

The Mech Touch

Chapter 4711: Never Alone

The source of the strength of an expert pilot turned out to be a double-edged sword.

Ves already knew that expert pilots derived much of their strength by motivating themselves to an inhuman degree.

In order for them to draw out their potential and perform at levels beyond the reach of normal humans, they needed to find a grand and noble goal for themselves that could serve as their driving motivator.

From the moment they broke through by relying on a conviction, their entire life and purpose centered around fulfilling the important life goal that they had set.

Everything they did henceforth was ultimately tied to this singular goal.

Ves had long speculated that the reason why certain expert pilots such as Venerable Jannzi experienced such an extreme shift in personality was because they thought they had no choice but to do so in order to fulfill a much more difficult goal.

This phenomenon showed how the extraordinary willpower of a demigod was built on a singular foundation.

Everything was fine as long as this foundation remained strong and healthy.

However, even a single problem with this foundation could cause the extraordinary willpower to collapse!

This showed how high-ranking mech pilots pursued a path of extremity. They shook away all doubts and fears and did not hesitate to throw themselves onto a singular cause no matter the circumstances!

If they chose poorly or became affected by adverse circumstances outside of their control, then they lost everything all at once regardless of any extenuating circumstances.

It was brutal. It was extreme. It was unfair.

It was the life of a warrior who sought to traverse the path of godhood.

Out of all of the possible paths to transcendence, this was definitely one of the most dangerous and perilous that Ves knew of! It was no wonder that mech pilots must possess great courage and bravery in order to qualify to set foot.

"Do not feel sorry for myself, Ves." The older man said as his voice grew even feebler than before. "As an expert pilot that has broken his vow to defend the Bright Republic, I did not die when I suffered my defeat. Instead, I went on to live for many decades while seeing my family grow and flourish. In your eyes, I may seem like a cripple. In my eyes, I am a happy father, grandfather and great-grandfather. That is not a punishment at all. That is a second lease on life, and one that I have enjoyed to the best of my ability."

Ves understood his grandfather's sentiments better. Longevity did not matter at all to him. The Larkinson who belonged to an older generation had grown up in a much simpler time where life-prolonging treatment had never been attainable to the Larkinsons in the first place.

As such, his grandfather as well as many other Larkinsons never obsessed too much about enjoying an additional century of life.

This was much different from the likes of Senator For Life Camden Tovar. That bastard readily appropriated a military mech regiment in order to fulfill a private mission to retrieve a high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum for cheap. All of the earnest Flagrant Vandals who sacrificed their life to allow a greedy old bastard to gain another century's worth of lifespan mattered little to the statesman.

When Ves compared his own grandfather to Senator Tovar, he much preferred the former over the latter.

Benjamin thought the same. His perspective on life was much different from those decrepit old cowards who would readily betray their loyalties and sell out their own relatives to the highest bidder.

In that sense, Benjamin Larkinson still retained the integrity of a valiant and noble expert pilot.

"How long will you be able to last?"

"Not long." The old man said in a whisper. "My decline is inevitable, but I have been fighting to prolong this process for my entire post-war life. It is becoming a little harder to resist with each passing day, but it has become much worse since a year ago. I estimate that I can only keep this up for five months at most. After that..."

He did not need to finish that sentence. His grandson already got the message.

"I see..." Ves said. "Have you already decided where you want to get buried?"

The old Larkinson closed his eyes. "It has always been my earnest wish... to get buried next to other Larkinsons on Rittersberg."

"We can't go back to the Bright Republic anymore."

"I know... Since that is the case, you can bury me where many other of your clansmen are buried."

"Uhhh..."

"What is the matter, Ves?"

"My clan is housed in a fleet. It has always been customary for fleet-based organizations to conduct space burials. We usually shoot any bodies that we are able to retrieve into the direction of the nearest star. It's a cremation on a stellar scale."

His grandfather clearly did not like the thought of that. "I do not want to impose on you, but do not throw my corpse into space as if it is a piece of trash that needs to be discarded as soon as possible in order to free up space for your precious ship. Give me the dignity of an actual burial. I want my remains to rest alongside many other kin. The more, the better. It would bring me no greater joy to know that I am with my family in life and in death. I never want to be alone, whether I am buried on land or on a starship."

He had made his preferences clear. Ves understood that his grandfather was too old-fashioned to ever embrace the notion of a space burial.

"There will be no problems." Ves assured. "I will speak extensively with Ark to decide where exactly we shall bury you. Personally, I do not think it is suitable to bury you here in Davute. It may be an important planet now, but it will become a backwater a century or so later. It is much better if we can bury you on a ship that accompanies our fleet. In fact, we can bury all of our deceased on the same ship. That way, your coffin will be joined by an increasing number of relatives. What do you think?"

Benjamin made a slight gesture with his arm. "Do... what you want. I... trust you. You don't need to spend a lot of money... a simple burial in a graveyard on this planet is already enough..."

There was no way that Ves would toss his grandfather's corpse into a simple hole in the ground!

His grandfather meant too much for him and many other trueblood Larkinsons. It would be best if Ves prepared a burial on a ship. This way, his grandfather would not only have plenty of company among the dead, but also remain surrounded by lots of living relatives!

The talk came to an end at this point. Benjamin had staved off his exhaustion long enough and needed to rest in order to preserve what little he had left.

As Ves walked away from the estate and accompanied his wife and children back to the Royal Mansion, Andraste tugged his hand and asked a question.

"Grandpa used to be an expert pilot, right?"

"That is right."

"Why is he so... weak?"

"Piloting mechs is dangerous." Gloriana seriously replied. "It is too easy for young children such as you to dream about the glory and the victories that you can earn with a mech. What you often overlook is that for every winner, there is a loser. Piloting mechs is dangerous, baby. As your mother, I don't want to subject you to the many dangers that come with fighting on the battlefield, but we don't always get what we want. If we want to defend our clan and keep us all safe, then some of us need to step up. I hope you will be able to step up and take responsibility if you have the ability."

Andraste grinned up at her. "Don't worry, mama! I am really strong now! Ketis has taught me how to fight with a sword!"

Ves ruffled her red hair with his hand. "That's nice, pumpkin, but don't forget about your marksmanship practice as well. There are good reasons why firearms are the standard weapons in the Milky Way and the Red Ocean. Not everything can be beaten by chopping at it with a sword."

"I know, papa! You don't have to tell me that again." The little girl whined.

As they returned to their temporary home in Davute, Ves remained in a somber mood for the rest of the day.

It was hard for him to accept the fact that he could truly do nothing to prevent his grandfather's death.

With the kind of resources and connections that Ves had at his disposal, it was easy for him to arrange life-prolonging treatment to any member of the older generation of his clan.

This was how he was able to give Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson a hundred years of additional joy and fulfillment.

However, Raymond was just an ordinary human. He never had the ability to pilot a mech and was exempt from all of the complications that made it troublesome to extend his life.

Benjamin Larkinson was pretty much the polar opposite in that regard. Although the MTA mastered the technology to reluctantly extend the lives of expert pilots and ace pilots, even the mighty Association could do nothing if these pilots suffered grave injuries!

Though Ves could still think of half-a-dozen different ways to come up with his own solution, the explanation given by his grandfather about failing to fulfill a promise pretty much ended that route.

"I guess that is life. The older generations eventually have to make way for the younger generations."

This was the natural cycle of life. Any means to artificially prolong the life of a human was a distortion of this cycle.

That didn't mean Ves liked it when it affected him on a personal basis. As far as he was concerned, his grandfather deserved better.

His wife eventually joined him in one of the living rooms. "Ves. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay... I guess."

Gloriana sat down next to him and gave him a warm hug. "I am happy that our children are able to spend enough time with your grandfather to develop lasting memories and impressions of him. When he passes to the next stage of his existence, our offspring will always cherish his memory of his current self for the rest of their lives."

"Mhmm."

"What are you thinking about, Ves?"

"I'm thinking about a lot of stuff. For example, I want to fulfill my grandfather's wish by burying him among family, both living and dead. Do you think it is extravagant of me to commission a starship that is solely dedicated to holding the remains of our honored clansmen?"

Gloriana looked puzzled. "We already have a ship called the Graveyard."

"That is true, but she is solely meant to be clad with the salvaged debris taken from various battlefields. She is not a suitable vessel to bury our kin. This is why I am thinking about acquiring a purpose-built ship."

"I am not too certain about that. Our existing starships can accommodate many bodies."

"That is true." Ves nodded. "One of my other ideas is to convert a section of one of the large parks inside the Spirit of Bentheim into an exclusive graveyard. This way, anyone aboard our flagship can pay a visit to the buried heroes of our clan at any time."

The couple exchanged several more ideas on this matter.

The way the Larkinson Clan treated its dead up until this point was rather disrespectful now that Ves thought about it to a deeper degree than before.

There were good reasons why space burials became the customary standard of treating the deceased, but it did not fit with the culture and the means of the Larkinson Clan.

He felt it was much more fitting to acquire a dedicated starship and use the new vessel as a floating hall that not only honored the dead, but provided lots of inspiration for the Larkinsons who were alive today.

"I need to talk to Vivian Tsai."

Chapter 4712: Official Visitation

Learning about his grandfather's inevitable passing put Ves into a morose mood for a time.

None of the many positive developments of his clan could cheer him up like before. All of the spending and all of the acquisitions did not seem important anymore when he was faced with the impending loss of one of the most important relatives of his life.

His grandfather had always been good to him. Ves had constantly looked up to Benjamin whenever he visited the Larkinson Estate in his youth. He had listened to so many stories and learned so many life lessons from the wise but aging man that it took the sting out of losing his mother at an early age.

Now, history was repeating itself as Ves or Gloriana regularly brought their children over to Benjamin's quiet and peaceful estate.

The parents insisted on bringing their children whenever Benjamin was in a good enough condition to receive visitors, which didn't happen all that much.

No matter whether it was Aurelia, Andraste or little Marvaine, their great-grandfather could always provide them with a fun, engaging and educational story.

Most of the time, Benjamin tried to pass on his obsession towards family to his youngest descendants. He instilled the young children with a much greater appreciation of relatives who they could trust and count on in their lives.

Though Ves personally thought that a part of his grandfather's life lessons sounded a bit old-fashioned or that relevant anymore, he tolerated these instances as it would not be long before his children could no longer receive any further tales from the father of the father of their father.

It was shortly after his children started to spend time with their oldest living relative on the side of the Larkinsons that Ves received an important message.

"Boss!" Gavin Neumann shouted over the comm. "The colonial government has finally made its big move. A large procession is making its way to the Cat Nest. You should take a look at it. There are not only a dozen shuttles on the way, but it is even being escorted by a full mech company that also happens to include two expert mechs! We have already received a priority missive to prepare for its arrival and greet an important guest."

"Oh." Ves said without much surprise. "I guess the style of Davute hasn't changed. It would have been nice to receive a notification a few days in advance, but I guess those guys like to take people by surprise. Have you informed Minister Shederin Purnesse?"

"He is already on top of the situation. He has prepared for this state visit for over a week. While we have made sufficient preparations to receive a government envoy, the principal representative of the government that is on the way has a much greater status than we expected. Our clan administration is scrambling to upgrade our reception so that we will not convey any unintentional disrespect."

That caused Ves to become more attentive to this development.

"What do you mean, Benny? Is it necessary for us to roll out the red carpet for Reina Kernsk?"

"Madame Kernsk is on the way as well, but she is not coming as the principal representative this time! A much more important figure is heading over to open up a dialogue with our clan!"

