

Mech 4171

Chapter 4171 Upgrade Tracks

If the first upgrade track was already outrageous enough, the second one was even more astonishing!

Just the last part was more than enough to drive every person in the mech community crazy if they knew this option was available!

Ves forcibly tried to calm himself down. He already began to understand the division between the upgrade tracks.

The first one was undoubtedly centered around increasing his agency and facilitating his own growth.

To be more precise, it allowed him to affect the course of human history more extensively by allowing him to more frequently travel back in the past without worrying about anything happening to him in the present time.

It also allowed him to accrue a much more comprehensive understanding and mastery of many different mech types. This would undoubtedly help him design mechs that exquisitely accommodated the needs of many mech pilots!

The second track followed a completely different tack. It did not improve his design capabilities directly, but enabled him to gather the strongest or the most promising mech pilots and improve their fighting capabilities in many different ways!

If Ves was able to gather stronger and more formidable mech pilots around him, he would not only feel a lot safer against external threats, but also gain opportunities to design stronger mechs that fully kept up with their improved performance!

"This is the perfect choice if I want to build the best mech army!"

He would be lying if he said he wasn't tempted. Wasn't he worrying about trying to gather 1 billion MTA merits recently because he feared that his

second daughter Andraste might not develop the right genetic aptitude to pilot a mech?

Even if she did luck out and turned into a potentate when she became ten years old, Ves could still grant her better opportunities by asking the Transhumanist Faction to upgrade her talent.

"Rather than relying on others, it's best to do this myself!"

Though Ves hoped to be able to develop his own solution to this impossible problem, he knew that his chances of succeeding were too slim.

By choosing the second upgrade track, he would not only gain a guaranteed method to repair the genetic aptitude of other people, but gain other powerful means to empower his warriors even further!

p Still, as much as he felt attracted by the possibilities of the second upgrade track, he grew hesitant about it due to one important factor.

"It doesn't focus on empowering me directly."

Choosing this upgrade track meant that the System would specialize in a direction that effectively made him more dependent on the protection of other people.

Even though Ves had a lot of confidence in his ability to recruit and retain the loyalty of his subordinates, a part of him felt uncomfortable for building up a dependence on other people.

"This is the life of a mech designer." Ves sighed.

Though this was most certainly a downside, it was not as if his situation was any different from now. The current age of humanity completely centered around mechs, and the only individuals who could make effective use of them were mech pilots.

Therefore, the second upgrade track perfectly fit the present circumstances. Making mech pilots as powerful as possible would definitely benefit him the most as long as he maintained control over the soldiers in question.

Ves did not ignore the possibilities of the first upgrade track, though. The initial option presented by the System was even more unreasonable.

Who in the cosmos possessed the power to travel back in time and manipulate past events in order to influence the rise and fall of entire states and civilizations!?

This was arguably the most unreasonable and ridiculous power of the Mech Designer System, and one that he did not exploit often enough.

He did not realize it before, but now that many years had passed since he last went through a Mastery experience, he began to miss the benefits and the possibilities that it provided.

While it was no doubt important for Ves to experience what piloting a mech was like from the perspective of an actual mech pilot, the fact that he was thrust into the mind of an individual in the past was an implication that he did not fully appreciate in the past!

If he ever regained the ability to go on trips to the past again, he intended to be a lot more unrestrained with his actions.

In any case, if the MTA or anyone else got wind of his manipulative actions, Ves could easily pass off all of the blame to the mysterious 'Mr. S.', a presumed Star Designer whose traces could only be found in fleeting points of history.

Before Ves made any further considerations, he paused and waited for the System to deliver its next option. He had a feeling that it was far from finished with its presentation.

He was right.

The System no longer presented images of powerful and heroic mech pilots to Ves.

Instead, the gray ball began to project images of a single individual that Ves immediately recognized.

"That's me!" Ves gasped!

Perhaps the System had picked up his dissatisfaction at the previous option's lack of personal empowerment, because this next choice centered all around Ves!

[Upgrade Track #3: Spiritual Ascension. This upgrade trajectory specializes in cultivating, upgrading and empowering the user's personal spiritual capabilities. You will be able to accumulate considerably more spiritual energy and increase its quality through various means. You will be able to learn vastly more techniques to utilize spiritual energy and receive comprehensive assistance in developing new and original techniques. You will gain the possibility to evolve and transcend your mortal limitations and attain true godhood. You will also have the possibility to spread yourself across many more incarnations, each of which can experience life in different forms and develop different talents and powers.]

"What?!"

Though he already guessed that the third upgrade choice centered around strengthening himself directly, the possibilities that the System mentioned sounded so ridiculous that they could compete against the possibilities of the other upgrade tracks!

Though Ves did not take the claims surrounding godhood seriously, he did recognize the insane benefits that he would obtain if he was able to beef up his strongest specialty, his spiritual engineering abilities.

He would love nothing more than to wield more spiritual energy and be able to harness it in a much more sophisticated way. Not just to empower himself, but also empower his mechs with special and amazing properties.

The mention of acquiring more incarnations also sounded interesting to Ves. Blinky and Vulcan granted him brand-new abilities and options that expanded his repertoire and vastly increased his versatility.

Though he was theoretically capable of creating additional incarnations, he feared that going overboard might cause him to weaken his 'original' self and spread himself out across too many versions of himself.

If the third upgrade track was able to minimize the downsides of creating additional incarnations, then this would begin to look like a much more attractive option.

This was especially the case when there was a possibility where he would be able to create 'backups' of himself that ensured that he would be able to live on even if someone completely obliterated his original body!

"Still... is this what I truly want?"

The third upgrade track was all about survival and personal empowerment, both of which possessed selfish connotations. It did not mention anything directly about improving his mech design capabilities or helping his customers.

It did not escape the fact that this trajectory also sounded awfully similar to the power system of the cultists of the Five Scrolls Compact.

Though Ves did not have a lot of personal encounters with the dreaded Compact, he knew that the cultists completely embraced personal empowerment.

While this did not necessarily sound wrong, the problem was that many of its powerhouses were extremely selfish and callous to the point of treating the lives of anyone lesser than themselves as trash!

If Ves followed in the Compact's footsteps, he feared that he may also develop the same obsession.

"I'm a mech designer." Ves spoke as if to remind himself. "I have dedicated my life to serving mech pilots. A bit of selfishness is okay. No human is perfect. However, if my goal to become stronger no longer centers around designing stronger and more useful mechs, then is this trajectory truly the right choice for my present self?"

The System was ultimately an assisting tool. Just because it was able to turn him into a monster did not mean he would necessarily become one. It was all about how he leveraged its possibilities.

As long as he maintained his discipline and followed a predetermined strategy, Ves could easily imagine himself becoming a more skilled and comprehensive spiritual engineer who could easily empower a mech through multiple dazzling means.

Besides, he did not have to reject everything the third upgrade track offered for fear of losing his true self. It all came down to how much he was able to cling to his original identity and goals.

Still, he vaguely felt that this upgrade track might not be the most optimal path of becoming a better mech designer.

Fortunately, the System presented him with another upgrade direction that catered much more extensively to this need!

[Upgrade Track #4: Technological Supremacy. This upgrade trajectory assists and strengthens your efforts into learning, mastering and utilizing different forms of technology. The Mech Designer System will be able to tap in many

more branches of technology, granting you access to secret and less widespread human innovations at a lower cost. Furthermore, you will more easily be able to learn and decipher alien technologies, much of which humanity has yet to understand. You will also gain access to different methods of cognitive empowerment in order to strengthen your ability to absorb and make effective use of vastly greater data and knowledge.]

Ves instantly tied this upgrade track to a single iconic individual.

"The Polymath."

There was no way he could miss the connection. While he could not tell if the famous Star Designer had been presented with the same upgrade trajectories as Ves, he was pretty certain that her fragment of the Metal Scroll undoubtedly helped her master technology with far greater ease than before!

This package fit perfectly with a mech designer that was obsessed with mastering as much tech as possible. As a rational mech designer, she possessed the least bias against any specific fields of technology, which meant she could unflinchingly master vastly different fields of technology without worrying about incompatibility and clashes between different philosophies.

"I'm not the Polymath." Ves mentally shook his head.

Perhaps his rejection came from his desire to be different from anyone else, but he did not want to become an inferior version of the Polymath.

Ves was a passionate mech designer who did not necessarily care about mixing and matching the best and most appropriate pieces of tech in his mech designs.

He was a firm believer in specialization and felt that he would ultimately be able to develop vastly superior mech by developing his current strengths to their limits and beyond!

"Well, that's easy, then."

This was the only upgrade track that Ves rejected shortly after its introduction. Though he did not deny the immense boost that this could provide to his future mech design projects and other technological endeavors, he felt there was more to his life and career than learning as much tech as possible!

Besides, if Ves started to excel in this aspect in the following years and decades, he was immensely afraid that the Polymath might drop by for another friendly 'visit'!

"The less I have in common with that Star Designer, the better!"

It didn't matter if she was one of the leaders of the MTA faction that he was close with. The fact that she possessed a fragment of the Metal Scroll meant that she most certainly desired to obtain additional pieces of this mythical artifact!

This meant that he and the Polymath were rivals and competitors in a sense. To be honest, Ves also wished to steal the fragment that she had made excellent use of in order to empower his own piece of the Metal Scroll!

Chapter 4172 Ridiculous Options

As Ves continued to fantasize about all of the ways he could make use of the upgraded mech Designer System, he suddenly recalled his previous conviction.

"Ugh, why am I growing so obsessed over the System again? Did I not promise that I would quit with this kind of thinking?!"

No matter how much he tried to temper his desires, he found it difficult to do so. He was not an expert pilot whose will was as hard as steel. The return of the System and the surprise roll-out of powerful upgrade routes instantly pushed away his resolve to minimize his dependence on its capabilities.

His life in the Red Ocean was already hard enough. He needed every advantage he could get to continue his rise to power!

He decided to set aside these conflicting feelings for later. He still didn't know the extent of the System's changes. He wanted to wait until he learned the full extent of what had changed and what it could offer to him. Only then would he be able to formulate a sound plan on how to utilize its capabilities in the future.

After the System had done enough to convey the possibilities and advantages of excelling in technology to the same degree as the Polymath, it began to present its next upgrade track.

It started to project instances where Ves personally fabricated his mechs, especially the ones that went on to become masterworks.

He already felt quite nostalgic towards those moments. The recent creation of the Mars was one of the best workshop experiences of his life, even though he was not primarily responsible for elevating it into a masterwork mech.

"How many more upgrade directions do you have in store, exactly?!"

[Upgrade Track #5: Ultimate Craftsmanship. This upgrade trajectory will facilitate and strengthen your creation capabilities. You will be able to make drastic improvements in your ability to make higher-quality objects, no matter whether they are tangible or intangible. In order to assist you in making better goods, you will be able to upgrade your understanding and vision for quality and the elements that make creations superior. You will also be able to teach and pass on much of what you have learned to apprentices and students that are receptive to your lessons.]

This sounded a lot more in his ballpark! Compared to the previous option which basically entailed piling up as much science and engineering in his head as possible, the fifth upgrade trajectory focused more on how to best make use of what Ves already learned.

