

## Mech 3951

### Chapter 3951 Momentary Advantages

After turning three more pakklaton captives into his test subjects, Ves triumphantly returned to the Spirit of Bentheim and resumed his regular duties.

It would take time to collect enough data. Studying the most recent batch of test subjects and verifying the abilities granted by their newborn companion spirits could not be rushed.

Ves predicted that it would probably take a month or so before Jovy made his choice and readied himself for the implantation process.

"This won't be easy."

Performing spiritual surgery on a Journeyman was a lot different from performing the same procedure on a bunch of weak and defenseless pakklatons!

Though Ves already had experience on operating on Journeymen such as himself and Gloriana, who knew what difficulties he might encounter when he tried to do the same to Jovy.

As a member of the MTA, Jovy Armalon received a lot of special treatments. His mind and body had undergone many changes in order to turn him into a superior mech designer.

Ves had no idea whether any of them affected or protected Jovy's spirituality and more specifically his design seed.

If this was the case, then Ves needed to be ready to adjust his approach. It would be good to have universal life energy as well as other safeguards ready.

"Well, I have plenty of time to prepare."

Ves threw himself back to his work and his routine duties. The expeditionary fleet followed a direct route back to the Davute System, and hadn't encountered any obstructions along the way. It would not take long before the Golden Skull Alliance was ready to settle down for a time.

Now that Ves wanted to devote several years to expansion and reconstruction, he had to attend a lot of meetings with different clansmen in order to discuss their spending plans.

Many of those multi-year investment plans demanded substantial amounts of financing.

If anyone suggested that the Larkinson Clan should invest over 100,000 MTA credits on a single initiative, then Ves would have booted the delusion fellow from the compartment!

Nowadays, Ves did not show much of a reaction. The other Larkinson executives also assumed that this was the new norm.

This was the tyranny of possessing a lot of MTA merits and phasewater!

The Larkinson Clan obtained so much spending power all of a sudden that every clansman had adopted the mentality of a nouveau riche!

The problem with that was that some of the spending plans went too far. Ves may be happy and eager to spend a lot of money in the coming years, but that didn't mean he was a proponent of wasteful spending!

As a mech designer, Ves still held to the principle that he should spend as little as possible in order to obtain the maximum possible benefit.

The Larkinson Clan's wealth was only incidental at the moment. There was no easy way to replicate the feats that allowed them to earn a huge amount of profit.

This was why Ves felt it was important to invest much of it into the Larkinson Clan. He wanted it to become large and strong enough to earn this kind of money through routine business operations!

The Larkinsons faced a lot of challenges in meeting this goal. The clan still did not have a strong foundation in the local economy. The business environment in the Red Ocean was still underdeveloped and competition was extremely high.

Money alone could not lift the Larkinson Clan into prosperity! The more he talked to various knowledgeable experts, the more he understood that the Larkinsons needed to integrate in the local business community.

"You can view the current circumstances in Davute as a zero-sum game." Minister Shederin Purnesse explained. "The markets and the infrastructure are so limited that only a fraction of the total number of companies can achieve profitability at this time. In truth, none of the companies that have moved to Krakatoa are earning any profits. Each of them must spend large amounts of money in order to obtain a foothold in the local economy. The power blocs and coalitions that are in control of the port system try to keep out the newcomers as much as possible. Do you know why?"

It was not difficult to guess the answer.

"Because each new competitor that enters the market will force the existing companies to shrink their market share." Ves responded. "The pieces of the pies get smaller and

smaller. The only compelling reason to allow a newcomer to settle in Davute is if the company provides a good or service that is sorely needed. This explains why Murphy & Sons has not encountered too many hindrances."

Starships were in high demand, so there was still sufficient room for shipbuilding companies.

The mech industry was in a completely different state. There were way too many mech designers and mech companies trying to capture the nascent markets for different categories of mechs.

The mech companies involved in the founding and colonization of the initial settlements on Davute enjoyed an enormous first-mover advantage!

If these founders had any sense, then they would do their best to abuse their power and position in the industry to choke out new arrivals!

This explained the Living Mech Corporation's current state in the Red Ocean.

The Larkinsons were more than eager to expand their business operations in the new frontier, but the mech companies that arrived first did everything in their power to maintain the status quo!

Of course, there was no way that a limited number of mech companies could maintain their oligopoly forever.

Once the local economy developed further, the demand for different mechs would surely skyrocket. The supply of raw materials would also catch up, thereby making it easier for latecomers to set up shop.

The problem for the Larkinson Clan was that it would take thirty, fifty or even a hundred years before a semblance of fair and open competition became possible!

"The reality of this early period is that gaining a foothold in the local economy cannot be achieved without the consent of the dominant players in Davute." Shederin stated in a neutral tone. "Our clan is but one of many outsiders who are desperately trying to gain the acceptance of insiders. If we want to succeed, we need to convince the latter that embracing us will not harm their interests. In fact, that is not enough. We need to persuade enough insiders that letting us into their ranks will profit them instead."

Ves grimaced. He could see where this conversation was going. "Let me guess. The best way to become an insider is to pay big fat bribes to these early movers and dominant players, is that correct?"

"Indeed. It is relatively uncommon for newcomers to donate large sums of money or phasewater. Takeovers and partial ownership transfers are more common around here.

The power blocs are aiming to become stronger instead of weaker. It is much harder to persuade them to approve us if we do not want to give them a stake into our mech company or clan."

There was no way that Ves would allow any ownership stake to escape his hands!

The Larkinson Clan must never answer to a higher authority than a Larkinson! This was one of his most important principles! Freewebnovel.com.

Although Ves was willing to invest a considerable amount of money to integrate into Davute, he would pack up his bags and go if there was any further talk about transferring ownership!

"You don't need to explain the old boy's club that is controlling Davute any further. I already understand the many difficulties. What I need is an answer. How can you turn our clan into an insider without wasting the majority of our windfall on bribes?"

Minister Shederin smiled. "As I have stated earlier, the key to becoming an insider is to persuade the existing ones that we can advance their interests. That does not necessarily mean we should give them partial control of our clan or bribe them with enormous sums of money. The plan that I have formed after the events in Purgatory takes advantage of our new conditions to win over one player after another. We do not need to win over every insider. We do not even need to obtain the approval of a majority of them. As long as we have obtained tentative support, we can rely on ourselves to do the rest."

The old man transferred over an electronic document.

When Ves skimmed through the plan, he wasn't sure whether the Larkinson Clan was able to pull it off. It relied heavily on diplomacy to do the job.

"Can we really win over enough insiders without spending a lot of money?" Ves skeptically asked.

"I am confident we can do so, sir." Shederin confidently replied. "You are underestimating the power of status, wealth and reputation. Your personal attitude towards galactic citizens is woefully shallow. I can guarantee you that as long as we publicize the fact that you have become a tier 6 galactic citizen, many more dignitaries will be interested in building up relations with you. If we reveal the fact that we have successfully concluded an exploration run and returned home with hundreds of kilograms of phasewater, we will become one of the most prominent pioneers in Davute, at least for a time. These factors already put us ahead of other competitors."

The logic was sound, but Ves wasn't sure whether the established power blocs would truly be swayed by status and reputation.

In his cognition, these power players were all ruthless and utilitarian!

If the Larkinsons did not give them any solid and costly benefits, there was no way the insiders would open the gates!

"I don't have that much confidence that your attempts at diplomacy will go as smoothly as you think." Ves replied. "However, I'm willing to give your plan a chance, mainly because it is by far the cheapest proposal that I have come across. We still have plenty of time to build up a solid presence in Davute, so we don't need to rush too much."

"You won't regret this decision, sir. I have studied Davute's conditions extensively. The distribution of power in this port system is complex, and that gives us numerous openings. The best way to break into a castle is not to breach its strongest defenses, but to exploit its weak points. There is no single overpowering player in the port system. Instead, numerous different parties must share power, which means that none of them have the power to single-handedly drive us away."

The situation that Minister Shederin described sounded similar to what the Golden Skull Alliance faced in the beginning of the Purgatory Campaign.

"Divide and conquer." Ves softly said. "You're essentially trying to apply this stratagem to our entry into Davute."

"Essentially, yes. The most brilliant aspect of divide and conquer is that you can continue to apply it as you go further. If you can truly persist, we might end up ruling Davute as a whole. We may even rule over the state that has formed around the regional economy."

"Stop! No more, please. I have no ambitions to take over a lucrative port system. We don't need to rely on conquering a fief in order to do well in the Red Ocean. Holding a port system or worse yet an entire state is far too much trouble in my opinion. The enemies we make and the heat we attract will distract us and put us into way too much danger. I just want to be a mech designer, Shederin. I don't see why I should try and become a neo-feudal stellar tyrant."

Shederin sighed. "It is only an option, patriarch. If you leverage your gains from the Purgatory to the fullest, it is not impossible to gather a following and build up a power bloc of your own. From there, you can scheme or persuade the other power blocs to stand aside or offer their allegiance to you. In fact, this is how many leaders in frontier regions rose to power. The Life Research Association of Majestic Teal is a good example. You can assuredly become the next Supreme Sage if you are truly willing to maximize your advantages."

The mention of the Supreme Sage briefly prompted Ves to recall what happened to this once-revered leader.

"...No thanks. I'm already fine the way I am. Leading the Larkinson Clan is already good enough."

## Chapter 3952 Frontier Region Development

The plan that Minister Shederin Purnesse concocted in the last few weeks was actually quite brilliant.

Even though it relied on a lot of assumptions that sounded dubious to Ves, its logic was sound and the chances of succeeding was quite good compared to many of the other suggestions that he heard as of late.

"If we rule out the wasteful and self-destructive act of giving our hard-won wealth, we need to look to ourselves if we want to find a better option to win over the parties that have come to dominate Davute's political and economic landscape." Shederin patiently explained to Ves. "Now, what is the greatest strength of the Larkinson Clan?"

"Our mechs." Ves immediately answered. "My efforts and the contributions from the rest of the Design Department has allowed us to design a lot of strong and unique second-class mechs. We are known for our living mechs and we are able to exert greater combat power because of that. While our military might is not weak due to that, I believe that our advantage is best reflected in the mech market. Once we complete our next design round, I have no doubt that our latest wave of commercial mech models will take the regional markets in Krakatoa and Yeina by storm!"

The earning potential of living mechs and other special mechs was just too strong!

The LMC may be a complete newcomer in the Red Ocean, but it shouldn't be too difficult to rapidly build up its brand awareness. Ves just had to make sure that his mech company published at least one great mech model that successfully turned into a bestseller.

From his previous experiences, just one bestseller was enough to support an entire mech company's rise!

It didn't matter if the other models in the catalog did not achieve critical success or provided any profit. Ves could just treat the mech market like a giant lottery. He might lose money after buying 99 lottery tickets, but as long as he managed to hit the jackpot with the next one, he could recoup all of his investment and more!

Of course, not every mech designer and mech company was qualified to adopt this lottery strategy. If their ability to develop good mechs was not up to par, then they would never be able to win a prize even if they bought a million lottery tickets!

Seeing Ves react with so much confidence in his mechs caused Minister Shederin to smile as well.

"Your mechs are valuable and so is your ability to design them on a continuous basis. What we need to do is to entice more parties into forming mutually-beneficial relationships with us by attracting them with your products. Are you confident that you can win them over with your work?"

That was an intriguing question.

