

Mech 4111

Chapter 4111 Scaled Tests

All of the Cross Clan's expert pilots aside from their patriarch had gathered in one of the observer's rooms of the Primary Cross Lab.

Professor Benedict Cortez invited each of them over in order to witness one of the many live tests performed with the help of a scale model of the Mars Project.

Though the Cross Clan used to retain a much larger roster of expert pilots, many of them had perished during the flight from the Garlen Empire and the major battles that ensued afterwards.

Aside from Patriarch Reginald Cross, only Venerable Linda Cross and Venerable Imaris Cross managed to survive up to the present day.

Both of them were revered in the Cross Clan. They had fought with valor and skill and directly contributed to the survival of the Crossers.

In a clan that already looked up to high-ranking mech pilots, Venerable Linda and Venerable Imaris were far more than mere champions to the Crossers.

They were also decision makers and judges whose voices held significant sway in the clan!

Although the strength and prestige of Patriarch Reginald was so overwhelmingly great that it was hard for anyone to naysay his commands, the expert pilot was not that big into governance.

These days, the Cross Clan grew explosively in size and scale. With the help of the Cross Network, the Crossers were able to adopt the recruitment model of the Larkinsons without much fear of inviting outsiders with malicious intentions.

The industrial and business side of the Cross Clan had especially grown more prominent as of late. Though Professor Benedict effectively decided over most of these matters, there were plenty of alternative responsibilities where the remaining leading figures of the clan could have their way.

Venerable Linda and Venerable Imaris had already begun to assert their leadership in the clan. As the Cross Clan continued to grow beyond Patriarch Reginald's immediate scope, there were more and more areas where the other expert pilots could assert their own will.

The pair of veteran Crosser expert pilots weren't the only champions who took advantage of the changing times.

Venerable Florence Cross also became more prominent in the Cross Clan.

As one of the lucky pilots who broke through to the rank of expert pilot during the Battle of Purgatory, Venerable Florence became the standard bearer of the younger generation of Crossers.

His recent breakthrough represented the most solid sign yet that the Cross Clan was on the rise again. No longer were the Crossers bleeding expert pilots left and right.

The emergence of a new one showed that the clan that they belonged to had regained its vitality and possessed hope of reaching or perhaps even exceeding its previous height!

The only problem at the moment was that Venerable Florence had yet to receive his expert mech.

Though Professor Benedict promised to design an expert striker mech for the newly-promoted demigod, the Senior devoted most of his time on furthering the Mars Project.

It was understandable that the new expert pilot was not in a good mood these days. His expression looked sour as he crossed his arms.

"This better be worth it. Our mech designers have worked almost one-and-a-half years on this expert mech design. I get why it is so powerful, but do we truly need to set everything aside just to finish our patriarch's expert mech a little earlier?"

Venerable Linda and Venerable Imaris experienced the same frustration to an extent. While they still retained their respective expert mechs, their machines were horribly outdated and could not keep up with the more powerful and expensive expert mechs that were common in the Red Ocean.

Even so, they were old enough to know what was truly important.

"Waiting our turn is exactly what we need to do, Florence." Venerable Linda admonished. "The three of us may be powerful compared to ordinary mech pilots, but we cannot protect and dominate our clan by ourselves. If we want to increase our standing and reputation in the Red Ocean, we need a leader who can command absolute respect from others. Patriarch Reginald is the main reason why the Larkinsons and many outsiders value our existence, but once they grow stronger, we can't be sure anymore whether that will stay the case."

Florence let out a sigh. "I can see that, but investing all of that time and resources on a single super expert mech looks like a huge gamble to me. I have heard that the development of the Mars Project was anything but smooth. What if... it won't match our expectations?"

"...We'll see what happens when that time comes."

The Cross Clan bet so big on the Mars Project and Patriarch Reginald's future breakthrough that it could not back away from this ambitious plan!

Therefore, the Crosser expert pilots eagerly awaited for the test to commence.

Minutes before the mech designers were ready to test the scale model, a mech designer entered the observation room.

The 'other' patriarch had decided to drop by the Crosser expert pilots for one reason or another.

"Good afternoon, pilots. Are you looking forward to the upcoming test?"

"We are." Venerable Linda said as she and the other expert pilots schooled their expressions. "Can you tell us what you and your fellow mech designers are about to accomplish?"

Ves smirked. "That will be a surprise. I am sure you will love it, though. It's a risky test, but I think it is a worthwhile one to conduct. Miss Sara Voiken was the one who came up with the idea. She wanted to find a way to put serious pressure on the scale model's implementation of a miniature version of the Abasis Armor. It is extremely important for us to know whether the shrunken version of the Mars Project can resist serious blows."

"It sounds as if you are about to put the scale model through the ringer."

"You can say that. Come. The test is about to start. Patriarch Reginald is just about to interface with the scale model by remote."

Another minute passed by until a change finally occurred. Every nearby expert pilot looked sharper as they noticed a powerful will and consciousness emerging from the miniature Mars Project!

Compared to interfacing with an actual expert mech, the process and the results of doing the same on a scale model were substantially different.

"It's weaker. Reginald's resonance strength is much weaker." Venerable Imaros Cross observed.

"That is natural. A 1:50 scale model is too small and limited to maximize the resonance between it and its pilot. There are too many imperfections and compromises that ultimately makes it less optimal for expert pilots to resonate with this realistic toy."

"Will the coming test even have any meaning if the performance between a scale model and a real mech is so far apart?"

"Oh, this is definitely a useful test. We can't measure everything we'd like, but we can certainly give everyone a demonstration of the power of our design!"

Several minutes passed by as Patriarch Reginald tested his control over the scale model. Once it became clear that nothing was amiss concerning the operation of the miniature Mars Project, a massive door slid open to reveal a mech.

A full-sized mech.

"Is that... the Redaxe of your Larkinson Clan?" Venerable Florence Cross asked.

"Yup." Ves grinned. "The Redaxe is the work of Miss Tifi Coslone. Although it is not our most impressive mech, we believe it can serve as an adequate sparring partner to the scale model of the Mars Project."

"Are you serious?! That's a real mech out there! It's fifty times larger than the scale model!"

"Normally, your concerns would be warranted, Venerable Florance, but we are not talking about an average test machine this time. The Mars Project is so powerful that my colleagues and I have a decent level of expectation that it will prevail in this battle scenario."

The Redaxe piloted by an Avatar mech pilot did not remain still for long. As soon as the control room transmitted the signal, the Redaxe strode forward and quickly built up a formidable amount of momentum as it raised its signature weapon!

The Avatar mech pilot did not hold anything back. Even though the scale model was extremely expensive, there was no actual person in its tiny cockpit, so the Redaxe showed no scruples towards the small machine!

"Where is the scale model's resonance shield!?"

"For a variety of different technical issues, the scale model cannot deploy a resonance shield. Don't worry. The machine's armor is not flimsy even at this diminished size and scale."

Strangely enough, the scale model of the Mars Project did not attempt to dodge or evade the blow.

Instead, it held out its tiny transphasic axe in a guard position and attempted to meet the incoming blow!

CLANG!

The sound and force of the impact did not disappoint! Since the Redaxe was dedicated to wielding just a single weapon, it was able to employ its red-bladed axe with great force and precision!

Yet even as it managed to overpower the scale model's feeble attempt to block the incoming attack, the huge and much more massive axe actually collided head-on against the tiny frame of the scale model without making any further progress!

"What?!"

"How can this be?!"

"This is impossible!"

Every Crosser expert pilot looked completely astonished by the fact that a machine that was 50 times smaller was actually able to repel a full-powered blow of an offensive melee mech!

Sure, the Redaxe was nowhere near as strong as a real expert mech, but Venerable Linda and the Crossers intuitively understood that when the differences in scale became so big that the scale model shouldn't have been able to fend off the blow so well!

The downscaled mech was not only around 50 times lighter, but the machine's armor plating was also around 50 percent thinner.

"How can this toy stay in place when a full-sized mech had put all of its force and weight behind this blow?" Venerable Imaris Cross puzzlingly asked. "Even if the Mars Project's fancy new armor system is as indestructible as I heard, the mech should still bounce backwards. However, from what I can see, it hadn't even moved a single centimeter from its place!"

Ves smirked. "That is indeed a counterintuitive result, but that is one of the less obvious benefits of transphasic mechs. They can anchor themselves in a location in space, thereby making it seem as if they are standing on invisible soil. If they are already standing on solid ground, then the anchoring function can make them unmovable. As you can see, the scale model did not disappoint us in this regard."

"Patriarch Reginald is taking action with his mini mech!"

Now that the Redaxe had its turn, the scale model went on the offensive this time!

The tiny mech flew upwards and completely evaded the Redaxe's follow-up swing in order to strike its tiny axe at one of the shoulders of the axeman mech.

Slice!

The diminutive size of the scale model and its weapon did not hinder Patriarch Reginald from dealing effective damage against the Redaxe.

The man even enjoyed himself as he piloted the scale model in a circle around its prey. He essentially treated this testing session as a practice session for disabling warships!

Much like an actual warship, the Redaxe found itself completely unable to fend off and resist the attacks of a much smaller machine.

It was suffering cut after cut as the mini-Mars Project did not allow its diminutive size get in the way of its mission!

What the shrunken transphasic mech lacked in force and strength, it made up for it with insane penetration.

The scale model significantly expended a lot more energy than before in order to make sure it would be able to sustain its energy-intensive attacks.

"The Mars Project isn't able to deal a killer blow." Linda observed. "Its axe doesn't go deep enough."

Patriarch Reginald noticed that as well and quickly grew more frustrated as the Redaxe bore more wounds.

"Let me try this, then!"

The expert pilot tried to resonate with the scale model and its weapon. Reginald succeeded in summoning up a formidable amount of strength through his efforts.

Soon, the scale model's axe began to glow in an ominous red shade.

Swing!

With just a single attack, the scale model managed to reach deeper into the Redaxe's frame than before!

"The mech engine is gone!"

"It has lost its ability to move its limbs!"

The three Crosser expert pilots looked flabbergasted at this time. They expected the duel between the scale model of the Mars Project and the Redaxe to proceed much longer.

They never expected the battle to end so soon!

"Was this test useful at all?" Venerable Imaris Cross asked with a frown. "This duel did not last as long as I thought."

Ves chuckled. "Hehehe. Don't worry, Linda. This is just the appetizer. We just needed to collect an initial batch of data in order to form a baseline for our modeling and calculation work. The real fight is about to commence."

As the immobile frame of the Redaxe was brought away, another mech stepped forward this time.

"It's an expert mech!"

An iconic, golden expert mech that featured defined muscles and an even more defined codpiece had appeared at the entrance.

"C-Man, ready for duty!" Venerable Vincent called. "I'm going to enjoy smashing Reginald into the dirt. This will probably be the only time I can do this to him. I will definitely savor every second of this beatdown."

The expert brawler mech slammed its smart metal fists against each other as emphasis.

Chapter 4112 Disproportionate Power

In the initial test, the scale model of the Mars Project displayed absolute superiority against a full-sized regular mech.

The Redaxe had been unable to penetrate the scale model's deceptively thin armor. What is even more absurd was that the axeman mech failed to displace the scale model despite all of the force and weight exerting on a machine that was 50 times smaller.

The Crosser expert mech pilots were still stuck with trying to make sense of how that could be possible.

Even Venerable Linda Cross who was able to alter the force of her blows could not wrap her mind around an expert mech that could negate so much incoming force.

Ves had already moved on, though. Though the brief bout between the Redaxe and the scale model generated a lot of interesting data points that were just waiting to be analyzed, it was not the main show.

This was because the recently-completed C-Man had entered the testing chamber.

"Reginald won't be able to bully a weaker mech this time." Ves smirked. "While Venerable Vincent is not as strong as Patriarch Reginald, the difference in scale should more than even up the odds."

