

The Mech Touch

Chapter 4741: Oblique Warning

The reception plaza steadily became more and more crowded. VIPs and other privileged guests arrived from various locations at a steady rate.

The mood continued to remain positive and upbeat. The bright colors, the aromatic flowers and the low music played by a prestigious band added to the uplifting and hopeful atmosphere.

Military mechs consistently flew above everyone's heads as they diligently guaranteed the security of the elaborate, city-wide event.

No one exhibited any elevated fear, hesitation or wariness. Over the years, the colony had worked hard to create an image of competence.

As a colony that aimed to become the largest trading hub in the Krakatoa Middle Zone, Davute tried its best to overfulfill all of the basic requirements in order to beat all of its rivals.

The Clive Consortium, the Dogen Collective, the Serenitas Foundation and numerous other wealthy groups based in the old galaxy refused to settle for less!

Tens of thousands of people who constituted the biggest contributors to the future colonial state had all gathered together in the large but increasingly more busy Government District.

Under the backdrop of this joyous and uplifting occasion, Ves gradually concluded his friendly chat with General Herman Foraine.

Though he wanted to talk to the interesting mercenary general for a few more hours, Ves did not forget about his original purpose.

In the face of a possible surprise attack that could kill a lot of people and put his family under threat, Ves could not let down his guard and get distracted by other concerns.

He decided to wrap up this conversation and try to seek out other contacts. He reached out and patted his hand on the older man's shoulder.

"The talks between our alliance and your fleet have been progressing well as far as I know. If nothing goes wrong, we should welcome you into the fold in a month or two. If

you are eager to become stronger and increase your position in human society, then I can say that you have made a great decision. However, nothing comes for free. I just want to warn you that you are in for a wild ride."

General Foraine did not look squeamish. "We are aware of that, patriarch. We did our research. Mercenaries such as us are acquainted with the truth that every opportunity is paired with danger. That is why we have sought you out. Your alliance not only knows how to grasp the right opportunities, but also manage to earn amazing profits out of them. That is an advantage that only a few pioneers in the Red Ocean are able to master."

Ves briefly smiled before adopting a serious expression. "Thank you for the compliment, but what I am trying to convey is that we do not live peaceful lives. There may be stretches of time where we can enjoy relative peace and calm, but we often get embroiled in violent or crazy incidents, often against our will. It comes with the territory, I am afraid."

"Hey, we have already prepared ourselves mentally for the difficult journey that you are describing. Do not worry. We are not like most mercenaries. We have more courage and we are not afraid to sweat a lot more in order to earn richer rewards. We will fulfill whatever you ask for us because we know you will be right by our sides when you go deeper."

"Thank you for your trust in us, but that is not exactly what I am talking about." Ves replied and leaned in so that he could lower his tone. "When you live a life of danger, you need to start building up the habit of expecting it to come at any time, including moments where you least expect it to appear. While you are not a Golden Skuller quite yet, I suggest you immediately review the current posture of your forces and make whatever adjustments you can in the short term."

These words sounded out of place in the current situation. General Foraine was many things, but he was not stupid. He picked up on Ves' body language and tone and started to generate different ideas.

"You are correct in principle." The mercenary general responded. "It is always better to take more precautions. I have not lived in the Red Ocean as long as you, so you are able to speak with greater authority on this matter. That said, the majority of our forces remain stuck in orbit. We have only received permission to bring over a limited number of mechs as we are purely guests in this star system. We were forced to mark most of them in the outskirts of Kotor City."

This was different from the Larkinson Clan. The Davute Branch alone easily housed over a thousand combat-ready mechs. Years of business and cooperation had built up a lot of trust between the local branch and the colonial government. A newcomer like the Adelaide Mercenary Company simply couldn't compare.

Fortunately, Ves never counted on them anyway. There was only one particular combat asset that Ves valued the most.

"Your ace mech is stationed elsewhere on the planet, right?"

"Correct. Saint Marissa Lewandowski is not pleased at being forced to observe the founding ceremony in a distant city, but Davute has promised to open up access to a large amount of priority services."

"Try and avoid those kinds of obligations next time." Ves sincerely advised. "People like us must always have strong and reliable protection close at hand. Anytime a situation arises where our lives are under threat, it is the assets that are closest to us that we can rely upon. If I was in your place, I would find a way to remain in regular contact with Saint Marissa so that your ace mech can take action in the fastest possible timeframe. How quickly can the Jedda Sandivar reach this district?"

General Foraine frowned. "It will take more than an hour normally."

"That long? I thought that ace light skirmishers are supposed to be the fastest machines around."

"You are correct, but even ace mechs cannot completely disregard the effect called air resistance. The Jedda Sandivar can move much faster in space where there is no meaningful atmosphere to impede its forward progress."

Though Ves hoped for better, the general's answer did not fall outside of his expectations.

The entire point of transferring the Jedda Sandivar away was to prevent it from posing an immediate threat to Davute and the founding ceremony.

Ves bet that as long as the Adelaide ace mech abandoned its post and immediately raced towards Kotor City, alarms would begin to ring among the armed forces of Davute.

An ace mech belonging to the Internal Group would definitely get dispatched to intercept the Jedda Sandivar at all cost!

"Oh well." Ves shrugged. "Hopefully I am just being overcautious. I have often been accused of exhibiting too much paranoia."

"Given your track record, I am sure that you are more than justified in questioning your safety." General Foraine generously said. "I shall mull over your words and think more critically on the issues that you have raised."

The two separated so that they could mingle with other dignitaries. A massive event like this gathered a huge amount of important figures together. Many of the more reclusive and powerful leaders were hard to reach during normal times.

Although the most influential individuals in Davute usually moved to a more private and exclusive chamber where they could hobnob directly with Yenames Clive and his team of senior officials, it was still possible to catch a few important figures in the meantime.

Ves did not have any desire to do this. Even without bearing a heavy burden, the Larkinson Clan was already doing well. He did not see much of a net benefit by drastically increasing his cooperation with local companies and institutions.

Of course, the Davute Branch thought differently. After a bit of looking around, Ves had managed to spot Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and his own team of executives.

The director of the rising side branch had become a much more popular figure as of late. The arrival and commissioning of General Ark Larkinson had caused the Davute Branch to become a much hotter commodity in the local and regional scene!

Even Ves became subject to increased attention. A lot more eyes turned into his direction than normal, though he did not particularly mind this change.

The opinions of the people around him did not particularly matter to him. Though he cared a lot about his reputation in a general sense, he was not willing to demean himself and alter his behavior on the spot just to cater to the tastes of a specific group of random strangers.

After gently pushing away a few annoying flies and sycophants that sought to take advantage of the Larkinson Clan, people no longer bothered him as much.

Anyone who gained Davute's approval and received an invitation to become a part of this high and mighty gathering possessed a lot of intelligence on average.

Ves also altered his demeanor to convey a less welcoming and more intimidating posture. This quickly drove away any of the weasels that sought to build a connection to him and his clan.

It took a while for Ves to find the Boojay delegation.

The men and women of this old Terran-descended family wore more traditional and exotic formal garments that caused them to stand out from the crowd.

Right now, the two-dozen or so representatives of this family had settled down in an open lounge where they partook in the drinks delivered by cheerful-looking bots.

The matriarch of the Boojay Family rose to her feet and greeted Ves as he arrived in a dignified manner.

"I bid you welcome, patriarch of the Larkinson Clan. I am pleased we can see each other after letting our lawyers and our experts speak to each other over the course of several weeks."

"I feel the same way." Ves replied as he assumed a friendlier posture again. "So how do you Boojays like Davute so far? Is it a place where you think you can settle on a more permanent basis?"

The members of the Boojay Family all looked at each other before shaking their heads.

"We do not consider any star system in the Red Ocean to be a viable candidate for our ancestral home." Matriarch Rezzie Boojay replied in a grave voice. "We have never forgotten that our rightful home is unfairly and unjustly occupied by the Chabran Ancient Clan. We will not stop and retire on any colony because it does not fall in line with our goals. The Red Ocean is only a single stop in our long quest to return to the Greater Terran United Confederation and reclaim our rightful throne."

"Err... that is an admirable stance. You Boojays are highly goal-driven. I like that. So you have no interest in setting up a branch office or something in Davute?"

Matriarch Rezzie Boojay shook her head. "No. We have already strayed too far from our ancestral home as it is. Establishing a permanent branch on this planet will start to trigger a metamorphosis that is irreversible. We are the proud descendants of an ancient feudal kingdom that has since been absorbed by the Greater Terran United Confederation. I do not want to see our subsequent generations forget about our illustrious past and transform into feeble Davutans that mainly answer to the Clives and the other ruling powers of this colony."

Her views sounded incredibly sensible and far-sighted to Ves.

He should have taken the same stance in hindsight. Maybe he would have been able to prevent the Davute Branch from developing too many ambitions and breaking away from his central development strategy.

"Well, I am not sure how long it will take for your family to reach its ultimate goal, but I wish you luck in this long endeavor."

Matriarch Rezzie Boojay let out a chuckle. "Hehehe. We do not need your luck. All we need is for you to lead us to further wealth and riches. We must make more haste in growing stronger as interest in this goal is waning among our younger generations. If we cannot regain our old power in time, it may be far too late for us to regain our ancestral holdings."

Chapter 4742: Mad People

Compared to the Adelaides, the Boojays were a bunch of oddballs.

Unlike most of the losers of power struggles that eventually went into exile, the Boojay Family simply couldn't accept its defeat and continued to cling onto its bitter past.

Ves thought that it was a rather sad and pathetic attempt to cling to forgotten glory. The Boojays turned into sore losers who did not choose to make the sensible decision and accept their diminished lot in life.

Instead, the leaders continued to draft the descendants of the family into a deluded and incredibly foolish quest to depose a core Terran power!

The Chabran Ancient Clan that had driven out the Boojays a long time ago was not any average pushover.

If the Yorul-Tavik Clan where Lord Pearian hailed from was a modest trade-oriented organization in the galactic center, the Chabran Ancient Clan was one of the major influences of a first-rate superstate!

The Chabrans not only grasped a high degree of authority and autonomy on its own territories, but also spread out millions if not billions of loyal and filial descendants throughout all of the massive institutions of the superstate!

The Chabran Ancient Clan therefore wielded both concentrated power and widespread influence. It had become so unassailable and unshakable within the Terran Confederation that no outside organization could possibly displace and replace such an entrenched clan!

This sounded like a fool's errand of epic proportions!

Ves believed that if the Boojays ever became crazy enough to travel all the way to the Terran Confederation so that they could wrestle against the Chabrans, the other Ancient Clans would soon rise up to reinforce the latter!

After all, if an outside group with just the barest hint of a claim to the territories of the Terran Confederation could actually succeed in displacing an existing ancient clan, then all of the other ones became vulnerable to external challenges as well!

Whether the Boojays understood this reality or not, Ves could not say for certain, but he did not hear much encouraging words from the matriarch of this madhouse of a family.

"The opening of the Red Ocean is an event that reveals that destiny is in our favor." Matriarch Rezzie Boojay rambled. "Compared to the old galaxy, there is still an untold amount of riches and plunder in the new frontier that are still ripe for the taking. Many pioneers shall fall in the pursuit of greatness, but we must persevere because our ancestors are still waiting for us to return their ashes to the graveyards of their homelands."

"You respect your ancestors a lot, I see. That is a great virtue. I truly wish you good luck on your endeavor, but there is so much we can do to help you on your way."