That made Ves suspicious. "Who?"

"Yenames Clive."

"What?! Are you sure about that? Have you misread the first name perhaps? There are many people with Clive in their name in Davute."

"I'm not kidding, boss! There is only one member of the Clive Consortium whose first name is Yenames. To be honest, we didn't quite believe it at first either, so we called the administration for confirmation."

"And?"

"The person that everyone is convinced will become the ruler of the colonial state is definitely making his way over to the Cat Nest! He and his entourage will arrive within 10 minutes!"

"!!!"

Ves became truly startled at this time. The future king, president, prime minister, chancellor or whatever of Davute was paying an official visit to the Larkinson Clan's main holding on the planet.

This was a huge development and one that vastly exceeded his expectations!

It was not as if he anticipated that he would be invited to speak to Yenames Clive in person.

However, if the big man wanted a meeting, Ves expected that he would get summoned to an official palace or government office.

This was how it was supposed to be. For a man of great stature and power to condescend to visiting a mech designer and clan leader at a comprehensive complex located in the middle of Industrial District 2 was highly abnormal!

A part of Ves felt flattered by it. The high-profile visit showed that Davute valued him so much that the big man decided to go to the Larkinsons rather than the other way around.

Another part of Ves grew suspicious at the theatrics. The better the treatment, the more the Davutans wanted to take from him. What was happening was way too excessive for a medium-sized pioneering organization!

Could Ves and his clan truly bear the price of an official visit from the highest official of the colonial government?

"I will be there as soon as possible." Ves said as he remembered that time was of the essence. "I need time to change into my best ceremonial outfit. Where will our initial meeting be held?"

"We have consulted with a number of officials and decided to go through with holding the initial meet and greet inside the Ascension Gallery."

"Good choice. That is the most beautiful site of the Cat Nest. It will surely make a powerful impression on Mr. Clive and his entourage. Well, let's get to it. Make sure to clear much of the Cat Nest and put our garrison on a heightened level of alert."

"General Verle is already taking care of that, boss."

The call ended. Ves scrambled to his bedroom to change his outfit and allow the makeup bot to brush up on his appearance.

"C'mon, Lucky. We're meeting an important fellow today."

"Meow..."

Ves picked up his tired and overstuffed cat and quickly judged the weight.

"Oof, your digestion system still hasn't made much progress, I see."

"Meow!"

"You should get on and produce those gems if don't you want me to talk about it! It's not my fault you're overweight!"

"Meow meow!"

Ves ignored his cat's complaints and quickly boarded a small shuttle that had landed in the front yard of the Royal Mansion.

As the vehicle quickly lifted off, he noted that the usual escort of mechs had been bolstered by the Everchanger and the Minerva.

The quick arrival of the two masterwork expert mechs allowed the Larkinson Clan to show off its own splendor. It was one of the many ways in which the Larkinson Clan could convey to third parties that it was worthwhile for the future ruler of Davute to head over in person.

The shuttle soon touched down next to the Ascension Gallery. As Ves stepped out with Lucky in his arms, he could already see that the staff and guards on duty had hastily ushered out the guests that had come to admire the monumental structure and the series of totems placed inside.

Although Ves found it rather strange that Yenames Clive readily agreed to meet in a location that was saturated with different glows, perhaps the man truly didn't feel there was any risk of getting mentally influenced.

His personal assistant along with a bunch of other Larkinsons already awaited him at the center.

The group stood in front of a large totem of the Golden Cat.

The magnificent work looked resplendent as it bathed in the light that passed through the transparent circular window on the roof.

"Boss, you have arrived in time." Gavin smiled at Ves. "Minister Shederin Purnesse has already received Mr. Clive at our landing zone. The latter's group is already on its way to this location."

"Where is Calabast? I figured that she would be here as well."

"She has actually declined to attend. She told us that it was already enough for her to monitor the talks from a distance."

Ves shrugged. "She may be right. So how will we proceed? Should I leave all of the serious talking to Minister Shederin or should I lead the discussion on our side?"

"I believe that it is best to take the latter approach. We have no real choice. Mr. Yenames Clive has graced us with the immense honor of a visit in person. It would be highly disrespectful for you to pass on the responsibility of talking to him to a proxy, especially when you are right here. The highest leaders on both sides must engage with each other. That is the way the Davutans have set this up. You can only solicit the advice from Shederin and other advisors at most, but you will have to carry most of the conversation by yourself."

"...Damnit. I knew it wasn't so simple."

Ves didn't have to be a seasoned diplomat to know that the colonial government had weaved an extensive design around the Larkinson Clan. The latest move of the Davutans fit right into the constriction strategy that they had apparently employed.

These moves demonstrated the intelligence, the patience, the determination, the ruthlessness and above all else the determination to secure their objectives!

It was extremely concerning to deal with these kinds of people. It was always the schemers and the masterminds that seemed to screw his clan over.

Ves much preferred to deal with honorable warriors or obvious idealists as they could easily be outmaneuvered with a bit of cleverness.

"Oh well." He shrugged. "Let's go over the list of points that I need to pay attention to, shall we? I need to make certain that we are on the same page."

A few minutes passed by as Ves quickly jogged his memory and made certain that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hadn't changed any priorities.

"Our guests have almost arrived!"

"Get in position, everyone!"

Due to the security rules imposed by the colonial government, Ves had to leave most of his honor guard well outside. The mechs that were a part of his security detail also had to remain parked outside.

As such, Ves only had four or so guards protecting his person.

In contrast, as soon as the massive gates of the Ascension Gallery slid open, eight powerful mechs slowly stepped inside.

Each of the machines were coated in vertical stripes of white and blue, though their exteriors were also embellished with silver.

The only mechs that looked a little more unique were the two expert mechs at the end. The knight mech and the rifleman mech formed a classic combination that could snipe threats from afar while blocking any enemies that managed to get close.

Once the mechs entered the enormous center hall that could easily accommodate many more mechs, a large column of white-and-blue guards marched inside.

The column eventually split up in order to form a long lane that led straight to the center.

It was only now that the main delegation proceeded forward.

Ves could already spot Shederin Purnesse wearing his best formal suit walking alongside a tall, dark-haired man who wore a slightly exotic formal robed suit.

The outfit was certainly colorful. Patterns and symbols of multiple different colors painted an entire canvas across Yenames Clive's outfit.

Ves was sure that the artwork conveyed an entire story, but he didn't have the motivation to decipher it at the moment. He was much more focused on the upcoming talk itself.

Finally, the head of the procession stopped around twenty paces away from Ves and his own entourage.

The future ruler's chief of staff stepped forward and shouted out in a formal voice that echoed throughout the massive hall.

"Patriarch Ves Larkinson! Prospective President Yenames Clive greets you in the name of the Colony of Davute, the future capital of our colonial state! Please receive our sincerest well-wishes and encouragement for your glorious endeavors! Know that the Colony of Davute considers you and your clan to be our most honorable compatriots! Let us come together and discuss the joining of our fates so that we can both prosper from the cooperation that we can forge in our names!"

"..."

Well, the Davutans sure liked to do things big!

Chapter 4713: Yenames Clive

Ves had heard rumors that the original founders and investors of Davute argued intensely about the selection of the founding ruler of the colonial state.

The influence that such a figure could exert on a massive and growing state in its infancy was massive!

This was the reason why many different pioneering organizations and the old galaxy powers who backed them couldn't make up their minds for a long time.

It took a lot of discussions, jockeying, making promises and old-fashioned horsetrading to finally rally a majority around a single consensus candidate.

Ultimately, a prominent member of the Clive Consortium won the ultimate honor.

Among the major components of the power bloc behind Davute, the Clive Consortium most definitely had a right to decide how the future colonial state should be run.

Ves and many other people may have never heard about the Clive Consortium before, but it was a big commercial organization that developed many branches in both the galactic heartland and the galactic center.

It was one of the driving forces behind the colonization of the port system and was among its biggest investors. The consortium was also a huge proponent of trade, open immigration, heavy industry, consensus-based decision making and intensive external trade.

Considering that the current economy of Davute closely aligned with the stated policies and ideology of the Clive Consortium, it was clear that it definitely possessed the greatest voice in the colony!

Of course, the consortium also had to pay a huge price to secure so much real power.

It sunk so much money, resources, personnel and favors into this colonization project that it was determined for one of its own to take the reins and personally ensure it would succeed while preserving its own interests!

The Clive Consortium ultimately pushed forward Yenames Clive as the first leading executive of the Davute Project.

From what Ves could derive from reading the man's history and profile, Yenames was an heir to a large commercial organization who had passed every test that mattered.

From the start of his life, he had been put onto an extensive raising, training and educational program that was meant to turn him into the most optimal chief executive of the powerful and expanding Clive Consortium.

Yenames Clive had to prepare for at least a hundred years or more before he ever had a realistic chance of being appointed as one of the consortium's powerful executives.

As such, he worked hard and utilized the limits of his augmentations to excel in every school, succeed in every side activity, become the leader of several social circles and produce lots of growth in every business venture under his charge.

Though Yenames experienced his fair share of failures and setbacks, they were fairly minor and forgivable compared to his remarkably consistent pattern of producing solid results and exceeding everyone's expectations.

If nothing else went wrong, Yenames Clive was dead-set on becoming the next CEO of the Clive Consortium. All of the other possible members of his generation simply couldn't compete against this excellently engineered monster!

Then, the Red Ocean opened up for colonization.

Many old galaxy powers suddenly gained an opportunity of a lifetime. For the first time in many centuries, a large swathe of space that was completely devoid of entrenched human interests had become available!

The Clive Consortium weighed the pros and cons at a rapid pace and quickly decided to bet much of its accumulated war chest and reserves into this venture.

However, unlike many other organizations that simply settled for occupying a single nice planet or star system, the Clive Consortium wanted to go much bigger.

It not only wanted to colonize a hot and highly desired port system, but also use that as the basis of a fully-fledged state in the new frontier!

This was a massive endeavor and one that the consortium could never found and build on its own.

This was why Clive did what it had always been good at, which was finding like-minded business partners and roping them into this incredibly promising initiative!

Although much of the foundation and the leadership of the Clive Consortium in the old galaxy remained the same, the ambitious organization needed to send a leader to the

new frontier that commanded enough respect and demonstrated a sufficient degree of competence to take charge of the Davute Project on the ground!

The Clive Consortium chose well.

As a businessman by nature, Yenames Clive had truly been a great fit to lead a colony in a commercially attractive port system. His ability to balance the interests of many different stakeholders and bring aboard new business partners gave Davute the support it needed to grow rapidly.

The 120-year old executive's deep understanding of the practical realities of the dwarf galaxy and the local region also helped him set the right policies and institute the right regulations to keep Davute's economy on an upwards trend.

If there was any major weakness that critics could fault the man, it was that he possessed no proven military acumen. Although Yenames Clive could delegate military affairs to extensive team of hand-picked military officials, his overemphasis on commercialism had led to a number of weird circumstances in the military sphere.

For example, Unlike Karlach which was more heavily invested into forming a strong and more homogenous core for its mech military, Davute's military establishment was still fractured into many smaller and more chaotic pieces.

Although Davute was able to field significantly more mechs on its side in theory, in practice the lack of coordination and unity among all of the disparate mech forces might severely affect their collective performance in the upcoming war.

In any case, the briefings that he received and the research that he conducted on his own gave Ves a thorough understanding of the person known as Yenames Clive.

Naturally, the future ruler of Davute also did his homework on the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan.

This led to an odd situation where both men knew each other 'well', but never actually met each other to confirm all of the facts and speculation that they had acquired.

