

## Mech 4151

### Chapter 4151 New Goal

Ves finally left the secure chamber after receiving a stern reminder to keep his mouth shut.

He remained in deep thought as he slowly left the MTA's branch headquarters on Davute VII and shuttled back to the Cat Nest.

Once he returned to his Royal Mansion, he put Lucky on his lap and continued to contemplate on all of the revelations that he received.

"Meow?"

"Sorry, Lucky. I can't divulge what I have obtained today. You'll have to keep your curiosity in check this time."

"Meow!"

As his gem cat began to grow a little grumpy again, Ves completely ignored the feelings of his pet as he thought of the many implications of what he learned.

One of the biggest takeaways from his recent meeting was that god pilots were truly worth all of the hype.

Certainly, their combat prowess was unmatched and they could easily demolish entire warfleets depending on their specialties and the capabilities of their god mechs.

He never expected that mech designers such as Master Dervidian put more weight on their ability to create materials and make the most unlikely processes possible!

Ves fully understood why the MTA obsessed so much over god pilots. They were strategic assets that had the power to strengthen an entire civilization!

Dervidian explicitly attributed the initial entry to the Red Ocean to the ability for god pilots to create phasewater!

If god pilots could create phasewater, then they could easily create other materials that Ves wanted but could never attain.

He already started to make a wish list of the materials he desperately needed to create better and more powerful mechs.

"I could use more P-stones, B-stones, F-stones and Unending alloy..."

The lack of access to these spiritually reactive materials was a great heartache to him. Though he tasked both his own personnel to scour for any locally available resources that matched the properties of what he already possessed, none of his people found any whisper of what he sought!

He also asked the MTA to watch out for the same materials, but the mechers hadn't sent any word to him so far. Perhaps they already forgot about his request or simply did not rank it high in their enormous list of priorities.

It would have been nice if he had access to his own personal god pilot.

He frowned.

"It will take a long time before any of my subordinates can get within throwing distance of this rank."

Venerable Joshua, Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Casella were simply too young and tender! The distance between them and the likes of Divine Hussain Albedo was as large as the distance between the Milky Way and the Red Ocean!

"Wait, I don't need to rely on my own mech pilots..."

The recent advancement of Patriarch Reginald Cross was a massive event that was already rippling throughout Davute and beyond.

Ace pilots were incredibly powerful and they were particularly valued for their ability to defend critical star systems just like god pilots.

As such, many parties in Davute and beyond wanted to secure an accord with the Cross Clan!

Ves even heard that there were groups and companies who were willing to pay thousands to tens of thousands of MTA credits just to obtain a year-long guarantee of protection from Patriarch Reginald Cross!

"Damn, it's so easy for him to earn lots of money!"

While Ves and his Design Department had to invest tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of man-hours into designing technologically sophisticated mechs for the market, Patriarch Reginald only needed to make a simple promise before proceeding to go about his day as usual!

The chances that Reginald actually needed to take action was incredibly low. Nobody was a fool. Ace pilots always kept their word so they would definitely go all out in order to abide by their commitments. The destruction that they could unleash was unpredictable and a battle could easily turn into a catastrophe.

Therefore, what all of those organizations and companies were actually trying to obtain through their actions was virtual immunity.

Few human groups dared to hit anyone under the protection of an ace pilot!

The only serious threat came from alien threats who did not play by the rules of humanity. However, Ves already heard that the Crossers took that into account.

Patriarch Reginald himself refused to provide any guarantees to anyone in case of an alien incursion!

This was because he knew quite well that if a powerful alien threat ever attacked the entire Davute System, his Cross Clan would need all the help it could get to evacuate from the warzone!

"Smart."

Leaving the Cross Clan's rapid rise in fortune aside, the most significant implication of Reginald's successful advancement was that he was much closer to becoming a god pilot than anyone else in the Golden Skull Alliance!

Ves did not know how long it would take for the Cross Patriarch to reach the limit of his current rank and become eligible to undergo his third and most dangerous apotheosis, but he suspected that it would definitely not take too long!

As long as Reginald continued to work hard and do his utmost to cross the bridge of life and death, Ves could finally gain access to his own human factory that can pump out all of the P-stones and Unending alloy as he wished!

"I will need to pay more attention to his progression."

It was well worth it to pay more attention to the Mars and continue to offer his assistance in tweaking it and upgrading it. After all, the stronger the mech, the stronger the mech pilot!

After deciding to provide more support to Patriarch Reginald, Ves shifted his thoughts to his future plans.

Ever since he discovered that Divine Hussain Albedo possessed the unique capability to upgrade a person's genetic aptitude, a growing part of Ves wanted to challenge this monopoly.

This was an absolutely crazy notion!

No Journeyman would ever think about challenging a god pilot by stealing the supremely powerful warrior's routine!

Yet Ves was different!

His amazing successes along with his growing mastery of spiritual engineering gave him a hint of confidence that he might be able to replicate a feat that the entire MTA had failed to do for a long time.

"I just need a good starting point."

Ves quickly came up with multiple different research directions, some of which were more hopeful than others.

There was one solution that he believed may be the most assured way to reproduce Divine Albedo's unique ability.

"If I can harvest a portion of his power, I can use it as an ingredient for a brand new design spirit!"

Ves could already imagine it! The spiritual product that he envisioned in his mind would be the ideal mech pilot, one that best represented and stood up for this profession!

This design spirit might not possess the strongest attacks such as Helena, but the new entity would definitely provide the biggest boost to the growth and evolution of mech pilots!

"Wait, do I even need to create a new design spirit? What if I merge this special ingredient with one of my existing ones?"

Now that he thought about it, the Quint already fulfilled a part of this job description. Though it was not a human mech pilot itself, the mech interacted with so many mech pilots that it definitely gained a deep understanding of how they worked!

As long as Ves was able to obtain a shard of Divine Albedo's awesome force of will or whatever it turned into at the god pilot stage, he could definitely transform the Quint into the patron spirit of mech pilots!

"All of this sounds great, but how am I supposed to satisfy the most essential requirement?"

Ves did not dare to bring up his ludicrous idea to Master Dervidian. The Transhumanists idolized Divine Albedo so much that they would consider any notion of harming him or stealing his power to be sacrilege!

That was despite the fact that many Transhumanists were supposed to be intelligent and open-minded mech designers!

"Ugh. Forget about it. There is no way that this can happen."

The second-most viable idea he came up with was to imitate Divine Albedo's ability by developing a homegrown version.

Now that he knew that Genetic Aptitude Reparation was actually real, he was a bit more confident that he could develop a bootleg version of it by relying on his unorthodox specialties.

However, without an appropriate spiritual ingredient or reference, it would be extremely hard for him to develop this solution.

"I can't just create a design spirit that can magically do what I want."

The design spirit needed actual substance in order to accomplish a specific task. Not only did it need to possess the right spiritual attributes, it also had to possess at least some theory in order to perform a complicated feat.

Ves would need to obtain ingredients related to biology, neurology, interfacing and other related subjects.

He also needed to develop a theoretical framework that could make this happen.

"That last part is the biggest problem. I barely know anything about the science of neural interfacing!"

Though he managed to learn the bare basics of this sensitive field, he was hardly an authority on this subject.

"If I truly want to make this happen, I will need to cooperate with a top research team that knows everything about neural interfacing and genetic aptitude."

This requirement was almost just as harsh as trying to harvest a fragment from a god pilot!

Ves grew more pessimistic as he thought of all of the hurdles he needed to overcome.

Developing his own version of Genetic Aptitude Reparation would take too long and require too much work at this rate. It was completely unfeasible, especially since he did not have the time to work on such a difficult research project.

"Forget about it." He shook his head in surrender. "Maybe I should just wait until I stumble upon the right materials or inspiration."

He came up with several other ways in which he might possibly be able to replicate Divine Albedo's unique method.

They ranged from experimenting with Venerable Joshua's life domain to seeking out a phase whale in order to conduct a mutual exchange on biotechnology, but none of these plans sounded reliable.

In the end, it all came down to the fact that Ves was not qualified enough to tackle this problem.

"It is useless to think more about it. Let's wait until my situation changes for better."

Rather than trying to research the impossible, it was a lot more realistic to accumulate 1 billion MTA merits.

He had managed to earn over 200 million MTA merits before, and that was before the Golden Skull Alliance underwent a comprehensive upgrade and expansion phase.

While he didn't want to think about it before, now that the Cross Clan had gained a powerful ace pilot, Ves belatedly realized that he no longer needed to act as timid as before.

As long as he could convince Patriarch Reginald to support his schemes, Ves could take much bolder risks!

"It would be a waste to leave an ace pilot in reserve. All of that combat power is just begging to get used!"

If Ves had the current version of Patriarch Reginald and the Mars at his side, he and his allies would have been able to conquer all of Purgatory!

"This is the right way to exploit the power of an ace pilot!"

The power of Patriarch Reginald was much stronger than before and the Mars was expressly designed to defeat alien warships.

This meant that Ves did not have to fear as many enemies as before!

"There's no way I can earn a billion credits by sitting here in Davute and conducting research behind closed doors. I need to get back out into the deep frontier and plunder as much phasewater as possible!"

Even if it was too difficult to stumble upon another phase whale enclave, there were bound to be other alien settlements and strongholds that contained a lot of riches.

The profits of raiding these places would be unimaginably high!



Now that he gained a new goal, Ves completely set his mind on preparing for an extensive expedition that would take the Golden Skull Alliance across the new frontier!

All thoughts about relying on peaceful accumulation and steady sales had gone out of his head.

Though a part of him enjoyed the stability and comfort of living in Davute, the wild streak within him could not be suppressed now that he was driven by a new purpose.

"I'm not an ordinary mech designer." He reminded himself. "I'm an explorer and a wanderer. The stars are calling out to me. The Red Ocean has so much more to offer. There is no reason why I should hole up in Davute and Krakatoa."

He had made a firm decision. Once the Golden Skull Alliance completed its years-long upgrade and rebuilding plans, he would strongly advocate for the expeditionary fleet to embark on the biggest grand expedition to date!

Whether he would actually wish to exchange 1 billion MTA merits for a chance to upgrade one of children's genetic aptitude or not, it was always useful to stock up on this exclusive currency.

The MTA had so many goodies to offer that Ves would never be able to pay for it all. His talk with Master Dervidian also revealed to him that the mechers held back a lot of exclusive goods and services that were even more precious.

After all, there were a lot of god pilots, each of which possessed their own special capabilities.

Perhaps a handful of them offered a good or service that Ves desperately needed in order to progress his design philosophy!

"I have to learn what they can all do! Where can I find more news about these amazing people?!"

### Chapter 4152 A New Expedition

A fire lit up inside Ves.

Ever since he conceived of a major and more goal-oriented expedition, he became completely enamored by all of the possible gains he could make from this epic adventure.

Just like his prior grand expedition and past campaigns, he could obtain a wealth of benefits by exploring places where few dared to travel!

Though Ves already planned to take his fleet out of the comfortable and increasingly more prosperous Davute System in order to resume his explorations of the Red Ocean, he had never seriously spent much time on planning and setting expectations.

There was even a part of Ves that told him that he had fought enough battles and risked his life plenty of times already.

Now that he had become the most prominent and successful Journeyman in the Krakatoa Middle Zone, there was no need for him to take insane risks in order to get ahead.

If he just focused on researching and improving his existing set of solutions and possibilities, he had no doubt that he could evolve his current product offerings to a higher level.

"As a father, I owe it to my children not to make them suffer due to my mistakes..."

His sense of duty as a parent held him back from committing to this brand-new expedition.

Yet that only lasted a brief time.