The matriarch reined in her exuberance and gave him a friendly look. "We did not request to join your Golden Skull Alliance in order for you to fight our battles on our behalf. We have our mechs, expert mechs and ace mechs to rely upon. We mainly wish to join forces with you so that we can challenge greater alien opponents and yield vastly greater rewards upon defeating them. The joint operation organized by the Gemini Family has shown us that there is a faster means of earning a multitude of phasewater, resources, money and MTA merits."

Ves nodded. "That is true, and we welcome you into our alliance as long as you are willing to abide by our rules. No matter what your ultimate goals you are pursuing, we in the alliance are united by our commonalities, not our differences. Everyone in our group wants to become stronger. That is what we are all fighting for. You will be in good company as long as this goal fits into your own plans."

They chatted a bit more, but Ves did not manage to warm up to Matriarch Rezzie Boojay as well as General Herman Foraine.

The latter possessed a more modest background and still retained a touch of his humble past, just like Ves. That caused both men to click with each other and talk frankly without being too concerned about differences in perspective and social taboos.

The matriarch of the Boojay Family was a lot stiffer and more formal in comparison. It didn't help that she was considerably older than the likes of General Foraine.

The gray-haired woman wielded authority for so long that it had become ingrained in her aging but still vigorous bones. She seemed to possess no casual interests and never let down her airs.

Ves decided to bring up the topics he really wanted to raise with the Boojays. He gave her the same spiel about how danger could creep up on them at any moment.

"Your concerns are valid." Matriarch Rezzie Boojay said. "However, as long as we remain guests of this planet, we can enjoy the hospitality of Davute. We have not remained here for long, but from what we have gathered so far, the local institutions have proven to be credible and trustworthy partners."

"That description fits the overall administration of Davute, but it does not rule out that differences of opinion within the ranks can lead to unauthorized actions. Some of them may be detrimental to third parties such as us. I may not have lived as long as you, but in my limited experiences, I have found that it is always better to rely on our own troops."

The female leader looked sympathetic towards him. "Your words ring true, but our Royal Jeem piloted by our only Saint is not close enough to intervene if the Davutans have lost control over this district."

Neither of them could do anything about this. Ves inwardly cursed the excessive precautions of the Davutans once again.

"Then I suggest you study an overview of the forces that you have on hand and remind them of how they need to respond if any irregularities occur. This day may proceed just as our hosts have planned, but if there is the smallest chance of disruptions, you and your family need to be ready to make proactive moves rather than react in a more passive manner. Take it from a clan leader who has learned this lesson the hard way."

Ves already pushed at the limit that Calabast had explained to him. From the moment he started talking, he began to play with fire by dropping vague hints that all may not be what they seemed.

He truly could not tell whether General Herman Foraine and Matriarch Rezzie Boojay picked up the hidden meaning behind his message. Both of them were clever in their own right, but whether they were willing to believe that Davute was unreliable was another matter.

If Ves tried to push his message a bit too much, then he would not only turn into a liability to the powerful conspirators, but also risk getting dismissed as a conspiracy theorist by his intended audience.

He left the gathering of Boojays shortly after that. He did not count on them to provide any timely assistance as their ace mech was not only stationed further away, but the Royal Jeem was also considerably slower than the Jedda Sandivar.

Ves tried to track down the members of the Cross Clan, but the venues were too big and expansive. The Crossers could have holed up in one of the many reception rooms and lounges that the Davutans had prepared in order to encourage greater levels of cooperation between the stakeholders of the colonial state.

The interference field blocked most forms of communications so it was not as if he could call Master Benedict Cortez over the comm.

A loud chime soon sounded across the city. This was a signal that the next phase of the founding ceremony was about to commence.

The majority of the invited guests headed in the same direction. Some walked on the ground while others used their antigrav clothing to fly above everyone's heads.

Many of them poured into a series of large floating halls that had been specially constructed for a specific purpose.

Each of them was notable, but the one floating in the center was the most important of them all. Only the highest representatives of each group could head inside.

Thousands of round dining tables awaited the people inside. The white walls were decorated with real paintings and virtual With banners representing Davute as well as different groups hanging from the ceiling, it was pretty easy for the newcomers to seek out their assigned places.

When Ves arrived at his assigned table that was located close to the front and center of the large and opulent hall. The position of this table reflected the high regard that Davute held towards the Larkinsons.

"Papa! You're back again!" Andraste squealed as she sat on her elevated kid's seat.

Ves grinned and moved forward so that he could hug his second daughter and kiss her on the top of her head.

"Hello again, pumpkin. Have you had fun so far?"

"Everything looks so pretty, but nothing is happening. When will the fun stuff start?"

"It will not start in at least another hour. A few minutes from now, a bunch of important people will step forward and hold a bunch of important speeches."

"Boring~"

The current stage of the founding ceremony was not geared towards children. Perhaps only Aurelia might find the speeches engaging due to her growing expertise on leadership, politics and governance.

One of the more interesting aspects of the seating arrangements of this stage was that Ves and his little family weren't sitting here alone.

The top representatives of another group had been assigned to the other half of the round table.

The purpose behind this arrangement was clear. Davute wanted its stakeholders to meet with fellow investors of the colonial state and forge new agreements as a result.

More deals translated to a greater integration into the Davutan community. It became much harder for organizations to pull themselves out of the colonial state when they were anchored by a larger amount of commitments and contracts.

Davute sorely needed more committed investors and business partners who were willing to commit for the long haul!

After a short wait, a group of four distinguished ladies and gentlemen wearing refined but understated black suits approached and confirmed that they had found the right seats.

"Ah, you are from the Larkinson Clan. We have heard much about you and your exploits. It is a pleasure to meet you." The oldest man with graying hair and beard spoke as he extended his hand.

Ves stood up and shook hands with the man who unquestionably conveyed authority. "It is nice to meet you, but I am afraid that I am not acquainted with you and your organization. Could you introduce yourselves?"

"My name is Bonte Richardson. I have many functions and titles, but I am primarily known for being the current chairman of DEP Construction. The friends that I have brought are also board members. We decide the overall strategic direction of the company that we have been entrusted to oversee."

"That is... interesting." Ves said as he tried his best to maintain his enthusiasm. "So how big is your company and what sort of work does it do? I take it that it is not an average construction company."

"We are not the largest construction company in Davute, but we are constantly expanding our operations due to persistent demand for high-quality structures. We can build anything from civilian condominiums to artificial floating islands. However, we are most known for erecting strong land-based defensive fortifications." Chairman Richardson explained as he sat down on his seat.

"I see. Has your company built a lot of fortifications in this star system?"

Richardson responded with a rich grin. "We have completed many aboveground and underground fortifications that are of great strategic importance to Davute. We are proud of our completed projects and the trust that the colonial government places in our work methods."

Now that truly stood out to Ves.

"That sounds impressive. Is there a reason why your construction company has received so much trust from the government? No casual construction company can build so many military strongholds."

"You are correct in that." Richardson nodded. "The truth is that DEP Construction is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Serenitas Foundation. I believe you understand what that means."

Ves widened his eyes when he heard the name of the second organization. Before he could issue his comment, his wife already blurted out her own thoughts.

"Serenitas Foundation is one of the original founders and investors of the Davute Project! It carries just as much weight in this colony as the Clive Consortium!"

Chapter 4743: Serenitas Foundation

"Meow meow."

"Miaow."

"Settle down, you two." Aurelia instructed the cats. "Snacks will be served later."

As Clixie and Lucky stayed on guard and kept watch over the surroundings, Ves began to get pulled into a surprisingly engaging discussion with complete strangers.

Ves understood now why the directors of DEP Construction had been assigned to the same table as him and his little family.

He was not necessarily given the opportunity to talk to the representatives of a boring-sounding construction company.

Instead, Ves came in touch with the Serenitas Foundation for the first time!

There was no other reason why Chairman Bonte Richardson should be seated at this table.

The Davute Branch may have planned to build a lot of new real estate now that General Ark Larkinson pushed for greater engagement, but that did not require any special attention from a company known for building lots of military infrastructure.

Ves treated Richardson as if the older gentleman spoke for the Serenitas Foundation rather than his construction company.

Since Ves lacked an understanding of the mother company of DEP Construction, the chairman thought it would be best if he elaborated on this topic.

Ves along with the rest of his immediate family listened with rapt attention as Richardson unveiled a small amount of details about one of the more mysterious founding parties of Davute.

"I assume that you have received at least a basic description of the Serenitas Foundation. It is publicly known as a trust fund and has investments in over 60 different star sectors in the Milky Way Galaxy."

"Wow! 60 star sectors!" Marvaine couldn't control himself and sounded impressed. "You must be really rich!"

Chairman Bonte Richardson laughed in a good-natured manner. "We are richer than you, I am sure! Seriously speaking, we must work hard for the money. It is a constant struggle for the foundation to keep its investments afloat over the long-term. There are situations where our financial managers must decide to cut our losses and let go of an enterprise that previously earned us a fantastic return, but has since fallen behind the times."

"How long has the Serenitas Foundation been in operation?" Gloriana asked.

"It has started to allocate the funds placed under its care for over two centuries. Our investment strategy is fairly moderate in risk, so we have rarely lost our entire investments. On the other hand, our returns are not as dramatic as those earned by more adventurous investors."

This sounded like a great outlook for a trust fund that was expected to operate for several centuries.

Ves leaned forward in interest. "From what it sounds like, the Davute Project does not fit into this moderate risk category. The way that the colonial state is gearing up for a violent confrontation with Karlach makes it clear that this is among the riskier but more lucrative investment choices that your foundation has made."

The chairman gave Ves another appreciative smile. "That is correct. Others have made similar observations to us in the past. To that, we reply that there are no colonization projects in the Red Ocean that can truly be described as low risk. Even the smaller and more impoverished colonies that are located in obscure and low-resource star systems will drain a large amount of funding before they have finally reached a state of profitability."

That was an interesting way to look at the Red Ocean. Ves was inclined to agree with the man's descriptions. A lot of star systems in both the Milky Way and the Red Ocean were so low in value that it was extremely difficult to make them profitable.

Groups that tried to take them over and transform them into livable and profitable locations usually ended up harming themselves in the process.

"So what has drawn Serenitas to Davute?" Ves questioned.

"In our opinion, the Davute System is no more special than the Karlach System and the other port systems in the surrounding middle zones. We chose to invest a significant amount of funding in Davute because it was available and because we have existing business relations with the Clive Consortium."

As Richardson continued to say more about the Serenitas Foundation's stance on Davute, Ves got the feeling that the wealthy trust fund did not value this investment particularly highly.

If the chairman's opinion was reflective of the people who he answered to, then Serenitas actually treated this colonization project as a gamble that it could afford to make!

The impression that Ves got from this faction was much different from that of the Clive Foundation!

"So who carries the most weight in the halls of power in Davute?" Ves cautiously asked. "Are the rumors true that the Clive Consortium is the largest voice?"

Richardson and his fellow directors looked amused after they heard this question.

"The discussions that take place in the Skyline Palace and other governing institutions are confidential. I cannot go into too much detail on this topic, but as far as your rumor is concerned, let me correct you and state that the Clive Consortium has the loudest voice in the room. Whether the other founding partners are interested in the message that is being said is another matter."

"Your message is clear."

The subtext was that the Clive Consortium may make the most noise in public, but that it might not wield that much influence behind closed doors.

Chairman Richardson provided a bit more information. "The Clive Consortium has tied a considerably greater proportion of its funding and resources into this colony. The Clives have elevated it into their prestige project. The success and failure of this entire colonial venture will have major implications to their consortium's profitability and growth."

"I take it that the success and failure of the Davute Project will have much less of an impact on the bottom line of the Serenitas Foundation." Ves threw out a guess.

