

Mech 3001

Chapter 3001: Protesting Lucky

Ves blissfully woke up from his slumber.

Though he had already left Majestic Teal behind a long time ago, he still thanked his fortune that he managed to make it out of Prosperous Hill VI.

Every day he woke up without having the threat of getting attacked by a fringe group or the overpowering forces under the control of a political faction made him feel at ease.

Obviously, Ves still hadn't fully processed the lingering trauma of his latest adventure. It was truly harrowing for him to go back to a circumstance where he lacked the protection of thousands of strong and loyal mech pilots. It was as if all of his hard work and effort into raising the military wing of the Larkinson Clan was for nothing!

"Well, I learned my lesson now." He murmured.

He would pay extra attention to any planets that imposed strict restrictions on how many escorts an organization could send down.

The problem was that this custom was quite common. Prosperous Hill VI wasn't even the worst of the bunch. As a port system, it had to accommodate a high amount of foreign traffic, and all of those businessmen, industrialists and entrepreneurs could never completely place their trust on the Planetary Guard or soldiers for hire to protect them against their rivals!

"The problem now is that my clan has grown too powerful."

This was a rather strange problem to have, but it definitely gave him some new headaches. According to his assistant Gavin, the threat level of the Larkinson Clan had grown so much that even the strongest second-class states would be wary of the arrival of a massive fleet that possessed the equivalent battle power of a military mech division!

The expeditionary fleet could do a lot of damage if all of its mechs went on a rampage. Perhaps the Larkinson Clan's ability to unleash total annihilation was not as exaggerated as that of Uranus, but the sheer amount of mechs meant that Ves could theoretically command all of his forces to spread out and wipe out many population centers at once!

Even if the bigger and more strategic cities were protected by military garrisons, not every city enjoyed as much protection! The Larkinsons could easily take advantage of the holes of any planet's defensive strategy and wipe out millions of people while inflicting even greater material damage without getting wiped out in an instant!

The Larkinsons needed that power in order to protect themselves. Yet that also put them on the list of high risk visitors whenever they crossed over in any state.

The expeditionary fleet already detected signs that this was the case. There were monitoring devices pointed at all of their ships and maybe mechs if their resolving power was good enough.

Military patrols and other, less overt signs of monitoring persistently dogged the fleet. Some star systems became a lot more unfriendly towards their arrival than others.

While local authorities knew better than to provoke an independent fleet with thousands of battle-ready mechs at its disposal, there were several annoying ways to get their message across.

It didn't matter to Ves. He had no intentions of making any extended stops in Winged Serenade or any other place for that matter. His fleet had already bought enough supplies to last a couple of months, and if the Spirit of Bentheim stopped her production activities, the clan could probably spend a year or two in space!

"This is the advantage of grasping power by myself." He whispered.

He was not strictly beholden to any single state or organization. While the clan was still dependent on others to acquire valuable materials and strategic goods such as capital ships, the Larkinsons had already grown strong enough to trade with organizations that Ves could only look up to in the past!

Money could not solve every problem, but it had enough power to address the mundane issues plaguing the fleet.

As Ves thought about the plan to acquire the next batch of capital ships, he began to feel a bit of pain from the top of his head.

He activated a mirror projection that showed what was going on. Resting atop the pillow where his head rested, Lucky was gnawing on his hair for some reason. Teeth that were sharp enough to cut through extremely resilient exotics such as Unending alloy were merely bending his hair strands. Saliva that was corrosive enough to soften and melt Breyer alloy was merely causing his hair to become stained with cat saliva.

"What the hell...? Have you lost some circuits, Lucky?"

"Meow... meow..."

"You're being too demanding. Aren't you happy with your Breyer alloy meals? I've even supplemented your diet with some other exotics every day!"

"Meow!"

"You're a cat! Other cats are perfectly fine with eating the same cat food every day. Besides, those exotics in our vault are too precious for you to eat. I need them all to fabricate our next expert mechs. You can forget about taking a bite out of them. The warning system that I have set up already told me you have been lurking close in the last week!"

Though Ves was not able to block Lucky from sneaking into his vault in order to gorge on his P-stones and other precious materials, he at least succeeded in setting up a rudimentary spiritual tracking system.

While he still wanted to refine his design of this system before he deployed it on a wide scale, so far its ability to detect Lucky was quite good. Ves was quite proud with how much his spiritual engineering had progressed. Hopefully he would be able to use his new invention to detect all manner of spiritual infiltrators. He still remembered how he never noticed those freaky Haatumak cultists standing in close proximity to him. The way they completely negated both visual and electronic detection was incredibly weird!

Gloriana had already woken up earlier so the other side of the bed was empty. She had been sleeping less as of late in order to devote more time in the design lab.

"Damn overworker. She'll work more effectively if she takes adequate rest."

Well, it wasn't as if Ves was any different. Everytime he became passionate, he could never resist the urge to cut back on his sleep despite knowing the consequences.

The expert mech design projects were her passion, so even if she had to cut short her sleeping cycle for several months, she would gladly sacrifice her beauty sleep in order to dedicate more hours of her time on refining her designs!

Ves calmly walked into the bathroom and took a quick shower. Naturally, the shower of his grand stateroom was extremely luxurious and efficient by second-class standards.

Before water poured down from the ceiling, a strong gust of wind removed most if not all of the dust and dirt particles from his body.

"Meow!"

Lucky, who had followed him inside for whatever reason, got shocked as well, causing him to jump towards the ceiling of the large shower cabin!

Seconds later, a shower of cleansing water poured down his body. Soap and other cleaning and perfuming substances had already been infused in the drops, so Ves did not need to grab any soap.

Gravitic modules built underneath the shower cabin gently caressed his entire body at once. It was as if a hundred invisible hands scrubbed his entire body at once. Even his hair was being massaged by fine threads of force.

The shower only lasted thirty seconds at most. Any longer was completely unnecessary as the algorithms running the shower cabin already determined that he had been cleaned to the most optimal state. Any further scrubbing was counterproductive and would lead to health problems down the line.

As a quick blast of air and force blew away all of the moisture clinging onto his body, Ves exited the shower cabin and dressed himself in his dignified-looking patriarch uniform.

It was not an especially extravagant piece of clothing. Aside from the extra golden filigree and other minor flourishes, it bore a high resemblance to the typical standard service uniform of the Larkinson Clan.

This was a deliberate design choice. He had no reason to dress himself up too much in front of his clansmen. Doing so would just increase the power distance between himself and his subordinates and make it seem as if he was not truly one of their own.

Ves was still accustomed to the somewhat casual and close way the old Larkinson Family exercised leadership. There was no need to be overly pretentious in front of the people that had become his new family.

Besides, after witnessing many examples of good and bad leadership, he felt that all of the artificial trappings of power were merely icing on top of a cake.

If the cake itself was rotten, then it didn't matter how much sugar he poured on top of it. At best, the sweetener would just mask the foul taste. At worst, it would make him misjudge his own situation and believe he was infallible when he had already stumbled.

"Meow."

His indignant cat landed on top of his head again, messing up the neatly-combed hairstyle that his grooming bot had just prepared.

"I told you already, I'm not feeding you with the good stuff! At least wait until our situation has stabilized. It's rather difficult for us to obtain quality exotics when we are constantly on the move."

"Meow meow!"

His cat settled on his head as if it was his cushion. Though Ves could easily bear the weight of his metallic pet, it was still an annoyance to go about his day while wearing an irritable cat as his hat.

"Blinky, do something about it. Get rid of this squatter."

A purple blinking cat emerged from his mind. The Star Cat materialized next to Lucky and attempted to dislodge the protesting gem cat. His black-tipped tail already started to swish in anticipation of another fight!

Mrow.

"Meow!"

The two cats wrestled against each other while playing king of the hill. Lucky tried his best to stay on his chosen perch, but Blinky made it very difficult for the gem cat to have his way!

Suffice to say, Ves did not enjoy a quiet breakfast.

It took half an hour later before a bruised and battered companion spirit returned to his mind in order to recuperate. It seemed that this time Lucky had gained the upper hand.

"Meow!" Lucky arrogantly flipped his tail as he settled back on top of Ves' hair, making it even messier than before.

If Lucky was an organic cat, then Ves might have felt a bit worried if his pet would use his head as a litter box.

Fortunately, Lucky was a different sort of critter. Ves would gladly present his black, messy hair as Lucky's personal toilet as long as the pet produced as much 'waste product' as possible!

"Are you at least in the process of forming a new gem in your stomach?"

"Meow!"

"I hope you don't produce another nonsense gem like the Supreme Comprehension one. Although it ultimately helped me out, it also got me in a lot of trouble. I have had enough excitement for a time, so please focus on producing normal gems."

"Meow." Lucky tapped his paws against Ves' forehead.

Ves merely shrugged and went about his day. Just as he started to receive his daily briefing from Gavin, an alarm rang throughout his private office.

"That's a ship-wide alert!" Ves widened his eyes.

He didn't have to wait long before someone informed him of the emergency.

"What is it, General Verle?!"

"Someone struck our expeditionary fleet, sir! Five support ships and one combat carrier have blown up! Wait, I'm getting new information. As far as we could tell, our forces are not under attack by any other nearby forces. The space around our current location is largely devoid of other fleets. The most likely explanation is sabotage. The explosions that tore apart the ships have likely been generated by high-yield bombs planted in strategic locations within their hulls!"

Ves felt his chest grip tight. "Who do the vessels belong to? Is it the new Heavensworder vessels that have recently entered our fleet?"

"No, sir. None of the affected vessels are ours." Verle quickly reassured. "Four of the destroyed ships belong to the Cross Clan while two hail from the Glory Seekers. All six vessels had joined the expeditionary fleet a long time ago. They are not recent additions."

"Huh?" Ves frowned in puzzlement.

Chapter 3002: Ignited Storm

After a quiet journey through the Majestic Teal Star Sector, the expeditionary fleet had become engulfed in another incident!

This time, the cause and effect weren't immediately clear. The Golden Skull Alliance fleet had not done anything special at the time that six of its starships blew up without any chance of recovery.

Suffice to say, the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers had become incredibly alarmed! They had all raised the alert level to red and sortied every single mech that they could bring into space.

Thousands of mechs belonging to many different mech forces joined the patrols that had already become a lot more vigilant for possible attacks.

In the end, a total of roughly 9,000 mechs of the Golden Skull Alliance had entered full battle readiness, which was several thousand more than Ves expected. While the amount of available mechs his clan could deploy at this time was still limited, his two allies had been working quite hard to raise their effective strength.

What gave him a sense of comfort was the Infinity Guards putting their own mechs into the field. The thousands of spaceborn mechs that emerged from their combat carriers might not be up to military standard, but the deterrent they possessed was far greater than their actual battle strength.

No one sane in the star cluster wanted to mess with the Star Strider Security Group. This should especially be the case now that the expeditionary fleet had entered Winged Serenade. The headquarters and several powerful fleets of the powerful mercenary organization were based in this star sector!

