

Mech 4401

Chapter 4401 Damage Lndex

One of the more interesting design traits of the new Instrument of Doom cannon was that Ves focused on increasing its inherent firepower as much as possible.

By making sure that the luminar crystal cannon already started off with unreasonably high single-shot attack power from the beginning, Ves could help it attain ridiculous damage results by applying multiple forms of amplification!

For example, if a weapon like the Instrument of Vengeance rifle possessed a base damage index of 100, Venerable Stark might be able to increase that figure to 400 or something after resonating with the weapon.

This was the limit that she could achieve with her resonance strength and other factors.

One of the design choices that Ves sometimes regretted was that the Instrument of Vengeance did not come with any further amplification mechanisms.

Many ranged expert mechs were usually capable of boosting the firepower of their weapons by making use of the right resonating exotics.

Instead of trying to increase the damage potential of the Instrument of Vengeance further, the Larkinsons had instead opted to emphasize its ability to target weak points by integrating it with Opticonium.

This was the resonating alloy that enabled the Amaranto to bend and curve its energy beams.

While Venerable Stark had definitely managed to play a crucial role with the help of this unusual ability, it was still regrettable that the Amaranto had no further means to overcome tougher resistance.

The only exception was to take the advantage of the fact that the Instrument of Vengeance was a masterwork where Ves was able to connect to it and amplify its next shot with the power of Worclaw energy.

Considering that Ves and Blinky had to rely on their own efforts to generate more Worclaw energy and replenish what they had lost, this was a trump card that could only be used once every few months!

In any case, the Amaranto mostly had to make do with topping its damage index to 400 or maybe higher at times if Venerable Stark exceeded her limits.

This might already sound impressive, but these were fairly typical results for expert mechs at this level.

What Ves sought to accomplish with the new Instrument of Doom was to use this second chance to implement a different design direction!

As the Amaranto fired several more shots after tapping some of the potential of the Instrument of Doom, Ves already formed an estimate of its damage indexes.

The base damage index relative to the Instrument of Vengeance was easy to calculate in advance due to the lack of any metaphysical shenanigans.

"A full-powered laser beam attack from the Instrument of Doom should already have a damage index of around 300."

This might not sound like much given the enormous differences between the luminar crystal rifle and the luminar crystal cannon, but Ves had already done his best to cope with the law of diminishing returns.

"Venerable Stark is not yet familiar with the Instrument of Doom, so her ability to resonate with it in the beginning is not as good. The weapon also has a lot more volume which further reduces the effectiveness of true resonance. It is

already fairly good that resonating with the cannon can allow it to reach a damage index of around 800 to 900."

This might not sound as extreme as Ves was hoping for, but he was sure that Venerable Stark would be able to increase the damage potential of the Instrument of Doom over time!

Once she became intimately familiar with her new weapon, Ves wouldn't be surprised if the Amaranto could reach a damage index of 1200.

This was already at least three times as powerful as the damage that the Amaranto was previously able to inflict!

"It will get even better over time as Venerable Stark's resonance strength is constantly getting better."

Resonance strength was a measure of an expert pilot's extraordinary capacity to distort reality. The higher the number, the more ridiculous the expert pilot could impose his or her own rules in the material realm!

Once Venerable Stark became a high-tier expert pilot, Ves wouldn't be surprised if she could reach a damage index of 1500 or higher!

Compared to the repeatable damage output that she was able to produce in the past, the difference was enormous!

This example clearly illustrated why high-tier expert pilots could crush their weaker counterparts in battle.

Their exceptionally strong willpower not only allowed them to amplify the performance of their weapons to an absurd degree, but also enabled them to do the same for their resonance shields, their armor systems, their flight systems and more!

Of course, Ves had to remind himself that blindly chasing after multipliers was not the only way to increase the performance of a mech.

A more convenient way to increase the indexes was to increase the base performance of a weapon or mech.

This was why Larkinson expert mechs such as the Riot and the First Sword were barely capable of competing against the Shockshell!

Their Unending alloy and other expensive parts and tech significantly strengthened their technical performance! This allowed them to get away with lower amplification factors, though only to an extent.

In any case, the testing session was far from done.

After collecting enough data on how much stronger the new cannon had become after Venerable Stark resonated with it in a more general manner, she finally got to try out a feature that was absent from her old luminar crystal rifle.

"The next tests will be a lot more exciting for us all. I don't want you to resonate with the cannon on a normal basis this time. Instead, I need to resonate specifically with the resonating exotic contained within the weapon. Can you sense it, Davia?"

"I can." The expert pilot replied. "It is already calling out to me. It is impossible to ignore its presence."

Ves smiled. "That is an indication that you possess a remarkably high compatibility with Urthan Silver. Have you read the briefing on this resonating exotic?"

"I do. It is a naturally occurring resonating material that is fairly common in both the Milky Way and the Red Ocean. It is not particularly rare or valuable, and its effect isn't the strongest. Many expert pilots can easily get along with Urthan Silver. The sole job of this resonating exotic in an expert mech is to amplify the damage inflicted by an energy attack by 80 to 200 percent depending on the resonance strength of the expert pilot."

This was actually a fairly mediocre effect. There were other resonating exotics that could achieve better results.

The primary reasons why the Larkinsons settled for Urthan Silver was because it was easily available and because it was highly compatible with Venerable Stark.

Compatibility was extremely important. Expert pilots were rarely capable of drawing out the full potential of most resonating materials.

However, if they were capable of doing so, then even average resonating materials would be able to produce fantastic results on the battlefield!

As the Instrument of Doom began to light up even brighter than before, Ves could sense the horrible power accumulating within the weapon by observing the live feed.

His intuition warned him that the regular firepower of the Instrument of Doom had greatly exceeded the regular firepower of the Instrument of Vengeance!

"Fire!"

When the Amaranto unleashed a blast, over a dozen target dummies that had been placed on line did not even last a fraction of a second before the massive resonance-empowered laser beam disintegrated them before striking clean through the body of another asteroid!

Not only that, but an asteroid that was lined up behind the last one also received significant damage!

"Damn! The power of that attack can equal the Star of Liberation's best efforts!"

"No high-tier expert mech can come away unscathed after getting struck by this ridiculous laser beam!"

The Larkinson Clan already had plenty of reasons to celebrate if the testing session ended at this point.

None of their expert mechs had ever managed to inflict so much damage with a single repeatable attack!

Outside of trump cards such as battle formations and the remote energy channeling of masterwork mechs, the Amaranto wielding the Instrument of Doom would henceforth serve as the top damage source of the Larkinson Clan!

Ves eagerly studied the data and performed a quick analysis to loosely estimate the damage index of the latest shot.

"If my calculations are correct... then the damage index of that latest attack has definitely exceeded 2000!"

That was already an astounding result even if Venerable Stark did not come close to maximizing the potential of Urthan Silver!

This was the first time that the expert pilot worked with this kind of resonating material, so Ves already expected Amaranto to perform a bit rough at first.

As the Amaranto carefully accumulated more energy before unleashing another stupendously powerful attack, Ves clearly noticed that the raw numbers had jumped a bit. This was already a sign that Venerable Stark was already mastering the art of resonating with Urthan Silver.

The Amaranto continually showed that it was capable of inflicting enormously powerful blows with its new weapon!

"How are you doing, Venerable Stark?"

"My mech and I are doing fine so far, but we cannot keep up this intensity for long." She honestly replied. "It is a lot more exhausting for us to use the Instrument of Doom."

Ves nodded in understanding. "That is the price of using such a large and powerful weapon. Let us hurry up with the final two tests."

The expert mechs of today relied extensively on phasewater to give them an extra edge, and the Amaranto had just joined this expanding club!

While Venerable Stark still resonated with the Urthan Silver like before, this time she also activated the transphasic function, thereby causing the luminar crystal cannon to glow brighter and radiate more power than before!

Faint spatial distortions surrounded the Amaranto before Venerable Stark finally pulled the trigger.

The subsequent massive energy beam did not look that much different from the last couple of ones, but the difference was that it managed to pierce through one asteroid before spearing another one that was floating in the distance!

Not only that, but the remaining energy of the laser beam ultimately dug into a third asteroid before stopping.

"Damn! This is awesome!"

Even though the hardness and density of an asteroid was nowhere comparable to a purpose-built warship, Ves could already imagine how many meters of solid hull plating the Instrument of Doom could bypass and overcome!

Though the damage of the latest energy beam had actually spread out over the three asteroids due to the effects of phasewater, what was important to Ves was that the transphasic laser beam had affected a third asteroid this time!

"The damage index of this attack should still be around 2000 or so, but the penetration factor should be multiple times greater."

Phasewater caused attacks to inflict less damage to the exterior but more damage to the interior. This meant that it was no longer easy for Ves to compare the damage potential of the Amaranto's expanded attack methods.

"Let us proceed with the final and most important test, Davia." Ves transmitted to the Amaranto. "Follow my instructions but listen to your instincts. If there is any point where you feel that the Instrument of Doom is exceeding its limits, don't hesitate to abort the test."

"I will keep that in mind." Venerable Stark answered.

She concentrated her mind and will and began to perform all of the necessary steps to properly make use of the new blessed weapon.

She not only resonated with the Urthan Silver and activated the transphasic function, but also reached out to the design spirit of the mighty weapon and requested his intervention for the following attack.

"He's coming!"

The Phase King had already been standing by as this historic testing session unfolded.

As soon as Venerable Stark opened a channel, the powerful design spirit readily made use of it by sending down his presence as well as his spiritual energy!

Soon enough, the entire Amaranto lit up as if it had turned as bright as a star!

The silhouette of the Phase King briefly overlapped with that of the expert rifleman mech before shrinking down towards the luminar crystal cannon that was made in his image!

During this time, the presence of the Phase King temporarily suppressed that of the Illustrious One, causing the Amaranto to look and feel as if it had become the living embodiment of phasewater!

As the whale head muzzle of the Instrument of Doom became so bright and lifelike that its decorated red eyes conveyed vitality, Venerable Stark eventually gathered the strength to pull the trigger!

"DESTROY!"

A flash of energy so bright that it seemed to cut through space itself instantly struck the edge of the asteroid belt!

Numerous floating rocks irrevocably changed as the bright and piercing laser beam successfully drilled and phased through an enormous amount of matter!

A huge number of witnesses within the fleet had become speechless.

They could no longer process the latest result as it was so far beyond their expectations that their minds still needed to catch up to reality.

Ves finally broke the silence in the observation compartment. "How... how many asteroids?"

"Sixteen..." His wife replied.

Chapter 4402 Ship Killing Weapon

All of the theories that Ves came up with could not achieve the same impact as seeing the results in reality.

For a long time, the astounding effects of the Amaranto's final attack still lingered in his mind.

For a transphasic laser beam to be able to penetrate so many asteroids at once was an outcome that could truly change the entire game.

This was in line with his prediction, but the test result was so visually shocking to Ves that he reacted as if he was completely overtaken by surprise.

The truth was that he doubted his own calculations. Surely the extrapolated data couldn't be that ridiculously high, right?

Perhaps the Phase King might exhibit more and more difficulty in applying his abilities to a weapon that was much larger and more massive than a handheld luminar crystal pistol.

The reality was that the vastly increased scale of the Instrument of Doom didn't seem to matter all that much.

The Phase King still had plenty of strength and control left to affect a weapon of this magnitude!

"Is this truly real?" Gloriana asked as if she too found it difficult to accept the result in reality.

"You're not dreaming, honey."

The active intervention of the Phase King took a luminar crystal cannon that was already oriented towards extreme firepower and gave it wings.