Despite Vincent's bravado, the Larkinson expert pilot did not underestimate his current opponent.

As funny as it looked to confront an expert mech that was so small that the C-Man looked like a juggernaut in comparison, the resonance strengths of their respective expert pilots were too far apart!

Vincent's resonance strength was still measured in the single digits while Reginald's resonance strength was already nearing the absolute limit that expert pilots could reach!

As the two disproportionately-sized machines squared off against each other, their pilots already began to clash their domains against each other.

Neither side wished to take a step back in this invisible confrontation. Both Vincent and Reginald concentrated their willpower and tried to resonate with their machines as much as possible!

The golden corona surrounding the C-Man was larger but more diffused. The red corona surrounding the scale model was smaller but more concentrated.

The physical characteristics of both machines had a profound influence on how much they were able to channel the strength of their pilots.

While Patriarch Reginald was undoubtedly a stronger expert pilot, the remote connection along with the limited size of the scale model severely weakened the resonance he could achieve.

It was like trying to transmit a signal through an area with heavy interference while relying on a low-tech communication device. The circumstances were so adverse that Patriarch Reginald simply couldn't perform at his best!

"The question now is whether those factors are enough to curtail his ability to win this little bout."

This was an extremely lop-sided matchup. No one could make a solid prediction on who would win.

Would a weak expert pilot paired with a formidable expert mech be able to show that size mattered, or would a strong expert pilot paired with a miniature mech be able to prove that the qualities of the controller mattered more?

Ves and the others were extremely curious to see which one would gain the advantage this time!

"It's starting!"

Upon receiving a silent signal, both mechs began to move against each other at once!

This time, the miniature Mars Model did not straightforwardly resort to its tiny axe in order to overpower its opponent in a melee duel.

The C-Man excelled in melee combat, so Reginald recognized that it was always a better idea to soften up his opponent from a safer distance!

Thus, as soon as the Mars Project jumped into the air and flew backwards, the expert hybrid mech made use of the ARCEUS System to fire a torrent of transphasic positron beams that also happened to be empowered by true resonance!

All of these conditions ensured that the energy beams inflicted a devastating amount of damage against the C-Man's resonance shield.

"Damn, how powerful is the full version of the Mars Project?!" Vincent shouted as he became distressed by how much more difficult it became to maintain his resonance shield. "These energy beams are supposed to be tiny!"

Although the miniature implementation of the ARCEUS System was not straightforwardly 50 times weaker, the tiny integrated weapon systems were undoubtedly unable to inflict as much damage as their full-sized cousins.

Even so, the concentrated beams pressured the much larger machine to such an extent that Venerable Vincent was completely jarred!

"This is nonsense! How can those tiny guns possibly deal so much damage?! It's as if I'm being attacked by a regiment of artillery mechs!"

Although Vincent was exaggerating to a certain extent, the C-Man's resonance shield was truly losing integrity at a distressing rate.

The only way for him to stop this decline was to go on the offensive and get into point-blank range of the scale model.

However, despite the fairly limited size of the shielded testing chamber, the scale model constantly remained ahead of the larger mech as it circled around the fighting space.

The C-Man was barely able to get closer to the scale model!

"Damn, what have those mech designers done with the Mars Project's flight system? It's so powerful!"

The scale model's flight system might be smaller, but the rest of its construction was smaller and lighter as well!

This produced a circumstance where the scale model did not actually lose that much speed.

Dozens of seconds passed as the Mars Project unscrupulously fired its formidable arsenal of integrated energy weapons at the pursuing machine.

Soon enough, the C-Man's resonance shield broke as the combined power of the scale model's true resonance as well as its transphasic properties proved to be too much!

Many observers felt mixed when they saw this happen.

What broke this time was not a regular energy shield. It was a genuine resonance shield that was generated by an expert pilot and an expert mech.

While it was true that Vincent's resonance strength was not that impressive at this time, the ease in which a machine that resembled a toy could strip the most important defenses of an expert mech was appalling!

"If this is what our patriarch can do with a mini mech that he is piloting from a distance, how much more powerful will he be when he pilots the real thing?" Venerable Florence Cross wondered.

Venerable Linda Cross on the other hand grew happy at the sight.

"Do you see why our clan invested so much time, effort and resources into developing the Mars Project? This is but a hint of the true power that our clan is about to obtain."

If any of them had any doubts about the stupendous amount of funding and resources put into this extravagant design project, the individuals completely cleared them away!

Ves paid attention to other factors while the high-intensity duel continued to unfold before his eyes.

He had worked on the ARCEUS System for so long that he was highly familiar with the properties of both its full-sized and its down-sized version.

He knew that if the scale model was already capable of stripping the C-Man's resonance shield in so little time, the full version of the Mars Project could easily do the same to ten times as many expert mechs!

No low or mid-tier expert mech could survive getting attacked by the Mars Project for long! The ranged threat posed by this powerful machine exceeded that of the Amaranto!

Even high-tier expert mechs such as the dwarven Gatecrasher or the Planat Clan's Erin Tear would fall into a heavy disadvantage as their defenses wore out a lot faster than that of Venerable Reginald's new battle partner!

Ves returned his focus to the ongoing engagement. The C-Man may have lost its resonance shield, but its innovative TESMAS was currently energized in order to provide transphasic defenses to the beleaguered expert brawler mech.

While the other expert pilots looked surprised at how well the C-Man's smart armor system was holding up against the persistent ranged attacks of the scale model, Ves did not look surprised in the slightest.

As a transphasic defensive system, TESMAS possessed the right means to negate or at least mitigate the transphasic properties of the incoming energy beams.

"This confirms that the best way to fend off a transphasic attack is to rely on a transphasic means of defense." Ves murmured to himself

While TESMAS was not as phasewater-intensive as the Mars Project's Abasis Armor, with 5 kilograms of phasewater the smart armor was more than capable of neutralizing the most troublesome part about the ARCEUS System's energy attacks.

When Venerable Vincent noticed how the physical armor of his expert mech was holding up against the puny positron beams, he became a lot more optimistic about this fight!

"Haha! That's right! My TESMAS is better than my resonance shield! I can take whatever you can dish out as long as I have enough juice!"

Although the C-Man was consuming a large amount of energy in order to keep its TESMAS in its energized state, the defensive boost was so profound that Vincent fully regained his confidence!

The C-Man seemed to fly a little faster than before after that. It was as if Vincent's eagerness to close the distance literally caused his expert mech to fly faster for no reason!

As such, the distance between the two mismatched machines had closed to a point where the C-Man could finally pose a significant threat against the scale model.

"Take my stretchy fists!" Vincent roared!

A pair of arms launched forward and stretched so that they became increasingly longer and thinner.

Even though the fists grew smaller in the end, they were still more than large enough to land a pair of heavy blows on the scale model!

Bang! Bang!

The miniature version of the Mars Project remained unaffected due to its resonance shield, but its tiny scale meant that this protective cover quickly deteriorated after suffering another set of blows!

Soon enough, Patriarch Reginald was unable to count on this layer of projection.

"You're mine now!" Vincent crowed as his C-Man launched another pair of stretchy fists at the scale model.

Clang! Clang!

However, as soon as the smart metal fists smacked against the miniature mech's exterior, they bounced away as if they had hit an unbreakable wall.

"Huh?"

When the C-Man launched another set of attacks, the same result happened without any deviations.

The Abasis Armor was much stronger than TESMAS!

Even if the former was shrunk by 50 times this time, the fists formed out of the latter could not immediately overpower the scale model!

Venerable Vincent wasn't happy with this result, but that didn't mean he gave up. He knew that any form of defense would succumb as long as he continued his offensive.

"Take this, then!"

The C-Man continually stretched its arms in order to punch at a higher frequency.

While the scale model had never stopped firing back with its ARCEUS System, it was clear that its progress was not so great after bumping into the protective properties of TESMAS.

Patriarch Reginald decided that it was time to switch gears.

The scale model ceased to fire its powerful arsenal of transphasic energy weapons and readied its miniature axe and shotgun. The miniature mech subsequently proceeded to turn around so that it could get as close to the C-Man as possible!

Vincent grinned at the sight. "Welcome to papa, Reginald. You're mine as soon as you enter my range!"

He quickly commanded his C-Man to retract its stretchy limbs and prepare to fight a buzzing fly.

Yet before the expert brawler mech could launch a jab at the incoming scale model, the opposing machine let loose with a shotgun that fired a special transphasic slug that happened to slam into the head of the C-man!

"Ahhh!" Venerable Vincent cried out in pain as the simple attack actually cracked the non-TESMAS plating of the head of the C-Man!

The scale model's shotgun fired repeatedly at the C-Man at different components from different angles. Even though the shots weren't particularly large or heavy, their transphasic properties dealt surprisingly effective damage against the C-Man's TESSMAS, thereby rapidly weakening the integrity of Venerable Vincent's armor coverage.

Even as the miniature Mars Project softened up the expert brawler mech at just outside the latter's optimal range, Patriarch Reginald also commanded his expert mech to swoop forward and land a nasty axe blow against the C-Man's vulnerabilities.

In contrast, Vincent's lack of skill relative to his experienced opponent meant that his tactics always failed while his opponent's moves consistently outplayed his own.

"This isn't fair!" The Larkinson expert mech pilot complained. "How am I supposed to compete against you when you are twice as old?"

Chapter 4113 Piloting Mentality

The battle turned lop-sided as soon as the two opponents fought at close range.

Though it didn't look obvious at the start, the duel between the full-sized C-Man and the pint-sized Mars Project was unfair from the beginning.

The handicap of piloting a much smaller machine did not diminish Patriarch Reginald's skill and experience in the slightest!

While Reginald had to spend enough time with the scale model in order to become accustomed to its quirks and properties, once he got the hang of piloting such a tiny machine from a distance, he turned it into a terror that could not be caught!

After fighting against the C-man for a time, Reginald discovered that Vincent's expert mech was not that agile and quick to turn around.

If this was the case, then it became a lot easier to torment the C-Man. The scale model just had to circle around the larger machine and attack at angles where the ungainly mech was unprepared to defend against!

"Stop attacking my back!"

Although Venerable Vincent tried to use the arms and then the other limbs of his C-Man to smack the buzzing miniature mech, his predictable and foreseeable attacks consistently failed to hit the mark.

Patriarch Reginald was simply too good at dodging the C-Man's attacks, especially now that he had grasped his opponent's rhythm!

The horrendous amount of skill, intuition and experience that Reginald displayed during this duel completely overwhelmed Venerable Vincent to the point where his willpower began to lose ground.

In the end, before the C-Man reached a threshold of damage that would signify a loss according to the rules, Vincent had already lost the fight on a mental level!

"Alright, that's the end of this duel! Please retreat from each other before you inflict serious damage that is costly to repair!"

The two expert pilots immediately commanded their mechs to separate from each other while ceasing any offensive acts.

In fact, it didn't matter what Vincent did as his actions were irrelevant at this point. Patriarch Reginald and his miniature mech had schooled the Larkinson expert pilot so much that it was impossible for the C-Man to have any hope of damaging its opponent at that stage!

A lot of people became happy with the results of this testing session.

"Hahaha! This is great! This is exactly what we needed to observe in order to finalize the design of the Mars Project!" Professor Benedict gleefully said.

As his passion project, he had invested so much of himself into this expert hybrid mech design. To see his work validated in this way was everything he could have hoped for during this phase of the design project.

Not only did he confirm that many of his design solutions were sound or even excellent, he also spotted many new details that he had overlooked when the Mars Project did not exist in such a real form.

The tests conducted on both the standalone components and the scale model uncovered many unknown interactions and variables that Professor Benedict and the other mech designers missed before.

As long as the Senior followed up on these details and made whatever changes he deemed necessary, then he would become a lot more assured in turning the Mars Project into a critical success!