The fire that sparked within his heart could not be snuffed!

"I truly have to go out there!"

The benefits were too great even if the risks were vastly increased as well. The main reason why he persisted with this new plan was because he was confident his combined fleet and forces were much better equipped to face the challenges of the new frontier than before!

"Even if I drag my wife and all of my children along with me, I will still be confident it will be okay!"

His clan had made an enormous leap in strength during this past year and there was still plenty more time to go before his intended departure time.

As long as the Larkinson Clan and its allies put more effort into rearming and expanding its combat forces, there was no doubt that they could form a formidable expeditionary fleet that could smash enemies that were ten times stronger than the enemies they faced before!

This gave him enough assurances that he would be able to protect his wife and kids even if he brought his fleet awfully close to the frontlines where the Big Two's warfleets were fighting intensely against the increasingly more united indigineous alien opposition!

Ves became so driven by this new initiative that he quickly activated his desk terminal and began to structure his thoughts and intentions into an initial document.

Just because he decided to go on a second major expedition didn't mean it would happen in a heartbeat. His clan had grown much larger and his allies had also grown substantially more powerful.

Not only did he need to gain the support of his clansmen and convince them that this was a great idea, he also had to persuade his other stakeholders

such as the Crossers and the Glory Seekers to go along with his bold new venture.

"That is going to take a bit of effort." He frowned.

Despite the opposition that his new expedition would evoke, Ves was determined to push through his plans!

This was the first time that he became passionate about his next major expedition!

Regardless of whether he wanted to earn enough MTA merits to obtain an audience with Divine Hussain Albedo, he could expect to obtain a lot more gains from such a lengthy and exciting trip!

"Meow..."

While Lucky kept demanding more attention, Ves continued to formulate a framework of an expedition that would last at least several years.

One of his most important demands was that he did not want to return to civilization too frequently.

It was a big waste of time to travel to unexplored space, stay for a few months and then head back to Davute in order to repair and resupply.

"If possible, we should bring enough supplies and try our best to extend our operation time by scavenging or mining the resources needed to keep our fleet running."

In other words, Ves needed to make sure to beef up the logistical elements of his expeditionary fleet.

"My forces must be as self-sufficient as possible!"

Alongside bringing along additional production and repair vessels, Ves also needed to stockpile a huge amount of supplies that could not be reproduced aboard the fleet.

"I can't forget about manpower as well."

There had been times where Ves had been limited in what he could do due to lacking enough mech pilots or technical personnel.

The great thing about starships was that their personnel capacity was quite flexible. The clan would not impose an unreasonable burden on a typical starship by crewing her with four times the amount of personnel needed to run her operations.

If necessary, the clan could even upgrade its ships so that they could accommodate even more crew and passengers!

"A lot more people have arrived in the Red Ocean as of late. We should have no trouble hiring the manpower we need."

A lot of people wanted to travel to the Red Ocean, but the difficulty of entering it was too great for most individuals.

However, as more and more traffic flowed through the greater beyonder gates, plenty of enterprising companies have adopted business models that proved to be surprisingly profitable!

Their arrangements were quite simple. They took huge mass conveyors and initially filled them with compact passenger accommodation.

Once titanic cargo ships that temporarily moon-lighted as makeshift passenger liners were stuffed with as many paying customers as possible, they transited to the Red Ocean and subsequently dumped their human payloads into central star nodes such as the Vulit System.

The ships subsequently ditched their passenger modules and proceeded to fill their hulls with phasewater and other rare and unique goods and materials that were exclusively available in the new frontier.

The vessels then retraced their steps and transited all the way back to the Milky Way where they subsequently unloaded their precious cargo and earned a massive profit from the trip!

Ves had heard that the major trading companies responsible for setting up this costly rotation managed to secure preferential treatment from the Gate Consortium.

Otherwise, there was no way that these trading convoys could repeatedly pass through the greater beyonder gates. The cost in MTA merits was too great to sustain the volume of traffic!

"What else do I need to take into account?"

When he thought of the strength and preparation of the Larkinson Clan, the Cross Clan and the Glory Seekers, he became somewhat confident in their ability to handle unexpected situations.

"Yet... what if that's not enough?"

The dangers of venturing too close to the active front lines were well-known. There was no shortage of daredevil pioneers who saw great profit in plundering the star systems that had recently been swept by the Big Two's warfleets.

The MTA and CFA only cared about smashing apart organized opposition and major population centers. Since their forces needed to sweep through a lot of territory, they simply did not have the time to thoroughly scour and salvage anything of value from the places they had just conquered.

This presented a lot of lucrative opportunities to the scavenger fleets that hungrily descended upon these freshly bombarded star systems.

The huge hauls that these scavenger fleets brought back to port systems such as Davute produced a lot of success stories.

Even if their profits did not match the value of the plunder that the Golden Skull Alliance brought back from the Garimel System, Ves had definitely noticed the arrival of pioneers who managed to rise to prosperity in a single leap due to winning their bold gambles!

"However, the scavengers that eventually manage to return with their ships intact are not among the majority."

The threat of alien reprisal was quite great as many remnant alien forces regularly slipped through the Big Two's net.

Aside from that, infighting was quite frequent among the scavenger fleets. The situation got especially ugly when multiple groups descended onto a single planet!

Though Ves was confident that few would dare to attack his own expeditionary fleet when it was helmed by an ace pilot with a cutting-edge transphasic ace mech, who knew if he stumbled upon another major player.

If he wanted to obtain more assurances, then expanding his fleet by bringing along additional forces was a viable proposal!

There were huge issues, though. Trust was the number one concern. Ves and many others in the alliance were extremely reluctant to expand their military alliance with a party that had not shared their struggles and did not prove their loyalty and commitment to promises.

This was why there had been no news about expanding the Golden Skull Alliance after all this time.

Occasionally, Minister Shederin Purnesse came and brought up several potential candidates to Ves, but there were always reasons to reject their entry into the alliance.

"Maybe I've been too harsh. Do you think we should expand the Golden Skull Alliance, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"Is that so? You make a good point."

If he could find a way to share the burden and gain tens of thousands of additional mechs to his expeditionary fleet, then that would increase his chances of returning while preserving his life and the lives of his children!

Compared to this benefit, the potential costs and complications were much less concerning. Ves did not mind splitting the profit to more parties if that was what it took to crush stronger enemies.

As Ves finalized his initial framework, he called in his three most trusted and insightful advisors to his office.

"General Verle. Director Calabast. Minister Shederin. Come take a seat and tell me your first impressions."

As the three senior leaders of the Larkinson Clan proceeded to do just that, their expressions quickly changed in different ways.

Ves paid close attention to each of their expressions.

Unfortunately, he did not get much out of this little test as he wished.

Calabast possessed such great control over her body language and emotions that Ves couldn't glean any reliable clues from her behavior!

Shederin was the same, but he expressly crafted a response that expressed mild surprise that might overstate or understate his actual thoughts.



Only General Verle was fairly honest about his initial reaction. The military leader frowned as he read through elements that troubled him for one reason or another.

,m "I have no objections to committing to another expedition." The general began. "You have made your intentions regarding the need to keep our clan active and on the move quite clear from the beginning. However, I was under the impression that once we finished our recuperation in Davute, we would venture into the hinterland regions of Krakatoa. There is still a great amount of unexplored and underexplored star systems in our current zone. While the chances of making gains are lower, the risks of encountering overwhelming alien opposition is much lower as well. The risks are much more manageable for these reasons. Now I find out that you want to travel to the border where fights between humans and aliens are much more frequent."

"Is there a problem with that, general?"

"The risk factors are much greater the closer we travel to the frontlines of humanity's ongoing conquest of the Red Ocean, Ves! I'm not talking about bumping into refugee fleets or remnant military vessels that are already on their last legs. There is a realistic possibility that we may get cornered by a complete and intact forward echelon alien warfleet, one that is formed to fight against MTA and CFA warfleets! Their strength and technological prowess is far beyond what we can handle even if we can count on the support of a friendly ace pilot!"

These were realistic concerns. Ves could not easily account for this scary possibility.

### **Chapter 4153 More Extensive Preparations**

It did not take much time for his first meeting with his core advisors about his new expedition to hit a stumbling block.

Ves already took into account that the risks of approaching the active frontlines of the invasion would be greater.

The chances of encountering enemy elements, both human and alien, were significantly greater.

However, the possibility that General Verle brought up was highly realistic.

As much as Ves wanted to deny or downplay this risk, he had looked up enough news to know that plenty of scavenger fleets met their untimely ends at the hands of frontline alien fleet elements!

This was also the reason why many of the most powerful pioneering fleets chose to keep their distance from the frontlines.

The toughest and most intractable fleets fielded by the nunsers and the puelmers had developed a terrible reputation among the pioneers and frontiersmen.

The nunsers fielded massive 'ships' that were also concentrated in huge 'fleets' that were more like floating cities!

The puelmers adopted a similar approach but concentrated more on equipping their ships with advanced technology rather than aiming for maximum quantity.

Regardless, any ordinary pioneering fleet that got targeted by the nunsers or puelmers rarely managed to get away!

Ves fell silent as he idly stroked Lucky's back. The cat had grown a lot more concerned as well when he heard the new plan.

"Meow meow."

"I'm working on it. Let me think."

As Ves tried to come up with an answer to the problem presented by General Verle, the Director of the Black Cats took the initiative to speak her thoughts.

"While I have my own doubts about this new venture, we can significantly decrease the risk of encountering unpleasant surprises by beefing up our scouting operations." Calabast said. "If you study all of the cases where pioneering fleets were struck down by frontline alien troops, you will find that the former never put much effort into scouting and risk assessment. They only dispatched a perfunctory amount of scouting vessels to neighboring star systems and did not thoroughly research the alien territories they intended to strip of valuables."

This was not necessarily because the scavenger fleets were led by stupid or incompetent leaders.

Their means were just too limited. The availability of starships was still horrendously limited, which meant that any new arrivals would find it incredibly difficult to expand their initial fleets.

Without access to enough wealth, military strength, influence and allies, there was no way for these fresh pioneering fleets to convince a shipyard to accept their order.

This left these groups in a tight spot. They could either make do with what they brought over from the Milky Way, or they could risk everything on a single throw of the dice and head towards danger in the promise of obtaining a huge haul of precious materials and advanced alien tech.

As Ves recalled the articles that he read, Calabast indeed made a good point. The majority of pioneering fleets that got suckered by alien warfleets were incapable of deploying scouting ships.

Without spreading enough corvettes and other observer ships to neighboring star systems, it was much harder to gain an accurate impression on how many enemies might be lingering in the region!

The situation was much different to the Golden Skull Alliance.

"We are in a much better position in this regard, Ves." Minister Shederin Purnesse provided his opinion. "Our recent successes have raised our profile and made us much more reputable in the eyes of major players. It has become significantly easier for us to commission ship orders at shipyards that previously closed their doors to our inquiries. While we are unable to order any capital ships from them, it should not be troublesome to commission modest batches of corvettes."

Ves looked surprised. "Is that true?"

"More vendors are willing to do business with us." Shederin confirmed. "It's not just us. The Cross Clan have also found it a lot easier to place priority orders at major shipyard companies. Everyone is eager to please an ace pilot, you see. At the very least, these people do not want to leave an impression that they deliberately snubbed the Cross Clan due to petty reasons. There is no way to predict the reaction of an ace pilot that has a well-known history for being volatile and impulsive."

In other words, now that Patriarch Reginald Cross had grown into a big and powerful bully that could always decide to flip the board if he got triggered for whatever reason, a lot of companies took the initiative to offer their tribute through this manner!