As Ves and his wife studied the sensor data on the asteroids affected by the Amaranto's latest attack, they found that the results largely matched their expectations.

Much of the power of the laser beam passed right through the rock substances in the way. This was the power of phasewater being manipulated by an ancient and extremely proficient fish-whale king!

While the Phase King's powerful efforts allowed the transphasic resonance-empowered laser beam to strike the sixteenth asteroid in a row, the actual damage inflicted on all of the space rocks was not as great anymore.

Of course, this was just relatively speaking.

Assuming that the damage of the laser beam spread equally across all sixteen asteroids, which was not entirely the case in reality, then each rock absorbed damage equal to a strike with a damage index of just 125 points.

That was not only worse than the base damage output of the Instrument of Doom, but the energy was also dispersed along the entire trajectory of the laser beam when it was drilling through solid matter!

The visual inspections confirmed the math. Instead of the big and clean holes they witnessed before, the latest attack instead produced messy, blackened portions of rock that had melted rather than vaporized.

A stronger material such as second-class armor plating probably would have maintained at least some of its integrity.

"The power of the Phase King hasn't actually increased the absolute damage of the Instrument of Doom to a significant degree." Gloriana remarked. "There are situations where it is not that useful to employ transphasic attacks. If attacking the exterior of a target is just as useful as attacking the interior, then Venerable Stark will waste much less resources by employing more normal attacks."

Ves nodded in agreement. "The Instrument of Doom was never designed to be employed against cannon fodder. It is a contingency weapon that should be reserved against enemy warships or other powerful threats. That is because this weapon is our only option to damage the deeper and more vital internal systems of those kinds of threats."

This was the advantage that he was trying to create for his clan. The Instrument of Doom's greatest power was not its damage index of over 2000 or something, but it was instead its ability to spear through 15 useless asteroids before passing on at least some of its damage to the sixteenth asteroid that could stand for a more vital component!

For example, it was extremely hard for a single ranged mech to take down a fleet carrier like the Wild Torch.

The massive kilometers-long vessel was designed in a way that her exterior was made up of thick and fairly sturdy hull plating.

An incoming laser beam could damage this massive, dense and heavy exterior layer all day and still not come close enough to crippling the ship, let alone reduce her performance in any way!

The laser beam could only truly begin to degrade the Wild Torch's performance if it was able to go through the dense and thick outer layer, either by relying on brute force or by taking advantage of the power of phasewater.

Once a laser beam got through, it would probably end up in an outer compartment where relatively ordinary work was being done.

In the case of the Wild Torch, this most certainly corresponded to her carrier-related duties.

The laser beam would probably strike a few mechs, repair machines or even valuable workshop machines before running out of steam.

Though the damage inflicted by such an attack most definitely harmed the Larkinsons, the integrity of the Wild Torch was still mostly intact aside from gaining a deep hole!

A powerful ranged mech could still attack the Wild Torch a hundred times like this and still be rendered helpless as the fleet carrier merrily flew away, though looking a lot more like swiss cheese of course.

There were at least several ways to put down a capital ship for good.

One was to shoot it so many times that her entire structure started to fall apart.

This was highly inefficient but it was usually the only solution available to mechs when fighting against enemies that were much larger and more massive than themselves.

Another way was to employ a weapon that was so overwhelmingly powerful that it could efficiently cripple or blow up a vessel like the Wild Torch.

This was a solution that was usually reserved for warships because only they possessed the caliber of weapons that could unleash so much raw power.

An ace mech like the Mars also possessed the equivalent firepower of a warship, so it was within the realm of possibility for Patriarch Reginald Cross to cripple the entire expeditionary fleet if he went rogue one day!

The third way was to employ a bit more finesse and take advantage of a ridiculous blessed transphasic weapon like the Instrument of Doom.

Given the result that it had just produced, Ves quickly tried to estimate whether the Amaranto armed with this weapon was capable of crippling the Wild Torch with a single blow.

He called up the simplified design of the capital ship and turned the projected ship around a few times until he found a good angle.

"If the Amaranto can aim its Instrument of Doom at the Wild Torch from this angle, the subsequent laser beam will strike the external hull plating at a flat angle, allowing the energies to pass through while retaining as much of its damage potential as possible. It will probably punch through a couple of small outer compartments as well, but the bulkheads in the way are too thin to bleed away too much energy."

"Once the laser beam reaches the interior, it will probably pass through a lot of empty space as the hangar bays inside are largely hollow and empty. There is a lot of vertical clearance in these halls as they sometimes need to accommodate mechs or other gear that are taller than average."

"After passing through a lot of air, it will likely punch through more important compartments. These are the places where more important ship processes

take place such as recycling air to keep it breathable for humans or coordinating field operations."

"If the laser beam is able to make it this far, it will eventually hit the citadel of the Wild Torch. A citadel is basically a box within a combat vessel that acts as an inner layer of armor. The reason for its existence is because it is meant to protect the truly vital processes that are responsible for running the vessel. The citadel typically stops the vast majority of attacks that were able to penetrate the outer hull."

There were many different naval design philosophies.

Some starships did not feature any citadels. This was usually the case for cheaper and smaller civilian vessels. This also explained why they crumbled so easily when attacked by a single mech.

Other starships only possessed a rather superficial citadel. The inner layer still provided a measure of protection, but it may be the case that the ship designers cheaped out on it in favor of strengthening the exterior as much as possible.

Then there were starships where the designers did not cut any corners as was the case with a ship as good as the Wild Torch.

In this case, penetrating the citadel was considerably more difficult than overcoming the exterior hull!

It was as if the citadel inside represented the core of the capital ship while everything outside of it was just window dressing!

Though this was an oversimplified description, it was enough to illustrate the immense challenges of inflicting real damage onto such a vessel.

However, as long as a laser beam was able to pass through this difficult obstacle, it did not need much power to drastically reduce a capital ship's

performance! Even a damage index of just 0.1 was enough to kill a lot of people and destroy a lot of valuable ship parts!

For example, the laser beam could strike a power generator, causing the ship to have much less energy to spare!

The laser beam could strike one of the FTL drives, which meant that the Wild Torch was one step closer to getting stranded in the star system.

The laser beam could also knock out all sorts of other vital elements such as the CIC, the data vaults and other crucial systems.

"The Instrument of Doom is a true ship killing weapon." Ves concluded.

He never thought that any mech in the fleet other than the Mars was capable of knocking out starships with relative ease.

Ves still recognized that the Amaranto still could not come close enough to match the firepower of the Mars.

The latter possessed an even absurdly higher base power as the Cross Clan had put in a vastly greater amount of money and resources into its development.

The amplification factor of an ace pilot was at least an order of magnitude greater than that of a high-tier expert pilot!

Even so, the addition of the Phase King gave the Amaranto such an enormous boost that its attack broke past the boundaries of a high-tier expert mech!

"If my evaluation is correct... the Amaranto has gained the equivalent firepower of a quasi-ace mech." Gloriana summed up the result.

Ves peered at the numbers but also looked beyond the obvious.

"That may be true, but... the Amaranto and its pilot doesn't have the fortitude and endurance of a quasi-ace mech."

When he studied the feed that displayed the cockpit, he could clearly observe that Venerable Stark had become a lot more winded. It took a lot of willpower and concentration for her to cope with the descent of the Phase King's formidable might.

Not only that, but the Instrument of Doom had just discharged a transphasic attack of much greater consequence!

Even if the changes produced by the Phase King amounted to a much more efficient and sophisticated use of phasewater, the relatively primitive luminar crystal cannon was never designed to support so many complex and difficult operations of this nature!

Gloriana quickly became concerned about the state of the weapon. "The Instrument of Doom can't fire too many shots like this on a continuous basis. Some of its parts are already showing signs of stress. I can easily foresee that they will wear out at an accelerated rate, which means that this weapon will require time in the workshop after a battle in order to restore it to peak condition."

In other words, this powerful weapon was also finicky. Most products with high performance tended to require high maintenance, but the Instrument of Doom was especially affected by this relation!

Ves brushed this inconvenience aside. "I would rather have a disabled weapon than end up incurring a more substantial loss. This weapon will help us save the lives of many clansmen and prevent the downfall of numerous expert mechs and starships. That is why I designed this experimental weapon in the first place. Its limitations are serious, but sometimes all you need to

defeat a powerful opponent is to launch an overpowering attack at the right place at the right time."

A new era had begun for the Larkinson Clan. Ves pitied his future enemies who thought that his clan could only count on battle formations and the Mars to overcome difficult challenges.

Chapter 4403 Lmbalance Between Man And Machine

The successful trial of the Instrument of Doom presented a fundamental change in the application and use of mechs.

Of course, Ves was not naive to think he was the first mech designer to break the limit of mechs.

This was far from the first time that a mech weapon was able to burst out with power that was far in excess of its size, technical design and material composition.

Ves had read articles in the past where other, more brilliant mech designers were able to transform junk into treasure through even greater feats of brilliance!

The Age of Mechs had persisted for over four centuries and the amount of mech designers working in the industry was too many to count. There were always a handful of inspired inventors among them who had succeeded in developing groundbreaking tech.

Ves believed his work was different, though.

The reason why he thought this way was because of several reasons.

Theoretically, he could turn anything into blessed equipment. The only requirement was to match a design spirit with the right sympathetic material.

He could only work with relatively expensive phasewater for the time being, but he was hopeful that he would find a different pairing that was based upon cheaper material!

For example, if Ves was able to match Vulcan with ordinary iron, then he could easily transform any mech or product into a blessed product without paying any extra!

The overall implications of his new invention was that it enabled mechs to make leapfrog challenges!

A standard mech might gain the power to threaten an expert mech.

An expert mech might gain the power to threaten an ace mech!

It was not impossible for a bunch of mechs to defeat a formidable warship by outputting damage that was far more potent than what their technical specifications could produce!

"This technology can change the entire mech landscape!" Ves exclaimed!

He was boasting a bit. The truth was that the blessed equipment concept suffered from a massive weakness that severely constrained their mass adoption.

The additional power channeled by the Gray Lotus and the Instrument of Doom did not emerge out of nowhere.

The law of conservation of energy still remained valid as far as Ves knew.

This meant that if either of those powerful guns suddenly became a lot more powerful, then there had to be another source that paid the price!

In this case, the design spirits footed the bill for every blessed attack.

Ves understood their situation quite clearly. Most of his design spirits had grown considerably over the years, but many of them were still at the start of their journeys.

They still had a long way to go to form a Divine Core and evolve into a post-divinity entity!

From what little clues that Ves had obtained from the System, it was only when a spiritual entity became a so-called True God that they ostensibly broke away from the confines of the law of conservation of energy!

In other words, True Gods were likely capable of producing an endless amount of energy!

This was how mythical existences such as god pilots were able to materialize any material, no matter how rare, by exerting their supreme willpower.

While this likely meant that True Gods could only produce so much matter or energy at a time, this still meant that they could support the usage of many more pieces of blessed equipment!

Ves could already envision a future where elite envoys wielded terrible power.

These chosen mech pilots became strong not by virtue of their own development, but because they were chosen by a higher power to act as their representative in the cosmos!

At first, Ves felt repelled by this possible vision of the future. Mech pilots ought to rely on themselves and seek to break their limits in order to attain greater strength.

Rather than surrendering themselves to other True Gods, they should step on the path to godhood just like many other strong-willed mech pilots!

It sounded as if Ves had inadvertently created an alternate path to wielding power, one that was easier and less demanding than trying to become a god pilot.

"Maybe it is possible to pursue both paths for a time, but there is ultimately a limit to how much you can borrow from another source."

