of helping our fellow Larkinsons succeed. Designing stronger mechs and offering more value to our customers are both necessary. The easiest way we can boost our mechs is to master at least one form of phasewater technology."

"You're asking a lot from us, Ves." Gloriana spoke up. "I don't think you have made the wrong decision, but you placed a great burden on Sara and Juliet's shoulders. Both of them are competent mech designers, but they are still a generation too young to effectively develop new phasewater-enhanced armor systems or minidrives."

He sighed. "You may be right, but I don't want us to remain helpless whenever we obtain a batch of phasewater. We need to get started on this sooner or later. I would rather start too soon than too late."

"What about the difficulty of learning all of this high technology? If we bite more than we can chew, then we will delay our progress! That is not acceptable. We all improved quickly with each passing design round. It is vital that we continue to grow our competences, but that will be much harder to achieve if we are forced to study tech that exceeds our level!"

Ves waved his hand. "Calm down, Gloriana. Your worries are valid, but it is still worthwhile to make this attempt. Sara, Juliet, tell me what you think. Are you confident you can master the use of phasewater in the next few years?"

The two women looked at each other. Neither of them exuded a lot of confidence.

"If I am being honest, then I don't think I can design or build a miniature warp drive within a decade." Juliet explained. "I might be able to do it after another decade, but we will all be in our fifties at that time."

Ves did not want to wait that long before the Design Department was able to develop its own warp-capable mechs.

Even though these kinds of mechs were extremely rare on the battlefield at the moment, he was convinced that they would become a lot more ubiquitous in the future!

Once phasewater became more abundant and once the mech industry made numerous technical breakthroughs in the development of minidrives, the cost of equipping mechs with minidrives would surely drop, making this addition more accessible over time!

As mech designers, Ves and his fellow peers would lose too much if they missed out on this future trend!

This was why Ves did not intend to change his stance despite the points that Gloriana raised.

"Sara, I'm sure you have already spent a bit of time investigating the use of phasewater in defensive systems. How confident are you in mastering this specific form of high technology?"

"I am sorry to disappoint you, but I do not think I can achieve any results that are game changing enough to empower mechs within 15 years. That is how much time I need to familiarize myself with this tech to a degree where I can design new and alternative phasewater armor systems."

Ves did not look happy even though he already anticipated these responses.

The more people familiarize themselves with phasewater technology, the more they realized their inadequacies.

That said, the disappointing answer was not an excuse for Ves to give up on this initiative!

"Sara, Juliet, if the both of you are struggling in your studies, I am more than willing to give you additional help to master the new tech faster. I already mentioned that I would not hesitate to hire tutors and pay for additional augmentations."

"I already have a cranial implant. It is hard to improve my learning speed further."

"Improving our memory and speeding up our learning speeds still won't solve our fundamental problem that much." Sara Voiken shook her head. "What we need is time. Lots of time. If you can be patient enough to wait for me to complete my studies and combine them with my specialty, I can design a defensive mech that can withstand several times the damage of a normal mech!"

She wasn't confident enough to claim she could match the amplification achieved by the MTA. Even after spending so many years on absorbing all of the new knowledge, she could only hope to double or triple the defensive performance of her mechs.

"Will it be worthwhile for us to invest that much MTA merits and time on these studies?" Gloriana frowned. "Think about it, Ves. Sure, Sara may be able to design much tougher mechs than before, but have you ever considered how many mechs like these we can actually build? I don't know how much phasewater it takes to construct a single strong mech, but I doubt it is less than 100 grams of phasewater!"

His wife was right once again. Ves knew that it took substantial amounts of phasewater to impart remarkable phasing properties to armor. The two originally didn't get along with each other, so it took a lot of precious materials as well as ingenious design solutions in order to produce an effective combination!

"It's not useless to learn this advanced knowledge." Ketis spoke up. "The price of phasewater will always remain too high for us to use it on mass production models, but it is a different story for our elites. We don't have enough Unending alloy to empower our future expert mechs with superior armor, but so what? Once Sara is ready to develop phasewater armor systems, all of our expert mechs and maybe ace mechs will be invincible against their regular counterparts! Even powerful alien threats can't threaten us as much as before! Phasewater armor is not only tougher than normal armor, they are also more resistant against spatial attacks!"

This was the biggest reason why Ves wanted Sara to master this tech. The native alien races learned to harness phasewater in many different ways.

This was why Ves felt it was essential to provide his mechs with effective protection. Native threats such as the phase whales were known to rely heavily on spatial manipulation.

The Larkinsons already got a taste of how damaging they could be, but the fish-whales were practically children in front of their real phase whale ancestors!

Other powerful alien forces also made use of phasewater in other offensive uses. In time, human forces would begin to follow suit as well as their own weapon developers and mech designers made their own advances!

"I agree with Ketis." Ves said as he sided against his wife. "Phasewater armor systems can directly enhance the combat effectiveness of our strongest assets. We have many powerful expert pilots in our ranks. Many of them are fairly young and are bound to grow quickly due to being paired with masterwork expert mechs. We cannot afford to lose any of them, but the piloting profession is never safe. Equipping them with mechs that are a lot more resilient than before will do much to preserve their lives, thereby increasing the chances of obtaining an ace pilot!"

"So you still insist on going through with this." Gloriana flatly said.

"Yes, but not everyone will be tasked with mastering a form of phasewater technology. 60 million MTA merits is only enough to grant us basic access to three different forms of phasewater technology. I have already assigned one of them to Sara and another to Juliet. That covers our defensive and mobility needs. We need one more Journeyman to empower our offensive solutions. Who of you is willing to take on this responsibility?"

Chapter 3973 The Final Allocation

Eight Journeyman Mech Designers fell into thought after Ves had spoken.

Many of them grew tempted at the prospect of gaining access to high technology.

The opportunity to study and master a small but powerful component of advanced human technology was precious!

While they were more accessible to first-raters, the secrets of high technology were still out of reach to the vast majority of the citizens of second-rate states.

There were three major barriers why this was the case.

First, high technology took far too much time to learn. They were often derived from the signature technological accumulation of powerful alien civilizations. After humanity's researchers spent an untold amount of effort to reverse engineer all of the weird and powerful alien technologies, humanity was able to convert them into its own use, if only reluctantly.

Second, those that wished to harness high technology needed to meet extremely high requirements. Unaugmented scientists and engineers could forget about ever getting started on it. They could study one course or another for fifty or a hundred years and still fall short of understanding the essence of how advanced technologies such as teleportation or portal generation could be achieved!

Third, the cost of producing anything based on high technology was probably high. Practically all of them were either based on powerful exotics and components that were extremely difficult to reproduce.

While it was not impossible to achieve powerful results using more mundane materials and production methods, the truth of the cosmos was that a more powerful foundation made it a lot easier to achieve more impressive results!

It was practically impossible for Ves to design a mech based on Breyer alloy that could defeat an equivalent mech built with Unending alloy! The huge gap in material properties gave the latter such a crushing advantage that the contest was doomed from the start!

The only flaw was that the most special and powerful materials also happened to be the most scarce. The reason why first-raters were able to monopolize the key materials needed to reproduce high-tech products was because they were able to price out everyone else from the market!

As long as the Terrans, Rubarthans and other rich parties were able to throw around a thousand times more money than second-raters, there was no way that someone like Ves could get a turn!

All of these limitations and more meant that the decision to harness high technology might not be a good development for the Larkinson Clan.

However, that didn't mean the gathered Journeymen grew discouraged. The prospect of obtaining early access to the most advanced form of first-class technology was irresistible to any enthusiastic engineer or designer!

It didn't matter if they were unable to master the tech as well as one of the top researchers of the MTA. It was not always necessary for them to understand the core principles or the entire theoretical fundamentals surrounding advanced tech.

FTL drive technology was a good example of this. There were many naval engineers who studied hard to work in the engineering departments of many starships.

None of them actually knew how to design and build an FTL drive from scratch. The knowledge they mastered with great effort was only enough for them to operate the devices and perform basic repairs on them. Perhaps the more brilliant among them were capable of performing more extensive repairs, but it was a dream if they wished to develop newer ones without help!

This was why Sara Voiken and Juliet Stameross did not say no when Ves assigned them the responsibility of familiarizing themselves with two pieces of high technology.

They only needed to gain surface proficiency in whatever high technology they could get their hands upon. While they still needed to spend a lot of time on studying, as long as they optimized their courses and prioritized using the new tech instead of understanding the fundamentals, they could probably incorporate existing applications of high technology into their mech designs a lot sooner!

Ves was not impatient regarding this. The mech designers here were all Journeymen who still needed time to develop their competences further.

They could wait until they became Seniors or Masters before they could truly begin to master the pieces of high technology they had access to. That would be the time where they could not only catch up to existing progress, but move beyond this point and develop more powerful innovative solutions!

However, this was a scenario that would only take place in the far future. Ves had no patience to wait that long. He wanted to gain more immediate benefits. He did not set his standards too high. As long as the mech designers found a way to make effective use of the phasewater collected by the Larkinson Clan, he would already be happy!

This made the current consideration important in many ways. The Larkinson Clan needed a mech designer that could master a way to amplify the attack power of mechs through phasewater.p

Any of the mech designers aside from Sara Voiken and Juliet Stameross could assume this important but time-consuming responsibility.

"Well?" Ves asked as none of his peers immediately rose up to volunteer for this duty. "Are none of you eager and confident enough in your own ability to push your work to the next level by incorporating phasewater?"

His wife let out a tired breath. "We all have our own pursuits, Ves. We formulated our design philosophies and developed our skills without knowing about the existence of phasewater. I think we are all attracted by this opportunity, but if we choose to accept it, we need to realign our approach and shift the focus of our work. We don't know whether our gains will outweigh our losses."

This was not an unknown phenomenon in the mech industry or any other industries. New technologies came out all the time, and some of them were so significant that existing developers had to make hard choices on how to go forward.

They could either stick to their original plans and risk becoming irrelevant, or they could choose to embrace the new advancements only to lose all of their advantages and fall behind!

