

## Mech 4361

### Chapter 4361 Post-Living Mech

"Wow. So cool!" Marvaine said as he stared admiringly at the projection showing the Everchanger swinging its powerful new plasma sword at the Mars.

The other kids gathered around to observe the ongoing testing session as well. They were too young to understand the destructive potential of the two amazing mechs and their weapons, but the incredible lightshow and release of energies intuitively allowed them to understand that ordinary mechs could not possibly handle all of this power!

"My mech will definitely be more powerful one day!" Andraste boasted.

"Nuh, uh. My mech will be stronger than yours!" Kirian insisted.

Their parents also became impressed at the results so far. The evaluations given by Patriarch Reginald were encouraging. As a former expert pilot, he deeply understood how much damage a typical expert mech could endure.

Ordinarily, the resonance shields of expert mechs could withstand a lot more blows. This always made it tedious to overcome the initial defensive layer of a powerful machine.

The Scarlet Ember was not a typical weapon for an expert mech, so it did not follow the rules of one. This was exactly why the Larkinsons were so willing to convert this foreign weapon into their own asset!

"This is just the start." Ves reminded everyone. "Once Venerable Joshua is able to turn the Scarlet Ember into a friend, he should be able to resonate with it with much greater ease, which means its damage amplification will become a lot higher!"

This would probably take years. For now, the Larkinsons were more interested in the new weapon's inherent power.

Not only was its power level still high despite the latest adjustments, the plasma sword also possessed transphasic properties, though not as much as the Neo Amadeus' destroyed transphasic sword.

The Scarlet Ember still had enough transphasic qualities to mitigate the effects of transphasic armor systems, and that was what mattered the most.

The Everchanger managed to give the Mars a powerful massage due to all of these factors, but the expert mech soon stopped.

Joshua gave a warning. "My expert mech has already run through half of its energy reserves."

Ves frowned. "That was quick. Shall we proceed with the final test, Ketis?"

The woman nodded. "Joshua, let's skip the following tests and go right to the end. Activate the Amadeus Mode of your new weapon and strike the Mars a final time."

"Alright."

From the moment Joshua activated this new mode, the Scarlet Ember's red plasma edge began to grow hotter and brighter! Its glow even turned from red to white!

Many sensors detected a substantial surge in power as the plasma sword quickly reached its original level of power!

The Everchanger couldn't sustain this extreme state for long, so it quickly lunged forward and slashed towards the Mars as if it was flinging a miniature sun!

A larger and more dramatic eruption of light and heat took place as the Mars finally had to put a bit more effort into resisting the attack!

As the sensors managed to obtain clearer readings again, the Mars looked as unruffled as ever.

The Everchanger on the other hand had already switched off the Scarlet Ember in order to avoid dwindling its remaining energy reserves entirely.

The expert mech could still fight for a minute or two if necessary, but Joshua did not want to burden his living mech any further.

Though Patriarch Reginald's Saint Kingdom was still as strong as ever, those with more discerning eyes could see that it had actually destabilized to a tiny extent.

Of course, Reginald quickly remedied this imperfection, but it was already notable that the Everchanger was able to put the Mars under slight pressure given the amazing power disparity between the two masterwork mechs.

"Interesting." Ves murmured as he continued to focus on the Mars as opposed to the Everchanger and its new weapon. "The power of the Scarlet Ember increased by three to four times. However, the energy it consumed was at least an order of magnitude greater. The Amadeus Mode is an extremely inefficient option."

Ketis nodded. "The Amadeus Mode is nothing more than restoring the power setting of the Scarlet Ember to its original parameters. This is how powerful the plasma sword used to be when it was wielded by the Neo Amadeus. It's not a surprise that the late Saint Jeremiah Gauge wielded this sword after he expended his first two ones. The plasma weapon is just too hungry for energy. It was definitely designed to function as a finisher, and that is also why I made sure to program this extra feature."

The amazing damage potential of that final attack had not reached the standard of an ace mech, but definitely surpassed a serious blow from a high-tier expert mech!

The price to launch the attack was incredibly high, but the results reluctantly made it worth it as long as it was used in the right conditions.

"It will be better in the future." Ves predicted. "Joshua will experience a lot of growth in the coming decades. Our clan will also be able to gain access to better and more expensive energy cells that can vastly improve the Everchanger's energy reserves. By then, the Everchanger can fully showcase the value of the Scarlet Ember. I bet the power of its most serious attack will finally be able to reach the standard of an ace mech!"

Before, Ves' only hope of being able to launch an attack of this magnitude was to wait for Venerable Davia Stark and the Amaranto to grow up further.

Now, the Larkinsons had another option, which significantly relieved a lot of pressure.

"The Mars handled itself quite well through this session. It's as if it is still in a pristine state."

Ves actually paid attention to more than just the Scarlet Ember and the Everchanger today.

His second goal for this testing session was to observe and assess the current state of the Mars.

That was why he became so pleased when Patriarch Reginald agreed to help the Larkinsons test the performance of the reformed plasma sword.

Not only would Ves be able to figure out the capabilities of the sword, but he would also be able to see how the Mars fared after a few weeks of servicing and after it had settled down as a post-living mech.

Post-living mech. That was how he decided to call the current state of the Mars. The ace mech no longer possessed its own independent personality and consciousness after Reginald murdered the life and turned the powerful machine into his own incarnation through sheer willpower.

The fact that the Mars retained possession of nearly all of the qualities of a living mech aside from the aspect that Ves cared about the most made it both alive and dead.

He had struggled to figure out whether the Mars leaned more towards alive and dead, but never managed to make up his mind. He eventually settled for the term 'post-living mech' because it signified that the Mars was still a living mech in a sense, but had also moved beyond its traditional definition.

Regardless, becoming a post-living mech did not make the Mars any weaker. In fact, it was the opposite. The complete harmony and lack of resistance from the damaged but powerful ace mech meant that Reginald felt a lot more comfortable in his current vessel.

Ves wasn't the only person who noticed how easily the Mars resisted a power attack that could have dealt much more devastating damage against another target.

"The Mars is still as unbeatable to us as ever." Ketis sighed. "If not even the Scarlet Ember in its Amadeus Mode can change that, then it will take a long time before our expert mechs can pose a serious threat against any ace mech."

Ves sighed but nodded in agreement. "The pilot is just as important as the mech and equipment. The expert mechs of our clan are already substantially more powerful than the pilots they are partnered with. The gap between the power of the expert pilot and the expert mech has only grown even wider in this case. Joshua and the Everchanger are like kids trying their best to swing around a massive greatsword like your Bloodsinger. Even if they can barely lift up the weapon, that is different from being able to wield it proficiently."

The Mars was powerful not just because of its amazing tech and materials, but also because it was paired with an extremely powerful mech pilot. Reginald was able to match its strength a lot better.

As long as Master Benedict continued to upgrade the Mars with newer tech and better parts in the future, he could ensure that the disparity between pilot and mech would never grow too wide.

"It's not cost-effective to upgrade the Everchanger any further at this stage." Ves concluded. "It costs a disproportionate amount of money to give our expert mechs a boost comparable to this. It's fine if we can plunder powerful weapons from our enemies without paying any money, but if we want to improve our mechs any further, we will have to spend hundreds of thousands of MTA credits at the very least, and likely more if we want to obtain more serious improvements."

Ketis agreed with his sentiment. "Let's wait for Joshua and the rest to grow stronger. In any case, my husband is lucky enough to be paired with a masterwork expert mech, so his growth rate is considerably higher than average."

This was the easiest way to resolve the problem facing him and his expert mech. Once his resonance strength reached the standard of a mid-tier expert mech, it might be viable to upgrade the Everchanger into a high-tier expert mech.

"Let's wrap this up, Ketis."

In the end, both Ves and Ketis got what they wanted out of this testing session.

Ketis confirmed that her husband and his expert mech gained the power to fight against a high-tier expert mech.

To be honest, the young wife and mother harbored a lot of concerns about Joshua's performance and ability to survive on the battlefield.

His marksmanship was quite good but his swordsmanship was too basic in her professional eyes.

If his Everchanger ever fought against a threat comparable to that of the Shockshell, the Skorpion Kommando or the Star of Liberation, she did not want Joshua to suffer a worse fate than that of Jannzi!

The addition of a single powerful weapon did not entirely relieve her concerns, but she at least gained a lot more peace of mind.

Ves was happy for the same reasons, but he also became slightly more worried about the excellent performance of the Mars.

Turning it into a post-living mech did not hinder its growth and evolution at all. Ves could already foresee that the Mars in its current makeup would continue to grow at a brisk pace under the influence of its powerful pilot.

In fact, Ves expected Reginald and the Mars to grow even faster than before because the fit between the two had increased by a considerable margin!

The more Reginald succeeded, the more his actions repudiated Ves' design philosophy, if at least partially.

If Ves wanted to defend his ideology and prove that his design philosophy still held value as mech pilots ascended up the ranks, then he needed to produce a game-changing result with the Dullahan Project!

He could never allow post-living mechs to gain superiority over more classical living mechs!

"Maybe... the answer lies in creating a fourth order living mech." Ves speculated.

Third order living mechs were unprecedentedly aware, intelligent and alive, but they didn't actually grant that much of a performance boost to their frames.

Mechs such as the Quint were still standard mechs if Ves overlooked all of its special effects. The only reason why it was stronger than a typical Bright Warrior was because he and his clan had upgraded its physical parts several times over the years.

The fact that it was a third order living mech of considerable strength hardly played a role in elevating its specs beyond their technical baselines.

Ves saw hope in producing a qualitative difference when he saw that weapons such as the Scarlet Ember and mechs such as the Neo Amadeus and the Mars became stronger through the process known as willpower baptism.

If the spiritual strengths of fourth order living mechs became strong enough, would they be able to baptize their physical frames with their power as well?

### **Chapter 4362 Unique Advantage**

Nothing more exciting happened during the return trip. Testing the new Scarlet Ember for the Everchanger was the most visible gain the Larkinson Clan had made from its participation in Operation Saturday Market.

Of course, the Larkinsons also gained in many other ways. They just weren't as obvious and impactful.

A good example would be phasewater.

Aside from extracting varying amounts of phasewater from the broken wrecks salvaged from the battlefield, the Larkinsons also managed to plunder small quantities of pure phasewater from Pima Prime V.

After several weeks of sorting out the loot and carefully processing the less usable salvage with advanced machinery, the clan finally obtained a tally of how much phasewater it had added to its vault.



"37.2 kilograms." Gavin Neumann informed Ves during a morning briefing. "That is how much pure and readily usable phasewater our clan has collected from the previous battle. There are still numerous broken expert mechs with transphasic parts that we can still send to the Graveyard in order to recycle their materials, but don't expect too much change. It is much easier to put phasewater into a component than to take it out again. I've been told that the method of extraction mastered by our clan is not the most efficient, so there is a lot of waste."

Ves knew enough about phasewater to understand that this was natural. Perhaps the Big Two and the first-rate superstates could increase the yield to 80, 90 or even 100 percent, but that tech was far out of his reach.

"Hm, it's nice to earn a large chunk of phasewater from a single operation." He smiled in satisfaction. "I hope we can obtain many more kilograms of this stuff once we embark on our Trailblazer Expedition. The aliens should have accumulated a lot of phasewater throughout their long reign in their own territories."

"There are also many opportunities to quickly harvest phasewater from untouched reserves." Gavin noted. "There are already stories about lucky pioneers finding undiscovered deposits that the local alien species haven't been able to detect due to their inferior tech."

"The chances of that happening should be low, and we don't have the time to stay too long in any single star system. We might as well sell the information to other pioneers in order to earn a quick reward."

"That is indeed a worthwhile trade."