Although the benefits sounded a bit less obvious and dramatic, Ves knew how much potential this upgrade track possessed. Many people in the mech industry struggled their entire lives to ascend Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship.

Even though Ves managed to reach the second rung of the ladder numerous times, he was under no illusion that it would be easy for him to reach the third rung that was normally exclusive to Star Designers for some reason.

Even if he became a Star Designer himself one day, his journey did not end at that point. Ves still recalled the moment where Master Dervidian alluded to a fourth rung of the ladder that could potentially change the course of human civilization forever due to the incredible power of a product that reached this tier of quality!

While it should definitely be possible for people to reach the fourth rung of the ladder through their own efforts, the value of shortcuts and external advantages should not be discounted.

So far, it looked like every brilliant and talented Star Designer in existence struggled to climb up to the fourth rung of the craftsmanship ladder. If they weren't able to make this achievement up until now, then the chances that they would be able to succeed in the future were rather slim!

"Even if the Polymath or someone else managed to do it, then that doesn't mean that other Star Designers are capable of catching up. I could definitely use all of the help that I can get when I reach this stage."

Out of all of the upgrade tracks the System presented to him so far, Ultimate Craftsmanship appealed the most to his identity as a mech designer, a craftsman and a creator.

It did not provide him with strengthening in areas that could pose as distractions that could cause him to go astray.

It mostly strengthened his ability to understand and make better individual mechs and other projects.

He could already imagine himself building masterwork mechs on demand and making a head start towards creating his first grand work.

He also imagined creating other masterworks out of products that were not directly related to mechs. What would it be like to equip himself with masterwork armor, masterwork weapons, masterwork sensor systems and even a masterwork starship?

He could potentially become the most impressive craftsman that humanity had ever produced!

Compared to the fourth upgrade track, the fifth one was a much safer and more fitting choice as well. The fourth one would turn him into a clone of the Polymath while the fifth one allowed him to stand out in a more unique way.

Ves already developed a reputation for being talented in craftsmanship due to all of the masterwork certificates he accrued at this stage in his career.

Progressing a lot further in this aspect would not throw up any suspicions. In fact, people would expect him to make a lot of progress in his craftsmanship after he had shown a lot of talent in this area!

"Damn, this upgrade track is so tempting."

Yet as much as this option called to him on an emotional level, his rationality told him to slow down.

There were at least two reasons why it would not necessarily be a good idea to choose this upgrade trajectory.

First, Ves already had Vulcan. His incarnation might not be a mech designer himself, but he wasn't known as the 'God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship' for nothing!

With the help of the Hammer of Brilliance as well as the constantly expanding Creation Association, Vulcan continued to get in touch with more and more mech designers, craftsmen and artisans.

The constant exposure to different styles, different crafts and different philosophies had already turned Vulcan into an excellent and qualified craftsman in his own right!

His incarnation already knew significantly more about making masterwork products than Ves himself. This was remarkable progress considering that Vulcan was only a handful of years old.

"Vulcan still has a lot of room for growth. His mastery of craftsmanship may not have grown as fast as before, but it is still evolving over time."

Ves was certain that Vulcan would become a lot more formidable in fifty or a hundred years time.

Together, Ves and his incarnation may be able to make as much progress in advancing their craftsmanship and their ability to climb up the craftsmanship ladder than if Ves just made use of the System with this upgrade track!

"Even if Vulcan can't substitute the System's capabilities, there is someone else who is already trying her best to exceed what everyone else can do on this front."

His thoughts wandered to his wife.

Though Gloriana could be rather abrasive and annoying at times, Ves never doubted her talent, her drive and her design capabilities.

She had already chosen to do her utmost to excel in the more physical aspects of mech design.

At the same time, she also opened herself up to more esoteric influences. One of her more recent research interests was finding ways to blend the tangible with the intangible in order to produce powerful new synergies.

Her god body concept was a wonderful product of that effort. Though it was still immature and had yet to prove its potential, the promise it held was great.

Given Gloriana's considerable effort to climb up Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship with nearly single-minded determination, it sounded rather redundant for Ves to focus on the same goal.

One of the driving motivations of their marriage and collaboration was to split up their responsibilities and specialize in different fields!

Though it would be great if Ves was able to excel in craftsmanship by himself, he could spend his time on much more useful endeavors if he left much of the heavy lifting to Gloriana.

Together with Vulcan, it appeared that Ves already possessed enough advantages in this area. Adding the System on top of this sounded excessive!

"Next, please."

The System proceeded to show him moments where he was fighting for his life and trying to survive under arduous circumstances. From hiding and running away from hostile mechs to trying to keep his head intact while he was stuck on Prosperous Hill IV that had descended into civil war, Ves was not a stranger to violence and threats!

Though Ves did not worry as much about personal threats anymore due to the massive growth of his clan, he still understood the truth that strengthening others did not necessarily make him invulnerable.

There may be crises in the future where he might be stripped or taken away from all of his friends, colleagues, allies and subordinates.

If he ever had to rely on himself to survive a sticky situation, then his chances would vastly increase if he became as formidable as the best soldiers of his clan!

[Upgrade Track #6: Unparalleled Combat. This upgrade trajectory comprehensively enables and strengthens your ability to fight against a variety of threats. You will gain access to a large selection of special and powerful augmentations that increase your physical and non-physical capabilities. You will also gain access to new skill sets that allow you to master different forms of personal combat, thereby enabling you to wield powerful weapons with excellent proficiency. Eventually, you will be able to forge a powerful combination of spiritual, technological and physical advantages to survive and defeat almost every threat up to and including mechs and warships.]

"Ridiculous..."

The sixth upgrade track appealed straight towards his paranoia and his persistent concerns about survival.

The cosmos was anything but peaceful and the two galaxies where humanity was present were filled with all kinds of internal and external enemies.

Though humanity had entered a golden age after the end of the Age of Conquest, Ves knew that the good times probably wouldn't last forever.

There were too many enemies that wished nothing more than to tear down the existing order and impose their own vision onto others!

If Ves took this upgrade trajectory, he would definitely be able to arm and empower himself beyond any reasonable measure!

Even if the highest-ranking mech designers were able to create all sorts of gizmos for themselves that allowed them to wield a surprising amount of power, that did not change the fact that they were still non-combatants by nature!

The sixth upgrade track perfectly addressed these shortcomings and more by offering options that quickly enabled Ves to develop the fighting skills and other aspects that were normally mastered by professional soldiers.

One of the more positive aspects about this upgrade path was that it did not clash with his existing work and specializations.

Though the upgrade track would definitely steer the Mech Designer System away from its initial purpose, it was not as if Ves had a burning need to keep all of those original functions.

Ves already possessed plenty of means to improve his skills, advance his design philosophy and bring his craftsmanship to a higher level.

However, his ability to secure his life and freedom were mostly limited to relying on the protection of others. He did not mind it if he could address this shortcoming with the help of the new and improved System. It would resolve a concern that was related to his most basic and essential needs.

He could design mechs and engage in spiritual engineering as much as he preferred, but the basis for doing so was that he remained free and undisturbed!

Chapter 4173 Contemplating New Possibilities

As Ves thought a bit more about the sixth upgrade track that the seemingly generous System proposed to him, he began to harbor doubts about the suitability of this choice.

"You're called the Mech Designer System, not the Strongest Warrior System. Is it truly appropriate for you to propose that I should use you to become an unparalleled fighter? This is the Age of Mechs! No matter how strong I become, there is no point for me to enter the battlefield by myself. Every significant battle is fought with mechs and warships these days!"

He had a creeping suspicion that if he chose this upgrade path, he would forever turn the System away from its original purpose of helping its user become a better mech designer.

As Ves considered himself a mech designer above all else, this sounded like an awful proposition. He would potentially burn his bridges and completely lose access to the functions that initially helped him get up to speed in his mech design career.

"Besides, what is the point of becoming a superstrong fighter? Is this truly a good use of my time?"

If he lived in a galaxy or environment that was far more dangerous and far less civilized than the Red Ocean, then he might seriously consider this upgrade trajectory.

After all, he could achieve almost anything he wanted as long as he was able to guarantee his own life and freedom!

Everything would be moot if someone managed to kill or take him into captivity!

What Ves found the most appealing about the sixth upgrade path was that it strengthened his survival ability in multiple different ways.

No matter whether his next opponent was a spiritual sorcerer or a god mech, the System would find a way for him to equal the playing field!

He could even keep pulling out tricks if he was taken away from his clan and stripped of all of his gear.

However, the fact that this was probably the most useless upgrade track in the current circumstances also weighed heavily on him. The redundant nature of the benefits offered by the sixth upgrade track heavily irked his sensibilities as a mech designer.

This was not the most efficient choice out of the options presented so far! The fact that it mentioned nothing about any direct improvements in his design capabilities was a serious shortcoming!

With so many mechs, bodyguards and other forms of protection at his disposal, Ves did not feel so eager to turn himself into a powerful commando.

"I might not be great in a fight, but I am much deadlier than the vast majority of people in the galaxy."

With excellent gear such as the Amastendira and the Unending Regalia at his disposal, Ves was no slouch on a battlefield!

"With all of the new tech that I have access to, I can build much stronger gear for myself!"

He was already salivating at the opportunity to build a set of transphasic gear that would allow him to deal more effectively with threats that were specific to the Red Ocean.

Given what he could already do if he followed his current course, the sixth upgrade path held much less appeal to him at this point.

He mentally shook his head. "It's a great fantasy, but it's not that practical to me as a mech designer."

What else did the updated version of the Mech Designer System have in store?

After the System was done with trying to lure him into becoming a super soldier, it started to present a different vision this time.

Not much had changed at first. It still showed instances of combat.

The difference was that Ves did not recall participating in any of these battles.

"What the..."

The System showed him images of different living mechs in action. From the Bright Warrior to the Stingripper, each of Ves' iconic works fought dazzlingly against numerous powerful alien or human opponents.

One of the mechs even began to explode with energy, signifying that the mech pilot experienced a breakthrough!

Ves already grew suspicious at this time. The prompt given by the System confirmed his guess about what the next upgrade path was all about!

[Upgrade Track #7: Personal Piloting Cultivation. This upgrade trajectory will help you enable and improve your ability to pilot mechs, including the ones that you have designed yourself. You will immediately restore your genetic aptitude to a degree that allows you to pilot mechs, and you have the option to repair this trait even further at greater cost. You will gain access to new skill sets that will quickly enable you to master the many skills required to operate a mech in combat effectively. In the future, you will gain the choice to upgrade your physical, mental and spiritual qualifications that will allow you to become an effective expert pilot, ace pilot and even god pilot.]

"...I knew it. I just knew you would dangle this tempting offer in front of my face."

If the System presented this option to him a decade ago, he would embrace it without any hesitation.

As of now, the seventh upgrade path was just as tasteless as the one that came before.

"What use is it for me to pilot my own mechs?"

There were lots of strong, powerful and talented mech pilots around him. Venerable Joshua, Venerable Casella and even allies such as Patriarch Reginald were all great at this job already.

How would Ves be able to gain any benefit from trying to chase after their footsteps?

"I'm a mech designer." He reminded himself. "Although there is no rule that states that I shouldn't be able to pilot my own work, I think it is better if I stay in my own lane."