There was always a difference between primary sources and both secondary as well as tertiary sources.

Neither Ves nor Yenames assumed that everything they learned totally matched up to the person they met in reality.

This was what separated the bad diplomats from the good ones.

The former either rigidly adhered to past intelligence and could not adapt to deviations, or they ignored their homework entirely and made judgments on the fly.

The latter on the other hand intelligently allowed themselves to get informed by prior intelligence but deftly made adaptations and adjustments based on the actual situation in real time.

Right now, Ves was pretty sure that Yenames Clive had him beat on this area, but that was okay.

It was clear from the circumstances of this visit and the recent behavior of the colonial administration that Davute was trying to court the Larkinson Clan.

The future colonial state centered around this port system desperately needed all of the help it could get to build up its advantage over Karlach, its rising archenemy and super competitor.

In contrast, the Larkinson Clan did not really need Davute for anything.

Although it would be rather costly and painful for the clan to uproot its entire Davute Branch and relocate to an entirely different star system in a different region, the Larkinsons could still do it if it wished!

That put the clan at a considerable advantage over the colonial state in any negotiations.

This was why the so-called prospective president found it worthwhile to lower his head and visit Ves in the Cat Nest.

Though Ves initially became a bit jarred by the weird announcement, the Davutans kept their ceremony short and quickly allowed the two to come forward to shake hands.

They were already studying each other intensely as they smiled at each other and reached out to hold each other's grips.

As Ves used all of his senses to study the other man, he noted that Yenames Clive was certainly the real deal.

The older man exuded an abundance of gravitas, but not to the point of becoming suffocating. He adopted just the right amount of approachability to put Ves at ease and encourage a friendly chat.

From a spiritual perspective, the man did not possess any spiritual potential, which was fairly normal and to be expected.

That did not mean he was weak. Ves' many senses had improved so much as of late that he could pick up the other man's heavy mental activity. Yenames Clive's mind and highly sophisticated implant was constantly going through a ton of different thoughts. He was like a supercomputer in that sense!

"Patriarch Larkinson. It is good to finally meet you in person." The man's smooth and highly trained voice spoke in a firm but slightly gentle tone. "Before we talk any further, let me thank you for choosing to settle your clan in our colony. You and your Larkinsons have contributed greatly to the economic growth and the rapidly rising prosperity of our expanding community. We hope that your clan will continue to benefit as we grow into a mature and established state within the Krakatoa Middle Zone."

Ves smiled back. "Davute has indeed provided our clan with a lot of support. It is a shame that I might not be sticking around much longer. While our local branch will continue to manage our existing holdings in this region, our expeditionary fleet only goes where excitement can be found."

"We are well aware of your personal proclivities as well as the emphasis your alliance places on expeditions. I believe that a number of the proposals we have prepared for your clan will be of great interest to you regardless of what you have planned for your fleet."

"Interesting. Before we continue, can I request a tour through your grand and imposing gallery? I have heard much of this facility, but never had the pleasure of paying a visit to it. I can already feel I should have stepped into these halls sooner."

Ves did not expect to receive such an off-beat request, but he was more than ready to play an impromptu tour guide.

"Why certainly. Our Ascension Gallery does not contain a lot of exhibits relative to its size, but then again there is no need to add any superfluous elements. The pieces that we did place in this gallery already attract enough admiration."

They both approached the giant metal statue that depicted the Golden Cat. The light shining down from above along with the substantial glow radiating from the totem caused many guests to feel as if they were truly standing in front of a special existence.

Yenames Clive was no exception to this rule.

"I have seen and felt my fair share of living mechs over the years, but this is different. Is this large cat an accurate representation of the source of the glows that characterize so many of your mech designs?"

The man had really done his homework, apparently. Ves bet that he had received a huge amount of insights from a team of Master Mech Designers who extensively studied every LMC mech they could obtain.

Ves decided to be ambivalent and shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows. I prefer not to go into too much detail. After all, a mech designer has to protect his trade secrets."

Yenames Clive continued to look up and admire the giant cat sculpture. "Is it a secret when you have placed an ostentatious representation of a glow source in the middle of a public gallery?"

"There is no need for me to hide everything." Ves responded in a steady voice. "I show off the Golden Cat because I want to prove to everyone that my living mechs and its components aren't derived from eldritch monstrosities or anything. The glow that defines my clan is personified by a perfectly cute and cuddly cat, as you can see. We Larkinsons consider Goldie to be a reflection of our character and culture."

"I can see that." Yenames Clive spoke as he continued to be fascinated by the totem and its distinctive glow. "You and your Larkinsons are curious, affectionate and playful. Your people can also be predatory, possessive and sensitive towards danger. I find that to be an unusual but refreshing combination of traits. Your clan is utterly unique and enriches our colony more than any other organization at your scale."

Ves blinked. He never actually equated his clan's traits to that of an actual cat, but now that he thought about it, the comparison was incredibly apt.

"Mrow."

"My pardon?"

"Oh, um, it's nothing!"

Chapter 4714: Indoor Cats and Outdoor Cats

As lots of striped white-and-blue mechs and guards stood guard within the central hall of the Ascension Gallery, two prominent leaders continued to engage each other in conversation.

On one side was Prospective President Yenames Clive, a man that had already started to shape Davute when it was in its infancy and reluctantly won enough support to keep ruling it once his jurisdiction expanded to an entire colonial state.

On the other side was Patriarch Ves Larkinson, a Journeyman Mech Designer who already led a growing clan that fought against some of the more formidable indigenous aliens and also introduced so many innovations that even the Mech Trade Association already recognized his contributions.

Both of them were giants in their respective spheres of influence, and each of them possessed the pride, confidence and dignity of those who had fought hard to reach their current positions.

These similarities fostered an immediate sense of understanding and camaraderie. Despite their vastly diverging backgrounds and substantial difference in age, Ves found the other man to be a lot easier to talk to than he expected.

Of course, there was no doubt that Yenames Clive purposefully modulated his conduct in front of Ves in order to increase the chance of a positive outcome. The future ruler of Davute was not stupid enough to put on airs and throw his weight around in front of a critical individual who could become a real asset to his upcoming state.

"Meow..."

Oh, there was also a cat in the chamber.

Lucky largely ignored the complicated dynamic between the two leaders and laid next to the statue that depicted a much larger and more resplendent-looking cat.

Occasionally, the gem cat stared curiously at Yenames Clive and a few members of his well-dressed entourage, but otherwise the Davutans did not hold his interest.

As Yenames Clive stared up at the giant golden statue in wonder and experienced the exotic object's strange but comforting glow, he continued to lead the conversation.

"You have traveled further across the new frontier than I have." The future president said. "I envy you for that. You are a self-made man and a pioneer who does not have to answer to a group of superiors. How is the Red Ocean like beyond the region around this port system?"

Ves shrugged in response. "I have barely scratched the surface of what the new frontier has to offer. It may be a miniature galaxy, but the Red Ocean still encompasses plenty of light-years even if humanity has only captured a part of the outer edge up until this point. Still, the aliens I've encountered and the warships that my mech forces have fought against are much more diverse than any human force. You can never get tired or bored with exploring what these completely different and inhuman civilizations have come up with. This is what I crave and this is what will help me become a better mech designer."

"Understandable." Yenames Clive spoke with a respectful nod. "As an accomplished mech designer without much of a fixed foundation, your freedom of movement is much greater than many of your peers, and you are taking full advantage of that by going on interesting expeditions."

"I consider myself to be a true pioneer." Ves proudly stated as he stood behind the mech-sized statue of the Golden Cat. "The MTA said as much as well. There are so many mysteries and so much treasure out there that are ripe for the taking. Sure, the local aliens aren't so eager to let us take what we want, but as long as we have enough guts and mechs, we can overcome any obstacle."

Yenames Clive shifted his gaze from the giant cat statue to the much smaller gem cat that was lazily lounging to the side.

Lucky responded to the gaze by letting out a lazy yawn that showed off his sharp metal-tearing teeth.

"Meow..."

The prospective president grinned in amusement. "I admire and commend your activities. You are truly embodying one of the archetypical roles of a pioneer. That does not mean that other varieties of pioneers are less deserving of respect. The territories conquered by humanity are vast, and some pioneers have to do the arduous task of civilizing them to the point where they can become the latest havens for our expanding race. The pioneers who undertake much of the risk of building colonies across the new frontiers should also be worthy of respect."

That was a noble sentiment and one that Ves could not deny.

"You have made a good point, president. I do not explicitly place myself above the other diligent pioneers who have chosen to grasp a different opportunity in the new frontier."

Yenames Clive gestured his hand at the cat statue. "I find that pioneers bear a large resemblance to cats. There are different variations of cats. Some are clearly indoor cats. They feel safe and in control when they remain in the same home for many years. They are highly protective towards their family and will make their stand and defend their territory against any hostile intruders."

Ves threw the older man a strange look. "I take it that I am an outdoor cat in this analogy of yours?"

"It fits, does it not? There are certain cats that are more adventurous by nature. They will become restless and dissatisfied if they continue to remain locked inside a home when there is an entire world outside to explore. They are most content when they are regularly let out to spend their days as they wish and get to experience new sights and interactions each time they range outside of their homes."

"That sounds like an apt description of myself and my clan." Ves smiled. "My nature is identical to that of an outdoor cat. Don't get me wrong. It's nice to stay in a warm and comfy home, but I won't be able to become the biggest cat on the block if I can only be a normal housecat."

"Meow!" Lucky helpfully agreed.

That caused Yenames Clive to subtly shake his head.

"As much as outdoors cats spend their time beneath the open skies, they are not equivalent to feral cats. The latter live much rougher and shorter lives as they are never truly safe. They have no support to lean on when they grow hungry or are targeted by larger and more vicious predators. An outdoor cat on the other hand can explore the outside world just as much, but also has the convenience of returning to a safe and peaceful home where they can let down their guard, fill their stomach and seek shelter from any storms. They can also build a much more secure nest to raise their kittens and deposit their less capable relatives. In short, outdoor cats get to enjoy the best of both worlds."

That was an interesting way to extend this analogy. The implicit message behind it was that being an outdoor cat was vastly more preferable than becoming completely feral. After all, the latter had no fallback option at all, while the former could always go back to a warm hearth for either himself or his family.

"My fleet indeed falls short of that of the much more self-sufficient armadas of true spaceborn clans." Ves conceded. "My clansmen aren't entirely ready to say goodbye to planets and we are still dependent on the resources and facilities that only fixed locations can provide. That said, this outdoor cat is rather picky. This cat has already been driven out of his original home by his previous owner. That has left him scarred and distrustful of other owners. Aside from that, the feline also doesn't have any attachments to alternative homes. There is not much of a difference between Davute, Karlach or any other colonial state from the perspective of a wandering cat."

Ves did not want Yenames Clive to one-sidedly grasp the thread of the conversation. He needed to throw in a few complications and make the future ruler work a little harder to appeal to the Larkinsons.

"The Red Ocean is vast. Humanity are still newcomers in this dwarf galaxy, but pioneers such as ourselves have already settled many different locations. The Davute System is but one human stronghold among many. I can readily admit that the port system and the colonial state that we are building around it are not the largest, the wealthiest or the most martially formidable of colonies. What I do appreciate is that it is mine, yet it can be yours as well."

Ves looked impressed. This pitch sounded more and more compelling. He liked it when bigshots put down their arrogance and frankly admitted the reality of their weaknesses. It showed that such a leader not only understood his place quite clearly, but also made him more inclined to listen to others.

