

## Mech 2081

### *Chapter 2081 Eccentric Selection Process*

The big day had come. To many young mech designers in their twenties and thirties, the opportunity to work and learn from the most prominent Journeymen of the star cluster had arrived!

Pretty much every mech designer who resided in the hotel rented out by the Larkinson Clan knew what was at stake.

The men and women who had made it through the extensive selection process watched each other with varying amounts of friendliness and wariness.

Those who made it this far all possessed enough strength to earn each other's respect.

A lot of candidates had forged new friendships as they waited for the time of the final selection.

The concentration of more than a thousand young but promising mech designers of similar status meant that many of them had already made a lot of gains up to this point.

Even if they washed out and returned home, the networking they accomplished would definitely pay off in the future!

Of course, the applicants didn't forget that they were competitors as well. Though no one was sure how many mech designers the LMC planned to hire, the amount would certainly not be in the hundreds!

This meant that the friendly mech designer from the Reinald Republic that they bantered with might enjoy the opportunity while they themselves returned empty-handed!

All of this led to a strange dynamic where the mech designers treated each other in a complex fashion. Those who were more socially adept had gained a lot of advantages during this period.

A number of passenger shuttles soon arrived in front of the hotel. The large shuttles were shaped like buses and could accommodate a hundred passengers while providing excellent comfort.

Additionally, the Living Sentinels dispatched a company of aerial mechs. Each of them looked formidable and could protect the convoy of passenger shuttles from all kinds of threats.

The wealth and power of the Larkinson Clan was on immediate display. As the mech designers entered the vehicles, their determination to join the LMC only burned hotter!

After a brief trip, the mech designers arrived at the expansive base the Larkinson Clan had rented.

As the shuttles landed at the designated zones, they immediately felt different as a number of different glows affected their minds!

During their stay on Cinach VI, every mech designer had the privilege of experiencing the glows of LMC mechs in person!

To many of them, the effect they had on their moods had been eye-opening.

"Please don't mind all of the glows." One of the clansmen in charge of corralling them instructed. "When you are accepted into the clan, you will quickly grow used to them. Many of you will even appreciate their comforting presence. The Larkinson Clan and the LMC are inseparable from the clan patriarch's glows. If their influence somehow frightens or offends you, then you can always head back into a shuttle. We are offering free return trips!"

A few of the mech designers chuckled, but none of them turned around. Those who believed in the conspiracy theories that the glows were designed to brainwash people or something never applied in the first place. Everyone who made it this far were all fans of the mysterious glows!

"Very well. Now follow me and behave yourself. The two lead designers of the LMC will be examining you in person. I've heard that they have prepared some unusual tests, so be ready to do anything, no matter how ludicrous it sounds."

The group of mech designers slowly walked across the base, encountering many impressive LMC mechs along the way.

A pair of Blackbeaks along with some Crystal Lords moved across their path.

A freshly-fabricated Aurora Titan was heading towards the section occupied by the Avatars of Myth.

A trio of ferocious Doom Guards were slowly moving to one of the ships of the Battle Criers.

Each of these mechs featured the standardized coating of the various mech forces under the control of the Larkinson Clan.

Each of the mech designers were aware that the Larkinson Clan was more than just a group ruling over a lucrative mech company. It used to belong to a family of honorable soldiers! This storied history generated a lot of admiration among the candidates.

Eventually, they reached a large hall that had been specially prepared to conduct the final selection. A handful of mechs of different models already stood at various places. A number of guards were stationed throughout the hall in order to maintain order and prevent any outsiders from interfering with the selection process.

Ves and Gloriana both showed up in their clan uniforms. They looked fairly indistinguishable from the other clansmen if not for their confident demeanors! The success they enjoyed and the power they accumulated amplified their stature and turned them into individuals who would always stand out in a crowd!

Their cats obediently sat next to their feet. The two felines stared vigilantly at the candidates while flicking their tails. If they detected any problems, they would surely warn their owners!

Ves rapidly counted the number of heads with his implant and determined that 1053 candidates had arrived today. That was a little less than was on the list. He didn't ask why a couple of them hadn't showed up. It didn't matter anyway.

"Welcome, fellow mech designers." He greeted the neatly assembled mech designers in a warm and friendly tone. "My name is Ves Larkinson, and this is Gloriana Wodin. Both of you should already know who we are. In addition, you should also be aware of the reason why you are here. Each of you have been tested and deemed worthy to receive our personal consideration. That does not mean your entry into the LMC is guaranteed. Far from it. Only 50 of you will receive an offer from us. That means that 1003 of you will be sent back home!"

Gloriana crossed her arms. "We only demand the best. If we declined to hire you, that means you fail! You can blame us all you want, but the truth of the matter is that we went for someone who is better. If you don't want that to happen to you, then be sure to perform at your best! We are not inclined to give any second chances. We don't care if you are a genius or if you have won some prestigious prize. If you can't show up when we ask for it, then that's your fault. Consistency and reliability are some of the core traits we value in the LMC."

"Remember that this is an opportunity of a lifetime for some of you. The LMC is a mech company that doesn't possess a fixed headquarters." Ves reminded them all. "This means that our headquarters is actually moving with the Larkinson Clan. Due to this reason and more, everyone who joins the LMC will also have to be adopted into the Larkinson Clan. This is an irreversible decision, but one that can transform your lives!"

None of the candidates showed any doubts. The ones who weren't willing to abandon their old families and affiliations had already been filtered out!

After making their points clear, Ves moved on and explained the rules. "My partner and I have decided to conduct separate tests on all of you. We are both selecting according to different criteria. This means if one of us has passed you over, you still have a chance. Just take into consideration that what works for Gloriana might not work for me, and vice versa. If you have done your research on us, then you should be able to guess what we appreciate."

They had both made this decision when they entered into a deadlock yesterday. Neither of them were able to come to an agreement on which set of criteria they needed to apply to the new recruits!

Eventually, they threw up their hands and decided to split everything up. Both would be conducting their separate round of tests and hire twenty-five mech designers each!

Ves started first. He stepped forward and approached the ranks of mech designers that had formed into rows. Lucky padded after him while keeping a close eye on the potential new Larkinsons.

He approached one of the corners of the row and peered into the eyes of the mech designer standing in front of him with a scrutinizing gaze.

The man tried to shy away before realizing that this might be some sort of test. The candidate did his best to muster his courage and return the stare.

Ves lingered for a few seconds before moving to the side to peer into the eyes of another mech designer.

He didn't say anything. The confused candidate wondered whether he had been passed over.

What was Ves Larkinson looking for? Why did he insist on staring at each of them in the eyes?

No one talked. No one moved. Ves went from mech designer to mech designer in a calm and patient fashion.

Not even Gloriana knew what her boyfriend was looking for, but she showed no irritation at the amount of time that Ves was determined to take.

After inspecting nearly a hundred mech designers in this fashion, he eventually halted. He stared a bit longer at a seemingly-random mech designer.

"You." Ves raised his hand and placed it on the shoulder of the mech designer. "You pass. Welcome to the LMC. You are suited to become a Larkinson."

For a moment, the lucky man in question couldn't believe what he heard? Was it that easy to earn Ves Larkinson's approval? He didn't even do anything! He just stood as straight as a rod while making sure to meet the Journeyman eyes with his own! He didn't even do anything else!

"Th.. thank you!" The man bowed with incredible glee. "I will strive to meet your expectations!"

Ves jerked his head to the side. "Head over there. One of our guides will process your entry into the Larkinson Clan after this process is done."

As the successful candidate happily walked out of the row, the other mech designers looked incredibly envious at him! They all wanted to take his place! What did he possess that allowed him to be selected straight away?

The strange and unusually short selection caused the remaining mech designers to stand a little straighter.

Ves didn't really bother with that. He resumed his routine and continued to go over every single individual.

In the end, he selected six more mech designers.

He smiled in an intriguing fashion as the seven mech designers all gathered at the side.

Each of them possessed spiritual potential!

That wasn't all. There were even more candidates who possessed spiritual potential. Since each of them were fairly talented and capable in their profession, Ves wasn't surprised to encounter over thirty mech designers with spiritual potential!

The reason why he didn't pick them up was because of several reasons.

Perhaps the vibe they exuded didn't meet his tastes. Perhaps his intuition reacted somewhat cool towards them. Perhaps the attributes he sensed from them repelled his sensibilities.

The seven he selected represented the best of the group of candidates with spiritual potential. Their strength and development varied, but Ves had a very good feeling about all of them, and that was enough!

Of course, he didn't just select them on the spot due to his feelings alone. He also made sure to go over their records through his mind. He had already downloaded the complete profiles and records of every single candidate in his implant.

There weren't any problems with the seven mech designers who possessed a good chance to advance to Journeymen. While he admittedly didn't spend a lot of time going over their strengths, he could always explore them later.

Right now, it was sufficient to know that they were worth investing in once they joined the Larkinson Clan.

When Ves withdrew from the time-consuming examination, it was Gloriana's turn to conduct her test!

She stepped forward with a grin. "Unlike my boyfriend who likes to rely on gut to make his decisions, I prefer to conduct a more objective test. As a mech designer who is expected to work under my supervision, I expect excellence in as many areas as possible! In order to see whether you have what it takes to keep up with my demands, you will have to demonstrate your intelligence!"

With a snap of a finger, a projected screen appeared in front of the faces of all of the candidates.

"What you are looking at right now is an advanced textbook that contains knowledge that I am very confident that you aren't familiar with. You have thirty minutes to absorb as much knowledge from the book as possible. After that, you have thirty minutes to complete an exam. Those of you who have managed to achieve the best scores will enter my short list!"

A lot of mech designers lit up. There were a lot of geniuses and high performers within the crowd. None of them lacked confidence in their learning ability!

However, Gloriana wasn't quite finished.

"Oh, before you ask, we won't be providing you with any seats!"

#### *Chapter 2082 Different Criteria*

Gloriana's test sounded a lot more straightforward than the inexplicable selection that Ves just performed.

The mech designers who applied to join the LMC all felt as if they returned to their student days.

As engineers and creators, every mech designer had to master the fundamental sciences. From mechanics to physics, the amount of knowledge they had to learn by heart was incredibly voluminous.

Not a lot of people possessed the intellect and learning ability to become a mech designer. However, these were essential traits to their profession, especially

considering that even the most highly-rated mech design universities only allowed its students to become Apprentice Mech Designers upon graduation at most!

While there was a lot of employment available to bottom-tier mech designers, that was not what the profession was all about. Those who stopped learning and absorbing new knowledge after graduation were not worth investing in. It was fine to put them in some dead-end design team in order to perform crunch work, but their lack of growth and improvement meant that they would never gain their employer's appreciation.

Ves and Gloriana weren't looking to exploit their new hires. Not necessarily. They wanted to build up a solid foundation for the LMC as it grew from a sector-wide enterprise into a cluster-wide enterprise and beyond.

With the meteoric growth of the mech company, the demand on low, middle and high-tier design capabilities rapidly increased!

Ves and Gloriana couldn't possibly waste their time on addressing all of these demands in person. Their time was valuable and should constantly be spent on moving their progression forward.

Therefore, acquiring new talent that could be cultivated into useful substitutes was their ultimate goal.

This was why Gloriana put a twist in her test.

The mech designers each flipped through the pages of the virtual book projected in front of their faces. The exact subject matter of the book was something that involved very complicated internal architecture concepts.

While the mech designers didn't experience much strain at the start, it quickly took more and more effort to maintain their concentration. The devious part about it was not that they were forced to stand all the time, but the angle of the projected screen only revealed its contents when their viewers looked at it in a precise angle!

If the mech designers slouched over or tilted their head in any way, the screen would immediately become illegible!

Along with the fact that they didn't have any tables to lean on or distribute their weight, the mech designers struggled increasingly more to maintain the exact posture that was required to keep reading the textbook!

Gloriana grinned. She personally programmed all of it. She keenly studied the people who held up better than the others.

Eventually, one of the candidates had the bright idea to take regular breaks. The man in question simply decided to sit on the ground and take the time to mentally process the complicated subject he just absorbed.

His example inspired the mech designers around him. Soon enough, over seventy percent of the entire crowd began to follow suit!

"It's too bad he's male." Gloriana shook her head.

Some of the mech designers stubbornly remained ramrod straight. Perhaps their bodies were strong enough to endure strain, or perhaps they believed their performance would improve their scores.