Phasewater was extremely precious and even information about any significant deposits of this rare substance was worth a fortune.

"Do you have any other relevant news to report concerning the plunder that we have collected, Benny?"

"There is nothing further that requires your attention. We have already sorted out the majority of the salvage and loot and have already found buyers for most of it. We expect to earn at least million MTA credits and likely more than that soon after we return to Davute and dump our excess cargo. If you want to buy something valuable from the port system, this would be the time to conclude a deal. It will be a lot more risky and expensive to order high-value goods from Davute after this. The cost of shipping is prohibitively expensive."

There were plenty of cases in the frontier where an isolated pioneering fleet needed to order specialized mining machines or urgently needed high-quality parts to repair their damaged expert mechs.

Strong shipping companies had already come into being as a result. They either formed a huge fleet that encompassed thousands of mechs or employed the fastest courier vessels available that were equipped with excellent superdrives.

Regardless of their setup, their services were surprisingly reliable, but their prices had reached the level of extortion!

Gavin thoughtfully reminded Ves to avoid hoarding money.

Aside from giving the Larkinson Clan a large reserve of cash that could tide them over a crisis, it wasn't actually doing anything to strengthen the expeditionary fleet.

Ves could earn money through many means, but he only had a single life, and so did the rest of his clansmen.

He already started to think on how he should spend his windfall.

"A million MTA credits is an astronomical sum." Ves mused. "Do you know that the mechers and fleeters only earn hundreds of MTA or CFA credits a month? Of course, they have access to countless free benefits and they also have easier ways to earn merits, but the money that we have earned already makes us superior to first-raters in a sense."

Gavin shook his head. He didn't agree with this notion.

"There is more to status than money, boss. You could be ten or even a hundred times richer and still be inferior to those first-raters. I still envy them a lot even though I am doing well in our clan."

"There is no need to feel this way. The fact that we are able to earn so much money shows that we are slowly closing the gap. Our clan will become so strong in a century that it will be unrecognizable to ourselves. In fact, I could have never imagined we would have leapt so far when I initially founded our clan."

Ves was becoming increasingly more hopeful that his clan would continue to grow rapidly in the coming decades.

It might not even take a century for the Larkinson Clan to formally transition into a first-class organization!

It was with great optimism that the Golden Skull Alliance finally completed its journey back to Davute.

The busy port system hardly looked any different compared to when the Larkinsons and their allies left the place.

Of course, a lot of locals and visitors showed a lot more respect towards the returning victors.

Though the Golden Skull Alliance didn't actually make any strong commitments to the future state centered around this region, many people considered it to be a power that was rooted in Davute.

As such, the clear and overwhelming victory attained by the alliance turned into an achievement that everyone in Davute took pride in! Even foreigners who came from other regions began to take the locals more seriously.

This was a rather silly phenomenon to Ves. He paid no attention to all of the incoming messages and gifts that many different people and groups had sent to the Larkinson Clan since the main fleet's return.

The only instances where he paid more attention was if the other parties offered material help to the clan. The Larkinson Clan engaged anyone who was willing to open new trade channels or opportunities to obtain more starships with much more enthusiasm.

The willingness of the Larkinsons to engage with local businesses in this manner gave the powers rooted in the port system an even greater degree of confidence that the clan was firmly in their camp.

Much to the disappointment of both the Larkinsons and their enthusiastic trading partners, Ves didn't intend to stick around for too long.

He not only desired to set off on his Trailblazer Expedition before he entertained any second thoughts, he also wanted to maximize his chances of finding Lord Pearian Yoruk-Tavik.

The good news was that no one publicized any indication that the missing pioneer had been found.

The bad news was that the chances that the Golden Skull Alliance would find any trace of him were slim to none. Already, lots of different pioneers were combing through the border region between Krakatoa and Zelmar.

"A lot more greedy and ambitious pioneers have ventured to the border region than I predicted." Calabast told Ves after he requested her to update him on the situation. "Though there are no solid numbers available, we can infer that over a thousand human fleets are roaming around in the border regions. The vast majority of them come from second-class powers, but there is also a small but extremely dangerous minority of fleets dispatched by first-class powers."

Ves frowned. He did not have much to fear from second-raters, but first-raters were another story.

Even if the Mars was strong enough to compete against regular first-class mechs in a head-on clash, it was anything but simple to make enemies out of groups that were older, wealthier and more connected than the Larkinson Clan.

"Will it be risky for us to proceed to this place?" Ves inquired.

"There are always risks, Ves. The dangers we may face are greater than before, but the opportunities are also great."

"I'm not so sure about that, Calabast. I'm fine with paying a visit to this border region if it only attracted half as much traffic, but this is starting to turn into a spectacle. I'm sure that more and more pioneering fleets will come as time goes by, so the chances that we enter into hostilities with a third party will continue to increase. Meanwhile, our chances of earning a big reward will dwindle even further."

The black-clad spymaster understood the situation just as well as Ves. In fact, she possessed an even greater comprehension of all of the chaos that had descended on the border region.

Despite knowing how many pioneering fleets had already fallen or left in disgrace, Calabast still did not give up on this initiative.

Her lips curled into a smirk. "Before you hesitate any further, let me remind you that our chances of success are far greater than anyone else's. While it is true that the risks are great, your assessment on how likely it is that we are able to find Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik is seriously flawed. This is because we possess an advantage that just happens to be perfect for missing person cases."

"Oh? What is this killer solution that you are talking about?"

"The fact that you don't have a clue shows that you are still letting your biases override your good sense." Calabast snorted. "It's the Great Prophet! Have you forgotten all about your favorite robed friend Ylvaine?"

"Ylvaine is not my friend. He's a design spirit. I think."

Even though Ves said that, he already began to think about whether he could leverage Ylvaine's predictive capabilities to succeed where thousands of other pioneers have failed.

He suddenly found out that this was a viable option as long as Lord Pearian didn't possess any weird or special protection against spiritual prediction abilities!

Ves paused and concentrated his mind for a moment. He directly made contact with Ylvaine and silently inquired whether it was possible for the design spirit to find the individual in question.

The response made him satisfied.

"Well, Ves?"

"We can do it." Ves grinned as he relaxed his mind and opened his eyes again. "There are too many light-years between Davute and the border region, so Ylvaine isn't powerful enough to lock onto our mission objective's coordinates. However, the design spirit told me that it should be possible for

him to sense the vague direction of the missing lordling as long as we reach the approximate region. The closer we get to the fellow, the more precisely Ylvaine can determine the direction."

"You see now, Ves? We can succeed where many others can only fail. The only factor that is working against us is time. The more we are delayed, the greater the chance that Lord Pearian will suffer a mishap, or worse, is found by one of our many rivals. We need to hurry up and depart as soon as possible."

"You don't need to remind me. It shouldn't take more than a few days to conclude all of our outstanding trades and such."

The only interesting transaction that Ves was interested in was how he planned to spend a huge portion of the windfall profits generated from selling so much loot.

Though the Larkinson Clan already invested a lot of money on additional spare parts for its expert mechs and such, Ves could still splurge on other powerful goodies.

Ves didn't know whether he should invest the money in high-grade exotics, powerful mech equipment or high-end ship modules.

He could even use his money to buy stock in several important companies that the Larkinson Clan might want to develop a long-term partnership with. The benefits from these investments weren't much at first, but that would certainly change in the future.

### **Chapter 4363 Super Devices**

The Larkinson Clan along with its allies earned a huge windfall of money, phasewater and other resources from raiding Pima Prime.

It was enough to raise its strength by a small but noticeable margin.

Ves spoke with General Verle and others to discuss how they could best convert their liquid assets into real benefits that could increase their chances of surviving the new frontier.

"We can spread the money around and use it to buy large amounts of goods, but it will be hard for anyone to notice the difference." General Verle told him over the comm. "It can also take weeks for us to purchase and ship all of the extra goods from many different vendors. Given the short timeframe available to us, I suggest that we should focus on investing in a single, powerful product that can massively improve a specific capability of our expeditionary fleet."

The general's argument was sound.

"I suppose you already have an idea on what we should buy, am I correct?"

"Yes, sir. Let us consider our situation. We are about to embark on the Trailblazer Expedition in earnest. This will take us far away from Davute and other bastions of civilization and bring us to lawless regions of space where piracy, rivalries, alien incursions and even pockets of hazardous anomalous regions can overtake our fleet. Most serious battles that may occur during these encounters will pit us against technologically or biologically advanced adversaries. What sort of measure can we take that can ease our pressure?"

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Hm. At first, I thought about giving a mech like the Amaranto a massive upgrade, but it is difficult to increase its combat effectiveness considering that its Instrument of Vengeance rifle is already powerful. If we want to increase our ability to defeat many different threats, we should probably go for a more universally applicable boost."

"Those are my thoughts as well." General Verle concurred. "This is why I have instructed my staff to inquire with the local tech companies in Davute whether they have developed any tools that can help our fleet deal with the more troublesome enemies. We have obtained information on many different



experimental and prototypical products that may or may not fit our needs. Each of them promise drastic effects, but what they all have in common is that they cost an astronomical amount of money and phasewater to obtain."

That interested Ves. After cooperating with several different development companies over the past five years, he had become quite familiar with their operations and their activities.

Companies such as Melmen Advanced Systems engaged in a dozen or more R&D projects. The smaller and more practical projects usually centered around developing mature and commercial-oriented products that were relatively cheap, efficient and reliable.

Then there were the more radical and fanciful projects that were much more ambitious. The success rate of these projects rarely hovered past 20 percent, which meant that the companies could easily waste hundreds of thousands of MTA credits as well as multiple kilograms of phasewater on failed research!

Though the companies could compensate for those massive losses by using the lessons they learned on completing the few daring projects that just happened to be viable and earn a huge amount of profit as a result, there was no doubt that the barrier to entry was prohibitively high.

The biggest problem these companies faced was obtaining the massive amount of phasewater needed to sustain their ambitious research projects. No matter whether they succeeded or not, it was inevitable that they would use up a lot of phasewater.

This was why the development companies had become so welcoming to the Larkinson Clan after it had returned from the Purgatory Campaign.

Anyone who possessed a massive amount of phasewater and conveyed the willingness to trade this resource turned into their favorite customers!

Ves just recalled that his clan managed to plunder at least 37.2 kilograms of phasewater from Pima Prime.

Since his clan did not expect to receive such a massive haul, there were no special reasons why he should hold on to this stash. Aside from reserving a sufficient quantity to support the development of the Dullahan Project, he was more than willing to spend the remainder on a powerful combat asset.

"So what do you have for me, general?"

"Our scientists and engineers have filtered out the more dubious and impractical inventions from the list. They have also left out the products that are too large and complicated to manufacture in a short amount of time. That leaves us with only a handful of options, but we have thoroughly vetted each of them to ensure that they will deliver on their promises."

The general proceeded to present the inventions to Ves one by one.

A projection of a large, cube-shaped machine appeared into view.

"The first tool is the SPM, which stands for Super Phase Monitor. It is a new long range phasewater detection machine developed by RISMIN, an institution that we have never conducted business with before." General Verle introduced.

"We already have plenty of phasewater detection devices in our fleet. They're mandatory equipment to every pioneering fleet."

"That is true, sir, but the equipment we have are fairly standard products that do not give us a competitive advantage. Their effective ranges vary depending on environment, interference and many other factors, but even our best detectors will struggle to pick up phasewater past 8 kilometers and less if there is a lot of solid matter in the way."

Ves nodded in understanding. He learned enough about phasewater to know that searching for it was an ordeal in itself.

Basically, most prospectors had to perform carpet searches in areas suspected to contain phasewater deposits. This was a tedious and extremely time-consuming activity for both aliens and humans.