"This scale model's performance exceeded my expectations." Gloriana murmured as she collected her own gains from this pivotal testing session. "I never imagined that something so small could be so powerful."

"That is because you never met anyone who would be willing to invest so much money and resources into building these scale models in the first place." Sara remarked as she stood behind a nearby workstation. "The Cross Clan did what was necessary in order to make sure its flagship project won't crash and burn."

"Hmmm. You have a point."

Although the scale model performed well by all accounts, the mech designers had all caught a few dubious areas that might still remain in the original design.

If this was the case, then Professor Benedict and the other participating mech designers needed to examine them further and decide whether to develop new solutions that addressed the matter in question.

Fortunately, the issues weren't that big, so it shouldn't take too much time to tweak the mech design and smooth it even further.

While Ves had spotted his own share of issues and questionable points about the scale model's performance, he was more interested in how the pilots of the two mechs were doing after this duel.

He bid farewell to the Crosser expert pilots and left the observation room to head over to the area where the C-Man and Vincent were both commiserating in their utter defeat.

As both Vincent and his battle partner derived their strength from their courage and bravery, the rather stagnant and depressing aura emanating from the expert mech frame was quite concerning.

Ves moved forward until he stood at a respectful distance in front of one of his latest works.

"Are you doing okay, Vincent?"

"Ugh.. I'll be fine." The expert pilot spoke through the speakers of his mech. "Just give me a few days. I really hoped that I would have been able to reduce the gap between myself and Patriarch Reginald."

"There is no problem with setting the Cross Patriarch as a goal, but don't get ahead of yourself, Vincent. Reginald is an expert pilot that is sitting right against the threshold of ace pilot. Did you truly think you could have beaten him in the earlier duel?"

"He wasn't piloting a real expert mech this time! He was merely piloting a toy of a mech!"

"A scale model is not a toy!" Ves firmly corrected Vincent. "The scale model that we adapted from the original design is a dangerous war machine that can partially allow Patriarch Reginald to unleash his destructive potential in a smaller package. While it is true that the scale model is not as powerful as the real deal, in my opinion the strength of the expert pilot is just as important as the mech. A strong pilot can partially compensate for the weakness of the mech by relying on pure skill. Besides, the scale model may be weak relative to the real version, but it is absolutely not inferior to other expert mechs like yours. It is just that good."

Ves actually saw a bit of promise in these remote-controlled miniature mechs. If not for the fact that it was possible to cut the connection between pilot and mech, they would have been a lot more ubiquitous.

Of course, the fact that a similar expert pilot with a full-sized mech could easily crush the miniature machine also played a major role in depressing the popularity of these smaller machines.

"Urgh. I am not going to let this beatdown pass." Vincent eventually said as he picked himself up from his cloud of defeat. "I will train harder and work together with my C-Man to come up with newer and better tactics. Patriarch Reginald won't be able to push me over so easily next time!"

"That sounds like a better goal. Keep improving. Keep growing. It is not impossible for you to catch up to Reginald." Ves told Vincent in an encouraging tone.

After he finished sounding out Vincent, Ves said goodbye and moved over to the chamber where the controller cockpit had been installed.

Even though the test had already ended for a time, Patriarch Reginald was still immersed in the magical experience of piloting a miniaturized version of his future expert mech.

The might and power of the scale model impressed him so much that he developed an even greater desire to pilot the finished product!

"Ves."

"Reginald."

"How soon...?"

"It's hard to say." Ves tersely replied. "We will need to squash a lot of bugs and perform a lot of tweaks to get the Mars Project just right. I would say that it is around 95 percent

complete. If we fabricate it right away, you can immediately enjoy its power. It is just that we can still do better. Finishing that remaining 5 percent will make a substantial difference in the quality and battle performance of your expert mech. If I have to give an estimate, then I would say it will probably take another month to truly finalize your promised machine."

Patriarch Reginald relaxed. "That is good. I can wait for another month. If what I piloted just before is a preview of the 95 percent that you talked about, then the 100 percent will surely be greater. There is just one issue..."

"Yes?"

"Maybe it is the remote control interface that is creating interference, but I couldn't help but notice that the scale model... doesn't possess as much of the living traits that make your mechs so loved."

"That is true. That is a deliberate choice on my part."

"Why?"

"I have my reasons." Ves said without elaborating any further. "Let me just say that I have a special package planned for the living aspect of the Mars Project. It will go a step beyond the other implementations of living mechs that I have developed throughout the years. I am still working on it but it will absolutely surprise you once I unveil it with the completion of the design project."

Patriarch Reginald stared deeply at Ves. The former was familiar enough with the latter to know that the leader of the Larkinson Clan was definitely thinking about realizing another radical innovation!

Unlike other people, Reginald trusted Ves' work. The older man wouldn't have made so many concessions to get Ves and his crew of fellow Journeyman to work on the Mars Project if this wasn't true.

"I hope your work will not detract from the Mars Project."

"On the contrary, Reginald. My work will complement your new expert mech. I can promise you that. It will elevate it to a new height and might even redefine the meaning of living mechs. You will have a true battle partner who you can trust to support you on and off the battlefield."

That was all Ves was willing to say to the Cross Patriarch. He was afraid that Reginald would reject the idea once more became known.

Perhaps it might not be the most ethical choice to withhold critical information about a product from his client, but Ves didn't care. The Mars Project was the most powerful

expert mech he had worked on up to this point and served as a unique platform where he could test and implement his most ambitious tech and design solutions.

Ves spoke a bit more with Reginald about the piloting experience of the scale model. The expert pilot had plenty of things to say, and some of his inferences were quite sharp and insightful.

"Will you be able to turn it into a masterwork when it comes time to fabricate my expert mech?" Patriarch Reginald asked as he paid close attention to Ves.

"I cannot say. You should approach Professor Benedict or my wife with this question. They are much more concerned about this matter. That is not to say that I am not thinking about this at all, but there is only so much I can do to help turn this expert mech into a special machine. You should talk to Gloriana. She has developed a potential new solution that might eventually provide you with what you need. The C-Man you have fought earlier already bears her crucial innovation. Did you notice anything special when you fought against it earlier?"

"Not particularly." Reginald shook his head. "The C-Man is rather decent, but the pilot is too weak. Vincent is a good kid, but he is at least half a century too young if he thinks he can outwit me and outfight me in a contest between mechs."

"That is what I told him as well, but whether it will sink into him is another matter."

"That is the problem with him. Vincent needs to believe he is strong in order to put out his best effort."

"Don't I know it..." Ves sighed. "Why else do you think I allowed him to keep the C-Man's idiotic codpiece?"

Chapter 4114 Visual Flair

"It's done." Professor Benedict Cortez announced in front of all of the mech designers who contributed to the most important design project of the Cross Clan.

Everyone who had gathered in the main design hall of the Primary Cross Lab felt a mixture of emotions.

They felt relieved now that they no longer had to wrestle with the advanced science and the extremely complicated design challenges of this high-end expert mech design project.

They felt proud for being able to do their part in delivering an expert mech design that was more powerful, more advanced and more transformative than any other design the Cross Clan had ever handled.

They felt nervous because their work was not truly complete. Sure, the design of the highly ambitious Mars Project was complete in form and function, but it only existed in a virtual form.

So long as the Mars Project only consisted of a large amount of documents and design schematics, it wasn't truly real as far as anyone was concerned.

The only remaining challenge to this project was to fabricate the mech and realize the vision that Professor Benedict and every other participating mech designer and component developer had worked on for eighteen months straight!

The five mech designers who stood at the front of the crowd experienced more accomplishment than anyone else. They were the leading designers and contributors to the mech design. It was through their efforts that the Mars Project was able to contain all of the new technologies and integrate them in a cohesive and synergistic fashion.

They also felt more pressure than most due to the heavy expectations that everyone set for the upcoming fabrication of the Mars Project.

None of the five mech designers forgot that Patriarch Reginald insisted on obtaining a masterwork version of his fantastic new expert mech design.

While the mech designers all believed that the Mars Project was powerful, innovative and sound enough to be worthy of becoming a masterwork, the difficulty of fabricating all of the high-end systems was not small.

Professor Benedict and Gloriana already had a taste of the challenges ahead of them when they fabricated the partial and complete scale models of the Mars Project.

This precious experience had given them a clearer picture of what they needed to pay attention to and what they needed to improve in order to get ready for the crucial fabrication run.

Both of them looked at each other for a moment before they wordlessly formed a common understanding.

"We shall begin with fabricating the new expert mech in two weeks." Professor Benedict declared. "While we can technically start right away as we have already prepared all of the necessary raw materials and production equipment in advance, there are plenty of actions that we can undertake to gain more assurances."

Ves inwardly nodded in agreement. Two weeks was a good buffer period. Benedict and the Larkinson mech designers could devote much of their time on familiarizing themselves with the production equipment and studying additional articles on how to handle difficult materials such as phasewater.

Most importantly, the mech designers would also be able to calm their restless spirits and make proper psychological preparations for the responsibility invested into them. Ves and all of the other mech designers were keenly aware that this was not 'just' another completed project.

This was an opportunity for them to change the course of history of their clan and alliance in their favor!

Since the future of the Cross Clan and the Golden Skull Alliance was at stake, it was logical to be extra thorough and make additional preparations.

However, this could easily become detrimental when everyone made so many excessive preparations that their mentalities changed too much. It would be hard to maintain their original enthusiasm and mood if the time between the completion of the mech design and the attempt to fabricate the mech grew too long.

Two weeks was relatively short, but the mech designers could still make good use of this available time. Ves anticipated that everyone would still retain the right condition to embark on the fabrication project in a good mood.

"Professor." Ves turned to the lead designer of the project. "Since the fabrication run is so important to your clan, do you want to turn it into a spectacle? It might be nice for your men if they can witness the making of the most important expert mech with their own eyes."

The older man frowned a bit before shaking his head. "It is not necessary. There are too many security risks involved with fabricating the mech in front of an audience. The Mars Project will be the trump card of the Cross Clan for many years if not decades. While it is foreseeable that we will parade the Mars Project in public in future events, showing off the finished product is different from letting people see how the internals are put together. There are too many sensitive secrets that can give opposing champions a major advantage if they prepare targeted strategies towards our expert mech."

"I see. That is indeed the most prudent choice."

The Mars Project was not like the C-Man. The latter mech was just one of the many expert mechs that the Larkinson Army had in its collection. While the C-Man was definitely on the more expensive side, the Larkinsons did not put all of its eggs into a single basket.

The Cross Clan's attitude towards the Mars Project was different in this regard. The clan valued martial strength above all else and no mech pilot was stronger than its patriarch.

Therefore, equipping him with the most powerful expert mech of the Golden Skull Alliance was seen as a comprehensive upgrade of the entire clan. It was of utmost

importance to ensure that Patriarch Reginald and his new expert mech remained as unbeatable as possible!

As Ves turned back to the projection of the completed mech design, he could fully see that the mech was not only designed to achieve absolute superiority on the battlefield, but also appear natural while accomplishing this result.

Professor Benedict and Ves had both worked extensively on designing the exterior of the mech.

It had been quite difficult at first for the two of them to agree on a single cohesive visual design of the Mars Project.

Ves possessed an artistic flair that he had exercised many times on all of his mech designs. He wanted his mechs to stand out and look unique amidst a crowd of other machines.

Benedict on the other hand did not place that much additional value on the look of his mech designs. His design philosophy always centered around function over form. The piloting experience of the mech and the impact it made on other people was secondary to attaining the highest possible performance parameters.

In theory, that meant that the Senior shouldn't care too much how Ves wanted to turn the Mars Project into a mech that exemplified might and power from its appearance alone.

In practice, Benedict became just as bad as Gloriana at times whenever Ves wanted to make a bolder and more extravagant addition to the visual look of the Mars Project.

"No! I will not allow you to engrave this surface! According to the preliminary calculations that I have performed, the aerodynamics of the Mars Project will deteriorate to a point where the mech will lose 0.03 percent of its flight speed under standard atmospheric conditions."

