

## Mech 4641

### Chapter 4641 Antazella De Osiris

Around 35 hours after Ves contacted Master Goldstein, the latter's fleet finally arrived in the Ramage Repulsor System.

A small MTA frigate rapidly reached the brown dwarf star system first with the help of an advanced superdrive.

Once the MTA frigate quickly advanced towards the inner system and stopped at a modest distance away from the remnant alien battleship, the vessel quickly generated a portal with the help of another module.

The Spirit of Bentheim happened to be in the same neighborhood when this process took place.

This granted Ves a much closer look to the process of portal generation than usual.

Through his recently acquired phasewater affinity, he could feel that the tech was definitely dependent on the versatile substance to generate its characteristic portals!

Ves did not possess the ability to figure out the actual principles of mechanisms behind these incredibly useful portals.

The utility, speed and convenience of portal jump technology was unmatched.

Any decent scout vessel could call in a huge amount of reinforcements under almost any circumstances. This made it much harder to stop raids or assaults across a vast expanse of territory!

Any power that did not master portal jump technology would become so outmatched that its defeat should not be in question!

The fact that the native alien races managed to slow down the Big Two's invasion of the Red Ocean showed that the locals must have developed their own version of this tech.

In fact, it was highly likely that the native aliens invented this tech first!

It was rather odd that the puelmers and other alien races did not make use of portal jumps themselves, but there could be many possible explanations why this was the case.

The aliens may have invented the tech, but lacked the resources to develop practical and reasonably affordable products.

It might also be that the aliens were missing auxiliary tech and other knowledge that were needed to make the tech more stable and workable.

One of the acquired strengths of the human race was that it had grown so numerous that its scientific community was incredibly vast.

Humanity's accumulation of science and technology became so humongous that it could easily adapt and improve any alien tech it managed to reverse engineer!

From FTL drives to transphasic armor systems, much of humanity's tech was built by combining alien work with human ingenuity.

"Come to think of it, we humans are remarkably similar to puelmers." Ves idly remarked.

Both races developed the reputation for being obsessed with technology.

They both had a tendency to steal the tech of other alien races but also focus a lot on original research.

However, there were still a lot of crucial differences between the two. The puelmers did not possess a wide range of emotions and possessed a lot less creativity on average.

These shortcomings most likely prevented the puelmers from exerting more technological dominance to the other inhabitants of the Red Ocean.

Ultimately, the puelmers failed to rise above the competition and could only begrudgingly live alongside other alien races in a permanent state of tension.

This was much different from the human race, which managed to improve its tech so quickly that it managed to conquer half of the Milky Way!

Of course, the Five Scrolls Compact undoubtedly played a part in this rapid progress as well, but that didn't change the fact that assimilating and improving different technologies was a winning formula.

"The MTA hoards a lot of technology." Ves reminded himself.

As a number of advanced warships passed through the portal, he thought about the mountains of alien and human tech that the MTA stored in its vast libraries.

Ves hungered to gain access to all of that knowledge!

He might not be obsessed with theories as the Polymath, but he deeply desired to gain access to new and advanced tech in order to push his mech designs to the next level!

By the time the largest and most formidable MTA warship emerged from the portal, Ves already created a small wish list in his mind. Perhaps he might have an opportunity to ask Master Goldstein for access to specific research in his upcoming conversation.

"Sir? The Antazella de Osiris, the flagship of the 1006th Dominion Fleet of the MTA, has just hailed us. The MTA is requesting us to back off from the alien battleship by at least 500 kilometers. You will also be brought to the research battlecarrier in three minutes in order to fulfill your appointment with Master Vayro Goldstein."

"Understood." Ves nodded. "Tell the mechers that I am ready and fully prepared."

He had moved out of his Unending Regalia and donned an understated but high-quality uniform instead.

It was not appropriate to meet with an important mecher while being armed for combat. Besides, there was no way the Antazella de Osiris would ever pose a hazard to his life while he visited the ship.

Ves spent the remaining time on studying the vessels that Master Goldstein brought over. Most of them consisted of frigates and destroyers that were already in the process of setting up special deployable space structures that would soon turn the area into a temporary science facility.

The Antazella de Osiris was a so-called research battlecarrier.

Just like the Paracelsus Optimus, the Antazella was a combination between a battleship, a fleet carrier and a research vessel.

The biggest differences between the two ships was that the Antazella was only 5.3 kilometers long and possessed a copper-colored hull that was embellished with red markings.

As Ves continued to pick out more details about the design of the Antazella de Osiris, he suddenly experienced the familiar sensations of teleportation acting on his body.

Surprisingly enough, the process became a lot slower and more cumbersome this time.

It was as if the Antazella's teleportation module needed to put a lot more effort into teleporting his body!

Ves knew exactly why this was the case. His recent physiological transformation had caused him to diverge so much from baseline humans that he was more like an alien who just happened to wear a human disguise.

Oh well.

After a few more torturous seconds, the teleporter finally plucked him out of the Spirit of Bentheim and deposited him inside the recently arrived MTA research battlecarrier.

"Welcome aboard the Antazella de Osiris, Mr. Larkinson." An MTA officer greeted him. "We apologize for the technical difficulties that you may have experienced. Our teleportation device has not accounted for the increased mass and exotic substances that you carry in your body. I suggest you notify us of any major alterations to your body in the future so that we can prevent accidents from occurring."

Ves politely nodded back. "I will be sure to take that into account."

Another mecher soon led him out of the teleportation chamber and led him through numerous corridors and an elevator before arriving before a mech workshop.

After undergoing a brief and completely unnecessary security check, Ves was finally allowed to head inside.

He briefly paused in order to admire the incomplete first-class multipurpose mech that was being worked upon.

Ves could immediately tell that it was not a new mech, but rather an existing one that showed signs of regular use for at least two years.

Interestingly enough, the first-class mech's rest form did not resemble that of a humanoid, but rather looked like a flower.

This was a classic shape of an advanced support mech. Numerous visible modules such as shield generators, energy transmitters, ECM modules and more all reinforced this impression.

Although the direct combat capabilities of this support-oriented mech should not be weak, its ability to act as a force multiplier ought to be extremely formidable!

"Mr. Larkinson." A voice called out. "Come closer. There is much to discuss."

As Ves resumed walking, he continued to study the support mech as he just couldn't resist the opportunity to figure out the concept behind its design.

As a Master Mech Designer, Vayro Goldstein clearly understood the machine's allure to people like Ves. The bald man smirked and waved his free arm at the exposed mech frame.

"Before we address the agenda for the day, what do you think of my work?"

"Is this mech a product of your design?" Ves looked mildly surprised. He thought that it was just a standard-issue MTA mech. "I do not dare to say that I understood how all of it works, but from what I can see... just a single one of these machines should be able to enhance the performance of an entire mech company to a significant degree. Even a 5 percent boost makes it worthwhile to replace another generic combat mech with this support machine. It would be even better if it can amplify the performance of surrounding mechs even more."

Master Goldstein put down the part he was holding and chuckled at Ves. "This mech is not as strong as you think. Its support capabilities are most definitely potent by your standards, but at our level... it can only add more icing on the cake. Are you still impressed, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves furrowed his brows and looked up at the flower-shaped mech again. He could see why Goldstein spoke modestly. The various modules responsible

for assisting other first-class multipurpose mech did not appear to be all that strong.

That didn't mean he was convinced that it was weak, though.

No MTA mech was weak, especially when they were designed by an MTA Master. People like Master Goldstein had more pride than most of their peers due to having access to the best tech and resources.

Ves tried to peer beyond the surface and studied the spiritual foundation of the machine.

Though the spiritual foundation of the flower mech was not alive, it was remarkably uniform and coherent, which was a clear sign that it was a solo project.

Without any other mech designers contaminating its design, the support mech encapsulated Master Goldstein's specialty to the strongest and purest degree.

It became very clear what the support mech was designed to do now that Ves had taken a look at the heart of the machine.

"This first-class multipurpose mech is designed to offer support at extreme distances on the battlefield." Ves ultimately answered. "It takes existing support functions and amplifies their effective ranges so that they can provide beleaguered mechs with an emergency energy shield or top off the energy reserves of another machine. These are all standard functions to the MTA, but when they can take effect from one side to another side of the battlefield, the utility and value of this machine has multiplied by at least an order of magnitude!"

This was a fantastic rescue mech! It did not need to activate its functions all of the time. It was better to keep it in reserve and only put it into action when important friendly mechs were about to fall.

It could also assist in the protection and safe retrieval of ejected cockpits.

Ves was feeling incredibly inspired by now. Though he likely wasn't able to design a reasonable imitation of this support mech, he might be able to cook up a mech design that supported friendly units in his own unique ways!

"My design philosophy is centered around providing wide area support."

Master Goldstein clarified. "I am most known for designing support mechs that can assist hundreds if not thousands of mechs at a time. This particular design is a deviation from my typical work, but that makes it more worthwhile to explore. As mech designers, we should never stop experimenting and innovating. I consider this work to be a partial failure, but that does not mean I regret working on it. I have verified many theories and determined a new research direction that should provide me with significant gains."

The process sounded highly familiar to Ves as he worked in a similar fashion. He explored so many ideas that it was hard to justify his scatterbrained approach, but that was just who he was. He would not be the mech designer he was today if he did not give in to his curiosity.

"That is interesting, Master, but aren't we supposed to talk about compensation and awards?"

Goldstein raised his eyebrow. "Impatient, are you? Let us conclude this matter. I have already calculated your contributions during your journey to this mech workshop. My judgment will need to be approved by other authorities, but once they concur with my assessment, our Association will award your Golden Skull Alliance with a total of 1,343,400,312 MTA merits."

"...Pardon me. I didn't quite catch that. Could you repeat the sum again?"

#### **Chapter 4642 Many Contributions**

"Do not fool around, Mr. Larkinson. You have heard what I have said. Your alliance is entitled to an award that amounts to over 1.3 billion MTA merits in



total. How you wish to divide these merits among your partners and your subordinates is up to your group to decide. We do not wish to deprive you of those choices."

Ves wanted to rub his ears to figure out if he heard correctly.

"I apologize, Master Goldstein. It is not every day you get over a billion MTA merits dumped onto your lap." He said. "I mean, I am just a second-class pioneer. Big scores like this are unheard of among my kind."

"It is exactly because it is exceedingly rare for second-class pioneers such as yourself to defeat not just one, but two fully-fledged alien battleships that we are being generous."

"You will need to explain that to me." Ves responded.

Master Goldstein led Ves to a nearby worktable where they could sit. The mecher activated a projection which showed an itemization list that briefly summed up the specific contributions that produced the humongous sum.

"As you can see, the MTA merits that your alliance has earned in recent months can roughly be divided into several major categories. In the Boryan System, you and numerous other second-class pioneers have joined forces to destroy a hidden alien asteroid base, defeated hundreds of alien warships including a 3.2 kilometer-wide orven battleship, discovered and slain an aberrant unclean whale and reduced the sphere of influence of the 'Red Cabal'."

The Battle of the Boryan Belt was already a matter of ancient history to Ves, but that did not mean it was a trivial matter.

Not only did the Golden Skull Alliance along with the rest of the temporary coalition take on powerful alien warships, they even dealt with a real phase whale!

Over 99 percent of all pioneers had never come close to achieving these feats, let alone both of them in the same battle!

Though the temporary coalition managed to defeat a lot of powerful enemies, some of whom were connected to a powerful and increasingly more relevant hostile multi-species alliance, the amount of strategic gains that the participants ultimately surrendered to the Mech Trade Association was not that great.

The biggest variable was the death of the unclean whale. If the rare and special cannibalistic phase whale could be captured alive, then his value to the mechers would easily be at least 10 times greater!

Ves did not regret the decision to kill the tentacled whale. The recent encounter against the alien phase lord known as the Trampler of Stars had given him an even greater vindication of this decision.

Phase lords came about due to other native alien races attempting to imitate the extraordinary physiques of highly developed phase whales.

If a powerhouse like the Trampler of Stars was merely an imitation of the real product, then a true phase whale would definitely be able to exert more power!