"That sounds nice, President Clive, but I can imagine that you say the same phrase to many other people. Davute has become a lot more crowded compared to a few years ago. While the colony definitely remains yours, it has also become the common property of hundreds if not thousands of other magnates and organizations. Becoming another 'owner' of Davute has become a meaningless statement. I would be no more influential than a tiny retail investor in a gigantic public company."

"Ah, but that is where you are mistaken. Patriarch Larkinson, do you think that a tiny retail investor who only bought a couple of shares merits a formal visit from the CEO of the company? You do not need to belittle yourself. You and your clan have become one of the larger and more famous pillars of our growing colonial state. From our viewpoint, you have become a significant institutional investor of our great Davute Project. While your monetary commitment may be far less than that of other institutional investors, you make up for that in other helpful ways, from becoming a famed adventurer pioneer to increasing the diversity of mechs in our colonial state."

Ves looked skeptical. "That may be true, but it is a stretch to equate my clan to those fellow partners of yours that have sunk hundreds of millions if not billions of MTA credits in the initial years of your colonization project."

He did not exactly know the full monetary cost of building up Davute, but it was not that difficult to make a loose estimate.

"The total sum is considerably greater if you include both opportunity costs and intangibles." Yenames Clive informed the Larkinson Patriarch. "That is beside the point. A strong colonial state cannot be built with money alone. We need more if we want to forge hundreds of disparate star systems and thousands of different shareholders in a single, united cause. We need inspiring heroes like yourself. We need unique mechs that can become the iconic machines of our nascent mech military, just as your Valkyrie Redeemer model has done so for the Hexadric Hegemony. Your Larkinson Clan is utterly unique and can enrich Davute in ways that others cannot equal. We are prepared to make a good case of how you can benefit us, and how we can benefit you in turn."

The dynamic of this discussion had been rather weird from the start. It was pretty normal in negotiations for one side to oversell itself while underselling the other party.

However, before Yenames Clive properly began to extol the virtues of committing to Davute, he had pumped up the value of the Larkinson Clan and thereby made it harder for him to limit the amount of concessions he had to make.

The man had little choice, though.

Ves wasn't eager to settle in Davute to begin with, and he would be a fool if he did not play hard to get in this verbal dance.

The prospective president therefore had to build a proper case of why Ves and his clan would become valued partners of Davute before he could proceed any further!

Chapter 4715: Hard Line

Yenames Clive had received his fill of the large-scale totem of the Golden Cat. He wanted to move on and explore the other interesting exhibits of the Ascension Gallery.

There were two wings to the massive monumental hall.

One of them displayed excellent copies of the most iconic mechs of the Larkinson Clan. Though not every model was represented due to the need to maintain confidentiality of the Larkinson Army's more strategic assets, the wing still displayed plenty of bestsellers such as the original version of the aforementioned Valkyrie Redeemer.

The other wing displayed similar mech-sized totems of all of the design spirits that Ves saw fit to reveal. Visiting clansmen and guests all had an opportunity to admire and acquaint themselves with the majority of his current design spirit collection.

It would have been logical for Ves to lead Yenames Clive and his silent entourage to the mech wing, but that would be the boring option.

Ves instead decided to give the future president a tour through the mystical hall of wonders of the Larkinson Clan.

This was both a whimsical and strategic decision. Mechs were much more common and well-understood by everyone. Even if the born and raised businessman did not receive any significant military or technical training, he definitely possessed a good understanding of how mechs worked and how they were used on a more general basis.

Rather than verbally spar against Yenames about mechs right away, Ves decisively took the big man to the gallery wing where a long row of over a dozen different large-scale totems beckoned for his attention.

At least Ves could speak with much more authority and confidence with regards to his design spirits that produced the distinctive glows for all of his mech models.

For his part, Yenames Clive did not object to this tour. The totems and the design spirits that they represented were all unique, and no recordings could compare to experiencing them at close proximity.

They approached the totem that represented one of the oldest design spirits in the collection.

The Solemn Guardian was a far rougher and less defined spiritual product than Ves' later works.

His visual appearance reflected this lack of sophistication. Depending on the circumstances, Ves interpreted the Solemn Guardian as either a uniformed human soldier or an old living mech.

For the creation of the totem that stood for the Solemn Guardian, Ves decided to keep it simple and stick to molding a generic human soldier in uniform.

Of course, how he looked didn't matter all that much. It was his simple but helpful duty-based glow that made him worthy of attention.

As the old design spirit bathed Yenames Clive with a glow that has influenced many different battles in the old galaxy and the new frontier, Ves paid close attention to the interaction.

Despite the prospective president's lack of spiritual potential, his mind was so strong that it was like a fortress. Yenames Clive did not allow himself to get influenced by external factors unless he allowed it to. He only sampled the Solemn Guardian's glow in order to understand its properties, nothing more.

"I have experienced this glow once before from a handful of your products that carry the same glow." The elaborately robed figure said. "I already had a sense that the glow was human in origin. Did you derive this power from a heroic human pilot who possessed exceptional loyalty to his state? I can scarcely imagine how you can produce this glow in any other fashion."

The true story of how Ves brought life to the Solemn Guardian was a lot more complicated and controversial. There was no way he would reveal anything incriminating.

"The Solemn Guardian was born in a time of need. Many of the humans who have lived in my home star sector never even conceived of the idea of making a common stand against external alien aggressors. When the sandman race randomly decided to attack human space, it took extraordinary measures to encourage mech pilots to do their duty. The Desolate Soldier is the earliest work I took a lot of pride in. It has made a huge difference and saved a lot of lives. The mech line spawned from it continues to play an important role to many customers, though its profile is no longer as high as before."

Yenames Clives nodded in agreement. "The Solemn Guardian has made the Desolate Soldier helpful, and it can add value to other mechs as well. I can think of many possible mechs that you can design for Davute. Perhaps you can increase a mech force's sense of belonging and obligation towards our colonial state."

Ves frowned for a moment.

"Maybe, but it would not really be as effective as you think. Part of the reason why the Desolate Soldier did well back then was that it already drew on the sense of duty and honor of defending human space against the mass-murdering aliens that sought to destroy their states and all of their people. Here in Krakatoa, the stakes are considerably lower. Most mercenary outfits are not necessarily fighting out of a sense of duty. They are opportunistically fighting for profit and will not hesitate to abandon a

contract if the circumstances become too dire. No glow can trump a mech pilot's sense of self-preservation."

Too many people expected too much from glows like the one from the Solemn Guardian. If anyone thought they could compensate for awful leadership, excessive deaths and terrible treatment with a duty-based glow, then they would sorely get disappointed!

The Solemn Guardian also made no significant difference in well-trained and well-treated mech units.

Considering that the early movers paid a lot to enter the Red Ocean during the early days of human colonization, they always had their troops in order. It was impossible for them to hire a lot of scumbags that did not possess the most basic loyalty to their employers.

As Ves downplayed the importance of the Solemn Guardian, Yenames Clive decided to bring up another unique phenomenon to the Larkinson Clan.

"As my men studied your clan and your closest allies, we have learned that you have developed an incredibly effective measure that can guarantee the loyalty of all of your members, including the large number of diverse recruits who all possess different motivations, ideologies and other circumstances. As an administrator of a large and growing colony, I find it remarkable how serious instances of betrayal and desertion are practically nonexistent within your Golden Skull Alliance."

Oh, this fellow definitely did his homework.

Though Ves and the Golden Skullers did not do their utmost to hide the existence of the spiritual networks that produced the effects that the other man described, it was rather disconcerting to hear it explained by an outsider.

"I do my best to help my family and friends." Ves smiled. "They are the ones who have truly stuck with me in times of good and bad. Considering how much they have sacrificed to help me attain my goals, it is only fair for me to repay them with sincere gifts and rewards."

Yenames Clive did not spare in his praise of Ves' work. "Your gratitude is incredibly valuable indeed. While Davute may not be as close to your clan as your older allies, we can offer just as much support if not more to you. If you are open to the proposal of creating a similar mechanism for our colonial state that can help with converting our new colonists and citizens into a single group, then--"

"Stop." Ves raised his palm and rudely interrupted the highly influential man. "Don't go there. I can already foresee what you want, and my answer to that is no. I will not provide this service to Davute."

"I am confident we can work out whatever doubts and objections you may have with regards to our proposal." The prospective president gently said while spreading his hands. "You have not even allowed me to elucidate the sizable amount of compensation that our colonial state is willing to provide for this service."

Ves crossed his arms. "Allowing your forces to play around with the Solemn Guardian is one thing. The compulsion element is not that strong. At most, his glow only encourages people to do what they already want to do. What you are asking is much more serious. There are some lines that should never be crossed. I have never even thought about providing this specific service to the Hex Federation. What makes you think I would make a different decision for Davute? If I do not stop myself, then I am certain the Mech Trade Association will do what I should have done."

Although the MTA had never properly addressed Ves on the dubious ethical and legal implications of his spiritual networks, he was not stupid.

He exchanged with the mechers often enough to develop a good idea on what he could get away with. He was absolutely certain that the MTA would come down hard on Ves if he foolishly proceeded with this proposal.

Not only would Davute not be able to obtain its own spiritual network, the Larkinson Clan and its allies were also at risk of losing their own ones!

That was absolutely unacceptable to Ves. He much preferred to keep his head down and hoped that the MTA would continue to turn a blind eye to his more questionable activities as long as he kept everything quiet.

Ves was pretty sure that he maintained an unwritten and unspoken agreement with the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction over this matter.

Nothing good would come to him if he gave the MTA a reason to speak and write about how much he disrupted so many people's lives!

Though the prospective president did not give up and tried to persuade Ves to change his mind, nothing worked.

Ves did not wish to engage in any trade that excessively risked his fundamental interests. Preserving his relations with the MTA superseded any extravagant rewards that Davute might be willing to exchange.

This was also why Ves was adamant about shutting down the discussion as soon as possible. He did not wish to get tempted by the concessions that would no doubt get him to agree against his best judgment.

Seeing that Ves had shut down like a rock, Yenames Clive reluctantly dropped the matter.

"Our offer shall remain open." The older man eventually said. "If you are in ever need of immediate support or relief, we can always revisit this discussion."

He looked back up to the statue of the Solemn Guardian in the guise of a soldier.

"As an alternative, I am also receptive to the idea of commissioning you to design a line of military mechs based on the Solemn Guardian's glow in cooperation with our resident Master Mech Designers. It may not match the effectiveness of your clan's exclusive loyalty mechanisms, but it should reduce the occurrence of incidents and increase the overall cohesion among our mech forces. What is your opinion, Patriarch Larkinson?"

"It can be done, but that doesn't necessarily mean I have to make it happen." Ves steadily responded. "I generally only design the mechs that I am passionate about and believe in. The Solemn Guardian is rather tricky as it cannot make a boring mech exciting. I need to obtain a unique and interesting mech concept first and figure out afterwards whether the Solemn Guardian's glow is an appropriate fit."

"Yet you are open to fulfilling one of our mech design commissions, correct?"

Ves realized that he almost got pulled into the devious bastard's trap.

By starting off with a highly sensitive and excessive demand, Yenames Clive already took into account that he would get rejected. This allowed him to step down and issue a milder request instead that sounded much more reasonable in comparison.

Fortunately, Ves recalled that he did not want to enter into any agreement with Davute so easily.

It would be best if he did not sign any contracts at all, but that did not seem wise considering how much Davute desired to come away with at least a few concessions from the Larkinson Clan.

