

## The Mech 4831

### Chapter 4831 Handling Dossiers

Ves and his little family freshened up for the day and finished their sumptuous breakfast.

Each of the survivors of the alien abduction event gained an entirely new appreciation of the simpler pleasures in life.

It had only been less than a day where they had been deprived of the ability to choose when to eat and when to use the bathroom. While the Larkinsons not only managed to get free while suffering minimal losses, they also harvested an immense amount of gains from this incident!

Already the news portals went abuzz with what the Larkinsons had done. From deploying powerful mechs such as the Everchanger to quickly resolve the rampaging warbeasts that had been let loose on the streets to massacring thousands of hidden aliens that had supposedly taken over a pocket space that Davute never discovered, the buzz surrounding the Larkinson Clan propelled its reputation to another peak!

When Ves separated from his wife and children and calmly headed over to the main office of his Royal Mansion, his personal assistant prepared an entire stack of dossiers.

"You know, Benny, I originally intended to take a day off." Ves said in a weary tone.

"You really shouldn't, boss. Too much has happened and everyone is running around trying to put out all of the ongoing fires. I do not think that the new colonial federation will like it if we continue to delay their pressing matters for another day."

Ves stood in front of the tall windows that gave him a decent view of the surrounding forest and the taller city structures in the distance.

Kotor City still enforced a form of pseudo-martial law at this stage. The colonial government clearly did not want to drive all of the party-goers away, but it also had an obligation to guarantee the safety of everyone in its domain.

The military and the assisting third parties had already wiped out the immediate threats, but the security holes that allowed the Karlachs to launch their novel surprise attack and the remnants of the pescan race to kidnap the VIPs needed to be closed.

A lot of engineers employed or contracted by the state were in the process of going over every crucial security and protection system. They needed to manually check for any forms of sabotage and subversion, putting extra effort into investigating how the attackers managed to disable the well-protected warp interdiction field generators.

Only after plugging these critical gaps would Davute have the confidence to kick off its much-anticipated festival!

Ves frowned when he heard this news. "The colonial government is still insisting on holding a week-long celebration? A lot of people died. Entire streets in the Government District turned into warzones."

"It is exactly because so many negative incidents occurred that Davute is eager to turn the page. That president is really clever, boss. He pinned all of the blame on Karlach and even took advantage of our victory in that pocket space to claim that his new colonial state had managed to come out on

top. He's desperate to keep Davute together. Do you remember that the VIPs of two of the seating blocks got wiped out in an instant? The organizations they led are pissed, leaderless and probably about to collapse. Yenames Clive is personally intervening to prop them all up and prevent them from going bankrupt and so on. It is a huge mess as those organizations aren't so eager to cooperate with the state that failed their leaders."

A complex expression appeared on Ves' face. He was one of the few individuals who figured out that the targeting of those seating blocks was not random.

Ves and Calabast had no way to determine how extensively the conspirators within the colonial government colluded with Karlach's saboteurs.

The fact that those odd and powerful warbeasts immediately spat out devastating energy beams in the direction of Block M and so on indicated that this was not a simple matter of pulling a few plugs!

He shook his head. The depth of this conspiracy went so deep that it was far too dangerous for the Larkinsons to get involved. His clan may have been on the rise, but it stood no chance against established old galaxy powers such as the Clive Consortium!

Besides, the Larkinsons did not stand to gain any benefits from following up on this matter. Ves had already decided to leave Davute and never return, so there was no point in getting entangled over its internal affairs.

The only clansmen who needed to be concerned about the follow-up were the ones that had transferred to the Davute Branch or the new military division led by General Ark Larkinson.

Ves did not really care about what the Davute Branch decided to do. He had already set them loose in his heart. The clan was already in the process of completing the administrative and legal reforms that would officially grant the side branch more autonomy in exchange for receiving less support from the main branch.

It was all part of the new proliferation strategy that would ultimately spread the Larkinsons across the Red Ocean.

The clan might not be able to build a strong regional stronghold by pursuing a strategy of geographic diversification.

Once Ves had enough of the view, he returned to his desk and sat down onto his chair. He was ready to get to business.

"Alright, let's start. What do I need to take care of first?"

"There are a number of documents that you need to sign..."

So much had happened yesterday that different arms of the government had sent a lot of paperwork to the Larkinson Clan.

They mostly pertained to the defense of the Government District. The Larkinson mechs on the scene had saved many lives but also broke a lot of laws in the process.

Of course, there was no way that Davute would ever go after the Larkinson Clan for defending the citizens of the state, but the proper procedures still needed to be followed.

Ves found that there were surprisingly little documents related to the pocket space. The only ones he had to sign were provisional non-disclosure agreements that would have to be renegotiated in the future.

Although Ves did not want the government to shut him up, the contract terms were remarkably gentle, so he did not mind throwing Davute a bone.

"Our Ministry of Foreign Affairs has already been working throughout the night to handle our communications with the government." Gavin Neumann reported. "You do not need to waste your time on these matters. As far as our clan as a whole is concerned, Davute has dropped the ball to such an awful extent that it owes a lot of compensation to us. What helps our case is that we are not alone in this. Every major stakeholder of Davute who sent their representatives to the founding ceremony are just as angry as us, if not more. Right now, we are united in our dissatisfaction with the government. If President Yenames Clive doesn't take us seriously enough, more investors will get fed up to the point where they will pull out of his state."

That had already started to happen according to Gavin. Not everyone was as brave as the Larkinsons. To many of these pampered and high-born leaders, getting caught in the middle of the battlefield was an enormously traumatic experience!

When Ves requested a list of organizations that had already published their intention to divest their holdings in Davute, he learned that over two-dozen different companies had already begun this process.

The colonial government was likely working extremely hard to convince these stakeholders to change their mind. The danger was that the sentiment would spread. If too many companies decided that Davute wasn't safe enough anymore, then the panic might spread, causing the state to lose support for its upcoming war against the purported perpetrators of the surprise attack!

"As you can already imagine, the colonial administration is prioritizing its talks with our clan a lot. President Yenames Clive insists on scheduling a meeting with you within the next two days. He wants to close a deal with us before the festival begins."

Ves directed a grim look at his assistant. "I am not in the mood to talk to that bastard. Can we postpone this meeting until after the festival has passed?"

"I do not think that is a viable option for us." Gavin advised. "One of the reasons why we need to sign a new agreement is to settle the matter of the pescans that we have claimed as our prisoners. While we managed to get them past the Davutan soldiers and stuff them in the holding cells beneath our compound, the legality of what we have done is extremely dubious. Davute is well within its rights to barge into our Cat Nest and gun the pescan captives down without giving us a chance to protect our new property. The Big Two heavily frowns on keeping indigenous aliens alive."

That was indeed a serious concern. Ves did not want to break the promise he had made to the pescans regardless of whether they were aliens.

Of course, he still didn't take the threat of government intervention too seriously. Any sign of overbearing behavior would completely crush its efforts to establish a free trade hub where any company could engage in honest business without needing to worry about arbitrary laws and unfair treatment!

It was still better to resolve disagreements through mutual talks rather than unilateral action. Ves and the Larkinsons had tested the patience of the colonial state numerous times already. Going overboard would cause his reputation to deteriorate as more and more people assumed he was petty, childish and vindictive.

"Fine." Ves conceded. "Schedule meetings with both the president and the MTA. We need to get both of them off our backs."

Although he was not in the mood to negotiate with President Yenames Clive once again, the dynamic of the upcoming talks would definitely be completely different from before!

This time, the Larkinson Clan unquestionably held the upper hand. Davute needed to grovel even harder to retain the approval of the people who played a starring role in resolving the serious crises that broke out yesterday!

"Did you hear any news about the pocket space that has fallen into the lap of Davute?"

"There are a lot of unverified rumors flying around, but nothing solid as of yet." The personal assistant replied. "It is far too early for the official institutions to announce anything regarding this huge surprise. I think that the colonial administration is already trying to persuade the MTA to turn the pocket space into a territory of Davute. Even if the government has succeeded in these talks, it might take months for the details of this possible agreement to leak to the public. The Davutans want to keep the Karlachs in the dark as long as possible. I wouldn't be surprised if the center of the Government District turns into a forbidden land."

"Yenames Clive should give our clan a lot of remuneration for helping his colonial state claim an invaluable pocket space. We may not have discovered it, but we helped to conquer it from the pescans without causing our side to incur excessive losses."

"I will be sure to pass that on to our negotiators."

"The upcoming war will become even hotter than before because of this." Ves grumbled. "Karlach is bound to grow so jealous that its leaders have little choice but to take over this port system or die trying."

There were so many repercussions to yesterday's events that Ves couldn't keep up with it all. The Krakatoa Middle Zone would soon get embroiled in a war that would inevitably produce a lot of losses.

Meanwhile, humanity's war against the native aliens continued to get stalled as the defenders finally got their act together. The aliens who used to treat each other as rivals had finally begun to settle their differences and join forces in order to unite against the human invaders!

Chapter 4832 Getting Up To Date

Ves needed to make a lot of important decisions after his return. The day had just started and already more and more dossiers fell onto his desk.

His subordinates had already analyzed the pros and cons of many plans and favored many specific decisions. They just needed to check whether the patriarch of their clan approved of their initiatives.

Though Ves had already granted his chief ministers and other important leaders a lot of autonomy, what happened with Ark Larkinson was a warning of what might happen if no one kept these people in check.

For better or worse, Ves needed to take back some of the reins and exert more oversight over the people he empowered to make decisions for the clan.

This was not a trivial change. The clan had grown to the size of a small city-state up to this point. The sheer amount of departments that rose up during this time had become massive entities that spent thousands of MTA credits like running water.

It was impossible for Ves to zoom in and devote his precious time on every single affair, so he still needed to rely on trusty assistants like Gavin and his team to filter all of the irrelevant crap and pass on all of the truly important stuff.

Ves had already given his assistant an order to present a broad and varied selection of dossiers that provided an up to date snapshot of what was taking place in the clan these days.

It took several hours to patiently go over these dossiers. Ves began to learn more and more about the happenings surrounding the individual mech legions, the clan administration, the Larkinson Biotech Institute and many other departments and daughter organizations.

He learned plenty of interesting developments that he hadn't been aware of in the past. He would have never thought that all of this had begun to happen if he did not specifically request an update rather than let his subordinates make all of the decisions under the supervision of the chief ministers.

"What is this about our local mech academy becoming an official affiliate of the Federal Military of Davute?" Ves questioned in a suspicious tone.

"Oh, that. It is a recent change made with the help of General Ark Larkinson." Gavin explained. "The mech academy that we have founded on the outskirts of Davute hasn't been operating that long, but the extensive use of War Squires and the Mental Simulation Training System has caused its mech cadets to improve at a rapid rate. During many periodic contests where mech cadets from different schools compete against each other, the cadets of our First Star Mech Academy have consistently won. It has made our school a lot more popular to the point where the local military has gained a strong interest."

"So what, the newly-named Federal Military wants to take over my mech academy, just like that?" Ves grew upset. "I funded the establishment of this mech academy early on so that it could turn into an in-house talent factory for our clan. We invested in expansive and superior facilities so that its graduates have become so well-versed in piloting the mechs of our clan. The ultimate purpose is to provide us with lots of ready-made mech pilots that can instantly slot into our Larkinson Army. Now you are telling me that Davute wants to subvert one of my prime sources of mech pilots?"