The only exception appeared to be the mysterious phase whales. There were rumors that their sensitivity towards phasewater was so high that they could even detect a deposit on the other side of a star system!

"I take it this SPM breaks the mold of the phasewater detectors that are generally available on the market, or else you wouldn't have bothered to bring it up to me." Ves guessed.

"That's correct, sir. What makes RISMIN special is that it is founded by several technical universities. Numerous professors and researchers form cross-disciplinary R&D teams, allowing the relatively new institute to engage in more advanced research that ordinary development companies cannot engage in for many reasons. It is through these efforts that the researchers of RISMIN succeeded in producing a breakthrough. The new SPM can detect phasewater from up to 44 kilometers away. What is better is that this is only a first generation product. If RISMIN continues to iterate on the design, there is hope that this range can be extended in the future."

Ves widened his eyes. Compared to ordinary detectors, 44 kilometers was a massive improvement!

While the SPM wasn't capable of detecting and identifying the coordinates of every phasewater deposit on an entire planet, the true value of this super detector was to make it easier to detect phasewater in underground deposits!

The only reason why Ves didn't pounce on this fantastic new invention was because he didn't really want to turn his Trailblazer Expedition into a full-time phasewater harvesting operation.

"I'm certainly interested, but the SPM can only indirectly improve our strength by allowing us to collect more phasewater." He eventually told the general.

"That is not entirely true, sir. The SPM can be useful in other situations as well. It can detect the passage of objects in warp travel at much longer distances depending on how extensively space is being warped. It can precisely evaluate how much phasewater is contained in a mech or starship. It can help us detect cloaked mechs and vehicles as long as they are carrying phasewater. It can even be used to detect and precisely identify the coordinates of the entrances of hidden phase whale enclaves or other pocket spaces, though RISMIN has warned us that this capability has never been tested."

Ves looked intrigued. "Ah. I see. Information is power. A detection device as advanced and versatile as the SPM can truly provide us with massive help in the deep frontier as long as RISMIN's boasts turn out to be true. I think it will definitely be necessary for us to procure a super detector such as the SPM sooner or later. I don't know whether it is necessary for us to obtain it now, though."

One of the concerns he possessed was that early generation products were known to provide relatively mediocre performance at insane prices.

If the Larkinson Clan was willing to be patient and wait for a decade or so, the development cycle might progress to a point where RISMIN was able to release a phasewater detector that was ten times cheaper but nonetheless offered similar performance!

"You don't need to decide now, sir. Let me bring up the remaining options so that you have the information that you need."

The projection of the SPM made way for another projection that displayed a different machine.

"This is the Gravity Net, an experimental new warp inhibitor developed by one of our more familiar partners. Morton Tech has invested big in developing devices that can disrupt or solidify the fabric of space to prevent mechs, starships and even missiles from sneaking up to their targets at speeds that make it impossible to intercept them. While many companies have already developed different warp inhibition and warp interdiction devices, the Gravity Net is special for several different reasons."

"What is the Gravity Net's effective range?" Ves curiously asked.

"That depends, but Morton Tech guarantees that it can block all undesirable warp travel activity within a radius of 30 kilometers."

Though 30 kilometers sounded a lot, it was far from impressive in the context of space battles.

The Golden Skull Alliance already possessed similar devices that were able to do their jobs at similar ranges!

"I suppose there is more to it than that." Ves said while looking expectantly.

"Right. The Gravity Net may only be able to extend so far, but Morton Tech guarantees that the inhibition effect is extremely strong. Normally, powerful warp drives that have used up a large amount of phasewater can break the blockade by relying on brute force. The Gravity Net incorporates tens of kilograms of phasewater itself depending on the exact model, so even powerful ace mechs should struggle to activate warp travel within its range."

Now that sounded a lot more interesting!

The Battle of Pima Prime had fully showcased the horror of mechs such as the Mars and the Neo Amadeus. The thought that a hostile ace mech could quickly arrive within the heart of the Larkinson Navy and demolish crucial ships such as the Spirit of Bentheim in an instant was a nightmare to Ves and many Larkinsons!

Though a strong inhibition field that was only effective within a 30 kilometer radius would not slow down an ace mech that much, even a minute or two of advance warning might be enough to save the expeditionary fleet!

"What else is special about the Gravity Net?" Ves asked as he became more interested in this cutting-edge product.

"You can exert much more control over the warp inhibition effect." General Verle replied. "Due to the special way it exerts its effect as a 'net' rather than a 'field', the Gravity Net can be used to selectively forbid warp travel for enemy mechs and ships while allowing friendly ones to take full advantage of their combat drives or warp drives. What this means is that within a 30 kilometer range of this device, our forces will enjoy an absolute mobility advantage!"

"What?!"

This was an astounding claim!

If the Larkinson Clan had access to the Gravity Net during the Battle of Pima Prime, then Ves was certain that the Skorpion Kommando would have never been able to fell the Shield of Samar.

This was because once the Skorpion Kommando got close enough, it would have never been able to catch up to the Shield of Samar and the Promethea!

The Gravity Net might not be effective against distant targets, but as long as the Larkinsons fought within their own security perimeters, they would enjoy a massive defensive edge!

## Chapter 4364 Astronomical Purchase

General Verle and his staff truly had an eye for excellent devices. Ves already fell in love with the features of the SPM and the Gravity Net.

Both of them were new. Both of them were insanely costly to build. Both of them offered strong capabilities that could substantially strengthen the expeditionary fleet.

If he had a choice, Ves would have wanted to obtain both of them, but that was way too extravagant.

He had always insisted on showing restraint in his spending. It was okay to splurge every once in a while, but he would always make sure that he never exceeded his budget.

This was no different. The latest gains afforded the Larkinson Clan enough room to exchange a single super device.

Though General Verle informed him that it was possible to obtain lesser versions of the SPM and the Gravity Net at the same time, Ves immediately rejected this compromise option.

The strength and the effective ranges of the neutered versions of those products did not impress Ves that much. It was better to obtain the strongest iterations of one of them in order to produce the greatest possible impact on the battlefield.

"What else is available?" He asked as he was ready to hear about the next super device.

"Melmen Advanced Systems has also worked on a product that might interest you. It has done extremely well as of late, and we have contributed much to its success. Professor Neihy Almar has therefore let us in on a secret project that she has personally been working on for the last three years. While she wasn't

able to share too many details in order to prevent premature leaks, she was generous enough to give us a couple of hints."

Ves grew curious. Although Melmen Advanced Systems was not as big and capable as other rivals such as Morton Tech, it was still a decent player in the tech industry. It could probably support at least one ambitious research project.

"So what did you learn?"

"Well, her new invention is oriented towards defense. It offers much greater protection than ordinary products, but the demand for phasewater is massive."

"What is the scale of this new defensive tool?" Ves inquired. "Is it designed for mechs or for starships?"

General Verle frowned for a moment. "Professor Neihy didn't give us a solid answer, but I can guess from the context of the discussion that it is likely applicable to starships. It makes the most sense. A lot of developers such as Truvek Defenses have already invented strong defensive systems such as the Abasis Armor. Melmen does not have the scientists and resources to top these products. It makes more sense for the smaller company to focus on less saturated product categories."

Improving the defenses of starships was just as important as enhancing the defenses of mechs, but the difference was that the latter was a lot more affordable due to the smaller scale!

This was why R&D institutions did not prioritize research projects centered around the former.

The idea was that they should first establish successful implementations with regards to mechs before trying to transplant the same working principles to starships.



While this was a logical approach, the downside was that not a lot of companies offered effective products related to protecting starships at this early stage.

"How effective is this new defensive measure?" Ves inquired.

"That... is a bit uncertain since Melmen has never built a prototype despite completing all of the main research and design work. The company can't muster up the huge amount of phasewater needed to build a working example. However, Professor Neihy was adamant that her invention would be a game changer for us. She makes it sound as if we can take advantage of this new defensive measure to resist attacks from alien warships for an extended amount of time."

Ves was willing to believe that claim. Melmen never fooled around and it had always been thorough in calculating and simulating all of its experimental designs.

Besides, even if the actual defensive product was rather shoddy, the huge amount of phasewater put into it should still be able to generate a strong effect.

"Do you have any other details about this new defensive tool?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. We can speculate a lot, but none of our guesses are reliable."

Ves became a bit frustrated at the lack of information. The Larkinson Clan possessed a 7.75 percent stake in Melmen, but that still wasn't good enough for him to learn about this classified project.

He waved his hand. "Forget it, then. I'm sure that Melmen will be able to astound the market with its new starship defensive systems in the following decade or so, but right now it is not necessary for us to jump in first."

General Verle introduced a couple more experimental products developed by different research institutes, but none of them sounded as compelling as the ones mentioned earlier.

It was still useful for Ves to hear about what the development companies were working on these days. He was surprised at how much progress the researchers had made. He also became impressed with the variety of phasewater applications that would soon be available to the market.

Ves shook his head. This was not the time for him to indulge in all of those exotic possibilities.

With the Trailblazer Expedition right in front of him, he needed to maintain his cool and focus on what could provide his fleet with the most useful and effective boost.

It did not take too long for him to make up his mind.

"I'm really attracted by the SPM and the Gravity Net." He told the general.

"Detection and warp travel inhibition are both essential. However, if I have to make a choice, I would rather go for the Gravity Net."

General Verle did not look too surprised at his decision. "The Gravity Net is a solid choice. If it truly works as Morton Tech has promised, you can't go wrong with it. We still have to discuss how much phasewater is required to make it and how much phasewater we have to pay as commission. We also have to pay an astronomical amount of money to help Morton Tech pay for all of the high-grade materials needed to build this advanced tool."

"Leave it to the professionals." Ves said. "I'm not afraid of investing ten or twenty kilograms of phasewater for a good product, but I don't want our clan to get ripped off. Our negotiators should make sure that the phasewater fee is not too excessive. We are already paying a lot to turn ourselves into voluntary

test subjects. There is a limit to how much these development companies should be able to exploit our clan."

The Larkinson Clan worked quickly after this meeting. As a regular customer, Morton Tech already began by offering plenty of sincerity with regards to its new Gravity Net.

The main iteration of this new R&D project demanded 26.5 kilograms of phasewater.

This was a hefty amount of phasewater and would eat away much of the gains from Pima Prime.

However, Ves already expected this and did not object to it. What he did have a problem with was how much Morton Tech tried to charge for this commission.

"5 kilograms of phasewater is too much!" Ves complained. "We are testing the Gravity Net on behalf of Morton Tech. Not only are we working with unstable and untested technology, we have also agreed with the concession to share all of its usage data to the greedy researchers. The least they could do is thank us for trialing their new Gravity Net in the field!"

In the end, the Larkinson negotiators managed to reduce the commission fee to 3 kilograms.

This was still a hefty amount, but Ves and the clan had little choice.

The Larkinsons were crucially aware that Morton Tech needed enough incentives to continue to provide technical support to the clan.

If the researchers at Morton Tech developed the impression that the Larkinsons were generous people, the developers of the Gravity Net would show a lot more enthusiasm in debugging and updating the device over time!

The Larkinson Clan soon transferred 29.5 kilograms of phasewater as well as 650,000 MTA credits to Morton Tech.

Both sums were dazzlingly high to Ves. A lot of people in the clan who found out about this matter issued a lot of complaints. The clan could have invested this money in all kinds of improvements that could strengthen the Larkinson Army as a whole or substantially increase the quality of life of the civilians in the fleet.

Ves paid no notice to these complaints. General Verle and many other leaders thought it made a lot of sense to purchase the Gravity Net.

Weaker threats generally didn't employ much phasewater, so they could easily be defeated through the clan's existing means.

