

Mech 4041

Chapter 4041 Business Empire

Jovy's vague and confused description of Ves' future turned out to be a fizzling disappointment.

Ves did not need the help of a fortune teller to know that his life was intertwined with life and death.

After all, Helena was his sister while Gaia was his latest creation! Both of them were literally capable of stalking him as he went about his day!

Ves understood why James Ylvaine had always been annoyingly vague and cryptic whenever he issued a new prophecy.

It turned out that he had never been capable of seeing the future in its entirety!

His relative weakness and clear lack of capabilities meant that he would burn out in an instant if he attempted to gain a clear reading!

In order to make actual use of his ability, James had to minimize his consumption of energy by making do with less.

Reading the future probably became a lot less intensive if the time interval was limited, if the subject wasn't big or significant and if there was no need for a clear picture.

By cutting back on all of these variables, it became a lot more affordable for entities with the power of Ylvaine to obtain vague clues of the future!

Ves predicted that the combination of Jovy's inherent ability to read probabilities might play an even more helpful role in this endeavor.

By calculating the probabilities of the present in advance, Jovy could provide a lot more starting data to his Eye of Providence!

The more he knew about the present, the greater the amount of data his companion spirit was able to work with. This meant that the Eye of Providence needed to make much fewer guesses in order to obtain a more solid prediction of the future!

Ves looked forward to observing whether Jovy would achieve this degree of synergy in the future. The MTA mech designer could become quite a formidable figure if he was not able to read someone's destiny, but also affect it in any way!

That reminded Ves that he should survey and upgrade his spiritual defenses sometime. While he was happy that Jovy gained a companion spirit that could provide him with a

lot more insights on reality and the stuff that inhabited it, that didn't mean that Ves was happy with getting stared at! The MTA already spied on him too much to begin with. He did not want to give away any additional information for free!

After undergoing a round of debriefing where a few mechers asked a lot of annoying questions about the successful procedure, Ves finally disappeared from the undisclosed underground base.

He materialized inside his flagship a moment later, again amazed at the speed and lack of side effects of the MTA's teleportation tech.

"Still, can the mechers at least avoid making a mockery of our anti-teleportation countermeasures?" Ves helplessly spoke.

He felt an even greater urgency than before to reinforce this aspect on all of his important ships!

There was no way he could go about his day in comfort if he knew that any advanced group could just pluck him out of his ship and teleport him straight into a holding cell or other location!

"Well, I'll put it on the list."

For now, he needed to wrap up all of his remaining chores. Imparting Jovy with a companion spirit was the last major item on his immediate agenda. After he spent another day on addressing various administrative tasks, he became ready to design his mechs in earnest!

When Ves finally headed over to the design labs, he passed by groups of industrious assistant mech designers and approached his wife and daughter.

"Hihihihi!"

Aurelia passed the time by playing with their cats as usual.

She ran around while throwing a ball at Lucky, who made a marvelous leap in the air to bounce it back by using his metal head.

Clixie on the other hand took advantage of her recently acquired blessing from Gaia and trapped Mana between her furry, spiritually-infused paws so that she could lick the fur of her intangible 'kitten'!

"Mew! Mew! Mew!"

"Miaow~"

It was a wholesome sight as usual, and with Shannon Maris standing by to take care of the business that Gloriana had no time to deal with, all seemed well.

"Welcome back, Ves." Gloriana cordially greeted him as she swiveled around her seat. "Are you ready to start your work in earnest?"

Ves first leaned in to exchange a kiss with his wife. Her floral scent was intoxicating. He truly missed it after spending several weeks on negotiations and exchanges.

"I'm ready now. I'm probably severely behind schedule already, but I think I can catch up as soon as we can make use of all of the new advanced processors and other computing hardware that we have ordered."

"About that..."

"What is the matter, honey?"

"We have already received enough hardware shipments to begin the upgrade process." Gloriana revealed. "However, it doesn't make much sense to install the new computing hardware on this ship when she is already about to undergo a major refit. After mulling over this issue, I have decided that we should temporarily relocate to a design lab within the new clan compound that we have already started to build on the surface of Davute VII."

Ves looked taken aback. This must have been a relatively recent decision because he did not receive any advanced warning about this matter.

"We have other ships, you know. We have an entire fleet of vessels where we can perform our work. Strictly speaking, we don't need a design lab to do most of our development work. We only need office space that provides access to decent terminals in order to perform much of our work. We can find space in any cargo hold in order to install our lab machines and workshop machines if we have any need for them. This way, we can remain in our fleet."

Gloriana didn't like the sound of that. "You dummy. How do you expect us to maximize our productivity when we have to work in spaces that were not meant to accommodate mech designers in the first place? Compared to the shabby proposal that you have just mentioned, it is much more effective to relocate to the surface where we can erect a brand-new structure that is completely tailored to our needs! In fact, the design labs that we have developed with the help of our architects will be an even better place to do our work than here! There are much less space constraints when building structures on a planet so we can give much more space to all of our personnel and equipment!"

Her logic was sound, and Ves agreed with her arguments.

The problem was that her motives weren't pure. Ves knew what she was truly aiming for. She was using the excuse of the Spirit of Bentheim's upcoming refit to move their family and their entire Design Department to the surface of Davute VII!

This way, Gloriana would easily be able to raise her children in a planetary environment! She wouldn't have to deal with the major inconvenience of transiting back and forth between the fleet in orbit and a destination on the surface.

"Honey..."

His wife placed her hands on her hips. "Don't you 'honey' me, Ves. We talked about this already. You must grant Aurelia and our next little daughter the opportunity to grow up in a vibrant community where they could make friends with all of the future movers and shakers that are also growing up in this port system. Don't spoil their childhood by insisting on raising our children among Larkinsons and no one else!"

"There's nothing wrong with growing up alongside our clansmen." Ves retorted. "We have a lot of them and we are almost ready to initiate our largest recruitment round. We have made sure to put special emphasis on senior personnel, so not all of the newcomers will be ordinary grunts. The diversity of our clan is already great. It will become even more varied once we have recruited an additional half a million people."

"You can recruit as many people as you want, Ves. That has little to do with providing the best growth environment for our children! I am grooming Aurelia to become a leader and she won't be able to do that if she cannot gain enough practice with socializing with people who don't automatically treat her as a princess of the clan. Her social skills will become stunted if she has only ever learned how to deal with fellow Larkinsons."

"There's the galactic net, you know." He responded. "We don't need to leave the comfort of our home or ship in order to talk to virtually anyone in this galaxy or the one that we have left."

"THAT IS NOT A VALID ARGUMENT, VES! VIRTUAL INTERACTIONS ARE JUST NOT REAL ENOUGH!"

The two argued a bit more, but Gloriana had too much logic on her side. Her arguments were well-reasoned and difficult to refute. The situation had grown to a point where relocating to the surface in order to work at a landbound design lab was the most logical and convenient course of action!

This was why Ves and his little family ended up on the surface of Davute VII a day later. They had descended onto the bustling planet in order to pay a visit to the new compound that the Larkinson Clan had already started to build on an expensive plot of land.

While Ves initially thought about building the important compound at an empty region that was far away from the capital city, Gloriana and several other Larkinsons did not agree with this choice.

While it was both cheaper and easier to buy a lot of plots of land at once in the less populated regions of Davute VII, the distance to the capital city and other major cities were too great!

Even if they utilized the most modern and effective shuttles in their possession, it would still take several hours to reach Kotor City under comfortable conditions!

This was why the Larkinson Clan eventually decided to build their initial compound in the outer center of Kotor City.

The industrial districts formed the primary engines of the capital city. Each of them were intended to house the manufacturing complexes, logistical centers and other related facilities of the largest and most productive industrial companies in Davute!

Industrial District 1 was definitely the most coveted of them. It housed all of the mech factories, starship component factories, colonial equipment factories and other essential industrial facilities that belonged to the founders and members of the dominant power blocs of Davute VII!

It featured the most developed infrastructure and the highest security measures out of all of the industrial districts.

Unfortunately, the Larkinson Clan had arrived too late to procure a plot of land in this prestigious district.

The Larkinsons were only able to settle for buying the largest available plot of land of Industrial District 2.

As the second-best industrial district, it wasn't too shabby. While its infrastructure was still under construction and its security measures were not as well-equipped to withstand orbital bombardment from alien fleets, it was at least a place where the authorities would place a decent amount of importance in the future.

"So this will be the place where most of the Larkinsons assigned to the Davute branch will work in the future." Ves remarked as he stood in front of the massive construction site.

He didn't even want to know how much the Larkinson Clan paid for this expensive piece of land, but it had to be a substantial sum!

Fortunately, his clan wasn't short on money even after it had spent a lot of MTA merits and a bit of phasewater on lots of goodies.

As Ves surveyed the ongoing construction of massive factory plants that were designed to be as sturdy as fortresses, he gained a modest sense of satisfaction.

"All of this is ours. This will be the beginning of our empire in the Red Ocean." Gloriana smirked as she clasped his hand.

"You mean business empire, right?"

"Ah. Yes. Business empire. How could I forget?"

Chapter 4042 Genesis Lab

Slowly but surely, the Larkinson Clan showed that it was here in Davute to stay.

Industrial District 2 welcomed a player that wasn't afraid to invest a large amount of money.

The Larkinson Clan might not be particularly loaded with cash, but it had an abundant reserve of phasewater that effectively served as a form of hard currency in human society.

In many cases, the Larkinsons didn't even have to exchange their phasewater for MTA credits on the open market. A lot of vendors and institutions were more than happy to accept payment in phasewater directly!

For this reason, the inflated price of land at a desirable location on the surface of the Davute VII truly did not bother the clansmen.

They knew that the ruling parties did not sell their plots of land due to scarcity alone.

As a port system that was definitely on track to become one of the largest trading hubs of the Krakatoa Middle Zone, there was a huge amount of commercial potential in Davute!

Any company that got in early and built the most substantive facilities on the main trading planet was bound to earn a huge amount of investment in return!

In fact, just holding on to the land for a century and waiting for the price of land to appreciate wildly due to increasing urban development was a hugely lucrative speculating opportunity!

If not for the limitations imposed by the authorities and the risk of Davute getting raided by alien extermination fleets, investment funds would have snapped all of the available land in and around Kotor City already!

As the Larkinsons constructed their major facilities, it became clear that they did not spare any money in building the most robust and defensive structures in the entire district.

They eschewed the trend of constructing floating structures entirely, deeming them to be unsafe and a waste of money to keep afloat, and focused their efforts on building a formidable surface fortress as well as underground facilities that went up to a kilometer underground!

If not for the fact that the land grant did not allow for deeper structures, the Larkinsons would have dug further underground!

While the Larkinsons had yet to draft too many plans for the underground spaces as of yet, for now they made for a handy secure storage site where they could dump much of their surplus mechs, bulk goods and miscellaneous supplies.

For now, the surface construction efforts already took up much of the attention of the Larkinson Clan.

Ever since the Design Department decided to relocate its design teams from the Spirit of Bentheim due to the capital ship's impending refit, Ves and the other mech designers waited for the builders to finish the new design facilities first.

Modern construction technology was extremely fast and productive. As long as the clan spent enough money to hire the best construction engineers and acquire powerful construction mechs, vehicles and machines, the Design Department did not have to wait too long to utilize their new workplaces.

It only took a week to erect a large design lab that could accommodate up to 1000 mech designers!

While the large, sturdy and modern structure still needed to be furnished and outfitted with full suites of high-quality heartland-level lab and workshop equipment, the quantity and quality of the facilities would definitely not fall short of the ones utilized by Master Mech Designers!

Once the facility was complete, Ves anticipated that his design teams could tackle dozens of major design projects at a time without needing to wait their turn to access specialized machines or get constrained by increasingly more inadequate processing power.