"You are crazy if you think I will allow you to shape your shoulders into eagle heads! The additional mass and structure that you intend to add to the design will change the total mass and its distribution to such an extent that our design will slightly deviate from the most optimal center of mass."

"NO CAPES!"

Remarks like these frequently hindered Ves from implementing his full vision onto the Mars Project.

What was worse was that Professor Benedict made plenty of objections but did not offer any constructive suggestions of his own. If he had his way, then the Mars Project would look plainer and duller than what it deserved!

Fortunately, this was not the first time that Ves worked with a collaborator who possessed a radically different attitude towards the visual design of a mech. He already accrued a decent amount of experience with that when he worked with Professor Taigen Voiken on the Pacifier Project.

Just as with the rapidly growing law enforcement mech model, Ves and Professor Benedict eventually found a middle ground and formed a compromise on the look of the Mars Project.

Ves opted to apply a more streamlined and restrained version of his original vision and turned the Mars Project into a high-end mech that looked like a futuristic version of a metallic god.

Inspired by its codename, Ves tried to realize a visual concept that could loosely be described as a futuristic wargod.

It started with the head of the Mars Project. Ves applied a remarkably human-looking face on the sculpted front of the head design. The top of the head resembled a helmet and featured a prominent vertical crest.

Similar to one of his earliest designs, Ves applied a projector inside the crest that caused it to project an energetic red crest out of the C-shaped construction.

The best part about this projected crest was that Patriarch Reginald could alter it into any form or color as he liked.

That was also the reason why Ves was able to secure this addition despite how it altered the performance of the mech. The client liked it so much that Professor Benedict had no choice but to tolerate its existence!

The rest of the Mars Project also looked fairly ostentatious. Its iconic Abasis Armor caused the exterior of the mech to be covered in a large number of small circular shapes.

Ves rolled with this feature and generally shaped the mech in a way that made it seem as if it was wearing chainmail.

With great difficulty, he managed to add a short 'skirt' at the waist as well as more defined shoulder plating in order to give the Mars Project a more soldierly appearance.

It was a pity that he failed to convince Professor Benedict to add a real cape to the Mars Project, but with Patriarch Reginald's support he managed to add an acceptable alternative to the mech.

He borrowed a page from yet another one of his old designs and added a projector to the back that allowed the expert mech to project an insubstantial cape to the back.

There was no purpose to this cape other than to make the Mars Project look more heroic, but Patriarch Reginald absolutely loved how much gravitas it added to his future expert mech.

The projector was relatively small and it did not take much energy or other requirements to support its operation, so Professor Benedict reluctantly agreed with its placement.

The rest of the Mars Project also looked a bit better due to the additions that Ves and the others had made.

The most important part to the mech designers was the addition of their signature looks, albeit in smaller and more subtler forms than usual.

Since the Mars Project first and foremost belonged to the Cross Clan, it was not appropriate for the Larkinson mech designers to leave a large footprint behind on the exterior of the expert mech.

Ves' third eye and Gloriana's hexagon were smaller and placed in an inconspicuous place below the 'helmet' of the helmet.

Juliet's red six-sided wings had shrunk as well and were difficult to distinguish on the surface of the red-coat Pulsvar V-1 transphasic flight system.

Sara's brown coating was only applied to the feet of the Mars Project instead of the entire underlegs.

Only Professor Benedict was allowed to prominently apply his signature look on his pride and joy. He placed a black infinity symbol on the upper left side of the chest of the Mars Project.

Its addition did not detract too much from the prominent white cross that marked the front of the entire expert mech's torso!

The two weeks that followed after completing the Mars Project was a tense and uncertain period.

Ves and the other Larkinson mech designers were not completely free to devote all of their time on preparing for the most challenging fabrication attempt of their lives up to this point.

The Design Department already embarked on another design round. Many of the mech design projects were meant to refresh a lot of older Larkinson mech designs as Ves found it important to ensure his works kept up with the times.

Ves, Gloriana, Juliet and Sara put down much of the design work that the foursome were supposed to handle in the next three weeks.

They accepted the delays and disruptions in the design schedule because they all found it important to put themselves in the best possible condition for their upcoming fabrication run.

While it was true that the Mars Project mainly benefited the Cross Clan, the Larkinson Clan also had a stake in the outcome of this expensive endeavor!

Aside from strengthening the entire Golden Skull Alliance to a large degree, Ves and Gloriana also cared about the consequences to their professional reputation.

"The completed Mars Project has a large chance of becoming the mech of the year in Davute." Gloriana told her husband one day as they both took the chance to absorb additional knowledge at the Genesis Lab. "Unless there are ace mechs under development that we don't know about, the Mars Project is most definitely the most powerful mech that will emerge from Davute this year."

Ves looked up from his terminal and turned to his wife. "Why are you mentioning this? Do you want to win some sort of prize or something?"

"Why not? We certainly deserve it considering all of the challenges we have overcome and all of the innovative design solutions we came up with to realize such a powerful mech design. Though I admit that Professor Benedict deserves most of the credit of delivering an excellent expert mech design, our contributions matter as well. Without us, the Cross Clan would have never been able to turn the Mars Project into a living mech and a god body, among other additions. We deserve recognition for our work."

Ves adopted a skeptical expression. "I don't disagree with you, but... the Cross Clan isn't eager to show off its Mars Project too much. If you want our contribution to be recognized, then the Crossers must be willing to show off the completed Mars Project in public exhibitions. They must also demonstrate its excellence by holding a live demonstration session. That will doubtlessly expose crucial details about its performance that might give their future enemies an advantage."

Gloriana looked rather sour. "I don't think Patriarch Reginald will mind that all that much. Only the weak are most keen on hiding their own secrets. Didn't we take the initiative to put the C-Man on public relations tours because we aren't as afraid of exposing our strength as before? I can imagine that Patriarch Reginald will also be eager to increase his reputation and the reputation of his clan."

"Maybe you're right, but I'm not too sure about that. In my talks with the Crossers, I never got the impression that Patriarch Reginald is willing to compromise the security of his clan in order to gain more recognition. The Red Ocean is filled with sharks that are much more powerful than us. It is still prudent to maintain a lower profile and continue to go about our day without attracting excessive attention from the wrong crowd."

His wife did not look convinced. "That may be true to the Cross Clan in its current state, but that may change in the coming weeks. If our greatest hopes come true, the Crossers may once again be led by an ace pilot once again. Do you know how many Saints are based in Davute?"

"Uh..."

"Seven." Gloriana revealed the answer. "Several different major power blocs reigning over Davute have managed to bring over seven ace pilots as far as we know. There may be two or three more that the pioneers have kept up their sleeves, but there shouldn't be too many of them since it is difficult to hide the measures needed to keep an ace mech and ace pilot up to strength."

That sounded about right. Ace pilots were extremely rare to begin with. Most of them rose up from the military branches of the various states of the Milky Way. They were extremely noble and principled which meant that it was impossible to bribe them or persuade them to abandon their original missions.

There were only a limited number of circumstances where pioneers were able to convince the powerful servants of their respective states to emigrate to the new frontier.

The groups that were able to do so were either affiliated with governments or had committed to serving the people that the ace pilots swore to protect.

In any case, all of these conditions meant that the number of ace pilots in the Red Ocean was quite low.

While it was rather remarkable that seven were openly present in a single star system, that was because Davute was the hub of the entire surrounding star region.

This put the possible breakthrough of Patriarch Reginald Cross in a much more special light.

The Cross Clan and the Golden Skull Alliance would carry much more weight in Davute and the local region.

The biggest benefit of Reginald's successful breakthrough was that the Golden Skull Alliance would no longer be treated as upstarts!

Although the explosive rise of the Living Mech Corporation's business operations had already elevated the status of the Larkinson Clan to a degree, it had also attracted a lot of unwelcome attention from rival companies and those who felt threatened by the rise of the Larkinsons.

If one of the core allies of the Larkinson Clan happened to produce the eight publicly known ace pilot of Davute, then Ves would no longer have to worry about encroaching upon the core interests of rival parties.

This was because the Golden Skull Alliance finally possessed the capital to stand up to the major players!

Perhaps the Larkinsons and Crossers might not be able to match the numbers or the industries of the groups that founded the settlements in Davute, but the existence of an ace pilot presented a major deterrence against anyone who harbor ill intentions!

It did not even matter if the Mars Project was still an expert mech at that point. Its design was so extravagant that it could already be described as a half-step ace mech!

However, all of this sounded like wishful dreaming to Ves. It was anything but guaranteed that he and his fellow mech designers would be able to deliver a masterwork mech and that the resulting product would trigger Patriarch Reginald's breakthrough.

There were far too many events that had to go exactly right in order to produce this rare and precious outcome.

"Gloriana, let's not put the cart before the horse. We should focus on completing our work to the best of our abilities before we think about earning any accolades. Let's talk about this after we have put this fabrication behind us, okay?"

"We'll succeed." She stated with a burning desire behind her tone. "I'm sure of it. We spent so much time and invested so many resources in this design project. It has to succeed."

"I would like to see that happen as well." The latest_epi_sodes are on_the Libread.com. website.

They continued with their preparations and did everything they could to maximize their chances.

Ves chiefly occupied himself with studying the properties of various materials, many of which he had never come across or worked directly with before.

Although Professor Benedict took responsibility for handling the most troublesome materials and components, there were still plenty more difficult areas of the Mars Project that Ves had to take care of himself.

The ARCEUS System was particularly a focal point to him. No one in the design team possessed a deeper understanding of its design and implementation than him. He possessed the vision and the comprehension to make sure it was applied in the most exquisite manner to the completed mech.

"It's a pity that it's not a luminar crystal weapon system." Ves sighed for the umpteenth time.

Working on a high-end energy weapon system like this one had opened up his perspective of what was possible in this field. Humanity's development of more conventional laser beam weapons and positron beam weapons still remained vigorous as the demand for them remained high.

Ves even recognized that it was quite hard for luminar crystal weapons to compete against the most powerful and sophisticated implementations of energy weapons at the top end of the mech industry.

Although conventional energy weapons lacked the special qualities that made luminar crystal weapons so versatile and quirky, the absolute firepower that human products were able to produce was more important than any other specification!

"Maybe that will change in the future."

It wouldn't come from him most likely. Ves did not specialize in energy weapons and only treated this field as a minor at best.

Time went by as Ves and the other relevant mech designers slowly completed their additional preparations and completed their psychological preparations.

Each of them were ready. That became clear as soon as they gathered in the workshop of the Primary Cross Lab.

Before they were able to enter the facility that was located deep inside the Cross Production Complex, they had to go through numerous extensive security checks.

"Wow." Ves remarked as he was being scanned for any bombs or other dangerous materials. "It looks as if your clan is preparing to repel an invasion."

"We are." The Cross security officer replied. "We do not know whether anyone wants to stop us from regaining our former status, but it is better to make sure we are ready for anything. We are on a full war footing for the entire duration of your fabrication run. Our clan will not allow anyone to disturb your work."

The Crossers had completely closed down the complex and mobilized as many mechs and soldiers as they were allowed in Davute!

The neighbors occupying the adjacent plots in Industrial District 2 must be feeling a lot more nervous at the moment. Any fight that might ensue in the vicinity could easily spill over to other factories and facilities!

The risk to public safety was so great that the local Planetary Guard had taken note as well. A squad of law enforcement mechs had decided to patrol the surrounding blocks to deter any would-be troublemakers.

When Ves and his fellow Larkinsons finally entered the secure workshop hall, they were greeted by the most important members of the Cross Clan.

Professor Benedict was in the process of inspecting the expensive batch of phasewater that the Crossers had taken out of the vault.

Patriarch Reginald and the other three Crosser expert pilots had gathered to discuss security arrangements.