It was the bigger and stronger enemies that started to make use of a lot of phasewater. Being able to inhibit their warp travel functionality as well as a couple of other effects was immensely valuable in battle.

Ves partially regretted that his fleet didn't have a Gravity Net on hand in the last battle. The Shield of Samar probably wouldn't have suffered a massive calamity if the Skorpion Kommando lost its ability to engage in warp travel.

Then again, without the Shield of Samar's death, Ves would have never come up with the Dullahan Project. The current situation was actually a lot better to Ves as a mech designer because he finally became inspired to work on a potentially ground-breaking project that could finally push his design philosophy forward!

Losing one expert mech was already bad enough, though. His clan really couldn't afford to lose more of them in quick succession.

In any case, now that the Larkinson Clan had made a deal with Morton Tech, the latter promised to supply a working version of the Gravity Net within a week.

Though this would delay the departure of the expeditionary fleet by a couple of days, this was more than an acceptable tradeoff.

Ves was surprised that it didn't take a month to fabricate such an amazingly complex machine.

It turned out that Morton Tech had already built the main chassis as well as many other components several months ago. The only parts it needed to make and put into the machine were the most expensive ones that demanded lots of phasewater or extremely expensive high-grade materials.

Time quickly passed by and Ves and many others waited for the completion of their order.

In the end, an armored transport escorted by hundreds of the Avatar mechs slowly lifted off from the surface of Davute VII and approached one of the fleets in orbit.

A special crew of engineers and other specialists carefully transferred the precious cargo from the transport to the hangar bay of the Spirit of Bentheim.

After the Larkinsons removed the protective packaging, Ves and many other Larkinson finally laid eyes on their latest super gadget.

"So this is the Gravity Net AXR-01." Ves spoke with a breathless voice. "It looks uglier than I thought."

Morton Tech clearly didn't have aesthetics in mind when they designed this iteration. Only function was important.

The result was that the Gravity Net turned into a large mech-sized machine that looked as if a lot of bent tubes were wrapping around a cube.

A lot of unknown and unfamiliar components were visible as well. Each of them could be tweaked, removed or replaced in order to change the

performance of the Gravity Net, but the Larkinsons received strict warning from Morton Tech not to mess around.

"I wonder if this gravity net is strong enough to catch a phase whale?" Ves idly wondered.

Gloriana snorted. "You're dreaming if you think this tool can trap a phase whale. The mature ones have accumulated a lot more phasewater than was put into the Gravity Net. I think the creatures should easily be able to break the net by relying solely on their massive strength."

"I guess you're right, but I can always dream."

### **Chapter 4365 Strong Net**

The Golden Skull Alliance finally set off for the deep frontier.

Though the border region between the Krakatoa Middle Zone and the Zelmar Upper Zone was not that deep into uncharted territory, it was still along the route to the more exciting parts of the Red Ocean.

In any case, it looked as if the Golden Skull Alliance was one of the many parties that was willing to try its luck and see whether it would be lucky enough to stumble upon Lord Pearian by luck.

Practically no one imagined that the Larkinson Clan possessed an incredibly effective means of homing in on the missing first-class lordling's actual coordinates!

It wasn't even that difficult to figure it out. The Larkinson Clan's association with Prophet Ylvaine was a matter of public record. The Ylvainans that utilized the mechs that Ves had especially designed for them even demonstrated astounding feats that they could have never pulled off through ordinary technological means.

Yet despite the fact that all of the clues were out in the open, no one managed to connect the dots and directed any extra attention to the Golden Skull Alliance.

"It's too unreal." Calabast told him when he shared his doubts about this matter. "We rarely made a big show out of Ylvaine's powers. The Sand War happened a long time ago and in an entirely different galaxy. Perhaps those who were directly involved in the battles against the sandmen may be aware of the effectiveness of Ylvaine's prophetic abilities, but those survivors are all third-raters and most likely stuck in the Komodo Star Sector."

"I see."

The only way to figure out the truth was to go by third-party accounts. A lot of those stories and news articles sounded so exaggerated and fantastical that it was hard for a stranger to believe it was all true.

In short, the chances that others would immediately figure out that the Larkinson Clan possessed the ability to home in on Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik should be negligible.

Calabast wasn't finished, though.

"Suppose we enter the border region and head directly to the star system where Lord Pearian is presumably hiding. Once we take him out and return him to the custody of the Yorul-Tavik Clan, a lot of people will begin to question how we were able to succeed where others have failed."

"Oh. That can be a problem." Ves frowned. "It can be incredibly dangerous for us to expose our ability to find different people, assuming that our upcoming attempt succeeds. We will have to act more circumspect in order to deflect suspicion."

Calabast nodded. "That is what I wanted to bring up with you. We shouldn't be too obvious and direct about our actions. I suggest that our fleet should take a

more meandering route that makes it seem as if we are doing what everyone else is doing. Once we finally reach the star system where Lord Pearian resides, we should pick him up as quietly as possible and gradually make our way out of the region."

"Hm, it will be difficult to keep it all a secret." Ves guessed. "As long as proof of Lord Pearian's retrieval leaks to the public, we will probably get swarmed by hundreds of pioneering fleets. There is no way we can survive so much attention."

The spymaster still maintained a confident demeanor.

"I don't think our situation is as bad as it sounds. We have several advantages that we can rely upon to maintain secrecy and bring Lord Pearian away as soon as possible. We just need to make good plans and be observant enough to make changes on the fly depending on how the situation develops. If others find out, we can always toss him away and let the other pioneers fight over returning him to the Yorul-Tavik Clan."

"I suppose you're right."

The leaders of the clan were already forming a lot of plans on how they should handle this upcoming task. There was no need for Ves to provide his input, so he was free to spend his time on other matters.

For example, he met up with Cormaunt Hempkamp and confirmed that he had succeeded in recruiting a bunch of Apprentice Mech Designers that obtained special certificates from the MTA.

The new design team formed by these Apprentices would soon be ready to help with upgrading the neural interfaces of every Larkinson mech design.

Ves also checked up on the installation of the new Gravity Net.



The highly competent crew of engineers and other specialists had cleared out a highly protected compartment deep inside the interior of the Spirit of Bentheim.

There were high requirements to the use of the experimental device. The Gravity Net not only had to be protected against external damage and shocks, but it also needed access to a huge power supply.

This was also one of the reasons why the Larkinson Clan decided to install this powerful device in the flagship. The Spirit of Bentheim possessed a lot of power generators in order to meet the demand of her powerful superfabs and other production machines.

Ves and many others in the fleet paid close attention to the first live tests of the new Gravity Net.

In order to minimize the chances of accidents, the Larkinsons made extensive preparations. The Spirit of Bentheim had to separate herself from the rest of the fleet by several hundred kilometers.

The factory ship's many expensive production machines and other equipment were buttoned down.

A lot of non-essential crew members and civilian residents temporarily moved away from the factory ship.

Though these measures introduced a lot of inconveniences, it was better to safe than sorry.

Fortunately, the initial testing session was a resounding success.

Researchers and developers working for Morton Tech witnessed and monitored the performance of the Gravity Net from remote. Their input had been crucial in solving the minor glitches and inconsistencies in the initial activation of this powerful device.

When the Gravity Net became active and began to exert its influence in the surrounding space, the space around the Spirit of Bentheim didn't look any different.

Ves had to look at a simulated image in order to figure out that the factory ship had generated a large and invisible spatial net around her hull!

The density of the nets was extremely high at close range, but this rapidly dropped the further away from the new device.

In truth, the 30 kilometer range was just a loose estimate. The actual truth was that the net could still be effective at inhibiting warp travel at 50 kilometers or even 100 kilometers as long as the target's warp travel power wasn't too high!

Numerous different mechs and starships cautiously strayed into the spatial net and began to initiate warp travel at various ranges.

The results largely matched the promises of Morton Tech. The device pretty much worked as expected and any deviations between expectations and reality were well within acceptable range.

When the Gravity Net worked at full power, the Spirit of Bentheim would definitely struggle to keep it running while at the same time providing sufficient energy to her shield generators.

However, the effect was astounding.

None of the Larkinson expert mechs equipped with minidrives were able to engage warp travel at all. The exact ranges where they could no longer speed up their own flight differed by the phasewater and other properties of the minidrives, but none of them were able to employ vastly superior mobility in the vicinity of the flagship!

The same applied to starships equipped with warp drives and superdrives.

It turned out that these vessels were even more sensitive to the restrictions produced by the gravity net. They could be inhibited hundreds of kilometers away due to the relatively modest amount of phasewater integrated by their drives.

"Essentially, the amount of phasewater put into a target is the most important variable that determines the effectiveness of the Gravity Net." Ves concluded.

This pattern had massive implications to the Larkinson Clan and the Golden Skull Alliance.

The most immediate one was that poorer enemies would probably suffer immensely!

Even richer opponents had to take care not to stray too close to the Spirit of Bentheim!

This became abundantly clear when the Mars ventured closer to the factory ship under warp.

The ace hybrid mech's advanced Pulsvar V-1 Transphasic Flight System developed by the Godwin Institution ran smoothly until it came closer to the 30-kilometer bubble that surrounded the Spirit of Bentheim.

As soon as it passed an invisible border, the warp bubble generated by the Pulsvar V-1 fizzled out and threw the Mars back into normal space!

"What?! This is impossible!"

Patriarch Reginald thought that he and his ace mech were strong enough to partially resist the spatial net.

Even if the Mars was unable to maintain its warp bubble through its own means, the support from Reginald's strong force of will should have been able to keep the powerful mech free and unburdened.

Unfortunately, the density of the web was so high at this point that not even Reginald's stubbornness could will the inhibition effect away!

"Amazing!"

"So ace mechs can't do everything after all. How disappointing."

"The only reason why the Mars can't warp around anymore is because its transphasic flight system is fairly weak. It was originally designed for high-tier expert mechs and doesn't match the standard for an ace mech!"

Whether that last argument was true or not, it was conceivable that the Gravity Net would still remain effective to mechs with even stronger warp travel solutions.

Ves already looked forward to putting this new super device to good use. Whether the next enemies were human mechs or alien monstrosities, none of them should be able to resist the effect of the Gravity Net!

The initial test of the Gravity Net produced a lot of data and made the researchers of Morton Tech extremely happy.

They had already promised the Larkinsons that they would analyze the data and propose various tweaks to optimize and improve the performance of the Gravity Net.

After handling all of this excitement, the expeditionary fleet soon returned to normal, though Patriarch Reginald spent a lot more time on trying to figure out a way to break the inhibition effect.

Ves on the other hand went back to his original job, which was designing mechs.

He and the other Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan had all focused on completing the remaining batch of design projects while simultaneously preparing for the next design round.

Ves had spent a fair amount of time on preparing for the design of his first expert stealth mech.

"I don't want to design a generic stealth mech at the expert mech level." He told Gloriana during a design session. "I want it to be able to sneak up to other expert mechs and stab them in the back without giving them a chance to repel the attack."

"You're asking for a lot." Gloriana responded. "Expert pilots are too good at detecting threats even if they aren't visible. Their intuition is so unreasonably good that most expert mechs that rely on advanced stealth technology to get close simply get found out too soon. This is also the reason why many of them tended to be equipped with powerful ranged weapons instead. It is easier for them to pull off an assassination strike when they can maintain their distance from their targets. Staying away also helps with preventing damage as mechs equipped with stealth systems are much more fragile than normal."

"I already know that, but I don't think we need to stick to this pattern. Venerable Zimro Belson is proficient in both ranged and melee combat, but he is particularly strong in the latter. It would be best if we can design an expert mech for him that performs similar to an expert light skirmisher in combat but is also equipped with a highly capable cloaking system."

His wife did not have much confidence in this idea.