Whatever the case, after thirty minutes of frantic learning, the textbooks disappeared.

"Alright, the examination begins now. You have thirty minutes to solve all of the solutions with the knowledge that you have learned. Good luck." She said.

As was typical to mech design courses, the exam was not a simple quiz where the test paper needed to be answered by performing some dry calculations and derivations.

Instead, each candidate came face-to-face with a design interface that had already loaded in a very complicated section of the internals of a mech!

The internal makeup of this section contained some obvious and less obvious problems. Each candidate had to fix these problems by applying what they learned and knew in the best way possible.

Due to the openness of the problems, the candidates possessed a very wide range of freedom. Gloriana rarely set up a problem in a way that could be solved in a limited amount of ways.

This was a true challenge to the mech designers!

The reason why Gloriana set up the exam in this way was to mitigate the advantage of augmentations as much as possible. Those with better backgrounds who were able to afford a gene mod template or a cranial implants must have absorbed the knowledge in the textbook much better.

Yet that didn't mean that they were necessarily good at applying what they learned!

Mech design was a profession based on practice rather than theory. A mech designer wasn't some erudite theoretical physicist who locked himself inside a lab all day to run formulas in their minds.

They used what they learned to get something done!

The performance of the candidates quickly diverged. There were those who possessed powerful augmentations but managed to apply what they learned in a competent fashion.

There were also those who enjoyed the same advantages but let the stress of their situation get the better of them! They failed to match the performance in the previous tests conducted by the recruiters!

On the other hand, there were plenty of mech designers from poorer backgrounds who managed to tough it out and bear the burden without substantially affecting their normal performance.

"Mech design can be stressful at some times." Gloriana softly whispered. "When the stakes are high and the time is short, I expect my assistants to withstand the pressure and perform up to my expectations."

Ves agreed with her. He knew that she wasn't looking at the absolute best performers, but rather those who were able to match the performance of their earlier tests as closely as possible.

When the thirty minutes finally passed, the projected design interfaces finally disappeared. No matter how many problems the mech designers had to solve, they no longer had the opportunity to do so! What they managed to accomplish in this brief interval of time was their only chance to prove themselves in this manner!

"Alright, I have taken note of your results and scored them accordingly." Gloriana sternly notified. "Those who have performed well have attracted my attention. Please make sure you maintain your performance in the subsequent tests."

She didn't say that those who did poorly were still in her consideration. That caused some of the deep thinkers in the crowd to frown.

Unlike Ves, Gloriana wasn't ready to make her choice until she conducted all of the tests she had in store!

What she sought were well-rounded mech designers who excelled in every criteria she set! Though it was unlikely for any of the candidates to approach her level of perfection, she didn't want to get stuck with assistants who might fail her at a critical moment!

Anyway, now that Gloriana's turn had finished, it was time for Ves to conduct his next test. He stepped forward and gestured at one of the mechs looming quietly at the side.

"Do you see that Doom Guard?" He asked with a smile.

Though the mech was inactive, its fearsome red coating and ominous scarlet third eye already intimidated some of the candidates.

While everyone stood at a healthy distance from the mech, the truth was that they were already within its range!

Ves calmly approached the Doom Guard until he roughly reached halfway between the striker mech and the crowd of candidates.

He loudly tapped his foot against the floor. "My next test is simple. When the Doom Guard standing behind me becomes active and turns on its glow, your task is to approach me! The first five mech designers who reach my side will pass and be guaranteed entry into the LMC!"

A lot of mech designers lit up in that condition! Compared to Gloriana's selection process which appeared to be a marathon, the tests given by Ves were much more direct.

As long as they performed well in some way, they received an immediate entry in the job of their dreams without needing to undergo any further tests!

A lot of the candidates wanted to join the group of seven mech designers that Ves picked out before. Right now, those lucky bastards were gleefully watching the proceedings as if they already belonged to a superior class!

However, the mech designers who applied to join the LMC all heard about the Doom Guards. They were very well aware that it wasn't simple to approach the mech at all! If not for the fact that Ves set the finish line a good distance away from the Doom Guard, perhaps no one would be able to pass this test!

Just to be sure, Ves added an additional condition. "If none of you manage to reach my position, don't worry. I will just select the five who are in the leading positions. Don't give up and push yourselves to your limits and beyond!"

Though the majority of candidates already dreaded this test, a significant portion of them looked fired up! Ves keenly noticed the burning passion and ambition fueling their determination to push through as far as possible!

This was what Ves wanted to see. For this test, he was looking to pick up the mech designers who exhibited the most determination!

Upon his command, the mech pilot of the Doom Guard slowly booted it up. After several minutes, the pilot flicked the switch, causing its glow to ramp up within a minute.

The growing pressure immediately affected the moods of the candidates despite standing further away!

Even Ves experienced some strain, but he maintained his easy smile as best as possible. "Start!"

The mech designers moved. Surprisingly, over three-hundred of them immediately moved away from the Doom Guard!

Ves wanted to rub his eyes. Had they given up already?

He was profoundly disappointed at their decision. From a logical standpoint, it made sense for those who weren't used to enduring this kind of pressure to withdraw. While that meant they wouldn't have any chance of getting selected this round, the prudent candidates possessed enough self-knowledge to understand they would never be among the top five.

Why waste their energy and pile up their stress if they wouldn't gain anything for their efforts? In fact, this entire test was a bit perplexing to begin with! Unlike mech pilots, mech designers weren't frontline soldiers!

While Ves understood this rationale, it didn't conform with his principles or the principles of the Larkinson Clan! In his opinion, even if there wasn't a chance that they would make it very far, at least they needed to show some courage!

If mech designers constantly avoided challenges they never believed they could overcome, then they wouldn't make it very far. The whole point about progressing to Master Mech Designer was to accomplish the impossible!

Those who only took the path of least resistance didn't possess the heart of a high-ranking mech designer. Every single mech designer who managed to advance to Journeyman not only possessed spiritual potential, but also the willingness to swim upstream!

Those who managed to advance to Master and realize their design philosophies were even more extreme! They defied common sense so much that they even managed to swim up a waterfall!

Mech designers who were capable of reaching these extremes were worth their weight in phasewater in his opinion. Even if they didn't possess any spiritual potential, he wanted to snap them up anyway!

Several minutes into the test, the crowd of mech designers quickly split apart. A couple of hundred more mech designers joined the ranks of those who gave up at the start. They overestimated their ability to withstand the terror emanating from the Doom Guard and learned their lesson the hard way!

Less than two-hundred candidates managed to keep moving forward, but even this group quickly stretched out. The majority of them slowed their pace and looked like they were walking into blizzard.

Only a couple dozen managed to maintain a brisk pace. Just as Ves expected, most of them consisted of the passionate, strong-willed or determined candidates of the bunch!

There were plenty of outliers as well. Those who came from a military background or received a harsh upbringing all possessed minds of steel! No matter how much the Doom Guard tried to break their will, they held themselves together and kept approaching Ves as if he was their only savior!

*Chapter 2083 Catherine and Moltar*

"AAAHH! My future is there! I can't falter now!"

"This is my only chance to escape my debt! I won't settle for anything less than first!"

"How can this be?! You filthy commoners can't possibly surpass my courage! I am the scion of a noble house! I have undergone unimaginable training to get where I am. I refuse to be your lessers!"

The candidates tried their best to reach Ves while fighting back against the Doom Guard's ominous glow.

As far as Ves was aware of, the intensity of the glow of a mech roughly scaled according to the inverse-square law.

Light, gravity, electrical fields and more all operated along the same lines. This effectively meant that as the candidates moved closer, the difficulty of taking the next step rapidly increased!

This meant that all of them quickly slowed down. It was no longer possible for them to jog. They had to take it one step at a time.

The difficulty of the test was unimaginable at this stage. Ves could already tell that practically none of the candidates had entered a battlefield. They were still too soft in his perspective!

Sure, there were those who grew up in military families. Just like the Larkinson Family, these people received at least some form of training that prepared them for these kinds of challenges a lot better than those who had never been exposed to pressure of this nature!

However, even if a couple of the mech designers possessed more discipline than others, it didn't change the fact that they were ultimately pursuing a backline profession in the end!

Without experiencing the kind of fighting that the Bright Republic regularly forced its own younger generations of mech designers to endure, how could they be ready to face true pressure?

While Ves hated to acknowledge it, he approved of the Bright Republic's old measure to toughen up its mech designers. There were way too many useless professionals that would never step up when the situation called for it. The state might as well filter them all out by throwing them to the frontlines of a war!

As the candidates all began to scream and pour their hearts out, Ves casually raised his hand and rubbed his smooth-shaven chin in thought.

Should he take a page out of the book of his former state and enact something similar?

Nah.

While it was easy for someone at the top to appreciate the advantages of this controversial policy, those at the bottom hated it with a vengeance!

Ves himself grew quite resentful at the government of his former home state even as he rose to the occasion and became stronger. Just because he turned into a better mech designer didn't mean he liked risking his life all the time! The amount of dangers he personally endured would have long killed off any other mech designer in his position!

Therefore, Ves needed to find some different way to toughen his mech designers up. Resorting to a prop like the Doom Guard was an excellent way to accomplish this objective without going overboard.

No matter how deeply a Doom Guard frightened them out of their wits, at least they wouldn't actually die! The most they acquired was some unspeakable trauma that would haunt them for the rest of their lives.

As the differences between willpower, determination and mental fortitude became more and more stark, Ves noted with keen interest that the people with spiritual potential didn't actually differ in performance.

There were plenty of those with the potential to become Journeymen yet immediately distances themselves from the Doom Guard straight away!

There were also a handful of those with the same potential yet walked at the forefront of the crowd!

Their overall distribution matched that of the rest of the candidates, which suggested to Ves that spiritual potential didn't necessarily convey any advantages in mindset. It was merely a sign of a possible bright future. The individuals in question still needed to work hard to realize their great potential!

"Huh." Gloriana commented through their private comm channel. "I initially opposed this test because I didn't believe it had anything to do with mech design. Why do mech designers need to match the mental fortitude of combat personnel? It's only now that I see the difference. A portion of their true nature is revealed."

How much pain and fear were the candidates able to endure? How much was the opportunity to join the LMC and work under Ves and Gloriana worth? Were the mech designers truly willing to give it all in order to achieve the best result?

All of these questions and more were revealed in the starkest way possible. Unlike his earlier test where Ves inexplicably picked up a couple of mech designers with promising spiritual potential, this time the test was very transparent.

Those who did poorly or lacked the spine to face this challenge were practically shamed in the presence of everybody. The candidates who strode forward despite the mounting pressure all received looks of envy, jealousy and admiration.

Every candidate knew where they stood in relation to their other competitors!

Those trailing behind the frontrunners mustered more and more energy in order to increase their pace.

Those at the front gained confidence in their early success and tried to maintain their advantage as best as possible.

As for the increasingly large collection of mech designers who slowed down, they had to make a difficult choice.

If they gave up early, they would be able to preserve their wits and energy for the challenges to come.

However, if they gave in too early, they might receive a bad impression or gain a low score!

No one knew whether their performance at this point mattered or not. The uncertainty and the high stakes of this selection process gnawed at their minds and increased their doubt.

As Gloriana had already mentioned, a portion of their true nature became evident at this time.

The majority made the rational choice and gave up. They turned around and quickly shuffled backwards. Reaching the top five was a pipedream for them if they already started to falter at this distance.

Only a couple of dozen made the 'stupid' choice to clench their fists and persist. They arduously took some steps forward even if their minds started to succumb at the terror gnawing at their sanity!

Though Ves didn't react to their performance, he nonetheless marked them out with his implant and recorded their valiant performance.

Even if they were fairly average in other regards, at least in this test they had risen to the occasion!

As the leading mech designers neared Ves' position, the ranking slowly became clearer and clearer. Around fifteen or so competitors constantly tried to overtake each other and secure a promised spot in the LMC!

With the Doom Guard becoming an increasingly more mysterious and dreadful presence in their minds, their steps never ceased!

Ves paid attention to the leading two mech designers. Both of them had already distanced themselves even further than the remainder of the group.

Neither of them maintained the lead position for very long. Every time one of them took the lead, the other mustered up some energy from somewhere and caught up shortly afterwards!

According to the implant, the tall, brown-haired woman wearing an expensive suit was actually a local.

