

Mech 1701

Chapter 1701 Conspiracy

Reality froze around Ves as he took in Raymond's explosive news.

The 'reinforcements' turned out to be an entirely different beast!

All official communication between the LMC and the authorities only described the incoming fleet as reinforcements meant to bolster Cloudy Curtain's defenses.

There was nothing that hinted at taking Ves into custody and bringing him away to a different star system!

Ves thought that the Tovars had already solved this problem. How could the Mech Corps deceive them all by sending a capture fleet under the guise of reinforcements?!

Perhaps the most worrying aspect about the new arrivals was the presence of an expert pilot! Venerable Ghanso Larkinson himself accompanied the 'reinforcements', which was massively overkill for a lesser star system!

Each and every expert pilot was needed to defend the most strategic locations. Bentheim needed expert pilots more than Cloudy Curtain! It didn't make any sense to send Ghanso to Cloudy Curtain just to fend off some sandmen!

The only way it made sense was if Ghanso had been sent to oppose Ves and the Larkinsons on his side!

Ves always knew there were contradictions between him and the more patriotic faction of the family. He knew that Ghanso strongly sided with the Larkinsons who pursued duty to the Republic above anything else. Yet how could his illustrious cousin ever agree to be used as a sword pointed at a family member?

"This is outrageous!" He exploded. "Family doesn't fight against family! This has been the Larkinson rule for centuries, right!?"

The Larkinson elder looked grave. "There are exceptions to this rule, Ves."

"And those are..?"

"If.. a Larkinson has betrayed the family or betrayed the state, he or she does not deserve to be treated as family."

"..."

Ves fell silent. He vaguely recalled this exception when his father lectured him about it in his youth. Of course, back then he was just a little kid, so he couldn't really remember so many clauses.

"Does Venerable Ghanso and his fleet come with any orders?"

"See for yourself." Raymond replied and activated his comm to transfer some files.

The desk terminal lit up, allowing Ves to skim through the official looking documents. The format, letterhead and everything else looked completely identical to his prior correspondence with the Mech Corps!

"Are these orders fake?"

"No. I've already verified them." Raymond pointed at a corner of the current page. "Look at this virtual signature. As long as you are connected to the galactic net, the signature automatically links up to the servers of the Mech Corps. You can visit a site and immediately verify that this unique signature is a valid order."

Ves did so, and quickly found out that the Mech Corps indeed issued these orders!

They weren't fake!

This meant that Venerable Ghanso was acting on official orders!

"This.. why would the Mech Corps issue such orders?!"

The documents were very wordy and full of formal terms, but they all came down to a single priority.

Ves had to be taken into custody by the Mech Corps, no matter what he wanted.

"The Mech Corps isn't a unilateral entity, Ves. You should know this since you served with Vandals for some time." Raymond wearily told him. He seemed more old and frail than ever since he took up the position of COO. "While I'm not a veteran, I'm decently aware of the power struggles within the military. I strongly suspect that these orders don't represent the will of the entire institution. This is very likely someone in the hierarchy playing games with us! No average military official can arrange such elaborate deception surrounding the reinforcement fleet!"

This was something that befuddled Ves. He was no longer the kid who operated a mech workshop by himself. He was the head and the lead designer of a large mech manufacturer, a prominent elder of the Larkinson Family and a well-connected individual!

Why didn't the Tovars say anything? Why didn't Flashlight warn him ahead of time? How could Calabast possibly miss something so huge?

All of these partnerships and alliances had failed at this critical moment! With Ghanso Larkinson and three combat carriers worth of military mechs bearing down on Cloudy Curtain, Ves had been completely caught off guard!

He quickly contacted Captain Silvestra and briefly filled her in on the situation.

"Captain, can the Barracuda escape this star system?"

The projection of the captain shook her head. "My apologies, sir, but it's too late. According to the movements of the forces in orbit, the defense fleet has already spread out to envelop every approach. The combat carriers have split up as well to surround the entire planet from three angles. No matter which angle we attempt to follow, at least one of the combat carriers and accompanying mechs will be able to intercept our escape!"

Venerable Ghanso only transmitted his ultimatum when the capture fleet had come close enough to seal off any escape routes!

It was too late to run! Ves had been far too complacent against the so-called 'reinforcements'!

He cut off his call with Captain Silvestra and contacted someone else.

"Miles!" he shouted. "Are you aware of what is going on right now?!"

"I have just been informed, sir." Miles replied with panic. "The Mech Corps wasn't supposed to come with orders to take you away! I can guarantee that our Tovar Family had nothing to do with this! I'm trying to gain more information from my family right now, but from what I have heard so far, we were completely blindsided! It will take some time for Senator Tovar to uncover the truth!"

Ves grunted in frustration. "You better give me an answer, soon! I trusted you Tovars to cover my back!"

As he shut off the comm channel, he briefly contemplated the possibility that the Tovar Family stabbed him in the back.

Did Senator Tovar really tear up their existing agreement in order to achieve another objective?

"No."

It did not make much sense. The Tovars agreed to work with Ves because they thought he had a lot of promise as a mech designer. They also wanted to leverage his connection with the Hegemony to serve as a hedge in case the Hexadric Hegemony won the Komodo War.

Both of these motivations still applied, and Ves trusted that the Tovars would not do anything to endanger their benefits!

There was a possibility that the Tovars might have agreed to drop their support of Ves in exchange for other benefits, but he doubted it. The Tovars should not be shortsighted enough to stab the designer of the Desolate Soldier in the back!

This was not to say that Ves cleared them from suspicion, but for now he gave them the benefit of the doubt.

"Hmph. Let's see what my resident spy has to say."

He contacted Leland next, who didn't even wait for clarification to talk.

"I'm aware of what has transpired, Ves. I can emphatically say that I was in the dark as well. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has no involvement in this development at all!"

"I thought your 'ministry' was well-connected to the military." Ves responded with a glower.

Leland's cover identity was a liaison from MinFA. Since they were talking on a comm channel, they couldn't mention Flashlight directly.

Nonetheless, Flashlight was a military intelligence agency. Out of all of the Brighter spy organizations, it should have been the first to become aware of this ambush!

For his part, Leland pretended to look sheepish. "We are mainly concerned with staring at foreign militaries instead of our own. We can absolutely assure you that we are not involved in this matter. In fact, we are victims ourselves since another arm of the Bright Republic has dared to move against our interests! We value the shares we own in your company, and we are aware that they are only useful so long as you are placated!"

Ves didn't know what to think. While he often lied, he never really picked up the ability to sense if others tried to do the same. He knew that he especially couldn't trust his judgement towards trained spies like Leland and Calabast.

For now, he could only go by Leland's word that Flashlight did not intend anything nefarious towards him. Ves was inclined to believe the spy this time.

Just like with the Tovars, it didn't make much sense for Flashlight to burn their bridges. Through a shell company, they owned 21 percent of the LMC, which was an extremely lucrative share.

Ves had long wanted to do away with this, but refrained from doing so. He knew that as long as Flashlight had a significant stake in his company, they would do everything to safeguard their and by extension his interests!

This shouldn't have changed. Flashlight was probably just as much of a victim as Ves at the hands of the hidden conspirators!

"Find out as much as you can." Ves instructed Leland with gritted teeth. "Tell me who is responsible and what you guys can do to negate these orders! I swear that if the Mech Corps robs my freedom and takes me away from Cloudy Curtain, my relationship with your 'ministry' will irrevocably change!"

Leland discolored for a bit. This was not an idle threat!

Ves did not dare to specify what he would do, though. Instead, he left it to Leland's imagination.

This was because Ves didn't actually want to ruin his relationship with one of his allies in the government. Perhaps the situation could still be salvaged after Ghanso dragged him away!

"I understand." Leland bowed. "My superiors are already at work trying to uncover the truth. It is extremely strange that the ones who are targeting you managed to blind our eyes. I can only conclude that another 'ministry' has run interference on us. This means that more than the military has moved into action against you! Be careful and don't do anything rash!"

The call ended shortly afterwards. Ves collapsed in his seat and rubbed his face.

"Meow."

Lucky noticed his concern and worryingly swished his tail while he sat on his desk.

"It's been a bad day, Lucky. You might have to go into action."

"Meow!"

"At least you're still reliable."

Once he took in the new information, he turned back to Raymond, who had been quietly conferring with some other Larkinson elders.

"What is up with Ghanso?" Ves asked. "It's one thing to act against me if I threatened the Bright Republic, but I didn't! I did nothing but contribute to the state all this time! My insistence on staying at Cloudy Curtain shouldn't be enough to make him move!"

Raymond grimaced. "As you know, Young Ghanso has always been a part of the most conservative and most duty-oriented Larkinsons. The.. recent developments in the family has made them all worried. They fear that you and the prosperity that you bring is hollowing out our family's traditions. When Larkinson mech pilots started flocking to the Avatars or Sentinels instead of the Mech Corps, this faction has grown a lot more concerned!"

"If they have anything to say about it, they should bring it up when the steering committee convenes!"

"That's the problem, Ves. The steering committee can't convene during wartime. Too many Larkinsons are obliged to fight during this time. This is bad for the conservative faction because more and more Larkinsons continue to go over to our side. The longer this situation develops, the weaker Ghanso's faction becomes! For this reason, he should have a very strong desire to curb your growing influence in the family!"

"By becoming the lackey of my enemies?!"

"As far as he is concerned, he is following orders." Raymond sighed. "This is a very potent shield. If Ghanso is acting in private, we wouldn't hesitate to stand up against him. Yet because he is acting on official authority, our family cannot do a thing! In fact, even non-Larkinsons won't dare to oppose the Mech Corps!"

Ves froze at these words. This meant that the Avatars and Sentinels would never take up arms against Ghanso and the capture fleet! The mech forces he painstakingly cultivated in order to protect him were rendered useless if they had to square off against the Mech Corps!

Chapter 1702 Hidden Hands

There was still some time before the new arrivals reached low orbit. There, the combat carriers could maintain their blockade or make landfall to dispatch mechs and troops to capture Ves.

During this time, Ves had to do everything to stop this operation!

Right now, the Tovar Family and Flashlight both performed their own investigations and tried to come up with ways to put a stop to this action.

Raymond constantly talked to every influential Larkinson he could reach and ask for a way to convince the Mech Corps to reconsider!

Unfortunately, the Larkinson Family wouldn't be of much help.

"Many Larkinsons who have the most say in the family are currently in active service." The Larkinson elder explained. "You know what that means. They can't be contacted without a good reason."

"I.. understand." Ves sighed. "Soldiers aren't supposed to have access to the galactic net in order to maintain operational security and stuff."

Even though they fought against aliens who did not perform any intelligence gathering, the Mech Corps never let down its guard. It maintained the same tight communication restrictions as during the Bright-Vesia Wars! The military would never allow complacency to be the reason why the Bright Republic fell!

Therefore, Ves knew it was hopeless to gain the assistance of the most respected and influential Larkinsons!

While the retired veterans in the family had a lot of say as well, the biggest issue was that the status of an expert pilot like Ghanso ranked at the top in the family!

While that didn't mean he could dictate family policy, no one in the family would be inclined to oppose him if he wanted something!

The only one who could truly oppose him was another expert pilot!

Right now, the only other Larkinson expert pilot Ves could think up was Ark Larkinson! As his father's brother by blood, Ark would definitely stand up for his cousin!

"Uncle Ark will never stand for this!" He said. "Can you get a hold of him?! He'll surely smack some sense in Ghanso!"

"As far as I'm aware, Ark Larkinson hasn't taken a side in our family dispute. However, he is consumed by the Sand War at this time. We haven't been able to reach him in months."

Ves cursed in his heart. "My grandfather."

"Benjamin is likewise out of reach. During wartime, the Ministry of Defense can be just as strict as the Mech Corps. As long as he is involved with a sensitive operation or important strategic plan, you can forget about contacting him. He's likely unaware of this development!"

In essence, Ves could not count on any Larkinson to exert any influence on Ghanso or the Mech Corps!

What a useless family!

Of course, that was a bit unfair to the Larkinsons. They weren't powerful enough to contend against a state, especially one which they trusted and served from the bottom of their hearts.