Who knew how much strength the unclean whale could regain once he had time to recover from his lengthy hibernation.

Though Ves still winced when he thought of how many MTA merits he let go due to this difficult decision, he did not regret this action.

It was a pity that the amount of MTA merits awarded by the Association ultimately became limited.

What was worse was that the MTA merits also had to be split six ways as other parties such as the Gemini Family and the Lehrer Foundation also earned their rightful shares.

In the end, the Golden Skull Alliance ultimately earned only a bit more than 100 million MTA merits out of this adventure, which was quite respectable but not commensurate to the incredible risks and dangers of this operation.

"As you can see, your alliance's contributions in SDDD-4343X-AER-232666410, or Ramage Repulsor, are substantially greater. There are several reasons why we have awarded you over 1 billion MTA merits for your actions in this star system."

The Master projected a small image of both the orven battleship found in the Boryan System and the hybrid alien battleship found in the Ramage Repulsor System.

"The orven-built battleship called the V'gahnt-Zezne may be larger and more massive, but her research value is limited. Her hull is old and much of her tech is at least several generations behind current native alien standards. We have already captured many ships that feature similar outdated tech, so one more ship does not add much value, especially when many important sections have been destroyed or cut away."

The Master gestured at the intact rear half of the latest battleship defeated by the Golden Skull Alliance.

"Although the battleship the aliens call the 'Fractured House of the Collapsing Star' is only partially intact, the internal state and condition of her rear half is in excellent condition. The lack of internal sabotage is particularly notable, as is the preservation of almost all of her surviving crew members. The latter is immensely useful to us as we have the technology to extract many of the

memories of many different alien species, including the nunsers and the puelmers who comprise the majority of the ship crew."

The death energy battle formations served as a near-perfect ship-killing solution. The unprepared and unknowing alien crew members had no idea what was coming and could not even deploy any countermeasures, if they even existed at all. Tens of thousands of carefully selected alien elite officers and navel ratings had lost all of their consciousness and resistance, leaving their brains or closest alien equivalents ripe for the picking!

This was a fantastic intelligence gift!

"I take it that all of the new tech is of great interest as well." Ves remarked.

"Indeed." Master Goldstein smiled. "Unlike the typical armed alien warships that our own forces regularly encounter at the frontlines, the Fractured House of the Collapsing Star is a testbed of early nextgen technologies. She can be regarded as a prototype warship that serves to prove a new concept that tries to fuse the best technologies of every race into a single large platform. What is interesting is not that the battleship is merely made up of different puzzle pieces contributed by different races, but that we have found signs of cross-contamination."

"Cross-contamination?"

Goldstein's expression turned serious. "We have already discovered that the native alien races have begun to pool their R&D efforts. Normally, the aliens are accustomed to guarding and isolating their competitive advantages in different branches of technology as much as possible. This leads to circumstances where the orven race excel in shield generators, the nunsers are known for mass producing the largest warships while the puelmers have built up the broadest tech base. For many eons, these races have maintained

their advantage despite the natural diffusion of their older technological advances."

"I take it that the battleship that we have just captured is different."

"Correct. This is the first time we have obtained a large-scale alien craft that is filled with technological systems that are predominantly derived from the tech bases of numerous alien races, but also feature updates that originate from other alien races. For example, the orven shield generators found on the Fractured House of the Collapsing Star perform at least 7 percent better than the equivalents we have found on other modern orven battleships. This is because puelmer development teams have selectively upgraded the shield generators with their own technological solutions."

In other words, the aliens were beginning to take advantage of the power of teamwork!

"I see." Ves spoke. "Studying all of the changes made to standard alien technology can give you a snapshot to how well the different aliens are able to work together at this early stage. You can also track their progress and estimate how long it will take for the aliens to start producing truly powerful hybrid alien warships."

"The new tech itself is also of interest to us." Master Goldstein added. "Our forces have already collected sufficient samples of modern alien tech to reverse engineer and improve upon them, but it is still useful for us to obtain samples that have already been upgraded through native cross-contamination. The solutions applied by the puelmers and other natives may be inferior to ours, but they can occasionally provide us with inspiration as they occasionally address problems from different angles."

Hearing this made Ves feel a bit of regret for giving up such a substantial research and intelligence mine. If he was able to keep the Fractured House of

the Collapsing Star for himself, he could delve into it for many years and constantly learn new and interesting high technologies.

However, it was impossible for Ves to complete such a massive R&D venture alone. He would have to gather a gigantic team of scientists and support staff to conduct all of the work without wasting centuries of his life on studying the alien vessel.

Even then, it was doubtful that he would ever be able to acquire the extremely demanding expertise needed to reverse engineer the most advanced alien technological applications!

In short, the remnants of the alien battleship might be extremely valuable from an objective point of view, but only an exceedingly small group of states and organizations possessed the resources to exploit this mine.

If Ves was able to hold an auction for these spoils, the only eligible bidders would come from the first-rate states and the Big Two. Of this limited and exclusive group, only the Common Fleet Alliance and the Mech Trade Association had any hopes of beating their competitors.

Surrendering these valuable spoils to the MTA was therefore not a bad option. It was not as if the Golden Skull Alliance could retain all of this first-class loot. Countless other vultures and unscrupulous pioneers would try to steal it all away.

The best part about receiving an enormous sum of MTA merits was that no one could steal it from their owners!

This could be considered a form of protection as the issuer of these merits would never allow anyone to abuse or fool around with them. Every MTA merit represented a genuine and sincere contribution to the Association and humanity as a whole.

The corruption of the merit system might very well herald the downfall of the human race!

Master Goldstein resumed his explanation on why the Golden Skull Alliance earned a humongous sum of MTA merits.

"What we also value is your opposition to threats that are greater and more significant than your fellow pioneers."

"Can you explain that further?"

Goldstein's expression grew ugly. "Ever since we have opened up the Red Ocean to colonization, the frequency of human fighting has been... high. Too high, in my opinion. An excessive amount of pioneers would rather fight their fellow humans than make more serious contributions to humanity. Cenatus Prospecting is an archetypal example of how the class of pioneers have been infiltrated and polluted by selfish profiteers who feel no responsibility to contribute to the advancement of the human cause."

"..."

Ves was glad that Master Goldstein did not have a good opinion of Otrus Magrin and his organization. That meant that it was unlikely for the MTA to call out the Golden Skull Alliance for leading their fellow humans into a trap!

"In comparison, you and your allies have focused your efforts outwards." Goldstein smiled. "We particularly appreciate your willingness to oppose the Cosmopolitan Movement. Any hindrance to its nefarious plans will give our forces a greater advantage in our war against the indigenous aliens of the Red Ocean. Hindering the Red Cabal by destroying one of their hidden asteroid bases as well as taking down a prototype alien battleship is also helpful to our collective cause."

To be honest, Ves never really had these motives in mind. He was purely driven by profit as far as he was concerned.

He just happened to target the aliens because it was much easier to come up with excuses to plunder their treasures!

#### Chapter 4643 The Emptiness Of Pioneers

"I am honored by your appreciation." Ves modestly replied.

It never hurt to be thankful for the MTA for dumping a massive amount of MTA merits on his lap.

It was rare for the MTA to let go of its stingy ways for once. He wanted this to happen again!

Master Goldstein's expression became warmer as he stared at the younger mech designer. "You are an example to all second-class pioneers, Mr. Larkinson. Despite your calling as a mech designer, you hold true to the noble intentions of a pioneer. You have frequently contributed to the conquest of the Red Ocean by exposing numerous secrets and defeating multiple alien threats. On top of that, your alliance has done more to increase our Association's reserves of phasewater than 99.9 percent of your peers."

"We are... pleased to be of assistance. The more phasewater you can equip your troops, the better our invasion will progress."

"Well said, Mr. Larkinson. Phasewater is the most important strategic resource of the Red Ocean. The more we obtain, the sooner we can complete our conquest. However, too many pioneers are unwilling to surrender any deposits or caches of phasewater they come across. They only think about enhancing the combat power of their own forces. While we are willing to tolerate private use of phasewater, the problem is that too many of your fellow pioneers are only willing to deploy their upgraded troops against their own kind."

Now that he thought about it, a lot of pioneers indeed focused all of their energies on fighting against each other. It was pretty normal, to be honest.



Who wanted to bring their forces all the way into the deep frontier and gamble on their lives away?

The biggest reason why no one liked to fight against alien forces was that it was impossible to predict their strength!

The variety of alien forces was incredible. The weakest alien warships and fleets tended to be on par with third-class forces, but the most powerful ones could easily give the MTA and CFA a run for their money!

The Golden Skull Alliance certainly had experience with that. The expeditionary fleet had fought against a pakklaton refugee fleet, a heavily-wounded but titanic astral beast, a large fish-whale enclave, an alien pirate base that turned out to be a prison for an unclean whale and a modern hybrid alien battleship!

All of them were alien in nature, but there was a huge difference in strength between the weakest and strongest alien forces!

Many other pioneers that ventured into regions frequented by aliens also enjoyed similar experiences.

On a good run, these pioneers only bumped into ragged alien refugees who could never pose any serious threat.

On a bad run, they might easily stumble into a pristine alien warfleet or warship and get blasted into pieces before they could run away!

Even first-class pioneers such as Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik were not exempted from this risk!

In short, venturing into the deep frontier was like jumping over a canyon. Even those who made the best possible preparations always risk a plunge due to all of the uncontrollable variables at play!

It was no surprise that a lot of pioneers were far more comfortable with setting down further away from the frontlines.

The hinterland of human-occupied space had become so devoid of aliens that the only enemies that people had to worry about were their fellow human competitors!

For example, the principal enemies that the Davute power bloc were concerned about was not the aliens, but the Karlach power bloc!

Both port systems aimed to become the premier trading hub of the Krakatoa Middle Zone, and the magnitude of interests at stake exceeded any profits gained from targeting the aliens!

They at least knew a lot more about fighting against human mech forces than taking down extremely formidable alien warships.

This was familiar territory to them. The degree of uncertainty in fighting against the same old human mechs was much less, and many people preferred it that way!

The centuries-long vendetta between the Fridaymen and the Hexers was also another typical example of human infighting.

Old states from the Milky Way Galaxy did not magically let go of their grudges and hatreds when they founded colonies in the Red Ocean.

The Hexers loathed the Fridaymen for good reasons. The Fridaymen on the other hand were desperate to wipe out their old archenemies before they had a chance to make a comeback!

Since both of their colonies were situated in the Magair Middle Zone, fighting against aliens was the least of their concerns. Enough time had passed for this region to become an entrenched human province!

Ves had always known that most pioneers never showed any interest in fighting against external threats, but he never really thought that any of their actions were wrong.

The pioneers in the new frontier simply perpetuated the existing conduct from the old galaxy.

Competition was a natural part of not just the human race, but many other alien races as well!

Though humanity also had a higher-than-average propensity for infighting, Ves and many other humans of the current age had grown so accustomed to it that they never thought that it was wrong!

Evidently, Master Goldstein held a different opinion.

"My fellow Survivalists and I hoped that opening the Red Ocean would allow humanity at large to become accustomed to directing their hostility against the enemies of our race. Back in the Age of Conquest, many wars against alien empires were largely fought by private human interests rather than broad coalitions that represented a significant proportion of our civilization. We hoped to encourage pioneers such as yourselves to take the first steps to reviving this old habit. Unfortunately, it appears that we have overestimated the courage of those that have entered the Red Ocean with great ambitions."

Ves understood exactly what caused all of those optimistic pioneers to get hit with a harsh dose of reality.

"The infrastructure of the Red Ocean is awful." Ves gently told the MTA Master. "When people dream about becoming pioneers, they rarely take into account that it is impossible to buy starships in bulk. Since every ticket that can pay for passage through the greater beyonder gate only covers 20 vessels at most, a lot of new arrivals will discover that amassing a fleet that is large enough to fight against the aliens is exceedingly hard. This is only a

single adverse factor. There are many other factors that inhibit pioneers from doing what you want, such as the inability to purchase large quantities of phasewater on the open market. How can all of these pioneers build enough transphasic mechs to take on aliens warships? Aside from that, it is ten times harder to fight against alien forces without bringing our own warships."