Not only that, but she was a descendant of House Evenson!

It made sense for House Evenson to raise some mech designers. As the rulers of a mech industry hub like Cinach VI, the local nobles needed to develop a keen understanding of the sector in order to maintain their current prosperity!

As long as their decisions stopped making sense, Cinach VI would inevitably decline as business moved to competing planets!

What interested Ves even further was that Lady Catherine Evenson also studied at Rawlings University at Cinach VIII. She graduated with honors and started up her own mech business after receiving a generous capital injection from her own house.

In fact, according to the latest record, she was still the founder and lead designer of her own mech company! Why would someone like her give up all of that hard work in order to apply to become an assistant?

"Hmm.." He silently hummed. "Maybe she's similar to the Tovar mech designers. She might have learned that she can't lean on this kind of support to achieve true success."

It had already become evident to Ves that Catherine enjoyed a privileged but rigid upbringing. She was born with a silver spoon, yes, but she also worked hard to excel among her peers!

She was kind of like Gloriana in a sense.

The only difference was that she didn't shine as brightly as his girlfriend. Her grades were good but she did not even rank in the top 10 of her class.

Her talent didn't particularly seem exceptional and her performance in Gloriana's test didn't stand out that much.

Yet the willpower she summoned this time was truly remarkable. Despite her various advantages or lack of advantages, her desire to succeed was stronger than that of anyone! She was the opposite of a pampered noble who never worked hard in her life!

Though the aristocracy of the Sentinel Kingdom raised plenty of useless idiots, they never gained actual power. Only the accomplished inherited the mantle of their houses! This was how the aristocracy managed to retain their power over the centuries.

The noble houses which tolerated incompetence had already died out over the years. Generations of accumulation had all gone to waste when just a single incompetent descendant tore it all down!

Someone as promising as Catherine should have received a lot of attention from House Evenson. That made it even more inexplicable why she was here of all places.

Perhaps the only disappointing factor about her was that she didn't possess spiritual potential. As she was 33 years old, Ves wasn't sure if she had already wasted her chance.

"Ahhh! I won't settle for second place!" The man who overtook her roared. "My future is here! I will shake off my debts no matter the price!"

Her closest competitor on the other hand possessed a much poorer background. He turned out to be a Reinaldan who studied at some average mech design university and managed to start his own mech company as well.

Whereas Catherine Evenson received a lot of capital from her noble house right away, Moltar Ringer had to attract investment the hard way.

Somehow, he managed to persuade some investors to invest in his startup and borrow the remainder of what he needed from a bank.

Though his mech business didn't do all that well, at least it managed to keep its head above the water.

That was until the Sand War broke out. Ves recalled that roughly half of the Reinald Republic succumbed to the sandman incursion before the spread of the Desolate Soldier and some other measures managed to stabilize the defensive line.

Moltar Ringer happened to have founded his mech company at one of the many industrial star systems that had been scoured by sand.

Properly speaking, Moltar and his mech company should have been bankrupted. However, due to shady Reinaldan bankruptcy laws, Moltar wasn't allowed to start a clean slate. He still needed to pay back a portion of the huge debts he accrued!

If Moltar did not get selected today, then Ves could easily imagine that his future would become very dark in the future! Unless he ran off to become a pirate, he would probably face a life-time of exploitation!

What surprised Ves was that Moltar wasn't content with remaining in the top 5. He summoned even more willpower than Catherine in order to achieve first place!

This was highly uncharacteristic. According to Moltar's record, he never applied himself to this extent during his time as an independent mech designer and a mech design student. His grades were average and the mechs he designed after he started his business lacked too much rigor and imagination.

Where did all of this willpower come from? Was Moltar similar to Ves in that he performed at his best when the stakes were raised?

Ves almost couldn't believe he could witness this performance from a Reinaldan of all people!

In the end, Moltar fell short. Just as he maintained the lead, Catherine somehow exploded the remainder of her strength and reached the finish line a half-second earlier!

"No!"

"Yes!"

Chapter 2084 Don't Worry

Ves found it interesting to observe the eruption of emotions from the candidates.

Those who made it in the top five largely exhibited a huge amount of exuberance and relief!

They knew that they had gained the chance of a lifetime!

Working under a pair of promising mech designers like Ves and Gloriana was one of the biggest prizes they could win under the circumstances.

Certainly, they wouldn't say no to working for a prestigious Senior and Master, but those opportunities were largely out of reach for them. Only the most exceptional prodigies attracted their attention!

In that sense, applying to work for the LMC was the next-best option. In fact, some clever mech designers even guessed that working for the two was even better than attracting the attention of a Master!

It was no surprise that a lot of mech designers applied to join the LMC. The thousand that managed to take part in this final selection process had come closer than the majority of the competition.

Yet the LMC only had places for fifty of them. Ves had just absorbed thirteen of them, which meant that the odds for the rest dwindled with each passing test!

The top five all realized what a great fortune it was to be rid of all of this pressure!

Aside from Moltar Ringer who was mentally beating himself up for failing to reach first, the remaining four including Catherine Evenson all looked as if they had entered paradise.

They were about to become part of the rising Larkinson Clan!

The Doom Guard immediately switched off its glow after the conclusion of the test. No matter how far the remaining mech designers reached, their chance had come and gone.

"Congratulations. You five can join the rest at the side." Ves spoke to the five winners.

As for the remaining candidates, they returned to the middle of the hall. Everyone looked depressed, regretful or disappointed for failing to win this test.

In fact, the ones who showcased a middling performance didn't look all that bad. As far as they were concerned, they tried their best but failed.

It was the ones who made it in the top 20 and the people who gave up right at the start who had been impacted the most!

The former all recognized that they could have been among the lucky five if they just mustered up some more strength. To realize that they came so close yet brutally failed to reach the cut-off mark was agonizing!

As for the people who decided to run in the opposite direction in order to get out of the range of the Doom Guard's glow, their shame constantly gnawed at their confidence!

It wasn't that big of a deal to make the most logical decision considering their slim chances of winning. Yet to see several mech designers performing to a herculean degree and putting their all into reaching the finish line first was very humbling!

How would they have been able to perform if they attempted this challenge?

A large number of them began to doubt whether they inadvertently failed some invisible test.

They weren't wrong. Both Ves and Gloriana had noted the group of people who gave up early. Neither of them were inclined to favor them when their courage only amounted to this much.

When all of the excitement died down and the remaining mech designers reformed their ranks, Gloriana took the lead again.

"Alright, I'm sure that all of you are rather frayed right now. However, that is no excuse for me to spare you. A mech designer must always be ready to work even if the galaxy collapses around you! Our love for our profession must exceed every other desire!"

Her words only depressed the remaining candidates even further.

She quickly moved on. "For my next test, I would like you to test your perception and ability to discern flaws. Much of your work upon joining our Design Department will consist of a lot of optimization and debugging work. It takes a lot of effort to polish a mech design once its design choices have been set. Your efficiency and effectiveness in this type of work is essential for your future positions! Don't think that you won't need to be so thorough anymore when you are allowed to design your own mechs. Maximizing the potential of your mech designs is an essential requirement to achieve greatness!"

Ves quietly coughed. While he agreed with Gloriana's sentiment, her standards were way too strict! She could spend years on optimizing a single mech design if not for external factors forcing her to cut her ultra-long cycle short!

When Gloriana waved her hand, a handful of LMC mechs strode forward from the side. Mercifully, the Doom Guard remained inactive, saving the mech designers from confronting the source of their recent trauma once again!

"I have personally selected all of these mechs for their distinct flaws and shortcomings. Each of them may look fine to mech pilots and other laymen, but mech designers recognize a flaw no matter how obscure they appear."

The Blackbeak, Crystal Lord, Aurora Titan, Desolate Soldier, Deliverer and Bright Warrior all stopped a short distance away from the crowd. Their glows blended into each other and washed over the mech designers, thereby giving them a lot of reprieve from the depression that had clouded their minds!

"All of you must choose one of these mechs to examine for flaws. Each of them exhibit numerous flaws. Most of them are production flaws arising from sloppy fabrication and assembly work, but every design also contains a decent number of design flaws. Your job is to record every possible flaw you can spot within a single hour. The more obscure the flaw, the higher your points! However, if you happen to record something that isn't a flaw, we will deduct your points depending on the magnitude of your error!"

This caused the mech designers to look troubled. This was a rather unusual test that only someone like Gloriana could come up with! It was clear that she wanted to test their judgement.

Many flaws were obvious, yet a lot of other quirks might not necessarily be wrong! Whether something was actually a flaw or just a well-intentioned but awful-looking implementation was a subjective question.

Nonetheless, Gloriana still went through with this test! To these subjective matters, she decided to abide by a simple standard.

If she thought it was wrong, then it must truly be a flaw!

Ves looked rather sour as the test commenced. "You could have used some other mechs as props, you know."

"Your mech designs, even the ones I have been involved in, are never perfect. You need to get it through your head how unsatisfying they really are to me." Gloriana admonished him. "Besides, every time I see these eyesores being used by the Larkinson Clan, I have to resist the urge to tear my hair out. The LMC's Production Department has slipped! Quality control has declined and more and more mechs are rolling out of the production line with dozens of egregious production flaws!"

Though he hated to admit it, she was right. Ves had noticed the same problem to a lesser degree. "The LMC has undergone a lot of turmoil in the past couple of months. Back when we still had the Mech Nursery back at Cloudy Curtain, we developed a mature and solid production chain in-house. Now, we either have to fabricate our mechs in some of our cramped ships with light production capabilities, or rely on external manufacturers to do the job. Ever since we established the Larkinson Clan, we have recruited a lot of new mech pilots. Each of them require mechs in order to be put to use, and that has forced us to rely a lot on third-party manufacturers."

Gloriana looked displeased. "I won't mention anything about providing mechs of this standard to the market. However, I expect better if the mechs are meant to serve

ourselves! You better set the LMC's Production Department straight or I'll come and do it myself!"

"I get it, I get it! I'll fix the situation right away after this is over!"

While the two of them discussed the LMC's shortcomings, the candidates all swarmed around the mechs laid bare to them. They were not only able to examine the mechs up close, but also received access to some limited design schematics that revealed some of their internal makeup!

Any mech designer should be able to spot plenty of flaws of every mech and design. However, once they finished picking all of the low-hanging fruit, they needed to look much closer in order to spot another flaw!

This was where the difference between mech designers became apparent.

What was interesting was that a lot of mech designers tried to be clever and chose to study his older mech designs such as the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord.

In contrast, hardly anyone chose the Bright Warrior, which was currently in its lancer mech configuration, and the Deliverer!

"It doesn't matter." Gloriana noted. "The scoring already compensates for the difficulty of discerning flaws. In truth, those who have decided to study the newer mechs are rewarded for taking on a tougher challenge!"

This was another hidden aspect behind this test. Gloriana didn't necessarily want to hire mech designers who pursued the lowest difficulty all the time. In her opinion, mech designers should constantly tackle greater problems! How else could they surpass their limits if they didn't challenge themselves?

The test proceeded quietly. The hour quickly ended, whereupon the mechs soon moved back to their places.

"Very good." Gloriana smiled. "Your performance is noted and graded. You will receive your results at the end."

She still needed to grade them all, but she planned to do that quietly in her mind with the help of her implant.

In the meantime, it was her boyfriend's turn to conduct his next test.

"For this round, I have invited a special guest."

Ketis entered the hall. She strode valiantly to Ves with strong, measured steps. She wore a training outfit that was typical to the Swordmaidens, though she also wore her

signature poofy beret in order to hide her horns. Nonetheless, her lean but muscular arms were on full display and her scabbarded greatsword obediently trailed her back!

Once she reached her position, she unsheathed her weapon and grinned. "Hello. Ves asked me to test you all. I might not look like it, but I'm a mech designer. I am Ves' first student and I learned a lot from him. If you want to attract his attention, then you need to show some battle spirit! If you can't even get close enough to me, you don't deserve to be my colleague!"

Every single candidate looked confused. Was she truly a mech designer? She resembled a thug more than an intellectual!

She withdrew a smaller but very sharp sword and threw it in front of her. The antigrav module built into it caused it to float in the air with the tip pointed at the ceiling.

"Each of you must wield this sword and stand ten paces away from me." She explained the rules. "On my mark, you must charge at me and do your best to land a blow on me! I will be doing my best to block your attack. I might even push a bit back! You only need to launch a single attack."

