

## The Mech 4881

### Chapter 4881 Jocasta Clive

As Ves continued to chat with Jocasta Clive, he became increasingly more confused by what she actually knew about him and his contentious relationship with Davute.

It did not sound as if she was anywhere close to the core decision making structure of the Clive Consortium.

However, Ves did not believe that Jocasta was as ignorant and 'naive' as she sounded. He could always sense a subtle air of calculation and utilitarianism around her. She did not engage him in conversation for trivial reasons. She talked with him because it was a worthwhile activity in her opinion.

Still, after talking with Jocasta a bit further about topics pertaining to the tournament as well as Davute as a whole, Ves figured that she was primarily a mech designer who did not spend much time on other matters.

This should not be a surprise. Any mech designer that became too distracted by mundane matters would not be able to channel sufficient passion and interest in their work. It was highly unlikely for descendants from rich and powerful organizations to make it far in their mech design careers if they became too entangled in their family businesses.

His wife Gloriana was the same. She had spent much of her time since she was young on learning how to design mechs. Even if she received lessons about the Wodin Dynasty, there was never any heavy expectation that she would take up any major responsibilities within her family organization. Her mother and her other relatives understood that she needed to pursue her passion without too many restraints in order to maximize her success.

Once he realized this, he briefly turned his attention to himself.

There was no doubt that Ves had already become heavily entangled in the clan that he had founded through his own efforts. He fueled its growth and continued to set a lot of policies and standards that had profound effects on the lives of a growing number of Larkinsons.

While he definitely gained a lot of satisfaction with seeing his homegrown organization swell to greater heights, he also could not help but recognize that he had taken more time off his design schedule than he should.

Had he truly gone too far and let all of his responsibilities drag down his work?

Ves didn't entirely think so. The time he spent on managing and growing his clan was not entirely unrelated to his mech design work. A stronger and wealthier clan provided him with much greater support than one that was hollow and lacking in resources.

Many Journeymen who attended the afterparty enjoyed much less support compared to the likes of Ves. They lacked the funding, the manpower, the facilities and the connections to freely engage in research and design their mechs.

It was not that easy to become a successful mech designer. Ves had successfully built up a prosperous organization around him that liberated him from all sorts of mundane concerns that restricted him in the past.

That made him feel a lot better about himself.

He was different from the travelers who came from afar and had no means of starting up an independent business in a highly competitive mech industry.

He was also different from the likes of Jocasta Clive who had access to a huge amount of resources but also became beholden to their family organizations.

In any case, as Ves grew more familiar with Jocasta Clive, he no longer found her worthy of suspicion.

"Where will you work in the future?" He curiously asked. "Has the Clive Consortium made any special arrangements?"

Jocasta smiled. "I have numerous options that I can choose from. Given my prior work at numerous classified research facilities, I can continue my work on important and strategic projects, though I will not have much opportunity to work on my own mech designs. It is a great honor to work for the Seniors and Masters that have earned the trust and approval of our colonial state. They have taught me much, though evidently not enough seeing that I have only been able to attain third place in this tournament."

This was a sector in the mech industry that Ves was not familiar with. His past experiences in the Bright Republic were hardly representative to the much more impressive research facilities owned by a second-rate colonial state.

"It sounds as if you do not think you want to persist in this kind of work." Ves observed.

"I would much rather follow your example and start my own business, but..." Jocasta trailed off her words.

There was no need for the two of them to talk about the many challenges of going independent.

"What can you do, then?"

"I have received an invitation from Master Elroy to become a teaching assistant and junior researcher at the Davute University of Technology." Jocasta Clive regained her proud smile again.

"My work and my ranking has caught the eye of the professors of this institution. I can climb the academic track if I wish as long as I accept this invitation."

Academic mech designers spent far more time on research and experimentation than on designing mechs for the market. They also had the opportunity to work with numerous affiliated mech companies to incorporate new technologies into nextgen mech designs.

If Ves already hadn't achieved a lot of success in the commercial mech market, then he would have probably made for a good academic mech designer. He possessed the drive to push the boundaries of knowledge and investigate all kinds of interesting new ideas.

However, academics who were bound by a mech design university also had to follow the rules and the arrangements of that very same institution. Ves could not stand other people dictating what he should work on. He found it even less acceptable for him to become dependent on sources of funding that were outside of his control.

He looked carefully at Jocasta.

"If the DUT extended an invitation to you, then you would probably make for a good academician. Is that truly what you seek in your life?"

The female mech designer lowered her head for a bit. "In all honesty, I do not think I can reach my full potential if I work in a highly structured and regulated work environment of a top research institution. I would not be able to gain enough opportunities to engage in my personal projects. I will mainly be tasked with working on the projects of other, more accomplished mech designers. I can learn much from them, but there comes a point where you have spent enough years witnessing other mech designers design impressive mechs. You instead start to experience the growing desire to cut loose and focus on your own work while you still can. I am afraid that I have reached this tipping point."

It took a moment for Ves to recall her information and understand her plight.

Jocasta Clive was 51 years old. She was not particularly old compared to all of the geezers who were born during the closing years of the Age of Conquest and still managed to cling to life somehow.

However, Jocasta still dedicated more than her entire years as a child and a student in many different assisting positions. If she continued to work in a similar capacity for twenty or thirty more years, it would be much harder for her to break her habits and flourish in a more independent capacity!

"I have heard that you treat your lead designers well." Jocasta suddenly said without any forewarning. She smiled at him as she sipped her glass of wine. "Since you are a Journeyman, you sympathize and understand the plight of your fellow peers much better than the Seniors and the Masters who are detached from us. I heard that you even allow your Journeymen to propose and lead their own mech design projects, is that correct?"

"That is correct." Juliet confirmed. She had been standing besides Ves all the time, though she felt no need to interject until now. "Our patriarch trusts us to contribute to our clan in our own ways. That has worked out well enough for us so far, though I cannot say whether I can say the same a few decades later."

"Our clan is a family." Ves emphasized. "As long as any mech designer rises from the ranks of our Apprentices or as long as they have passed our strict entry tests, a Journeyman is worthy of our trust. While we still have several monitoring mechanisms in place to make sure that our lead designers aren't squandering our resources in vain, they can do whatever they want as long as they remain productive."

"That is remarkably trusting of you, sir. How are you able to keep it all together?"

"My clan is nothing like other organizations." Ves confidently smirked. "You really won't be able to understand what that means unless you actually join us. If you become a loyal and committed Larkinson, you wouldn't have any thoughts about leeching from our clan. In any case, I will just kick out anyone who hasn't been doing anything useful without a valid reason."

"I see." Jocasta said with increasing interest in her voice. "I assume you have gained a good understanding of my design abilities. Do you think I would be a useful addition to your Design Department?"

"..."

"..."

"Is there anything amiss, patriarch?"

Ves blinked a few times. "Uhm, you're from the Clive Consortium, right? Shouldn't you be looking for employment in Davute?"

"I am a Journeyman." The woman responded with a rueful smile. "If you have a better understanding of our consortium, you will understand how little that truly means. The only Clives whose entire lives are arranged in advance are the direct descendants of our most prominent leadership figures. A relatively unremarkable descendant such as myself enjoys much greater permissions. Transferring to your Larkinson Clan is not forbidden, especially if doing so is helpful to my career. The Clive Consortium would rather obtain a descendant that has become a Master while working in another organization than to stay at home and remain stuck as a Journeyman."

That sounded pretty cold to Ves, but that was how large organizations operated in human space.

Ves nonetheless frowned. "I am afraid we cannot fulfill your request, madame. I respect your ability as a mech designer and value your expertise on kinetic weapons. However, I have already explained to numerous other mech designers that joining our clan is a permanent decision. We strongly insist that every recruit retire all of their existing oaths and loyalties. This is because joining our clan means becoming a member of our family. Do you understand?"

"I... think I do, patriarch. Still, this is not an insurmountable problem. If I am able to gain permission from my elders to join your clan on a permanent basis, will you allow my entry? The Clive Consortium already has a history of sending away its descendants to the Mech Trade Association and other groups in the context of arranged marriages."

Ves frowned in thought. That sounded similar to his relationship with Gloriana, so it was not an outlandish idea.

He still felt deeply reluctant to recruit any individual called Clive, especially in a capacity as sensitive and important as a lead designer!

Though he wanted to say no to her outright, he didn't think it was appropriate for him to do so. Jocasta sounded earnest enough and she wasn't to blame for the many missteps of Davute.

"I need to think about it." Ves said in a noncommittal tone. "You also need to get in touch with your elders to figure out what you can do from your end."

The woman looked pleased. "Very well. We shall do that then. You should hear from me within the week."

Once Jocasta Clive finally bid goodbye and went off to chat with other Journeymen, Juliet slowly turned towards Ves.

"Are you being serious, sir? Are you seriously thinking about letting a Clive join our Design Department?"

"Relax." Ves told her. "She's just a mech designer."

"She's a Clive!"

## Chapter 4882 Lanie's Tournament Run

The Twin Weapons Tournament had come to a conclusion, and so did the founding festival.

The celebration was a smashing success. It not only wiped away the fear and pessimism that hung over the Colonial Federation of Davute ever since the founding ceremony got spoiled, but also instilled new hope into the hearts of its citizens!

Many mech pilots, mech designers, warriors and other talents showcased their strength and ability during the last seven days. Many new citizens and foreign travelers managed to stand out from the crowd and turn into heroes overnight.

The Larkinson Clan also managed to distinguish itself a few times. While its mech pilots hadn't been able to live up to certain people's overinflated expectations, a few of them still managed to attain higher rankings, though none of them managed to win any championships in any truly important tournaments.

For example, Lanie Larkinson came away satisfied after she ended her difficult run in the Davute Star Tournament.

Out of the hundreds of thousands of mech pilots that competed in the Davute Star Tournament, she managed to persist in the first couple of days as the insanely brutal qualifying rounds tested the skills and the versatility of every pilot!

Nonetheless, the few thousands of pilots that managed to make it through all of these cruel tests managed to convince everyone that they truly deserved to fight on the main stages!

Though Lanie failed to perform well during the free-for-alls and other chaotic rounds, it didn't really matter. She only needed to attain a passing score in order to advance through the tournament.

It wasn't until the matches turned into more traditional 1-on-1 mech duels that Lanie truly had a chance to get in her element again!

Due to the number of competitors that remained, she still had to fight dozens of different opponents in virtual mech duels before she could subsequently demonstrate her strength in reality!

Those were the most glorious matches of her life. She fought opponents ranging from highly regarded military mech pilots to a trusted retainer hailing from the household troops of a visiting aristocrat.

Each of these elite pilots who managed to rely on their skills to make it through the same brutal rounds all possessed their own individual advantages! Each of them were much different than the Larkinson mech pilots that she sparred on a regular basis. Defeating them became progressively more difficult, but Lanie always felt more and more fulfilled with each opponent she subdued by relying on her martial ability alone.

What gratified her even more was the support of the millions of people who entered the Clive Arena!

"Lanie! Lanie! Lanie!"

"Larkinsons are the best!"

"Go kick their butts, little girl!"

The further she advanced through the rounds, the more her relative youth and incredible skills stood out. She fought in a manner that spoke of skill, discipline, precision and above all else actual combat experience.

Lanie was not some sort of professional athlete that lacked the determination to kill. She always fought all-out and did not hesitate to perform killing moves. She also didn't flinch away whenever her opponents sought to deter her by pulling off their own killing moves.