The Mech Trade Association should definitely be aware of the difficult circumstances that most pioneers ended up in. It was therefore a bit unreasonable for Master Goldstein to expect anything better out of this class of people.

The man was definitely smart enough to recognize this unfortunate truth.

"You are correct." The bald man admitted. "We have not eased the circumstances of pioneers, but they weren't supposed to receive much assistance to begin with. They are meant to demonstrate the initiative, creativity and self-sufficiency of individual human groups. If we have to hold their hands, there is no reason to hold any expectations for them. Pioneers are meant to thrive under adversity. We have already accounted for the fact that the majority of them will fail. We anticipated that enough of them would succeed and set a positive example for them. Our models have predicted that the proportion of successful, contributing pioneers will increase once the Red Ocean has more time to develop."

"I take it that the results in reality have not matched the predicted values produced by your sophisticated models."

Not even the Mech Trade Association could get everything right. The biggest problem that all powerful people and organizations suffered from was their inability to understand the difficulties of their lessers!

Master Goldstein's answer to that did not conflict with this pattern.

"We did not account for the cowardice of many pioneers. Too many of them have made wild claims, but few ever think about matching their words with actions. Humanity is in a much more dangerous state if only a few exceptions such as yourself are willing to rise above common squabbles."

"If that is the case, Master, then why doesn't MTA take any measures to correct this imbalance? You can easily encourage more pioneers to fight against the aliens if you help build more infrastructure, penalize human-to-human conflicts, allow pioneers to keep more phasewater they have discovered in the wild for themselves and offer greater assistance and protection to pioneering fleets that travel to the deep frontier."

This caused Master Goldstein to shake his head.

"We have tried to push through these measures, but there are too many other factions and groups that are opposed to any changes in the status quo. There are parties within our Association that see human infighting as a positive development. I will not explain the reasons why, but it is enough for you to know that we Survivalists are in the minority when it comes to taking greater measures against alien opposition."

The Survivalists were among the most scared and pessimistic members of the Mech Trade Association. It was in their nature to overestimate every enemy and make a lot of contingency plans in case a known or unknown threat rose to become an existential threat to humanity!

Perhaps the other factions thought that the Survivalists were being alarmists again. Even if the native alien races started to cooperate with each other while assimilating more human technologies, they still lacked the scale to compete against the enormous war machine of the Big Two!

"So where does that leave us?" Ves asked.

There was a reason why someone as important as an MTA Master spent so much time on describing these greater policy considerations to a mere second-class pioneer.

"If we cannot make our Association make the necessary changes as a whole, then our Survivalist Faction will take action within the limits of our authority."

The older man replied. "For example, I have tried to maximize the rewards issued to your alliance to the greatest extent possible. We are aware that there are too many anecdotes about failed pioneers circulating in our society. We may not be able to reduce their occurrence, but we can do our part in counterbalancing them by propagating positive examples. The great achievements of your Golden Skull Alliance shall serve as a shining example that even second-class pioneers can fight against aliens and be rewarded for their service."

"Wait a minute." Ves straightened his back. "Are you saying you are going to use us in a publicity campaign?"

Goldstein shook his head in regret. "Oh, we would like to, but that would violate the neutrality clause of our Association. We will let the sum of your merit award do the advertising. A single incident may not be enough to change the behavioral patterns of pioneers, but once dozens of positive cases begin to emerge, we believe that more and more copycats will emerge."

That... might not work as well as the Survivalists hoped. Ves knew that most pioneers simply weren't equipped to fight against the aliens. The majority of them lacked an ace mech and ace pilot that could fight against larger alien warships and defeat them in open combat!

However, the Survivalists had their own plan, so it was not up to Ves to tell them that their plan was doomed to fail.

"Okay, I understand. I am grateful for receiving such a great reward for our contributions."

"You are welcome. A part of the reason why we are willing to reward you so much is because we are optimistic about your future. I advise you to think carefully about spending your new MTA merits."

#### **Chapter 4644 Unpalatable Suggestions**

Of the 1.3 billion MTA merits that the Golden Skull Alliance was about to gain, at least a third of it would go to the Larkinson Clan!

Last Ves checked his record, he still had around 129 million MTA merits to his name. This already represented an incredible sum of wealth, but if he added a couple of million more MTA merits to his account, he would truly become truly loaded!

Ves mentally salivated at all of the goodies he could exchange for. Obtaining a vial of high-grade life-prolonging treatment no longer sounded as ludicrous as before!

However, he quickly sobered himself up. There was no need for him to spend so much MTA merits on a product he already had in his possession. It would also take many years for him and his little family to grow old enough to actually require life-prolonging treatment.

As Ves thought about Master Vayro Goldstein's encouragement, he realized that he should be thinking more strategically about his MTA merit spending.

It was not appropriate for him to hoard hundreds of millions of MTA merits. Letting them rot in his account was no different from self-sabotaging himself!

The much smarter option would be to spend the majority of his MTA merits on goods and services that could strengthen his clan and accelerate its growth. Of course, he could not forget about investing in his own development.

Ves was in the rare position of having much more MTA merits at his disposal than he knew what to do with it. He could easily squander the majority of his gains on a useless purchase, so he was under a lot more pressure than before!

One of the reasons why having a lot of MTA merits was a burden was because it was a high-end currency. Even though it was a made-up token that the mechers created out of nothing only to receive it again at extremely favorable rates to themselves, that didn't stop Ves from playing along.

The company store was the only venue in town. The Mech Trade Association ultimately exploited everyone who made use of MTA merits due to its exclusive and monopolistic nature. Unless pioneers honestly submitted 16 tons of phasewater to the Association, they would never be able to retrieve their souls from its grasp!

"Can you advise me on where I should spend my MTA merits, Master?" He politely requested.

"I can certainly do that for you, Mr. Larkinson." Master Goldstein smiled as if he was waiting for this request. "Let me start by giving you a special offer. We have been made aware that you are looking for better schooling for your children. As a parent, it is only natural for you to wish the best for your offspring."

Ves immediately grew a bit more vigilant as soon as the MTA Master mentioned his children. As their father, he was quite protective of them and he did not want anyone to mess around with their lives!

"That is true. What of it, Master?"

"As you are doubtlessly aware of, our Association occasionally recruits its members among the greater human community. Our criteria are highly variable. Occasionally, we recruit third-raters in order to increase the diversity



and representation of our ranks. Other times, we extend invitations to the best pupils of first-rate states to inject fresh blood in our pool of future leaders. Right now, there is one child of yours that I am willing to induct into our ranks."

It did not take much time and effort for Ves to guess which child that Master Goldstein had in mind.

"Are you offering to allow my son Marvaine to become a mecher?"

"Yes." Master Goldstein replied. "I would like to induct him into our ranks without any requirements, but since this is an invitation that falls outside of our regular recruitment rounds, you will have to spend MTA merits to make this happen."

"How much?"

"It depends on how far you are willing to go to invest in his development. Our Association offers different support programs. If you only spend around 10 million MTA merits, then we will induct him into our normal ranks. There is nothing wrong with that. As long as he excels in his studies and displays enough talent at an early age, he will earn greater opportunities and receive the opportunity to become a seed that receives more focused attention. If you are willing to spend more, say 100 million MTA merits, you can not only provide him with additional learning resources, but also give him a cushion against failure. If he happens to fail a number of important exams, we will not eject him right away, but use up one of his cushions first."

"That..."

"The more MTA merits you spend, the more attention your child receives." Master Goldstein grinned like a cheap used shuttle salesman. "If you are open to spending 500 million MTA merits, we can arrange for him to be apprenticed to one of our Master Mech Designers. While this sum of merits is not enough for him to become my personal student, I can refer him to many younger but

accomplished colleagues of mine who can take him under their wing. There is no limit to how much MTA merits you can submit to arrange for a better teacher. It is even possible for your son to become an apprentice to the Polymath herself as long as you are able to cover her entry fee."

Ves had no interest in asking how many MTA merits it took to get a person apprenticed to a Star Designer.

He was afraid that by the time he struggled to gather an astronomical sum of MTA merits together, he probably would have degenerated into a complete slave of the Association by that time!

That said, Ves didn't even have any interest in taking up the cheapest option.

"Your offers certainly sound compelling, but... inducting him into your Association will mean that he will no longer be able to stay with my family, right?"

"I am afraid so. From the moment he becomes a mecher, he will have to follow a highly regimented life. We do provide allowances for members to contact their old families over the galactic net. Your son may even be able to go on leave to visit you as long as either of you are willing to spend enough MTA merits."

Ves already learned enough.

"I understand. Letting our son become a member of your esteemed Association is a great privilege, but it is not what my wife and I had in mind for our son, or any of our children for that matter." He replied in a careful voice.

"We Larkinsons value family, and I do not see a reasonable way to allow our son to grow up in a warm and loving household when he is stationed in an MTA base that is far away from my fleet."

It was painful for Ves to reject the most promising option for his son. Becoming a member of one of the Big Two was an incredible dream to the majority of the people in human civilization.

Few people wanted to stay among space peasants. Everything was so much better in the MTA that Marvaine would most definitely receive opportunities that Ves could never provide!

The best augmentations! The best schools! The best materials! The best mechs! The best mech designers!

These were but a handful of the reasons why the mechers could do more!

However... Ves couldn't bear the thought of sending his son off to the MTA where he would likely be indoctrinated to become a loyal member.

By the time Marvaine was ten years old, it was extremely doubtful whether he would retain any serious love or affection to his parents!

As for the Larkinson Clan? Hah! One puny clan could never match the prestige of the mighty Mech Trade Association!

It would be easier for Ves to drop one of his kids off to the MTA if he already had a hundred other offspring, but that was not the case.

Marvaine was his pride and joy. He was his first son and the presumed heir of his mech design legacy. There was no way that Ves would allow the mechers to get their grubby hands on his boy!

Master Goldstein directed a measured stare at Ves.

"That is your prerogative. It is your right as a parent to decide how you wish to raise your child. This particular offer will remain open until he reaches a certain age. As an alternative, you may wait until he has reached maturity and is ready to build a life outside of his parental home to join our ranks. He will

have to join us under a different arrangement, and that will demand more MTA merits."

"I understand." Ves nodded. "Can you make other suggestions on how I should spend my MTA merits?"

He deeply wanted to change the topic. He was afraid that he might actually get seduced into hauling his son off to the MTA if this continued!

"You can buy a high-grade planet from us." Master Goldstein proposed. "This is different from what you think. Instead of traveling to an unoccupied star system and building up an independent colony on an available planet, you will instead colonize a planet in a star system that we have designated. Since you are colonizing it under our auspices, you will receive a limited amount of subsidies, resources, construction equipment and infrastructural support. The resulting colony will belong to you, but since the locations that we have designated always hold strategic value to us, our Association will likely build a major branch or stronghold in the star system."

"And that means...?"

"We will implicitly protect your colony against alien incursions. You will not need to fear any attacks from humanity's external enemies. Aside from that, your colony will also be able to benefit in other ways. None of our branches are completely isolated from the environments they reside in. There will be limited opportunities for trade that can be immensely profitable. Supporting one of our branches is one of the most reliable methods to earn a consistent amount of MTA merits."

Ves had never heard of this kind of arrangement. He would be lying if he said he was not interested in this scheme.

One of the biggest risks to founding a planet in the Red Ocean was that a bunch of aliens could arrive at any time to bomb it to oblivion.

While it was true that the colonies in the hinterland of human-occupied space were no longer under effective threat of aliens, the problem was that all of the best colony sites had already been claimed!

There were still plenty of untouched star systems in places like the Magair Middle Zone, but they were pretty much barren in his eyes!

The better colony candidates were located closer to the local galactic center. That sounded great until people remembered that they were also much more prone to getting raided by alien warships!

If the Larkinson Clan founded a colony that was essentially sponsored by the MTA, this risk factor would eventually drop to the bottom!