A lot of mech designers looked scandalized!

"Are those weapons real? They look sharp!"

"Yup!" Ketis enthusiastically nodded. "What's the fun in conducting this test when we are just swinging some practice weapons at each other? There are no protective measures in place! Only our skill will determine whether we can avoid harming each other!"

A lot of mech designers already started to back off. This test was too insane! If someone made the wrong move, they could easily harm or kill each other!

"By the way, my greatsword happens to be a 'gift' from the CFA. Don't believe me? Then let me demonstrate."

A lifter bot entered the hall and deposited a sheet of thin armor plating in front of her position.

"This plate consists of Breyer alloy." She stated. "It's the same material that clad the Bright Warrior. Even though this plate has been slimmed, it is still strong enough to withstand small-arms fire for several hours! Now watch what I can do!"

Ketis enthusiastically lifted her greatsword and chopped it down in a single, vigorous move!

She made for a magnificent sight as she chopped down her sword with force!

The greatsword, which possessed unparalleled sharpness, activated a couple of inbuilt modules that enhanced its sharpness even further! The blade parted straight through the middle of the plate without any sign of obstruction!

In fact, when the tip of the sword finally reached the floor, it continued to cut through the solid metal material until the blade had sunk a third of the way through the surface!

A lot of mech designers gasped!

"Don't worry." Ketis cheekily smiled. "I will only use the flat of my blade."

### *Chapter 2085 Oops*

The sword wielded by Ketis differed substantially from the weapons owned by the rest of the Swordmaidens.

Just like Ves, Ketis gained an unimaginable amount of benefits from the Aeon Corona Mission. The sword issued to her by the AI systems of the Starlight Megalodon was suited for a CFA officer.

Though its design and material composition was outdated by as much as three centuries, it was still a first-class sword that incorporated numerous applications of high technology!

It might not be an exaggeration to state that the worth of this sword actually surpassed the total value of the Penitent Sister Fleet!

Fortunately, for all of its ostentatious value, it wasn't immediately apparent that the sword belonged to the CFA. Ketis had also 'decorated' the sword in a way that made it seem as if it emerged from the frontier rather than a CFA battleship.

None of the thousand or so mech designers who had made it through the final selection process figured out the true might of the greatsword.

Nevertheless, the fact that Ketis was able to cut through an admittedly-thin but very solid plate of Breyer alloy proved that it should not be underestimated!

If the edge passed through their skull, their heads would instantly part in half without presenting even a smidgeon of resistance!

"Is she even a mech designer? She's built like a mech!"

"We're mech designers, not infantry soldiers!"

"What does swordplay have to do with mech design?!"

"Ves Larkinson is crazy! I regret taking part in this test!"

Nothing happened for a few minutes. Ves let the mech designers banter among themselves. The more they speculated about Ketis and her sword, the more their fears started to spread.

Considering the previous tests conducted by Ves, this one shouldn't be simple!

There were a lot of smart minds among the crowd of mech designers. It was a pity that they were all non-combatants who never expected to be confronted with violence up close in their lives!

Even if a few of them enjoyed some combat training, it was usually in the lines of attending mandatory self-defense courses or engaging in recreational hunting.

Almost none of them engaged in something as archaic and barbaric as hacking swords against each other!

When Ves thought they had stewed long enough, he clapped. "What are you waiting for? Get to it! There is no order this time. Anyone who wants a try can step forward and grab the floating sword. You are only required to launch a single attack on Ketis. She will do her best to block and fend off your attack."

"Sir, what if someone gets injured?" Someone asked a very smart question.

Ves grinned and pointed his thumb behind his back. "Emergency services are already on standby. No matter how injured you are, unless your head gets hit, you'll make it through."

A large number of specialized medical bots along with some doctors entered the hall and stood at the side.

The presence of so many doctors in white coats and medical bots specialized to treat all kinds of trauma didn't reassure the mech designers.

In fact, their presence only intimidated the candidates even further!

After a bit of hesitation, one young man stepped out. He looked confident and gripped the floating sword with a firm grip.

Both Ketis and Ves immediately narrowed their eyes. From the practiced stance the mech designer immediately adopted, it became clear that he knew a thing or two about swords!

The competitive streak within Ketis instantly fired up! "Come!"

Instead of charging forward, the first challenger shuffled forward while carefully scanning his opponent's stance for the best way to overcome her defense. He even began to circle around Ketis!

That wouldn't do.

Clap!

"Hurry up!" Ves shouted in irritation. "There are over a thousand other mech designers who are waiting for their turn! I told you to charge at Ketis, not dance around her! This isn't a duel! If you aren't willing to fight, then let go of your weapon and make way for someone else!"

Understanding that he couldn't take the tactical approach, the challenger took a deep breath and closed the distance!

Though his steps were still rather slow, the distance between him and Ketis was only ten paces, so the two quickly exchanged blows!

After attempting a feint, the man quickly shifted his grip and attempted a tricky stab at the very last second!

Unfortunately for him, Ketis reacted faster and with much greater force than he expected! Her augmented body moved in unison! Not only did she manage to lift her enormous sword and parry the stab with ease, she also managed to redirect her weapon so that the flat of its blade whacked her opponent's side!

She did not hold back too much! The trained challenger cried out in pain as his body hurled a short distance to the side! It was as if he had been clubbed away by a caveman!

As the first challenger laid on the floor in a pathetic heap while crying out in pain, Ves continued to pay close attention for a few more seconds before he minutely shook his head.

"Next!"

Though the forceful hit took the breath out of the man, Ketis had been merciful enough to spare his ribs. He slowly picked himself up off the ground and limped back.

The brutal exchange intimidated even more mech designers! Hundreds of them already took a step backwards, making it clear that they absolutely did not wish to be a part of this sadistic game!

It didn't matter. There were enough people who wanted to try.

The second challenger was a younger man. When he took hold of the floating sword, his two-handed grip was firm. Nonetheless, even Ves could tell he wasn't a trained swordsman. The stance the fellow took actually reminded Ves of some kind of sport.

The man didn't waste much time. He approached at a steady pace, swung his sword to the side before launching a powerful horizontal sweep!

From the bottom of his feet to the rotation of his hips, the second challenger generated as much force as possible!

It was a pity that Ketis read the man's attack like a book.

She yawned and blocked the forceful attack with ease. As the baseball player lost his balance due to getting hit by the recoil of his all-out attack, Ketis rapidly thrust the pommel of her sword forward until she bashed her opponent in the chest!

"Agh!"

The man let go of his sword as he fell onto the floor.

All in all, it was a respectable performance. It was too bad that Ves hadn't seen anything worth his time while he watched the fellow carefully.

"Next!"

The third challenger happened to be a woman. Unlike the previous two challengers, she didn't possess a single athletic bone in her body!

Nonetheless, what she lacked in physical conditioning, she made up for it with courage! She did not pause after she grasped the floating sword. She simply raised the sword above her head and charged Ketis without any hesitation!

The moment she chopped her sword down, Ketis simply raised her own weapon with just a single arm and bounced away the attack with ease!

As the third challenger wobbled backwards, she suddenly received a hefty kick that pushed her body backwards by more than ten paces!

"Next!"

The fourth challenger was another woman. She was taller and stronger than the last one, though her untrained sword stance almost completely negated this advance.

When she bravely strode forward and attempted to put her entire momentum into a stab, Ketis once again blocked the attack with ease.

However, in the process of doing so, she also chopped off the wrists of her attacker! The greatsword sliced clean through the flesh and bone without any hindrance!

"Ahhhh!"

The woman dropped to her knees while staring agonizingly at her amputated arms! Her two hands flopped lifelessly on the floor while four sprays of blood rapidly turned the site red!

"Medics!" Ves shouted.

The bots already moved into action as soon as Ketis parted the female mech designer's skin. As soon as they flew at the wounded mech designer, they rapidly sprayed some foam around the clean cuts, preventing them from bleeding out. A few more bots arrived to rapidly take the injured mech designer and her detached limbs away to a treatment center.

Practically every mech designer on sight widened their eyes or screamed at the gruesome sight! To them, the grinning Ketis suddenly turned into a demonic being!

"Oops." She said frivolously as she casually stood in front of a pool of blood. "My grip slipped."

Ves chuckled. "No problem. Accidents happen. At least your opponent didn't die. She'll be as good as new after a few days."

With modern medical technology, it was trivially easy to heal such injuries!

Their exchange only intimidated the mech designers even further. It was clear that Ketis might not have 'slipped' as much as she claimed!

The pool of blood remained in place. A few splatters had even landed on Ketis' training outfit, though none of them managed to stick onto her sword.

"Next!"

It took some time until the next challenger came up. The man shakily grasped the floating sword and walked feebly to Ketis. He only managed to launch a weak attack before Ketis handedly knocked his weapon out of his grasp before punching his face!

He screamed and fell onto the pool of blood, instantly soaking his clean suit!

Ves shook his head. "Next!"

A few more people challenged Ketis. When another untrained challenger took hold of the sword and charged forthrightly at Ketis, the man suffered the same fate as the ones that came before!

However, even as his body crashed against the bloody floor with a meaty thump, Ves did not call for the next challenger to step forward.

"You pass."

"Ahh.. I... what?" The man tried to lift his pained body up. "I.. pass?"

"Welcome to the LMC." Ves smiled and gestured to the ranks of other chosen mech designers. "Please join your future colleagues over there."

"I.. I passed!" The man joyously cried! "I've become a Larkinson!"

No amount of pain stopped him from celebrating his fortune! Though he didn't know why he succeeded where others failed, he wasn't one to look at a gift horse in the mouth!

The inexplicable success fueled the enthusiasm of the other mech designers!

They pushed each other in order to grasp the sword! The drying pool of blood no longer intimidated them so much. Not when there was such a huge prize in sight!

Ketis easily blocked and parried the next couple of challengers. Just as a tall man futilely tried to slash at her, a greatsword suddenly bashed the attack aside before cutting straight through the man's arm!

"AAAAAAHHHHH!"

The man's entire arm had been lopped off at the shoulder! Another huge spray of blood splattered onto the already-dirty floor!

"Sorry. I used too much force. I didn't think you were so weak."

"Medics!"

"Next!"

The enthusiasm of the crowd quickly doused.

The next couple of challengers were still too enthralled by their fears to launch any forceful attacks. Ketis yawned again and again as she fended off the basic attacks with ease. She didn't forget to give them all a good whack afterwards!

Her body seemed to acquire a formidable aura. The more mech designers she beat down, the greater her stature to the remaining mech designers! It became increasingly harder to challenge her upfront, especially when she occasionally 'slipped' every now and then!

Ketis stabbed the tip of her sword straight through the upper leg of a woman.

"Oh gosh. I didn't mean to do that!"

Ketis whirled her greatsword like a tornado, inflicting a deep cut in the chest of a cowardly man!

"Whoops! I didn't practice this move!"

Ketis chopped her greatsword straight down, cutting off both an arm and a leg at once!

"Ahahaha. I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you."

Ketis stabbed straight forward, managing to sink the tip of her greatsword half a finger deep into the flesh of her latest challenger!

"Oops! I did it again!"

The stinking, coppery smell of blood spread through the hall. The poor underneath Ketis' feet kept growing larger. Almost no one believed that Ketis was a mech designer now. She seemed more like an asura who crawled straight out of hell due to all of the blood dripping from her training outfit!

Ves didn't care. He endured the ugly sight and smell as best as possible while observing each and every challenger with utmost care.

So far, he passed a handful of people more for reasons that no one figured out!

As the crowd of mech designers stagnated, Ves clapped again.

"Hurry up! This is your final chance to get recruited by me!" He shouted. "Fifteen spots in my quota are already taken, which means that there are 10 more vacant slots for you to occupy! Unless you are confident you can meet my girlfriend's expectations, you better hurry up and swing the sword before it's too late!"

*Chapter 2086 Atypical Mech Designer*

The third test initiated by Ves gradually turned into a bloodbath.

About one in every thirty challengers suffered severe wounds ranging from deep stabs to outright limb amputations!

Despite the growing number of 'mistakes' made by Ketis, she gleefully maintained her smile while looking forward to clash against the next challenger!

It became increasingly harder for the candidates to muster up their courage and grab the floating sword. While the rate of suffering grievous injuries was rather small, anyone who got hit by the sharp side of the greatsword instead of the flat side suffered unimaginable pain!