"I'm not sure." Ves honestly admitted. "I don't know how other people and organizations will view my mechs. Many powerful pioneering organizations usually employ their own mech designers, so they are not short on quality mechs. Their core mech models are all internally developed, which not only ensures that they have total control over their military assets, but also allows them to design mechs that exactly fit their needs."

Even if there were lots of external mech companies and mech designers that could offer superior products, these pioneers would not easily switch over to them. At most, only a part of a mech force's composition would be made up of third-party mechs.

However, this was enough of an opening according to Minister Shederin.

"No organization can design the best possible mechs in every category. You of all should know that, patriarch. There are also gaps in coverage that mech designers cannot easily fill. For example, several of your mech models provide unique glows that provide utility that cannot be found elsewhere. These mechs are the foundation of the LMC's rise and they can also be leveraged to bind more powerful parties to our clan."

Ves understood the logic of this argument, but it was not so easy to win over ambitious pioneers who already achieved a lot of success of their own. Their strength wasn't weak and it was difficult to convince them that they should invest in mechs designed by Journeymen.

"That still isn't enough to overcome the inertia of the power blocs in control of Davute." He refuted. "Mechs designed by Masters are the norm at this level. The performance, optimization, support and infrastructure of these mech models are all superior to ours in many ways. Even if their mechs are not alive, who cares when they can just crush our machines the old-fashioned way?"

Shederin nodded in agreement. "The first steps are always the hardest. This is why we need to start small and win over a smaller party at first. Now, out of every possible type of organization in the Red Ocean, which ones rely more on good mechs than others? Which ones base their strength on the quality and features of their mechs the most?"

It did not take long for Ves to supply an answer.

"Plenty of pioneers have found a place in the new frontier by relying on their primary business activities. Our clan is supported by selling mechs, for example. Murphy & Sons are banking on your shipbuilding operations. The Aduc Family who we will soon be



acquainted with has a foothold in the terraforming industry. Each of these groups have achieved success in their respective business field, so their reliance on mechs is not that great. Their mech forces only need to be strong enough to protect their assets. They can call upon the services of other parties if they are faced with a threat that they cannot handle."

Shederin smiled. "And who exactly are these parties that primarily generate revenue by renting out their combat units?"

"Mercenary organizations." Ves answered.

"Exactly. The security industry is unique among all of the other service industries. It is not based on a productive activity. The companies that are active in this field do not produce any goods. They provide a service, which happens to be protection. In order to do this job well enough to attract well-paying customers, the mercenaries must make certain that their combat strength is up to par. Employing good mech pilots and maintaining a strong esprit de corps are just a couple of requirements. Fielding a strong and balanced mech roster is also a necessity. This is where our clan can be of value. If we approach these mercenary organizations and allow them to commission customized mech models from us, I believe that it will not take long for them to fall in love with our solutions."

This was one of the strong points of the living mechs designed by Ves. Almost every customer that experienced them turned into recurring customers. It was difficult for them to consider alternatives when living mechs were so useful and so comfortable to pilot!

Ves briefly fell into thought. He had dealt with numerous different mercenary outfits and mercenary organizations over the years.

Space was too big and order was relatively sparse in many areas. Protection was essential and many companies were not able to protect their assets on their own. This gave birth to an enormous security industry where many different companies earned their keep by meeting this essential demand.

There was a huge variety of mercenary companies, and Ves had dealt with two of the extremes.

Early on in his career, he had contracted a scumbag mercenary outfit that was weak and unreliable in combat.

Later on, his financial means had grown, so he and his clan contracted the services of a powerful and reputable mercenary organization.

Right now, Shederin was mainly referring to the latter. Providing security was risky business, so a lot of mercenary organizations tried their best to elevate their combat power by any means possible.



No one appreciated good mechs more than those whose lives and livelihoods depended on them! Mercenary outfits were unlike shipbuilding companies or nutrient pack producers that supported their existence through peaceful means.

Even if a company like Murphy & Sons only possessed garbage mechs that were over three generations out of date, so what? As long as the Murphies used their earnings to contract a reputable security company, they had no concerns about protecting their business assets!

Mercenary organizations usually didn't enjoy this option. They were only good at fighting and deterrence and nothing else. While there were plenty of cases where they attempted to diversify their income streams by branching out to other sectors, it was too difficult for them to succeed without inherent advantages.

All of this meant that good mechs were far more than a luxury to them. Good mechs were literally their lifelines!

The more Ves thought about it, the more he felt that it might be useful for his clan to entice a few of them. Even if the mercenary organizations weren't strong enough to provide any political support, it didn't hurt to befriend them over time.

This was far from securing political support, though.

Ves frowned. "I can see how we can establish tentative partnerships with a couple of marginal and struggling mercenary organizations, but how will that help us in the long run, Shederin? The power players that we truly need to win over are more than capable of addressing their own shortcomings. I don't think our goods and services are attractive enough to catch their attention."

"We can adopt several different strategies to solve this blockade. For example, we can win over a smaller party that is related to a larger party. If we earn the approval of the former, we will have an opportunity to earn the approval of the latter."

"That takes too long."

"I agree, sir. That is why I think we are better off by pursuing a riskier but more rewarding strategy. We should support the rise of a new power bloc. There are many struggling mercenary organizations that are in the same position as us. If we band together with them, we can strengthen their mech forces and help them gain their footing in Davute's expanding security industry. We provide the mercenaries with living mechs while they provide us with greater access and acceptance. This is a win-win deal for both of us. As long as we are able to form a symbiotic relationship with several mercenary organizations and use our initial successes to attract stronger security groups, we can essentially form a rising new power bloc that can become a fixture in Davute!"

This was one of the more unreasonable steps of Shederin's plan! Ves did not believe that it would be that easy to build an entire coalition of mercenary organizations around his products!

The Larkinson Clan's foreign minister was not finished, though.

"You aren't thinking far enough, Ves. You need to view this situation in the context of the development of a frontier region. What do you think will happen in Krakatoa in the next couple of decades?"

"Settlements will grow larger. Once the colonies have matured to the point where they are able to project their strength to other star systems, their owners will finally become strong enough to found their own states. Territorial struggles will break out as many rising states will attempt to grab as many star systems as possible."

"That is what I envision as well." Minister Shederin replied. "Now, ask yourself this question. Which groups will be the ones who take the lead in fighting these frontier wars?"

"...If the states haven't organized their own military branches as of yet, then I guess the mercenaries will take charge. Is that what you are saying?"

"It's more than that, Ves. What if I tell you that most of those mercenary organizations will eventually be absorbed by the states and turn into the first mech armies, mech corps, mech divisions and mech regiments?"

Ves widened his eyes. He hadn't realized this yet! Although it sounded a bit dangerous to turn external groups into state-backed military forces, it actually made sense in a way!

"That isn't all." Shederin continued. "When these mercenary organizations transition into formal military troops, their ties to the industries that have supported them will not fade. In fact, in light of all of the wars that will break out, it becomes even more important for these mercenaries-turned-soldiers to develop strong, long-term relationships with the suppliers of their arms! In my world, we call this the rise of a military-industrial complex."

## Chapter 3953 Professionalisation

At first, Ves thought it sounded ridiculous for emerging states to convert third-party mercenary organizations into sanctioned military mech units.

There was a huge gap between soldiers who fought for fortune and those who were willing to fight and die for a state!

However, the rules of the Milky Way did not apply to a frontier region.

States that were less than a decade old did not exist long enough to instill a strong sense of loyalty and patriotism among its people.

Since states could not rely on duty to incentivize people to fight, then they could only resort to naked interests to obtain the necessary soldiers!

The struggle for territory was harsh and pivotal to the future of many states. Ves knew quite well how dramatically a win or a loss could affect the fortunes and the power balance of entire regions for generations to come.

Back when the Komodo Star Sector initially opened up, the founders of states like the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom used to be legitimate contenders in the struggle to form second-rate states.

However, both of their groups got smashed so much by the competition that they had little choice but to settle in the periphery of the star sector.

It was groups like the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony that managed to win more battles than others and managed to retain their hold on all of the richer territories.

Now, this pattern was about to take place again on a wider scale in the Red Ocean. Every zone in the new frontier was just begging to be divided by ambitious pioneers!

The only requirement was that these pioneers were able to defeat their closest rivals on the battlefield.

There was no way for the founders of these nascent states to capture more territories if they ran out of mech troops too soon!

This was why the people in charge of places like Davute would soon extend olive branches to mercenaries.

The need for soldiers was too great! In the face of the huge amount of power, wealth and resources that powerful states could obtain, the great cost and considerable risks of absorbing mercenaries were no big deal!

Besides, the mercenaries who accepted these deals were more than willing to undergo a career change.

While the private sector offered fewer restrictions to mech pilots, there was nothing honorable about being a mercenary.

Soldiers possessed more pride, honor and acceptance. Combined with the rich incentives offered by rising states, the former mercenaries were more than willing to fight for the chance of founding their own military families and dynasties!

In fact, this was exactly what happened to the original Larkinson Family. Didn't the Larkinson Ancestor offer his services to the founders of the Bright Republic and fight for greater rights and honor for his descendants?

Although the Larkinsons and many other loose forces started off as soldiers for hire, once the Bright Republic integrated them in the Mech Corps, they turned into the first military cadre of a growing state!

Ves already studied the history of his former family a long time ago, but he did not equate its circumstances to the conditions of the Red Ocean until recently.

Now that Shederin enlightened him, Ves fully understood Davute's greater trends and what would happen in the coming years!

He also recognized that there were several ways in which the Larkinson Clan could rise by taking advantage of several openings!

Many of these opportunities sounded tempting to Ves, but as he recalled his priorities, he quickly tempered his desires.

"I don't want our clan to become too attached to any state." Ves reminded his foreign minister. "Look, I get it. There is a rare and valuable chance for us to become one of the founding groups of a powerful second-rate state. However, all of this talk about becoming a part of a rising military-industrial complex sounds extremely dubious to me. I don't want our clan to become anchored to a state centered around Davute. The Red Ocean still has a lot more to offer to us and the Krakatoa Middle Zone is only a part of its periphery."

Minister Shederin raised his hand. "It doesn't have to go that far, sir. Following my plan doesn't mean that we will become completely dependent on Davute. It is hard to disentangle ourselves from the new state if we offer our services to it as mercenaries, but we will enjoy much greater leeway if we merely stick to our role as a provider of mechs."

A mech manufacturer could be a useful addition to a state, but it was never an indispensable part of one. The larger ones tended to sell their products in many markets.

While it was true that mech companies and mech designers could offer favorable services to the states they were more attached to, these relationships weren't necessarily permanent.

It was normal for companies to rise and fall. The mech market was dynamic and today's winners could turn into tomorrow's losers.

Due to this, many states adopted a more utilitarian attitude towards mech companies, at least at the beginning.

After Minister Shederin explained this dynamic, Ves did not feel as opposed to the plan anymore.

"A military-industrial complex describes a deep and mutually-beneficial entanglement between certain military organizations and friendly arms manufacturers. What you need to distinguish here is that only the former are permanently attached to states. If you want to get out, then you can do so without paying a ruinous price. Unlike professional military organizations, companies are expected to value their own interests over that of their states. As long as we make our intentions clear from the start, the outcomes that you fear will never come true."

Ves fell silent for a moment as he thought about how the Larkinson Clan could benefit if it participated in this game.

The risks were still considerable, and he wasn't sure whether the Larkinson Clan would be able to gain a solid footing in the regional economy in a single decade.

"I admit that I am attracted by the prospect of becoming one of the key suppliers of an established military unit, but there is a key variable that determines whether we can succeed or fail."

"What variable are you referring to, sir?"