In any case, the Clive Arena incorporated the latest advancements in transphasic shielding technology. There was no way the relatively basic tournament mechs could ever punch through the ultra-resilient protective barriers generated by starship-grade transphasic shield generators!

It wasn't just her fighting skills that allowed her to overcome her opponents. She also trained hard with the tournament mech models with the help of the MSTs. This granted her a small but subtle advantage as she had managed to master her swordsman mech better than any other pilot taking part in this prestigious competition!

Unfortunately, all dreams had to come to an end.

Lanie did not know how many matches she had fought already. She only knew that she had made it quite far during the elimination rounds, where only a single defeat would spell the end of her participation.

Her opponent happened to bear a familiar name.

[Lanie Larkinson vs Oliver Clive]

Compared to a youthful face that looked as if she had just stepped out of the mech academy, Oliver Clive looked like a grizzled veteran mech pilot who had lived through at least two full-blown wars!

His entire demeanor conveyed restrained aggression and it looked as if he treated every other mech pilot in the tournament with contempt!

It wasn't until Lanie fought against the opposing mech pilot that she understood what she was truly dealing with! Oliver Clive was not an ordinary elite veteran mech pilot.

He was a monster!

Amidst the loud and continuous roars and cheers, a section of the Clive Arena turned into a contested field as the swordsman mech piloted by Lanie immediately went on the backfoot as it became pressured by the spearman mech piloted by the descendant hailing from the Clive Consortium!

"Go get him, Lanie!"

"I believe in you, Lanie!"

"No stinking men should lay a hand on a fair lady!"

The crowd overwhelmingly supported the younger and prettier tournament participant, but their shouting had no effect on the thrilling match.

It took everything Lanie had to fend off the fast and powerful spear thrusts of the opposing mech.

As a man whose last name was Clive, Oliver's martial skills were stellar among second-class mech pilots. The decades he spent on performing his duties allowed him to hone his skills and develop a spear style that completely matched his own temperament.

Even his augmentations were superior! His cranial implant could process so much data that Oliver could catch almost every detail that could play a role in the fight.

If that was not enough, his understanding and mastery of the tournament spearman mech was also not inferior to that of Lanie. He even performed moves that suggested he knew even more.

She had the illusion that Oliver understood all of the tournament mechs as if he had practiced with each of them for multiple months!

This was not enough to cause Lanie to feel distressed. She might not be able to pilot her favorite living mechs, but she had never lost confidence in her skills, many of which she originally inherited from an expert candidate through an experimental process!

Yet no matter how refined she could fight, she was ultimately a mech pilot in her twenties. She may have fought in numerous major battles, but these made up for a relatively small proportion of her life.

Oliver Clive was much different! He had already spent over half of his life as a mech pilot! He took part in several campaigns. As a major organization rooted in the old galaxy, the Clive Consortium may not outright be at war with anyone, but it still got dragged in numerous different shadow conflicts and territorial disputes as many different rivals and competitors sought to inhibit its growth!

Perhaps these secret wars were simply a matter of business to the people at the top, but the mech pilots who fought in the trenches regularly experienced brutality that represented the true darkness of human prosperity!

As a veteran and a survivor of these conflicts, Oliver Clive brought a quality to the battlefield that Lanie could not possibly master due to her relative youth and inexperience. It was a quality that talent and prodigious skills simply couldn't replicate.

Oliver's instincts had been honed through so many life-and-death battles that it had reached a beastly level!

Whenever Lanie sought to feint her opponent and strike at the spearman mech up close, Oliver seemed to detect the scheme in advance and laid a trap that caused her to suffer!

Instances like this happened over and over again, causing Lanie to feel increasingly more doubtful about her competence.

Wasn't she supposed to be a champion?

Shouldn't she have approached the limit of an ordinary mech pilot?

Why was her intuition not as good as that of Oliver Clive?

The more her attempts to strike at Oliver's mech failed, the more Lanie understood how much she was lacking compared to the likes of Oliver Clive!

It couldn't be helped. The Larkinson Clan may have grown strong in a remarkably short amount of time, but much of its basis in strength rested on the quality and design characteristics of their living mechs.

As far as mech pilots were concerned, their training was excellent, but few of them had received so much tempering in wars. The recruiting standards of the clan was heavily biased towards younger mech pilots who demonstrated plenty of growth potential. The clan generally refused to hire old dogs because they were too stubborn and set in their ways to fully adapt to the ideals and customs of the Larkinsons.

In other words, the Larkinson Clan was lacking in beasts!

Ultimately, the swordsman mech piloted by Lanie received far too many puncturing holes while the spearman mech piloted by Oliver Clive only received a few shallow slash marks in return.

[Lanie Larkinson... has been defeated! Oliver Clive shall advance to the next round.]

"Nooo!"

"Our beautiful goddess has fallen!"

"Larkinsons aren't supposed to lose!"

While many different fans and spectators lamented her loss, Lanie ultimately became satisfied with all of the experiences she had gained from fighting so many different strong opponents.

She ultimately ended her run in the Davute Star Tournament by attaining 164th place.

This might not sound impressive in a smaller competition, but it was absolutely respectable given how many opponents she had to beat in order to make it this far!

Pretty much everyone who attained a higher ranking was simply better than her. None of the competing mech pilots were below 35 years old, and many of them had at least two decades of active service under their belt!

Lanie could not accept the notion that she got beaten due to her skills, but she was okay with losing due to lacking in experience and other intangible factors.

Melkor greeted her once she left the boisterous Clive Arena with a silver star-shaped trophy in her hands.

"You did well, girl." The Avatar Commander smiled as he patted her weary shoulder. "It doesn't matter if you end up in the top 200 or top 2000. Your true gains are much greater than that. Do you understand?"

Lanie nodded her head. "I do. I never realized how many different kinds of strong mech pilots existed. I started to take my superior skills for granted and ignored how others were able to develop their combat strength."

"Our clan is still too young." Commander Melkor sighed. "While I have tried my best to nurture the Avatars of Myth into an elite mech force, it will take a lifetime for my men to reach the desired standards. You cannot buy this kind of progress with money or technology. Only time and effort can make the difference. Even you have to abide by this rule."

The restlessness and impatience in Lanie's heart had subsided a bit after hearing his words. His ideas happened to align with her own notions.

"Maybe... I still need to hone myself further." Lanie guessed. "I have been working so hard to advance to the rank of expert candidate that I never really stopped and asked myself whether I am in the best state to do so. While I don't want to spend more time than is necessary as an ordinary mech pilot, if I can't beat the likes of Oliver Clive at my current level, I do not feel I deserve what comes next."

"There are more variables at play than that. Don't forget that Oliver Clive's augmentation package is simply better in every way. He's a designer baby who received one gift after another during his childhood. The Clive Consortium must have pumped tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of MTA credits in his growth trajectory, and that is just a conservative estimate. You on the other hand received much fewer benefits but managed to grow so strong at half of his age. There is no reason for you to feel inferior at all, Lanie."

Though she understood her reasoning, all of them sounded like empty excuses to Lanie. The fact of the matter was that she was still not strong enough.

"Maybe I need to look into getting better augmentations..."

#### Chapter 4883 A Simple Investigation

Although Lanie Larkinson only reached 164th place in the Davute Star Tournament, the Larkinson Clan was already pleased with the performance of other champions.

There was no suspense about Ketis. She unquestionably became the undisputed champion of the Ultimate Warrior Tournament. Other Swordmaidens and Heavensworders also attained high rankings, but there was no one who dazzled the audience more than the only swordmaster in their midst!

To be honest, Ketis was disappointed by the caliber of opponents she fought against. She held a certain expectation of meeting other extraordinary warriors.

Human space was enormous. A lot of different heritages had formed over the millenia and it was not outlandish to think that there were more unusual fighting methods than traditional swordsmanship.

Unfortunately for Ketis, no warrior had come up to her and tried to pummel her with fists of steel or axes that could cut through the fabric of space.

As long as she held a sword, even if it was just a practice blade that was deliberately blunted in order to prevent fatal injuries, there was no human warrior that could stand against her might!

It had only been a week since she had wielded the legendary Heavensword and slaughtered over a thousand pescan soldiers. How could these ordinary mortal champions possibly stand a chance against her transcendent might?

Ketis even tried to make the fights more thrilling for herself by completely suppressing the enhancements bestowed by Sharpie, but even then her transhuman physique and limit-breaking swordsmanship were too much for others to bear!

This completely robbed her of any satisfaction and sense of accomplishment for winning the tournament.

Of course, she did not show her true feelings to anyone. She was conscientious enough to look pleased and enthusiastic for being able to vanquish over many powerful opponents, many of whom dedicated even more lives to becoming the ultimate martial warriors. She had done her part to bring glory to the Larkinson Clan.

Once the Larkinsons returned to the Cat Nest with their new trophies and prizes in their hands, the festive atmosphere brought by the founding festival slowly came to an end.

The Davutans had already partied long enough. They needed to get back to reality and restart their old lives, though much had changed in the past two weeks.

For one, the formal establishment of the Colonial Federation of Davute had tied together a vast amount of people who previously treated each other as separate groups!

Even though a lot of trade and friendly exchanges had already taken place between the Davute System and the surrounding colonies, it was only now that the residents of both places truly came together as one people.

A lot of Davutans needed time in order to adjust to this mental shift. The colonial administration also had to implement a lot of legal and bureaucratic changes in order to fully integrate the outlying colonies in the same power structure as the colony of Davute.

Fortunately for the politicians and administrators involved, the governmental structure did not insist on pursuing too much centralization.

A federation was made up of many smaller territorial units. All of the colonies and provinces under the sway of Davute largely retained their existing ownership and governance structures. None of the founders who invested a lot of money and resources into building their own planets had to completely change their methods of ruling their colonies.

Perhaps Davute would slowly be able to lessen the differences between its main port system and every other star system within its borders, but that would probably take decades if not centuries.

None of that had anything to do with the Larkinson Clan.

Now that Ves and many other clansmen had done what they could to show off their strength, they needed to get back to their duties.

The Davute Branch under the leadership of General Ark Larkinson and Branch Director Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson continued to increase their cooperation with the remarkably accommodating institutions of the colonial government.

The main branch of the Larkinson Clan resumed its efforts to prepare for the resumption of the Trailblazer Expedition.

The clan invested a lot of effort into upgrading and refitting their starships. The clan was a lot wealthier and more endowed with resources than before. Even if there was a persistent shortage of orbital drydocks that could help with reinventing existing starships, the clan could still conduct a lot of basic internal work as well as EVA operations.

The Larkinson mech pilots went back to training and polishing their skills. Their tournament runs had broadened their horizons and helped many of them obtain crucial insights that could elevate their combat abilities to next level.

Ves meanwhile had to address a bunch of different issues that had been piling up on his desk during the founding festival.

For example, the MTA finally made contact with him after investigating the circumstances surrounding the Davute pocket space.

Surprisingly enough, the Association did not send a familiar to him this time. Ves expected to meet with the likes of Jovie Armalon or Master Vayro Goldstein of the Survivalist Faction.

If the Survivalists didn't come, then the MTA should at least send a member of the Transhumanist Faction such as Master Termaneo Dervidian.

Instead, the mechers only sent out a single investigator. The man wearing the uniform of the MTA might occupy a respectable rank, but he was not a mech designer or anyone tied to the true core power structures of his organization.

Ves didn't take the investigator seriously and just treated the interrogation session as a chore.