The floor around Ketis quickly began to resemble an abattoir with the growing amount of blood pooling below her feet. It got to the point where the mech designers had to watch their step lest they tripped!

It became worse for them as time went by. Ketis continually grew more formidable in their eyes. Her bloody existence even started to cast a shadow onto their hearts!

A growing number of mech designers decided they wanted nothing to do with this extremely dangerous test. Three-hundred of them had already stepped back from the ghastly sight. They would rather take their chances with Gloriana's remaining test! Even if that didn't work out, they wouldn't be particularly sad at the prospect of returning home empty-handed.

Working under someone as sadistic and bloodthirsty as Ves was a curse rather than a blessing!

"Next!"

Ketis had already chopped up a woman who clumsily overextended herself in a feeble attempt to escape severe injury.

The man who followed suit felt a bit more confident about his attempt. So far, Ketis never subsequently chopped off the limbs of the challenger who came after her previous victim!

He happened to be one of the mech designers with a cranial implant. He keenly observed Ketis' body language and microexpressions. He also performed a very thorough statistical analysis on the injuries suffered by the challengers who came before. With a sample size of over 200, the man was 86 percent confident that Ketis would not leave him with more than a bruise!

When his hands grasped the handle of the floating sword, he sprinted forward with confidence. He uttered a guttural cry as he launched a simple chop!

He had already analyzed the previous attack patterns and concluded that Ketis was far too strong, fast and skilled. There was no way to defeat her by resorting to trickery, finesse and technique unless he was a formidable swordsman himself!

Since defeating Ketis was out of the question, he simply decided to launch a straightforward attack with only a portion of his momentum. Too little force wouldn't impress anyone, while too much force made it too easy for him to lose his balance.

As his sword steadily chopped down, Ketis moved faster than he ever thought possible!

In one instance, his sword clanged against the flat of the greatsword.

In the next, he suddenly lost all feeling in his hand, before realizing to his horror that his wrist was transmitting an unimaginable amount of pain!

"Aaahh!"

Ketis apathetically shrugged and didn't bother to voice an excuse this time. "You think too much."

Standing at the side, Ves nodded his head in agreement.

This test was not about outsmarting Ketis!

When Ves approached her to administer this test, he specifically stated that he wanted to see blood.

"How often?" She asked.

"As much or as little as you want. You can decide for yourself who you want to chop." He responded. "Though do keep enough of them intact. Gloriana needs enough bodies to make her choice as well, so do try to keep the casualty rate reasonable. The goal is to make it clear that there are real consequences to holding a weapon."

"I'm not complaining, what is the point of this, Ves?" She scratched her head.

"If these mech designers are about to work for me, I want them to be able to keep their cool during a possible combat situation. I have witnessed plenty of cowardly mech designers in the past. To be honest, they disgust me. While I don't expect my new employees to be as fearless as you, at the very least they shouldn't lose their marbles if they are ever shot at! I have no time to coddle mech designers who faint at the sight of blood."

While Ves didn't plan to drive them into the middle of an active battlefield or anything, he wanted his subordinates to keep functioning in case a crisis occurred!

It was much easier for him to increase an assistant's talent or knowledge. It was much harder to boost some of their other traits!

The goal of this selection was to distinguish the candidates who possessed the rare qualities he sought!

As the challengers slowly moved forward as if they were about to face their executions, Ves inwardly shook his head.

The mech designers all let their nerves get the better of them. In fact, it got so bad that he seriously started to doubt whether he could meet his quota today!

He had witnessed too many mech designers who lost heart before they even grasped the floating sword!

Some battles were unwinnable. In his short but eventful career, Ves had experienced several setbacks, tragedies, and defeats. What stood out to him was how people behaved during an impending catastrophe.

Would they break down and cry?

Would they raise their hands and offer their surrender?

Would they run and flee as fast as possible?

None of these responses satisfied him. While they were excusable reactions for typical mech designers and other noncombatants, Ves wasn't looking to hire typical mech designers!

He couldn't help but recall two memorable incidents where Ves witnessed awful defeats.

In one instance during the journey through the frontier, the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet stumbled upon the survivors of Chopra Interstellar Services in space.

One of them happened to be a mech designer by the name of Eric Kichiro, who uttered a phrase that Ves never forgot.

"Cowardice is a virtue!"

Just recalling those words made unsettled Ves considerably! His mood sunk even further after learning what Eric had done.

When the Chopran fleet clashed against a pirate group called the NIN, Eric didn't stay put at his assigned station on a ship. Instead, as the Choprans suffered a sudden setback, Eric quickly abandoned his post and ran straight towards the escape pods and launched without asking for permission!

His premature escape inadvertently sparked a panic. Many of his fellow comrades saw his escape pod flying away, thereby sparking a panic throughout the Chopran fleet!

Their morale took a considerable hit, causing several more people to lose their nerves as well and flee their ships!

This sparked a vicious cycle where more and more Choprans thought that the battle was lost despite the fact that their mechs could still turn the battle around!

In the end, the Chopran fleet was defeated. Perhaps the outcome was already set, but there was always a chance they could have won if they had only persisted to the end! Yet due to the cowardly actions of a single mech designer, the window of opportunity had closed too quickly.

"At least he suffered the fate he deserved." Ves whispered.

Another incident that also shaped his views was the total defeat suffered by the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens on the surface of Aeon Corona VII.

With the Starlight Megalodon within reach, the Vesians finally forced them into a decisive battle.

Ordinarily, the Flagrant Swordmaidens could have defeated the Hostland Warriors and Meandering Monkeys in open battle.

It was too bad the Vesians cheated by fielding an expert pilot with one of the strongest expert mechs that Ves had ever witnessed at the time! The Belisarius piloted by the prodigal Venerable Foster made mince meat out of the Vandals and Swordmaidens!

No matter how hard the Belisarius got hit, its armor remained impervious due to the sinfully huge amount of Rorach's bone incorporated into its design!

Though the expert mech appeared utterly invincible and inviolable, the Vandals and Swordmaidens never stepped back.

They didn't run. They didn't scatter. There was no point to it in the harsh conditions of the planet.

Instead, the mech pilots valiantly fought to the end, hitting as many Vesians as possible in order to buy time for Ves and other scattered comrades to escape to the Starlight Megalodon!

Commander Lydia, the founder of the Swordmaidens, sacrificed her life in that battle. A large number of elites who formed the pillar of the sisterhood bravely followed her into death.

Ves respected the Swordmaidens ever since that tragic loss. No matter how uncouth, how unfriendly and how Hexer-like they seemed, he would always value the precious opportunities the Swordmaidens had bought with their lives!

Their brave performance at the Battle of Kesseling VIII only raised his esteem for them even further!

This made it all the more sad that none of the candidates displayed an inkling of the valor shown by the Swordmaidens.

While he didn't expect them to match the standard of an elite soldier, at the very least they should exhibit some spirit!

Fortunately, at least a handful of them showed something special.

When Ketis whimsically decided to chop a leg off a woman who tried to perform a sloppy slash, the victim didn't cry out as much as the others!

Even though the stump of her leg was spurting out a copious amount of blood, the woman still managed to maintain a fierce face while doing her best to hold back her screams!

Ves stared closely at her defiant eyes. Though she suffered an abject defeat and an injury that was severe enough to release the contents of her bladder, she still attempted to reach out to the handle of the sword she released!

"You pass." He announced, surprising every remaining mech designer!

This was the first time he approved a mech designer who lost a limb!

"Miss Rina Orion, correct?" He read out the name supplied by his implant. "You don't have to join the rest of your new colleagues. You'll be taken to our medical facility where your wounds will be attended to first. Are you still willing to join the LMC and the Larkinson Clan?"

"I.. I do.." She uttered between her gasps of pain. "I won't let anyone take this opportunity away from me. I will suffer this pain a hundred times if that is what it takes to gain your approval!"

"That's not necessary." Ves quickly spoke before the medic bots finally sedated her and moved her away.

A brave-looking man quickly stepped up after that. He grabbed hold of the floating sword with confidence and immediately charged towards Ketis with an overhand strike!

Different from anyone else, the man didn't attempt to defend himself or try to mitigate any possible blows. In fact, he continued to throw his body forward, causing Ketis to use considerably more force than she intended as she cut off half of the man's upper limbs.

Though the man quickly fell as copious amounts of blood poured out of the wounds, he tried his best to put up a brave face and tried his best to look defiant!

"Medics!" Ves simply shouted. "Take him away. Next!"

"Ahh.. what? I.. I'm not done yet! I can still fight!"

Ves shook his head at the man whose clothes had turned into a mess due to all of the blood soaking through it. "Don't pretend. This isn't an acting test."

That quickly doused the enthusiasm of the rest of the mech designers.

Though the available slots gradually diminished, it became harder and harder for the remaining challengers to step forward. Over five-hundred mech designers had already given up on challenging Ketis and her lethally-sharp greatsword!

It had become so bad that Ves estimated that he would likely run out of challengers before he reached his quota!

It took a lot more courage to confront Ketis later on after she cut through dozens of random mech designers!

The complete uncertainty of whether they would lose their limbs or not froze them into place. None of them wanted to get disabled at this point and miss the last test administered by Gloriana!

With the available bodies quickly running out, Ves finally sighed and decided to loosen his standards. Anyone who stepped up and grabbed hold of the floating sword at this point should already possess a sufficient amount of courage.

"Pass!"

"Pass!"

"Pass!"

When the success rate abruptly increased, the remaining daredevils among the crowd finally showed some enthusiasm and fought over the next turns!

"You pass!"

"Pass!"

"Pass! That's it! This test is finally over!" Ves announced, causing almost everyone else to exhibit a considerable amount of relief. "Now, let's clean this mess up before commencing the final test of the day."

After a lot of bots cleaned up the copious amount of blood and freshened up the air, Gloriana reluctantly stepped up. "Ahem. My final challenge is a lot more civilized than the last one. I won't demand any of your limbs to be chopped."

No one laughed.

### *Chapter 2087 Highlighted*

Gloriana's third and final test consisted of a fairly standard mech design challenge.

Every mech designer who made it through the earlier tests were tasked with designing the best possible mech they could manage in two hours.

Projections emerged in front of their faces. Just like the first test, they had to work while standing, which wasn't easy after the gruesome bloodbath they just witnessed!

With their nerves frayed and their patience running out, hardly any candidate managed to hit their stride. They haltingly manipulated the design interface with shaky fingers and uneven breaths.

Even though the pervasive smell of blood had long disappeared, many of them still had the illusion that they were under threat!

This hall wasn't safe!

The Journeyman they dreamed of working under were completely mad!

With all of these psychological hits, it became considerably harder for them to perform this common task.

Just like similar examinations of this nature, Gloriana had already picked out an extensive library of outdated components and modular parts for them to put together their mech.

There wasn't much they could do in two hours anyway. Every mech designer had to race against time to cobble up a mech design that was functional enough to fight!

"Two hours ought to be enough for you to design a complete mech." Gloriana sternly announced as the mech designers frantically sorted through the catalog of parts. "You can pick and choose any mech type of weight class you want. Just make sure to do your best and finish them within the time limit. I won't accept any designs that are incomplete!"

A test like this reminded Ves of the old days when he frequently took part in competitions. Designing a mech in a day or in a matter of hours was a steep challenge to any mech designer.

However, as long as they worked quickly enough, they should be able to design something that could perform all of the basic functions expected of a mech.

They just needed to cut as many corners as possible while retaining the best possible quality.

This was a lot harder than it sounded like, particularly when the mech designers themselves needed to judge how much time they could afford to invest in something!

All in all, around 900 candidates who mercifully avoided getting chopped frantically worked to deliver the best mech they could design under the circumstances!

Gloriana stood silently while she constantly observed the ongoing design processes with the help of her implant. No one knew which candidate's work she was observing at any time.

In truth, she didn't need to see their finished work in order to get an accurate impression of their capabilities!

A half hour in, it already became clear from their work whether they worked quickly or meticulously.

She encountered a lot of mech designers who tried to cram as much work in two hours as possible. They brazenly skipped a lot of essential steps in order to put something functioning together as fast as possible!

There were also those who took the opposite approach. They did not display a sufficient amount of expedience. Unless they planned to rush their work considerably at the end, it was doubtful whether they could even finish their designs!