The thought of opposing the Mech Corps never crossed the minds of many Larkinsons! Only a crooked member of the family like Ves had no qualms against resisting the military!

"Urgh!"

With all of his helpers, backers and allies rendered impotent due to the nature of his opposition, Ves was running out of people to turn for assistance.

He called Gloriana next and briefed her in on the situation.

"I'm aware." She spoke with concern. "I'm just as mad about this as you, Ves! I won't let anyone take you away if I have anything to say about it! I'm doing everything I can to stop this travesty!"

Ves thought of the detachment of the Glory Battalion assigned to protect her during her stay in the Bright Republic. While they didn't number very much, each second-class mech was a force to be reckoned with. While a third-class expert mech still possessed some advantages, a Hexer mech company could easily suppress Ghanso!

"Can you move the Glory Battalion?"

Her face suddenly turned glum. "I.. can't. I tried, but Melody and the Glory Battalion are abiding by my mother's orders before my own. Their only duty is to protect me. They won't lift a finger to help you. In fact, my guards won't even allow me to go near you in fear that you would drag me in this mess!"

Melody's face entered the projection range, crowding Gloriana aside.

"Mr. Larkinson, please exercise restraint. We are guests of the Bright Republic. We will not allow you to break our agreement of neutrality with your government. If we become involved in whatever infighting you are caught up in, a significant diplomatic crisis will ensue!"

Though Ves hated it, he had to admit that Melody was in the right. It was unfair for him to try and drag the Hexers in this mess of his own making.

He realized that he couldn't count on anyone else to solve this immediate crisis. He could only rely on himself and his closest, most loyal confidantes to resist the incoming capture fleet.

"I understand, Miss Melody." He replied in a defeated tone. "Rest assured that I will figure something out without involving Gloriana."

"Good." She spoke in her cultured accent while staring at Ves with interest. "We will be observing you. If you wish to be a worthy suitor, then you must prove you have the capacity to operate at this level. This difficulty of yours is very minor compared to the intrigues that take place in the Hegemony."

Gloriana finally managed to push Melody away. "Ves! I'm sorry for her! If it was up to me, I would have intervened, diplomacy be damned!"

"Don't do anything drastic, Gloriana. I'm more resourceful than you think. I'll find a way to thread the needle." He spoke confidently.

In truth, he was quaking in his boots. Without Gloriana, where else could he turn to for assistance?

After ending this latest call, Ves breathed deeply and pressed his fingers against his forehead. He turned towards Raymond, who remained in constant contact with fellow Larkinsons.

"Any progress?"

"The contradictions within our family have come out in the open, Ves. Ghanso's involvement in this ambush has forced everyone to make their stance clear. There are Larkinsons who are openly supporting Ghanso and agree with his agenda to make our family return to its roots."

"That's madness! Does Ghanso want to turn back the clock and throw away all of the rewards the family has gained?!"

"You're not alone, Ves. I've roughly gotten the measure of most of our available Larkinsons. At least a third are openly on your side. They believe in you and think you are the only Larkinson who can elevate our family to a greater height!"

"That.. leaves a lot of people who aren't on either side."

"Correct." Raymond sighed. "The majority of Larkinsons are on the fence. They value our heritage and traditions, but they also think the LMC has done a lot of good to the family. However, the main reason why they aren't taking any sides is because they don't believe this conflict is all that serious."

"What?! Don't they know what will happen to us all if Ghanso has his way!?"

"No one believes that anything bad will happen to you, Ves. You are a respected mech designer, war hero and celebrity. It is extremely doubtful the Mech Corps intends

anything towards you. Their only goal is to move you from a less secure star system to a more secure star system. Even if you object, it won't really harm our interests."

"Is that what you think?" Ves eyed Raymond with suspicion.

"I am on your side, Ves. While it is difficult for me to agree with your suspicions, I have a duty to assist you in my current position."

At least Raymond remembered who he really worked for. This elder became more and more pleasing to Ves.

"Thank you for your support. For now, let's see how we can escape this crisis."

He estimated that it would take about an hour or so for the new arrivals to reach Ves and bring him away.

He continued to contact various people such as Marcella Bollinger and Professor Ventag. Neither of them could offer any assistance.

As Ves was running out of options, the door to his office opened. Both Leland Toll and Miles Tovar entered at the same time.

"We have made some progress on our respective ends." Leland spoke first after reaching the desk and sitting down on the opposite chair.

"Do tell."

Leland first activated a jammer to shield their conversation from any eavesdropping.

"After some extensive snooping, we managed to identify why our intelligence has failed in this instance." He spoke softly. "It turns out that Spotlight has assisted the unit that is tasked with bringing you way by camouflaging their mission with fake orders and other bureaucratic smokescreens."

"Spotlight is able to do that?"

"Even though Spotlight is responsible for domestic intelligence, there is a lot of rivalry and overlap between the spy agencies. Spotlight has invested a significant proportion of their limited resources in the Mech Corps to assist in the deception! We were completely caught off-guard!"

Ves grimaced. "What is it with Spotlight?"

"Spotlight hasn't decided to oppose you directly. We believe that they are acting on the instructions of a higher authority."

Miles Tovar took over from Leland. "We just happened to find out the person who signed Venerable Ghanso Larkinson's orders. After we have managed to pierce through the smokescreen, we have found out that Mech General Ulrich Cavendish is supporting this operation!"

"Who? Cavendish?" Ves frowned, before his eyes widened. "Is he a part of the Cavendish Family?!"

The Cavendish Family was one of the five founding families of the Bright Republic!

"Correct." Miles nodded. "General Cavendish is 173 years old and one of the mainstays of the Cavendish Family. Out of the founding families, the Cavendish Family are military hardliners. They have a very strong presence in the Mech Corps. For General Cavendish to issue these orders in a covert manner while keeping everyone else in high command in the dark can only be done with the full support of the Cavendish Family!"

"Why.. is the Cavendish Family targeting me?" Ves asked hollowly. "I never did anything to them. I don't even know Ulrich Cavendish!"

"This is our fault." Miles admitted. "Our Tovar Family is competing against the Cavendish Family for influence. Due to the difficulties caused by the Sand War, the Bright Republic is forced to make increasingly more desperate decisions. The contradictions between every faction has intensified because no side wants to pay an excessive price to keep our state aloft."

Ves banged his fist against his desk. "So the only reason General Cavendish has issued these orders is because they are targeting your family?!"

"We are attempting to remedy this problem as best we can!" Miles held up his hands. "However, our Tovar Family is mainly involved in administration. While our influence in the government is considerable, we don't have much say in the Mech Corps."

"Don't forget what time we are in right now. In times of war, the military has the most say. The Mech Corps is able to act with near-impunity, especially when martial law has been declared throughout our entire state!" Leland reminded Ves.

"Goddammit!"

"It gets worse." Miles Tovar spoke. "From what we have gathered, the Cavendish Family hasn't acted alone in this. The hand of the Ramza Family is also evident! While they are mostly engaged in commerce, they possess a decent influence in the government and the military."

"Let me guess. The Ramzas have a beef with you Tovars as well, right?"

The Tovar mech designer reluctantly nodded. "The Ramzas are our biggest rivals. They may even be the instigators of this scheme. With their extensive influence in the mech industry, the Ramzas are likely responsible for the followup. When you are taken to Rittersberg or New Foundation, you will probably be pressured into working for the military or some other mech institution for the remainder of the Sand War!"

In other words, Ves may not be a captive of the state, but he would definitely be restricted and firmly under its control!

Chapter 1703 Illegal Move

"So both the Ramza and Cavendish Families are out to get me because I'm in your camp." Ves summed up while directing an acrimonious look towards Miles. "This is your fault. Fix it. NOW!"

"We are doing the best we can! Senator Tovar is personally contacting anyone who can countermand Ghanso's orders. However, it isn't proper for a legislator to influence the military. Not only do the Cavendishes have deep roots in the Mech Corps, there are only a few military officials outrank General Ulrich Cavendish!"

The wartime situation wasn't helping them either. The military possessed the most say right now. The civilian government could only cede ground in order to make sure the Mech Corps had what it needed to defend and save the Republic!

"Tell me what you can accomplish, then."

"Give us at least three to four hours." Miles spoke. "Senator Tovar informed me that he needs at least this much time to access the right officials and countermand the orders. As long as you can stay out of the clutches of the Mech Corps, we can probably deprive Venerable Ghanso of his authority!"

"Three hours? This is way too long! Don't you see how close the combat carriers are? They can be on top of us in less than an hour!"

"This is the best we can do, Mr. Larkinson."

While Ves appreciated the help, it wasn't enough to bail him out. Should he play hide and seek or something in order to stall out his capture?

With his stealth toys, this might actually be a viable plan. It was just that Ves was not very confident about it. His stealth and sensor shielding drained a lot of energy, so he could only hide himself from the Mech Corps for only so long.

The main difficulty was that it was too late to go into hiding. The Mech Nursery was isolated, but that also made any departure extremely obvious to enemy scans.

Right now, Cloudy Curtain's ever-present cloud cover was very helpful in obscuring most orbital scans. That did not mean the military possessed no solutions, however.

There were doubtlessly some assets in the vicinity that kept an eye on the Mech Nursery. Perhaps Spotlight placed a lot of watchers in and outside of the company to stare at him specifically.

When Ves shared this suspicion, Leland immediately concurred.

"This is likely the case. Spotlight and Searchlight has never given up on keeping you and the LMC under observation. Even if you've cleaned out their spies a few months ago, it isn't in their nature to give up after a single setback."

"Great. And I take it Flashlight can't help?"

"We are all on the same side, Ves. We never act directly against each other."

"Is there anything Flashlight can do that's actually helpful?"

"Our organization may be vast, but most of our resources and personnel are dispersed. Our headquarters might be able to make some small actions, but you are better off relying on the Tovars to solve your problems."

"I see." Ves flatly replied.

Whether Leland lied to him or not, clearly Ves could not rely on Flashlight in this situation, which was a massive disappointment.

Leland noticed Ves' disappointment. "Please keep the precariousness of our situation in mind. Two founding families have moved directly against an ally of another founding family. Two spy agencies are directly entangled in this confrontation. A detachment of the Mech Corps is acting under secret orders that can't be countermanded on a whim."

Different institutions and factions of the Bright Republic opposed each other at this time. It would be very bad if relations between each other deteriorated over this spat. Each side had to act with restraint and play by the rules in order to avoid any undesirable escalation.

This was why no one ever seriously thought about opposing Venerable Ghanso and his comrades with force!

Yet what most people considered taboo, Ves thought differently.

"We need to buy time." He concluded after understanding the complete picture so far. "I have only less than an hour of time to remain free. I might be able to extend this time if I

go into hiding, but it's obvious our opponents have prepared for this operation for a while."

He strongly suspected that the Ramzi and Cavendish Families might have laid the groundwork for this operation a few months ago!

These clever and well-prepared opponents probably took most of his possible actions into account. They likely had a countermeasure ready for any decision he might make.

It was as if his opponents put him in checkmate before he even became aware that he was playing a game!

Their plan was almost airtight! Just an expert pilot of the Mech Corps alone was enough to suppress every open opposition!

Ves was not willing to accept defeat! There had to be a way to resolve this impossible situation!

The only way for him to outfox his opponents was to flip the board or make an illegal move.

Perhaps he wasn't strong enough to flip the board at his current state, but he happened to be an expert when it came to illegal moves!

He first thought about messing with Ghanso's spirituality. By himself or with the help of an F-stone, he could probably inflict considerable mental damage to his stuck-up cousin.

Ves experimentally concentrated his mind and cast a piece of himself in the imaginary realm.

He had a very strong impression of Ghanso Larkinson, and the expert pilot also happened to be pretty close to him. It did not take much effort to find his spiritual presence in the imaginary realm.

Unfortunately, Ves could immediately tell that attacking it was unlikely to succeed!

The spiritual presence was not only active and in its most guarded state, but its strength and resilience was also far stronger than anything he had seen before!

After exploring it from a distance, Ves understood why Ghanso looked so spiritually unassailable.

Ghanso was interfacing with his expert mech!

Ves had never succeeded in messing with a mech pilot's mind when they interfaced with a mech!