"We know that you have landed in a cell as soon as you and the people around you were pulled into the abandoned pocket space. How did you manage to leave your cell and appear in the corridors when all teleportation devices had become ineffective?"

Ves rolled his eyes as he sat on the opposite side of the table. "Trade secret."

"Can you be more detailed? We are aware that you carry one of our emergency single-use teleportation devices on your person, but they are not rated to overcome barriers at the level of the transphasic walls of the alien prison."

"As I said, it's a trade secret." Ves affirmed. "I have a right to remain silent and protect my secrets, especially if they are related to my mech design work."

"None of your mechs were pulled into the pocket space." The investigator stated.

"So? My answer will still reveal too much proprietary knowledge that will expose my methods. I do not think that the MTA has an inherent right to coerce other mech designers into coughing up their trade secrets. Who would want to work with your Association if people like you have a habit of stealing the hard work of others?"

The investigator could not press any further after this. He did not possess the authority or the mandate to press harder.

Perhaps the man would have been able to intimidate ordinary mech designers by using his exalted status as a member of the Association, but Ves had long lost his awe and worship towards the MTA.

The mechers were unquestionably powerful, but they were hardly united and fully aligned with each other. The MTA was so huge a lot of different political factions and interest groups divided all of the power and resources amongst themselves.

Ves hadn't figured out whether the investigator belonged to any notable faction or group within the MTA, but it appeared that he was just an ordinary schmuck who had been told to do a simple job without any special instructions.

His questions were annoying, though.

"Your subordinate Ketis wielded a remarkable glowing sword and unleashed power that is far in excess to that of a human. How was she able to defeat so many alien soldiers by herself?"

"What methods or tech did you employ to coerce the surviving leader of the pescan remnants to cease any further resistance?"

"What are your intentions with keeping the survivors of the pescan race alive and in captivity?"

"We have detected definite signs that a phase whale remained captive within the innermost cell of the alien prison for an indeterminate amount of years until recently. Do you happen to have any information or clues where this former captive alien can be found?"

Suffice to say, Ves tried his best to answer as vaguely and ambiguously as possible. Even if he knew what had happened, there was no way he would provide accurate and detailed information to the MTA for no good reason!

After Ves finally managed to live through an hours-long interrogation session, the investigator issued his final verdict after he submitted an electronic report.

"The Mech Trade Association appreciates what you have done to safeguard your fellow humans and foil the malicious plans of the indigenous alien population that managed to enter this ancient alien pocket space. However, we cannot extend you any claim towards the ownership of this pocket space and anything found inside. We have concluded negotiations with the Colonial Federation of Davute that fully recognizes their ownership of pocket space and the right to use it for their own purposes so long as we can supervise their activities."

"Okay." Ves simply answered.

He never really had any hopes that his attempts to claim partial ownership of the pocket space would succeed. The planet and star system belonged to the government, so it was only natural that its claims were the strongest.

The investigator smiled. "We can give you the reward that you deserve. Given your contributions in this action, our Association has decided to award you with 8 million MTA merits. We are also bestowing the Journeyman Mech Designer known as Ketis Larkinson with 2 million MTA merits. Do you have any comments or objections?"

That was it? Ves somehow expected more. Perhaps he had been far too spoiled with the hundreds of millions of MTA merits that he obtained during his previous adventures.

These days, a couple of million MTA merits was nothing to him. He wouldn't be able to exchange anything really good aside from interesting gadgets or access to knowledge related to more accessible high technologies.

Oh well.

"I have no objections."

"Very well, Patriarch Larkinson. This concludes our debriefing. Have a good day."

This entire session ended far too simply. Ves expected a lot more poking and prodding from the MTA, but he wouldn't look at a gift horse in the mouth.

"Maybe the mechers are preoccupied with far greater matters." He muttered.

It was no secret that the Big Two's warfleets continued to get stalled in the frontlines of the conquest of the Red Ocean.

While news of successful breakthroughs and territorial conquests continued to trickle down from time to time, the pace of expansion still remained awfully slow compared to the early years of the opening of the new frontier.

In any case, Ves threw all of these matters aside and tried his best to finish his remaining administrative duties.

"Once I have dealt with all of this stuff, I am going to throw myself into my design work." He told his wife over dinner. "I have harvested so much inspiration and ideas from the last couple of weeks that I cannot wait to adjust my existing projects and bring my visions to life. The Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project will definitely break a lot of ground! I can guarantee that you will be amazed with what you will see half a year later!"

Gloriana did not look enthused or interested for some reason. She kept circling her spoon in her soup bowl while pinning Ves with a stern expression.

"Ves?"

"Yes, honey?"

"What is this I hear about recruiting a female mech designer that goes by the name 'Jocasta Clive'?"

"Oh, that? I want to poach her from the Clive Consortium. I've interviewed her a bit and I think that she is a remarkably talented Journeyman Mech Designer who is being completely stifled by her current superiors. Don't you think it is a good idea to pull her into our clan so that she can design tons of powerful mechs armed with penetrating kinetic weapons?"

His wife began to scowl after hearing his answer.

Chapter 4884 Recruiting New Women

"NO MEANS NO, VES! I VETO THE RECRUITMENT OF JOCASTA CLIVE!"

"What?! Do you know what you're doing! You're throwing away an opportunity to recruit a talented and motivated Journeyman! Jocasta is not an average mech designer, you know! She has enjoyed the best mech design education that the Clive Consortium can offer. She has managed to advance to Journeyman many years ago and has made enough accumulations to start thinking about advancing to Senior. If we bring her over to our clan and allow her to flourish, I think we can provide her with the conditions to realize her design philosophy and advance to Master Mech Designer within a century. It's brilliant!"

"NO! I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU TO BRING THAT WOMAN INTO OUR CLAN, ESPECIALLY NOT A MEMBER OF THE CLIVE CONSORTIUM!"

Ves tried his best to convince his wife of the merits of recruiting Jocasta Clive. He truly believed that she was sincere enough towards starting anew in his clan, but Gloriana continued to remain stubborn about this issue.

"I am not the only mech designer who is skeptical about recruiting Jocasta Clive, Ves!" Gloriana hissed as she vented her anger to an extent. "Juliet has informed all our fellow Journeymen about your ideas. Do you know how they responded to your notion?"

"Uhhh..."

"Ketis said 'no way'. The Voiken siblings shook their heads. The Power Pair said that our clan shouldn't host anyone named Clive. Miles Tovar thinks that it is a better idea to recruit a mediocre Journeyman. Merrill O'Brian suggests that we should take our time and wait for less problematic candidates. The only lead designer among us who hasn't expressed disapproval towards Jocasta Clive is Cormaunt Hempkamp, but that is because he thinks he is too new to our clan to add his voice to this discussion."

"So?"

"NO ONE WANTS TO WORK WITH JOCASTA CLIVE!"

"How can you all say that when you aren't even prepared to give her a chance?!"

"SHE'S A CLIVE!"

Ves tried his best to maintain his composure and stand his ground. "I know what she is, thank you very much. I may have met her only once, but I can read her pretty well. Regardless of what she has said, I can truly feel that she shared our passion for mechs. She is much more of a mech designer than a servant of the Clive Consortium. So long as she manages to pass Goldie's test, I don't think we should have any concerns about her lingering attachment to where she came from. The Larkinsons will become her new family from that point onwards and that can never be changed."

"NO! I HAVE TOLERATED YOUR HAREBRAINED DECISIONS FAR TOO MUCH, BUT I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU TO BRING A POISONOUS WOMAN IN OUR CLAN! NO OTHER JOURNEYMAN WANTS TO WORK WITH HER, SO CEASE YOUR STUPID THOUGHTS AND FIND MORE HONEST MECH DESIGNERS!"

That pretty much ended the discussion. Faced with the near-unanimous disapproval of every Journeyman in his clan, Ves had to reject any further action towards Jocasta Clive.

For one reason or another, Gloriana refused to allow him to meet with Jocasta in person, so he could only arrange his subordinates to figure out a way to gently suspend any actions towards recruiting her into the clan.

Though Ves was unable to recruit Jocasta Clive, he still had hopes of reeling in Beatrice Hendrix.

He was afraid that Gloriana would find fault with her for whatever reason, so he tried his best to evade any mention of Madame Hendrix.

Ves first waited a few days to see whether Beatrice Hendrix would take the initiative to contact the Larkinson Clan.

When that did not happen, he tried to send her a message and invite her to another talk.

The response he received was less than solid.

"Let me be plain with you, Patriarch Larkinson." Beatrice Hendrix's projection spoke to him. "I am still ambivalent towards your offer. I will not lie to you and say that I have no interest in the rich conditions that you have offered, but your demands are too excessive in my opinion. I cannot embrace the idea of joining your clan on a permanent basis and surrendering many of the rights that ordinary partners are entitled to when they work together with their peers. You and your clan retain too much control than I am comfortable with. If a dispute ever happens between you and I, how will that be resolved? Will you impose your authority on me and force me to work on projects against my will?"

"That will never happen!" Ves protested. "We expect all Larkinsons to do their duty, but how exactly they go about it is not as important. The lead designers of our Design Department enjoy a wide degree of autonomy. While I do admit to imposing additional controls when it is prudent such as in the case of our neural interface specialist, I have no desire to boss you all around too much."

Beatrice did not look convinced. "Those are empty words, Patriarch Larkinson. It is unquestionable that you are both the founder of the Larkinson Clan, the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan and the head designer of the Design Department of the Living Mech Corporation. These identities bestow you with an unparalleled amount of authority, allowing you to do virtually anything you want. The soft power you hold among the people you have recruited and brought up is also great. This makes it so that it is too difficult to oppose or object to your decisions."

Ves looked exasperated. Why did Beatrice Hendrix obsess over this issue so much? Couldn't she trust him to do what was right for his clan and his people? He never treated his clansmen particularly badly! He had always been generous towards them as far as he knew.

"Our clan may be young, but it can still grow and evolve. If you join our clan and work towards increasing your authority, you will have the power to change how we work over time. I may be in charge of everything, but that doesn't mean I have time to micromanage all of my subordinates. I respect mech designers such as you and fully expect that you will be able to take care of yourselves. If you do not believe my words, then I can offer you the contact information of my fellow Journeyman Mech Designers. They should be able to provide you with a much better idea on their actual work conditions."

A short pause ensued as Beatrice Hendrix thought deeply on his offer.

This was an important moment in their talks.

If Beatrice rejected this opportunity to collect more information about what it was like to work in the Design Department, then that meant that her interest in working for the Larkinson Clan was almost zero.

If Beatrice accepted the contact information, then she either intended to drag her feet or sincerely look into whether it was the right decision for her to join the clan.

It took ten more seconds before she issued her reply.

"You can do that. I may be interested in asking them questions. Please notify them beforehand so that they are open to satisfying my curiosity."

"Great! I will transfer the data over to you now. You can rest assured that they will open you with open arms. Our Design Department is able to work on many projects on a concurrent basis, but out of all of our lead designers, only one of them is a defensive specialist. There is little reason for us to reject an excellent Journeyman Mech Designer who can design fantastic adaptive modular armor systems such as you. I can promise you that you will be able to experiment and implement your own ideas in many different mech design projects, whether they are solo or collaborative ones."

They chatted a bit more before Beatrice Hendrix decided to end the call.

Ves did not feel certain enough about whether he had managed to bring Beatrice any closer or further towards inducting her into his clan.

He decided he needed a second opinion on this matter and decided to call Calabast. Her ability to read people was even better than his own as she was a professional in this regard.