"The fault tolerance of such a mech is low even if we make use of phasewater technology. It can take only a couple of mistakes to doom Venerable Zimro. Are you sure you want to take this route?"

"I'll have to talk with Venerable Zimro in order to make sure, but I am confident that he will be interested in this idea."

## Chapter 4366 In A Camp

The latest design round came to a conclusion. The Design Department hadn't actually published a lot of groundbreaking new design projects this time.

As the Larkinson Clan began to build up its mech catalog, an increasingly greater proportion of design work consisted of updating existing designs, especially the ones geared towards the mech market.

Old and familiar mech lines such as the Crystal Lord, the Doom Guard and the all-popular Desolate Soldier had all proven to be profitable under different circumstances.

Though there was never any certainty that adapted versions of these mech designs might still do well in the Red Ocean, the LMC at least possessed a much greater understanding of their performance, appeal and customer base.

By applying the lessons the LMC learned back in the Yeina Star Cluster to the Red Ocean, Ves and many other business-oriented Larkinsons hoped that their mech company could replicate their past success!

So far, the results of reintroducing old designs in newer coats were generally positive. A good mech always remained a good mech no matter where it was sold.

As long as the Design Department altered the tech, material composition and other specific design factors to better fit the regional markets, the market reception was always at least decent. Models with proven formulas therefore gained new life in an entirely different galaxy with a vastly more diverse customer base.

Ves always smiled when he saw mercenary outfits, security companies and even rival pioneering organizations field familiar-looking mechs such as the Doom Guard Mark II Version B and the Desolate Soldier Mark II Version B.

These modernized second-class adaptations of the original designs joined the ranks of the Ferocious Piranha Mark III Version B and the Hymenoptera as the LMC's mainstay commercial offerings.

Nowadays, the Living Mech Corporation raked in a monthly income that always exceeded 50,000 MTA credits!

What was even better for Ves was that his ownership in the LMC was finally about to rise from 59 percent to 71 percent!

His lips curled into a satisfied grin.

The successful conclusion of Operation Saturday Market meant that Master Olson was willing to give back almost all of the shares that she had obtained through murky means.

His former Master never contacted him directly, likely because she was afraid that any direct communication between the two might leak out, but the Larkinson Clan had already received a discrete message that Carmin Olson would eventually find a way to pass on the shares without connecting this transfer to the recent attack on Pima Prime.

Ves knew exactly why the Fridaymen were so eager to please him. They did not hesitate to pass on a substantial amount of shares from a booming mech company that was only becoming more lucrative over time.

"They are afraid of you." Minister Shederin Purnesse told Ves.

There was no way for Ves to enforce the informal deal that he had made with the weaker coalition partners of the Friday Coalition.

However, he had leverage.

As long as leaked word about his meeting with Tristan Wesseling to the Gauge Dynasty, the Carnegie Group, the Vermeer Group, the Vanguard Group and the Puffer Clan would definitely get into a lot of trouble!

Even if the Gauge Dynasty already guessed that its own coalition partners had stabbed it in the back, there was still a massive difference between suspicion and confirmation!

This was why the people behind Tristan moved quickly to reassure and placate Ves.

"It looks as if the conspirators are willing to accept a huge loss in order to buy your silence, but this transaction goes deeper than that." Minister Shederin continued to explain. "The Carnegies and company don't want to be your enemies anymore. Now that you have secretly fulfilled their mission, the relationship between us and them has undergone profound changes."

"In what way, Shederin?"

"Do you still consider the Friday Coalition as a whole to be our enemies?"

Ves had to pause for a moment in order to form a proper answer.

"I guess not. I mean, those weaker coalition partners aren't that bad. The Carnegies and the Vermeers have never done much to target us specifically, and it is clear that they don't want to generate any trouble. I'm willing to give them and their buddies a break as long as they leave me and my clan alone."

Minister Shederin smiled. "The only coalition partner that we truly have a feud with is the Gauge Dynasty. The way the Friday Coalition is divided means that it is relatively easy for the other coalition partners to distance themselves from the Gaugers. Right now, the greatest concern of the conspirators is to ensure the new status quo takes hold. Returning most of the shares of the LMC to you is not just about trying to buy our silence, but also about trying to buy our goodwill."

Ves scratched his head. "Okay. I can understand that, but what about the Hex Federation? We are still allies with the Hexers. We have supplied a number of powerful living mech models to the Hex Army, which its soldiers use to good



effect against the Friday Colonies. If the weaker coalition partners think that a bribe is enough to stop me from increasing my influence over the Hexers, then they will be sorely disappointed."

"I am sure the diplomats over there are aware of this dynamic. The Carnegies and so on don't expect you to bend over backwards for them. They just want you to go about your business and move on as much as possible."

All of this politics sounded increasingly more abstruse to Ves. Times were much simpler when he simply regarded the entire Friday Coalition as his enemy.

Ves shook his head. "They don't have to worry. I am no longer thinking about this old conflict at all anymore. The Hexers can take care of themselves especially now that the Friday Colonies has taken a major hit. I'm more interested in the Trailblazer Expedition to be honest. Do you have any special news related to our current mission?"

"Many developments have taken place, but none of them are relevant to us." Shederin replied. "The usual conflicts have occurred. Though it is hard for two different pioneering fleets to be able to get close to each other. Even if they do have an opportunity to start a fight with each other, they usually do not do so because there are many downsides. However, the rare fights that do take place are already starting to produce ripple effects throughout the region. Some pioneers have made a lot of gains while others have disappeared entirely. The longer this affair goes on, the more the power structure in the surrounding zones will become disarrayed."

"How does that affect us directly?" Ves asked with a concerning frown.

"There are many possible ways that this increased turbulence can affect us. For example, more and more feuds between different parties will form in the

following weeks and months. The demand for combat mechs will rise, which means that our LMC will likely experience a further boom in business."

"I take it that there are a lot of negative consequences as well."

"That is correct, Ves. I do not think I need to mention the risk of making new enemies when we travel through the border region. We may be able to avoid this as long as we control our movements and show enough diplomacy during our communications. However..."

"There is no way we can reason with everyone." Ves stated.

"Exactly. While the presence of Patriarch Reginald and the Mars will ensure that most pioneers will not be stupid enough to seek conflict with us, there are always others that may have different ideas in mind. Currently, there are two human groups in the Red Ocean that have clear and solid motives to attack us if they can. The Gauge Dynasty is one of them, and it is unlikely that we will encounter one of their fleets in the border region considering the circumstances. It is much more likely for us to enter into a conflict with the other group."

"What people are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the pioneers who are part of the power structure of the Karlach System."

"Oh. Those guys."

The Karlach System was both a port system as well as a rising economic hub that had become the most direct rival to the Davute System.

Both of them shared many similarities, and the fact that they were located in the same zone meant that it was inevitable for them to compete for trade, wealth, territory, resources, manpower and more.

A lot of the pioneers who founded the colonies or became invested in their development became oddly attached to the camps associated with them. As Davute and Karlach moved closer to statehood, its current stakeholders were bound to become a part of their structures!

Minister Shederin reminded Ves of an important factor. "You might not care too much about Davute, but that is not what outsiders think. They think that our clan and the alliance that we are part of have become so intertwined with Davute that we have become one of its many representatives. This creates a motive for attacking us. Any power from Karlach who is able to stumble upon us in space will be able to earn a lot of rewards and appreciation for hitting us. If there is an opportunity to deprive Davute of a talented Journeyman, a Master Mech Designer and an ace pilot, then the Karlachers will definitely be willing to pay a heavy price to wipe out our entire fleet."

Ves grimaced. There was no way to avoid this risk. After all, the Larkinsons definitely conducted a lot of business in Davute. There was no way to avoid it after settling in the port system for over 5 years.

The Karlachers might not be entirely wrong to assume that the Larkinsons and Golden Skullers made Davute stronger.

Even so, Ves didn't really care about the rivalry between the two future colonial states.

He already had his fill of stupid fights after getting involved in similar conflicts. The constant warring between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom and the centuries-old hatred between the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony had all taught him a lot of lessons.

The main one was that a lot of wars between human powers were driven by banal reasons such as pride, inertia and greed.

They were different from wars between humans and aliens. At least those were productive and more essential to the survival of the entire race. Petty conflicts between human states mostly turned out to be vehicles that existed to benefit the rulers who issued all of the orders from the rear but never risked their lives at the front.

Therefore, Ves had absolutely no interest in advancing Davute's interests by engaging in scraps against the powers based in Karlach.

It was a pity that the latter likely wouldn't listen to reason.

He sighed. "If anyone wants to fight, then we will fight as long as our chances are good. I don't think that there are many enemies that can take us on, though. We will need to put a lot of effort into our scouting operations in order to ensure we don't overtaken by powerful fleets from Karlach."

"We should also maintain contact with nearby pioneers who are based in Davute." Minister Shederin suggested. "It doesn't hurt to say hello and the Davutans may be willing to provide assistance to us. Since most people have developed the mistaken impression that we have chosen a camp, we might as well take advantage of this situation when it suits our needs."

Ves casually waved his hand. "You can do what you want, but I don't want this to be a permanent situation. We should travel to a different zone after we have concluded the Trailblazer Expedition and settle down in an entirely different place. Once we continue to set up additional major branches throughout the Red Ocean, it will become increasingly more clear that we are not overly attached to any single place."

"That is a good idea, but it will take time and energy to change people's minds."

## Chapter 4367 Free Scheduling

Though Ves foresaw that the chances of entering into a conflict with Karlachers may be fairly likely, that did not deter him or any other leader of the Golden Skull Alliance from proceeding with their current plans.

None of the alliance partners were afraid of a fight. Patriarch Reginald Cross even looked forward to fighting a duel against another ace mech!

However, just because the Golden Skull Alliance feared no battle did not mean that Ves could ignore this latent threat.

What he was most afraid of was that the Karlachers in the border region might choose to combine their forces and employ overwhelming numbers to overrun the expeditionary fleet!

Just as how Lord Hemmington Cross fell after getting ambushed by two enemy ace mechs, Ves did not think that Patriarch Reginald Cross would fare any better when put into a similar corner!

Would history repeat itself once again?

Ves shook his head. "That's impossible."

The biggest mistake made by Lord Hemmington Cross and his clan was that they grew too arrogant and stopped being careful.

The Larkinson Clan wouldn't be making the same mistake. With the Black Cats and many other clever Larkinsons keeping careful watch over both allies and enemies, Ves was confident that his people would be able to detect most potential threats in advance.

If any Karlachers attempted to form a massive armada, then it was impossible to hide such a massive movement from the eyes and ears of the Black Cats.

In addition, now that Calabast reminded Ves of a certain prophet's powers, he was tempted to turn Ylvaine into an early warning system if not for the fact that it took a lot of energy to make predictions.

After checking to make sure that his clan had the situation well in hand, Ves felt relieved and began to commit most of his time to his core work.

It was finally time to commence the next design round.

This was a big event and one that involved an even greater amount of Journeyman Mech Designers than before.

As soon as his wife and all of his other peers gathered in the conference room, Ves stood up and prepared to make a big announcement.

"This will be the final round of mech design projects that we will embark upon." He revealed. "Once we complete this batch of projects, we will no longer wait until we have completed the last remaining design project before starting another round of projects."

Numerous mech designers looked surprised.

"You're abandoning the design round model?" Ketis asked.

Ves nodded in confirmation. "Yes. While it has worked for our Design Department in the past, it is becoming increasingly more restrictive as we continue to involve more people and projects. For example, the smaller projects can usually be completed in three months, while the larger ones can take up to one-and-a-half years to finish."