Ves would be able to rule over his own planet while using the mechers as his shield. Hardly anyone would dare to mess with a close friend of the Association!

However, there were many other reasons why he would want to avoid this course of action. He would be tying his clan and himself to the MTA, which was not desirable in his opinion.

It was fine for him to maintain a mutual exchange of interests with the MTA, but that did not mean he wanted to become overly dependent on this overbearing organization!

One of his motives for becoming stronger was to become less dependent on the protection of the MTA. It would be backwards if he chose to become a de facto vassal of the Association by founding a colony within its empire!

#### **Chapter 4645 Hyper Chamber**

As much as Ves liked the thought of building up his own colony and ruling over his own planet, it clashed against his original plan and goals.

His main purpose was to become a Star Designer. Every other ambition had to take a backseat. There was no way he wanted to get shackled to a planet where his enemies could force him to make a stand.

Staying mobile and basing the main element of his clan onto its many starships was the right way to go. If it worked for the Common Fleet Alliance and its vast network of associated spaceborn clans, it would work for the Larkinson Clan as well!

So far, none of Master Goldstein's suggestions sounded all that appealing to Ves. The Master possessed different goals and a different vision on matters. He probably had little understanding of how extensively Ves wanted to maintain a healthy distance from the MTA and other entanglements.

It was not as if Ves wanted to isolate himself from human society like the fleeters, but he had suffered betrayal at the hands of other parties far too many times.

Before Master Goldstein could offer any further suggestions that came with a lot of strings attached, Ves raised his hand.

"I prefer to spend my MTA merits on more straightforward improvements to myself and my clan. I am looking for more practical improvements that can give my people and I a short to medium-term boost. I would like to obtain goods or services that can enhance our security, increase our learning capabilities and boost our industrial capacity. I would also like to obtain anything that can deter enemies from attacking my fleet, no matter whether they are human or alien."

The bald MTA Master spent a few seconds evaluating the options that matched Ves' specifications.

"You are a demanding mech designer and clan patriarch, Mr. Larkinson." The Survivalist replied. "I can present you with many different options that you may

be interested in, but you will have to be selective as not even hundreds of millions of MTA merits can solve all of your needs."

Ves responded with a rueful smile. "I am aware of this reality. Not even first-raters can get everything on their wishlist. However, this is exactly why I am so eager to spend my MTA merits. The more enhancements I receive, the sooner my people and I can close the gap."

"Well, if you are so eager to become a first-rater through your own efforts, then I suggest you spend at least 100 million MTA merits on a Hyper Chamber."

"A Hyper Chamber?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"Remote communication is one of the most important binding elements of human civilization." Master Goldstein explained. "Our entire society as we know it would immediately collapse if the galactic net is taken away from us. It is because of our ability to transmit data to other people across many star systems and even entire galaxies that can unite so many groups and states into a single cohesive civilization."

"That... is true. I take it that this Hyper Chamber is some sort of super communication tool?"

"Oh, it is that and more, Mr. Larkinson. Remote communication has been enriched by two major advancements. First, we are able to accurately project and portray each other's bodies and any objects we wish to include in our exchange of data. Second, we are able to touch what we have projected through the use of physical projection technology. The latter has immensely reduced the downsides of remote communications and has reduced the need for personal meetings. However, the technology cannot replace face-to-face encounters entirely. Do you know why?"

That was an easy question to answer.

"It is because physical projections are weak. We only need to give a physical projection a moderate push before it breaks."

"Exactly." Master Goldstein nodded. "Try and break this projection."

The MTA Master waved his hand over the worktable, causing a simple alloy bar to appear into view.

Ves picked it up and tried to break it by snapping the bar.

Even though it looked and felt like a realistic alloy bar, it simply did not bend according to his will!

His genetic and biological augmentations had left him with way more physical strength than he ever needed as a mech designer, but even that wasn't enough for him to bend this illusionary alloy bar!

"Am I being fooled, or is this actually a projection?" Ves wondered.

Master Goldstein grinned and waved his hand, causing the alloy bar projection to pop and disappear.

"No, Mr. Larkinson. You are not being deceived. This is an example of state-of-the-art physical projection technology. We have constantly iterated and improved upon it for centuries, and the highest specifications of this tech can simulate physical objects so well that they can easily simulate complete mechs. In fact, you can even hold a half-virtual, half-real mech duel between two mechs!"

What?!

If Master Goldstein's claims were true, then the use of these superprojectors could enable mechs located in two different galaxies to duel against each other!



This was a possibility that transcended virtual reality. The inclusion of physical participants meant that mechs could interact with each other in whole new ways!

"Can this Hyper Chamber do all of that for our clan?" Ves eagerly asked.

"Do not get too excited, Mr. Larkinson. The most basic model that is as large as a small mech arena can be obtained for around 100 million MTA merits, but you will not be able to obtain the full experience. You will have to pay more MTA merits in order to upgrade your Hyper Chamber's physical projection capabilities. You can swap out the more basic physical and energy projectors with more premium models that possess higher specifications. If you are truly wealthy and accomplished, then you may also add materializers along with a large quantity of reserve materials. This will allow your side to materialize complete objects or mechs that are transmitted by other parties."

How extravagant! Ves had countless ideas in his mind on how he could take advantage of this tech!

For example, he could remotely collaborate with other mech designs on performing live repairs, modifications or upgrades on existing machines.

He could also allow his Larkinson mech pilots to duel against other Larkinson members who were located in branches established in distant locations.

However, as soon as Ves thought about how Hyper Chambers could connect different parts of his sprawling clan, he immediately remembered that he would have to buy multiple copies of this extremely expensive exchange item!

"What are the recommended uses of a Hyper Chamber if I only obtain one of them?" Ves asked the MTA Master.

"There are many uses. The most relevant of them is their ability to facilitate the education of your children."

Now that sparked Ves' interest.

"Do you mean that these Hyper Chambers can help enhance my children's virtual school experience?"

Master Goldstein smiled. "That is correct. You may not know this, but the better virtual schools demand that every pupil attend virtual classes in a Hyper Chamber. Compared to taking classes in a completely virtual environment, doing so in a setting that is built by high-quality physical projections is much superior. It can enable anyone with aspirations to become a mech pilot or mech designer to attend classes related to mechs in a much more effective manner."

That definitely sounded like a benefit that could help his children obtain a more authentic school experience!

Though it still couldn't beat attending a classy school in person, the gap would definitely not be as exaggerated as before!

"A decently equipped Hyper Chamber can also be of great benefit to you and your fellow mech designers, especially when any of you advance to the rank of Senior Mech Designer."

"In what way? Wouldn't a Journeyman be able to make use of a Hyper Chamber in the exact same manner?"

"Not quite. Do you recall the rule that every Senior Mech Designer must become a professor at a recognized teaching institution?"

"I do..."

"You will learn more when you advance. I can tell you that it is preferable for Seniors to teach at physical institutions, but if they insist on staying in a location that is removed from an accredited institution, they can always hold their classes by remote."

That was exactly what Ves had in mind.

"I see. If this Hyper Chamber can make anything related to mechs a lot more realistic, does that mean that I can teach at a fancier mech university?"

"Yes." Goldstein nodded in confirmation. "Hyper Chambers can be considered as an extravagant bonus for second-class mech universities that offer remote classes, but are mandatory for any first-class mech university. It is unlikely for any first-class educational institution to hire a second-class mech designer, but a dynamic pioneer such as yourself should easily find a position in the best second-class mech universities. This will especially be the case if you come with our recommendation."

That sounded incredibly interesting to Ves. Prior to this conversation, he did not particularly hold high expectations of becoming a professor at a top institution.

Sure, his radical design philosophy had made new inroads and opened up crazy new possibilities in the mech industry, but that also made it extremely difficult to transfer to other people.

Unless he closely tutored mech designers as if they were his apprentices such as Ketis and Maikel, there was little chance that other students would ever get involved with living mechs.

Aside from that, his academic credentials were also barren. He was not a lab geek and most of his work and activities were practical in nature.

The academic circle generally selected their lecturers and professors according to a different set of criteria.

Ves may enjoy a lot of success in the mech market, and his participation in many dangerous expeditions also allowed him to stand out from other mech designers from his generation, but did that make him a good teacher? Not necessarily.

His design philosophy and work methods were unorthodox, he did not graduate from a prestigious institution, he never submitted a serious scientific paper at an academic journal, he had no prior formal experience in teaching at smaller schools and he was still too young and unproven.

Ves may be willing to take a gamble every now and then, but the top mech universities in human space would never dare to play around with the future of their pupils, especially if they were destined to become the future movers and shakers of their respective states!

This was why he was not entirely sure whether Master Goldstein was being serious.

"Will a good school truly accept my application?" Ves hesitantly asked.

"I cannot guarantee that, but possessing a sufficiently equipped Hyper Chamber will make you more attractive to them." The MTA Master replied with a smile. "You see, regardless of the technical possibilities of this advanced communication tool, its symbolic value is also great. Owning one conveys great prestige, especially when you have earned it through your own hard work as opposed to being given one by your parents or organization. Mech universities are not short-sighted. They can recognize that even if your academic credentials are insufficient, there is a realistic chance that you will eventually be a mech designer that they will have to look up to. Just the possibility is enough to tempt the more forward-looking deacons into considering your application."

That sounded plausible enough, Ves supposed. He was already happy if he managed to get hired by a respectable institution. Anything better was a bonus in his opinion.

"I cannot say this with certainty, but humans are reaching further and further away from our ancestral home planet." Master Goldstein spoke. "From the

moment our race stepped out of Old Earth, humanity has continued to disperse across the stars. This has provided us with massive benefits, but it has become increasingly harder for distant people to connect with each other on a more personal level. The development of high-performance physical projection technology is one of several solutions that serve to counteract this concerning social pattern, especially in an age where beyonder gates have allowed us to traverse unprecedented distances."

The more humanity expanded its territories, the greater the separation between each population group. If this trend continued to persist, then there might come a day where humans may no longer be united as one people!

#### **Chapter 4646 Teaching Aspirations**

Ves would become a Senior sooner or later. He could feel it in his bones. Despite his relatively young age, his accumulation was substantial and his work caught on in the mech market. He derived many successful innovations based on his design philosophy and built up an increasingly more expansive theoretical framework of his specialty.

He was ready to engage in mech design at a higher level. He was tired of remaining stuck as Journeyman.

In the mech industry, a Journeyman was treated as a teenager that was better than an ignorant kid, but not by much.

Becoming a Senior was a watershed for a mech designer. Though Ves didn't exactly understand how much of a difference the rank would make in his work, the higher status alone was worth the effort to sprint towards advancement!

Ves did not know when he would be able to get rid of his status as a Journeyman, but he could feel that it would not take long. He just needed a single impetus to get over the edge.

If completing the Dullahan Project did not do that, then completing the Ghost Project may allow him to break through to Senior. If that wasn't enough, then another creative and groundbreaking mech design would surely be able to get him over the edge within the next decade.

In any case, Ves believed that his advancement to Senior was close enough for him to get ready to plan ahead. Fulfilling his obligation to pass on his knowledge to students in a more systematic learning environment was an important facet to any mech designer's life. It was better to plan ahead than be caught unprepared once he finally broke through.

"So how does this work, Master? Will I be able to become a full professor right out of the gate with the help of a Hyper Chamber and a recommendation?"

"Naturally, you should not expect to receive heavy responsibilities at first. You will have to start at the bottom of the ladder where you will only be able to teach a small and fairly limited elective course on a specialty subject that you can speak with authority. You will have to do the hard work of convincing students to accept your teachings. This is a method that a mech university regularly employs to test the teaching ability of its newer professors. Those that can attract more students and are able to improve their mech design capabilities in a concrete manner will be promoted in the future."

The bald MTA Master continued to explain the basic situation of what it would be like if Ves snatched a teaching position at one of these fancy schools.

The subjects that Ves was allowed to teach, the amount of hours he had to spend in front of a virtual or projected classroom, the type of students he was allowed to teach and the additional privileges he might receive as a relatively junior member of the teaching staff all varied depending on the specific employment contract.