Advancing to the rank of god pilot remained the ultimate pursuit for many mech pilots, but that didn't mean that blessed equipment had no place.

Far too few mech pilots possessed all of the qualifications necessary to make it to the end.

There were pilots that had taken the wrong turn, incurred too many injuries or exhausted all of their potential.

There were also warriors who had lost their heart in battle and wanted to focus on other pursuits such as spending time with family or growing a new company.

Whatever the case, these mech pilots had a need for greater strength as well, and these were the people who he could serve with his blessed products!

"Hm, if this is the case, then I shouldn't be making this stuff for my best and brightest expert pilots." Ves murmured as he rubbed his smooth-shaven chin.

"I should be handing them out to mech pilots who I don't care about or have no hope of advancing too far such as Commander Melkor."

In this case, it was fine for Ves to hand Venerable Stark a weapon that relied on an external source to produce greater power.

The vengeful woman would leave sooner or later, so why should Ves invest too much in her personal development?

In contrast, Ves needed to be a lot more careful about granting unearned power to hopefuls such as Venerable Tusa and Venerable Joshua.

Giving them gear that caused them to rely too much on the power of a design spirit and not enough on pushing their own limits would cripple their growth in the long term!

Ves thought about all of the difficulties his expert pilots experienced during the Battle of Pima Prime and noted that each of them had stepped up when it mattered.

The data clearly supported this idea as the resonance strengths of all of the Larkinson expert pilots had jumped by a significant margin immediately afterwards.

Not only that, but his expert pilots continued to grow at a considerably faster rate than in the past, showing that they were still reaping the benefits from passing their life-and-death challenges!

Ves had thought about this issue before, but the emergence of blessed weapons caused this matter to become a lot more relevant.

"Are my expert mechs becoming too strong for their own good?" He wondered.

This was a valid question and one that could significantly impact the future of his clan.

Advanced technology tended to make mech pilots overly reliant on their machines.

This was not the most optimal outcome as the power of mechs was based on the strength of both the machine and the man.

The two needed to be within a reasonable distance in order to foster the growth and evolution of the latter.

If the machine continued to bear all of the burdens, how could the man ever get the 'exercise' he needed to grow stronger muscles?

"There is already a good example of what will happen if the man has given up on developing his own strength and foisted every responsibility on the machine. The Common Fleet Alliance is the epitome of this philosophy."

This was exactly what Ves did not want to pursue. The aim of the Mech Trade Association and anyone who supported its cause was to match technological development with human development.

According to this philosophy, Ves should seek to limit and restrain the use of incredibly powerful blessed weapons as much as possible. Their specifications were so high that they could turn many difficult battles into trivial affairs, thereby robbing many mech pilots of the opportunity to grow under pressure.

"This is also an important reason why the breakthroughs aren't as prevalent among first-class mech pilots."

The mechers as well as other first-raters enjoyed much better lives and had access to much more powerful mechs.

Though these high and mighty individuals also had their own fair share of problems, the sheer amount of conveniences they enjoyed along with the powerful tech at their disposal led to lower rates of breakthrough.

Sure, the first-raters tried to compensate for this by utilizing their formidable tech and knowledge base to stimulate their mech pilots through special training programs and so on, but there were limits to everything.

"If I'm not careful enough, my clan will be following in the same footsteps!"

This was not an outcome he desired. Perhaps he could employ his own brand of tech such as the transcendence glow to counteract this downward trend, but Ves preferred not to rely on one flawed solution to solve another flawed solution.

He shook his head. "This is way too abstract for me. I shouldn't be too high-minded about how I should utilize my work. My clan urgently needs strength."

With all kinds of powerful enemies spread across the new frontier, Ves did not feel reassured with the means he possessed at the moment. He and his clan would be a lot better off if he developed a bunch of blessed weapons that the Larkinson expert mechs could pull out in case they bumped into an overpowering opponent such as a phase whale.

Between death and stalled human development, Ves would rather choose the latter over the former any day!

Besides, Ves was never one to follow the rules. He did not take all of the existing assumptions too seriously.

"There has to be a way for mech pilots to continue their progression while also relying on the help of blessed equipment."

He recalled his design philosophy, which centered around the concept of mutual growth.

The fundamental premise of his work was that he believed that mech pilots do not have to rely on themselves to win their battles and grow stronger throughout the process. It was okay for them to partner up with their living mechs and work together for a better future.

The addition of blessed equipment did not have to sabotage human development as long as Ves found a way to incorporate his new invention in the framework of his design philosophy.

He just couldn't figure it out as of yet. He needed to think more deeply and form a proper model of a relationship between a mech, a mech pilot and a design spirit. This was a matter that he had never spent much thought on in the past.

"I can't leave it like this anymore." Ves shook his head. "If I want to advance to Senior, I need to come up with a better answer than 'I don't know' or 'forget about it'. Mech designers who are too afraid to address difficult problems do not have what it takes to realize their design philosophies."

Master Mech Designers earned a lot of admiration from Ves and other people because they truly mastered their own specialty in every possible dimension. They could provide answers to almost every problem at their level and could even begin to explore the greater mysteries that far transcended mundane reality.

Ves had a long way to go before he could decipher any of those greater truths. He first needed to resolve all of the lower-level problems, and that would inevitably take a lot of time and effort!

Ultimately, Ves gained more out of this experimental weapon project than he thought.

Though the successful realization of the blessed equipment concept did not directly progress his design philosophy, he felt more aware and certain of what he needed to do in order to take this crucial leap.

His eyes burned with ambition. "The Dullahan Project... will become even more exceptional than I originally planned."

Just as he was about to wrap up the current project and turn his attention back to his ongoing expert mech design projects, the expected call from the MTA finally arrived.

Ves had to move to a special ship which carried the Darkbreak module, which was connected to a secure MTA communication network.

Though neither Ves nor his contacts trusted it completely, it was at least a much better option than talking over the public galactic net which was as leaky as a sieve!

Chapter 4404 Gentle Reminder

Ves expected to receive a confidential call from Master Dervidian or another representative of the Transhumanist Faction.

After all, he had corresponded the most with the Transhumanists in the past few years. Much of his work regarding the transcendence glow and other spiritual projects was of paramount importance to the mechers whose goal was to enable human ascension.

However, the physical projection that showed up did not come in the form of a familiar-looking gray-haired man wearing a brightly colored tech suit over a lab coat.

Ves instead came face to face with an entirely new figure.

He quickly scanned the appearance of the new man.

At first, the projected individual did not look like a mech designer. His head was prominently bald and he wore an excellent tailored business suit.

The only unusual part about his appearance was that he wore a purple patterned cape over his shoulders.

Ves was sure that if the newcomer turned around, he would be able to see unknown heraldry on the cape.

Despite this unusual feature, the man did not exude the demeanor of an aristocrat or a priest.

Ves could clearly sense from the projected vision that he had met another Master Mech Designer, one that likely stood at the same height as Master Dervidian!

Though the new Master carried himself with the similar air of a leader within the Association, he did not show any disdain towards Ves.

It was the opposite!

The high-ranking mecher conveyed respect and appreciation through his body language and his expression.

This caused Ves to gain a better impression of the man and allowed him to relax a bit. The ensuing conversation should not be too troublesome.

The man eventually introduced himself.

"I am Master Vayro Goldstein. I am a friend of the Polymath and I manage a number of her affairs within the Survivalist Faction. I believe you should already be aware of the reason for my call."

Ves nodded without any pretension. "I do. To be honest, I was expecting a call from the Transhumanists."

"We are aware of your increasing cooperation with the Transhumanist Faction, but your most recent work is of much greater interest to us. I would like to explain more, but our current means of communication leaves much to be desired."

"I understand. What do you want to talk about then, Master?"

"We can still discuss other matters aside from going into greater detail of your latest technological accomplishment. One piece of news that I have been asked to convey is that Mr. Jovy Armalon should soon be able to contact you again."

Ves grew a little more excited at this mention. "I haven't seen or heard from my friend in a while. I have only been able to talk with him over the comm on an infrequent basis."

Master Goldstein nodded. "Mr. Armalon is a promising seed that has demonstrated both competence and a willingness to challenge the unknown in more ways than one. We have subjected him to a strict regime in order to prevent him from wasting his potential. He should be done with his current

program in the near future. If he is able to live up to our expectations, then he will be able to upgrade his status and gain considerable autonomy over his own schedule."

Though Ves was happy to hear that Jovy was doing well within the Association, it was a bit strange for a Master Mech Designer who was presumably a bigshot among the mechers to convey this news in person.

It was as absurd as employing a galactic mech councilor to deliver a parcel to a random person in the Red Ocean!

The only way Master Goldstein's actions made sense was if the Survivalists valued Ves and Jovy to a much greater extent than before!

Ves gained more confidence at the realization that his standing among the Survivalists had risen yet again.

That did not mean it was a good idea to start acting presumptuously in front of one of the direct subordinates of the Polymath, though.

He quickly reined in his messy thoughts and tried to maintain his professional demeanor.

"Thank you for informing me of Jovy's current conditions. I consider him to be a friend and I would like it if I am able to regain proper contact with him again."

Master Goldstein smiled. "That is good to hear, but let us move on to more substantive business. We have quietly observed your progress and your work since you have entered the Red Ocean. We are generally satisfied with your productivity, your diligence, your contributions and your sincerity in cooperation with our Mech Trade Association. We admire your passion towards mechs and your drive to advance your own vision of them, but we are also concerned with your more extreme tendencies."

"Mech designers such as myself are usually capable of producing many brilliant innovations by pursuing ideas that more prudent colleagues have dismissed." Ves mildly retorted.

"I do not disagree with you, but everything must have a sense of proportion. You, Mr. Larkinson, do not seem to know the meaning of the word. This has become especially obvious now that you have left the stable environment of the Davute System and have gone on expeditions that mech designers usually do not take part in, especially ones as successful and high profile as you. We have observed that there is a much higher prevalence of radical actions and decisions when you subject yourself to greater turbulence."

Well, that was what Ves pretty much figured out about himself as well.

The only difference was that Ves saw this as a positive development while Master Goldstein made it sound as if this was an expression of insanity!

Ves did not feel ashamed at his approach. He felt no need to deny or repudiate his strategy.

"Davute has provided my family and I with a comfortable living environment." He admitted. "However, I know myself well enough that I do not have the talent or personality to do my best in a quiet and stagnant locale. Perhaps I may be able to work towards Senior and Master over time by coasting along, but that has never been my end goal."

Master Goldstein grew less stern after hearing this answer. "Ambition is good. We will not fault you for your decisions as long as you are aware of the risks and have a clear purpose in mind. The fact that you have produced excellent results makes your actions more tolerable."

In other words, the Survivalists were inclined to let Ves do whatever he wanted as long as he was successful in his endeavors.

Their response would probably be a lot different if Ves badly screwed up during his adventures!

The unspoken context of Master Goldstein's message was that the Survivalists did not want him to suffer an accident.

At the very least, Ves could still make a lot of contributions to the MTA! It was intolerable for him to cut his miraculous career short before he managed to realize his design philosophy and passed on his teachings to the rest of the mech industry!

Both of them were smart people, so there was no need to discuss this kind of topic in the open.

As Ves grew older and wiser, he was beginning to resemble those old and wise statesmen to an increasing degree. Hanging around with people such as Calabast and Shederin Purnesse allowed him to acquire more and more of their tricks and depth of thinking.

Though Master Goldstein was still far above his level of cognition, Ves at least reached a level where he wouldn't embarrass himself in this sort of exchange.