This was the benefit of acquiring a notorious reputation!

"What of the Glory Seekers?" Ves curiously asked. "Since the local shipyards are already beginning to offer their services to us and the Crossers, I don't think they have much capacity left to help our remaining allies."

"The Glory Seekers have their own channels, Ves. The Hexer colonies may be overwhelmingly preoccupied with building up their settlements, but now that they have overcome the initial hurdles, they are much more secure in their own positions. That means that the Hexer dynasties are becoming more willing to supply the Glory Seekers with mechs, starships and other war materiel."

"Interesting. I did not expect those arrogant and selfish Hexers to forgo the opportunity to strengthen their own positions by agreeing to donate to a common cause."

Calabast chuckled. "Don't get fooled, Ves. The Hexers are well aware of how vulnerable they have become now that they lost the support of their enormous holdings in the old galaxy. They are also clever enough to understand that our commitment to them is not as great now that we no longer need their help to survive and grow stronger. The best way for them to maintain active and friendly relations with our clan is to pump up the Glory Seekers so that the Golden Skull Alliance will always possess a Hexer presence."

"That's quite smart and far-sighted of them. I did not expect them to be able to do this." Ves mildly replied.

"Losing the Komodo War has given the exiled Hexers a powerful reality check. A lot of hardliners have been pushed from positions of power while more pragmatic and adaptable female leaders have risen up. Many dynasties are cognizant that they cannot act as extreme as before."

"Back in the Komodo Star Sector, the Hexers used to be the biggest fish in the pond." Minister Shederin illustrated. "Here in the Red Ocean, they are medium-sized fish at best. No matter which pool they choose to swim in, they will always live alongside other fish that are no weaker than them despite the fact that the Hexers have evacuated from the Komodo Star Sector in good

order. Throwing around their weight will only unite every group in the Magair Middle Zone against them. That is what they must avoid at all costs."

Both Calabast and Shederin tracked the progress of the Hexer colonies quite closely. It was quite interesting to hear their perspectives on how different forms of pressure had forced the escapees from the Komodo War to become a lot more likable and diplomatic.

Ves welcomed the changes. He designed the Superior Mother with the express purpose to deradicalize the Hexers as much as he could get away with, but it was never quite enough.

He hoped that the threat of becoming a pariah in a place where they could not afford to make too many enemies would finally normalize them to a level where they became tolerable.

He turned his attention back to closer concerns. Whatever happened to the Hexers these days did not concern him all that much anymore.

"So if I am understanding this correctly, we will soon be able to acquire enough starships to form an extensive scouting contingent, is that correct?"

"That is... correct, sir." General Verle admitted. "The ships do not need to be large, expensive or powerful. It is already enough that they can travel ahead of our main fleet and warn us of any nearby threats in advance. This will significantly increase our ability to avoid dangerous enemies before they can ever get near."

Ves thought of a possible concern. "These scout ships will have to brave the frontier alone, though. They may be quick and agile, but if any enemy manages to get within range, there is little these flimsy corvettes can do to survive an encounter. I'm afraid our scouting contingent will suffer extensive losses over the course of our next expedition."

"That is an acceptable price." General Verle stated. "It is always more preferable to lose a corvette that is crewed by a dozen clansmen at most than be forced to resist an ambush by a major alien fleet that we weren't able to foresee. Trust me, the Larkinsons crewing our scouting vessels will gladly do their duty even when they fully understand the dangers that they must brave."

"I will take your word on that, general."

The four Larkinson leaders continued to discuss the other aspects of Ves' bold plan for their next expedition.

Though there was no way to mitigate every possible risk, the plan became a lot more feasible after the inclusion of a few more measures.

Calabast especially found it important to raise her voice this time. "Information is power, Ves. I have always told you that because many people constantly have a tendency to forget about this truth."

"You have made that point clear to me already. What do you want this time?"

"I need more funding and allowances to expand the Black Cats." She plainly stated her demands.

"Hasn't the recent funding increases been enough for you to expand our spy department?"

"This is different, Ves. We have invested much of the money and resources that we have received from the clan into building up local and regional spy networks. We have spread an extensive amount of agents and informants throughout Davute and many other star systems. It costs a lot of effort and money to do the job correctly. If you want our Black Cats to increase our ability to collect vital intelligence on the less-explored star systems that are closer to active war zones, then we must expand in a different way."

Ves sighed before waving his hand. "Fine. You will get your funding. It is not a big deal to give you an extra 100,000 MTA credits. The only thing I ask is results. You and your Black Cats have overlooked numerous dangers in the past. I'm aware that is because your means were much more limited then, but we have no excuse this time."

His strategic partner smirked. "Don't worry, Ves. Previously, it was difficult to do much because we were constantly on the move while working with limited resources. This time is different. We aren't short on funds and we still have plenty of years to make proper and adequate preparations. Trust me when I say that I do not want to make another major blunder. Not when my life is on the line as well."

That was one of the more positive aspects of keeping everything important in a single fleet.

Every core member of the Larkinson Clan was on the same boat, both literally and figuratively!

Any mistake they made would directly impact their chances of surviving the upcoming expedition.

As Ves thought about other matters, Shederin brought up another major point.

"This is a major development, Ves, one that will affect our entire clan as well as our closest allies. If you want everyone to work towards your goals in a united fashion, then you will need to drum up strong support. One of the ways you can do that is by naming our upcoming operation. Have you come up with any suggestions that you like and can effectively communicate what we will embark upon in a couple of years?"

"Hmmm... let's call it the Trailblazer Expedition. This time, we must truly venture closer to the territories that have yet to be plundered and occupied by other human forces."



## Chapter 4154 Trailblazer Expedition

### The Trailblazer Expedition!

Shortly after Ves attached this bold and exciting-sounding label to his plan, he generated immediate excitement among those who learned about the new development.

"Trailblazer Expedition? This sounds like the turbo version of the Purgatory Campaign!"

"I hope the Trailblazer Expedition won't be as destructive as our first expedition and escapades. I'm tired of limping back to civilized space with only half of our fellow mech pilots alive."

"Damn... I would love to go with you guys, but my wife just gave birth to a son. I can't bear to bring my kids to a warzone. I think... I will prepare the paperwork to transfer to the Davute Branch of our clan."

Ves did not hide his new plan from the others. He deliberately spread out the news in order to measure the overall sentiment of his clansmen and gauge their willingness to leave the comforts of Davute behind in order to endure a lot of hardships in the deeper parts of the new frontier.

Fortunately, his clansmen had not lost that much fire and ambition. His values and ideals still remained strong among the soldiers and support personnel of his clan.

Still, the amount of voices that betrayed the timidity of their speakers had also grown more numerous. Many of these Larkinsons had gotten married and started having children.

While Ves could sympathize with their parental instincts, he did not really like it that he would have to leave them behind in Davute while they could still do a lot of good in the main fleet.

"Oh well, it's their choice whether they want to trade their ambitions for stability."

Ves did not intend to stop or discourage these transfers in any way. He wanted his core fleet to be filled with supportive and like-minded Larkinsons who could tolerate the same risks as him. His clan could just make up for the shortfall in specialized personnel by picking up more bodies from the job market.

Besides, the Davute Branch of the Larkinson Clan had actually grown quite extensively as of late. The Cat Nest, the First Star Mech Academy as well as other auxiliary holdings all demanded Larkinsons to operate and protect these sites.

As word continued to spread, Ves held brief discussions with both the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan on his new initiative.

Marshal Ariadne Wodin did not exactly react with much enthusiasm when Ves called her over the comm.

"Is it truly necessary to keep acting as recklessly as you did in the past?" She asked in an uncomprehending tone. "We are in a completely different situation than before. Our power base is secure, our financial position is healthy and our support among the locals is growing by the day. We do not have to struggle as much to ensure our survival as before."

"Exactly."

"Pardon, Ves?"

"You are right that we aren't struggling as much anymore." Ves explained his view. "While you and many others see this as a benefit, I see it as a disadvantage. The moment we stop struggling is the moment we become ordinary. Average. Complacent."

"I think you are exaggerating this too much." Ariadne frowned. "As I have stated before, we are in a different situation from the past. We no longer have to take desperate actions in order to survive and cover our expenses. Instead of making decisions that are high risk and high reward, we can continue to develop on our current course and focus on achieving success on the market and in the political arena. The immediate rewards may not be so high, but the risks are much lower, especially now that our collective status has risen to a large degree. Calm and peaceful development is not cowardice, Ves. Many people and organizations have taken the slow and steady route and achieved much more success than relying on one fluke after another."

Though her logic was sound, Ves still rejected her stance. He shook his head in disagreement.

"I don't disagree with you, but what works best for others doesn't necessarily work best for me. Let me give you a bit of additional perspective. You have a military background, correct?"

"I used to serve in the Hex Army as a mech officer." The Hexer marshal confirmed. "I resigned my commission well before the outbreak of the Komodo War, though, or otherwise I would have chosen to take up my duties again."

"I understand. As a military officer, you are probably more attuned to risk and danger than normal. After all, your life and your lives are on the line whenever you make a decision that exposes you all to greater danger."

"That is only one part of the question, Ves. As soldiers, we also have a duty to follow orders and protect our people. Sometimes, you must brave great danger in order to prevent great tragedy from befalling on our own citizens."

Ves nodded in understanding. "That is an admirable sentiment. I would like to call upon your sense of duty and responsibility and support my Trailblazer Expedition."

"I fail to understand your logic. There is no obligation for us to head straight towards the frontlines and compete for spoils. The salvage that we can gather in those ruined but untouched star systems may only be worth as much as a thousand MTA credits. As far as I am aware, the revenue your LMC earns on a monthly basis vastly exceeds that sum of money."

"You are not drawing an accurate picture of the benefits that we can obtain." Ves shook his head. "Selling lots of mechs is good for our balance sheet but doesn't net us any MTA merits at all. We need to do much more in order to earn approval points from the Association."

"You can do that here in Davute." Marshal Ariadne reminded him. "The MTA rewards good research and brilliant new inventions, both of which you happen to excel at. You can keep earning a steady amount of merits without bringing you and your family any closer to dangerous alien fleets."

How could Ves possibly explain to her that this was not enough for him anymore? He needed to earn 1 billion MTA merits as fast as possible!

"Merits are only part of the equivocation, marshal. You have seen much of my brilliant works, but what you might not fully understand is what it takes to invent all of them. Many of my innovations are the products of the inspiration that I gain from getting exposed to new and different stimuli. If I remain stuck here in Davute, my exposure to new and different phenomena will remain limited."

"You don't necessarily have to travel to the wilder reaches of the new frontier, Ves. A leader and a mech designer such as yourself are always expected to remain in the rear. Do you understand how atypical it is for you to stay by the side of soldiers who are rushing towards the front?"

"I understand that, as much as I understand that I am different from those other mech designers. I would have never made it this far if I acted like any

other average professional. Look, marshal, I am determined to advance to Master and maybe Star Designer in the future. I won't be able to do that if I don't try my best to move forward. I am proceeding with this expedition with or without your support. I would rather have you and your fellow soldiers at our side. You and your fellow Glory Seekers might not have much use for inspiration, but I will make sure you will gain your fair share of loot and plunder."

Ves directly pointed at the weakness of the Glory Seekers. For all of the support that they could expect to receive from the Hexer colonies, it was highly uncomfortable for them to be so dependent on external help.

Unlike the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan, the Glory Seekers had not set up any enterprises that could cover their expenses and grow their organization.

Soldiers had their pride as well, and that counted double for prickly female Hexers. For them to be able to earn their own keep and prove their ability to provide for themselves was a powerful incentive in itself!