Right now, phasewater happened to be the shiny new toy in the tech circles of this generation.

The vast majority of developers simply had no practical way to get in touch with phasewater, so they had no reason to struggle.

It was people like the Larkinsons who were in a much more difficult position. They had the potential to strengthen their work with phasewater, but only after making significant sacrifices.

Ves glanced towards his wife. "I thought an enthusiastic mech designer such as you would pounce on the opportunity to incorporate phasewater technology in your perfect designs."

She crossed her arms. "Despite what you might think about me, I am a humble mech designer. I know what I am capable of. I have already planned out my progression over many years. There is no room for a subject as advanced as phasewater technology. Besides, even if I attempt to learn it, the applications that I develop may be different from the needs of our clan. I don't specialize in weapon systems."

Though Gloriana could be conceited and overconfident at times, she wasn't stupid enough to claim that she could design better swordsman mechs than Ketis.

Ves nodded. "I understand. Who else, then?"

"Tifi and I probably aren't suitable either." Janassa Pellier spoke up. "Our specialties are geared towards designing mechs that can hit harder and leverage more strength out of their frames, but I don't see how phasewater could add to that. I don't deny that phasewater may be able to help us develop more powerful systems that could be relevant to our specialty, but this is so tenuous that you are probably better off passing this on to others."

"You're right. Maybe the situation will be different after a couple of generations, but for now humanity is only scratching the surface of what is possible with phasewater."

Ves turned his attention to the remaining mech designers.

Ketis and Dulo Voiken were the two remaining candidates aside from himself.

All three of them were able to design mechs that excelled in different offensive aspects.

Before he could speak, Ketis interrupted his routine by pointing her finger at his chest.

"Why don't you assume this responsibility yourself?" She asked with a frown on her face. "You're the main developer of luminar crystal weapons in our clan. Since ranged weapons play such a big role in space combat and fights against larger opponents, it makes sense for you to find a way to enhance the firepower of our machines."

"I'm already busy, Ketis. I have already accepted an offer from the MTA to study and master luminar crystal technology. This is already a huge commitment. While I don't specialize in ranged weapons, the only reason why I have made accomplishments in luminar crystal technology is because my specialization enables me to harness it better. I am not arrogant enough to think I can immediately blend alien technology with high technology at my current level."

Ves would be lying if he said he wasn't tempted. Phasewater technology was the future and it would certainly become a powerful improvement factor to many top-level mechs!

However, he wasn't in a hurry to gain access to it right away. He could wait until he digested a sufficient degree of luminar crystal technology before shifting his focus elsewhere.

Perhaps the System could give him a hand once it finished its lengthy upgrade cycle and came online again. If Ves had the opportunity to master a specific application of phasewater technology through the Skill Tree, then he was not in a hurry to learn it the old-fashioned way.

There was also another reason why he wanted to pass on this opportunity for the time being.

"If we want to augment our ranged arsenal with phasewater technology, then we should wait until we have recruited a competent and loyal ranged specialist." He said. "We have already started to cast our net. I hope that we will be able to welcome a new Journeyman to our ranks that excels at designing ranged mechs. We can consider whether it is a good idea to task the newcomer with learning how to work with phasewater."

Gloriana and several other mech designers reluctantly nodded. With Ves out of the picture, no one in the clan was particularly suited to find ways to empower ranged weapons with phasewater.

Perhaps Zanthar Larkinson may be able to explore this field in the future, but it would take way too much time for him to become a Journeyman.

"That said, we shouldn't limit the offensive uses of phasewater to ranged solutions." Ves stated. "Our melee mechs also deserve a bit of love. Ketis, Dulo, only the two of you are left. Who of you is willing to embrace phasewater first?"

Both of them excelled in designing offensive mechs, so they were the best choice out of the eight Journeymen gathered in the meeting room.

They exchanged glances with each other.

"I will take a pass on this." Ketis eventually said while shaking her head.

"Are you sure? I thought you would be a lot more enthusiastic about embracing this tech."

"I already have my own way of making my swords sharper, Ves. I can also make my swordsman mechs stronger and more useful by leveraging my swordmaster abilities. I need to conduct so much original research that I don't have the time to study phasewater technology as well."

"I see."

That left only a single mech designer.

Out of everyone else in the room, Dulo Voiken was perhaps the most unexceptional mech designer among them. With a dazzling swordsman mech specialist like Ketis in the Design Department, every other melee mech specialist inevitably became overshadowed.

However, as everyone turned their attention to the man, Dulo showed increasingly more determination.

"I am aware that my spearman mechs aren't as strong as the works designed by Ketis." He frankly admitted. "If this goes on, my spearman mechs and lancer mechs will never be as popular. Phasewater technology can change that. Compared to swords, spears are obviously more suitable. It is much more economical to improve its penetrating power because only the tip needs to be laced with phasewater."

Dulo was right! If Ketis tried to make use of phasewater technology, then she would probably have to apply phasewater across the length of any blade.

Since the swordmaster favored the use of greatswords, this could easily add up to a lot of phasewater!

In contrast, Dulo had it much easier. The body of a polearm did not need to be anything special. As long as he incorporated a bit of phasewater in the tip of the weapon, then that would be enough to elevate its battle performance!

Ves smiled. "Alright. It's decided then. Dulo, you will be the third mech designer who will undertake the responsibility of mastering an offensive use of phasewater. I hope to see you design mechs that can impale the strongest expert mechs with their spears one day."

"I hope that day will come as well, sir."

Dulo Voiken grasped his fist. With this opportunity, he could finally earn a proper place in the Design Department!

Chapter 3974 Upgraded Design Facilities

Ves immediately acted once he and his fellow Journeymen came to an agreement on how to allocate the new responsibilities.

He activated his comm and logged onto the MTA's internal portal. He accessed their restricted library and picked out the relevant items on the list.

With the cooperation of all of the mech designers, Ves configured each knowledge package to contain the most relevant and useful data and learning resources.

Depending on what Ves wanted to redeem from the MTA, he could spend as little as 7 or 8 million MTA merits.

That would only grant the Larkinsons the core knowledge of a specific aspect of phasewater technology. Journeymen such as Sara and Dulo wouldn't be able to figure it out because they needed to understand a lot of prerequisite subjects first!

This was why Ves threw in enough additional textbooks, articles, tutorials, recorded lectures, experimental logs and so on to reach a target sum of roughly 20 million MTA merits for each knowledge package.

After confirming the composition of packages multiple times, Ves pressed a single projected button, thereby confirming the exchange of MTA merits!

"It's done." Ves declared in a heavy tone. "That is 58,346,713 MTA merits down the drain. I hope you guys don't waste this chance. The sooner you are able to incorporate phasewater technology into your designs, the sooner we can strengthen our expert mechs and elite mechs."

This was an important priority to him. He and his clan depended on the fighting forces of the Larkinson Clan so many times that they would never feel safe unless the Larkinson Army was equipped with the powerful mechs!

Though Ves also harbored ambitions to fulfill commissions centered around designing highly desirable phasewater-empowered mechs, this was secondary to increasing his own security!

He already looked forward to upgrading the latest iterations of mechs such as the Everchanger with phasewater technology.

The masterwork expert mech was already powerful in many ways, but it could not outperform other comparable machines in any area.

The story would be a lot different if the Everchanger was equipped with a combat drive and a sword that could pierce through the chest armor of any opposing expert mech!

It would become such a terror on the battlefield that only other phasewater-empowered expert mechs were able to contend with the new and improved Everchanger!

This example also illustrated one of Ves' greatest concerns.

The Larkinsons weren't the only people with the opportunity to learn phasewater technology.

There were a lot of first-raters and a fair number of second-raters who were also trying to leverage phasewater in their own work!

Sooner or later, a number of these hard-working researchers would begin to release their own improved products. More and more forces would get their hands on phasewater mechs, thereby making life a lot more difficult for rivals that weren't able to acquire these precious machines!

This was why Ves did not regret the decision to spend so much MTA merits so soon. He believed in his fellow mech designers. Each of them were among the more talented and competent cohort of Journeymen in their generation.

Even Dulo Voiken wasn't that bad of a mech designer. The only reason why he had to lower his head in the Larkinson Clan was because he was overshadowed by Ketis. Without her dazzling presence, he would have been able to earn more recognition for his work!

"Now that we're done with this, can we move on to discussing other necessary investments?" Gloriana impatiently asked.

Just because she declined to study phasewater technology didn't mean she had become frugal all of a sudden!

She already set her eyes on other ways to spend the clan's hard-won MTA merits!

"We might as well." Ves slowly nodded. "We still have to reserve a lot of MTA merits to strengthen our core starships. Our fleet is the home and the foundation of our clan. We cannot neglect it. I think I will allow up to 60 million MTA merits to be spent on design-related upgrades."

Gloriana grinned. "That's great! I already formulated a list. Take a look and tell me your thoughts."

She shared a document to every mech designer.

It turned out that Gloriana already put a lot of thought on this. Although Ves initially became a bit overwhelmed by the sheer amount of details in her wish list, he quickly recognized that she did not make any thoughtless purchase decisions.

When it came to her work, Gloriana was utterly serious!

Her greatest obsession was designing good mechs. She would never squander this precious opportunity to upgrade the equipment and facilities that she relied upon to develop her various works!

Her wish list was separated into several different categories. Ves focused on the first and arguably most significant purchase the Larkinson Clan could make.

"You want to upgrade the Spirit of Bentheim's data processing capabilities?" Ves asked.

"Yes. Out of all of the improvements we can obtain, none can make a greater difference than speeding up the calculations we can perform. The ASTERA AI core that you obtained years ago was good at the time, but aside from its deep learning capabilities,

its raw processing power has fallen far behind. This is especially the case now that we are joined by more lead designers and work on more design projects per round."

Ves grimaced a bit. Gloriana raised an excellent point. Every serious design project relied on a lot of math and simulations to optimize many different design solutions.

While it was theoretically possible to perform the most essential calculations with the tiny processors that came with every comm, the difference in speed and processing power was so enormous that a mech designer who relied on such a pathetic device would take forever to complete a design that was up to market standard!