Gavin blinked. He did not realize that a 'mere' mech academy played such an important role to Ves. Perhaps many other Larkinsons dismissed the local mech academy as a side venture.

"It is not unusual for states to sponsor mech academies that it has faith in." The assistant replied.

"Military academies do not always have to be wholly owned by the militaries they are tied to. It is much more common for the military to only become partially involved, and that is exactly the case for the First Star Mech Academy."

Ves grimaced even further. "How much of its budget is the government prepared to subsidize?"

"30 percent."

"Too much! I am not going to let these Davutans use their money, instructors and other resources to claim all of the best graduates for themselves! Limit the funding to 20 percent and make sure that the Federal Military can only make suggestions with regards to the curriculum and teaching methods of our mech academy."

"Those are heavy changes, boss." Gavin said with a serious expression. "You will be overriding the agreements that the Davute Branch has already made with the relevant institutions. You can't just do that without suffering serious consequences."

Ves snorted. "I don't give a damn what the government thinks. They should keep their grubby hands away from our mech academy. It may be based on this planet, but that doesn't mean the local branch can treat it like any other side business. You may think that I am being overdramatic with regards to a simple school, but it is part of a deliberate strategy to reduce our dependence on external recruitment to replenish and expand our ranks of mech pilots. Rather than continuing to rely on recruiting random batches of mech pilots with lots of random skill sets, it is better to start early and focus on recruiting mech pilots that are not only familiar with our approach to mech combat, but are also compatible with our values. For example, we need to focus on acquiring more personnel that are open to living the spaceborn life."

"I see. I will make sure to pass that on to the Education Ministry. No, I should probably pay it a visit so that I can make sure to convey your policies and stances in person. We should draw up a framework and clarify that all of the mech academies that we run in the future will also prioritize the needs of our fleet over more local concerns."

"That is the kind of initiative that I am looking for in a handy helper, Benny. Make sure this is the only time I encounter this problem. Manpower is important, and our internal training is not enough to meet our future needs. With the way we are going, we will probably expand explosively in the future. I don't want our growth to be limited by a lack of preparation."

Once he handled this matter, Ves directed his attention to other important affairs.

After going through a number of minor dossiers that did not really matter too much to Ves, he finally encountered another topic that interested him a bit more.

"Ah, the Murphy Family. I haven't seen this name in a while. What is up with them? Are there any developments in our relationship with our clan and their shipyards?"

Gavin nodded. "First, let me remind you that while Murphy & Sons currently operate two orbital shipyards, of which one of them is rated for capital ships, the government has already begun to help the company build two more capital-grade shipyards. It will take time for the Murphys to construct four ships at a time, but by then they will be able to work on four starships at a time."

"I already know that. What is new?"

"Well, the Murphy Family wants to collaborate with our clan on co-developing a new line of starships. The Murphy family members believe that they can combine their competitive advantages

with ours to develop starships that not only fit our needs the best, but also turn into viable and more profitable starships."

That certainly sounded ambitious. "We don't have a strong shipbuilding tradition, Benny. We may have the Diligent Ovenbird, but that is far from enough. Let me guess what these Murphys want. They want me to combine my glows with their starships."

"The Murphy Family has seen how well glows can work in jointly developed mechs such as the Pacifier. For example, if you can employ totems in a clever manner to improve the effective performance of a starship, the Murphys can increase her sale value without increasing her production cost by too much. Their shipbuilding company is already known for building conservative but affordable starships. Take a look at one of the concept blueprints they sent with their offer."

Though Ves couldn't care less about the petty profits that his clan could make by helping Murphy & Sons beat the competition, he became a lot more interested as soon as his assistant mentioned the word 'blueprint'.

Perhaps the Murphys knew the Larkinson Patriarch so well that they already knew that technical designs were bound to attract his interest.

"Show me." Ves ordered.

A new projection came to life that displayed an annotated schematic and virtual model of such a starship. The fake vessel was clearly modified from an existing design, but the interior featured a large number of small and subtle modifications that drastically altered the livability and operations of the concept ship!

"These Murphys have certainly done their homework, but..."

The ship design was radical in how thoroughly it integrated glows. The schematic showed a simple combat carrier that relied on hundreds of totems to provide many different glow effects!

For example, the exterior was covered by a large array of totems that could produce disorientation glows.

This would help the starship repel enemy intruders that managed to get too close to the hull for their own good.

Totems of Lufa covered the infirmaries as well as certain pilot ready rooms so that they could give people peace.

Certain meeting rooms tried to do the opposite and get people riled up instead. Totems of Zeigra or Bravo made sure that mech pilots and other personnel became more ready and eager to fight!

There were many more examples like these throughout the entire hull of the concept starship. Ves admired the gumption of those who worked on the design. Even the resident shipwrights of the Larkinson Clan had never proposed to go this far in integrating glows into starships!

As much as Ves was interested to see how such a ship would work out in practice, he reluctantly shook his head.

"No. We will not work on this project."

"Uhm, very well. Are you willing to disclose the reasons why so that we can explain to one of our shipbuilding partners why we are unwilling to cooperate on a joint project?"

"It's not that hard to guess." Ves replied in a bored tone. "First, the Murphys get way more out of this deal than us. They have every reason to cooperate with us, but the same is not true in reverse. We are no longer dependent on a single shipbuilding company to supply us with additional starships."

"That may be true to an extent, but every capital ship counts."

"I do not deny that, but I don't want us to get taken advantage of by the Murphys. Besides, the amount of totems required to produce enough glows to cover much of the internal spaces of a starship is excessive. Even if one of our craftsmen employed by the Creation Association has figured out the knack for mass producing totems, they are not commodities."

"What if these totems of yours can be mass produced in the future?"

"...Then my answer would still be no." Ves replied. "Glows should not be abused to this extent. Constant exposure to them can damage the sanity of any ordinary person. What do you think will happen if they are constantly exposed to the same influences on a constant basis? It will distort their personalities and who knows what else."

"I didn't expect a glow merchant like you to hold such a stance." His personal assistance reacted with surprise.

"It is fine to make widespread use of glows in mech combat and other specific work circumstances. However, it should always be used in moderation as I do not want mech pilots to become dependent on this gimmick. They should be able to function well enough without them. This is why I have always made sure that the mechs of the Larkinson Army can still put up a good fight even if they lose all of their glows one day."

"I see..."

## Chapter 4833 Deserved Reward

Ves enjoyed catching up with the developments of the clan.

By reading about various proposals and developments that pertained to many different departments of his clan, he gained a much better understanding of where his people stood.

There were hardly any mentions of setbacks and regressions. Many documents painted a rosy picture for his clan. Every department experienced growth in one form or another. From greater funding to access to better resources, hardly any part of the Larkinson Clan remained static.

As much as Ves wanted to continue to sign off on documents or issue verbal orders on what must be done, he could not remain in his office all day.

He refused to remain detached from the happenings of his own clan.

Before he did anything else, he first decided to visit the extensive hospital built underneath the Cat Nest.



This medical facility was much larger and more expansive than was strictly necessary. Many of the rooms remained empty and off-limits as the clan simply did not have as many injured clansmen to treat for the time being.

That might change if the Larkinsons lost a major battle, but that had yet to happen.

Right now, the Larkinson Clan only had a modest amount of sick and wounded people.

Ves had come to check up on a single patient.

"How is she?" Ves asked the resident doctor who was in charge of the relevant individual's treatment.

"She is doing well, patriarch." The doctor replied. "Her wounds are severe, but none of them are insurmountable to heal. The injuries to the legs are the most serious, but her organs are mostly intact. Her highly protective combat armor along with her augmented resilience have done much to prevent her injuries from deteriorating right away when getting struck by transphasic attacks. The senior hospital directors working for Freewell Medical Services still know their craft and have done a marvelous job at keeping her stabilized under less-than-ideal conditions. All of these factors suggest that she will make a full recovery."

Ves believed the woman. As a former citizen of the Life Research Association, she knew more about these matters than many other doctors!

"That is great news. Can she receive visitors?"

"It is not recommended, but it should be fine given her robust health."

Once he knew it was okay to visit, Ves entered the recovery room and examined Nitaa's current state.

His chief bodyguard was in a better condition than he expected. He expected her to look mangled and wrapped in lots of thick bandages, but the doctors had already addressed a lot of potentially serious injuries.

Fe Nitaa was one of the earlier people that Ves recruited. This was because she was a Kinner.

The former members of the Kinner Tribe had always remained a strange bunch in the clan. They inherited unusual notions of loyalty that made them absolutely reliable once they pledged their oaths to their new employers.

Ves took a lot of reassurance in them. It was why he played favorites with the Battle Criers by allowing this odd mech legion to form the Nullifier Battalion.

This was a fairly recent development, though.

For all of the loyalty and commitment shown by the Kinners, Ves had neglected them for years.

As the clan grew in strength and scope, Ves gained more confidence in the loyalty of his regular troops. There did not seem to be a need to put too much stock in the reliability of the Kinners as the Larkinson Network ensured that every clansmen was loyal by default.

He knew better these days.

Certain recent events had given him a much better appreciation of the Kinners within his clan. Separated from their tribe they may be, they had taken strong measures to ensure they could continue to practice their distinct cultural customs even if they were hundreds of thousands of light-years away from the third-rate state they once called home!

Nitaa slowly opened up her eyes. Her eyes remained strong and alert as ever even when she was confined to her bed.

"Sir..."

"You did a good job, Nitaa." Ves shut her up by placing his hand on her strong shoulder. "I regret that you had to be put in a vanguard position in the first place. I also should have invested in better combat gear from the start."

"You do not have to apologize for that, sir..."

Ves did not know how much it helped, but he tried to soften the blow by not casting any blame. His honor guards had made the most out of an awful situation as far as he was concerned.

"How many... have fallen?"

"Five of your colleagues have perished while several more have sustained serious injuries. The good news is that the latter should be able to get back up sooner or later. This also goes for you, Nitaa."

The woman minutely nodded. "Understood. The honor guards will need to draw from their pool of reservists. Elite infantry soldiers are not difficult to come by, so your security detail should never be compromised."

"Our clan should have taken our guards and infantry units more seriously a lot sooner." Ves sighed. "While I cannot spare much personal attention to you all, I am not short on funding. I will make sure to increase the budgets and set more ambitious goals for the relevant units. Mechs may be the bread and butter for our clan, but our infantry must never fall too far behind."

That put a smile on his head bodyguard's expression. "We shall be able to protect you much more effectively if that is the case."

"That is not the extent of what I am offering to my most important guards. Starting with you, I will provide every honor guard with a companion spirit if possible."

That truly startled her! Her tall body shifted on the bed. "We do not require any gifts. There is no need for you to go through such effort to form a precious companion spirit in my head."

As his bodyguard who stuck with him in many different settings, Nitaa undoubtedly learned a lot of different secrets. She practically knew him better than Gloriana due to her constant shadowing!

Still, much of the information that she learned was based on false or biased sources. She still lacked a thorough understanding of companion spirits if she thought that the cost was so great.

Ves had other reasons to hold back the propagation of companion spirits. He did not want to get swamped by tedious work that was not directly related to mech design.

He had already tasked the T Institute to work on a means of mass-producing special fruits that could plant companion spirit seeds inside everyone's inner self. This project was far from finished, however.

This left Ves with the option to personally install companion spirits inside the heads of a relatively small and controllable group of individuals.