While Gloriana and Juliet went off to perform their usual ritual, Ves walked up to the Senior Mech Designer who he had worked closely with for more than a year.

"Hey. Are you in a good position to fabricate our long-awaited expert mech?"

"I am more ready, Ves. This is the most significant work of my life as a Senior." The older man replied in a solemn and serious tone. "It may be the last mech that I will make at my rank. The Mars will be the mech that represents the culmination of my tumultuous career as a mech designer and the progress that I have made with my design philosophy. It is the most powerful expert mech that I have worked on, but also one that possesses an unparalleled degree of efficiency relative to its power level. The Mars will either go down in history as the magnum opus that will spark a new wave of innovation or a giant missed opportunity that might haunt me for the rest of my life."

The expert mech already bore its final name. Every mech designer already treated it as a wargod in form and function, so they could think of nothing better than to adopt the codename as the label in which their work would be known to the public!

Chapter 4116 Much At Stake

In truth, everyone involved in the fabrication run had already completed the necessary preparations a day ago. They checked all of the production equipment and verified that the materials were all up to standard.

Once the mech designers made sure that nothing had changed, they finally chose to turn the Mars from a dream that had been in the making for eighteen months into a reality that could spark the rise of the Cross Clan!

As Patriarch Reginald stood before the five individuals that had combined their expertise to develop one of the most unique and special expert mechs in Davute, he looked both proud and expectant.

His willpower already imposed itself on the mech designers who would decide his future. Reginald was intensely focused on what was about to take place. It would be surprising if he was not excited at this time.

The man visibly increased the pressure on Professor Benedict. As the lead designer of the Mars Project, the man with a less-than-clean past saw this expert mech as the key to put a firm end to his past as a lost and struggling Senior Mech Designer.

As long as his Magma Vein System and his other design implementations turned the end product into an expert mech beyond comparison in Davute, he would gain the validation and the recognition he needed to realize his design philosophy and take the step that had eluded him for several decades!

"We are ready, Reginald." The older mech designer spoke.

"I know you are." The Cross Patriarch smiled in a failed attempt to lighten up the mood. "You have told me often enough how much you have invested in my expert mech. I hope my trust in you is not misplaced."

"You will find that entrusting me with the responsibility to lead the development of your most important mech is the best decision that you have made in your life."

Those were big words. The mech designer had pushed himself into a corner by making this boast. He could not afford to do anything else but deliver the work that Reginald truly wanted to obtain.

It was good that the former Skull Architect was no stranger to taking bold risks and working under pressure.

The Cross Patriarch turned his attention to the guest designers. Ves and Gloriana both looked eager and ready to turn their respective visions into reality. Juliet and Sara were a little more nervous due to their relatively lower experience.

"Are the four of you ready as well?"

"That goes without saying." Ves replied in a light-hearted tone. Whether he truly felt as relaxed as he sounded was a mystery. "We worked one-and-a-half years on this blasted design. It's time we prove that we did not spend all of that time in vain. The Mars is an

expert mech of unsurpassed power and tech. It fully deserves to stand on the same level as the Minerva in terms of quality of construction.

The Minerva was still the latest standard when it came to masterwork mechs in the Golden Skull Alliance. It was the most recent masterwork mech that Ves and company had produced, and it was one that attained its coveted state without the use of gems or other forms of external aid.

It would be a grand miscarriage of justice if the Minerva was able to become a masterwork mech while its big brother failed to reach this threshold!

"Mars." Patriarch Reginald uttered the name as he would the name of a lover. "It is a simple and fitting name for my mech. When I looked it up on the galactic net, I found myself identifying what this ancient god has stood for. It is strange how the circumstances of ancient people who lived many millennia ago still echo the circumstances we live in today. We must unleash unsurpassed rage and fury on the battlefield in order to create lasting peace."

That was indeed a large reason why the Mars bore this name. Ves and the others hoped that its awesome power and might would form the deterrent needed to prevent the Golden Skull Alliance from being targeted by malicious parties.

"Don't worry, Reginald." Gloriana spoke up. "With our innovations, we will definitely ensure that the Mars will become more than just an expert mech. It will literally be a god in the form of mech. When you finally get to pilot your new machine, the Mars will not only be a large metallic body that you can control in order to fight your opponents. It will be the divine seat that will play an essential role in your elevation to godhood."

The powerful expert pilot liked what he heard. "Hahahaha! That is exactly what I wish to attain! I truly hope that you can deliver the Mars that you have described into my hands at the end of this week. You and your Larkinsons will become our eternal friends if you can succeed!"

The group exchanged a few more words until Professor Benedict deemed that it was time for them to start.

Maow.

Gloriana had already summoned Alexandria from her mind. Her companion spirit looked more than confident that she could play a pivotal role in the following days.

"Begin!"

As soon as Professor Benedict issued this command, everyone moved to their respective stations.

While Benedict assumed control of the Cross Clan's high-quality superfab that was comparable in functionality to the Larkinson Clan's AP-VEX model, the other mech designers took control of various other machines.

The fabrication of the Abasis Armor, the Pulsvar V-1, the ARCEUS System and more were highly complex jobs that were better left to specialized production equipment.

This way, each of them were immediately able to begin work without needing to wait in line.

They had all familiarized themselves with the production machines. They even conducted a few virtual practice sessions in order to make sure they knew how to perform all of the difficult production steps.

Maow maow!

In the meantime, Alexandria performed her job and formed a design network between each of the five mech designers.

None of them were new to this phenomenon anymore. Even Professor Benedict had selectively opened up his mind during the times where he helped the Larkinsons fabricate a couple of expert mechs.

The only newcomer to the design network was Patriarch Reginald himself. As Alexandria initially tried to establish a connection, her spiritual bond failed to reach the expert pilot!

Maow?!

Reginald's force of will was too strong and thick compared to other expert pilots.

As a demigod whose resonance strength had surpassed 60 laves according to the latest measurement, the Cross Patriarch was much further removed from regular humans than most of his kind!

"You need to lower your guard and accept the connection." Ves paused his work and told the powerful expert pilot. "It will be uncomfortable at first, but as long as you are willing to share your thoughts and feelings to us, we will gain the information we need to attune your expert mech to you. This is but a small price to pay for a better result."

Though it was against his nature to bare so much of himself to other people, Reginald did not believe he had much to hide in the first place. It was clearly in his interest to cooperate if he wanted to obtain the mech of his dreams, so he reluctantly tried to lower his formidable guard.

As the air around him grew stiller and less volatile, Alexandria tried again and succeeded in forming a successful connection.

As soon as Patriarch Reginald joined the design network, his overpowering will and desires affected everyone else!

Maow!

Alexandria clearly struggled to hold back the tide and regulate the transmissions so that Ves and the other mech designers did not get distracted.

Fortunately, none of the participating mech designers were weak in mind. Having tempered themselves over the course of solving the most difficult challenges of the Mars Project, they adequately tolerated the additional pressure that Reginald's overpowering influence added to the mix.

Everyone became entranced by the new perspectives and influences that Reginald's entry into the design network had sparked.

For example, Reginald became more closely connected to Benedict than ever before. While both of them did not bare everything that took place in their minds to others, what they exposed on their own initiative was enough to give others a deeper understanding.

Reginald was impressed by how much fight there was in Professor Benedict. The Senior Mech Designer was far from an ordinary nerd due to his turbulent life experiences. He had traits that were commonly found in warriors and he treated this fabrication run as a battle that he had to win at all costs.

The Cross Patriarch also gained a whole new appreciation of Gloriana's ambitious vision and intentions for his expert mech. Her god body concept was so intricate and beyond the norm that it looked truly possible for her efforts to produce a mech that could be described as divine!

Of course, Reginald did not understand any of the actual science and engineering involved in her work, and he did not make any attempt to learn anything related to such. He was more interested in the result than the process.

What Reginald gained from Ves was a much more thorough understanding and appreciation of living mechs and design spirits.

He found it surprising how different Ves approached mechs. The patriarch of the Larkinson Clan truly felt as if he was creating a new life as opposed to putting together a simple machine.

Juliet Stameross and Sara Voiken also offered different perspectives on mech design and how they viewed the Mars. The expert mech design played a huge role for their

development as well due to how powerful and extravagant it turned out. They were both proud to leave their stamp on this pivotal machine.

Another factor that impressed Reginald was how youthful and vigorous the Larkinson mech designers were compared to Professor Benedict.

The latter possessed the mindset and the attitude of an experienced professor who had gone through many storms. This caused Benedict to come across as weary and tired in some sense.

This made the presence of the four rather youthful Larkinson mech designers a lot more valuable. They were much more optimistic about their work and they were also a lot more fearless and daring in what they could accomplish.

The combination between new and old produced a wonderful synergy where both sides gained what they needed from each other.

With the addition of Patriarch Reginald who provided everyone with a powerful motivating influence, every mech designer became significantly more engaged in their work.

Yet as work proceeded at a pace in the following hour, everyone involved felt as if there was something missing.

Ves slowly frowned as he realized that one of the conditions that he hoped would appear during this session had yet to emerge.

"Serendipity has not graced us, it seems."

Professor Benedict, who endured most of the pressure, did not enter into an inspired state.

Regardless of his preparations and regardless of how extensively he committed himself to the Mars Project, his mentality remained as calm and controlled as ever.

Maybe too calm and controlled.

While he was definitely passionate about his work, he found it difficult to channel it without losing control entirely.

"Benedict." Ves spoke up from his station. "Do you want to...?"

The Senior nodded almost immediately. "Do it, Ves."

That was fast. Ves had already discussed this option to Reginald beforehand, and the design network already exposed the consequences of this action, so there was nothing to discuss about.

Ves shrugged and paused his current work so that he could leave his station and move over to the superfab.

He pulled out a glowing hammer from his toolbelt and raised it over Professor Benedict's head.

For his part, Reginald made sure to temporarily deactivate his shield generator and his other defenses to prevent any accidents.

"Are you ready?" Ves carefully asked.

"Hit me. I have grown curious about what I will experience under this state for a long time."

"Here goes nothing, then!"

Whack!

As soon as the hammerhead tapped the Senior's head, an air of frenzied enlightenment immediately exuded from his body!

Chapter 4117 Anton Mendoza

"Mr. Anton Mendoza." An official female bureaucrat said as she sat behind a wooden desk. "I see you have graduated from your high school with high grades, with a particular distinction in math and physics-related subjects. That is commendable, but that is only the minimum requirement to become eligible to study at our great institution. In order to determine your suitability to study at our fine halls, I would like to ask a few questions to you. Is that agreeable to you, young man?"

A high school graduate wearing a cheap but serviceable business suit nodded. "I am at your service, madame."

"Good. Let us begin by allowing you to explain why we should enroll you into our mech design program."

The pressure on the student was already considerable. Anton could answer the open-ended question in many different ways, but which one would allow him to raise his impression the most?

This was the most important interview of his life. For years, he had sacrificed his time to study everything he could about the sciences. He did this just to be able to reach this desk of this specific university.

Now was the time for him to prove that he did not spend all of his time in vain.

"I can be a useful addition to your school because I am a good learner." Anton replied. "I may not have broken any records at my previous school, but that is solely because the students who scored higher than me on the exams had the benefit of cognitive augmentations. I applied myself in ways that allowed me to catch up to my richer classmates with nothing but my own baseline human ingenuity. If I gain the opportunity to receive similar augmentations, I am confident I can reach the top of my classes once I start my studies at the Martin Hildebrand College of Mech Design."

"I am pleased you are confident in your own abilities, but that does not particularly make you stand out among your peers." The woman stated in a factual tone. "You are the fourteenth applicant that has reached my desk today and I have hundreds more to interview by the end of the week. Many bright men and women who have grown up under similar circumstances such as yourself have presented the same message. What makes you different?"

There were many mech universities in the Friday Coalition. Plenty of good ones could be found in the Vermeer Group.