Yet the chunks of debris spreading out in all directions were not illusions. Six starships blew up without warning. Not just logistical ships, but also a combat carrier became swept by explosions from within!

This was an incredibly frightening attack for multiple reasons. The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan weren't known for their sloppiness. Both of them abided by military standards of the states they came from and did not slack off in their security measures. It should have been impossible for saboteurs to plant enormous bombs within the hulls of several starships!

From an engineering standpoint, a typical bomb could ruin a few compartments at most. Anything that was more powerful than that should have been large and noticeable enough to be detected ahead of time. This was particularly the case for the bombs that rent the combat carrier apart. It took extreme force to shatter a combat carrier's entire hull!

Yet for some reason, these extremely powerful bombs remained undetected until someone finally detonated them at once.

"If they can blow up six of our vessels, they can blow up twelve of our vessels!"

When Ves raced to the bridge, Nitaa quickly retrieved a case mounted on the back of her heavy armor and threw it on the deck.

The case unfolded and turned into an open suit of combat armor behind Ves' back. Within seconds, the armor engulfed his body and covered him completely except for his head.

Though he was still conscious of the possibility that there might be assassins or infiltrators about the Spirit of Bentheim, he felt that the odds of this possibility coming true was too low.

Even if he misjudged, he had nothing to worry about. The bridge of the capital ship was one of the most secure compartments in the fleet. His honor guard were on full alert and kept very watchful eyes on every crew member sitting behind their consoles and workstations.

Minutes later, the blast doors to the bridge opened just enough to allow Calabast and her pet to squeeze inside.

The spymaster hadn't bothered to don any battle gear. She quickly strode to the Larkinson patriarch's side and began to give him a short briefing just as she was receiving lots of new information from her Black Cats.

"Tell me what is going on." Ves asked.

Sabotage and infiltration was Calabast's specialty, so it was better to get a situation report from her rather than General Verle.

The general was probably too busy directing the mech forces to spare much time to entertain Ves anyway. Now that they had entered a dangerous period, the professionals should be allowed to do their jobs without getting pestered with too many questions.

Even Calabast was busy commanding her own force of spies and security personnel. She was just a lot better at multitasking with the help of her advanced implant and impeccable training.

"It doesn't look good for the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan." She began with a troubled voice. "While I am still in the dark about the party who attacked us, the simultaneous detonations make it very clear we are dealing with one organization with hostile intentions towards our entire fleet. What concerns me is that this hidden group has managed to infiltrate our alliance to such a deep extent that its agents managed to plant powerful bombs while circumventing every security measure designed to stop these kinds of plots from going through."

Ves had a phobia for enemies in the dark. As long as he could anticipate a threat, he could form targeted contingency plans in order to manage his risks.

It was a different story when the enemy was too good at hiding! Ves could only form some general plans and hoped they fit the situation. He could not make any more specific preparations or warn his guards and soldiers to watch out for specific attack methods.

A few concerning fears went through his mind.

"Freeze all ongoing production operations aboard the Spirit of Bentheim!" Ves commanded. "Keep this ship locked down even if the alert level is lifted. We need to sweep our entire flagship for signs of sabotage. I don't care if we'll delay our journey a bit. Please pay special attention to all recent shipments of minerals and other goods!"

"On it, sir! The production halls have already stopped production, but we will lock it down to the greatest degree."

Calabast nodded in approval. "This is a good precaution. The reason why those Glory Seeker and Crosser ships exploded without warning is because there were multiple chains of failure aboard those vessels. A traitor is behind each and every chain. The

Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan both carry tens of thousands of personnel aboard their starships, so it is impossible to ensure that each of them are honest. Yet it is not so easy for our hidden enemies to plant so many infiltrators in a single ship."

The fact that this had likely taken place meant that there had to be some high-ranked traitors within both organizations. Otherwise, how could that unknown person concentrate a sufficient amount of saboteurs on specific vessels?

While Ves generally didn't bother to think about the internal affairs of his allies, right now he had grown quite annoyed at their lapses!

"You can't blame them for slipping up." Calabast said. She obviously sympathized with her counterparts in the other two organizations. "The Glory Seekers and Crossers don't have our.. advantages. Aside from very rare exceptions like the one that has beset you on Prosperous Hill VI, it is too difficult for any of our clansmen to develop nefarious thoughts and get away with it. Combined with the fact that there are no non-Larkinsons aboard our starships, the only feasible way to sabotage them is to insert infiltrators into them, but a movement as big as blowing up an entire ship at once can't be done in this fashion."

The best way to ruin a ship was to have a traitor or two take advantage of their high-level permissions. Since it was practically impossible for the Larkinson Clan to have any traitors in their midst, this means had become completely invalid!

Ves relaxed a bit as he accepted this logic. The fact that no Larkinson vessel had blown up with the other ones was a clear indicator that this was likely the case.

That didn't mean that he completely let down his guard. His clansmen needed to stay sharp and guard against any follow-up attacks.

Yet as the minutes continued to pass, no enemy approached their fleet. The relatively quiet star system visited by the expeditionary fleet was just an ordinary low industrial planet. It didn't possess a lot of developed industries and there weren't many fleets within the star system at the moment.

Even after performing extensive scans in every direction, the fleet failed to detect any mech or ship within at least a light-hour around its current coordinates!

The alert level slowly lowered to yellow. Many mechs cautiously flew back to their motherships but half of the available mechs were still assigned to complete their hours-long guard missions.

Calabast had gathered a lot of information by now. She also performed extensive analyses and formed many guesses.

While she worked, Arnold comfortably laid on the deck before her feet. From time to time, the spymaster pushed her boot forward, causing its tip to push Arnold's over.

"Squeak squeak!"

The eight-legged exobeast didn't seem to mind getting pushed around. His chubby body eagerly crawled back forward so that he could lick Calabast's boots or rub his nose onto its glossy surface.

"Meow."

Lucky arrogantly turned his head away from the shameless sight. Arnold was a disgrace of a pet in his eyes. The exobeast was so weak that it couldn't even put up a decent fight against any cat.

Even Ves questioned why Calabast took a fancy for a weak and defenseless pet that only knew how to submit or run away.

"This attack doesn't make sense."

"Huh?" Ves turned to Calabast. "What makes you say that?"

"The planning and preparation for this wave of sabotage is quite extensive." She noted. "It is already difficult to plant bombs and keep them hidden on a single ship. The fact that it happened on six ships of two different forces is a sign of deliberate and strategic planning. If those ships blew up during a sensitive time, then the enemy who arranged it all could have inflicted considerable damage to us after triggering other attacks."

"Those follow-up attacks don't seem to be coming, at least for the moment."

"The best moment has already passed, Ves. It has become increasingly unlikely that whoever detonated the bombs had anything else in mind. That is also what makes this initial attack so perplexing. What goal does it achieve? What kind of benefit is worth losing the opportunity to inflict greater damage to our fleet at an inopportune time?"

These were good questions. Now that Ves started to think about this incident from the perspective of benefits and losses, it truly appeared that the masterminds hadn't advanced their interests with this sudden act.

The expeditionary fleet still retained virtually all of its strength. Though its journey was delayed by a bit, the delays generated from turbulent FTL travel were greater.

In fact, this isolated terrorist attack should be considered a loss for the attackers because the advantage of surprise had been wasted to achieve marginal results.

A sensible enemy who was powerful and competent enough to set this all in motion shouldn't have gone through all of that trouble just to inflict the equivalent of a bee sting to the expeditionary fleet.

Calabast widened her eyes a few minutes later. She had just received some explosive news that might explain what had happened to their fleet!

"You should see this, Ves."

Instead of explaining any further, she activated a news broadcast.

She tuned in on the main broadcast of Galaxy News One.

The news presenters projected in front of Ves and Calabast were reporting on a huge incident that had just broken out without warning!

[...We are receiving ongoing reports of sudden terrorist attacks of varying scales breaking out across human space. Every star cluster and star sector is beset by both small-scale attacks launched by isolated people and larger attacks orchestrated by larger organizations. The damage is incalculable and the losses are rapidly mounting across the Milky Way as well as the Red Ocean...]

The news networked showed several dramatic clips of footage.

In a wealthy state in the New Rubarth Empire, a noble descendant of the current emperor had lost his mind and used all of his potent arsenal to kill his own mother before beheading his sister!

In an average state in the galactic heartland, an entire mercenary corps that was relaxing on a resort planet had gone mad. All of its mechs violently slaughtered the tourists and locals who were working and having fun. Though the local Planetary Guard and some helpers quickly put down the murderous mercenaries, over 500,000 people had died!

In a simple town situated in the galactic rim, the core members of a small religious church turned into bloodthirsty madmen. They left their church and used all of the guns in their hands to kill every person they came across! If not for the fact that a retired veteran still had access to a cheap mech, these crazed fanatics could have slaughtered the entire population!

It seemed that many people across the galaxy and beyond had suddenly transformed into monsters who only cared about inflicting as much death and destruction as possible!

Many of the clips happened to catch a disturbingly common phrase uttered by all of the people that had gone mad.

[RETURN OUR STOLEN CROWN!]

[RETURN OUR STOLEN CROWN!]

[RETURN OUR STOLEN CROWN!]

Both Ves and Calabast looked flabbergasted at this civilization-wide development. Neither of them could imagine what had happened to cause so many people to utter the same phrase across so many locations.

Calabast slowly narrowed her eyes and gazed at Ves. "Did you happen to come into possession of a crown lately?"

"It wasn't me!" Ves innocently raised his hands. "I swear I did nothing this time! I'm truly innocent!"

"Meow!"

Lucky, who was still nesting atop Ves, also raised his paws in innocence!

Chapter 3003: Sudden Uprising

It wasn't just the fleet that was attacked.

All of human space was also suffering!

When Ves switched to other broadcasts such as Galaxy News Network, the Rubarth Daily, the Terran Telegraph and the Red Ocean Digest, the stories they told were all similar.

No state seemed to be spared. Terrorist attacks broke out in even the most secure locations of the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire!

Other first-rate, second-rate and third-rate states fell victim to various attacks. Both poor and rich states had to contend with the ravages of this sudden trans-galactic terror wave!

For some stupid reason, Calabast did not immediately allay her suspicions when Ves protested his innocence. Her strategic partner had stirred up so much trouble lately that it seemed that every awful incident was his fault somehow!

Ves truly felt wronged though. He didn't think he had anything to do with something that could cause so many people across so many different areas of human space to lose their sanity!

"I know quite well that I don't have any crowns or other fancy headwear in my possession." Ves emphatically said in order to dispel Calabast's suspicion. "I might have picked up some treasures back on Prosperous Hill VI, but your Black Cats should easily be able to trace all of the goods we've plundered and shipped back to our fleet. The other gains I've made largely consist of exclusive research data that have no relations to any crowns."