It just so happened that the shock to the honor guards came at a good time. The offer to supply them with companion spirits did not sound sketchy at all after a serious incident.

Right now, the act of implanting a companion spirit in a human with weak spirituality was highly troublesome.

Ves was banking on another possible research project under the T Institute that could resolve this particular issue, but that was a matter for the future.

He first swept the body of his new patient for anything negative or harmful.

Of course, the doctors had been thorough enough to treat all manner of minor ailments.

Ves just wanted to be sure that nothing could mess up the companion spirit creation process.

He smiled at her. "Alright, everything seems fine, so let us proceed with the design stage. You've seen my companion spirit and that of others many times. Each one is unique. It all depends on the ingredients I use and the conceptual design I use. Each of them can grow over time so that they can adapt to your needs, so don't worry about whether your spirit is weak in the beginning. Sharpie for example synergizes so well with Ketis' swordsmanship that the combination of both has produced incredible power. It will be difficult for you to replicate those circumstances."

"I am aware." Nitaa wearily said. "I have attended the swordsmanship classes organized by the Heavensworders in the past. I have discovered that I do not have the talent for it and that my foundation is already incompatible with this discipline."

"That's a shame." Ves sighed. "I think it would be better if you can train in the marksmanship equivalent of traditional swordsmanship, but if any of it even exists, I haven't found it yet. Let's stop worrying about enhancing your direct combat power and look towards synergies instead. What do you think you are lacking in and what abilities would you like to obtain? Try not to ask for anything too extravagant because spirits cannot easily affect the material dimensions."

As his chief bodyguard, Nitaa had witnessed many different companion spirits. She often fantasized about gaining her own one after seeing the likes of Blinky and Alexandria.

"I have... an idea." She said as she became more animated despite her injured state. "I do not need a boost in combat power. Your gear and my skill can take care of that. I need to detect or foresee potential threats that cannot be discovered through ordinary means. You will meet many powerful people in the future and not all of them have good intentions in mind. If you can make a companion spirit for me that can help us obtain advance warning, we can avoid dangers such as what we experienced yesterday."

"That... is a good idea." Ves admitted. "Let me think for a moment. You have an extraordinary ability, right? Since your nose has always been so sensitive, let me see if we can crank that up. I think it will become especially helpful when those cultist bastards finally manage to sneak into the

Red Ocean in greater numbers. They have always been good at hiding themselves and they'll be able to slip past the strict security checks of the Big Two sooner or later."

One of the main reasons he left the old galaxy with so much enthusiasm was because he wanted to get rid of the entanglement of the Five Scrolls Compact.

Unfortunately, he knew in his heart that this was only a temporary solution. Though he managed to buy a lot of valuable time in which he used to propel his Larkinson Clan into the big leagues, the chances of bumping into hidden Compact cultists became increasingly greater.

Ves needed to prepare a lot of countermeasures in order to avoid their pursuit!

Sticking to a mobile fleet that could move to distant and highly obscure places helped a lot, but he could not avoid the necessity of interacting with human society. He already had an appointment to attend an important conference organized by the Survivalist Faction, for example.

Ves and Nitaa exchanged a few ideas and slowly formulated a concept that fit well with Nitaa's personality and special talent.

The projected sketch displayed a bloodhound. She was dark red in color and resembled a scent hound in shape and proportions.

This was a deliberate design choice as the dog was all about detecting danger, possibly by scent.

Naturally, Ves did not expect this companion spirit to perceive material scents, but rather more esoteric ones.

In order to realize and empower the detection capabilities of this special hound, he needed to make it out of suitable resources.

"Aside from relying on my own spiritual energy, I should also make use of ingredients taken from the Solemn Guardian and Ylvaine." Ves decided. "The former doesn't sound very useful at first, but he fits extremely well with your character and will possibly allow you to attune yourself to me even better. The latter can gather future information. He should be able to provide your hound with the key ability she needs to perceive threats that aren't obvious on the surface."

His bodyguard had no expertise in this matter and straightforwardly agreed to Ves' proposal.

Ves grinned. "Great! I will make your companion spirit right away. You'll be able to acclimatize with it as you recover from your injuries."

#### Chapter 4834 The Sensitive Hound

Even though Ves did not treat this as a critical project, he still took the time to do it right.

This was the first companion spirit he made after a long time. Much had changed since that time.

He recently completed a comprehensive evolution that not only turned him into a phase lord but also boosted his Spirituality to a new height.

He completed a lot of interesting projects and improved many aspects of his spiritual engineering.

He became exposed to many new and interesting phenomena that allowed him to harvest a lot of useful insights.

All of these gains and more granted him much greater confidence in his ability to implant useful companion spirits into other people.

No matter whether they possessed active spiritualities or not, Ves would find a way.

After all, if he had been able to grant companion spirits to his unborn children, then doing the same to a bunch of average people should not be challenging!

What played in Nitaa's favor was that she was one of the few people who possessed active spiritualities. Her strength in this aspect was not strong when he initially found her. A secret splinter organization affiliated with the Five Scrolls Compact had experimented on her and many other people, causing her ability to smell certain spiritual properties to become abnormally strong.

Years of spending time in an unusual organization like the Larkinson Clan had grown her spirituality by a lot. Ves theorized that frequent exposure to spiritual entities along with other forms of spiritual stimulation had caused his bodyguard to exercise her 'spiritual muscle', for lack of a better term.

Once Ves harvested a couple of spiritual fragments from the Solemn Guardian and Ylvaine, he brought out Blinky and instructed his own companion spirit to get to work.

Mrow~!

There were many circumstances where Blinky could offer no assistance, but this was not one of them. Ves had originally created Blinky to augment his spiritual engineering endeavors and creating a new companion spirit definitely qualified!

Compared to where Ves manually cut into people's spiritualities and messed around until a part of themselves transformed into semi-autonomous spiritual entities, Blinky could perform the same procedures with much greater finesse.

Mrow mrow mrow.

The cat's remarkable affinity with spiritual energy allowed him to skillfully manipulate Nitaa's spirit while inflicting as little harm as possible.

Though there was no way to avoid causing pain akin to an enormous migraine, Nitaa gritted her teeth and relied on her willpower and training to remain as calm as possible.

"It will take a little longer than I initially expected." Ves reassured his struggling guard. "Your spirit is stronger and more resilient than I expected, which is good news because your new gift will have a higher starting point. The only trouble is that Blinky has to put more effort into cutting and reshaping parts of your inner self. Please bear with it. You will get your new hound soon enough."

Both Ves and Nitaa sighed in relief as Blinky finished much of the rough cutting and shaping work.

It was at this point that Ves added the spiritual fragments that concentrated the energies donated by both the Solemn Guardian and Ylvaine.

As old humanoid design spirits, both of them got along with each other remarkably well. They were old friends who graced the earlier glow mechs that Ves had designed and introduced with great fanfare back when he was still an Apprentice Mech Designer.

Although the two older design spirits lacked the strength and extraordinary abilities of the likes of the Superior Mother and the Phase King, Ves never questioned their utility. Not all powers had to be flashy or attention-grabbing.

Breaking up the spiritual fragments and merging the shards with the new spiritual construct proceeded smoothly enough.

He recently understood that attributes mattered and that it was not that simple to merge contradictory or opposite attributes together.

While it was not impossible to fuse light and dark, life and death and other opposing concepts together, Ves had to be more creative and create a logical construct that could harmoniously fuse them together.

It was like the time he created the Ouroboros. He imbued the mech with the opposing concepts of life and death by imagining it as a cycle. It was one of the chief reasons why he chose that particular name for the first-class mech.

Fortunately for Ves, the domains of the Solemn Guardian and Ylvaine were not incompatible with each other. At best, they had little to no intersection, which meant that they did not naturally clash when squashed together.

The challenge was to draw out the strengths of both design spirits while also creating greater combinations that produced fantastic synergies.

Ves and Blinky tried their best to come up with such synergies, but they hadn't been able to do much due to lack of resources.

He knew that if he wanted to make this companion spirit start off on a stronger and more robust footing, he would have to 'expand its capacity' by feeding it with a moderate amount of universal life energy.

As much as Ves cared about his bodyguards and his safety, the universal life energy derived from high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum was still a finite resource. He was too reluctant to make such a heavy investment even if it benefited him in various ways.

Eventually, his cheapskate tendencies won out as he decided not to draw on that particular precious resource. This decision may cause Nitaa's initial companion spirit to start off weak, but it was not as if there was much of a hurry to create the strongest spiritual hound right away.

If the Compact needed to take its time to infiltrate the new frontier, then Nitaa would have plenty of years to slowly train and shape her companion spirit to sniff out the most acute threats to his life in advance.

"Let's keep it simple for the time being."

He decided to focus on imbuing Nitaa's companion spirit with three potential abilities that fit the themes and design of the scent hound.

The first and most obvious ability was Scent Detection, which Ves clearly derived from Nitaa's own inherent talent. Its name said it all and was expressly designed to sniff out spiritual threats in the imaginary realm.

The exact mechanics behind this ability was complicated and even Ves did not fully understand the theory. He just created a basic scaffold and hoped that his intent behind this aspect would guide the companion spirit's growth into filling all of the gaps.

The second ability was Danger Premonition. This was an attempt to narrow and specialize the small part of Ylvaine that Blinky blended into the companion spirit.

Ves knew from working with Ylvaine that predicting the future was incredibly vague and complicated. It was also extremely resource intensive on top of that. There was no way that Nitaa's companion spirit could endure so much work without getting exhausted in an instant.

This was why Ves heavily limited the scope and made sure that the hound's predictive talent only manifested in the form of detecting danger in advance.

Just like in the previous case, Ves did not have a good idea on how to implement it, so he merely programmed what little parameters he could set at this time and hoped that the companion spirit's organic growth would do the rest of the work.

The final ability drew from both Nitaa and the Solemn Guardian. Ves called it Bonded Loyalty and its purpose was obvious. It would allow the companion spirit to form a permanent spiritual bond with Ves that was oriented around loyalty and protection.

Ves was able to add a lot more details to this ability because he had plenty of existing examples to work with. While it sounded rather redundant at first because the Larkinsons were already connected to each other via the Larkinson Network, Bonded Loyalty possessed its own specialties.

For one, the new spiritual bond granted Nitaa a good idea on Ves' health and location. The Larkinson Network already accomplished this, but if it ever became compromised or unavailable in any way, then Nitaa could still rely on her own companion spirit to seek out Ves no matter the circumstances.

Another area in which Bonded Loyalty was supposed to distinguish itself was the ability to apply all of the companion spirit's other abilities on Ves as a focus.

For example, instead of using Danger Premonition to detect threats directed at Nitaa herself, the companion spirit should instead be able to detect danger directed towards Ves instead!

This could become an extremely potent capability in the future. If Nitaa's companion spirit became a lot stronger, it may be possible for her to offer direct protection to Ves by incurring damage on his behalf!

These were all fantasies for the moment, but Ves did not hesitate to imprint his dreams and expectations onto the companion spirit. This would serve as a rough guide and growth target for the new spiritual hound.

There was not much of a reason for Ves to hold back in making choices. He tried his best to give his children the freedom to make their own choices, but he did not have to restrain himself when he worked on his subordinates.

"It's almost done... there. Good work, Blinky."

Mrow.

Blinky arrogantly dove out of Nitaa's head. His craftsmanship and control over spiritual energy was impeccable as always. After twirling around in the air, the Star Cat returned to Ves and fell into slumber again.