The man-machine connection was so strong that Ves had a much easier time attacking expert pilots in isolation rather than affecting the combined strength of a regular mech pilot paired with a regular mech!

If the regular man-machine connection was already that bad, then the bond between an expert pilot and an expert mech was far more formidable!

Unless Ghanso stepped out of his cockpit, Ves could forget about messing with his mind and spirituality!

He pulled back his concentration and began to contemplate another solution.

"Is Ghanso leading this operation?"

"The commander of this unit is probably a confidante of General Cavendish. However, if you manage to affect the Venerable in some way, he might be able to hold back his comrades."

"Hmm.."

This was what Ves wanted to hear. He hardly had any options left. The only one he could turn to was to make full use of his Devil Tongue.

Of course, he wasn't stupid enough to think he could convince Ghanso to change his mind. Expert pilots were extremely strong-minded and rarely flinched from their decisions!

The only possible way that Ves could make him halt was to employ the one thing he cared the most aside from his duty!

Ves waved both Leland and Miles to silence.

"Be quiet. I need to address the family right now."

He first took care of his appearance. He sat up straight behind his desk and adopted the most serious expression he had ever formed. He mentally thanked himself for wearing his Pride of Dusk ensemble today. Of course, he had kept his cat ears in his pockets. He could not afford to paint himself as a fool this time!

In order to make himself more impressive, he activated his comm and activated a function before patting his palm against his chest.

A projection of all of his medals appeared in place. The Darkness Eater, the Plasma Spark, the Torchbearer, the Golden Mech and so on shone so realistically that no one would be able to tell if they were illusionary!

"Alright, it's showtime!"

He entered the communication section of his desk terminal and selected every Larkinson on his contact list. He initiated a one-sided broadcast to every Larkinson at once, no matter if they were on Cloudy Curtain, Bentheim, Rittersberg or anywhere else!

At least half of the connections failed to go through! The Larkinsons on the other end were either asleep, under communication blocks or simply didn't want to accept his call.

No matter what, Ves still managed to reach hundreds of Larkinsons, enough to sway the family!

As no new connections emerged, Ves centered himself and began to employ some tricks to boost his stature!

He concentrated his mind and began to envision the Desolate Soldier design!

He made contact with the Solemn Guardian, which had grown even stronger than Ves had last seen.

Yet no matter how much it had grown, it still remembered its creator. It didn't take much to convince the Solemn Guardian to allow Ves to borrow its strength!

Right now, Ves did not appear casual or selfish at all. His straight but empathic bearing highly resembled that of exceptional Larkinson veterans!

"Fellow family members. Let me begin by apologizing for you for bringing up this ugly incident to you. Today is a day where our Larkinson Family is beset by division. The conservative and tradition-minded members of our family have acted against me and our mech company without going through the rest of our family! Our latest source of prosperity is at risk because some people in our family don't want us to enjoy nice things!"

Ves could immediately sense a wave of disgust from the other end of his broadcast.

There was a reason why he addressed the Larkinsons first! Hopefully, Ghanso was in the dark about this little move of his. Since Ghanso was such a stickler for the rules, his communications were probably restricted!

Knowing this, Ves addressed his family with confidence!

"If you have not heard about what is going on, then let me fill you in. Two of the founding families, the Ramzas and the Cavendishes, are conspiring to take down the LMC and remove me from my home in order to stop me from enriching and empowering the Larkinsons! This is despite the backing I've secured from the Tovar Family!"

The mention of three of the founding families probably shocked many of the Larkinsons! Anything involving the three foremost groups of the Bright Republic was bound to be explosive!

"Make no mistake. Under my efforts, our Larkinson Family has started to rise from a middling military family with little influence into a prosperous power with enough money to make every Larkinson rich! However, the Ramzas and Cavendishes don't want us to rise! They want to keep us under their thumb and continue to volunteer our mech pilots to the Mech Corps as obedient dogs!"

He was probably touching a lot of nerves right now. In ordinary times, he would never disparage the family's noble mission, but Ves could not afford to mince any words! He needed to convey the gravity of the situation in the most dramatic way possible in order to make every Larkinson feel as if they were in a monumental crisis!

"A supposedly-respected mech general from the Cavendish Family has directly abused his authority, employed spies to confuse the headquarters of the military and issued fake orders to hoodwink me into surrendering everything I have done for the family!"

Ves painted a very big and dangerous vortex. While this might scare away some Larkinsons from getting involved, he wasn't finished!

"What is worse is Venerable Ghanso Larkinson willingly sided with these snobby elites and betrayed the interests of our Larkinson Family! Is this what our family stands for?! Is this what constitutes honor to us?! I fought and bled for the Mech Corps just as Venerable Ghanso has done!"

His medals appeared especially eye-catching right now!

"While I may just be a mech designer, I have done more for the Larkinson Family than Ghanso and his conservative faction has ever done! After four centuries of continued service, no expert pilot managed to elevate the wealth and status of our Larkinson Family! As for me, it took less than five years for me to enrich the Larkinson Family to the point where all of you can buy your own mechs with plenty of money to spare!"

Ves was right! Even the neutral Larkinsons agreed with his argument!

"Let me ask you this, my fellow Larkinsons. Do you believe that Ghanso's vision of our family is better, or mine? Is tradition worth giving up all of the wealth we are entitled to? Is service without reward for four more centuries worth our continued sacrifice?!"

Each of his questions landed like a bombshell among the Larkinsons he addressed!

Chapter 1704 The Family Address

The Larkinson Family numbered thousands of people. Though a large portion of them consisted of spouses, children and norms, the entire family developed an immense amount of pride and worship in its heritage.

The Larkinson Ancestor, who left the New Rubarth Empire for reasons lost in history, earned a lot of merits during the founding of the Bright Republic.

Ever since then, his descendents multiplied and adopted the noble mission of defending the state their ancestor fought and bled for. In time, this noble mission took on its own identity.

Constant dedication caused the Larkinson Family to develop a reputation of an upright, honorable military family.

Reputation was like a glow. Every Larkinson became someone more. The accomplishments of their predecessors surrounded them like a halo, causing everyone who was aware of the Larkinsons to see them in a much better light.

Yet reputation also served like a shackle that constrained their choices along a predetermined path.

Because their predecessors selflessly fought for the Mech Corps, their descendents automatically gained the expectation to perpetuate this duty.

Over time, so many Larkinson mech pilots volunteered for service that the family no longer questioned this pattern. It became a deep-seethed family tradition that every eligible Larkinson had to take part in because that was the price for maintaining the honor of their family.

To most Larkinsons, the reputation and honor they carried were sufficient rewards for their sacrifice.

Few Larkinsons developed ambitions to achieve anything more.

This was because they would have to play by different rules. To break into a higher orbit, they needed to make enemies. This went against their instincts as a family dedicated to the betterment of the state as a whole!

Of course, there were plenty of Larkinsons over the years who disliked this burden and wanted to carry on with their lives without the baggage of the past.

The Larkinson Family did not force the unwilling misfits, rebels and deviants to take part in its noble mission. It simply cast them out and made it very clear to the public that these exiles no longer had anything to do with the official family.

This was why there were a lot of Larkinsons who weren't on the family rolls. Raella Larkinson was one of the most recent ones. Even if she became a part of a vicious gang from Bentheim, her choices no longer affected the stellar reputation of the Larkinsons.

Due to the voluntary departure of dissenters, the Larkinsons who remained all believed in their family's noble mission. The most sincere, fanatical and dedicated Larkinsons continued to dominate the family and perpetuated its burden of duty!

Ves had thought long and hard about this situation. As a deviant Larkinson, he knew how pernicious this expectation of duty had become in his family.

From birth, this expectation of duty was hammered into the minds of their children through many subtle ways. The tales of their extended family and the teachings of the Larkinsons acting as mentors all served to indoctrinate every young Larkinson into serving the Bright Republic!

Even Ves was aware that he developed some codes within his mind which compelled him to defend his home state. Although his many changes and experiences caused this programming to glitch, he still couldn't get rid of his impulses to aid the state that shaped his life.

Yet now that Mech General Ulrich Cavendish unilaterally dispatched Ghanso and some troops to take him into custody, Ves finally felt as if his programming had crashed.

He no longer felt any goodwill towards the Bright Republic anymore.

While his home state was his cherished home, Ves felt he no longer owed it anything.

This was why he addressed the Larkinson Family with not a single shred of doubt or guilt!

While he was taking several liberties with the truth, he truly believed in the main points he tried to convey!

"Do you not think that the Larkinson Family has done enough to defend the Bright Republic?!" He addressed his audience of Larkinsons with complete conviction! "The Bright Republic at the time of the Larkinson Ancestor was a fragile entity that only amounted to several poorly-defended colonies. It's different now! Even with the sandmen testing our resolve, there are countless mech pilots and starfighter pilots fighting for the Republic! The few hundred mech pilots who bear our family name hardly makes any difference at this point!"

While he spoke the truth, this was not enough to introduce a sufficient amount of doubt in the minds of his audience.

He only said this to diminish the contributions of the Larkinsons of today. They needed to get off their high horse and recognize that they have become nothing more than cogs in a large and unfeeling machine!

Ves patted his chest, drawing attention to his prestigious projected medals. "While I respect the honorable service of the Larkinsons who served, I have done more for the Bright Republic as a mech designer than hundreds of Larkinson mech pilots!"

He could hear the outrage from the mech pilots now, but he wasn't finished!

"I do not mean any disrespect! I am simply telling the truth! With the wealth, knowledge and power that I have gathered through my own efforts, I have saved the Bright Republic from collapse by designing the Desolate Soldier and its variants! Tell me if I'm wrong!"

No Larkinson was ignorant of the Desolate Soldier. It single-handedly propped up the morale of many wavering mech pilots, not just in the Bright Republic but also in many other states!

Although the Dawnbreaker recently stole its thunder, it was definitely the most influential mech design of the Sand War!

The supreme contribution this single mech design earned had given the Larkinsons much more honor than any expert pilot had ever accumulated!

Not even Ark Larkinson, the most impressive living Larkinson at this time, could match what Ves had done to support the state in these trying times!

Ves momentarily paused his speech to allow the Larkinsons he addressed to form these conclusions on their own. It was not appropriate for him to brag too openly and stomp on the many sacrifices made by the Larkinsons risking their lives at the front.

Nonetheless, his noble posture as he sat behind his desk with his hands clasped in front of him conveyed a strong message in itself! An effect similar to the time he channeled Ylvaine's spiritual fragment occurred again!

This time, Ves dialed back the effect in order to extend the time he could empower his stature. While he wasn't short on spiritual energy these days, this was still a very draining action!

The expenditure was worth it though. In order to maximize his persuasion towards the Larkinsons, Ves had to occupy the high ground by painting himself as a bigger contributor than any other Larkinson!

"My fellow family members, what are we actually fighting for all these years? Is it for honor? Reputation? Heritage? If this is so, why are we still the same family as a hundred years ago? Have we grown wealthier? Did we gain more say in the running of the state? I don't see any changes. Even our family's honor and reputation seemed to hit a ceiling!"

Perhaps many Larkinsons already knew this, but no one wanted to mention this. They were too comfortable with the status quo!

"Look, I get it. Our Larkinson Family is a military family. We shouldn't bite off more than we can chew. We're not politicians or businessmen. We had no advantages in this area, but this has changed!"

He pointed his thumb at himself in a dramatic fashion. "You have me now! I am an illustrious, award-winning Journeyman Mech Designer who has designed many innovative mech designs! I have used my talents and abilities to better the Bright Republic during the latest Bright-Vesia War as well as the Sand War! While I have selflessly contributed to the state because it is my duty to do so, I have done even more to enhance the wealth and standing of our family! This is because I am different from you! I am the sole Larkinson who has benefited our family more than dozens of Ghansos put together!"

Ves grinned as he brought up his killer point. "Yes, while Ghanso Larkinson and his band of 'sefless' Larkinsons have served the Mech Corps with distinction, how have they actually benefited our family? Merely maintaining our current level of honor and reputation is not enough! Have you never considered that while our Larkinsons are constantly dying and bleeding to fulfill our noble mission, the state has never really rewarded us in a substantial fashion?"

A silence stretched among all of the Larkinsons listening in on his address.