Gloriana and Ves dropped by the incomplete design lab facility just as several teams of specialists and engineers had arrived to set up and install the extremely precious first-class processing banks, lab machines and workshop machines.

Due to their extremely high value, the Larkinsons had already begun to station a small garrison that consisted of both Living Sentinels and Eye of Ylvaine units.

While neither of the two mech legions excelled at offensive actions, they already formed a highly effective defensive against raids and long-ranged bombardment.

Though there were still months to go before the MTA ceased to offer its protection to the clan, everyone thought it was better to be overprepared than the other way around.

General Verle even opted to station the Shield of Samar and the Minerva at the compound early in order to provide additional guarantees!

Just the sight of them was enough to inspire the workers at the compounds.

"This is where we will be spending much of our time working in the next five years, isn't that right, Ves?"

"Mmhmm."

Ves held his dozing daughter against his chest as they both stood before their future workplace.

A lot of other construction efforts were still ongoing in the background, but the widespread use of sound-dampening technology made sure that none of the noises spread too far away.

The facility is almost done. I think it is time for us to give it a name. Do you have any suggestions?" Gloriana asked.

Ves observed the white facade of the modern structure that had already been interspersed with green plants in order to liven it up the location and make it look less like a functional industrial site.

The architecture of the design lab was inspired by the interior of the Green Dream. Ves had visited the Green Dream multiple times and had taken a liking of the Aduc Family's aesthetics.

"Let's call it the Genesis Lab." Ves spontaneously decided. "While we won't stay here forever, this will be the place where our Design Department will spawn hundreds of mech designs in the coming years."

Gloriana accepted his decision but did not look too enthused about the name. "Hmmm, that can work, but what of the rest of the compound? It will need to bear a name as well. Since this will be the industrial heart of our clan and mech in Davute, its name will be known to many different parties. Have you come up with any good candidates?"

"Not yet. I was thinking of calling it the Mech Nursery, which is a name I used for my previous manufacturing complex back on Cloudy Curtain, but I think this place deserves its own identity."

"Well, you should hurry up as our new neighbors and the local business community have already shown a lot of interest towards our decision to invest in Davute."

She was right. Gavin had already passed on a dozen invitations and requests for meetings from different parties. Ves did not have time to handle most of these social calls so he shoved most of them to Minister Shederin.

Even so, there were a couple of companies that looked like potential business partners to Ves. He had marked out their names and planned to meet with their leaders in person in order to signal his willingness to work together.

After studying their future workplace's exterior, they approached the facility and headed inside.

They passed by numerous construction teams and heavy-duty lifter bots carrying all sorts of valuable equipment.

Ves did not worry about whether any of the men around him were up to no good. Every builder, specialist and construction engineer were either long-standing members of the Larkinson Clan or had recently been inducted to it. The clan had already hired hundreds of additional personnel just to speed up all of the construction efforts!

The key factor was that the loyalties of all of the construction workers were beyond doubt. This made Ves feel at ease in entrusting them to build the facilities that would host the main revenue-generating activities of the clan.

Ves and his wife toured numerous different places.

They visited the workshop area where an MTA-provided superfab worth 5,000,000 MTA merits would soon be available.

They visited the design rooms and design halls that offered many design amenities to both individual mech designers and large teams of assistants working in unison.

They also visited the highly-guarded data vault where all of the advanced, first-class processing banks and memory banks were already in the process of getting installed.

A total of 60 million MTA merits worth of first-class machines and equipment would soon be concentrated in the Genesis Lab. This was an extremely luxurious lineup of hardware that was practically overkill for a bunch of Journeyman Mech Designers!

It was fortunate that Ves wasn't an ordinary Journeyman. He was confident that he could earn back all of the value put into acquiring all of the expensive machines with enough time!

"I love this workplace." Gloriana gushed as they completed the short tour. "There is much more room available to us now even if we hire another batch of Journeymen. The interior is also much more configurable for us, which enables me to configure my own design studio exactly to my liking. The amount of energy and processing power available to us will also be unprecedentedly high!"

"This is only temporary, Gloriana. We just invested a lot of MTA merits in this expensive equipment. We only have a single copy of every high-quality machine."

"What are you trying to say, Ves?"

"The Genesis Lab won't remain well-equipped forever. Once we resume our expeditions, I don't want to go back to using inferior second-class lab and workshop machines. We'll have to uproot all of these machines and ship them over to the new and improved Spirit of Bentheim so that we can resume our work while on the move."

Gloriana didn't look too happy with that, but Ves had the final say in the clan.

He knew that not everyone was particularly fond of living the spaceborn life, but Ves was still convinced that this was ultimately the best choice.

The fact that he poured a lot of money into building several plots of lands and constructing a lot of expensive facilities was not a sign that he had changed his stance on this matter!

Ves just thought that he had a lot more money to spend these days, so he readily approved an ambitious spending plan.

Even if his expeditionary fleet would ultimately depart from Davute in the future, a branch of the Larkinson Clan would remain to keep the manufacturing complex running!

"As long as this place doesn't get attacked and razed, this compound will become a big source of revenue for our mech company!"

After the couple finished their tour of the incomplete Genesis Lab, they visited a few other facilities under construction.

They briefly observed the massive halls that would soon house most of the LMC's production lines.

They also dropped by the collection of apartment buildings, estate buildings and standalone mansions that provided enough living space for 50,000 clansmen.

Of course, the clan could easily expand this figure by constructing additional housing!

The last place the couple visited was a wide expanse of grass and greenery.

The builders had already constructed the bare form of a large gallery-like structure.

Though much of the interior and exterior needed to be worked on, the gallery already played host to its most important feature.

A mech-sized statue of the Golden Cat was placed in the center of the gallery!

The massive totem brought warmth to the Larkinsons and a sense of welcome to any external guests.

With the natural light of the local star shining down from above, the golden totem made the Larkinson Clan's ancestral spirit look transcendent and otherworldly!

"Meow. Meow."

"Miaow~"

Naturally, Lucky and Clixie had already been hanging out around the statue for some time. Dozens of cats brought by other Larkinson stationed on the surface had been gathered in a small semicircle at the front of the massive totem.

Both Ves and his wife found this sight to be adorable!

"You truly went overboard by building such a large totem this time. Our compound will probably become the number one cat sanctuary on this planet." Gloriana noted with mirth in her voice. "Strays will pour in from every direction in order to pay tribute to the Golden Cat!"

This wasn't his intention. The gallery was meant to exhibit the Larkinson Clan's unique collection of design spirits.

However, seeing how a bunch of cats imitated the behavior of human religious groups such as the Ylvainans, Ves suddenly realized that this gallery structure might take on a different meaning!

Chapter 4043 Three Point Shipping

Ves originally commissioned the construction of a gallery to serve as a museum of the Larkinson Clan's splendor.

The Ascension Gallery as he contemplated calling it was a large semi-open structure that was meant to be both grand and open.

The intention of this gallery was to give both clansmen and visitors from outside an introduction or reminder of the best mechs and design spirits of the Larkinson Clan.

The long structure was split up into two wings.

The design spirit wing would feature large totems of every design spirit that Ves was willing to expose to the public.

Though Ves still had to spend time on making all of the mech-sized totems, once they assumed their place in this facility, the wing would turn into a glow-filled course that was sure to become a popular attraction!

Everyone who visited it would be able to experience the glows and familiarize themselves with the character of the Larkinson Clan's design spirits first-hand!

The other wing of the Ascension Gallery was dedicated to exhibiting the most iconic mechs of the Living Mech Corporation.

Visitors would be able to get close and bask in the presence of the bestsellers that defined the LMC's product catalog. Models such as the Desolate Soldier, the Ferocious Piranha and even the Monster Slayer would soon be able to show off their splendor!

Ves even weighed the option of showing off commissioned mechs and Larkinson-exclusive mechs such as the Valkyrie Redeemer and the earliest edition of the Bright Warrior.

As long as exposing their frames did not reveal anything the public already know, he had no problem displaying the mechs that he used to rely on in battles.

Putting them on display was also a good way to keep their designs and lines alive even if they had become too outdated to be of use to the Larkinson Army.

As Ves stood in the center hall where a bunch of cats were paying tribute to the Golden Cat by imitating human behavior, he tried to imagine the splendor of the Ascension Gallery once it was complete.

A lot of Larkinsons assigned to the surface did not have to seek out specific mechs in order to experience their glows or study what made them great.

Tourists and potential customers might drop in as well in order to experience the Larkinson Clan's unique products.

"Maybe I should charge money for entry." Ves contemplated.

The Masterwork Galleries showed that there was a lot of demand for exhibitions that showcased interesting mechs and products. It would be reasonable for the Larkinsons to charge a fee to enter the Ascension Gallery.

However, Ves was disinclined to set a high price that was unaffordable to average colonists. Part of the reason why he wanted to show off much of his work was because he wanted to promote his mech company's products!

He decided to let the branch decide these matters on its own. It would be fine to attract a lot of visitors as long as the gallery did not become as busy as a marketplace.

After Ves and his wife finished their lengthy tour of the compound that was under construction, they decided to follow-up on a couple of appointments.

They left Aurelia and Clixie in the company of Shannon Maris and began to visit a handful of other nearby lots that were either under construction or already built.

Industrial District 2 might not be as impressive and prestigious as Industrial District 1, but the high costs and high requirements associated with the former meant that only well-off pioneering organizations had any chance of occupying the surrounding lots!

Any facilities built in this district also had to pay substantially higher taxes than those built outside Kotor City.

It was all worth it for those that already possessed an abundant amount of money.

The reason why this district was so favored was because its location was highly favorable. It was easily accessible from both the center and the outskirts of Kotor City. Visitors and customers did not have to go through a lot of trouble to visit the new compound.

The district was also meant to become a shipping nexus. There were many warehouses and distribution centers in the vicinity that could quickly and efficiently meet the logistical needs of nearby industrial facilities.

While all of this sounded a bit boring, more efficient and more convenient shipping could save many hours and days of waiting. Less goods would remain stuck in inventory and many products would arrive in the hands of their customers a lot faster.

In the end, the gains from more efficient logistics and distributions would do much to offset the high cost of maintaining a large compound in this district!

It was not without reason that Ves first chose to visit the nearest warehouse and distribution center!

The couple alongside their substantial security escort stopped before an open gate.

A jolly-looking fellow in a brown business suit floated forward until he landed in front of his guests.

"Larkinsons! Welcome to our latest branch. I am Alistair Wirtle, the branch director of this large-scale distribution site. We are glad to learn that your mech company is interested in making use of our extensive array of services."

The new arrival extended a chubby hand which Ves eagerly shook.

"Hello. Thank you for receiving us, director. We are glad to obtain an opportunity to tour your fine warehouses and distribution facilities. We will be relying on your services to ship us the raw materials we need and transport our end products to their intended recipients."

The two exchanged nice-sounding pleasantries while heading further inside. Just like the new compound of the Larkinson Clan, the new distribution center was still under construction.

Even so, Three Point Shipping had already made sure it completed a couple of warehouses and a modestly-sized distribution center first so that it could already perform smaller-scale jobs.

Dozens of shuttles and transports were already in the processing of loading up on trade goods or taking out manufactured products.

"Three Point Shipping welcomes shipping from all forms of industries." Director Alistair Wirtle explained. "We can safely store and transport volatile goods ranging from energetic exotics to entire batches of biomechs."

"What is the reach of your distribution network?" Gloriana asked.

"We are in the process of building over a dozen smaller branches throughout the Krakatoa Middle Zone. We are already in the process of building more branches in locations such as the Magair Middle Zones and other other surrounding regions. However, we do not need a dedicated branch facility at a given destination in order to cater to your needs."