"Nghh..."

The lucky recipient experienced a lot of new sensations this time. Not only was she suffering from the mental pain from having the most essential part of herself get carved into a different shape, the new companion spirit that her liege had bestowed her entered life in an abrupt and confusing manner!

Woof!

Just as Ves envisioned her, a red spiritual hound gradually floated out of Nitaa's head!

The guard may have witnessed plenty of companion spirits in the past, but this was the first time that a spirit of her own emerged in front of her eyes!

The double perspective along with the massively better spiritual senses of her new companion spirit was making her dizzy. She was unable to process the sheer amount of observation data that poured into her mind!

Ves pressed his hand on her shoulder. "Breathe, Nitaa. Don't try to take it all by yourself. Let your new hound process the input by herself. That is what she is for. She may be an evolved part of your spirit, but she is also a life form that possesses her own form of life."

The advice he provided to her helped with acclimating to her new and highly unusual spiritual state.

Wonder appeared in her eyes as she became more and more engrossed by the huge amount of stimuli that her hound was able to collect.

"It is so magical... she has just been born, but she can already distinguish smells at a much greater sensitivity than my old self." Nitaa said as she conveyed real emotion. "It is too much for me. Your scent alone overwhelms everything else."

"I am sure that will be fixed over time. Have you thought of a name for your companion spirit?"

Nitaa didn't hesitate in the slightest. "Siobhan. She is called Siobhan."

"...Alright. It's your choice."

Ves patiently gave her a lecture on how she should interact with her companion spirit, what she should do to stimulate Siobhan's growth and what she should do when encountering different types of spiritual life forms.

"Siobhan's birth may have granted you a lot of useful capabilities, but it has also exposed you to a layer of competition that can be extremely dangerous to you." He warned. "There are predators lurking in dimensions that previously had nothing to do with you. That has changed. Be sure to do everything you can to promote the growth of your companion spirit. All it takes is to engage in activities that align with her attributes."

"I understand. You will not find me wanting." His bodyguard vowed.

Chapter 4835 Contrite President



Obtaining a new companion spirit was anything but simple. Ves was afraid that he had delayed Nitaa's recovery process by another week or so. She still bore the spiritual scars from getting cut by Blinky and the nature of her new spiritual side fed her with an overwhelming amount of sensory data.

Nonetheless, all of this suffering was worth the reward. Once Nitaa got back in action, she would become his most alert guard. He would gladly trade a hundred guards just to get a single copy of her because the ability to detect dangers in advance could save him a lot of trouble.

Before he left the recovery room to give Nitaa the time to explore her new reward, she raised her strong arm and beckoned him to stop.

"Sir... before you go, I have one more request."

"Hm?" Ves looked intrigued.

"The honor guards... deserve to have their own companion spirits." Nitaa said. "They will become stronger and more useful to you if you augment them like you have done with me. It would be too much of a waste to leave them incapable of defending you in this manner."

He smiled back at her. "Don't worry. I already had this in mind. I am currently too busy to attend them in person, but I will get around to it once I have cleared my workload. I can promise you that every member of my honor guard will have their own companion spirits within the month. I can spare at least that much time and resources for them. Their new gifts might not be as notable as yours, but in time their second selves will most definitely be able to gain a formidable amount of strength."

"That is all of the reassurance that I need."

It was worthwhile for Ves to augment his full complement of honor guards. The workload was not excessive, and he would be able to gain a lot of strong guards that could fight and handle different problems in a much more adept manner than before. They would also become utterly unique and produce unexpected surprises that might be helpful in a future crisis.

Ves already formed a rudimentary plan on how to approach this issue. If he varied the design and capabilities of all of these companion spirits, then he would be able to produce an incredible variety of new and unusual abilities.

Mixing them and grouping them in different combinations would allow him to create different action teams that could perform a lot of difficult tasks.

If any of the new abilities caught his interest, then he could study their template and replicate them in his other projects.

The only danger was that certain configurations might not work out as well. If Ves screwed up in any way, then one of his test subjects might end up with relatively poor abilities or awful synergy.

"Wait, why should I treat my best guards as my test subjects when I already have more disposal ones at hand?"

Ves and the researchers of the T Institute had been experimenting with granting different spiritual abilities to the pakklaton prisoners that his clan had captured years ago! Many of them gained a lot

of random companion spirits that started out as blank slates but eventually developed spiritual abilities that evolved in a completely natural fashion!

This was how they were originally meant to be used. There was no point in experimenting on alien test subjects if his clan was not going to make any practical use of the research results.

"I don't have to confine this application to my honor guards."

Ves could bestow specific companion spirit templates onto the most suitable recipients depending on their vocations and talents.

For example, he could work together with Calabast to set up a premier infiltration team. The members of this team would have companion spirits geared towards infiltration, detection, mental manipulation and other shadowy powers.

He could bestow companion spirits to talented mech pilots such as Lanie Larkinson. He already thought about granting them spirits with abilities such as prediction, spatial awareness, mental defense and more.

He could also provide companion spirits to all of his Journeyman Mech Designers and a number of his more talented and promising Apprentices. The workers he liked such as his former students could clearly benefit from having spiritual helpers that possessed complimentary powers related to their specializations.

All of this would take time and effort as well as proven templates. If he had existing examples to work with, then he wouldn't be shooting in the dark all of the time.

He could make better use of the pakklavons and now the pescans if that was the case. Both species were humanoid aliens that somewhat resembled homo sapiens. Even if there were many differences, they wouldn't have that much of an impact from a spiritual perspective.

Ves eagerly wanted to invest more time on this proposal, but he still had many other obligations.

The biggest event of the day was meeting with President Yenames Clive once again.

This time, the two didn't meet with lots of fanfare and pageantry. The time for empty showmanship was over and it wasn't suitable to act in a high-profile fashion while the new colonial state was still in a mourning period.

Ves was not eager to return to the Government District anytime soon. Stepping foot in Skyline Palace was out of the question as he did not want to be separated from his clansmen and his mechs so soon again. The forces working for the government had dropped the ball once, and they could do it again.

After the Larkinson Clan and the colonial government exchanged messages, President Yenames Clive visited the Cat Nest once again.

The procession was smaller and the shuttles were coated in unassuming gray. While the Koi Riser accompanied the vehicles, it was not an ace mech that often performed escort duties due to its offensive focus. The Indormeon was simply much better at this job and the fact that its ace pilot was a member of the Clive Consortium also helped.

As the shuttle convoy arrived at the Cat Nest's landing zone, Ves stood in a conference room in one of the many office buildings of his manufacturing complex and studied the ace mech assigned on guard duty.

Every ace mech was a work of art, but the Koi Riser literally embodied this phrase.

Even though it was not a genuine aquatic mech, the Koi Riser was themed around fish and water. Looking at a live feed of this ace mech made Ves feel that he had been transported to a beach or a pond where hundreds of colorful fish swam in harmony.

There had to be an interesting story behind Saint Megan Roonzin and her eye-catching ace mech. Ves even had the feeling that it helped the ace pilots a lot if their ace mechs were more famous and recognizable!

Ves was not alone in the conference room at the moment.

Given the importance of the upcoming talks and the possible subjects that might come under discussion, he had invited a couple of his advisers to ensure that his clan would be getting a good deal.

"It is curious that the colonial government did not request your presence at their palace." Minister Shederin said as he prepared a few documents. "Davute is adopting a humble posture towards us, and isn't afraid of showing that to the public. We should have more leverage as a result."

"Mhmm. General Verle?"

The leader of the Larkinson Army carefully studied the standard mechs of the government as well as the Koi Riser in particular.

"The president could have brought General Ark. I am glad he didn't." Verle shared his opinion.

The atmosphere in the conference room turned a lot more awkward as a result.

General Ark Larkinson did himself no favors by attaching himself to the colonial state so quickly. While his reasoning convinced a lot of clansmen, a lot of people who worked hard to expand the main fleet alongside Ves saw his actions as nothing less than betrayal!

Though Ves himself was not willing to go that far, it was obvious that he expected more from his blood relative.

Ves tried to act casual and waved his hand in dismissal. "What Ark does is his business. I don't even want to talk about it in my upcoming talk with the president."

"That is understandable, sir, but we may not be able to avoid this topic."

"We will see."

After a lengthy wait, President Yenames Clive along with a few attendants and guards stepped inside the conference room.

They exchanged greetings but neither side bothered to posture so much. They might act out in public, but this was a purely private setting.

Both sides had already grown familiar enough that they understood what either side wanted from each other.

"President." Ves said as they all sat down.

"Patriarch." President Yenames Clive returned as he reached out with his arm. "Let me begin by stating how grateful we are for the assistance that your clan has provided. You have done a great service to us by rescuing so many important Davutans in that awful pocket space. We have thought long and hard on how to compensate you and your clan, and I believe that our next proposal should be of great interest."

Reina Kernsk approached and placed a data pad in the president's outstretched hand. The woman quietly retreated once she was no longer needed.

The president then proceeded to place the data pad on the conference table before sliding it towards the Larkinson delegation.

Ves picked up the data pad and quickly skimmed through the document. It depicted an altered version of the contract that the Larkinson Clan had signed with the colonial government.

It contained a lot of little changes that provided a lot of conveniences to the Larkinson Clan. A welcome alteration was the right to field up to 1000 mechs at once in the Davute System!

This was a massive change and allowed the Larkinson Clan to secure its people and properties without becoming limited by the safety rules enforced by the local authorities.

Ves was pretty sure that President Yenames Clive did not offer this heavy concession to the other stakeholders of Davute. This was a uniquely valuable concession that granted the Larkinson Clan a lot of trust!

"Aren't you afraid that our clan will abuse the fact that we can field 1000 mechs on this planet?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"Your clan has already supported our state multiple times. We are on the same side." The president retorted with his own smile. "You and your clan also have a stellar reputation for keeping your word. We do not believe that a tier 6 galactic citizen and an associate of two separate MTA factions will abuse our trust and betray us to benefit Karlach. That is not your style."

That may be true, but it still took a lot of guts for Yenames to go this far. Ves understood how difficult it was to grant the Larkinsons so much power. It went a long way in placating his concerns.

He never kept his paranoia and fear of his own life and safety a secret. Allowing the clan to bring lots of mechs wherever he traveled was a clear means to convince Ves to stay on this planet for a longer time.

It was too bad that Ves was already dead-set on leaving.

His eyebrow raised even higher as he read the second major concession.

"For every major mech design commission I complete for the Federal Military, your government will award us with three capital ships instead of two? Are you serious?!"

"We are always serious, Patriarch Ves. We truly stand by this change. It will be difficult for us to free up and reserve all of the necessary shipbuilding capacity, but we should still be able to shuffle

and delay existing orders. We do not accept any inadequate mech designs, however. You must meet our highest standards with regards to your work and do not accept anything that is less than best."

If President Yenames Clive was being truthful, then the Larkinson Clan would definitely harvest a lot of gains!

#### Chapter 4836 Amazing Incentives

Davute showed great sincerity towards the Larkinson Clan this time

The revised terms that President Yenames Clive offered on his own initiative and without any prior bargaining were far more generous than the Larkinsons expected!

Even though Ves had good reasons to remain pissed with Davute, the massive improvements in remuneration increasingly affected his emotions. His excitement jumped again and again whenever he gazed upon another benefit that Davute showered on him and his clan!