Once he established a connection with his spymaster, he summarized this matter and transferred a recording of the comm call.

"Hm, I see what is going on." Calabast spoke after she quickly processed the data. "She is too similar to you, have you realized that, Ves?"

"What do you mean?"

"She is a talented and ambitious mech designer who detests the idea of answering to others. She desires to start her own company and build up her own empire so that she can fully make her own decisions. She is greedy for resources and other valuable aids that can help her progress her design philosophy and help her become a better mech designer. I believe that should sound familiar."

"Oh. I guess you're right."

If Ves thought of Beatrice Hendrix as a mirror to himself, then he understood her reluctance to join the Larkinson Clan much better.

If he was faced with the same situation, then he probably would have been inclined to say no! There was no way he would want to tie his fate to another person, especially someone who was known to be a serial risk taker and a volatile leader!

Still, Beatrice Hendrix probably hadn't been betrayed or exposed to as many crises as Ves. Her record did not contain anything that sounded tragic or serious enough to merit enough paranoia.

As such, her objections towards answering to others should not be too great. So long as he took a page out of Yenames Clive's book and worked towards overwhelming Beatrice with bribes, he might have a chance of winning her over!

"That is unlikely to work." Calabast shook his head as she read his intentions from his changing expressions. "Material benefits are attractive to her, but she does not want to sell her soul to you if that is what you ask. You need to put more effort into assuaging her concerns. You also need to work more towards increasing the attraction of the Larkinson Clan. Explain to her what your clan stands for. Tell her the ideals that motivate us all. Make it clear to Beatrice Hendrix that the clan is not your personal kingdom, but rather a collection of like-minded dreamers who are working towards a better future for themselves and their descendants."

"Hmmm..." Ves looked thoughtful. "That sounds like something President Yenames Clive would do. I don't know if I can pitch that stuff to her. I would much rather rely on a straightforward exchange of interests to reel her into our clan."

"I already told you that you will fail if you turn this into a pure transaction. What you need to do is build up trust. The more benefits you offer to her, the more she becomes suspicious of your actual intentions. You cannot simply promise her the right to rule over an entire planet and expect her to believe you have her best interests at heart. She will instead be preoccupied with figuring out what ulterior motives you have. This is why I highly recommend you to change your recruitment strategy."

"Then what do I need to do, Calabast?"

"Let me give you a handful of suggestions..."

She gave him a number of tips that enlightened him a lot. There were much better ways to win over a skeptical Journeyman Mech Designer.

"Did you get all of that, Ves?"

"I think I do." Ves nodded. "I think you are right that I probably won't be able to persuade Beatrice unless I can demonstrate to her that our clan is special compared to all of the other possible organizations that she can join. Hopefully, she'll contact me and agree to meet with me in person after she has contacted our other Journeymen. If we can't recruit her, it is unlikely for us to obtain the services of a good defensive specialist."

## Chapter 4885 Points Of Failure

Recruiting new mech designers was the last major task that Ves wanted to complete before he fully threw himself onto his work. The Design Department already employed plenty of Journeyman Mech Designers, but their specializations left obvious gaps that hindered the development of their mechs.

For example, Ves still lacked a ranged weapon specialist by his side. One of the reasons why he wanted to invite Jocasta Clive to his clan was because he became greedy for her kinetic weapon expertise.

The Larkinson Clan's utilization of gauss weapons and other ranged kinetic weapons had fallen behind due to its embrace of luminar crystal technology.

While Ves had a lot of confidence in the strength, efficiency and versatility of this branch of energy weapons, he knew better than to bet his entire clan on a single horse.

Technological progress often occurred in jumps and spurts. The mech industry had a long history of changing trends due to the uneven advancements of different technological applications.

For example, energy weapons and transphasic technology were in vogue at the moment. They were both stronger than other tech, so many of the leading and well-regarded mechs incorporated applications from one or both of them in order to keep up with the forefront of progress.

Gauss weapons were still widely used for many reasons, but their overall strength and practicality hadn't significantly changed compared to the previous generation.

The only gauss weapons that were noticeably stronger and more worthwhile to use were transphasic gauss weapons, but that was more because of the use of phasewater more than anything.

If the technological basis of gauss weapons did not experience any significant improvements in the last 30 or 40 years, then how could they outperform energy weapons under the same conditions?

Besides, gauss weapons possessed a clear disadvantage compared to energy weapons in the current generation that caused a lot of mech designers to favor the latter rather than the former.

The difference was not necessary based on performance, but had to do with cost.

A transphasic laser rifle only needed to incorporate phasewater in its body, while gauss rifles needed to integrate this expensive substance in both its body and its physical ammunition in order to maximize their effectiveness!

Even if Ves could get away with integrating a tiny drop of phasewater in the tip of a gauss round, a typical rifleman mech armed with a gauss rifle could easily expend over a hundred rounds in a single battle.

If the Larkinson Army deployed a couple of hundred of those rifleman mechs, his clan would probably throw away a kilogram's worth of phasewater in a single battle.

Although the results would definitely be astonishing, Ves did not think his clan could afford to sustain this level of consumption for long!

It was much more economical to resort to transphasic energy weapons instead.

The Nullifier Battalion was the first elite mech unit that fulfilled his goal of arming an elite mech unit with transphasic weapons.

Each Nullifier mech was armed with a Godkiller heavy luminar crystal rifle that integrated 5 grams of phasewater.

This might not sound like much, but this was already enough to neutralize much of the boost in damage resistance of transphasic defensive systems!

Their penetration power was even more exaggerated against non-transphasic defenses!

Better yet, as long as those ostentatious weapons did not get destroyed in battle, the Nullifier Battalion could use their Godkiller heavy rifles over and over again without needing to replenish their phasewater content.

In short, transphasic luminar crystal weapons played an essential role in the Larkinson Clan's current development strategy. They were the key to powering up the combat strength of the Larkinson Army and enabling the expeditionary fleet to hunt down alien warships and strip them of their valuable salvage!

That was not to say that transphasic gauss weapons had become irrelevant due to this crucial difference.

Transphasic ammunition was expensive, but the upside to that was that their penetration power was far superior to transphasic energy beams.

The Larkinson Clan had already encountered multiple different alien foes whose transphasic defenses proved to be too resilient to overcome.

In situations like these, the Larkinson Clan needed to stop worrying about minimizing cost and throw everything it had to defeat the foes that had the power to crush the expeditionary fleet!

One of the most memorable battle moments in the past year was the instance where the Thunderer Mark II piloted by Saint Jelmer Osenring managed to utilize all 10 of its transphasic heavy gauss cannons to overcome the transphasic barriers of an orven battleship!

The destructive power of those heavy gauss cannons was unparalleled, and their penetration power gained an immense boost after Ves had 'blessed' it with the guidance of the Phase King!

Ves often thought back on those times. He could already guess that unless he was able to design a much stronger and more sophisticated energy weapon, he wouldn't be able to equip his mechs with luminar crystal cannons that could come close to those impressive heavy gauss cannons in damage output.

The only other way to obtain the weapons he wanted to turn his mechs into the ultimate warship killers was to ingest an appropriate enlightenment fruit and quickly develop a proficiency in transphasic gauss weapons.

Ves did not necessarily reject this approach, but it was not an appropriate strategy for him to take.

He already minored in luminar crystal technology, and he felt that was enough for his needs.

His research interests were already broad enough. He was not the Polymath who could engage in an unlimited amount of research directions. Adding one more minor would only burden him more and divert his time on what was truly important.

What he needed instead was a couple of ranged weapon specialists by his side who could do a much better and more effective job at equipping his ranged mechs with the best transphasic armaments.

He was already setting up Zanthar Larkinson to inherit his advancements on luminar crystal technology. He hoped that his former student would be able to divest him from the burden of researching this alien tech so that he could spend his time on more relevant design work.

"I'm not sure how long it will take for him to become a Journeyman, but I can wait."

That still left him with a shortage of mech designers who could equip the mechs of the Larkinson Clan with strong ranged kinetic weapons.

He still regretted the decision to let go of a talented and well-educated Journeyman Mech Designer like Jocasta Clive.

She was probably the most impressive kinetic weapon specialist at the Journeyman level that he could recruit in Davute!

He had already instructed the clan's recruiters to prioritize the search of mech designers with similar specializations as Jocasta Clive.

The likelihood of finding a mech designer as good as her was slim, but it should not be as difficult to find less qualified professionals with a related specialization.

Ves just hoped they would still be good enough to meet his minimum standards. If they were not good enough, then he would rather pass them over and work without them for the time being. He did not want to poison the productive atmosphere of the Design Department by filling it up with lots of freeloaders and incompetent fools.

"Beatrice Hendrix should definitely not fall into that category."

The results of mech design tournaments was hardly definitive proof of the competence of a mech designer. Nonetheless, for her to be able to overcome so many different of her peers and become the second-place winner of the Strange Lands Tournament was a testament of her design abilities!

The Double Up she designed for the Twin Weapons Tournament also put up an impressive fight during the second round!

It was that odd but impressively resilient double-layered mech that impressed Ves so much.

He had taken the time to study her record and her known mech designs a bit more. Although he understood little about the galactic heartland and its many divisions, he found out that Beatrice Hendrix grew up in a relatively stable and prosperous region of the Milky Way.

The conditions of the region that she grew up in enabled Beatrice Hendrix to pursue more expensive and high-end specializations. The relative lack of large-scale conflicts shifted the development of mechs away from mass production and put more emphasis on high-end mechs that were necessary to fight in important mech duels and small skirmishes.

Beatrice apparently inherited her specialization from Master Relice Yovarn, just as Ves expected at the time.

What Ves found interesting was that Beatrice Hendrix's works had yet to diverge from that of her Master.

The works of Master Yovarn were similar to that of her direct disciple, but her applications were considerably stronger and more varied.

As Ves waited for Beatrice Hendrix to request another meeting with him, he sought out Sara Voiken in order to give her perspective on the design philosophy of her potential new colleague.

"Passive armor systems are the mainstream in human space." Sara began as soon as she skimmed through Beatrice Hendrix's record. "A basic metal plate might sound boring, but it is one of simplest and foolproof means of protecting a mech from harm. You only need to affix it into place and you are ready to go. Replacing or repairing the damaged plating also isn't difficult. These modular armor systems are much different in comparison. They need to be powered in order to move around and they incorporate so much more circuits and electronics that they have far more points of failure. Do you understand what that means?"

Ves nodded. "I think I do. If a mech has more points of failure, Murphy's law can take a greater hold over it. Hacking, EMP attacks, hazardous environments or unconventional weaponry can all strip a mech of their modular armor plating. This doesn't happen often, though. I have hardly read any stories in the news that describe this occurrence."

"That is because almost no one bothers to prepare any special countermeasures against modular armor systems." Sara retorted. "If they become more ubiquitous, that will definitely change. If our clan adopts more mechs equipped with lots of modular armor, then you can be certain that many of

our enemies such as the Fridaymen will prepare targeted countermeasures that will prevent our mechs from taking advantage of this tech. Can you bear the thought of this happening to us one day?"

Ves shrugged. "I won't deny that there is realistic chance that this might happen, but that does not dampen my interest in these armor systems. Our Maiden of Adversity model already incorporates a version of it, though the Battle Skirt System is akin to the work of a child compared to her much more elaborate and sophisticated applications of the same tech!"