One of the lessons that he had learned early on in his career was that everyone's time and energy was limited.

Ves already anticipated that he would have to go through many twists and turns in order to climb to the top of his current profession.

Becoming a Journeyman Mech Designer was just the start. His first real challenge was to become a Master Mech Designer, but how many people were able to make this leap?

Professor Benedict's tortuous struggle to overcome his final bottleneck showed that not even Ves should underestimate the great difficulty of realizing a design philosophy!

The more drastic and unorthodox the design philosophy, the harder it was to overcome this major challenge!

After that, Ves was not yet finished with his fight. Some mech designers consider the rank of Master to be the true starting point of their careers. Many Masters dedicated centuries of their lives to advance to Star Designer, but out of many of them, only a minute proportion had succeeded in making this jump!

Ves had set his eyes on Star Designer from the beginning of his career. Reaching the peak of mech design had been his driving goal and purpose for many years.

As for the possibility of becoming a god pilot if he chose the seventh upgrade track?

"Feh. Keep dreaming."

The difficulty of becoming a god pilot was well-known!

Even if Ves received a huge amount of help from the System, he understood that he needed to put in a huge amount of time in practicing his skills and developing the right mentality to go further in this career.

"If I devote half of my time on mech piloting, I will take away half of the time I can spend on progressing my design capabilities!"

In the end, he might end up in a situation where he may be able to reach Master Mech Designer and ace pilot but no more.

Though the rest of the mech community might celebrate the emergence of a single person who occupied both of those ranks at once, Ves knew that stopping short of Star Designer or god pilot would be an enormous regret!

Rather than getting too greedy and trying to chase after both, he would rather stick to his original path and stick to his original goal of advancing to Star Designer.

He took a mental pause in an attempt to purge any lingering interest in becoming a mech pilot. Though he had a feeling that he might be able to excel in this career, he had made his choice of what he wanted to become a long time ago. It would be an enormous waste for him to compromise his original trajectory because he wanted to give in to his juvenile impulses!

"Alright System, do you have anything else in store?"

[Please make your choice.]

"Really? That's it? I thought you would flood me with more than a dozen different options considering that many of them are a bit far out there. Half of

what you have presented doesn't seem to be related to mech design at all! What's up with that, by the way? Are you truly certain that you are actually a Mech Designer System?"

[...]

The System ignored his questions as usual. Some things never changed.

Ves felt rather annoyed at this situation. The System had not given any hints that it was preparing to present these choices to him. While he was able to guess that it would not remain the same after taking such a long time to complete its upgrade, the list of possible upgrade tracks far exceeded his expectations!

He would have been able to put much more thought on how he wanted to utilize the System if he was able to think about it for a few years!

"Hmmm..."

None of the upgrade tracks sounded useless or detrimental to him. The System had studied his life quite carefully and formulated several different packages that all granted him better options to exceed the limitations that had hindered him in the past.

Ves also appreciated the fact that the System did not dictate a specific upgrade path but left the choice up to him. It was important that the System still granted him agency on how he utilized its various features.

If the System started to get too pushy, whether it was through controlling the features that it made available or foisting him with specific missions, then Ves would seriously consider who was the actual user in this relationship!

Though Ves had never rid himself of his many suspicions towards the System, right now it was more important for him to make his choice and see what else this tool had in store.

Ves briefly listed out the options that the System had presented to him at this junction.

[Upgrade Track #1: Mental Projection]

[Upgrade Track #2: Mech Pilot Cultivation]

[Upgrade Track #3: Spiritual Ascension]

[Upgrade Track #4: Technological Supremacy]

[Upgrade Track #5: Ultimate Craftsmanship]

[Upgrade Track #6: Unparalleled Combat]

[Upgrade Track #7: Personal Piloting Cultivation]

Though Ves had already picked a lot of faults with many of these options, he did not cross them off his list right away. This was an important point in his life and he did not want to make a decision that he would regret by making a quick but thoughtless selection!

"Each of them have their merits. Each of them are helpful in specific situations. Each of them will change my life in highly specific ways."

It did not escape his notice that the System did not offer him a middle ground option. This deprived him of the option to proceed as normal.

It was as if the System was forcing him to choose a specific direction for him to progress in the future.

"Well, let's get on with this. First, I need to determine which upgrade paths enhance my strengths and which ones shore up my weaknesses."

Mental Projection, Spiritual Ascension, Technological Supremacy and Ultimate Craftsmanship all fell into the first category. They took an aspect that Ves was good at and made it a lot better. Each of them appealed to his professional side in one manner or another.

Mech Pilot Cultivation, Unparalleled Combat and Personal Piloting Cultivation all improved his personal safety and ability to defend himself in different ways. This was one of his most persistent concerns and it told him a lot that the System focused so extensively on this part of himself.

Before he made a specific selection, he needed to answer an important question.

"Should I use the System to amplify my strengths or compensate for my weaknesses?"

He could come up with plenty of excellent arguments to support either of these approaches!

Chapter 4174 Indecision

"I shouldn't rush this decision."

The apparent evolution and specialization of the Mech Designer System was a life changing event to Ves. Whether he liked it or not, he could not deny that this mysterious existence massively boosted his chances of becoming a Star Designer one day.

Given how so many other mech designers who leveraged different advantages but ultimately failed to overcome the final obstacle, Ves did not dare to distance himself too much from the System.

No matter the negative repercussions of making too much use of the System, it was better to become a Star Designer like the Polymath than a hopeless Senior or Master like many other professionals in the industry!

After making this determination, Ves began to think about the role the System should play in his life.

Should he mainly utilize its functions to boost his already considerable strengths and allow him to excel even more in his chosen roles?

Or should he leverage the System to plug his weaknesses and turn him into a more rounded person?

Ves agonized over this basic choice. He could come up with arguments that supported one or the other.

As a mech designer, he strongly favored specialization. Trying to get better at what he was already good at was the most conventional and established way for people in modern society to get ahead.

A doctor was valued for his ability to save and treat people.

He would become a lot more useful and valued if his ability to successfully pull off surgeries had received a massive boost!

However, if the doctor spent much time on taking self-defense classes and practicing his marksmanship, it was unlikely that he would do any better in his actual job.

"The real difference is when the doctor gets in trouble."

That was when all of the effort he put into increasing his self-defense capabilities came in handy. He would be able to beat off muggers and prevent himself from getting killed in situations where he could not rely on the authorities to protect his life!

Therefore, his paranoid self that had stumbled into way more sticky situations than almost every other mech designer felt more attracted to the alternative option.

There was real value in strengthening his defenses, which was a traditional weakness of a non-combatant like himself.

"I can't forget that safety is an illusion in this galaxy and cosmos."

Struggle was everywhere. There was an endless list of alien races from the Red Ocean and the Milky Way that wanted nothing more than to crush the humans that had pressed them out of their territories.

Within human space itself, infighting between different groups of humans were rife as states and organizations all competed over the same basket of limited resources.

Laws were merely words on an electronic document. They could not restrain the beasts among human and alien groups from taking what they wanted by force.

Only force was able to defend against force.

One of the fundamental lessons that he had learned throughout all of his adventures and expeditions was that entrusting his safety and wellbeing to ephemeral concepts such as laws, customs, and friendly relations was a big mistake!

Rather than relying on other people's goodwill, Ves would rather build up his own power, which was exactly what he had been doing all this time.

The Larkinson Clan in its current state made him feel much more safe than he had ever been in the past!

The question now was whether he should leverage the System to strengthen his ability to deal with even greater threats!

Right now, Ves did not feel completely safe against every conceivable threat. There were massive alien fleets as well as powerful organizations like the Big Two, the first-rate superstates and the Five Scrolls Compact that could easily crush the Golden Skull Alliance at any point if they wanted!

The chances of this happening was unlikely, but Ves would rather not rely too much on rosy assumptions. What if the Terrans suddenly thought he was a

nuisance that had to be wiped off the face of the map? There was little he could do to resist such a whimsical and unjust decision in his current state!

"If I want to boost my ability to defend against threats, which of the upgrade tracks would suit me best?"

Ves did not feel conflicted at all about this particular decision. If he had to choose between Mech Pilot Cultivation, Unparalleled Combat and Personal Piloting Cultivation, then only one of them was a suitable choice for a mech designer!

Mech Pilot Cultivation would not only allow him to resolve his concerns regarding Andraste's genetic aptitude, but he would also be able to facilitate the growth of his other mech pilots.

He had high hopes for people such as Venerable Joshua, but that did not mean he was guaranteed to become a god pilot one day!

If Ves was able to improve the conditions of Joshua and many other loyal and trustworthy mech pilots, then he could surround himself with an army of all-powerful soldiers who could take on any human or alien army!

Although relying on mech pilots to protect him did not sound as self-sufficient as turning himself into the ultimate commando or mech pilot, there was only so much he could do by relying on his own personal power.

"The Five Scrolls Compact is the embodiment of the failure of this approach."

What Ves admired about the Compact was that its spiritual sorcerers or whatever they were called over there were immensely strong in a personal capacity.

However, plenty of powerful figures from this dreaded cult had met their downfall due to putting too much stock in their personal strength!

Ves would prefer to keep doing what he had already been doing, which was building a large and formidable mech army that could take on increasingly stronger threats.

This was why he was seriously eying Mech Pilot Cultivation. Other than Divine Hussain Albedo, he had never heard of anyone else that could replicate the functions of this upgrade track!

As much as he felt tempted to make this choice right away, he did not rush to do so. He still had to see whether the alternatives were any better.

He briefly considered the other four upgrade tracks.

Mental Projection, Spiritual Ascension, Technological Supremacy and Ultimate Craftsmanship were all capable of increasing his self-defense capabilities to an extent as well.

Though none of them were as ridiculous as directly empowering mech pilots, the difference was that excelling in spiritual engineering or technology would allow him to build the tools that could subsequently strengthen his mech pilots in a different manner!

"There is a fundamental difference between Mech Pilot Cultivation and these choices. The former is a black box that will make me completely dependent on the System while the latter will allow me to build up my own theories and applications."

There was no doubt that relying on developing his own tech was much slower and more difficult than relying on the instant convenience provided by the System.

Yet in a circumstance where he was not overly pressed for time, Ves could afford to take the slower route. It was not as if a powerful alien threat was looming right above his head at the moment!

As a creator, mech designer and innovator, Ves felt much greater affinity for the upgrade tracks that facilitated his strengths.

This was how he used the System before and with great results, so why should he turn away from this success formula?

Each of the four creative options appealed to him in different ways.

Mental Projection was the most unreasonable upgrade track of all. Even though it did not sound as if he could directly increase his skills or abilities, just the fact that he was able to snoop into the minds of people in both the past and present time was a reality-defying power!

Depending on who he inhabited and when the visit took place, he could make or unmake entire states and change the course of human history in his favor!

Ves only needed to remind himself of the Vulcan Empire and General Axelar Streon to know how much he could manipulate the society he lived in. If he made more focused changes, he could stack the deck in his favor to the point where he could become the protector and ruler of human civilization in the dark!

"Still... should I truly be spending my efforts on messing about with time and manipulating the lives of random people?"

All of this sounded like a distraction from his true work and calling. It was also a lot more difficult to secure direct gains for himself.