Only a modest number of mech designers displayed both. They possessed superior skill and ability or were far less impacted by the stress and trauma that they acquired in the previous test.

These people attracted Gloriana's attention. What made her happy was that a significant number of mech designers who worked briskly but not too sloppily had also performed well in her previous two tests!

Those with superior capabilities always stood out no matter the challenges they faced.

Granted, there were a lot of mech designers among this group who performed exceptionally poorly in the tests cooked up by Ves. Of all of the mech designers that Gloriana had marked out for their satisfactory performance, there were a lot of clever-minded people among them who opted to decline her boyfriend's challenges!

Though their decision to conserve their energy and avoid unnecessary damage had paid off at this moment, she wasn't sure whether she should value them. She was a bit more inclined to hire mech designers who performed a little worse right now but made a decent showing when confronted by the Doom Guard or Ketis!

Soon enough, two hours went by. The projected design interface automatically disappeared regardless if the candidates were done or not! A lot of regretful groans immediately filled the hall as everyone felt that they could have done better if they just had a little more time!

"That's enough." Gloriana spoke. Everyone instantly fell silent. "I have continually observed all of your efforts. I have already determined your scores for this test and compiled it with your other scores. After much consideration, I have made my choice."

Lights appeared around twenty-five individuals.

"Congratulations! All of you who are lit up have earned my appreciation. Please confirm your decision to join the LMC and work under me by stepping to the side. If for any reason you wish to withdraw, then say so now so that you won't be wasting my time any further."

Though a handful of selected candidates showed some reluctance, in the end they didn't decline this hard-fought opportunity!

Now that Ves and Gloriana filled up their respective quotas, the final selection process finally came to an end.

A lot of regret and remorse appeared on the faces of the candidates who remained. They lost their opportunity to join a very promising mech company and work under a pair of mech designers who might very well advance to Master in the future!

The ones who strategically withdrew from the challenges posed by Ves looked especially sour. Many of them thought they performed well enough to earn Gloriana's appreciation, but it turned out that there were twenty-five other mech designers who performed better!

Perhaps they could have gotten into the Larkinson Clan if they exerted themselves in the tests conducted by Ves. Losing a limb or getting frightened out of their wits didn't sound so bad at this time!

Ves and Gloriana along with their cats stood together at this time. They observed the mix of emotions on the faces of the crowd with interest.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this selection process has come to an end." Ves announced. "My partner and I set out to recruit fifty mech designers for the LMC's Design Department, and we are happy that we have managed to do so. As much as we are

tempted to expand our quotas, we have decided to stick to our plan. There are no more chances for you to join our design team."

A lot of candidates looked crushed. Hardly any of them believed they were inferior to the fifty mech designers who passed!

Before their depression could sink in, two-hundred of them suddenly discovered that they were being lit up as well!

Gloriana suddenly smiled. "That is not all, though. After a brief discussion with my boyfriend, we decided to provide some of you with a different opportunity. While none of you managed to measure up against the fifty who met our expectations, Some have come close. We would like to extend an offer to two-hundred of you to join the Larkinson Clan in a different capacity."

"Our Larkinson Clan currently requires a lot of technical expertise in areas outside of our design lab." Ves explained. "For example, the LMC's Production Department requires higher-level technical supervision and quality control that only a qualified mech designer can provide. The Maintenance Departments of our various military troops such as the Avatars of Myth and the Living Sentinels also require the assistance of those who can perform work beyond a typical mech designer. Think of individually modifying a particular mech or restoring a wreck to a completely functional state."

A lot of mech designers suddenly looked hopeful, though there were also those who looked disdainful at these positions!

The difference between working in a design lab and working in some mech hangar or mech workshop was completely different!

Gloriana addressed those concerns. "We are aware that these employment offers do not match your qualifications. However, before you decline, please be aware that you will become fully-fledged members of the Larkinson Clan if you accept. In addition, as long as you perform well and keep improving your skills, there might come a day when you are invited into our Design Department whenever there are vacancies."

A lot of mech designers, particularly the common-born Sentinels, reacted very positively to this announcement. To them, becoming a Larkinson was pretty much the same as becoming a noble, so that was already enough to win them over!

"This is also a reminder to the fifty of you who will soon be joining us in our design lab." Ves turned to the group of chosen candidates. "You must make sure to work diligently and follow our orders. We don't tolerate any deadweight in our design teams. As long as you slack off and take your position for granted, we won't hesitate to kick you out and put a more deserving mech designer in your place!"

The chosen candidates barring the missing Rina Orion all looked concerned. Just because they passed these arduous tests didn't mean they were allowed to relax! It gradually dawned upon them that their hard work had just begun!

Though the work offers didn't sound impressive, the incentive of joining the Larkinson Clan and enjoying the many benefits it brought had attracted a lot of candidates!

Around 170 of them decided to bite the bullet and accept the offer. The remainder declined, which was well within Ves and Gloriana's expectations.

They didn't extend any offers again. As far as the pair was concerned, it was already generous of them to add more than a hundred of them to the Larkinson Clan!

The process finally ended for real. A lot of disappointed mech designers left the hall and walked back to their transit shuttles.

A number of clansmen showed up to process the 170 mech designers who were slated to take up lower-ranked positions.

Ketis meanwhile personally led the chosen candidates to another part of the base in order to process them separately! Due to their importance, Ves personally wanted to induct them into the clan with the help of the Larkinson Mandate.

When the hall emptied out, Gloriana turned to Ves and placed her hands on her hips. "I really didn't believe you went through your barbaric tests. How could you allow your student to chop so many mech designers up! While I understand that you wanted to see how they performed in a crisis, there are much safer and less egregious methods to perform this examination?"

"You wouldn't understand. Simulations and other crap just aren't real enough." Ves definitely crossed his arms. "While I admit I could have refined my tests, what I have arranged today is already sufficient. As I have already stated yesterday, I don't believe in all-rounders. I want specialized mech designers who excel in certain areas."

He selected five mech designers at the start because of their amazing potential. Ves didn't need them to possess exceptional willpower or courage because their talent already made them useful.

As for those who failed to meet this standard, they needed to make up for it with hard work. To ensure that they were willing to undergo all sorts of hardships, he pushed them to their limits in order to reveal their true nature.

It was always in the darkest of moments when people threw away all pretenses. This was the best situation for Ves to evaluate their fit within his design teams!

Unfortunately, Gloriana didn't see it that way.

"You didn't have to act like a brute to get what you want! All of those traumatized mech designers will definitely leak what has happened to the media!"

"That's great!" Ves grinned and spread his arms. "The more this story proliferates, the better!"

"Are you crazy?"

"I'm afraid that all of the latest publicity surrounding me has toned down my eccentric image. A stunt like this will definitely remind the public that I'm not entirely sane, haha!"

Gloriana looked gobsmacked. "Aren't you afraid of getting in trouble?"

"Who will arrest me?" Ves casually shrugged. "The MTA won't bother with low-level matters like this. The Hexadric Hegemony can't tell me what to do. The Bright Republic can screw themselves for all I care. As for the Sentinel Kingdom, they're too scared to act! As far as the local authorities are concerned, we are essentially above the law!"

With his Hexer backing and the six-hundred second-class mechs of the Penitent Sisters under his command, Ves could probably shoot a random person on the street and get away scott-free!

This was the privilege of power!

"Besides, it's not as if I inflicted any permanent damage. All of the cuts made by Ketis can easily be remedied." Ves added.

"What about their mental trauma?!"

Ves shrugged again. "As far as I'm concerned, they have learned an incredibly useful life lesson."

"You're sleeping on the couch tonight!"

*Chapter 2088 The New Design Department*

The LMC's design lab quickly turned boisterous after the addition of so many mech designers. Previously, it was just Ves, Gloriana, and twelve assistant mech designers.

Now, the amount of people crammed in the same room abruptly ballooned! If they were all assigned to work on the Scarlet Rose, her workshop and lab compartment would quickly grow cramped!

Nonetheless, once Ves thought about all of the design resources he suddenly gained, he felt it was all worth it. With so many new design teams, he could finally embark on true parallel mech design!

The sight of so many mech designers in their brand new LMC uniforms caused Ves to imagine all sorts of future scenarios.

Of course, the newly hired assistants still needed to be worked into the organization. They had barely become Larkinsons after Ves personally inducted them into the clan a day ago. The bonds they formed with the Golden Cat were still thin and fragile.

They may have gained the status of clansmen, but there was still a huge distance to go before they turned into 'true' Larkinsons!

Ves clapped his hands, causing the low conversations to die down.

"Good morning, mech designers. Congratulations for becoming Larkinson clansmen. Each of you now bear the same name, which means that we are all brothers and sisters."

A wellspring of pride and relief suffused the faces of the new entrants.

In contrast, the assistants who had joined the LMC beforehand all looked smug. While their qualifications weren't necessarily better than these talented new mech designers, they at least possessed a considerable head start!

Of course, the Tovars and Ylvainans also looked worried. To be honest, their talent and track records were fairly average. If they didn't work hard and study as much as possible in their free time, they might get overtaken by the newcomers!

In the case of someone as young and junior as Mayer Torto, it was inevitable that he would have to bend his head. He had already studied the records of his new colleagues and realized that the LMC hired mech designers in the cusp of their prime this time!

Due to the high number of applicants, the LMC had the luxury of choice. Almost every mech designer who recently joined was a force to be reckoned with! At least half of them were fully capable of starting a successful independent mech company!

Naturally, the proud new hires not only had to compete against the legacy assistants. They already started to eye each other. Not much kinship and brotherhood sparkled in their eyes. Only competitiveness bred in their hearts.

Each of them were already aiming for a promotion! They wanted to stand out from the crowd and earn the appreciation of their bosses! Once Ves or Gloriana favored them, they would definitely receive his favor and enjoy special treatment!

As someone who always suspected his underlings, how could Ves not be aware of these dynamics?

He didn't need to resort to his spiritual vision to see the plots and schemes brooding in their hearts.

After all, if he was in their position, he would probably do the same!

While Ves believed that harboring an ambition was good for productivity, he did not relish the thought of playing nanny to all of them! This was why he was already eying Ketis and Miles to manage the eager new mech designers.

Though Ketis showed up in a regular blue-and-white LMC uniform today, she still brought along her floating Greatsword as always. Even in its sheathed form, its mere appearance sent shudders through the bodies of the new hires! They made sure to remain at a healthy distance from this demonic mech designer!

Ves inwardly grinned. Though the test conducted by Ketis was unnecessarily barbaric, it at least raised her stature among the new clansmen to a meteoric height!

This was something he intentionally pursued. He knew that Ketis didn't possess much management experience. She might not be able to gain the respect of the other mech designers due to her lack of completed mech designs.

Many of the people in the crowd had designed and published more than five mech designs in their short careers!

If Ketis wouldn't be able to gain their respect, then at the very least she should be able to inspire their fear!

He gestured his hand towards his assigned deputies. "Please take note of Ketis Larkinson and Miles Tovar-Larkinson. They are currently the highest-ranking mech designers in the Design Department after myself and my partner. If you require any assistance or have any requests, take it up with them first. Ketis will take charge of the mech designers that have been selected by me, while Miles will supervise the design teams that consist of individuals selected by Gloriana."

Half of the faces of the crowd fell while the other half looked joyous!

Compared to a scary beast like Ketis, they would rather receive instructions from the guy who looked normal!

Ketis didn't take offense at the negative reaction she received. Instead, she thrived on it! She already began to crack her knuckles.

"You better do what I say. If you have a problem with that, you can meet me in the dueling ring! I will gladly hand over my post to you if you can beat me in a fair fight!"

No one took her up on her offer! They were mech designers, not soldiers! This challenge didn't even make sense in the context of their profession! If anything, mech designers should be dueling with their designs, not their fists!

Ves smiled indulgently at Ketis. He indirectly conveyed his approval of her methods. While he believed her potential as a mech designer was no less promising than any of the new hires, it was still helpful to reinforce her authority among the upstarts!

"Ahem, fighting isn't mandatory in our organization." Gloriana coughed. "Never forget what is truly important. As mech designers, our design skills are paramount! Those of you who wish to seek more should focus all of your efforts on improving yourselves. Very soon, we will begin to design more second-class mechs. While we will still design plenty of third-class mechs, those of you who are aiming to higher MUST be capable of assisting us in the development of more advanced machines."