"Do you know what I think?" He swept his arm in a half circle. "We have all become unwitting slaves for the state! If our Larkinson Family truly received the remuneration we deserve from all of the sacrifices our predecessors have made, we should have been equal to the Cavendish Family! Instead, this jealous founding family is deliberately trying to suppress me, the only Larkinson who can make our family rise to the top! What is worse is that Venerable Ghanso Larkinson has willingly become General Cavendish's tool!"

Attacking an expert pilot, especially a Larkinson expert pilot, was not something that anyone could do lightly within the family!

Yet Ves boldly targeted the latest and most prominent expert pilot of the younger generation! The sheer daring of this action astounded even the most experienced Larkinson veterans!

"It is one thing if Venerable Ghanso is acting for the betterment of the Larkinson Family. Yet how much has he contributed to our family compared to me? Why does he think his way of empowering the family is better than mine! We belong to the same generation! Our ages are identical! Yet as Ghanso Larkinson has become a willing attack dog for the state in exchange for some scraps, I have done much more for both the state and our family!"

Though it was not exactly a proper comparison, Ves made a very persuasive argument! If the Larkinsons compared Ves and Ghanso directly, most of them would definitely side with the Journeyman Mech Designers who introduced so many benefits to the family!

"Service is not an end. It is a means to an end. Following Ghanso's vision of the Larkinson Family is nothing less than perpetuating our slavery to the state! Yes, I did not misspoke. What do you call those who toil and suffer for someone else without receiving the remuneration we deserve? Slaves! No matter how much we have done to fulfill our noble mission, it is never enough to change our status! All of the work we have done over the centuries has not resulted in any gains! Do you think it's ridiculous to regard ourselves as slaves under these circumstances?!"

He was sure that a lot of Larkinsons were thrown into doubt. Very likely, a lot of veterans were doing some soul-searching right now! What had their suffering and sacrifice accomplished?

Ves figured it was ready to unveil his main goal. He calmed down and tried to look as authoritative as possible.

"In my opinion, we have sacrificed enough. We do not need to perpetuate our noble mission any longer. Whatever debt we owe to the Bright Republic has long been repaid! If you don't think that is enough, then add my contributions on top of that! I have saved our state from imminent defeat with my Desolate Soldier mech and I will save it yet again with my upcoming mech design!"

He boldly cast his arm towards his audience. "Allow me to free you! Allow me to release you from your burden of duty! As long as you appoint me as the patriarch of the family and invest me with power, I promise to improve your fortunes and lead you all to prosperity! This change is long overdue! If you believe our family deserves better, then do not follow Ghanso's hopeless trajectory! Instead, believe in me and my ability to elevate our family!"

Every Larkinson became stunned yet again! Ves wanted to become the sole leader of the family, depriving the expert pilots and the steering committee of their say!

The Larkinson Family never concentrated power in a single person in its entire history!

However, at this time, the broadcast suddenly took a different turn!

"VES LARKINSON!" Ghanso's angry voice interjected. "Do not spout your poisonous lies! You have no right to lecture our family!"

Before Ves could utter a reply, his broadcast suddenly shut off!

The Mech Corps forcibly interrupted and blocked his transmission!

Chapter 1705 Bound By Tradition

Ves stared at his empty desk terminal in astonishment.

He knew that what he was doing would not escape the Mech Corps or Spotlight. Eventually, they would find out about his attempt to address the Larkinson Family.

Even though it wasn't very obvious how he could extricate himself from this current situation, it was bound to be bad for the people targeting him! Overriding the broadcast through the backdoors in the planetary communication network was trivially easy to his enemies!

Unfortunately for them, Ves already anticipated this problem.

A vicious grin appeared on his face as he made a small internal call. At the very least, the internal network of the LMC was fully intact! Few spies or saboteurs were in place that could mess with this network because Ves had already cleaned most of them out during the mass firing spree a few months ago!

"Mr. Larkinson." Crindon greeted.

"Please assist me in maintaining my upcoming transmission. The forces targeting me have shut me out of the network, but we both know that's not enough."

"I will do my best to monitor our network for any attacks."

After he finished notifying Crindon, he turned to Lucky.

"Meow?"

"You know what to do. Let me use your CFA protocols to override the overrides of the Mech Corps. Heh, do they really think they control their own networks? No backdoor under their control can trump that of the Big Two!"

Ever since Lucky gobbled up his CFA officer comm, he somehow inherited some of its functions.

What was even better was that Lucky possessed the most up-to-date protocols, which was fully usable on any modern communication equipment, especially the quantum entanglement nodes regulated by the Comm Consortium!

He had already taken advantage of the CFA's backdoors before, and knew how pivotal it could be. Ves always refrained from using it again. He treated it as a trump card that should only be employed when he had no other choice, just like the Amastendira!

Ves was afraid that the CFA would get wind of his use of this backdoor. He was very certain that its uses had been logged in some CFA database.

However, the CFA performed countless actions every day. As long as Ves wasn't too blatant about his misuse of their protocols, he could probably avoid triggering some alarms.

After issuing some instructions to Lucky, his desk terminal lit up again. The interrupted broadcast suddenly resumed as if it only experienced a momentary glitch!

This time, his broadcast directed off-planet routed through the Barracuda's quantum entanglement node. Since his ship was fully under his control, there was no way his opponents could block his broadcast!

Different from last time, the projection of Ghanso Larkinson in his cockpit appeared at the side. Obviously, Ghanso hijacked the broadcast in an attempt to undo the damage that Ves had done!

"Are you surprised, Venerable Ghanso?" Ves spoke lightly. He had already wiped the unsightly grin off his face in order to leave a better impression on his audience. "If I was an ordinary person, you would have gotten away with your attempt to silence me. Don't you think it's rude to cut me off so you can hoodwink our family with your misguided beliefs?"

Anger and resentment simmered in Ghanso. Since he was an expert pilot, he always exposed his emotions. It was too easy for Ves to manipulate his opposing cousin's emotions.

In contrast, Ves maintained a calm facade that exuded dignity, superiority and confidence. His connection with Solemn Guardian constantly made him come across as righteous!

If Ghanso was aware of how bad he looked, he didn't show it. Expert pilots possessed too much confidence in themselves to engage in deception or duplicity unless their force of will was crooked from the start!

As a tradition-bound Larkinson, it was impossible for Ghanso to center his will around deception. His will exuded strength and aggression that was somewhat similar to that of Venerable Foster's will!

This only gave Ves more confidence in this confrontation. He knew how expert pilots like Venerable Foster worked. Dealing with the known was far better than dealing with the unknown!

"You are blowing this situation way out of proportion, Ves." Ghanso hissed. "I am acting under legal and valid orders to escort you to a safer location. In no way is there a conspiracy at foot that seeks to silence or imprison you! The higher ups merely want to keep you safe so that you can keep contributing to the war effort in complete safety!"

Ves shook his head. "What an awful lie. You are tarnishing the dignity of expert pilots by parroting the excuses of a political enemy of ours. First, those orders you are acting upon represent the will of a single general instead of high command! Just because General Cavendish managed to confuse the headquarters of the Mech Corps doesn't mean his orders are right! As long as the other generals have their say, I am confident that your orders will be rescinded!"

"If that is the case, you have nothing to fear! You have no right to resist authority! You should just allow us to do our jobs and wait for a resolution." Ghanso huffed. "Instead of doing that, you would rather resist the state! Not only do you refuse to surrender to authority, you are also trying to drag in innocent Larkinsons who have nothing to do with your misgivings towards the Republic!"

Ves wanted to laugh. "Did you not hear what I said earlier? I admit that I have misgivings towards at least some of the factions that are in power. I also admit that I want to involve every Larkinson. Is that wrong? I am merely doing what you have never done, which is stand up against the Republic's exploitation of our family! I think we deserve better than being treated as slaves! All that is wrong right now is that you have decided to stand in the way to perpetuate our thankless service!"

"Thankless? Absurd! We are a family of soldiers! Helping the Bright Republic exist and prosper by fighting its enemies should be enough of a reward! You say that we have never been properly remunerated for our services, but that is completely wrong! The personal glory that our mech pilots have earned is enough to give them opportunities after they have done their duty! Do you think your own grandfather Benjamin could have become an influential advisor at the Ministry of Defense if he was a nobody?! We Larkinsons are better off than 99 percent of Brighters!"

More and more Larkinsons heard about what was going on and started to tune in to the family broadcast. Over a thousand Larkinsons listened closely to what the two most prominent Larkinsons of the younger generation had to say about their future!

"We have fought and sacrificed far more than to lead slightly more comfortable lives than average Brighters." Ves retorted. "How many expert pilots did we provide to the Bright Republic? At least two in every generation! We have supplied so many expert pilots and so much more normal mech pilots that we have done more than enough duty to cross out any obligations we have towards our state!"

"You are talking about breaking off our Larkinson Family when our Republic is in the middle of a war! I can think of nothing more disgraceful than to cease supporting those in need when they need it the most! We are serving the Bright Republic in order to protect its citizens, not its higher ups! You have forgotten what it means to serve. Our duty is not to the powers of the state, but the people who depend on its institutions!"

"As I have already stated, I do not mean to pull our support for the Bright Republic during this war. I have already done more than enough to prop them up and I will surely be able to do it again in the coming weeks as long as I stay free and in control of my work! What you are trying to do is nothing less than sabotaging the introduction of my latest mech design, one that is definitely more decisive and impactful than my Desolate Soldiers!"

"Are you talking about that marksman mech your company has tested in orbit? That machine is too ordinary to be able to swing the war!" Ghanso sneered.

Ves found it interesting that Ghanso was aware of his Deliverer. Obviously, the information he received wasn't very complete. Either that or he simply didn't believe in the more outlandish claims surrounding the Deliverer.

"Venerable Ghanso. I have already done the impossible once by releasing the Desolate Soldier. I am definitely capable of doing it again! My upcoming mech design will single-handedly save the Bright Republic! You can bet on that!"

"Whatever the case, you can 'save the Republic' when you are safe in Rittersberg!"

"Again with the kidnapping! Why are you so eager to take me away? Don't think I am ignorant of what will happen once I fall into your hands. Your combat carriers will quickly shut off all communications in the name of operational security and travel straight to Rittersberg without any interruption! By the time you've arrived, it's too late for you to receive the revised instructions that countermand General Cavendish orders!"

"Do you think we are bandits, Ves? I am a soldier! Even if I think you are a cancer to the Larkinson Family, I am committed to following the rules and regulations of the Mech Corps! I can hardly believe you served in the Mech Corps as well if you think our men and women are allowed to pursue our personal interests over the military's interests! It doesn't surprise me that you are willing to upend centuries of tradition and seize absolute power over our family! Only a selfish, greedy and immoral individual will do something like that! You are not a true Larkinson!"

"If being a 'true Larkinson' means becoming a selfless drone who automatically enlists in the Mech Corps because that is what tradition is compelling them, then I would rather be different! Your vision of the family is absolutely thankless and will never benefit the family in any way! In order to change our direction, it is better to allow someone with the courage to buck the old ways to be in charge!"

"What you plan to do is no less than usurping power in order to corrupt our family! Our heritage built over four centuries of sacrifice will be tainted in your hands! All of the honor and reputation that we have painstakingly built through continued service will become a thing of the past! All future Larkinsons will lose what their predecessors have fought so hard to secure for their offspring!"

"Is it wrong to be a little selfish? If you had your way, our Larkinsons would continue to be selfless to the point of paying everything we have. I don't think this is the right way for our family anymore."

"What you are trying to do is nothing less than to destroy our family and replace it with a different one that is unworthy of the Larkinson name!"

Ves dramatically released a sigh. "We can argue this over and over, Ghanso, but you're only stalling for time so that your combat carrier can get close enough to kidnap me in order to suppress your own family! I won't let you have your way! Instead, I propose we allow our family members to decide who is right!"

"We are not in a steering committee meeting right now! You have no right to call a vote!"

"Unlike you, I value our family members over our harmful traditions! Let them have a voice! To any Larkinson who is listening in on us, please issue your votes in the upcoming prompt. Do you believe the Larkinson Family should continue to bow its head in service to the Mech Corps in perpetuity, or do you believe we can rise to greatness with the help of the prosperity that I am providing to you all? Vote for what is best for the family, not for a state that we don't owe anything anymore!"