Marshal Ariadne sighed. "You can count on our support and our participation. We are not comfortable with letting you, your wife and your children travel to the more dangerous parts of the new frontier without our protection. You all play a significant role to us and our fellow Hexers. We cannot allow you to come to harm."

"Then do your best to prepare for our next expedition. There is still a couple of years left before we are done with the current rearming phase. I hope to see your fleet and mech forces replenished and ready to begin a large and extensive campaign."

The two discussed what the Glory Seekers should focus on in order to be as helpful as possible once the Trailblazer Expedition commenced.

p "I don't need you to invest too much in logistics, research or any of that crap." Ves told her. "Our clan can cover those aspects for the most part. What we truly need are additional mechs and carriers. Combat power is the root of our strength. My clan currently fields the most mechs and we have a rich roster of expert mechs. The Cross Clan has an ace pilot who will soon gain access to an ace mech. What can you bring, marshal?"

"We can bring state-level support from our contacts with the Hexers in the Red Ocean. Neither your Larkinson Clan nor the Cross Clan have the backing of state institutions."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "We don't need any help from afar. It's not as if technical support from a team of Masters can magically make a powerful enemy battleship explode. What we need are soldiers in the field. You have the least amount of carriers, mechs and expert mechs. Your Glory Seekers have always fallen behind when it comes to contributing in battle and the disparity is only growing over time. If you don't do anything about it, your voice will grow smaller and smaller, and the share of the loot that you are entitled to will shrink as well."

As a dependent force, the Glory Seekers were unable to expand in the same manner as the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan. While that was advantageous in some cases, right now their slow growth was dragging down the rest of the alliance.

His words served as a signal as well as a warning message. If the Glory Seekers did not kick their expansion into gear, Ves would make sure to marginalize them in the future.

Marshal Ariadne definitely got the message. "I shall speak to my relatives of the Wodin Dynasty as soon as possible. Although it will put more strain on the development of the Hexer colonies, it is best if they can increase their contributions to my fleet. We have already transferred a couple of kilograms of

phasewater to them as dividends in a sense. The prospect of earning additional treasures by supporting us should increase their willingness to contribute."

Ves didn't know that the Glory Seekers had actually passed on a significant amount of the phasewater they obtained from the Purgatory Campaign.

That made the relationship between the Glory Seekers and the Hexer colonies more transactional and also hierarchical.

"Don't be so enthusiastic about sending your loot back to the colonies." He advised. "You should retain more of it and invest more in your own expansion. Don't hoard all of the phasewater you have left. You should try and convert them into valuable goods and phasewater products as soon as possible. There are still a few years left before we depart from Davute, so there should be plenty of time for you to figure out how you want to spend your remaining wealth."

"We will take your advice under consideration."

#### **Chapter 4155 Quantity Over Quality**

Compared to the hesitant and problematic Glory Seekers, Ves obtained a much better impression of the Cross Clan.

Though he decided to contact Professor Benedict as opposed to the Cross Patriarch, the mech designer was authoritative enough to speak on behalf of the clan.

The older man only paused for a brief moment before he nodded. "We will be ready to depart alongside your fleet when the time has come."

Ves blinked. He didn't think it would be that easy to gain a positive response from the Crossers.

"What does Patriarch Reginald think?"

The Senior scoffed and crossed his arms. "What do you think, Ves? There is no way he is going to miss out on all of the action that will be sure to haunt your tracks. Even if you did not decide to depart Davute in order to pursue greater opportunities, he would have taken his clan out for a different purpose. Patriarch Reginald... is incredibly eager to test his new strength against actual opponents."

It was hard to deny the powerful ace pilot's wishes. His authority and recognition was too great.

Ves already expected Reginald to be eager to flex his new muscles and that of his soon-to-be-upgraded Mars, but for the ace pilot to be so quick to disregard the safety of his fellow Crossers was concerning.

Oh well. Reginald's lust for glory and battle worked out well in this situation. With their leader in such a hurry to fight, the Crossers would definitely be willing to play along and become an enthusiastic participant of the Trailblazer Expedition.

"Do you guys have any special concerns or demands?" Ves asked.

"Hmm." Professor Benedict paused and thought for a moment. "We can take care of our own needs. We will be able to bring plenty of ships and mechs if that is what you are concerned about. The only pertinent issue that will bother us is what we should do for the people we are leaving behind in Davute."

"What are your clan's concerns, exactly?"

"We are both mech designers who have witnessed how low people can go when they think they can get away with their deeds." Benedict said in a lower tone. "Though the authorities and power blocs of Davute have made great strides in developing this planet and maintaining law and order, the society that they have built in this corner of space is like a house of cards. Any shock



to the system can easily cause the cards to collapse, thereby exposing the people stationed in this star system to the coveting gazes of others."

"Hm, I see what you mean, professor."

"For now, everything is okay because we have concentrated our entire strength here. No one dares to do anything to our people because the bulk of our forces are close at hand. That will change once we depart. While we are still able to deter many parties from doing anything to our assets and people that we have left behind, what if something happens to us? What if we fall out of contact for an extended period of time? Both our Cross Production Center and your Cat Nest will become increasingly more attractive targets. You know how ruthless and cutthroat the people in the frontier have become."

Ves grimaced but nodded in agreement.

The rules of the game were different in the new frontier. Even a place as openly calm and peaceful as Davute was not as stable as it appeared on the surface.

It was like a masquerade. Due to every stakeholder's overarching need to present Davute as a safe and fair port system, no one wanted to cause chaos and trigger panic among the population.

However, that did not mean that all of the power plays and confrontations had disappeared.

The fighting merely took place in a different arena and form that was out of sight to the public.

The local news portals regularly reported about companies that suddenly went bankrupt and got taken over by other companies. They also reported on companies that suddenly reconciled with their former competitors and merged with them to form larger organizations.

These were the results of hidden struggles that might not be as violent as open battle but could be just as vicious as one. Whole lives were ruined every day in order to further the ambitions of more successful competitors.

Right now, the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan were in an overwhelmingly strong position, so much so that they were already moving to become one of the major power blocks of Davute.

However, their lack of eagerness to commit to Davute would probably come to haunt them sooner or later. Leaving for another major expedition essentially meant that they would have to leave their large and valuable landbound holdings behind.

Ves eventually shrugged. "We don't have any strong solutions that can guarantee that people won't mess around with our planetary branches. Aside from relying on deterrence, the only other viable way to guard them is through relying on mercenary contracts and allies. I think combining the two is the best way to go forward. As long as we befriend local mercenary organizations and pay them handsome rewards to guard our people and locations, I think the effect will not be much different from guarding these places with our own forces."

Though it sounded good, Professor Benedict still maintained a contemptuous expression.

"Mercenaries. No matter how reputable they become, the bottom line is that they only care about themselves. Hardly any mercs will fight and die in order to uphold a written contract. Every penalty is tolerable as long as they can run away from a powerful enemy with their lives intact. The only truly useful aspect about hiring mercenaries is that we can prevent them from acting against us and that they are still effective at scaring away weaker parties."

Ves let out a tired breath as he scratched his head. Professor Benedict was remarkably hard to please.

However, a part of Ves was glad that he was facing a skeptical and critical conversation partner as opposed to a dim-witted yes-man.

The turbulent life experiences of the man that used to go by the Skull Architect was particularly rich and varied compared to many other Seniors.

Though Ves always had to remind himself that Professor Benedict used to be a vicious and unhinged mech designer who deliberately murdered an expert pilot in order to experiment with the demigod's skull, for now the former criminal was on his side.

If Benedict was concerned about something, then it was always prudent to listen to his warnings.

"What do you suggest, then?" Ves asked. "If mercenaries are out and if other allies can't be relied upon in a crisis, then what else can we do to safeguard our assets?"

It was all well and good to criticize potential solutions, but if they couldn't come up with any better alternatives, then they wouldn't be getting anywhere.

"There are no ideal solutions to this situation." Professor Benedict frankly admitted. "There is only an array of least-bad options within our reach. I have two different suggestions."

"Explain."

The older man gestured with one hand. "First, accept that our people and holdings in Davute are always expendable. There is no absolute defense. It is impossible for our main fleets to remain in this star system forever when the rest of the Red Ocean has so much more to offer. Do not forget that while Krakatoa is an exciting zone at the moment that has plenty of novelties to offer, it is only the equivalent of a star sector in the galactic rim of the old

galaxy. As soon as the invasion progresses, every zone in the vicinity will turn into backwater regions, especially if the Big Two decides to open a new greater beyonder gate in a more central location."

He was right. The MTA and CFA chose to invade the Red Ocean from the edge of the galaxy where the density of stars was the lowest and the amount of resources available were also lackluster.

This ensured that there were relatively few concentrations of strong alien fleets and strongholds that could seriously stall and hinder the Big Two's initial blitzkrieg.

In the long term, economic factors outweighed these temporary strategic factors, making the Davute Branch less relevant in the next century.

Of course, the branch played a critical role to the Larkinson Clan's business operations for the time being.

"I suppose you're right." Ves sighed. "While we will definitely get set back if we lose our stuff in Davute, the rest of us will still be okay for the most part."

"We should still seek to minimize the risks at all costs. This is why I suggest that you beef up your local presence with an abundance of personnel. You do not necessarily need to invest too much funding and resources into their development. As long as you can afford it, just go ahead and hire a lot of average but easy-to-please mech pilots and other useful personnel. Equip them with cost-effective mechs that can be powerful when grouped up in large numbers and you have gained ownership of a permanent garrison force that is decently strong, much more loyal than any third-party force and not that costly to maintain."

"That... is actually a pretty good approach."

Ves looked thoughtful as he seriously considered the merits of this approach. While he felt a bit repulsed by the thought of bringing in a lot of 'cannon

fodder' into a clan that centered around family and loyalty, the pragmatic side of him won out this time.

He knew that as soon as he kicked off his Trailblazer Expedition, the Cat Nest and the other clan facilities on the surface would become a lot emptier. Some workplaces might even be understaffed entirely!

Instead of emptying out these places and turning them into attractive targets, Ves would rather fill them up with bodies that could at least be counted upon to do their duty.

Building up an extensive amount of rear echelon personnel did not sound so bad now that he recognized their greater value to his organization.

The increasingly growing reputation of the Larkinson Clan played a large role in making this feasible. Huge numbers of random people constantly approached the recruiters and begged to be let into the clan that was famed for treating its members extremely well!

Even if the new entrants found out that branch members weren't treated as well as the core members, it hardly mattered as Ves did not intend to mistreat or shortchange the former.

Besides, he had already instituted several promotion channels to give branch members the opportunity to promote to the core of the clan after earning a large amount of Larkinson merits.

As long as Ves and his fellow leaders spent more effort into fleshing out the branch system, the Davute Branch would likely remain fairly solid once the Trailblazer Expedition finally commenced!

Originally, the Larkinson Clan planned to leave 10,000 to 20,000 branch members behind once the main fleet made its way out. This was a respectable number that could fully keep the production facilities running, but

the amount of troops that could defend the Cat Nest would be slightly insufficient.

If Ves hired tens of thousands more personnel with most of them focused on defense and local field operations, then the Cat Nest would still be able to function as a formidable fortress!

Not only that, but expanding the Davute Branch to a massive degree also helped with building up a large reserve of readily-available mech pilots. If the main fleet ever suffered heavy losses, Ves could call up thousands if not tens of thousands of branch members to fill up an immediate shortage in manpower.

All in all, there were no obvious downsides to Professor Benedict's proposal other than that it demanded a huge amount of monetary investment and upkeep.