"You can say that." The other man smiled. "You have to realize that we are still in the early phase of the colonization of the Red Ocean. The Big Two has only conquered a modest corner of the galaxy at large. There are still an untold amount of star systems that contain much more value than the Davute System. For now, they remain in alien

hands, but they will gradually become available for colonization in the following decades. These are our true targets."

This was a much greater outlook. It sounded as if Serenitas did not care that much about securing a first-mover advantage in the new frontier.

"What about Davute?"

"We primarily consider it to be an experiment or a learning experience, if you will. The Red Ocean is far greater than the Krakatoa Middle Zone. I believe that you are clear about this truth as well, patriarch."

"I do. Davute is a great place, don't get me wrong, but we are in the Red Ocean equivalent of the galactic rim. The star systems closer to the center of the galaxy must be a lot more interesting and lucrative."

"That is true. Serenitas along with many other groups in the old galaxy are still waiting for the Big Two to make more progress, though it appears that we may have to delay our spending plans further than we expected." Richardson responded. "In the meantime, side projects such as Davute not only allows us to accrue practical experience in founding and growing a state from the beginning, but also gives us a chance to build a strong and reliable supply depot in the new frontier. If all goes well, we can use this colonial state as the base of operations of a much greater colonization wave targeted towards the center of the Red Ocean."

It was fascinating to hear how casually Serenitas belittled Davute. The trust fund did not treat this colonial state as a crown jewel like the Clive Consortium. Instead, it only treated this place as a tool to attain the colonies it truly cared about.

How utilitarian! How cold-blooded! How dispassionate!

Ves suddenly came up with the idea that he may be seated at the same table as the group responsible for hatching a conspiracy that sought to kill a lot of people later today!

The moment he made this connection, he tried his best not to show any outward expression of surprise or realization.

He immediately split his concentration into two separate threads. He usually did this when he was working, but he found it necessary to take this step in a moment where he could not afford to make any mistakes!

His first mental thread tried to maintain a casual act so that he could continue to converse with the directors of DEP Construction without any noticeable difference.

His second mental thread ran through the information that he had gathered so far and also focused on observing his conversation partners.

Ves couldn't read any clues from Chairman Bonte Richardson. The man's ability in the social arena was just as good as Calabast if not better. Not only did he control his body language to perfection, emotional and spiritual fluctuations were also suppressed!

It reminded Ves a lot of rational mech designers who deliberately drained themselves of their passion so that they could emulate other design philosophies to an accurate degree.

Just like those eerie mech designers, Chairman Richardson emulated a specific personality as he continued to unveil the Serenitas Foundation to the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan.

Whenever Richardson smiled or laughed, his mind remained ice-cold. The chairman of DEP Construction was pretending to put on a friendly act the entire time!

Of course, as Ves climbed higher and higher in society, it became a lot more probable for him to meet with these sorts of figures. Emotions had no place in high-level decision-making. A lot of catastrophes had taken place throughout history because idiots with too much power for their own good had gone off the handle.

That didn't mean that Ves liked it, though. At least President Yenames Clive cared so much about Davute that he was willing to put his career and future on the line.

As for the likes of Bonte Richardson and the people he spoke for, they probably wouldn't shed much of a tear if Davute crashed and burned, so long as they managed to evacuate in time.

These were precisely the sort of people to target the people who ostensibly belonged to their own side if they could gain a greater advantage in the process!

As a number of well-dressed individuals started to walk up to the center podium, Ves quickly asked one more question to the talkative chairman.

"I would love to talk more with you about Serenitas Foundation and its plans for the future, but it seems we are out of time. If it isn't too much to ask, can you tell me who is actually behind the Serenitas Foundation?"

Chairman Bonte Richardson responded with a coy smirk. "Many have asked, but few have ever received an answer. Only a small group of top executives of the trust fund are privy to the identity of its trustor. Even I cannot reveal anything to you about the identity of the person or persons I am ultimately working for. All we pay attention to is the capital that we are entrusted to manage."

"Doesn't that bother you?" Ves furrowed his brows. "I can't imagine working for a boss who could be anything from a Terran mech designer to a Rubarthan shipping magnate."

"We tend not to ask any questions that are not convenient for us to know the answers, patriarch. Curiosity may be a virtue in your line of work, but it can be a career ender in our sector. We follow rules, not people. It matters not who issues the orders. As long as that person holds the rightful authority to command us, we are expected to obey without making any superfluous actions."

What a dreary mindset. Ves could not bring himself to agree with this stance. He did not want to be treated like a mindless drone, and he did not want to treat his subordinates like one either.

Ves found it questionable whether it was worthwhile to befriend anyone who adopted this heartless mindset.

Chapter 4744: Shared Experiences

Speeches were being held in every hall that was floating close to the center of the Government District.

Different high-ranking individuals from different public institutions stepped forward and told their own stories. These public officials generally spoke how proud of what they appreciated about the current state of Davute and what progress they wanted to see in the future.

As Ves and his little family had been assigned to the most important floating hall, they got to hear the stories of a selection of ministers, military generals and other bigshots.

"...Our military buildup is proceeding according to plan. Soon, we shall have the numbers to not only outnumber the Karlachs on every battlefield, but open up as many fronts as we wish. We have employed a wide variety of proven battlefield operators that excel in both the frontlines and behind enemy lines..."

Ves questioned whether it was wise for a general of Davute to reveal so much information about his colonial state's military preparedness.

Then again, Karlach might have learned all of this a long time ago. It may therefore be better for Davute to brag about all of the measures it took to increase its chances of winning the upcoming war.

"...Our diplomatic outreach continues to produce results. Our exceptionally trade-friendly policies have earned us the support and confidence of multiple major colonies in the middle zone. Due to their geographic distance from Davute, we do not have many conflicts of interest, allowing us to cooperate on numerous fronts such as technology exchange, resource trading and more..."

Gloriana perked up a bit when she heard this message. The talk about cooperating with other states might just refer to the Hex Federation!

She turned towards Aurelia. "What is your analysis on the possible consequences of an alliance between the colonial state of Davute and the Hex Federation?"

The young girl's political mind had already been churning even before her mother asked for her opinion.

"The Davutans shall vanquish Karlachs with the help of the Hexers." Aurelia began her prediction. "Once Davute has won the war and expanded its territories, it can return the favor by providing military assistance to the Hex Federation so that the Friday Colonies can be wiped off the map. This way, both the Krakatoa Middle Zone and the Magair Middle Zone will fall under the indirect control of our clan! We can become the uncrowned queens of these two neighboring middle zones!"

Ves almost sputtered out the glass of wine that he had been sipping.

Not just him, but all of the other adults at the table reacted with various degrees of surprise.

This time, their emotional responses towards the young girl's political forecast were genuine!

Chairman Bonte Richardson gave an ambiguous look at Ves. "You have taught your daughter well."

"I have taught most of her lessons. She takes after myself." Gloriana proudly raised her chin.

"What sort of formula is your oldest daughter derived from?"

"It is nothing impressive." Ves quickly replied. "We did not earn that much money by the time we wanted to have our first child. We paid a modest sum to Witshaw & Yeneca for a formula that is centered around leadership and so on. Our other children are also products of W&Y."

"There is an art to raising designer babies. The performance of your eldest exceeds the level that we typically encounter in children at her age bracket, and we have great confidence that they have invested at least one or two orders of magnitude more funding into their formulas."

This time, Ves couldn't help but feel proud. "You would be right in that. It is normally not recommended to deviate from the plans of the genetics company, but our clan has a few ways of enriching our children and giving them a few more advantages than normal."

The directors of DEP Construction all showed greater interest towards this. Each of them were parents in their own right and always wanted to raise talented descendants that could exceed their own work attainments.

"What measures have you applied to make your daughter so much more clever and insightful?"

"Ah, I cannot go into this any further because it concerns a trade secret of our clan." Ves said as he refrained from revealing any more sensitive information. "I can tell you that I have presented portions of my work to both the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction of the MTA."

"I see."

Ves had thrown out just enough information to pique the interest of the board directors. Through them, the Serenitas Foundation would definitely receive the same information as well.

Even if he exaggerated a bit while he made his claims, the powerful backer of Davute with ambitions to colonize more centrally-located star systems would definitely put Ves and his clan on a special list!

Perhaps a few years or decades from now, the Serenitas Foundation might choose to enter into a serious business relationship with the Larkinson Clan.

This was only a faint possibility, though. It may very well be the case that the Larkinson Clan and the Serenitas Foundation wouldn't ever intersect with each other again.

As more and more people stepped up to the podium and flooded the crowd with their individual messages, everyone had a clearer idea about the people who would soon get to govern the various sections of the colonial state.

Though not all of their stances and opinions sounded interesting, they all conveyed a high degree of competence and conviction.

They cared about their missions and they wanted to make the Davute Project succeed more than anyone else. Just like President Yenames Clive, these hand-picked senior officials knew that they only had one shot to found a state and successfully turn it into an enduring power in the Red Ocean!

As the messages started to blend into each other, more and more people already started to lose interest and began to chat with their table mates again.

People like Ves only really cared about the big speech, which was the only one that mattered today.

The history books and documentaries would never bother to mention anything from these mundane public addresses.

Only the words spoken from President Yenames Clive would get remembered by every attending this founding ceremony and those born afterwards.

Ves had experienced the same in his youth back when he grew up in the Bright Republic. Every decent state tried its best to indoctrinate its children and make them as loyal and attached to their homes as possible.

Davute had a much harder task ahead of it as it needed to generate a lot of attachment in people who previously never had anything to do with this colony.

This caused Ves to turn grave again. Noon was getting closer and Ves had made no significant progress in figuring out the details of the conspiracy and preventing the representatives of the Cross Clan from getting killed in an attempt to drive Patriarch Reginald crazy!

As the Davutan officials continued to step forward in order to speak uplifting words about how great their colonial state would become, Ves felt as if he was living in an alternate reality.

It felt surreal for all of the people around him to treat this occasion as a celebration when hundreds of them may die in a few hours.

As the time to the most important event of the day continued to draw closer, Ves felt more and more ill at ease.

Ves entered a state of mind that caused him to become extra paranoid and a lot more jumpier than usual. He had to put significantly more effort into maintaining his cool.

His intuition became more sensitive towards any perceived inconsistencies that might denote possible threats.

Though he usually derived a lot of benefits from his intuition, this time was different as the entire Government District was filled with military mechs.

Standard mechs, expert mechs and ace mechs openly flew above everyone's heads. Each of them were armed with deadly weaponry that could definitely inflict mass casualties among a crowd as long as their attacks punched through whatever energy shields or other forms of protection was in the way.

Who could tell whether their pilots had secretly turned traitor?

Maybe the threat did not originate from the mechs. As Ves surreptitiously glanced at the heavily armed and armored soldiers that were chiefly responsible for securing the

various venues, perhaps these lowly guards that no one ever paid much attention may hide a few sleeper agents who were actually planted by Karlach from the beginning.

He inwardly shook his head. The answer shouldn't be so simple. The colonial government took security so seriously that the true nature of the threat had to come from an angle that no one could foresee!

Yet as Ves kept churning his mind while continuing to scan his surroundings with his various senses, he failed to pick up any useful clues.

Once the round of speeches had ended, it was time for the guest to make their way over to the dreaded seating blocks.

The pit in his stomach grew heavier as he realized that time was beginning to run out. The great speech was about to commence in less than an hour, and Ves guessed that the surprise attack would begin not much later!

Although all of the parallel thinking that he had done so far had presented him with a possible solution on how to foil the attempt to kill the people assigned to Block M, he was not sure it would work.

Even if it successfully produced a positive result, Ves risked a lot of exposure, which was not desirable.

At least he had been able to catch up to the Crossers before they took their seats on that blasted floating seating block.