In general, Three Point Shipping would already possess a fairly impressive distribution network after a couple of months. The fact that the company that was mainly based in the galactic heartland of the Milky Way already set up so many branches at once showed that it possessed a strong foundation!

"What about your security arrangements?" Ves critically asked. "What preparations have you made to ensure your shipping won't get lost during transit?"

"We have adopted a different business strategy for the Red Ocean that puts a much greater emphasis on security and guarantees. Our rates may not be as affordable as that of our competitors, but we believe so strongly in the security of our trade convoys that we are willing to offer guarantees and insurance for all of our shipping. As long as we lose any shipment, we will provide full compensation to the affected clients. However, the chances of accidents taking place should be low due to our extensive security forces and protocols."

Ves had learned that Three Point Shipping dared to offer guarantees for the safe delivery of goods due to heavy investment in its mech forces.

The shipping company was willing to wait a few days in order to accumulate enough goods and gather enough mech pilots together to form a well-protected trade convoy.

Though such fleets would stand little chance against advanced alien warfleets, the chances of any ship bumping into them in and around Krakatoa was extremely low!

Even if a trade convoy did end up getting lost, then Three Point Shipping would still be able to survive even after paying hefty compensation to its clients!

The reason for that was that Three Point Shipping simply charged several times the money of other shipping companies.

Shipping in the Red Ocean was already high to begin with due to the difficulty of engaging in any shipping activities in an underdeveloped dwarf galaxy.

If the Larkinsons seriously went to bed with Three Point Shipping, then the clan would probably have to pay thousands of MTA credits on shipping alone!

There were shipping companies that only charged hundreds of MTA credits for delivering shipments at this scale.

However, Ves did not agree to go to bed with those cheaper companies.

Not only did they refuse to provide full compensation for any shipments that got lost in transit, Ves also had little confidence that they would be able to survive in the dwarf galaxy in the long run!

The Red Ocean was too dangerous. Human and alien raiding fleets were constantly on the lookout for easy marks.

Perhaps an ordinary shipping company might be able to absorb the losses produced from losing a single trade convoy, but what about a third one or a fifth one?

Until Krakatoa and the surrounding zones became civilized enough, Ves thought it was extremely foolish to rely too much on under-defended trade convoys and expect everything to go right.

Ves quizzed Director Wirtle a little more. The high fees sounded painful, but as long as the new manufacturing Complex started churning out hundreds of mechs a day, the profits generated from selling mechs could easily absorb the cost of shipping!

"Do you offer any shipping services that allow me to import products from the Milky Way or transport goods produced in Davute all the way back to the old galaxy?"

The branch director straightforwardly shook his head. "We are planning to introduce this service to our fixed customers in the coming decades, but I cannot divulge any further details. Several conditions need to be met before we can offer cross-galaxy shipping."

"What are the conditions?"

"First, the price of gate travel is too high now. We are waiting for the Gate Consortium to cut its prices by half. The scale of shipping in the Red Ocean must also be great enough in order to be certain that we will have a sufficient amount of shipping orders to make this expensive endeavor profitable."

To Ves, it sounded as if it would take a long time for the conditions to be met.

"How long do you expect your company to start offering cross-galaxy shipping?"

"I cannot possibly give you a strong prediction, but in my estimation you will have to wait until the next mech generation has commenced for the circumstances in the Red Ocean to become available."

That was disappointing news, but it couldn't be helped. Ves was glad that he could more easily obtain products exclusive to the old galaxy in twenty or thirty years.

"Do you offer any shipping to destinations in zones that are close to the frontlines of the ongoing invasions?"

"We do, Patriarch Larkinson, but the rates for shipping to danger zones are considerably higher." The branch manager readily explained. "However, we are one of the few shipping companies to begin with that is willing to accept these dangerous jobs. Much of the extra cost comes from hiring additional mercenaries in order to bolster our trade convoys."

"I see. Well, this is a reasonable price to pay as long as the shipment doesn't get intercepted along the way."

This was an important detail to Ves as he expected a lot of the fighting and raiding to take place in these danger zones.

Many of the star systems in the partially-conquered zones had only been swept by the MTA and CFA's warfleets rather recently.

Since the mechers and fleeters only bothered to loot phasewater and high-grade exotics from the defeated alien planets, a lot of valuable salvage remained on the surface!

This attracted a large amount of vultures that eagerly sought to pick up all of the pieces that still held value!

Naturally, salvaging under these conditions was dangerous business, so the demand for powerful mechs would certainly be high!

Chapter 4044 Cat Nest

Ves enjoyed the visit to the nearby branch of Three Point Shipping.

The company charged high rates for its services, but they weren't a big deal to Ves.

The Living Mech Corporation had always pursued a strategy of competing in the upper end of the mech market, at least when it came to its business operations in the Yeina Star Cluster.

The competition was much tougher in the Red Ocean. The LMC could only reluctantly compete in the middle segment for the time being.

Even so, the product margins from selling the upcoming batches of commercial mechs should be high enough to retain a sufficient amount of profits.

Ves did not expect the gains to be too high at first. The business environment and industry conditions were too harsh at the moment. He was even willing to settle for breaking even if that was what it took to expand his brand and get his mechs in the hands of more and more customers.

After he and his wife bid farewell to Director Wirtle, they visited a couple of other addresses.

They stopped by the local works of a recycling company, a metal producer and a couple of rival mech companies.

Ves and his group even moved past a facility that belonged to ZZR Heavy Manufacturing.

Naturally, he did not choose to visit it as his relationship with the CEO of the company was not exactly the best. He doubted that Tyana Delcrost was willing to talk to him again!

In any case, Ves and his wife had opened their eyes to the efforts of their rivals and potential business partners. The Larkinson Clan may have been on the rise, but there were many other pioneering organizations that had entered the new frontier with considerably more funding, assets, manpower and business competences!

"There is still a gap between our clan and those other companies." Gloriana told Ves as they finally returned to their unfinished compound. "Based on what we have seen, I think we will remain stuck as middle players for several decades. It is difficult for us to outgrow our immediate rivals in Davute unless our mechs are truly able to take off in a major fashion."

Ves was confident that he and his fellow Larkinson mech designers could design and publish at least one bestseller in the Red Ocean. The previous design round showed a lot of promise and the current one was fully dedicated to commercial mechs.

If that didn't work, then he had the next couple of years to work on other projects. He had so many new and interesting ideas in his head that he looked forward to surprising the people of the Red Ocean with his most creative works to date!

After concluding their tour of the local district, a few days passed by as the new industrial and residential compound continued to take shape.

Gloriana spent a lot of time at the Genesis Lab in order to make sure that her future workplace was built and set up exactly according to her specifications.

Ves on the other hand paid more attention to the other facilities at the compound such as the fabrication plant and the housing for the clansmen who were temporarily or permanently assigned to this branch.

The issue of housing was a fairly difficult matter to resolve.

On the one hand, his clansmen desired to live in a residential district or neighborhood. No one would choose to live among a lot of busy factories and logistical centers. Even if the companies that owned them did their best to make their facilities look more pleasant, that didn't change the fact that these were not the most ideal places to live!

Ves had a different opinion, though.

"I don't approve of buying another plot of land at a nearby residential district just so that we can build houses." He told Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson. "This is a needless expense to our clan. The Cat Nest is already large enough to fit as much housing as we want. Have you forgotten all of the times we got screwed while we were

stuck on a planet? If we concentrate as much of our assets on this planet in a single location, then we can more easily defend everything against enemy attacks. Having much of our people in a single place also makes it a lot easier and faster to evacuate them all from this planet in a hurry."

For some reason or another, the compound that was still far from completion had already started to attract an increasing number of cats.

A lot of cats brought by Larkinsons that were stationed at the compound converged inside the Ascension Gallery at first.

When those cats weren't getting spoiled by their owners, the animals started to roam around and pass on word to other sentient cats.

These Larkinson cats at first managed to persuade a dozen foreign cats to visit the giant totem of the Golden Cat in the center of the Ascension Gallery.

Nobody was bothered by the arrival of these foreign cats. They were all smart enough to know when they had to leave and return to their own humans in order to get their food and companionship.

The problem was that those foreign cats started to pass on word to other foreign cats!

When the Larkinsons first started to observe this snowball effect, already a lot of foreign cats started to make the industrial compound their second home!

This was why the people working there started calling it the Cat Nest. Though the cats weren't allowed to roam too close to the manufacturing plant and other important areas, they were still free to roam around in the more public places, hence why more and more people mistook the industrial compound as a cat sanctuary!

Ves kind of liked the name, though, so he did not push for a change at all. It was as good a name as any for the clan's important branch territory in Davute.

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"You will also be putting all of our eggs in a single basket." The elderly chief minister retorted. "If a powerful enemy manages to detonate a powerful bomb in our Cat Nest, then we will instantly lose everything and everyone at once."

Ves shrugged. "That is true, but we will just have to make sure to beef up the defenses of our new Cat Nest as much as possible. The threshold to inflict damage to our clan must be as high as possible to deter troublemakers. It makes little sense to split our attention and resources across multiple facilities."

"There is also the Open Consortium, you know. We built its headquarters in the Financial District a few months earlier."

"There aren't a lot of Larkinsons assigned to the Open Consortium. We should easily be able to replace the losses if any incident occurs."

He did not budge from this issue no matter how much Raymond and the other Larkinson leaders pleaded to provide a better housing location.

Ves even gave up the opportunity to buy and build an opulent mansion in the most elite and expensive district of Kotor City!

He would be lying if he claimed that he wasn't tempted. Gloriana had been nagging him to build a classy mansion at the Austere District that was located in the very center of the capital city!

This was where most of the founders and major leaders of the various pioneering organizations made their homes. Despite its contradictory name, the Austere District was filled with excess and splendor. The luxury shopping mall that Ves and his wife had once visited was typical of this expensive area!

However, the reason why he eventually rejected this option was because of security concerns.

Ves and his immediate family might be living in one of the most protected areas of Davute, but he would have to put his trust into the local military and security forces, which was hardly reassuring to someone who got backstabbed on a regular basis in the past!

The rules in the industrial district were much more generous in comparison. The Larkinsons were allowed to station a much more formidable security garrison in the Cat Nest, which meant that Ves could rely on the protection of his own troops if he decided to settle in this compound!

Ves reached out his hand and patted Raymond's shoulder. "Look, I know you are close to retiring. I can fully understand that you wish to buy a quaint home to reminisce about the past with fellow retirees who live in the neighborhood. However, only a small proportion of our clansmen are at retirement age. There are plenty more who have a lot of years of work ahead of them. If the star system is under any threat, I want to be assured that we can quickly evacuate our clansmen with minimal delay. Have you forgotten about events such as the Sand War and the outbreak of civil war on Prosperous Hill VI? I don't want our clan to ever get caught like that again."

In the end, his paranoia outweighed everyone's desire to live in greater comfort.

Ves at least approved of greater efforts to make the Cat Nest more livable and pleasant. The abundant greenery and the attraction of lots of cats had already done wonders to lift the moods of the first batches of clansmen to arrive and settle in the temporary dormitories that their clan had rushed into completion.

The Blue Cat Estates as people started to call them was a series of planned and constructed housing units that were divided by several tiers or categories.

The apartment buildings were the plainest of all. Even though they were all roomier and better furnished than the cabins in different starships, they weren't too special at the moment.

Higher-ranking Larkinsons received the right to inhabit the standalone houses and estates that were also under construction.

They could house a single household or a dozen ones depending on their design and other variables. Someone like Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson or his grandson might choose to live in these classy estates if they were stationed on this planet.

Of course, there was one mansion that stood far above the rest.