Still, Ves believed that as long as he was clever enough in setting up an economical mech roster for the Davute Branch, the local business operations should be able to generate enough revenue to maintain a sizable standing force.

"Quantity over quality has its virtues at times."

### **Chapter 4156 Simpler Opponents**

Ves held a fruitful talk with Professor Benedict Cortez about the Cross Clan's participation in the Trailblazer Expedition.

Just as expected, Patriarch Reginald Cross was so eager to test his massively improved combat against real opponents that he would jump at any opportunity for a fight!

To be fair, his eagerness to prove himself and enjoy a good fight was not only about satisfying his urges.

Ace pilots could not stand still. The journey from junior ace pilot to senior ace pilot was long. The journey from senior ace pilot to god pilot was even more arduous and torturous.

Halfgods that took it easy and only spent their time on training and preparation would never be able to make significant progress!

One way or another, ace pilots needed to fight in a battle with real stakes in order to progress their willpower and mentality.

This was a known concern to many states that were qualified to retain ace pilots and they found various ways to resolve this issue.

In fact, Ves had learned only recently that one of the favorite methods that states employed to keep their ace pilots in shape was to conduct secret duels.

A state with at least two ace pilots who could both compete against each other without provoking any incidents against foreign neighbors.

These were intensive sparring sessions that were much more destructive than usual!

In order to generate as much stimulation as possible, the two combatants received allowances to fight harder and more extensively than regular sparring sessions. Inflicting serious damage to the ace mechs was not an uncommon occurrence!

Though the practice was expensive, the growth of the ace pilots made it all worth it. States that weren't short of money were naturally more interested in accelerating the growth of their top combat assets.

More contentious and controversial spars occurred between states.

Ideally, the states that agreed to pit their ace pilots against each other had nothing to do with each other.

States that did not neighbor each other generally had no competing interests, so their ace pilots could fight to their heart's content without giving their enemies detailed information about their fighting prowess.

These spars usually yielded more growth because the ace pilots wouldn't be fighting against colleagues from their own side. They also became more exposed to different mech design styles and unique piloting specialties.

Still, the chance of details leaking out was still a persistent concern. This was a devastating disadvantage that could give an enemy a powerful head-start in countering an essential military asset.

What surprised Ves was that Patriarch Reginald Cross was not afraid of exposing his full combat prowess.

"There is no way to hide this information forever, Ves." He spoke during a follow-up meeting on the planning of the Trailblazer Expedition. "I will fight in a battle sooner or later, and the more I show up on the battlefield, the harder it becomes to keep the footage and details confidential. Rather than cowering back because we are so paranoid about giving away an information advantage, I would rather fight in front of an audience and gain the combat experience I need to further my rise. As long as I become a senior ace pilot or more, what is the harm of letting our enemies know how strong I am? The Mars and I will just smash through the opposition by relying on our superior strength!"

The new Saint did not just convey his confidence in words. He radiated it with his powerful Saint Kingdom!

Even if Patriarch Reginald wasn't interfacing with the Mars right now, his force of will was still qualitatively more powerful than ever before, allowing him to distort reality in a short range around his body!



Ves winced as he found it harder to maintain his composure. The strong mental and spiritual pressure that Reginald exerted when he became passionate was enough to influence ordinary people into submission!

"Can you be more considerate and temper your emotions?! It's difficult to conduct a proper conversation with you when you are expressing yourself so exuberantly!"

"Oh. My apologies, Ves. I am not accustomed to holding myself back."

"That is quite obvious."

Patriarch Reginald was not only an aggressive person by nature, but grew up in a substantially different culture and environment where open expression of strength was much more common.

This was why Ves knew that Reginald didn't necessarily mean to browbeat anyone. It was just part of who he was, as evidenced by how the ace pilot's domain had developed.

Ves and the Larkinsons had already learned that they needed to change the way they communicated and cooperated with the Cross Clan.

Anything that Reginald had a vested interest in always had to meet his approval. This was quite annoying at times because the strong-willed ace pilot almost never changed his mind! He was so resistant to persuasion that it was just easier to work around him entirely if possible!

Fortunately, Patriarch Reginald was still a bit more grounded than his infamous father.

Compared to the son who had undergone a huge amount of hardships and suffered lots of tragedies, Saint Hemmington Cross had enjoyed a relatively smooth ride to his peak.

The more Ves understood the emboldened Cross Patriarch, the less concerned he was about their continued cooperation.

Patriarch Reginald might be wilder and less restrained, but he at least paid more attention to the safety of his fellow Crossers.

"I will tell my men to step up their recruitment." Reginald promised to Ves.

"With my presence, my clan's ability to recruit strong mech pilots has become a lot easier. We can produce as many strong mechs as we want, so that is not a problem either. The only real bottleneck that we are facing is getting our hands on more hulls, but I am already working on that problem. Shipyards tend to be a lot more accommodating towards our orders once I pay a personal visit to their offices."

"I can imagine how easily the executives of those companies are willing to bow to your persuasion." Ves twitched his mouth.

Compared to his reputation as the so-called Devil Tongue, the Cross Patriarch was the true demon in this room!

Whereas Ves had to rely on trickery, lies, half-truths and misdirection, Reginald merely had to leverage his naturally intimidating presence in order to gain other people's agreement!

The new ace pilot's domain actually lent itself well to this purpose. Reginald's instinct to dominate had become the defining trait of his domain field, which meant that both enemies and neutral people who did not possess strong mental defenses were easily susceptible to his unique method of 'negotiation'!

Though the ethics of Patriarch Reginald's actions were debatable, Ves could not argue about the results.

"How many mechs will your clan be able to field once we have reached the end of our rearming phase?" Ves curiously asked.

"I don't exactly know. I leave that business to Benedict and my administrators. I think one of them has given me an estimate that we will have enough carriers to field approximately 12,000 mechs."

The ace pilot's grimace made it obvious that this was far from satisfactory to the ace pilot.

Back when the Cross Clan was led by Saint Hemmington Cross, the Cross Clan at its height could easily rally hundreds of thousands of mech pilots if not more!

However, the circumstances that Reginald and his father operated in were different.

The old galaxy was already highly developed and the Garlen Empire was both a powerful and established state that hosted a lot of industrial activity.

The new frontier was much more limited in every way. Though shipyards and other factories had been popping up like mushrooms in the past year, the influx of more and more pioneers into the Red Ocean continued to increase demand on starships without any signs of slowing down!

Therefore, no matter how 'persuasive' Patriarch Reginald had become, even he could not utilize his formidable willpower to conjure up entire combat carriers out of thin air!

"I told Benedict that if other companies are so reluctant to sell carrier ships to us, that we should take our money and build our own shipyards." The Cross Patriarch casually said. "It could even be a lucrative new industry for us seeing how popular it is. I heard that even your clan started to produce starships as well."

Ves crossed his arms. "Let me guess. Benedict and the rest of your clan rejected your proposal."

"That's exactly what happened! I don't understand! They bring up all kinds of charts and numbers that I don't understand."

"If you don't have an existing foundation in shipbuilding, it's extremely hard to get into." Ves told the man. "Even our converted shipyard is mostly relegated to constructing simpler combat carriers for internal use. It's not that we don't want to, it's just that our access to resources is extremely limited. It takes a lot of metal to construct a ship, and while plenty of them gets shipped to Davute every day, a lot of the imports are already reserved by the oldest industries that have signed long-term contracts with the suppliers years ago. These first movers effectively maintain an oligopoly on resources that is hard to get around."

Though the Larkinson Clan has been doing its best to establish fixed relationships with newer material suppliers that arrived late to the party, these were still smaller players that could only make contracts with smaller and less dominant mining companies.

The logistics behind this was extremely complicated and the overall picture evolved every month due to new developments and random events.

One day, a mining planet might get burned to the ground because an errant alien starship had arrived to exact vengeance against the human race.

The next day, a mining company might get bought out by a larger party after bribing the shareholders.

The new frontier was such a wild environment that even the Larkinson Clan's large Hammerworks Manufacturing Complex had to lower its output at times because the supply of several critical materials had dried up for a few weeks!

If the volatility in the supply of raw materials affected the production of mechs, then they most certainly impacted the production of starships as well!

"I feel tempted to fight for power and try to take over Davute." Reginald expressed his frustration as his will became more agitated! "Those other fellows that came in earlier than us have claimed so much of the good stuff for themselves that they're not leaving us with enough materials! It is beneath us to keep begging for scraps."

p "Whoa, whoa, whoa! Slow down, Reginald! Let's not talk about trying to compete for power or anything. It's not worth it. Davute is a planet that is built up by the first wave of pioneers. They put a lot of effort and invested huge amounts of money to develop this trading hub. They are not only highly entrenched in this star system, but they also built up a tight network of allies. I can guarantee you that no matter whether you're an ace pilot or not, if you declare war on a single group, you will instantly make a hundred additional enemies!"

The fiery pressure exuded by Patriarch Reginald receded a bit as he recognized the reality of the situation. "You're right. There's too many ace pilots anyway. I am certain I can beat any one of them in a duel, but my father has taught me that it is not wise to fight against multiple of them at the same time."

"Your father taught you that lesson with his life." Ves concurred. "Don't disappoint him by ignoring that and making the same preventable mistakes. Compared to fighting against the powerful founders of Davute, you're much better off joining me on my Trailblazer Expedition. Just think about it. Once we head to the deep frontier and explore former alien strongholds, we'll definitely bump into our fair share of exotic alien enemies. You don't need to care about their opinions at all. You can smash them all to pieces with your Mars without needing to restrain yourself!"

Reginald grew a lot more excited about this prospect. "You're right! There's no complicated politics or alliances when it comes to aliens. They all hate us

anyway, so everyone will think that we are doing a lot of good by killing off the original races of the Red Ocean!"

There were so many indigenous alien populations in the Red Ocean that it would take a long time to wipe them all out! This meant that Patriarch Reginald could fight as many of them as he wanted to without worrying about running out of opponents!

The Red Ocean was practically paradise to him for that reason alone!

"Don't forget about human opponents as well. There are many scavengers and lowlives scurrying about in the deep frontier. Not all of them would take kindly to our presence. The rules are different over there and fights can break out over the slightest reasons. We need to get ready to fight against powerful mech forces at any time, just in case." Ves cautioned the ace pilot.

"You're right."

### **Chapter 4157 Emergent Boutique**

Everything was slowly heading in the right direction. The announcement of the Trailblazer Expedition generated a lot of support and invigorated all of the parties involved.

The unveiling of the tentative new plan also invited a lot of feedback from many people. A lot of Larkinsons, Crossers and Glory Seekers met together and shared their insights and suggestions.

Many of them were not particularly relevant, but with so many people available, a few ideas were bound to raise good points!

With several years to go before the kickoff of the Trailblazer Expedition, all of the parties involved had plenty of time to prepare beforehand.

One of the factors that Ves cared the most was the amount of mechs that they could bring along the journey.

The latest estimates that Ves received was that the Larkinson Clan was aiming to field 10,000 mechs from the main fleet.

The Glory Seekers promised to do their best to bring 5,000 mechs to the expedition while the Cross Clan was confident it could meet its target of 12,000 mechs.

In total, the expeditionary fleet would therefore be able to field 27,000 mechs at once, which was much greater than before but still rather insufficient considering the potential opposition that they might face!

"If we can't bring anymore mechs, then we have to make sure to strengthen the ones we have as much as possible!" Ves concluded.

This resulted in a revised design strategy that called for designing new Larkinson-exclusive mechs and upgrading existing mech models at much higher performance standards than before!

The amount of design work required to accomplish all of this was considerable. The Design Department had to allocate more mech designers away from commercial mech design projects in order to meet the internal needs of the clan.