Everyone looked incredibly eager at the prospect of working on a second-class mech! None of them came from a second-class state, so designing a superior mech had always been out of reach to them! One of the biggest reasons why they wanted to apply to a promising mech company like the LMC was because it was clearly about to tackle a higher class of mechs. The presence of a Hexer mech designer guaranteed this transition!

"Before you can learn how to run, you need to learn how to walk. Before you can learn how to walk, you need to learn how to crawl." Ves reminded the crowd. "Each of you will need to get up to speed on how the Design Department is run. My partner and I have recently revised and expanded the rules and regulations governing our workplace, so each of you will need to become familiar with them. In addition, you also need to gain a thorough understanding of the Larkinson Clan. Only when you gain an inside perspective of the various facets of our clan will you be ready to work on our behalf!"

Gloriana stepped up. "To that end, we have organized a lengthy welcoming program to familiarize you with everything you need to know. Ketis and Miles will take each of you on a tour to the various divisions of the clan while also informing you of the merit-based system we have recently instituted to reward you for your contributions."

This was something that Ves came up with on his own recently. Inspired by the way the MTA, the Rim Guardians and the Clifford Society offered a fair and regimented means of rewarding those who worked on their behalf, Ves implemented a rudimentary version of a merit system. This allowed the Design Department to systematically manage, motivate and reward his growing number of assistants.

In fact, Ves thought it was such a good idea that he already contemplated whether he should push such a system to the rest of his clan!

"Each of you can earn a small but steady amount of merit merely by showing up for work and doing what is expected." Ves elaborated. "However, as long as you perform

above expectation, you can earn considerably more. Excellence will always be rewarded by us. Possessing a good work ethic is essential to your success within this department!"

He waved his hand, causing all sorts of projections to appear in everyone's views.

One projection displayed the library of printed books that Ves stole from Lady Aisling Curver. Another projection showcased the high-tech fabrication equipment of the Scarlet Rose. A third projection presented the interior of a well-stocked materials warehouse. The last projection featured some cranial implant models!

"Your individual development is important to us. While we expect you to work hard for us during your working hours, what you do in your free time is up to you. Most of you will likely be attracted to our internal library. We offer a wide selection of textbooks, many of which are normally exclusive to prestigious second-class universities!"

The eyes of at least eighty percent of the new hires already lit up at this mention! A mech designer's hunger for knowledge was voracious, but it wasn't easy for them to get their hands on quality textbooks!

Now, in order to borrow a very valuable book from the library, all the mech designers had to do was to exchange a certain amount of merits!

Naturally, the more valuable textbooks cost more to borrow. Ves had individually gone over every book and set their prices. For the most valuable ones that contained profound knowledge, an assistant had to spend months to accumulate the required merits!

On the other hand, the cheaper books only came with a nominal merit fee. The knowledge they contained was so basic and fundamental that the mech designers could easily buy them from the galactic net. There was no point in charging more, and Ves wanted every mech designer to know at least this much in order to be of use in the LMC.

Gloriana smiled. "That's not all. Aside from accessing the library, you can also spend your merits on various other services. As mech designers, it's important to design and fabricate your own mechs, so we have generously decided to put some of our facilities at your disposal in exchange for merits. In addition, if you ever need personal guidance or tutoring, you can redeem your merits in exchange for our complete and undivided attention. Lastly, you can redeem some other valuable goods and services such as gene mod templates and cranial implants to boost your cognitive functions."

That last sentence excited a considerable amount of mech designers!

A lot of the mech designers in the crowd were still baseline humans! Though they were all brilliant for making it this far with their plain human capabilities, as long as they

received a couple of augmentations, they would definitely be able to reach greater heights!

A small group remained calm. Those who enjoyed a more privileged background such as Catherine Evenson already enjoyed some augmentations. Until the Larkinson Biotech Institute caught up, second-class upgrades were still off the table.

In the lower portions of society, augmentations practically didn't exist. Anyone who possessed one was regarded as a freak!

However, at their current level, every mech designer who joined the LMC knew that augmentations were essential to climbing up the ladder! If they didn't improve themselves, their colleagues definitely wouldn't pass up on the offer!

Ves could already see the burning intent in their eyes. Each of them were already planning to work harder than ever in order to earn as many merits as possible!

He grinned. This was exactly what he wanted to see!

For the first time in his life, Ves comprehended what a huge advantage he possessed by becoming the person who presided at the top of a merit system.

When every gain and loss was added together, the resulting balance would always end up in a net profit for the LMC!

"Work hard, my slaves." Ves inwardly exulted. "No matter how much you benefit, my gains will always be more!"

#### *Chapter 2089 Scarier Than A Doom Guard*

The welcoming program for the new mech designers was fairly extensive. It not only served to introduce them to the rules and regulations of their new positions, but also sought to instill them with the principles and values that the Larkinson Clan embodied.

One of the more interesting parts of the program was the time they would spend with the mech forces of the clan. Every mech designer had to spend a week among the Avatars of Myth, the Living Sentinels, the Battle Criers and the Flagrant Vandals.

After their week with one group had passed, they rotated to another group, and so on. This not only allowed every mech designer to gain a thorough understanding of the various mech forces operating on behalf of the clan, but also provided them with a lot of hands-on practice with every LMC mech.

This was very important for Ves. He needed his mech designers to understand his design philosophy so that their efforts wouldn't clash with his own. As far as he was

concerned, other than revealing his core secrets, the best way to get them up to speed was to expose them to a large amount of LMC mechs.

Overall, the month-long welcoming program was designed to kill multiple birds with a single stone!

"It's essentially an intensive indoctrination program." He muttered with a smirk.

By living alongside the different groups of Larkinsons, the mech designers would quickly absorb the culture and deepen their integration into the clan. By the time they returned to the Design Department, Ves expected them to be truly ready to contribute to his mech design projects!

The design lab quickly turned empty as every other assistant mech designer had been tasked with guiding and supervising the new hires.

It didn't matter. Right now, Ves and Gloriana only worked on one remaining mech design project. The Hexer mech design they stewed over for so long was almost complete, but much of the work still had to be done by the pair themselves.

They couldn't help it. Second-class mech designs were simply too complicated. A third-class mech designer could easily ruin a huge portion of the design with a single, careless mistake!

"Our first iteration is almost ready." Ves remarked as he finished another mental design session with his girlfriend. "I'm not quite sure it is up to par, though."

Gloriana frowned and crossed her arms. "I feel the same way. It's a lot harder to refine this mech design than I thought. The technical challenges posed by this design are exacerbated by all of the military technology and components we are required to incorporate. It's very tough to stick to those standards!"

While their landbound knight mech was commissioned by DIVA, the mech utilized a lot of mid-tier specifications from the Hex Army. Every mech serving under its banner had to abide by a host of exacting specifications.

As a large organization that only fielded a limited amount of approved mech designs, the Hex Army always pursued efficiency in production and logistical support.

This meant that in order to minimize as many inefficiencies as possible, a lot of their mechs used the same parts and standards.

Cross-compatibility was a very high priority to the Hexers. For example, a single given power reactor could be put into dozens of different mech models without requiring any custom adjustments!

Once this applied to many other instances, the gains in efficiency built up to a very scary degree!

The variety of parts and materials stocked by a typical Hexer mech regiment was probably just a third of that of a Fridayman mech regiment!

All of this came at a cost, however. What the Hexers gained in efficiency, they lost in versatility.

Every Hexer mech design was very optimized, but also fairly rigid. If Ves had to describe it briefly, he would say that they all fit into the same boxes.

This was because the mech designs were all built around the same set of components. These components all served to constrain a mech design within a narrow band. It was too difficult to design anything truly new if their mech designers all drew from the same pool of parts!

Both Ves and Gloriana faced plenty of difficulties for this reason. Sometimes, they wanted to incorporate something that was outside of the scope of the parts they added into the design, but that was impossible!

Up until this point, Ves still had several complaints about the current state of his Hexer mech design.

The knight mech's shield and armor was a bit too light for its role.

Its energy storage capacity wasn't large enough.

The extra appendages designed to siphon energy from a fallen edge were a bit too weak.

Fortunately, the combination of all of these traits still resulted in a serviceable mech design. The mech might not excel at any single criteria, but it possessed enough strengths to turn it into a viable new addition to the lineup of the Hex Army!

Ves just wished he had more leeway in the design. While Gloriana didn't have much of a problem with the circumstances, Ves chafed at the restrictions!

"I really wish you Hexers would provide more options for your male-gendered mech designs." He grumbled.

His girlfriend leaned into his body and pecked his cheek. "It's okay. As long as we prove we can contribute to the Hex Army, we might earn another opportunity! Once we receive a commission for a female mech design, we will have a lot more options at our disposal! Women always enjoy the best in our state."

Ves still couldn't get used to the arbitrary discrimination the Hexers practiced on a daily basis. Their attempts to impose gender differences in mech design was completely baseless to any normal person!

That reminded him of something.

"I plan to hold a very elaborate.. ritual when we are ready to finalize our mech design." He slowly spoke. "This is my first true second-class mech design, and I think I can turn it into something special. I have a lot of plans in store, but I am afraid that they might raise a considerable commotion."

"What are you up to now?" Gloriana asked in suspicion.

"I can't tell you right now. I still have to make a lot of arrangements and I'm not sure if they will all go through. Suffice to say, it is going to make our mech design truly special!"

"Does this have to do with the birth of your next proto-god?"

He nodded. "Partially. Well, mostly. Do you remember the founding of the Larkinson Clan? I plan to conduct a larger and more elaborate ceremony in order to create an even stronger spiritual product!"

Ves learned a lot of new insights when he created the Golden Cat. He learned even more when he witnessed the ancestral spirit's growth and evolution. He couldn't wait to put his new theories to use in his next attempt!

"Aren't you afraid of attracting Master Willix again?" Gloriana instantly brought out one of his greatest fears! "She already portal-jumped straight to our star system when we published the Doom Guard. Do you think that our upcoming Hexer mech design will be interesting enough to attract her attention yet again?"

Ves widened his eyes. He would rather endure the Doom Guard's glow for a week than spend a minute in Master Willix' company!

At least the former never aimed at his design philosophy!

No matter how fearsome the Doom Guard became, it would never surpass his fear of the MTA stealing his trade secrets!

He coughed. "Hopefully, the stench I've gained will repel her from making a repeat visit. She has already inspected our work just a week ago. I don't believe a busy Master enjoys so much free time!"

What happened during the recent final selection process leaked out to all of the news publications. There were hundreds of aggrieved mech designers who wanted to take

revenge on Ves and the LMC for passing them over or imparting them with severe mental trauma!

However, outside of his expectations, the outrage on the galactic net was very muted. Part of it was because none of the candidates had been allowed to take any recordings, so they could only describe what happened with their own words or with the help of simulated reconstructions.

The blood wasn't real. The descriptions didn't do justice to that day. It was not that easy for other people to care about the suffering of some stuck-up nerds.

Compared to the immensely tragic Sand War or the incredibly sickening Friedmont Massacre, who cared about the fact that some crazy madwoman chopped off the limbs of a bunch of mech designers?

The LMC reattached those limbs immediately afterwards, so no one suffered any permanent harm. There was no reason for the public to care what had taken place! Besides, Ves was such a prominent mech designer that it wasn't strange to think he could get away with these kinds of stunts!

Ves could only chuckle at this surprisingly feeble response.

Perhaps the only serious 'damage' he suffered was that the mech industry didn't think so well of him anymore. Plenty of mech designers admonished his barbaric decisions, accusing him of besmirching the image of their noble profession!

This was enough for Ves. He wanted to raise his reputation with his customer base while simultaneously earning some contempt from his own kind!

It would be best if the MTA looked down on him further. Hopefully, as long as Ves pushed his eccentric act far enough, he would become way too stinky for someone like Master Willix to associate herself with him any further!

The conversation quickly shifted back to their mech design.

"Before we get to that point, we need to make sure our design is as optimal as possible." Gloriana warned. "To be honest, I've been thinking about something."

"What is it, honey?"

"Designing a mech according to the standards of a Hex Army is.. not that easy for us. While I am confident in our abilities, you have to remember that the standards are geared towards the Master Mech Designers of our state. We're essentially trying to fill in some very big shoes. Though we have done decently enough, it is becoming clearer and clearer to me that we need.. external assistance."