Chapter 4716: Tricky Questions

The pair moved on to observe another totem up close.

This time, they stopped in front of the statue that attempted to portray the massive bulk and physical might of Qilanxo.

Though Ves did not maintain frequent contact with the former sacred god who originated from Aeon Corona VII, he knew that the genetically engineered exobeast still maintained an active friendship with Venerable Orfan, Venerable Dise and Venerable Jannzi.

As Ves and Yenames Clive stopped right in front of the reptilian creature statue, a strong glow that possessed both protective and spatial properties encompassed the two human leaders.

"What manner of alien beast is this? I have been informed that you have utilized the glow derived from this odd creature years before you have entered the Red Ocean. Did you already develop the urge to explore unknown territories back then?"

"That is classified." Ves firmly said. "The story behind my meeting with Qilanxo is probably my most engaging story, but I am sorry to say that the Big Two will probably not appreciate any attempt to divulge it. This is a shame as I think Qilanxo would love to share her story."

"A pity. I see that this is not the only alien beast that you have converted into your asset. Do you attempt to do this for any exotic creature that you come across in your expeditions?"

Ves chuckled. "That would be a bit too excessive, hehe. There is a price to create these 'assets', so I do not do this casually. Each one has good potential and my clan and I are still far from utilizing the full extent of their capabilities."

They moved on to another totem. This one was definitely the most eye-catching one as it depicted an angel that looked to be in complete peace.

"Ah, I am intimately familiar with this glow." Yenames Clive smiled and admired the life-like detail of the metal sculpture. "The Pacifier line that you have conceived with Professor Taigen Herman Voiken has helped put Davute on the map in the Krakatoa Middle Zone and beyond. It is becoming increasingly less common for Planetary Guard units to lack this practical and useful mech. I truly cannot stress how the popularity of your Pacifiers has enhanced the commercial activity of our colony. It is works like this that enable you to accelerate the economic activity and development of our colonial state. To think that the root of it all is an angel. Is he real?"

The Pacifier indeed had the capital to receive such praise. Its demand had skyrocketed yet again now that Davute and Karlach were about to go to war against each other.

In fact, demand had become so excessive that the LMC already submitted a proposal to open yet another manufacturing complex in one of the many cities of Davute VII!

Ves shrugged at the other man's last question. "Whether Lufa is real or not depends on how you define the word 'real'. In my opinion, the border that separates what is real from what is not can be blurry. One of the criteria that I personally use to judge whether something is real is to figure out whether it is alive. Lufa is definitely alive, so that means he is a real existence. It's that simple."

"Your words suggest that it is anything but simple."

"Well, other people may disagree. Lufa does not exactly exist in a form that is tangible. You cannot actually touch or see him in a conventional manner. It doesn't matter to me, though. Neither Lufa nor I have any desire to prove that this angel is actually real."

"I question that, Patriarch Larkinson. You have built an excellent work of art that gives your angel friend a solid and tangible form. Not only that, but you have placed it in this magnificent gallery where your clan openly invites visitors to witness Lufa and the other sources of your glows. Is that a reflection of your desire for the public to acknowledge his existence and make him more real?"

That was a good and surprisingly deep question. Ves had to look inward and question his motives to figure out whether he subliminally wanted to increase the popularity and brand awareness of his design spirits.

As he looked deeper, he recognized a desire to show off his 'works', and not just the mechs he designed.

The design spirits that he had either made or induced under his control were all unique and powerful in their own way. As long as showing them off did not harm his core interests, then he would be happy if others acknowledged their existence.

Ves scratched his head. "Maybe you are close to the mark. Many of these existences have trouble interacting with people due to their obvious conditions. Attaching them to tangible objects helps to anchor them and allows them to get in touch with humanity. If this is not done, it is too easy for them to become isolated. If no one remembers them anymore, are they still real?"

Yenames Clive found this to be an intriguing description. "To the wider human society, an angel that has become forgotten no longer exists as far as people are concerned. Would you not say the same can potentially apply to your clan? Take a look at the famous spaceborn clans that are attached to the CFA for example. Hardly anyone has ever seen them, traded with them or talked with them. Not even the first-rate superstates are in regular contact with this highly nomadic section of humanity. They are ghosts who largely exist on a number of records but otherwise do not appear to have any impact on our general society. Is this a desirable state?"

Ves shook his head. This was a decent trick, but it still wasn't enough to push him into a corner.

"I have never aspired for the Larkinsons to follow the example of the traditional spaceborn clans. I do not agree with the necessity of isolating ourselves entirely from the rest of humanity. That said, there is no need for me to pursue the other extreme and become permanently rooted on a planet like Davute. It is perfectly fine to balance between the two. My main fleet can keep exploring the many curiosities the Red Ocean has to offer while the side branches of my clan can take care of the more mundane activities such as mass producing mechs like the Pacifier."

The two leaders proceeded to observe a couple of other totems. The ones depicting the likes of Zeigra, the Illustrious One, Bravo and Arnold did not elicit too many comments from the prospective president.

It was only when they reached the large totem of the Superior Mother that Ves had lovingly made that Yenames Clive spoke more than a few perfunctory sentences.

"Ah, I suppose this is the famous or infamous Superior Mother." The older man smiled even as he became subjected to a powerful maternal glow. "I have heard that mothers of all walks of life prefer to visit this gallery for the sole purpose of beseeching her blessing in the hopes of birthing or raising a healthier, stronger, smarter and more obedient child. This myth has gained so much traction in recent months that the pregnant relatives of my cabinet members have even started to seek out this sculpture. Can you tell me whether their visits truly make a difference or if they are only being influenced by the placebo effect?"

That was a tricky question for Ves to answer. He did not condone religion in any form and this stunk of it. Yet he could not deny that the Superior Mother was not only a role model to many women with children, but could truly exert a small but subtle positive influence.

"Mothers can attain reassurance and encouragement from multiple sources. The Superior Mother can be one of them. The Hexers most certainly derive a lot of benefits from her. My wife enthusiastically consults her pretty much every day, and I happen to be very proud of my children. Make of that what you will."

Yenames Clive smiled as if he became more intrigued. "Ah, the Hexers have made a large amount of claims about the Superior Mother. What has triggered my interest even more is their outlandish tales about your familiar connection to her. They say that the Superior Mother is not just an ideal given form, but is in actuality your actual mother. It is a matter of public record that the face and appearance of the Superior Mother is modeled after your own birth mother."

"As you have just said, the Hexers believe in many stories. That does not necessarily make them true. Certain people and population groups have grown more dependent on myths and beliefs in order to sustain themselves. If the Hexers do not believe in one story, they will believe another one. It is better if they put their faith in more innocuous tales than more toxic and harmful ones like they have done in the past."

"It still amazes us how much you have single-handedly influenced an entire state that is controlled and filled with female supremacists, Patriarch Larkinson. Both you and the Hexers have gained many advantages from this fruitful relationship. If you have the chance to play a similar role for our colonial state, would you be interested in reprising your role?"

Ves immediately shook his head. "No. Even if I did, it wouldn't work. It is easy for the Superior Mother to capture the public consciousness of the Hexer people because of how prone they are to belief in a mother figure. It also helps that the Hexers live in a highly homogeneous society with a single dominant culture. Davute is practically the opposite in this regard. Not only has your colony gathered many different people with many different backgrounds and cultures, it has not even propagated a single strong national identity for them to rally around."

"That is correct." Yenames Clive frankly admitted. "Karlach has made much more progress on this front due to its diverging policies. For us, it is not so simple to set a single culture and identity. Davute is a melting pot of different people from different walks of life, and we must preserve its openness in order to maintain its abundant economic prosperity. The moment we enforce any strict set of norms and values, we begin to repel a significant proportion of our colonists and trading partners. This is not acceptable. It is better to maintain a light touch and exert minor influence to ensure that our colonial state will naturally develop a neutral culture."

The more appropriate word to use here was 'cosmopolitan', but that had turned into a poisonous term ever since an infamous diplomatic movement became pariahs of human civilization.

Ves understood what Yenames Clive conveyed. Davute had to become a state that was built on a strong economy. Abundant trade, industry and other commercial activities was the most powerful engine of growth.

As long as Davute had more money and developed faster than other states, it would definitely be able to dominate the Krakatoa Middle Zone!

After all, it was extremely hard to repel an enemy that could field twice or thrice as many mechs or ships as the other side!

Ves already got the sense that President Yenames Clive and by extension the Clive Consortium became determined to go all-in on this risky growth strategy.

Whether it would ultimately work out for Davute was still in question, but the Clives certainly did not feel confident enough in their chances.

This was why Yenames Clive patiently and earnestly tried to negotiate with Ves in person. Davute had to win the upcoming war at all cost. The Clive Consortium stood to lose its entire investment if it did not go far enough in stacking the deck in its favor.

Therefore, as long as the future ruler managed to secure substantial material and military assistance from the Larkinson Clan, it was worthwhile to pay a heavier price!

Chapter 4717: More Substantive Talks

As Ves and Yenames Clive continued to hold a discussion that took place over multiple layers, Lucky continued to observe and listen as he settled down on top of the head of the Superior Mother totem.

"Meow..." The gem cat yawned as his senses also kept an eye on the guards and mechs that quietly watched over the most powerful man in Davute.

The tour itself did not last too long. Ves briefly introduced Yenames Clive to a handful of other totems tied to different design spirits.

The prospective president at least had a good eye for excellent artwork. He did not hold back in praising the craftsmanship and the unique artistic fingerprint that made these totems stand out from many other works that he had seen in his life.

"Even without these glows, your sculptures are already good enough to be put on display in our better museums for modern art." The 120-year old man gently praised. "If not for your lack of reputation in the art scene and your unusual background, I would have offered to admit your work in a top museum right away. This way, your art will most assuredly be able to reach the widest audience."

Ves smiled at the praise. No one disliked being complimented on their earnest work. "These works are not purely ornamental in nature, and their glows make them unsuitable to be housed in the same exhibition halls. The works of other sincere and earnest artists will just get overshadowed by the glows. It is better to put them in a dedicated venue like this Ascension Gallery so that they can be enjoyed without any distractions or disruption."

"That is an interesting name you have chosen for this grand hall." Yenames Clive pointed out. "Does the name express your personal hope of elevating yourself through your work? Or does it apply to these fascinating existences who by all rights can be described as gods?"

That was another loaded question. Ves had already grown tired of getting his thoughts picked apart as he tried his best to answer in a manner that was internally consistent.

"I let my works speak for themselves." He eventually said. "Whatever message I wanted to convey is already embedded in the artwork themselves. It's up to you to decide how you interpret them all. I don't have the right to override and invalidate the unique impressions that you have made. Just like how you aim to turn Davute into a free haven that is accommodating to all sorts of people and cultures, I prefer my work to be enjoyed by the widest possible audience. We both know that we cannot impose too much of ourselves onto others."

They briefly exchanged glances at each other. Despite their vastly diverging backgrounds and vocations, both of them needed to appeal to a broad swathe of humans for similar reasons.

Ves wanted to sell more mechs and make his design philosophy become the new standard of the mech community. That meant he needed to design many different mechs, of which at least a portion of them had to achieve mass market acceptance.

Yenames Clive wanted to transform his upcoming colonial state into an economic juggernaut, but that was impossible if he tried to push too many of his own rules and directives down the throats of many unwilling immigrants and trading partners.

It was the recognition that they were on similar boats that brought them a bit closer together. After all, it was natural for people who suffered from the challenges to sympathize with each other and lend a hand if convenient.