It was situated on a low hill that was supposed to be surrounded by a small forest. Its traditional architecture along with its excellent location caused people to refer to it as the Royal Mansion.

Ves wasn't so sure whether he wanted to keep this name for the opulent estate, but he hadn't come up with a better alternative at this time.

The Royal Mansion was where the director of the local branch of the Larkinson Clan would reside under normal circumstances.

If Ves had stopped by for a visit, then he would be taking it over for as long as he remained.

In practical terms, that meant that the Royal Mansion would essentially be Ves and Gloriana's primary home for the next five years!

He had paid a lot of attention to the design and planning of the Royal Mansion. In order to make sure that Gloriana became happy enough to settle for the place, he had allocated a lot of money to make it look more impressive.

He even planned to add a few totems and handmade artwork to it to truly turn it into a grand abode that was fit to house the leader of a growing clan!

"All is going well." Ves smiled as he swept his gaze across the Cat Nest and surveyed all of the rapid construction efforts.

Although he didn't particularly like the phrase, he had to admit that it was truly satisfying to build a business empire.

He had done it before in the Yeina Star Cluster, but Ves didn't really take his business activities in his former home region seriously.

Back then, he had been extremely reluctant to enter the second-class mech market.

His eyes glinted in determination. "This time will be different. This time I will properly compete against rivals who can match or exceed my efforts."

The Cat Nest played a crucial role in his upcoming plans!

"A new age has begun for the Larkinson Clan!"

Chapter 4045 A New Assignment

"A new influence is on the rise in Davute."

A sentence like this could apply to many different people and organizations.

The Red Ocean was a brand new territory that was filled with opportunities.

Ambitious pioneers constantly divested everything they could get rid of in the old galaxy in order to pass through the greater beyonder gate in droves.

Each of them brought an abundance of starships, mechs, goods, supplies and personnel.

Unfortunately, it was only after they moved past hearing all of the success stories that they remembered that there were many more pioneers who failed to achieve anything of note!

Those who grew up their entire lives in civilized star sectors had no idea what they were truly getting into. Despite the constant warnings and the abundance of statistics that showed how many ships and fleets went missing every day, there were too many fools who thought they could beat the odds and realize their wildest ambitions in a single leap!

It took failure after failure for many would-be pioneers to gain an inkling of the terrible odds they faced if they chose to dive into the shark tank that was known as the Red Ocean.

It was through these repeated failures that the success stories increasingly stood out from the background.

The Larkinson Clan was one of them! Led by its young and eccentric patriarch, its public record was filled with improbable victories and wild adventures. The fact that it had

managed to return with a haul of hundreds of kilograms of phasewater after conducting only a single expedition had become one of the legendary tales of the new frontier!

As the Larkinsons settled on Davute VII and steadily put out one product after another, the locals and the players that operated on the same planet began to grow more familiar with the immigrants from the galactic rim.

Whether it was their iconic living mechs, their increasing entanglements with religions or their odd obsession with cats, the Larkinsons were definitely among the more colorful groups of people that had chosen to establish a base in Davute!

Their allies also merited a decent amount of attention.

Due to their association with the Larkinson Clan, they exhibited a number of familiar traits.

Compared to other pioneering organizations in the Red Ocean, the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan both exhibited an abnormally high degree of unity and loyalty.

No member had ever defected from the partners that made up the alliance!

Aside from that, the two also began to field a number of living mechs. The Glory Seekers particularly embraced them whenever they could.

With iconic mechs such as the Valkyrie line, the Glory Seekers had quickly established a formidable reputation within the martial circles of Krakatoa.

The Cross Clan on the other hand fielded a different style of mechs that did not make heavy use of living mechs.

The only exception was their high-ranking machines. As the Crossers slowly outfitted their new and existing expert pilots with machines that corresponded to their rank, they fully embraced the power of living mechs to their most powerful champions!

Though the Larkinson Clan had already developed a high reputation for the strength and quality of its expert mechs, the Cross Clan was not any worse!

The latter's expert mechs were just as good, but their expert pilots were more experienced and oftentimes much more skilled and aggressive in battle!

Whenever detachments of the Golden Skull Alliance ventured out of the Davute System in order to fulfill the requirements of their mercenary contracts, the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers earned a lot of respect and fear among their fellow mercenary colleagues.

No matter whether they fought against remnant alien stragglers or enemy mech forces, they utilized their numerous unique advantages to dominate their opponents!

From the beginning of the establishment of the Larkinson Army's Mercenary Hall, different groups of Larkinson mech units had pounced on the opportunity to stop wasting their time on monotonous practice so that they could brave their lives in battles with actual stakes!

The eager Larkinson mech pilots exhibited an odd selection strategy.

They never paid too much attention to the rewards of a mercenary assignment.

They did not pick the safest and most boring assignments.

They eschewed missions that were located too far away from Davute or demanded too much time to complete.

They also did not mindlessly accept the riskiest and most dangerous assignments.

They never selected missions where they were the only mercenary groups to respond to the call.

Though there had been times when the Larkinson mercenaries got scammed or lured into an ambush, the clan had always found a way to retaliate in one way or another!

Whether it was the sudden death of the mastermind behind the mission or the inexplicable disappearance of the ships carrying the mech troops that conducted an ambush, the Larkinson Clan showed that it was not an easy bully target!

As the Larkinsons began to conduct more mercenary assignments, they became more familiar with the surrounding region.

Other actors operating in the same region became familiar with the Larkinson Clan as well. Both of them forged an increasing amount of friendships and business relationships between each other.

Slowly but surely, the Larkinson Clan became a fixture of Davute's community!

It was hard for outsiders to believe that the Larkinson Clan had become a strong and established player in a rising colony that had the potential to become the center of a new state!

Tristan Wesseling, Journeyman and Fridayman, repeatedly read through the intelligence reports and compilations of public information.

Years after the turbulent end of the Komodo War, he no longer possessed any obligations to serve along the armed forces of his victorious state.

As soon as he was released from compulsory service, he applied to travel to the Red Ocean immediately!

Of course, getting there was easier said than done. The cost of transit was so prohibitively high that few ever got the chance to get aboard a ship that could bring them over to the new frontier!

It did not surprise Tristan the slightest when the higher ups rejected his initial applications.

He did not give up, though. He applied at every interval he could. In the meantime, he diligently worked and contributed to the pacification of the conquered territories that used to belong to the Hexadric Hegemony.

That state existed no more. Its name had turned into a taboo in his native star sector.

Even so, the former Hexer state still created a lot of headaches for the Friday Coalition. The conquered populations were so brainwashed by female supremacists that they constantly resisted against the efforts of the Fridaymen to undo generations of extreme indoctrination!

Not only that, but outside groups frequently wandered into the Komodo Star Sector and stirred up trouble in various places.

Under these circumstances, the Friday Coalition still hadn't been able to stand down too much from full mobilization!

So many Fridaymen were needed to control and rebuild the conquered territories that Tristan had been bouncing around numerous Hexer star systems for years on end.

It was only recently that he received a call from his Master. Tristan still recalled his reaction towards the responsibility that his Master had suddenly heaped onto his shoulders.

When Tristan entered a secure communication room and accepted the call, the projection of his Master appeared in front of his body.

Age had practically left his Master untouched.

As an accomplished mech designer who had lived over two centuries old, Master Katzenberg did not completely look a major contributor to the Friday Coalition's eventual victory in the Komodo War.

Despite the long hours and despite all of the stress she endured during the infamous war and its troublesome aftermath, Meredith Katzenberg still looked like an unassuming middle-aged housewife.

If not for her brilliant eyes and her abnormally confident posture, even Tristan would find it hard to believe she was one of the Friday Coalition's most strategically valuable technical experts!

"Good evening, Tristan." Master Katzenberg amiably greeted. "How is the reconstruction of Tetilin III proceeding?"

The Journeyman Mech Designer shrugged. "Our progress isn't good. Our requests for shipment of goods, materials and soldiers have been delayed yet again. The Hexer population aren't fighting against our occupation troops anymore, but their passive resistance isn't helping any matters. Many of them do not show up for work and others continue to sabotage the infrastructure that we are trying to rebuild."

Katzenberg did not show any special reaction towards this story.

"The former territories of our enemies are large and densely populated. Our state may have won the war, but the ruin that has resulted from it has depleted much of our reserves. We truly cannot send anymore troops and goods."

"I understand, ma'am. I am only passing on my observations. I do not mean to question the decisions made by our leaders."

Katzenberg nodded in approval. "The war has left us with many burdens, but do not forget that it could have been much worse for us all. A modest amount of sacrifice is not an unbearable consequence."

"I know, ma'am. I just feel like I can spend my time more productively. In the past few years, I have been assigned to work on one civil engineering project after another. I hardly have any free time to design any mechs or keep up with my studies these days."

"There is a great shortage of engineers and construction personnel, Tristan." His Master explained. "The longer the conquered planets remain in ruin, the more they will drag down our economy. We must restore a semblance of their infrastructure as fast as possible in order to truly integrate them into our state. You have contributed much to that effort. You may think that it is a waste of your design talent to spend your time designing and supervising the construction of bridges, hospitals, strongholds and so on, but has your ability to design mechs truly stagnated from working on these infrastructure projects?"

He frowned and thought for a moment. As a mech designer that had lived through half of the Age of Mechs, Master Katzenberg's wisdom was not to be taken lightly!

Tristan was no longer a young and impulsive mech designer either. Whether it was the passage of years or all of the time he spent on participating in various infrastructure projects, he had gained a lot of experience in working under difficult and restrictive circumstances.

"Now that I think about it... my design skills and my knowledge base may not have advanced that much, but my attitude towards my work is much more different than before. If I recall the times where I previously worked on my design projects, I feel I was a lot more foolish back then. Now that I have experience with working on real projects that matter to many people, I think I can design mechs that can also impact a lot of lives!"

Katzenberg smiled. "I am happy to see that you have matured. I am much more confident that you will be able to catch up after you have tempered your passion. You are ready for your next assignment."

That certainly caught Tristan's attention!

"My new assignment?"

"Did you not apply to relocate to the Red Ocean as of late? Originally, we did not intend to provide you with a quota, but the situation in the new frontier has deteriorated to the extent where we must take a more proactive approach. You are a part of our new plan."

"Pardon, ma'am?"

Master Katzenberg's projection leaned forward a bit. "Have you followed the news of our colonial endeavors?"

Tristan nodded. "I have always been interested in the Red Ocean. I always try to keep up with the news. It sounds as if our colonies aren't doing so well. Each of the coalition partners of our state are enduring pressure from multiple sources."

"The Komodo War is to blame for that." Katzenberg sighed. "Though our state has won in this star sector, the pacification and reconstruction effort has continued to impose a burden on us. We have not been able to dispatch too many pioneering fleets to the Red Ocean over the years."

Tristan's eyes grew sharper. "The defeated Hexers are in a different situation. Many of their elite groups and dynasties abandoned the Hegemony early and evacuated to the Red Ocean in droves. They have founded a lot more colonies than us and each of their settlements are a lot more developed as well."

"Exactly." Katzenberg grimaced. "While we have always been aware of this disparity, it did not mean much at first. Both Fridaymen and Hexers had no choice but to direct most of their energy on developing their colonies. It is only recently that the Hexers have built

up a sufficient degree of infrastructure to expand their reach. Do you know what they have decided to do now that they have built up their bases?"

"The Hexers have begun to pick a fight with our colonists." Tristan answered.

"Exactly. Though the Hexers are not yet able to deploy larger armies against our colonial holdings, it is only a matter of time before our old enemies initiate a war in earnest."

Tristan widened his eyes. This would not end well for the Fridaymen!

"What will we do? Can we send more troops?"