Ghanso looked livid! "VES! Don't you dare do this! Your actions are too divisive! You'll tear our Larkinson Family apart!"

After Ves inputted some commands on his terminal, every Larkinson tuning into the broadcast was presented with a choice!

Would they agree to stick to tradition?

Were they willing to allow Ves to take charge and lead their family in a new direction?

This choice directly put the Larkinson Family at a crossroads!

Chapter 1706 A Pivotal Choice

Expert pilots were amazing individuals. They possessed strength beyond the reach of average humans, especially when paired with expert mechs!

They were a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield and could single-handedly turn a large battle around by their deterrence factor alone!

Although they were not as effective against the sandmen due to their inability to feel fear, expert pilots still served as the pillar of the military.

Every human worshipped or respected expert pilots. They were some of the foremost groups of modern society. Through the constant efforts of the MTA, expert pilots were deified as demigods! They transcended their mortality and grasped a portion of power that did not belong to normal humans!

Yet for all of their might, will and skill in battle, expert pilots all possessed some shortcomings.

Regular people might not know this, but a Larkinson like Ves who interacted with several different expert pilots long figured out their weaknesses.

The source of their strength was also their greatest weakness. Every expert pilot developed an obsession or pursued an ideal to the extreme. This was a consequence to developing a force of will!

A normal human was a lot more mixed when it came to their thoughts. Every human was a complex individual who possessed numerous different values and principles, many of which contradicted each other.

While this sounded messy and flawed, this was exactly why humanity managed to rise through various difficulties. By acting duplicity and deceptively, they managed to fool many stronger alien empires.

If every human was truthful, they wouldn't be human anymore!

A human society that adopted the same strong principles as expert pilots would be one which wouldn't be able to hide anything and could only fight its opponents honestly!

This was a very bad thing to Ves because humanity only came out on top by playing dirty!

Of course, this was his analysis on the official history of the rise of the human race during the Age of Space and Age of Conquest. Ves was not entirely sure how much of a role the Five Scrolls Compact played in humanity's rise and how much it affected his narrative.

In any case, expert pilots all lost a part of humanity when they broke through the extraordinary threshold.

It kind of made Ves feel relieved that his life did not follow this trajectory. Who knew what kind of simpleton he might become if he became a mech pilot and advanced to expert pilot on account of his strong Spirituality!

As an expert pilot, his mind and Spirituality developed in a completely different direction.

Whereas high-ranking pilots seemed to pursue strength through purity, high-ranking mech designers opted to pursue strength through complexity.

These directions were very suited for their chosen professions. Expert pilots did not need to think too much or develop their intelligence. Instead, they needed to harness their minds and spirits to handle the enormous load of interfacing with their powerful mechs!

In contrast, high-ranking mech designers had no need to go through such a burden. They had to master the sciences and polish their design ability in order to create new mech designs. To give them an edge in this aspect, they focused on developing new innovations that developed as a result of combining knowledge, inspiration, their own traits and some spiritual sauce!

As a result, high-ranking mech designers were much more capable of navigating the commercial sector and upper society than high-ranking mech pilots!

The latter was just too unsuited to play politics!

Right now, Ves engineered a verbal confrontation against Venerable Ghanso. Once Ghanso fell into his trap, he soon managed to turn their semi-public argument into a political contest by letting their audience decide who was right!

Ves refrained from grinning or showing any undue pleasure while he waited for the Larkinsons to issue their votes.

Throughout the entire debate, Ves had continued to do his best to cast himself in the best light. Meanwhile, he threw as much shade as possible at his opponent, not even caring if he lied or exaggerated some of his accusations.

Though Ghanso did a reasonable job at parrying the attacks, his nature as an expert pilot did not exactly make himself look good! He was extremely honest in showing his contempt and disdain, which worsened the impression he made!

While this wouldn't do much damage to expert pilots considering they enjoyed a very high regard, Ghanso hadn't refuted every argument either.

At the very least, the unwitting expert pilot was more concerned about his mission than winning a popularity contest!

In his opinion, as long as Ves was taken away, his influence in the family would eventually collapse, or at least diminish to the point where Ghanso could regain the upper hand.

How could he possibly guess that Ves outright ignored the rule that he could propose drastic changes when the steering committee convened!

Ves did not wait for such a useless, tradition-heavy meeting. He also didn't limit the vote to the elders of the Larkinson Family, and neither did he wait for the Larkinsons on active duty to come back from their deployments!

Instead, he gave each and every available Larkinson a choice to decide their own future. He even offered this choice to the minors of the family!

He made these choices deliberately to maximize his share of the votes.

It was no secret that most of the Larkinsons who sided with Ghanso and valued their duty were serving in the Mech Corps. The old and retired veterans who felt they still needed to offer their services to the Bright Republic due to the outbreak of the Sand War had left as well!

This meant that most of those who remained behind consisted of Larkinsons who were much more inclined to take his side! Each of them would probably agree that the Larkinsons deserved more, and that prioritizing duty to the state above everything else was not worth all of their sacrifice!

While the decision to give the minors a chance to vote was not entirely proper, Ves doubted that anyone cared at the moment.

While the older generation were more set in their ways, the younger generation had adapted to the recent changes in the family the fastest! While many young Larkinsons still dreamt of serving in the Mech Corps, even more were lured by the promises of working for Ves!

Though Ghanso sputtered with outrage, Ves continued to sit while projecting confidence as he waited for the Larkinsons to make their choices known.

After several minutes, most Larkinsons who wanted to make their choices known had issued their votes.

"Alright." Ves spoke. "Every available Larkinson has spoken. Let me announce the results."

Ghanso narrowed his eyes as he couldn't help but be curious how many Larkinsons took his side.

"I will only be mentioning the Larkinsons who took part in this vote today. 39 percent of you have abstained. No one from this group has offered any support to Venerable Ghanso or myself. That's alright. I understand if you don't really have a preference or simply wish to avoid taking sides."

Those who wanted to abstain simply didn't vote at all.

Perhaps if Ves was more scrupulous, he would offer the choice of abstaining as a third voting option.

The reason why he left that out was because he feared the abstainers would amount to 80 percent of the Larkinsons! After all, most Larkinsons probably disliked the infighting in their family.

The Larkinsons had to stick together! This was what they had always been taught! Strong disagreements were never allowed to fester to the point where they produced a schism!

Of course, Ves stomped on this rule like many other rules formed by his family. No one aside from Ghanso were there to rebuke his decisions at the moment, so he was free to trample on tradition whenever he liked!

"46 percent of the family has voted in favor of letting me assume command of the Larkinson Family!" Ves cracked a modest smile this time. "Each of you believe in my vision for our family, and for that I thank you all for your vote of confidence!"

"Hey! This vote is farce! It's not representative of the family at all! Only our wisest, oldest and most honorable Larkinsons should be making these decisions!" Ghanso objected. "Even if I let this go, you should at least include every Larkinson instead of excluding those like Colonel Ark Larkinson who is busy saving us against the sandmen!"

Though Ghanso had a point, Ves outright ignored his protests, thereby diminishing their weight!

"The remaining 15 percent of you have chosen to side with Ghanso, who wishes to perpetuate our current traditions. I think it is clear who has won this vote!"

Instead of shouting at him again, Ghanso suddenly retracted his outrage and looked at Ves with an anticipating grin.

"Do you believe you've won, Ves? This vote of yours has no basis in our family's rules. As far as I am concerned, the Larkinson Family is still the same! Just wait for my arrival to your little headquarters, Ves. I will be arriving soon to escort you to safety. As for our

family, we should do everything properly and make a decision by convening the steering committee after the sandman invasion has passed."

Perhaps knowing that Ghanso would not be able to accomplish anything, he cut the connection, leaving Ves to face the Larkinsons alone.

While it appeared that Ves had gained an absolute advantage over Ghanso as a result, he knew that his victory would only be empty as long as Ghanso succeeded in taking him away!

Right now, Ves had to return to his primary goal and convert the gains he made into a way to extricate himself from this crisis!

To do that, he needed to make use of his newly gained authority and appeal to the Larkinsons once again!

"My fellow Larkinsons. You have heard Venerable Ghanso. His dislike towards me is evident. He hates me because I want to change the Larkinson Family for the better! While I do admit that this vote is not fully representative, I have won a majority of your support!"

Whether the Larkinson Family would truly acknowledge his victory remained to be seen. However, it was difficult for other Larkinsons to band together and argue against his decisions at the moment!

This gave Ves the opportunity to make use of the halo he gained from 'winning' the vote!

I hope that those of you who disagreed or abstained will respect the opinions of the majority of our family. As your temporarily-appointed leader, let me begin with a request! Those like Ghanso and the paltry 15 percent of our family do not wish to see me follow through with my promises! They wish to deprive you all of the wealth and fortune that only my mech company and I can provide!"

He clasped his hand and tried to look a little desperate.

"Let us stop Ghanso by showing how much we disapprove of him by standing in his way! To any Larkinson on Cloudy Curtain who is serving with the Avatars or Sentinels, please lend me your support today! I am granting every Larkinson permission to board any mech they like and deploy in front of my headquarters!"

He could sense the shock from his audience! Was he asking for them to fight against a fellow Larkinson and an expert pilot?! This was outrageous!

Ves quickly raised his hand. "I am not asking you to fight! I am not asking you to point your weapons at Ghanso's expert mech or push it back! I am just asking you to form a

wall of mechs to make your stances clear! Family should never attack family! Let us stop this rule breaker from pursuing his personal vendetta! Stand with me, Larkinsons, and fight for a brighter future!"

He ended his broadcast at this point. His office descended into silence as he had finally made his gambit.

Were the Larkinsons brave enough to support him by standing in the way of an expert pilot of the family?

After a few minutes had passed, the first mechs piloted by the Larkinsons already started moving out of the bases of the Avatars and Sentinels.

Ves inadvertently smiled as the Larkinsons started to show their support.

Chapter 1707 Taking Sides

Hundreds of Larkinsons lived on Cloudy Curtain. Many of them left the Larkinson Estate on Rittersberg in order to take part in the new and promising ventures of Ves and LMC.

Most of them were at least partially inclined towards Ves and his bold new vision for their family.

Even so, most Larkinsons disliked turning against their own family members.

The Larkinson Family had never been good at politics and infighting. They never raised their children to scheme and to turn against each other to gain an advantage.

To be honest, they abhorred such conduct. They much preferred the entire family to get along with each other. Open conflict between family was very taboo because it disrupted the camaraderie between every member of the family!

This was also why the steering committee convened behind closed doors. Not even the Larkinson Family could escape division. The best way to control it was by allowing the most influential members of the family to hash out their differences of opinions in a formal gathering.

This was a tradition formed in the early days of the formation of the Larkinson Family.

Now, Ves outright ignored this tradition and deliberately aired his conflict in full view of every available Larkinson!

None of the Larkinsons had ever encountered a situation like this! Even though disagreements between Larkinsons were common, no family member ever dared to do anything in public for fear of disrupting the harmony among their own kind!

Most Larkinsons, even the oldest veterans who had survived multiple wars, reacted to this explosive incident with horror and confusion!

"What is this kid Ghanso doing?! Family never goes after family!"

"How can little Ves be so outrageous to trample on every rule that has allowed our family to remain strong?!"

"I don't want to see our family getting torn apart by these two knuckleheads! Can anyone contact Ark?! He should be able to sort this crisis out!"

"I've already asked my contacts, but to no avail! It seems that Ark and the 1st Havensworth Division is currently locked in a battle against a large sandman fleet! There is absolutely no way the Mech Corps will allow us to disturb his mood as he is leading his troops in battle!"

This was an extremely unfortunate coincidence. Ark Larkinson was not only a strong and respected expert pilot, but also a mech colonel who possessed a strong foundation in the Havensworth Mech Army!

It was not very rare for expert pilots to become qualified mech officers able to command a mech company or two, but very few of them became senior officers due to various reasons.

First, expert pilots were generally disinclined to meddle too much in the affairs of mortals. Most of them pursued greater strength and considered the heavy responsibilities of a senior officer to be a detriment to their growth!