The other three options were much more direct and personal to him. Though each of them came with their fair share of issues, Ves had no doubt he would be able to accelerate his progress as a mech designer and advance much faster up the ranks than normal with the help of the benefits brought by any of these upgrade tracks!

"Between Technological Supremacy, Spiritual Ascension and Ultimate Craftsmanship, the first and the latter aren't that attractive to me. I'll get in trouble with the Polymath if I excel too much in harnessing technology and Vulcan is already on his way to excel in craftsmanship."

The only area where the System could truly help a lot was enhancing his spiritual engineering capabilities.

Ves had long been in his home with regards to furthering his spiritual development. Though he had slowly surrounded himself with design spirits as well as other spiritual adepts such as the Aduc Family, he still struggled to make progress because of lacking access to the rich infrastructure and accumulation of more established organizations such as the Five Scrolls Compact.

If he selected Spiritual Ascension as his choice of upgrade track, he could make so much progress on this front that he might be able to match and exceed this infamous cult in the future!

"The Five Scrolls Compact originally derived their knowledge and abilities from the Sacred Scrolls." Ves surmised. "If the cultists can do it, then so can I! As long as I work hard enough, I'll be able to beat them at their own game!"

He still felt mixed about this choice, though. He wanted to become a better mech designer, and focusing too much of his energy on spiritual engineering sounded like a distortion of his original purpose.

He was already happy with his current course. It was not necessary for him to be all-knowing and all-powerful in the field of spiritual engineering. He just needed to develop enough useful applications to impart new synergies in his mech designs.

As Ves weighed this option along with the other ones, he could not come to a definite choice. Each of them came with their own pros and cons.

He needed help!

"Hey System, can you pull me out of this weird extradimensional space and let me discuss my decisions and future strategy with my friends and family?"

At a junction like this, Ves found that it was always better to obtain input from other sources. Many different people such as Calabast and Shederin possessed a wealth of wisdom and could always point out useful factors from new and unfamiliar angles.

This was especially important for a major decision like this.

[...]

"It would really help, you know!"

[...]

"C'mon! I won't make a choice unless you bring me back to the present so that I can actually talk and gather more advice! You can't expect me to decide your future upgrade path without fully thinking this through!"

It appeared that his persuasion worked, because Ves suddenly found that his consciousness had left the strange ethereal space and returned to his body!

"Meow?"

Lucky, who hadn't seemed to notice that Ves had temporarily moved to another space, curiously flew closer and poked his face with an extended paw.

"I was just distracted for a moment, Lucky. Let's take a walk, shall we? I need to gain more perspective in my life."

Chapter 4175 A Confidential Talk

Ves felt burdened by the fact that the System was waiting for an answer to him. It was not as if it was exerting some sort of force on him, but he had the

feeling that it would not be good for either of them if he postponed his decision for too long.

This was why he did not dare to take his time trying to make up his mind. Shortly after the System booted him back to his body, he rose to his feet and left his office.

As he headed towards the exit of the Royal Mansion, he formed a small but growing list of people that he wanted to consult.

Though it was easiest for him to seek out his wife, he instead opted to board his shuttle that brought him straight back into orbit under escort.

The reason for that was because the person he wanted to speak to was Calabast.

As the person who arguably knew the most about him, Calabast was a person that could speak frankly and honestly about sensitive matters.

It also helped that she was damned smart and a lot wiser than himself. He just knew that she would be able to navigate the abundance of choices with greater clarity and awareness.

His vehicle slowly arrived at the Blinding Banshee. Compared to a few years ago, the capital espionage vessel had undergone an extensive transformation.

The Larkinsons managed to upgrade almost every aspect of her construction and configuration in order to bring her up to the standards of the Red Ocean.

Her armor system and many key structural parts had been replaced with stronger and more resilient versions that could keep the ship together a lot better.

The clan also invested a lot in overhauling her sensor systems, scanner systems, analytical engines, ECM and ECCM systems.

What Ves was particularly happy about was the massive improvement to her short-ranged and long-ranged detection measures.

Huge investments in the Blinding Banshee's sensors and scanners meant that hardly anything could sneak up to the expeditionary fleet without triggering a detection alarm!

Aside from these obvious changes, the Blinding Banshee also received a lot of other additions and upgrades that were much more confidential.

Ves did not pay a visit to the ship in order to discuss all of these changes, though.

As soon as he stepped onboard the ship, he headed straight to Calabast's office. He knew the route quite well as he had visited her pretty regularly in the past few years.

Though he found it a bit inconvenient that he had to fly to orbit each time he wanted to hold a secure discussion with her, Calabast argued that she was best able to control the environment aboard her own ship.

He soon reached the entrance of her private domain and entered it without issue.

As the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, no barrier within his fleet could stop his advance.

Of course, the Director of Intelligence was already awaiting his arrival.

"Ves. I must say that I did not expect you to visit me today." The woman who hardly looked as if she had aged in the past few years spoke out as she turned away from the projected window. "As far as I am aware of, there are no new initiatives or unexpected surprises that could have prompted you to travel to my little ship in person."

Ves smirked. "That's because you don't know everything. There are still ways to circumvent your surveillance. How are Cassie and Cleo, by the way?"

The dark-haired woman strode forward as her boots clacked against the tiles of the compartment. She moved over to a floating animal bed where an eight-legged creature was dozing off without a care in the cosmos.

She softly stroked Arnold's back as her expression turned uncharacteristically gentle.

"Squeak."

"Cassie has started to attend kindergarten, thankfully. Raising an energetic and eager daughter can be a handful, especially if she is a designer baby who develops faster than normal. I'm sure you have plenty of experience in this regard."

"That's what nannies such as Shannon are for. As much as I would like to spend all of my time with my family, our work never ends."

Calabast sighed. "You are right on that account. I've dropped Cleo off at the Purnesses since they have plenty of retired people who are more than willing to babysit a bunch of brats."

Calabast was a mother, not that she looked or acted like one most of the time.

Cassie and Cleo Purnesse-Larkinson were both designer babies that carried the DNA of both Calabast and Novilon Purnesse.

As the offspring of two high-ranking executives of the clan, they were almost just as prominent as Ves' own kids!

Both of them spent a few minutes on exchanging their woes as parents before Ves was ready to address his actual purpose.

"Can we talk?" Ves asked.

"Sure. Let's move to a more secure chamber if you think that is necessary."

The two along with Lucky and Arnold moved to the center of the Blinding Banshee where the Larkinsons had recently set up a ultra-secure meeting chamber.

Surrounded by 20 meters of thick and signal-inhibiting alloys on all sides, the modestly-sized compartment was most definitely the most secure place to hold a confidential discussion!

One of the purposes behind its construction was the need to create an absolute safe space where Ves could hold talks that would not get leaked to the MTA.

Therefore, all of the solid alloys were only a part of the measures to prevent eavesdropping!

Ves had personally designed and built all kinds of jammers and other pieces of tech that scrambled any attempts to monitor what went on inside the space. He did not dare to utilize any preexisting components or devices for fear that they were compromised by the MTA.

Although Ves could not guarantee that all of these measures were enough to stop the MTA from penetrating through all of these security measures, it at least minimized the chances as much as possible.

After completely closing off the space and activating every interference measure, both Ves and Calabast felt a lot less comfortable than before.

It was as if their entire bodies were being massaged by energy waves.

"Meow!"

"Squeak!"

Their pets were suffering quite a bit as well, but no one cared about their wellbeing at the moment.

Calabast turned to Ves while crossing her arms. "Alright, Ves. We're here now. Talk."

"I don't exactly know how to say this, but I will try my best to describe my situation."

He did not use too much obfuscation to describe the System's return and its presentation of different upgrade paths.

Though he did not explain everything that he had on his mind, he provided enough information for Calabast to understand the gist of his problematic position.

She did not rush to supply her views on the matter. More than a dozen seconds passed by before he opened her mouth.

"My first impression of your situation is that you are way more fortunate than almost every other person in human space. Who can boast of receiving unprecedented opportunities from a piece of the actual Metal Scroll? You are truly blessed to be one of the few Holy Sons in existence. Trillions of people would literally go out to kill you if they can gain access to just one of those upgrade paths that you have mentioned. Now that you are in a position to pick any of them as you would like, your response is not to jump with joy, but instead you agonize over your inability to make a selection."

Ves frowned. "Don't you realize how serious this is, Calabast?"

"I do, but that doesn't mean you should put too much weight on this matter. None of the choices sound bad, to be honest. They merely lead to different beneficial outcomes. Let me put this in a different way. No matter what you do, you will win a prize. One prize may be more valuable than the other, but you will get ahead in life no matter where your decision lands. I don't think you need to quibble too much about lost opportunities or failing to maximize your profit when you stand to obtain power beyond any reason. I mean, who heard

of a Journeyman who is able to become an expert mech who can pilot his own mech? You stand to be the first person to turn this possibility into a reality!"

Ves snorted. "Do I look like a combat junkie who is eager to hop into a cockpit and beat up our opponents with a mech? Let's leave the violence to those that are more suited for the job."

"Looks like you have already ruled out a few options."

"Yes. I don't think it is a good use of my time to become a super soldier or a mech pilot."

"I would have chosen differently if I were in your shoes, but then again I am not a mech designer." Calabast replied. "You have made a wise decision. However, the thing about wise decisions is that they are not always the correct ones. Perhaps the reality of your situation is actually different from what you think, which means that a good decision might actually turn out to be bad."

"What is your point, Calabast?"

"My point is that there may come a time where you regret turning away from an opportunity to strengthen yourself. You might not be aware of this, but many smart people predict that the current age of peace and prosperity will not last forever. There is a limit to how extensively we can maintain the status quo without frustrating powerful interest groups. Whether it is the first-rate superstates, the CFA or the many alien empires that will make the first move to tear down the current order, it is practically inevitable that all of our comfortable lives will soon be a relic of the past."

Ves had heard these kinds of remarks from many different people at many different times over the years.

A part of him felt that these fellows were wildly exaggerating the flaws and faultlines of human civilization. Humanity had managed to attain an

unprecedented degree of peace and prosperity in the last four centuries. How hard would it be to proceed like this for another handful of centuries?

Another part of him recognized that if so many smart people like Shederin and Professor Benedict predicted that a calamity would take place in the not-so-distant future, perhaps he should take all of these experts seriously!

Ves' expression grew heavy. "So you think it is better to prepare for the worst?"

"That would be my recommendation." She nodded and replied. "From my point of view, the two strategies that you have outlined amount to two different outcomes. The first outcome is that you can win harder at something that you are already good at. The second outcome is that you can limit the damage that you suffer if you are ever in a situation where you have suffered a loss. In fact, if you possess enough strength, you can reverse defeats and victories, thereby saving your hide and everything you worked for. Isn't that more precious than everything else in your life?"

"So you're telling me that I should go for Mech Pilot Cultivation?"

"Not necessarily, Ves. I wouldn't be in such a hurry to dismiss the other two self-defense options as well as the other ones that allow you to build up your own defensive measures. They both have their uses, and I can easily see how they can be useful in different scenarios. One of the biggest factors that might influence your decision is whether you want to commit more to mechs."

"What do you mean by that, exactly?"