Of course, Ves eventually became clued into this unconscious bias after receiving a helpful reminder from Shederin.

He never let down his guard for a single second, but even he could slip up every now and then. It was only now that he became cognizant that the opposite man gently steered the conversation in a more favorable direction to Davute.

Knowing was one thing. Calling it out was another.

Due to various reasons, Ves did not find it convenient to confront the future leader of a colonial state on his clever conversation tricks.

This was one of the many games that people played against each other. The consequences of losing were incredibly serious, so Ves needed to keep navigating the currents with exceeding care.

Fortunately, he was not completely on his own. Minister Shederin Purnesse remained constantly within his field of view.

If Ves ever became stumped or if he happened to overlook a rhetorical trap, then the highly seasoned diplomat would make a subtle signal that the two had agreed upon beforehand.

It did not take much to clue Ves in. A shift in posture. A slight turn on the foot. The raising of a specific finger. Looking away for a specific amount of seconds.

All of these subtle signals each conveyed a short meaning that Ves could easily decipher and contextualize by himself.

So far, he did not have to rely on Shederin's help too often. Ves had already spent enough time in the upper levels of human civilization to gain a lot of proficiency in the social arena.

As the group ended their tour and made their way back to the central hall, Lucky decided to float down and land on Ves' shoulder.

"Meow."

"Oh hey, buddy. Do you want to join the party as well?"

"Meow meow."

"I see."

For his part, Yenames Clive did not comment on the strange sight. He was well aware of the many eccentricities of the Larkinson Patriarch.

It was clear to see from the decision to put a giant totem of the Golden Cat in the center of the Ascension Gallery that he had an incredibly soft spot for felines!

Now that they were done with probing each other over the short tour through one of the wings of the massive structure, it was time to take a more substantive turn in their talks.

Ves gestured his arm towards the exit. "We have prepared a more suitable venue to continue our discussion. Please follow me to one of our conference buildings where we can go more in-depth."

The Cat Nest boasted a lot of different facilities, including a conference center that was used to introduce new mech releases or host gatherings for invited guests.

The prospective president's security detail had already entered the structure beforehand and completely swept it to ensure that everything was in order.

Inside the grandest and most luxuriously decorated conference room, Ves and Minister Shederin sat on one side of the imposing meeting table while Yenames Clive and Madame Reina Kernsk opted to sit at the other side.

"Meow~"

Lucky meanwhile left Ves' shoulder and tried to fall onto the lap of Yenames Clive's chief of staff.

Reina Kernsk's severe-looking expression softened for a moment as she held the mechanical cat and petted his head.

"My apologies, but for security reasons I must ask you to maintain your distance from us. I would love to spend time with you after we have successfully concluded an agreement with your clan, but that will take time."

"Meow..."

Ves could learn a lot about a person by observing how they reacted to different circumstances.

Reina Kernsk was the primary gatekeeper and errand woman to the future ruler of a colonial state. The Black Cats had tracked her movements and learned that she had visited a lot of parties related to Ves and his clan.

As the primary assistant of Yenames Clive, Madame Kernsk was an interesting person by herself.

One of the more intriguing clues that the Black Cats obtained through their activities was that the chief of staff enjoyed the trust of both her immediate superior, but also reported to the higher ups of the Clive Consortium based in the old galaxy.

Ves knew quite well that a single person could never properly serve two masters. The woman, who clearly possessed ambitions on her own, did not have to deal with any compromising situations as long as Yenames Clive and his elders were on the same page.

For the most part, this had always been the case in the past.

It was only after several years had passed that Yenames Clive began to show more initiative. It was not entirely a secret that he did not always roll over and implement the directives from the old galaxy.

As the leading figure on the ground, the heir to the Clive Consortium thought that he knew better than his distant superiors.

Perhaps he was right due to his greater familiarity with the local situation. Perhaps he was wrong due to his lack of experience in managing affairs at this scope.

Whatever the case, Ves had been advised to pay attention to both Yenames Clive and his chief of staff to understand the true leadership dynamic of Davute.

"Let me begin with stating the sort of cooperation we wish to establish with your clan." Yenames Clive began. "Davute appreciates the Larkinson Clan and is happy with your current level of activity within our colony. As we begin to form a state and seek to establish and strengthen the many institutions that we need to sustain our growth, we hope your clan will agree to become a more active and engaged partner in the Davute

Project. Today, we would like to make a case that it is to our mutual benefit if you work together with our administration."

This time, Ves allowed his minister to speak.

Shederin Purnesse adopted a smooth smile that made it look as if he was genuinely looking forward to working together.

"The Larkinson Clan is always open for business. That said, we are asking for your understanding as our organization is limited in what it can offer to a large colonial state. Our primary focus has always rested on our expeditions, which does not have much relations to Davute, and our mech business. If your requests fall outside of these two activities, then I must warn you that our ability to make a difference is exceedingly small."

"We are aware that a single clan has limited capacity and resources to contribute to Davute." Reina Kernsk spoke on behalf of her principal. "We believe that your clan can still exert an outsized impact on our state and community under the right circumstances. We have prepared a list of proposals that we wish to go through with your team. For a start, we can begin to discuss a business activity that your patriarch is most known for, namely designing mechs."

"You wish to commission a mech design from us?" Minister Shederin directly asked.

"We do. We would like your clan to accept multiple different commissions from us. The more, the better. We have learned that your patriarch has previously fulfilled over half-a-dozen commissions for the Hexadric Hegemony, of which its successor state still makes use of the results. We are more than willing to compensate you for fulfilling ten of our commissions."

Ves raised his hand. "Before we go any further, your superior mentioned that any commission involves a collaboration between myself and a team of Master Mech Designers of your choosing. Is this correct?"

"That is so." Reina Kernsk nodded in confirmation. "Wish to combine the best of both worlds. Your glows and living mechs paired with the other powerful advantages of our Masters should produce an excellent combination. We not only want to maximize the combat strength of the jointly designed machines, but also wish to ensure that they fully comply with our military standards. It will be much more difficult to integrate mech models into our armed forces if they are not designed to fit our fighting systems in advance."

This was a reasonable and understandable concern. Ves never had this problem with the Hex Army, but that was mostly because he designed his Hexer mechs in collaboration with Gloriana.

His wife studied mech design at Kelma University, which was one of the most elite and prestigious institutions of the now-defunct Hexadric Hegemony.

That meant that she not only received a high-quality education, but also learned the technical standards and doctrinal choices that the Hex Army had adopted for its military mechs.

Ves did not have such a convenient collaborator within his clan this time, so he had no choice but to work together with an insider from Davute to make sure his commissioned works lined up with the prevailing standards.

Chapter 4718: Order Discussions

Generally speaking, Ves did not possess much enthusiasm at the notion of collaborating with a bunch of Masters.

He had done it a few times with a number of Hexer mech designers for specific high-end variants, but at least these incredibly smart and arrogant women showed enough deference to him due to his outsized status in Hexer society.

Ves did not expect to receive the same level of respect and deference from the Masters. These older figures would no doubt feel annoyed for having to collaborate with a Journeyman on an equal level.

It would be much better if he managed to become a Senior prior to collaborating with any Masters on any projects. The gap in status and design capabilities would be a lot more tolerable if that was the case. Ves would also be able to gain a much greater voice in the direction of the commissioned projects.

Perhaps the colonial administration understood his concerns, because Reina Kernsk moved quickly to reassure the Larkinsons.

"Your patriarch has nothing to fear from us. If you decide to accept any commissions from us, we will ensure that Ves Larkinson has the final say over the design projects. His prior work for the Hexers years ago has already proven his ability to contribute strong and useful mech designs to a professional state-backed military organization. We have great confidence that his ability to do so has only improved in the years that have passed since you have completed your initial batch. This is especially the case with the release of recent Hexer mech models such as the Maiden of Adversity."

Though her words sounded reassuring, she clearly did not understand mech designers as well as Ves.

It was one thing to cooperate with a close friend and trusted mech designer such as Master Benedict Cortez.

It was another thing to usurp control over a project from a bunch of strangers who also happened to be at least four times older than him. When he factored in the awareness that the Davutan Masters were much more knowledgeable and experienced, then it would be difficult for him to implement his desired vision without encountering a lot of opposition!

"I am already involved in a large number of ongoing design projects." Ves told the Davutans. "Many of them are extremely important to our clan, and I will not set them aside in favor of working on any commissions. If you want to make use of my design expertise, then you will have to wait at least half a year before I have cleared up my schedule. I can promise you that I will work on any commissions with the best of my efforts when I can fully devote my time to them. This is my promise as a professional mech designer."

Reina Kernsk frowned for a second. "That is disappointing to hear, but we can accommodate your schedule. The anticipated war between our rivals based in Karlach is not projected to start in at least six months to several years. Both of us need time to consolidate our new government institutions, stockpile a large amount of supplies and organize our armed forces. Even if the war commences sooner than we prefer, it will still take multiple years before it reaches its culmination. We need to field the commissioned mechs before that happens."

That made a lot of sense. Wars were serious business. The Komodo War involved thousands of major battles across many different star systems. Even if one side gained an advantage, the other side could still do a lot to delay their adversary's progress and work towards reversing the trend.

The two sides talked a bit more about the conditions for the possible commissions. After settling a few minor differences, the Davutans wanted a firm answer on how many designs they could commission from the Larkinsons.

"We are reluctant to collaborate with Davute, but in light of our existing relations with your colonial administrations, we are open to accepting a limited number of commissions under the terms that we have previously discussed." Minister Shederin spoke in an officious tone. "How many we are ultimately willing to fulfill depends on the scope and complexity of the mech designs, the additional requirements you have set for them and the height of our remuneration."

The Larkinson Clan was still reluctant to get too involved in a war between two colonial states. Taking sides was generally bad for business for a player that wanted to sell its products to every market.

Nonetheless, Ves and Shederin had already spoken about this matter beforehand. They both agreed that they would generate unnecessary hostility and rejection from Davute if they refused any sort of transactions.

It was best to allow Prospective President Yenames Clive to come away with at least a few successes under his belt.

Also, by agreeing to the colonial government's smaller and more palatable requests, it became a lot easier to reject any larger and much more problematic demands!

Yenames Clive and his chief of staff exchanged glances before the latter projected a list above the conference table.

"A team composed of several chief mech designers and military advisors have formulated a list of possible mechs that should measurably increase the performance of our mech units. You do not have to design them exactly according to our descriptions. As we have stated earlier, we respect your design judgment and are willing to accept any suggestions from your end as long as we think they can strengthen our mech troops."

That was rather generous of them. It showed that Davute was seriously willing to allow the Larkinsons to take the lead in any commissioned design projects.

Ves busied himself by going over each and every suggestion on the list.

Some of them were fairly easy to fulfill, such as one that requested a full military-grade adaptation of the Ferocious Piranha.

Others required him to start from scratch. One of them concerned a proposal to design an elite transphasic heavy cannoneer mech that was not only armed with a powerful weapon, but also enjoyed enhanced defenses in the form of adaptable defensive plates similar to the Battle Skirt System.

Enhancing this mech design with the steadfastness of Qilanxo along with the phasewater manipulation of the Phase King should turn it into an offensive and defensive powerhouse!

Even Ves felt tempted to design such an imposing mech, though on second thought his clan already possessed a decent cannoneer mech in the form of the Eternal Redemption.

"These are fine suggestions." Ves complimented the Davutans. "I can see that your team has put careful thought on which of my glows can better complement specific mech designs, but I do not wish to go into any specifics at this early stage. I would much prefer to meet with your Master Mech Designers that I am supposed to work with. I

believe a more direct exchange will allow us to formulate much more relevant and fitting mech concepts."