The spymaster judged that Ves didn't have any direct relations to the current incident. She lowered her suspicions and opened up another interface. She needed information. A lot of information. Seeing that much of the terrorist attacks happened elsewhere, she couldn't rely on her agents to explain what was happening.

Only the news could give her an indication of what was going on. She immersed herself in the news reports that had just been put on the galactic net.

Ves browsed the news as well, but not before issuing some commands.

"We don't have to return to yellow alert but let's make sure we are on guard. Wherever we go, don't allow any ship or mech to approach our security perimeter. I don't care what the local laws permit people to do, anyone who comes close and ignores our warning should be shot down without mercy."

"Yes, sir!"

"Also, please keep an eye on the local unrest in our current star sector. We should steer away from any locations where a lot of trouble has erupted."

"Yes, sir."

"Do not answer any calls for help or communicate casually with outside organizations. We need to assume a more cautious posture. Pretend that we are operating in a warzone. Nowhere is safe. We need to revise our planning with regards to when we recruit and pick up supplies."

Ves did not want to suffer because he was too complacent. He smelled a grand conspiracy from this civilization-wide unrest.

Even though the scale of attacks weren't actually big enough to topple entire states or cause the societies of entire planets to collapse, the bloodshed and material damage that the madmen had inflicted was already quite immense.

The worst part about it was that humanity continued to be beset by terrorist attacks!

[...a space station has plunged into a city in the Galactic Heartland. The city's shield generators failed to resist all of the damage, causing at least three million humans to die upon impact...]

[...a large mech manufacturing complex exploded as several industrial machines overloaded at the same time. The culprit, a rogue mech designer, had eroded the programming of these powerful machines over a span of four years...]

[...The Komodo War has entered into a temporary lull as both the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony have suffered from many terrorist attacks. The war is unlikely to end due to this incident, but many citizens from both states have decided to...]

[RETURN OUR STOLEN CROWN!]

[RETURN OUR STOLEN CROWN!]

[RETURN OUR STOLEN CROWN!]

No matter what kind of person committed the awful deeds, they all shouted the same four words.

Ves could not fathom how so many people living in so many different parts of human space simultaneously shouted the same demand as if it was their company slogan!

It didn't seem as if all of these hidden sleeper agents were instructed to shout this phrase ahead of time.

Calabast happened to concur.

"We still lack a lot of information, but I think I can make a guess. A major incident must have taken place recently. It could have happened a few months ago, but this outbreak of terror is too sudden and seems to be awfully devoid of planning and immediate strategic considerations. Aside from sowing fear and getting their demand across, the perpetrators are wasting too many opportunities!"

A spymaster like her would definitely think this way. Many of the people who had gone mad were all people who occupied both the lowest and highest echelons of society. The fact that even exalted Rubarthan princes and eminent Terran clansmen became infected by the craziness was enough to showcase the horrible power and influence of the masterminds!

Yet all of these extremely hidden assets exposed themselves to the public on their own accord and launched attacks that inevitably led to their deaths without achieving any other discernible value.

It was just like the random terrorist attack on the Glory Seekers and Cross Clan. Without enacting some sort of follow-up plan, the random explosions did not fundamentally hurt the expeditionary fleet.

"You know what I am thinking about?"

"What is it, Ves?"

"This has all of the signs of a boss issuing an impulsive command. I don't know who he or she is, but something must have happened that has obviously tipped this person over. This person must wield an enormous amount of authority to be able to trigger so many people to go mad at once. That, or the loss of this so-called crown is so severe that an entire council of leaders agreed to let their subordinates loose in response to the theft!"

Cabast grimaced as she continued to flick through news reports across the galaxy. "My own analysis concurs with your guess. Every organization is led by people, and those at the top can easily abuse their power whenever they lose control of their emotions. What frightens me is the scale and the background of the organization that is responsible for setting off so many people. It has to be a trans-galactic organization, and one that can reach every corner of human space. Not even the Red Ocean is exempt from this terror wave, which means that powerful pioneers that are capable of earning lots of MTA or CFA merits are part of this powerful but evidently hidden organization!"

"There aren't many trans-galactic organizations in human space that possess this much reach..." Ves lowered his eyes in concern.

"From the sheer number of people this organization has managed to turn as well as the extremely high status of a number of them, this organization is incredibly powerful. It must be far more powerful than a typical megacorporation. What organization can you think of that comes close to matching the Big Two?"

Both Calabast and Ves exchanged concerned glances. They both knew something about the Five Scrolls Compact. There was no other organization that had the ability and the craziness to unleash so many hidden assets at this random time!

"It makes me wonder what this crown is all about." Ves lightly said. "Anything that such a powerful organization wants back must be a relic of extreme importance."

"Don't even think about it, Ves." Calabast growled.

"Hey, I'm just wondering, that's all! I'm not crazy enough to paint a target on my back. Besides, what are the odds that this missing crown is anywhere near our fleet? Something as important as this relic ought to be stationed close to their 'headquarters'. I heard that it got breached once. Its security likely hasn't improved all that much."

Neither of them knew the inside story behind this chaotic incident. They were just swapping guesses at this point.

The only reassurance was that they both judged that their clan was not involved. They were just incidental victims just like many other innocent people in the galaxy. The fact

that the expeditionary fleet got attacked was not a sign that the Golden Skull Alliance was specifically targeted.

While there was no doubt that the Compact or most likely one of its branch organizations had plotted against the expeditionary fleet, neither Ves nor Calabast exhibited too much concern.

"Massive organizations like these like to have their finger in as many pies as possible." She said. "If this particular organization truly has the power and reach to threaten the Big Two, then they can easily plant their own spies in our midst without exerting too much effort. They're probably sleeper agents as well. They could spend their whole lives keeping their true sides in the dark as long as their superiors have no reason to target us specifically."

Ves agreed with this guess due to the simple fact that the Compact hadn't gone after him despite possessing the mythical Metal Scroll.

If the cultists truly knew who he was and what he held, then they should have made a much greater effort in infiltrating the Golden Skull Alliance!

"That doesn't mean that the remainder of our fleet is free of sleeper agents, though." Calabast warned. "Look at the news. Not all of the hidden assets have shown their fangs. More are emerging after every moment. It is conceivable that more will attack when they see an opportunity to inflict greater destruction. Worse yet, I believe the majority of hostile agents in the ranks of our allies will continue to live among us while wearing their false identities!"

If Ves was in charge, he would have ordered just 5 to 20 percent of the agents under his command to go mad and expose themselves in the process. With 80 percent of the hidden assets still in place, he would still be able to retain a lot of possibilities!

Days passed as the expeditionary fleet reluctantly journeyed deeper into the Winged Serenade Star Sector.

Terrorists attacks continued to break out without any signs of abating. Space stations burned. Starships disappeared into the void. Mechs killed their own mech pilots. Hospital patients mutated into cannibalistic monsters. The news across the galaxy continued to spread more fear among the people of the galaxy.

Entire states were becoming paralyzed because too many people had grown too scared to go out and live their daily lives!

The news agencies as well as many official organizations such as the Big Two began to refer to the unrest as the Crown Uprising.

Everyone who heard the phrase 'return our stolen crown' had become sick of it. Absolutely no one in the galaxy except for those affiliated with the nefarious organization that sparked the uprising wanted to utter those blasted words.

Ves was starting to feel more and more unsafe even though his powerful fleet was traveling along one of the safest transit routes through the Winged Serenade Star Sector. Plenty of minor and major incidents had erupted in nearby states. It didn't matter whether their security levels had remained high for centuries. The hidden agents were seemingly everywhere!

Who thought it was a good idea to steal a relic from the Five Scrolls Compact? It was a lot safer to poke a dragon! Now the entire galaxy had gone mad because someone couldn't resist stealing from the most powerful organizations in human space.

"Whoever caused the Crown Uprising deserves to get spanked!" Ves growled in frustration. "That person needs to get punished day and night. I want to squeeze my hands on this blasted thief's throat. I want to tie this stupid crown stealer up and perform lots of experiments... He or she doesn't deserve any mercy. Death is too kind to the criminal who provoked those crazy bastards!"

Chapter 3004: Shifting Human Space

The Crown Uprising affected every part of human space. Not even the Golden Skull Alliance remained unaffected by the chaos erupting in every star sector.

The expeditionary fleet suffered both directly and indirectly from the ongoing slew of terrorist attacks.

The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan had all entered a heightened state of alert. Every crew member could be a potential traitor. With six broken starships as undeniable proof that there were enemies among them, both Colonel Ariadne Wodin and Patriarch Reginald Cross implemented drastic measures to prevent any subsequent acts of sabotage.

The movements of every Glory Seeker and Crosser became restricted. They were tracked everywhere they went and often had to stay in a team so that everyone else could keep an eye on them. Hordes of security officers manually inspected every accessible space to check whether they had missed a hidden bomb or other illicit equipment.

The disruption that all of these extreme measures caused in the past few days was so severe that the expeditionary fleet had to pause its journey.

The leaders had no choice but to prioritize safety over speed!

Even though the combat potential of the fleet hadn't dropped in the slightest, the explosions along with the heavy-handed checks severely impacted people's morale. The bonds of trust and camaraderie that the Glory Seekers and Crossers had built up with each other became a lot more shaky.

If Ves and Calabast could figure out that the organization in the shadows only activated a portion of their sleeper agents, then Colonel Ariadne and Patriarch Reginald could come to this conclusion as well!

The latter two leaders didn't even have to be familiar with the Five Scrolls Compact. There were many secretive organizations in human space. Many of them had risen and fallen over millennia. The Big Two did not lack challengers, and there were many delusional people in the galaxy who thought they could defeat the undefeatable.

Strangely enough, the Larkinson Clan adopted a much more moderate attitude. The existence of the Larkinson Network was pretty much an open secret among the clansmen. Both early and late joiners became aware of how they were able to feel an indescribable kinship and closeness to anyone sharing the same affiliation as theirs.

Some even discovered that they came under some sort of adverse influence whenever they contemplated decisions that obviously harmed their fellow clansmen.

No one else outside the Larkinson Clan enjoyed this invisible benefit!

This was why the Larkinsons did not institute their own version of martial law. While the leadership did impose some restrictions and performed extensive checks, the crew members weren't forced to abide by too many oppressive rules.

Most of the inspections that went on throughout the Larkinson fleet were directed at imported goods and other items brought in from the outside.

The Larkinsons held near-absolute trust in each other. Only their trading partners posed a risk to them, so checking everything the clan had bought including the Graveyard and Dragon's Den became paramount!

Of course, inspecting all of this was an enormous endeavor in itself. If not for the fact that the Larkinson Clan hired more than 50,000 people in a short amount of time, it would have become too cumbersome to complete the inspection of the two new capital ships within a year!

Though Ves should have been devoting his time to fleshing out the draft designs of the Chimera Project and the Sentry Project, he really couldn't be bothered with his work now that humanity became beset with a crisis from within.