"That is not necessarily an adverse arrangement." Juliet Stameross countered. "It was usually the case that finishing one project freed up time to work on other projects. Those of us who just happened to work faster can use their free time to take a break or to work on various personal projects. None of us have wasted our time in the period between design rounds."

As someone who lived through these moments himself, Ves knew that Juliet was right. Every Journeyman in the design department was relatively young, ambitious, eager and professional.

None of the people in the conference room were inclined to slack off and waste these precious moments. Even their holidays were strategically planned to work away their exhaustion and provide them with opportunities to gain inspiration.

"I don't disagree with you, Juliet, but I still hold the same opinion. The structure of planning and scheduling our design work around design rounds is not only overly clunky, but also produces a lot of delays. For example, Venerable Jannzi lost her Shield of Samar almost two months ago, but aside from doing a lot of prep work, we haven't done any serious work. If we weren't stuck with the design round model, we could have made a lot more progress in the Dullahan Project already."

That said, the preparation work was not all that useless. Ves and the others had spent a lot of time on searching for and selecting new tech, materials and component designs to add to the Dullahan Project.

The more time they invested in their searchers, the more fitting elements they found for Venerable Jannzi's future expert mech.

As soon as they concluded this meeting, the mech designers involved in the Dullahan Project would definitely make a lot of progress in the following weeks!

The Journeymen all exchanged their opinions about the current planning structure, but none of them showed any strong objection towards the proposed change.

They were all flexible and capable enough to work under many different structures. Whether their design projects were grouped in organized design

rounds or not made little difference to them. They just had to pay more attention to the workload of others in order to make sure that there was enough time for collaborations.

"What happens after we end this design round?" Dulo Voiken asked.

Ves shrugged. "You are free to start your own projects, either by yourself or in collaboration with others. You are all free to choose how many projects you want to take on at the same time. You can also set your own deadlines. My wife and I won't interfere with your choices as long as you remain productive enough to deserve a place in our Design Department. Our clan has already accumulated a sizable amount of existing mech designs, so it is no longer important to maximize the quantity of our output. I care much more about quality these days. You can tackle fewer design projects if you want, but you must always make sure that the ones you do work on will deliver solid results at the end. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Now that he got that out of the way, he began to organize the major design projects in person.

Ves did not spend much time on going over the upgrade projects. Older mech designs regularly needed to be updated in order to keep up with the changing times.

Some upgrade projects were fairly straightforward and could easily be completed in a couple of months.

Other upgrade projects required much more extensive redesign work, so they could easily stretch for a year if they were particularly complicated.

Fortunately, much of that time was spent on simulation and optimization work. The mech designers didn't have to do a lot of intensive and challenging design work in order to complete these activities.



What the Journeymen were truly interested in was the original design projects that centered around developing completely new mechs.

The mech designers introduced numerous new projects that generated interest from Ves.

For example, Ketis finally fleshed out her mech concept that she came up with after getting inspired by the plasma sword of the Neo Amadeus.

She first instructed the central projector to display a draft design of her work.

The projection depicted a swordsman mech that possessed a distinct oriental and exotic aesthetic. It differed substantially from her other swordsman mech designs as the proposed mech featured a lot more curving lines.

Aside from its look, the new draft design also attracted attention because it wielded two sword at once.

The swords that it held in its hands were not the regular straight ones that Ketis preferred. They resembled slender sabers at first, but their vibe was substantially different from the ones that she had designed in the past.

"Okay, so you have chosen to proceed with designing another dual-wielding swordsman mech." Ves said as he did not look too impressed so far. "What makes this mech special and what is the reason why mech pilots should opt over your work over other competing products?"

Ketis remained confident so she should have a good answer.

"Let me explain the reasons one by one. First, my new Samurai Project is centered around designing a new form of assault-oriented offensive swordsman mech. It is designed to be an offensive powerhouse similar to the Red Axe but with different strengths and weaknesses. The most important element of my new proposed design is the use of special technology that I

have found after spending many hours searching for the right offensive solution."

She waved her hand, which caused the sketched mech to activate a function that caused the curved swords to light up with energy!

"These katanas are meant to be based on stormblade technology, which is a relatively new and ingenious way to allow bladed weapons to inflict partial energy damage."

"How does it work?" Dulo Voiken curiously asked. "Does it work for spears as well?"

Ketis smiled at him. "I will share the details of this tech to you later, Dula. For now, what all of you need to know is that stormblade technology can enhance the damage potential of my new Samurai Project on an optional basis. Against weaker opponents, it is not necessary for my new mech to activate the stormblade function. This allows the mechs to save a lot of energy. It is only when they are fighting against stronger and tougher opponents that it makes sense to energize their katanas so that they can inflict additional heat and energy damage to their targets."

The swordsman mech designer projected a document that showed a summary of the technical specifications of stormblade technology.

Ves and the others looked increasingly more impressed. Stormblade technology did not add any overwhelming power boost to a swordsman mech, but it did not demand a lot of space and it was fairly energy efficient.

This was mainly because an active stormblade weapon did not have to remain at full power unless it was about to hit a target.

The damage boost was also pretty nice, though it was far from reaching the level of a true plasma weapon.

However, Ves believed that the biggest advantage of stormblade technology was that it was affordable!

Sure, stormblade weapons might not present any actual bargains, but the Larkinson Clan could bear the cost of mass producing Ketis' new swordsman mech!

His eyes glinted with approval. "Tell me more."

"Stormblade technology lies at the heart of the Samurai Project. As you can imagine after studying these numbers, my new mech is more flexible and adaptable against the enemy. It can handle crowds of weaker opponents just as easily as smaller numbers of well-armored elites. In addition, since it is a mech that can be piloted by both Swordmaidens and Heavensworders, its upper boundary of performance is extremely high, just as with all of my other mechs. Those who possess great skill are easily able to punch above their weight! The same can't be said for a Redaxe."

That was true. Technique had always been one of the core factors of all of her mech designs. Drawing from her extensive transcendent swordsmanship skills, Ketis always designed her machines in a way that would allow her to use them to the utmost if she was able to pilot them in person.

Ketis grinned and pointed towards the scabbards of her draft design. "The Samurai Project even has a special solution that allows it to breach armor with greater ease. If you look closer, you will be able to see that the scabbards of the katanas are thicker and integrated with tech. That is because they can infuse the blades with additional power, allowing the katanas to burst out with significantly more cutting power shortly after pulling them out. This was one of the selling points that convinced me to adopt stormblade technology for this design project."

"This mechanism of accumulating power is awfully clunky."

"You don't know what you are talking about, Ves. Let me do my work and finish my design. I can guarantee you that you will change your mind once you see this attack method in action."

Ves chuckled when he heard this boast. "I would be glad if you can prove me wrong."

### **Chapter 4368 Eye Project**

Ketis was no longer the inexperienced Journeyman Mech Designer who barely had any completed mech designs under her belt.

She had designed dozens of different swordsman mechs in the last five years or so. Some of them are more significant than others, but each of them provided her with a lot of experience.

What impressed Ves about Ketis was that she never ran out of ways to come up with new swordsman mech concepts that were distinctly different from her prior work.

Perhaps other mech designers might run out of ideas on how to design a swordsman mech that wasn't derivative of a previous work, but Ketis could come up with endless variations that all possessed different combinations of traits.

The Stormblade Samurai was an even bigger departure from her previous body of work than normal.

The stormblade technology that she had licenced from a specialized development company that Ves had never heard of introduced a lot of new possibilities to a swordsman mech.

The katanas that integrated this new tech were still physical, but could be energized to cut through targets with greater ease through the additional application of energy and heat.

Stormblade weapons were more sophisticated than the heated blades that Ves was familiar with. The latter simply amounted to channeling a lot of thermal energy through a heat-resistant blade in the hopes that it could deal a lot more damage upon contact.

Of course, Ves wasn't too knowledgeable about the specific differences. He needed to wait until Ketis completed this project before he could see a finished mech with this tech in action.

"Okay, what are the remaining characters of your Samurai Project?" Ves asked.

"Well, my Samurai Project is not that impressive in other matters." His former student replied. "

"The main reason for me to design it is to add a powerful new offensive option to our Larkinson Army. To that end, I will be collaborating with Tifi Coslone on this project to ensure it can deliver the strongest possible strikes."

"What are your thoughts about this project, Tifi?" Ves asked as he turned to the other woman.

"The Samurai Project relies on both energy and physical power to maximize the damage of its strikes." She said. "I don't specialize in solutions such as stormblade technology, but what I do excel at is making the frame of this mech as strong as possible. I will do my best to ensure that this mech is able to hit hard enough even if it doesn't activate its stormblade function."

It went without saying that the Samurai Project would be able to hit even harder if it did energize its weapons!

Ketis quickly explained the remaining traits of the Samurai Project. "We have to invest a lot of capacity to enhance the offensive power of our swordsman mech, so we don't have that much room left to improve its other aspects. Sara Voiken has agreed to design a serviceable armor system for an offensive

melee mech, so I expect that our upcoming mech will be able to withstand enough damage to last on a typical battlefield."

"What about its mobility?"

"Let me say that speed and acceleration will not be its strong suits. Just like its codename, the Samurai Project is meant to fight and duel against opponents in head-on clashes. Speed is nice, but we already have lighter and more maneuverable alternatives in our clan. The Second Sword is a notable example of this. One of its more serious shortcomings is that it doesn't have enough armor to fight hard battles. The Samurai Project is different."

"I see. That makes sense." Ves replied.

In general, the Samurai Project lived and died by its offensive capabilities. This project presented Ketis with plenty of new challenges and learning opportunities.

Ves was curious whether Ketis could combine this special stormblade technology with her design philosophy and other special abilities. It would be great if she was able to elevate the Samurai Project where the whole was far greater than the sum of its parts.

As Ketis wrapped up her presentation, Ves quickly looked around the conference room before deciding to make a request.

"Who do you plan to collaborate with on the Samurai Project?"

"For now, I have made an agreement with Tifi Coslone and Sara Voiken." Ketis answered.

"No one else?"

Ketis shook her head.

"Then can you do me a favor and include Merrill O'Brain to the design team of this project?" Ves requested.

His former student looked surprised, though Merrill only displayed a mild reaction.

"I... can, I suppose." Ketis slowly replied as she thought about how she should change her plan with the inclusion of a fourth Journeyman. "Merrill, your design philosophy is related to mechanics, right?"

"That is correct, Ketis."

"Will your specialty conflict with that of Tifi? Both of your design philosophies look as if they overlap."

"I think we can try to work that out. Just because both of us deal with mechanics doesn't mean that we will conflict with each other." Tifi said.

Ves looked hopeful. "I think that there will be plenty of situations where you will all work alongside mech designers who may intrude upon your territories. It is best to find out early whether you can work together with those who possess overlapping specialties. If it turns out that a combination doesn't work, we can always reevaluate the situation and change the assignments."

He just wanted to ease one of the newbies into the existing design projects. Merril O'Brian had only advanced fairly recently and she was probably not capable enough to design a new Larkinson mech that was good enough to meet the standards of the Design Department. This was why it was essential to have her work alongside others at the beginning of her career as a Journeyman.

Now that they handled the Samurai Project, it was time to introduce the next major design project.

Ves decided to speak up at this time.

"Just like many of you, I have gained a lot of inspiration from the Sundered Phalanx from the previous battle. Some of my new ideas are rather

complicated and will take more time to prepare, but I have come up with a fairly simple but ingenious mech concept that I can easily realize with my current capabilities. I have decided to design this mech so that we can add another useful and popular commercial product to the LMC's product catalog."

He uploaded his own draft design to the central projector, causing it to depict a fairly simple looking rifleman mech.

At first glance, the mech did not look that differently from other ranged mechs. Those with discerning eyes could tell that the mech was designed for sniping at longer ranges rather than strafing at medium range.