The competition at the middle and upper levels of the mech market was extremely fierce. Any products that weren't optimized to a sufficient degree would essentially lose at the starting line!

Even if Ves didn't plan to commercialize a new mech design, he still wanted to provide the best to his soldiers.

This became a lot more difficult during the last design round. The amount of processing power available in the fleet remained the same, but the number of active mech design projects had practically doubled.

All of this meant that Ves, Gloriana and many other lead designers had to wait twice as long to obtain processed data and results!

If Ves could spend MTA merits that could bring the wait time back to its original level, then he could get back to his old schedule.

However, this would only last a short time. Once the Design Department completed another round of recruitment, the addition of multiple lead designers would strain the fleet's processing capabilities once again!

Gloriana obviously wasn't in the mood to endure all of these hardships. She wanted to make a big investment right away so that the Spirit of Bentheim could satisfy her data processing needs for a long time!

"30,000,000 MTA merits." Ves uttered the astonishing sum. "You want to spend half of the budget that I have set on upgrading the primary data vault. Your appetite is quite big!"

"Why are you using that tone on me? You should know very well that increasing our data processing speeds by several orders of magnitude will allow us to complete design projects faster! Not only that, we can perform additional calculations without delaying their completion!"

"I understand that, but we can spend a lot of MTA merits on other improvements. Allocating half of our budget on this item alone means that we will have to forgo many other useful gadgets."

"We don't need them." Gloriana contemptuously said. "We should prioritize the foundation of our work. The quality and soundness of our designs must be as high as possible. We also need the improved processors to handle the more complex analysis and simulation of phasewater technology."

"We can speed up our mastery of phasewater technology if we have access to faster processors." Juliet added her voice. "We can iterate our design solutions and facilitate our research to a greater degree with greater processing power at our disposal."

There were strong arguments in favor of investing so much on data processing alone.

The main reason why Ves was reluctant was because he grew increasingly less comfortable about spending huge sums of MTA merits at once.

30 million MTA merits was almost a third of the price of a second-class fleet beyonder ticket!

Though he had just decided to spend almost 60 million MTA merits on different forms of phasewater technology, he fully believed in the usefulness of these acquisitions.

Additional processing power was also useful, but Ves wasn't sure about spending so much at once.

Just like every other expensive product, the law of diminishing returns made it increasingly more expensive to obtain a small amount of improvement.

Reducing the spending sum to 20 million MTA merits would still provide a powerful boost in processing power. The difference was not that big. Ves was certain that he and his fellow mech designers would not be in a hurry to upgrade their data processing capabilities again within a couple of decades!

"If you look closer at the specific equipment I have selected, you will see that my list encompasses more than processors." Gloriana said. "I've also added modules that can improve the realism of our simulations and enhance the adaptivity of our software. We don't need to solve as many tedious problems anymore as the upgrades to our data network will allow us to take care of them in advance!"

When Ves looked up the modules that Gloriana was referring to, he figured out the setup she had in mind.

"I'm surprised you don't want to replace our original ASTERA artificial intelligence core." He remarked.

"The CFA has good reasons to farm the sandmen for their admiral cores. I have compared its performance to the other adaptive AI cores on the market and learned that the alternatives weren't necessarily superior. We have already worked with the ASTERA core for a number of years. It has learned so much from our work methods that it is already increasing our productivity by as much as twenty percent. If we switch to another AI core, we not only have to spend additional MTA merits, but also reset the deep learning process."

The ASTERA AI core was based on the body of a dead sandman admiral. Its systems were completely different from conventional AI cores that were based on conventional human technology. The two weren't compatible for this reason.

Though Ves did not mind switching over to a conventional AI core, he felt it would be a shame to ditch their current one. The ASTERA AI core was not only one of the most responsible and adaptable data processing tools at his disposal, there was still a lot of room for scaling.

Even if the AI core only possessed limited processing power, he just needed to hook it up to additional processor banks in order to speed up its calculations!

After a bit more discussion, Ves eventually agreed with this investment. Not just Gloriana, but also other mech designers such as Juliet and Sara supported her plan.

Ves looked at the other items on the list. He did not comment on all of the high-quality lab machines that Gloriana wanted to acquire. While they were rather luxurious for Journeymen, research was essential to them. Anything that could help them obtain more detailed and more hidden research data were vital additions to the design labs!

It was only when he shifted his attention to the expenditures related to mech fabrication that he was taken aback for a moment.

"You only plan to upgrade a single personal workshop?"

"Correct." Gloriana said. "Our workshops remain unused for the majority of time. We can make do with only a single upgraded facility. Rather than splitting the remaining budget in order to obtain duplicate amounts of mediocre workshop equipment, it is better to obtain a single copy of every essential workshop machine."

He couldn't argue with her logic. Even he would have made the same choice if he was in her position.

His wife wasn't done. "By the way, my personal workshop needs to be upgraded first. After all, I am the one who is responsible for developing our expert mechs and custom mechs. I need access to the best equipment at our disposal in order to fabricate the highest quality of machines!"

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "That's fine as long as every other lead designer can borrow your workshop when they need to fabricate their own mechs."

Chapter 3975 AP-VEX

Ves couldn't resist the upgrades.

As a mech designer, he wanted nothing more than to work with superior equipment.

He still hesitated for several more minutes as he tried to convince himself that he was spending his MTA merits in a responsible manner.

"We can upgrade our design and workshop facilities with money instead of MTA merits," Ves remarked. "Our MTA merits are scarcer and more valuable. Once we spend what we have, it is not so easy to replenish what we have lost. We also forgo the opportunity to exchange for items that are not available on the open market. What if we need access to life prolonging treatment?"

Gloriana shook her head in disapproval. "None of us need any of that. It will take at least a century before we have to resort to this solution. We have plenty of time to earn more MTA merits in the meantime. It is much more logical to spend our MTA merits on more immediate improvements to our design environment."

"Why insist on spending MTA merits when we can just wait until we have earned more money?" Ves asked. "In fact, we can pay for many comparable products by trading for them with phasewater."

"That's not a good choice. We can't squander our phasewater, Ves. It's much more precious than these products. There are real differences between the exclusive equipment that we can only obtain for MTA merits and the more regular versions that are sold for regular money. Don't you realize that the former are first-class lab and workshop machines that even the MTA doesn't look upon? Many of the models are actually co-developed by the mechers!"

Though Ves often complained about the profiteering behavior of the MTA, he never questioned the organization's credibility.

The MTA spent a lot of effort into making its merits as valuable and desirable as possible. The goods and services that it offered through its expansive and renowned exchange were all precious and useful without doubt!

The only question was whether the products were relevant enough.

When Ves applied this test to Gloriana's shopping list, he reluctantly admitted that she chose well.

Practically every item on the list was a first-class product. The cheapest items easily cost hundreds if not thousands of MTA credits if the Larkinsons had to buy them on the open market!

The most extravagant workshop addition was the Handagan AP-VEX High-Precision Superfab.

This single device was worth 5,000,000 MTA merits!

When Ves curiously looked up the specs of this superfab, his mouth already started to salivate.

Every single technical specification was vastly superior to what Ves had worked with before!

The AP-VEX superfab practically beat the ELKINE 3D printers that Ves and Gloriana had worked with for several years in the dirt!

"The AP-VEX superfab is a first-class production machine." Gloriana introduced. "It isn't a top-of-the-line model, but it is more than adequate for our current needs. It is designed to work with extremely tough or volatile first-class materials, so we don't have to exceed the limits of our ELKINE production line anymore whenever we want to add superior components to our work."

"The power requirements of this superfab must be insane." Ves frowned.

"That is why I added a first-class power reactor to the list. However, the AP-VEX's energy needs aren't as great as long as we use it to process second-class materials. It can also produce second-class components at much faster speeds. This will allow us to shorten our fabrication runs by several days! The Minerva took around a week for us to make. The AP-VEX along with the other first-class production machines on the list will allow us to finish the job in three days or less! Not only that, but we can exert much more precise control over the parts that we can make that it is much easier for us to attain higher quality levels!"

Gloriana wasn't boasting. While Ves was only able to work with ordinary tournament superfabs a couple of times, he had thoroughly studied the devices and learned what the more expensive versions were capable of. Even the cheapest first-class superfabs were a treasure to any competent mech designer!

Of course, it wasn't easy to make full use of them. While they ordinarily featured a lot of automation, an demanding operator had to become a lot more involved in order to obtain the best results.

The AP-VEX granted its users a huge amount of control over different variables. The problem was that all of its additional settings inflated its learning curve.

Ves and everyone else had to spend a significant amount of time to master the new production machines!

Each of them were designed with first-class mech designers and production personnel in mind.

These people usually learned how to operate these difficult devices back when they were students.

The Larkinson mech designers did not enjoy this advantage. They had to allocate additional time in order to gain proficiency in operating all of the new machines.

No one issued any complaints. The AP-VEX superfab provided such a powerful production boost that Ves would be a fool to turn to any cheaper alternatives!

"There is also another reason why we should acquire this superfab." Gloriana mentioned. "The AP-VEX is capable of working with small quantities of phasewater. We will need to make use of more specialized production machines if we want to work with larger quantities of phasewater, but the AP-VEX such be good enough for most applications."

Ves' eyes lit up when he heard that. This was another useful feature!

"Alright, then. I can agree with this selection. I don't see any clear problems with your selection. The first-class power reactor is also a nice addition. It can supply additional power to our factory ship whenever we are not making active use of the superfab or any of the other power-hungry equipment."

This would definitely be helpful in case the fleet ended up in another battle. The Spirit of Bentheim's shield generators gained a lot more staying power!

Once the Journeymen completed their examination of all of the advanced items, Ves tentatively agreed to exchange for all of the items.

"Let us wait before we acquire all of this new gear."

"What? Why?"

"I have a lot more upgrades in store for our factory ship." Ves revealed as he waved his hand in a circle. "The Spirit of Bentheim is seriously undergeared for the challenges of the Red Ocean. We don't need to upgrade all of her systems to first-class standards, but she needs to be a lot tougher and more productive in order to keep up with our growing demands."