"The strength of the mercenary organizations that we are able to partner with." Ves answered. "If we can only gain the cooperation of a few marginal mercenary outfits, then I don't see how we will be able to gain enough influence and benefits. We need to win over stronger mercenary organizations and security companies in order to gain a stronger voice in a rising state."

Ves based these thoughts on what happened to the Larkinson Family.

The Larkinson Ancestor and his dependents fought hard for the Bright Republic. In the end, while the Larkinson Family earned a lot of honor and recognition from the state, none of this translated to actual power and prosperity!

The founding families that were truly in control of the Bright Republic completely treated the Larkinsons as their hereditary cannon fodder.

The ultimate reason why the Larkinson Family failed to become a part of the upper echelon of the state was because it simply wasn't big and strong enough!

While it was admirable that the Larkinson Family was always able to supply a handful of expert pilots with every generation, the Mech Corps back then employed a lot more demigods, some of which came from even larger military families!

Though Ves did not mind participating in this state-building game, he wanted to back a winning horse instead of another loser comparable to the dumb and gullible Larkinson Family.

"We will take care of this problem." Shederin reassured Ves. "We have already examined hundreds of different mercenary organizations, and we are continuing to study the ones that will arrive in the future. Once we return to Davute, we can start to approach the groups that may be interested in what we have to offer. If we receive any positive responses, I will inform you of our progress so that you can decide how we should proceed."

Ves shrugged. "Well, I guess there's no harm in talking. You can do what you want as long as you don't make any serious commitments on my behalf. I want to meet with the leaders of these mercenary groups before I decide whether to get in bed with them. If we want to enter into a long-term partnership with any of them, then I want to make sure that they are trustworthy."

The two talked a bit more about this plan before Minister Shederin left..

This was actually just one of several different plans to facilitate the rise of the Larkinson Clan. Even if Minister Shederin's diplomacy initiatives failed to yield the desired results, Ves could still bank on his other plans to gain a foothold in the region.

Ves thought about his commercial ambitions and his shared research initiatives with the MTA. These were just a few of the activities that would surely boost his clan in a generation.

His current goal was to turn the Larkinson Clan into a city-state on the move!

This was an ambitious goal, but an attainable one in his opinion. With the huge amount of MTA merits and resources he obtained, he possessed a powerful head start that he did not intend to waste.

"I need to start moving as soon as my fleet returns to the Davute System."

Days went by as the expeditionary fleet continued on its journey. After briefly stopping at a high-traffic star system that was not too far away from Davute, the fleet finally embarked on its last leg of the journey!

A lot of Larkinsons and other people were already looking forward to enjoying a long and well-deserved vacation.

The stress and pressure they accrued during the Purgatory Campaign needed to be released, and what better way to do so than to allow the clansmen to spend their huge bonuses in a booming colony?

Even Ves looked forward to winding down for a week. He looked forward to bringing his daughter down to a planet where she could gain all kinds of new experiences.

Ves smiled as he thought about organizing his first family vacation.

However, when he approached his wife in order to discuss how they should spend their leisure time, she brought up a matter that he hadn't been paying attention to lately.

"Our students are close to graduating into mech designers." Gloriana said.

"Huh? So soon?"

"They've completed all of the compulsory courses that we have specified." His wife continued. "They also finished enough optional courses to start forming their own design philosophies. At this stage in their studies, it is no longer useful for them to stick to book learning. They are ready to design their first mechs. Let's assign them their graduation assignments. As long as they can independently design a functioning second-class mech from scratch, we can officially recognize them as Novice Mech Designers."

Novice Mech Designers. This was a trivial rank to Ves, but every new mech designer had to start somewhere.

After several years of study, Maikel Larkinson, Zanthar Larkinson, Maisie Ann Larkinson and Rennie Larkinson were finally ready to create their own mechs!

A lot had changed since the start of their studies under Ves and Gloriana. As the Larkinson Clan continued to prosper, the students prospered as well.

They received better treatment and gained access to better learning resources. Ves and Gloriana continually raised their expectations of the four Larkinson seeds and the adolescents did not disappoint!

Although Ves did not think that the four trueblood Larkinsons were the most brilliant mech design students in existence, they were anything but average mech designers!

Ves had taught a lot of knowledge and passed on a lot of unique ideas to Maikel and Zanthar. Both of them were so heavily influenced by him that their chosen specialties had a lot of relations with his own design philosophy!

As long as Maikel and Zanthar managed to get their footing as mech designers, they could offer a lot of assistance to Ves in the coming years!



## Chapter 3954 Demonic Graduation Assignments

When Ves visited the design lab, he entered an office and sat down while studying the contents of a data pad.

He hadn't paid much attention to Maikel Larkinson and Zanthar Larkinson's recent academic progress. The Purgatory Campaign and all of his other responsibilities took up too much of his time.

He never worried about the two, though. Although the pair of Larkinson seeds acted a bit presumptuous at times, their grades were real and they never failed a course since they started their studies.

The data pad not only contained a log of their academic progress, but also contained Gloriana's personal notes on their performance under her tutelage.

Gloriana was effectively in charge of the design lab most of the time. Although Ves officially held more authority, his split responsibilities often caused him to be away for weeks at a time.

Under these circumstances, Gloriana efficiently took over and made sure that every subordinate remained productive.

She also took charge of Maikel and Zanthar's studies during these times. Though her teaching style and philosophy was different, she was already passing on her teachings to Maisie Ann Larkinson and Rennie Larkinson, so it wasn't as if this was anything new and different.

"Hmmm. Your results have actually improved. That's impressive." Ves commenced as he looked at the list of grades. It looks like both of you have embraced your respective passions. Otherwise, you wouldn't have studied these final courses with such enthusiasm."

"Luminar crystal technology is really difficult to get into." Zanthar helplessly said. "I haven' changed my mind on specializing in this wonderful tech, but I don't think I can come close to designing the luminar crystal weapons that our mech pilots love."

"All in due time, Zanthar. You're not even a Novice yet. Even if you are, you still need to take many more steps before you can independently design energy weapons at that caliber. However, once you become good enough to call yourself an Apprentice, I might allow you to assist in the design of future ranged mechs such as the Bright Warrior Mark II or the Crystal Lord Mark III. The experiences you can gain from participating in these projects will provide a massive boost in your understanding of luminar crystal weapons."

Zanthar looked a lot more enthused than before. "Really, patriarch!?"

"This is part of the reason why I have taught you. I expect the both of you to grow into mech designers that can specifically help our Design Department improve our products. We still have many holes in our mech designer roster. It is practically impossible to hire a lumina crystal weapon specialist from the job market, so I can only place my hopes on you to develop this tech in my stead."

Neither Maikel nor Zanthar were stupid. They both knew that Ves and the other Larkinsons had groomed them for a purpose.

They didn't see a problem in this. Both of the young men had received far more attention and tutelage than students who attended actual mech design universities.

While Ves and Gloriana could never come close to matching the orthodox teachings of those reputable institutions, the pair of eccentric but accomplished Journeymen were able to provide a lot more personalized instruction!

All of the individual treatment caused Maikel and Zanthar to become a lot more prepared to work in the Design Department than others!

Other mech design graduates may be smarter and more talented, but they still needed a lot of time to fit into the Design Department and understand their roles.

In contrast, all four Larkinson seeds practically grew up in this place! The design labs were their campus and they had become exposed to the methods of their fellow Larkinson mech designers for several years!

They even made friends with many of the assistant mech designers. As long as the four supplemented their knowledge and polished their skills a bit, they could seamlessly join a design team and begin to work shortly afterwards!

To Ves, Maikel and Zanthar were truly treasures in his eyes. No one should be better prepared to inherit parts of his mantle than these trueblood clansmen who completely absorbed the Larkinson style of designing mechs.

"Madame Gloriana told us that we are ready to begin our graduation assignments." Maikel mentioned. "Can you give us the details, teacher? We are eager to become actual Novices."

"Impatient, aren't you?" Ves looked amused. "Well, I like your enthusiasm. Give me a moment. I need to compose suitable assignments based on the results of your studies. This will be the definite period where you prove your worth. The mech designs that you submit this time is not only about earning a passing grade from me. Your work must convince the others that you are good enough to become a productive member of the mech industry. If you only submit a perfunctory design, then what have you been doing all of these years? Any random graduate from a mech university can whip out a boring

mech design. It takes true skill and passion to design a unique mech that is marked by your imprint!"

His words heaped up a lot of pressure on the shoulders of the Larkinson seeds.

At the same time, Ves also raised the pair's expectations. They did not shy away from this challenge!

Ves briefly studied the pair of students. Maikel and Zanthar both possessed the typical black hair of their Larkinson lineage. Their faces and their bodies had grown less delicate and more masculine as they grew into their twenties.

The various genetic treatments and other augments they received from the Larkinson Clan had turned them into formidable engineers that were more than ready to begin their mech design careers!

Whether it was their knowledge base, their career preparations, their cognitive functions and their appearances, the pair of Larkinson seeds were much better off than Ves at this stage of their lives!

It should be impossible for Maikel and Zanthar to stumble and fall!

Once he was done with thinking how much his students had changed over the years, Ves knew what he needed to do to end this fruitful period.

"Alright. The two of you have remained students long enough. I don't need to treat you as kids anymore. It is time for you to enter the real mech industry. Each of you will receive a different assignment that conforms to your respective specialties."

Ves turned to one of the pair. "Maikel, you have developed a passion for living mechs and have completed a lot of courses related to AIs and mech automation. With all of that effort, you need to create a solid result that vindicates your choices."

"How can I do that, teacher?"

"By designing a fully-automated battle bot that can defeat a regular second-class mech piloted by a trained mech pilot."

"What?! Sir... I... I don't think I can do that yet." Maikel said while looking queasy. "Can't you allow me to design a regular mech?"

Ves shook his head. That was too boring! If Maikel thought that he could get a standard graduation assignment, then he severely underestimated his teacher!

"This is for your own good, Maikel." Ves smirked. "For mech designers like us, it is not enough to think about embracing a design philosophy. You need to practice it and prove

that you can actually develop a specialty to the point where you can compete against your peers. If you can't design a fully-automated battle bot that can defeat a conventional mech, then I would rather have you fail your graduation and study under me for another year. I don't want any timid mech designers under my name! If you can't achieve the same level of success as Ketis, then you are a disgrace of my teachings!"

Ves may have been a bit too harsh in his words, but he truly thought that Maikel was strong enough to endure the pressure.

It looked like he was right. Though Maikel originally looked overwhelmed, the mech design student quickly fired himself up. He was confident in his skills!

"Alright, sir. I will do it. Can you give me the details?"

"Sure." Ves said and waved his hand to transfer an electronic document to Maikel's comm. "In short, I want you to design a battle bot that can defeat a Bright Warrior piloted by an average Living Sentinel mech pilot. Now, I don't expect the work of a Novice to overcome one of my older but still good works. The synergy that a human mech pilot can add to a mech is a considerable force multiplier. You don't stand a chance if your battle bot has to be designed with an equivalent design budget to my Bright Warrior. I will give you... double the budget in order to give you a fighting chance."

Maikel looked a lot more relieved when he heard this. If his rudimentary battle bot had to defeat a fully-fledged Bright Warrior under equal circumstances, then his chances of succeeding was close to zero.

The story was different if his work was twice as expensive!

Although it was impossible for the technical performance of his battle bot to be double as much as the Bright Warrior, Maikel would still be able to make a work with a decisive advantage in raw performance!