"That is difficult, as you very well know. While we are planning to dispatch additional pioneering fleets to the Red Ocean to reinforce our beleaguered colonists, we cannot match the efforts of the Hexers in the short term. We need to buy more time if we want our colonies to stand a chance of staving off the revenge of our old enemies."

"How can we do that, ma'am?" Tristan then recalled what she said a moment earlier. "Wait, are you saying..."

"Yes, Tristan. We will be relying on you to help our colonists survive. Have you remained in touch with the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan?"

Chapter 4046 Colonial States

Tristan had already visited several different occupied planets since he arrived in the Red Ocean.

There was no direct transit route between Bridgehead One and Davute.

In order to reach the latter, Tristan first had to board a passenger liner that brought him to the Vulit Star Node.

There, he did not choose to take the next available ride to Pellysa, but stayed in Vulit for a week in order to tour one of the most important human trading hubs in the Red Ocean.

The Journeyman from the Friday Coalition quickly became overwhelmed by the excitement and optimism of the people that chose to seek their fortunes in the new frontier!

He encountered immigrants who originated from the galactic center.

He participated in a mech design tournament that caused him to lose badly due to his rusty design skills and lack of practice.

He met groups of destitute colonists that had suffered far too many losses in their failed attempts to colonize different planets.

Tristan rapidly absorbed what life was like in the new frontier.

Despite all of his reading and despite his psychological preparations, it turned out that life in this dwarf galaxy was so much harsher!

Still, the many examples of failures did not dampen people's willingness to seek their own chances. No matter whether their preparations were adequate or not, many pioneers went through their risky plans in the hopes that they would be lucky enough to survive the difficult early period!

These colonists did not have to turn their colonies into a major economic or military powerhouse.

Everyone knew that as long as the pioneers did a decent job in building a sustainable colony, they would eventually receive an invitation from a local power to become a part of a new state!

Once the most dominant groups founded their states, the lesser pioneers automatically received protection in exchange for pledging their loyalties to their new masters!

Few players had the power and the opportunity to proclaim themselves as the kings of their own state.

Many smaller players were already happy with becoming the dukes, counts or barons of those states. As long as everything went well, their bloodline and lineage would always maintain hold of their colonial holdings!

This was a dynamic that became increasingly more prevalent in the Red Ocean.

When different colonies decided to band together, a peculiar pattern emerged.

Compared to working together with a bunch of strangers who originated from completely different star sectors of the old galaxy, it was a lot safer and more reassuring for those with similar backgrounds to combine their forces!

There were too many advantages to this. Cultural clashes were kept to a minimum. The parties already possessed a high degree of understanding towards each other and they could already make use of existing relationships to develop a deeper understanding.

Due to this, both the Fridayman and Hexer colonies were already on the verge of consolidating their colonies into cohesive states.

Once that happened, both of them would eventually be able to build up enough strength to go to war against each other!

Normally, wars did not break out instantly under these circumstances. Colonial states were not as strong and deep as their counterparts in the Milky Way.

If two colonial states directly fought against each other with all of their strength, they might weaken themselves only for third parties to swoop in and finish them both!

"There should still be time before total war breaks out." Tristan Wesseling quietly stated as he waited for a passenger transport to bring him to the surface of Davute VII.

Normally, the Hexer and Fridayman colonists should have kept to themselves at this time. It took a lot of time, effort and resources to bind hundreds of colonized star systems into a single, unified state. How could they possibly have any attention left to spare on foreign attacks?

There was also quite a bit of distance between the two groups.

The earliest wave of pioneers had opted to found their colonies in the Magair Middle Zone at the time.

This caused subsequent waves of pioneers to settle in nearby star systems of the same middle zone.

This way, the new colonies could receive at least partial protection from their nearby neighbors.

As the years went by, both sides colonized hundreds of star systems, all of them clustered at two different areas.

The first Hexer pioneers arrived first and decided to plant their flags on the 'west' side of the Magair Middle Zone.

The early Fridayman pioneers that arrived a little later chose to settle a healthy distance away from their acrimonious archenemies.

The latter all knew that they would definitely suffer years of grief and harassment if they chose to become neighbors to the female supremacists once again!

While the Fridaymen and Hexers both wanted to squash each other's colonies at all costs, they were not ready to come to blows when their nascent colonial states were still too fragile to support a full war effort!

The Komodo War taught a lot of lessons to both sides. Even the eager and vengeful Hexers knew better than to pull the trigger too early.

Normally, the two sides should have merely been throwing hateful stares at each other, but the Hexers did not play by the rules!

Though outright war was out of the question, the Hexers who possessed a distinct numbers advantage in the Red Ocean started to employ various means to attack their old enemies!

From conducting raids on under-defended colonies to ambushing trade convoys shipped over valuable goods, the Hexer raiding forces had begun to terrorize the Fridayman colonists!

This was also the reason why Master Katzenberg and a few other higher ups entrusted Tristan Wesseling with an important responsibility. When he thought about his new mission, he felt an enormous weight on his shoulders.

"It sounds absurd. How can I stop all of these hostilities by talking to a single mech designer? He's not even a Hexer!"

Even though Tristan said so, he knew quite well that his old friend Ves held an unusually high status among the former citizens of the Hexadric Hegemony.

He did not know how much he should believe and how much he should dismiss as hyperbole.

"The son of the Superior Mother. The brother of the Daughter of Death. The ultimate good boy."

These were just a few of the identities that Ves had acquired among the Hexer diaspora.

Though all of them sounded silly and nonsensical, the difference was that Ves possessed actual weight among the Hexer colonists!

The reason for that was simple.

"His living mechs are too effective!"

The Friday Coalition already became highly familiar with the power and the abilities of so-called living mechs.

Though the Fridaymen managed to overpower all of these gimmicky Hexer mechs during the Komodo War, the circumstances were different this time!

The living mechs were even more effective in smaller-scale scuffles. The Larkinson Clan had published a flood of new models, some of which the Hexer colonists embraced with great enthusiasm!

While the Fridaymen colonists made use of quality mech models that were not necessarily weak, the true problem was that their opponents had too many mechs and mech pilots to spare!

If this pattern continued, then the Fridayman colonies would inevitably suffer and slow down their development.

Once a true war finally broke out, the Hexer invasion forces would easily be able to smash the weakened Fridayman colonies without encountering as much resistance as before!

Even though the leaders of the Friday Coalition were mostly preoccupied with consolidating their gains from winning the Komodo War, they did not wish to lose their colonies in the Red Ocean so easily.

While the significance of a Fridayman colonial state was not that great at the beginning, this would definitely change in the future!

Whether it was coming in touch with many powerful groups from the Milky Way or gaining a reliable channel to import phasewater to the Komodo Star Sector, the coalition partners could not afford to give up their vulnerable colonial holdings!

This was why Tristan finally received his chance to move to the Red Ocean.

The only issue was that he did not get to settle in one of the colonies founded by the Carnegie Group.

His mission also had nothing to do with putting his design skills to good use by doing his part to design new mechs that were adapted to the circumstances of the Red Ocean.

Instead, Tristan had to take on a diplomatic role this time!

The reason for that sounded confounding to his ears.

"The Hexer colonies in the Red Ocean are nominally led by the remnants of the six matriarchal dynasties." Master Katzenberg explained at the time. "However, the old Hexer order does not necessarily apply to the current situation anymore. The Wodin Dynasty has been on the rise and already shows faint signs of overtaking its former superiors."

"Because the designer of the Valkyrie Redeemer and all of those other living mechs is associated with the Wodins."

"Correct. I cannot state the importance of this relationship to the geopolitical developments in the Magair Middle Zone, Tristan. No matter which dynasty a Hexer colonist hails from, he or she always looks up to the 'Superior Mother' or the 'Daughter

of Death'. As the mech designer who introduced these supposed gods to the Hexer people, Patriarch Ves Larkinson most definitely wields a great amount of influence over them. He is effectively the ruler of the future Hexer state by proxy!"

While Tristan found it hard to accept this chain of logic, he could not bring any arguments to refute it. Even if his old friend Ves did not possess the authority to boss around the Hexers, his influence among their people was undoubtedly great!

This was why Tristan did not reject this assignment in the end. As long as he managed to meet with the former Brighter and persuade the man to let bygones be bygones, the Fridayman colonists would finally have room to breathe!

"We will not send you to Davute without resources or support." Master Katzenberg told him. "You will receive basic training and instructions and also obtain assistance from liaisons that we assigned to Davute VII beforehand."

"Why me?" Tristan asked. "Why not send out a professional diplomat?"

This question had been bothering him for a while.

"Only you can do this, Tristan. We already dispatched our diplomats to Davute a year ago, but all they accomplished was holding fruitless talks with their counterparts from the Larkinson Clan. They never got to talk with the man in charge."

"How can you expect me to do any better?"

Katzenberg smiled. "According to our analysis of the Larkinson Patriarch, he values both personal relationships as well as material benefits. The way to reach him and win him over is to target both of those traits. We are sending you to Davute because we believe that Patriarch Ves is sentimental enough to meet with you directly. As long as you can speak with him directly, you have a chance of sparing our colonies from Hexer aggression."

"How do you expect me to convince him to bring the Hexers to heel, ma'am? He bears quite a grudge against our state if I recall."

"It has been years since he has last been wronged by our state and people. He has long moved past those incidents and fully invested his attention to his current and future endeavors in the Red Ocean. As long as you appeal to that, you will gain his interest. Your ultimate goal is to use the bargaining chips that we will provide to you to melt the hatred between him and our state. As long as you can make this crucial step, the rest of us can take over and work from there. Is that understood?"

"Not completely, but I will do my best to take advantage of my friendship with Ves, though do not expect too much from me. We haven't met each other in years. We are merely distant acquaintances at best."

"Let us see whether you can arrange a meeting with the Larkinson Patriarch first."

Chapter 4047 Growing Wealth and Influence

Tristan Wesseling's first impression of Davute VII was that it was a booming economy.

"This trade junction is doing extremely well!" The blond mech designer with a maturing face noted with surprise.

Though he already read a lot of articles about the increasingly more important economic hub, many of those were already outdated.

The actual situation of Davute VII was a lot more prosperous than a few months or years ago. Kotor City had already expanded to accommodate a population of over 10 million inhabitants while many other settlements on the planet had grown at least half as big!

Due to all of the traffic and people converging on the planet, the main spaceport was extremely busy. People were everywhere and Tristan had to wait behind many long lines in order to go through every mandatory arrival procedure.

If Tristan had already settled in Davute, he would have been able to skip much of this, but he was a first-time arrival from 'abroad', so he had to bear with the congestion.

Once he finally left the spaceport, he followed the navigation instructions provided by his comm and reached a large landing zone where an unassuming shuttle awaited his entry.

A relatively young woman with straight gray hair and a sharp business suit moved forward and extended her arms.

"Welcome to Davute VII, Mr. Wesseling. I am Perla Monater, an attaché of our local diplomatic mission. Please step inside the shuttle where I can brief you further on your assignment."

Both Fridaymen hopped inside the vehicle which soon lifted off and flew away from the direction of the city center.

"So Miss Monater..."

"What do you wish to ask, Mr. Wesseling?"

"I learned that our state sent a team of diplomats to this planet a year ago. Are you part of this delegation?"

"Correct." Perla Monater admitted. "While we have failed to gain any purchase in our talks with the Larkinsons, we have learned much about them. I do not think that there is any Fridayman that understands our subjects more than us. It is our duty to pass on a part of the information that we have collected to you. This way, you will be able to avoid several detours and prevent yourself from violating any of their taboos during your initial talks."

"Can you pass on more than that?"