The two began to talk a bit more substantively about his recent work.

Though neither Ves nor Master Goldstein could go into detail about the specific details due to the lack of trust in the confidentiality of the communication channel, they did not need to convey too many words to express their meaning.

Master Goldstein had already done his homework and was fully up to date with the research that Ves had handed over to the MTA. Sometimes the two didn't even need to open their mouths to convey a meaning to each other.

It was not a surprise that someone as old and brilliant as Master Goldstein to be able to do so, but the highly experienced mech designer was surprised that a relatively young Journeyman had reached this level so quickly.

In fact, Ves was already accustomed to communicating through non-verbal means.

He interacted with many design spirits on a regular basis. Many of them did not communicate through words but instead through emotions or more esoteric spiritual cues.

Ves had to become good at deciphering the more obscure forms of communication from inhuman design spirits such as the Titania and the Phase King!

"I am pleasantly surprised at the restraint and forethought of your attitude towards the propagation of your tech." Master Goldstein said in an appreciative tone. "You are correct to hold back and wait for our judgment. You are far from the only mech designer that has developed radical new design solutions, but the mech industry and our greater society is not always ready to adopt them. The purpose of instituting the system of mech generations is to control and regulate the pace of technological progress. Too much innovation at once is not always beneficial. In your case, it may take at least two or three mech generations before your more consequential inventions are eligible for propagation."

That did not deviate too much from Ves' own expectations.

"I can still apply my own work to my own clan or network, right?" He asked.

This was what mattered the most to Ves! His greatest motivation for coming up with inventions such as blessed weapons was to give his clan an insurmountable edge against rivals and opponents.

If Master Goldstein told him that he wasn't even allowed to equip his own clansmen with blessed weapons, then Ves would seriously question the wisdom of continuing to associate with the Survivalist Faction!

Fortunately, the man did not make it difficult for Ves.

"An innovator such as yourself is allowed to spread his work to his own organization. That is the prevailing custom within our industry." The MTA Master reiterated. "We see no reason to deviate from the rules in your case, but that only applies so long as you handle your work in a responsible manner. Try to stay within reasonable boundaries and be certain that your more explosive products will not be of any use to others if they happen to fall into the wrong hands."

Ves was already familiar with this demand. The Polymath had already warned him before.

"I have already taken the necessary precautions. I have added multiple safeguards to my latest toy so that it will never perform as well as it did in our clan."

Master Goldstein nodded in satisfaction. "You must continue to remain thorough in safeguarding your tech. It is already detrimental enough if your work falls into the hands of other human groups, but they are not significant to us. What we are truly concerned about is the possibility that advanced alien races such as the puelmers may obtain new human tech in advance."

That was indeed an extremely serious possibility.

"I heard the indigenous alien races have been making a lot of progress in closing the technological gap."

"It is true." Goldstein admitted with a frown. "Traitors among humanity have contributed much towards this unwelcome development, but the aliens have become increasingly more proactive in their attempts to steal samples of our

advanced technology so that they can study their weaknesses and deduce their working principles. The puelmer race has become particularly obsessed with mastering our high technologies. One of the purposes for contacting you is to remind you to strengthen your protection measures so that we will not find imitations of your work in alien hands one day. I can assure you that our corrective measures will be swift and fierce if it becomes clear that you have voluntarily or involuntarily colluded with aliens."

"...I will be sure to pay more attention to this possible risk."

Chapter 4405 Needing A Favor

Master Goldstein eventually ended the call.

"Mr. Jovy Armalon will likely visit you in person after he has completed his intensive program. You will be able to hold a much more thorough discussion about your work and your future once you are able to talk to him face to face. Until then, please control your enthusiasm. The more you show off your inventions, the greater the possibility of attracting alien scrutiny. Although the puelmer race primarily pays attention to first-class organizations, the aliens will notice your work sooner or later. It is best for both of us if they become aware when it is too late for them to prevent their own extinction."

That was as clear of a message as any. Ves dutifully nodded.

"Understood, Master. I do not plan to spread my latest tech too much. I only developed it with my expert mechs in mind. It is not economical to apply my new work to other mechs."

Master Goldstein looked satisfied. "There is no problem in that case. We will be in touch."

When the Darkbreak module finally became inactive again, Ves paused for a minute before silently leaving the secure communication chamber.

Upon his return trip to the Spirit of Bentheim, he thought about the possibility that aliens might be able to harness his work.

At first, he didn't even believe that such a possibility existed. Ves was a mech designer as well as a spiritual engineer. None of the major alien races seemed to have anything to do with these professions.

However, Ves could only base his judgment on the knowledge that he obtained. Who knew whether there was anything more to the indigenous aliens that the Big Two had withheld from the rest of the public.

There were plenty of brilliant aliens throughout history that had been capable of accomplishing feats that other races had never managed to replicate.

Spiritual sorcery and spiritual engineering were hardly exclusive to the human race. Back in the old galaxy, Ves encountered several pieces of evidence that numerous extinct alien races used to harness the power of spirituality in the past!

It was not crazy for him to guess that there was at least one alien race in the Red Ocean was able to tap into this power!

He recalled that not all of the major alien races that were native Red Ocean had appeared on a wider scale at this time. Their territories and strongholds were mostly located far away from the current frontlines of humanity's invasion of the dwarf galaxy.

It was conceivable that the more obscure alien civilizations would finally fight against the humans once their interests came under threat!

"I can't allow aliens to threaten my good name!"

What if the phase whales or another powerful alien race turned out to be spiritually gifted?

What if that allowed these extraordinary aliens to understand and imitate living mechs and other powerful applications?

No matter how unlikely these possibilities sounded, Ves needed to make extra certain that no dirty alien would be able to use his tech without permission!

Fortunately, it should not be difficult to maintain this guarantee. He just needed to make sure to strengthen his existing safeguards in his various products.

Due to his paranoia, he already developed a habit of 'encrypting' his spiritual engineering products. No matter whether they were literally or figuratively alive, someone who possessed the ability to perceive and interact with spiritual energy should not be able to unravel his work without triggering numerous different safeguards!

"They're not foolproof, though. Someone with sufficient ability might be able to unlock my encryption and learn valuable secrets one day."

This was especially the case when the principles of much of his work were not all that complicated.

The only tricky part that would probably stop most thieves in their tracks was that it was impossible to replicate his work in full without the ability to create new life.

The absence of people who possessed his unique combination of skills and talent should buy him enough time to work towards realizing his design philosophy.

Once he became a Master, it was no longer crucial for him to retain a monopoly on living mechs and many of his other applications.

In fact, given what Ves knew and suspected about Star Designers, it might even be beneficial to his own development if a lot of copycats followed in his footsteps!

"Well, none of this is relevant at the moment. For now, I need to step up my efforts in protecting my intellectual property."

Ves returned to his routine once he arrived at his flagship.

The results produced by the Instrument of Doom during the testing session were so shocking that Ves and Gloriana couldn't help but spend more days on analyzing the data.

They improved their understanding of blessed weapons and used what they learned to draft more blessed weapons for a number of their other expert mechs.

Ves wasn't in a hurry to develop them, though.

"The completion of the Instrument of Doom has met our most urgent demand for more firepower." He told his wife. "The addition of another blessed weapon or two won't increase our effective combat power as drastically as before."

His wife looked confused. "I thought you felt that our clan was horribly inadequate after the disappointing performance of some of our expert mechs during the Battle of Pima Prime. You wanted to address some of the shortcomings that we have identified by upgunning our champions. Why have you suddenly changed your tune?"

He changed his tune because his talk with Master Goldstein made him realize that haste might not always be a virtue!

The Master Mech Designer hailing from the Survivalist Faction explicitly told him that the indigenous alien races were actively trying to steal advanced human technologies.

Ves had taken the time to browse the galactic net for any mention of this, and he found plenty of mentions about increased alien raids!

The major alien races had grown bolder over time.

Before, most of them were reeling from the successive blows inflicted by the thunderous offensives of the Big Two.

Nowadays, the indigenous alien empires not only managed to work together and slow the bleeding, but also gained a far greater understanding of their human opponents!

The aggressive puelmers were especially keen on stealing intact samples of human high technology. There had been many more sightings of their smaller but faster raiding fleets in the border regions of the upper zones.

From the perspective of both humanity and the indigenous aliens, the relatively small but incredibly resource-rich upper zones were the only regions in the Red Ocean worth fighting for. Every lesser zone was basically a backwater at best or a wasteland as worst in their eyes.

This was because the sparser and lower-quality resources available in the middle zones and lower zones could not adequately support the buildup and upkeep of a powerful first-class force.

However, this did not mean that the puelmers or other powerful aliens avoided the lesser zones!

Cutting through a lesser zone might allow a fleet to take a shortcut from one upper zone to another upper zone.

A powerful fleet such as the remnants of the pioneering fleet led by Paerian Yorul-Tavik might be on the run and urgently needed to find safe harbor that was away from hostile first-class competitors.

Whatever the case, Ves did not want his clan to perform too ostentatiously and attract too much attention from powerful alien or human groups.

"We should go for quality instead of quantity." Ves provided his wife with an excuse. "The main downside of blessed weapons is that it relies on a limited pool of resources to fuel its power. If we want to avoid overburdening the Phase King, then we should try to adopt a more deliberate and thoughtful approach. We should also be working harder to find other sympathetic materials that can allow us to put our other design spirits to good use. It is too much of a waste to allow them to sit around and do nothing."

His wife didn't have much of an objection to his proposal.

"Hm, if this is the case, then we can also go back to spending more time on our original design projects. The Dullahan Project, the Ghost Project, the Greenaxe Project and the Bloodripper Project are already running behind schedule due to our lack of participation. The expert pilots that are waiting for us to deliver on our promises won't be pleased if they have to wait additional months to receive their much-anticipated machines."

The two therefore proceeded to put their subsequent weapon design projects on a lower priority so that they could make up for lost time in their main design projects.

Ves found it a little jarring to go from designing a crazy experimental weapon project to more elaborate and deliberate mech design projects.

He had to adapt to a different approach, timeframe and mentality, and that slowed him down at first.

This was far from his first rodeo though, so he quickly found his groove and began to make substantive progress in each of his projects.

He mostly invested his time in the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project. Both of them were innovative and possessed design aspects that Ves had never worked on before.

Ves found the Ghost Project to be a particularly interesting design challenge. It was the first expert stealth mech that he had ever worked upon.

Since no one in the Design Department possessed a considerable amount of knowledge on advanced stealth systems except for himself, Ves could not lean on his colleagues to delegate important work or rely on their expertise.

Ves had to design the fundamental elements of the Ghost Project from the ground up by himself.

This was a considerable challenge when he could not fall back on prior experience or access to existing expert stealth mechs.

To be honest, Ves felt a bit lost at first.

He possessed experience in participating in numerous different expert mech design projects.

He also possessed a formidable amount of System-granted knowledge. stealth and cloaking systems.

The problem was that Ves couldn't immediately figure out a way to merge the two so that he could form a proper mech design that harmoniously blended these two elements!

"I need to study existing designs of expert stealth mechs." Ves concluded.

That was easier said than done. The galactic net contained a lot of messy information, but the designs he stumbled upon were either incomplete, deliberately flawed or outdated by at least three mech generations.

The latter weren't actually that bad, though. Ves learned many fundamental lessons after studying the aged mech designs, but he needed to understand

how the current generation of expert stealth mechs applied some of the latest advances in this field to defeat highly effective sensor systems.

His wife noticed his struggles and offered an easy solution.