The biggest concession was definitely the increased payment for fulfilling a major mech design commission for the Federal Military.

To Ves, designing a mech for a client was not a big deal.

To Davute, exchanging three medium-sized capital ships for a single mech design was absolutely crazy!

The government already received a lot of criticism for daring to trade two capital ships for a single mech design. Too many people simply did not have the confidence that a single work of Ves Larkinson and his colleagues could match the value of those starships.

Every fleet carrier added to the war represented another powerful asset that could be used to sway many battles in the favor of Davute.

A single fleet carrier accompanied by a collection of combat carriers could easily support the operations of an entire mech regiment.

According to the original deal, the presence or absence of 6 fleet carriers essentially removed an entire mech division off the board. The government essentially trusted that whatever mech design the Larkinsons delivered to the Federal Military more than compensated for this serious loss in combat power!

President Clive made it harder on himself by raising the maximum price to 9 fleet carriers. Numerous strategic shipyards would essentially be unable to contribute to the war effort as a result.

Not only would lots of important clients face even more delays, but the critical resources used to build these powerful and expensive hulls would also disappear!

This deal was different from the one that General Ark Larkinson signed with the colonial government. No matter how many fleet carriers his military mech division received from the state, at least he would make good use of them in the coming battles against the forces fighting on behalf of Karlach.

Ves did not hide his intention to get the hell away from this stupid war!

As far as the main branch of the Larkinson Clan was concerned, the upcoming conflict between Davute and Karlach only served regional interests. It did not have much relevance once the

expeditionary fleet left the Krakatoa Middle Zone and started to explore the less traveled areas of the Torald Middle Zone.

This meant that Davute would most certainly be reducing a strong offensive or reinforcement option.

Its defensive outlook probably wouldn't change that much as long as the Federal Military shipped all of the necessary mechs and war materiel in place beforehand.

After Ves silently exchanged opinions with Minister Shederin, they concluded that this was an excellent concession. The Larkinsons had no reasons to deny this freebie even though it came with a couple of strings attached.

Ves needed to make sure that Davute did not use the additional conditions as a means to scam the Larkinson Clan.

"I need more details on the requirements that we need to meet in order to satisfy your appetite." He stated to the president of the colonial federation. "I don't want to put my heart and soul into designing an excellent living mech for your Federal Military only for your people to nitpick on so many details that you will be able to withhold the full remuneration I deserve. If I finish an original mech design to your satisfaction, then I expect to gain three capital ships out of it and nothing less."

The president already expected to hear such a concern. "Trust me that we have no intention of cooperating with you in bad faith. The Mech Trade Association will enforce our new contract, just as is the case with our previous agreement. I cannot present you with the detailed requirements that you have to meet because my legal team has drafted this revised contract on short notice, but we shall be able to clarify this issue once our technical consultants have completed their work."

This was as good as Ves could get for the time being.

He did not have any concerns about failing to meet the requirements of the major mech commissions. Ves was no longer an ordinary Journeyman Mech Designer for a long time and possessed a huge amount of confidence in his design skills.

Aside from that, he would be working in collaboration with Davute's other Master Mech Designers, each of which possessed an extremely high mastery of technical skills. Ves did not have to worry about this sort of stuff at all. He instead had to focus on the conceptual and more metaphysical aspects of his mech design projects.

It would probably be difficult for Ves to compel older and more accomplished Masters to follow his lead. He knew quite well that mech designers were highly confident and egoistic in their own craft. It took a lot of time and teamwork to establish genuine cooperation.

Raising the technical requirements of the mech designs meant that Ves needed to perform even better than his usual level. He might not be able to fulfill several demands given his level of technical proficiency, which ultimately meant he would have to rely on the very same Masters who did not really like the fact that they had been relegated to second fiddle to a much younger mech designer.

He inwardly groaned. This was going to be an even more troublesome set of mech design projects than usual.

Still, he did not reject this challenge. At worst, he would just have to surrender more initiative and allow the Masters to cover for his incompetence.

After Ves and the Federal President settled this matter, they soon moved on to an even greater change in the contract.

Ves paused when he read the dense and complicated legalese that dealt with this matter.

"Shederin." He said. "Is this saying what I am thinking it is saying...?"

His foreign minister's expression looked extremely serious at the moment. His ability to interpret this kind of language was much greater than Ves, so he instantly grasped the gist of what Davute was offering.

"You are right. Davute is giving us clear guarantees on bestowing territories to our clan."

President Yenames Clive was smiling at this time. He knew what he was doing and counted on it to impress the clan.

"The exact terms will take much time to explain, but the overall intent is easy enough to understand." The statesman said. "As long as the Colonial Federation of Davute wins the war against Karlach, your Larkinson Clan will gain priority rights to claim territory taken from our opponents."

"You only mentioned winning. What about losing?" Ves suspiciously asked.

The president shrugged. "It is likely that we will have nothing left to give to your clan. Wording the contract in this manner is meant to serve as an incentive that encourages you and every other stakeholder to do their utmost to win the war. There will be no gains if your commitment is not sufficient."

"Understandable."

Ves did not argue this point as it would be too difficult to change the rules too much.

"To summarize the terms, your priority rights will allow you to stand in the front of line for any group that is eligible to receive territory." Yenames Clive continued. "There are a handful of parties that have greater priority than you, so if our gains are limited to a couple of star systems at best, then we will have to disappoint your clan. This is unlikely to happen as neither our state or Karlach will be content with ending the war in a stalemate."

That was also understandable. As long as Davute gained the upper hand, there should be plenty of star systems to choose from! Dozens if not hundreds of locations would be ripe for the picking!

Minister Shederin also recognized another benefit to having priority rights.

"If our turn to choose our territories comes first of almost everyone else, then we can pick from many lucrative star systems that have yet to be claimed. We can select a star system that has greater mineral deposits, more terraformable planets, ancient alien ruins and possibly untapped sources of phasewater."

Ves widened his eyes!

While he did not hold any personal interest in claiming a planet or a star system, that did not mean he denied its benefits to his clan.

The Davute Branch would probably become ecstatic at the thought of claiming a highly promising star system!

The Wodin Dynasty originally relied on the power base it built in the Scimitar System back in the Hexadric Hegemony. The Davute Branch could easily rise up to become a comparable power if it managed to lay claim to an industrial star system.

"That is not the extent of the rewards that we are willing to bestow to your clan." Yenames Clive said with a smile. "If your clan has contributed greatly to the war effort in the form of providing us with battlefield-changing mechs and enabling General Ark Larkinson breakthrough to ace pilot, it is not out of the question to allow your clan to gain the right to administer an entire province. Our colonial state would have to conquer a substantial amount of territory in order for that to be possible, however."

Governing a single planet or a star system was entirely different from governing an entire province!

While provinces came in all shapes or sizes, the ability to develop many different star systems at once would be an absolute gamechanger for the Larkinson Clan!

The Davute Branch would be able to specialize the development of many different colonial sites and build up a prosperous regional economy that could produce an astounding amount of revenue!

Even if the Larkinsons would have to pass on much of those earnings to the central government, the clan would definitely retain a high degree of control!

Davute had adopted a federal governance structure, after all. Federations were characterized by granting higher degrees of autonomy to provinces.

President Yenames Clive lifted a finger. "There is a final territorial reward that we are prepared to bestow to your clan. It is admittedly a low-probability event, but I find it important to make this promise to you in order to demonstrate our appreciation for you. If by any chance your clan has contributed so much to the war effort that you are being credited with serving as the decisive factor in a total victory against our adversary, Davute is more than willing to allow you to govern the Karlach System."

"What?! Are you serious?!"

"We are not exaggerating or giving you false hope." The new president affirmed. "The criteria that you have to meet to be eligible to earn this great reward will all be defined in clear and concrete terms that will come into effect as soon as we sign a revised MTA-enforced contract. No one within our administration or among our stakeholders will be able to deprive your clan the reward it deserves if you have managed to fulfill our greatest hopes."

"That... is quite generous of you, president." Ves said as he still remained in shock.

This was the Karlach System that they were talking about! It was a fully fledged port system that possessed nearly the same commercial potential as the Davute System!



While President Yenames Clive would undoubtedly make sure that his own port system would become the premier trade hub of the Krakatoa Middle Zone if their side won the war, that did not mean that the Karlach System would turn into a backwater all of a sudden!

Even a secondary port system would still be able to earn revenue far in excess of a normal province!

Karlach had the potential to become an incredibly valuable power base for the Larkinson Clan!

Chapter 4837 Skilled Political Operator

Ves immediately recognized that the possibility for the Larkinson Clan to earn the right to govern the Karlach System as its fief was a giant piece of bait.

He had to give it to the federal president. That bastard Yenames Clive knew exactly what to give in order to placate an angry clan leader and his men!

There were hardly any star systems that attracted pioneers more than port systems. Their natural advantages in relation to human FTL drive technology meant that each of them became such attractive destinations for trade and transit that they inevitably grew into enormous cash cows!

And this was just one of the benefits to ruling over a port system!

It wasn't just the gigantic amount of revenue that made port systems so attractive.

They also attracted a high amount of competitive personnel and companies. Ves only had to look out of the window of his Royal Mansion to see how a port system like Davute had managed to attract millions of mech companies, research companies, biotech companies, trade conglomerates, art museums, resource processing companies and more.

If each of these useful organizations settled in the Larkinson Clan's backyard, a portion of their productive activities would become directly available to him and his fellow Larkinsons!

The circumstances of his clan would change completely. Instead of needing to beg for advance tech from numerous high tech development companies, these R&D institutions would instead take the initiative to offer their goods to their new overlords!

The change in status and gaining access to much greater revenue and support all sounded great, but what were the chances of the Larkinson Clan ever earning the right to rule over Karlach?

The only viable way was to earn more war merits and make more contributions than any other participant in the war!

Ves briefly thought about how much chance his clan had of winning the top spot.

"It is doable." General Verle quietly said. "We will need to meet many requirements in order to make it possible. First, we have to help Davute conquer the Karlach System. Second, your mech designs should have as much impact on the Federal Military as your previous Hexer mech designs have done for the Hex Army during the Komodo War. Third, the military division under General Ark Larkinson must win multiple war campaigns. Fourth, General Ark must not only advance to ace pilot, but also defeat at least one other ace mech in combat with his own ace mech."

It took a huge amount of effort and risk just to fulfill one of these requirements. Trying to meet all of them by the end of the war sounded like a pipedream!

"That is like winning a roulette bet four times in a row!" Ves quietly hissed. "It is not difficult to win one or two times in a row if you bet on red or something, but trying to make it happen four times without messing up is highly improbable!"

Minister Shederin did not look surprised. "That is the point, I believe. Davute cannot promise to give us its second-most important crown jewel to a clan that is not a part of its inner circle. Too many other stakeholders that are much greater and much more important than us will become upset if that happens. The only way to convince them that we 'deserve' to govern over the Karlach System is if our clan has contributed so much more towards victory that there can be no doubt about the winner of this contest."

Ves sneered. "I see. That makes a lot of sense. If we don't meet this excessively high standard, I suppose we'll have to make do with a province or a couple of star systems."

"That does not sound like a bad deal." General Verle commented. "Any territory is already a massive step up for our Davute Branch. A complete port system may be too big and complex for our own good. Our clan has no experience in governing such a massive trade and industrial hub."