Ves was also concerned about the vulnerability of his factory ship. Installing a superfab and other advanced equipment worth tens of millions of MTA merits instantly turned the Spirit of Bentheim into a highly lucrative loot piñata!

This was why Ves had already tasked Vivian to work on a comprehensive refit plan for his factory ship. He wanted the Spirit of Bentheim to become tougher, faster and more productive.

Though Gloriana quickly wanted to get her hands on all of the juicy new equipment, she knew that Ves was right. The fleet wasn't ready yet. It would take months if not years to complete all of the necessary adjustments.

"Can we at least upgrade the primary data vault first?" She asked. "Our next design round is just around the corner. We can get much more work done if we have access to much more processor power."

Ves reluctantly nodded. "I suppose that is doable. I will look into it later."

Now that they were done with discussing how to invest their MTA merits, the Journeymen moved on to discussing an occasion that everyone had been waiting for. They had prepared so long for this occasion!

"You all know what comes next. While our clan is about to undergo a lot of changes, that doesn't mean we should set aside our work. Now that our fleet has returned to Davute, we can finally start a new round of mech design projects."

A new round!

Every mech designer stood up straighter in their seats. They looked as if they couldn't wait to introduce their proposed mech designs!

Ves smiled at everyone. "I have already informed you that we will be recruiting an additional batch of Journeymen in the next few months. That won't affect our design round as it will take several months for the newcomers to familiarize and integrate into our clan. Given our current numbers, I think we should tackle up to 14 mech design projects. Also, don't forget that we have agreed to collaborate with Professor Benedict to design the Mars Project."

The Mars Project was the most ambitious expert mech design project of the Golden Skull Alliance. Ves and Gloriana would definitely spend a lot of hours on this massive project! It would probably be the closest thing to a ace mech that they would get in touch with for the time being.

"Will you have enough time to lead two expert mech design projects?"

Gloriana snorted. "You should have more faith in me, Ves. As long as the upgrades to our primary data vault go through, I can get so much more work done that I can promise you that neither of the projects that you are talking about will fall behind schedule."

"I will make sure we can hurry up with those upgrades, then."

He activated a projection and instructed it to display two different sketches of different mech designs.

One of them depicted the C-Man Project, the extensive effort to upgrade the B-Man into an expert mech.

One of them depicted the Firestarter Project, a fairly normal effort to design a completely new expert rifleman mech.

"The C-Man Project is significantly more intensive than the Firestarter Project." Gloriana explained. "A brawler mech at the expert mech level is much more complicated than it looks. It needs to endure stresses and resist forces in many more ways than other melee mechs. We also need to realize this design by upgrading an existing mech."

"The advantage of the C-Man Project is that it doesn't involve a lot of different fields." Ves remarked. "It is all about its mechanical structure. Sara, Tifi, we will be counting on the two of you to do the bulk of the work."

Sara Voiken and Tifi Coslone would be responsible for designing much of the exterior and interior of this physical mech. Their work directly affected how well the C-Man would be able to dominate the battlefield in the future!

In comparison, Gloriana and Ves did not have to contribute as much.

Ves merely planned to take care of the spiritual design of the expert mech. Gloriana would mostly play a coordinating and facilitating role while designing more miscellaneous elements.

Gloriana gestured towards the sketch of the expert rifleman mech. "The opposite is true for the Firestarter Project. A mech like this will involve many different disciplines. Each of the mech designers involved in its design will need to make substantial contributions."

"The Firestarter Project is not that different from the Minerva that we have recently developed. We can take advantage of the experience we have gained from designing Commander Casella's expert mech and make sure we can provide an even stronger machine to Venerable Isobel Kotin."

Ves already grew excited at the thought of working on the Firestarter Project. It was an expert rifleman mech that was paired with an expert pilot that wanted to apply her attacks in a different manner.

He could already foresee the many flames that Venerable Isobel would unleash upon her enemies in the future!

His only regret was that there was far too little time for him to learn anything substantial from the MTA's files on first-class luminar crystal technology.

Perhaps he might learn a trick or two, but he doubted he would be able to make any substantial breakthroughs in so little time.

Ves consoled himself by telling to himself that he could always design a better rifle for the Firestarter Project at a later date.

Chapter 3976 Fifth Round of Mech Design Projects

The design of the Larkinson Clan's expert mechs was a fantastic occasion for every participating mech designer to explore the upper limits of their design capabilities.

Since they were usually designed by Seniors and Masters, it was not uncommon for expert mechs to serve as testbeds for their latest technological innovations.

While the mech designers of the Larkinson Clan were merely Journeymen, each of them had already developed different solutions that they would love to apply to a mech with a high performance limit.

Unfortunately, only a limited number of mech designers could make meaningful contributions to a mech design at a time.

The generally accepted limit was 5 contributors. Any more than that and there would be too many cooks in the kitchen. The direction and vision of a mech design would become completely muddled, leading to a phenomenon where too much potential was being wasted.

"Aside from myself, Gloriana, Sara, Tifi will be working on the C-Man Project." Ves announced. "Sara, Tifi, the two of you will be the main contributors to this expert brawler mech design. Are you confident enough to take on this challenge?"

Sara nodded. She already had prior experience with working on a Larkinson expert mech, so this was not a completely new experience for her. The only issue was that the C-Man Project needed to rely much more heavily on its armor system than the Minerva.

"I can do it, but I will probably be stretched for time." She said.

"We will try our best to cover the other aspects of the mech design." Ves promised.

Aside from Ves, Sara Voiken was probably the most universally desirable Journeyman in the design department. Her defensive specialization meant that she was able to increase the durability of every single mech design that passed through her hands.

No matter whether a project centered around a light mech with a flimsy exterior or a heavy mech that was clad with thick armor plating, Sara could apply many different solutions to increase their resilience!

The difference she could make was massive. Fewer mechs would get downed as they were able to resist damage that would have otherwise been fatal. Their mech pilots had a much higher chance of surviving a battle as well as their cockpits were better protected against breaches.

As far as Ves was concerned, Sara Voiken's participation in expert mech design projects was mandatory. No mechs were more important than the expert mechs that empowered and protected the clan's precious expert pilots.

The longer they remained on the battlefield, the more they could tilt a fight in their favor. Being able to outlast enemy expert mechs was already an incomparable advantage!

It was a pity that there was only one defensive specialist in the Design Department. Ves briefly considered whether he should attempt to hire another defensive specialist.

Sara's specialty was mainly focused around empowering the physical armor of her mech designs. Her solutions mainly dealt with negating kinetic impacts, but she possessed a big gap when it came to defending against energy damage.

If Ves wanted to round out the Design Department further, he should ideally be on the lookout for a defensive specialist that specialized in energy shielding systems or energy damage mitigation.

As long as Sara and this new defensive specialist combined forces, they could easily design defensive mechs that could endure all kinds of damage!

However, this was not an option for this design round. Even if Ves found a suitable Journeyman right away, it would take months for the newcomer to integrate into the clan.

Before the new mech designer completed this essential requirement, there was no way that Ves would hand over the important responsibility of contributing to the design of one of the Larkinson Clan's most important strategic assets!

While Ves was thinking, Gloriana, Sara and Tifi already started to voice their thoughts on how to configure the C-Man Project.

"I have spoken to Venerable Vincent several times." Gloriana said. "He doesn't want to stick to the original configuration of his B-Man anymore. He wants to pilot a pure melee mech that puts all of its strength into punching, grappling and kicking. We will satisfy his requirements, but I am under no illusion that it will be easy."

"A mech that strikes with its entire body will have to endure a lot of physical stresses." Sara observed. "What is worse is that the forces that will be acting on the mech can come from many different angles. I will need to design a fortified external and internal structure that can keep the mech intact and prevent its more vulnerable components from rattling loose."

"I will assist you as best as possible." Gloriana said before turning to another Journeyman. "Tifi, even though armor plays a major role to the C-Man Project, it is first and foremost an offensive mech. We need to rely on you to impart a mechanical system that can allow our upcoming expert brawler mech to attack with great force. Can you do this at the expert mech level?"

Tifi Coslone frowned. This was the first time she would play a major role in the design of an expert mech, so she did not have complete confidence in her ability to do the C-Man Project justice.

"I am not accustomed to contributing to a mech design with a higher budget and higher performance targets. I think I will have to spend more time on this in order to try out my more radical design solutions, but I should be able to manage. I will also have to work with Vincent to determine his personal fighting style and best reflect his physique on the C-Man Project."

Ves smiled. The three women had solid plans in mind despite working on a brawler mech type for the first time in their careers.

"What do you think about the 'boxing gloves' that will be paired with the C-Man Project?" He asked.

"It's not unusual for brawler mech models to feature modular arm attachments." Gloriana replied. "Brawler mechs are almost just as hard on themselves as their opponents. It makes sense to equip them with semi-disposable buffer equipment that can absorb much of the damage and stresses. The only problem is that our clan will need to replace it on a regular basis as the wear and tear will be great."

Ves shrugged. "It's fine as long as equipping the gloves will reduce the wear and tear of the rest of the frame."

They talked a bit more about the C-Man Project before Sara finally addressed the elephant in the room.

"I understand that Venerable Vincent has made several... unorthodox demands for his expert mech." The woman slowly said.

Everyone immediately knew what she was referring to. Ves even palmed his face.

"Our expert mechs are not the personal property of their principal controllers. They are the guardians and symbols of our clan. While it is fine to fool around a bit with ordinary custom mechs, our high-ranking machines must rise above this infantile level."

Sara frowned. "What do you want us to do concerning the C-Man's... codpiece? From how passionately Vincent talks about it, he will never accept a mech that does not bear this cosmetic element."

This was especially the case now that Vincent had advanced to the rank of expert pilot! His willpower had become so strong that codpieces had become a matter of principle to his current self!

Ves let out a frustrated breath. "Just do what we have done before. You can add a codpiece, but make sure that Vincent isn't directly involved in its design. Do as much as you can to satisfy his vanity but also make sure you design it as tastefully as possible. In fact, don't let him speak. Just show him different designs of different shapes that only vaguely resemble codpieces and let him pick from one of them. I think this is the best way to resolve this particular issue."