Second, anyone who wanted to surpass the rank mech captain needed a certain degree of political skills or at least learned how to curry favor!

The reason why Venerable Ark Larkinson managed to climb up the ranks was because he was very charismatic!

While most expert pilots were rather difficult to get close to, Ark Larkinson maintained both a friendly and dignified demeanor, which turned him into a very good leader!

Ark Larkinson became known as an expert pilot who was impeccably upright and moral. At the same time, he was also compassionate and inspirational.

By relying on these strengths, Ark easily became a mech colonel some years ago, but stalled ever since then. It was far more complicated to become a mech general.

Even so, Ark's ability to become a high-ranking officer brilliantly proved his ability to work with people.

If Ark was reachable, he would definitely be able to mediate this disastrous conflict between Ves and Ghanso!

The absence or inability to contact any Larkinson who could deescalate the situation forced every Larkinson to take a stance!

At this time, everyone who watched the broadcast and heard Ves' appeal began to make their own decisions.

Very few Larkinsons sided with Ghanso. This was not only because the most duty-minded Larkinsons were currently in the Mech Corps and therefore difficult to reach, but also because the young expert pilot did not appear very likable.

His abrasive attitude and his insistence on following unpalatable orders did not paint him in a good light!

Many retired Larkinson mech pilots ordinarily held much respect for the Mech Corps they served for many years. Yet they were not blind to the factionalism within the military.

The Larkinsons were never taught to navigate the political currents within the Mech Corps, so they ordinarily avoided them altogether.

When Ves accused Venerable Ghanso Larkinson of acting as the lapdog of Mech General Ulrich Cavendish, a lot of veterans unconsciously expressed disgust!

While it was not a problem in itself to obey a superior who belonged to a faction, it was a different matter if the orders aimed at their own family!

Whether Ves was truthful or not, Ghanso never refuted this accusation, which likely signified that it was true!

Therefore, despite the feelings of the Larkinsons towards the Mech Corps, they did not associate Ghanso's conduct with the service as a whole!

Instead, they recognized that Ghanso improperly involved himself in some kind of private scheme!

This has led to the indignation of many Larkinsons who would have otherwise remained neutral!

"I don't really agree with how Ves is handling things, but at least his heart is in the right place! Someone like him is worth protecting!"

"While Vessie here has broken a ton of rules, at least he believes he is doing what is best for our family! On the other hand, Ghanso has shown that he is willing to follow orders and adhere to rules no matter what harm they do to our Larkinson Family!"

"If I had to choose between the two, I would go for the one who actually cares a damn about our lives! The galaxy is inherently chaotic, and no rule lasts forever!"

Most of these crotchety Larkinson veterans were still able to interface with a mech, though only barely. Their bodies and their brains deteriorated significantly due to aging, causing them to be less responsive and less able to handle the flow of data from a mech.

However, this was still enough to activate a mech and move it to the headquarters of the LMC!

A lot of retired Larkinsons moved into action.

Those who were enjoying their retirement at the Cloud Estate entered into some of the mechs bequeathed by the patrolling Sentinels.

Those who were teaching at the Larkinson Basic Academy at Freslin hopped into mechs as well and headed to the Mech Nursery as fast as possible!

Though Ves hadn't explicitly appealed to the Larkinsons outside of the Avatars and Sentinels, they nonetheless offered their support on their own accord!

This was because they wanted to do what was best for the family, and believed that they could do so by showing up and stopping Ghanso from doing anything outrageous!

Though these old and wise Larkinsons were aware that they would be opposing the Mech Corps if they did so, right now the family mattered more!

Of course, this also led to a lot of inner turmoil among these older Larkinsons.

Director Clinton Larkinson who led Ves' charity was one of these conflicted veterans.

"I never thought I would be stepping into a cockpit again, let alone stand in the way of the service!" He muttered with turbid eyes.

The old Blackbeak he borrowed from the Sentinels had been stashed for many months as its assigned pilot shifted to a Desolate Soldier.

The knight mech only received a minimal amount of servicing during this time, making the mech a bit difficult to move.

It didn't help that Clinton was actually a disabled mech pilot. The damage he incurred in a past war had crippled his ability to pilot mech.

Such damage was actually fairly common among veterans.

In truth, the damage to a mech pilot's ability to pilot a mech varied a lot. Clinton happened to have suffered enough damage to reduce his battle effectiveness but not enough to prevent him from moving a mech entirely!

As it was, he could only slowly move his Blackbeak around, and had to take careful steps in order to avoid tripping his machine or crashing against other objects.

There was no way he could fight an expert mech in his state.

This was not the point. Clinton simply wanted to show his attitude and hope that Ghanso would refrain from doing anything worse.

"I only have to show up. This fight can't go on any further!" He believed!

Naturally, aside from these veterans who wanted to show their stance, stop Ghanso from doing anything radical or support Ves in leading the family to greatness, a lot of younger Larkinsons made their decisions as well!

Unlike the older generation of mech pilots who mostly experienced a lot of wind and rain, these inexperienced Larkinsons were much more straightforward.

"The Mech Corps should not be our only destination! Ves is right! We don't owe the state anything!"

"I think we can go much further in our careers if we stick with Ves! He's a Larkinson, and he'll definitely treat us better than a military that only ever cared about using us! We're nothing more than thugs to people like General Cavendish!"

"The way the Mech Corps is using Venerable Ghanso is not right! If this is what the military is truly like, then I made the right decision to join the Sentinels!"

Almost every Larkinson among the Avatars and Sentinels joined these forces because they believed in Ves. It didn't take much for them to hop into their mechs and gather at the headquarters of the company!

Commander Melkor Larkinson, who was supposed to be recuperating from his recent tour, hesitated a bit longer in front of his mech.

"Ves is going too far." He muttered.

Unlike most Larkinsons, Melkor had been with Ves for years. He had grown somewhat familiar with his cousin's unsavory methods.

Nonetheless, even if Melkor disliked how Ves was handling this situation, he couldn't do anything except to offer his support.

As the Avatar Commander, Melkor had already declared his allegiance to Ves! As a true Larkinson, he needed to show his dedication to his commitment regardless of what he thought in private!

"I am the leader of the Avatars! I should do my duty and protect Ves regardless of what kind of mess he made!"

The mech commander threw everything else aside and entered into the cockpit of his personal Crystal Lord. Though it had been months since he last piloted it, he easily got used to his mech again and left the Avatar base alongside other mechs!

Though Melkor deliberately refrained from issuing any orders aside from granting his men permission to pilot their mechs, every other Avatar had followed suit!

The battle-hardened survivors who served alongside Melkor had entered their mechs and moved out even earlier than Melkor!

With the example of these loyal mech pilots, every other Avatar followed their example!

Only a small portion of them consisted of Larkinsons! Even if these Avatars possessed no ties to the Larkinson Family, they still remembered their obligations to Ves!

The Avatars existed solely to protect their only employer, and to stand at the times at this difficult time was doubtlessly the wrong thing to do!

Even though many of them did not possess any confidence in stopping an expert pilot, they still needed to do their duty!

Perhaps the only notable mech pilot that remained behind was Silent William. He wasn't an Avatar or a Larkinson, so he wasn't obliged to meddle in this situation at all.

The mute mech pilot simply leaned against the wall of a mech workshop and looked out in the distance.

The departing mechs made for an awe-inspiring sight. The support personnel all stepped out and watched them leave.

Chapter 1708 True Suppor

Those who supported Ves or wanted to use this opportunity to cool everyone's tempers all brought their mechs to the headquarters of the LMC.

Almost eighty mechs showed up in the following half hour.

In the meantime, a single combat carrier of the Mech Corps descended from orbit. It did not take much guessing that this vessel carried Ghanso Larkinson and his expert mech. The vessel made a straight trajectory towards Freslin without obscuring it at all!

This was because the Mech Corps did not need to resort to caution within the territory controlled by the Bright Republic! Cloudy Curtain was still firmly in the hands of the state. No power residing on this planet should ever have the guts to oppose the military!

Yet Ves managed to accomplish something many Brighters considered impossible. He managed to persuade many Larkinsons in siding against the Mech Corps and one of their own family!

The local journalists smelled a scoop, and they eagerly flocked to the Mech Nursery in order to document this exceptional event!

"The Larkinsons have gone crazy! We have to let everyone else witness this historic clash!"

"Expert pilot versus Journeyman Mech Designer, which Larkinson is the prodigal son? Find out today!"

Unfortunately, with martial law in place, few of them managed to sneak out, and none of them could circumvent the lockdown of the local communications network!

Only a handful of resourceful reporters managed to solve these problems. Once they arrived at the Mech Nursery, the guards did not hinder their entry after searching them thoroughly.

Ves had already issued a command to the gate guards to let every journalist inside!

In addition, he also opened the Barracuda's quantum entanglement node to their equipment, allowing them to stream their footage live onto the galactic net!

Of course, with the Sand War raging hotter than ever, not a lot of people paid attention to this event at first.

Ves stepped away from his desk and moved over to the high windows to view the mechs that moved to him in support.

A mix of Blackbeaks, Crystal Lords, Desolate Soldiers, Dawnbreakers and even training mechs showed up to form a wall of mechs!

Even though the headquarters was taller than the mechs, their mech pilots mainly wished to make a statement.

Whether they sided with Ves or not, they possessed enough determination to block Ghanso from making things worse!

"You've did it, Ves." Raymond said as he stepped to his side. "You managed to turn Larkinson against Larkinson."

"As if I am at fault. Venerable Ghanso moved on me first. I'm just defending myself."

Raymond smiled sardonically. "You did it in the most disruptive way possible! You didn't hesitate to push our family to the brink by exacerbating our division! No matter what happens today, the Larkinson Family will never be able to turn back the clock."

"Is that a bad thing? Our views have continued to diverge. Neither of us want to change our minds. A confrontation is inevitable."

"It's just.. this could have been avoided. Your propensity to blow matters out of proportion has turned this conflict into a much bigger incident! If it was any other Larkinson, this would have been kept quiet in order to avoid disrupting the rest of the family!"

Ves crossed his arms across his chest. "That wouldn't have solved any of my problems. You can't avoid change forever, Raymond. Our family has become so reluctant to address its problems that it has missed many opportunities to reform itself!"

"Is that what you wish to do? You didn't have to hold an irregular vote to take charge of our family. Most Larkinsons won't recognize your authority."

"I don't need their recognition. Not at this point, at least." Ves mildly spoke. "I merely wanted to make it clear that I'm not alone in this. Many Larkinsons agree with me or side with me. Ghanso must respect them if he wishes to maintain his influence within our ranks."

There was more to it than this. During this crisis, Ves saw an opportunity to openly take over the Larkinson Family!

He had always harbored an ambition to liberate his family from the shackles of duty and lead it to a better future! It was just that Ves did not dare to do anything that risked tearing the family apart.

The main reason why he went ahead with his ambition this time was because Ghanso made the first move!

As long as Ves could pass off all of the blame of the schism to Ghanso, he would be able to escape most of the blame!

Of course, the smarter and wiser Larkinsons such as Raymond already saw through his plan, but so what? Ghanso was still guilty of disturbing the harmony of the Larkinson Family!

"Do you think this wall of mechs can stop Ghanso? He's an expert pilot, Ves. While he is young, he and his expert mech are impossible to overcome with the forces you have on hand!"

"I know." Ves sighed. "I only hope my supporters can stall him. At worst, I can still make use of their show of support. I'm grateful to all of them for answering my call. They didn't have to go out on a limb for me. That they did so despite the risks is.. brave."

"This is who we are, Ves. No Larkinson is a coward! Even the thought of standing up against an expert pilot from our own family isn't enough to shake our courage!"

Raymond was right. Ves had underestimated the resolve of the Larkinsons. In truth, he only expected twenty or thirty mechs to show up at most.

In addition, he didn't even consider that all of the Avatars, most of whom weren't related to the Larkinsons, would show up in total! Every Avatar who hadn't departed to the front spontaneously followed the Larkinsons in supporting their employer!

This was the first time Ves truly felt he could depend on his Avatars of Myth. After so much investment and time, his personal force had reached a satisfactory standard!