This could be considered a handicap in an attempt to give him a fighting chance. If Maikel was not able to make sufficient use of this advantage, then even he would agree that he was not ready to become an actual mech designer!

"I'll do it, teacher." Maikel said in a serious tone. "I will do my best to design a battle bot that can fight well enough to defeat an actual mech piloted by a real mech pilot. Will you test my work in a simulation or in an actual match?"

"The latter, of course. Simulations are safer and less costly, but they're not convincing enough. I like real results produced by real machines, so you must make sure that your fabrication skills are up to par. Designing a good battle bot isn't enough. You have to produce an adequate copy in order to make sure it doesn't fall apart during the match."

This was a comprehensive test that fully pushed Maikel to his limits. Although Ves had doubled his student's design budget, that didn't mean this assignment was a cakewalk.

If Ves accepted this challenge, he had no doubt that he could easily design a battle bot that could smash his Bright Warrior! His design skills had become so formidable that he could squeeze much greater performance out of every part and material than a Novice Mech Designer!

Maikel was far from reaching this level, but Ves believed that the kid should be good enough to overcome this hurdle.

Meanwhile, Zanthar looked increasingly more apprehensive. Ves did not make it easy for Maikel at all. What kind of torture did Journeyman intend to inflict on his other student?

"Zanthar."

"Yes, teacher?"

"Your assignment is different. You have chosen to specialize in energy weapons and more specifically luminar crystal weapons, so your final work as a student must showcase your strength and belief in this exotic technology. Luminar crystal tech is extremely difficult to master at the higher levels. In fact, research on its fundamental principles is still ongoing and there is much that we don't understand."

"What do I need to do for my assignment?"

Ves paused for a few seconds as he settled on a suitable challenge for the firepower enthusiast.

"Zanthar, I'm worried whether you are innovative and creative enough to succeed in this difficult field. If you want to specialize in luminar crystal technology, then you need to prove that you are good enough to advance humanity's understanding of this half-deciphered alien tech. Just like Maikel, I want you to design a work that can compete against a regular mech. This time, you need to design a rifleman mech that can defeat an ordinary Bright Warrior. Both of them will be piloted by ordinary mech pilots of equivalent skill, so their differences shouldn't be a factor."

"Uhhh..."

"Before you ask, you will receive the same handicap as Maikel. You will have twice as much money at your disposal than what I was working with when I designed the Bright Warrior. I do have to impose a unique requirement on you though. I need you to pair your rifleman mech with an original luminar crystal rifle that is able to fire an energy beam that is different from the six attack phases that our clan is already utilizing. In

other words, you need to invent a seventh attack phase that is strong enough to compete against my existing solutions."

"What?!" Zanthar reacted almost identically to Maikel at first!

## Chapter 3955 Undeserving

The graduation assignments that Ves handed over to his students were anything but normal.

Their difficulty was hellish!

Different schools and different teachers adopted different approaches towards graduation assignments. Some treated them as ordinary exams. Others approached them as previews of what mech designers needed to face in the real mech industry.

Ves did not want this to be a forgettable test for his students. He held high expectations for the two kids, but that also meant he was considerably afraid that they would squander their opportunities once they started their careers!

Obviously, Maikel and Zanthar did not look as if they realized that this was for their own good. The difficulty of their assignments was so formidable that they had to put a lot of time and effort into their first independently designed mech designs.

Even then, the chances of passing the actual tests were not that high!

This was because their solo works had to be put to the test by dueling an actual combat mech!

Having hung around the design labs a lot of times, the Larkinson seeds learned a lot from the mech designers working over there. They heard many stories and gained many insights about the clan's existing mech designs.

Since the Bright Warrior was pretty much the default mech model of the Larkinson Clan, Maikel and Zanthar possessed a good understanding of most of the properties of this versatile modular mech platform!

Although the Bright Warrior Mark I Version B was beginning to show its age, it was still a mech designed by the clan patriarch and his wife, the best and most synergistic pair of Journeymen in the Design Department.

The Bright Warrior might not possess any pronounced strengths, but it did not have any glaring weaknesses either. It was a hard mech for opponents to exploit because it was just so rounded and balanced.

It was also an easy mech to get started with. Ves and Gloriana designed it with universal compatibility in mind, so even the weirdest mech pilots could achieve at least a basic degree of combat effectiveness after completing a few practice runs.

Since the Bright Warrior was such a solid and reliable Larkinson mech, it could only be defeated through straightforward means.

Ves already mentioned that the mech pilots assigned to the dueling mechs would both be ordinary Living Sentinel mech pilots, so differences in skill, experience and handling could be ignored.

The true key was to design a mech, or battle bot in the case of Maikel, that performed well enough to achieve victory in the arena!

Even if Maikel and Zanthar received a generous handicap of having twice the design budget of the Bright Warrior at their disposal, their faces still remained ugly.

Their design skills were still immature and their experience in developing mechs was woefully short!

Aside from completing many different design exercises that mostly pertained to specific sections of a mech, they rarely designed a whole machine from beginning to end.

The few times they did, the mechs that they completed performed well below the standards of works of Apprentices, let alone Journeymen!

The gap in quality, performance, utilization, optimization and other factors was quite big at the lower ranks of mech design.

While there were also gaps between Journeymen, Seniors, Masters and so on, high-ranking mech designers already mastered their basics to a degree where the differences had become more nuanced.

This was why having twice as much money was not necessarily enough for the mech design students!

Both of them understood this situation, and so did Ves.

"Are you dissatisfied?" Ves asked the pair as he exerted even more pressure. "Do you think that you are being treated unfairly?"

The two knew better than to respond to these questions.

Ves crossed his arms. "Welcome to the mech industry. When you finally get thrown into this sector, you will realize that the happy little world you have been living in for so long is a false reality. Out here in the real industry, no one will hold your hand anymore. No



one will push you to improve your work and develop your design philosophies except yourselves."

Once the Larkinson seeds graduated from their studies, they became full-fledged professionals who needed to make their own decisions in life.

Ves no longer assumed as much responsibility over them. Even if he wanted to guide Maikel and Zanthar further, he knew that it was counterproductive to their development.

All of the great mech designers earned their achievements by relying on their own passion and efforts!

There were no shortcuts to becoming a celebrated mech designer. Good teachers and expert guidance could only get them so far. Maikel and Zanthar needed to understand that they needed to push themselves in order to fulfill their own ambitions.

"The life of a mech designer is one that is characterized by work, lots of work. Before you succeed in designing mechs that are good enough to sell at least a thousand copies, you can forget about maintaining a healthy work-life balance." Ves continued. "Every day, you need to make a choice between going out on a night of clubbing or putting in long hours of revising advanced textbooks. If you don't show up at the design lab and put in long hours often enough, then you can forget about advancing to the rank of Journeyman Mech Designer before your thirtieth birthday. Compared to the hardships that I have just described, is it really a big deal to pass your difficult graduation assignments?"

Maikel grimaced. "Teacher... I am willing to accept any challenge in order to prove my worth, but isn't this going too far? How can I design a complete battle AI that is good enough to fight against an actual mech pilot that attended several mech academies for at least 15 years? I barely know anything about piloting mechs myself! Besides, you haven't specified which configuration the Bright Warrior that my battle bot is supposed to duel against."

Ves snorted. "Do you expect me to tell you the configuration of the Bright Warrior that you are supposed to fight against in advance?"

"..."

"Real encounters against enemy forces never go as you wish, Maikel. People like us design mechs that might be good at defeating certain mech types, but there are times when our work is forced to fight against machines that can counter our efforts. Uncertainty is a factor that every mech designer and mech force has to manage. If I tell you that your battle bot has to fight against a Bright Warrior in a space knight configuration, then I am sure that you will design the most extreme lancer mech driven by a narrow AI that can only defeat slower and heavier enemies in a monotonous fashion. That is too simple of a test. No, I will not tell you the exact opponent that your

work needs to fight against, because the outside reality will never be nice enough to give you the same advantages."

This meant that Maikel needed to design a more balanced battle bot that was versatile enough to fight against several different mech types. The workload and design challenges were greater as a result because it was a lot harder to design an all-round battle machine with higher performance levels!

"What about me, sir?" Zanthar asked.

"The same applies to you. Did you think I would be nice enough to give you a guaranteed mirror match?" Ves maliciously chuckled. "Rifleman mechs don't always get to stay in the back while they leisurely pick off distant opponents. Sometimes, light skirmishers sneak up on them and lancer mechs charge straight at their positions. If you want to build a career out of designing ranged mechs armed with powerful energy weapons, then you need to show to everyone that your solutions are good enough to handle a wide variety of different opponents."

Zanthar looked just as glum as Maikel. It took different approaches to defeat different mech types. Needing to account for multiple of them meant that the aspiring luminar crystal specialist needed to make a lot of compromises to his rifleman mech design. It became a lot harder to reach higher performance levels as a consequence!

"Teacher, how much time do we have to complete our assignments?" Maikel asked another important question.

"A year. That is plenty enough time for the two of you to study additional textbooks, learn from mech pilots, conduct your own research and iterate on your mech designs."

The pair of mech design students finally eased up a bit. A year of time was not too crazy.

Ves settled on this deadline in order to account for the relatively slow design pace of his students. They were lacking in experience and hadn't fully mastered their knowledge yet. It was unrealistic to expect Maikel and Zanthar to work as fast and efficiently as real Apprentices or Journeymen.

Second-class mech were also a lot more difficult and time-consuming to design than the third-class mechs that Ves started with. The assignments also prohibited variants and any instances of borrowing from existing mech designs, so the Larkinson seeds had to start from scratch!

All in all, a year might not be enough for both of them to complete all of the steps they needed to take in order to design powerful enough machines!

"Do you know why I am making you complete these difficult assignments?"

Neither of the pair knew the answer.

"It's because the two of you don't deserve the treatment that you have gotten." Ves stated, shocking them both. "Our clan invested a lot of funding, resources and time in raising you to this point. Think about all of the lessons you've received, the textbooks you were able to study and the insights you've gained from spending time in design labs and workshops. Compared to students who attend mech design universities, the treatment that we have granted you is almost as good as the direct disciples of Master Mech Designers. The problem is that your starting qualifications are nowhere near as good as the likes of those talents."

"What does that have to do with our graduation assignments, patriarch?"

Ves disappointedly shook his head. "The fact that you can't figure that out shows that you are still lacking in awareness. To me, the two of you are just lucky third-rate brats who happened to receive luxurious study opportunities because you happened to possess the right bloodline. If the two of you weren't members of the Larkinson Family by the time I initially rose to success, you would have never been put under my wing."

His original commitment to the Larkinson Family was no longer valid! From the moment he split from the old family, he was no longer obliged to raise Maikel and Zanthar into excellent mech designers. The only reasons why Ves continued to do so was because of his professionalism and his obligations as a teacher.

"Times have changed. Do you know what kind of talents have sent their resumes to me while begging me to teach my secrets to them? They're all second-raters who have either attended an elite university or graduated from them. A few even come from mech designer families where they learned the fundamentals of mech design in their early teens! Together with their formidable augments, their talent and their starting qualifications are at least thrice as good as yours. That means that if I invested the same amount of time and resources into raising them, they would have been Novices or Apprentices by now who are already proficient in designing original mechs!"

What the patriarch said was all true.

Before they studied under Ves, neither of them were heaven-blessed geniuses or elite students with top academic results. Their qualifications were just average in the greater scheme of things.

Their self-worth took a substantial hit from Ves' incisive words.