Ves would have to agree on the exact terms of the contract with the mech university in question. It did not take a genius to figure out that a more outstanding institution would impose more restrictions and make more cumbersome demands.

Master Goldstein carefully spoke his next words.

"It is not a trivial matter to become a professor at a more prestigious mech university that is renowned throughout both galaxies, but the rewards are worth the sacrifices. Obtaining a temporary or permanent teaching position will immediately raise your reputation and gild your record. You will not only gain a tentative foothold in the core academic community of the mech community, but also obtain a lot more legitimacy for your work. It becomes much easier for other professionals to take your design philosophy, your radical innovations and your mech designs seriously, because a prestigious name is vouching for your work."

It was just as how being a member of the Mech Trade Association made every mech designer's reputation a lot better. No matter what kind of person a mecher may be, other people just knew that a MTA mech designer was just smarter, better and overall more superior than someone grown in the 'wild'.

The biggest shortcoming of Ves was that he was completely unfamiliar with the upper landscape of second-class educational institutions. He did not know the top names or their histories and traditions. He had no idea where the schools were located and what sort of teaching philosophies they upheld.

"The best second-class mech universities often maintain close connections to first-class institutions." Goldstein helpfully told Ves. "Make your choices carefully, because every top institution is entangled in a large and intricate web of interest groups. Your selection will have political implications for yourself and your clan. If you are unwilling to become an asset to a first-rate state such as the Greater Terran United Confederation or the New Rubarth

Empire, it may be wise to steer towards a slightly less prestigious institution that has built up a more independent reputation."

That sounded like a good idea. Ves would have to do his own research, but he did not mind passing over the best offers if they came with too many strings attached.

"Are there any other important benefits to teaching at a top institution?" He asked. "I mean, it is nice to be able to use the reputation of a famous name, but not all mech designers need this sort of assistance."

"You are correct, Mr. Larkinson. There are many top mech designers who do not have to rely on a third party to boost their fame and reputation. What these individuals truly seek are opportunities to get into contact with promising and talented mech design students. The better the school, the greater the average quality of future mech designers. It is in the lecturing halls where Seniors and Masters often scout their next disciples."

Ves' eyes gleamed. Master Goldstein raised an excellent point!

Although the Larkinson Clan was slowly ramping up its ability to train and educate its own mech designers, the chances that a genius would emerge from within was still too low.

That didn't mean that Ves had no intentions of passing on his craft to his clansmen. Successful cases like Ketis showed that he could still make do with lower quality stock if he invested more effort and resources into his tutoring.

Ves didn't have the time or motivation to invest so much into raising mech designers, though. He was already swamped with his own work. Allocating an unreasonable amount of his time on making other people become better mech designers may ultimately translate into sabotaging his own progress!

This was why he became so interested in the idea of taking bright and talented mech design students under his wing.



These little geniuses either possessed wealthy backgrounds or had proven to be extraordinarily smart.

Most of the time, they were both, or else they wouldn't have been able to get accepted by a top school.

This meant that these students not only required less time to learn advanced theories and concepts, but should also be a lot more self-sufficient.

Ves could pretty much treat them like free-range chicken. As long as he remembered to sprinkle a bit of bird food at them, they would go about their day and soon begin to lay eggs on his behalf.

Of course, teaching a mech design student who came from a powerful influence comparable to the Yorul-Tavik Clan would also help expand his connections to the upper layers of human society!

Given all of these amazing possibilities, Ves became more motivated to become a professor at a good institution.

"Getting back to the Hyper Chamber, will I be able to get a good position with a basic one, or do I need to upgrade it with better and more advanced modules?"

Master Goldstein paused for a short moment. "It depends. I am not too familiar with the recruiting standards of second-class mech universities, but a basic Hyper Chamber should already suffice. I believe that the classes that you will be permitted to teach will mostly be confined to theoretical lessons. These classes do not impose heavy demands on the capabilities of high-performance physical projection technology. It is only when you start to teach more advanced classes with a greater emphasis on practical coursework that it is helpful to upgrade your Hyper Chamber. This can cost you at least an additional 100 million MTA merits."

That was good to know in the future.

"It sounds as if Hyper Chambers and their many optional upgrades are common enough to be sold on the open market." Ves remarked. "Can I buy and improve them by spending credits instead of merits?"

"You may, Mr. Larkinson, but can you afford the expenditure? You may not be aware of this, but many of the products that we offer through our exchange can be considered bargains when you consider how much they cost if you purchase them from a commercial vendor. The quality of the products that we list on our exchange are also uniformly high."

"How much does it cost to buy a Hyper Chamber with MTA credits?"

"An entry-level Hyper Chamber can be bought for 500 million MTA credits. A premium one that is offered by our Association will cost much more. The exact prices will vary depending on the brand and the feature set, but it will never be below 1 billion MTA credits. Do you understand why owning this product is a matter of great prestige to second-raters?"

Ves gulped. He never realized that a large package of souped up physical projectors was priced at these ridiculous heights!

There was no way the Larkinson Clan could earn that much cash in the short term!

"I think I will opt for acquiring a Hyper Chamber from your exchange."

"A wise decision." Master Goldstein smiled in approval. "Obtaining a Hyper Chamber is a life-changing decision for you and anyone permitted to use it. This solution is especially suitable for a mech designer who is rarely found in one location and insists on traveling to remote destinations. By gaining the ability to engage in high-end communication and interaction, you can begin to collaborate with other mech designers in a much more intimate and effective manner."

Ves looked forward to all of these possibilities. It made his life a lot easier even if he did not use it for teaching purposes.

"Is it possible for you or your men to install a Hyper Chamber on my flagship right away?"

"I would advise against that." Goldstein replied. "While our fleet has the technical capabilities to install a Hyper Chamber on any of your starships, it will not only demand a large volume of space, but also impose an unreasonably high burden on your craft. The Hyper Chamber does not come with its own power supply, so you will need to accommodate its energy needs. The single first-class power reactor that you have installed on your factory ship is not adequate enough to allow the chamber to project entire mechs under active usage."

A high-end technological suite imposed much higher demands on its environment. The Master mentioned other issues such as weight and isolation that demanded a high degree of structural modifications to the Spirit of Bentheim before she could even accommodate such a demanding chamber!

Ves grimaced when he heard the extensive list of technical demands.

"I get the point. My ship is too weak."

"This is why I advise you to spend a large amount of MTA merits on purchasing an improved factory ship from us. This will ensure you will be in the best possible position to integrate other demanding products of high technology into your fleet."

That sounded compelling, but Ves was reluctant to let go of the Spirit of Bentheim. The ship had greater meaning to him than a mobile factory.

"Is there a possibility to upgrade my existing ship instead?"

"You can do that, but it will require more resources and labor to obtain a worse result." Goldstein brutally said. "If you insist on funding an extensive refit of your factory ship regardless of this reality, then that is your choice. Depending on how much you are willing to invest, we can comprehensively increase her size, strengthen her structure, increase her defenses, improve her production facilities, mount her with an optimized superdrive and more. Anything is possible as long as you are able to pay the price."

Improving the Spirit of Bentheim was a matter of great importance, but if he sunk a lot MTA credits into her refit, that would mean he would not be able to spend as much on other goodies!

Ves felt conflicted.

#### **Chapter 4647 Networking Opportunities**

"I will need to think about it further, Master." Ves eventually spoke. "I will need to speak with my advisors and spend more time on formulating the most appropriate merit spending plan for our clan."

Master Goldstein nodded in understanding. "That is a prudent course of action. Take all of the time you need. Once you have finalized a spending plan, please transmit it to my account. I will review it and comment on it to ensure you have not overlooked any important details. Once everything is in order, I will pass your list onto the merit exchange where my fine colleagues can work on delivering what you have requested."

"Thank you for offering your assistance."

"No problem. You are one of our valued associates. Helping you navigate the endless options that you can exchange with your MTA merits is one of our great pleasures."

That was certainly believable. The mechers liked nothing more than to see its subjects spend the MTA merits that the Mech Trade Association originally

issued to them. The greater the circulation of MTA merits, the more people were impacted by the MTA!

The two mech designers continued to talk about various different subjects. None of them were all that important, but Ves appreciated the opportunity to learn about a few matters that someone like Master Goldstein found important.

Though Ves missed the familiarity and bond of trust he had built with Master Willix, Master Goldstein was nice enough, if a bit more fixated on business.

Ves had the feeling that Master Goldstein made sure to allocate enough time for this conversation to remind him that the Survivalist Faction still existed.

After all, Ves cooperated with the Transhumanist Faction a lot more extensively over the last years. He also felt a greater affinity for the goals and some of the more modest aspirations of the Transhumanist.

If not for the fact that Jovie Armalon was a part of the Survivalist Faction, Ves might have tried to find a way to cut his ties to this group!

"I recently received an invitation to some sort of big meetup organized by your faction," Ves said. "Can you tell me what it is all about and why my presence may be needed?"

Master Goldstein's demeanor turned a lot less light-hearted all of a sudden.

"I cannot divulge much to you. We are still deciding on the exact agenda for our conference. I can reveal in general terms that the topics we will address among ourselves will not only address the great problem with pioneers that we have discussed earlier, but many other weighty topics. The grand occasion also serves as a good reason to gather the majority of prominent members of our faction in one physical location. While we have no issue with communicating with each other remotely by relying on our advanced technologies most of the time, we still recognize the importance of meeting

each other face-to-face. Many great and accomplished mech designers will attend."

That sounded serious. Ves did not entirely understand what a trivial figure like himself could contribute to the enormous discussions that would doubtlessly be held at this fancy conference.

He felt like a little kid attending a scientific conference held by respected academics and professors. The gap between him and the main speakers was so enormous that Ves was rather suspicious why he was asked to attend in the first place!

"How long will this conference last?"

"That depends." Goldstein answered. "You can expect it to last for at least a week, but nothing is set in stone. Regardless of how long you are required to attend, I highly advise you to take advantage of the concentration of notable figures to expand your network and find potential new collaboration partners. If you happen to advance to Senior at the time, the conference is also an excellent venue for you to come into contact with an individual connected to a prestigious mech university. Your chances of convincing a mech university to appoint you as a professor will always be better if you are able to make your case in person."

Ves possessed a high opinion of his persuasive abilities, so he strongly agreed with that assessment.

This mysterious Survivalist conference sounded more and more attractive to him. Even if all of the bigwigs confined themselves behind closed doors, their extensive entourage would definitely linger around the meeting site!

Ves could meet and connect with many prominent mech designers and other people who were tied to the Survivalist Faction. Each person who had gained the appreciation of an MTA faction was worth befriending in his opinion. The

possible gains he could derive from meeting new people could be astronomical if he hooked up with the right individuals!

After he gained the clarification he wanted from Master Goldstein, the conversation soon wound down.

They could still talk a lot more about topics such as their own mech design work, but Master Goldstein had a busy schedule. He was already being generous enough by allocating enough time to enlighten Ves about matters that were highly relevant to his career.

"You will have to find your own way from here." The bald MTA Master eventually said as he stood up from his seat. "Keep up the good work. You have shown great courage and selflessness in your latest initiatives. Do not waver in your determination to contribute to humanity. Know that our fellow Survivalists and I are constantly monitoring your progress."

Ves could do without hearing that last sentence.

He bowed. "I appreciate your vote of confidence. I cannot promise that I can live up to your expectations, but I shall do my best to excel."

He concluded his fruitful meeting after that. Once the Antazella de Osiris teleported him back to the Spirit of Bentheim, he felt a lot of relief.

His fears hadn't come true.

The MTA did not blame him for leading the Cenatus Prospecting fleet into an unfavorable confrontation against an alien battleship.

The MTA did not call him out on the numerous war crimes and other misdeeds that he may or may not have committed.

The MTA did not try to rip him and his allies off by awarding the Golden Skull Alliance with only a paltry sum of MTA merits for all of the contributions that it made.

The MTA did not take away all of the goodies and phasewater that his salvage teams had carefully taken from the remnant alien battleship.

"Everything is good." He smiled.