Whether it would work or not remained to be seen. It was worth an attempt at least.

After every relevant mech designer gained a good idea on how to approach the C-Man Project, Ves shifted the discussion to the Firestarter Project.

"The expert mech we will be designing for Venerable Isobel Kotin will be our second true rifleman mech. Sure, the Everchanger and the Minerva are also capable of fighting at range, but this is not their main focus. The Firestarter Project will be a true ranged powerhouse that puts great emphasis on firepower. That makes the Amaranto's sibling."

The Amaranto was probably the most powerful offensive mech of the Larkinson Clan at this time. While the First Sword was capable of bursting out with great damage up close, the Amaranto's range and peak firepower formed a potent combination that could cripple many powerful mechs if left unopposed!

Ves was particularly proud of the Amaranto's design. He had played a large role in configuring and designing it. The expert rifleman mech faithfully channeled his vision of a machine that pursued extreme firepower.

The opportunity to work on a second expert rifleman mech granted him the opportunity to surpass his earlier work. He did not want to turn the Firestarter Project into an uninspiring ranged platform.

If he wanted this work to surpass the Amaranto, then he needed to give full play to Venerable Isobel's unique strengths!

"As you all know, Venerable Isobel has developed a potent offensive ability after her apotheosis. Her extraordinary willpower centers around flames or burning, which allows her to burn any enemy by leveraging true resonance. I have already talked to her about her future expert mech and I believe that the draft that I have made is a good starting point."

He enlarged the projection of the draft design and quickly explained its basic properties.

Soon enough, he addressed the Firestarter Project's weapon systems.

"The rifle that I intend to develop for the Firestarter Project will be a close relative of the Amaranto's main gun. The Instrument of Vengeance suits Venerable Stark best as she is excellent at picking her targets and sniping any weak points from afar. This also makes the Amaranto best at penetrating through powerful defenses, but fairly worse when it comes to spreading out damage over larger surface areas."

Ves tapped the projection, causing it to zoom in on the Firestarter Project's rifle.

"The main weapon of this expert mech is not optimized for sniping. Instead, I intend to optimize it for rapid firing. This will turn the Firestarter Project into a run-and-gunner style of ranged mech that can attack many targets in rapid succession or spread a lot of shots over the surface area of a larger target. The reason why I think this is best is because this should be the most efficient way to apply Venerable Isobel's burning attacks onto the enemy."

"You're banking a lot on Venerable Isobel's special powers." Janassa Pellier commented. "What if her natural resonance abilities aren't as effective as you think? What if the burns that she can apply through her ranged attacks are only strong enough to cause surface damage?"

Ves shrugged. "Then we will take what we can get. I have confidence that this can be effective. I personally observed her power during the Battle of Purgatory. The Quint burned every fish-whale with its resonance-empowered attacks. Even if this was an instance of forced resonance that Isobel is unlikely to reach for many years, we can afford to wait for her to build up her resonance strength."

The burning property of her willpower was too powerful for him to dismiss!

Even if the Firestarter Project's offensive power would not be as impressive due to its fast-firing rifle and Isobel's underdeveloped force of will, he predicted that the female expert pilot would definitely gain more notoriety than Venerable Stark in the future!

This was great for Ves as Venerable Isobel was a full member of the Larkinson Clan.

Though Ves appreciated the strength and skill shown by Venerable Davia Stark, she had never shown any interest in joining his clan.

Ves found that to be a pity, but as long as more ranged expert pilots such as Venerable Isobel emerged from the ranks, the departure of a powerful high-ranking mech pilot should not cause too much of a disruption.

Chapter 3977 Against Traditional Swordsmanship

As a ranged mech, the Firestarter Project was an excellent opportunity for Ves to explore the potential of luminar crystal technology even further.

Even if Ves could not immediately absorb all of the restricted knowledge that the MTA promised to open up to him, it was enough for him to gather a few useful insights!

If he could develop a new luminar crystal attack phase crystal that happened to complement Venerable Isobel's extraordinary burning ability, then the Firestarter Project would truly be able to live up to its codename!

However, it had been quite a while since Ves last tinkered with luminar crystal technology. He did not have complete confidence that he could whip up a new luminar crystal rifle that was more powerful and more potent than his previous works.

"No one plays a more important role in the Firestarter Project than you." Gloriana remarked towards her husband. "If you do a good job, the end product will most assuredly become a celebrated work in our clan. If you fail to deliver, then much of the potential of this expert mech will be lost."

She was right. Ves carried the greatest burden in this project. This was not great as Ves needed to be involved in many different design projects. He would be just as busy as Sara Voiken in this regard!

The more active design projects per round, the more Ves needed to split his time. It was becoming increasingly harder for him to keep up with his design responsibilities.

He couldn't wait for another mech designer who specialized in living mechs to show up and take over some of his burdens!

If Maikel Larkinson managed to achieve enough breakthroughs in his chosen research direction, then Ves predicted that he would have an excellent helper by his side.

Even if Maikel's design philosophy centered around a different interpretation of living mechs, his work should probably be sufficient to breathe life into mech designs.

Only Gloriana and Ketis came close to doing so, but both of their solutions possessed serious flaws and limitations. Their specialties were completely different so they were limited in how close they could imitate his work.

What Ves needed the most were mech designers who believed in the concept of living mechs to such an extent that they developed their own life domains!

This was an extremely rare quality in the mech industry. Ves was not yet certain whether he had done enough to push his student Maikel in the right direction.

Even if Maikel did everything right, it would take at least a decade before Maikel rose through the ranks and advanced to Journeyman Mech Designer.

He would be of no help to the Design Department at all for the foreseeable time!

"Maybe I should spend my MTA merits on upgrading or exchanging my cranial implant." Ves muttered to himself.

The general rule was that cranial implants were permanent to those that implanted them in their heads. They integrated with the fragile and delicate brain tissue of a human to such an extensive degree that pulling them out would result in permanent and ruinous damage to the most essential organ of a person!

This meant that it was extremely important for people to decide what they wanted to implant in their heads.

Ves did not regret the decision to integrate his brain with the Archimedes Rubal implant that he had once salvaged from the Starlight Megalodon. It was the most powerful and expensive solution he had access to at the time.

Ever since he partially digitized his mind and gained access to an internal processor that allowed him to perform a lot of mathematical calculations on the fly, his work efficiency had shot up. It was unimaginable for Ves to give up all of the benefits provided by his bioimplant!

However... as his workload increased and as his mech design projects became more advanced, Ves started to get increasingly more frustrated by the shortcomings of the Archimedes Rubal model.

Even with its upgrades, the Archimedes Rubal was never an implant that was specifically designed to complement mech designers. Its enormous storage space may have allowed Ves to store a lot of data and integrate System-infused knowledge faster, but Gloriana had access to a lot more helpful design functions.

If Ves was able to exchange his current implant model with one that was specialized for mech designers, he was confident that he could speed up his work by at least 20 percent!

Many people were unable to change their cranial implants for the remainder of their lives, but those who possessed enough wealth or merits were different.

The Big Two were so advanced that they possessed the technology to safely exchange older and weaker cranial implants for newer and better ones!

Ves seriously considered whether he should make use of this service now. The price of doing this was steep. Not only did he have to spend a lot of MTA merits to cover for the procedure, he also had to spend even more to obtain a new and superior cranial implant!

"Don't think about it." Gloriana softly told him. "You're already good enough for now. Wait until you have advanced to Senior or Master. By then, you will truly feel that your current cranial implant is unable to keep up with your demands anymore. I have little doubt you have earned even more MTA merits with all of the achievements you have made up to that point. Newer and better implant models will also come out in the future, which will upgrade your new capabilities even further."

"Mhmm. You're right. I am being way too impatient. My time might be stretched, but the situation isn't unbearable for me yet. I can still hold out for the time being."

He cast his thoughts about exchanging his cranial implant aside and turned his attention back to the Firestarter Project.

"Venerable Isobel has expressed a desire to have access to a flamethrower weapon when piloting her expert mech. As you can see, I have tentatively decided to integrate it as a secondary armament attached to one of the Firestarter Project's arms. This will allow the mech to unleash a powerful spurt of flames while still having the option to fire its regular rifle."

"The mech won't be able to carry enough propellant to last an entire battle." Ketis noted. "Will this addition be useful enough to justify its inclusion?"

"It depends on the quality of the propellant. There are expensive formulas out there that essentially mix a lot of potent and volatile exotic materials together. A mech only needs to ignite a small quantity of it in order to release a huge amount of energy."

Gloriana frowned. "That will help with allowing the Firestarter Project to spread more flames, but you are essentially filling up its propellant tanks with lots of money. It will be several times more expensive to field this mech in battle compared to a more reasonable expert mech such as the Dark Zephyr."

"I believe this addition is worth the investment." Ves replied in a firm tone. "Venerable Isobel's abilities are aligned with flames, so giving her the option to play with fire is the best way for her to learn and improve her affinity to it. Also, if the flamethrower module is as powerful as I envision, the Firestarter Project can instantly torch a whole swathe of swarming enemies at once. Do you remember the time the voribugs attempted to swarm our fleets? We didn't have enough weapons that could sweep them all at once. That will change with the introduction of this expert mech."

"We could also design a modern striker mech. Didn't you publish the Doom Guard years ago? I bet it would make for a fantastic anti-voribug mech if we adapt it to the Red Ocean!"

"Let's talk about that later, Ketis. For now, I want to make sure we are on the same page with regards to our expert mech design projects. Do any of you have any further questions on the Firestarter Project?"

A few of the Journeymen made a few inquiries which Ves quickly answered. He had a relatively clear idea on the expert rifleman mech that he wanted to design, so he already thought about many of its design elements.

Once the round of questioning had ended, Ves moved on to the third expert mech design project that the Design Department would be tackling for this design round.

The projections that depicted his interpretation of the C-Man Project and the Firestarter Project disappeared in order to make way for another sketch.