Calabast grinned. "Tell me, Ves. Do you think mechs will last forever? Will they remain strong enough for you to continue to rely on them, or will they be phased out by other, more superior weapons in the future?"

"That..."

Chapter 4176 Future In Mechs

Ves was frozen in shock.

Calabast had just presented him with a question that could potentially shake the foundation of his belief in mechs!

As much as Ves didn't want to think about this difficult topic, the spymaster did not intend to let him off this time.

"Nothing lasts forever, Ves." She said in a matter-of-fact tone. "In the past, humanity fought with spears and bows, but where are they now? Once upon a time, infantry was actually formidable in battle, but that has no longer applied for several millennia. Obsolescence can apply to everything, even the mechs that you value so much."

"Mechs are not weak!"

"While I admit that they are fairly powerful at the moment, and they even show a trend of catching up to warships with the help of phasewater technology. However, what if other technological advances are made that grant enormous advantages to warships? What if vehicles that can be controlled by ordinary people such as starfighters and tanks have made so much progress that they can defeat mechs in a cost-effective manner? Do you really think you will retain a future as a mech designer?"

These were all plausible scenarios. Some of them even sound rather likely. While warship development had slowed down to an extent due to how few people were involved in this field these days, that could always change in the future.

Once warships became legal again and made a resurgence, what would happen to the demand for mechs? If warships proved to be extremely effective at demolishing large amounts of mechs from a comfortable distance, how well would the mech industry be able to withstand the decline?

Ves forcibly tried to calm his roiling emotions.

"Mechs are not hopeless. New tech always comes out, and the need for better solutions against trending war machines will ensure that those who remain involved in the industry will fight tooth and nail to lessen the disparity. I will definitely be part of the effort to keep mechs as relevant as possible."

"Are you sure you want to stick to that commitment when the Age of Mechs has long passed and humanity has moved on to the next mode of war?"

"Yes." Ves said with growing conviction. He may have been struck by confusion earlier, but his inner mech designer had made sure to put him on the right track again. "My entire life centers around mechs. Perhaps it may be foolish for me to continue to stick with them even if they become outdated today, but I really can't imagine switching to anything else. If no one wants to use mechs anymore, then I will continue to work on them and try to make them good enough to revive at least some demand for my products. I am all-in on mechs no matter how many changes occur in the future."

Calabast might not agree with his stance, but she respected his conviction.

"Well, I suppose I shouldn't have expected any other answer from a mech designer." She said. "If this is the case, then you should put your money where your mouth is and commit to a choice that maximizes your use of the mechs you are able to develop. Personally, I would choose either Mech Pilot Cultivation or Personal Piloting Cultivation."

"Between the two of them, which one would you choose over the other?" Ves curiously asked.

"That is hard to say. There are arguments to be made for either of them. If I truly have to make a choice, then I would opt for Personal Piloting Cultivation."

"Truly?"

"I'm not kidding. Don't you think it would be the ultimate surprise if a weak and harmless mech designer turns out to be a formidable ace pilot or something? None of your enemies will be able to predict that you can defeat any opponent as long as you are in a mech. Even if this secret leaks out one day, you will still be in a stronger position than normal."

"I don't know, Calabast. It sounds too selfish. I also don't have the time to excel in two professions at once."

The spymaster shook her head. "That isn't necessarily true, Ves. Look at Ketis. She's still improving her swordsmanship even though she keeps designing great swordsman mechs. Hasn't the System allowed you to cut short the time you spend on improving your design skills? If you go for this upgrade route, I bet it can do the same with regards to mech piloting. If you are so worried about splitting your time, then just treat it as a minor. What I mean by that is that you should just proceed with designing mechs as you have always done. However, when a threat barges all the way up to your doorstep, instead of squirming like a defenseless pig, you will always have the option of hopping into your personal supermech and fight back when every other line of defense has failed."

Ves had to admit that this scenario sounded attractive.

How many times in his life had he relied on the protection of others, only for him to be left in the cold?

There were so many instances where he was forced to watch others fight on his behalf without being able to contribute to the battle himself.

He could change all that if he chose to become a mech pilot himself.

Ves suddenly shook his head. "While you make a lot of sense, I don't think I would be able to concentrate on two completely separate professions at the same time. Ketis is one of a kind. I don't think I will be able to imitate her, not

when I have decided to forgo fighting entirely in order to completely dedicate myself to designing mechs."

"Fair enough. Then I would go for Mech Pilot Cultivation if I was in your place. You can keep designing all of the mechs you want, but the difference is that your pilots are able to make much greater use of your work. Every mech designer is able to make their mechs stronger for a price, but it is much more difficult to do the same for mech pilots. If you are able to gain this additional capability, then you will be a lot better off than almost everyone else in the mech industry."

That was an idea that Ves could get behind. Not just his cute little Andraste, but every other mech pilot he cared about such as Joshua would be able to gain immense benefits with his help!

Although committing to this choice would inevitably make him even more reliant on mechs, so what?

As a mech designer, there was no way he wanted to switch to another industry!

"What do you think about the other choices?" Ves asked. "Don't you think they sound good as well?"

"They have their uses." She admitted. "From the way you've described them, Spiritual Ascension and Technological Supremacy are both versatile and extremely helpful no matter the circumstances. You can use the boosts you've gained to design better mechs, develop other useful tech, build better self-defense gear and make yourself more valuable in the eyes of powerful groups. You won't go wrong if you choose either of them. However, ask yourself this. Do you truly need help in these areas?"

"...I guess not. Don't get me wrong. It's undoubtedly useful if I can obtain more help, but I've been managing decently well on my own so far. I'm not sure

whether I can keep this up in the future, but improving these aspects is not an urgent matter."

He talked a bit more about his options with Calabast. Though he did not agree with all of her opinions and stances, her unique perspective nonetheless helped him gain a more comprehensive understanding of how his life would be impacted by his choices.

Just as Ves was about to end this discussion, his spymaster brought up another important topic.

"Before you go, I would like to ask you this. What do you think your 'System' is trying to accomplish by presenting you with these choices?"

Ves stopped and furrowed his brows. "What are you insinuating this time, Calabast?"

"I'm just asking a question. Is that wrong, Ves? I just want to remind you that ever since you started to obsess over this matter, you have been thinking way too much about yourself and not enough about the source of all of this. No one is selfless. Nothing comes for free. These are lessons that you have learned many times. The System that has defined much of your life shouldn't be any different. Ask yourself this. Why is the System suddenly willing to change itself based on your input? This is clearly outside of its *modus operandi*. Can you think of a plausible reason why this mysterious existence is so eager to cater to your tastes?"

He had already thought this over.

"My initial thought is that the System has noticed my increasing determination to wean myself off its services. This may be one of the ways in which it wants me to become more willing to make use of it again. For what reason, I don't know."

"If this is the case, then we can surmise that the System is quite eager to maintain an active relationship with you. Don't you get it? The System is dependent on you. For it to be willing to alter its operations in order to regain your favor says a lot about its wants and needs. Whether it is programmed to service your needs or whether it depends on its relationship with you in order to stay alive, you have power over the System. Don't forget that, Ves."

"Uhh... okay..."

While she certainly shared an interesting thought to him, he wasn't sure whether he could make use of it in any way.

In any case, he soon ended his confidential talk with Calabast and left the Blinding Banshee in order to seek out advice from other trusted individuals.

Of course, he did not mention anything explicit about the System or anything. He merely phrased his inquiries in broad hypotheticals.

The answers he received from them did not surprise him too much.

"People think that mech designers such as us are pushovers." Benedict Cortez explained. "That is why we are ultimately not as respected in society. People respect and worship strength. If I can be as strong as any mech pilot, I could have avoided many problems in my life. Sadly, my ability to defend myself and stand up for my rights are limited. We can only serve."

Patriarch Reginald Cross offered a much more exuberant answer!

"Hah! I admire your courage, but a little bastard like you has no place on the battlefield! Just keep designing fantastic mechs like the Mars. Leave the fighting to the professionals. As long as you keep delivering the goods, you can count on me to beat your enemies! I already owe far too much to you as it is. My honor compels me to do everything I can to repay my debts to you. If you keep supplying me and my clan with help, we will have to keep paying you back."

Well, the two powerful members of the Cross Clan reacted exactly as Ves anticipated. He didn't even know why he bothered to solicit their opinions in the first place.

He paid a visit to the Glory Seekers next.

"You're family, Ves." Venerable Brutus Wodin sincerely said. "My sister is the mother of your children and I am married to a member of your clan. It is my duty to serve as your sword and shield. You are too important to many people. The Larkinson Clan, the Cross Clan, the Glory Seekers and even the Hexer colonists in the Red Ocean are all relying on your work and your miracles to build their own futures. We cannot do without you. Each of us are at your beck and call. You can always count on us to lend you a hand."

Chapter 4177 T-1 Building

Unlike the Crossers, the Glory Seekers all shared the same mindset.

"You are a mech designer. Fighting is the last thing you should do, sir." Venerable Eona Ballentine of the Glory Seekers said as she looked at Ves as if he was sick. "As the son of the Superior Mother, it is our duty and our mission to sow death on your behalf. If you are ever in a position where you are forced to fight for your life, then we have failed. That will never happen as long as we breathe."

Venerable Olivia Remis, the other Handmaiden of Death, nodded in agreement.

"No one is good at everything, sir. Aside from our Supreme, anyone lesser than her can only excel at one's respective phase of their lives. You are the embodiment of the life phase and a creator that spawns all beginnings. As powerful and as magnificent as you are, it is clear that your talents lie in creation, not destruction. We are the agents of your holy sister and the destroyers of your foes."

According to the adherents of hexism, men or 'boys' traditionally corresponded to the first phase of existence. Since Ves possessed so many strong associations with life, the Hexers all developed the notion that he was the ultimate good boy!

Naturally, good boys needed to be protected by as many strong and valiant women as possible!

"I don't even know why I bothered to ask your opinion." Ves grumbled and as he rubbed his face.

He continued to tour various places in order to collect more input. There was no such thing as too much input. The more people he asked, the more angles he collected. He already started to look at his available options in a much more comprehensive light.

After he concluded his brief visit to the Glory Seekers, he sought out the Aduc Family next.

With the help of Gaia's powerful support, the Aduc Family managed to take rapid root in the Krakatoa Star Sector.

Gaia Worldcrafting Services was only a recent entrant in the competitive terraforming industry, but already made a name for itself in this sector.

Although the Aducs hated rush jobs, they were realistic enough to know that many pioneers wanted to settle and start living on the planets they picked out as soon as possible.

Though Gaia Worldcrafting Services did not win any records when it came to speedy deliveries, the quality of the planets terraformed by this upstart company quickly stood out for their pleasant climates and lack of problems!

The Green Dream, the Aduc Family's flagship capital terraforming ship, was pretty much never present in the Davute System. She traveled around from

one star system to another in order to perform the biggest and most cumbersome terraforming assignments.

Even though Gaia Worldcrafting Services had drastically raised its prices in order to temper the demand for its services, the Aduc Family still received a lot of commissions!

Relatively few Aducs remained in Davute due to all of these jobs. The family did not want to stay idle and wanted to earn as much money as possible in order to build up its foundation in the Red Ocean.