"Frankly speaking, our clan squandered way too much money and other resources into your study programs. The talents you have shown and the academic results you have achieved are not proportionate to the opportunities we have provided to you. Look at Ketis, for example. Her circumstances are much different than yours, but compared to how much I invested into mentoring her, she has already become a talented

Journeyman with extremely bright prospects ahead of her. She is already showing signs that she is capable of earning back my investment many times over!"

The Monster Slayer model was already picking up momentum through the Wild Fighter Association's sales channels.

Once Ketis truly got going, her product catalog would probably earn enough money to cover the Larkinson Clan's annual expenses in a few years!

The question now was whether Maikel and Zanthar were able to get close to this level.

Ves didn't even know if the pair were capable of paying back their student debts!

### Chapter 3956 Finding Brilliance

There was a reason why Ves spoke those harsh words. It wasn't because he liked to bully his students or wanted them to fail.

The design office fell into silence as Ves kept his mouth shut for a minute. He gave Maikel and Zanthar a bit of time to reflect on themselves and how lucky they were for receiving the tutelage of one of the most accomplished Journeymen in human space!

Although Ves was not a Master Mech Designer or Star Designer, his qualifications were vastly superior compared to most teachers!

Whether it was his proven commercial success or his many masterwork certificates, his insights and understanding of mechs were extremely valuable!

For years, the two young men had access to much of it without encountering too many barriers. They never questioned whether they actually deserved the treatment that they received. Ves feared that this would cause the brats to develop an inflated sense of entitlement.

This was a development that needed to be strangled as early as possible!

If Maikel and Zanthar graduated from their studies with a conceited attitude, there was no way that they would be able to make substantive progress once they entered the actual mech industry.

"Do you understand the point of your graduating assignments?" Ves asked his students.

"Uhhh... since our qualifications aren't as good as other students, we need to prove even more that our treatment is justified. The best way we can do that is to perform extra well on our graduation assignments."

"Your answer is close, Maikel. There are a couple of elements that you have missed. Zanthar, can you supplement your colleague's arguments?"

The other young man frowned as he quickly tried to grasp other angles.

"I think... the tests you have given to us should be doable for the promising students that you have referred to. Since you haven't decreased the difficulties of our graduation assignments, you expect us to achieve the same results by compensating our lack of talent with diligence and hard work."

Ves looked impressed. "That's better! You've hit one of the keys here. You're right. Both of you want to advance to Journeyman quickly and begin leading our clan's design projects, right? How can you possibly do that when you aren't as good as the likes of the Voiken siblings or the direct disciples of Master Deliz Corenay? The four Journeymen that we have recently brought onboard our clan are carefully selected among hundreds of different applicants, many of whom possess their own impressive qualifications."

Compared to the recent hires in the Design Department, Maikel and Zanthar were truly inferior in almost every criteria!

"It is all well and good to hold high ambitions, but you need to possess the necessary ability to realize them. If your talents aren't good, then you need to rely even more on your other strengths. Diligence and persistence are just a couple of them. If you want to match or surpass the results of mech designers who have a realistic chance of advancing to Master, then you need to work your butts off in the next twelve months."

Part of the reason why Ves wanted to increase their workload was to emphasize that putting in so many hours was necessary to excel in this profession.

He did not want them to think that they could take it easy once they no longer studied under strict supervision.

While there were plenty of mech designers who treated their jobs as 9-to-5 gigs, these people simply didn't have what it took to become Master, let alone a Journeyman.

Average mech designers that assumed a normal work ethic only climbed up to the rank of Apprentice Mech Designer at most.

Regardless of whether they possessed spiritual potential or not, anyone who wanted to climb higher needed to show brilliance in at least one aspect.

What Ves was trying to do was to pressure his students into doing just that. A year sounded like a lot of time, but the difficulty of designing a high-performing original mech could not easily be overcome by working long hours alone!

In fact, there was one more reason why he imposed harsh demands on the Larkinson seeds.

According to his analysis of Maikel and Zanthar's academic results and design submissions for different practical assignments, the two young men were highly likely to fail their final tests if they adopted a normal approach.

If Maikel and Zanthar did not recognize their own shortcomings and thought that working additional hours a day was enough for them to earn a passing grade, then they were in for a rude awakening!

Since Ves expected the pair to fail their graduating assignments, why set the bar so high in the first place?

The answer was that Ves wanted Maikel and Zanthar to solve their problems by thinking outside the box!

Neither of their chosen specialties were conventional or straightforward. Both of them were determined to tread new ground.

This meant that they needed to be better at innovating and developing new solutions than other mech designers!

Without exercising their creativity and without finding shortcuts, there was no way for them to make any meaningful progress towards designing more battle-ready living mechs or more damaging luminar crystal weapon-equipped mechs!

In short, Ves wanted the pair of mech design students to follow in his own footsteps as a mech designer.

He wanted them to embrace the approach of a Brave and smash through all of their obstacles by possessing more guts and taking more calculated risks than other mech designers!

If they weren't talented enough, then they should be braver!

If they weren't smart enough, then they should take more risks!

If they weren't rich enough, then they needed to be more inventive!

Every problem had a solution!

If an easy solution wasn't available, then they shouldn't give up so soon. Harder solutions were always available. It all depended on whether his students had learned enough from Ves to realize that their only way to success was to adopt a radical approach towards mech design.

They had to be crazier than other mech designers in order to have any hope of reaching Master in their lifetimes!

Ves wasn't generous enough to reveal this hint to his students openly. They needed to figure out this truth by themselves. If they weren't even bright enough to make this realization in the following year, then what had they been doing since they began their studies?

"Your graduation assignments are more difficult than the ones given to other mech design students, but have you ever thought about what you will gain if you succeed?"

Both Maikel and Zanthar looked up to their patriarch.

"I am not simply giving you an exam. I'm also giving you an entry test to see whether you have what it takes to become a high potential prospect of our Design Department."

"Are you saying that we will get better treatment if we succeed?" Maikel asked.

"You can think of it that way." Ves nodded. "If you can show me that you have the potential to make real gains in the field of living mechs or luminar crystal technology, then our clan will continue to channel more resources into your subsequent development. This will give you a better chance of advancing to Journeyman quickly. The reason why we are doing this is because we urgently need mech designers with your respective specialties. This is not a gift. This is a trade. Prove to me that you are good enough to uphold your end of this lucrative deal, and we will not treat you poorly."

If Maikel and Zanthar failed to impress Ves, then the Design Department would not grant them special treatment. Their only way forward was to start at the bottom and work their way up like all of the other assistant mech designers.

This was already a better start than what most mech designers could attain!

The Larkinson Clan still employed hundreds of low-ranking mech designers outside of the Design Department. They helped with producing mechs and servicing the existing ones fielded by the different mech legions.

The Larkinson seeds didn't need to do that because it would be an even greater waste of their studies. They had already hung around the Design Department for so long that they could quickly start assisting with smaller assignments.

Before Ves was ready to dismiss his students, he decided to throw them a bone.

"Each of you can ask me a single question. This is the only time I will directly provide assistance that is relevant to your graduation assignments."

Zanthar went first.



"Sir, you have asked me to develop a completely new luminar energy attack phase crystal. How can I possibly do that when I have only learned this tech relatively recently?"

"It's not that difficult to synthesize luminar crystals that can be combined with energy weapons to produce energy beams with different properties." Ves answered. "If I spent more time on this, I would have been able to develop a seventh, eight or ninth variety of attack phase crystals that are powerful enough to be utilized in combat. I only stopped at six because they are already sufficient to cover the majority of combat scenarios."

Zanthar blinked. "Can I really invent another attack phase crystal if I experiment for a time?"

"Yes." Ves nodded and smiled. "That does not mean that you are done, though. You need to overcome at least two challenges. First, your new attack phase crystal must be different from the existing ones that I have developed. I don't want to see another variation of a laser beam or positron beam from you. I want you to design a rifleman mech that can inflict damage through different means that I haven't seen before. The only way to do that is to experiment a lot. You need to combine theory as well as trial-and-error to invent a unique new attack phase crystal."

This meant that Zanthar had to spend a lot of time in a laboratory or workshop!

The young man frowned. "I don't know how long it will take for me to succeed."

"That is the second challenge you must overcome. Mech designers in the mech industry work under time constraints all the time. They don't get the luxury of having 3 or 5 years to design a single mech. Their clients, bosses or the market expect people like us to deliver a workable product within a year or half a year. What you must do is manage your time and plan your schedule well enough to meet your requirements within the deadline. Do you understand?"

"I understand..."

The outcome of Zanthar's graduation assignment heavily depended on his research effectiveness!

He needed to do well in many different aspects, from time management, theoretical modeling, methodology, iteration, data analysis and so on. If he was lacking in any of these areas, then he didn't possess the qualifications to specialize in a technological swamp such as luminar crystal technology!

"What about me?" Maikel prompted as Zanthar fell into thought. "How can I possibly program an AI that can come close enough to matching or exceeding the control of a professional mech pilot?"

Ves snorted. "By learning how mech pilots do their jobs, of course. Mech designers are never too far removed from mech pilots. The latter are our clients and the entire reason why our profession exists. If you don't know anything about how mech pilots control their machines, you will have a bad time when you embark on your specialty. You can't maintain your ignorance in this aspect. If I was you, I would start to interview and spend time with lots of different mech pilots. Learn their habits. Study their battle footage. Figure out their best practices. Once you learn all of this, use what you have absorbed to program the strongest possible battle AI that you can accomplish at this stage."

"In a year?"

"Less, actually. You still need to design the rest of your battle bot, remember?" Ves devilishly grinned.

## Chapter 3957 Ahead of Schedule

As Maikel and Zanthar scurried out of the design office in order to embark on their difficult graduation assignments right away, Ves reflected on what he had done.

When Gloriana originally reminded him that his students were close to graduating, Ves did not immediately set out to make their final year so challenging.

It was only after he met them and studied their results that he came up with this impulsive idea to push them into a corner.

The two reminded Ves of himself.

Although the pair of trueblood Larkinsons did not possess an advantage as insane as the Mech Designer System, the Larkinson Clan provided them with a lot of other forms of assistance.

All of these boosts had given Maikel and Zanthar a much higher starting point than many other mech designers!

When Ves was put in this position, he did not grow complacent but worked extra hard to accelerate his progress and succeed where others failed.

He clearly managed to thrive because of this approach! The biggest reason why Gloriana became so adamant about marrying Ves was because she saw a mech designer who possessed the strongest qualifications to become a Master Mech Designer compared to all of her other peers!

While the strategy she chose to hook up to him wasn't entirely proper, her vision wasn't wrong. Gloriana was smart when it came to mech design and she rightly viewed Ves as a partner with much higher potential than the elite Hexer mech designers who also graduated from Kelma University.

Right now, if Gloriana was looking at Maikel and Zanthar, she would immediately pass them over without any hesitation.

This was because the pair of Larkinson seeds had yet to show the brilliance that denoted any high potential.

How could mediocre mech designers be worthy of her attention? Ordinary professionals who could only make ordinary accomplishments were worse than the dirt beneath her heels!

"They really need to step up if they want to satisfy me a year later." Ves softly sighed.

Though Ves did not aim to pair them up with Gloriana-esque girlfriends, he did want them to get good enough to meet their standards.

Becoming Gloriana-worthy was the minimum standard to become a future lead designer in the Design Department!

"Well, now that I am done here, I better get back to my other responsibilities."

Nothing of critical importance happened during the last leg of the return journey.

One day later, the expeditionary fleet emerged at the edge of the thriving and booming Davute System.