This one showed off a draft design for an expert swordsman mech that stood out by wielding two swords at once.

"Ketis, you are the principal mech designer for this upgrade project, so please give us your thoughts on this work."

The swordmaster stood up. She looked a lot more mature and less frivolous as of late. Her recent marriage, her early pregnancy and the initial success of her Monster Slayer Project had boosted her confidence by a substantial margin!

Even though Sharpie was lying dormant inside her Bloodsinger, Ketis still exuded an edge that easily allowed her to command attention.

"In order to understand this expert mech, we need to understand Venerable Imon Ingvar first. Commander Casella's younger brother... is a difficult expert pilot to work with. Our initial talks did not go as well as I would like."

"Oh?" Ves raised a curious eyebrow. "Why so? Did he put on his overprotective brother act again?"

Ketis shook her head. "I'm not a threat to Casella, so he did not act unreasonably in that manner. It's just... he's a swordsman mech pilot, but he doesn't embrace traditional swordsmanship. He has accepted instruction from Venerable Dise and the Heavensworders in the past, but he has never accepted their approach towards swordsmanship."

"Traditional swordsmanship is rather obscure throughout human space to begin with." Ves explained. "If it was truly a successful combat method, then it shouldn't have remained so obscure."

"I can say that you are not completely wrong. The swordsmanship tradition passed on by the Heavensword Association can produce exquisite techniques and powerful outbursts, but it requires both discipline, diligence and total belief in a sword style. While the exact requirements vary from sword style to sword style, even the loosest of them demand a fair amount of control. Even then, it is not enough. He is only able to touch the surface of traditional swordsmanship."

Ves leaned forward. "That sounds interesting. Do you think this is a flaw? What is his actual fighting style?"

Ketis grimaced a bit. "After Venerable Dise and I sparred against him multiple times, we discovered that he is not a true swordsman at all. He's a warrior that only regards swords as tools. He would be just as happy if he is wielding a pair of axes or a pair of hammers. The only consistent rule we have discovered is that he likes to hold two weapons at once."

"Why is that the case?"

"Because Venerable Imon is a momentum-based fighter. What I mean by that is that he is a fighter who is more driven by his emotions than other expert pilots. If he is angry, sad, desperate or confident, he can reach a higher peak than normal. If he is not as stimulated, then his combat performance is quite average."

"Huh. I never figured that out. It makes sense now that you explain it this way."

Ves felt it was quite fitting for an expert pilot who had made it his conviction to protect his sister. If any enemy dared to threaten Commander Casella, then Venerable Imon would easily be able to display at least 120 percent of his power!

In other words, Venerable Imon was the perfect attack dog!

"So how does that translate to the expert mech you wish to design for Venerable Imon?"

"We don't need to make any major changes to the configuration of the original Blade Chaser as we upgrade it into an expert mech." Ketis answered. "We just have to adjust

it so that it can fully take advantage of Venerable Imon's ability to grow more formidable. I have come up with several ideas on how to make that happen."

Chapter 3978 Selling Out

"Venerable Dise is an expert pilot that practices true swordsmanship. The First Sword is designed to accommodate that by giving her much more control over the motions and strength exertion of her machine. She is able to control her expert mech just as well if not better than her own body."

Ketis gestured towards the projected draft design of the Blade Chaser. "If you compare the design of the First Sword to this sketch, you should be able to observe many differences. The design choices that I have made for Venerable Imon's future expert mech are different because its pilot has developed a different fighting and piloting style."

"Can you explain it for us, please?" Ves politely asked.

"What Imon needs are two things, namely speed and power. If you look at my draft design, you can see that it is equipped with a larger flight system than normal and that it also features a more robust mechanical structure. I will need Juliet and Janassa to flesh out these areas further, but you can see where I am going for this expert mech."

Ves and several other Journeymen nodded.

The Blade Chaser Mark II Project was all about leveraging its speed and power to produce a lot of figurative and literal momentum in battle.

Even though it was armed with two smaller swords instead of a single bigger one, it could strike pretty hard in the right circumstances.

In fact, it shouldn't matter too much if the Blade Chaser Mark II hadn't built up any speed. Ketis had envisioned the upcoming expert mech as a close-ranged terror by designing it so that it could strike repeatedly with its two weapons.

It didn't matter if Venerable Imon's control and technique were not impressive!

It didn't matter if the Blade Chaser Mark II did not allow for more precise control over its movements!

It didn't matter if Ketis had to design a different swordsman mech than what she originally envisioned!

As an ambitious mech designer who wanted to design the ultimate mechs of this archetype, Ketis understood that not all of her customers fit her ideals.

She loved to design mechs for the Swordmaidens because she shared the same approach towards swordsmanship as her fellow sisters.

It was not challenging at all for her to envision new mech designs that could give the Swordmaidens another way for them to channel their sword skills.

The story was different for users outside of the group she was familiar with. It was still manageable for her to design swordsman mechs for the Heavensworders due to how seriously they adopted swordsmanship as the center of their lives.

Outside of that, Ketis still had much to learn. She had struggled on this issue when designing her recent Monster Slayer mech.

Compared to her previous works, she consciously had to dumb down her Monster Slayer and make it more universally compatible in order to widen its appeal.

If she had to design the Monster Slayer for the Swordmaidens, then it would have become a much tighter and exacting mech design!

While the skill and control requirements for the mech would be higher, its upper limit on performance would be raised as well, allowing the Swordmaidens to defeat opposing mechs that were much more powerful on paper!

As Ketis thought about her plan for the Blade Chaser Mark II Project, she figured that she needed to explore a different approach towards power.

"The Blade Chaser Mark II is meant to be an expert mech that can swing its swords faster and harder as Venerable Imon gets more excited." She continued to explain. "I intend to design his expert mech in a way that can channel and derive strength from his special qualities as an expert pilot. He's a hothead, and that is manifested in his bright and powerful will. His expert mech will complement this trait."

Ves crossed his arms as he developed a few doubts. "It all sounds rather vague to me. Are you sure your approach to this design project will fit Venerable Imon?"

"You're not a fighter. You don't understand anything. Just leave it to me. I know exactly what Venerable Imon needs."

"Don't worry, Ves. I won't spend as much time on the Blade Chaser Mark II Project, but I will be supervising it to make sure it is a good fit for its pilot." Gloriana assured.

That was enough for Ves.

They settled a few more details before they were done with discussing this expert mech design project.

One of the interesting details about the Blade Chaser Mark II was that Ves did not intend to take an active part in its design.

When Gloriana designed the original custom mech, she managed to make it alive by borrowing a few tricks and techniques from her husband.

She used to struggle with this in the past, but ever since she obtained her own companion spirit, all of this changed. She was finally able to observe and interact with spiritual phenomena on a more conscious level through Alexandria.

Since Gloriana had already turned the current iteration of the Blade Chaser into a living mech of some sort, Ves was curious to see how she could develop it further with the upgrade project.

Ever since Venerable Imon broke through while piloting his custom mech, the Blade Chaser had gained a lot of spiritual feedback and came close to becoming a third order living mech.

It would only be a matter of time before the Blade Chaser or its upgraded version surpassed the threshold and turned into an existence on the same level as the Everchanger and the Shield of Samar.

However, Ves had a hunch that a Gloriana-style third order living mech would look substantially different from the ones he developed. Just thinking about what he might encounter in the future made him feel excited!

"Ahem. Now that we have gotten the expert mech design projects out of the way, let us discuss the regular projects that we will be tackling for this round. As you all know, the fifth design round is all about commercial mechs. I want each and every one of us to focus on designing mechs that serve at least a single common purpose, and that is generating as much revenue for the LMC and by extension our clan as possible."

He had waited for this moment for a long time. Ves was finally going back to designing mechs for the commercial mech market!

After saying a few more perfunctory words, he quickly introduced the projects that he had in mind.

The projection changed to show another set of draft designs.

One of them depicted a sketch of a training mech. Another showcased an extremely light striker mech. A third one displayed a commercial ECM mech.

"Let me give you a quick rundown of these designs." Ves said. "The Tutor Project here is my attempt to revolutionize the market for training mechs. As you know, the Chiron model that our mech academies have been making use of has been particularly

effective at helping our mech cadets develop their piloting skills. I think we can use it as a model for a more universal training mech that also contains numerous other enhancements that can make it even better at its job. If I am able to succeed in creating these new solutions, the Tutor Project will definitely achieve comprehensively better results!"

"Will you replace our Chiron with this new training mech model if the latter turns out to be better?" Ketis asked with concern.

"Of course not. We treat our living mechs better than that." Ves quickly answered. "We always keep the best for ourselves. For me, the Tutor Project partially serves as a proof of concept for me. If it works out the way I intended, I have no qualms about upgrading the Chiron model so that its newest iteration not only catches up to my commercial offering, but is able to go a step further!"

This way, the Larkinsons could upgrade all of the existing Chiron mechs and preserve their precious living qualities that they had developed over the years.

After Ves briefly elaborated on what he had in store for the Tutor Project, he shifted over to the ECM mech that he also wanted to design.

"I'm sure that you are all confused why I want to design an ECM mech of all things. While it is true that I don't have any experience in designing shady mechs, I think I can make this auxiliary mech a lot more valuable by adding in an existing function that is already present in our Cherub and Signal Bearer designs."

Not everyone liked what they heard from Ves.

"You're selling out the feature that has given our Hexers an advantage in the Komodo War!" Gloriana angrily burst out. "How dare you, Ves? How could you do this? If the Fridaymen get their hands on this, they will be blaspheming the Superior Mother by using her as their alternative communications network!"

"Gloriana, the Hexers have already lost the war. Don't deny it. While I don't like how it is going either, the Fridaymen have made too much progress in the last few months."

"That doesn't mean you can start selling an enhanced version of the Cherub on the open market! Don't forget that more and more groups of Hexers have arrived in the Red Ocean. They are still relying on the Valkyrie Redeemer and the other mechs that we have designed for them. Don't you have principles, Ves?"