"Master Benedict!" Ves called. "I've been meaning to catch up with you today."

The Master Mech Designer who had decided to wear a colorful ceremonial garment for this occasion turned around and greeted the younger mech designer with a smile.

"Hello again, Ves. You look more handsome than before. You are truly growing into your role as a top mech designer and a clan leader."

"Hehehe, thank you for the compliment. To be honest, I wanted to share my feelings on this ceremony with you. No one really understands my perspective, but I think that you are one of the few who do, Master."

"Oh? What is this all about, Ves?"

"We are more alike to each other than anyone else." Ves stated. "Our work experiences are remarkably alike despite the fact that we are separated by several generations."

"That we do, but this is not the time to talk about our mech designs. We are about to witness an occasion that will have a profound effect on many lives."

Ves nodded. "You are correct. The upcoming speech will indeed affect a lot of lives, some more than others. I think that whatever President Yenames Clive is about to announce will literally cause people to fly off the seat of their pants, including you guys. Especially you guys."

The other man frowned a little. "You are not wording this phrase correctly. You are also not applying it in the right context."

"Oh, did I? My mistake. I hope this public event will not end up anything close to what has happened during the time I visited Prosperous Hill IV in the Life Research Association. Back then, it was surprising how we were met with hostility by the people who we least expected to resort to extreme actions. Anyway, take care. No wait. You can already take care of yourself well enough. If I were you, I would pay more attention to your fellow Crossers. They are not as experienced as you and I. At least not yet. That will undoubtedly change sooner or later."

Someone as smart as Master Benedict should definitely be able to pick up the hidden message through all of those hints.

Though Ves had probably said a lot more than he should have, he couldn't care that much anymore now that the critical time dawned.

He exchanged one deep look with Master Benedict before he turned to join the rest of his family.

Chapter 4745: Professor Zin Galbraith

Many people in Davute went out in the streets to celebrate the founding ceremony!

Whether they resided in the Davute System or one of the nearby star systems that fell under its sway, many colonies already developed a strong belonging to the state that they had worked to realize through their modest efforts.

Billions of colonists who had left the old galaxy and sought to restart their lives in the virgin territory of the new frontier were about to witness a dream come true.

It had always been an aspiration for humans to be contributing to the creation of a new state.

No matter how humble of a role they played in its formation, being able to celebrate this kind of day in an area that fell within the scope of a new state was an accomplishment that embodied the colonial ideal!

Tristan Wesseling started to experience the same joys despite his late arrival to Davute.

He had only converted to Davutan citizenship a few months ago, but already he felt as if he had become a small but meaningful contributor to the rise of his new home state!

Once, the Journeyman Mech Designer would have never developed so much affection for a new and rudimentary state.

The Friday Coalition had been the only home he knew. He had no desire to leave the Carnegie Group and move an entire galaxy away from Master Katzenberg.

"It's funny how I ended up in a completely different place than I imagined a decade ago." He murmured to himself as the noise of music and shouting drowned out his words. "I like it though."

The Friday Coalition may be his home, but it was old and set in its ways.

Originally formed by numerous coalition partners who had nothing in common aside from getting beaten by the Hexers, his former home state never managed to move beyond its initial tribalistic divisions and form a strong collective identity.

While life was still fairly good in the Friday Coalition, Tristan simply couldn't tolerate the constant infighting and division any longer. It would have been much better if they all accepted the current reality and broke up, but none of the coalition partners wanted to lose the strong collective defense that allowed them to carry a lot of weight in the Yeina Star Cluster and the Magair Middle Zone.

Compared to the complicated rivalries and covert undermining of the Friday Coalition, Davute was like a breath of fresh air.

The founding groups responsible for building up this colonial state had a lot of time to formulate elaborate plans, build all of the necessary infrastructure and move all of their men and assets into place.

The lack of haste allowed the Davutans to do things right. They could have announced the formation of their colonial state a few years earlier, but they deliberately dragged it out in order to bolster Davute's foundation and basic institutions.

It clearly paid off. As the colonists poured into the Commercial District in droves, none of them expressed any doubts or skepticism.

Everyone had become convinced that the time was finally ripe for Davute to ascend to a higher stage!

Tristan's heart swelled further as he thought about all of the changes that would take place. The deep integration of many different star systems surrounding the Davute System practically merged their economies together.

From today onwards, there would no longer be hundreds of individual markets.

Instead, they would all combine into one unified market where the only complication was the time it took to ship goods over from one star system to another!

This made it a lot easier for him to take on bigger and more lucrative orders.

The recent windfall he earned from satisfying Reina Kernsk's curiosity helped a lot with expanding his company. He had already bought an additional set of processors and was in the process of doubling his pool of low-ranking mech designers.

His career slowly started to advance again after a long time of interruption and stagnation due to being forced to take on other jobs during and after the Komodo War.

"Mr. Wesseling!" One of his subordinates shouted in his direction. "The team and I are thinking about getting smashed at the Huxine Draw! Do you want to come with us, boss?!"

"You fellows can go ahead! I will remain outside and observe the parade!"

Drinking until his augmentations couldn't handle the alcohol poisoning anymore sounded like a stupid way to reinforce his authority over his employees. None of them had been with him long enough for him to turn them into 'his' men.

Compared to all of the assistants and retainers that Master Katzenberg had accrued over her career, Tristan still had a long way to go before he was able to build his own core circle.

He couldn't help but compare himself to the only other mech designer on this planet that he considered a friend.

Ves Larkinson had managed to progress at lightspeed, all without relying on the assistance of a mentor or a strong backer!

Though it had become clear that Ves had managed to build numerous relationships with powerful groups and factions, he always had to work for it rather than getting everything handed on a silver platter.

If Ves could do it, so could Tristan.

This was why he did not enter a drinking establishment and drink until he experienced a pleasant buzz. He needed to remain completely sober so that he could study all of the mechs that were about to go on parade.

As the music shifted to a more martial and aggressive rhythm, Tristan perked up. He had to hurry up and find a good seat so that he could have a clear view of all of the mechs that were about to parade through the streets.

He activated his anti-grav clothing and floated up to one of the many floating structures occupying the upper layers of the Commercial District.

He headed over to a transparent diamond-shaped building that housed a number of cafes, shops and other establishments.

Tristan had visited the floating diamond multiple times as it reminded him a lot about his specialization.

It was not particularly special aside from overcharging its products. It always cost a lot more to consume inside a floating building because the resources needed to keep it in the air was not cheap.

He moved over to an exclusive entrance and flashed a virtual pass with his comm. "I have a reservation."

"Everything is in order, Mr. Wessling. Please proceed and enjoy your stay at the Sparkling Facet."

Tristan twitched a smile and entered the upscale restaurant. One of his goals in life was to earn enough money to be able to buy out this establishment and maybe the rest of the giant diamond while he was at it. He could make it a lot classier if he had the resources to upgrade the entire construction.

Many well-dressed guests had already arrived early and enjoyed their brunch.

Tristan tipped his head as he met the few fixed customers that he recognized. They had become shallow acquaintances after seeing the same faces over several weeks.

"Here to enjoy the food or the show, kid?" A Senior Mech Designer with a bushy mustache asked as he swirled his glass of wine.

"Only the latter this time, Professor Galbraith."

"I personally find it more productive to have a few glasses before studying the mechs of other colleagues. A clear mind is one that is completely enmeshed with your own theories and paradigms. If you deliberately impair your judgment, you can release your shackles and feel free to explore other design philosophies."

"...I think I will order a pot of tea."

"Your choice. Would you like to sit at my table? We can observe the parade mechs together and exchange our views on their merits."

"I would like that, professor." Tristan quickly agreed and sat down at a nearby chair.

Professor Zin Galbraith may not be a Master, but he was a respectable mech designer in his own right.

He taught at ZUTA University, an up-and-coming educational institution based in the Academic District.

Though ZUTA did not possess as much prestige as the more famed and well-funded universities such as the Davute University of Technology, the commercial technical university developed a lot of ties to local and regional middle-tier mech companies.

Tristan knew that Professor Galbraith had folded his own mech company because he wanted to focus on his research. Since ZUTA University cooperated with a lot of mech companies, it was easy for the academic mech designer to get his fix by collaborating with market-oriented mech designers.

This was especially the case when Galbraith specialized in developing new lightweight alloys and materials for mechs.

Their shared background in materials science had made it easier for them to befriend each other.

As a bot arrived with a teapot and poured a cup for Tristan, a lot of activity was taking place down below.

"The parade is starting." The Senior Mech Designer spoke. "The first batch of mechs are already threading through this avenue."

The floor was nearly transparent, but in order to get a better view, the professor transmitted a command that caused their table and seats to shift towards the closest balcony.

Both Tristan and Galbraith were able to observe the parading mechs by looking over the edge.

A different musical theme began to flood the air as a column of plain-looking dark gray-coated mechs strode down the main avenue of the Commercial District on foot.

Professor Galbraith smiled and took another sip. "Ah, I knew it. Rorsh & Rorsh is the largest mech manufacturer in Davute by production volume. Master Siman Rorsh and his most successful descendants are highly prolific. They design more mechs than several design studios put together."

The main avenue became increasingly more engulfed by machines that looked nearly black despite the bright and clear skies.

Rorsh & Rorsh became the largest mech company in Davute due to its close connections to the Clive Consortium. It was pretty much an open secret within the local mech community that the colonial government deliberately played favorites with R&R in order to exert more control over the trends of the local industry.

If the colonial government did not do so, then any other mech company could have become the leading player in the mech industry. This was not desirable because it left open the possibility for a foreign company to occupy the top spot instead!

"That is a lot of mechs." Tristan remarked. "Their models and configurations are all different as well. I am impressed by how well they fit together despite being so different."

"R&R does have multiple mech ecosystems, each of which are targeted towards different segments of the market." Professor Galbraith noted. "Master Siman Rorsh and his many mech designers can afford to explore so many mech ideas because his mech company receives the greatest share of all of the mech production resources pouring into Davute."

"It has also turned him and his sons and daughters into popular collaboration partners."

"That is true, kid. The supply of resources is still tight in the new frontier, but there is an abundance of smart and experienced mech designers. R&R can easily gain their most valuable input under favorable conditions merely due to the fact that the company can produce the collaboration works in large volumes."

"The resulting mech designs need to be good in order for Rorsh & Rorsh to decide to mass produce it. That is not always the case." Tristan spoke.

"Given the large variety of distinct mech models down below, their business model is doing well enough."

That was true. R&R cleverly exploited its favorable relations with the government to gain more resources from long-term suppliers and lure more valuable mech designers into lending their respective advantages.

Though the mechs designed by R&R could hardly be called the best, the unified standards of the different mech ecosystems often made it a lot more economical to settle for this company's products!

Chapter 4746: Requirements for War

Rorsh & Rorsh was the biggest local game in town.

Everyone who needed to buy a large batch of mechs and have it delivered in a short time could always count on R&R to satisfy their needs, at least on a basic level.

As Tristan lifted up his tea cup and took another sip of his exotic tea that had a fruity taste that was unique to the restaurant, he thought more about how the dominance of this large and iconically Davutan mech company pressed upon the rest of the mech industry.

"I am glad that Rorsh & Rorsh is not in the business of accepting client commissions or offering customization services." He commented as the tide of black mechs seemed unending. "I wouldn't know if other mech companies would still have room to survive if that was the case."

Over a hundred unique models had already marched down the avenue below and the column still hadn't reached its limit!

Professor Zin Galbraith chuckled in a good-natured manner.