"I am afraid not. We do not wish to fill your mind with instructions. It is important for you to come across as authentic. A person as emotional and informal as Patriarch Ves will appreciate that more than excessive preparation."

"I understand." Tristan sighed. He had heard this argument several times before. "By the way, please indulge me for a moment. Are you a diplomat, or are you a spy?"

Perla Monater smirked. "In my line of profession, the lines between these two professions are often blurred. That is especially the case for those of us who have received... special training. It is remarkable to think how much the skillsets and responsibilities of the two overlap. We can be whoever we want to be depending on the situation."

That was a frank explanation. Tristan already developed the vibe that Monater was not a straightforward woman.

"Then... since you and your fellow colleagues haven't been able to make much progress as diplomats, I am guessing that you have made more progress as spies."

"You can say that." Miss Monater frankly admitted. "While we have been unable to collect any intelligence from the interior of the Larkinson Clan or the Golden Skull Alliance, we are still able to collect information around them. Even so, we know full well that the Black Cats have kept their eyes on us before our team even arrived on this planet."

"The Black Cats? You mean the spies of the Larkinson Clan?"

"The Black Cats are far more than mere spies, Mr. Wesseling. I can guarantee you that they have already noted your arrival as well. While they cannot operate with impunity on this planet, their agents must have already collected your biometric data and obtained the registration data that you have submitted to the authorities. They may even know about your important mission."

Tristan grew concerned. "That sounds bad. Will I still be able to meet with Ves if this is the case?"

"It depends on what the people around the Larkinson Patriarch decide." The woman replied. "I do not believe that Director Calabast Arnland of the Black Cats will block your attempts to meet with Patriarch Ves. There is little threat to this meeting and she no longer values her ties to the Hexer people. She cares more about the gains and losses of the Larkinson Clan. As long as we show enough goodwill towards the clan, it does not matter if we strike a deal that damages the interests of the Hexer colonies. We believe that plenty of Larkinsons including their patriarch do not care much about the remnant Hexers these days."

Tristan looked skeptical. "What about his wife? She's a Wodin as well as a Larkinson. Everything I've read about her suggests she still has a strong attachment to her former people and more specifically her relatives in the Wodin Dynasty."

"That is correct, but Patriarch Ves holds the final say."

Perla Monater continued to fill Tristan in on various details about the Larkinson Clan. She clarified Gloriana's position in the clan as well as the clan's ambiguous relationship with the Hexer diaspora.

Much of this sounded quite murky to Tristan. It was not entirely clear how much power and influence that Patriarch Ves had over the Hexer colonists.

"Wait a second." Perla suddenly raised her hand. "Our pilot has just informed us that we are about to fly past a patrol of Planetary Guard mechs. Our shuttle will approach the machines so that you can take a look at them up close. It is quite an experience, especially if this is your first time."

Tristan already had an inkling of what the diplomatic attaché was referring to. He moved over to the side of the vehicle and looked out the window.

Seconds later, a soft but unmistakable glow encompassed the shuttle!

Tristan, Perla and the pilot in the cabin at the front all became affected by a mysterious energy field that directly caused them to lose their stress and ease their concerns.

The effect did not limit itself to muting their negative thoughts and emotions. Their positive impulses and emotions had become just as muffled at this time!

Fortunately, the Planetary Guard mech responsible for propagating this glow had put it at a modest setting.

"If this glow was hitting you at full blast, it would be so strong that you would find it challenging to maintain your wits." Miss Monater stated in a tone that was only mildly flatter than before. "A Journeyman such as you will still be fine for the most part, but ordinary people such as myself require special training in order to resist the most potent effects of a glow."

The Fridaymen had fought against the Hexers so many times for so many years that they were intimately familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of glows and living mechs!

There were hardly any other groups of people that possessed a greater understanding of these phenomena!

It was because of their great familiarity with the design solutions of the Larkinson Clan that the Fridaymen urgently sought reconciliation with its patriarch.

The reason for that was because continuing to fight against living mechs was too unpleasant!

They weren't necessarily stronger than mechs sold by other companies, but those who fought against them had to endure a lot more mental pressure and take many additional variables into account.

Any fight that involved living mechs was at least twice as exhausting to the Fridaymen mech pilots!

It was already bad enough to fight against mechs with suppressive glows a couple of times.

The Fridaymen had discovered that subjecting their mech pilots to living mechs for years on end induced so much mental damage and exhaustion that a lot of soldiers wanted to quit their service early!

This was the pervasive aspect of fighting against an opponent that made unscrupulous use of the Larkinson Clan's most iconic products!

As Tristan experienced this new glow that was rare in his home star sector but increasingly more prevalent in the Red Ocean, his thoughts turned grave.

"The combination is too effective. A glow that can reduce any form of agitation, aggression and excitement is just too effective when paired with a mech designed for peacekeeping duties. I can clearly see now why the Pacifier line has taken the Red Ocean by storm!"

Tristan was able to observe the frame of the living mech up close.

It was a fairly modestly-sized mech. He could see even without referencing the spec sheet that the famous copy of the Pacifier VK13500-PF0 possessed a limited amount of mass and volume.

Normally, law enforcement mechs that were built on the skinnier side were not that threatening to rogue mechs.

This was different!

Despite its relatively cheap and budget-friendly design, its intangible qualities were so strong that the Pacifier model had quickly turned into a trending product just months after its initial release!

Even as the shuttle flew out the glow range of the Planetary Guard patrol, Tristan still felt a sense of oppression that dampened much of his previous excitement for finally making it to the Red Ocean.

"It's impossible for me to design a mech that can outperform and outsell the Pacifier line." He concluded. "I feel lucky that I don't have any intention of competing in the law enforcement mech market. I feel sympathy for all of my colleagues that have already done so. There is no way they can compete fairly against the Pacifier model and its variants."

Tristan could not imagine how much money and influence the Larkinson Clan had obtained from selling this mech line alone!

"The Larkinson Clan only received a modest proportion of the proceeds from the sale of the Pacifiers." Perla Monater explained. "However, the increasing volume of sales means that the Larkinsons continue to increase their warchest with each passing month. What is even more ridiculous is that their business partner, the Voiken Family, has actually agreed to hand over the same proportion of earnings generated by the sale of the rest of their mech ecosystem!"

Tristan nodded. "When I read the regional mech publications during transit, I have regularly come across articles that praise the LaVoi System. More and more Planetary Guard units and other peacekeeping organizations are thinking about switching over to it. If not for the fact that many of them have already bought into the mech ecosystems of other competitors, they would have switched over already."

The LaVoi System was the rather simple name for the Voiken Family's mech ecosystem dedicated to peacekeeping and law enforcement purposes.

Although the name sounded rather odd, it was easy enough to figure out that the 'La' came from the Larkinson Clan and the 'Voi' came from the Voiken Family.

According to the articles, over half of the people residing in both the Magair and Krakatoa Middle Zones knew what the LaVoi System stood for! This was often because those very same people had experienced the glows of the Pacifier mechs at least once in their lives already!

"It is rather difficult for existing Planetary Guard organizations to switch over to the LaVoi System right away, but it is not that difficult to buy a batch of Pacifier mechs at first. What is more significant is that colonies founded today and in the future will more

likely than not embrace the LaVoi System right away, thereby turning themselves into both large and fixed customers to the Voikens and the Larkinsons."

The breakout success of the Pacifier mech line and the LaVoi System was not good news to the Fridaymen.

The Larkinson Clan had grown even faster after this success, which made them stronger and more difficult to assail.

The Pacifier model did not just bring them a lot of money. The new possibilities they granted to their users also won the Larkinsons a lot of approval from the Planetary Guard units of many different planets in the surrounding regions!

So many peacekeepers had fallen in love with the Pacifier mech line that they did not want anything to happen to the Larkinson Clan and its most famous mech designer!

If anyone attacked or said anything bad about the Larkinsons, a surge of angry customers who had become addicted to living mechs would quickly rise to the defense of their providers!

This was what Tristan had to stop.

"Oh boy. This is not going to be easy."

Chapter 4048 Pacifier Project

Much had changed over the past years. The Living Mech Corporation had gone from an obscure mech company that was indistinguishable from other ones to a rising market player that intimidated many market competitors!

Leveraging Patriarch Ves Larkinson's unorthodox design philosophy and unique glows that provided tons of utility, the living mech models that the LMC published with increasing frequency quickly became famous — or infamous in various circles — for their ability to affect the minds of people!

Whether it was their supportive glows that lifted the morale of soldiers or suppressive morale that ruined the concentration of enemy mech pilots, the glows associated with LMC products quickly became one of the more famous features of the products of the Red Ocean!

Though paranoid critics and disgruntled competitors often brought up accusations that the Larkinsons exploited illegal brainwashing technology, such news only gained a moderate amount of traction.

One of the key reasons why these legitimate-sounding concerns did not completely tarnish the LMC's brand and reputation was because the Mech Trade Association never issued any statement regarding the controversy!

The MTA merely reminded every inquirer that it had already issued proclamations regarding glows in the past. The mechers saw no need to provide any additional guidance to the mech community.

In the end, regulatory action or inaction did not become a factor in people's purchase decisions.

While there were plenty of mech buyers who turned away from the LMC's product catalog, there were also others who swore by them and made great use of the unique range of mech models.

The owners of living mechs often possessed a competitive advantage over their rivals and enemies, causing them to win more battles than they should, especially when their opposition had not made any preparations to fight against this new phenomenon!

In addition, more and more customers had begun to discover the more profound benefits of living mechs.

Their glows may have caught their attention from the beginning, but many mech pilots who had piloted their living mechs for months or years refused to part with their battle partners due to all of the growth they experienced together!

Due to all of these reasons, the Living Mech Corporation became the only mech company led by a Journeyman to break into the consciousness of the mech market and become a known brand!

p The start of the LMC's major success in the Red Ocean began with the design of the Pacifier Project.

As a collaborative project between the Living Mech Corporation and Voiken Industries, its development trajectory was different from ordinary projects.

Ves and his fellow Larkinson mech designers were already accustomed to collaborating among themselves. They also accrued a decent amount of experience working together with external consultants such as Master Moira Willix and Professor Benedict Cortez on powerful expert mech design projects.

This was a different form of collaboration, though.

During the very first virtual meeting between the two principal mech designers, Professor Taigen Herman Voiken made it clear who was in charge of the Pacifier Project.

"I believe that you and I already possess a clear understanding of each other's competences." He spoke. "Your strengths lie in designing living mechs and adding useful glows to them. My strengths are based on my extensive exploration and mastery of different types of non-lethal mechs."

Professor Taigen Voiken was over a century older than Ves. If not for the fact that he and his family held high expectations for the unique design solutions of the Larkinson Patriarch, he would not have bothered to address him as an equal!

The large generation, rank and experience gap made their initial moments of cooperation rather awkward. Ves was quite aware of how much a powerful and experienced Senior had to alter his behavior in order to maintain a harmonious atmosphere during their collaboration period.

Ves casually waved his hand and made his stance clear. "I have no objections to allowing you to take the lead. You are the authority on law enforcement mechs here and I agreed to cooperate with you exactly because I do not need to provide any input on how to put such a machine together. I will not pretend to possess any expertise on law enforcement mechs, so I do not intend to get in your way."

The Voiken Senior responded with a genuine smile. He had been afraid that someone who shot up as rapidly as Ves might have developed an arrogant or conceited personality, but it appeared those fears were unfounded.

In truth, Ves didn't want to fight with Professor Taigen on this issue because he was short on time!

How could he possibly have the hours to spare on trying to push his own vision onto a Senior who started designing law enforcement mechs long before he was born?

Ves might be confident, but he wasn't a fool!