"Do you know how much customers are willing to pay for long-ranged, instant and unjammable communications?!" Ves heatedly retorted! "This is a guaranteed cash cow for us, Gloriana! Combined with the ECM functions that I plan to add to this design, I believe that my Buzzy Bee Project will have a good chance of becoming the product that will turn the LMC into a household name in the region!"

Although Ves wanted to remain honorable and avoid spreading out a feature that only he and the Hexers enjoyed thus far, the market potential for the Buzzy Bee Project was too high!

Ever since Calabast gave him this idea, he had asked his subordinates to study the market and do more research on what customers wanted.

Practically everyone responded positively towards the functions of the Buzzy Bee Project!

Gloriana could complain all she wanted, but Ves did not allow her to mess up this opportunity to capture a lot of market in the Red Ocean.

Ves had little confidence in conquering the market for rifleman mechs or knight mechs, but a machine that not only excelled at communicating under heavy jamming conditions but also possessed a few unusual ECM capabilities was practically a necessity in a complex and chaotic environment like the Red Ocean!

In the end, Gloriana could only grumble while turning her head away. No matter what she wished, Ves was in charge around here.

Besides, he was the one who came up with the design solution that enabled mechs to communicate with each other through the Superior Mother's spiritual network. It was fully within his rights to apply it to any other mech of his choosing.

"What is up with this tiny mech, Ves?" Ketis asked in a clear attempt to divert the topic away from the current controversy. "It looks too small and fragile to fight against mechs."

Ves chuckled. "That is because it isn't meant to fight against human mechs at all. In fact, this is a specialized solution against the voribugs. I became inspired by how well our suppressive glows managed to debilitate the swarms we fought a few months ago. Think of it as a Doom Guard that is scaled down and equipped with a shotgun instead of a flamethrower order to deal more effective damage against the bugs. I can bet you that as soon as the public learns what it is capable of, there will definitely be a lot of major organizations who will be interested in buying batches of my cheap but effective Voribug Nemesis Project!"

"...Voribug Nemesis Project? Really, Ves?"

"It's just a codename!"

Chapter 3979 Jabber Project

The fifth design round was of great significance to Ves and the others.

The previous one was all about enhancing the Larkinson Clan's direct combat power. In this regard, the mechs that emerged during its run clearly succeeded. Even though the Larkinsons weren't able to produce too many copies of the new models, their power and capabilities invigorated the Larkinson Army and gave the soldiers hope of wielding greater power in the future!

This time, Ves wanted to address the clan's economic and diplomatic foundation.

The Larkinson Clan had only made tentative moves to integrate into the regional economy. The release of a couple of products such as the latest iteration of the Ferocious Piranha or the recently completed Monster Slayer had little effect on the Living Mech Corporation's brand awareness.

If Ves wanted his mech company to shine in the Red Ocean, then it was essential to start with selling at least one killer product and multiple staple products!

One design round was not enough to complete his goal, but the Larkinsons had to make a start.

Ves already planned to lay low for five years. This was more than enough time to complete four additional design rounds.

With the impending expansion of the Design Department and the comprehensive upgrades to every design facility, the LMC could easily release over a dozen different commercial mech models a year!

Even accounting for the need to upgrade outdated models to modern standards, this was a horrible release date, especially when the addition of glows and the unique functionality of living mechs boosted their value and desirability to greater heights!

Unless Ves and his fellow Journeymen were all donkeys, they would surely be able to design at least one breakout success during this five-year period!

As Ves thought of how many MTA credits the LMC could earn at that time, Gloriana interrupted his musings by asking an important question.

"Aren't you trying to do too much this time, Ves? You are already obliged to participate in the design of the Cross Clan's Mars Project. You have also chosen to lead the Firestarter Project and contribute to the C-Man Project. Those are all expert mech design projects. Can you even manage the Tutor Project, the Buzzy Bee Project and the so-called Voribug Nemesis Project as well?"

Ves frowned. His wife had a good point. He wanted to execute a lot of different ideas for the next design round, but he had far too little time to explore them all at once!

On top of the projects that his wife had mentioned, he also wanted to work on the Fearless Project as well as other side projects. It sounded increasingly more unrealistic for him to get everything done by this year.

He quickly started to think on how he could manage so many projects at once.

"It's not as bad as it sounds." He told his wife. "The Mars Project is Professor Benedict's passion project. He will definitely be responsible for the bulk of the design work on this high-tier expert mech. We don't need to make too many contributions to apply our own specialties to the mech design. The C-Man Project will mostly be your responsibility. In fact, I don't think I need to spend much time at all on this project. Only the Firestarter Project will take up a lot of time."

"What about the other projects?"

"The Tutor Project is fairly important to me and will also require a lot of work in order to live up to its promises, so I will probably spend a lot of time on it. The Buzzy Bee Project is not as radical, though I will probably need to collaborate with an ECM specialist to make it compelling enough. The Voribug Nemesis Project is much smaller and simpler than the others. I can easily hand over much of the design work to our design teams without losing too much quality."

As long as Ves delegated as much work as possible, he believed he could manage the workload. Sacrifices were unavoidable but he felt that it was worth it to compromise a bit in order to increase the quantity of mech design projects he could work on at the same time.

His wife still looked skeptical, but she knew he couldn't be persuaded anymore. He needed to see for himself whether he had bitten off more than he could chew for this design round!

Once Ves was done with introducing his projects, it was time for the others to propose their own initiatives.

"I don't think I will be designing any custom mechs for this round." Gloriana said as she gently rubbed her belly. "I am already committed to leading or contributing to the Mars Project, the C-Man Project, the Firestarter Project and the Blade Chaser Mark II Project. I don't have time to manage any additional projects, especially when I have to discharge my duties as a mother as well."

She not only had to raise Aurelia, but also had to carry her second child to term. Her chances of falling behind schedule was not small, especially when Ves also took on a lot of obligations.

In fact, one of the main reasons why Gloriana was so concerned about his busy schedule was that he wouldn't have enough time to watch over Aurelia!

It was extremely important to give Aurelia the attention she needed from her parents. Even if she was smarter than ordinary children and even if Clixie did much to watch over the baby, there was no substitute for parental affection and guidance!

While Ves wanted to spend more time with Aurelia as well, the coming period of the Larkinson Clan was just too important to everyone. The LMC needed to enter the regional mech market with as many strong offerings as possible. Everything he did during this year would have a profound impact on everyone's future!

"It's okay." He told his wife. "While we have gained a bunch of expert candidates, they don't necessarily have to obtain their own custom mechs. Any of our living mechs will facilitate their growth."

She nodded. Gloriana enjoyed the process of designing custom mechs, but expert mechs were a step up in every way!

She especially looked forward to working on the Mars Project! Even if Professor Benedict did not allow her to provide too much input, she was confident that even minor exposure to the design process of such a powerful, high-end expert mech would provide her with a wealth of insights.

Any Journeyman would feel blessed to be in her position! She was already living her dream by being able to work with expert mechs every year!

Now that Gloriana declared her intentions, Ves turned to the next Journeyman.

"What about you, Ketis? Your Monster Slayer has shown that your specialties have commercial appeal. What challenges will you tackle next?"

The only swordmaster in the compartment tapped her finger against the surface of the meeting table. "You already know that I will be leading the Blade Chaser Mark II Project. Considering my pregnancy, I think I will only have time to dedicate myself towards designing one or two additional mech design projects at most. I have decided to design one swordsman mech in collaboration with another Journeyman and one additional product for the market."

Ves sat up straighter in his chair. Ketis hadn't mentioned her plans to him at all in these last few weeks. He was curious what she had in mind for this design round.

"Please tell us what you have in mind."

Ketis raised her finger, causing the center projection to display a different draft design.

Ves quickly scrutinized the sketch and realized that Ketis was only partially responsible for making it. The draft design bore foreign elements that did not conform to Ketis' style or design choices.

At first glance, the swordsman mech depicted in the draft looked like a Monster Slayer on a starvation diet. It was a landbound mech that was even lighter and thinner than Ketis' first commercial success.

However, Ves could see how slimming it down and shaving a lot of armor off its frame could make it even lighter and more agile. He wouldn't be surprised if this light swordsman mech could perform a pirouette on stage!

Aside from the swordsman mech's skinny frame, the other element that stood to Ves was its primary weapon.

Instead of wielding one of the long and heavy greatswords that Ketis and the Swordmaidens favored, the draft design carried a bladed weapon that was nearly the opposite!

The long and thin fencing saber was so slim and delicate that Ves questioned whether it was sturdy enough to stay intact after performing a single slash.

The appearance of a fencing mech reminded Ves of a young and lovely woman he once met during one of his past virtual forays.

His eyes lit up as he realized who Ketis was collaborating with for this project!

"Did you hook up with Miss Angelique Harcourt?" He directly asked.

Ketis nodded. "Yup. You gave me her contact information a while ago, remember? I talked to her a few times and befriended her. It's really nice to exchange with a fellow swordsman mech specialist, especially one that grew up in the Heavensword Association. I already planned to collaborate with Angelique once I finished my Monster Slayer design. Now is as good a time as any to see what we can accomplish together."

The combination of two different swordsman mech designers should definitely yield a good result! Ketis possessed a lot of flair while Angelique accumulated a lot more experience and insights in fencer mechs.

Both of them would be able to learn from each other. They could also cover for each other's weaknesses. Ves was happy to see Ketis or any other mech designer collaborate with a third-party mech designer because it was a great way to get exposed to other perspectives on the same mechs.

This was a win-win collaboration that was only marred by the fact that Angelique Harcourt was still based in Majestic Teal.

Ves frowned when he thought about the last part. Collaborations between mech designers who were located in vastly different regions were much less practical!

"If I recall, you left a PP behind, so your works should retain all of their strength in the Yeina Star Cluster. I suspect that Miss Harcourt is much more limited where she can propagate her mechs. Does she have any influence in the Red Ocean?"

"No." Ketis straightforwardly admitted. "Angelique hasn't entered the Red Ocean nor bought any PPs. We only plan to release our finished product to the Heavensword Association. There is no point in marketing our Jabber Project anywhere else because there isn't enough demand in other regions."