Fortunately for Ves, the Aduc Family always made sure to station a fixed contingent in Davute. These were the specialists who had been assigned to work in the T Institute which they partly owned.

Ves had many dealings with Pesca Aduc. She was a good exobiologist and was particularly interested in ecology and such.

While her specialty was not a perfect fit for the research that took place in T Institute, her high birth meant that she knew how to take charge and handle administration.

In the years since Ves worked with the T Institute, he had few complaints on how Director Pesca Aduc ran the jointly-owned research organization. Her frequent contact with Gaia had not only strengthened her activated spirituality, but also granted her insights beyond the reach of ordinary people.

Visiting her at her workplace was quite an ordeal.

p Situated within the underground tunnel complex of the Cat Nest, few people heard of the existence of the T-1 Building. The deliberately bland and boring name was meant to disguise the fact that a lot of interesting metaphysical research took place within its halls.

The entrance to the T-1 Building wasn't on any maps. Ves had to go through various secret entrances and go through numerous mandatory security checks before he got through.

It was all worth it, though. He immediately entered into a different world once he stepped inside the amazing lab.

Trees and plants of various kinds were planted in biomes that were locked behind transparent walls.

Many of the larger trees were already growing various fruits that glinted in the light that shone down from above.

Different exobeasts and designer beasts roamed throughout the artificial environments. Many of them were unique and one-of-a-kind. Ves could sense the growing spiritualities of these extraordinary creatures.

Ves looked at each of them as either potential design spirits or potential ingredients for other purposes.

Whether they would turn into the former or the latter depended on their development potential. Not every mutated beast was worth nurturing, especially since the T Institute and its parent organizations only had so much space to grow all of these animals.

"Grow well, little fellows."

After passing through numerous corridors, he entered a lab where a group of researchers in pristine white lab coats were monitoring an ongoing experiment.

Ves looked through the reinforced window and saw that the current test centered around a member of the pakklaton race.

He happened to recognize the bird-like sentient alien that was in the process of commanding a group of feral exobeasts belonging to different species.

Normally, these dangerous alien predators would have reacted with intense hostility to other species. They would have torn each other as well as the tall avian apart if left to their own devices!

Yet what actually occurred was that each carnivorous beast obediently stood in several neat rows.

When the female pakklaton raised her winged arm, the creatures all ran around in a circular route while maintaining the exact same pace.

If Ves didn't know any better, he would have thought that these exobeasts had all undergone months or years of beast training.

In reality, the creatures had all been randomly taken from their biomes and dumped in front of the pakklaton test subject for the first time in their short lives!

"How is it going, Pesca?" Ves casually asked as he approached the side of the Director of the T Institute.

Pesca Aduc curled her lips downwards. "My day could be better, if that is what you were asking. Subject 5 showed great promise in the first few years, but her growth and development has stagnated as of late. Many of her fellow pakklaton test subjects have exceeded her in terms of spiritual development and ability proficiency."

As her number suggested, Subject 5 was one of the first pakklaton prisoners that the Larkinsons had converted into a test subject. She had taken part in one of the first research projects related to the development of companion spirits and provided a considerable amount of useful data that helped him refine this remarkable spiritual application.

Ves was quite charmed by Subject 5's ability to dominate exobeasts, but so far she had never succeeded in taking control over larger, stronger and more intelligent creatures.

She also couldn't control too many creatures. Ves could already see that her spirituality was straining and struggling to exert fine control over so many different exobeasts.

"It's not that surprising for her growth to stagnate." Ves commented. "She was one of the earliest recipients of a companion spirit. I did not add a lot of structure to the design of my creations back then, so there is a huge degree of variance between the strength and abilities of every spiritual pet. The newer generation of companion spirits are much stabler in this regard."

This was one of the advantages of founding the T Institute. Although much of the research on spirituality and related phenomena were rather vague, speculative, tentative and messy, the lessons and insights that Ves gained from the results helped with developing more refined spiritual applications.

Ves continued to discuss about Subject 5 and the state of companion spirit research with Director Pesca for a while.

It wasn't until the researchers concluded the current round of testing that Ves addressed his actual purpose.

Director Pesca Aduc briefly fell into thought.

"I don't really understand why you would ever think about becoming a mech pilot. It makes no sense even if you have the ability to do so. You have done great work. There is no one in human space that can do what you can do. I am convinced of that. Even your work in your capacity as a mech designer is not as important as the many new and amazing possibilities that you have brought to life with the help of our institute."

"So you think I should spend even more of my time on our spiritual research projects?"

"If I were you, I would stop designing mechs entirely." Pesca Aduc said.

"Please don't judge me too quickly. Hear me out please. How many mech

designers are active in the industry at this time? There are so many people who are dedicating so much of their lives to designing mechs that you are but one among many."

She waved her arm across the entire lab. "This is where you can truly change our entire society. All of the work we have done on spirit trees, companion spirits and breakthrough solutions will shock all of human space if others learn about the results we have gained so far. The Transhumanist Faction's increasing interest in our research is a reflection of how much more valuable your contributions in this area matter. In comparison, your mechs are not as remarkable. There are plenty of mechs that can satisfy the mech market. Maybe they don't have the same properties as your living mechs, but it is not as if your customers will become ruined if they can only work with ordinary mechs."

She was right. From a societal perspective, Ves' work as a spiritual engineer was much more impactful than his work as a mech designer, at least for the time being.

Though Ves could continue to invest a huge amount of time and effort into progressing his design capabilities, he could achieve a lot more if he dedicated himself entirely towards spiritual engineering!

"No one can do what you can do." Pesca Aduc repeated. "While there are other powerful individuals who are able to wield similar powers, none of them have come out with so many different forms of empowerment. Your dedication to researching different spiritual applications that can make people stronger and more capable than before is highly praiseworthy. If you decide to spend less time on mech design, then our T Institute will truly be able to take off! We will surely be able to help humanity ascend higher than any other race in the Milky Way and surroundings!"

That was a powerful boast, but one that might actually come true if Ves truly became more serious about his spiritual engineering activities.

Taking time off his mech design sessions was out of the question to Ves. He would never accept an approach that forced him to abandon the root of his identity.

However, if Ves opted for Spiritual Ascension, he could easily imagine a future where he became so good at spiritual engineering that he could accomplish a lot more results in much less time!

This was the perfect way for him to maximize both his mech design and spiritual engineering pursuits!

What was even better was that if Ves became better at spiritual engineering, his ability to design mechs would become even stronger!

Each of his products would become a lot more remarkable and useful on the battlefield. His ability to service the needs of mech pilots would skyrocket, primarily because there weren't any other mech designers that could come up with so many powerful spiritual engineering applications!

"You make a good point, Director Pesca."

Chapter 4178 Untapped Market

Ves still hadn't made up his mind on which upgrade track he should choose.

His discussions with Calabast, the Crossers and the Glory Seekers had caused him to swing towards Mech Pilot Cultivation.

His recent talk with Director Pesca Aduc shed new light on the value and the utility of Spiritual Ascension.

As much as Ves liked the idea of upgrading mech pilots with the help of brand-new System functions, he became even more enamored by the idea of expanding his spiritual engineering capabilities.

Ves was a creator by nature!

Philosophically, he believed that he could solve every problem as long as he built the right device or tool.

Even the matter of repairing or upgrading a person's genetic aptitude was not outside the realm of possibility. If Divine Hussain Albedo was able to do so by leveraging his willpower, then Ves believed that it was possible to develop a spiritual solution that could achieve similar results.

Of course, without enough time, skill, knowledge and commitment, it was unlikely for him and the T Institute to create a viable method to perform this impossible feat.

Ves and Director Pesca Aduc had already spent a few months exploring this fantastical idea, but they encountered so many hurdles that they quickly gave up and set their sights on more modest research goals.

They still dreamed about developing more powerful applications, but their depth and understanding of spiritual engineering was so shallow that they could only keep their more ambitious ideas to themselves.

The thought of being able to bring them out of the dark after gaining a massive boost to his spiritual engineering capabilities sounded extremely attractive to him at the moment!

It was probably the best choice he could make among the more productivity-oriented upgrade tracks.

As Director Pesca had just mentioned, there were many people that already excelled at designing mechs.

However, outside of himself and the researchers of the T Institute, there were few spiritual engineers who dedicated much of their expertise to developing helpful applications that could make humanity stronger as a whole.

The only major exception was the researchers of the Five Scrolls Compact, but they were so crazy and hostile towards the current order that they would never dedicate their time on research that could improve the lives of the common people!

As Ves continued to imagine how much good he could do as a spiritual engineer, he felt as if he could truly turn into an existence akin to a god as long as he became good enough in this aspect.

"Damn, this option sounds more and more tempting by the minute."

He was not done with exploring his options, though. He continued to approach different people in order to sound out their own views.

The next person he visited was 'Director' Samandra Avikon of the Creation Association.

As an organization centered around the spread of Vulcan's totems, the Creation Association was not a regular club.

When Ves entered its headquarters that was located in the busy Commercial District of Kotor City, he did not get the impression that he had stepped inside the venue of a trade association.

The high ceilings, the abundance of arches, the prevalence of mixed dwarven and human iconography along with the smell of incense made him feel as if he had entered a cathedral!

Numerous robed figures bowed in respect at Ves' passing. They recognized him and revered him for introducing Vulcan into their lives.

Ves frowned deeper with every respectful greeting. It was never his intention to turn the Creation Association into an actual church, but somehow it had morphed into this form.

As much as he disliked the Creation Association's tendency of turning its members and adherents into fanatical worshipers, he could not argue the results.

Not only did the Creation Association collect enough member fees to earn a handsome profit, it was also responsible for spreading Vulcan and the totems made in his image throughout the Red Ocean!

"Patriarch Ves! I am honored by your visit!" Director Samandra Avikon spoke as her robed figure rose from her ostentatious-looking chair. "Have you come to bless us with a new gift, or are you here to discuss our new dealings with the Rubarthans?"

"Wait, what?"

"Didn't you read the notice that I sent you a day ago, my lord?"

"I must have missed that since I became preoccupied with another matter as of late. Can you tell me more about the Rubarthans?"

It turned out that a group of superstitious Rubarthan craftsmen had heard about the wonderful benefits of the Creation Association. They proposed to pay a considerable fortune for the 'production method' of the totems that were exclusive to the Creation Association.

Of course, it was impossible for the Creation Association to agree to such a deal. Totems were exclusive to the Larkinson Clan. This was a hard rule that Ves already adhered to. Besides, he didn't think that anyone could fully replicate his work, so the point was moot.

"These first-raters are too overbearing." Ves grimaced. "However, it is not so simple to say no to them. Who knows how they will react if we slam the door in their face. Try and stall out the negotiations and insist that we can't do anything except to supply the products that the Creation Association already

sells. If that isn't enough to satisfy them, then come to me. I'll find a way to drag in the MTA and deter them with my backing."

This was not the first time a group of first-raters had approached Ves or his organizations for something.

After all, if his glows were effective and useful for second-class mechs, they would undoubtedly be useful for first-class mechs as well!

If Ves wanted to, he could contact a desperate enough first-class mech designer and enter into a collaboration with that person to design and release a line of first-class living mechs.