"We can hire enough outside help to take over all of the essential institutions that are necessary to run this place. I think that there should be a huge amount of people who would love to become a mayor or run a planetary department. Trust is not that big of an issue for us given the distinct advantages of our clan, so we should be able to take it over with much greater ease. I'm not even worried about rebels and partisans, although it will probably take many years to root out all of the cells."

Ves hadn't forgotten about the shenanigans of the Bentheim Liberation Movement back in his former home state. The BLM managed to persist for centuries despite being rooted in the most important port system of the Bright Republic.

Nonetheless, Ves believed that his clan had plenty of unique tricks at its disposal that should help with preventing saboteurs from messing around.

The Larkinson delegation chatted a bit more about the possibilities of gaining control over the Karlach System.

Neither of the three Larkinson Leaders were blind to the fact that President Yenames Clive clearly used this possible reward as bait to incentivize the Larkinson Clan into working harder for Davute.

Ves felt really tempted to suspend his Trailblazer Expedition and go all-out on fighting for the Colonial Federation of Davute. It was not every day that his clan would gain the opportunity to become the rulers of a complete port system!

It normally took a coalition of wealthy partners to build up the infrastructure and defend these special star systems. The chance to take over an existing port system, even if much of it had crumbled into ruins due to getting scarred by war, was invaluable!

"I believe there is another reason why the federal president has added this term in the revised contract." Minister Shederin shared another conclusion that he had made. "that certain leaders and advisers within the colonial government may actually become pleased if we can take over Karlach."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "Explain, please."

"It is a matter of balancing the power of different interest groups, sir. If the president wants to retain his effective power over the state, he cannot allow any other rival to gain too much power. The more powerful and influential stakeholders will become too strong for their own good if they take over a part or the entirety of the Karlach System. In time, they can either become separatist or contest the presidency of the colonial federation. This is detrimental to the interests of Yenames Clive or the Clive Consortium behind him. It is in their nature to do anything possible that their 'Clive' faction remains as dominant as possible."

Ugh. Politics again. Ves was tired of dealing with this kind of crap, but he was not naive enough to think he could avoid it entirely.

"Okay, I can see the logic in denying powerful factions and interest groups the possibility of becoming strong enough to threaten the established regime. Why us, then? Isn't the president afraid that he may inadvertently turn our clan into a threat to his own power base?"

The old diplomat shook his head. "That is likely not the case. Davute possesses a great understanding of your motivations and the overall purpose of our clan. The president knows that you have no personal interest in playing the political game in Davute. Our side branch may have other ideas, but without support from you and the main branch, General Ark Larkinson and Branch Director Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson will never be able pose a serious threat to the establishment."

That also made a lot of sense. Ves felt mildly offended by the thought that President Yenames Clive never saw the Larkinson Clan as a serious threat to his political ambitions, but it was hard to argue with the truth.

President Yenames Clive was simply too good at this stuff. This could clearly be proved by how well he managed to placate Ves and his fellow Larkinsons by proposing an altered contract.

The two sides talked a bit further about how the colonial government wanted to redefine its relationship with the Larkinson Clan.

Ves understood that Davute wasn't being so generous without a reason. For one reason or another, the Larkinson Clan had become an important symbol for the colonial state.

While there were plenty of other groups that were much more powerful and more integral to the economy or the military establishment of the state, the Larkinson Clan's fame accrued over many notable successes had turned it into something of a mascot to the citizens of Davute!

If such a famous and prestigious organization decided that Davute was a lost cause and pulled out entirely, then this departure would spur on many other people and organizations into doing the same!

By the end of the talks, both Ves and Yenames Clive shook hands with each other. They had managed to form a new understanding over the course of a single session.

Ves and the Larkinsons hadn't done much talking to be honest.

The Davutans retained the initiative from start to finish by offering so many attractive incentives that the Larkinsons simply couldn't argue about the concessions. No one wanted to look at a gift horse in the mouth.

By the time that President Yenames Clive and his entire retinue and guards departed from the Cat Nest, Ves still looked numb to an extent.

"The president is a businessman by nature." Minister Shederin ultimately remarked. "His approach to resolving the resentment we hold towards his state is typical of his kind. It may sound callous, but a straightforward bribe can solve many problems that seem insurmountable at first. Everyone has a price, and it appears that Davute has successfully bought our forgiveness."

All of this reeked of manipulation. Even if Ves and his fellow Larkinsons were aware of it, they couldn't really do anything because rejecting the government's goodwill would put them in a worse position.

Ves eventually shrugged. "If Davute wants to throw free money and stuff at us, I am fine with that. It doesn't really matter if the colonial government screws up again. I will make sure that my fleet and I will be many light-years away when that happens!"

"Good strategy." General Verle chuckled in a good natured manner. "Discretion is the better part of valor. There is no need to incur the risk of failure with anything related to Davute."

"We are probably not the only ones that Yenames Clive intends to bribe. His schedule must be really busy as he needs to placate many other groups that have suffered greatly in the previous surprise attack. Will Davute have any money and resources left by the time he is done?"

Shederin shook his head. "You should note that not all of the concessions that the government has made are frontloaded, sir. It is easy to promise us priority rights on selecting a territory in conquered territory when the war against Karlach has yet to commence. Davute is only obliged to reward us for our contributions if it wins the war. If that happens, the state does not have to surrender any of its existing territories, but merely pass over the spoils that had yet to be integrated into its growing empire."

"It will make the possible gains from winning the war a lot less dramatic, though." Ves pointed out. "Davute will turn into a true federation. Many pioneering organizations will turn into moderately powerful regional powers that all become strong enough to have a say in how the colonial state should be run. It won't be easy to balance so many quarreling interests."

Shederin shook his head. "I disagree, sir. The emergence of many moderately powerful interest groups can be advantageous so long as the president is skilled enough to manipulate them. It is much more preferable than the alternative, which is trying to rein in the growing ambitions of a handful of major powers."

#### Chapter 4838 Clive Arena

In the end, the Larkinson Clan and the Colonial Federation of Davute agreed to formalize an altered contract in record time.

The federal president appeared to prioritize this change a lot. He personally urged his subordinates to complete the details in the fastest possible timespan.

It was as if Yenames Clive was afraid that the Larkinsons would have second thoughts about the deal!

It only took a single day for Ves and President Yenames Clive to visit the branch headquarters of the MTA and sign a formal contract that automatically superseded their previous agreement.

Ves still had mixed feelings about his decisions. He felt once again that Yenames Clive had constricted his options and forced him down a single path of the president's choosing.

The only consolation was that the state paid a heavy price to bribe the Larkinson Clan into maintaining its support for Davute!

The concessions were serious and concrete enough for Ves to no longer hate Davute's guts. He merely disliked the state. He still hadn't changed his mind about leaving this place and never coming back.

After handling many other affairs, an event that many people had been waiting for finally kicked off after a four-day delay.

"The founding festival has begun!"

Although it was hard for many people to find joy in their lives after suffering heavy personal losses during the previous surprise attack, there were more people who did not really suffer and cared more about partying.

Plenty of people thought that it was rude and inappropriate to start a festival so soon after a horrible tragedy that would be remembered for many years.

Other people agreed with President Yenames Clive's sentiment that the Davutans should not let the Karlachs dictate their actions!

The latter group of people won out for the most part. The festival commenced with virtually no changes to its original programming!

"Welcome to Davute! In the following seven days, we shall gladly introduce you to a culture that uniquely belongs to our new and scrappy state. We shall demonstrate with our actions that Karlach's evil blow against our people has failed to damage our unwavering belief in our colonial state!"

Kotor City and many other cities throughout the territories of the colonial federation became engulfed by a festive atmosphere!

The municipal governments had worked hard to dispel any forms of discouragement and did their utmost to lift the spirits of as many people as possible!

Projected light shows filled the skies while entire streets received colorful makeovers. Different forms of uplifting and festive music played in many venues as people began to celebrate the founding of the colonial state while forgetting about all of the unpleasantries that happened just recently.

Ves felt bemused by how quickly the masses adjusted to the new status quo. The colonial government had been frighteningly effective at swaying the hearts and minds of its own citizens.

He was among the minority who couldn't forget about everything that had happened and embrace the festive atmosphere. His personal involvement in the surprise attack and subsequent alien abduction event still put him on edge. He could never feel entirely safe while he remained on this cursed planet.

After consulting a few people, Ves decided that he needed to take a longer break in order to restore his mental balance.

"I have withdrawn my participation in the Strange Lands Tournament." He announced his decision to his wife during breakfast in the morning of the first day of the founding festival. "I am really not in a mood to compete against a bunch of Journeymen as if nothing has happened less than a week ago. Compared to defending against rampaging warbeasts and trying to take over an alien prison against a forgotten group of indigenous aliens, designing a competition mech and having my work beat up the competition mechs of other mech designers doesn't sound as important anymore."

His wife did not begrudge his decision. She placed her slender palm over his own. "You should do what you think is best for you. I may not like these mech design tournaments myself, but I recognize the benefits that they can offer. It is logical to withdraw from them if you do not think you will benefit as much as you initially thought. Your mental health is more important than whatever insights and experiences that you can obtain from participating in a public spectacle. I have heard that many other participants have pulled out of the tournaments for similar reasons."

His expression softened. "You are right. I am not sure whether I will withdraw from the Twin Weapons Tournament as well. I made an appointment with Juliet Stameros. I also miss the pressure and excitement of trying to score as high as possible in these mech design tournaments. I think I will go through with it if the following three days are enough to put me back into the mood."

Many thousands of people had either died or became too seriously affected to remain in the mood to take part in any contests. A lot of tournaments had to scramble to adjust their schedules and other arrangements in order to make sure to keep any disruptions to a minimum.

The tournament organizers generally did not kick up much of a fuss if anyone decided to withdraw. They waived all penalties and allowed people to pull out at the last minute given what had previously happened.

When Ves called up a list of Larkinsons who still chose to take part in the tournament, he noted that most clansmen stuck to their original decisions. Their moods still remained optimistic and each of them wanted to earn glory for the clan!

"Our clan has not suffered substantial losses, after all." His wife explained to Ves. "You can even argue that we benefited more out of this than others. This is why our people are still willing to compete in the tournaments."

Since Ves decided to take a break, he would have plenty of time to take his little family to the different competition venues and witness the best of what Davute had to offer.

His children were extremely ecstatic about being able to watch the competitions with their father!

"I am so happy that papa will not be gone for the entire week." Aurelia said with a smile as she held Clixie against her body.

"Miaow~"

"I am glad I won't have to watch papa and many other mech designers do all kinds of boring calculation stuff for so many days." Andraste shared her own opinion.

"Hey! Design work isn't boring! It's much more exciting than you think, sister." Marvaine whined.

"Meow." Lucky ambiguously replied while he hovered next to the youngest member of their immediate family.

There were so many possible tournaments that they could attend that Ves and Gloriana were spoiled for choice.

With the elevated status of the Larkinson Clan and the enhanced security allowances that came into effect after signing the revised contract, Ves could attend any tournament for any duration without needing to go through the hassle of buying any tickets.

These changes encouraged him to visit multiple tournament venues. Ves had no particular desire to observe a single competition from start to finish. He just wanted to obtain snapshots of all of the notable people and organizations that settled in Davute.

"It probably isn't a good idea to attend any mech design tournaments on the first or second day." Ves decided while he rubbed his hairless chin. "The participating mech designers don't have anything concrete to show to us. Only other mech designers can fully appreciate their work at an early stage."