Unfortunately, the opposition was simply too strong for the Avatars to have any hope of victory! While Ves wanted to make his Avatars be able to fight against overwhelming odds, an expert mech was simply too much for them to handle at this point!

Under the direction of Melkor and the former mech officers among the Larkinsons, the eclectic mix of mechs formed into ranks and took positions according to their mech type.

The Desolate Soldiers and Dawnbreakers took up the rear. As spaceborn mech pilots, their maneuverability on land was not very great. Their mech engines and legs were too weak as they mostly depended on their flight system to move.

However, their flight within a gravity well was very cumbersome. Though it was still possible for them to fly in the air, they would be sitting ducks if they did so! Considering the risks of crashing, it was better if they remained firmly rooted on the ground!

As for the front ranks, various Blackbeaks and other melee mechs stood in front.

There was likely no way for them to do anything to Ghanso's expert mech. Regardless if he piloted his famous Glittering Combat or another expert mech, as a ranged specialist he didn't have to close into melee range to take out these melee meechs!

Though many of the mech pilots knew this, they still chose to go through with their seemingly futile action!

As time started to run out, none of the mech pilots who showed up had changed their mind. They resolutely kept their mechs in place, making Ves feel more and more appreciative of his family.

Leland and Miles hadn't left the office either. They remained in frequent contact with their organizations and occasionally kept Ves in the loop.

"Senator Tovar managed to convince one of the mech generals he's friendly with to convene an emergency meeting." Miles told Ves. "It's scheduled to begin in two hours. We don't expect the debate to last long since General Cavendish clearly crossed a line."

"Can't they hold this meeting sooner?"

"This is the best we can do, sir."

Bureaucracy. Even the Mech Corps was rife with it, especially in the upper ranks. With all of the responsibilities that high command had to deal with during the Sand War, it was already miraculous to convene an emergency meeting in two hours!

"Flashlight hasn't been sitting still either." Leland added. "We have been gathering evidence of misconduct and irregularities surrounding the strange orders. They're not exactly illegal since General Cavendish has the authority to initiate small-scale special operations. It's just that most of them are targeted at our enemies, so General Cavendish is only obliged to account for himself after the operations have finished. He's bending or outright misinterpreting a lot of rules by targeting a citizen of the Bright Republic."

"So he's not at fault?"

"He is, just not as worse than you think. This is not the first time a higher up from the Mech Corps has acted first or unilaterally. Sometimes, time is of the essence and decisions have to be made on the fly. Generals have some leeway in what they can do as long as they account for themselves afterwards."

"So he won't be arrested or removed from his position, is that what you mean?"

Leland nodded. "General Cavendish is one of the pillars of his family. Their influence in the Mech Corps is very substantial."

"I don't care about the general." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "I just want to be safe and in control of my own life. As long as Cavendishes back off, I'm not inclined to pursue this matter further!"

This caused both Leland and Miles to let go one of their worries. As one of the founding families of the Republic, their power and influence was too great! They were no less powerful than a noble house of a feudal state, and could never be toppled easily!

Ves recognized the futility in retaliating against the Cavendish Family. Instead of pursuing his grievances at ruinous cost, he would rather do something productive.

"He's here." Nitaa spoke as she stepped closer until she stood right behind Ves. "The combat carrier has landed some distance away and dropped off a single mech and some shuttles before flying away."

"They only need one expert mech to force my surrender, is that what they are saying?"

"Regardless, we are still keeping an eye on the carrier."

A sense of dread started to press onto Ves. A small shape appeared in the distance and slowly approached the Mech Nursery.

Soon, Ves managed to distinguish some smaller shapes following the central form.

"The Glittering Comet!" Ves gasped as he recognized the famed expert mech designed for Ghanso Larkinson. "What an exquisite mech."

Every expert mech was a sophisticated work of art to mech designers like Ves. Even if the Glittering Comet belonged to his enemy, he couldn't help but admire its fantastic design.

While it was clearly a machine optimized for space combat, it still managed to fly in the air without exhibiting any strain!

The flight system of an expert mech was much more powerful than the flight system of a standard mech! While the Glittering Comet definitely performed worse than an expert mech designed for atmospheric combat, it was still able to exert most of its strength in the air!

A couple of military shuttles followed the Glittering Comet. Ves was sure they held infantry troops tasked with capturing Ves and extracting him from the Mech Nursery.

"Let's step outside."

"What?! Are you crazy?!" Raymond objected.

"I highly advise against this course of action, sir!" Nitaa protested as well.

Ves shook his head. "It makes no difference if I'm inside or outside. I would rather face my enemy up close."

He turned around, picked up Lucky, and headed for the exit without another word. His followers had no choice but to follow him and keep persuading him to shelter somewhere else!

Chapter 1709 Wall of Mechs

By the time Ves passed the lobby with the stuffed body of Zeigra put on display, the Glittering Comet had entered the perimeter of the Mech Nursery.

Despite the considerable amount of turrets and patrols on guard, none of them did anything to stop the expert mech from advancing!

Even if an ordinary military mech took the Glittering Comet's place, the Living Sentinels still wouldn't have made a move. This was because it was illegal to attack a military mech!

For this reason, the Living Sentinels did not have the guts to turn their weapons towards the passing expert mech. Even if they were willing to break the law in order to express their loyalty, they still wouldn't be able to inflict any meaningful damage!

This was because the Glittering Comet was far too resilient!

Though Ves himself judged that Ghanso's expert mech was far from impervious to damage as Venerable Foster's Belisarius, it could still mop the floor of every mech of the Avatars and Sentinels!

This was the terror of opposing an expert mech. Even now, Ves felt a little shaky at the prospect of facing one that was hostile towards him. The impression that expert mechs such as the Belarius had made on him had infused him with a very considerable amount of fear towards these extraordinary machines.

"Make room! Spread out! Don't crowd too close to the headquarters or put it in the firing line!"

Now that Ves stepped out of the headquarters, the wall of mechs shifted in response to his movements.

After a brief discussion with Melkor, they decided to move to the open garden area in the middle of the campus. The mechs formed into several ranks in front of Ves while facing the approaching expert mech.

"You should leave. I'll be fine here with Lucky." Ves spoke to his followers.

"Meow."

Lucky leisurely clung to his shoulders, ready to move into action if necessary.

As for Nitaa, Raymond, Leland and Miles, Ves doubted they would be useful in this instance.

"You don't have to face Ghanso alone, Ves." Raymond said. "I'm a Larkinson elder as well."

"I doubt he'll pay attention to you. You'll only be risking your life here for no reason. Don't think that I'm vulnerable here. I have enough gear on me to protect from attacks or flying debris."

After a brief argument, Ves managed to persuade the others in retreating. Ves did not fault them for leaving. This was his battle to fight, and he did not wish to put others at risk. Besides, they wouldn't be of any help in instance anyway.

The only exception was Nitaa. As his loyal Kinner bodyguard, she was compelled to obey, but also compelled to protect his life!

"Please don't convince me any further, sir." She spoke as her combat armor's helmet swept over her head. She brandished her heavy ballistic rifle. "I will not do anything to aggravate the situation unless you give the order."

"Hopefully, it won't come to that." Ves softly whispered, feeling very appreciative of Nitaa's loyalty.

Ever since this crisis erupted, Ves learned how much support he truly enjoyed.

Many partners and allies turned out to be ineffective, cowardly, out of reach or unreliable!

The Tovar Family which he relied upon to secure his place in the Republic directly caused General Cavendish to move against him. The Tovars hadn't been able to shield him from their troubles at all!

Calabast and her secret band of Swordmaidens were completely absent. Ves had no idea what they were doing and how their actions benefited him, but he trusted her

intelligence network to warn him about these dangers in advance. How could she have possibly missed this threat?

Speaking of spies, Flashlight might not be as good as Calabast in spycraft, but it should have infiltrated the Mech Corps extensively! Yet because of Spotlight's interference, this military intelligence agency had been completely fooled!

Gloriana was not in control of her own organizations. Her mother and the Wodin Dynasty provided everything for her, but that meant that she was powerless when she acted outside of her dynasty's intentions!

The alliances and partnerships he formed in order to protect him from these kinds of threats all failed because a single enemy managed to outfox these powerful people!

Ves did not blame them for their inability to detect this scheme in advance. From what Ves had heard from Leland and Miles, General Cavendish masterfully manipulated his authority to spring this ambush!

What he was really disappointed about was their lack of ability to provide more help.

The Tovar Family arguably did the most as Senator Tovar personally applied his influence over several influential officials and generals.

Yet two hours was too long to save Ves! He could see the details of the Glittering Comet at this distance!

The others did much less. Flashlight might as well be sitting at the sides while Calabast or her subordinates didn't even bother making contact!

Only Gloriana expressed some concern by sending him messages on his comm. Ves idly replied to a couple of them before setting them aside.

Ghanso had arrived. The Glittering Comet hovered in the air just a few hundred meters away from the front ranks of the wall of mechs.

The eclectic mix of mechs did not cower in front of the expert mechs. They did not brandish their weapons either. They merely.. stood in place as if to block the Glittering Comet's approach.

Due to the potential risks to Ves, the wall of mechs had dispersed a bit, leaving plenty of gaps around the machines.

A very significant distance formed between Ves and the nearest mechs. None of the mechs stood in front of Ves directly, as if the mech pilots were afraid that a single mech could crush him if it toppled backwards!

To be honest, the wall of mechs resembled a honeycomb. The Glittering Comet could easily make use of its superior mobility to pass through the gaps of the formation and reach Ves' side before anyone else could react!

In fact, the Glittering Comet did not even have to race across the ground or hover just above the surface. It could outright fly over every mech's head and land behind the formation instead!

It was just that an expert mech did not need to resort to such theatrics.

"Step out of my way." Ghanso broadcasted to the mechs in the open. "You are impeding an officer of the Mech Corps from fulfilling his mission."

None of the mechs moved. They maintained formation in a silent protest against Ghanso!

Evidently, the stubbornness of the mech pilots rubbed him in the wrong way!

"You fools! Ves has been spouting lies all this time!" Ghanso blasted against the Larkinsons who chose to pilot a mech in opposition to him. "This is not the time to argue about the appropriateness of my orders! We can sort out these issues after I have completed my mission!"

"Nice try, Ghanso." Melkor sardonically replied on the open broadcast. "It doesn't change the fact that you should have never executed your orders in the first place!"

"Melkor Larkinson." Ghanso sneered. "How times have changed. I used to look up to you. You used to win against me in every marksmanship bout. Now look where you've ended up. Instead of serving in the Mech Corps with distinction, you instead became a young and clearly unqualified commander of a band of mechs barely better than a mercenary corps!"

"My career is not up for discussion today. While I acknowledge that you have surpassed me, at least I haven't done anything to harm the interests of our family. I can't say the same for you, since you seem determined to follow General Cavendish's orders!"

"Orders are orders!" Ghanso rebuked. "We have an obligation to obey our superiors! Any problems will be sorted out in time. The Mech Corps is an honorable institution! There are safeguards in place that prevent any commanding officer from pursuing any private vendettas!"

Ves decided to interject and patched into the communications channel.

"The system has already failed, Ghanso. If you weren't so caught up with the rules and regulations of the Mech Corps, you should have been the first to stand up to General Cavendish!"

"I don't know why you keep mentioning the general's name. I do not care a whit about the Cavendishes or the disputes of the founding families. Do you know what I think? You deserve to be targeted by them. What did you think when you tried to reach beyond your station? The primary reason why our Larkinson Family never pursued greater power is because we are not the opponents of the true rulers of our Republic!"

"That sounds like cowardice to me. We Larkinsons should never flinch from a little danger!"

"You fool! Our courage is all about overcoming our fear in battle! Outside of that, too much courage will only lead to disaster! Our Larkinson Family is not suited to enter politics or the business sector! Too many families have gone to ruin by competing against families and organizations that are much more able to navigate these spheres than us! The future that you are advocating for is nothing less but a dead end!"

Ves scowled. "If you had your way, our Larkinson Family would be performing its duty for thousands of more years for free! Just because you're a scaredy-cat doesn't mean you should spread your cowardice to the rest of the family! Unlike you, my supporters and I are brave enough to face the unknown!"