"We've arrived!"

A lot of Larkinsons relaxed their shoulders and lost their tension as they finally made it back to a star system that offered a lot more safety than all of the other places in the Krakatoa Middle Zone.

Although absolute safety didn't exist, the risks in Davute were so low that Ves did not particularly worry about getting ambushed.

As the fleet slowly followed the instructions of traffic control and headed over to Davute VII, Ves spent many hours addressing a lot of different matters.

From arranging a masterwork inspection of the Minerva to preparing for his first meeting with the Aduc Family, Ves needed to make sure his clan was on the right track.

He couldn't neglect his mech designer responsibilities either. He scheduled numerous meetings with his fellow Journeymen in order to discuss their plans for their upcoming design round.

Enough time had passed for every lead designer to come up with numerous good ideas about their next batch of commercial mech designs.

It was important for the Living Mech Corporation to become more than an obscure mech company in the Red Ocean. The LMC and by extension the Larkinson Clan had to build up a brand and earn much more revenue than the thousands of MTA credits it earned from selling its older products in the Yeina Star Cluster.

"Dum-dum!"

"It's papa." Ves corrected in an annoyed tone.

"Papaaaa~" Aurelia cutely grinned as she lifted up her arms.

Ves immediately leaned down and picked her up in his arms. She giggled as he kissed her cheek and rocked her body.

"Are you looking forward to our upcoming holiday down in Davute?"

"Um!"

Mew!

Mana emerged from Aurelia's head and playfully circled around. The juvenile companion spirit acted as if she was a measure of how much the little girl looked forward to exploring a planet!

Ves smiled proudly at his daughter. Even though she was still awfully young, she was a bright designer baby that demonstrated more cleverness than other babies at her age.

He wasn't sure how much of it was a function of her designer genes and how much of it came from her boosted spiritual development.

He believed that both of these factors enabled Aurelia to slowly stand out in terms of awareness and intelligence.

These differences would definitely become more obvious and magnified in the coming years!

Nyaaa!

The spontaneous appearance of Mana prompted the Golden Cat to emerge from the Larkinson Mandate.

The grand stateroom became filled with warmth and love as the spiritual embodiment of the Larkinson Clan flew over to the tiny white kitten and licked the intangible furball silly!

Mew! Mew! Mewww!

"Gowdie! Stop! Already clean!" Aurelia complained!

Nyaaaaaa~

Of course, Goldie didn't listen to the little girl's protests. She continued to shower Mana with licks until the ancestral spirit was satisfied with the results.

Mew...

As Goldie began to play around with Mana, the hatch to the grand stateroom slid open.

Gloriana finally returned after she completed her shift at the design labs. She grinned as she moved close to nuzzle her daughter.

"Have you been a good girl today, Aurelia?"

"Yaaaaaaay!"

"Good girls deserve a reward, don't they?"

Aurelia nodded.

"I'll give you twenty kisses instead of ten kisses this time, does that sound good?"

The baby looked uncertain. Numbers were still beyond her grasp, but it probably wouldn't take long before she could count to ten.

After Ves and Gloriana were done with cuddling their daughter, they threw the little rugrat to their cats before they talked about more serious subjects.

"I heard about the assignments you have given to Maikel and Zanthar. You really didn't cut them any slack." Gloriana remarked.

"It's sink or swim, honey." Ves said as he sat down at a couch. "You of all people should know how difficult it is to leave a legacy behind in the mech industry. Ordinary mech designers are a dime in a dozen. I only have to open up our doors and thousands of mech designers will apply to join us in a week. They're close to worthless as far as I'm concerned. The only ones that matter to me and the clan are the mech designers that can become our lead designers. If Maikel and Zanthar can't reach this level, then I really have no qualms abandoning them. We have invested so much into them that there comes a point where we need to cut our losses."

Gloriana slowly nodded. "You're not wrong for maintaining this attitude. If we decide to raise another batch of mech design students, we need to be much more discerning in our selection. Our clan's technical schools haven't produced any notable geniuses yet, but it shouldn't be a challenge to attract external ones to receive our tutelage."

"I'm not in a hurry to teach another bunch of brats from the start again. The reconstruction and expansion of our clan comes first. Once that is done and once we have reorganized the Design Department, we will have a much better idea of which mech design specialists we are lacking in. There are certain specialists that we can pick up from the job market easily enough. There are also other specialists that we can't obtain unless we raise them ourselves."

If Maikel or Zanthar failed to live up to his expectations, then Ves would just try again with a better batch of mech design students.

One way or another, he wanted to add a qualified living mech specialist and a luminar crystal technology specialist to the Design Department!

If he wasn't able to do this, then Ves would get swamped by too many design priorities!

Gloriana understood what Ves was going for, so she did not object to his decisions.

"What about you, Gloriana? Did you provide Maisie Ann and Rennie with similar challenges?"

"Unlike you, I don't want to drive my pupils crazy. Their graduation assignments are difficult, but mainly because I expect them to design mechs that meet much higher quality standards than the works of other beginner mech designers. I don't care what they do after they have graduated, but they better show me that they can design mechs that are much closer to perfection than the shabby rust buckets that other Novices tend to design at the beginning of their careers."

For some reason, Ves felt as if her remark was specifically targeted towards himself.

He shrugged this detail aside and thought about his plans for the most crucial institution of the Larkinson Clan.

"We need to expand the Design Department again." He told her. "I know we expanded it shortly after we entered the Red Ocean, but eight Journeymen still isn't enough to keep up with our rate of expansion. I know we have already talked about hiring additional lead designers after a few design rounds, but this plan is already outdated as soon as we leave the Garimel System with over 200 million MTA merits and several hundred kilograms of phasewater. We can speed up our growth and fill up the gaps in our coverage within a year instead of half a decade."

This was new to Gloriana! She turned and stared deeply in his eyes.

"Are you sure, Ves? While I am happy with the progress we have made with integrating the Voikens and the mechanical strength specialists, adding four more Journeymen in a short amount of time will cause our Design Department to become a lot less organized."

"I am aware of the risks, but all of this is worth it if we can pump out 4 or 8 more mech designs per design round. For a long time, we have focused on increasing the quality of our output. There is nothing wrong with that. Many of our completed works have gone on to rake in a lot of profit or save our lives during a crucial battle. I think we should shift our priorities on maximizing our current gains. As long as we expand the Design Department once more, we will not only be able to earn more money, but also save a lot of time. If we want to advance to Senior quickly enough, then designing a huge quantity of mech designs is indispensable."

As soon as Ves mentioned this last argument, Gloriana had no more objections to bringing the expansion of the Design Department forward.

"Fine, then. Have it your way. If you think you can maintain control, then I am willing to let you try. How soon do you want to complete the recruitment and what specialties are you trying to obtain this time?"

"I don't want to wait too long, so I am thinking about having this done within a month or two." Ves answered. "As for the specialties, you should already have a good idea of what we are lacking at the moment."

"I do, but which roles do you want to fulfill most urgently this time?"

"We should at least be able to recruit a neural interface specialist, a ranged mech or ranged weapon specialist and a light mech specialist. As long as we can fill up those holes, it shouldn't be a problem for us to design competitive mechs in most product categories."

"Do you want the new hires to start working right away?"

Ves shook his head. "No. Nothing so exaggerated. I was thinking about giving them at least half a year to acclimatize to their new environment and familiarize themselves with our clan. They should be ready to contribute to our mech design projects after this crucial period."

## Chapter 3958 Compound Choices

The expeditionary fleet finally arrived in high orbit of Davute VII!

This time, their arrival attracted a lot more attention. Though the details of the Purgatory Campaign hadn't leaked to the public, rumors had already spread that the Golden Skull Alliance had returned with a massive haul of phasewater!

Though there were plenty of parties who did not find these stories credible, there were enough grifters and opportunists who eagerly tried to make contact with the Larkinson Clan and its allies.



Naturally, the overwhelming majority of strangers never managed to get past the automated AIs that initially took their calls.

Only a tiny proportion of spokespersons and representatives managed to get through and talk to actual humans.

Ves did not have to spend any attention on this matter. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs already made adequate preparations to handle the wave of popularity that arose whenever pioneering organizations returned with enormous hauls of phasewater in their reserves.

There were already plenty of anecdotes circulating around the galactic net of lucky pioneers obtaining stashes of phasewater only to lose it all due to various mistakes.

There was no way the Larkinson Clan would be gullible enough to fall for these scams.

Right now, Ves wasn't in a hurry to go on an immediate spending spree. Though it was easy to start spending lots of money right away, his clan was not short on time at the moment.

The Larkinsons chose to maintain a lower profile and only initiated routine resupply operations.

Shuttles and transports moved in and out of the expeditionary fleet as they off-loaded various minerals mined from the Garimel System.

Though the revenue earned from selling these ordinary exotics was miniscule, the Larkinsons did not become profligate just because they had hundreds of kilograms of phasewater in their vault.

The demand of phasewater was too high compared to its supply!

It was a lot harder to regain this substance when they got rid of it. As a strategic material with many wondrous properties, the clan needed to make sure they obtained an even greater benefit from trading phasewater.

Using phasewater to pay for ordinary supplies was a hugely wasteful transaction!

Therefore, the clan did not despise the revenue generated from selling the mineral excavated from one of the moons of the Garimel System.

The Purgatory Campaign may have stolen all of the limelight of the last expedition, but the Andrenidae had quietly fulfilled her mining duties and filled up a lot of cargo holds with valuable exotics.

The Larkinson Clan had no problem finding suitable buyers for all of the excavated ores. The Resource shortage on the market was so great that growing colonies were desperate to buy any useful building material even if there was a lot of variety.

The sales of these random materials generated enough money to help the clan make up for its material losses.

The biggest priority was to make up for the shortages in energy cells, fuel cells, ammunition and other consumables. The Larkinson Army hadn't fought a lot but already expended a lot of combat supplies in numerous battles against the fish-whales.

It couldn't be helped as the natives of the phase whale enclave were big and meaty creatures that had a lot of numbers on their side. The Swarmer fish-whales were especially costly to fight against because it took a lot of firepower to neutralize all of their cannon fodder.

The next priority of the Larkinson Clan should be to restore the strength of its mech legions.

This was a more complicated issue as the Larkinsons had to decide whether to prioritize rebuilding older mechs or settle for producing the newer models.

Although the Larkinson Clan was able to restore a lot of damaged mechs, it still needed to fill a hole of around 500 or so mechs.

"Don't build anymore Bright Warriors, Ferocious Piranhas, Valkyrie Redeemers and so on." Ves told Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson, who was usually in charge of the production side of the clan. "All of these mech models are good, but they are showing their age. Aside from the latest variant of the Ferocious Piranha, all of our older models are rim-level products based on old-galaxy materials and old-galaxy component designs. It's only a matter of time before they will be phased out and replaced by newer models."

Raymond nodded in agreement. "Good choice. Some of our mech pilots will miss the opportunity to pilot these older but reliable mechs, but what comes next is a time of renewal. Our demand for immediate combat solutions will not be as high in the coming years."

Ves already decided not to go on another expedition for a time, so there was no great urgency in bringing the Larkinson Army back to full capacity.

The Larkinsons could take it slowly and slowly reform the mech legions so that they adopted the most modern and effective mix of mech models.

That didn't mean that Ves intended for the Spirit of Bentheim to remain idle all of this time.