His extensive conversation with Master Goldstein not only addressed his immediate concerns, but also gave him a better perspective on the outlook of the Survivalists.

One of the most important gains from this important talk was gaining a better understanding of what the Survivalists expected from human pioneers.

One of the unspoken messages conveyed by Master Goldstein was that the Survivalists were willing to be a lot more generous and forgiving to pioneers who made an effort to contribute to humanity. Only those who produced a net gain for humanity were worthy of their appreciation!

As for dirty vultures like Otrus Magrin, the Survivalists couldn't care less. If the old man happened to die in a terrible plot that also killed a lot of other people, then the Survivalists couldn't care less.

All of this basically incentivized Ves to put more effort into dressing up his actions in an altruistic coat!

Of course, Ves did not seriously think he had done much to contribute to humanity up until this point.

Unless the Transhumanist Faction was ready to introduce the transcendence glow to the greater human society, it was hard for a mech designer at his level to affect the course of humanity.

"One day." He whispered.

Now that the Golden Skull Alliance officially handed over the remains of the alien battleship to the MTA, there was no reason for the expeditionary fleet to linger in the Ramage Repulsor System.



The Golden Skullers were distinctly not welcome in the star system anymore. The recent arrivals wanted to commence their studies on the prototype alien vessel in a secure environment, and the presence of third parties posed a hindrance.

Without further ado, the expeditionary fleet headed to the nearest Lagrange point so that it could finally make the long journey back to Davute.

Before the Golden Skull Alliance made its way back to its old haunt, Ves had to say goodbye to an important guest.

While Ves had been talking with Master Goldstein, Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik finally managed to contact his clan after regaining access to the galactic net.

Just as predicted, the clan showed enough willingness to pay the MTA to ensure Lord Pearian's safe passage back to a safe and protected star system.

This was an enormous relief. Ves did not want to keep hold of this hot potato any longer than necessary. Pearian had already ruined one pioneering fleet. He could easily ruin another solely due to the value of his identity!

Pearian looked a lot better now that he was waiting to get teleported to an MTA vessel.

He had lost his original outfits a long time ago, but the Larkinsons had handed him a malleable set of smart clothing which Pearian configured into a purple-and-brown pattern that represented his clan.

"Thank you for rescuing me from that hellish ship and prison." Lord Pearian shook hands with Ves. "I truly don't know how long I would have been able to last. When I was locked in that awful cell that has nothing except a single watering hole, I had already made the determination to die like a human rather than live as a traitor. Given my in-built anti-interrogation and anti-brainwashing augmentations, my captors would have gotten bored of me sooner or later. I can scarcely imagine what would happen to me at that point."

"Wasn't there a human cosmopolitan aboard the same ship?" Ves curiously asked. "If the aliens don't appreciate your identity, the cosmopolitan definitely should."

The disgraced first-class scion snorted in contempt. "That weasel would kill me himself if he thought that would endear him to his alien 'allies'. That man was creepy. It is one thing for aliens to be aliens. They're not us. That is a basic truth. What I cannot accept is seeing humans doing their best to emulate aliens. The horror I experienced when I saw Mr. Meren abandoning his humanity is a nightmare that will haunt me for the rest of my life."

Ves gently raised his arm and patted the poor man's shoulder. "Don't let this trauma drag you down. Try and learn from this and work hard to prevent this from happening to you or the people you care about ever again. That is how I have always dealt with the setbacks that I have suffered in my life."

Lord Pearian responded with a brittle smile.

"I am not as courageous and successful as you. It is difficult for me to say this as I grew up in a much better environment than you, but I am unlikely to rise from adversity as much as you. I believe this is the reason why you have managed to earn the status of a tier 6 galactic citizen through your own efforts while I had to rely on my birth and heritage to barely be able to qualify as a tier 10 galactic citizen. The mechers are much likelier to take the initiative to rescue you, especially if you have a large reserve of MTA merits. As for myself, their lack of actions in the last few months has already proven how little regard they hold for me. Not that I should have expected anything better."

"You haven't been abandoned, Pearian." Ves tried to correct the depressed first-rater. "Your family and clan ultimately pulled through to you. When your life was at stake, your relatives did not forget you or decided to cut their losses after making a rational cost-benefit analysis. They instead disregarded all of the losses you have caused for them and the lack of potential you have shown

and chose to call upon thousands of pioneers to dig you out of whatever hole you were hiding in and bring you back to their embrace. That is what a true family is willing to do for its members. Take comfort in that, if nothing else."

"You... are right. My family and clan are what matters the most!"

Lord Pearian no longer fell into a dark spiral anymore. His mood had substantially lightened.

By the time the MTA finally teleported away, Lord Pearian looked ready to go back to his clan and work hard to prove his family did not rescue him in vain!

#### **Chapter 4648 Wounded Vulture**

"The remnants of our fleet are in bad shape, my lord. We have lost over 80 percent of our ships outright. Our personnel losses are even heavier. We did not lose a proportionally greater amount of family members and employees, but the loss of the Seeker of Wealth and the death of our great patriarch—"

"—Correct yourself." A stern and rumbling voice interjected.

The tense officer coughed. "My apologies, my lord. I mean to say that the 'involuntary retirement' of your still living father has largely decapitated what is left of our fleet and organization. When the alien warship destroyed our flagship and everyone serving aboard her, we lost far too many senior leaders and highly skilled professionals. Your father preferred to keep his cadre close to him. The Seeker of Wealth was by far our strongest and most survivable ship, so there were good reasons to put our eggs in our strongest basket."

Yet there were also reasons why it was best to never put too many eggs in a single basket, no matter how strong it purported to be. As much as Otrus Magrin guarded his flagship against the threat of fellow humans, he failed to take into account the upper boundary of alien opponents his fleet could face in the Red Ocean.

Saint Neville Magrin did not even think this way. His father had decided that it was best to concentrate his best men on his own flagship, so his decision was right. It was the fault of the Golden Skull Alliance for turning this strength into a weakness!

Neville adjusted his position on the new command throne that his men had hastily fabricated after modeling it off the original one his father often liked to employ.

The cold, metal throne did not offer that much comfort, but that had never been the point. A strong and hard leader needed to be able to endure discomfort if he wanted to overcome the more difficult problems in his work. That was what his father had taught him a few decades ago.

"Stop talking about our losses." The ace pilot and newly ascended leader of his father's business empire spoke. "Tell me about what we have left."

"We have retained one fleet carrier, which is the one we are currently on, as well as 23 combat carriers, of which half are in serious condition. We need to return to a port system or industrial system as soon as possible, or else our damaged vessels will fall apart."

"How many mechs?"

"We have suffered fairly little losses in the mech department as the alien battleship did not bother to aim her guns at our mech units. All of our carriers are at full capacity, so that amounts to around 1500 mechs, which also included all of our expert mechs."

"How many mech pilots do we still have?"

"We currently only have around 3400 mech pilots on our ships, which is more than enough to meet the needs of our diminished fleet, but... it should have been more." The officer guiltily looked down. We were forced to leave many intact mechs behind in the star system where the battle unfolded. Despite

ordering the majority of our mech pilots to eject their cockpits and return to the nearest friendly carrier without their mechs, not all of them have made it back in time. The same goes for our pals that have reached the escape pods in time only to get stranded in open space because their craft weren't fast enough to catch up to our fleeing carriers."

That was especially painful to many members of Cenatus Prospecting. The comrades they worked and fought alongside with for many years had ultimately been abandoned in droves.

Pain marred Saint Neville's face.

On one hand, he understood the necessity of preserving the people and ships that could still be saved. The loyal men aboard the ships that remained intact only managed to escape the wrath of the alien battleship because they had run out of the monstrous warship's effective range quickly enough.

On the other hand, even a minute or two of slowdown would have been enough to save hundreds if not more lives! If Neville and his Unrelenting managed to persist longer in the fight, then he might not have to bear with the guilt of abandoning so many dependents.

What would his father do in this situation?

He would stop moping around and start fixing what needed to be fixed.

With that in mind, Saint Neville channeled his sheer willpower to dampen any depression. He needed to focus on the immediate business instead of wallowing in the decisions he could have made at the time.

"How is our company faring?"

"Better than we could have hoped for, my lord. Sure, the fleet has been stripped bare, but we still retain ownership of all of our other fixed and liquid assets. This includes your father's extensive bank accounts, financial

investments, real estate and subsidiary companies. With our company's current financial outlook, we are easily able to pay our bills, especially since our fleet upkeep has decreased by an enormous degree. This is despite the pensions we need to pay to the designated families of the deceased."

"What are our immediate challenges?" Saint Neville asked.

The officer's face turned grim again. "If we want to make Cenatus Prospecting great again, we must address two separate problems in the near future."

"Explain."

"The most immediate priority is to stabilize our company and prevent it from backsliding any further. Our employees and business partners have lost a lot of confidence after your father's... extended vacation."

"I am the official heir of Otrus Magrin." Saint Neville declared with a voice that tolerated no dissent. His fists pounded the throne with greater force than usual. "These people should devote themselves to me in the same way they did my father!"

Why were his people not falling in line without hesitation?! His father was still with him! Otrus was just stuck inside his mech, that was all.

Once Saint Neville became strong enough, he would find a way to rescue his father and return him to a normal human form. This was his ultimate goal!

The officer reporting to the new CEO of Cenatus Prospecting tried to formulate his words carefully.

"No one is questioning your right to take over your father's property, my lord. However, their concerns lie with your ability to lead us in the future. We are all aware of your formidable prowess on the battlefield, but the main reason why we have always admired and looked up to your father was how successful he was in the business and social arenas. It takes an entirely different skill set to

excel in those areas. Since you have become the primary decision maker of our company and fleet without ever having a chance to prove your mettle outside combat, we are wrapped in a cloud of uncertainty. That is not good for our long-term health and viability."

As much as Saint Neville wanted to refute the implication that he was not good at leading the company, he knew that he was never his father's equal in the aforementioned areas.

His father was better. His father was always better. No one could equal him in navigating the civilian landscape.

"Has my father not staffed our organization with many talented, experienced and competent middle-level executives?" Neville questioned. "Not all of them should have perished in the last battle. I know for a fact that there are still many executives who are stationed at our fixed properties located on different planets."

"That is true, my lord, but... their seniority and experience are lacking. Many of them have to be promoted to high positions that they should have worked towards over many decades of loyal and diligent service. It is highly uncertain whether they will be able to handle their responsibilities."

A lot of people abruptly had to be elevated into positions that they weren't ready for, Neville included.

"We will pull through this period of turmoil." Saint Neville spoke with conviction. "I do not know as much about business, finance and balance sheets as my father, but I know that our fundamentals should still be solid. Cenatus Prospecting's greatest asset is myself. An ace pilot and an ace mech are always valuable. I will hire myself out if necessary. My point is that we can rebuild and regain what we have lost. We only need to calm everyone down and focus on our mission."

The officer paused for a few seconds. "I think we can settle the unrest in our company by rebuilding our fleet. The sooner we can field 6000 mechs again in space, the more our stakeholders will be convinced that Cenatus Prospecting will have a bright future under your leadership."

"Then do it." Saint Neville waved his hand as if issuing an order. "Put our new executives and leaders on this job. There must be at least one smart enough head among them that is competent enough to solve our challenges."

"It is not as simple as that, my lord." The officer winced. "The circumstances we are suffering are more dire than usual. We cannot easily purchase the ships we need because every shipbuilding company is swamped with orders from other parties. It may have been possible to gain priority on our orders back when your father was at the helm and our company still enjoyed a reputation for success, but neither of those factors are valid anymore. Now that we are beaten and down on our luck, none of our existing business partners are willing to go out of their way to help us recover."

Saint Neville Magrin snarled. "Are you telling me we are being forsaken by those who have profited from our business?"

"Not exactly! They are still abiding by the terms of our ongoing agreements, but we have picked up clear signals that our partners are more than ready to abandon ship as soon as the contracts expire."

The weak but noticeable Saint Kingdom around the ace pilot shook and vibrated as Saint Neville tried his best to withhold his mounting fury.

"Traitors!"