What was rather typical of Ves was that he chose to pursue an extreme configuration for this draft design.

Ves placed a heavy emphasis on the luminar crystal rifle as well as all of the supporting systems that existed to maximize its performance.

This left him with little room to improve its defenses or mobility. The mech didn't possess any further physical features that could amplify its technical performance. It was even more extreme in this regard than Ketis' Samurai Project!

"This new mech of yours resembles a mass production version of the Amaranto." Gloriana spoke up. "There are a lot of familiar design elements in this new commercial project."

Ves nodded in admission. "That's correct. I have always wanted to design a more standardized and affordable interpretation of the Amaranto, but I never came up with any ideas on how to make stand out until recently. I have the Gaugers to thank for that. The greatest source of inspiration of my Eye Project is the Blackened Reapers Mech Division of the Sundered Phalanx."



His wife looked thoughtful. "The Blackened Reapers? You mean the elite mech division that is centered around fielding ranged mechs that excel at long-ranged precision fire?"

"Yup. While they have failed to stave off a loss, the Blackened Reapers actually performed quite well. They provided a lot of help for their soldiers by using their accurate shots to strike the weak points of their targets or take out specific modules that have a lot of strategic value."

Several mech designers in the conference room looked thoughtful. Some were able to see the value of these kinds of ranged mechs while others were a bit more skeptical.

"Isn't it better to rely on heavy artillery mechs for ranged suppression and fire support?" Dulo Voiken asked. "I mean, the firepower disparity between the two is huge. A mech company of heavy artillery mechs can destroy mechs as well as starships a lot easier and faster than a mech company of marksman mechs."

"That may be true, but this analysis of yours is too shallow." Ves replied.

"First, don't forget that this is a commercial model. While most of our customers are generally wealthier and more capable than the ones in the old galaxy, it is still rather difficult for them to remain profitable while investing in heavy artillery mechs. Mechs such as our Transcendent Punishers are much more expensive to build and buy and their maintenance and repair costs are vastly higher. Not only that, but they impose additional requirements such as requiring bunkers in order to participate in space battles."

"Ah. I understand." Dulo looked enlightened. "Medium rifleman mechs are much cheaper and more cost-effective in comparison. They can fit in any slot in any carrier vessel and they can also deploy in space if they are design for spaceborn combat."

"Heavy mechs have their place, but they are too cumbersome and restrictive to employ in every combat situation. The ease in which you can employ rifleman mechs such as my new Eye Project provides enough of a reason to choose it over the most obvious long-ranged combat solutions."

That answer provided an economic rationale for this new mech design, but that was hardly enough to generate market demand.

Gloriana grew impatient. "So what is the gimmick of your new mech, Ves?"

"Well, I can talk a bit about its powerful rifle that I intend to configure and optimize for power and long-ranged precision, but that is rather boring." Ves replied. "You can just take me at my word that it will be armed with a heavy sniper rifle that works extremely well when it is outputting laser beams. The real gimmick does not come from any visible parts. Instead, it comes from its design spirit."

His wife still looked skeptical. "You mean the Illustrious One? His involvement in this design will hardly increase its value proposition. It will just make the pilot feel more in tune with the luminar crystal rifle. That is not enough to convince buyers to purchase this product in large numbers."

Ves answered her doubts by removing his Hammer of Brilliance from his belt and placing it on the surface of the conference table.

Thud.

"...What do you mean by that, Ves?"

Ves gestured towards the hammer. "This is the primary design spirit of the Eye Project."

"...Okay? Why didn't you go for Ylvaine instead? Isn't he your go-to solution for long-ranged precision."

"You don't get it." Ves disappointingly said. "Ylvaine is an excellent option for this kind of mech, but not if I want to make it commercially viable. I need to employ a more universal design spirit that can work well with people of different backgrounds and beliefs. Vulcan is the alternative that I have chosen."

"Explain."

"It's simple. While Vulcan can't correct the aim of mech pilots like Ylvaine, the former has an excellent understanding of mechs and technology in general. Since I initially brought Vulcan to life, he has been taking advantage of my work as well as the work of every craftsman and creator who has used the services of the Creation Association to learn how mechs, starships and other machinery can be made or broken. Now imagine a situation where Vulcan analyzes all of the weak points of an enemy mech and passes that information on to the mech pilot. How well do you think my Eye Project will perform?"

"That... is actually a clever idea! The cost is probably minimal but the results can be drastic. Now I understand why you want to pair a marksman mech with Vulcan. Only someone who understands machines as well as a mech designer can point out all of the flaws of an opposing mech!"

The working principle behind the Eye Project was actually similar to an event that Ves had experienced in the past.

Ves had once played a role similar to Vulcan to a mech pilot known as Ivan Barley during one of his early Mastery experiences.

His eyes clouded over as he recalled that past event.

Perhaps he could reproduce a portion of that glory by designing the Eye Project.

By designing a rifleman mech that was watched over by Vulcan, his incarnation would not only be able to experience many realistic battle situations in a front-row seat, but also gain an even more important resource.

Spiritual feedback!

Now that the Mech Designer System had recently evolved towards Spiritual Ascension, it became more important than ever for Ves to pay more attention to developing his Spirituality.

Helping Vulcan grow faster by tying him to a commercial mech design was an excellent way to boost his incarnation's growth!

Ves actually should have done this sooner, but he had previously been reluctant to do so because he was afraid of the repercussions.

#### **Chapter 4369 Sharing Observation Data**

If Ves presented a mech concept like the Eye Project in any other place, his fellow mech designers would probably laugh at him and his ideas!

It sounded incredibly crazy that a relatively ordinary marksman mech with no expensive frills and modules could outperform the competition by relying on a single metaphysical trait.

However, none of his fellow Journeymen in the Design Department doubted whether Ves could pull off this simple but profound mech concept.

This was because each of them had become thoroughly familiar with his amazing inventions!

Design spirits played a key role in almost every Larkinson mech. Even newcomers such as Cormaunt Hempkamp understood what design spirits were capable of when utilized in the right circumstances.

Iconic mechs such as the Transcendent Punisher and the Valkyrie Redeemer would never have been able to rise above mediocrity and become so powerful and beloved without the help of their design spirits.

Even the ones that did not really convey any powerful abilities such as the Solemn Guardian played a useful role by their presence alone.

As far as design spirits went, Vulcan had yet to prove himself in this context. Ves had never seriously considered using his own incarnation in this manner before!

Ves had always considered Vulcan to be a patron spirit for craftsmen, artisans and other makers.

The Creation Association led by Director Samandra Avikon had done well in spreading the totems of Vulcan around various workshops, factories and other places.

Of course, the Creation Association also gained a rather ugly reputation for being a cult and propagating a scam.

However, those who were willing and able to pay at least 1 MTA credit to receive Vulcan's blessing occasionally made a lot of progress. The Creation Association built up quite a sizable cult following by offering over the years!

Ves was fine with letting Vulcan serve in this capacity until recently. The changes to the System along with his growing desire to develop a useful ranged mech model led him to this point.

Aside from utilizing Vulcan as the Eye Project's design spirit, Ves did not intend to add anything too special to the mech design.

"That's odd." Gloriana said as her expression grew puzzled. "You usually do your best to make your designs as unique and distinctive as possible. I don't see that here. Sure, the focus on maximizing its offensive power is an extreme

approach, but it is not as if sniper mechs are a rarity on the mech market. Why is your draft design so... dull?"

He wasn't surprised by her remark.

"I do admit that my proposal deviates from my usual work, but that is because this mech is designed to sell." Ves calmly replied. "Adding Vulcan is already enough to make it strong. The only other way I can make it stronger and more distinctive is to add powerful tech to the mech design, but that will make the product more expensive. That is not what I want to accomplish. I'm not looking to maximize the profits from selling this new mech. I'm trying to maximize its sales volume. Do you understand the difference?"

His wife slowly nodded. "You want to make another product like the Desolate Soldier. You want to introduce a product line that is cheap, affordable and easy to fit into the mech rosters of many customers."

"Exactly!" Ves grinned. "The Desolate Soldier is a good example. While it has been a while since I have targeted the middle and lower segments of the mech market, this is where the Eye Project should belong. There is no need for the Eye Project to become the strongest ranged mechs that we put for sale because customers will not be buying it for its raw firepower. Instead, they will seek to acquire it because it can give them crucial intelligence about the weak points of their targets. No matter whether buyers only purchase a single copy or an entire batch, my Eye Project will always find a way to make itself useful."

His goal was to turn the Eye Project into an irresistible temptation.

Normally, the LMC tended to target the upper end of the mech market. Most of its products offered excellent value and performance, but the downside to them was that their prices were also high!

What Ves sought to accomplish this time was to sell a new mech that performed well at a bargain-worthy price!

Perhaps the LMC might not be able to earn a huge amount of MTA credits from positioning his Eye Project this way, but this was the best way for his company to put out as many copies of this mech as possible!

Ves already looked forward to all of the spiritual feedback that Vulcan would be able to harvest from so many mech pilots.

The only serious concern was that exposing Vulcan to all kinds of messy thoughts from so many different mech pilots might skew its growth trajectory.

Ves did not forget that Vulcan's main purpose was to assist him in design and development-related activities. It would be a shame for the design spirit to cater his abilities to mech pilots as opposed to creators.

He needed to pay a lot of attention to this once the Eye Project began to get sold in large numbers.

"Besides, the Eye Project is not entirely good because of its analytical glow." Ves gestured towards the primary weapon of the design. "I plan to pair the Eye Project with a luminar crystal rifle that is optimized for long-ranged combat. I only plan to equip it with a laser beam attack phase crystal to lower the cost. There is no need to add additional crystals to the mix. If our customers want to make use of a more powerful mech equipped with luminar crystal weapons, then they can buy our more premium offerings."

Laser beam weapons did not pack the greatest punch, but they were efficient and struck at the speed of light. It also helped that their requirements were the lowest among energy weapon solutions.

Even so, the luminar crystal version of a laser beam weapon was both powerful and efficient, which would help a lot in making customers respect the firepower of the Eye Project.

No matter what, the LMC had a reputation to uphold. Even the more affordable products had to be desirable in terms of performance.

His only regret was that the Eye Project did not have the budget or capacity to include any notably powerful defensive or mobility solutions.

Adding them into the mix would not necessarily make the mech stronger in its chosen role while drastically increasing the price of the product.

"What price are you aiming for with this new marksman mech?" Gloriana asked.

"I want to keep the price as low as possible, but if I want to ensure that the Eye Project will perform according to my standards, then I probably won't go any lower than 1.1 MTA credits per copy."

For comparison, the Monster Slayer designed by Ketis generally sold for 1.4 MTA credits.

Gloriana furrowed her brows. "You are cutting it close, Ves. It will be a struggle for you to establish enough of a margin for the LMC to break even. It will be an even greater challenge for you to ensure that our mech company will be able to earn a modest profit from this product. If anything goes wrong throughout its sales run, the profitability of your Eye Project can quickly crater. Why not sell it for 1.2 or 1.3 MTA credits instead? Given the value proposition of this rifleman mech, there are still plenty of customers who will not hesitate to add at least one copy to their mech roster."

Ves shook his head. "I already thought about it, but increasing the price by just 0.1 MTA credits will make my product a lot less attractive. There are a lot of price-sensitive customers who will carefully weigh the decision to buy a good mech that costs 1.2 MTA credits but will not hesitate to snap up the same mech if it sells for 1.1 MTA credits instead."

In fact, it would have been even better if he could set the price at 1 MTA credit instead, but the configuration and quality standards that he had set for the Eye Project did not allow for this option.