The female chief of staff nodded after a few seconds. "That is acceptable. We still wish to negotiate with you on how many commissions you and your clan are willing to undertake on behalf of our colonial state. The sooner we settle these details, the sooner we can plan and prepare for their eventual introduction into our armed forces. Are you willing to accept ten separate commissions from us as a start?"

Ves immediately shook his head. "That is too much in too little time. It does not take ten of my works to turn the tide against Karlach. Two or three distinct and original mech designs should be enough to improve the combat effectiveness of the forces aligned to your side, provided that they are willing to make use of my work. My Design Department is also open to developing a handful of customized variants of our existing commercial and maybe non-commercial mech models. However, we are not willing to undertake much more than that for the time being. We also have to address other priorities."

He did not want to turn his clan into a de facto vassal or employee of Davute. Working on a couple of commissioned mech designs was already sufficient. Working non-stop on nothing but mech designs meant for the war was not okay!

"We are always willing to extend more commissions from your clan, but is it acceptable to start with three major collaboration projects and three minor projects?"

That request pushed against the upper boundary of what Ves was able to stomach. He had to admit that the Davutans read him well for choosing these numbers.

"It depends on what you are willing to pay for our services." He said. "I am well aware that my design work has great value, so I have high standards for remuneration. If you are not willing to show enough sincerity, then I am afraid I have to decline your proposals."

The key word here was sincerity. If there was one advantage to face-to-face meetings, it was that Ves could get a much better read of his potential clients and business partners.

If he had any suspicion that the Davutans intended to exploit or screw him over, then he would stand up and leave the conference room without hesitation!

The other side probably figured that out as well.

"Can we obtain a discount for placing multiple orders?"

"Nope." Ves immediately shook his head. "It's the opposite in fact. If you want us to undertake six commissions at once, then I expect you to pay a greater price. Despite what you said, it is clear that time is of the essence for Davute. The sooner you can

reinforce your armed forces with the right living mechs, the greater your side can make use of the advantages of my work."

This was a logical argument and made it more difficult for the Davutans to justify a lower price.

Right now, the ball was on their court. The colonial administration had to use its judgment to make a good opening offer.

If it was too high, then Davute would most certainly hurt its cause and take away precious resources reserved for other purposes and stakeholders.

If it was too low, then Davute risked offending the Larkinson Clan, thereby reducing the chances of forging a successful agreement.

It felt quite good for Ves to be in this position for once. He didn't have to be the one to overwork his brain this time.

He leaned back on his chair and idly petted Lucky's back. The cat had made his way back after getting pushed away by the Davutans.

"Meow~"

Thirty seconds passed by as Yenames Clive silently conferred with his assistants over a secure communication channel.

The leader eventually decided to voice his offer in person.

"We have studied the needs of your clan." Yenames Clive began. "We have noted that you are not particularly in need of additional funding or phasewater, but we have also ascertained that you are lacking in strategic goods and assets that are difficult to come by for a pioneering group such as yours. Our colonial state can greatly address your persistent and acute shortages, so I believe we have a strong basis of cooperation."

The future ruler raised his palm, causing a new projection to appear that displayed numerous different starship models.

"I would like to propose a straightforward transaction at the start. We are willing to award you with two medium-sized fleet carriers — or any other capital ship type of your choosing — for every major commission that you complete for us. We are ready to award you with one large sub-capital ship of almost any class or type for every minor commission that you fulfill. Do take into account that we will not outfit these starships with any sensitive or important proprietary technology that we ordinarily reserve for our core forces. The vessels will be built according to conventional commercial standards, though our shipyards will not reject higher specifications as long as your clan provides the necessary tech, designs and materials."

Ves looked utterly surprised at this offer. He glanced towards his diplomatic advisor and saw that Shederin was not totally caught off guard by such a generous proposal.

The Davutans had definitely shown a lot of sincerity this time!

Chapter 4719: Hard Currency

The magnitude of Davute's opening offer was so great that Ves did not dare to voice any further decisions.

He needed to have a good talk with Minister Shederin Purnesse as well as other advisors in order to make the best possible decision at this junction.

This was why Shederin immediately called for a recess. He and Ves moved to another room in the conference building before requesting the virtual presence of a number of advisors.

General Verle, Director Calabast, Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai and Chief Minister Abigail Evern all gathered around a smaller conference table.

With Ves, Lucky, Calabast and the Black Cats employing their own precautions to secure the communication channels, it was unlikely for Davute to be able to eavesdrop on their conversation.

Ves went straight to this business. "Vivian, Abigail, the two of you are our highest-ranking naval experts. How would you judge the value of Davute's offer?"

"I have cooperated with multiple shipbuilding companies in Davute and have extensively studied the rest." Vivian Tsai began. "I can tell you that based on my own experiences with growing up and working in a shipyard, every single shipyard in our current region is backlogged with existing orders from many large and influential organizations. It has become rarer and rarer for the shipyards to accept priority orders that they are willing to fulfill ahead of their regular obligations. This is especially the case with large-scale drydocks rated to build capital ships. Only a few parties are powerful enough to force this action not once, but multiple times. Governments can definitely make this happen, though not without paying a massive price."

"Prospective President Yenames Clive will most definitely offend many other clients if he makes this move." Abigail Evern added. "Dozens of clients are depending on those shipyards to get around to completing their orders. They have already recruited and trained the necessary spacers to crew the vessels. They may have even acquired all of the expensive mechs and supplies needed to put a new fleet carrier into service. They may have even made plans on how to deploy these new fleet elements in advance, especially with regards to the upcoming war. How do you think they will feel when they

learn that the government blatantly pushed them back in line so that our clan has priority?"

"Not good, I guess." Ves wagered a guess.

Calabast chuckled. "That is an understatement. We will generate animosity because of this, but that pales in comparison to the backlash that President Yenames Clive will incur because of this initiative. He will most certainly pay a heavy political price and has to offer a lot of compensation to other parties in order to placate them all. It should be easy for the colonial government to please them, though. What truly matters to Clive is whether he can get Ves onboard. That is worth almost any price."

Several people nodded. They did not question whether it was worthwhile to gain the cooperation of Ves. He already proved multiple times that he could significantly alter the direction of entire wars with his work. Doing it one more time did not sound like an outlandish idea.

Ves looked pretty satisfied. "Okay, I understand that letting us gain priority on ship orders and especially capital ship orders is a big deal. What does Yenames exactly mean by telling us he will pay us in the form of medium-sized capital ships?"

Vivian Tsai easily answered this question. "It is an informal classification of the length or size of a starship and is widely used by laymen. As you already know, a capital ship is defined by a length that is 1 kilometer or longer. Although length alone cannot be the sole criteria to put different ships in specific boxes, it is a convenient shorthand to use. For example, small-sized capital ships are always 1 to 2 kilometers long regardless of their other dimensions. It doesn't matter whether one small-sized ship is shaped like a cube that measures at almost 2 kilometers in every direction. She would still be considered a small-sized ship. In practice, the professionals in my industry have other ways to communicate these differences."

"How long is a medium-sized capital ship supposed to be, then?" Ves frowned.

"The most common definition that people adhere to is a length that rests between 2-4 kilometers. There are major differences in the performance and strategic value between small-sized and medium-sized capital ships. For Yenames Clive to specify the latter right away is a generous concession on his part."

Chief Minister Abigail Even raised a concern. "We should discuss and clarify the additional parameters of the capital ship in any treaty that we are about to sign. At the very least, we cannot leave the width and depth of starship up for interpretation. Davute will have an opportunity to disadvantage us by heavily limiting the other two dimensions. We can only receive ships that look similar to the Blinding Banshee if this is the case."

The Blinding Banshee was technically a capital ship, but her internal volume was smaller than some sub-capital ships!

This was because her hull was essentially shaped like a long and thin needle. She mainly needed the length in order to increase her surface area and accommodate more sensor arrays and ECM modules.

While it was fine to design an intelligence-oriented ship in this fashion, it was not okay for a fleet carrier!

The taller and wider the hull of a fleet carrier, the more mechs and cargo could fit inside the giant metal box!

The cost and construction time of a capital ship could also diverge wildly depending on the mass, volume and complexity of her hull!

"I do not think it is likely that President Yenames Clive will betray our trust in such a banal fashion." Minister Shederin spoke as he crossed his arms. "He has already incurred enough anger as it is. It is counterproductive to incur our wrath as well. Besides, it takes months if not a year to design the mechs and construct the capital ships. Both sides can track each other's progress and see whether Ves or the shipyards are not working up to expectations. It is still best if we can specify more exact ship parameters into the contract in advance so that there is much less ambiguity with regards to what we expect to gain for our services."

Ves tentatively nodded. "That is a good idea, but I think the colonial government will ask us to reciprocate by forcing me to meet more precise performance criteria for the commissioned mech designs. This isn't necessarily a problem as long as the requirements are reasonable, but more rules will mean that I won't have as much freedom to design what I want, which is not ideal for me. I can still work with it, though."

He decided to leave the specifics to Minister Shederin and his negotiation team. It wasn't really that important to set a lot of details in advance as long as both sides sincerely wanted to cooperate with each other.

At the very least, no one questioned the wisdom of accepting this exchange.

"We are gaining a massive advantage by trading a portion of Ves' design time for six capital ships." General Verle said as he was already drooling about what he could do with so much extra mech capacity. "Fleet carriers are treated as hard currency among the different pioneering organizations in the Red Ocean. I cannot think of an easier and less costly way for us to obtain so much in a single deal. We can not only expand our mech legions on a much larger scale than before, but we can also begin to think about splitting up our increasingly more unwieldy fleet."

Many people nodded. They also experienced the difficulty of expanding the fleet with additional starships. No matter what angle they pursued, the clan always collided against a wall each time it tried to obtain more vessels.

Minister Shederin Purnesse added another dose of harsh reality with his words.

"The cold hard truth is that major colonies and states effectively maintain an oligopoly of capital ships. Every other player is subject to the conditions that they decide to impose. In our case, we technically have the ability to shop around and offer our services to Karlach in order to encourage Davute to raise a more competitive offer. In practice, the heavy presence of our side branch in Davute makes it unwise to deteriorate our relationship with the upcoming colonial state."

"The only consolation is that President Yenames Clive has opened up with a considerably generous offer." Chief Minister Abigail Evern said. "I cannot think of other mech designers, especially Journeymen, who were able to command such a high premium on their services that they can trade two medium-sized fleet carriers for a single mech design!"

Everyone had to acknowledge that this 'exchange rate' was pretty amazing in itself!

There were many factors that prompted Davute to set such a high price. From the lack of effective living mech models to the need to placate Ves as an individual, Yenames Clive and his team knew exactly what they were doing.

It was unlikely that Davute would be willing to prioritize capital ship orders for the Larkinson Clan to this extent again, so this was the only opportunity for the Larkinsons to expand their capital ship roster without making any excessive commitments.

Just as Ves and his advisors came to a consensus on whether to accept this generous deal, Calabast raised her voice.

"Not so fast." She spoke as she pressed down on Lucky's back, eliciting a soft complaint from the cat. "I have been thinking about this entire setup. Combined with the intelligence that my Black Cats have been feeding me, I think that this is the setup for a greater scheme."

That caused a lot of people to freeze, though Shederin's aged expression slowly shifted as he began to guess at what the spymaster might be alluding towards.

"Explain." Ves spoke in a grave tone.