In order to prevent the LMC from sinking into stagnation again by slowing down the release of new commercial mech models, Ves and Gloriana paid extra attention to hiring additional batches of mech designers.

It was easy enough to hire low-ranking mech designers. If there was one type of professional that would never run out, it was Novice Mech Designers and Apprentice Mech Designers who were struggling to build their careers!

Just because they managed to move to the Red Ocean did not mean that their fortunes suddenly turned. The competition was higher and the standards were higher as well.

The different market and industry conditions ruined a lot of hopes. The painful truth was that mech designers who originally came from poorer states from the galactic rim possessed the least chances to get a good job.

Few people wanted them because these mech designers were not as qualified to work with heartland-level materials and equipment that had become the norm in the new frontier!

Though Gloriana was extremely picky about the mech designers that applied to join the Design Department, Ves was not as discerning. He paid attention to a lot of other traits such as loyalty, humility and obedience.

"Look, you can put forth all of the demands you want when it comes to hiring Journeymen, but our assistant mech designers don't need to be as good." Ves pushed back against her when recruiting had slowed down. "All of the good ones would rather work for the Cross Clan since rumors that Professor Benedict Cortez is close to realizing his design philosophy have already spread out. A lot of mech designers are eager to work for Master Mech Designers even if they can only speak to such an impressive person only once a year. We on the other hand aren't attractive enough because a lot of colleagues think they can do better than us, as absurd as that sounds."

Gloriana grimaced as she held a sleeping Andraste against her chest. "Those fools. Just because we are still Journeymen does not mean we are in the same league anymore. Can't those mech designers pay more attention to our accomplishments?"

Ves shrugged. "It's hard for them to take us seriously. The newcomers who are still fresh off the boat are particularly ignorant of our true strength. The genuine talents will all be snapped up by more reputable and established mech designers anyway. Just give up on hiring the best prospects and try to look among the group of people that are not as desirable at first glance. I'm confident that you'll be able to find a couple of hidden gems."



His wife did not look impressed.

"So what you are telling me is that I should go dumpster diving in the job market, is that it? I have to sift through tons of garbage in order to find a single relatively clean and relatively nice gem, is that it? Are you crazy?!"

If Gloriana wasn't holding one of their sleeping daughters right now, she would have certainly expressed her feelings louder!

"Hey, if you are feeling so stressed out about hiring the right personnel, you can leave the job to me. I have a good eye for talent." Ves boasted.

"No! I won't let you botch this job or bring in any weirdos into our Design Department! I will do this myself because that is the only way I ensure we do it properly!"

In the end, they decided to split their responsibilities.

Ves mainly concerned himself with recruiting low-ranking mech designers. The amount of applicants was rather abundant, but it was still a challenge to identify those that were the most honest, productive and suitable to work in large design teams.

In the interest of recruiting as many potential Journeymen as possible, Ves tried his best to recruit mech designers with spiritual potential.

Unfortunately, they were quite rare!

If Ves wanted to maximize the chances of breakthroughs among his own people, then he would have to string out his recruitment campaigns across several years, all the while rejecting the majority of applicants.

This was not sustainable. If word spread about how the Larkinson Clan turned away most applicants including those with excellent qualifications, then less and less mech designers would make the attempt.

In addition, there were lots of talents among those with no spiritual potential. Just because they were unlikely to advance to Journeyman and higher did not mean they had no uses in the Larkinson Clan.

Plenty of the more senior assistants had gone on to become team leaders. As the amount of projects the Larkinsons needed to complete had skyrocketed as of late, more senior leadership positions had come into existence as well in order to keep everything organized.

As such, Ves no longer paid as much attention to spiritual potential and kept to a more reasonable set of recruitment criteria.

Since his goal was to expand the amount of assistant mech designers at his disposal to 1000 individuals, the Design Department quickly experienced a lot of changes!

The Genesis Lab at the Cat Nest became a lot busier as more and more bodies moved back and forth.

A lot of new faces showed up and newcomers were being introduced to old hands every week.

Though the frequent changes disrupted the schedules and routines of every mech designer, the amount of design work that got done nonetheless increased by a massive degree, which made everyone happy in the end!

"We can complete more parallel variant design projects per design round!"

As bestsellers such as the Pacifier, the War Squire and the ever-popular Ferocious Piranha continued to be sold in massive numbers, the demand for official first-party variants that excelled in different areas rose as well.

"One size never fits all in the mech industry. There are many different mech forces that all work under different circumstances. As much as their leaders would like to adopt our mechs, if it doesn't fit into their system, it's no use adopting our products."

The massive increase in assistant mech designers proved to be essential to getting a lot of work done on the variant designs.

The difficulty of designing the alterations was nowhere near comparable to designing a completely new mech model from scratch, so Ves and the lead designers readily entrusted most of the work to the ordinary design teams.

What was interesting was that many of the first generation of assistant mech designers that had worked for Ves and Gloriana from the start all took up management and leadership positions in order to herd all of the cats.

Ves could already tell that many of these mech designers were probably planning to dedicate all of their attention to leading other mech designers as opposed to continuing to expand their own design capabilities.

He sighed. "Not everyone has the same opportunities as others. Life isn't fair sometimes."

Just like genetic aptitude, there were intrinsic factors that prevented mech designers from fulfilling their dreams.

Some people found out their true situation fairly soon. That, or they just gave up too easily.

Other people were rather late in their willingness to admit defeat. There were even stubborn fools that insisted that they still possessed the chance of advancing to Journeymen!

Though Ves could clearly tell whether a person possessed spiritual potential or not, he did not intervene or say anything to anyone.

This was a journey that every mech designer had to go through. He also believed that even the most talentless person still had a chance of developing and activating spiritual potential later in their lives.

As time went by, an increasing number of mech designers cut their teeth in many different design projects.

The more ambitious individuals among the assistant mech designers also spent much of their free time on designing their own mechs.

Though their work was in no way comparable to the primary output of the Design Department, the Living Mech Corporation still offered to sell the homebrew mechs through its own sales channels.

Of course, there was no way that Ves wanted to sell these messy and inconsistent mechs under his main business brand, so he specifically ordered the LMC to set up an alternate brand that specialized in selling low quantities of these products.

The Hammerworks possessed such great production capacity that there was still room to produce small batches of relatively low-quality mechs.

"Let's call our new brand the Emergent Boutique." Ves proposed. "The mechs that will be sold under this label might represent the future of our clan one day."

From a commercial standpoint, the Emergent Boutique was an abject failure.

In a market environment where there were an abundance of good mechs that were designed by highly-skilled Masters, it was extremely hard for the works of Novices and Apprentices to get taken seriously!

The only way for any of these mechs to get sold was by competing in terms of price, and that was a lot more difficult in the Red Ocean due to the high cost of raw materials.

No matter how much the assistant mech designers cut back on the design budgets of their projects, the painful truth was that their machines were

unlikely to get sold unless they charged a price that was significantly below the cost of production.

In other words, the Larkinson Clan lost money for every Emergent Boutique mech that got sold!

This was an insane business model and would most certainly get shut down if this went on without any signs of improvements.

However, Ves never set out to make a profit with the Emergent Boutique. He accepted the losses it incurred because its existence kept his assistant mech designers content.

It only took a single sale of a mech of their own design to make them happy! The satisfaction and fulfillment they gained at the realization that someone actually saw value in their work was precious to every mech designer.

As a large proportion of the roughly 1000 assistants of the Design Department took advantage of the Emergent Boutique, they improved significantly faster than before.

Being able to work outside of their narrow responsibilities on other people's design projects provided many more challenges and rewards!

Each independent design project they completed brought them closer to a critical turning point.

Soon enough, the Design Department welcomed its first batch of assistant mech designers that managed to break through to the rank of Journeyman Mech Designer!

"Finally!"

### **Chapter 4158 Internal Lead Designers**

Journeyman were the heart of the Larkinson Clan's renowned Design Department.

In the absence of Seniors and Masters, Journeymen wielded great authority within this highly productive department.

Their titles already showed how much leeway they obtained. Every Journeyman in the Design Department automatically received the title and position of lead designer.

Though each of them needed to undergo a small assessment period, as long as they proved their abilities, Ves was more than willing to let them loose and decide on their own projects and work assignments.

This was a level of freedom and autonomy that mech design organizations rarely granted to Journeymen!

In institutions where Masters and Seniors were in charge, Journeymen were simply higher-level assistants who could be entrusted with more complicated design tasks.

The latter rarely received more comprehensive opportunities to design brand-new original mechs where they could implement their own ideas and design philosophies!

As such, many Journeymen that went on to become lead designers in the Larkinson Clan began to love their jobs!

This was also one of the primary means that Ves employed to keep the growing number of Journeymen in the Design Department happy and unwilling to leave.

Though every member of the Larkinson Clan was loyal to it by default, Ves wasn't willing to take any chances and test the boundaries of his personnel.

As the amount of commitments of the Design Department increased, everyone's workload continued to increase. More and more lead designers were needed in order to keep everyone's time schedules reasonable!

Fortunately, a steady trickle of Journeymen joined the Design Department through two different channels.

These channels consisted of both internal promotion and external recruitment.

There were advantages and disadvantages to both channels.

p Internal promotion allowed the Larkinson Clan to obtain trustworthy Journeymen among those who had worked in the Design Department for years.

They had not only acclimated to the Larkinson Clan and the Design Department, but were also heavily influenced by the work of Ves, Gloriana and other established lead designers.

This meant that they immediately fit into their new positions and knew exactly how to fulfill their new work responsibilities!

Their loyalty was never in doubt since their time in the clan had thoroughly influenced their thoughts when they were still fairly impressionable.

However, the downside to this was that they were so similar to other long-standing members of the Larkinson Clan that there wasn't enough diversity in opinion and thought.

Internal lead designers were also less spectacular to those that were recruited from outside of the clan.

While every Journeyman started off as a Novice and Apprentice, there were still differences in talent, qualifications and motivation.

The ones that advanced within the Design Department possessed relatively modest to average backgrounds. No matter how many skills they learned while they diligently worked to advance to the next rank, there was only so much they could do to widen their knowledge base.

Gloriana even considered them to be rather dull and uninspiring due to the relative lack of imagination and innovation in their works.

Ves was not so quick to dismiss the value of these 'boring' mech designers.

Not everyone needed to be a superstar and the Design Department could use a lot more solid and stable personalities in order to counterbalance the more crazy ones such as himself!

The quintessential representative of this class of mech designers was Miles Tovar-Larkinson.

The man had been a Journeyman candidate within the Design Department for years.

In fact, Miles showed so little progress and ingenuity since he became a Journeyman candidate Ves and Gloriana frankly forgot about the former highborn Brighter!

It was hard not to feel disappointed in Miles. He had become a Journeyman candidate at roughly the same period of time as Ketis. While the latter had broken through a long time ago and designed one innovative swordsman mech after another, Miles was still mucking about as an Apprentice who had gotten stuck in the mud!

Therefore, no one expected Miles to break through to Journeyman a few years after the Larkinson Clan temporarily settled in Davute.

"You sure took your time." Ves simply said as he met with the man who belatedly advanced to Journeyman.

Miles looked fairly hapless despite reaching the same rank as his superior.

"To be honest, I did not expect to become a Journeyman Mech Designer myself. I had just completed another aerial mech design for the Emergent



Boutique. I had higher hopes for it than my other projects, but never did I realize that it would be the design that would push me forward."

"Can I take a look at your design?"

"Ah, certainly. Here you go, sir."

Ves studied the design schematic as well as the supplementary documents.

"This flight system looks odd."