Once Ves clarified his vision for the Eye Project, he invited several mech designers to collaborate with him on this commercial project.

"Not many of you possess specialties that are relevant to ranged mechs, particularly a marksman mech that should always be placed in the rear of a battle lineup. However, at least one of you possess a specialty that might be relevant to this project. Cormaunt, I'd like you to design a custom neural interface and other possible control systems for the Eye Project."

The latest Journeyman to join the Larkinson Clan blinked in surprise. "I would be honored to design this mech with you, sir. I'm not entirely certain what you expect from me. I have never worked on your tech before."

"That's no problem. You can leave that stuff to me." Ves replied. "I'm not asking much from you. Your main role is to enhance the data management and control aspects of the Eye Project. More specifically, I want you to make it so that the mech pilots can immediately act on the information provided by Vulcan during combat. I also want you to allow the Eye Project to convert the input from Vulcan into a digital format and be able to share this data to a command center or other friendly mechs."

"That sounds as if you want to turn your work into a scout mech."

"It would be helpful if the mech pilot of the Eye Project can easily share Vulcan's revelations to other friendly units." Ves said and nodded. "That will make it so that even one copy of my mech will provide an incredible amount of value to a mech force."

What Ves wanted to accomplish was to make the Eye Project so useful and indispensable that it would become popular among customers that normally weren't interested in living mechs.

There were still a lot of people who harbored a lot of fear, reluctance or skepticism towards the products sold by the LMC.

Ves wanted to turn the Eye Project into a force multiplier that could comprehensively elevate the combat effectiveness of an entire mech force through its observation capabilities.

By allowing it to point out the weak points of powerful mechs or important starships, those that made use of this information would definitely achieve greater success in their missions and encounters!

Other groups that did not make use of the Eye Project would fall behind, causing them to feel pressured to buy a copy of this useful mech themselves!

This would not only boost the sales of his new commercial mech even further, but also act as a 'gateway drug' that could introduce a lot of more customers to the wonderful world of living mechs!

"I will do my best to increase the utility of the Eye Project." Cormaunt promised. "Thank you for your trust in me. I have always been curious to see how I can tailor my neural interfaces to your esoteric design solutions. I think we can come up with many new possibilities by increasing the integration between material technology and immaterial phenomena."

"Those are my thoughts as well." Ves said. "Anyway, I am done with presenting my Eye Project. Do any of you wish to introduce any interesting new mech design projects, or shall we proceed with going over our upcoming expert mech designs?"

No one presented any promising ideas, but that was fine. There were already enough projects on the agenda even if most of them centered around upgrading existing mech designs or developing additional variant designs.

The previous battle exposed many shortcomings of their existing Larkinson mechs, and it was crucial for them to remedy the issues as much as possible.

## Chapter 4370 Ghost Project

The discussion finally shifted to the most powerful and arguably the most exciting projects.

The Larkinson Clan adored its expert mechs. Each of them represented the best of what the Larkinson mech designers could impart in their work.

This time was no different.

Ves first presented the Dullahan Project to his audience. The other Journeymen were already aware that he and his wife were working on a new expert mech for Venerable Jannzi.

There was no need to go into too much detail. Ves had a lot in store for the Dullahan Project, but no one else could help him all that much in his attempt to make the Shield of Samar undergo a rebirth process. This was completely uncharted territory for him and he was the only one who could make it happen.

The Ghost Project was a bit more interesting to the Larkinson Journeymen because it was a completely new and different mech that the clan had never worked with before.

"Not many expert stealth mechs exist in the first place because it is rare for mech pilots who engage in shady operations to advance to the rank of expert pilot." Ves began. "This has to do with the requirements of becoming a demigod. Strong willpower, strong convictions and the absence of guilt are just a couple of the criteria that determines whether mech pilots can advance. I think that having a guilty mind is a major stumbling block that prevents many mech pilots engaged in assassinations and other clandestine operation from undergoing apotheosis."

There was a large variety of conflicting theories around this controversial topic. The question of whether the subjective feeling of guilt truly held back

mech pilots or not was still in contention. This was merely the most recognized answer out of all of the possibilities.

High-ranking mech pilots generally tended to emerge from brave, fearless and upright warriors. It was not a coincidence that stubborn and brazen personalities such as Patriarch Reginald tended to do better in this aspect. Ignorance was no hindrance to their success!

In contrast, those with clever, subversive, sneaky and vile personality traits ultimately failed to break their limits throughout their careers.

While there were certainly exceptions to the rule, it was still incredibly difficult for a large and prosperous state like the Friday Coalition to produce more than a handful of expert pilots among the ranks of black ops units.

Ves had studied Venerable Zimro Belson's case in person to determine why he was able to succeed.

He obviously possessed a bit of talent, but he did not stand out too much in this regard.

What truly made Zimro special among those who liked to sneak around was that he possessed a clear conscience!

His life trajectory was remarkable and even living in exile in a dark and violent place like the Nyxian Gap had never corrupted his honest heart!

He and the other former members of the Xona Stalkers that eventually joined the Larkinson Clan had all thrived once they became a part of the Black Cats.

Director Calabast showed a lot of care to this group and never assigned them any dirty missions that might taint their sensibilities.

Of course, the Black Cats rarely took action against different parties. They mostly engaged in spying, monitoring and data theft.

"Venerable Zimro Belson is therefore an absolute treasure to us." Ves told everyone. "The Ghost Project may be our only opportunity to add a powerful stealth machine to our lineup. The immediate question that comes to mind is how much we should orient our new stealth mech towards combat as opposed to solitary infiltration missions. We can try our best to make Venerable Zimro's expert mech excel at both, but eventually we need to make a choice and commit to it. A stealth mech optimized for combat is substantially different from a stealth mech that is meant to sneak inside powerful fleets or a well-defended military base."

It would have been great if the Larkinson Clan welcomed two new expert pilots that could work with stealth mechs, but that was just a fantasy.

"You've already made a choice." Ketis spoke up. "The previous battle showed that we are still short on expert mechs that can defeat powerful enemy units. Rather than design a mech that is good at infiltrating enemy strongholds, it is a lot more useful for us to obtain a mech that can assassinate enemy expert mechs on a busy battlefield. That way, we can easily destroy or plunder an enemy stronghold after we have wiped out all of the opposition."

"You've pretty much read my mind, Ketis."

The swordmaster confidently smirked. "It's not difficult for me to simulate your logic chain after working with you for so many years. Our clan has always relied on open combat to solve our enemies."

"That's right. While I do not deny how helpful it is for us to be able to deploy a powerful expert stealth mech that can assassinate a crucial commander or cripple an enemy force before we commence a proper battle, I think it is better and safer for Venerable Zimro to fight alongside his peers and other fellow soldiers. The assistance of his upcoming expert mech will definitely allow us to finish off a lot more powerful enemy units than normal."

If the Larkinson Army already had a machine like the the Ghost Project at its disposal, then a lot less Fridayman expert mechs would have been able retreat intact in the previous battle!

"We need to add another sharp and hidden knife to the Larkinson Army." Ves insisted to everyone. "One of our faults in the Battle of Pima Prime was how our expert mechs were usually able to defeat their adversaries, but failed to finish the job in too many cases. The successful rescue of Saint Rebecca Andus after felling the Shockshell is the most egregious example of this. I don't want this to happen again. Our survival will always be at risk if we keep letting our enemies retreat so that they can confront us on another day."

Many faces grew serious. This was indeed the case.

"So what are the specifics of your Ghost Project?" Sara Voiken asked.

"That's a good question. This is the draft design that we have come up with so far. As you can see, it is a bit unusual in that it is a melee stealth mech. We plan to arm it with daggers that will allow it to sneak up to enemy expert mechs from behind and inflict critical damage onto them whenever the opportunity arises."

Several mech designers who were aware of the challenges of sneaking up to expert mechs looked doubtful. They weren't certain whether this idea would succeed.

"Are you certain we can design a stealth mech that can effectively assassinate enemy expert mechs?"

"I am." Ves confidently replied. "I know that stealth mechs at this level mostly rely on ranged weapons, but we have two ways to increase the success rate of the Ghost Project. First, I know a lot about stealth and cloaking systems. As long as we license a powerful enough transphasic stealth system from a

reputable development company, I am certain that I can successfully integrate it into the expert mech design."

It was a bit difficult for Ves to explain how his competence in this area had suddenly risen to the level of a Senior Mech Designer. He simply opted to say nothing and hoped that his previous successes gave him enough credibility to believe in his ability.

It would be bad if it turned out that none of the Larkinson Journeyman were able to work with advanced stealth systems.

The only way for them to complete the Ghost Project was to bring in an outside consultant to solve all of the complicated problems. That was unacceptable because it meant that all of the stealth-related details would end up in the hands of outsiders!

In fact, the Larkinsons were already forced to involve Master Benedict Cortez in the design process in order to enable the finished expert mech to resonate with Venerable Zimro.

While this was already a major security risk, Ves could at least preserve many crucial details by withholding a lot of crucial information about the stealth system and its implementation in the mech design.

Whether his colleagues harbored any doubts towards him or not, none of them followed up on this matter.

Several of them were more interested in hearing how Ves would help the Ghost Project avoid detection from alert and perceptive expert pilots.

"If the stealth system of the Ghost Project is effective enough, then it should likely be doable for this expert mech to assassinate low-tier expert mechs." Gloriana ascertained based on what she learned from various sources.

"However, the more powerful machines are not only equipped with better sensor systems, but they are also controlled by mid-tier or high-tier expert

pilots who have developed extremely strong intuition. They can detect danger even if their expert mechs detect no abnormal activity at all. A single hunch may be enough to foil an assassination attempt."

Ves responded with a smile. "You are describing two different problems. The first is technological and can be solved by investing more money. The second is metaphysical in nature, which means it can be solved through metaphysical means. This is an area that I happen to excel in. I don't have any solid ideas on how to do it, but I am confident I can cobble together a solution that will be effective in battle. I just have to shape the spiritual foundation in the right way."

"You need more than that, I think." Gloriana responded. "You will need the help of a design spirit as well I think. As far as I know, none of the design spirits are good at hiding their presence from enemies except for one. The Superior Mother's dust aspect should be able to make the Ghost Project less noticeable. The Devious mech model that we have designed for the Hexers has already shown that it can work."

"Venerable Zimro is not a Hexer nor a woman."

"That shouldn't be a problem, Ves. I'm sure that Zimro will find a way to get along with your mother. He's a good boy."

Ketis and a couple of other Journeymen snorted or snickered under their breaths.

"No thanks, Gloriana. I will solve this problem in my own way. I don't think that the Superior Mother is my only solution. I'll just create another design spirit if there are no other alternatives. A new entity that is good at hiding stuff can be useful in many different situations."



They discussed other details about the Ghost Project. Ves went over topics such as explaining the requirements of the sensor systems and discussing the possibility of equipping it with transphasic grenades.

Overall, the Ghost Project had the potential to become a killer machine that exceeded the Dark Zephyr in terms of lethality!

While the Dark Zephyr primarily had to go through a difficult struggle before it gained the opportunity to land a killing blow, the Ghost Project was designed from the onset to start and finish a fight with a single strike!

Ves grinned. "The best part about the Ghost Project is that as capable as it may be in solo actions, it is likely more effective when teaming up with our other expert mechs. Just think about it. A loud and attention-grabbing mech like the C-Man can distract an opposing expert mech, which means that the enemy mech pilot will have less attention to spare against surprise attacks. The Ghost Project should more easily be able to sneak up on the target and land a fatal blow!"

This was the best way to utilize the Ghost Project in his opinion. Working together with other friendly expert mechs not only made it easier to finish off a powerful enemy, but would also provide the expert stealth mech with additional safety once it got exposed.