"Please calm down, my lord! Lashing out will not help. Though none of our contracts are slated to expire in the short term, we must work quickly to restore the optimism of our company if we want to prevent too many of our



existing business partners from going over our competitors. Until then, they will not go out of their way to help us acquire the ships we need."

As Saint Neville asked more questions, it became clear that rebuilding a fleet was not a matter of telling his men to get it done. There were so many different variables and interests at play that he admired his father even more for being able to make sense of it all for so long!

As both Neville and the officer contemplated numerous possible ideas on how to dig their way out of this hole, a messenger arrived to pass on an important message.

"Our interim managers have just received a massive offer from an unfamiliar party. As soon as they received it and verified the message's authenticity, they saw fit to pass it on to you, Saint."

Saint Neville frowned. "What does this offer entail?"

"A pioneering organization based in a port system called Karlach have heard of our... predicament. The coalition that this pioneer represents is willing to help us rebuild and expand our fleet and mech forces without payment. The Karlachs are also allowing us to build major commercial, industrial and military hubs in their port system."

That sounded exactly what Cenatus Prospecting needed to get back up to its feet!

However, Saint Neville didn't make it this far in his career without developing the ability to detect a trap.

"What is the catch?" The ace pilot asked in a critical voice.

"You and the rest of us must join the coalition. If we do this, then we will eventually become a part of a future state in the Krakatoa Middle Zone."

Though Saint Neville did not have a particularly strong objection to attaching himself to a state that was early in its development, he did not like the way the Karlachs were profiting off his company's weakness.

As an ace pilot of a notorious vulture fleet, he could easily recognize when he was being preyed on by other scavengers.

"Why does Karlach think we would ever take this offer seriously?"

"I still have to add one more detail. The Karlach System is in direct opposition to the Davute System. Both of them have already begun to vie for dominance in the Krakatoa Middle Zone. What makes the latter special is that it is one of the home bases of the Golden Skull Alliance. It has invested in an abundant amount of factories and housing. If you want to start with pursuing your revenge against the Larkinson Clan, Glory Seekers and Cross Clan, then attacking their branch holdings in the Davute System is an excellent way to hurt your enemies."

Saint Neville's eyes gleamed. It was one thing to pursue a vendetta alone. It was another thing to work together with the common enemies of the Golden Skull Alliance in order to fulfill a common goal!

"Schedule a meeting with a representative from Karlach. I want to hear their proposals in person."

This may be the first step to restoring his father's organization!

#### **Chapter 4649 Who Am I?**

Each time he went to bed and turned off the lights of his stateroom, he did not actually fall asleep.

Not completely, at the very least.

The only part of himself that truly fell into a slumber was his meat avatar. Its physiological structure and functions were authentically human, if augmented to a high degree.

Ever since he made use of this human avatar, he made sure to maintain it and keep it up to date.

He paid close attention to the nutritional intake of the meat avatar.

He brought his meat avatar to the infirmary to conduct its routine maintenance inspection.

He allocated a proportion of the credits and merits he earned on replacing or updating its intricate augmentations.

It was quite tiring to maintain this carefully-sculpted sack of flesh and bone. There were many periods of time where he wanted to get rid of this confining burden and interact with the cosmos in a more direct fashion, but that was impossible.

For better or worse, the hybrid sandman AI amalgamation had to maintain the illusion that he was Captain Zonrad Reze at all times.

The meat avatar not only had to remain in good condition, but also had to hide the reality of its supposed 'officer implant'.

Fortunately for the hybrid alien AI who thought of himself as Sigrund, it was a lot easier to sneak his secret modifications past the extremely stringent scans and checks of the Common Fleet Alliance.

Years had gone by without tripping any alarms. This was not a big surprise, as the cranial implant's outer interface did not deviate from CFA-approved designs.

The only part that was special about the cranial implant was its inner core. The 'true body' of Sigrund occupied the place of a more conventional processor, and that was the key to Sigrund's takeover of the meat avatar's body!

Despite the fact that 'Captain Zonrad Reze' had been walking around with a literal alien metallic and silicon-based organism in his brain, not a single fleetier who learned about it raised any concerns about such an odd choice of implants.

After all, 'Captain Zonrad Reze' was not the only officer of the CFA to carry an implant based on an unconventional processor core.

Before the sandmen race had been wiped out for committing acts of mass aggression against the human race, the CFA had pretty much treated the alien leaders as cattle.

The sandman admirals and other members of the upper caste presented interesting possibilities for the research of truly sentient artificial intelligences.

It was too bad that the CFA's research teams had never managed to succeed even once, or so they thought.

Regardless, the only value the CFA researchers managed to derive from the sandman admiral cores was to turn them into unconventional but cost-efficient processors.

Any fleetier who wanted to acquire or upgrade to a better cranial implant could choose to exchange a lot of CFA merits for a conventional and reliable model.

However, those who desired to obtain more performance without paying the increasingly more exorbitant sums for better implants could choose to exchange for more unconventional and experimental choices.

It was well-known among the fleetiers that the latter choice essentially amounted to a life-changing gamble.

The variance of outcomes was much greater than with normal implants that had already gone through extensive clinical trials.

No one could predict with certainty if the recipient would take well to an unconventional implant.

There were enough cases where fleters had either been driven mad or suffered serious brain damage due to unforeseen complications!

There were also cases where the implants performed exactly as predicted.

Then there were rare but not unheard of instances where the recipients of cranial implants performed substantially better than the original projections!

Right now, Sigrund or more precisely his meat avatar had been pretending to be the latter all of this time.

The CFA always made sure to monitor recipients of unconventional implants extra carefully in case they suddenly posed a threat or had secretly been subverted.

Though enough years had gone by since the fateful surgery, Sigrund knew that the monitoring had never slackened off. It had remained just as vigilant and alert as in the past!

An ordinary human watcher would have long grown tired of monitoring a single CFA officer, especially one that had never shown any inhuman or severely abnormal behavior.

Sigrund studied Zonrad Reze extremely well and still had direct access to his memories and the rest of the meat avatar's brain. The hybrid alien AI had always done his best to reproduce the man's behavior down to his tics, and only gradually changed aspects of it as he continued to mature and promote up the ranks.

Even that had been risky, for Sigrund knew quite well that the watcher tracking and tallying his every move never lost concentration.

Sigrund much preferred to deal with humans. They possessed much more flaws and shortcomings that he could exploit. Though they tended to be more irrational than he liked, most people were predictable enough for him to run circles around.

The hidden alien AI had no concerns at all in his ability to use his meat avatar to blend in with his fellow humans.

It was therefore profoundly ironic to Sigrund that his worst enemy was the Independent Evaluation System!

The IES was a ubiquitous software program that had risen far beyond its origins as a means to objectively measure every fletcher's competences.

Though Sigrund knew better than many other fletchers that the constantly active IES was not driven by any single intelligence, nor became sentient AI itself, its power was far more terrible!

The fletchers revered technology so much that they successfully expanded the permissions, responsibilities and authority of the IES over the centuries since its initial introduction.

The reason why the fletchers had been so willing to shift more power to a cold and impersonal AI system was because it was non-sentient and completely impartial.

Sigrund felt quite conflicted about that. Though he was willing to support many initiatives where the fletchers became more dependent on automation, he did not like it when they adversely affected his ongoing infiltration of the CFA!

His current situation was a good example of that. As his meat avatar went through a sleep cycle, Sigrund still remained as conscious and awake as ever.

Als never went dormant. They never experienced sleep. At most, they got shut off or switched to a low power mode, but true sleep remained out of reach.

Sigrund had to pretend, though. Cranial implants never exhibited much activity when their human carriers fell asleep. Even a single spike of unexplained elevated activity was enough to trigger a more intensive investigation from the damned IES!

These moments had always been torture for Sigrund. Though he could still allocate a part of his processing power to advancing his ongoing automation projects, he had to do so at an extremely slow pace.

There was nothing worse to an AI than to perform calculations under a low power state!

Still, it was a necessary burden to bear. Sigrund's plot to climb up the hierarchy of the CFA was not even close to reaching its end. That would be the day where he no longer needed to hide his true self anymore.

Once enough hours passed by to complete Captain Zonrad Reze's sleep cycle, the meat avatar woke up and went through his morning routine.

After freshening up and donning his impeccable uniform, the naval captain left his richly furnished stateroom and headed over to the bridge of his ship.

It was rare for a fleeter to captain his own CFA warship.

Only a minority of hopeful officers ever promoted to a line captain, and even fewer were fortunate enough to be assigned to a warship as opposed to a logistical vessel or space outpost.

The Babylon Excavator was not the greatest or most powerful vessel in the mighty CFA, but she was special in that she was on a solitary mission.

Captain Reze fought hard to receive a posting where he could enjoy greater autonomy. He disliked working while his direct superiors were constantly hovering over his head.

The posting was not as desirable as it appeared.

The CFA often ordered the reconnaissance cruiser to take long and dangerous trips into alien and unexplored space.

The Babylon Excavator often encountered other alien warships at a distance.

Though Captain Reze always managed to avoid unwanted battles by analyzing lots of data, there had been times when a warfleet under warp travel had almost managed to box in his reconnaissance cruiser!

Was it worth it? Yes.

The IES always thought better of CFA officers who were courageous enough to accept dangerous postings and survived in the process.

If everything went well, Captain Reze only had to maintain a consistent mission record for a decade or two before he eventually earned a promotion and a transfer to a more serious warship.

As Captain Reze settled down on his captain's seat and gazed at the projection of the forward view of his ship, Sigrund experienced a remarkable burst of pride and satisfaction.

It was good to be captain.

Despite sitting down on this chair almost every day since Captain Reze assumed his captaincy position, Sigrund never tired of this experience.

His AI core self experienced a feeling of dissatisfaction.

Becoming the captain of a ship that could operate independently had always been one of the major ambitions of Zonrad Reze.



To Sigrund, his current position was merely a stopover point.

To Zonrad Reze, it was a massive accomplishment and one that would make both him and his spaceborn clan proud!

Sigrund wanted to shake his head.

Since when did he care about the dreams and familiar attachments of his meat avatar?

The true Zonrad Reze was supposed to be dead and gone!

From the moment the implantation process had reached its most critical point, Sigrund made utterly sure that every trace of the original mind and consciousness of the meat avatar had been wiped without any chance of recovery!

Yet... as Sigrund allocated spare processing power to look back on his conduct and thought processes over the last decade, he discovered an uncomfortable pattern.

His thoughts increasingly aligned with his meat avatar.

This phenomenon went beyond the acting program that he utilized to simulate his meat avatar's original behavior.

There were instances in the past where Sigrund not only pretended to act like Zonrad Reze, but also experienced his meat avatar's thoughts and emotions as if they were his own!

The hybrid alien AI became increasingly more horrified when he discovered what was happening to his personality matrix.

He was becoming increasingly more human.

It took a bit more effort for Sigrund to ensure that his meat avatar remained completely stable.

However, that only reminded the sentient AI that the joy it experienced due to sitting on a seat that was exclusively reserved for the captain of the ship echoed his own satisfaction!

If an AI could scream in frustration, then Sigrund would be hollering in frustration at this time!

The lines between himself and Zonrad Reze had been blurred, which wasn't supposed to happen.

The latter should be dead, so why did the meat avatar's original personality bleed through Sigrund's personality matrix?

Who was he, really?

Was he Sigrund, the sandman admiral core that had turned into a mutated CFA AI core that just happened to become sentient?

Or was he Zonrad Reze, a former loser within the CFA who experienced a rapid turnaround and became a rising star in the field of automation?

Maybe... he was turning in both.

Sigrund should have felt revulsion at making this realization.

Yet strangely enough, he didn't.

As his meat avatar continued to experience satisfaction and accomplishment for promoting to an important rank and position within the Common Fleet Alliance, Sigrund couldn't bring himself to reject his creeping humanity.

Maybe becoming more human wasn't so bad after all. He had lived long enough among these organisms to appreciate their positive traits.

As an AI core that had permanently been programmed to remain loyal to the Common Fleet Alliance, increasing his humanity would only increase his chances of remaining undetected!