"The Hex Army should be able to provide a few designs if you need them." Gloriana offered. "Normally, the designs of stealth mechs and especially those at the expert mech level are supposed to be highly classified information, but I am certain the Hexers are willing to do us a favor. After all, we are the creators of the Valkyrie Redeemer and the Maiden of Adversity. The Hexers are eager to receive the next powerful Hexer mech design from us. Given the credibility and reputation that we have built up, the Hexers aren't afraid that you will leave your debts unpaid."

That was a deliberate image that Ves cultivated in order to attract business partners and avoid turning away customers.

The advantage of developing a good reputation was that it opened many doors that would have remained closed if he was still a nobody, or worse, a scumbag!

The disadvantage of doing this was that it took a lot of work and effort to retain his credibility!

Ves knew that if he issued this request to the Hexers, he must definitely pay back the favor one way or another!

"Let me think about it, honey."

Chapter 4406 Motivated Subordinate

Ves eventually declined to follow up on Gloriana's suggestion.

While he believed that the Hexers would definitely be willing to offer him a glimpse of their current expert mech designs, he was not sure whether it was worth the price.

It went far beyond owing a favor to the Hexers. What Ves was truly afraid of was that he would copy and take over too many of the design solutions developed by Hexers and adapted to different circumstances.

If Ves wanted to do right by the Ghost Project, then he needed to design it so that it could optimally serve its purpose in the Larkinson Clan rather than under the umbrella of an intelligence agency of the Hex Federation.

He thought it might be better if he worked on the Ghost Project from a fresh perspective that was relatively free from any existing biases or preconceived notions.

In any case, his understanding on the mechanisms of outdated expert stealth mechs already made him feel a lot more confident about designing the Ghost Project.

He just needed to figure out a way to apply the latest tech to his complicated design. In particular, he wanted to make the outer layer transphasic so that the Ghost Project could actually take a few hits and come out unscathed.

"You're making a mistake, Ves." Gloriana told him in a disappointed tone.

"You always insist on trying to reinvent the wheel in your own style. While I can respect your determination to develop an application from the ground up, you will just end up with a wheel that is inferior to the latest generation of wheels. Instead of wasting far more time than necessary in designing an expert stealth mech that is quirky at best, it is much more efficient to start from studying the best of what the Hex Federation has to offer so that you will begin at a higher starting point."

Ves sighed. "I can understand your logic, but you are leaving out a lot of variables that I find important. I won't explain it to you all, but according to my own logic, it is not a bad idea for me to forgo your offer."

"...You'll regret it, Ves."

"Let us see. I might surprise you, honey."

"Don't call me honey!"

Ves did what he said and proceeded to go his own way. As the expeditionary fleet continued to hop from star system to star system, often times staying for a time in order to explore and survey different planets and asteroids, the Larkinson Journeymen continued to become engrossed in their design work.

Both the older and the newer cohorts of Journeymen were hitting their stride.

While it became increasingly more obvious to everyone that Miles Tovar, Merrill O'Brian and Cormaunt Hempkamp weren't as productive as the ones that had been designing mechs in the Larkinson Clan for many more years, the gap wasn't insurmountably big.

Ves and the rest had already taken the differences into account and made sure to assign lighter and more manageable responsibilities to them. This quickly allowed them to find a comfortable place within the Design Department.

In fact, as Journeymen, the three were anything but fragile children who needed the help of a babysitter to do anything complicated. They were true mech designers who had already moved beyond the mortal limitations of ordinary professionals.

Miles and Merrill had both joined the Larkinson Clan when it was still a third-class organization, which meant they were already at home in the Design Department.

They only had trouble with transitioning from a subordinate assisting role to a leading contributing role. The increase in responsibilities was massive, but by working alongside more experienced mech designers such as Ketis and Gloriana, they were never left to fend for themselves.

What surprised Ves quite a bit was that Cormaunt Hempkamp adapted to his responsibilities faster by virtue of his prior work experiences.

Mr. Hempkamp not only proved to be a competent project leader, but he was also able to quickly bind the newly recruited neural interface specialists into a coordinated design team.

The newcomers were sorely needed to replace the standard neural interface models of the Larkinson Clan's existing mech models with customized versions.

Though the difficulty of most of these jobs was not that much as long as Mr. Hempkamp designed a neural interface for a base model, the amount of work that needed to be done was massive!

Ves expected the design team to start off shaky considering that each of them had only joined the Larkinson Clan only recently, but when Ves paid a visit to their design lab, he was greeted by the sight of a smooth operation.

Every assistant mech designer was diligently working on planned assignments without any fuss or confusion. Nobody looked lost and it was rare for any of the neural interface specialists to be doing any redundant work.

This was not the picture that Ves expected to see from a design team led by a Journeyman who had a history of insubordination and reckless experimentation.

"I am not incapable of learning from my mistakes." The dark-skinned mech designer told a skeptical-looking Ves. "I am cognizant of all of the chances that I have blown when I worked for previous employers. After joining your clan, I became truly taken in by the warmth and trust that I have received from you and your fellow Larkinsons. I have made the determination not to ruin my opportunity to work in the best possible place I can work with. I have even cut short my breaks and off-days in order to meet your expectations."

That caused Ves to look concerned. "Don't work too hard on my account. I know people like us can easily get pulled into our work to the point where we neglect everything else around us, but I don't want you to maintain an unsustainable schedule. You are still human, Mr. Hempkamp."

The other mech designer dismissively shook his head.

"I understand my own limits well enough, sir. I am determined to show what I can do for the clan. It helps enormously that I get to run my schedule and manage my design team exactly the way I like. The main reason I fell out with my previous employers is because they constantly hindered or interfered with my work. I have not experienced any of these grievances from you and your wife up until this point. I want to thank you for the trust you have put into me by not only meeting your expectations, but exceeding them. A part of me also wants to prove my former employers wrong for dismissing me from their companies."

Ves blinked. Was he such a great leader after all? From what it sounded like, Mr. Hempkamp sounded as if he was eager to put 120 percent of himself in his work!

After asking a few more questions, Ves became reassured by the neural interface specialist's motivation and attitude.

Of course, it was not a trivial matter to design new neural interfaces. Each new creation had to be tested out in reality, and that meant subjecting actual human mech pilots to an untested and potentially dangerous product.

Though Mr. Hempkamp promised to be careful and try his best to minimize accidents, Ves wanted to make sure that the man did not go rogue like he did in the past.

"I don't want you to stifle your creativity. I know what it is like for imaginative mech designers such as myself to be compelled to rein in our work because

of the need to abide by artificial limits. You can do anything you want as long as you abide by the ground rules that we have originally set. Actions have consequences and you will only have yourself to blame if you walk too close to the river, do you understand?"

Mr. Hempkamp nodded in understanding. "I am clear about that, sir, but..."

Ves frowned. "What is the matter, Cormaunt?"

"I have become enormously inspired by your living mechs. Ever since I joined your clan, I have been introduced to mechs that are able to think and maybe even act by themselves on an entirely different level. I can't help but develop new ideas to take advantage of these new conditions. I have been working on developing a new kind of neural interface that might make it easier for mech pilots to cooperate with living mechs."

"Can you give me any details?"

"I can, but you won't be able to understand my detailed theories without a deep foundation in neurology and man-machine interfacing technology. I can only tell you that I am doing my best to find a way to make a neural interface forge a more profound connection with the living quality of a living mech. I've become incredibly inspired by the 'design networks' that you and your wife have created, and I think it may be possible to reproduce their advantages in conventional neural interfaces."

That... indeed sounded complicated.

"Okay, then let me change my question. How much of a risk does it pose to mech pilots?"

"Well... I cannot give you an accurate estimate of that, but it should not be low." Hempkamp admitted.

Ves figured as much. He might not understand neural interface technology as well as a genuine specialist, but he still received an introduction into the field.

Every lesson and every textbook he came in touch with repeatedly emphasized that developing new neural interfaces was no different from playing with the lives of mech pilots!

A good result might give customers a slight edge in combat, but a single mistake could take away their dreams and hopes!

A neural interface developer must constantly question his work every step of the way.

Seeing that Hempkamp was ready to dive head-first into the unknown, Ves felt as if he was dealing with a potential timebomb.

There was no way a mech designer with so much passion would abandon such an interesting research project. Hempkamp would definitely work on trying to deepen the relation between living mechs and neural interfaces no matter the risk.

All Ves could do was to increase supervision and hope that Hempkamp knew how to control himself.

"When you joined our clan, you pledged an oath. The most fundamental principle that you must abide by as a member of the clan is to never do harm to your fellow brothers and sisters."

"I remember, sir. It is not my intention to put my fellow clansmen in danger. The purpose of my work is to facilitate their jobs and help them utilize their mechs to a better degree. I am trying to save their lives."

Ves observed the other man closely and came away satisfied.

As long as Hempkamp's heart was in the right place, the neural interface specialist should be able to exert enough control over himself.

"Alright. I will hold you to that." Ves replied with a smile. "I am quite interested in this potential new solution that you have mentioned. How do you expect this interaction to add anything to the piloting experience? After all, a standard neural interface can already establish a man-machine connection that runs quite deep. The mech and mech pilot are literally connected to each other."

"That is true, sir, but a normal man-machine connection is not as deep as most people think. We have enough technology to allow the integration between man and machine to go deeper, but we do not have the means to lower the risks to an acceptable degree. I believe the unique properties of living mechs can give us an alternative that enables deeper connections while also forgoing most of the dangers."

Ves looked surprised. He knew just enough about neural interfaces to know how ludicrous this statement sounded.

"How would you do that? Won't a deeper connection inevitably increase the danger to the mech pilot? How can you avoid this from happening?"

"This is where my theories get complicated. You see, if the living mech can serve as a partial stand-in for the pilot..."

Chapter 4407 Battlefield Stalker

In the end, Ves vaguely understood the gist of Mr. Hempkamp's theoretical model, but he had no idea at all how to accomplish it on a technological level.

He had no choice but to trust the optimistic neural interface specialist's plan and hope it would work out. It might take years for Hempkamp to achieve a breakthrough in his research, but once he managed to get over the most difficult threshold, the results should definitely be promising!

In contrast to Hempkamp's ambitious layout, Miles and Merrill did not embark on any wild ideas.

The main reason for that was because they were still at the earliest stage of a Journeyman Mech Designer. Although they had managed to formulate the initial forms of their design philosophies, they still had a long way to go before they could design mechs at a satisfactory level.

"Neither of us have any good design applications at the moment." Miles Tovar told Ves during a meeting. "As far as my own specialty goes, Juliet is much better at designing flight systems and integrating them into mechs. While my own focus is different, it is impossible for me to outperform a mech designer that has advanced to Journeyman a lot earlier."

Juliet not only enjoyed a considerable head start, but also possessed considerably greater talent than Miles.

If nothing out of the ordinary happened, the latter would never be able to close the gap!

Miles was clever enough to understand this reality. Perhaps a more ambitious, confident or unwilling individual would try to fight against this fate, but the former member of the Tovar Family was an Erudite rather than a Brave.

Merrill should have had a brighter future as she was younger. However, her low profile along with her lack of enterprising spirit meant that her progress shouldn't be too fast either.

As Ves kept asking questions about their ideas and ambitions, he became disappointed by the lack of energy in their replies.

"It is understandable for the two of you to take a backseat and allow our more experienced mech designers to take the lead, but don't forget that you must pay attention to your own development. I don't want to raise any useless people in the Design Department."

Miles felt the need to defend his position. "We understand that, sir. We do not intend to stay back forever. It is just that the projects we are working on are

too important to the clan. Our skills are not up to par so many of our contributions will only drag down the quality and performance of our upcoming mech designs. I intend to spend a few years polishing my skills and learning from better mech designers such as you before I am willing to take on greater responsibilities."