"You can start producing a bunch of the new Larkinson-exclusive models such as the Stingripper, the Redaxe, the Rigid Wall, the Rigid Spine, the Transcendent Charger and those auxiliary mechs." He told the chief minister. "We have plenty of time so don't rush them off our production lines. Tell the production crews to take it slow and focus on quality. If nothing goes wrong, our mech pilots will depend on these new machines for many years."

"Understood, Ves. The Production Department will focus on quality over efficiency. Do you wish for us to bring our plans to overhaul the Spirit of Bentheim's production facilities forward? If we invest in newer and more modern production lines right away, our crews will get a head start in learning how to operate the new machines. Better equipment will also allow us to produce mechs at faster speeds while reaching higher qualities."

"Let's not rush this important project." Ves shook his head. "Besides, upgrading the production lines will massively increase the energy consumption of our factory ship. We will have to upgrade the power reactors along with a bunch of other systems as well. This is a massive transformation that can't be done in piecemeal. Let us wait until we have formed more comprehensive plans. For now, just focus on filling up our available mech capacity with the newer mech models. We still need to bring our military strength back to par in order to guard against the unexpected."

Even though Ves intended to lay low for a few years, that didn't mean he wanted to get caught flat-footed if a crisis emerged at an unexpected time.

The Davute System was never completely safe. If a massive alien retribution fleet suddenly arrived, it would be too late for his clan to raise its combat strength!

After they decided on how to fill up the missing spots in the Larkinson Clan's carrier vessels, Chief Minister Raymond brought up another important topic.

"One of your plans calls for constructing a large planet-based compound, is that correct?"

Ves nodded. "We need to build a large and complete manufacturing complex in order to produce our own mechs. It's all well and good to license our mechs to external parties such as the Wild Fighter Association, but we will be forgoing a lot of profits if we continue to outsource our production."

A real mech company took charge of every step of its value chain. The costs were higher but the profits were even more so due to cutting out all of the middlemen.

What Ves valued even more than profits was control. He did not want the LMC to remain too dependent on the whims of business partners and vendors. The latter always prioritized their own interests over that of the Larkinson Clan, and that meant that they could never be relied upon in the long run.

There were no eternal allies in the business world. Ves had learned that lesson as soon as Marcella Bollinger, his first true business partner, stabbed him in the back.

Raymond had no objections to this expansion plan. Space was incredibly scarce in the expeditionary fleet, so the clan experienced a lot of difficulties in realizing some of its ambitions.

Now that the clan was about to buy a large plot of land, the lack of space would no longer be a pressing problem!

"We have numerous different options when it comes to buying land to construct our first terrestrial compound in the Red Ocean." Raymond explained as he activated a projection that showed a list of possible candidates. "First, you need to decide whether you want us to settle in Davute or another star system."

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin as he studied the selected sites. He already considered this matter extensively, but he was not entirely certain of his choice.

"What do you think, Raymond?"

"This is not a straightforward choice. There are advantages and disadvantages to every plot of land. Some are cheaper while others are more expensive. Some are located near a lot of industrial infrastructure while others are located in rural areas. It is easier for us to gain permission to build more extensive facilities on rural planets, but we will have to solve a lot of problems by ourselves. In contrast, a port system such as Davute offers much greater access to industrial infrastructure and other services. However, the laws are much more restrictive here and we will also be under much more scrutiny than normal."

There was no wrong choice per se. No matter what the Larkinsons chose, they could always make it work as long as they put in enough effort.

"I can't make a decision by myself." Ves said. "This matter is too important to be decided on a whim. Let's schedule a meeting where we can discuss this among our advisors. We need more input from different people in order to make the best and most rational decision. Once we build the compound, we will remain attached to our chosen planet for a long time."

"Very well."

"By the way, you haven't told me your preference yet, Raymond. Do you prefer to settle in Davute or a rural planet?"

"Personally, I think we should consider a third option."

"And that is...?"

"Colonizing our own planet." Raymond replied. "It does not have to be a major investment. It can just be a private retreat where we can build up a modest community that is centered around producing mechs, performing research and other mundane activities. By opting to found our own colony rather than immigrating to an existing one, we can completely shape every aspect of its society, infrastructure and defense forces. I wouldn't have mentioned this option to you a few months ago, but our conditions have radically improved. With all of our newfound wealth, we can afford to invest in our colony without breaking the bank."

"...Let's not make any quick decisions." Ves eventually said.

He feared that Raymond was not the only Larkinson who developed the ambition to claim a star system and build a colony.

The windfall of phasewater and MTA merits had increased the appetite of his clansmen!

It was not unusual to encounter Larkinsons with delusions of grandeur these days. Their behavior and ideas disturbed Ves and caused him to be a lot more careful on his spending plans.

"If you don't want to found your own colony, then I suggest you settle for buying a rural plot of territory in Davute." Raymond said. "The port system's political environment may be a lot murkier than we would like, but gaining easy access to so many goods and services more than makes up for it. We can also provide a better living environment for the Larkinsons that temporarily or permanently reside on the planet. In fact, even if you decide to settle on a more remote planet, I suggest you invest in a more modest compound in Davute as well, just so you can address the living needs of our clansmen."

"Hm, that is actually a good idea."

## Chapter 3959 The Art District

After Ves handled all of the necessary affairs that required his personal input, he finally cleared his schedule for the time being.

Sure, he still needed to approve a lot of plans and make all kinds of decisions, but none of them were particularly time-sensitive.

The more people wanted to urge him to make decisions, the more Ves wanted to pull back and postpone the issue.

The scariest part about obtaining a lot of wealth all of a sudden was the possibility of squandering it all on wasteful and ineffective initiatives!

Ves would never be able to live with himself if he screwed up a fantastic opportunity to make the Larkinson Clan rise all at once!

He told everyone to slow down and research their options. He did not necessarily disapprove of big expenditures, but the clan should better get its money's worth!

As many leaders in the Larkinson Clan started to build a case for their own initiatives, Ves decided that there was nothing stopping him from taking a vacation this time.

"Gloriana?"

"Yes, husband?"

"Let's start our vacation."

"Now?"

"Yes. There's no better time to do so. Our last expedition was a wild ride. I've accumulated so much stress that I have a growing urge to spend a week on activities that aren't related to our work. Will you come?"

His wife hesitated for a moment. She looked back at her terminal where she was studying the records of different Journeymen who had caught her eye. Each of them had the potential to enrich the Design Department.

"Can it wait, Ves? I would like to study these names first. While none of them have applied to join our clan, they are still available for hire. As long as we offer enough incentives, it shouldn't be too difficult to obtain their services."

Ves shook his head. "All of that can wait. Even if our competitors snap these talents up, there will be a different list of names within a week. A lot of people are constantly pouring into the Red Ocean. The job market isn't short of Journeymen."

"That is only the case for mediocre or problematic mech designers. Real talents are still scarce. We need to put in a lot more effort to entice them into joining our clan."

He grabbed her arm and dragged her away from the terminal. "As I said, all of that can wait. It makes little difference if we start recruiting this week or the next. Now let's go grab our baby daughter and bring her along to see new sights."

Upon his insistence, his wife eventually acquiesced and set her current priorities aside to make landfall.

The descent of their transport was even more ostentatious as before. Ves knew quite well that possessing a lot of wealth meant that he attracted a lot more attention than before, and not always of the good kind.

Davute VII was a trading hub that attracted all kinds of different people and organizations, so the Larkinson Clan did not want to take any risks.

The security regime of the planet was still restrictive towards mechs, but the authorities gave a bit more leeway to the Larkinsons this time.

Perhaps they heard that the clan returned with a lot of phasewater. There were a lot of different companies and organizations in Davute that would love to get their hands on a couple of kilograms of this substance, so the locals treated the Larkinsons a lot differently this time!

Ves smiled contemptuously when he heard how much easier it was to assign an adequate security detail to him and his family.

"You're not a random low-level pioneer anymore, boss." Gavin Neumann said as he rode alongside Ves and his family in the shuttle. "Several big names have issued personal invitations to you. It might be nice to accept a few of them. As long as you can befriend these local overlords, our subsequent business activities will go a lot smoother."

"Don't do it, Ves." Gloriana advised as she tied her daughter's hair into cute little pigtails. "We are hot commodities right now, so we shouldn't sell ourselves too quickly. Scarcity makes us more valuable so let all of these parties wait for a time."

Gavin nodded in agreement. "She makes a good point. Other parties will not easily turn away from us as long as we retain a lot of phasewater in our possession. However, we shouldn't play coy for too long. If it becomes clear that we are extremely miserly in our spending, we will make a lot of people impatient and frustrated towards us. If we want our clan to operate in Davute with fewer barriers, we should selectively conduct business deals with a couple of players just to show that we can be negotiated with. This is an excellent way to obtain more exclusive concessions such as starships, desirable plots of land and specialty goods."

Ves briefly fell in thought. "You can open up discussions with these parties, but don't move too quickly with them. Let these people make their bids to us. Once I am done with my vacation, you can bring the more serious ones to me and I will consider them on an individual basis. Does this sound good, Benny?"

"We can make this work."

To be honest, Ves did not expect the local community to become a lot more welcoming to the Larkinson Clan. As Ves met with a group of very friendly dignitaries at Kotor City's spaceport, it became increasingly clear that a lot of people were willing to accommodate the various needs of the triumphant Larkinsons.

From obtaining the right to operate more mechs in a planetary environment to receiving permission to carry heavier armaments, a lot of rules no longer became as restrictive.



"This is the power of wealth." Gloriana knowingly commented. "These people and organizations will all play nice with us as long as we have money and phasewater to spend. However, from the moment we run out, all of our flatterers will immediately turn their faces."

Ves already figured this out. "That's natural. If there is one thing the Red Ocean isn't lacking, it is greed. Most people traveled to the new frontier in order to get ahead in life and build a better future for themselves. Now that we've made it, there will always be a lot of jealous people who want what we have earned through our own efforts."

He maintained a relatively relaxed attitude towards these changes. He did not want to bother himself too much about managing all of these new social interactions. That was what the rest of his clan was for. He just wanted to forget about all of his burdens and relax for a time.

Once they got all of the formalities out of the way, they boarded an armored shuttle that brought them to their first destination.

Escorted by a squad of Larkinson mechs as well as two expert mechs in the form of the Riot and the Everchanger, Ves was not concerned about his vehicle getting blasted from the skies.

Hardly any mechs were out at this time as only a few organizations possessed the right to field them in such a densely populated area.

"There's been talk about tightening Davute's security regime." Gavin noted. "There are those who are in favor of granting fewer exceptions and those who believe that this port system needs to attract more big spenders. For now, it isn't clear where the winds will blow."

Ves crossed his arms. "I'm not going to spend time here anymore if I can't bring my own mechs anymore. I've exposed myself to way too much trouble without enough reliable protection on hand."

"I will keep paying attention to this discussion."

"You do that. Have we arrived at the Art District?"

"We will touch down in a minute."

When the shuttle settled down in the landing zone, a group of honor guards emerged from the vehicle first before Ves and his family stepped out into the open.

As its name suggested, the Art District was the place to be for any art enthusiasts. Even though construction was still on-going, the initial colonists already set up lovely streets, magnificent art academies and many unique little workshops.

As Ves and his group stepped onto one of the main avenues, they became acquainted with the emerging culture of Davute.

Musicians were plying their trade on streets while a virtual artist set up a gallery at a nearby park.

Flower beds featuring alien flower species covered the environment with a mixture of new and exotic scents.

The maintenance bots that tended to the plants and kept the streets clean looked a lot better as well. The district government had commissioned individual artists to paint over their surfaces with all kinds of pleasing colors and objects.