"That is reassuring for me to hear." Professor Taigen smiled as the tension between the two had dropped. "As long as we develop clear rules and make our division of responsibilities clear from the beginning, we will be able to avoid many problems. What aspects of the Pacifier Project do you wish to provide your input?"

"Hmm." Ves paused for a moment in order to think about exactly how he wanted to contribute. "I can leave the basic configuration and most of the technical design to you, but I would like to make my mark on the piloting experience, the external design of our mech as well as the marketing, branding and presentation of the product. The Pacifier Project may primarily be your work, but it is my contribution that makes all of the difference. It is important to me that our collaborative work possesses the flair and imagery that is expected from my mech company."

The Senior frowned. "I can agree with a number of these points, but I will not surrender all of my rights regarding these areas. The products that I have developed fit a more sober and functional style that does not match your visual language. We will need to hold individual discussions for each aesthetic and other contentious style choices."

"Very well, but let me remind you that the purpose of this collaboration is to develop and release a product that can shock our customer base and break open the inertia that has already taken hold in the mech market. I can understand why you do not want to make a law enforcement mech too loud, but the Pacifier Project will already be high-profile enough due to its obvious glow. We might as well go all the way and turn it into a truly visually striking machine!"

Unfortunately for Ves, Professor Taigen wisely did not allow a young and excitable Journeyman to have free reign on the exterior design language of the Pacifier Project.

The two would have to work it out ad-hoc when they actually started to work on the mech design.

After they hashed out their responsibilities, their collaborative project soon took off at a rapid pace.

Professor Taigen had developed many first responder mechs beforehand, so this was nothing new to him. He already thought about and drafted several different configurations that all possessed their own individual strengths and weaknesses.

The older man presented his draft designs to Ves during their next virtual meeting.

"Hmm." Ves rubbed his chin as he studied the different variations of the same overall mech concept. "Each of these drafts have their strong points. It's hard for me to make a clear choice."

"We can implement most of them without needing to cut them away as they are variations of a common template." Taigen told him. "The important point here is to choose a baseline that will determine the range of variations. A base model that is inherently fast will always produce variants that possess at least decent mobility. The actual choice we need to make at this junction is to determine the defining physical strong points of the base model. What aspect do you wish to prioritize the most?"

Ves studied the different variations and dismissed the ones with more extreme or radical performance characteristics.

Since the initial Pacifier Project served as a base for hundreds of possible variants, there was no need to go to extremes straight away.

What they truly needed to settle upon was a basic starting point that was nonetheless defining enough to convey a clear design direction and focus.

He eventually pointed his finger at three of the projected draft designs.

"This, this and this. Each of them resonate more with me than the others."

The three versions of the Pacifier Project were largely identical to each other. They only differed by their emphasis.

Professor Taigen did not look too surprised at the selection. "You have a good eye. These are certainly on my short list as well."

One draft design possessed a larger and more energy-intensive flight system, allowing it to close distances faster.

Another draft design featured beefier and sturdier armor, turning the Pacifier Project into a more median law enforcement mech that could hold its own in battle.

The last one was a bit skinnier and did not look as dependable as the other two. However, it was significantly more economical and featured the lowest overall design budget.

The two discussed the merits of every potential choice and compared them to the list of expectations and requirements that they made for this project.

"We don't need to start with a machine that tries to outperform the competition through superior performance." Ves stated to his collaboration partner. "We need to introduce a mech model that captures the attention of our clients and lure them into trying them out. It is much easier to persuade different Planetary Guard organizations to invest in our solutions if they don't come with higher price tags. I am confident that as long as a customer only buys a single unit or batch of our first responder mech, they will instantly fall in love with its actual benefits."

Professor Taigen Voiken looked intrigued at his argument. "Your argument makes sense, but if your glows are not strong enough to make a difference, then our Pacifier Project will turn into a low-quality, low performance product that will not impress any law enforcement agency. Many peacekeeping operations have standards, and they can be quite high in the Red Ocean. A race to the bottom is a losing proposition to us. We do not have access to infrastructure or cheaper raw materials to win a price war with our immediate competitors."

"Don't worry, professor. The glow that I intend to impart on the Pacifier Project will be anything but weak! We just need to make sure that my input on the mech design is sufficient enough for me to qualify as a contributor."

Though Professor Taigen was not completely convinced that they had made the right choice, they settled for designing a base model that was more affordable than most of the prevailing alternatives on the market.

They settled for a design budget of around 1 MTA credit. The low design budget made it difficult to design an adequate aerial mech for peacekeeping purposes while still earning a decent chunk of profits.

"The real cash cow is the rest of the mech ecosystem that I intend to design around our Pacifier Project." Professor Taigen told Ves. "If we commit to designing the cheapest and most affordable base model for our starter product, then we need to adopt the opposite approach for other main products. My colleagues and I can take care of that ourselves. Our greatest priority is to make the Pacifier Project as attractive as possible so that it can drive the sales of our more expensive offerings."

"It's a good thing that we signed an agreement that allows my mech company to earn a share of the earnings of your entire mech ecosystem." Ves smirked.

Ves would have objected to this business model if he was only entitled to a share of the profits of the Pacifier Project, but fortunately this was not the case.

Now that they agreed on the design budget and pricing strategy of their entire collaborative venture, they soon proceeded to design the Pacifier Project in earnest!

Chapter 4049 Barebones Product

Ves did not work on the Pacifier Project on a continuous basis. He spent much of his time on his numerous other mech design projects.

With so many mech designs on his plate, he was forced to ration his time as efficiently as possible. He was happy that Professor Taigen Voiken was both willing and capable of taking on the majority of the workload.

This way, Ves could spend much of his time on the works that fully reflected his design style and vision.

During the early stages of the Pacifier Project, Ves did not provide too much input on the ongoing design efforts. Professor Taigen pretty much designed the internal architecture as well as much of the armor layout by himself.

The Senior also picked out the various mech parts or designed them himself in case he wasn't satisfied with the available licenses.

One of the most important elements of a law enforcement mech was its suppression method.

While it was possible for a humanoid mech like the Pacifier Project to pick up a sword or a laser rifle, it was not supposed to participate in lethal battles in the first place.

The situation on a planet must truly deteriorate to an awful level for the Planetary Guard to take up lethal arms!

Most of the time, a law enforcement mech utilized non-lethal equipment instead. Whether it was noise generators that could instantly deafen and paralyze an unruly mob or a fluid projector that could gunk up the limbs of a rogue machine, there were many different solutions to disable a target without causing any excessive damage.

Naturally, Professor Taigen designed the Pacifier Project around a fluid projector system, which was the most standard solution for these kinds of mechs.

Fluid projectors were similar to flamethrowers but they spat out a special formula of foam or goo instead.

While it was difficult for a single fluid projector to disable a mech straight away, they had an advantage in that multiple mechs armed with the same system could rapidly disable a target mech.

The more fluid projectors in action, the faster and easier it was to disable a rogue mech!

This was why Planetary Guard units often conducted patrols with multiple mechs. Two machines were considered the minimum but it was much better to have four of them acting in unison.

Pretty much any rogue mech could be subdued in as little as half a minute when four fluid projectors were brought to bear!

The time needed to pacify a dangerous machine could be even faster if the target happened to be standing still!

"It would be great if fluid projectors were also effective in actual battle." Ves sighed.

He understood why they didn't show up in actual battles. The capacity of fluid projectors were too low. A typical law enforcement mech might deplete a third to a half of its capacity to disable just a single opposing mech.

This was not a big deal when it came to law enforcement. Unless an outright riot or insurrection took place, most incidents that required the intervention of Planetary Guard mechs usually amounted to a single mech going on a rampage or a couple of mechs having a scuffle against each other.

Even a more budget-conscious mech like the Pacifier Project would have sufficient capacity to handle these isolated incidents!

As for larger incidents such as explosive fights between rival gangs, that was where the heavier and more expensive products of LaVoi System were for! The bigger

peacekeeping mechs either relied on high-capacity fluid projectors or more advanced subjugation solutions to suppress and capture larger amounts of mechs going to town against each other.

Mechs like these were outside of the scope of the Pacifier Project, so Ves did not waste any further thought on them. It was enough to know that they existed and the roles they fulfilled in a standard law enforcement agency.

"At a design budget of 1 MTA credit, it becomes difficult to design a law enforcement mech that can satisfy the most basic role of a first responder mech." Professor Taigen told him during one of their scheduled meetings. "The performance of the Pacifier Project can only remain on par with the generic models on the market, but will never be able to exceed them. We will have to make considerable sacrifices in terms of defense and endurance. It will ever be a true powerhouse in any form of combat."

That was true. While the Pacifier Project wasn't actually that bad of a mech when deployed in an environment like the Yeina Star Cluster, the overall tech and strength level of second-class mechs was higher in most parts of the Red Ocean.

The expected standard of mechs employed in the Red Ocean were all equivalent to the mechs used in the galactic heartland. This meant that the Planetary Guard units at least had to be powerful enough to handle incidents involving machines at that strength level.

In this regard, a law enforcement mech that cost just 1 MTA credit would definitely struggle to suppress rogue mechs even if it worked in unison with a similar machine!

Ves did not worry too much about this, though. He believed that Lufa's glow would be able to make all of the difference. The Pacifier Project might be an inadequate product when judged by its technical performance alone, but once he added his own touch to it, the affordability of the end product would seem like a great bargain when it came paired with the perfect glow for peacekeeping purposes!

Professor Taigen Voiken understood this as well. He was willing to go along with the gamble that Ves wanted to make.

Of course, Taigen did not make this decision based on his collaboration partner's claims.

As soon as their two organizations signed a business agreement, Ves had shipped over a spare Sanctuary mech to the Magair Middle Zone where the Voikens in the Red Ocean had settled.

Many doubts went away as soon as Taigen was able to experience the Sanctuary mech's glow in person. Ves even gave him permission to perform as many tests as he liked in order to determine the possibilities and limitations of Lufa's glow!

After Professor Taigen thoroughly familiarized himself with this unique design solution, he started to ask whether Ves could tweak its expression in different forms.

"About the glow, can you turn it off or adjust its strength based on pilot input? It is too strong and can cause serious harm to nearby people if used without any restraint."

Ves nodded. "I have already started to include this function in my mech designs."

"Is it possible to concentrate the energy field and extend its range?"

"That is possible, but I do not think we should include this function for the Pacifier Project?"

"What is your reasoning for this decision?"

"The normal version of the glow is already sufficient. Most law enforcement mechs need to get fairly close to their targets in order to hit anything with their fluid projectors. It just so happens that the effective range of a glow and a fluid projector happens to match fairly well."

"It is still a useful function to add the ability to extend the range of a glow. We can even pair the Pacifier Project with an alternate weapon system that is more effective at longer ranges."

"We should reserve these possibilities for a future project." Ves replied. "If we do this, then the Pacifier Project will get a little complicated and be able to do too much relative to its price. We would miss an opportunity to enrich our pockets later on after many clients have become annoyed at the limitations of our initial product."

Professor Taigen frowned. He understood quite well what Ves was suggesting. It was a greedy, capitalistic approach towards product design.

"If we pursue this route, then we need to make certain that the Pacifier Project is valuable and useful enough with only the basic version of its glow."

"Relax, professor. I am confident that it will work out. We do not need to pile up any additional functions onto our law enforcement mech in order to increase its market appeal. Its value proposition is already high enough in my eyes."

"For what it is worth, I agree with you, Mr. Larkinson. However, it will be more difficult to persuade our clients that our Pacifier Project is worth that much if its only defining function is relatively limited in application. We will need to put more effort into marketing and promoting our product in order to generate enough interest and awareness."

The reason why they held different opinions on this matter was because the significance of the Pacifier Project varied between their two organizations.