This was fairly normal. Mech design tournaments were not that popular during the design phase. Their attendance only truly skyrocketed during the phases where the completed competition mechs finally had a chance to test their mettle against each other.

"Oh, I know what we should watch first." Andraste enthusiastically hopped on her feet like a rabbit. "A huge number of mech pilots have signed up for the Davute Star Tournament. I heard that the qualifier phase is really fun and chaotic!"

So many mech pilots wanted to prove they were the strongest in Davute that the participation rate still remained high despite the recent unpleasanties.

Far too many mech pilots had signed up to allow them to duel each other on an individual basis. This was why the tournament organizers wanted to whittle them down as brutally as possible during the first couple of days.

Ves hadn't heard anything concrete about what the Davute Star Tournament had in store for the qualifier phase, but it probably entailed group matches or free-for-alls.

His wife immediately scowled when she imagined the chaotic qualifying matches that would be held during the Davute Star Tournament.

"Absolutely not." She said. "There are much more suitable tournaments for young ladies to attend. There are flower arrangement competitions, dancing competitions, singing competitions and many other refined events taking place in Kotor City. You will be able to learn plenty of culture and refinement from observing the arts."

Though Aurelia looked interested at the thought of attending a couple of these cultural competitions, the other children vehemently shook their heads.

"Boring!" Andraste protested. "I want to see mechs beat each other up! I want to see Ketis slice and dice through countless weaklings! I don't want to miss any of these fights!"

Marvaine had his own interests.

"I want to see lots of mechs, papa. I got to see so many of them earlier this week, but none of them were fighting against each other back then. I want to see which ones are truly strong during the matches!"

"Many of the mech pilot tournaments are fought with generic and highly standardized mechs designed specifically for this festival." Ves explained to his youngest son. "Those contests are mainly centered around the mech pilots rather than their machines. We will have to attend a mech design tournament or two if you want to look at interesting mechs instead."

"I refuse to take our children to a mech design tournament! There is nothing to admire about machines that are designed and built in the span of a couple of days instead of many months."

"Oh, come on, Gloriana. If you don't want any of that, then fine!" Ves threw his hands up. "We'll just split up and pick whatever interests us the most, okay?! There is no rule that states we need to stay together for the next week."

Their interests diverged too much to stay together. While they wanted all three of their kids to stay by their side during the entire tournament, it was better to spread them out so that they could watch the tournaments that interested them the most.

Since Aurelia took singing and dancing classes as part of her demanding education, Gloriana decided to bring their oldest daughter to the relevant competitions. It was not often that the little girl could experience the performance of the best artists in Davute from a VIP booth.

Ves on the other hand indulged in Andraste and Marvaine's preferences and immediately brought them to the largest arena in town!

[Welcome to the Davute Star Tournament! In the following week, you shall be graced with both mayhem and martial combat as hundreds of thousands of hopeful mech pilots have signed up to determine who among them deserves to become the star of our colonial federation!]

Situated in the heart of Kotor City's Entertainment District, an enormous mech arena dominated the landscape.

The Clive Arena was built by the government shortly after the settlement took shape. Just as its name suggested, the Clive Consortium heavily sponsored it and likely earned a considerable share of its profits.

The oval-shaped arena featured a battleground that was up to 1.2 kilometers long, allowing large groups of mechs to clash against each other with plenty of space to spare!

Of course, the founding festival also held mech combat tournaments that took place across large and open plains, but the spectators would have to travel all the way to the more rural regions of Davute VII in order to witness the action with their own eyes.

As the initial matches of the Davute Star Tournament were about to commence, Ves and his younger children had just reached their VIP booth.

Each of them looked forward to the chaos that was about to ensue!

#### Chapter 4839 Virtual Mayhem

Despite the huge amount of arena space inside the Clive Arena, it was impossible for the Davute Star Tournament to allow hundreds of thousands of mechs to compete against each other in the qualifying rounds.



Instead, a large amount of projected screens hovered in the empty arena, providing the spectators who attended the tournament in person a good view of the battle royale-like matches where thousands of virtual mechs sought to beat each other up as soon as possible!

The Clive Arena could literally hold millions of spectators in the stands, but since no physical mechs would be coming to blows against each other during the first few days of the tournament, not all of the seats were occupied.

In fact, Ves guessed that most of the tickets for this phase were sold for dirt cheap prices. The majority of people who attended in the first day were budget-conscious tourists who couldn't afford to attend the truly good tournaments.

It didn't matter too much. Virtual or not, the high-fidelity visuals along with the huge amount of people present in the Clive Arena created a boisterous atmosphere!

Plenty of groups were shouting slogans or the names of their favorite mech pilots as the grand melee commenced!

Ves wished he could have sat in the middle of those crowds, but it was far too dangerous for him to expose himself to other people this way.

This was why he and his two children had entered a VIP booth that did everything possible to protect his privacy.

Dozens of guards surrounded him from almost every side. After the incident that took place earlier this week, his security detail took no chances. His original honor guard therefore became augmented with elite infantry soldiers taken from other units.

Their overt presence along with their constant alertness caused the atmosphere in the VIP booth to become a little tense.

Fortunately, his children were accustomed to the presence of guards and did not remain bothered by their presence.

Their attention had been stolen by the free-for-all matches!

"Wow, look at those mechs chasing after that poor rifleman mech!" Marvaine exclaimed. "Half of them got crushed after they got lured into a landslide!"

Ves directed his attention to one of the projections. A free mercenary mech pilot called Jason Ridholm had chosen to pilot a rifleman mech, which normally did not do so well during these kinds of matches. Ranged mechs were simply too vulnerable against attacks up close.

However, it looked like Jason had a plan coming into this tournament. He attracted the attention of enemy melee mechs and lured them into terrain traps. If he was lucky, he could even force his pursuers together and cause them to fight among themselves!

This granted Ridholm's mech an easy opportunity to take potshots at the distracted melee mechs.

Ves looked increasingly more impressed at how Ridholm managed to fell five mechs through this fashion. The mono-colored generic mechs of his competitors all cracked and collapsed as they succumbed to the physical rounds fired by a gauss rifle.

As an experienced mech designer, he could judge that Ridholm likely piloted a highly mobile rifleman mech. They were some of the riskiest mechs to pilot as they constantly danced at the edge of danger.

Andraste looked impressed as well. "I don't really like marksmanship, but even I can tell that he is good. His mech is not only firing its rifle while it is on the move, but the rounds often strike the holes in the armor of his target. He's so accurate!"

The hit rate was only around 30 percent, but that was already an impressive feat when both sides were on the move!

Just as Jason Ridholm's rifleman mech started to kite a sixth melee mech, an unexpected calamity struck.

The hilly alien landscape where this fight took place abruptly transformed into a soggy swamp region.

The terrain randomizer had struck again!

According to the rules, any piece of terrain in the virtual battlefield would transform into other forms of terrain on a completely random basis!

Flat plains of land could turn into snow-covered mountain tops where mechs found it difficult to find solid footing.

Active volcanoes where lava oozed on the ground could turn into dense alien jungles that were filled with trees that were powerful enough to resist mech attacks.

Jason Ridholm had taken advantage of this once when his targets got caught in an inconvenient transition, but now the appearance of a deep and festering swamp had screwed him over!

The mech pilot did not give up. His rifleman mech tried to traverse through the muddy and wet terrain as fast as possible, but it was a pity that the legs of his slender ranged mech weren't as strong as the ones of his pursuer.

The generic axeman mech relied considerably more on raw power than speed to defeat its opponents. This meant that all of its limbs possessed more mechanical power, which came in really handy as it was able to power through the swamp with much greater efficiency.

In the end, the axeman mech resisted the handful of gaus rounds that struck its left leg and chopped up the rifleman mech with a flurry of axe strikes!

"Awww!"

"That's not fair!"

Jason Ridholm may have been downed, but he was not yet out of the fight.

In another part of the expansive virtual battlefield, an identical rifleman mech respawned after a short delay.

The mech pilot's score had dropped from 5 to 4, which didn't really sound like an awful penalty.

The true cost of defeat soon became evident as Jason Ridholm commanded his rifleman mech to move forward.

Most people wouldn't be able to tell the difference, but Ves minutely narrowed his eyes as he observed how Ridholm's mech did not perform as well as before.

All of the technical parameters of his machine had dropped by exactly 5 percent. Only a couple of parameters such as sensor range and traversal speed had remained unaffected.

The penalty of getting killed would become more severe after every subsequent death.

In the beginning, the differences between the thousands of mechs stranded in the giant virtual battlefield would remain small and unnoticeable.

The differences only truly kicked in after lots of weaker and less skilled mech pilots suffered several defeats in a row.

When the performance of their mechs dropped by over 20 percent, their odds of winning against an undefeated mech had dropped by a drastic degree!

"Look at that unlucky swordsman mech pilot. He got beaten 9 times in a row!" Marvaine pointed at one of the projections.

A pilot by the name of Dick Rainier clearly had no business signing up to the Davute Star Tournament. He lost virtually every encounter while his chances of making a comeback faded away.

His points remained stuck at 0 while the outward appearance of his mech looked more worn and aged in order to reflect its heavily decayed performance.

The more worn his mech looked, the more other competitors hunted it down due to how easy it would be to earn another point!

Ves winced as a rifleman mech armed with a laser rifle managed to punch through the rear armor of Dick Rainier's swordsman mech with just a single well-aimed shot!

"Oh? It looks like he has finally wised up. Do you see what he is doing? He is grouping up with other weaker mech pilots. While they certainly don't trust each other, they all recognize that their only chances of making it through the next qualification round is to seek strength in numbers. Even if their chances of earning points is miniscule, they only have to collect enough of them to make it through the next qualification round."

The rules were set up in a way to encourage weaker mech pilots to group up with each other.

People like Dick Rainier whose mechs performed so poorly that it looked as if they were 200 years out of date had no other choice!

After over 30 penalized ranged mechs formed a hunting group, they set out and began to assault any other mech that were by themselves!

The mob of worn mechs did not even have to close the distance. They only had to point their guns in the right direction and open fire, causing their target mech in question to be peppered by so many attacks that its armor buckled due to the quantity of attacks hitting its exposed frame!

After this initial success, the ranged mech pilots gained more confidence and started to hunt down other lone mechs.

Even though this formation encountered other formidable groups of worn mechs, their pilots tacitly avoided each other so that they could hunt easier marks.

"That's not fair!" Andraste repeated again as she saw that more and more loser mechs started to use dishonorable tactics to defeat their betters.

"Nothing is fair on the battlefield, honey." Ves said as he held her against his body. "This qualification round doesn't merely test the mech pilots on their piloting skills. They are also being challenged on their ability to show humility and their ability to group up with other like-minded mech pilots."

Just as predicted, the lone wolves who previously got by on their own due to their superior skills experienced the limitations of tackling mobs of weaker mechs.

The generic mechs they piloted did not grant them the possibility of overpowering their adversaries anymore! Their designs were just too bland to give them the leeway they needed.

The only other option to preserve their points as well as the remaining performance of their machines was to group up themselves!

More and more survivor mechs whose exteriors barely looked affected by age started to band together.

Once this change took place, the weaker mechs started to suffer again!

Dick Rainier and his compatriots were no exception. While his growing group of worn ranged mechs managed to annihilate smaller groups of opponents with ease, it quickly became disarrayed when two squads of melee mechs charged the rifleman mech formation from opposite directions!