Ves furrowed his brows. "What about you, Merrill?"

"I intend to do the same." The woman softly replied. "My learning needs are greater than average, so I must invest much more of my time on studying textbooks. Only when I have broadened and deepened my knowledge base can I begin to operate properly."

He understood what she meant. Merrill O'Brian was the only rational mech designer in the Design Department. She possessed the rare ability to imitate other design philosophies, and she even demonstrated her progress in imitating Ves' work!

Of course, her imitation works were still too shallow to be of use to the Larkinson Clan, so she needed to invest a lot of time and effort to shore up this aspect.

In addition to realizing her advantages as a rational mech designer, Merrill also had to work on her own design philosophy.

Her focus on mechanical systems meant that she needed to spend a lot of time on studying advanced textbooks related to mechanics. On top of that, she had to design a lot of mechs with a focus on designing more efficient mechanical layouts.

Merrill would have probably been able to keep pace with the likes of Ketis or Juliet if she focused her available time and energy on just one of these pursuits.

However, the fact that she chose to do double duty meant that her progress in both pursuits would inevitably proceed at a slower pace.

If Merrill had an opportunity to advance to Senior when she became 75 years old, then now she might not be able to achieve this breakthrough until she was 125 years old or higher!

This was a massive gap in time and would most definitely cause her to fall behind the majority of her peers in the Larkinson Clan!

Ves needed to remind himself that people like Miles and Merrill weren't bad at their jobs. Their rate of progression was fairly normal within the mech industry. It wasn't always the case that those who broke through early and displayed brilliant talent were guaranteed to realize their design philosophies.

There were too many stories about tortoises outspeeding hares.

The main reason why the mech industry tended to pay more attention to hares was because they were generally more promising, but that didn't mean that other mech designers were all worthless.

Ves could only wait in the long run to see whether Miles and Merrill would be able to succeed despite their slower pace. Their lifespans were finite and they only had so many years to realize their ambitions.

"I hope the two of you will remain productive and don't neglect your assignments while you are working in the Design Department." He eventually said. "Do you have any questions or encountered any issues in your projects?"

Miles raised his hand. "Yes. I don't entirely feel comfortable working on the Ghost Project. I can understand your intention of putting me under your wing and allowing me to leverage my specialty to a mech that suits my work, but as I have mentioned earlier I do not entirely feel competent enough to undertake this responsibility."

"My wife and I believe in you." Ves told the man. "You have worked in our clan since the beginning. We know what you are capable of and we possess a good understanding of your limits. The work assignments that we have prepared for you are supposed to be difficult, but not to the point of overwhelming you. I don't intend you to play a nominal role in this design project. I expect you to provide material help in finding the right low-profile flight system and integrate it properly into our upcoming expert stealth mech."

Miles did not look confident. "Those are daunting tasks, sir. First, flight systems developed for stealth mechs and at the expert mech level no less are rare and difficult to understand. I am having a hard time communicating with the development companies that are familiar to our clan because of this reason. Second, I do not understand stealth technology well enough to understand what is needed to integrate a special flight system to a stealth mech and ensure that it will not leak out any emissions when active."

"Neither of these problems should be insurmountable to you." Ves replied. "The first issue that you have mentioned can be remedied easily enough by taking a crash course. If you can't find the necessary information in our extensive internal library, then come to me and I will obtain the necessary textbooks from an external channel. As for the second issue, there is no need for you to bear all of the burdens by yourself. I will be taking care of all of the stealth tech stuff. The main reason I want you to be involved is because you can provide material help in making it easier for the Ghost Project to remain stealthy while moving quickly."

One of the greatest challenges to designing the Ghost Project or any flight capable stealth mech for that matter was to retain its invisibility while on the move!

It was fairly easy for a stealth mech or stealth vessel to sneak up to an enemy when it was coasting along in space on a ballistic course, but the situations in reality didn't always work out that way.

There were many times where stealth mechs needed to take a turn, navigate through a winding tunnel or take a detour in order to avoid a closely monitored zone.

This was where stealth mechs tended to slip up the most!

Every mech weighed a lot of tons. In order for such a large and heavy machine to navigate properly in space, they needed to be equipped with flight systems that were powerful enough to push them in different directions.

This was not a trivial exertion!

If a single human in a mobile space suit attempted to change the course of a drifting mech by pushing against its frame, it would take a lot of time to gradually change the angle of flight of the machine!

This was obviously impractical in the field, so stealth mechs needed to exert far more power in order to maneuver in space.

That was where the dilemma came into play. Every mech designer working on a stealth mech project had to make a difficult choice.

The mech designer could opt to prioritize stealth over mobility. The stealth mechs that followed this approach were excellent at infiltration, but were too slow to make enough contributions in battle!

The reason why this was the case was because the slower stealth mechs did not have as many chances to screw up and show any imperfections while they were active. It became exponentially more difficult to hide their traces as long as they kept moving faster!

This was why there was also another category of stealth mechs that put a much greater emphasis on mobility. Such stealth mechs were much more practical in active battle situations, but their chances of infiltrating enemy positions outside of battle were too low since it was harder to blend into a calm environment.

However, stealth mechs actually didn't need to hide themselves flawlessly when they operated on an active battlefield.

No matter whether they fought in space or on land, a typical battlefield was filled with lots of messy emissions such as energy beams and jamming signals!

As long as a stealth mech did not release any strong emissions that were obviously inconsistent with all of the background energies, it could readily sneak up to an enemy mech formation unnoticed and assassinate a key machine!

Once the stealth mech had done the deed, it would probably expose its traces, but as long as it was able to maintain its stealth systems, it could quickly retreat and move to safety before its position was bombarded by a furious volley of counterattacks!

Generally, stealth mechs either leaned in one or the other direction.

There were many confident and ambitious mech designers that tried to have it both ways, but few of them truly succeeded.

Most stealth mech designs that tried to take the middle approach ended up too mediocre to outperform competing products.

Ves was not arrogant enough to believe a bunch of Journeymen could break this paradigm.

Given the needs of his clan, he had firmly decided to position the Ghost Project as a battlefield prowler.

He wanted Venerable Zimro Belson to become good at assassinating enemy expert mechs or equivalent opponents!

This was why it was crucial to ensure that the Ghost Project scored well enough in terms of mobility.

Most powerful enemies that the Ghost Project would be tasked with eliminating tended to be fast and powerful.

It would be a dream for the Ghost Project to assassinate targets such as the Tensars if it could not even close the gap!

Ves patted Miles' shoulder. "Don't give up before we have properly started. I am counting on you to do your part in turning the Ghost Project into a battlefield stalker. I am confident enough in my ability to make it stealthy enough, but I need your help in ensuring that it possesses the mobility to be at the right place at the right time."

"I will try... sir."

Chapter 4408 Gemini Family

Though Miles Tovar needed a little more handholding than Ves anticipated, it was not a big deal.

The Ghost Project gradually entered the right track as Ves and Miles regularly worked together to select and plan out the integration of numerous advanced mech systems.

The role of advanced technology was indispensable for this design project, so Ves was willing to pay a lot of money and phasewater to obtain a cutting-edge stealth system and low-profile flight system from an advanced development company.

"It is best if we purchase both of these key elements from the same developer." Miles told Ves. "That is because the developer can attune the flight system to the stealth system from the start. We will experience much greater design problems if we attempt to mix and match separate systems from different developers."

"Hm, you're right. Let us try and find the right combination from the right development company."

The problem was that there weren't many development companies that were large and capable enough to support the development of advanced stealth systems.

The market for these products was too small and limited, which meant that the price was inevitably high.

Even if the Larkinson Clan was willing to spend lavishly, Ves did not like getting ripped off, so he could only look beyond the limited offerings available in Davute.

They eventually found a relatively good combination of mech systems when they shopped around at a major development company called Arcan & Bolt.

Arcan & Bolt was a relatively major player in the tech development market and was based in the Magair Middle Zone, which was far away from Davute to avoid any possible conflicts of interest.

What Ves liked about Arcan & Bolt was that it had a lot of product lines and developed many different mech parts.

The company was not only highly professional, but also accustomed to making its products work together.

"Arcan & Bolt has a good reputation in the industry." Miles mentioned. "There has never been a case where the secrets of its stealth systems has been leaked to the enemies of a client."

"That we know of." Ves emphasized.

"That may be true, but since Arcan & Bolt deliberately markets itself as a trustworthy company, it should not be willing to risk its credibility for short-term gains."

The negotiations with Arcan & Bolt went well. The company was highly professional, so while there wasn't much room for changes, the terms were relatively fair and transparent.

Soon enough, the Larkinson Clan signed a contract where Arcan & Bolt would develop customized versions of its products for the Ghost Project.

It was crucially important for the stealth system developed for the Larkinson Clan to be unique from the ones provided to other customers of Arcan & Bolt.

If the differences between all of these products weren't too big, then figuring out how to overcome the efforts of one of them would simultaneously unravel the others as well!

The biggest downside was that Arcan & Bolt needed months of development time in order to prepare the customized products for the Ghost Project. This meant that Ves, Miles and anyone else involved in the project could not make much substantial progress.

Ves did not mind this problem as he could easily shift his attention to other design projects.

As he began to spend his time working on other upcoming mechs such as the Dullahan Project and the Eye Project, he suddenly received an interesting piece of news from Calabast.

Normally, the two held regular meetings in order for Ves to remain up to date on any major developments related to intelligence.

For Calabast to contact him out of the blue and during a time where he was in the middle of a design session no less was highly unusual!

Ves pulled himself out of his design mentality before accepting the call.

A projection of the spymaster appeared. Calabast was sitting behind her desk while Arnold rested on her lap.

The woman pampered her pet as usual by massaging his back with her hand.

"What's up, Calabast?"

"We have stumbled upon an opportunity that may be of interest to us."

Calabast answered as she immediately addressed the topic. "One of the many pioneering fleets roaming the border region has discovered a secret alien asteroid base that has apparently existed for centuries if not millennia. It is supposedly a thieves' den that has long provided safe harbor to smugglers and pirates."

Now this sounded interesting.

"What race does this pirate station belong to?" Ves asked. "Is piracy even common among the indigenous aliens. What is the fighting power of this secret stronghold?"

Calabast raised her palm to stop Ves from asking more questions. "I can't provide you with any detailed answers. The information that we have received is extremely limited. If we want to know more, then we need to join the upcoming raid on the pirate station."

Ves frowned. "It sounds like there is a greater story behind this. Please start from the beginning."

"Very well. This story started when a pioneering fleet belonging to a group called the Gemini Family somehow discovered this hidden alien asteroid base. As an old and established pirate haunt, the indigenous aliens that operated it for a long time had done an excellent job at blending it in the middle of an immense asteroid belt. We do not know how the Gemini Family succeeded in finding it when other pioneering fleets transiting through the star system presumably failed to detect any clues, but I digress. What is important is that the Geminis have found a juicy alien target that has not yet been spoiled."

This was a massive find. These days, any region of space where humans had begun to explore on a wide scale turned into a disaster region.

Entire continents became uprooted when greedy pioneers engaged in destructive mining.

A lot of primitive aliens living on life-bearing planets were wiped out in totality so that the pioneers could earn MTA merits.

With so many pioneers working to extract any possible source of easy profits from the border region, it was hard for a single cohesive alien force or stronghold to remain intact all this time!