To the Larkinson Can, the Pacifier Project was just one of many commercial mech design projects. Even if it was tied to a complicated collaboration agreement that possessed an elaborate profit-sharing arrangement, the Larkinsons were completely fine if this product turned out to be a flop!

The Voikens couldn't afford to make this gamble. The ones that had entered the Red Ocean needed to build a market presence from scratch but did not possess any design solutions that were compelling enough to stand out among the competition.

There were a lot of mech designers in the Red Ocean who used to be geniuses or authorities back in their home galaxy!

After so many ambitious and capable people passed through the beyonder gate, they intensified their efforts so that they could get ahead of their peers!

It was too difficult for the Voikens to stand out in this cruel and cutthroat environment if they could not rely on the work of Master Barnard Voiken.

In short, Professor Taigen would find it a lot more difficult to establish himself in the Red Ocean if he did release a successful product in the near future!

The two held repeated discussions about the glow of the Pacifier Project, but Ves was not willing to make too many changes.

"This is only the first complete iteration of this mech design." Ves stated. "We should leave room for improvement for future interactions. We can also add them to more premium mech designs in the future. This is a good way to revitalize interest in the LaVoi System after several years have passed."

"Can you at least implement smaller additions that can make the glow of the Pacifier Project more unique? I believe it is necessary to give the pilot the ability to control its range. We may also need to be ready to give a central dispatcher or a commanding officer in the rear the ability to change and disable the glows from a distance."

Ves furrowed his brows. "I do not think the latter is a good idea. That part about being able to control the range of the glow is a lot more useful, though. There will probably be many situations where the Pacifier Project is operating in an urban area and needs to be careful not to affect office workers."

In the end, the glow features of the Pacifier Project weren't anything fancy or complicated. It did the job and provided a bit of control to the mech pilot but that was all. Both Ves and Professor Taigen planned to listen to user feedback in order to determine their unmet needs.

Once they learned what their clients were missing, they could design another law enforcement mech that addressed the most prevailing demands!

Months passed by as Professor Taigen slowly fleshed out the Pacifier Project.

Ves also met and worked on the mech design on an infrequent basis in order to make sure it was alive and could carry a glow.

As the mech began to approach its final shape, Ves became progressively more involved. His main goal was to make his mark on the visual design of the product.

He had always believed that he could make a mech a lot more popular if he dressed up its design!

The question now was how he could add more interest to a budget law enforcement mech. He wanted it to be more than a boring and functional machine.

Chapter 4050 Conflicting Visual Language

Though Ves did not interact often with Professor Taigen, they worked together and exchanged enough opinions for him to develop an understanding of the Senior's style.

Professor Taigen developed a design language that matched his Preserver roots. He was the sort of mech designer who tried to be the consummate professional who wanted his products to reflect a high degree of efficiency and professionalism.

Professor Taigen had a lot in common with technical and detail-oriented mech designers such as Gloriana Wodin and Professor Benedict Cortez.

Having collaborated plenty of times with the latter two mech designers, Ves already knew how he should adapt his work to his new business partner's design inclinations.

The man would never put his name behind a mech that was too flamboyant or extravagant in appearance. Such a mech would contrast too sharply against his existing body of work.

When Ves browsed the archives and studied Taigen's mech designs from the start of his commercial career, he could see that the man had settled on a single visual style and stuck to it all the way to the present day.

While Professor Taigen gradually improved and developed his visual design language across many decades, the essence of his approach still remained constant no matter the context.

It was never his intention to distinguish his products by their appearance. To him, a professional law enforcement mech had to convey a sense of trust, reliability and peace. A flashy and attention-grabbing appearance ran counter to that goal.

In the end, Taigen's products became known for their performance and effectiveness in the field. They never won any appreciation and awards for their visual designs and that was completely okay to the Senior.

Ves did not exactly agree with this philosophy.

"It's too boring."

Mech design held a different meaning for him. While Professor Taigen was happy if his products were able to blend into the background, Ves wanted his mechs to stand out from the crowd!

There were so many mech designers already that were accustomed to designing and publishing mechs that hardly looked any different from each other. They embraced the image of a standard mech because they believed that a design that featured a deviating appearance was a sign of immaturity and amateurism.

Ves did not care for this opinion. He wanted to apply his own style to a mech that would carry his brand, but the difficult part was that he needed to take his collaboration partner into account as well.

Ultimately, Ves had to find a middle ground that would be distinctive enough to satisfy his artistic tastes while at the same time remain professional enough to meet his partner's approval.

"I have to do more with less. I can't let myself go as much as before."

In order to determine an acceptable visual design of the Pacifier Project, he first developed a look of his product that completely fit his style and preferences.

Taking inspiration from the Angel of Tranquility's theme and appearance, Ves transformed the Pacifier Project into an angel-like arbiter of justice.

While he couldn't add too many flamboyant elements to the design due to its relatively limited size and lower design budget, he had creatively altered the contours of its armor system to reflect both peace and justice in equal measure.

When Ves took a step back and admired his artistry, he could clearly imagine how it could reassure distressed citizens while deterring criminals from fooling around any further. Its silvery metal surface and its lack of distracting colors gave the impression that it was pure and incorruptible.

He put special attention in sculpting and carving numerous engravings on the armor as well as the optional riot shield. Motifs ranging from angel wings to the scales of justice made it seem as if the Pacifier Project descended from above in order to mete out justice to the guilty!

"This is the perfect look if I was solely in charge of this design project!"

Unfortunately, this wasn't the case!

Though Ves didn't see anything wrong with it, a more professional mech designer would think that it was no longer a functional product but rather a work of art.

Ves was of the opinion that products could be both functional while also serving as a piece of art.

Mech designers such as Professor Taigen were convinced that adding art to a product would only detract from its functional purpose!

What Ves needed to do at this point was to tone down the distinctive artistic elements of his design and make it so that the Pacifier Project looked clean and professional while at the same time preserving the essence of his touch.

"This is going to be difficult."

He had been working on many different design projects at this time, many of which presented a lot of difficult technical challenges.

Both the Mars Project and the Firestarter Project gave him a lot of headaches!

Yet despite all of those difficulties, the need to tone down the flair he wished to impart on the Pacifier Project was just as challenging!

Ves felt as if he was cutting a piece of his own flesh whenever he erased a distinctive design element from his interpretation of the Pacifier Project.

Each negation turned the Pacifier Project into a duller and less visually striking machine.

Even so, Ves had tried to adapt whenever he could. He began to treat this as a test of frugality. By replacing more complex and extravagant visual elements with simpler and more restrained alternatives, he was able to make the Pacifier Project look a lot cleaner while preserving much of its identity.

Visual cues such as the angel wings and the scales of justice became more abstract and less obvious. Ves had transformed them into clever background elements that did not scream out attention but would attract a lot of appreciation if people studied the mech for a longer period of time.

Over time, he began to develop a liking for this subtler and more restrained visual design approach.

"This is quite an appropriate design language for a budget mech that mainly needs to look as strong and reliable as possible."

When he showed off his work to Professor Taigen, the man had paused for a while before he issued his judgment.

"I would not have portrayed a first responder mech in this manner, but... it is not as bad as I feared. You did well to adhere to minimalism when you shaped the Pacifier Project's exterior."

Ves smiled. "I think the aesthetics of the mech will help enhance its performance. Think about how troublemakers will react when they see several copies of the Pacifier Project approaching from a distance."

Professor Taigen might not agree with all of the design elements that Ves had added to the mech, but he knew that he needed to make compromises as well.

This was far from his first collaboration, though usually the Senior tried to avoid working together with a mech designer whose design approach deviated too much from his own.

This was a special situation, though, so both of them had to make compromises that they ordinarily wished to avoid.

After Ves completed the visual design of the Pacifier Project, they had completed the substantive and creative design phases.

The remaining work that needed to be done mostly entailed optimization and testing work. Ves did not need to involve himself too much at these stages as Professor Taigen and Voiken Industries could handle this by themselves.

The mech company of the Voiken Family was just as well equipped if not more than the Design Department.

Professor Taigen Voiken was able to allocate a lot of simple but time-consuming simulation and optimization assignments to his own design teams.

Not only that, but the processing power and other design facilities they had brought over from their home galaxy were not any worse than the hardware of the Larkinso Clan!

The Voiken Family also possessed an additional advantage that the Larkinson Clan could not match.

"I will pass on our current progress to Master Barnard Voiken and collect his input on our design." Taigen told Ves one day.

That briefly caused Ves to be taken aback. "Is that necessary? The Pacifier Project is a rather simple mech, and I think we did a good job in designing it. While it hasn't reached its final form as of yet, the broad strokes are all great."

"I agree with you, my friend, but we cannot afford this mech to fail. The patriarch of my family has lived twice as long as myself and possessed an incomparably greater understanding and insights on mechs. I can understand the concerns you might have with allowing a Master to interfere with our work, but if his advice can improve the performance or the value proposition of our mech, then it is worth listening to what he has to say."

"...As long as Master Barnard's feedback is limited to advice and suggestions, then I guess it's okay."

Ves did not feel as concerned about this action as before. Now that he thought about it, what Taigen did was not that different from using the System's Superpublish function to give a mech design an extra boost.

Though Ves ordinarily valued his ownership in a design, the Pacifier Project was not completely his work to begin with. Professor Taigen was the lead designer and designed the bulk of the machine.

This meant that soliciting feedback from a Master would primarily affect Taigen's sense of ownership towards the Pacifier Project.

As for Ves, his contributions would remain just as limited as before!

"Well, if you are willing to make this move, then be my guest."

"Our patriarch knows how much feedback he should provide. You do not need to show too much concern. What is important here is that the performance and design of the Pacifier Project is as sound and optimized as it can reach. The future of the Voiken Family is at stake. Our product must succeed."

As Ves directed his attention to his other design projects, the Voikens quietly polished their collaborative mech design. They conducted multiple rounds of prototype testing as well as simulation testing before making use of the collected data to solve minor problems and improve many different design elements.

In order to make absolutely certain that its specs would not be too far behind compared to the competition, Professor Voikenn had even transferred the design files to the Voiken Family in the Milky Way!

While Master Barnard did not directly insert his own design solutions to the mech design, he allocated his own design teams and facilities to assist with the optimization process!

The greater might of the main Voiken Family had been brought to bear on the Pacifier Project!

In the end, the Voikens invested an untold amount of manpower and processing power in finalizing a law enforcement mech that had reached a degree of optimization that Ves had never seen in any of his other works up to his date outside of his Superpublished designs!

His eyes widened when he saw the final product!

Though the changes weren't obvious at first, when Ves compared the current iterations to the ones that were months old, the differences were like night and day!

If not for certain obvious design elements, any mech insider who looked at the Pacifier Project would probably think it was designed by a Master!

"This is better than expected. Even my wife would celebrate how close it is to reaching its perfect state!" Ves gasped.

"I am glad to hear you approve of this iteration. If there are no further problems and requirements, this will be the finalized version of the Pacifier Project."

"That is great to hear! I have been waiting so long for our collaborative work to be put to use. When will it be available for sale?"

"That is the issue, Mr. Larkinson. A law enforcement mech is a specialized offering that is usually produced and sold on commission. If we want our work to fulfill its purpose, we must approach and persuade Planetary Guard organizations to try out our new and unproven mech model."

Ves could see why this could be a problem.

"Weren't you guys supposed to take care of this matter?"

"We are, but our reach only extends to a limited area of the Magair Middle Zone at the moment. If we want to spread our products wider, we will need your clan's assistance in persuading the law enforcement agencies in your region to try out our new solution. Can you do that, Mr. Larkinson?"

"I... will see what I can do. It will be difficult as our brand is not famous yet. We will have to resort to different methods to catch the attention of potential clients."