"Master Siman Rorsh already accumulated enough power as it is. While there is an argument to be made about artificially inflating a single mech company so that it can be a dominant market force in the Krakatoa Star Sector, it is detrimental to everyone else if it has gained a monopoly. Other mech designers must have room to flourish as well. Davute wouldn't be a good trading hub if competition has been kneecapped to the point where competitors can only crawl on the floor."

"The politicians are pretty okay."

This topic touched on economics and government policies, areas in which Tristan Wesseling had no background in. He only felt irked that Rorsh & Rorsh managed to cheat its way to the top by exploiting its connections to the founders of the colony.

"Rorsh & Rorsh wouldn't be able to do nearly as well if it started to expand into other mech services." Professor Galbraith elaborated. "The company has specialized in fabricating the base models developed by its many mech designers. All of its processes and operations are optimized for this single broad pipeline. Designing mechs according to the individual specifications of single clients requires a different approach as well as entirely different skills. Why would R&R risk its great success in its own niche so that it can become a mediocre service provider in another niche?"

"So does Rorsh & Rorsh truly keep its hands off any custom works? I noticed that the company doesn't design that many expensive mechs either. It's all about mass production as far as their models are concerned."

"That focus on mass production by utilizing cheaper materials more effectively, widening the pool of shared parts and attaining enormous economies of scale is why R&R attained the best price to performance ratios on the market for many of its mech lines. The company's mechs may not be the strongest or the most special product you can buy from the market, but if you have a great demand for quantity, you know where to go. Other mech companies may be able to satisfy your needs as well, but it will cost more money and require months of additional waiting."

Tristan understood this rationale easily enough, but he became confused due to another factor.

"Won't Davute run out of mech pilots this way?"

Professor Galbraith chuckled again. "You are clearly exhibiting your unfamiliarity to the new frontier again. Your concerns are valid if we are describing the conditions in the old galaxy, but the rules are different here. Not enough time has passed for the current population of humans to birth and a new generation of mech pilots. Every potentate and every graduate from a mech academy are immigrants who have managed to make their way to the Red Ocean. Now think about how costly it is to transport passengers to another galaxy. Do you think that the starships in question will let anyone aboard?"

Tristan quickly snorted. "No. You either need to pay a large sum, have someone more important secure passage for you or possess excellent skills in order to persuade an employer to bring you along."

"That is correct, kid. All of these methods are ultimately an indicator of ability. The Red Ocean's demographics stand out for being much younger, significantly better educated and performing considerably better at their respective professions than what we consider normal. With regards to mech pilots, their share of the population is almost double in the new frontier. What is even more interesting is that it stands to rise in the future as the outbreak of mass wars will increase the demand for mech pilots even further."

There were many reasons for mech pilots in the old galaxy to move to the new one.

The gradual proliferation of phasewater jumpstarted the technological progression of mechs. Even if most mass production models had yet to include any phasewater in their designs, that may change in the future.

Already, the discovery and research on brand-new materials and adapted alien technologies already caused the mechs of the Red Ocean to run ahead of the mechs of the Milky Way!

Aside from that, space was much more turbulent in the new frontier, which meant that soldiers with the right skills had a much greater chance of putting their training to good use. The immigrating mech pilots that chose to uproot their lives and move to the Red

Ocean were braver, more combative and more willing to risk their lives for transcendence and glory than usual.

"I understand now." Tristan said as the lengthy column of dark gray mechs finally stopped introducing more models. "The greatest limitation to fielding more mechs in the Red Ocean is not a lack of mech pilots, but a limit on the supply of materials needed to mass produce the machines."

The university professor nodded. "That is almost right, Tristan, but another limitation plays just as much of a role. There is still a shortage in carrier vessels that can transport large quantities of mechs to their destinations. This constraint has produced a glut in landbound mechs assigned to defend planets from external attacks."

Tristan had already heard that Davute started to reinforce the defenses of other star systems within its new state boundaries by shipping over more and more landbound and aerial mechs.

Carriers and cargo haulers only needed to go on a single trip to ferry over the newly produced mechs to their destinations. After that, the disembarking mechs could be put to good use right away without any further naval assistance.

As the next column of mechs produced by another major company in Davute made a much better effort at putting on a festive display, Professor Galbraith made another remark.

"If you look at the mech models on display, their overall level of sophistication of the mechs is higher than what we are accustomed to in the old galaxy. Do you think there will ever be a market for low-end mechs, for example frontline mechs?"

Tristan shook his head. "No. Resources are too scarce for that. The mining industry and shipping industry cannot keep up with the demand for raw materials as it is. There is no room for additional factories to be built so that they can churn out low-end mechs in mass quantities."

"You are wrong."

"I am?"

"Despite what I have said a moment earlier, there are still uses for mech pilots who are not as gifted as their better peers." Professor Galbraith said as he put down his empty glass of wine. He already flagged a bot to refill his glass. "Let me give you a piece of insider knowledge. Rorsh & Rorsh alongside many other well-connected mech companies are working on designing a multitude of simplistic budget-oriented mechs. They are even in the middle of designing frontline mechs that are much clumsier and more inflexible than their normal counterparts but can effectively be controlled by mech pilots with D-grade genetic aptitudes. What does that tell you, Mr. Wesseling?"

The shiny white mechs marching down the avenue below did not look anything like the machines that the academic mech designer described.

The current trends in the mech market overwhelmingly centered around premium mechs. Focusing on superior quality and performance was the most accessible way to strengthen a mech force. The difficulty of obtaining more mechs made it uneconomical to put too much emphasis on quantity.

However, Tristan recalled what Galbraith said earlier about shipping lots of landbound and aerial mechs to different planets.

"I understand now." He said. "The upcoming wars between different states will be brutal by all accounts. Every side will try to do their utmost to gain an advantage and win the war. If there is a possibility of drowning out an elite invasion force with an overwhelming number of cheap cannon fodder mechs, then this is a worthwhile trade to make for a state."

Tristan could partially speak on personal experience on this matter. The Komodo War which determined the fates of two powerful states had become so intense that every eligible Fridayman and Hexer mech pilot had to play a role no matter how effectively they could fight.

Back then, the Komodo War descended into a large number of attrition battles. Fancy tactics and maneuvering could no longer produce major shifts in momentum as both sides had dug in and prepared against many different attacks.

This was why both the Fridaymen and the Hexers simply agreed to converge at the same strategic locations and grind their respective mech armies against each other until only one side remained standing at the end.

It was a horrible way to wage a war. Tristan did not want to see a repeat of all of the slaughter and bloodshed in the new state that he had chosen to settle.

Unfortunately, he had no agency to speak of. No one wanted to dial down their war plans on his account.

"Victory is all that matters." Professor Galbraith affirmed. "Although the supply of high-quality mech pilots is abundant, they are not unlimited. In addition to that, the mechs that they require are more complicated and expensive to build, field and maintain. There are many mission types where employing them is the right choice, but there are also lesser tasks that do not impose high demands. Think about essential but fairly static chores such as garrisoning a defensive stronghold or pacifying an occupied planet."

Tristan understood that much. When the Sundered Phalanx, the Fortune Legion and all of the other Fridayman mech militaries advanced into the territories of the Hex Federation, they always led the charge with their most powerful assault units first.

These mech armies received the best mech pilots, made use of the most effective and resilient military mechs and always enjoyed priority on many services. They had to be well taken care of in order to undertake the most difficult missions of breaking open the Hexer defensive lines.

However, once the hard work was done and another planet fell into the hands of the Fridaymen, it was a complete waste to have all of these crack troops stay and waste their time on chasing dissidents and guarding repair crews as they fixed all of the broken infrastructure.

As such, these high-quality forces would eventually transfer to another front where they were needed while handing over the responsibility of garrisoning the conquered territory to a second-line force.

Though Tristan understood the logic of this mode of operation, he didn't know how states like Davute could pull it off in the Red Ocean.

"Aren't there too few mech pilots and resources to field all of the cannon fodder mechs that you have described?" He asked.

"Currently, that appears to be the case, but there are ways to remedy this problem. Davute and its backers can import large quantities of mech pilots with limited prospects to the Red Ocean. Unlike more skilled soldiers who know how much they are worth, those with lower genetic aptitude grades are not too demanding and can easily be hired at much lower costs."

"And the lack of resources?"

"There are large deposits of low-quality exotics and other resources within the borders of this colonial state. The reason why the mining companies have not exploited them yet beyond the current scale is because there are still high-yield deposits that they can exploit. Once they can no longer open up new mines that contain sizable quantities of medium to high-grade exotics, they will turn their focus to mining more readily available bulk resources. This means that the supply of more affordable materials will most certainly double or triple in the coming two years."

Tristan widened his eyes.

Such a vast increase in materials shipments would not only accelerate low-end construction and production, but also satisfy one of the essential requirements for waging a major war!

Chapter 4747: Sileena Dynamics

As the parade of mechs continued to delight and amaze the massive crowds and viewers watching the popular live broadcasts, Tristan's mood was no longer as joyous as before.

He did not know why Professor Zin Galbraith picked this day of all times to talk about the realities of preparing for war, but Tristan no longer felt as hopeful and uplifting as before.

The university professor did not talk about these sordid topics because he wanted to torture the younger mech designer, though.

"You are a rarer breed of mech designer of your generation than most of your peers." The older man said as he drank from his third glass of wine. "You have a good pedigree and a solid foundation in mech design, but you have also participated in a real war between mechs at a closer proximity. The experiences that you have accrued in the old galaxy will serve you well in Davute. You should know what is in store and how the mech industry will shift as the war intensifies. I expect much from you. The nature of the work that you do will also become more relevant to the mech companies that seek to expand their range of low-cost mechs but cannot figure out the right alloys to increase the value propositions of their products."

Tristan should feel happy about the increased demand for his services, but he couldn't bring himself to look forward to his rising prospects.

"One of the reasons why I gave up my citizenship to the Friday Coalition was to distance myself from wars fought at an enormous scale. I had hoped Davute would be different, but from what you are telling me, the coming conflict will be just as bad."

"Few places in the Red Ocean will become exempt from war." Professor Galbraith remarked. "Over in the neighboring Magair Middle Zone, the Friday Colonies and the Hex Federation are also dancing towards a reprisal of their earlier competition for dominance. They are just being slower at it because neither side believes the time is right."

As a former Fridayman, Tristan understood those circumstances well. The Komodo War had taught much to the two states about how much preparation mattered. The more they overlooked important variables, the greater the impact on their ability to fight down the line.

Tristan nodded. "Logistics matters. Having more manpower and resources than the other side will make it a lot easier to persist in a war. The side that runs out of mechs and soldiers first is the one that will no longer be able to launch any further offensive operations."

It all came down to numbers in the end. Davute, Karlash, the Friday Colonies and the Hex Federation were all preparing to field as many mechs as possible.

No matter whether they were high-end mechs or low-end mechs, any additional machine on the battlefield was one more factor that could affect the outcome of a battle.

Tristan recalled the young and earnest mech pilots he met before. Whether they fought for the Fortune Legion, the Blue Cavalry or the Sundered Phalanx did not matter that much to him. They were all Fridaymen who fought to free the Komodo War from the tyranny of the Hexers and keep the coalition safe.

He knew that a third of those pilots no longer had the opportunity to return to their families. Many of those soldiers had actually been killed by charging Valkyrie mechs whose glows granted them a major psychological advantage on a stressful battlefield.

Tristan always had mixed feelings towards Ves for arming the Hexers with his astonishingly effective mech designs.

When Professor Galbraith glanced at the Journeyman, the older mech designer already had a good inkling about what the younger mech designer was going through. He encountered many similar situations during his years as a teacher.