However, Ves possessed enough self-knowledge and prudence to know that he was not yet ready to play in this arena.

Just like how he was reluctant to disturb the second-class mech market in the past, he was afraid of making too many enemies by encroaching on their territories.

The people and organizations involved in the design, production and sale of first-class multipurpose mechs were anything but simple!

Their might, resources and energy were far greater than his own! Even if they were prohibited from messing about in the middle and lower zones of the Red Ocean, there were still plenty of ways they could screw around with Ves and his clan.

Due to all of these fears, Ves had long maintained a policy of limiting his exposure to first-raters.

He did not reject every potential business deal with either Terran and Rubarthan parties, but he took extra care to avoid any entanglements that would pull him far too deep in their dangerous games.

After he finished expressing his views on this topic, he moved on to bringing up the topic that truly occupied his attention at this time.

"You are a great person, Patriarch Ves." Director Samandra said with great conviction. "No matter who you are and where you devote your energy towards, I have no doubt that you will succeed beyond anyone's imagination. You have already accomplished much before your forties. I cannot imagine how extensively you have affected every person's life when you become four centuries old."

"So you think it doesn't matter what I choose to focus on in the future?" Ves asked.

"That is not exactly what I mean. I believe that destiny or fate will guide you into the right path. You are born for greatness, sir. You have stood out among other people and begun to build up a sizable following. I have faith that you will be able to lead each of us to a new and better future!"

Well, that was helpful. Not.

"So you have no opinions at all on my future course of action?"

"Well, I must truly give an opinion, then I think that it is helpful to our Creation Association if you can introduce more powerful means of spreading your splendor. While we have managed to distribute many totems over the years, it is difficult to appeal to different people. We are facing particularly substantial suppression from other faiths and religious groups."

That was a familiar-sounding problem. Other religions tended to regard the Creation Association as a direct threat to their own interests, so they pushed back heavily to limit this upstart organization's expansion.

The suppression was quite effective. The Larkinson Clan may be influential in Davute and the immediate region, but it was hard for the Larkinsons to project their power in more distant regions.

"How many clients do we have at this time?"

"According to the latest figures, we have around 23,350 active clients. Each of them possess at least 1 totem of Vulcan that is active and authorized. Due to how many craftsmen and makers wish to obtain Vulcan's blessing, we are able to collect at least 10,000 MTA credits in usage fees."

"How much monthly revenue have we earned last month?"

"Only around 80,000 MTA credits, which is not as high as the sum we have earned when we are at our peak, but I am assured that we will do better next time."

The totems were all capable of imparting a weaker version of what his Hammer of Brilliance was capable of, but only did so when receiving payment in the form of MTA credits.

The clever part about the totems was that the minimum amount of money needed to activate this useful function was 1 MTA credit, but there was no upper boundary to the maximum sum.

The general rule regarding totems was that a greater sacrifice was paired with greater benefits!

The totems not only extended and maintained their full glows for a longer period, but also granted more powerful inspired states to the main recipient!

As such, there were times when different artisans sacrificed as much as 2,000 MTA credits in order to guarantee a successful completion of a critical project!

Although this entire arrangement sounded like a cynical scam, the benefits offered by the totems were still real enough. Ves at least possessed that much integrity.

It was for that reason that this business model remained viable and that no one had truly managed to discredit the Creation Association.

"80,000 MTA credits, huh?"

In the past, Ves might consider this to be an astronomical sum and a huge windfall for him and his clan, but these days it hardly whet his appetite.

The expenses of his clan had ballooned as it expanded over time. It cost a lot of money to commission new ships, build expensive mechs and gain access to a sufficient amount of rare and valuable resources.

The maintenance and upkeep of his growing expedition fleet alone cost almost just as much money!

All of the investment and associated burdens were worth it, though. Every capital ship had undergone major overhauls that made them at least several times more effective than before.

Every existing mech had received massive upgrades while a lot of new and powerful machines expanded the already-impressive combat power of the Larkinson Clan.

With how much money the LMC was earning these days, it was absolutely no problem for the Larkinson Clan to bear this expanded burden.

Still, Ves felt his clan could have done a lot more to strengthen his clan further if he was able to earn more money.

The Creation Association's success showed that there was a huge demand for totems and other products empowered by spirituality. They were able to help in ways that no other alternatives could fully match and they did so at a surprisingly low cost.

If Ves opted to go for Spiritual Ascension, he had a suspicion that he could truly elevate the Creation Association into a massive influence!

"Thank you for your input, Director Samandra. I have a schedule to attend to, so I will leave you to your work."

Chapter 4179 The Strength Of Technology

After going around for a while, Ves eventually returned to his clan in order to solicit the opinions of his own clansmen.

Many of them did not have many insightful words to say to him, though that might be because of the vague way he introduced his topic.

"Hah!" Venerable Vincent Ricklin patted his hand on Ves' shoulder. "Leave the fighting to us, buddy! I don't know where you get these weird ideas, but you don't need to worry about yourself or us. I can do anything as long as you make the best possible mechs! My C-Man has worked out really well for me, but if I want to keep improving in the future, I know that I will have to depend on you. Making better mechs is all we ask from you, Ves."

None of the Larkinson mech pilots were weak. The current roster of expert pilots were especially promising. None of them were too old and many of them experienced rapid growth due to being paired with masterwork expert mechs.

Though Ves did not take Vincent seriously most of the time, the man's response was quite good this time.

If Ves was confident in his troops and his ability to supply them with powerful mechs, then why should he resort to anything else?

Whether it was Mech Pilot Cultivation or Personal Piloting Cultivation, both choices implied that Ves did not have any confidence in the soldiers that he had gathered around him and his clan.

Rather than getting sidetracked, it might be better for him to stick to his current strategy and seek to empower his mech army with better and more fantastic creations.

Expanding his ability to design and build better mechs and other pieces of tech could strengthen his troops and his defenses a lot more than relying on other means.

He just had to possess enough confidence in himself and his army.

When Ves approached Commander Casella, she voiced a similar opinion.

"Our clan is made up of many different people. Compared to other organizations, the proportion of members who are combat personnel is on the higher end." She explained. "We have many mech pilots and support personnel who are capable professionals. I have little doubt that even the humblest mech pilot among us is willing and able to fight to the utmost if the need arises."

"So you're saying that I should count on all of you guys to do your jobs?"

"That is part of what I want to convey. Please do not doubt the army that you have created. We have grown quickly since you created us and we are continuing to grow stronger with each passing year. Even I cannot imagine the opponents we will be able to fight against in a century. I think you will never have to worry about us falling short. We don't even need your mechs if it comes down to it. We have reached a point in our growth where we can defeat plenty of enemies even if we rely entirely on commercial mech models and mechs developed by external mech designers on commission."

She was right. In the past, Ves and his growing organization frequently encountered enemies that brought a superior force into the field.

The troops under his command had to rely on numerous unconventional solutions that their enemies couldn't foresee such as battle formations and design spirits in order to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

Though the battles that the Larkinson Clan fought in the past were certainly thrilling as a result, this was no way to survive in the long term!

This was why Ves and his clan invested a huge amount of funding and resources into strengthening the fundamentals of the Larkinson Army.

Powerful mechs with impressive specs paired with well-trained battle-hardened mech pilots ought to be enough to defeat or deter most enemies!

As Ves quizzed a few more expert pilots, they all supplied him with similar answers. They believed in their strength and the strength of their fellow pilots. They did not ask for Ves to help them in any other fashion other than supplying them with stronger mechs. They could take care of the rest by relying on their own power.

Ves began to receive different answers when he turned to the mech designers of his clan. They were much more interested in his struggle to decide what area to focus on improving the most.

"We are all humans, sir." Merrill O'Brian told him. "We are a classical tool-using race that relies foremost on our understanding and mastery of technology to gain strength and defeat our opponents. While there are alternate means of obtaining power, none of them are as suitable or as reliable as technology. As long as our technological superiority is vastly greater than that of our foes, we will always be able to win our battles."

Sara Voiken also voiced her support of focusing on technology.

"Phasewater technology is the future of mech design. Humanity is constantly coming out with new and better ways to build mechs. If we want to become the strongest clan in human space, then it is essential for us to master the best technology. I'm not just talking about the innovations that we create in-house, but also the tech that other people have developed. There are many brilliant people alive today, and the amount of new and amazing tech they come up with is unimaginable. The biggest groups such as the Big Two and the first-rate superstates are primarily strong because of how extensively they are able to access and make use of so much tech."

"I agree with Merrill and Sara." Juliet Stameross said. "We are all mech designers who hope to make mech better through our own research. However, no matter how much effort we put into developing new solutions, we can only do so much. A collective is always more powerful than any state or organization. One of the biggest reasons why the human race originally got ahead was because we shared all of our technological gains with each other. Inventions such as FTL drives and energy shields did not remain exclusive to a single faction of humanity, but became available to everyone. This process is continuing to take place, so if we do not want to fall behind, we need to maximize our ability to process the latest developments in the tech industry."

Several of the Journeyman that Ves had gathered adopted ugly looks.

"I have already spent years on trying to master the fundamentals of phasewater technology, but I think it will take longer than 10 years before I can develop my first decent transphasic armor system." Sara wearily sighed.

"Phasewater technology is a relatively new field. Rapid change and progress is taking place every day." Juliet mentioned. "The original package of textbooks and articles that we have obtained from the MTA is already outdated. By the time we have mastered the basics, I expect we will have to devour another pile of difficult textbooks in order to catch up with the progress that phasewater researchers have attained so far, but once we have devoured those books, we will probably have to devour another batch of study material in order to close the gap again..."

In short, this was a never-ending cycle. While it sounded incredibly tiring to keep devoting lots of time to try and fail to catch up with all of the exciting developments in this exotic new field, they had no choice in the matter.

As Sara Voiken had just said, phasewater technology was the future of mech design as well as many other sectors. Those that did not master its fundamentals at all were destined to become marginalized in the future.

However, the sheer difficulty of phasewater technology meant that there were large gaps in understanding and capabilities between different mech designers.

Those that excelled at book learning would undoubtedly be able to get a headstart in designing powerful transphasic mechs. Ves predicted that mech designers who were much better at absorbing new and difficult scientific theories would come to dominate the mech market within the next generation!

This was bad news to Ves and the Larkinson Clan! Every mech designer worth mentioning was still young and only absorbed so much knowledge up to this point in their lives.

Seniors and Masters were much stronger in this aspect due to their higher ages and their more formidable intellectual capabilities.

If the Larkinson Clan was led by a Master, then Ves wouldn't be worried.

Unfortunately, the Design Department only had Journeymen!

While this had not been a major problem up until now, once transphasic mechs became more ubiquitous, the LMC would definitely fall behind.

If Ves wanted to ensure that his mechs would never drop in popularity because he and his fellow Larkinson mech designers failed to harness the latest and most cutting-edge technologies, then choosing the Technological Supremacy upgrade track would be a great choice!

As long as he set aside his concerns about attracting too much attention from the Polymath, Ves admitted that this was indeed a fantastic choice for a mech designer.

Ves had always been proud of his ability to empower mechs beyond their technical specs and design. However, that did not mean that it was the right choice to depend entirely on his specialty to make his mechs strong.