That caused Sara to frown. "Are you thinking about encouraging me to work together with Beatrice Hendrix on the same projects? That negates one of the important reasons why you wanted to hire a defensive specialist in the first place. Besides, it shouldn't work as well as you think. I doubt that the other mech designer will be pleased with using her specialization as a secondary defensive system. She will want to design mechs where her modular armor systems make up the main defensive solution for her work."

That sounded like Beatrice Hendrix. This was the difficulty of working with proud and egotistical mech designers.

He sighed. "I understand these difficulties, but I think we can overcome or mitigate these issues. It is more important to relieve you of your heavy workload and enable others to share your burdens. Will you welcome her entry into our clan if she accepts our offer?"

Sara nodded, much to his relief.

"I will. I am not selfish to insist that I should be the only mech designer with a defensive specialization in our clan. We are bigger than that, and you are right about my heavy workload. Besides, I think it would help me a lot more if I can bounce ideas with a fellow compatriot who understands my work."

"That is great to hear. I feel more reassured about recruiting her after you have given your answer."

#### Chapter 4886 Ves The Show-Off

Despite the many shortcomings and limitations of modular armor systems, Ves still felt it was a promising piece of tech.

It was not as easy for enemies to disable modular armor systems. The mech designers who worked hard to elevate their effectiveness had made sure to minimize the chances that their life works would be rendered useless with the activation of a single countermeasure.

So long as the mechs equipped with this kind of protection functioned as normal, they would definitely be able to defeat comparable machines!

After all, mechs with modular armor could dynamically reinforce sections that were under heavy attack.

They could also plug any gaps in their innermost protective layers to prevent them from collapsing.

Furthermore, mechs like this also had the option of purging spent or unnecessary modular armor plates in order to obtain a substantial boost in mobility.

When Ves thought about equipping dozens of different Larkinson mech models with modular armor systems, especially the highly intelligent and adaptive ones developed by Beatrice Hendrix, his desire to bring her to his fold became even greater!

In order to increase his chances of winning her over, he felt it would be a good idea to give her a tour through the Cat Nest, and not just the public areas that were open to tourists!

This was a rare privilege as the Larkinson Clan hardly allowed any outsiders to step foot into the core areas of its local stronghold.

At the time of the appointment, Ves dressed up in a slightly more formal version of his patriarch uniform and moved all the way out to the landing zone to await the arrival of his honored guest.

While Ves knew that he was giving away a lot of bargaining power by putting so much effort into winning over Beatrice, he did not have much choice.

He would rather give her extra concessions in order to reel her in than let her go. Her specialization could add a lot of value to his clan as it was especially suitable for more expensive and premium mechs that the Larkinsons favored!

"Welcome to the Cat Nest, Beatrice!" Ves greeted the woman as she stepped out of her shuttle. "I hope that you will be able to enjoy your visit and get a sense of what we are all about during your tour today."

"Meow~" Lucky greeted as he flew over to the beautiful brown-haired woman.

Beatrice Hendrix studied the gem cat with an intrigued expression.

"So this is your famous pet. I can't identify the alloys at all. Fascinating. Are they self-repairable?"

"They are." Ves responded. "How did you figure that out, Beatrice?"

"I have encountered similar materials in the past. They possess a distinct combination of characteristics that are not that difficult to identify."

"Ah, I see. Let me bring you deeper into the Cat Nest. I guess we should start with the Ascension Gallery."

"Ah yes. I have heard that it is one of the most iconic tourist attractions of Davute VII. It is a place that you will have to visit in person to fully appreciate all of the ornaments."

"That is right."

They moved to the Ascension Gallery. In order to make the visit as unobtrusive as possible, Ves had already commanded the staff to close it to visitors for the day.

From the moment the pair of Journeymen stepped inside the central hall while being accompanied by a group of honor guards, they all came under the influence of the most defining glow of the Larkinson Clan.

"So this is the Golden Cat that is strongly associated with your clan." Beatrice said as she genuinely looked impressed. "What is it, exactly? Is it just a symbolic personification of the Larkinsons, or is it a more literal god as many people including your people claim to be the truth?"

According to the background checks conducted by the Black Cats, Beatrice Hendrix grew up in a secularist environment, so Ves did not have to speak any nonsense about religion.

"The Golden Cat is a real existence." He stated plainly to her. "I can tell you more, but that will touch upon the trade secrets of our clan. What I can share with you is that she is one of our greatest sources of strength. She is not a god, but she is definitely an extraordinary existence. Our people have a close working relationship with her. We support her while she helps us in turn. We take what we need from each other and benefit throughout the process. There is nothing divine about this transaction, though a lot of people who don't know any better mistake it as such. I can't really do anything about it. Reality is far greater than what most humans assume. There are many unknowns in the cosmos, and our clan just happens to master one of its more mysterious aspects."

Beatrice frowned as she listened to his answer. His words conveyed a lot of information, but without any greater context, she failed to grasp his deeper meanings.

"I still do not understand what your Golden Cat represents."

"That is okay. Let me show you around the Ascension Gallery so that you can get a better understanding of what our clan has built over the years."

Ves gave her a tour through both wings of the Ascension Gallery. He briefly provided explanations for every prominent mech or design spirit on display, making sure to never go into any specifics that were too controversial to share to the uninitiated.

Though Beatrice expressed many doubts about the nature or the motives of the design spirits, Ves went out of his way to explain that they were all helpful so long as the Larkinsons helped them in turn.

"These 'design spirits' of yours sound as if they are fully independent beings that are capable of making their own decisions." She shared one of her views. "What is stopping them from ending their relationships with your clan in the future? How badly will your troops and your customers get affected by their mass withdrawal?"

He grimaced when he thought of this scenario. "It won't be pleasant. However, I have already taken these kinds of scenarios into account. People will get pissed and people will miss the extra functionality that design spirits can add to our products, but it is hardly the end of the galaxy for us. Living mechs still possess a lot of intrinsic value even without the benefit of the glows provided by all of our design spirits. If necessary, I can obtain substitutes that can fulfill similar roles to the original design spirits as long as I have enough time. Therefore, the departure of a long-term business partner will not affect the health of our clan and mech business."

The substitute design spirit would be like a baby compared to other spiritual entities. The glow of such a creation would not be as strong and useful as that of an older being, but there was little Ves could do about that.

He did not hide the downsides of design spirits, but he made sure to explain to her the benefits of using them in their products.

"Design spirits can provide a lot of utility and sometimes power that cannot be obtained through more conventional means. The Pacifier model is probably my most well-known example of that.

They are being sold at a scale that is unimaginable for other Journeymen because their tranquil glows are just too suitable for law enforcement and peacekeeping duties. Do you know how many MTA credits it costs to add a glow to one of our products?"

"0.1 MTA credits? No, that does not sound correct. Your third-class mech designs also feature glows."

"It costs 0 MTA credits to bestow our mechs with this feature." Ves smirked. "Do you understand now why many of our products sell so well? Their value propositions are higher because they provide more benefits relative to the prices we charge for them. The only real cost is the need for me to get involved in the design process. I am sure you understand."

"I do. Thank you for explaining that. What you have shared is fascinating. I do not believe there is any organization that has done anything comparable with mechs. In fact, I doubt even the Mech Trade Association is able to replicate your unique works!"

As a mech designer, Beatrice Hendrix was much more capable of appreciating the benefits and value of his design applications. Ves did not need to tell her much in order to earn her appreciation.

Of course, Ves had to share real information with her in order to make her understand. This could be rather dangerous as he was sharing more information than he wanted to expose to other parties.

He was essentially betting that his earnest efforts to present his clan and his works to her would convince her to become a Larkinson.

Once they ended their relatively short but insightful tour through the Ascension Gallery, Ves decided to bring her to the main manufacturing complex of the Davute Branch.

"Let me bring you to the Hammerworks."

The Hammerworks Manufacturing Complex took up a lot of real estate in the Cat Nest. It was the reason why the Larkinson Clan bought this large plot of land in the first place.

As Ves brought her inside the less sensitive production halls that were in the process of fabricating a large amount of commercial mechs, Beatrice quickly became impressed by the scale of production.

"How many production lines do you have?!"

"I don't really know." He shrugged. "The Hammerworks is constantly expanding, so the numbers change every month. I can tell you that our workers here can easily mass produce more than 2000 mechs a day."

"2000?! That is an entire mech regiment!"

Ves did not really consider this to be a notable fact, but it held a completely different meaning for an independent Journeyman Mech Designer who had no mech company or factory in her name.

Let alone produce a hundred mechs, she wasn't able to fabricate a single mech without renting a third-party workshop!

As Beatrice studied the modern production lines that constantly produced a lot of parts and assembled them into brand-new living mechs, she never lost her awe at the scale of industrial activity.

"Does your clan own this entire manufacturing complex, or did you erect it with the help of outside investors?"

Ves smirked. "The Hammerworks is all ours. It officially belongs to the Living Mech Corporation. Just so you know, I directly own 72 percent of its shares, so I am its majority owner. The Larkinson Clan holds 24 percent of its shares while two different Master Mech Designers hold a 2 percent stake each. You can ignore the latter two. Master Carmin Olson and Master Toqueman Huron have never interfered with the running of my mech company as far as I know."

The female mech designer looked gobsmacked. It was as if she couldn't believe that he had managed to grow the LMC to this point while effectively retaining 96 percent ownership over the mech company!

He could quickly sense that her demeanor towards him had undergone a substantial shift. It turned out that Beatrice was much more easily impressed by material proof of his clan's wealth and prosperity.

"This is nothing." He told the dazed Journeyman Mech Designer. "I own a factory ship that holds our best production equipment. Since she is currently being refitted by the MTA, we have temporarily moved all of that stuff to our Genesis Lab and our more secure production halls. One of our latest acquisitions happens to be the AP-VEX first-class superfab. Did you know it cost me 5 million MTA merits to exchange it from the Association? I've also upgraded my main design lab with other high-end instruments and equipment for a total cost 30 million MTA merits. This might sound like a lot to you, but to a prolific contributor to the MTA and humanity like myself, this is just a drizzle. I invested at least ten times as many MTA merits on upgrading the Spirit of Bentheim into a quasi-first-class factory ship."

"..."

This time, his words broke Beatrice Hendrix!

## Chapter 4887 A Different Lifestyle

It was rather funny. Ves valued his design spirits and his groundbreaking mech designs a lot more than his material possessions.

This was because the former consisted of assets that could provide him with enduring wealth and recognition. They formed the basis of his success in the mech industry and allowed him to build a successful business empire and build a strong mech army no matter the circumstances.

However, it was hard for a stranger who was not too familiar with the impact of living mechs to appreciate these assets.

Success among Journeyman Mech Designers translated into owning lots of production lines, employing a lot of workers and selling lots of mechs to customers.

This was why the visit to the Hammerworks swayed Beatrice Hendrix's impression of the Larkinson Clan a lot more than her previous visit to the Ascension Gallery!

Though Ves initially remained ignorant of these considerations, now that he recognized what his fellow mech designer truly paid attention to, he brought her to a couple of other places that could make a clear visual impression to the defensive specialist.

For example, he brought her down to a few underground mech hangar bays which currently held the inactive expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

The few masterwork expert mechs that Beatrice was lucky enough to see up close prompted her to genuinely express her admiration of his skills.

"Your Everchanger and Minerva are both exquisitely designed and built." She sighed. "I cannot even begin to understand how you were able to craft them so well at the Journeyman level. I understand much better now why you are being celebrated as the best Journeyman of our generation in our current zone. Not even those prodigious first-class mech designers from the upper zones are able to replicate your feats in craftsmanship."