The Crown Uprising affected everyone!

Ves did not want to cast every concern aside and tunnel vision on his own work like usual only to allow a hidden danger to grow.

Perhaps he might get pulled out of his design lab one day to find the massive Hemmington Cross activating all of her thrusters and charging bow-first into the starboard side of the Spirit of Bentheim!

For better or worse, the safety and integrity of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan also affected the safety of the Larkinson Clan!

As long as they kept traveling together in a single combined fleet, Ves and the other Larkinsons couldn't help but worry about the reliability of their allies.

Calabast was obviously working overtime lately. When Ves dropped by her office, she looked like she had injected at least three stimulants in her bloodstream in order to cope with her enormous workload.

"Squeak... squeak..."

Not even Arnold was in the mood to cuddle Calabast or lick her boots. The exobeast morosely ate his bowl of specially-prepared meat while looking as if he was being neglected.

"Meow."

Lucky wasn't even interested in bullying Arnold this time. The gem cat remained perched on top of Ves' left shoulder as if he was a shoulder-mounted missile launcher.

Due to the heightened alert status, many Larkinsons opted to wear hazard suits or even better protection. Even Ves opted to wear his Unending Regalia even though he was quite sure that nothing would happen to him. He still had to set an example though, so he wore his armor even though it gave him bad associations of Prosperous Hill VI.

"What's up, Calabast?"

The older woman sighed. "We're dealing with the situation as best we can. Compared to what is happening elsewhere, we're clearly in a better shape than most, but that is not an excuse for us to lower our guard."

Ves grew grim as he sat down in front of her desk. "Tell me your greatest worry."

"The trans-galactic terror campaign has rattled the Big Two quite a lot." She replied, causing Ves to jerk in his seat. "What is happening is so widespread, so damaging and so difficult to prevent that it has injected fear into the hearts of every human alive today. Our society is shifting towards a darker and less optimistic direction. Public sentiment is dropping to levels unheard of since the end of the Age of Conquest."

The Age of Mechs was a period of reconstruction, consolidation and accumulation. This might not sound that impressive, but it was heaven compared to the hell that happened in the waning days of the Age of Conquest.

This pretty much meant that everything became a bit better with every year that passed by. Humanity today was unaccustomed to universal decline and the prospect of living in a galaxy that was becoming worse over time!

"What does that mean to us?" Ves narrowed his eyes. "Tell me your views."

"Well, first off, many peaceful states don't seem so peaceful anymore. Terrorists can emerge in the largest of cities and the smallest of towns. They're hidden in villages, space stations and starships. Less stable states that are no strangers to war are faring the current crisis better than states that have never confronted violence on a larger scale. As a consequence, a lot of leaders and politicians are overreacting right now. Militaries are being mobilized and the market for mechs and other military goods have become active."

Ves shone his eyes. Lately, the LMC had hit a plateau in its growth. The customers who were all interested in acquiring LMC mechs mostly received their orders already. While there was lots of repeat business and a steady influx of new customers, the extended hype from the release of the Ferocious Piranha IC and so on had already faded.

Yet this time was different. Now that security became a lot more valuable, the demand for mechs that could suppress terrorists and end incidents would definitely soar into the sky!

"This means big business." He grinned.

"It also means greater costs and less convenience to our own operations." Calabast retorted. "It has already become harder for us to acquire new goods and supplies. Every product that can make us stronger can also make others stronger. If we want to keep our fleet adequately supplied, we need to pay more in order to maintain our strength. I've heard that the average price has already risen by 20 percent, and it will certainly grow worse over time."

"As long as we sell more mechs, this price jump isn't a big deal. I'm more worried about losing access to scarce and exclusive goods."

Gloriana would definitely get pissed if the deals she made to acquire certain batches of strategic materials fell through!

The widespread terror campaign also affected the Big Two in some ways.

"The MTA has become significantly more active in recent days." She said. "The Association usually takes months or years to make a high-level decision, but it has

made its moves almost immediately after the terror campaign has begun. Its mechs are showing up more often and its agents are becoming more busy. We best stay out of their way when we encounter them. They are all authorized to act with lethal force when they stumble into a so-called crown terrorist."

The Five Scroll Compact's show of force could not go unchallenged. The MTA possessed a charter that granted them the responsibility of guarding the interior of human space. The terror campaign directly undermined the Association's mission and threatened to tear down their prestige!

Therefore, it was no surprise for Ves to hear that the mechers finally got off their lazy butts in order to show they were still in charge of human space!

Ves thought of another possible development. "The MTA is big, but I doubt it has enough manpower to address every single priority. I think they will release a lot of missions soon."

Human space remained largely stable as a whole. While there were plenty of states going to war on each other, this did not bother the MTA as long as no one broke any taboos.

This time was different. The crown terrorists were utterly crazy and did not have any regard for taboos. There were already cases where some of them managed to trigger nuclear bombs, subject an entire city with lethal radiation or poison the water supply with a new and unknown toxin!

Calabast nodded in agreement. "You're most likely correct. Perhaps you should keep an eye on the mission boards for a time. It's unlikely that any of the missions will pay well, though, and our current goal is incompatible with long-term guard assignments."

That was indeed a bit troublesome. One of the reasons why Ves hadn't accepted any mission after leaving the Nyxian Gap was that the ones that paid well were too inconvenient.

This time might be different, though. Perhaps he wouldn't be able to accept a lucrative mission right away, but as long as the terror campaign continued, the MTA would only become more and more desperate to regain order.

After discussing a few other guesses and observations, Calabast finally proposed something significant.

"I think we should really do something about the ongoing security crisis of our expeditionary fleet."

"How?"

"By granting the Glory Seekers and Crossers the same advantage that we currently enjoy." She stated. "It is the fastest and most efficient way to increase the security of our expeditionary fleet. We can't keep looking over our shoulders like this, Ves. Since we are in the unique position of possessing an answer to this problem, I think you should consider sharing it to our closest allies."

"What? Absolutely not!" Ves became alarmed. "The Larkinson Network is one of our core secrets and one of the most distinct advantages! Even though we haven't been doing our best to keep it from spreading, as long as there is no solid proof of its existence, we can continue to play stupid and deny that it exists. That will become a lot harder if we spread it out to others!"

Besides, granting equivalent networks to the Larkinson Clan's allies also strengthened them. The balance of power would shift in their favor. Why would Ves ever take the initiative to drop a rock on his feet?

The spymaster sighed in exasperation. "You're too shortsighted about this issue, Ves. Stop being selfish for one second and think of our greater concerns. Do you want to keep traveling with dependable allies or do you want them to resent us for withholding an easy and effective solution to their trust problems? What you can offer is exactly what they need to stabilize their own ranks. This means you possess an incredible amount of leverage. Think of the deals you can make!"

Ves had to admit that she made a good point. Once the Glory Seekers and the Crossers learned of what his spiritual networks could do, he would definitely take up an extremely favorable bargaining position!

He already began to rub his smooth-shaven chin. "If that's the case, maybe I can use this opportunity to gain some valuable and unique benefits..."

Chapter 3005: Misapplied Logic

Selling a spiritual network to his allies was a major decision. It was not something to be decided on a whim.

After discussing this option with Calabast, Ves decided to put her in charge of laying the groundwork of a potential deal.

Properly speaking, a trusted diplomat should be doing this job, but a spy usually acted as a decent substitute. Calabast was the sort of person who excelled at seeking advantages for herself. She should know how to maximize the Larkinson Clan's bargaining power and persuade their business partners into opening up their wallets.

As Ves reluctantly continued to stay on top of the ongoing developments while trying to resume his design work, he received a surprising request from Master Willix.

He looked at the notification on his comm with a mild surprise. He never spoke directly to her for quite some time.

Ves didn't take the initiative to talk to her because he didn't want to get confronted on what he had been doing back on Prosperous Hill VI. What kind of criminal was stupid enough to approach the authorities on his own initiative?

Another reason was that it simply wasn't necessary. Gloriana was in charge of the design projects this time, so it was natural for her to coordinate with the Master who supervised them. The nature of designing expert mechs was extremely technical, which fully conformed to Gloriana's specialty.

Ves even thought that he would be able to spend months without ever speaking with his reluctant patron within the MTA. The longer this went on, the lower the likelihood that Master Willix would confront him on stealing five precious vials of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum!

This was why he became quite nervous after receiving Master Willix's summons. While the timing of this message suggested that the topic she had in mind was likely related to the ongoing terror campaign, Ves still worried whether she would mention some of his misdeeds on the last planet he visited.

"I need to control myself." He muttered.

He tried to suppress all of his nervous tension before leaving the design lab. Various thoughts swirled through his mind as he moved down to the hangar bay and boarded his shuttle.

While Gloriana probably didn't care about discussing expert mech design over the galactic net, Ves was different. The topics that he sometimes discussed with Willix demanded greater precautions.

This was why he had to travel all the way back to his former flagship, the Scarlet Rose.

He still left the Darkbreak module in the mobile supply carrier because Ves simply didn't trust it enough to install it on the Spirit of Bentheim. While it was rather inconvenient for Ves to travel all the way back to his old ship, it was a small price to pay in order to gain a lot of peace of mind.

"Wait in my shuttle, Lucky. I don't want you to get too close."

"Meow."

Lucky lazily flipped his tail while resting on top of a shuttle seat. Ves threw a viable exotic towards his cat in order to keep the pet happy.

"Meow~"

Though Ves hadn't stepped aboard the Scarlet Rose for many months, he was still familiar with her layout. He entered the dedicated communication chamber and approached the dark metal slab that rested in the center.

After inputting a few commands, he waited until the Darkbreak module established a highly secure connection to Master Willix.

The woman looked the same as ever. Ves had met her enough times by now to shake off his instinctual fawning and worship towards Master Mech Designer. Though he respected their formidable design ability, they were human in some respects.

That didn't mean he underestimated her. Ves only possessed a partial glimpse of her role within the Association. He didn't know how much power she wielded, but he could definitely make some guesses.

"Master Willix!" Ves pasted on a sincere-looking smile on his face. "I've missed you quite a lot. I was wondering if you forgot about me or something. You seem to have grown very chummy with Gloriana lately."

The great mech designer remained calm and collected. The projection of her lab-coated body barely showed any sign of tension despite the severe crisis the MTA faced.

A modest smile appeared on her face. "Miss Gloriana is quite devoted towards her work. It is a pleasure to feed her passion and guide her into developing her own solutions. She is a fantastic young women to work with. You are lucky to have her as your partner."

Ves briefly coughed. "Yes. I'm very lucky, yes. I couldn't ask for a better collaborator."

"Perhaps you might not be aware of her brilliance at the moment, but you will assuredly find out once you have moved past the preliminary phases and proceed with the main design work. She has developed some new methods that will surely play well with the expert mechs that we are developing."

He already heard his wife mention that a few times. Just like how Ves was constantly building up his spiritual toolbox, Gloriana was also building up her own array of exclusive tools.