While Anton Mendoza dreamed of attending the most famous and the most prestigious mech universities of his state, not every student could succeed in getting through.

The high tuition costs and the long and sometimes bizarre enrollment criteria stopped a lot of hopeful students from getting through their pearly gates.

As a high school graduate who already experienced the disparity between himself and those with richer backgrounds, Anton possessed a lot of self-knowledge about his chances.

The Friday Coalition may be a large and powerful second-rate state in the Komodo Star Sector, but the gulf between rich and poor was still as wide in any other region in the galaxy.

Rather than wasting his time by applying to the institutions where he wouldn't be able to succeed, he chose to knock on the doors of one that offered the greatest opportunities for someone like himself.

The Marten Hildebrand College of Mech Design had close connections with the Vermeer Group's military establishment.

Founded and indirectly run by the Blue Cavalry, the institution received a lot of government support and quickly rose up in the upper-middle ranks of mech design universities in the Vermeer Group.

Though its graduates weren't known for achieving high rates of commercial success in the mech market, many of the alumni went on to become solid performers in the many companies and organizations that went on to supply the Blue Cavalry with military mech designs.

It was due to Marten Hildebrand's military background that it was able to offer generous scholarships, loans and subsidies to its less affluent student base.

This presented a problem to Anton because the competition was high. Marten Hildebrand was not particularly large and rejected a huge list of applicants every year.

The young man took a deep breath.

"I want to pursue a dream that can benefit the soldiers of the Blue Cavalry. From the moment I decided to become a mech designer, I studied the problems that mechs persistently struggled with. I found that efficiency was one of the most enduring topics that came up. This was a problem that resonated with me. As someone who wasn't able to afford the best clothes or obtain access to the best learning resources, I had to be more mindful of how I spent my time and money."

The school official nodded. "The remarks your teachers have left behind in your record have commended your diligence."

"In order to achieve the grades that I earned up until now, I planned my time and budgeted my spending down to the last coalition credit. The habits and instincts that I have developed have guided my approach to tech. Maybe it is too early for me to make this claim, but I believe that I am in an excellent position to apply my life lessons to my design approach and ultimately help the Blue Cavalry's mechs be more efficient."

The woman looked a little more intrigued at this point.

"It is not common to hear that you have already decided the direction of your work should you succeed in becoming a mech designer. I should caution you that you have not come in touch with true mech design as of yet. You do not possess the greater knowledge and perspective of what is possible and where you can apply yourself. Many high school graduates have set their sights on one goal only to change it to another in the middle of their studies. That has led to numerous missed opportunities as they have missed out on electives that could have furthered their progress in their new specialties."

"I will never do that." Anton shook his head. "For my entire life, I have endured deprivation and lack of opportunities. My options were few to begin with, so I learned to

appreciate the ones that were available to me even if they did not sound exciting at first. I have come to enjoy these simple subjects. Even if I had more opportunities later on, I stuck to my choices because I am already happy and am not willing to waste the time I put in so far. I know what I want to pursue and I know my position in life. Pursuing greater efficiency in all things is the sole area that I am good at accomplishing, so I see no reason to deviate from this trajectory."

While the school official did not show any obvious reaction to his answer this time, Anton guessed that he may have hit the mark.

He had wracked his brains to figure out how to get accepted in Marten Hildebrand. After conducting a lot of research, he developed a guess on what sort of applicants the mech design school most liked to accept.

He speculated that Marten Hildebrand probably kept an eye out on diligent, solid mech design students who were stable and free from controversy. The school did not especially prioritize geniuses and prodigies as they were usually arrogant, flamboyant or volatile.

While those personality traits were often correlated with radical and successful innovations, these divas weren't a suitable fit for an institution that was educating mech designers for the Blue Cavalry.

Therefore, Anton tried his best to present himself as a modest kid with relatively modest ambitions. By showing a determination to follow a course that he had planned and reasoned beforehand, he wished to demonstrate that he possessed many of the traits that the Blue Cavalry liked to see in the mech designer under its retainer.

The interview proceeded as the woman asked a dozen more questions. Many of them were open-ended and vague, thereby forcing Anton to use his judgment to supply the answer that would raise his score.

There were a few instances where he felt he was close to digging himself in a pit, but he endured the situations as best as possible and continued on as if nothing was wrong.

As the school official gained a more comprehensive understanding of Anton Mendoza that couldn't be obtained by reading through documents, the woman asked one final question.

"What will you do if Marten Hildebrand has decided not to enroll you for the upcoming academic year?" She asked as her eyes gazed closely in his direction.

Though Anton did not expect to hear this question, he thought quickly.

He could think of two possible ways he could answer this question.

He could show his commitment by telling her that he would wait another year before applying again, convinced he was the right mech design student for the right mech design school.

He could also show his pragmatism by explaining to her that he would simply apply to another mech university with lower standards.

Which one should he choose? As a few seconds passed by, the school official began to show more and more impatience, so he went for the truth.

"I would thank Marten Hildebrand for reviewing my application and proceed to apply at another institution." He replied in a firm and unquestionable tone. "While I would be disappointed if you did not decide to accept me despite my beliefs that I would be right for your school, I am accustomed to disappointment. Mech designers must recognize that they cannot always get what they want in their mech designs, so I too recognize that I cannot always have what I want when I do not control my own circumstances."

"Hmm. That is a realistic outlook on life." The woman eventually replied. "While I found your mature and honest answer commendable, mech designers are more special than other engineers because they do not accept the limits that reality imposes upon their work. If you take everything too seriously and accept every part of reality as a given, then how will you be able to push yourself to break the limits that are preventing existing mechs from becoming even greater and more powerful than before?"

Did Anton give the wrong answer this time? Uncertainty racked his mind as he guessed whether he had disqualified himself in front of the woman who would decide his entry into his chosen school.

The admission interview ended shortly after that. The woman dismissed him with a curt message and told him to wait for a message in two weeks.

The days he spent after that were some of the most agonizing ones of his life.

He sleeplessly rolled around in bed.

He prepared applications for other mech design universities.

He spoke to former classmates and virtual friends to evaluate his answers.

He studied the mechs of the Blue Cavalry that might or might not be within his reach in the future.

Exactly two weeks after the admission interview, young Anton received an official letter in his virtual inbox.

He immediately activated his comm and opened it up to read the most crucial sentence of the letter!

[...The Marten Hildebrand College of Mech Design has accepted your application to enter into our first-year Mech Design Bachelor Program...]

"YES!"

Anton normally kept himself under careful control, but this time his emotions grew so strong that he could not hold his surging emotions back!

"I'm in! I'm in! I'm in!"

Getting into Marten Hildebrand meant that he managed to get ahead of tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of rival students who sought to do the same!

He knew that as long as he worked as diligently and earnestly as before, he would definitely be able to make it through and graduate with decently good grades.

That was enough for him to receive an invitation from the Blue Cavalry to work at one of its many design institutions.

From there, he would not only be able to earn a good salary, he would also be able to rise higher by taking advantage of the generous learning and promotion opportunities offered by the military!

To poor adolescents like Anton Mendoza who had no hopes of becoming an independent mech designer, working for the state was the best way to become successful in their lives!

Chapter 4118 Slow and Steady

Young Anton Mendoza's life and professional career truly took off when he was accepted into the Marten Hildebrand College of Mech Design.

Joined by tens of thousands of other fortunate enrollees, he began to take to his new studies with gusto and enthusiasm.

Since Marten Hildebrand was affiliated with the Blue Cavalry, Anton's courses were geared towards the needs of the military.

This meant that the school culture and the classes emphasized the virtues of obedience, following orders, completing the mission and doing what you were told without any fuss.

Even among the fellow students whose backgrounds were similar to his own, Anton already stood out by how effortlessly he adapted to the regimented life of a student at Marten Hildebrand.

No matter how much his study load increased and no matter how he found himself with too little time to keep up with all of his classes, he tried his best to perform up to expectations.

"I can't let my grades fall before the threshold." He vowed to himself.

The threshold he referred to was the point where he proved himself to be a good enough student to receive one of the most coveted rewards from his school, namely a free chance to obtain a cranial implant or gene mod template!

He didn't know how he managed to do it, but Anton barely managed to score high enough to fall within this category.

"I did it! I can finally upgrade my baseline human cognition!"

The first surgery succeeded and he recovered quickly enough to tackle his studies at a considerably faster rate than before.

Even as his subjects rapidly grew more complex, Anton was able to work hard enough and make use of his constant improvements to score one reward after another.

From additional augmentations to entering into a more elite track, he slowly proved his worth by continuing to stick to his original study direction and trying to embody the concept of efficiency in everything.

In the meantime, many other students either stalled or dropped out. Marten Hildebrand was not soft in this regard as it no longer welcomed those that could not keep up with its demanding study program.

If the students weren't even capable of living up to expectations in the campus, then the chances were high that they would just drag down their colleagues and the soldiers who depended on their work once they worked for the Blue Cavalry!

Anton understood this truth early on and had never stopped shaping himself into the perfect military mech designer, even opting to forgo relationships entirely.

"I'm sorry, Marissa." Anton politely said in front of a fellow classmate who had sent subtle signals for him during the last three months. "I do not have the time to attend the latest theater show that is taking place downtown."

"That's fine, Anton. We can—"

The man immediately raised his palm. "Let me make this clear right away. I am not interested in dating you. A woman will only detract from the time it takes to complete my homework assignments and read the supplemental textbooks and articles that enrich my understanding of my current courses."

Marissa looked wide-eyed at Anton. "You..."

"If dating you would allow me to earn higher grades and achieve a better understanding of mechs, then I would go out with you within a heartbeat." Anton factually replied.

"Unfortunately, you are in a lower track than me and possess no special understanding of mechs that I might appreciate. As such, spending anymore time with you than necessary is out of the question."

It was with great pride and satisfaction as he stood in the midst of a large crowd of blue-robed graduates and accepted the diploma that he had worked so hard for in the past few years.

"I did it." He whispered to himself. "I did it by being as efficient with my time as possible."

His accomplishment only committed him even further on this philosophy towards life.

There was no place for relationships and fun in his life. If he wanted to become a Master Mech Designer and reach the apex of what he could achieve in the Vermeer Group, then he had to be more single-minded and dedicated to his purpose than anyone else!

He continued to do well after graduation. By then, he had already set himself far apart from the poor high schooler and possessed so many career prospects that poverty was long a relic from his past!

Though opportunities to design mechs by himself were few, Anton Mendoza enjoyed the projects and work assignments that he was able to sink his teeth into. He especially valued the moments where he was able to receive feedback and lessons from older and more experienced mech designers.

His superiors in the design institution that he worked for had followed the same trajectory as Anton. A few even shared the same alma mater. This allowed him to feel more at home and gain more favor from his predecessors.

Years went by as Anton steadily managed to make a name for himself within his group. Though he did not shoot up like a rocket, his diligent attitude, his consistent results and his continuous improvement became recognized by the same circle.

He developed his own mech designs in his free time and while the opportunities to turn them into a reality were few, he still managed to make enough progress in his design philosophy to break through to Journeyman when he reached 48 years old.

While that was anything but a record, his fellow mech designers valued his steadiness and his thorough foundation.

Many things changed after he became a high-ranking mech designer. He received more tutoring and was able to express his design abilities in much more significant ways.

Of course, he always reminded himself that he was just a single cog in a very large machine. He did not grow arrogant for being one of the few mech designers who were able to make this critical leap and continued to work diligently to deepen his efficiency specialization.

Decades went by like this. As his competences steadily grew, so did his responsibilities. His age advanced to the point where he was able to earn a lot of respect due to that. Even though he saw many of his fellow colleagues breaking through to Senior while they were younger, Anton never showed any impatience, certain that his time would come eventually.

He broke through to Senior when he was 86 years old.

"Finally."

It was then that he truly started to approach the big leagues of the Vermeer Group's mech design community. His identity changed substantially and he was entrusted with a lot more serious design projects and work assignments.