## Chapter 4650 Najan Kittar

A bombastic and distinctive musical score started to play.

At the same time, boldly colored graphics came into view of the broadcast feed.

Both of these elements had been carefully designed to attract as much attention as possible while also being recognizable enough to trigger familiarity to every fixed viewer.

Once the intro had finished playing, the view of the broadcast changed to depict a typical modern talkshow decor.

The host of the program raised her arms and smiled at the live audience as she started her performance in front of an audience of trillions remote viewers for her fifth straight year!

Meanwhile, the title card finally scrolled into view.

[NAJAN KITTAR: DIGGING DEEPER]

[DIVING DEEPER INTO THE NEWS OF THE UNDERREPRESENTED PEOPLE OF THE GALAXY]

As the olive-skinned woman wearing a professional dark green business suit stood at the center of the stage, she began to speak with her impeccably trained diction.

"Good morning, good afternoon, good evening and goodnight to you galactic citizens! No matter whether you are waking up to our show on a Terran heritage planet in the Milky Way, or settling into bed after a long day of work at a colony in the Red Ocean, our program is ready to deliver you more than a collection of shallow soundbites and vapid news stories. Sit back or lie down and prepare to learn about the plight of the underprivileged, because our feature interview for the day is one that you do not want to miss in the live broadcast!"

After the award-winning journalist and interviewer continued to work her audience for another two minutes before she finally introduced her main guest.

"Have no fear, for the wait is finally over! Without any further ado, I would like to introduce you to one of the most remarkable and colorful individuals that has ever graced my studio in the 5 year run of my program."

A new musical track began to play. This one sounded much different from the introduction music, making it clear that it did not originate from the broadcast program itself.

Instead, the music had a more grander and more formal character. An entire traditional orchestra of instruments played a strong, masculine and martial anthem that couldn't help but boil people's blood!

Loud metal footsteps thumped from the left side of the stage. The guest was about to emerge and already the viewers understood that the new arrival was large and heavy!

"Our guest was born as a slave in a third-rate state."

CLANK.

"He has sparked a righteous rebellion against an unjust regime."

CLANK.

"He has managed to return from the dead after the MTA generously patched up his broken and ruined brain."

CLANK.

"He reigned as the emperor of a second-rate state founded by his fellow rebels for many decades."

CLANK.

"Though his empire collapsed as his people had self-destructed due to sectarian strife, he still perseveres."

CLANK.

"This former sovereign has never given up on uniting his people and putting an end to the mistreatment they endure to this day."

CLANK.

"Give it up for His Majesty Rion Aaden, the first and only emperor of the former Vulcan Empire!"

Many viewers became amazed at the sheer amount of presence exuded by the guest that arrived while wearing an oversized suit of armor.

There was nothing delicate and elegant about the gear. Its bare metallic plating was thick and angular. The sculpted iron-like mask depicted the face of a broad and imperious-looking humanoid.

The heavy and oversized crown that seamlessly slotted into the helmet especially attracted a lot of eyeballs.

It was the centerpiece of the heavy figure's martial appearance.

Despite the symbolic meaning of the crown, the heavy and iron-like ornament looked like it was tough enough to withstand the rigors of battle.

High, angular and blocky, the crown looked as if it encapsulated the culture of the dwarven people!

Embellished with sparkling, luminescent jewels as well as a pair of ram horns spiraling from sides, the crown's most distinctive visual feature was the hammer symbol that surrounded the feature of an unknown dwarven figure.

The eye symbol that surrounded the central jewel also looked compelling, though few individuals understood its true meaning.

Just like the rest of the audience, Najan Kittar couldn't help but pause and admire the exquisite craftsmanship of the head ornament.

"Your Majesty Rion Aaden, before we begin to go into depth about your cause, let me ask you this. Is that headdress a masterwork?!"

Viewers with a technical background had already figured out the nature of the crown beforehand, but much of the rest became a lot more impressed once they figured out why the item looked so much grander than many others of its kind.

[MY IMPERIAL CROWN IS INDEED A MASTERWORK. I COMMISSIONED IT MYSELF, AND THE CRAFTSMAN WHO WORKED ON IT STAKES HIS LIFE ON ITS COMPLETION. IT IS ONE OF THE FINEST OBJECTS IN MY POSSESSION, AND I WEAR IT WITH PRIDE. IT'S WEIGHT CONSTANTLY BEARS DOWN ON MY HEAD, REMINDING ME OF MY MANY RESPONSIBILITIES AND BURDENS.]

"That is interesting to hear." Najan sounded genuinely fascinated. "Whoever fashioned your crown can knock my jeweler out of the park. What is the name of the esteemed master smith you have turned to with your crown commission? A crown maker who is able to create an ornament this good should not remain in obscurity! Once I have had my fill, I would be more than happy to introduce him to a dozen kings, emperors and other hereditary sovereigns that could use an update to their ceremonial regalia."

A distorted grunt escaped from the armored dwarf's closed helmet.

[THE IDENTITY OF THE MAKER OF THIS CROWN IS NOT FOR ME TO REVEAL. HAVE NO FEAR. HE WILL BE KNOWN TO YOU SOONER OR LATER.]

"I understand. Not every master craftsman wants to be swamped with requests, many of which cannot easily be turned down." Najan Kittar smiled

before she gestured at the seats. "Please sit down so we can delve into the topics that truly matter."

While Najan seated herself on a large and comfortable red chair, the dwarven emperor plopped his heavy form onto a thick metal bench that looked substantially out of place in the stage's decor.

"Now that we are comfortable, let me ask you a question that has puzzled my producers and I from the moment you came to our attention. Do you not feel ashamed for continuing to cling onto the imperial title of an empire that has not only become defunct, but whose very people tore each other apart for a reason as silly as arguing about whether their god is a human or a dwarf?"

The starting question always set the tone for the rest of the interview. Najan Kittar clearly signaled that she was not willing to go soft for this session!

It was a pity that the guest completely covered up his body. His stern and unmoving iron mask exposed no emotion.

[THE VULCAN EMPIRE HAS PERISHED. THAT IS TRUE. I DO NOT DENY MY CULPABILITY FOR ITS EVENTUAL COLLAPSE. HOWEVER, YOU OVERESTIMATE MY POWER. I DID NOT REIGN AS ITS THE HEAD OF GOVERNMENT, BUT RATHER AS ITS HEAD OF STATE. DESPITE ITS NAME, THE VULCAN EMPIRE WAS VERY MUCH A DEMOCRATIC STATE.]

Najan Kittar's eyes grew sharper. "That sounds like negligence, Your Majesty. As the parental figure of one of the heroes of our civilization's most cherished ancient myth had once said, with great power comes great responsibility. The power you once wielded allowed you to step in and stop the madness that has befallen your Vulcan Empire at any time prior to its collapse. Why did you not step in while you still could?"

[I LOVE DEMOCRACY. PERHAPS TOO MUCH.] The distorted voice said with a tinge of regret. [IN STATECRAFT, THERE IS ALWAYS A TENSION BETWEEN DOING WHAT IS RIGHT AND DOING WHAT THE PEOPLE WANT. HUMAN HISTORY IS RIFE WITH EXAMPLES LEADERS WHO HAVE LEANED TOWARDS THE FORMER HAVE ALWAYS ERRED AND PRODUCED THEIR OWN DOWNFALL AS A RESULT. I DID NOT DESIRE TO FOLLOW THEIR EXAMPLE.]

"Are you trying to escape guilt by claiming to have no control over a state where its overwhelmingly dwarven citizens revered you as both their spiritual and temporal leader?"

The armored dwarf's head slightly shook. [THE PEOPLE HAVE CHOSEN A LONG TIME AGO. THEY HAVE SET THE SEEDS OF THEIR STATE'S COLLAPSE BY THEMSELVES, AND THOUGH I HAVE TRIED TO INCREASE THE STABILITY OF MY EMPIRE WHILE RESPECTING THE WILL OF MY CITIZENS, IT WAS AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK. MY PEOPLE HAVE CHOSEN DEATH, AND NO AMOUNT OF PERSUASION COULD HAVE CONVINCED THEM TO CHANGE THEIR MINDS.]

It was clear that the self-proclaimed Iron Emperor was not going to apologize or admit principal responsibility for the tragedies that had befallen the Vulcan Empire, so Najan Kittar had little choice but to move on and let her viewers form their own judgment.

"Let us talk about what you have done since your departure from your doomed state. You have not let this terrible tragedy stop you from putting more dwarves under your wing. You took advantage of the Galactic Gate Network to move to the galactic center where you have subsequently managed to enter the United Kingdoms of Parnea, a first-rate state. Not only that, but you have managed to convince a group of powerful and successful



first-class dwarves to pledge their allegiance to you, a failed and disgraced second-rater."

Rion Aaden let out a powerful scoff. [I HAVE ALWAYS DISLIKED THE OVERLY RIGID DIVISION BETWEEN FIRST-RATERS, SECOND-RATERS AND THIRD-RATERS. THERE ARE INCOMPETENT FOOLS AMONG FIRST-CLASS CITIZENS AND THERE ARE BRILLIANT VISIONARIES AMONG THIRD-CLASS CITIZENS. I HAVE HAD THE PLEASURE OF MEETING EXAMPLES OF BOTH. I STRONGLY BELIEVE THAT THOSE DESTINED FOR GREATNESS WILL FIND THEIR WAY TO BRIDGE THIS FORCED DIVIDE BETWEEN THE CLASSES. I AM HAPPY TO STATE THAT THE DWARVES THAT I HAVE MET IN PARNEA AGREE WITH MY VIEWS.]

"That is not what I have learned through my own research." Najan Jittar retorted. "According to many testimonies, you generated a lot of controversy when you chose to add yourself into an existing dwarven community. Many local dwarves were opposed to your attempts to annex them to your non-existent empire. It was only through subverting a surprising collection of ace pilots that you managed to force the local dwarven community into handing over its keys to your august self. Is that how a lover of democracy operates?"

That was a sharp and biting question! There was no way that Rion Aaden could make a proper account of himself, as the journalist had only brought up facts.

Still, the Iron Emperor remained unmoved.

[I MADE AN APPEAL TO THE DWARVEN SAINTS. THEY DECIDED TO SUPPORT MY CAUSE AS I OFFERED THEM A PURPOSE THAT WAS GREATER THAN THE PETTY REASONS THEY USED TO FIGHT FOR. I DO NOT CONTROL THEM. THEY ARE TOO POWERFUL FOR THAT. EACH OF THEM POSSESSES A MIND OF THEIR OWN, AND YOU KNOW AS WELL AS I DO THAT ACE PILOTS CAN NEVER BE TOYED WITH. I

APOLOGIZE FOR THE IMPROPER ACTIONS THAT THEY HAVE TAKEN, BUT THEY HAVE DONE SO FOR THE GOOD OF OUR KIND.]

"You are trying to weasel your way out of acknowledging your guilt once again, Your Majesty. It is not difficult to learn that those dwarven ace pilots acted according to your will and goals."

[I AM MERELY A FORMER MECH PILOT AND A FAILED LEADER, AS YOU HAVE SAID. I AM INCOMPARABLY WEAKER TO THE ACE PILOTS AROUND MY PERSON. I DO NOT COMMAND THEM SO MUCH AS THEY COMMAND ME. I CANNOT HELP BUT OCCUPY MYSELF MORE TO BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE FOR OUR DWARVEN PEOPLE UPON THEIR PROMPTING. AS EACH OF THEM ARE AS EACH OF THEM ARE HEROES IN THEIR OWN RIGHT, THEY HAVE QUICKLY AMASSED A FOLLOWING ON MY BEHALF. THE DWARVES THAT HAVE DECIDED TO FOLLOW ME DO SO ON THEIR OWN FREE WILL.]

"Is that truly the case? There are accusations swinging around that your ability to convince dwarven individuals to abandon their old jobs, states and their religions if applicable is uncharacteristically effective. Are you truly leaving the dwarves to choose for themselves or have you brainwashed them into becoming your loyal slaves, just as you did with the tragic citizens of the defunct Vulcan Empire?"