In other words, the amount of revenue it could bring would undoubtedly be limited. It made little sense to design this fencer mech if Ketis wanted to maximize her earning potential for this design round.

However, that did not mean it was a waste of time for her to spend her time on the Jabber Project. This was an excellent learning experience for Ketis and a necessary process for her to learn how to work with external mech designers.

"Don't worry, Ves. The Jabber Project won't be a niche product, not when my name is attached to it." Ketis confidently said. "My unique identity carries a lot of weight in the Heavensword Association. As long as I release the Jabber Project in the mech market of my second home, I can guarantee you that my new mech will sell like hotcakes! If not for the fact that I have already traded away most of the rights of my Monster Slayer design to the Wild Fighter Association, it would have already turned into a bestseller back in our former star cluster!"

That was indeed a missed opportunity, but it couldn't be helped. The Larkinson Clan needed to make sure they added in a provision that addressed this gap in her next cooperative venture with the Wild Fighters.

Chapter 3980 Delivering Payloads

Ketis already agreed to form a simple equal partnership with Miss Angelique Harcourt when working on the Jabber Project.

Both of them would be equally responsible for the design of their fencer mech. Neither of them had more say than the other and they needed to come to a consensus on every design choice.

The earnings from selling the finished products would also be split equally between the two. While Ketis' involvement would probably boost the appeal of the Jabber Project once it was released, Angelique became responsible for producing and selling the copies in the Heavensword Association.

Ves had no objections to this simple and fair arrangement. Even if there were a few issues, it was only a single commercial project. It was fine to make a few mistakes. What was more important was that Ketis learned from this collaborative experience.

"Do you plan to do anything new or special with the Jabber Project?" He asked her. "It would be too simple if your first fencer mech design doesn't do your reputation in the Heavensword Association justice."

Despite the fact that she only stayed long enough in the state to participate in a couple of tournaments, the Heavensworders definitely hadn't forgotten about her! Ketis was the first Journeyman Mech Designer who managed to break the rule that high-ranking mech designers could never become swordmasters!

Every swordmaster was a celebrated hero in a state whose population practiced swordsmanship to the point of obsession. For Ketis to be able to design swordsman mechs on top of what she could do as a swordmaster was definitely seen as a miracle in the modern home of traditional swordsmanship!

His eyes lit up when he realized how many doors this collaboration could open.

The collaboration with Angelique Harcourt was a springboard to greater and more lucrative projects. The Jabber Project served as an excellent testbed to test whether a unique mech designer such as Ketis was truly able to enrich the Heavensword Association's mech market.

Since the market for fencer mechs was relatively small and stable, it was easier to measure the changes that took place after releasing the Jabber Project.

If the collaborative work sold well enough, then Ketis could easily collaborate with many other mech designers based in the Heavensword Association!

She could work together with numerous different specialists who each specialized in different styles of swordsman mechs. The sharing of insights and the exposure to different design philosophies on the same kinds of swordsman mechs could definitely do wonders in broadening Ketis' horizons!

Not only that, but once she truly got serious and collaborated on design projects with broader appeal, it was not impossible for her works to capture a lot of market share in different product categories!

However, in order to make all of this happen, Ketis needed to do a good job with the Jabber Project.

"I plan to add several features to the fencer mech design in order to beat all of the competition." She replied. "Just like the Monster Slayer, I plan to make its fencing saber as sharp and tough as possible, though this will not be easy. I also plan to develop a basic sword style around fencing and imbue it into my upcoming mech design. This will help any mech pilot become proficient with piloting fencer mechs."

Ves grew disappointed. "I don't hear anything that counts as an innovation from you. The features that you have mentioned sound nice, but they are nothing different from what you have done with the Monster Slayer."

"I know. I'm not happy with that either, but I don't have a good idea yet on how I can make it stronger or more special. I am hoping that sharing ideas with Angelique will inspire me to develop a new and useful design solution."

That did not exactly sound reassuring, but in truth the problem was not that great. The Monster Slayer was already a successful commercial mech. There was nothing wrong with applying the same design solutions onto another mech design.

Ves just wanted Ketis to avoid becoming complacent. As long as she kept trying to innovate and find different ways to solve her problems, she would continue to progress her design philosophy. It was essential that she remained inquisitive and willing to go out of her comfort zone in order to advance!

"You should have room for one more design project, right? What else do you have in store besides the Blade Chaser Mark II Project and the Jabber Project?"

"I'm afraid I have to disappoint you this time, Ves. While I have a couple of ideas in mind, I am not confident enough in them to pull them off at this time." She replied. "I plan to devote most of my time to the projects that I have already mentioned. I plan to spend much of the time I have left on studying, experimentation and preparing for my new baby. I also want to go out with Joshua in order to make up for all of the times that we have been busy in these past few years."

Family time was important, and Ketis was much more willing to forgo other projects in order to make sure she enjoyed enough personal time with her husband and her future child.

Ves did not comment on her decision. Even though he wished that she would design at least one additional commercial mech for this round, there were plenty of opportunities for her to do so in the future.

"Alright. You can do what you want as long as you do a good job with the Blade Chaser Mark II and your new fencing mech. My expectations for them will be higher since you don't have as much on your plate this time. Don't treat this design round as a vacation."

"I won't, Ves. I know what's important."

He turned to Juliet. "What about you? Have you come up with a good commercial mech design that you think is suited for your talents?"

"I am already assigned to work on the Firestarter Project and a number of other existing projects. I also have to allocate several hours a day on studying miniaturized warp drive

technology. That does not leave much room for me to design other mechs." The Penitent Sister answered.

"Do you plan to lead at least one design project this time?"

"I do, sir. I have been exploring what I could do with the glows that you have recently introduced. Please take a look at my proposed mech design."

Juliet waved her hand, causing the center projection to switch to a different draft design.

This one was neater and more detailed than the previous sketch. It looked as if Juliet had invested a lot more hours in fleshing it out. This showed that this was not a flimsy idea.

At first glance, her proposed mech design was a light mech. It was almost just as thin and light as the Jabber Project. The main reason why Juliet's work was bigger was because it had to be able to move in space.

However, different from light skirmishers, the new mech looked like it was not as agile and flexible. This made it much less suitable for high-paced dogfighting.

By sacrificing agility and reaction speed, Juliet was able to strengthen the light mech's forward acceleration, which meant it was able to traverse longer distances a lot faster than other comparable machines.

Hardly any light mech could catch up to this new machine!

There was a purpose to this configuration. Ves turned his attention to the curved but relatively boxy containers mounted on the back, hips and chest of the light mech.

They were light but relatively roomy. The prominence of these containers made it clear that Juliet's proposal was all about its payload!

"Is this... a grenadier mech?" Gloriana guessed.

"Correct." Juliet replied. "The Transporter Project is a light mech that is mainly designed to reach a strong enemy position and throw its grenades against its targets. This is a highly versatile machine as it can carry a variety of grenades, from simple explosives to ones that can blind enemy sensors by releasing signal-blocking smoke."

Ves scratched his head. "I'm not too familiar with grenadier mechs. Is it worthwhile for customers to buy and field this mech? Any machine can carry a bunch of grenades as long as you equip them with a bandoleer."

"Bandoleers are dangerous. The containers added to the Transporter Project will be made out of tough and protective materials. Even if they are hit, they will also include

functions that will minimize any explosive accidents. Trust me. It is much safer and more effective to depend on this mech to launch grenades than any other machine."

"I still don't understand the commercial appeal of this mech, Juliet. Missiles could achieve the same results as grenades. The difference is that the mech doesn't have to get too close."

"Missile launchers are strong and useful, but they have many flaws. Chief among them is how much volume a missile must devote to reaching its target. A typical grenade is much simpler in this regard. A mech can carry many more grenades at the cost of needing to get within throwing distance of its targets. This is why I came up with the idea of the Transporter Project. In our past few battles, we fought against large alien opponents. Ordinary light mechs cannot inflict meaningful harm on them because of the enormous disparity in scale. What I wanted to do was to develop an idea that can allow light mechs to inflict much more harm to phase whales and alien starships."

"Ah. Your Transporter Project makes more sense now. " Ves said. "It is a demolitionist. Even so, that still makes me wonder whether your grenadier mech is useful enough to attract buyers. Why field a grenadier mech when a ranged machine can do comparable damage at safer distances?"

"Ranged mechs cannot be everywhere or attack every enemy target, sir. There are tunnels, indoor regions, hostile planetary environments and more where ranged machines are constrained. Missiles also have limitations aside from the fault that I have mentioned earlier. They are easily intercepted and cannot always be guided to their targets. Sometimes, the only way for a mech force to deliver a powerful payload to its enemies is to rely on a mech to carry it over."

The Transporter Project possessed numerous advantages in that sense. While it was not as agile as light skirmishers, it was still flighty enough to weave and dodge through enemy attacks.

Once it was able to get within throwing range, the mech could throw a lot of potent grenades in quick succession.

Even though it looked as if its modest containers could not hold a lot of explosives, the deadliness of the Transporter Project depended on the quality and model of its payload.

If the machine was equipped with expensive grenades, then the damage they could inflict would definitely be amazing, especially against larger and less mobile opponents!

Ves understood that Juliet still needed to explain one more detail. "You mentioned combining it with a glow that can complement its role. What design spirit do you have in mind for this grenadier mech?"

"I was thinking about borrowing from the same glow that makes the Stingripper so difficult to hit. This not only increases the survival chances of the Transporter Project, but it can also synergize together with our existing Ferocious Piranha models to confuse enemy mech pilots!"

"This..."

Kalo's design spirit exerted a subtle effect that caused mech pilots to misjudge distances and directions to a small extent. The biggest flaw was that it was not effective at longer ranges so the Transporter Project would still be vulnerable during its approach.

Even so, Ves could see the Transporter Project occupying a niche in the market. There were plenty of weird circumstances in the new frontier where grenadier mechs could be of greater use. The small but dangerous machine proposed by Juliet had the potential to become a fearsome deliverer of bursting damage on the battlefield!