"We are mech designers, Tristan. We are not social workers nor medical doctors. We create engines of destruction for a living. Our work isn't as noble as you have imagined back when you learned your craft in a peaceful environment under a Master Mech Designer. What you have experienced during one war and will experience again during the next one are much more accurate representations of our work. If you want to get further in mech design and advance to Senior, then you will need to accept and embrace this role."

The man... was right. Tristan realized now that Galbraith deliberately noticed this fault in himself and sought to correct it through a confrontational approach.

Still, even though Tristan knew that it was for the best, the former Fridayman still couldn't get over the memories of all of the deaths and tragedies that had befallen so many people.

He had seen enough bodies to build an entire mountain in Davute!

"I know you mean well, professor, but what I have experienced... was death and destruction on an industrial scale. I have pried upon the stuck hatches of crumpled mechs so that whatever left of the pilots can be scraped off and put into coffins so that we can send them off with a semblance of respect. I have dug out the broken remains of civilians who tried to escape the ravages of combat by fleeing to an emergency shelter only to have the roof collapse on top of their heads. I do not think that any human was meant to witness the sights that I have seen."

"Yet you did, and I believe that you will ultimately become a better mech designer for it." Professor Galbraith said with sympathy in his voice. "Those mech designers who have

never been confronted by the realities of their work will either continue to work with an incomplete understanding of what mechs can truly do, or they will get overtaken by reality at a much later stage of their careers, which means that they are much less capable of adapting to this setback."

Tristan did not particularly appreciate the bloody lessons that he had learned against his will. His expression reflected his unwillingness.

"I am still struggling to get my career back on track years after the Komodo War has ended." He spoke. "I would have been able to push my design philosophy much further if not for all of the disruptions I have experienced."

The Senior Mech Designer at the table shook his head. "Be thankful that you have managed to overcome this test in your earlier years. Let me give you an important piece of advice, Tristan. If you let your morality and dislikes get in the way of your main pursuit, then how can you possibly expect to excel in this profession? Mech design has never been a clean line of work and you need to accept that, but that does not mean you can make it virtuous as long as you do so for the right reasons."

"And how can I possibly do that, sir?"

"By designing better mechs than your opponents." Professor Galbraith succinctly said as he flagged a sommelier bot to fill his glass for the fourth time. "Better mech designs does not necessarily make a war end faster, but it can be a powerful contributing factor under the right circumstances. Let us take a closer look at the mechs on parade. Let us evaluate whether our colleagues based in Davute are up to the task."

Tristan was eager to shift the topic away from his traumas, so he studied the mechs flying or marching below the floating diamond structure with renewed enthusiasm.

Several different parade columns had already marched by at this time. At this time, an odd procession of pink mechs marched down the avenue. A different theme song along with a projected display of flowers and girlish frills made it clear that the mechs were explicitly targeted towards women!

Whatever Tristan expected to observe during this high-profile parade, a procession of girlish mechs with distinctly feminine contours wasn't on the list!

For a few seconds, he wondered if a Hexer mech designer had moved to Davute.

"The mechs down below are products of Sileena Dynamics, a medium-sized mech company founded by Professor Sileena Vichard." The older man explained. "What are your first impressions of these colorful machines?"

Tristan found it hard to look past the shockingly pink appearances of the mechs and study their technical properties from a more objective viewpoint.

"These mechs... are too undersized to my liking." He said. "Back during the Komodo War, the Hex Army initially fielded a lot of mech models that were as thin and sleek as the waistlines of the ideal woman even if they weren't light mechs. The Hexer soldiers quickly ditched them due to their fragility and lower performance. Their speed and maneuverability may be superior, but in massive battles where mechs get pushed into circumstances where they will get hit regardless of what they do, that is not that great of an advantage."

Galbraith smiled in satisfaction when he heard this answer. "Those are valid observations, but do not linger on the details. Take in the broad picture and think about what this means for Professor Vichard and her mech company."

Initially, Tristan didn't really know what to say, but his earlier discussion with Professor Galbraith had clued him in on what sort of a conclusion he must draw from seeing the products of Sileena Dynamics.

"A pink color scheme is not that consequential." He slowly said. "Any customer can reapply a different coating to the mechs of their choosing at a minimal cost. Showing off these mechs in pink is a great marketing move and will definitely make a lot of female pilots and buyers remember the products of Sileena Dynamics the next day. What is less practical is the obsession with forcing so many designs to adopt the same kind of curvature to their exteriors. It doesn't work as well for medium mechs, though admittedly Professor Vichard is putting a lot of effort into making it work."

"Your points are all correct. I happen to have met Sileena in person during a conference. She is not a Hexer and does not appear to have strong ties with the Hex Federation, but femininity is important to her. She wants her works to reflect her ideals, and that has led her to begin an unrelenting pursuit to design female-oriented machines that can fight just as well if not better than mechs that possess more blocky contours."

Tristan frowned. "I respect her choices and her determination to make a distinct style of mechs more effective in combat. The mech industry is big enough to accommodate her products. She has also made it work well enough to advance to Senior. It is just..."

"Come on. Tell me your honest opinion."

"Frankly, this is ridiculous." Tristan spoke. "There are more worthwhile ways to make mechs better, such as trying to incorporate a new technological innovation or improving the basic properties of mechs. Obsessing over a physical attribute that is as frivolous as feminine mech shapes is just stupid."

"You are not alone in that, Mr. Wesseling. I happen to feel the same way." Professor Galbraith smiled. "Do you think that a Senior Mech Designer like this can make it further in her mech career?"

Tristan immediately shook his head. "No way. Professor Vichard is focusing on form over function. That is nice if she wants to capture the market for display mechs, but most of her pink mechs will get chewed up once they actually get deployed in the frontlines of the upcoming war. She... doesn't have my experiences to draw upon. If she did, then she would know that the aesthetics of a mech are not as important as their actual combat strength."

"The products sold by Sileena Dynamics are the works of a mech designer that has never known true war." Professor Galbraith pushed his point. "You could have become similar to Professor Sileena Vichard if you continued to maintain an illusionary impression of mechs just as her. That you did not adopt an approach that is similar to hers is to your credit. Do you appreciate your experiences more now that you have seen the difference?"

The former Fridayman mech designer felt a lot more ambivalent after receiving this lesson.

"I... don't know, sir. I need to think about it. This is deep material."

"Take your time. Some mech designers can take years or decades to reconcile their opinions. Do not be in a hurry to make progress. Take your time and set your own pace. Becoming a better mech designer is never as straightforward as you think. Your journey is riddled with challenges. Successfully overcoming them is what separates a Senior or Master from a Journeyman."

Chapter 4748: Renewal Tech & Design

Tristan's continued discussions with Professor Galbraith benefited the former a lot.

Even if the topics under discussion weren't always pleasant to hear, the university professor meant well and genuinely wanted the younger mech designer to come away with a better understanding of mechs as well as himself.

Thankfully, the products of Sileena Dynamics did not have to occupy Tristan's view for long. The column of pink and girly mechs finally turned a corner and moved out of sight.

A larger procession came next. These mechs adopted a blue and purple theme with cosmetic lighting that made them look advanced and futuristic.

One of the common properties that made these mechs stand out from the crowd was by the thinness of their exterior layers.

"These mechs are awfully fragile." Tristan noted.

The blue and purple mechs did not stubbornly try to cut down their weight in order to make them look more feminine. Instead, their lines and contours all looked sensible and optimal.

It was just that the designers did not have much armor to work with. It was as if a mech designer received a request to design a mech but with half the armor allowance than normal for a mech of a specific archetype.

How could a light mech operate if a light touch could breach their armor?

How could a knight mech shield more fragile mechs from attacks if it couldn't endure them for a long time?

There was no way a mech company would be stupid enough to publish mechs that possessed exceptionally poor defensive attributes. This was especially the case when Tristan was able to figure out that the mechs down below were designed by a Master!

"Ah. I think I get it now." Tristan put down his empty tea cup. "These mechs aren't designed to resist damage with their armor. They are designed to resist attacks by using active defenses! They should be equipped with much more powerful shield generators than average!"

Professor Galbraith actually took the initiative to clap. "Well done, Tristan. It may have taken you longer than you should have to draw this conclusion, but it is a correct one. Renewal Tech & Design is a mech company that Master Manuel Terrence founded years ago in Davute. I am not surprised that you do not know of it and its products. This is actually the first instance where RT&D has unveiled its products in full public view."

That showed that Renewal did not follow the crowd by releasing lots of mech models in order to capture market share at an early stage.

Instead, the company chose to delay its market entry by continuing to focus on research and development. It must have taken numerous hard years to develop practical shield generators that satisfied the high requirements of Davute.

Tristan focused his attention on Renewal's chief designer. "I have heard the name of Master Manuel Terrence a few times before. Isn't he a professor at the Davute University of Technology?"

The DUT was the most premier teaching institution for mech design and other hard sciences. Anyone who was able to gain a full-time teaching position over there was definitely a major leader in Davute's technology sector!

A look of genuine respect appeared on Professor Zin Galbraith's face. "That is correct. Master Terrence is an authority in the field of energy shield technology. He is one of the few rare defensive specialists who has decided to go against the prevailing trend and

base the defenses of his mechs around active systems as opposed to passive systems. Davute had to work hard to win him over and persuade him to settle his operations in this port system."

That caused Tristan to develop a different understanding of Master Terrence.

"Is he that good?"

"It is not necessarily a question of whether he is an excellent Master Mech Designer. What makes him so highly valued by many different groups in the Red Ocean is his deep mastery of energy shield technology. You must have learned that the native alien species of the Red Ocean tend to base their defenses around transphasic energy-based defenses. The existence of phasewater has made this much more effective than armor-based defenses to the natives. While this may have caused their development of resilient alloys to stagnate, their technological advances in the field of energy shields and transphasic energy shields are impressive."

The former Fridayman mech designer comprehended the situation surrounding this important Master.

"I think I understand now." Tristan said as he studied the mechs marching down below. "Master Manuel Terrence is a prize to any state that wants to imitate the defensive paradigms of alien war machines. The existence of elite starfighters equipped with absurdly effective transphasic shield generators show that it is viable for humanity to impart the same advantages to mechs. I bet that every state is working towards the same goal."

The blue and purple mechs marching towards the other end of the street represented a new trend in mechs.

Back in the old galaxy, most second-rate states favored mechs that relied on solid and dependable armor systems to make them last in battle.

Although humanity had substantially managed to improve its utilization of energy shields throughout the ages, it had always been considered a rather costly and troublesome means to defend an area from damage.

They were mainly used to protect warships, structures and cities from damage. Space was not that big of a constraint in these circumstances so it was easy enough for engineers to develop big and heavy devices that projected powerful energy shields by relying on brute force.

It didn't quite work that well for mechs because shield generators lost a lot of effective strength when they had to be shrunk to the point where they could be slotted into a mech frame.

Anyone who tried to develop more effective mech-grade energy shield generators had to fight an uphill battle!

The insane physical constraints of traditional shield generators had always caused this tech to remain stuck as an auxiliary defensive measure to the mechs that could afford to integrate these energy-hungry systems.

They were a lot more effective at the first-class level, but the cost of making them multiplied by several orders of magnitude, making them completely unaffordable for any second-class mechs aside from maybe ace mechs!

Professor Galbraith looked envious when he thought about all of the benefits that the prominent energy shield specialist received.

"When Davute managed to attract Master Manuel Terrence's services, he immediately started a new and extremely well-funded research group within the Davute University of Technology. Much of the research that takes place there is classified, but it is not much of a secret that he is working together with multiple renowned and authoritative mech designers, scientists and engineers with relevant skills and specialists."

This was a major government-funded effort, and one that took place right underneath many people's noses.

"I never realized that Davute is investing so much in building up its competences in adapting alien energy shield technology." Tristan uttered.