"Look! It's pink, hihih!"

Aurelia was so amazed with all of the new sights that she ran off to a nearby garden bot that was pruning one of the bushes that lined the main avenue.

"Miaow!"

Clixie made sure to keep up with the energetic young lady.

The garden bot's surface was originally white, but now it was overwhelmingly pink. The artist also added in several pretty pretty flowers in order to make the bot even cuter.

This caused the bot to attract a lot of kids!

When Aurelia came close, the garden bot already paused its work and made a few cartoony sounds.

[Why hello there, young lady. Are you enjoying your stay in our Art District?]

Aurelia grinned and reached out to the garden bot!

"Miaow!"

"Careful!" Gloriana said as she arrived to pick up her daughter. "Don't touch everything you see. Bots can be dangerous."

"I wanna touch!"

"You can touch many other objects, and they're all cuter than this pink bot. Now leave it alone so that it can go back to work."

"Okay..."

Their daughter gained plenty of stimulation as Ves and Gloriana brought her to various different places.

They entered a bakery where Ves tried out the local specialties.

They stepped into a water park where Aurelia got soaked trying to chase after the floating water streams.

They visited a small museum that was dedicated to a visual art movement that had reached its peak around 200 years ago. Its basic premise was to find beauty in the traces created by the movement of small exobeasts on a canvas.

Although Ves was still grasping for the overarching meanings of these artworks, the swirling patterns and organic traces fascinated him for reasons that he couldn't explain.

"Pretty..." Aurelia said as she eagerly took in all of these new and interesting sights.

An ordinary child of her age probably wouldn't have been able to understand anything, but Ves and Gloriana's daughter was no ordinary kid. Her intelligence became more apparent the more she became exposed to different attractions.

"Mama! Maaamaaa!"

"What is it, sweetie?"

"What is that?"

"Those are reptilian exobeasts, Aurelia. Their owners probably brought them over here because they resemble dinosaurs."

"So big..."

Ves and Gloriana both experienced a lot of joy as they continued to show Aurelia around. This was just the first of many happy family trips they wished to make in their lives.

They would probably become a lot busier once Aurelia gained a bunch of younger brothers and sisters.

Gloriana leaned against Ves' arm. "You were right to take me along today. I love this so much. It's so nice to put down my responsibilities and spend more time as a family. A part of me doesn't want this day to end."

"I feel the same way." Ves smiled as he basked in all of the warmth and love. "It's a shame we can't go to as many places as we want."

He briefly turned his head to gaze at the mechs floating high above their heads.

Their mech escorts maintained a higher altitude in order to avoid disturbing the locals. While that worked to an extent, the mechs weren't subtle at all and constantly attracted eyeballs from every direction.

Chapter 3960 cost of Land

"So what do you think?"

"It's... pretty empty."

"That's the point." Gavin said as he waved his arm at the empty and hilly landscape.

"This is a remote plot of land that is located in one of Davute VII's more remote continents. While that makes it harder to reach Kotor City quickly, we will also avoid much of the hustle and bustle that goes on in the planet's capital city. I think a location like this makes for a good compromise between accessibility and remoteness."

As Ves considered his assistant's words, their daughter was having the time of her life.

Having spent much of her first year inside a starship, the vast, green and open environment of a planet completely fascinated her. Everything on Davute was a new wonder to her and she eagerly insisted on exploring all of the strange new things that she had never come across before.

Right now, she used her little legs to run towards a small collection of trees.

"Hihihhi!"

"Miaow miaow!"

As always, Clixie always accompanied Aurelia in order to prevent the little girl from hurting herself. The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat had been busy these last few days as the energetic baby simply couldn't sit still!

As Ves studied the environment, he could see several signs that the local nature was not as authentic as it appeared.

How could the planet possibly be so friendly towards human life when people only settled on it a few years ago? This was way too little time to turn a barren, alien planet into a lush environment that was highly compatible with earth-based life forms!

The answer turned out to be rapid terraforming. This was the brute force version of terraforming when colonists lacked the patience to go through the more traditional process!

The normal mode of terraforming was to selectively manipulate the planetary environment to alter its parameters to be more friendly to human life step by step.

Terraforming entire planets was expensive business, and many colonists had already invested in so many different assets that they could not afford to spend a huge fortune on transforming their new homes.

This was why traditional terraforming plans sought to take advantage of modest changes to the natural cycles of a planet. Letting 'nature' do most of the heavy lifting was a huge money saver, though the process might take decades to complete as a result.

The initial wave of ambitious pioneers couldn't wait that long. Many of them wanted to develop their colonies and found their states as soon as possible in order to get ahead of the competition.

If any colonists tried to take it slow, it was inevitable for them to lose the initiative in the competition to found new states!

The powers that invested in a rich port system like Davute did not wish to get bogged down from the beginning.

In order to speed up the transformation of a planet, they contracted a company to conduct rapid terraforming.

This was a quick but extremely expensive process that started with removing whatever alien life or other disruptive factors. No matter what unique environmental features the untamed planet possessed before, all of it had to go as long as it posed a hindrance to the goal of making the environment more livable for humans!

Once the terraformers cleaned up the planet's surface, they rapidly transplanted the factors that were essential to regulating the temperature or providing breathable air.

Some of the steps involved transplanting huge tracts of forests and grasslands to dumping millions of animals in specially-designed regions.

The terraforming company had to make a huge amount of calculations in order to figure out the fastest and most direct measures they needed to make in order to complete the commission.

Ves happened to know all of this because he had read a few articles about the Aduc Family recently.

Since the Transhumanists really wanted the Larkinsons to get along with the Aduc, Ves felt it was prudent to learn more about the latter's business activities.

He became quite impressed by what he learned. Terraforming planets and making sure that every continent and region was able to develop sustainable ecosystems were massive engineering projects.

Their scope far exceeded that of mechs and starships!

The work involved with turning Davute VII into a planet that was already close to offering a perfect living environment to humans in a matter of years was probably worthy of a prize!

It also scared Ves away from allowing his clan to colonize a planet. The costs of doing so were so great that it was not unusual for colonists to get saddled with so much debt that it could take centuries to pay off their obligations!

While the potential payoffs were also huge, it was never his intention to build his own little kingdom.

Compared to all of the risks and expenses involved with colonizing a planet, Ves vastly preferred to stick to his fleet as his primary power base.

However, that did not stop him from forming numerous different outposts on different planets.

Right now, Ves was seriously considering whether he should allow his clan to build a large compound at this particular site.

"There aren't many other groups and companies around here, so it's a lot easier for us to guard our territory." Ves determined.

"If you want, we could also buy the surrounding plots of land while they are still available." Gavin noted. "The land prices of this planet are still fairly expensive due to its importance as a future commerce and industrial hub, but this continent is so remote and underdeveloped that the rates are relatively mild."

The cost of buying land in this place was incomparable to the thousands of MTA credits that the Larkinson Clan had spent on building the headquarters of the Open Consortium in one of Kotor City's most expensive districts.

However, the prices for this remote area were still relatively high because the sellers took Davute VII's future development into account.

Ves couldn't imagine how many MTA credits the founders were earning from selling so much land!

This was one of the best ways for them to recoup a portion of the money spent on rapid terraforming!

If not for the fact that Davute had to compete against other attractive port systems, the prices of different plots of land would have been even more expensive!

"How much do you think it would cost to get all of the land we need?" Ves asked.

"I can't say, boss. It depends on how much you want to buy and how badly you want our neighbors to stay away from our compound. If I have to make a quick estimate, we will probably have to spend thousands of MTA credits, maybe up to 10,000 MTA credits if you truly want to turn this area into your private resort."

In the past, Ves would have felt queasy about spending that much money.

Nowadays, this was just a trifling sum.

It was so tempting for him to wave his hand and tell his assistant to buy this plot of land as well as the surrounding ones. Ves held back though as he reminded himself that he was too impaired to make any rational spending decisions.

He along with many other Larkinsons were still drunk on wealth! Each of them risked spending money in instances where they previously would have felt disgusted by the wasteful acts!

Ves closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. He successfully pushed back his profligate urges and regained his calm.

"Let's keep this option under consideration." He eventually said. "I can see how we can build a large but remote outpost in this place. However, I don't want to go forward unless I am certain that this is the best choice out of all of the alternatives. Our people have been exploring several other sites on other planets, right?"

"Correct, boss. Compared to buying a plot of land here in Davute, we can obtain far more hectares of land at prices that are ten times or even a hundred times cheaper. There are even instances where the colonists are willing to pay us money to settle in their territory."

"Huh?"

Gavin smirked. "It's quite simple, really. As long as we invest hundreds of thousands of MTA credits in building facilities and infrastructure, we can directly and indirectly promote the development of a rural planet. It is quite natural for colonist organizations to offer us cash, subsidies and preferential treatment to pull us over."

All of these incentives made it cheaper for the Larkinson Clan to operate a large manufacturing complex and other facilities on remote planets.



Of course, the clan would also make sacrifices in other areas such as missing out on Davute's urban life or more limited access to other conveniences.

To Ves, the biggest downside to setting up shop in a remote colony was how vulnerable it was to attacks and raids!

This reason alone was enough for Ves to slowly lean away from this potentially disastrous option.

Though Ves did not mind taking a few risks every now and then, a decision like this affected the lives and futures of so many Larkinsons.

Naturally, Gloriana had her own opinion on this matter.

"Just buy it, Ves." She said as her sundress fluttered in the cool and pleasant wind. "Davute isn't that bad of an environment. There are so many powerful forces here that we don't have to worry about attacks from alien fleets. The booming industries allows our manufacturing complex to easily obtain raw materials and also ship our finished mechs to different vendors and distribution channels. We can easily visit and exchange with lots of mech designers and entrepreneurs that have also settled on this planet. Finally, Davute offers by far the best growth environment for Aurelia and our other kids!"

She made a lot of good points, but Ves suspected that her last argument was probably the driving factor of her choice.

Gloriana turned and stretched her arm towards their daughter.

Aurelia made a cute noise as her body floated from the grass and quickly flew back to her mother's embrace!

"Mama!" The little girl complained!

"Oh hush now, baby. What did I tell you about wandering too far away from me? Be a good girl and stay closer, okay?"

Gloriana briefly settled the cute girl before turning back to Ves. "Don't you think it is better for Aurelia here to enjoy a childhood on a warm and sunny planet instead of a cold and lifeless starship?"

"Our factory ship isn't as bad as you've described, honey! She has parks! She has a city on an entire deck! She even has her own schools!"

"None of them are better than the facilities that can serve our children better." His wife shook his head. "Look, I am not trying to discount our clan's schools, but Aurelia here deserves the best. There are private schools and elite academies in Davute where the descendants of Davute's privileged class are being sent. The quality of teaching here is

much better than what our clan can offer. More importantly, the networking opportunities are priceless. Don't you think it would be nice for our children to mingle with the region's future movers and shakers?"

Ves had mixed feelings about her arguments. Gloriana wanted to push for what was best for Aurelia, but her assumptions on what constituted the most beneficial choice differed from his own ideas on how to raise their kids.

"I don't think it is essential for our children to mingle with the locals." He responded. "What is wrong with befriending other Larkinsons? We have 200,000 members right now and I plan to increase it five-fold in the coming years."

His wife looked at Ves as if he was being stupid again. "Do you hear that, Aurelia? Dum-dum here is trying to ruin your future. Never listen to what he says when he is contradicting me, okay?"

"Um!"

"Now what do you call your papa when he is wrong?"

"Dum-dum, hihihhi!"