Perhaps she never had the opportunity to use most of her tools when she worked on mass production mech design projects, but now that she was working on mech designs more suitable to her inclination, she would definitely be able to make use of her most potent methods!

Ves continued to discuss various issues about the expert mech design projects with Master Willix. She remained annoyingly reticent about various topics that Ves most wanted to know.

"You don't have to concern yourself too much with reserving space for resonating exotics." Willix dismissively answered one of his questions. "Just design your expert mech as if it is just a standard mech. I can easily modify the structure and components in a particular section so that they incorporate the right amount of resonating exotics. I will take care of all of the matters related to combining the resonating exotics in ways that will result in resonating abilities when

activated by a compatible expert pilot. It is too soon for you to involve yourself in this process."

Naturally, she gave no exact reason why this was the case. Ves expected this already so he wasn't too upset about the lack of answers.

He could at least use this opportunity to ask other questions that were relevant to his work.

"I'm guessing Gloriana must have told you about the mounted wargear concept that I am attempting to apply to the Chimera Project, ma'am." He began. "What do you think about it? Am I going in the right direction and what aspects do I need to pay attention to in order to make it work?"

The Master directed a twinkling gaze towards him. "The idea of equipping mechs with swappable, external equipment is not a new one. The logic of it is similar to the reason why individual soldiers equip combat armor and other gear when they are in service. The assumption is that human bodies are weak and unable to exert enough strength in combat. It is for this reason that they need to rely on highly-sophisticated equipment to leverage power that is far beyond their ability to exert through natural means."

"Humanity is a technology-based race. We are not endowed with superior strength like some other alien races. We don't fight with our own bodies. We can't grow or evolve our bodies into superior combat forms, though that hasn't stopped people from trying."

Willix twitched her mouth into a disdainful sneer. "You are quite correct about that. The so-called 'Uranus' that you have experienced in person is but one of a long line of doomed attempts to redefine humanity. I am sure your little ordeal has taught you the folly of abandoning your humanity. We are strongest when we rely on our intellect and our tool-making ability to develop our society. Ordinary mechs are more than adequate for our race to satisfy our need to fight."

Ves tactfully didn't mention that warships were even better tools to wage war with. No matter what kind of mech the MTA was capable of designing, he seriously doubted that

it could overpower the best of what the CFA had to offer. The incident with Uranus fully reinforced his impression that size mattered!

"Let us get back to the previous topic." She said. "I have just explained to you the rationale for humans to rely on external equipment to fight. Do you believe it applies to mechs as well?"

"Not... exactly, ma'am." Ves reluctantly answered as he thought about the issue from this angle. "Mechs are different. Human bodies are all inherently weak. Even if you can augment them, it is prohibitively expensive to make them ready for modern combat. Mechs can be weak as well, but more often than not they are quite effective in battle by themselves. Depending on their design, budget, material composition and so on, they can be fabricated in huge batches and allow many mech pilots to exert considerable strength. Yet mechs don't necessarily need to borrow all of that power."

"Why is that, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Because they are machines. They are works that can be specified and designed with great precision. We can put anything in them as long as we have the resources, know-how and technology to implement our ideas. A mech is already a war platform by itself. Mounting external equipment on it doesn't necessarily make sense from that perspective."

"I see you have made the most important realization." Master Willix nodded in approval. "Mechs, at least the most popular humanoid variety, are designed to imitate the human form, but that does not mean they have to inherit all of the weaknesses associated with our physique. In fact, the goal is quite the opposite. Mechs exist to compensate for our inherent weaknesses. Since they have to be strong in order to be useful, they are already adequate by themselves. Aside from arming them with necessary weapons, the need to mount additional modules and equipment on them grows weaker. Do you know why most of humanity doesn't bother with this versatile option?"

Ves knew that Master Willix was guiding him towards a deeper answer. He took a couple of dozen seconds to think over this issue.

"It's not efficient." He finally answered. "Sure, mounting extra modules and other gear onto mechs can strengthen their performance, but on a wider scale it is probably better to just design a higher quality mech that incorporates the added strength in a much more effective and cost-efficient manner. Due to the limitations of mounting external equipment onto mechs, a lot of potential is lost and a lot of capabilities are being wasted. In most cases, it is already sufficient to field naked mechs that are designed to handle a job without needing additional assistance."

"That is a good answer, Mr. Larkinson. Mechs are not as weak as humans, so it is a mistake to blindly apply a model that works for the latter but is never meant to be used on the former."

Ves frowned. He could hear the implicit disapproval in the Master's guidance. Fortunately, he also recognized a window which he could use to stick to his vision.

"Even if that is the case, there are exceptions for everything. I can already think of one scenario. Expert mechs and expert pilots are scarce in our clan. While I can just design a vastly superior mech for one of my expert pilots, there are limitations to this approach. Their mass and volume can only be so much before they lose the ability to duel against other expert pilots. Since I don't have that much access to excellent but extremely expensive exotics, the only other method to strengthen an expert mech is to mount wargear on its frame to make it bigger. As long as size and mass limitations are no longer a big consideration in certain battle scenarios, I can make full use of the advantage of scale to design a loadout that can give an expert mech an enormous boost of power without paying too much!"

The Master raised her eyebrow. "Your logic is not wrong, but what you save in cost and other resources, you take on significantly more burdens. You already recognize the impact that excessive gear can do to the mobility of your design. I'm told that Miss Gloriana has already told you about the resonance compatibility problem. There are numerous other issues that affect the performance of your work."

"I can manage the downsides. What we need is to improve our top-end power, and there is no easy way to do so unless you are generous enough to donate first-class exotic materials to our clan. If not, I can only resort to a more stupid method and rely on size to make one of our expert mechs stronger. Unless you can give me a better solution, I will stick to my chosen course."

Master Willix let out a soft sigh. "Your determination is stronger than I expected. Have it your way, then. I will do my best to help you integrate the resonance characteristics of your mounted wargear with the rest of your expert mech, but only once. You will have to find another consultant in order to integrate additional wargear loadouts to your special expert mechs."

Ves smiled... "This is all I want."

Chapter 3006: Common Interests of Humanity

When Ves heard how hard it was to integrate different resonating exotics into a single mech frame, he became worried that Master Willix would refuse to extend her services to make the Superior Mother's incarnation compatible with the core mech of the Chimera Project.

Though it was not impossible for Ves to find another consultant to do this job, he would definitely have to pay a bigger price for worse service.

Out of every mech designer that he could solicit for this job, Master Willix was by far the best and most competent choice! She would do a far better job at preserving the

mounted wargear's existing strengths while adding additional power in the form of resonating abilities.

Fortunately, she acquiesced to his demand even if it didn't technically fall into the scope of their original agreement. She was only really obligated to design the core mech, which in this case was the hero expert mech that Venerable Joshua was supposed to pilot.

Now that he obtained her promise, he didn't have to worry about screwing up the first incarnation. If he was designing a normal mech, then he wouldn't have to bother with this, but since he was working on an expert mech, it was best if he could gain the cooperation of the best professional he could find.

Ves was quite happy that he was able to obtain what he wanted so easily, but he momentarily forgot that Master Willix wasn't so easy to deal with. She might be generous sometimes, but she was never the sort of person who allowed others to take advantage of her without paying something in return.

"Mr. Larkinson, to be honest, I did not take the initiative to contact you in order to discuss your expert mech design projects." She stated. "There are more important matters on my agenda."

Naturally, contributing to the design of a handful of second-class expert mechs was just a minor chore for her. All of the difficulties that Ves and Gloriana had to overcome was nothing more than a breeze to a Master Mech Designer.

"I don't see how that is my business, ma'am."

"Are you sure about that?" The projection of her eyes seemed to penetrate through his mind! "Let me ask you frankly, then. Do you have any relations to the Crown Uprising that is sweeping across human space?"

"What? No!" Ves immediately replied and adopted the most helpless expression that he could manage. "Why would you think that? I'm just a mech designer! I'm an honest businessman! I'm anything but a thief!"

"Did you happen to pick up any crown-shaped objects on Prosperous Hill VI or anywhere else by any chance?"

"No." Ves emphatically answered. "I'm pretty sure I did not. I can't fully account for the actions of my subordinates, but I think if they obtained a fancy crown from somewhere, our people would have noticed. I am absolutely sure that we are not connected to those stupid terrorists. We are merely their victims just like all of the other people who have suffered from their random acts of violence."

Though Master Willix continued to stare deeper into Ves' eyes, she eventually retracted her presence. "I believe you, Mr. Larkinson. It is indeed unlikely that you have any relations to the supposed crown that the terrorists are demanding back. The galaxy is immense and it could be anywhere."

"Then why did you ask me this question as if there is a realistic chance that I might have taken this crown?"

"Some of our intelligence sources suggest that the crown may have fallen on this side of the galaxy." She casually said. "We are not quite clear about this, to be honest. Do not be surprised if you witness much greater activity from all of the nearby branches of our Association."

"Oh."

Ves was starting to have a bad feeling about this. Even though he was pretty certain that he and his clan did not pick up a suspicion crown, he did have several dealings with the Five Scrolls Compact in the past. If the crown the terrorists were yelling about was a symbol for something else, then he might be in more trouble than he realized!

Though he grew slightly more nervous, he quickly forced himself to relax. His biggest offense to the Five Scrolls Compact aside from possessing their precious Sacred Scroll was helping his mother banish this temple protector fellow into the higher dimensions.

That was already ancient history to Ves. The impulsive and unplanned Crown Uprising should have erupted right after the end of the Battle of the Abyss if that was the case.

Since it was highly unlikely that these two events were related, Ves did not have to bear any suspicion.

For some reason, Master Willix looked disappointed for a moment. It was as if she judged that Ves was definitely involved for some reason!

This was unfair! This was naked discrimination! Ves was not some kind of repeat offender who screwed up every place he visited! It was purely a coincidence that Uranus activated and almost wiped out an entire metropolis!

"Is that all you wanted to ask?" Ves asked while he defensively crossed his arms.

"Seeing that this crown business has affected the upper ranks of the first-rate superstates, it is way too big for me to get involved. I don't want anything to do with this conflict. I just want to get to the Red Ocean and start a new life for myself and my clan."

"I am not stopping you from pursuing your dreams, Mr. Larkinson. Yet it is impossible for any human to remain uninvolved. The Crown Uprising affects us all. We must each do our duty in order to quell this galaxy-wide rebellion before it breaks the long centuries of stability that we have always enjoyed."

Ves furrowed his brows. "Why do you call it a rebellion? Isn't this uprising just a simple temper tantrum from some massive organization?"

"This 'massive organization' you are referring to is our greatest enemy. It is one of the most potent hidden dangers of our society. Make no mistake, Mr. Larkinson. This is but the first step to a greater plan to dislocate the mechanisms that keep us united and together. The days of constant peace and quiet reconstruction have come to an end."