"Davute is making a strong bet by supporting this initiative." Professor Galbraith said. "There is only so much funding and phasewater that Davute can allocate to research initiatives. By providing so much state support to the secret research group that is chiefly responsible for advancing our colonial state's application of energy shields and transphasic energy shields, our research sector cannot allocate as much resources to other applications of phasewater. For example, the development of superdrives and minidrives in our state is merely keeping pace with the progress of the overall pace of development in human-occupied space in the Red Ocean."

That was useful to know.

"Is Karlach working to develop its own powerful energy shield tech?"

"Most definitely. It would be an incredibly strategic blunder if the leaders of Karlach failed to put any emphasis on adapting and improving alien energy shield technology. However, Karlach is also keeping its cards close to its chest. We do not know how much progress they have made and what they have done to make their version of energy shields more effective than the norm."

Tristan scratched his head and gestured down below. "Aren't we revealing too much information about our progress by parading the mechs of Renewal Tech & Design? They are blatantly showing themselves off to a wide audience!"

"What you see is only the tip of the iceberg. RT&D is a pure commercial vehicle for Master Terrence. With the support and compensation that he has managed to extract from Davute, there is no urgent need for him to earn revenue by selling mechs. The RT&D mechs that are marching down the streets are mostly designed to introduce the concept of energy shield mechs to the regional mech community. Pioneers and mech pilots must learn how to work around their strengths and limitations in reality. The new commercial mechs have deliberately been stripped of thicker armor for that reason."

It was a good scheme. As long as groups began to field these energy shield mechs in battle, they would not only accrue valuable experience, but also generate highly realistic test data that RT&D could utilize to refine its more advanced applications of this powerful tech.

"Does Renewal sell any mechs equipped with genuine transphasic shield generators?" Tristan asked.

He did not expect this to be the case, but Professor Galbraith actually gave a different answer.

"It is not as simple as it appears. Let me give you another piece of insider information. The commercial mechs designed under the supervision of Master Manuel Terrance are equipped with conventional shield generators, though they are much more sophisticated than the models that you can find in the old galaxy. What is special about them is that they come with a standardized modular interface for shield generators."

Tristan understood how remarkable that could be! "You mean that customers can pick and choose what sort of shield generators they want to put into specific mechs?"

"Exactly. If a customer or client is willing to supply enough phasewater, they can pay RT&D to supply them with transphasic shield generators that can readily be inserted into the modular slots of existing mechs. The mech ecosystem designed by Master Terrence is completely centered around the interchangeability and universal compatibility of mechs and shield generators!"

What a fantastic business model! Every customer had different needs, and their demands also changed over time.

A middling mercenary outfit might start off with purchasing mechs equipped with ordinary shield generators.

Once they started to complete a lot of missions and develop the desire to tackle more interesting challenges, the mercenaries might decide to equip the mechs piloted by their officers and champions with more powerful transphasic shield generators.

The abundance of choice and the low technical requirements to swap the shield generators provided a lot of convenience to customers!

However, Tristan recognized that there may be a possible flaw to RT&D's business model.

"Are there any immediate practical advantages to make use of Renewal energy shield-based mechs as opposed to the armor-based mechs employed by everyone else? I do not know if mech pilots want to entrust their lives to machines that can lose their energy shields if the internal systems of their machines malfunction due to various reasons."

"It takes less materials to construct an energy shield mech." Professor Galbraith explained. "Armor is the greatest expense of a mech, that is common sense. The high amount of exotics required to produce highly damage-resistant alloys imposes an enormous burden to a state. If Davute can reduce the amount of tough materials used to produce mechs by 30 percent, then it can allocate those resources to produce tougher carriers at greater quantities."

This was one of the biggest reasons why Davute developed an enthusiasm for energy shield mechs!

Although the production of conventional shield generators imposed a higher demand on medium and high-grade exotics, it was still a lot easier for a state to meet these needs.

If energy shield mechs became practical, effective and reliable enough to replace armor mechs, then that might trigger a massive revolution in the Red Ocean's mech community!

Chapter 4749: The Deeper Messages

After the passing of the mechs developed by Renewal Tech & Design, an entirely different procession of mechs marched through the avenue.

"They've come." Tristan uttered.

"They do indeed." Professor Galbraith adopted an expectant look. "The Larkinson Clan is a completely different organization from the other ones that have marched through the streets. It will be interesting to see how the people that come from the same home star sector as you has decided to present themselves to the Duvatans."

The Larkinsons wanted to make an impression. That became clear to both mech designers as the first Larkinson mechs turned around the corner.

The crowd on the streets reacted remarkably differently than usual.

The first reason why they did so was because the column of caped mechs were led by expert mechs that also wore identical captes.

This was not the first time a group added expert mechs to a parade. The previous groups that showed them off usually consisted of mercenary organizations that had agreed to fight for Davute after accepting offers that satisfied many of their needs.

Of course, most of the expert mechs that the mercenary organizations were willing to display in public usually consisted of their older or relatively weaker combat assets. Showing this much was already enough to excite the crowd and boost their reputation.

Their true trump cards remained well hidden in order to prevent the critical machines from exposing all of their details to Karlach before the war had even started.

Mech companies such as Rorsh & Rorsh and RT&D had no need to field their own expert mechs as they entrusted their safety to the state. Attacking them was equivalent to attacking the colonial government, which meant that the latter might decide to send over its ace mechs if any belligerents dared to employ expert mechs in an offensive capacity!

The Larkinson Clan's Davute Branch may have agreed to sign extensive cooperation agreements with Davute, but its parent organization still retained its independence and sovereignty. It made a lot of sense for the clan to field its own expert mechs.

The ones shown off by the Larkinsons were different from the ones displayed before.

Each of them were masterwork expert mechs!

It was rare to see masterwork expert mechs as they were usually treated like absolute treasures by the forces that had been lucky enough to obtain them through various means!

In fact, many of the ones that existed to this day were usually legacy machines that had no practical use in combat anymore. They were treated as prized museum pieces and could only be seen in private collections or highly prestigious mech galleries.

Only a clan as bold and unconventional as the Larkinson Clan would blatantly show them off in front of so many people!

However, it was not necessarily their masterwork properties that amazed the crowds.

The vast majority of laymen on the streets did not possess the expertise to distinguish between a masterwork mech and a copycat mech.

What they were actually reacting towards were the glows radiated by the three machines!

The Larkinsons had helpfully decided to space out their column so that each of their mechs could give the people standing or floating to the sides a decent moment to experience their famed glows!

The Amaranto marched first despite being a relatively fragile expert rifleman mech. The oldest known expert masterwork mech of the Larkinson Clan looked extremely well-maintained and had received minor updates to her systems throughout the years.

Though her armor system was nothing special compared to other expert ranged mechs, her offensive orientation was extremely obvious to anyone with a good eye towards mechs.

The most impressive feature of the red-coated mech was her crystalline rifle. It looked different from the metallic armaments wielded by all of the other mechs that had passed by earlier.

Right now, the caped Amaranto rifle radiated in bright rainbow colors. Everyone who stared at it couldn't help but get mesmerized by the mysterious patterns.

Those who were situated close enough to experience the Amaranto's glow experienced this effect more deeply. Some felt blinded while others had the illusion that a spotlight shone on their souls.

Regardless, this moment did not last long before the Everchanger marched into prominence.

It was common knowledge that the Everchanger had the special ability to shift to any glow that the Larkinsons utilized before.

This time, the green masterwork expert mech radiated a sense of warmth that was uniquely tied to the Larkinson Clan.

Those that had visited the Cat Nest and approached the giant statue of the Golden Cat in the center of the Ascension Gallery had already grown familiar with this glow, but it was still new to a lot of visitors and colonists.

If the previous glow made them feel as if they touched upon a mysterious quality of light, the second glow caused them to become immersed in a warm blanket of satisfaction.

The Larkinsons possessed a strong attachment to kinship, and the idealistic notions imparted by the current glow of the Everchanger caused many people to develop the desire to become a part of their expanding family!

Whereas the lively Everchanger reflected the inner peace and property of the Larkinson Clan, the Minerva conveyed its martial strength and military professionalism!

The masterwork command mech that was predominantly coated in the silver and green colors of the Living Sentinels made a show of exuding a glow of dominance and control.

Those that were positioned closer to the streets when the impressive expert mech passed by felt as if they had come in close proximity to a dangerously intelligent alien monstrosity!

Plenty of people shuddered in fear and respect. Even if they hadn't seen any of the public combat footage of the Larkinson Army in action, these bystanders decided to never get into direct opposition of the clan if possible.

Compared to the masterwork expert mechs, the relatively modest amount of standard mechs that the clan had been allowed to bring onto the parade attracted less attention.

Nonetheless, there were still plenty of individuals who knew that the Larkinson Clan's mass production models were much more consequential to Davute.

Expert mechs were exclusive to individual pilots while standard mechs could be piloted by all qualified mech pilots!

Of course, people who studied Larkinson mechs before learned that certain models were so strongly geared towards specific groups that they performed poorly when used by pilots outside of the intended target audience.

This was most particularly the case for the Larkinson mechs designed for the Hex Army.

Plenty of Fridayman mech pilots had tried to make use of captured Valkyrie mechs before, but they universally experienced so much pressure and hostility from the glows of the machines that they simply couldn't last more than a couple of minutes in the cockpit!

Even so, a lot of interesting parties believed that the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan could design unique and interesting mechs with useful glows for any client if he was open to accepting commissions.

"What an unusual composition of mechs." Professor Zin Galbraith uttered as he started to drink from his fifth glass of wine. "Unlike the other groups, the Larkinsons are not trying to advertise the variety of their commercial offerings. They are behaving more akin to the mercenaries who have chosen to project their prowess in battle."

It sounded like a wasted opportunity, but Tristan knew the clan well enough that this was not the case.

"The Living Mech Corporation founded by my old friend is already doing well enough. The mech company's manufacturing facilities are all working at full capacity, and while the Larkinsons are no doubt in the process of building more factories, I am not sure they can increase the supply of materials fast enough to keep up with this expansion. It may be better not to attract the attention of so many potential customers only to disappoint them by putting them on a waiting list that can stretch on for months."

"The LMC is indeed on the rise." Professor Galbraith nodded. "The Golden Skull Alliance's exploits in the new frontier has aided enormously in that. The Larkinsons are one of the few people to make use of such a risky and unorthodox means of marketing the strengths of their products. It is both refreshing and reckless."

"That pretty much describes my friend and the clan he has built in his own image." Tristan affirmed.

The red-caped standard mechs of the Larkinson Clan made a drastically different impression than the expert mechs that passed by first.

Though laymen could hardly recognize the signs, mech designers such as Tristan and his table mate could clearly see the blatant signs of crude and hasty metalworking on all of the machines.

In their knowledgeable eyes, the standard mechs might as well look like those crude and cartoonish frankenstein mechs that often showed up in post-apocalyptic drama shows!

Tristan winced at the sight of all of the minor but still noticeable signs of hasty processing and rushed assembly.

The differences especially looked bad considering that they walked behind a trio of exquisite masterwork expert mechs!

"What is Ves thinking?" Tristan became perplexed and muttered. "He and his wife are good at making high-quality mechs. They wouldn't have been able to collect so many masterwork certificates if that wasn't the case. Is it really worth it to bolt what looks like salvaged alien alloys onto their frames due to making a last-minute decision?"

Plenty of mech insiders such as Tristan grew confused at the sight. They either thought that the Larkinson Patriarch had made a whimsical decision at an unreasonably late hour, or that the Larkinson Clan tried to convey a deeper message by presenting such a noticeable contrast of mechs in the most important parade of Davute's history.