Ves smiled with pride. "I appreciate your kind words. I won't lie to you. There are special circumstances and reasons that occasionally enabled us to fabricate our masterwork mechs when it is practically unheard of for Journeymen to be able to do so. If you join our clan and do a good job in our Design Department, you will get pulled into our fabrication runs sooner or later. You may have the privilege of finding out for yourself."

Beatrice Hendrix looked as if she wanted to say that it wouldn't take long for her to be in the workshop when that happened, but she prudently kept her mouth shut in order to avoid weakening her bargaining power.

"Can you tell me how easy it is to fabricate masterwork mechs at your current stage?"

Ves shrugged. "That is difficult to say. It gets easier the more you make them. Each successful attempt is an invaluable learning experience to mech designers such as ourselves. This is why the first time is the most crucial instance. As long as you learn what it takes at least once, you will have the qualifications to recreate the circumstances by yourself again. We can help you with that. I am not the only Journeyman with masterwork certificates in our clan. I helped others such as Ketis and my wife gather a bunch of them as well. They are not too far behind in their ability to create masterworks."

The woman looked impressed. He could already tell that her enthusiasm has grown yet again. Hardly any mech designer could resist the allure of making their own masterwork mechs!

"That is interesting to hear, patriarch, but I did not receive a clear answer to my last question. As far as I know, you and your people haven't made any masterwork mechs as of late. The Mars should be your last successful attempt, and that was a collaborative project that you completed over five years ago. Did you lose your touch in the following years?"

That was a rather rude question, but Ves did not mind her tone.

"While I love all of my mech designs, I am more invested in some than many others. I have worked on many updates, revisions and variants in the time that I have spent in Davute. While this is all important work, it is hard for me to get excited for retreads of my existing products. Only new and innovative products can fire up my passion and encourage me to exceed my limits. I am far from reaching the stage where I can fabricate a masterwork mech as long as I put an earnest effort into it. Hopefully, I will be able to go through that again in the near future as I have a couple of really interesting design projects in the works."

It surprised her that he wasn't as obsessed with chasing after masterwork mechs despite all of his earlier successes. She thought that he would try to reproduce as many of them as possible so that he could stand out even more as a Journeyman!

Though Ves thought about this many times, he felt that he would become too much like Gloriana if he constantly chased after a certain kind of perfection.

That did not exactly align with his goals and his ambition. His design philosophy centered around mutual growth.

His purpose was not to create the most perfect mech in its current form.

It was to create a living product that could persistently grow and adapt to its mech pilot.

He threw a deep look at Beatrice Hendrix.

Her specialization reminded him of the Devil Tiger that he developed a long time ago. Having witnessed it evolve to a massive extent during his last visit to the Nyxian Gap, he always wanted to design more mechs that could self-evolve their physical forms.

The only way to really do so was to employ smart metal as the principal materials of his mechs, but that was not very economical or efficient, especially in the early stage.

Though modular armor systems were substantially different from smart metal armor systems such as ASMAS, they did share a few commonalities that might enable him to take a few steps forwards.

Of course, it was better for him to keep those ideas to himself. He first needed to make sure that Beatrice Hendrix actually joined his clan before he could think about possible collaboration ideas!

"So this is the superfab that cost you 5 million MTA merits to procure." The woman said as she stared up at the incredibly high tech production machine. "It seems... overkill for a second-class Journeyman Mech Designer. Why did you choose to spend so much for this AP-VEX model? I think you should have been able to get by with utilizing a more economic superfab model that costs around 100,000 to 500,000 MTA merits, especially when you only make infrequent use of it. This superfab looks as if you have hardly used it ever since it arrived in your hands."

Ves shook his head. "It has to be a production machine as good as the AP-VEX. Don't get me wrong. The alternatives that you have described can satisfy my needs for a few years or so, but that puts me in a position where I have to replace it with a higher-end model in order to work with stronger and more volatile first-class materials. Rather than go through all of this trouble, I decided to just skip ahead and buy a superfab that can last me at least a decade before I can replace it with a superior model."

"A decade? How are you able to earn so many merits?!"

"Hahaha!" He grinned at her. "There are plenty of opportunities to earn MTA merits as long as you understand what the MTA needs and have a few friends over there that can vouch for you. I just earned 8 million MTA merits a short time ago, did you know that? My clan and I had the strength and expertise to deal with a little problem that harmed Davute. I am sure you have heard about it in the news."

Beatrice nodded. "Not many mech designers can speak about the MTA in such a familiar tone. You truly have a good relationship with the mechers."

"They value my original research as well as my pioneering activities in the deep frontier. Not everyone can succeed in those activities, but my clan and I happen to excel at both. I do not think there is a comparable pioneering organization in the neighborhood that can equal us in this aspect. This is also one of the principal reasons why we are able to grow so fast. I won't deceive you by saying that what we are doing is safe and sustainable. We frequently take risks that can scare away ordinary mech designers, but that is why they are ordinary in the first place."

"You are describing the reaction of normal mech designers." She responded.

Ves sneered. "And that is why there are so many Journeymen out there with great potential, but never managed to realize it. Do you remember all of those older Journeymen who we competed against in the Twin Weapons Tournament? While I can understand that it takes a bit of time to build up steam for a portion of them, those who are over a century old are really wasting their time. I think you should be able to understand that if mech designers such as us want to get ahead, we need to step outside of our comfort zone and proactively seek progress."

She nodded. Both of them were talented mech designers who pushed themselves harder than most of their peers. Their methods and approaches may be radically different, but they were still highly accomplished in their respective fields.

They continued to chat as Ves led his guest away from his private workshop. They exchanged their views on a number of topics and gained a better understanding of each other's opinions and stances on different matters.

Soon, the visit came to an end. Ves had led her all the way back to the landing zone where her shuttle had already warmed up its engine.

"I am truly awed by what you have shown me today." Beatrice said as she turned to address him.

"You and your clan are utterly unique among your kind. I can say that with a 100 percent guarantee. While you have shown me great promise and progress in many areas, you have also shown me that you live a dangerous life."

"The Red Ocean is filled with danger, Beatrice. Confronting that is the price of chasing after your dreams. That doesn't mean that this life is every mech designer who traveled to this dwarf galaxy, but I figure that since you took the trouble to get all the way out here, you might as well go all the way. Why enter the new frontier only to go back to a pattern of life that is more reminiscent of your routine in the old galaxy? If that is all you wanted to do, then you may as well turn around and go back to the Milky Way. Human society over there is much better suited for mech designers who seek to progress in a stable environment."

She did not have much to say about that. Beatrice Hendrix was not familiar with the lifestyle of Ves and his fellow Larkinsons. She clearly hadn't made up her mind whether she wanted to embrace this kind of life as well!

She was tempted, though. That was incredibly obvious to Ves. Few mech designers could remain indifferent to all of the amazing and expensive proof of progress that he had shown today.

"I need more time to conduct more research and weigh my choices properly." Beatrice Hendrix ultimately told him. "I would not want to make a hasty decision regarding my entry into your clan due to all of the elevated risks and dangers that you have mentioned."

"That is understandable. Please take your time, but it would be helpful if you can give your definite answer within the week. I have already presented you with an elaborate preview of what it is like to live and work in our clan. If you still can't make up your mind after all of this, then perhaps you lack the decisiveness that we seek from a member of the Larkinson Clan."

Beatrice gave him one last look before she turned around and entered her shuttle.

She gave him her answer three days later.

"I accept."

## Chapter 4888 Modular Ideas

The Design Department welcomed a new Journeyman Mech Designer today!

It hadn't been too long ago since Ves welcomed Cormaunt Hempkamp into the fold, but because his specialization was too obscure and niche, he did integrate into his new workplace without too many expectations on his shoulders.

It was different for Beatrice Hendrix!

Her qualifications were much more solid. Rather than bouncing around one employer after another, Beatrice was the sort of mech designer that many companies wished to hire!

Her greatest advantage was that she was the direct disciple of Master Relice Yovarn. Even if no one knew anything about this particular Master Mech Designer, individuals at this height never made any misjudgments about the selection of their most important students and inheritors!

Any mech designer who received the teachings and legacy of a Master Mech Designer always had a clear advantage over those who had been brought up in the wild. This was a simple truth, and though it might not sound fair, it was not as if those who never met a Master had no chances to succeed as well.

Still, it was undeniable that Beatrice Hendrix not only enjoyed a headstart in her career, but made good use of her starting point.

Her particular combination of talent, passion, education and tournament results showed that she was not only highly competent at her current stage, but that she also had a bright future ahead of her. She was only a little younger than the Larkinson Patriarch!

As the Journeymen of the Design Department gathered in the main lab of the Genesis Lab, Ves enthusiastically introduced the curly-haired woman standing beside him. Beatrice had conscientiously dressed herself in a clean and professional manner in order to convey that she was ready to start her work right away.

Everyone else gathered one by one. Ketis arrived first and silently took her measure of the newcomer.

Since Beatrice managed to pass Goldie's test, she had forged a brand-new spiritual connection to the Larkinson Network. This gave her an entirely new kind of awareness that caused her to identify every Larkinson as her kin and vice versa.

This was such a shocking phenomenon that the mech designer couldn't even begin to explain its mechanisms!

Though Ves had told her that she shouldn't bother wasting her time on trying to figure out what was going on, she still couldn't help but put a lot of thought into the matter.

As it was, Beatrice could not only feel Ketis' approach, but also gained a strong sense of security from the swordmaster.

"Hey. I'm Ketis. You must have heard of me already."

Beatrice snapped out of her temporary fascination. "Well met, Ketis. I have indeed heard many stories about you, particularly after I have been inducted into the clan. I must admit that many of the stories sound too... fantastical to be true, but the records and the footage that I accessed yesterday are too convincing. I apologize. I am still adjusting to all of the paradigm-shattering information that I have obtained. The public has no idea how amazing the clan truly is. I feel fully vindicated for becoming a Larkinson, because I wouldn't have realized how much I was missing out upon if I made a different choice!"

There was always a sense of superiority among the Larkinsons. This became especially pronounced when they came into contact with normal human society.

The Larkinson Clan turned into a secret club of sorts where the 'initiated' had managed to open their eyes and figure out the greater truths of the cosmos that most people never touched in their lives!

Being able to enter this secret club and learning all of the truths that many different parties suppressed or kept to themselves was an enormous privilege to many individuals! They never wanted to go back to their previous lives where they ignorantly trudged through their lives like innocent sheep.

This was an important reason why many new recruits, including Beatrice Hendrix, did not have too many regrets about joining the clan. She already understood a lot more why people who joined the clan weren't allowed to leave it. They couldn't be allowed to wander away after learning so much about the Larkinson Clan and more.

"You don't need to apologize for being unused to all of this." Ketis calmly said. "Everyone was new, once. You don't have to be afraid that we will hold unreasonable expectations towards you. We are already doing fine in our current projects, so we don't need you to do your best right away."

Ves nodded. "We're not going to throw you in the deep end, Beatrice. We understand it takes a lot more time to become a Larkinson and work in our clan. We do things a lot differently than other organizations and we hold different expectations towards our clansmen. My wife has already arranged a schedule where you will spend time with different lead designers and other Larkinsons so that you will smoothly integrate in our clan and work environment. Every newcomer has to go through this process. It will be lengthy, but it should provide everything you need to become a proper Larkinson mech designer."