Calabast smirked at him. "You don't need to sound so serious. Davute is not plotting to disadvantage us. President Yenames Clive is still keen on improving the relations between your clan and his state. The difference is that he also wants to hook you deeper into Davute's embrace. He can only do that if you are willing to play along. To do that he needs to create a chink in our armor."

Ves looked to Shederin. "Is her story plausible?"

"It is. In fact, given the goals as well as the strategy adopted by the Davutans, it is the most probable case." The shrewd diplomat claimed. "The prospective president is not prepared to offend a dozen other groups and give two fleet carriers for every single mech design from you. He is playing a greater game than that. If we assume that he wants to turn the rest of our clan into his colonial state's assets for his upcoming war, then he will use this opening exchange as bait for a follow-up proposal."

That made far too much sense to Ves! His intuition had already told him that it was too good to be true. Devious bastards like Yenames Clive who also had an entire army of analysts and experts at his disposal never traded at a loss!

"So what should we do, Calabast?"

"Do not be so quick to reject a good deal out of hand." She advised. "We should at least hear out the rest of Davute's pitch. Even if it has become clear that we are getting baited, it is not necessarily a bad idea to get hooked. We need to make a rational decision on whether we should bite after we gain all of the information we need to make a complete cost-benefit analysis. Don't forget that if we want our fleet-based organization to grow stronger, we need to get our hands on more capital ships."

General Verle sneered. "Short of engaging in outright piracy against our fellow pioneers, the only other viable method of obtaining more hulls is to play along with the states that govern all of the shipyards."

Ves sighed. His clan was still too dependent on the supply of ships produced by third parties.

"We need to upgrade the shipbuilding capabilities of the Diligent Ovenbird and think about obtaining another mobile shipyard."

Chapter 4720: The Follow-Up

When Ves, Lucky and Minister Shederin Purnesse returned to the main conference room, they were ready to issue their answer to Davute's opening offer.

No matter what, even if the deal did not go any further than this, it was already incredibly worthwhile to accept this deal on a standalone basis!

As for the greater scheme that Davute had in mind, Ves was not afraid of any follow-ups.

The Larkinson Clan maintained the upper hand in its negotiations with Davute. As long as this remained the case, the latter always had to pay a premium in order to secure the cooperation of the former.

The need to keep Ves happy and cooperative enough to supply his powerful mech designs ensured that any follow-up offer would be tailored to his likes and dislikes.

At most, he and his clan needed to swallow a few bitter pills in order to gain a lot of sweetness at the end.

As Ves and Shederin sat down at their respective seats, Lucky landed on the table and vigilantly observed the other two seated dignitaries.

Prospective President Yenames Clive looked as confident and charming as ever. His chief of staff maintained her usual expressionless demeanor.

Both of them looked as if they expected the meeting to go in their favor. Ves became more and more curious to hear what the Davutans had in store.

"Now that we have given you time to deliberate on our offer, what is your answer?" Reina Kernsk started the meeting again by asking this question.

"Our clan is receptive to your offer." Minister Shederin politely replied. "We are agreeable to fulfill the amount of commissions that you have requested so long as you go through with providing us with the stated quantity of capital ships and sub-capital ships. Our lawyers and technical consultants will need to go over the minutiae and technical specifications of the agreement to gain enough assurances that the trade remains sufficiently equitable by our standards."

Madame Kernsk nodded. "Agreed. Our team is already standing by to assuage your concerns and provide you with greater certainty. We shall not give you any cause to doubt our credibility. We will publicize a summary of our agreement and sign the contract under the witness and guarantee of the MTA. While it may be difficult to appropriate the necessary shipyard capacity required to fulfill your orders in the near future, we are prepared to demonstrate how much we hold you in our favor."

These were flattering words, but that made Ves more suspicious about any follow-up traps.

Calabast was right. There was no way that Davute would settle for such a costly deal. A lot of stakeholders who paid the price for this extravagance would probably torch Yenames Clive if they learned the truth!

At worst, Yenames Clive may even lose the support he needed to become the founding leader of the upcoming colonial state!

This made Ves respect the ambitious statesman even more. Yenames Clive acted differently than those cowards who only issued orders from the rear and always let their peons pay the price for their mistakes.

By traveling to the Cat Nest in person and pushing for an initial deal that sounded exceedingly costly for Davute, he boldly risked his own career prospects in order to do what he thought was right for his colony!

Yenames Clive used his actions to prove that he possessed the determination and commitment to earn the right to become Davute's highest leader!

The heir to the Clive Consortium reminded Ves a lot of himself. That was both good and bad.

As the two sides just came to a preliminary consensus on the initial exchange, Ves wondered when the other shoe would drop.

Yenames Clive finally unfolded his greater intentions by speaking up for the first time since they reconvened the meeting.

"We are pleased to learn that your Larkinson Clan is willing to engage with our administration to a greater degree." The man spoke with a hopeful expression. "You have shown with your reaction to our offer that we are right to extend our trust to your clan. To that end, we would like to invite you to make a more significant investment in our Davute Project. We are ready to give you a rare opportunity to become a partial owner of our colonial state. All we ask is that you stake more than technical support or normal business activities."

This was the big moment. Ves straightened his back a bit more as he waited for the plot to unfold.

"We have already contributed substantially to Davute's popularity and economic prosperity." Minister Shederin stated.

"We are not criticizing your clan, nor claiming that we are disappointed in you." Yenames Clive gently responded. "We are already content with everything that you have done. I am only observing a possibility in which we can consider a deeper cooperation, one that requires greater commitment but will stand to give us greater gains. I am proposing to forge a partnership between us that can not only give us a substantially greater chance of winning the war on the horizon, but also burnish the reputation of your clan and turn it into one of the stalwarts of our colonial state."

Ves widened his eyes. "Wait... are you asking our clan to take direct part in the fighting that will ensue when Davute and Karlach go to war? I have to inform you that we have no desire to commit to this degree. We are already on track to resume our Trailblazer Expedition and explore the frontier yet again."

His words did not deter the prospective president.

"We are aware of your proclivities, but what we are about to propose will not materially affect your core interests nor the viability of your expeditions." Yenames Clive said. "We have learned that your Golden Skull Alliance is currently in talks with the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family. Both of them have powerful fleets. Each can contribute the strength of an entire mech division, numerous expert mechs and a single ace mech each. Think about how many powerful assets your main expeditionary fleet will have at its disposal."

If both the Adelaides and the Boojays agreed to join the Golden Skull Alliance, then the expeditionary fleet at its height could easily bring 30,000 standard mechs, over two-dozen expert mechs and three whopping ace mechs to bear at once!

That was an amazingly powerful mech army — especially at the top end — that many states wished they could harness for themselves!

Such an incredible high-end force concentration could no longer be described as an ordinary pioneering or expeditionary fleet.

It was a straightforward warfleet, one that became qualified to fight in greater battles that could materially affect the balance of power in the Red Ocean!

As Ves thought about how much combat power that he could gain in his expeditions, President Yenames Clive continued to build his case.

"Let me ask you a question, Patriarch Larkinson. How many mechs and ace mechs do you truly need to bring on your expedition? Given your Golden Skull Alliance's past records, you can already make do with less. If your force composition has expanded by the full might of the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family, is it truly essential for you to form a bloated armada that is watched over by not one, but three ace mechs?"

"It is not necessary." Ves admitted. "That doesn't mean it is unwise to concentrate our forces to this degree. There is no such thing as overkill in the new frontier. Sure, most of the opponents we will encounter in our expeditions will seem woefully weak to our forces, but we will also have a greater guarantee of coming back alive at the end. That is precious in itself."

"Is this truly what all of the soldiers of your Golden Skull Alliance aspire to take part in?" Yenames Clive asked.

Ves began to frown. "You speak as if you know their opinions better than myself."

"I do not claim to understand your clansmen any better, but when my men have approached them in order to investigate their willingness to fight for Davute, we have discovered that they are attracted by the alternative that we are offering."

"What do you mean?"

Yenames Clive subtly gave off a more assured demeanor. It looked as if he was just about to checkmate Ves!

"Let me begin by announcing to you that our administration has reached a preliminary understanding with the Cross Clan. Our representatives have recently concluded a highly productive discussion with Patriarch Reginald Cross. Your fellow clan leader has expressed so much enthusiasm at the prospect of dueling the ace pilots fighting on behalf of Karlach that he has promised to commit two of his clan's mech regiments to the war cause. It goes without saying that your fellow patriarch in the Cross Clan will lead this task force in person."

What?!

That gloryhound Reginald actually decided to throw himself in this war on his own without telling his buddies?!

Ves wanted to groan and palm his face. He was 99 percent certain that Patriarch Reginald already said yes in the first five minutes of receiving this offer!

In hindsight, it should have been obvious that Davute would target Patriarch Reginald with a targeted offer. The ace pilot was so painfully easy to understand and manipulate that he was a living example of why high-ranking mech pilots often turned out to be poor civil leaders!

"Did you manage to rope in the Glory Seekers as well?" Ves bitterly asked as he did not bother to hide his displeasure.

President Yenames Clive shook his head. "We judged our chances of success to be too low. The Glory Seekers do not have the numbers to spare on this additional venture. The Hex Federation that they are dependent upon has a greater need for mech pilots and war materiel in order to keep the Friday Colonies in check. Besides, the Glory Seekers do not dare to make a unilateral decision without consulting other parties such as you and the Wodin Dynasty."

That provided Ves with a bit of relief. At the Glory Seekers managed to stay sane and resist temptation.

"However, we have gained a considerably better reception when my chief of staff spoke to the former patriarch of the Larkinson Family."

WHAT?!

This time, Reina Kensk briefly reported on the results of her talk with the 'other' Larkinson leader.

"Venerable Ark Larkinson has not changed his mind on joining your clan." The woman spoke. "With my help, he did recognize a possibility where joining the Davute Branch grants him enough leeway to lead a mech regiment or two into war. Officially, it would not be your main Larkinson Army that is entering the conflict under our flag, but merely your Davute Branch. That will technically preserve the neutrality of your mother organization, but still allow you to reap the benefits of the victories produced by the mech regiments manned by the volunteers of your clan."

This was the constriction strategy executed by President Yenames Clive!

The man was like a puppeteer who put all of his dolls into place before he commenced the play!

Ves already felt pushed into a corner even before he even started a discussion on the Larkinson Clan's possible participation in the upcoming war.

It turned out that Davute had already won over several of his confidantes in advance!

Yenames Clive smiled like a cat that got the canary. "I was pleasantly surprised to hear how quickly your capable uncle agreed to fight in our war. He is a true soldier and clearly wishes to turn your Davute Branch into a major pillar of our colonial state. Our examination of your Larkinsons has revealed an eagerness to do more than stand guard in your Cat Nest."

Ves found it hard to believe that his clansmen would rather throw themselves into a petty but exceedingly dangerous squabble between two rival colonial states.

Was it not enough to bring them deeper into the frontier and smash multiple alien warships?

What was wrong with a little adventure?

The head of Davute clarified the reasons for Ves.

"Their motivations to fight for our cause are varied. Many wish to earn glory for themselves and give their career greater meaning. Others, most particularly your expert pilots, seek to challenge themselves against proper human mech forces. Numerous Larkinsons aim to become a material contributor to the success of our colonial state and thereby build a better future for their descendants. Venerable Ark Larkinson is driven by all three reasons and more. He and his band of veterans from the Larkinson Family will feel right at home in our armed forces."

"...Damnit, uncle."

If Prospective President Yenames Clive ever earned a nickname, then he should be called 'the Constrictor'!