Professor Galbraith was leaning towards the latter. His expression turned serious as he put his considerable mind to work.

He even set down his half-empty glass of wine!

"I think the Larkinson Clan is conveying several important points to specific audiences." Galbraith said. "To the general public, the choice to bolt salvaged alien warship debris onto the frames of these mechs conveys the clan's considerable success in defeating powerful alien combatants. To its enemies and rivals, it is putting up an aggressive display to show that the clan should never be trifled with. To the colonial government and supporters of Davute such as ourselves, it is stating its intent and willingness to fight for the colonial state rather than sit back."

That latter message made a lot of sense even if Tristan felt it did not match with Ves' stated goals.

Nonetheless, he had already heard the news that Venerable Ark Larkinson had not only agreed to join the military, but also received an immediate promotion to the rank of mech general so that he could lead his own mech division!

Clearly, the Larkinson Clan had made an extensive backroom deal with the colonial state. Tristan already had a feeling that Ves could come around after Madame Reina Kernsk paid a personal visit to his office.

As the standard mechs marched down the main avenue while displaying varying degrees of stiffness due to their hasty modifications, the message that many people received was that the Larkinson Clan was not just willing to sell its mechs to others.

Instead, the clan also made it clear that it was more than willing to participate in fights itself by putting its own mech pilots into the cockpits!

"What an aggressive clan." Professor Galbraith spoke in admiration. "We truly need an organization like this in our community. All of the other pioneers and mech companies are much more cautious and restrained in their activities. They are older and more concerned with preserving their legacies than taking advantage of the greater opportunities of the Red Ocean. With the Larkinsons setting a positive example, there will be forces in Davute that will become more adventurous in order to earn the same windfalls that have earned the clan so much riches and glory."

The Larkinsons were not allowed to parade as many mechs as the processions that came before, but somehow it made a more memorable impression than any other group that contributed to this parade!

Chapter 4750: The Larkinson Factor

"What does Davute think of the Larkinson Clan?" Tristan asked Professor Galbraith.

It had become increasingly clearer that the older mech designer was not just another Senior based in Davute.

The man taught at ZUTA University and developed a lot of contacts within the academic community of Davute VII.

Tristan had also noticed that Professor Zin Galbraith possessed so much insider knowledge that he was probably involved in a number of confidential projects organized by the colonial government!

A mech designer like that should possess an extensive understanding of what the people in charge of Davute thought about a quirky organization like the Larkinson Clan.

"Opinions on the controversial clan are mixed." The professor steadily answered. "There are mech companies and political factions that are opposed to working together with such a new and volatile clan. There are also others that see great promise in what its talented patriarch can bring to Davute, especially in the long-run."

By this time, the column of living mechs moved almost right underneath the floating diamond structure. The Larkinsons had opted to enhance their show of force by playing a militaristic theme that synced nicely with the battle footage projected in the air.

The many sights and sensations enhanced a lot of people's impressions of the Larkinson Clan.

Numerous mech pilots and personnel working for other other employers seriously started to consider whether they could gain more fulfillment by joining this famous and far more exciting clan.

"Do you think that the products of the Larkinson Clan can make a real difference in the upcoming war?" Tristan asked.

"You are much more familiar with living mechs. Your former state had to fight against millions of them in its last war. What do you think?"

"I think the work of Ves will definitely make life harder for Karlach." The younger mech designer firmly stated. "Yes, the Hexers ultimately lost the war, but they managed to put up a considerably better fight with a number of highly effective living mech models like the Blessed Squire and the Valkyrie Redeemer. Ves has only grown stronger and more experienced after he designed those mechs. The commercial mechs sold by the LMC such as the Pacifier and the Buzzy Bee models are unique and highly practical in wartime situations, and that is just the start."

Professor Galbraith nodded in agreement. "Those mechs are indeed remarkable and have already proven their utility in many different circumstances, though they have yet to be employed in battles that are larger than ordinary border scuffles. That said, the LMC's commercial mech models are not impactful enough to tilt the balance of the war. The energy shield mechs developed by Master Manuel Terrence and his team have a greater chance of doing so due to how they can profoundly change the resource allocation and consumption patterns of our colonial state."

Tristan's eyes shone as he thought of another idea.

"You may be correct, professor, but that is only when you consider the works of Ves Larkinson and Manuel Terrence in isolation. What if they joined forces? There is no rule that states that they should keep their biggest selling points to themselves."

"They are competitors."

"They have also chosen to cooperate and side with Davute." Tristan immediately retorted. "That means that they have joined the same camp. In business, they may remain competitors, but as committed Davutans, they should agree to set aside any competitive rivalries and join forces for the public good of our state. It is understandable for RT&D and the LMC to pressure each other on the mech markets, but their chief designers must learn how to work together to deliver the strongest military mechs that Davute can field across its mech armies."

This comprehensive answer caused Professor Galbraith to look particularly impressed by the younger mech designer.

"You have thought much about this subject, I can tell."

"One of the mistakes that Ves has made in the past was that he did not cooperate too much with the Master Mech Designers in the service of the Hex Army. My fellow Fridaymen and I always wondered how the war would have unfolded if the two sides built up a better relationship and collaborated sincerely with each other. I guess that the egos, the lack of trust and Ves' well-founded reluctance to cooperate with the Hexers have ultimately prevented this from happening. The Komodo War might have ended in an entirely different way if history took a different course."

It was one of the great what-if scenarios that people of the Friday Coalition occasionally thought about. They were all glad they lived in a version of reality where the worst did not happen.

Now that Davute stood at the same crossroads as the Hexadric Hegemony at the time, the ambitious colonial state would certainly try to avoid making the same mistake!

Galbraith looked intrigued by the notion that Tristan raised.

"Your suggestion has great promise. Ves, despite just being a Journeyman, is able to impart his living mechs with strong and tangible benefits that no one in this part of human space can replicate. If he is able to add his strengths to the mechs designed by Master Manuel Terrence, the result will be a series of energy shield mechs that perform much differently from the counterparts that Karlach's own designers are surely working on. The differences may be decisive enough to give our unique brand of energy shield mechs a decisive advantage in the war."

Tristan picked up the point that the Senior was trying to make.

"Ves' value lies not only in his ability to impart strong advantages to his mechs, but also the difficulty of matching them or countering them. The Friday Coalition has tried various means, but they weren't really all that effective."

"Davute and Karlach are too similar to each other." Professor Galbraith remarked.
"Sure, they have their differences. Their locations are different. Their backers are different. Their policies are different. Yet despite all of these divergences, they are both rising colonial powers that seek to attain the same goal through similar means. It is hard for one of them to exceed the other, but it is also easy for the both of them to keep up with each other's progress in many areas. Imagine how the war between the two will unfold if this parity remains intact."

"It would turn into a stalemate. A bloody stalemate."

"Exactly, Mr. Wesseling. This is why both Davute and Karlach are eager to secure advantages in other areas. An unconventional mech designer such as your good friend can be the secret ingredient that can make our most critical mechs win more battles, thereby preventing a dreaded stalemate that will only weaken both sides in the end. We cannot let the war drag on for too long. Our economy and infrastructure cannot bear to support a war on the scale of what took place in your home star sector."

No matter how much progress Davute and Karlach had made in less than a decade, it was still undeniable that they barely had any time to build themselves up from scratch!

The reason why they were always associated with the term 'colonial state' was because they were still a long distance away from matching the standards of a proper state!

This was also what made the upcoming war so dangerous and destructive. It would not take as much effort to collapse a colonial state as long as its lines started to falter. The lack of depth and accumulation could easily transform a single major setback into a catastrophic collapse!

Of course, both Davute and Karlach would be trying their best to induce their enemy to experience this first!

"I knew that Ves and his work could make a difference, but not to such a drastic extent." Tristan said. "You make it sound as if he can single-handedly swing the course of the war. Is this truly the case?"

"That is a controversy in itself." Professor Galbraith answered as he resumed drinking his wine now that the Larkinson mechs had moved out of sight for a while now. "There are still many skeptics and naysayers in the colonial administration, in the academic halls and in the design labs of many mech designers. It is difficult for many people to take a Journeyman Mech Designer seriously. Cooperating with the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan will also be a challenge due to his volatile decision-making and other well-known eccentricities."

Tristan frowned when he heard that. "I won't deny that Ves is weird, but that is also why he is brilliant. He generates ideas that no one has considered before and somehow found a way to make them work. Geniuses shouldn't be judged at the same standards as ordinary people. Besides, Ves has always abided by his promises, especially when it comes to his business affairs."

"That is true, and that is the reason why President Yenames Clive and the advocates that wanted to bet heavily on Patriarch Larkinson and his clan have gained the upper hand for the time being. There are many people and groups that have become furious at the government's decision to grant the Larkinsons priority access to several capital-grade shipyards. They will react strongly if Patriarch Larkinson fails to meet everyone's high expectations."

That sounded dreadful. Not just the Larkinson Clan, but also Davute as a whole would suffer if this happened!

"Do you think this is likely to happen, professor?"

"I do not possess an in-depth understanding of the Larkinson Clan and its distinctive mechs. I wouldn't trust my own judgment on this matter. I still remain on the fence for the time being. Many of my other contacts have also decided to adopt a wait and see attitude. Let us observe how the first Larkinson mech commissioned by the government will fare in the war. If it does well, then we will be in favor of greater cooperation. If that is not the case, then we will hold the opposite stance."

That was a cold but pragmatic attitude to take. There was no need for people like Professor Galbraith to take sides in advance and piss a lot of people off when it could be avoided.

"Ves has an existing track record." Tristan argued. "He has helped the Hexadric Hegemony before and he can do more for Davute. Shouldn't that give you more confidence in his success?"

"It is not that simple, Mr. Wesseling. The circumstances are different. For one, Karlach knows what is coming in advance and is already in the process of making the right preparations. There is also no guarantee that Patriarch Larkinson can establish a good working relationship with the Master Mech Designers that the colonial government puts forward. The promised mech designs may also not be as impactful as hoped due to poor design choices."

This could all happen. It was clear that many people thought that a single quirky mech designer had the potential to materially affect the outcome of a war that could decide the fates of billions of colonists as well as the fortunes of many stakeholders.

Yet for all of their hopes, they were too afraid to bet on this hope. The way they simultaneously valued Ves for his proven abilities but also doubted that he could pull off his job was strange to Tristan.

Then again, he knew the mech designer who originated from the Bright Republic for many years and had seen his work produce results on a first-hand basis.

This caused Tristan to look forward to the future even more. He had a lot of confidence in Ves' ability to amaze his clients like he had often done in the past.

"So we are all waiting to see whether this Larkinson Factor can give us the decisive advantage we need to crush Karlach in battle." Tristan summarized.

"The Larkinson Factor, hm? That is a good phrase. You are correct. A surprisingly broad group of people are waiting with bated breath how this factor can skew a major war between two roughly even colonial states. It isn't just the people in Davute and Karlach that are paying attention. There are the Fridaymen, the Hexers along with many other interested and far-sighted individuals in the Red Ocean that are closely tracking the work of a single Journeyman Mech Designer."

"You make it sound as if he is a Star Designer."

"He can be a Novice Mech Designer and still earn our appreciation as long as his work can produce more victories. The rank is not important, Tristan. Not truly. However, it will take more than a single person's contribution to ultimately win the war. A single factor is never the only variable that determines the outcome of a massive conflict that is years in the making. You and I can also contribute to the effort in our own ways."

Tristan believed that more and more people would come to learn about living mechs and what they could do. Not just second-raters, but also first-raters may begin to pay attention to Ves' work and what he could contribute to their own machines!