"Forgive me for being blunt, but aren't you exaggerating a bit, ma'am? There are only so many brainwashed terrorists in existence. These guys are dying by the trillions. Sooner or later there will be no terrorists left because the previous ones have already blown themselves up. We don't have anything to fear after that."

"You are being too naive." Willix shook her head. "It is... difficult to convey my perspective of this epochal shift to you without breaching confidentiality rules. Let me just state in general terms that the enemy that is undermining our society should never be underestimated. There are more ways to damage humanity's institutions aside from launching indiscriminate suicide attacks."

"If that's the case, then I'm glad that I am leaving the Milky Way. There are lots of old powers and old states here that must have been fertile ground for this great enemy. The Red Ocean is still pristine and the pioneers who are doing business over there are all extensively vetted. Don't have to worry too much about this hidden enemy in the new dwarf galaxy."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, Mr. Larkinson. Our enemy greatly values phasewater for many of the same reasons that we do. It is a substance that allows for large-scale space manipulation. Building beyonder gates and equipping mechs with FTL-capable minidrives is the least of what it can do. It is the key material that is needed to push our civilization to the next level."

"How?"

"Perhaps you will find out in a couple of centuries." Willix smiled in an intriguing fashion. "There are grand and ambitious plans in the making. Our Association hasn't been sitting still all of this time. The difficulty we face is that our hidden enemy will not allow us to strengthen all of humanity. We have always waged a war in the shadows, but the outbreak of the Crown Uprising marks the first true turning point where our greatest foe has decided to take a step into the light. This is rather concerning to us because the darkness has always been their home."

Was she implying that the Five Scrolls Compact was about to make itself known?

"Whoever is in charge of public relations over there should be fired." Ves snorted. "The Crown Uprising is one of the worst marketing campaigns that I have ever seen. I don't think that any human will look kindly to the source of all of the terrorist attacks."

Pretty much everyone hated the crown terrorists! Ves could not conceive of a reason why anyone would voluntarily join their ranks, but apparently he was wrong.

"I told you not to underestimate our hidden enemy. Their intelligence and decisiveness are considerable, and they are able to offer unique rewards that will tempt any human no matter their rank or station. All you see is a large number of terrorists losing their lives. What you don't know is that this hidden organization has always been good at enticing more fools to join its ranks. You should take great care when you are approached by one of their recruiters. Do not act clever and think you can take advantage of this situation."

"It would help me if you can name this mysterious organization. I get invitations to join all sorts of clubs and associations every day. I can tell my assistant to block any letters that come from this great enemy."

"Denied."

"Oh well. It was worth a try."

He could infer that Master Willix had good intentions in mind. She avoided saying more not just because of confidentiality rules, but also to protect Ves from the Compact.

It was quite terrible to attract their attention. Fortunately, Journeyman Mech Designers did not register on their radar at all. Not even Senior Mech Designers were impressive enough to get noticed.

"You are short on merits, are you not?"

"Uhm. Yes."

"Then it's your lucky day today." She directed a mild grin towards him. "I happen to have a small assignment for you that can net you 2 to 5 million MTA merits depending on your results."

The mention of MTA merits instantly made him more excited, but his common sense quickly reasserted itself.

Ves knew exactly how difficult it was to earn so many merits at once! The MTA always aimed to make profitable transactions. It was practically their nature as a trade association. Therefore, if they promised to reward someone with a hefty chunk of merits, then the job in question must definitely be difficult!"

"I'm not interested." He immediately replied. "I have already used up my danger quota for the year. I just want to sit back and design my mechs in peace. I don't want anything to do with the Crown Uprising."

"We are at war, Mr. Larkinson. As a mech designer and a member of humanity, it is your duty to contribute to the safety and continuation of our society. We cannot allow malcontents to put an end to our golden age."

"Uhm, that sounds noble and all, but—"

"Would you rather subject yourself to a targeted inspection by our Compliance Department in order to determine what exactly you have gained from your visit to Prosperous Hill VI?" Willix pinned Ves with an impatient glance.

"—I would be glad to do my duty and serve the common interests of humanity!" Ves finished with a beaming smile. "Of course, I don't mind earning a couple of million merits while I am doing my part in ending the Crown Uprising. As a descendant of a long line of dedicated soldiers, I am eager to fight for a righteous cause! Please instruct me, Master."

A nervous atmosphere descended upon the communication chamber. Ves had shown exceptional skill at turning around his attitude, but that did not hide the fact that he really didn't want the MTA snooping too closely in his own affairs!

Fortunately, Master Willix was willing to let this slide. She slowly nodded in satisfaction.

"That is exactly the answer I wish to hear. Let me proceed with explaining what I expect from you. I have been covering for you for quite some time. It is only fair for you to assist me in solving a small issue."

Ves already dreaded what this 'small issue' might be. He didn't believe it was as trivial as she made it sound!

Chapter 3007: Ves the MTA Minion

When the MTA came calling, people answered.

Only absolute idiots dared to defy the might Mech Trade Association. The trans-galactic organization's stranglehold on the mech industry, its absolute military might and the Big Two's monopoly on life-prolonging serum all ensured that no one rejected the mechers when they issued their requests.

Fortunately, the Association rarely approached individuals on its own accord. The main reason was that it was already vast and powerful enough to solve its own problems.

Ever since the Age of Mechs kicked off, the Mech Trade Association had become the dominant father of human civilization. Its vast influence blanketed almost every part of human space and no one could completely divest themselves from this distant but extremely overbearing parent.

It was fine if the Association remained in the background. Too many events took place in the galaxy for this immense power to devote its attention to each and every one of them. To the upper echelon, the mundane lives of the space peasants under their care were no more consequential than ants locked inside a terrarium.

However, once those big round heads loomed close and focused a pair of massive eyes onto a single ant, the little insect in question would definitely not feel comfortable!

Ves currently had the illusion that he had become that ant. He did not dare to underestimate Master Willix just because she looked like a professional, middle-aged human woman.

One of the scariest aspects of the human race was that its most powerful and formidable members often looked no different from other people. If it wasn't for the fact that certain transcendents like Master Mech Designers possessed an air that caused them to stand out from the crowd, Ves could easily be fooled into assuming that Master Willix was just a doting aunt!

This was why he maintained a lot of vigilance towards Master Willix right now. Since she felt the need to apply coercion in order to get him to cooperate, the task she was about to announce must not be light!

Ves hated trouble. He already had his fair share of it during his last adventure and did not have any stomach for more.

At the very least, the great Master could have waited until he completed his expert mech design projects! Not only would he feel a lot more secure with a handful of expert mechs at his disposal, enough time would have passed for the rest of his mech forces to complete their consolidation and expansion efforts!

Right now, the strength of the Larkinson Clan was rather messy. The new Lifers and Heavensworders had only just begun to get accustomed to fighting as Larkinsons and his expert pilots were still stuck with prime mechs!

Even if Ves and his allies possessed enough strength to fight a military mech regiment head-on, the enemies he faced were only growing more and more stronger.

He already had plenty of headaches to worry about. He didn't want to add another major problem to his plate, but his patron in the MTA didn't seem to care.

"I have already revealed enough about the state of our civilization and how its stability is being undermined by our detractors." She stated in a calm voice. "Though our Association is mighty, we have many opponents. While our individual enemies cannot compare to us when they confront us by themselves, it is a different matter if they pool their forces together. Conspirators in the shadows, states that dream of becoming nations and vengeful aliens are constantly sharpening their knives."

Ves frowned. Even though he did not believe that a little mech designer like him could not possibly influence such high-level power struggles, he still couldn't stop himself from gaming this scenario.

"Your Association is actually in a worse state than I thought, ma'am." He slowly voiced his own views. "Since you aren't joking around with this, it means that you are truly concerned about the future of the MTA. This is... not what I expected, to be honest. I always thought you guys are too strong to entertain any pessimistic thoughts."

Willix sighed. "There is much history that is buried from the public. We have been fighting against threats that most people in the galaxy are not aware of. This is by necessity as the trauma of the second half of the Age of Conquest was too great. Without providing centuries of peace and stability, humanity could not recover to this extent. In fact, our human enemies shared this cognition as well, so they were content to play along."

Ves minutely widened his eyes. He always wondered about why the Five Scrolls Compact allowed their existence to be suppressed by the Big Two. He would have thought that it was better for their brand recognition and recruitment efforts if at least some word of their existence leaked out to a portion of the public.

Perhaps these crazies realized that there would be nothing left for them to rule over if their actions caused more humans to go extinct. Maybe this was why they shook hands with the Big Two and agreed to stay in the shadows!

However, after four centuries of long-term peace, humanity was not as fragile in the past anymore. Even though destructive conflicts like the Komodo War continued to rage throughout human space, on a galactic scale the population of humans had grown exponentially!

The original rationale for remaining quiet no longer existed. Ves was sure that all of humanity's enemies benefited from the peace and quiet as well.

As Ves remained in thought, Master Willix continued to emphasize the gravity of the situation.

"As I have stated before, we are beset by enemies, but so far they are too afraid to challenge our Association when we are at our peak. It would be stupid for them to attack our warfleets and fortifications head-on, so they have wisely chosen not to do so. Instead, they are gnawing at our foundation instead. Our best analysts and strategists are already convinced that the Crown Uprising is only the first phase of a greater plan. It is not as impulsive as it seems. The so-called crown that these terrorists are demanding back might not even be real."

Ves didn't think it was as simple as that, but he refrained from contradicting the Master Mech Designer.

"Our Association is able to exist and remain stable in our high position due to the support of the people. If this support erodes, we won't suffer in the short term, but as generations go by, a new perception will take hold among the people that will paint us as incompetents at best and tyrants as worst. Once this transition has taken place, it will not take long before our society begins to crack."

She put great effort into painting the MTA as the guardian of humanity, but Ves was not so naive to think that the mechers just wanted to maintain their supreme power and wealth. They were the biggest winners of the Age of Mechs, so it was logical that they had a vested interest in maintaining the current order!

Even if someone else came along and claimed to be able to lead humanity to a better place, the MTA would no doubt smash this challenger to pieces in order to cling to its current throne!

Ves let out an impatient breath. "Okay, I get it, Master. Humanity, and by extension the MTA, is in grave danger, so it needs all of the help that it can get. Though I still doubt what this has to do with a small figure like myself, can you get on with explaining my assignment already?"

"I am not in the habit of wasting time, Mr. Larkinson. In truth, you should not be hearing about this until you have become a Senior Mech Designer. Once you reach that height, you have gained enough strength to participate in the true affairs of our race. Many of the missions that we issue are all related to them in one fashion or another. The higher you climb, the more you are able to contribute. Never forget that as long as you are a mech designer, you are intricately tied to the Mech Trade Association."

She was right. His profession was fully represented by the MTA, and much of his design-related activities could only be performed under the auspices of the very same organization.

There was no way that Ves could ever develop a friendly relation with the CFA for this reason!