If he was able to excel in both spiritual and technical design, then his mechs would definitely become a lot more impressive and rounded than before!

In a more ideal situation, Ves would be able to rely on his wife and his fellow mech designers to compensate for this weakness.

However, with so much new and complicated tech coming out every day, there was simply no way for any of them to fully catch up with all of the crazy and powerful new technologies that pushed mechs even further.

If Ves was able to leverage the System to catch up faster than anyone else, he would be able to make certain that the performance of his mechs would always remain ahead of mechs designed by other capable people!

He finally received a different opinion when he approached Ketis for advice.

"Technology is great, but technology isn't everything, Ves." She told him as she paused her work on one of her powerful swordsman mech designs. "It's the user that is important as well. There are lots of great tech out there, but the people who must harness it need to be strong as well in order to make proper use of what they have available. When we put our focus on assisting people, I believe that they can become unimaginably strong!"

"So tech is not as important in your opinion?" Ves curiously asked.

Ketis firmly nodded. "Expert pilots such as Venerable Dise or swordmasters such as myself are proof of that! Both of us are able to take on far stronger opponents despite the fact that we are humans who are wielding sharp metal objects. Any normal mech pilot or soldier would never be able to come close to matching our battle prowess. This is despite the fact that all of the equipment stays the same!"

She made for a powerful argument, but there was one big flaw to her premise.

"Not everyone is capable of becoming as strong as you and Venerable Dise." He said. "Even if it becomes a lot easier for soldiers to break through in the future, there will still be a division between weak and strong."

"Limits don't exist, Ves. The act of breaking through from one rank to the next is proof that every barrier can be overcome no matter how strong they are. If a soldier isn't strong enough, then we need to put more effort into training! Have you seen how good the new generation of Swordmaiden mech pilots have become? They can beat their peers from every other mech legion in a melee battle! While the mech models they use are all over the place, their specs are not that different. It is the pilots that make up the difference."

Chapter 4180 For Family

Ves almost reached the end of his journey.

He had approached and solicited the opinions of hundreds of people.

His increasingly more elaborate search for voices generated a lot of confusion inside and outside of his clan.

His behavior resembled that of a mech designer who started to slide into a mid-life crisis. His insistent questions on what he should focus on in the future sounded as if he was losing sight of his own life.

Ves did not care what kind of commotion he caused. He already built up a reputation for being eccentric and doing whatever he wanted, so his clansmen merely shrugged and continued on with their work.

In any case, the Larkinson Clan had matured into an increasingly larger, more structured and more professional organization in the last few years.

As he continued to discuss his future with all kinds of personalities, he gained a lot more depth about the consequences of every potential decision he could make with regards to the System.

There was no avoiding the fact that the current decision would dictate how he would live out the rest of his life.

No matter how much he wanted to diminish the importance of the System to his life, the advantages he could obtain from its upgraded version were too great for him to ignore.

To turn his back on all of the fantastic benefits that it could provide to him was not wise. If he was able to strengthen himself and his clan further, he would not only be able to rise to the top faster, but also gain more advantages in battle.

When he looked back on his life, he clearly recognized that much of the reason why he was able to come out on top was because he improved faster and accumulated more power in a shorter amount of time!

The more he improved, the less he felt threatened by other parties.

In the past, the mere mention of the Friday Coalition and other second-raters would have caused him to shake in his boots.

Nowadays, any word about the Fridayman would prompt him to roll his eyes. Even if his old enemies were bored enough to seek him out, so what?

His clan was more powerful than ever and Patriarch Reginald Cross personally pledged to protect him against any foe!

After listening to so many opinions and hearing how a lot of people placed their hopes on his rapid improvement, Ves did not want to disappoint their expectations.

Right now, the Larkinson Clan still needed to tread lightly whenever any first-raters were involved. Ves and his subordinates did not dare to answer with straight refusals if the Terrans or Rubarthans came calling.

"I need to fix this sooner or later." Ves furrowed his brows. "Preferably sooner."

He and his clan might have grown into significant influences in Davute, but they were still small fry in the Red Ocean as a whole.

Plenty of Larkinsons voiced their concerns about getting confronted by enemies beyond their ability to handle. The ones that had been with the clan since the early days were especially sensitive to this. Their experiences with fighting against large and overwhelming forces such as state militaries and dominant alien groups had left them with traumas that still haunted them in their nightmares.

"We're still so small in the end." Ves depressingly whispered as he felt a lot less secure about the state of his forces.

The Larkinson Clan may have grown at a meteoric rate since its founding, but that did not change the fact that it was still an ant in the greater scheme of things!

There were many different zones in the dwarf galaxy, of which the upper zones with the richest deposits of phasewater and resources dictated the overall trend in this exciting new frontier.

Whatever happened in the Krakatoa Middle Zone had little to no impact on the development of humanity's expansion in the Red Ocean. The Larkinsons had no capital at all to feel proud of their strength or secure in their ability to defend their assets.

Ves and the Larkinson Clan did not need to be the strongest organization in human space. It just needed to possess enough strength to make parties such as the Big Two and the first-rate states treat Ves politely.

Even so, the journey to reach this point was unimaginably far. Considering how many threats might emerge during this lengthy period, Ves ultimately

concluded that it was better to leverage the System as much as possible despite any misgivings that he possessed.

Of course, he still needed to make sure to make clever use of its capabilities. There were good ways and bad ways to utilize the conveniences provided by the fragment of the Metal Scroll.

As Ves underwent this gradual evolution in thought and understanding, he finally returned to the abode that had been his home for the past five years.

The Royal Mansion looked as resplendent as ever. Situated in the heart of the Blue Cat Estates located on the southern end of the Cat Nest, the large estate served as both his sanctuary and his home during his stay on Davute.

As Ves entered the large and expansive back garden of his personal home, the laughter of kids and the meowing of cats filled up the pleasant air.

Maow! Maow!

Mew!

Maaw!

Meuw...

A spiritual red feline hovered before three growing spiritual kittens. Alexandria preened with pride in front of her 'offspring' and playfully licked the bodies of the three diminutive companion spirits regardless of how many times they complained!

"Hihihih!"

"Hihih!"

Further ahead, two little girls were sitting on the grass and played with a dozen or so animated dolls.

,m The bots in the shape of princesses, tigers, ponies and other cute figures were able to interact with the girls in different ways.

The sight of Aurelia and Andraste playing with each other without a care in their little world brought a lot of warmth to their father's heart.

The two sisters had always gotten along well with each other. Aurelia had already assumed the role as the responsible big sister and took care of Andraste whenever possible.

However, due to Andraste's combat and physical-oriented augmentations, his second daughter grew a lot faster than normal and already became just as tall as her older sister.

Nonetheless, Andraste was more willing to accept Aurelia's guidance and leadership role. This was rather odd as Andraste was partially bioprogrammed to become a leader as well.

"Miaow miaow~"

"Clixie..."

Up further ahead was his youngest child, who was already vigorous enough to chase after Clixie. Ves' eyes grew soft as he beheld his first son.

Though Marvaine Wodin-Larkinson was younger than Aurelia and Andraste, he represented a new beginning to his little family.

Just as Gloriana treated Aurelia as her principal heir, Ves already saw Marvaine as his designated successor.

There were multiple reasons for that. The fact that Marvaine was a boy was one reason for that. What truly made him special was his designer baby package.

For their third child, Ves and Gloriana went into business with Witshaw & Seneca yet again.

The wedded couple was happy with the products that the renowned genetics company had provided to them in the past. Both Aurelia and Andraste showed a lot of promise and their carefully-designed genes played a large role in their accelerated development.

When Ves and Gloriana made the decision to have a third kid, the pair made several important decisions.

Ves finally had his way and could start with raising a son.

The Living Mech Corporation had also begun to earn a lot of money at the time. With breakout successes such as the Pacifier, the War Squire and the the Hymenoptera mech lines, the Larkinsons suddenly gained a lot more room to spend their hard-earned cash.

While the Larkinson Clan invested most of its earnings into major asset acquisitions and infrastructure projects, Ves selfishly decided to spend way more money on his first son's designer baby package.

Whereas Aurelia and Andraste's designer genes had cost Ves 4000 MTA credits each, he forked out 100,000 MTA credits all at once in order to strengthen and optimize Marvaine's genes as much as possible!

His wife actually lodged a complaint at first.

"This isn't fair to Aurelia and Andraste!" Gloriana exclaimed! "How will our oldest daughters be able to compete against their younger brother? He'll become too good!"

Ves nonchalantly crossed his arms. "Don't turn this into a bigger deal than it sounds. You know as well as I do that there are horrible diminishing returns at this level of spending. Just because we spend 25 times more on our baby boy's designer genes doesn't mean he will be 25 times stronger or smarter. The actual difference will be only 5 to 10 percent at best. The bigger improvements are mostly found in secondary and tertiary properties such as

better health, strengthened immune system, more efficient metabolism and such. It's a lot harder to boost his smarts at this level."

"He will still be smarter than our two daughters!"

"That's the point, honey! We agreed to raise him as a mech designer, didn't you?! The designer baby package that I have chosen for him massively enhanced his memory, his learning speed, his pattern recognition abilities, his abstract thinking capability, his logical thinking processes, his compatibility and utilization of cranial implants as well as vastly greater protection to his brain and nervous system. All of these changes are especially geared to provide him with the greatest possible advantages in any job that is related to the hard sciences."

Ves had opted for Witshaw & Yeneca's Formula U-775128-MMT because it was tailor-made for mech designers.

Any baby that was born with the associated designer genes would exhibit a frightening ability to learn and understand a lot of science, engineering and math-related subjects at a relatively young age!

Though Marvaine was still too young at the moment, it would not take too many years for his intelligence to bloom to the point where he could skip multiple grades at school!

Faced with all of these fantastic future achievements, Gloriana eventually agreed to invest a lot more money into Marvaine's genes.

She too wanted to raise a little genius who could make her proud by designing a fantastic mech in the future!

It would have been better if Marvaine was a girl rather than a boy, but she already got her way with Aurelia and Andraste.

"Papa!" Little Marvaine grinned as he stopped chasing after Clixie.

The boy instead turned around and toddled closer until Ves waved his hand. Marvaine's little body floated above the ground and flew into his father's embrace.

"I missed you, papa!"

"I missed you too, my little genius."

Though Ves loved all of the children that he had so far, Marvaine was truly special in his eyes.

A part of him felt the need to live vicariously through the child he identified most closely with. He wanted to shower Marvaine with all of the advantages and opportunities that he never got to enjoy in his own life.

While Ves eventually managed to do well with the help of the Mech Designer System, he wanted to do his best to raise Marvaine into a talented mech designer that did not need to rely on such a dangerous tool to achieve success in the mech industry.

So far, Marvaine had already taken the first step in this possible career journey. This was because Denny, his fluffy blond main coon spiritual companion spirit, had already begun to embody the attribute of life!

This development gave Marvaine the potential to become Ves' true successor in mech design.

It also annoyed the hell out of Gloriana. If Marvaine developed a great talent for designing mechs, then it would be a lot harder for her to persuade her boy to design mechs according to her own ideas!

As Ves hugged his son, he suddenly felt a lot less confused than before.

No matter what he chose in the end, he needed to make sure he decided what was best for his family!