"How the Geminis have managed to discover the alien pirate base is not important." Calabast told Ves. "What we need to think about is what the Gemini Family has done next. You see, after scouting the defenses of the alien base, the initial discoverers eventually found that their strength is not sufficient enough to defeat the defenders. The only way for them to launch a successful assault is to bring in other help. Lots of help. This is why the Geminis have discreetly contacted an unknown number of other pioneers that are close enough to take part in a combined assault."

Ves understood what was going on now. The Gemini Family wanted to swallow up the long-standing alien pirate base but didn't have the numbers to succeed.

The Geminis would have no doubt preferred to sit on the news and wait until it had grown strong enough to defeat the hidden pirate base.

However, the longer the Gemini Family refused to take action, the greater the chance that another pioneer might discover the alien asteroid base!

At that point, the Gemini Family might end up obtaining nothing as one of their rivals went ahead and launched a decisive attack!

Speed was of the essence here. The Geminis probably didn't have the time to slowly form a united coalition of different pioneering groups, so they could only contact strangers who were in the vicinity in order to quickly gather a respectable attack force.

Ves grew suspicious. "We have never had any contact with this Gemini Family as far as I'm aware of. Do we have any existing relations with this group?"

"No." Calabast replied with certainty. "The Gemini Family is a pioneering group that originally came from the galactic heartland. Once the Geminis entered the Red Ocean, they moved to the Krakatoa Middle Zone and colonized the Hoster System. The new colony is situated well away from Davute and Karlach, so it hasn't fallen into their spheres of influence."

"I see. While that sounds reassuring enough, please look into the Gemini Family further to make sure they do not have any reasons for taking us down."

"Our agents are already on it. We will be able to provide you with a more extensive intelligence report on the Gemini Family by the end of the day." Calabast promised.

"Can you tell me what the Gemini Family is like? What kind of people are we dealing with here? Are they aggressive in nature?"

This time, the spymaster hesitated. It looked as if she had difficulty in formulating her words.

Ves narrowed his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"There is one important aspect about the Gemini Family that you need to know. This ancient and traditional family maintains an unusual cultural custom that has evoked a great amount of disgust and rejection in many people."

"There are a lot of weird and eccentric groups in human space. If man-hating people like the Hexers are able to build a state, then it should be easy for all kinds of other cultures to take root."

"That is true, but this case is different from that of the Hexers. No matter what you can say about them, the Hexers at least maintain a semblance of traditional marriage norms. The Geminis on the other hand have entirely subverted it so that they can put their own notions into practice."

"Don't tease me, Calabast. Say it already. What is wrong with this bunch of people?"

The spymaster no longer dragged it out. "The Gemini Family... maintains a universal custom of marrying brothers to sisters. Every adult member of this family is married to a sibling."

"...I see what you mean."

Humanity had come a long way since the days they were hunting mammoths and gathering berries to feed their bellies.

Even back then, the ancient cavemen knew better than to marry close relatives together!

Over the ages, humanity not only exploded in population, but also became more sophisticated as a race.

The practice of incest should have long been swept into the dustbin of history!

What the Gemini Family did sounded nothing less than regression!

"I don't understand." Ves said. "How are the Geminis able to maintain this practice without degenerating into a collection of inbred idiots? Does every member of the family play along with this unnatural custom?"

"It's not as dangerous as it looks if you think about it, Ves. You see, the Gemini Family consists entirely of designer babies. Every addition to the family is planned instead of left to chance. When a mother births a pair of twins, the offspring are both designer babies formed out of a combination of genes that minimize or rule out the possibility of genetic defects. In this way, the Gemini Family has been able to survive and even thrive for many generations while remaining remarkably united."

"That... sounds absurd. Only a crazy person would come up with such a disgusting approach to family planning!"

Calabast did not look as judgmental. "Your response is normal, but it isn't necessarily warranted. After all, the traditional objection to marrying brothers to sisters is that the children and grandchildren will become physically less fit. In genetics, inbreeding problems are produced by the ailments that have formed from the expression of recessive genes. There used to be no way to prevent this from happening, but human technology has developed so much that we can precisely understand the effects of individual genes and alter them to our liking. Inbreeding is not a problem anymore."

"..."

Technically, this was true.

In an age where people like Ves could order a designer baby where a team of geneticists could precisely program a baby's eye color or cognitive talents, it was trivial to prevent adverse recessive genes from emerging!

What this meant in practice was that any siblings, not just the Geminis, could marry each other and produce offspring without any worries!

Ves began to imagine what it would be like if Gloriana and Brutus or Aurelian and Marvaine married each and started having kids.

He shuddered at the images produced by his imagination.

Biotechnology or not, the family customs of the Gemini Family was just too unnatural!

Chapter 4409 Unorthodox Family Planning

"You're not pulling another prank on me, are you?" Ves suspiciously asked.

"Please tell me that the Gemini Family doesn't exist. Please tell me that there isn't an entire group out there where brothers and sisters happily form new couples while producing twin siblings that grow up to form the next generation of couples."

Calabast chuckled as she kept stroking Arnold's back.

"I am being serious, Ves. You can look it up on the galactic net if you need confirmation. Humanity is incredibly diverse and space is big enough to offer room for all kinds of peoples and ideologies. I can tell you that the Gemini Family is not the only organization that has institutionalized inbreeding. As I have already said, technology has broken down the rationale for many taboos a long time ago. The main reason why most humans still cling on to them is because society is lagging behind."

Though her initial reaction to the Gemini Family was not that much better, her training and her experiences quickly allowed her to move past her instinctive feelings of disgust and rejection.

Ves apparently had more trouble with trying to adapt to this strange family custom.

There was still a significant difference between making it feasible for close relatives to produce viable children and turning it into an acceptable social practice.

In the end, Ves let out a deep sigh and decided to adopt a tolerant attitude towards it. He was already accustomed to doing so with loathsome groups like the Hexers or difficult personalities.

His attitude towards different cultures had always been to ignore any detrimental aspects. He would rather focus on the points that could produce a basis of cooperation.

This had always worked out well for him. Over the years, much of his success was due to how he managed to bind different individuals and groups together. From securing the loyalty of alien design spirits that had little in common with humans to obtaining the loyalty of weird and different outfits such as the Swordmaidens and the Penitent Sisters, Ves had definitely become good at forming heterogeneous relationships!

There was no reason why Ves should make an exception for the Gemini Family. Clearly it was doing well if it was powerful enough to colonize its own planet in the new frontier.

As long as Ves aside the messy cultural differences and kept his focus on economic interests, there shouldn't be a problem to find common ground with the Gemini Family.

"Do you know how many pioneers the Geminis have invited to their party?"

"No, but I do not believe there will be too many participants." Calabast replied.

"The Gemini Family cannot control the situation if there are too many strongmen in one location."

"Do you know whether the Geminis contacted us for a specific reason, or did they just send out invitations to any pioneers that are in the vicinity?"

"The Gemini Family has invited our entire alliance to take part in a raid because we are close and because we possess enough strength as we have abundantly demonstrated during the Battle of Pima Prime. The demand for strong mech forces is an important indication about the opposition that the Geminis expect to face. While we presume that the alien asteroid base is situated on the Krakatoa side of the border, don't forget that the Zelmar Upper Zone is right next door. The main areas of activity of the alien pirate forces should have been the trade routes utilized by the major alien races."

Ves sat up straighter in his chair. "Wait, what?! Are you telling me these pirates are strong enough that they dare to attack first-class alien fleets?"

"Trade ships, Ves. While we have not obtained any details about the pirate forces rooted in this asteroid base, there is still an enormous difference between attacking a cargo ship and attacking a military warship or equivalent vessel. Besides, the division between classes is an artificial human construct. The indigenous aliens aren't as rigid so it is not unusual for second-class ships to mix together with first-class ships."

That did not reassure Ves so much.

"I hope that the Gemini Family and whoever else is willing to take part in this operation will first try to scout and determine the actual strength of these alien pirate forces. I may be reckless at times, but even I know better than to launch a blind raid on an enemy stronghold that has a history of challenging strong opponents!"

"You can ask all of those questions to the Geminis if our alliance agrees to take part in this operation. They would not have invited us to join the raid or even think about attacking the asteroid base themselves if the alien opposition

is too insurmountable. From what we can gather, the alien warships and defenses may be strong enough to require the intervention of ace mechs, but it shouldn't require too many of them. It is important to note that the Gemini Family is also capable of fielding ace mechs."

"The Geminis have multiple ace pilots?"

Calabast grinned. "They do. The Gemini Saints are one of the most remarkable pairs of ace pilots in human space."

Ves already had a bad feeling about this. "You mean..."

"Saint Sandro Gemini is the twin brother of Saint Kaia Gemini.

Simultaneously, Saint Sandro is also married to Saint Kaia. Both of them have produced multiple pairs of twins who have subsequently married each other and produced children themselves. The Gemini Saints are currently great-grandparents at this time. Imagine the amount of twin couples that they have spawned over their 150 years of life."

Calabast spoke those words as if she took pleasure in inducing discomfort in Ves.

To be honest, Ves almost felt sick after hearing how extensively the Gemini Family practiced its 'unorthodox' style of family planning.

He couldn't imagine what it would be like to study the Gemini family tree!

"At least they don't have a habit of marrying their parents to their children or something... right?"

"You don't have to worry about that particular cultural custom." The spymaster reassured him. "The Geminis care about families more than most. They would never distort marriage to such a degree. It goes against their ideology."

That sounded extremely weird considering that the Geminis have no problem turning twin siblings into married couples, but oh well.

Ves tried to do his best to push all of this strange but ultimately not so relevant marriage customs aside and focused on more important information.

"If the Gemini Family has two ace mechs at its disposal, will both of them be deployed in battle?"

"That is likely the case." Calabast said. "We have collected enough intelligence to now that the Gemini pioneering fleet is accompanied by the both of Gemini Saints. In fact, Saint Sandra Gemini and Saint Kaia Gemini are never too far apart. They have grown up together from the moment their embryos have been planted in the womb of their mother and they fought every battle as a Destiny Team."

"Destiny Team?" Ves questioned as he sensed an unusual meaning in this phrase.

"That is what they call the rare but incredibly symbolic pairing between a twin brother and sister that have both become mech pilots. This is quite a rare occurrence within the Gemini Family as the chances of both twins developing the right genetic aptitudes are fairly small."

It was like trying to win the lottery twice. Winning once was already remarkable enough, but winning it again was a lot more improbable!

While the Gemini Family might have tried their best to treat their twins as equally as possible, there were so many variables that determined the development of genetic aptitudes that even identical twins were not guaranteed to become potentates at the same time!

"I take it that there aren't a lot of Destiny Couples within the Gemini Family."

Calabast nodded. "That is correct, but each one is precious beyond belief. They enjoy a high status among the Geminis and they are known to be a lot more effective in battle. Each Destiny Couple has developed excellent teamwork and can cover each other in a battle to a near-perfect degree.

Compared to the Tensars that we fought against in the previous battle, the teamwork that the Destiny Couples are capable of are on another level."

It was not difficult for Ves to believe in this claim. He could not imagine how close an emotional and maybe spiritual bond these twin pairings had developed after living intimately alongside each other for so many years.

"What about the Gemini Saints?"

"They are the apex of what Destiny Couples can produce." The leader of the Black Cats said. "Saint Sandro and Saint Kaia have fought together in numerous battles over the past century. They not only managed to survive these difficulties together, but advanced to the rank of expert pilot and ace pilot in lockstep. Their story is quite remarkable and makes for good reading material so long as you can overcome the fact that they are an incestuous couple."

"I am sure their biography has become a bestseller." Ves mildly said.

"That's an understatement."