"It's my own original design." Miles Tovar said with a hint of pride. "While Miss Juliet Stameross admittedly provided me with a lot of help, I worked on this flight system after learning many lessons in my previous independent mech designs. It not only encompasses the design solutions that I had developed a long time ago, I also combined it with other, newer solutions that make use of clever techniques and interesting materials."

"I can see that, Miles. If I am guessing this right, this flight system is fairly low-powered but also stealthier than normal."

"That is completely right. Though it is still a work-in-progress in my eyes, this flight system represents the future direction of my design philosophy. I have chosen to specialize in designing mechs that are equipped with low-profile, low-powered and low-emission flight systems. They are best paired with stealth-oriented mechs but they can also play a useful role to mechs assigned to flanking and sabotage missions. The goal is to provide enhanced mobility while not turning the mech into a beacon on enemy sensors."

In other words, Miles' specialty was fairly narrow and obscure. Though he was no doubt decent in his own niche, Ves did not see many cases where Miles could play a pivotal role.

Ves knew better than to underestimate any mech designer. No matter what, Miles Tovar had advanced to Journeyman on his own merits, therefore

opening him up to a new world where he had a lot more possibilities at his disposal than before!

After talking to Miles a bit more, Ves confirmed that the newly-advanced mech designer could immediately get to work by leading a few design projects without needing any adjustment time.

The only thing that Ves needed to take into account was that he needed to provide his input on the projects as well in order to make them alive and decent enough to be piloted by other people.

"The current design round is still in progress, so for now I want you to lighten the burden of your fellow lead designers by supervising a few of our less complicated design projects. You can take the time to think about the first mech design projects that you will take charge of when we commence the next design round."

Miles looked surprised. "Would you entrust me with the responsibility of designing a mech for the clan or the LMC?"

"Why not? You are a Journeyman. You have already proven your competence. Besides, I can see from your latest design that you have polished your fundamentals to an admirable degree. I can already tell that your work will be solid enough to produce decent mech designs, though I think it is still necessary for you to collaborate with our more established lead designers in order to raise the standards of your work to a more satisfactory level."

"That... is understandable."

"Don't worry, Miles. As long as you begin to develop your own unique design solutions that leverage your design philosophy, then we will give you more leeway to implement your own vision on your own. Until then, it is best if you stick to collaborations."

Although it sounded as if Ves was trying to shackle Miles, both of them knew that this was for the best.

Even though all of the lead designers were nominally on the same level, in practice a hierarchy had already formed within their group!

Ves and Gloriana obviously stood at the top of the pyramid. Their authority and their design capabilities were the most impressive of anyone else's, so their opinions always came first.

A newly-advanced Journeyman with a relatively boring and niche design philosophy like Miles could not match Ves in design skill, talent, ingenuity and many other factors. He still needed to prove himself in order for his input to become more dominant within the Design Department.

Still, his new job responsibilities were already a major improvement compared to before. Unlike Apprentices, Journeymen possessed the right and privilege to provide meaningful contributions to any mech design. That was enough for Miles to get started as the most junior lead designer of the Design Department!

It turned out that Miles was not the only assistant mech designer to advance to Journeymen throughout this quiet period.

Several other notable personalities that Ves was familiar with had also made the life-changing leap from low-ranking mech designer to high-ranking mech designer!

"Congratulations, Merrill O'Brian-Larkinson." Ves warmly welcomed the rather stoic and rational mech designer to the fold. "I had a feeling that you would complete your ascension in the near future, especially since you were the one that suggested the Chiron design. You were always a bit brighter and more hardworking than the other assistants."

Despite climbing to a height that represented an immensely important turning point in her career, Miss Merrill maintained a completely neutral expression. It was as if breaking through was just another Tuesday as far as she was concerned!

"Thank you, patriarch. I have many new ideas that I have always wished to explore but couldn't. I hope you can grant me the room to experiment in my following assignments."

"You will get your chance. Just make sure they actually work and add value to the mech designs. I am sure you know the score already given that Miles has already gone ahead and adapted to his new responsibilities. Do you have any particular questions or requests or anything?"

"Not for the time being." Merrill shook her head. "I would like to take on my new duties as soon as possible."

"Uh, okay. You go ahead and do that. I have already updated your permissions so you can access more facilities and databases. I suggest you look that up and prepare for your next research projects."

Merrill O'Brian was certainly an oddball even in a clan that was filled with eccentric people. She possessed a rather mixed background and an unproven Class I design philosophy.

However, what particularly stood out to Ves was that Merrill had chosen to follow the path of a rational mech designer!

This threw Ves for a loop.

As one of the most defining example of a passionate mech designer, Ves had a lot of difficulty understanding the appeal of this radically different approach and outlook towards mech design.

Rational mech designers deliberately suppressed their passion and emotions, which usually resulted in worsening their ability to get excited over their own design philosophies.

The advantage of this was that they became so neutral that they could imitate the other design philosophies that they were familiar with to a decent degree of accuracy.

This possibility happened to make rational mech designers highly popular within the MTA, but even the mechers understood the need to employ enough passionate mech designers!

Though Ves initially had his doubts about Merrill's ability to excel in a clan and workplace where everyone else was fully passionate and invested in their own design philosophies, it did not take much time for the former pirate designer to prove her worth in the Design Department!

"What?! You can do that, Merrill?! How did you learn how to do this stuff so quickly?! I thought it would take years for you to be able to reach this point!"

Merrill's unexpected success caused Ves to develop a substantially different opinion towards rational mech designers!

#### **Chapter 4159 The Familiar Mech Designer**

It only took half a year for Merrill O'Brian, the latest Journeyman to have emerged from the growing ranks of assistant mech designers, to shock all of the lead designers!

No one was more surprised about her unexpected accomplishment than Ves!

Though Merrill had quickly distinguished herself from the other Journeymen due to her highly logical thinking process and approach towards mech design, she was still relatively new to her position.

Everyone expected her to prioritize her own specialty and passion at first in order to give her a solid foundation in being able to contribute to other mech designs.

Her specialty, which she referred to as Imbalance Exploitation, was a rather subtle and convoluted means to generate additional power and raise the efficiency of mechs by developing interesting synergies within their internal architecture.

Her specialization resembled that of Professor Benedict, though where the latter mainly focused on optimizing and improving the electrical energy transmission systems of a mech, Merrill preferred to focus on the mechanical and physical aspects of a mech.

To be honest, Ves found Merrill's specialty to be underwhelming. He couldn't imagine what kind of solid benefits she could provide that could make him choose her over another useful mech designer such as Juliet Stameross and Sara Voiken.

After all, a lot of mechs could use a solid bump in the performance of their flight systems and armor systems. The increase in strength and value was always obvious whenever the two women contributed to any given mech design!

Though Merrill did not yet manage to impress her peers by developing a brilliant new design solution that was related to her core specialty, what she did manage to do was show off the value of having a rational mech designer in the Design Department.

This was why Ves and Gloriana both looked gobsmacked as they studied the first mech that Merrill developed in her free time.

The mech she worked on was a typical landbound knight mech, which was the simplest and easiest mech type that any designer could develop.

It was a good choice for a mech designer that wanted to embark on a new concept or approach, and it also happened to synergize well with Merrill's inherent strengths in mechanical design.

While her knight mech design did indeed incorporate aspects of her core specialty, the main surprise was that it did not look as if she had designed it by herself.

As the two leaders of the Design Department looked up at the knight mech that Merrill had fabricated with the AP-VEX superfab after she had gotten her turn, it became clear that Merrill O'Brian had been working on more specialties than just her own design philosophy!

"It's... alive." Ves spoke with great admiration. "While it is only a first order living mech, it is a proper living mech that is close to my works in the past. The reproduction rate is remarkably close!"

Ves was already accustomed to the fact that he was no longer the only mech designer who could make living mechs. He had interacted with other mech designers such as Gloriana and Ketis so much that they inevitably built up a good understanding of his specialty.

By adopting similar solutions and putting their own spin on them, both Gloriana and Ketis succeeded in designing mech models that were alive, if in a different way than the classical works designed by Ves.

If Gloriana and Ketis chose to focus on their unique takes of living mechs further, then they could do a lot to catch up to Ves when it came to adding less visible properties to their products.

However, no matter how much they tried to imitate Ves, there was no way that they could surpass him when he was in his element!

Both Gloriana and Ketis had already locked themselves into their own specialties, and their spiritual attributes and domains reflected their choices.

Merrill O'Brian should be no different, but the power of rationality was entirely different from anything else that Ves had encountered in the mech industry.

The result of her unflinching efforts to leverage her distinctive strength was the knight mech before their eyes!

"It's an experiment." Merrill admitted. "This is my first formal attempt to imitate your design philosophy, patriarch, so I tried to simplify every possible variable in order to maximize my chances of success. After making many attempts to simulate your design philosophy in my mind, I eventually found a way to do so in a manner that worked."

Ves scratched his head. Her explanation was too simple and missed a lot of essential details. He hardly gained anything useful from her words!

"Do you know that several rational Master Mech Designers of the MTA have attempted to accomplish the same feat as you? None of them succeeded. Despite their formidable expertise and their high proficiency in simulating other people's design philosophies, they never managed to create a true living mech in this style. You are the first rational mech designer to have succeeded in imitating my work! How did you do it, Merrill?! I thought a design philosophy as unconventional as mine simply couldn't be expressed through mathematical formulas and calculations!"

"You are still correct as far as I know, sir." Merrill told him. "However, I think the reason why those Masters failed was because they did not make the necessary adjustments to their approach."

"Explain further, please. What makes your approach different that allowed you to succeed?"

This was an important question. Ves had long thought that rational mech designers were unable to come to terms to his own design philosophy



because it was just too weird and relied on rare spiritual attributes that were highly uncommon.

As far as Ves was able to observe, Merrill did not possess any unique advantages that clearly put her ahead of the competition. She was a young and inexperienced Journeyman who was just starting to leverage her rational approach to a greater degree.

Her spiritual attributes, though not as relevant to her specific work approach as with other mech designers, were also fairly ordinary. She did not develop any special affinity towards life.

Merrill took her time to formulate her words. "I may not be as good at designing mechs as those MTA Masters you have spoken about, but I possess at least one advantage over them. I worked in the Design Department for years. I joined the clan when it was still transitioning to a second-class organization and I have worked on over a dozen living mech designs throughout this period. I led numerous design teams that were charged with optimizing and analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of different Larkinson mech designs."

That was true. Though the qualifications of the assistant mech designers of the Design Department were fairly low, they accumulated a lot of practical experience with working with living mechs.

Combined with the knowledge that got shared in the Larkinson Clan, Merrill must have learned quite a lot of details and nuances of living mechs that were difficult to express in any manual or document!

"That is only part of the reason why I was able to imitate your design philosophy, sir. Do you remember the past few design sessions where we all became connected to each other with the help of a design network?"

Ves and Gloriana both nodded. Their companion spirits were both capable of forming design networks. Though the pair did not use this powerful capability too often for fear of developing an overdependence on this solution, it still came in handy at times!

Not only did design networks make it much easier to coordinate and collaborate on a complicated design project, they were also highly effective teaching tools.

Both Ves and Gloriana had made it a habit to employ design networks to quickly transfer a basic understanding and perspective of their unique design visions to their fellow collaborators and assistants.

The goal they had in mind was not to teach others how to design mechs like themselves, but to give them a primer on what was important and what they needed to be careful about.

It was much easier to work with mech designers who already understood your pet peeves and the elements that could trigger their sensibilities!

Ves recalled the projects he worked on in the past few months and remembered that he exposed a bit more of his design approach to Merrill.