"I have no objections to that." Beatrice replied. "I was already told that I would be in it for the long haul. How long will it take for me to seriously design a mech?"

"It should take about half a year." Ves said after a few seconds of thought. "You can theoretically start a new design project right away, but I highly recommend you not to do so. Our requirements, technical standards and so on are all different and distinct. You need to understand all of that first before you know what sort of mechs that our clients or our armed forces are asking for. Our mech legions are all different and distinct from each other, so it is critically important that you learn what each of them are like before you try to pitch your mech to them. Your specialty is a little unusual so you need to pay more attention to who actually needs a mech that is equipped with a modular armor system."

Beatrice smiled. "I already have a few ideas regarding that, sir. After briefly surveying the mechs that your clan is using, I see that the Bright Warrior line is the most appropriate starting point for my intervention. Its current iteration is already highly modular in that it can change its modules and its external equipment. I can easily revise the armor system of this platform from one that is based on fixed plating to more easily removable and changeable adaptive modular armor systems."

He quickly caught on to her suggestion.

"You don't intend to design a single standardized adaptive modular armor system for the Bright Warrior line. You are thinking about designing multiple different systems that are all compatible with this particular mech model."

"Exactly!" Beatrice grinned with enthusiasm. "I can already visualize it. Every mech pilot can pick and choose different modular armor systems, each of which excel in different roles. A defensive loadout will feature thicker armor plating and reinforced circuitry. A light and mobile loadout will feature lightweight modular armor plating that is designed to add as little encumbrance as possible. I can also design more specialized modular armor systems in the future such as a 'deluxe version' that consists of transphasic armor plating."

Ves could no longer remain indifferent when he heard her ideas. What she presented was so fitting for the Bright Warrior line that he wanted her to start with this ambitious project right away!

How could he not feel this way? The Bright Warrior had lately been regarded as a 'beginner model' that should only be piloted by newcomers. Not that many mech pilots wanted to stick with the highly compatible and universal Larkinson mech model when there were lots of stronger and more exciting alternatives available.

While Ves had managed to change this trend to an extent by enabling much greater modularization, the relatively fixed armor configurations of the Bright Warrior line significantly restricted their flexibility.

Beatrice Hendrix gave him hope that their clan would truly transform the Bright Warrior into the ultimate malleable mech in the Larkinson Clan's lineup!

This way, the Bright Warrior line would have value that was not any worse than the likes of the Transcendent Punisher and the Valkyrie Redeemer!

"Great great great!" Ves quickly repeated. "I am truly grateful for being able to bring you into the fold. I do not dare to think about where our clan would be if we failed to recruit a modular armor specialist such as you. I can think of a few other mech models that could sorely use your help to

elevate their combat effectiveness. Perhaps we should wait before we start work on the Bright Warrior Mark III Project."

A few other Journeymen had arrived. They formally introduced themselves to Beatrice Hendrix and generally got along well with her. None of the lead designers had any idea of rejecting her as they all needed the help of a competent defensive specialist in order to accelerate the progress of their own mech design projects.

When Sara Voiken entered the main lab alongside her brother, she stopped in front of Beatrice and shook hands.

"I cannot begin to describe how relieved I am to see you here." The female Voiken said in a relieved tone of voice. "Don't get me wrong. I love all of the work I can do around here, but my time is so stretched that I feel guilty about all of the delays. Once you get up to speed, I look forward to offloading many of my responsibilities to you. We may even need to hire a third defense-oriented mech designer in a year or two as we keep starting more and more projects."

Beatrice smirked. "I am not afraid of too many projects. I am glad for them, especially if I am authorized to make my own design choices regarding their armor systems. The freedom that you have offered to me is massive. I shall always cherish this privilege."

Ves was glad to see that Sara Voiken and Beatrice Hendrix did not treat each other as hostile competitors. There was simply too much work for them to bother with any rivalries.

After a short delay, the final Journeyman of the Larkinson Clan arrived at the workplace.

Gloriana Wodin had just sent her children off to their private tutoring sessions, hence why she was a little late.

Beatrice conscientiously stared at the Pop Cult branded tote bag hanging on the other woman's shoulder.

Any lady with a bit of awareness in fashion should easily be able to recognize this brand and the typical prices for its products!

Though Beatrice Hendrix had never lost her sense of pride and maybe even superiority in her skills, she nonetheless came under a considerable amount of psychological suppression as the young mother came close.

Gloriana stared critically at the fresh meat. The way she carried herself along with how much she took advantage of her status within the clan meant that she unquestionably mastered the identity of the 'mistress' of the Larkinson Clan!

Her eyes briefly flicked from Beatrice to Ves and back again. They narrowed for a brief moment before relaxing after she had made a silent judgment on the newcomer.

Gloriana nodded as if she was satisfied with the quality of a newly developed product. "You will do. Abide by my rules and you shall find your place in our Design Department."

Though Beatrice didn't like it, she bowed her head in acquiescence. "I will endeavor to do so. I have no intentions of creating a new order here. At most, I may feel the need to make suggestions. I have worked under a Master Mech Designer as well as numerous different professional design teams. Perhaps my advice can be of use to our clan."

"I will be the judge of that." Gloriana imperiously said. "Now that we are all in attendance, please introduce yourself and share your story with us all. We are all curious about what you can bring to the table."

#### Chapter 4889 Reviewing Agenda

The addition of Beatrice Hendrix to the Design Department did not cause any major disruptions.

The Larkinson Clan was too big and the Design Department already included a bunch of busy mech designers.

Every Journeyman continued to devote their time on their studies, research and mech design projects. The only difference was that one of them had to play tour guide and nanny for Beatrice from time to time.

Although Ves urgently wanted to turn Beatrice into a productive member of his clan, he knew he needed to restrain himself and bide his time until she fully embraced her identity as a Larkinson.

Ves made sure to spend a few more days with her in order to ensure that her integration into the clan was on the right track.

After that, he handed her over to Ketis who had agreed to show Beatrice around the different mech legions and familiarize herself with their unique martial traditions.

This finally left Ves free to devote his time on his mech design projects.

As he entered the Genesis Lab and sat down at his fixed workplace, he called up his agenda and briefly studied all of the important points that he needed to take into account.

"There are less than five months left before the MTA returns the Spirit of Bentheim in my possession."

He poured over 300 million MTA merits into upgrading his factory ship and flagship. Although the price of doing so was exorbitant, so were the expected results! Ves expected nothing less than a capital ship that could resist alien warship attacks head-on and could form the basis of a genuine first-class fleet in the future!

What Ves particularly looked forward to after regaining possession of the Spirit of Bentheim was her brand-new Hyper Chamber. This expensive physical projection module would allow him and his family to truly connect to many more layers of human society than before, particularly the upper ones. Collaborations and teachings would become a lot easier with such an amazing piece of high technology at his disposal.

"Hopefully I'll be able to complete the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project by this time."

He wanted to resume the Trailblazer Expedition on a stronger footing than before. Adding two powerful and highly innovative expert mechs to the Larkinson Army would definitely boost his clan and fleet.

Venerable Jannzi would no longer have to wander around looking as if she was missing the second half of her life. Ves might oppose her political stances, but he did not hate her or anything. She was still family and always tried to do what was best for the clan.

Ves frowned as he pulled up his design schedule for the coming months. If he wanted to prioritize the two aforementioned projects, he had little choice but to take time away from the Eye Project, the Bloodripper Project and the Blood Knight Project.

He did not mind delaying the Blood Knight Project since it was more of an experiment more than anything. He initially conceived of it after inventing the Empowered Blood Sharing System.

While he still wanted to investigate the power of a Blood Pact, there was no need for him to hurry up with this particular research direction.

The Eye Project centered around a relatively simple marksman mech that he designed in collaboration with Cormaunt Hempkamm. Ves could easily offload more responsibilities to his design partner. He had already contributed a lot to the spiritual design of the Eye Project and did not have to complete all of the more mundane design tasks.

"Let's do that, then." Ves decided. "This project is already well on its way to completion. It just needs to undergo several rounds of testing and refinement."

The only project that was almost just as important as the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project was the Bloodripper Project.

It was another expert mech design project. This time it was centered around a light harasser mech. Ves basically considered it to be a high-end version of the Stingripper model often utilized by the Flagrant Vandals.

Ves had never spent too much time on the Bloodripper Project as it simply wasn't necessary. Gloriana and Juliet both took charge of the design as their specialties were much more relevant this time.

He briefly recalled the work he had already done and knew that he did not have to do much in order to ensure his contributions remained adequate. He did not feel worried about handing over even more responsibilities to the pair of former Hexer mech designers. They obviously knew what they were doing and the Bloodripper Project clearly aligned with their visions.

With that in mind, Ves adjusted his work schedule and made sure he deprioritized a lot of distractions in order to free up more time for the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project.

"No matter what, it's time to finish these expert mech designs. I have kept them in limbo long enough. There are no mysteries for me to solve anymore. So long as I don't get distracted again, I should be able to finish both of them before it is time to resume my expedition!"

Ves deeply believed he could meet this deadline. It would have taken an ordinary Journeyman Mech Designer at least a year or maybe two to complete so much work, but he was different from the rest. His previous tournament run had fully illustrated the differences.

As Ves went back to his agenda, he also caught another important event.

"It shouldn't take more than a couple of months to complete the expansion of the Golden Skull Alliance!"

This was a huge occasion and one that deserved his utmost attention!

Even if he had to leave the Genesis Lab and suspend his design activities for a time, he would gladly do so because the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family played a vital role to his ambitions.

"Once their ace mechs preside over our expeditionary fleet, we should have the capital to go deeper into the frontier than ever before!"

His eyes turned into stars when he thought about all of the potential targets he wanted to hunt down!

Phase whales and alien warships might spell certain death to many pioneers, but Ves and his fleet were different!

Beating them numerous times had completely dispelled his fear and awe towards these indigenous enemies. They could be beaten as long as his clan grasped the right information and his troops made the appropriate preparations.

The only fly in the ointment was that General Ark Larkinson refused to lend his strength to his expeditionary fleet. That robbed Ves of a powerful high-tier expert pilot and expert mech.

He recalled that he still needed to have a good talk with his dearest uncle about a handful of future arrangements.

Ves mentally added these items to his to-do list before he looked further into his agenda.

"I can't miss the conference organized by the Survivalist Faction."

This was an extremely important event for many different reasons. Not only did he look forward to meeting up with Jovy and forge new connections with many important figures, he also wanted to collect as much inside information about the ongoing conquest of the Red Ocean as possible.

As long as he did well enough during this crucial conference, Ves might have the opportunity to turn himself from a smaller pawn into a bigger pawn!

Perhaps he could even promote himself to a knight or a bishop!

"That is still a long distance away from turning myself into a chess player, but I don't have the strength to do so anyway..."

Ves had a feeling that the people he met and befriended during this serious event could drastically change the trajectory of his life!

"After that..."

He did not have a good idea on what he should be doing next. He figured that he would have a much better idea on what he should be focusing upon after he absorbed a lot of new information during the Survivalist conference.

"Oh, I almost forgot about this!" Ves jerked as he recalled another important priority.

He looked around and made sure to activate more security measures and activate a few jammers.

Lucky wasn't around at the moment, but Ves was confident no one had been able to plant any bugs in his design lab.

Once he made sure that he had a measure of privacy, he pulled out a special skull from the storage space provided by his System Space.

Ever since the Vault of Eternity allowed Ves to rent additional storage space, he had enthusiastically taken advantage of it to store a number of goods that he wanted to keep on his person at all times.