What Master Willix implied was that it didn't matter if Ves was not an internal member of the MTA. His current profession already pushed him into their camp regardless of his actions.

He could either resist this fact and piss off his only powerful supporter, or he could just bend over and surrender to this inescapable reality.

This was what Master Willix was aiming to achieve. She wanted him to submit on his own accord and stop resisting her authority because he was too insistent on maintaining his independence.

He hated it, but what could he do? He literally relied on her favor to keep the rest of the MTA off his back!

"Fine." He said in a tired but sincere tone. "I get what you are trying to say. I truly do. I will do as you say, though don't forget about the merits you've promised."

Willix curled her lips into a subtle smile. "We always pay for honest work. Have no fear about that. Our Association is quite aware that people like you need some... encouragement to do your best. Let me introduce you to your assignment."

Ves straightened his back and became more attentive. He long wondered what she sought from him. There was very little he could offer that could interest MTA, but he could think of one unique advantage.

His spiritual engineering capabilities.

Did the MTA intend to borrow his glows in order to identify the rebels or something? Had Willix discovered the existence of his spiritual networks and sought to present the MTA with its own exclusive version?

The Master seemed to have read his thoughts. She shook her head.

"It's not what you think. Your... expertise has great potential, but it is just that. We have enemies who possess even more profound and unusual capabilities than you. I fear that these enemies can easily warp your immature creations and exploit their vulnerabilities to ferment greater mischief. Do not believe your applications are infallible. You should wait until you have realized your design philosophy before you are ready to fight in this arena."

This was actually quite a good point! Ves knew quite well that the Five Scrolls Compact possessed a much richer accumulation in spiritual engineering than him. His works may seem like child's play to them. If this was the case, then he should lay low before he advanced to Master.

"Then what is my task?" Ves frowned in puzzlement.

If she didn't want any of his spiritual inventions, then what else could he offer?

The woman smiled. "Your duty is quite simple. I will be transferring a batch of twenty of our specially-trained mech pilots to your clan. While they are internal members of the MTA, they are not allowed to reveal this to anyone while they travel with your fleet. What I am asking from you is to take them under your wing and turn as many of them into expert pilots as possible. The stronger and more remarkable they become, the better."

Of all the requests he anticipated, Ves never thought she would issue such an ordinary request. What did this have to do with the fate of human civilization and all that stuff? The MTA had plenty of expert pilots in their ranks! A couple of extra additions would never change the strategic outlook!

Master Willix didn't seem to notice, though.

"The Mech Trade Association will reward you with 500,000 MTA merits for each expert pilot that has successfully undergone apotheosis regardless of how much assistance you have provided to them. After five years, your mission will end regardless of how many of our mech pilots have succeeded. We will take the remainder back at that point. Of course, we expect you to do your best to fulfill our demands. If you have not achieved any notable results, then don't blame us if we deduct your merits."

"What?!" Ves almost shot up into the ceiling. "That's not fair! I earned those merits fair and square!"

Chapter 3008: Dog Food

Ves awkwardly coughed. "I am honored that you have faith in my ability to train expert pilots, but aren't you being a little too optimistic here? The probability of expert pilots emerging from a crowd of mech pilots is somewhere around one to several thousand, if not worse. This means that there is a high chance that the twenty MTA mech pilots you are sending to me simply don't have what it takes to undergo apotheosis! I don't want to waste my time and have my merits deducted from my account for nothing."

The Darkbreak module continued to project Master Willix's body without fail. It was so high tech that Ves could easily mistake the physical projection as real if not for the fact that it could not replicate her powerful spirituality!

Despite this limitation, Ves still sensed an instinctive source of power from her projection. This was an impression that he could never shake no matter how much he reminded himself that he was looking at a tactile illusion.

Right now, he could feel her irritation towards him. He hadn't been behaving very diligently so far. It was hard to blame him as Master Willix essentially roped him into a mission against his will.

Just because he surrendered to her authority didn't mean he liked being browbeat!

"You have already taken on this sort of mission before, have you not?" She raised her eyebrow at him. "William of the Urbesh Clan has turned from a cowardly disgrace of a mech pilot to a strong and fearless expert pilot. He's doing quite well for himself last I checked, though he is still mute for some reason. That is not a bad tradeoff if I might say so myself."

Ves twitched his mouth. "Our conventional training programs failed to inject some courage into William. We had to resort to extreme measures in order to kick him into shape. I wouldn't exactly call him a success story. Do you really want me to subject your fancy MTA mech pilots to similar treatment?"

"We must all make some sacrifices in this dire time." She said without any remorse.

"That said, no one will benefit if you send back just half of the mech pilots I have given you in a broken state. The better your results, the better it will strengthen my position."

"What are you up to, ma'am?"

Master Willix sighed. "There are many clever people in the Mech Trade Association. I am but one of many Masters in its ranks. If I wish to have my voice heard, I must build up my political capital. I am already pursuing several initiatives that will likely increase my standing within my circle of peers, but I am not the only Master who is trying to rise to a higher position. Many of my rivals are working as hard as they can to assume a leadership position within our great organization."

Ves entered more familiar territory. Though the MTA was unfathomably powerful, it was still an organization comprised of humans. This meant that it was probably rife with factional struggles and selfish power grabs just like any other organization!

"What does it matter if you fall short, Master Willix?" He needled her with a playful grin.

"You selfless Masters are all servants of humanity and the MTA, are you not? It shouldn't matter who among you gets to lord it over the rest. You are all on the same side!"

"I wish that were so." Master Willix disappointingly shook her head. "You should already know better, Mr. Larkinson. You have already touched upon the power struggle between the Rim Guardians and the Prime Humans. This is but one of many quarrels that has beset our Association. There is an even higher-level struggle within the upper hierarchy. The one that I am involved in actually goes all the way to the Galactic Mech Council."

"What?!"

The Galactic Mech Council was the supreme decision-making organ of the MTA. If Master Willix was chummy with one of the hundred councilors, then she possessed enough influence to change the course of human development!

"Oh, don't get me wrong. A single Master such as myself cannot possibly approach a Galactic Mech Councilor." She quickly clarified. "However, I am affiliated with someone who can definitely catch the attention of one of the highest leaders."

"...You're talking about the Star Designer that you're friends with, right?"

She nodded. "Correct. Even so, there are only around seventy Star Designers in existence. There are many more Masters currently alive today. Do you think it is easy to attract the attention of one of these great designers? The matters they handle and the problems they are dealing with are a billion times more grand than what is going through your head. Even if I have a solid connection with a Star Designer, there are many more like myself who can say the same. It is imperative that I get ahead of my rivals and gain a higher standing before the subsequent phases of the enemy plan unfolds. I cannot trust many of my colleagues to act responsibly and do their best to preserve the Association."

Ves understood her position more and more. She was not so different from himself, in a way. Just like him, she was not assured of letting other people be in charge. She would only feel assured that everything would go right if she assumed leadership herself.

Though she painted herself as a noble and selfless servant of the MTA, Ves had serious doubts whether that was entirely true!

If Master Willix wanted to climb to a higher position, then she must surely be motivated by a more direct reason.

It was none of his business, though. The Master did not look willing to elaborate any further, so Ves did not think too much in this direction.

All he knew was that Willix wanted to obtain a promotion in order to ingratiate herself to one of the top dogs of the MTA, and to do that Ves had to do his best to pitch in and make her look good!

"If you expect me to do a good job, then tell me about twenty mech pilots that you are sending." Ves said as he crossed his arms. "How old are they? How good are they? What training have they gone through? What are their personalities? Are they pissed at the fact that they're being assigned to my clan? How far can I go in order to push them to their limits?"

He hoped he wouldn't be getting spoiled brats or something. Perhaps it might be a great way to earn a colleague's support by turning one of their descendants into an expert pilot, but these sorts of scions weren't easy to suppress!

"I can only speak in general terms as I have not finalized the section, but you can rest assured that I will only dispatch professional soldiers with native backgrounds. These individuals tend to be the easiest to control. They all answer to different individuals, so they are not a united group."

"What is the point of turning them into expert pilots when they will just go on to benefit your colleagues?" Ves asked.

"It is a demonstration of ability." She replied. "I am essentially proving my ability to deliver expert pilots to the Association. As long as I become known for this, my peers will respect me for it. This will help elevate my standing. Don't underestimate the value of doing this. Mature expert pilots have already formed their loyalties so they are exceptionally hard to win over. In contrast, younger mech pilots can very easily be persuaded to join someone's camp. As long as these talents succeed in breaking through, then you will effectively be able to command an expert pilot!"

That made a lot of sense. In fact, this was what Ves had been aiming to do as well, with some degree of success. He didn't know where he went wrong with Venerable Jannzi, but at least Venerable Joshua's fanatic loyalty towards him had become permanently locked!

There was only one big problem with this arrangement.

"You do know that you are not the person who is actually responsible for enabling this conversion." Ves replied with a brief cough. "I'm the one who is doing all of the hard work here. You are the one who gets to reap most of the rewards. The only remuneration that I receive in return is just a paltry sum of 500,000 MTA merits per head."

Master Willix did not relent, however. "You can stop trying to bargain with me. As I have stated earlier, I have already provided plenty of assistance to you. It is only fair for you to reciprocate. I wouldn't have approached you with this assignment if I thought you were incapable, but since I have confidence in this ability of yours, I think it is appropriate to call on you for this matter. Besides, 500,000 MTA merits is not a trivial amount for what I am asking."

Seeing that Ves couldn't renegotiate this term, he gave up. He merely listened to Master Willix as she explained her conditions.

"I trust in your methods, so I am willing to grant you a great amount of leeway for this assignment. You can be as harsh with the batch of mech pilots as you want. You can even send them into battle and risk their deaths. They cannot use their prior status within the Association to call the shots or refuse any lawful orders you give to them. Just take into account that it becomes harder to gain any benefits if too many of them die during this five-year period."

"Will they really accept taking orders from the leader of a second-class clan?" Ves skeptically asked. "No offense, but you mechers are too powerful and full of yourselves."

Willix adopted a harsher posture. "I can promise you that none of the mech pilots will resist your training or call the MTA in order to stop you from doing what you want. It will not further their career in the slightest if they object to this arrangement. What I cannot

do is to persuade them to follow your instructions sincerely. You will have to do that yourself."

Ves pressed his lips into a line. These weren't the hardest of conditions that he heard, but he still had his work cut out for him. The status disparity was too big. This was the equivalent of sending one of his children to a space peasant!

After issuing a few more specific instructions, Ves roughly knew how he should treat his incoming guests.

"When will I be receiving these little bastards?" He asked.

"It will likely take a couple of weeks to finalize the list. Once I do, it will not take long for me to send them to you. In fact, I will transfer them over to your care in person. This will also allow me to transfer some important materials relevant to your expert mech design projects."

His eyes lit up at this mention. "Are you giving us valuable resonating exotics?"