Now that she advanced to Journeyman, she became much more capable of holding her own ground. Ves did not have to be afraid of contaminating her and drawing her away from her original path.

Also, her cognitive abilities had improved by a lot so she was much more capable of understanding more complex theories and frameworks.

"So... you took advantage of those design network sessions to understand the essence of my design philosophy through direct exposure?" Ves asked.

"Yes, and apparently I succeeded." Merrill replied in a calm tone that nonetheless conveyed a lot of confidence.

For a moment, Ves felt a chill running through his spine. He had long believed that he possessed a monopoly on living mechs. He vividly recalled all of the attempts that Master Willix had made to copy his design philosophy, to no avail.

To see that a much younger rational mech designer succeed caused him to feel a lot more insecure about himself!

Fortunately, Merrill O'Brian was on his side. She was a Larkinson through and through and could be counted upon to maintain the confidentiality of his trade secrets.

As Merrill continued to explain what she had done in order to gain a basic mastery of Ves' living mechs, it quickly became clear why she succeeded where others had failed.

"I know how you think. I have seen glimpses of what goes on in your mind. I know what you feel when you become engrossed in designing different aspects of a mech. I know what you care about the most and what you do not find as important."

If Ves didn't know any better, then he would have mistaken Merrill as a stalker! The words she just spoke out were quite frightening if the context was different!

"So you took all of that knowledge and understanding you obtained from me and... simulated a mental model of myself in your mind?" Ves dubiously asked.

Merrill finally revealed a small smile. "It is a lot more complicated than that, but your simplified description roughly characterizes my operation. You are right. I create a personality model based on you and essentially channel it when I want to emulate your design philosophy. Since it is based on limited data that may or may not be reliable, the accuracy of this model of you cannot be

guaranteed. However, as long as it is somewhat reasonable, the results that I can produce with it are enough to make a difference."

Both Ves and Gloriana already possessed a basic understanding of what rational mech designers were capable of, but they never expected to be confronted with one that could actually design authentic living mechs!

Sure, the living knight mech that Merrill had designed looked like the work of Ves back when he was still an Apprentice, but the properties of the machine showed that the most junior Journeyman of the Larkinson Clan already grasped the essence of living mechs!

The hardest part about getting into a vault was finding the key. Merrill had obtained this crucial object, which meant that all she had to do from now was to use it to unlock the vault and digest the wealth hidden within at her own pace!

"This... changes things." Ves concluded. "Maybe not much at first, but in the future..."

Gloriana glanced at her husband in concern. She knew how much he cared about maintaining his precious 'monopoly'. Seeing another mech designer faithfully imitate his design philosophy must have dealt a substantial psychological blow to her childish and selfish spouse.

The living knight mech that Merrill had designed essentially kicked off a new era in Ves' career!

An era where rational mech designers from other parts of human space might conceivably design living mechs of their own!

#### **Chapter 4160 The Emulator**

A part of Ves was thankful that Merril O'Brian was the only rational mech designer in the Larkinson Clan as far as he knew.

Mech designers of this ilk were very rare outside of the MTA because it was much more difficult to advance up the ranks with such an exotic design approach.

Ves had always remained fairly possessive of his unique design solutions, so he instinctively rejected any instances where other mech designers could copy the reason why he was able to beat the competition.

However, another part of him felt that it was regrettable that there weren't more mech designers like Merrill in the clan.

As Ves continued to grow and expand his design capabilities, he gradually became less insecure about his own worth and competence.

Even if others succeeded in copying his living mechs, so what? Ves had developed many other advanced design solutions that gave his work an even greater edge in battle!

He was confident that no one could fully steal all of the design techniques and methods that caused his works to become more and more impressive over time!

As such, Ves did not feel that Merrill's breakthrough was that big of a threat to him as it was in the past.

He could already tell from her first successful attempt that her mastery and understanding of living mechs was still at a rudimentary stage.

When Ves was at this level, it took him many years for him to reach his current level!

Though Merrill would doubtlessly be able to make faster progress at first due to her ability to copy Ves' homework, eventually she would slow down and get stalled as she hit a wall.

Ves did not believe that Merrill could completely figure him out to the point of being able to simulate everything he utilized to design his living mechs. It was simply impossible for her to be able to build a complete model of him without going through all of his experiences!

Still, what she managed to pull off on her own was already impressive in its own right. Her accomplishment also opened up a lot of interesting new possibilities.

He did not have to babysit every living mech design project, for example. Although his intervention was doubtlessly necessary for most essential and complicated design projects, there were many other mech designs that were less intensive and important.

The increasing number of variant mech design projects that the Design Department took on as of late was a good example.

Even if Merrill was not that proficient in living mechs as of yet, with a bit more guidance she could turn into an adequate substitute for Ves!

With someone like Merrill available, Ves could take longer vacations without worrying that the ongoing design projects at the Design Department would stagnate without his involvement.

Ves could also bounce his ideas off Merrill and gain another perspective on his living mech designs.

In fact, once Merrill became more proficient in simulating his design philosophy, they could even hold a more fruitful exchange where they could learn more ways to exploit living mechs because two minds were always better than one!

As Ves continued to discuss what Merrill could do and how they could cooperate in the future, Gloriana suddenly interrupted their conversation by asking a different question.

"How much progress have you made in emulating other people's design philosophies and approaches?" She pressed the new Journeyman. "Are you able to copy my work as well?"

"I... can do that, but it would require time for me to master the basics of your operation." Merrill calmly replied. "While your design philosophy is easier to emulate, the problem I face is that your design approach is intertwined with highly advanced technical design solutions that are beyond my ability to understand and replicate. The way you think and design your mechs is much more sophisticated on a technical level. That makes you much more different from your husband who prefers to simplify his work and think in broad strokes."

Gloriana looked as if she couldn't decide whether this reflected well or poorly on her as a mech designer.

On one hand, Merrill's difficulty in emulating Gloriana's work reflected the Hexer's excellence in mech design.

Gloriana clearly made a lot of progress in developing her design philosophy as well as her technical design capabilities. The greater her progress, the harder it became for others to catch up to her level!

On the other hand, Gloriana's difficult work also made it harder for Merrill or another rational mech designer to copy her work.

Certainly, Master Willix had demonstrated her ability to emulate Gloriana's design approach a few years ago, but that was because the MTA Master was much more versed in the science and engineering of mechs.

No Journeyman could come close to matching the technical prowess of a Master Mech Designer, so people like Merrill had to invest a lot of time and effort into book learning in order to catch up to the likes of Gloriana.

"I think... Merrill might be able to get close to reproducing a number of your design solutions, but it wouldn't be an efficient use of her time." Ves said to his wife. "First, your specialty is primarily relevant in individual custom mechs and expert mechs. These are always high-priority design projects that deserve to receive the best care and attention that we can offer."

Gloriana vigorously nodded. "That is right. No offense, Merrill, but our expert pilots deserve better than a cheap imitation. Leave the design of our most powerful and important mechs to me. It is better if you focus your efforts on using your versatility to design mass production mech models."

"There are other design philosophies that I have been exposed to that I am reasonably confident in emulating." Merrill stated. "As you already know, it takes time, effort and diligence to get started on them. It takes even more learning and practice to become good enough to meet the standards of our clan. I need to pick and choose my options carefully."

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin as he thought about where she should focus her efforts.

"How easy is it for you to emulate Ketis' design philosophy."

The young woman slightly frowned. "I do not have much confidence in my ability to copy her work. To be honest, her mentality and approach to her own work is relatively easy to understand. I know how her professional mind looks at mechs. The issue I have with her design philosophy is that I need to develop such an extreme love for swords and swordsmen mechs that it is almost impossible to replicate. Her strengths also encompass more elements that I can never replicate."

Ketis was not just a Journeyman, but also a swordmaster, which was an entirely different brand of weirdness.



She was arguably even more irrational than Ves! It was not surprising that Merrill did not possess the confidence to emulate Ketis' work.

"It's okay. Her specialty is rather narrow and not applicable to every mech." Ves said. "I think it is more useful to focus on more universal specialties that can be applied to a wide variety of mechs. Sara Voiken's defensive specialization is a good example."

Merrill shook her head. "I have a different opinion on this matter. I do not see much value in mastering Sara's design philosophy because you can recruit other mech designers with similar defensive specializations. Though their design philosophies may not be an exact mirror to that of Sara, they will still be able to fulfill the same purpose."

"I see. You're right." Ves said. "Instead of aiming for universality, you are better off prioritizing the design approaches that are less orthodox but nonetheless useful to many mechs. My design philosophy is a perfect example of that. My living mechs are incredibly useful but no one else has been able to publish their own versions of it. You can change that if you continue to study my design philosophy and specific design solutions in the future."

He already understood that rational mech designers were not innovators by nature. They did not practice their ability to come up with new solutions on their own but became crazy good at studying and reproducing the essence of other people's design solutions!

They could be regarded as parasites in a sense, but only in cases where they did not give back to the sources they stole from. If they actively cooperated with the mech designers they tried to emulate, then both sides could benefit from this relationship!

Ves wanted to make sure that Merrill would turn into an asset in the Design Department. He thought hard about who she should work closely with and which design philosophies she should prioritize.

It would have been great if Merrill had access to Jovy Armalon!

The MTA Journeyman's unique and brilliant design philosophy was both unconventional and extremely useful, so much so that the mechers were willing to put him on an elite track!

Unfortunately, Jovy disappeared ever since Ves granted him a companion spirit. Who knew where the man could be found these days.

"For now, you should definitely work closer with me, but other than that, I think it might be useful if you collaborated more extensively with Sara Voiken."

"Are you certain, Ves?" Gloriana skeptically asked. "You know it's only a matter of time before we will be able to hire more defensive specialists."

"That is true, but that does not mean that Merrill should forgo this option. The power of a rational mech designer is that she can effectively pick and choose the design philosophies that she wants to combine in her solo projects. That can lead to unusual combinations and synergies that were not apparent before. In order to get her to this point, she needs to develop a broad and varied repertoire. Being able to master at least one defensive design philosophy is a necessary step that she has to take. After that, I suggest she try to emulate Juliet's design philosophy."

Merrill did not immediately agree with this suggestion. "It may take years for me to emulate their design philosophies. I need to study a large amount of subjects in order to build up the knowledge base to properly understand and imitate their work. I am afraid it may take well over a decade to gain a decent amount of proficiency."

"Take your time, Merrill. We have been doing fine without your help for a long time. I would rather wait until you have built up a proper foundation before employing you in more strategic assignments. I can already think of several good uses for your talents."

The biggest advantage of Merrill was that she could serve as a reasonable substitute for several mech designers that she had studied.

This meant that she could act as their surrogate in other locations!

For example, if a client needed Ves' help in person, he could send Merrill in his stead to solve problems related to living mechs.

If his clan ever grew large enough that it was spread out over many different locations, then mech designers like Merrill could be quite handy in troubleshooting problems at various sites.

In the end, Merrill took up his advice and began to collaborate more extensively with Ves, Juliet and Sara.

For the latter three, it was much like teaching their knowledge and methods to an apprentice.

By imparting all of this to a rational mech designer, Merrill soon proved her worth by repackaging and reinterpreting what she learned into a more cohesive theoretical model that was considerably more systematic.

It was as if Merrill was a computer that converted irregular input into more logical output!

This significantly helped Ves and the others understand their own work and put their own theories and techniques in a more systematic light.

By relying on these systematic theories, Ves was better able to convey his own design philosophy and perspective to other mech designers!

"So this is another reason why the MTA loves rational mech designers so much! They are essential to the process of translating the specific works of passionate mech designers into more universal forms!"