The only annoying part was that he needed to pay a fixed fee of Ascension Points in order to cover the rent every year.

That reminded him that he should not neglect the System. He needed to wait until the available Missions refreshed so that he could complete the easier ones and earn himself a bunch more AP.

He also wanted to explore the function of the Time Gate. He had been reluctant to use it in the past because he was already mentally preoccupied with so many other matters, but now that the all-important founding ceremony and founding festival had passed, he should be able to utilize this evolved System function without any significant burdens.

Since the System stated that he could only utilize it once a year, he should make use of it sooner rather than later.

"Maybe I'll try it out in a week."

Right now, he became more curious about the skull of the primordial human that he managed to excavate in Davute's pocket space.

The investigator dispatched by the MTA never mentioned anything about human remains during the interrogation session.

Ves wasn't sure why the mechers hadn't brought up this topic at all because he had not hid the skeleton in his hand when the human troopers started to fight against the pescan remnants.

Did nobody ever wonder why the leading figure among them was holding a weird glowing skull in his hands?!

There was no way the mechers missed such a detail when they interrogated everyone else that had also been trapped in the ancient alien prison.

Were the mechers trying to do him a favor by deliberately ignoring the presence of the special skull, or were they waiting to send a more important figure to him in the future?!

"Urgh. I hope someone like the Polymath doesn't drop by again." He sighed.

He needed to get rid of the skull and the rest of the ancient skeleton. While he would love to examine it for years and figure out the mystery behind primordial humans, this was a hot potato that might cause him to land in trouble with the wrong sort of people.

His mother needed it a lot more. While Ves already had a plan in mind on how he should smuggle it through the greater beyonder gate and ship it all the way back to the Komodo Star Sector, it would probably take a long time for it to come into fruition.

"I should see if I can make any quick gains by studying it for a little while." He decided. "There is no need to send it out right away."

He at least wanted to figure out what kind of materials it was made of and whether he could formulate anything similar enough.

The skull was an extraordinarily powerful tool for him to channel his spiritual manipulation abilities!

Ves did not need to obtain a channeling medium that was just as good as this ancient human skull. He would already be content if he obtained an imitation product that was only a tenth as good!

"Let's see what you're made of, shall we?" He smirked. "It's a good thing that I upgraded my lab instruments to first-class standards. I don't believe they are unable to pry out your secrets. Life forms are temporal, but science is eternal!"

#### Chapter 4890 Mixing Ideas

Just as he predicted, it was far harder for his scanning equipment to figure out the details of the primordial human remains than normal.

The first-class lab machines and instruments shouldn't have been defeated so easily. They were so good that they could easily decipher the alloy formulas for all of the warship debris that the Larkinson Clan had collected from the battlefield.

Yet when they started to examine the bones that remained pristine despite existing for so long, they yielded remarkably little results.

Sure, the scanners were able to use their basic sensors to gather obvious data such as the mass, density and dimensions of the bones.

Yet when Ves wanted to learn what materials they consisted of and how their internal structure looked like, he obtained no information at all! None of the MTA-issued equipment could peer beyond the surface of all of the bones!

The results actually didn't surprise him that much. Primordial humans wouldn't have been so highly regarded if they could be figured out so easily.

Ves still had to go through the motions and exhaust every available test that he could perform.

"Since these bones are so damn hard, I should try out the more dangerous and destructive tests as well."

He subjected them to all kinds of examinations that should ordinarily break many other kinds of materials.

For example, he conducted impact tests where he slammed the bones with a giant metal spike.

He threw them into an extremely hot furnace to see whether they would melt or crack.

He submerged the bones in highly corrosive acids to see if any chemical reactions occurred.

He even exposed them to high levels of radioactivity!

Nothing he did seemed to harm them in any fashion! Their mass and dimensions remained exactly the same after he cleaned them up and measured them again.

"This is ridiculous!"

Not even the hardest first-class materials that he had gotten his hands on could match this level of resilience!

The endurance tests he conducted were not average in the slightest. He had to pay hundreds of MTA credits in order to obtain the required materials to conduct a few of them, yet none of them produced any meaningful differences.

Ves finally accepted the tentative conclusion that the primordial human skeleton was indestructible by his current means.

While he suspected that an all-out attack from the Amaranto or the Mars might be able to cause the bones to show weakness, he did not dare to call over those powerful high-ranking mechs.

He needed to keep the ancient human remains as secret as possible, and he did not actually want to pulverize all of the bones just to satisfy his curiosity!

"There is something weird going on here." He frowned. "Are the bones so awfully dense and resistant towards damage due to their material composition alone, or are their defenses being boosted by other factors?"

When Blinky appeared from his head and dove deep into each and every bone, the companion spirit only encountered a lot of emptiness.

This was not the emptiness of non-existence. The best way that Ves could characterize Blinky's explorations was that the Star Cat had entered enormous swimming pools that had been drained thousands of years ago. They were completely empty of water, but the space they used to occupy still conveyed a sense of empty space.

When Blinky poured spiritual energy into these bones, their 'swimming pools' became filled again, though only by a tiny measure.

Adding other varieties of spiritual energy into the same bone caused it to automatically partition itself into multiple smaller swimming pools.

This was an incredibly fascinating process to him. It happened completely automatically, so much so that Ves couldn't find any consciousness or programmed routine that caused this to happen!

Try as he might, Ves could not detect any surviving spiritual remnants or spiritual constructs in each of the bones. He had already found this out when he initially discovered them inside the ancient alien prison, but now that he was able to conduct his examinations without a crisis hanging over his head, he was able to confirm his original observations.

"They have truly turned into empty slates." Ves said with a hint of wonder in his voice. "The power of time is strong. Whatever spiritual qualities they had before have fully faded due to the erosion of so many years."

Ves was unable to determine an accurate assessment of how old they were, but the primordial human bones had to be over 100,000 years old given the age of the ancient prison facility.

He had a lot of questions concerning these remains, but his inability to gather more data heavily restricted the amount of answers that he could gain.

He either needed much better lab equipment or he needed the help of a genuine expert like his mother.

"Since I can't figure out anything important, let me try and see if I can derive any other benefits from these bones."

He had the strongest urge to grab a knife, cut out his leg bones and replace them with the ancient relic bones.

Although this sounded absolutely crazy, he had the belief that his evolved body would be able to integrate the primordial human remains without any serious compatibility issues!

It took a few minutes for him to calm his restless and eager heart.

"I can't completely guarantee that this is safe or reversible. If these ownerless bones imprint on me and turn into permanent fixtures of my body, I won't be able to remove them without consequences."

Ves played around with the skull and other bones with the intention of studying what happened if he added multiple different varieties of spiritual energy in them. The way they separated from each other made it difficult for him to utilize multiple kinds of energy at the same time, but it was still possible if he concentrated his mind.

"I wonder..."

He had never really experimented with mixing different kinds of spiritual energies that conformed to different spiritual attributes.

To him, it was as pointless as mixing different incompatible drinks with each other.

For example, it was fine to drink coffee by itself, but if he mixed it with a fizzy soft drink, he would undoubtedly obtain a completely undrinkable abomination!

However, this did not mean that every combination of spiritual attributes was detrimental.

Coffee and milk went well together. He could mix a more universal substance such as alcohol with all kinds of drinks in order to produce viable new products.

While he wasn't sure whether this analogy applied to this specific situation, he might as well try and see what would happen.

"Having a bone like this makes it a lot more convenient to conduct these kinds of experiments." He smiled as he held a skull that glowed in all of the colors of a rainbow.

He tried to mix the spiritual energies donated by different design spirits, but quickly found out that they didn't get along well.

Their spiritual imprints got in the way. Just because they had been given away did not mean they became ownerless.

"Maybe I should take care of that first."

Once he conducted the tedious process of removing their spiritual imprints, he was able to mix the energies together a lot easier than before.

This was not necessarily a good development. Ves had the feeling he was creating different versions of mud pools by mixing together a lot of random junk.

"This is not useful. I should be able to do more with this, but what am I missing?"

He tried to recall any instances in the past where he was able to witness pools of spiritual energies with different attributes that somehow got along with each other.

He immediately thought of the spiritualities of many life forms!

Every sentient life form developed at least a sliver of spirituality that encapsulated their very beings.

As humans and intelligent aliens were usually complex by nature, their spiritualities also became mixed with different spiritual attributes as a result.

The problem was that aside from the two or three dominant attributes, the rest did not seem to do anything useful. They polluted the rest of the pool!

"This might not necessarily be a bad development." Ves suddenly thought.

He thought of extreme personalities such as Venerable Jannzi and felt that she might have been able to develop a milder persona if she wasn't so obsessed with her ideals.

Ves had long known that increasing the purity of one's spirit allowed it to grow a lot faster, it might also turn the individual in question into an extremist!

This theory happened to align with his observations of many different expert pilots.

The younger they were, the easier it was for them to develop extreme personalities after their advancement. This was because their life experiences weren't all that much yet. They still retained a touch of innocence and naivety that limited their spiritual pollution levels.

"Wait, this theory doesn't necessarily hold against the likes of Venerable Joshua."

Joshua belonged to the same generation as his former girlfriend, but he was more laid-back and approachable than her. Their lack of compatibility was partially the reason why they broke up their intimate relationship.

Thinking about all of these different cases caused him to unconsciously mix and separate different types of spiritual energies together.

While nothing produced any solid results, Ves continued to deliberate over his guesses and deductions until he abruptly stopped.

"Wait! Energy alone does nothing if it is left to its own devices. Energy can only be harnessed properly if it is directed or channeled in a specific manner!"

He thought back to all of those expert pilots and attempted to figure out what they all had in common.

"Willpower!"

The extraordinary willpower of expert pilots enabled them to bend the laws of reality and harness many possible forces that they ordinarily shouldn't be able to control.

His eyes shone as he started to feel as if he had stumbled upon a potentially useful design application.

When he thought about what sort of mech design project he could apply his latest discovery to, he immediately thought of a single mech design.

"I might be able to improve the Dullahan Project with this possible innovation!"

This was remarkable as he originally did not intend to mix the Dullahan Project with many different forms of spiritual energy. It was supposed to herald the rebirth of the Shield of Samar. While he had implemented many changes into the design, much of them were derived from the previous incarnation of Jannzi's expert mech.

What he had in mind this time was a brand-new addition to the expert knight mech that the original Shield of Samar lacked!

He set the glowing skull aside and activated a design suite. He immediately started to manipulate the interface and designed an entirely new physical tower shield.

The inner core of the shield consisted of Unending alloy while the exterior was made out of first-class transphasic alloys.

In order to make the shield a little more special, he colored it so that its exterior showed off a rainbow color gradient!

"The Rainbow Shield!"

This was not a tower shield that happened to look a little more colorful than before. If he could pull off his ideas, he might be able to turn it into a much more effective means of defense than before.

By borrowing the power of different attributes and combining them together into specific sequences, the reborn expert knight mech might be able to defend against all kinds of attacks to a much more effective degree than ordinary defensive measures!

"This is the power of prime resonance!"

It had been a while since he last worked on anything relating to the phenomena he had invented a few years ago. Prime resonance might have started off as the discount version of true resonance, but Ves did not want to believe it was limited to this level.

If he was able to refine the design of the Rainbow Shield, he may be able to create a new wonder. He just needed to flesh out its mechanisms and design characteristics in order to gain greater assurances that his latest idea was viable!