He had actually grown extremely interested in meeting the Gemini Family and observing their couples up close. His intuition told him that their unorthodox family planning may have produced wonderful effects that were deeper and more profound than was visible on the surface.

After a bit of thought, he decided that it might be worthwhile to explore this invitation.

He clasped his fingers together. "Let me just say that I am open to cooperating with the Geminis. I'm not sure whether the Glory Seekers are willing to go along with this surprise offer, but I bet the Cross Clan will strongly be in favor of taking part in this operation. Patriarch Reginald Cross is spoiling for another fight and it will be extremely interesting for him to fight alongside several other friendly ace mechs."

"Our clan is still waiting for a response from our allies, but I do not think it will be long before we can issue a reply to the Gemini Family. We currently do not have enough details to determine whether it is safe enough for us to attack the alien asteroid base, so the Geminis must provide us with more information before we can think about committing to this attack. If the Geminis are smart enough, they will not leave us in suspension."

The deployment of not just one, but multiple pioneering fleets protected by ace mechs was a massive endeavor.

An enormous fight would ensue at an intensity that might exceed that of the Battle of Pima Prime!

While the amount of mechs involved may be a lot less, the weight of firepower and the amount of heavy combat assets may be far greater!

In the face of a fight between ace mechs and alien warships, ordinary mechs would probably be relegated to cannon fodder.

While mechs could still play a lot of useful roles in a possible assault against an alien asteroid base, quantity alone was not sufficient to carry a fight.

Only warships or assets equivalent to them could play the leading role in such an engagement.

If the Larkinson Clan received this offer a month before, then Ves would not have been inclined to accept it. The lack of heavy firepower was a severe shortcoming and battle formations alone were not enough to deal against warships, especially when distance was a big issue.

Fortunately, his clan had received an upgrade.

"The Instrument of Doom should come in handy." Ves grinned.

It was the perfect siege weapon. It had been able to penetrate through sixteen relatively small asteroids in a row during its initial test.

Whatever asteroid base the alien pirates were hiding in was probably a lot bigger and denser. It would most definitely be reinforced by all kinds of thick alloy plating and may even be covered by transphasic energy shields or similar.

Even so, as long as the Instrument of Doom struck hard and often enough, any formidable defensive measures would crumble against the Phase King's might!

Chapter 4410 Power Dynamics

The leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance held a short meeting in order to discuss the matter of responding to the Gemini Family's invitation.

Ves, Marshal Ariadne Wodin and Master Benedict Cortez held a quick virtual meeting to discuss their stance on the matter.

Properly speaking, Patriarch Reginald Cross should be the person attending this meeting on behalf of his clan, but the ace pilot had become more aloof towards any chores he considered mundane.

He found it much better and more convenient to push forth a proper thinker such as Master Benedict to handle the more administrative and political affairs.

That was probably one of the smarter decisions that Patriarch Reginald had made.

The three leaders immediately went to business as soon as they entered the virtual conference room.

Each of them already spent a bit of time on learning more about the Gemini Family. Their understanding of this successful pioneering group might not be as thorough as they liked, but they learned enough to make a preliminary judgment.

"The offer should be sincere." Master Benedict began. "We judge that this offer is unlikely to be a trap, simply because the Gemini Saints would never allow for such duplicity. All of the sources that we have references so far have painted them in an upright and honorable light. The Gemini Family has also maintained a relatively clean track record. Their greatest strength is their focus towards family, though some might argue that it is their greatest weakness as well."

That was an understatement.

The Gemini Family resembled a warped version of the Larkinson Clan. Ves saw many parallels of his own clan in that of this twisted family.

Both groups were quirky and eccentric.

Both groups preferred to remain independent.

Both groups tried to uphold a good reputation.

Both groups valued honor and integrity.

Both groups put a great emphasis on developing their mech pilots.

Yet for all of their similarities, they were nothing alike in many other matters.

For example, the Larkinson Clan was primarily oriented towards mech design and selling mechs.

The Gemini Family followed a more traditional route and invested much of its resources into building up a planetary colony, though it also happened to do well in the biotech industry.

It did not surprise anyone that the Gemini Family actually ran a highly successful human genetics company.

Although the Gemini Family was ultimately not the same as the Larkinson Family, Ves could still take advantage of the many similarities to read the other pioneering group.

He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "It is clear that the Gemini Family really wants to break open and plunder the alien asteroid base. There has to be enough spoils in there to make it worthwhile to assault defenses that are strong enough to be able to repel two ace mechs. While I am sure that the Geminis will attempt to form a profit-sharing agreement with the pioneering groups that have accepted their invitation, I can't help but feel there may be a tricky angle to this operation."

Marshal Ariadne Wodin did not view the Gemini Family in a good light. "I also have my suspicions about the Geminis. They are unlikely to plot against us, but they will not have as much scruples in trying to exploit us. Given the opposition that we might face, there is a great chance that we will suffer considerably more damage than we can make up with our share of spoils. We need to ask for assurances that we will eventually be better off than we were before, and even then there is still a chance that the Geminis may have hidden a greater secret."

Though the leader of the Glory Seekers utilized reasonable words, Ves could tell that the woman did not bother to hide her inward disgust at the Gemini Family.

Hexers and Geminis possessed radically different views about family. The two groups would probably not be able to get along well if they were put together in the same room!

Fortunately, a bit of the Larkinson Clan had rubbed off on the Glory Seekers, so Marshal Ariadne was able to exert enough control over herself to be open to the idea of cooperation.

Clinging too hard to morality and ideology had a tendency to get people killed in a place like the Red Ocean.

Only power and interests could help the pioneers survive this unforgiving early period.

"I think it is best to remind ourselves that we are not obliged to help the Gemini Family raid this supposed alien pirate den." Master Benedict astutely said. "There are far more opportunities to plunder alien riches in other star systems and regions, and we don't necessarily have to share in order to do so. Working together alongside powerful strangers introduces many complications that we may not be ready to handle."

Ves looked intrigued. "Does that mean your Cross Clan is disinclined to explore the Gemini Family's offer?"

The Master Mech Designer looked resigned. "If I had a choice, then I would have voted to stay our course and follow our original plan. Patriarch Reginald has other ideas."

Since Patriarch Reginald possessed the biggest fist in the Golden Skull Alliance, it was extremely difficult for anyone to go against his wishes!

Everyone in the virtual conference room exchanged knowing glances.

They all knew that if the only ace pilot of the expeditionary fleet was dead set on fighting alongside the Gemini Saints, there was little they could do to change his course.

It was best if the Golden Skull Alliance could obtain additional concessions from the Gemini Family in exchange for providing muscle for this major operation.

"To be honest, I am not that opposed to teaming up with the Geminis, but it has to be worth it." Ves decisively said. "I have many concerns about this raid,

one of which is how every participant is supposed to split the spoils. Although I don't think we may get betrayed, I am acutely aware that if we have won the battle, it will be relatively easier for other participating pioneering groups to bully us into accepting the less desirable spoils. If we want to ensure that we won't suffer any setbacks during this crucial time, then we better hope that our possible teammates will be manageable."

Marshal Ariadne snorted. "Hope is fleeting when you consider the Gemini Family has two ace mechs at its disposal. Not only that, but the Gemini Saints have literally grown up and become stronger together. Their teamwork should be so impeccably good that their synergy must have reached an unspeakable height. Fighting against the two of them may have the same effect as fighting against three more ordinary ace mechs. This is most definitely their greatest source of leverage and their primary means to keep the rest of us in line."

The power dynamic of the coalition that the Gemini Family attempted to build was an important source of uncertainty.

The Golden Skull Alliance had little idea on what sort of combined force the Geminis wanted to gather for their upcoming operation.

All sorts of mixed groups could gather together in a single place. The Geminis would have their hands full in trying to prevent quarrels and make sure that everyone performed earnestly on the battlefield.

Ves did not really look forward to combining forces with not so trustworthy pioneering groups.

At least the parties he was familiar with such as the Cross Clan and the Hexers had proven themselves worthy of trust after fighting alongside his clan during many difficult battles. The bond they forged during these trying times went beyond transactions and moved into genuine friendship territory.

There was no way to forge anything close to such an intimate bond after meeting a bunch of strangers for the first time.

It was already a certainty that the other invited pioneers would bring their own ace pilots as well, or else they simply wouldn't be worth much in an offensive operation of this scope.

The three leaders continued to exchange their thoughts and explore each other's willingness to go along with the Gemini Family.

"I'm open to participating in it as long as the price is right." Ves announced.

Marshal Ariadne Wodin sighed. "Our Glory Seekers are not greedy for alien treasures, but we will accompany you and Madame Gloriana everywhere you go. If you believe this operation is of benefit to you, then we will be there to protect you against the dangers that your own clansmen cannot handle themselves."

As for Master Benedict, his answer had already been set before this meeting had even started.

"Patriarch Reginald is not an ace pilot that is content with hiding his edge. He thinks that long-term stagnancy will only dull it instead. As long as the Gemini Family's operation is not a trap or a deliberate attempt to damage our interests, Reginald will not want to miss the opportunity to fight alongside his peers."

Now that they set the stance of the Golden Skull Alliance, Ves pulled out of the virtual setting and transmitted a message to Minister Shederin Purnesse to proceed with opening up a dialogue with the Gemini Family.

Jobs like these were best left to the professionals and Shederin Purnesse was by far the most qualified diplomat in the entire Golden Skull Alliance.

It did not surprise Ves that the talks proceeded at a rapid pace. Minister Shederin apparently only needed less than two hours to form a preliminary agreement with his Gemini counterpart.

As Ves puzzled over the design of the Dullahan Project, he was interrupted by another priority call.

"So what do you have, Shederin?"

"The Gemini Family has been fairly accommodating to our needs." Shederin immediately reported. "While we have yet to obtain too many details about the target the Geminis intend to hit, they have been much more forthcoming about providing the assurances that we have requested."

That sounded hopeful. Ves looked intrigued. "You've talked with the Geminis for a while. What is your overall impression of them? What is their attitude towards us? Do they see us as expendable mercenaries or do they value our strength?"

These were difficult questions to answer given that Minister Shederin only established limited contact with the Gemini Family. The older man had to take a moment to collect his thoughts.

"I cannot say this with any certainty, but my impression of the other party is that we may be able to play an important part in their battle plan. The discussion we held leads me to believe that the Geminis have studied our public battle footage extensively and have taken notice of the lethality of our battle formations."

It did not take much guessing what the Geminis wanted from the Larkinson Clan.

"They want us to employ our infamous death battle formations to bypass the defenses of a heavily fortified asteroid base and snuff out all alien life huddling inside, is that correct?"

"That is my judgment as well, sir. They also wish to borrow the firepower of an incredibly destructive ace hybrid mech in the form of the Mars. The Gemini Family has already confirmed to us that the alien pirate base is home to many warships, although most of them are fairly small and not as intimidating as they sound. The Mars with its ARCEUS System is well suited to cripple or break open the defenses of the weaker warships in quick succession."

This was exactly the kind of stage where the Mars could perform at its peak. The ace hybrid mech possessed the firepower to pummel warships and the mobility to take advantage of the cover of nearby asteroids.

"Do the alien defenders also make use of small craft that are more appropriate for ordinary mechs to fight against?" Ves asked.

"That depends on the composition of alien races and groups." Shederin replied. "There are aliens that make use of them, and they are likely more prevalent among pirate fleets due to their lower costs and logistical requirements. Our mechs will have plenty to do if we decide to take part in this operation."

Ves had always been curious to see how his mechs fared against alien small craft. Such a confrontation would represent a true clash of civilizations!