Ves immediately furrowed his brows. "I thought that only we are supposed to work on this mech design. It won't be purely ours anymore when we turn to someone else for help."

"You misunderstand, Ves. I'm not looking for another contributor or partner. I am merely suggesting that we could use some technical consultation in order to smooth out the most persistent problems of our mech design. I can contact some Seniors from my alma mater for help. I'm sure we can persuade one of them to lend us a hand!"

"Absolutely not!" Ves vigorously shook his head! "I know these problems are troubling you, but we can take care of them ourselves! I don't want some Hexer Senior butting her head in our project! It's vitally important that we retain full ownership of our design choices!"

He didn't trust any Hexer mech designer other than Gloriana to abide by the spirit of their mech design.

His girlfriend didn't look pleased. "I'm serious, Ves. I'm not satisfied with what we have managed to accomplish so far. I don't believe we can solve all of the problems by spending more time on this project! Its sophistication vastly exceeds that of the Doom Guard project!"

She wasn't wrong. Ves couldn't easily refute her point because both of them had already worked incredibly hard on the Hexer mech design project. They did their best and put in their earnest effort, only to fall short of some of their goals.

There were two ways to solve this problem.

The first option was to take up Gloriana's suggestion and borrow the capabilities of a better mech designer.

The second option was to upgrade their own capabilities!

His eyes slowly lit up. Though he had slowly forgotten about it, didn't he possess something that could easily help him do that?

"What are you thinking about, Ves?"

"Something that I've neglected for a very long time. Let's table this discussion for today. I need to check up on something."

*Chapter 2090 Self-Assessmen*

Ves no longer needed to hole up in a bathroom in order to conduct his shady business.

There were several more places where he could ensure absolute privacy. After contemplating his options, he decided to enter the Scarlet Rose that was parked at the rented base and make his way to Compartment G-13.

After passing through numerous rigorous security checks, Ves, Lucky and Nitaa entered the site where all of the Larkinson Clan's Breyer alloy secretly appeared.

Ves took the time to inspect the automated production loop. Just like always, Cassandra Breyer's constantly-reappearing escape pod was being melted for salvage at an optimum rate.

None of the machines had broken down. Cassandra hadn't posed any problems either in the last couple of months. Ves firmly believed that she had expended most if not all of her disposable spiritual energy!

While that didn't ensure that the production loop remained intact in the future, at least for now Ves didn't have to worry about any impending disasters.

"Alright, everything looks good."

"Meow."

Lucky had been doing his job as well. He thoroughly inspected the entire compartment for any bugs or untowards elements.

"The compartment is clear." Nitaa finally added.

His silent bodyguard's only role at this moment was to use her extraordinary nose to sniff out any hidden elements that could trigger it. He wanted to cover as many bases as possible.

"Go stand guard while I do my business."

"Yes, sir."

Ves sat down on a random crate and began to materialize his System comm from his inventory.

He had mixed feelings when he looked at his comm. The last time he interacted with it was when he briefly used it to redeem a lot of attribute candies to upgrade the capabilities of the Larkinson seeds.

Aside from that, he never thought about using it. He could spend months without devoting a single thought towards the System!

This would have been unthinkable for him a few years ago! Back then, not a single day passed without spending at least some time on how to spend his Design Points!

"Ugh. I was very caught up by the System's reward mechanic." He grumbled.

Now that he thought about it, the Mech Designer System operated in a similar manner to all of the merit based systems that he encountered. Each time, their purpose was clear. The peons at the bottom had to work hard to gain some scraps while the people at the top harvested most of the profits!

That had changed somewhat since the System abruptly ended its newbie program. Now that Ves no longer earned any DP from selling his mechs, it became a lot harder to earn them. This made him care about the System even less!

As far as he was concerned, this was a good development. He was a mech designer, not a slave to the System. He had always harbored the fear of becoming too dependent on its conveniences.

Fortunately, he acted with restraint and tried his best to develop his own ways to get what he wanted without spending any Design Points.

Even so, just because Ves tried his best to forget about it didn't mean the System no longer mattered!

Its extraordinary origins and its immense value still meant that Ves was under threat! As the treasure passed on by his father, Ves did not dare to take it lightly!

Right now, Ves wasn't sure what the System thought about him. Did he do well by becoming a successful mech designer who could stand on his own? Was it resentful for being ignored all the time?

For some reason, Ves had a hunch the System didn't care all that much. It possessed its own goals, and so long it didn't say anything to him, he was probably heading in the right direction.

He surmised that both of their goals were aligned at this time. Ves wanted to progress further, which matched the System's intentions. What it got out of it was still a mystery, but as long as he moved forward, it didn't matter if he took the left path or the right path. They both led to the same destination!

"Well, my path isn't always smooth." Ves muttered. "Sometimes, it's best to take a couple of detours."

When Ves finally activated the System, he soon encountered something that he should have checked much earlier.

[Design Evaluation: Doom Guard DG-A-01]

Model name: Doom Guard DG-A-01

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson, Gloriana Wodin

Weight Classification: Medium

Recommended Role: Marksman Mech

Armor: B+

Carrying Capacity: D

Aesthetics: A

Endurance: D+

Energy Efficiency: C

Flexibility: E+

Firepower: B

Integrity: B+

Mobility: D+

Spotting: C-

X-Factor: A-

Cost efficiency: C

Project involvement: 57%

Original component composition: 11%

Overall evaluation: The Doom Guard is a spaceborn striker mech that fulfills its deterrence purpose in an orthodox manner. It is an adequate mech in terms of armor and firepower, though it does not excel in those aspects. The lack of mobility along with the limited endurance are the Doom Guard's major shortcomings. However, the true value in this mech design lies in its glow. The value of this functional mech design has been elevated to a great degree by the inclusion of a complicated but effective glow.

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for completing an adequate original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

"Damn. I hoped for more."

He felt a little disappointed at the grades he received. They were adequate, but far from the point of earning a compliment from the System.

Ves cared more for the X-Factor. His design philosophy was especially geared towards this criteria, so it was by far the most important grade to him! Scoring higher had always been his aim!

It was too bad the System didn't think his Doom Guard's glow reached another tier of performance.

The spiritual counterbalancing method he applied to the Doom Guard was something different, but not necessarily better. While Ves still believed he gained a lot by innovating this new method, it merely added one more tool to his toolbox.

In order to break through the bottleneck of an A- grade, Ves needed to find some way to impart a qualitatively superior glow to his mech design!

He still didn't know how he could accomplish that. He didn't think it was as simple as waiting for his design spirits to grow. If that was the case, then a powerful spiritual entity such as Qilanxo should have been able to impart more strength to his mech designs!

His eyes widened in realization. "It's not the design spirits that are holding me back. It's my implementation that is holding me back!"

He had been focusing too much on borrowing the external strength of other spiritual entities! This caused him to neglect the other factors that determine the expression of life and spirituality in a mech!

Though Ves had improved the effectiveness of his mechs to a massive degree ever since he switched over to basing his mech designs around living design spirits, he suspected that he might not be able to break through his bottleneck at this rate.

Ves needed to explore other methods of empowering his mech design. Pursuing alternate options such as transforming the spiritual foundation of his mech designs or developing the concept of imaginary mechs became a considerably higher priority!

"The only problem is that I don't have enough time." He shook his head.

The fact of the matter was that he possessed a to-do list that was way too long! There was so much he needed to do, and the worst part about it was that he could only rely on himself!

The downside of holding so tightly onto the secrets of his design philosophy was that he couldn't pass on his work to anyone else! If he raised a couple of competent disciples, he would have been able to explore multiple opportunities at the same time.

"It's too early for that." He sighed. "Besides, I don't have anyone I can trust to this degree."

Not yet at least.

Once Ves sobered up, he moved on to inspecting his Status.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Journeyman Mech Designer

Specializations: Spiritual Man-Machine Symbiosis

Design Points: 332,342

Attributes

Strength: 1.6

Dexterity: 1.6

Endurance: 2.0

Intelligence: 2.4

Creativity: 2.1

Concentration: 2.1

Spirituality: 1.9

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Journeyman - [3D Printer Proficiency V] - [Assembler Proficiency V] - [Masterwork Mech Assembly II]

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice - [Knight Mech Mastery I] - [Rifleman Mech Mastery I] - [Space Knight Mastery I] - [Hero Mech Mastery I] - [Light Skirmisher Mastery I] - [Custom Mech Design III]

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Journeyman - [Mech Hacking III] - [Programming IV]

[Electrical Engineering]: Journeyman - [Structural Pathway Configuration V] - [Energy Storage V] - [Conductors IV] - [Ultracompact Energy Storage I] - [Power Reactors II]

[Materials Science]: Journeyman - [Crystallography III] - [Crystal Laser Propagation II] - [Lithic Materials I]

[Mathematics]: Journeyman - [Simulations V]

[Mechanics]: Senior - [Jury Rigging IV] - [Speed Tuning IV] - [Mechanical Fault Detection I] - [Fine Motion Control I]

[Metallurgy]: Senior - [Alloy Compression IV] - [Fixed Armor Specialization IV] - [Flexible Armor Specialization I] - [Smart Metal IV] - [ASMAS III] - [Internal Structure Specialization I]

[Metaphysics]: Apprentice - [X-Factor IV] - [Spiritual Senses II] - [Spiritual Exploration I] - [Spiritual Manipulation II] - [Spiritual Engineering II]

[Interfacing]: Novice - [Neural Interface Optimization I]

[Physics]: Senior - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization III] - [Gamma Laser Weapons I] [Lightweight Armor Optimization II] - [Mediumweight Armor Optimization IV] - [Melee Weapon Optimization IV] - [Polarizing Shielding II] - [Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation II] - [Optics III] - [Ballistic Weapon Optimization IV]

[Propulsion]: Journeyman - [Flight Systems IV]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice - [Field Repairs III]

[Signals and Communications]: Journeyman - [Anti-Stealth Detection II]

[Stealth and Cloaking]: Novice

Abilities

[Superpublish]: Unavailable. Can be activated once a year.

[Inventorize]: Unavailable.

Evaluation: A qualified Journeyman Mech Designer whose products gained prominence for their unique and distinctive glows.

He hadn't looked at his Status for a long time, so there were several notable changes.

First, his Spirituality score had improved by 0.1. While Ves still didn't know how these specific scores were measured, any improvement was welcome. Due to his chosen specialty, he relied so much more on this attribute than any other mech designer.

Second, he managed to make up for his previous DP expenditures. He spent a hefty amount of Design Points to redeem all of the attribute candies for the Larkinson seeds. The 100,000 DP he earned from designing the Doom Guard came at a good time.

"I could have earned more if I didn't Superpublish the Bright Warrior."

Ves believed it was necessary at the time, but it caused him to miss out on a good chunk of DP. The System also denied him a radiant lottery ticket after he created his second masterwork.

He didn't deserve it. Simple as that.

The only benefit the System couldn't deny was the boost to his affinity for mechs. Masterwork Mech Assembly reached the second rank, which reflected the reality that he had become more in tune with mechs after creating the Quint.

Ves smiled and rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Even if I resort to the same method in the future, it's still worth it. Improving my mech affinity is the most reliable way to increase my output of masterwork mechs. As long as it's high enough, every mech I make can become a masterwork!"

Aside from these notable observations, Ves also noticed that several of his Sub-Skills had improved. He hadn't spent any Design Points to upgrade them. They naturally improved as Ves regularly referenced the textbooks originally owned by Lady Curver in order to develop new solutions to the problems he encountered during his work.

With the partial digitization of his mind, his learning efficiency had skyrocketed. Ves no longer felt the need to purchase any mundane Skills or Sub-Skills from the System. He could easily acquire what he wanted by studying the right textbook!

"Still, some Skills cost way too much time to improve."

This was what he came for. In response to the mounting technical problems he faced in his remaining mech design project, he sought to quickly boost his capabilities so that he could overcome some of the challenges!

Ves not only wanted to solve the immediate problem. This was just the start. In the near future, he planned to design a lot more second-class mechs, each of which would likely incorporate a lot of advanced components!

Once he got in touch with more and more high technology, the demand on his knowledge base would continue to increase. Therefore, improving his fundamental capabilities would go a long way in improving his efficiency!

"It's time to improve some of my Main Skills. I should elevate more of them to Senior-level!"

He wasn't going after the small fry this time! He sought to upgrade his understanding in a comprehensive and holistic manner!