Although Master Mech Designers always took charge of the most important projects, each military mech design spawned at least a dozen and sometimes over a hundred different variants.

It would be a waste of time for those Masters to devote so much time on designing so many marginally different variants.

This was where design teams led by Seniors came in. People like Professor Anton Mendoza possessed enough experience and expertise to develop adequate variants based on existing solutions. Their rank meant that they were just good enough to solve any of the new problems that might emerge as a result of changing numerous variables.

For a long time, Professor Anton developed one variant after another, using each and every project as an opportunity to explore and improve his efficiency-oriented solutions.

The energy transmission systems and the overall efficiency of the variants that he developed increasingly stood out over time.

It did not take long for his superiors to recognize his value and allow him to lead the design of a select few original mechs!

That was probably the most enjoyable period of his life. Though Professor Anton never made any radical accomplishments in his projects, he believed that it was only a matter of time before he achieved greater success.

That outlook towards life gradually changed after he came into contact with a young but budding Journeyman Mech Designer that joined his design team for a number of interconnected projects.

Different from the other Journeymen that looked up to Anton due to his age and merit, the woman was not afraid to criticize and question his words and decisions.

"I am sorry, Professor Mendoza, but your design solution is not the right way to go. I can easily spot two flaws that can be addressed in order to make the mech be able to move a few percentage points faster."

Anton gazed at the woman that was exercising her right to provide feedback. Though the culture in the design institution was not that strict towards asking questions and providing criticism, the bold tone the woman adopted somehow grated on him for some reason.

"Miss Olson, I am aware that you are new here, but I would like to remind you not to speak if you are not completely certain about your suggestions."

"I am not doubting myself. I am completely sure your design is not as optimal as it could be." Carmin Olson claimed.

"If you believe you can do better, then please step forward and show me how you would optimize this solution."

She schooled him that day. Anton and the rest of the design team he was in charge of looked with increasingly more astonishment as Carmin Olson presented her brilliant solution.

By wiping away his rather conservative and boring design implementation and replacing it with a more radical but ingenious solution, she presented her vision on how they should actually design this mech!

Professor Anton could not have conceived of such a way to improve the performance of the mech. The fact that he was unfamiliar with these methods and that he never imagined that a problem could be solved in this fashion was a substantial shock to his system.

"Where did you learn this method?" He tentatively asked.

"I did not learn it from anyone." Carmin Olson said with bright eyes. "I came up with it on my own a few years ago when I was working on a similar energy transmission problem."

"I thought your specialty lay in mechanics and mech engine design."

"That is true, but that doesn't stop me from applying the same creativity to other fields of mech design."

"I must caution you that your solution hasn't been tested yet. Your method is much more extreme than what I am accustomed to seeing. It may very well lead to a fatal error in the mech design."

"It won't fail." Carmin confidently stated. "Even if it does, that does not mean we should give up on my suggestion. Instead of settling for a decent solution like yours, we should continue to explore mine until we can make it work. That is the only way to deliver a stronger mech design to our soldiers."

When they tested Carmin's solution, it turned out that she was right to be confident. Her implementation was not only stable and beneficial, but they managed to squeeze even more performance out of it after subsequent rounds of optimization!

The rest of the time when Carmin worked under Anton proceeded like this. Whenever the confident Journeyman saw something wrong, she did not let anyone stop her from doing better!

The way she continued to pull out one innovative and self-invented solution after another increasingly made Anton question his own approach towards his career.

One day, he took her aside and asked a question that was gnawing at his mind for many weeks.

"How can you keep coming up with these fantastic if unusual design solutions?" He asked.

"It is not that complicated, professor." Carmin responded. "I can say a lot to you about this, but I think it comes down to one key factor. You have always abided by existing structures and never sought to break out of them. That may be fine when you are a low-ranking mech designer, but I don't think that is enough to make any further progress. My goal has been to advance to Master from the start. If I want to make that happen, then I can never be satisfied with my current pace."

"Have you not considered the possibility that you will end up making mistakes that can lead to serious setbacks?"

The female Journeyman crossed her arms. "I have, professor, but I have accepted that as part of what a mech designer must endure. Frankly speaking, your approach towards mech design is so dull and lacking in initiative that I can never imagine that you will be able to realize your design philosophy. From what I know about this subject, conformity

is one of the last traits that you should possess if you want to break the rules and accomplish the impossible."

Her remarks went too far! She was not only being way too personal, she also sought to lecture a mech designer who was older and far more experienced than her! How could she possibly know what was better when she hadn't worked on as many design projects?

"Mark my words, professor. I will advance to Senior at a younger age than you and I will exceed all of your work and accomplishments within a decade. I have long grown frustrated at your plodding pace and your conservative attitude towards mech designs. I have decided to make it my mission to prove you wrong!"

As time went by and Carmin Olson moved on to other workplaces, she did exactly what she said.

Professor Anton watched on from a distance as the Journeyman not only bloomed into a Senior, but started to earn much more recognition and accolades from the mech industry due to her consistent innovations, some of which earned the appreciation of Masters!

In contrast, Professor Anton's standing within the Vermeer Group had remained the same as ever. Though he was also making progress, none of these methods and design solutions seemed to earn as much recognition as that of his former subordinate.

It was at this point that Anton started to question his whole life and career.

"Am I truly being too careful for my own good?"

He never paid much attention to the career progressions of his colleagues before, but that had changed now that he was doubting his own path.

He began to read the biographies of various Masters and Star Designers, and soon learned that Professor Carmin Olson may have been right.

No mech designer advanced to Master by taking it slow and steady.

It turned out that each of them were rule breakers in one way or another. It was the only possibility for them to break the laws of physics and introduce a brand new possibility in the field of mech design!

Chapter 4119 Beyond Normality

Professor Anton Mendoza became paralyzed for more than a year.

The realization that he had been following the wrong path and worked towards a dead end in mech design was a substantial blow to his life as well as his design philosophy.

It became so bad that he was forced to take a break from his duties. His conflicting thoughts simply left him unable to deliver adequate work because he constantly questioned his usual design solutions.

What previously looked fine and serviceable suddenly became inadequate and not sufficient in his warped perspective.

It left him feeling so incompetent that he wasted hours and hours of work time to refine his solutions or come up with other methods to present a better possibility.

While his delays would have been mildly acceptable if he was able to deliver measurably superior results like what Carmin Olson had done, the problem was that Anton failed to improve the performance of any of the designs he was responsible for during that time!

"Stop what you are doing and go home to rethink your design philosophy and approach towards mech designs." A Master Mech Designer spoke to the once-reliable Anton in a tired voice. "You must take a good look at yourself and your work and discover how you want to go forward. Do not return until you are able to meet our requirements again."

The time he spent 'at home' was one of the most miserable periods of his life. He felt as if he was spending entire days in a dark and dim room.

Sometimes, he opened up his desk terminal and played with the design interface, only to shake his head and discard whatever he had been doodling into the garbage bin.

"This can't work! Why can't I make anything work?"

Ask him to design a regular implementation, and he would be able to deliver one in time with minimal problems.

Ask him to design an element of a mech that was supposed to perform at least three percent better than normal, and he would become completely lost.

Professor Anton Mendoza discovered to his dismay that his long pattern of pursuing greater efficiency through developing stable and incremental design improvements left him unable to develop greater innovations.

When he looked back on his entire body of work as a mech designer, he recognized that every instance of improvement amounted to gradual evolutions over prior generations.

While that served him well up to this point, he was unable to spark any substantial revolutions in his design approach that could allow him to make substantial leaps forward!

The fact that Professor Carmin Olson had exercised her design abilities to a greater degree and became proficient at pulling out one revolutionary design solution after another was a testament to her superior if risky approach.

"It is no wonder she has not only caught up, but also surpassed my level in mech design recently!" Professor Anton gasped.

This realization was a major blow to his ego and psyche, one that sent his mentality to a dark pit that he seemed helpless to climb out of. For months he spent his time in a fugue where he became disgusted by his prior work and wished that he had taken a more bold approach.

When it seemed that he couldn't dig himself out of this dark and bottomless abyss, his friends and colleagues from work became increasingly more concerned about him and forcibly pulled him out of his house.

"You can't hole yourself up in your bedroom and eat nutrient packs all day! You need to take a sabbatical, Professor Anton. Come. Let us take you on a tour throughout the Friday Coalition. You should see what the mechs of the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan are like. Maybe you will find the answer that you need from their machines."

Professor Anton proceeded to travel around for three whole years. Though his friends and colleagues couldn't accompany him all the way, there were plenty of other mech designers from different locales who were more than willing to tour him around for a fee.

Although he never found his light after a single encounter with a different mech, he slowly pulled himself out of his malaise as he observed one mech after another.

He slowly reacquainted himself with his original love and appreciation for mechs. By looking at them from the perspective of an enthusiast rather than a professional, Anton slowly regained his motivation and drive for his work.

It was only near the end of his tour as he happened to attend a public parade organized by the Carnegie Group that he encountered the spark he needed to reignite his passion and drive for mech design!

An expert rifleman mech flew around in the air and unleashed one resonance-empowered shot after another at a high-quality practice bot.

As a Senior Mech Designer, Professor Anton happened to recognize the weapon model. He knew that the gun shouldn't be powerful enough to punch through the practice bot's armor.

Even if the expert rifleman mech was able to add extra power to its shots, the energy still shouldn't be sufficient to inflict heavy damage.

What happened completely proved him wrong. The practice bot's sturdy and high-quality armor plating offered almost no resistance as the energy beam pierced from one end to the other end of the machine!

By the time the expert mech shot the bot full of holes, Professor Anton sat frozen at his seat for many more minutes.

This single demonstration made a profound impression on his views. As he finally ended his tour and returned to the territories of the Vermeer Group, he finally found a viable way forward.

"I... can't break the rules on my own. I don't have an innovator's mindset." Professor Anton frankly admitted to himself.

Decades of adopting the same approach to his studies and work had fixed him onto a path that left him with limited options.

However, it was still necessary for him to make the jump if he ever wanted to make himself worthy enough to break through to Master.

"Then... if I cannot do it myself, then I will do it with the help of another!"

His solution?

Work with expert pilots!

These were the only individuals that he could have access to that were able to distort the laws of nature just by experiencing strong thoughts and emotions!

Everything about them was a walking contradiction of science. Although the MTA no doubt conducted a lot of studies on the metaphysical powers and properties of expert pilots, to a simple Senior like Anton Mendoza they were beyond the reach of conventional science.

"And that is exactly what I need to give my work the push it needs!"

When he finally returned to work, he did so with a solid direction in mind. He almost immediately applied to work on expert mech design projects.

Though his superiors weren't comfortable with granting his request right away, Professor Anton followed his old methods once again.

He returned to his old duties and performed his job with no complaints. He presented reliable results and did everything to meet everyone's expectations.

At a certain point, he not only rehabilitated his reputation, but also accrued enough merits to assist with the design of a low-tier expert mech!

"My hard work has paid off!" He sighed in relief.

That started a string of projects where Professor Anton applied himself to the expert mech design projects as best as possible.

He spent more hours behind the design terminal than others.

He took on all of the crappy, tedious and most time-consuming assignments.

He studied additional knowledge on how to design expert mechs and what to pay attention to in order to accomplish better results.

He spoke to every expert pilot that he could gain access to in order to understand their mentalities and how they were able to do the impossible.

Although opportunities to participate in expert mech designs were few and far in between, he did not give up and tried to earn high evaluations from his peers and supervisors in the few instances he got lucky.

Eventually, he was entrusted with more responsibility and was allowed to make a more substantial contribution to a ranged expert mech design!

The resulting expert mech of the Blue Cavalry bore his signature efficient energy transmission systems, allowing it to expend significantly more power in practice sessions or retain more energy at the end.