"VEEEEESSSS! YOU HAVE GONE TOO FAR! I HAVE FOUGHT AGAINST TOO MANY VESIANs AND SANDMEN TO BE ACCUSED OF A COWARD! THIS FARCE ENDS HERE!"

The Glittering Combat flew forward, only to halt as a number of Desolate Soldiers and Dawnbringers flew up to block its way!

"Get out of the way! You are interfering in military affairs! I won't warn you again!"

"It's useless, Venerable Ghanso." An elder Larkinson replied. "We have made our choice. If you want to pass our mechs, you have to take us down!"

A brief pause ensued as both the Glittering Comet and its opposition faced off against each other in the air.

For a moment, Ves thought that Ghanso calmed down.

Then, the Glittering Comet brandished its custom ballistic rifle. It aimed the weapon straight at a Dawnbreaker!

Ghanso spoke a little gentler this time. "On account of your honorable service, I will give you the opportunity to step away. Don't make things worse."

The Dawnbreaker did not fly away or point its Sandbreaker rifle at the Glittering Comet. It simply hovered in place.

"So be it." He spoke again, this time with a touch of finality in his tone.

Before anyone could process his words, a loud boom cracked in the air!

Ves instantly lowered himself into a crouch while pressing his palms against his ears!

The Glittering Comet fired a shot!

Not only that, the expert mech fired a round at the left leg of the opposing Dawnbreaker, causing it to disappear entirely!

The immediate aftermath of this event was just as horrendous!

The leg detached from the, causing a small amount of debris to spray everywhere!

The heavy limb itself fell onto the ground in a heavy thud that caused Ves' footing to be destabilized!

The powerful round penetrated right through the Dawnbreaker's legs as if its compressed armor didn't mean anything! It flew onwards at a downwards angle until it impacted the campus a kilometer away, throwing lots of dirt in the air!

The Dawnbreaker itself wasn't doing so great either. Though it had only lost a leg, some of the force transmitted to the rest of the mech, causing some of its components to malfunction!

Its mech pilot had no choice but to fly away and make an emergency landing!

As the rattling sounds and thunderous vibrations subsided, every Larkinson and Avatar looked at the Glittering Comet in shock!

"You.." Melkor stammered. "You actually attacked a Larkinson! What have you done?!"

Chapter 1710 Shaken Will

Every Larkinson became stunned as Venerable Ghanso Larkinson did the unthinkable.

His mech attacked a mech piloted by another Larkinson!

Not only that, he attacked an honored veteran who served in the Mech Corps for many years, no less!

Though Ghanso employed great skill and careful aim to disable the Dawnbreaker without imperilling the life of its mech pilot, that did not change the fact that he violated one of the family's most fundamental rules!

By shooting another Larkinson, he implicitly conveyed that the laws of the Bright Republic trumped the rules of his own family!

While it sounded ridiculous, no Larkinson ever thought those two would ever come into conflict.

The Larkinsons were an upright, military family who served the Bright Republic with honor and distinction.

They possessed a lot of faith in the justness and properness of the state. The Larkinsons wouldn't have dedicated their lives so wholeheartedly if the Republic they served was corrupt!

Of course, to Ves, the Larkinsons were mostly treated as unwitting grunts by the true powers of the Bright Republic. The level his family operated never ascended to a height where they became exposed to the dirty dealings that took place at the top!

Perhaps Ghanso's mission was the first time the Larkinsons became exposed to the true face of the Bright Republic!

Ves held some blame for dragging the Larkinsons into the pit. If he hadn't become such a successful mech designer, the Larkinson Family wouldn't have been exposed to the sharks that operated at this greater stage!

Naturally, Ves did not feel guilty at all. In his perspective, he was doing his family a favor. The Larkinsons possessed so much power, but rarely used it to better themselves! They should thank him for opening their eyes!

"Ghanso!" An old female veteran shouted. "You have taken up arms against your own blood! Do you have no shame!? Even if you are on a mission, there are some lines that you should never cross!"

The Glittering Comet did not seem deterred at all! It pointed its rifle straight at the mech piloted by the woman in question.

"I admire you, Eisbeth Larkinson. I listened to your stories when I was young. Yet that does not mean that you are right! Don't blow this situation out of proportion! I just shot apart the leg of a mech that is in the way, nothing more! I have never threatened the life of any Larkinsons!"

"You fool!" Ves couldn't help but shout. "Even if you are an expert pilot, damaging mechs is an inherently dangerous action! What seems like minor damage can easily cascade into major damage elsewhere! With the firepower of your expert mech's rifle, you only have to make one misjudgement to damage the cockpit!"

In truth, as long as Ghanso was careful enough, he could probably avoid damaging the cockpit. Mechs these days were quite compartmentalized, and no part was more shielded and separated from the rest of the mech than the cockpit!

The degree of compartmentalization depended heavily on the mech type, design style and budget of the mech design. The Dawnbreaker, which had been explicitly designed to preserve the life of the mech pilot, was a lot safer to pilot than a Desolate Soldier!

This meant that out of all of the mechs that made up the wall of mechs, it was the cheaper and poorly-armored Desolate Soldiers that posed the most risk to their mech pilots!

Ves knew his own mech designs the best. When he estimated the immense firepower of the Glittering Comet, he knew that his Desolate Soldiers were as fragile as leaves!

Ghanso's expert mech already crippled a Dawnbreaker with a single shot! Even though its armor coverage mainly converged around its torso and its formula was mainly configured to resist energy damage, it was still an astounding sight!

The Glittering Comet began to fly forward again.

"Since you've explained the risks of standing in my way, please tell the rest to stand aside. Don't force me to fire again!"

Instead of quaking in front of the Glittering Comet, the mechs instead remained rooted in place!

They would not allow Ghanso to proceed further!

"Ghanso!" Clinton Larkinson shouted. "I originally sympathized with your views! Now that you have fired your weapon at one of our own, I've realized how far you have gone! Duty does not equal serfdom! The degree in which you dedicate yourself to the state has gone too far! When the Republic wants brothers to fight against brothers, perhaps it is time to question whether it is still worthy of our loyalty!"

Though Clinton's words weren't specifically meant to support Ves, he nonetheless encapsulated every Larkinson's grievance against Ghanso's stance!

"Go back, Ghanso! Don't turn yourself into a kinslayer!"

"You are no brother of mine, anymore!"

"I looked up to you! How could you have tarnished our Larkinson name today? Get lost!"

The Glittering Comet's shiny exterior shook as Ghanso momentarily lost control. The scolding by his fellow family members started to affect his mentality!

This was normally impossible! Expert pilots possessed a near-unshakable will! They never faltered against even the most awful odds! They would rather die than betray their principles!

However, the root of their strength was also their vulnerability.

From his understanding of expert pilots, so long as they began to doubt their principles, their will would probably exhibit flaws!

Though Ves wasn't sure what Ghanso's principles actually were, following the rules and valuing his family probably ranked very highly in his mentality!

Ves began to look up to the Glittering Comet. Would they be able to defeat Ghanso in this fashion? Was attacking other Larkinsons a step too far to someone who always admired his own family's heritage?

"I.." Ghanso spoke. "I am not at fault. If not me, then the hundred other mechs of the Mech Corps would have shot at you. They don't have the control that I have. The reason why I asked to confront you alone is because I am the only one capable and willing enough to exercise restraint!"

"You.. you still haven't given up?" Melkor asked in astonishment. "Isn't it enough that you shot at a Larkinson once?!"

"Shut up, Melkor! You are not qualified to look down on me, you dropout! Family or not, we are citizens of the Bright Republic! What you are doing is already intolerable to the Mech Corps! If I refuse to execute my orders, I will be condemned as well! This is why I have to fulfill my orders faithfully! As long as I am "

A wave of conviction emanated from the Glittering Comet, causing every Larkinson to feel a chill.

Even Ves became affected by the outpouring of will from the mech! His eyes widened as he recognized that Ghanso's managed to solidify his wavering will!

All of his hesitation was gone! Only his mission mattered!

Before the Larkinsons could scold Ghanso further, the Glittering Comet fired yet again!

A loud boom erupted from its rifle! The Desolate Soldier that Ghanso targeted practically tore in half as its lower half separated from its upper half!

The damage was so catastrophic that the cockpit automatically detected that the situation was untenable and ejected away!

Two huge crashes thundered the ground as both halves of the mechs crashed on the ground! Fires began to erupt from the wreckage, releasing toxic fumes in the air!

Just like before, Ghanso carefully aimed his shot downwards so that the round impacted the ground a few kilometers away, thereby harming no one else!

Even so, the debris flying away from the shattering was enough to kill a crowd of humans!

Ves, who almost lost his footing yet again due to the thundering shocks, couldn't help but grasp Lucky tighter and run backwards!

The power of a single human was incomparable to the power of mechs!

Even with his abundant protection, he had no confidence in protecting himself against the power of mechs! Merely the aftershocks was enough to overload his shield generators and turn him into mincemeat!

As Ves hurried away, the Glittering Comet no longer held back.

Venerable Ghanso methodically fired his rifle after taking only a second or so to aim! This was enough time for an expert pilot specializing in marksmanship to control his damage output to a very precise degree!

While he wasn't too proficient in figuring out the extent of his damage against different mech models, his intuitive understanding was very high!

His rifle continued release round after round! Ghanso had configured his rifle to the lightest setting, yet it was still enough to crush any mech opposing him with plenty of damage to spare!

A battle between an expert mech and more than a hundred regular mechs shouldn't have been so one-sided.

At the very least, if the Larkinsons and Avatars did anything else stand in place, then they might be able to overwhelm the Glittering Comet through sheer weight of numbers!

Unlike the Belisarius, the Glittering Comet was still a pure ranged mech! Its defensive prowess was fairly limited compared to other melee mechs, so its defense shouldn't be as perverse!

As the mechs piloted by the Larkinsons and Avatars continued to break apart and collapse on the debris-strewn ground, the Mech Nursery began to resemble a graveyard of mechs!

Ves inwardly bled at the sight of mechs getting downed! Most of them belonged to his Avatars and Sentinels! In the current stage of the Sand War, it was incredibly difficult to procure more mechs or the materials required to build them! Each Desolate Soldier and Dawnbreaker was precious to him and the LMC!

A part of him wanted to give up and tell his fellow Larkinsons to stop their futile actions.

He recognized that his plan to stall Ghanso had failed. Outside of his expectations, his stubborn cousin decisively attacked the mechs piloted by family in order to complete his mission!

"Well, at least I have made a point." He muttered. "Support for Ghanso's faction within the family will probably drop to rock bottom after today!"

Those who were neutral would probably be repelled by the depths that Ghanso was willing to go in the name of duty. Ghanso unwittingly validated every accusation that Ves had made!

Of course, the more savvy Larkinsons would probably recognize that Ves played Ghanso like a fiddle. If he hadn't provoked the irascible expert pilot so much, the situation wouldn't have deteriorated to this extent!

Therefore, Ves was sure that the hardliners in his family would not easily give up on tradition.

That was fine. As long as Ves won over the majority of the Larkinson Family, he would definitely be able to grasp it completely!

This was an extremely important goal for him due to one important reason: the family's 25 percent ownership of the LMC!

As long as Ves took over the family, he could essentially control the family's stake in the company, thereby regaining absolute control of his company!

If not for these shares, Ves wouldn't have bothered so much with the Larkinsons! As it was, he could never allow the conservative and traditional faction led by Ghanso to control a portion of his company!

He shook his head. All of this was up for the future. For now, he still had to make it through the current crisis!

An expert mech confronting numerous standard mechs almost always led to the same outcome. The latter had no chance.

Dozens of mechs crashed or collapsed to the ground as cockpits continued to eject into the air!

With the help of his supreme marksmanship, Ghanso precisely controlled his aim to the point that not a single mech pilot came close to losing their life!

As Ghanso continued to disable mech after mech, his understanding of their properties deepened. Less and less explosions and fires erupted and the amount of debris being flung had lessened as well!

Soon enough, not a single mech opposing Ghanso was left! All of them lay shattered and broken beneath its feet!

The hearts of every Larkinson who witnessed this sight or survived Ghanso's attacks had frozen!

Even the spectators tuning in on the broadcasts of the journalists in the field were shocked!