"They're attacking our left flanks and our right flanks!"

"Split up and lead these melee mechs away!"

"We should have added melee mechs to our group in order to guard against this very possibility!"

"We already tried, remember? None of the melee mech pilots agreed because they wouldn't be able to earn any points."

"We're getting hacked apart!"

Even though a number of the charging melee mechs succumbed to the withering fire, enough of them managed to close the gap before they started their feast!

All of the surviving melee mechs started collecting points in rapid succession as their swords, axes, spears and other melee armaments cleaved through the weakened armor of their opponents with contemptuous ease!

The morale of the ranged mech pilots dropped. They had no way of getting away, so instead of trying to defeat the tough and resilient melee mechs, they instead turned their guns against each other!

"Arrgh! You traitor! I saved you just a few minutes ago, remember?!"

"Hah, you're saying that while the gun of your mech was already turning in my direction. You're just upset that I killed you first!"

This entire section of the battlefield turned into absolute chaos as every sense of teamwork had melted away.

It wasn't just the ranged mechs that turned against each other. The melee mechs that were beginning to run out of easy prey spontaneously targeted their former teammates as their mech pilots had become too hot-blooded to restrain themselves!

"Stupid." Ves shook his head. "Many of them will lose their points because their mechs either got defeated or because they have lost the protection of their group."

What happened next to the survivors of this confused melee matched his predictions. Each of them got picked off by the mech pilots who were still smart enough to stick to their own groups.

The mayhem continued and the crowd regularly went wild as one drama took place after another.

By the time the first round had ended, virtually no mech pilots had managed to avoid getting killed!

#### Chapter 4840 The Struggling Prodigy

Lanie Larkinson gritted her virtual teeth as her body slammed in the cockpit of her virtual mech.

"This stupid competition mech is holding me back!"

Despite the fact that she trained with the generic mech models within the MSTS for several weeks, she could never quite get used to average performance of these machines.

Each of them were designed to the standard of a second-class budget mech. That was already bad enough for a Larkinson mech pilot that had long been accustomed to piloting premium mechs designed in-house.

What was worse was that the mechs seemed to be deliberately designed to hinder skilled mech pilots. Their reaction speed was lower than average and their range of motion was... disappointing.

In case of the swordsman mech model that she currently made use of, the high mobility and high skill-based swordsmanship that the Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders favored became a lot more constrained.

Lanie had tried to adapt to these limitations during the simulation training by imagining that she was piloting a mech that was weighed down by a lot of extra mass, but trying to fight like this in a chaotic free-for-all was much more difficult than she expected.

Not only did she have to take weird terrain changes into account, she also had to be on guard against many different attackers!

"Ahhhh! Just die!" The young Larkinson mech pilot roared!

The sword in the hand of her generic swordsman mech model finally struck the spearman mech that tried to entangle her own machine. The blade sliced through the damaged frontal armor of the opposing machine and breached the cockpit, thereby killing the virtual mech pilot residing within!

Boom!

Unfortunately, Lanie's damaged and weakened swordsman mech had no means to defend against the attacks from an opportunistic rifleman mech.

Boom!

Her second opponent did not give Lanie the decency of fighting a fair duel and readily took advantage of her swordsman mech's preoccupation to strike at its vulnerable rear armor!

BOOM!

After beating numerous mechs and fending off multiple strong attacks, the swordsman mech truly couldn't take much more damage.

The mediocre design of the tournament mechs also extended to their internal architecture. So long as the mechs suffered any significant internal damage, their performance almost always dropped as a result!

"Move, damnit!"

Lanie didn't even have the luxury of working together with a living mech.

She along with many other Larkinsons had been spoiled by living mechs and the ability to continue to train with their battle partners through the MSTS rather than a conventional virtual training program.

Although Lanie had spent the previous weeks reacclimating herself to piloting lifeless mechs, it was only when she was put in a battle with real stakes that she truly became frustrated by the absence of a second opinion!

BOOOM!

Her crippled swordsman mech finally couldn't take it any longer. The final ranged attack had burst too many critical components and caused her virtual mech to finally lose all of its power!

Lanie's mind blanked out for a bit as darkness surrounded her senses.

[Points: 3

Deaths: 2

Rank: 87,534]

"Ugh. Forget about getting into the top 1000. I won't be able to qualify for the next round at this rate!"

She regretted her decision to accept Commander Melkor's suggestion by signing up for the Davute Star Tournament.

The Rising Prodigy Tournament that she previously considered was much more friendly towards younger mech pilots. The competition format was more structured and depended a lot less on luck and other skills.

The first round of the current tournament was much different!

Lanie along with every other participant had been thrown into a giant sandbox where they had to fight under rules that no ordinary mech pilot had ever trained in beforehand!

The battles here were much different from the more formal military engagements that she was accustomed to. Without any solid friendlies or support from the rear to back her up, she had no choice but to fend for herself, not even being able to trust any of the temporary allies that she might find!

Her swordsman mech finally respawned. One mercy granted by the tournament was that the newly emerged mechs never showed up in close proximity to other competitors.

That might change in any minute, so Lanie immediately urged her swordsman mech to move away. Her expression darkened. "Ten percent drop..."

The difference in performance compared to when she just started out was not that obvious at this time. Her swordsman mech moved just as fast as before, but as it began to draw out its blade and swung the weapon in different ways, the sword techniques no longer possessed the fluidity of before.

The swordsman mech fought as if it hadn't been adequately maintained. Rust and other marks of corrosion had not yet overtly ruined its appearance, but it definitely looked a lot more tired than before!

Lanie snarled. "This is getting dangerous. I need to team up with another friendly pilot."

She wished that she could meet with another competitor from the Larkinson Clan, but the chances that she could meet with fellow clansmen during these gigantic qualifying rounds was miniscule!

Since linking up with friendly Larkinsons was out of the question, she instead sought to make friends with another participant.

After trudging through a desert-like landscape that played hell with the footing of her machine, the swordsman mech finally detected the approach of another mech.

The new machine turned out to be a swordsman mech like her own!

Unlike the red coating that Lanie had selected for her own machine, the opposing swordsman mech was coated in pristine white.

"Hey!" Lanie broadcasted in the open. "Truce, please! Can we stop and explore the possibility of teaming up? We can earn a lot more points by joining forces."

"I don't need to team up with a loser!" An older female mech pilot angrily responded. "Give me a point!"

The white swordsman mech continued to charge forward while raising its sword to launch a devastating strike!

Lanie snarled and cursed her opponent's unreasonable conduct. Her red swordsman mech barely managed to jump out of the way of the sword attack!

"Fine! If a fight is what you want, then bring it on, woman!"

Red and white clashed against each other as the two swordsman mech entered a classic sword duel.

While Lanie and the unfamiliar female mech pilot both had to keep their eyes open for unexpected terrain changes and ambush attacks from third parties, they still put most of their focus on winning their duel!

Lanie couldn't help but adopt a savage grin as she was able to experience a real sword duel against a competent but unknown mech pilot.

"Fall already!"

"Hah! Keep dreaming, granny!"

"I'm not that old!"

Her opponent was good. Lanie had fought and sparred against plenty of veterans and could immediately recognize that her current adversary had been piloting mechs for several decades.

Even though the enemy veteran mech pilot clearly possessed much less practice and familiarity with this specific swordsman mech model, her rich experience and solid repertoire of sword techniques made it difficult to break her guard.

It was because of this foundation that the older female mech pilot had yet to suffer a loss!

That was bad news for Lanie because her swordsman mech performed 10 percent worse in almost every aspect.

This difference sounded marginal, but in a duel between two skilled mech pilots, Lanie's chances of winning this bout had dropped to just 20 percent or less because of this disparity!

"Haha! Go to sleep, young lady. This tournament is not for you!" The older pilot taunted as her assault became more ferocious!

Lanie felt more aggrieved as her swordsman mech incurred more cut marks on its exterior. Its lower reaction speed and inferior mechanical strength caused the red machine to fail in blocking every incoming attack.

Her mech also couldn't retaliate as effectively as the opposing machine was simply strong and fast enough to prevent these counterattacks from producing any useful results.

Though Lanie tried to compensate for the differences in performance by relying on the skills she practiced and honed through her training in the mech academy and subsequently her service in the Larkinson Army, all of the fancy swordsmanship techniques she learned or developed on her own turned out to be invalid or ineffective!

Instead, the more basic but unpretentious sword style mastered by her opponent produced consistently better results!

Lanie already understood that while a basic sword style might not be able to produce miracles on the battlefield, it fit remarkably well with the characteristics of a lower-performing mech!

Once Lanie accepted the fact that more elaborate sword styles could not help her make the most out of her inferior swordsman mech, she reverted to a basic sword style that she learned in her academy days and tried to beat her opponent at her own game.



It was a pity that her youthful reflexes and greater gumption did not grant her any advantages against a seasoned veteran that also possessed a bit of talent herself!

Slice!

One of the arms of Lanie's swordsman mech suffered a nasty blow as the white swordsman mech succeeded in its strike!

In turn, Lanie's swordsman mech managed to thrust its own sword into the armor of the opposing machine, but the abrupt loss of a limb had reduced more of the force behind this blow!

Bang!

Lanie grunted in surprise as the enemy machine had lashed out with a foot and kicked her own mech away!

"Hah! You're too young to beat me in a brawl!" The veteran mech pilot chuckled in amusement. "Now give me your point so that I can move on. This duel has gone long enough!"

Yet just before the white swordsman mech could take advantage of the red machine's unbalanced state, the environment around them abruptly changed!

Lanie desperately sought to stabilize the footing of her staggered machine. Her awareness immediately focused on observing what had changed.

The desert, the sand and the scorching sun had disappeared.

A lifeless rocky landscape took its place. Not only had the footing become more solid, but the gravity had increased to 3.4 g!

"Agh! What is this?!"

The pressure exerted onto the virtual swordsman mechs as well as the virtual pilots had multiplied by several times!

Not only had the two machines slowed down to a crawl, but the pilots themselves experienced considerable physical discomfort that the cockpits of their mechs belatedly compensated.

Once pilots no longer experienced the increased weight that only dwarves could comfortably endure, both women scrambled to defeat each other!

"I don't have time to play with you anymore!"

The white swordsman mech attempted to land a chop that took advantage of the heavy gravity, but the veteran mech pilot clearly did not have much experience in fighting under these circumstances.

Not only did her mech miss her strike, the machine also overshot its attack and caused it to lean forward a bit further than was wise.

Lanie meanwhile adapted better to the new circumstances. She pulled her mech aside as much as possible and waited until her opponent overextended.

Once this happened, her red swordsman mech stepped forward and dropped its weapon to free both arms!

"Fall!"

The young Larkinson mech pilot utilized her varied training and employed a basic wrestling technique to force the unbalanced enemy mech into tipping over!

Thud!

The fall inflicted extra damage to the white swordsman mech due to the heavy gravity. What was even better was that it struggled to get back up to its feet!

In the end, Lanie grinned as her swordsman mech stepped onto the opposing machine and crushed enough important components to earn herself another point!

"You don't deserve to get beaten by my sword." She grumbled.

Her red swordsman mech carefully bent down to pick up the intact sword of her defeated foe.

Having piloted Lucid Rage before, Lanie had become highly proficient in the art of dual wielding.

"Two swords should do the trick." She affirmed.