His work apparently satisfied his superiors to the point where he finally received the opportunity to lead an expert mech design project a year later!

Of course, he was only tasked with designing a relatively basic and affordable low-tier expert mech for an expert pilot that had only recently broken through.

"The name's Leif Stixson." The expert pilot of the Vermeer Group introduced himself in a rather relaxed tone. "So you're the Senior who's in charge of my new expert mech?"

Professor Anton smiled as he tried his best to hold in his excitement. "That is correct, Venerable Stixson."

"Hmm. You don't look like much. I was really looking forward to having a Master design my first expert mech."

"Our Masters are currently preoccupied with other vital design and research projects. While I cannot promise you that my work will be as good as theirs, I have prior experience with working on expert mech designs. You are in good hands, Venerable Stixson."

Since Venerable Stixson was a rifleman mech specialist, Professor Anton felt right at home.

Due to the rather low budget and limited resources of the design project, there was not much room for experimentation or innovation, which imposed a lot of constraints on Anton.

If he was his old self, then he would have abided by these restrictions and tried his best to optimize the mech design within the boundaries set by reality.

However, the Professor Anton Mendoza of today was completely different from the Senior Mech Designer who bore the same name a few years ago!

Although his work up until his point looked almost identical, his true ambitions were no longer as modest as before.

"This will be the turning point of my career!" He claimed as his eyes burned with passion. "This will be the mech design that will help me break through my current limits!"

As he began to conduct his work and lead his design team, his work did not appear to be unusual at first.

He deliberately came up with a boring and limited draft design to keep everyone comfortable and to reassure everything was fine.

He did what was expected of him and provided conventional design solutions that seemingly led the expert rifleman mech design in a steady and stable direction.

What no one knew was that Professor Anton secretly spent time on a parallel expert rifleman mech design that was substantially different from the proper version.

The newer and less familiar design incorporated riskier and more radical design solutions, some of which Professor Anton had been working on for more than a year.

Although he wasn't quite sure whether his new and improved design work could pass muster, he felt good about what he was doing.

There was only one problem.

"It doesn't go far enough!" Anton banged his fist against his desk in frustration! "My latest work is more than an evolution, but far from reaching the point of a revolution. What am I missing?! Why can't I push the efficiency of my design even further?"

Although he had great confidence that his more unusual version of the expert mech would be able to achieve better results, the differences were still within the range of normality.

"Normality is not what I am trying to accomplish! My goal has always been to break through the boundaries that everyone has taken for granted!"

He became more frustrated and angry with himself as considered his deviating work to be a failed attempt to reinvent himself.

He tried to tweak his work over and over before he finally recognized that this was not the right approach.

"I need to go further." He concluded with bleary, red-shot eyes. "My expert mech isn't exceptional enough at this point. I have to break more rules!"

His thoughts became increasingly more frenzied as he brainstormed for more solutions. If he let go of the rules and boundaries that had constrained his work before, what more could he accomplish with his design philosophy?

Chapter 4120 Master Rexen

"No. Absolutely not. This is out of the question, Anton."

"Why not, Master Rexen?!" Professor Anton became more agitated as his immediate supervisor shot down his experimental proposal. "I know it sounds risky, but we don't have to apply the results of my experiment to the expert mech if they fail to meet our demands. What is the harm in trying this out? I won't delay the progress of the design project at all. I will conduct all of the work and experimentation in my free time in any lab or facility that is available. Please grant me the opportunity to explore this idea. The performance boost that I can provide to expert mechs might reach as much as 5 to 10 percent if I succeed! Think about it. Our Blue Cavalry would definitely be able to increase its standing relative to the Sundered Phalanx."

Master Rexen did not look amused. The older man remained completely unmoved by the proposal from a Senior who had otherwise performed exemplary after returning from his sabbatical.

"Have you forgotten that you are working in the service of the Blue Cavalry and the state? Have you mistaken your identity to that of an independent entrepreneur? You are a public servant, not a maverick who can decide upon his own actions. The Blue Cavalry expects you to deliver a basic expert mech for Venerable Stixson within budget

within a timely manner. The higher ups are not asking for anything more than that, and most certainly will not embrace this harebrained scheme of yours that will not only waste everyone's time, but also cause your simple project to balloon to the point where it most certainly exceeds the strict budget and time constraints that we have imposed."

Professor Anton grew frustrated. Why couldn't Master Rexen understand the great potential of his plan?!

He had worked days on this proposal. He had racked his brains for every possible lead he could find in order to potentially increase the efficiency and the performance of his expert mech design project by as much as 10 percent!

"Please reconsider, sir." Anton pleaded as he grew desperate. "How can we keep up with the competition from the other coalition partners and the Hexers if we do not put more effort into innovating our expert mechs? We should not let go of any opportunity to gain an advantage over our opponent. If you can just allow me to work more closely with Venerable Stixson and attempt to develop a revolutionary new method to increase the degree of symbiosis between the expert pilot and his expert mech, we can—"

Master Rexen visibly grew annoyed. "STOP. I will not tolerate this nonsense from you any further! Listen to yourself! Do you know how irrational you sound? Your proposal is filled with vague promises and unscientific terminology. If you want us to take your ideas seriously, then at least make an effort to sound serious. This is anything but what we would consider sound. No supervisor in his right mind would allow such a ramshackle experiment to proceed under his nose, and I will certainly not stand for this reckless adventurism."

"But—"

Master Rexen did not even allow Professor Anton to get another word out. He resolutely swiped the air with his palm as if he was cutting off his subordinate's entire chance to speak.

"I will hear no further of this, Anton! You are out of line! There is a time and place for research and development. Wait until you have built up more experience and hammered out your theories so that they are no longer based on spurious assumptions that you have grasped from thin air.

Professor Anton's theories were not based on thin air! Although he hadn't been able to prove all of his assumptions, he was convinced that his chain of logic was sound! Why couldn't a Master Mech Designer recognize the truth!?

"You are not the first mech designer who proposed to empower an expert mech by searching for a method to transfer the psionic qualities of an expert pilot to the machine in question." Master Rexen calmly spoke as he adopted a lecturing tone. "It is an idea that is regularly put forward by mech designers who think they can empower a mech

with psionic properties. Are you aware of the results that they have obtained through their efforts?"

"No, Master. I tried to search the archives for any prior research, but neither our internal databases nor the MTA's own libraries have provided me with relevant information."

"There are reasons for that. First, the experiments have never come close to succeeding. They have all ended in failure. The greatest variable to them is the damage that they have wrought. At best, they wasted a large amount of money and time. At worst, their pseudoscientific approaches have produced actual harm to the expert pilots that they pretend to serve. That is the exact opposite of what mech designers such as ourselves stand for, and it is for good reason that the entirety of the mech industry has suppressed these inane research proposals."

The message was clear. Professor Anton would not be able to explore his fantastic train of thought because his research direction was effectively declared taboo!

"May I ask if there are any secret research labs that..."

Master Rexen contemptuously let out a snort. "Give it up, Anton. The only source of expert pilots in the Vermeer Group is the Blue Cavalry, and it will never embrace any experimental procedures that expose their assets to unnecessary and excessive risks. While I am not aware of every secret research lab operating within our borders, I can assure you that even the most shady of them will not entertain your idea."

"Why not, Master?"

"First, they simply won't do it. Second, even if there is the tiniest possibility that they are interested in this research direction, they would never entrust any of it to you. Your specialization is related to energy transmission systems and internal architecture. There is nothing in your record that gives anyone confidence that you are competent enough to succeed in this undertaking. You are a highly orthodox mech designer, and that makes you excellent in your current position. Experiments like these are normally performed by colleagues who possess more flexible minds and are more accustomed to thinking outside the box. You are not such a mech designer."

Professor Anton would have retorted that he had begun to move in this direction as well. His submitted research proposal was proof of that!

Unfortunately, Master Rexen was so rigid that he was not even willing to open any backdoors to Professor Anton.

The friendship and respect that they built up over the course of many completed projects meant nothing in the end.

The Senior Mech Designer left the office with a profound sense of disappointment. He was more passionate and enthused about his daring research proposal than he was with any of his prior projects.

What struck him the most was how betrayed he felt by the Master who guided him and taught him during all of these years.

"How could you... I trusted you, Master..."

Although Master Rexen was totally correct to squash any attempts to deviate from the mission and the requirements set by the Blue Cavalry, Professor Anton couldn't care less about that for the moment.

"Didn't Master Rexen realize his design philosophy by breaking a few rules at the time? Why isn't he willing to give me any slack?!"

Professor Anton's mood took a nosedive in the following days. His work efficiency dropped as he became consumed by dark thoughts.

As he looked out at the familiar design lab and the familiar mech designers who he led and worked alongside with for months and years, he no longer felt any pride and belonging in this place.

There was an invisible disconnect between him and his colleagues. He felt as if he was the only human in a gathering of aliens.

"I don't belong here anymore." He realized.

It became a struggle to conclude the design project for Venerable Stixson. No matter how much Professor Anton tried to rid himself of his distracting thoughts, he could not rid his mind of the experiment that he could have performed if his supervisor was a bit more generous towards his proposal.

Fortunately, the project had already reached an advanced stage. Professor Anton hardly needed to provide any essential input to the mech design. His subordinates had made adjustments and began to perform the necessary tasks by dedication among themselves.

Venerable Stixson eventually got the expert mech he needed, but not necessarily the one he wanted or deserved.

That made Professor Anton feel incredibly sour.

The increasingly more ambitious Senior eventually recovered a semblance of his mood after this period. He still felt alienated from his workplace and his fellow mech designers as he increasingly thought he belonged in a different design lab.

As a year went by without any major incidents, Professor Anton began to grow more concerned.

The interval between his last expert mech design project and the next one was growing increasingly larger.

Though Anton did not mind working on regular mech design projects, he felt that the only way for him to make meaningful progress was to sink his teeth into another expert mech design.

When he continually saw that the incoming orders for expert mech designs went to the other design teams and departments of the institution he was working for, he finally couldn't take it any longer.

He barged into Master Rexen's office and demanded an explanation.

"Do you want to know the reason why I have not assigned any expert mech design projects to you as of late? Look no further in a mirror to understand why I have grown reluctant to hand you this responsibility."

The Master waved his hand, causing a projection to appear that played back the security footage of the office.

Professor Anton could clearly see an agitated and emotional Senior Mech Designer storming inside the office before giving the man behind the desk a highly charged demand to receive the next assignment centered around an expert mech design!

"What is wrong with this?" Anton puzzlingly asked. "I am only trying to obtain my due. I have repeatedly told you that designing expert mechs is my current aim. My progression depends on it. I have contributed so much to our institution over the years. With the merits that I have built up, I should have long been eligible to receive another chance!"

The expression on Master Rexen's face was damning.

"You are emotionally compromised. If you cannot even recognize anything wrong in the footage, then the problem is clearly worse than I expected. Do you not realize how unprofessional you are behaving at the moment? I am sorry, my friend, but for the sake of your sanity and your future, I must ask you to restrain yourself and drop your unhelpful line of research. Go back to the drawing board and come up with a more proper and less controversial research topic. As long as your new idea is not excessive, I am willing to grant you allowances so that you can spend your time in a more productive fashion."

Suffice to say, Professor Anton did not leave the office in a good mood. Though he had always felt out of place in the institution, it was only now that he was willing to

acknowledge that everyone around him had turned into hindrances that prevented him from attaining his true goal.

"If I cannot obtain what I need from this institution, then I clearly have to look elsewhere!"

Though he continued to show up on work when he was supposed to, he was already looking for another channel to conduct his desired research projects.

For a time, nothing happened. Professor Anton's progress was slow as he did not exactly know where to look.

He trawled through the galactic net and attended different conventions and symposiums in order to obliquely ask the mech designers he met if they knew of any 'opportunities'.

It was during one of those professional symposiums that a fellow mech designer finally granted him a lead.