The Master nodded. "I might as well. Consider this an advance payment for your services. Don't expect too much, though. It is not good to pair expert pilots with resonating exotics that are too potent. The difficulty of controlling an expert mech and harnessing its resonance abilities increases drastically if you go overboard. It is good for you to aim high, but you must always make sure that you stay measured when you design something as important as an expert mech."

Though his enthusiasm dampened a bit after hearing this, Ves still felt pleased at this development. As long as he and his wife gathered enough resonating exotics, they could quickly move on from the tedious conception and research phase and proceed with the actual development phase!

He knew what she was doing, though. Master Willix wanted to keep Ves at her disposal, so she cleverly released a string of rewards in order to ensure his compliance.

Though his pride took some hits, his greed was satisfied. He didn't mind if Willix wanted to attach a leash to his collar as long as she supplied him with enough dog food!

Chapter 3009: Conversion Ratio

"So what did you talk about with Master Willix earlier?" Gloriana asked as Ves returned to the design lab after departing from the Scarlet Rose.

"Woof."

"I beg your pardon?!" His wife sent a glare in his direction.

"Miaow!" Clixie hissed as she sat up from Gloriana's lap.

"Erm, calm down! I was just distracted for a moment!" Ves raised his hands in innocence. "We had a lengthy talk about my new assignment. She wants me to do something for her. In return, she'll gift us a number of valuable materials as well as a lot of MTA merits depending on my performance."

Gloriana instantly forgot about getting barked at earlier. She rose up from her chair and ran over to Ves until her hands clung onto her uniform.

"Tell me more!"

Her lavender perfume already wafted into his nose, causing him to forget about the more unpleasant aspects of his conversation with Master Willix. He agreed to his wife's request and sat down in order to give her a very brief summary, leaving out many details but conveying enough to get her up to speed.

In the meantime, Lucky and Clixie cuddled together and began to lick each other's faces.

"Meow~"

"Miaow~"

"I see. Her request is not light by any means." Gloriana became a bit more serious. "She must have her reasons for approaching you. How confident are you in your ability to turn these random MTA mech pilots into expert pilots?"

Ves hesitated. "It... depends. Certain individuals have a 'talent' in this aspect. If the mech pilots that Master Willix has selected all possess this critical quality, then I am fully confident that I can push half of them to expert candidate and maybe expert pilot within five years. The issue is that the talent to become an expert candidate is actually quite rare."

He was quite afraid that Willix would send twenty hopeless cases to him. If none of the MTA mech pilots possessed spiritual potential, then Ves would have to put a lot more effort into his experiments in order to achieve a breakthrough on this front!

"So you can't determine your chances until you actually meet the mech pilots, is that right?"

He nodded. "I don't think I'll get lucky, though. I think that mech pilots with the necessary talent are already participating in better training programs. They're stronger and more skilled on average and they learn faster. Anyone who is unlucky enough to be sent outside the MTA in order to train with us will likely be those who have already tried and failed to an extent."

He was quite confident about this conclusion. The MTA was not a slouch when it came to training its own mech pilots. Master Willix would have never turned to him if her own organization could already solve this problem in house.

Gloriana was already thinking about the implications of this mission.

"Have you realized that this might be a repeat deal for you?" She pointed out.

"Huh?"

"Think about it, Ves. Let's just assume that you have succeeded, not just once, but several times. It is already a success if just one or two out of twenty manage to break through. The result won't look very remarkable, though. You may have beaten the statistical odds, but it could always be chalked up to a coincidence. Yet what if a fourth of the MTA mech pilots manage to undergo apotheosis? If we are able to turn 5 out of 20 into expert pilots, then our conversion ratio is insane! This is no longer a coincidence. This is proof that we have an effective formula!"

Ves placed his hand on her shoulder. "Hey, calm down. Don't get too excited. Have you ever thought about what a huge target we'll be painting on our backs once the MTA and the rest of the galaxy finds out that we can transform 25 percent of all mech pilots into expert pilots? Even if the mech pilots trained by the MTA are a cut above the rest, the Association's own conversion ratio shouldn't be higher than one in several thousand!"

If he assumed that the MTA had no way to induce spiritual potential in its own people, then it was impossible for the mechers to form too many expert pilots. They were limited by the same constraints as everyone else.

In fact, even Ves couldn't do anything about it unless he resumed his radical and fatal experiments with the Aspect of Transcendence.

While he had the guts to run these experiments on random human criminals, now that he returned to the fleet, it was very hard for him to obtain a large batch of adequate human test subjects!

Gloriana looked disappointed. "Master Willix needs us to succeed. We shouldn't hold back too much. So what if we succeed 5 out of 20 times? We can just chalk it up to our extreme training program! Maybe you can make it so that the 15 failures have all died in the process. As long as we pretend that there is a very high likelihood of death attached to our method, I bet people will become a lot less interested in our methods!"

"You underestimate the greed that people harbor for a method that can reliably produce expert pilots." Ves shook his head. "Manpower is one of the cheapest and most abundant resources in the galaxy. It is well worth the price to exchange the lives of 75 percent of all of the mech pilots in a batch in order to turn the remaining 25 percent into

expert pilots. The individual combat prowess of the latter is at least a hundred times greater than the former!"

This effectively resulted in a humongous increase in total combat strength! Of course, the higher-ups responsible for the new expert pilots also had to invest a lot of money, effort and resources into supplying them all with expert mechs, but that was not a big problem for huge organizations like the MTA or the first-rate superstates.

None of the people at the top cared about the plight of the many failed mech pilots who died over the course of the grueling training program.

"Then what will you do, Ves?"

"I'm still thinking about that." He said. "It depends on how much Willix can shield me from suspicion. I don't mind handing her 10 expert pilots so that I can collect 5 million MTA merits as long as she can take care of the rest. Fortunately, the mech pilots she is dispatching to us will remain incognito while they are serving alongside my men. It's not politically convenient if everyone becomes aware that we are hosting these high-status individuals."

Though Ves would not object to that outcome since that meant he could protect himself by using the MTA's reputation as his shield, Master Willix did not allow for that. This assignment already breached the MTA's neutrality rules to some extent. It was only acceptable if few people knew about it, but it was another story if it became widespread.

This was why Master Willix had to put a lot of effort into disguising the identities of the MTA guest pilots. The goal was to turn them into expert pilots, and experiencing actual combat was the best way to stimulate their potential. Who would have the guts to fight them if every enemy learnt that they were spilling mecher blood?

It was too bad that Master Willix couldn't send a batch of 500 mech pilots to the Larkinson Clan instead. It would have been much easier to get away with turning all 20 politically-important mech pilots into expert pilots if that was the case.

Yet transferring 500 mech pilots of unknown origins to the Larkinson Clan on a temporary basis was too eye-catching. It was too easy to attract snooping investigators who would definitely be able to expose his improper dealings.

In the end, Ves failed to settle on a strategy. He decided to defer his decisions on this assignment until he met the mech pilots in person and learned what they were capable of. It was too premature for him to make an elaborate plan at this point.

After he informed his wife of his new mission, he briefly spoke with General Verle over the comm in order to make the appropriate arrangements.

He clearly couldn't blend in the incoming MTA mech pilots with the rest of his mech forces. The newcomers would have to join the Larkinson Clan in order to do so, but that was unacceptable.

The point was to produce expert pilots who would all be loyal to their patrons in the MTA! He wouldn't be able to deliver the desired results if all of the individuals in question turned into committed Larkinsons!

"This is not an easy request to fulfill, sir." General Verle replied aboard the Graveyard. "Our armed forces have all been set up on the assumption that we would be fighting side-by-side with our own clansmen. Our common identity is one of our greatest sources of strength on the battlefield. We risk breaking this implicit trust and camaraderie if we sprinkle random outsiders within their ranks."

"I haven't heard any complaints about Venerable Davia Stark."

"She's an expert pilot, sir. Our men trust in her sincerity and she is an invaluable helper to us due to her ranged prowess."

Despite the general's skepticism, he agreed to deal with this problem. Perhaps this wouldn't be the last time that the Larkinson Clan would temporarily play host foreign fighters.

After he ended his call, Ves remained in thought. He knew that the greatest challenge to this mission was to succeed in implanting spiritual potential into the minds of mech pilots who were lacking in this aspect.

As long as he made it to this point, everything else was manageable!

"I guess I'll have to spend more time with the Aspects of Transcendence."

He did not dare to make use of the fourth and most mysterious statue of Lufa since he brought the entire batch back to his personal workshop. So many heads and bodies had exploded in the presence of its glow that Ves had no intention to subject any clansmen to this treatment!

Yet now that it became more urgent than ever to get this magical process to work without killing anyone, Ves felt a much greater urgency to solve this intractable gridlock.

A potentially-brilliant idea entered his mind now that he was looking at this problem from a fresh perspective.

"If I continue to perform the same experiments as before, it's highly likely that I'll have to burn a lot of excess biomass." He concluded. "After all, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

This famous quote was very relevant to this particular experiment. While Ves tried his best to tweak the variables for each test, the fact of the matter was that he hadn't changed the most significant variables.

What if he changed the nature of the glow? What if he altered it by changing or upgrading its source?

"What if I upgrade Lufa?" He voiced his great idea.

It had a lot of potential! Previously, Ves never entertained this suggestion because he simply didn't have the resources to afford the upgrade.

His circumstances had changed now. With five vials of high-grade serum in his possession, he had ample quantities of one of the key ingredients that could qualitatively upgrade an design spirit!

What was even better was that the birth of Blinky meant that his own energy limitations were a relic of the past. He had access to multiple sources of excess spiritual energy. This supplied him with more spiritual energy that matches his attributes than he could use up! There would be absolutely no problem with merging any additional ingredients into Lufa!

The main challenge therefore was to find the right ingredients and come up with a workable plan to evolve Lufa into the desired direction.

His ultimate goal was to make the Aspect of Transcendence viable!

"If I can make this happen, then this mission wouldn't be a challenge for me to complete at all! In fact, I have to try my best to make it harder than it looks!"

A lot of merits would assuredly land in his pockets if he could pull this off!

Chapter 3010: High-Impulse Booster Modules

Though the burden of taking on his new assignment troubled Ves a lot, he couldn't neglect his other priorities.

With the promise of firm material support from Master Willix, Gloriana's search for compatible and suitable resonating materials became a lot simpler.

Now that they had a better idea of what they were working towards, every mech designer was able to do their work in a much more targeted manner.

Everyone wanted to complete the preliminary phases and begin with the actual design work. The Journeymen of the Design Department made substantial progress into refining the draft designs of all six expert mechs.

It wasn't fast enough for Gloriana's liking though. Every day, she cracked her metaphorical whip onto the backs of other mech designers.

Gloriana had become so passionate and frenzied that she practically rode the entire Design Department to exhaustion.

This was not all bad, though. What Gloriana lacked in tact, she made up for it with her sound judgement and excellent eye for detail. Her heavy-handed instructions steered every mech designer to the right path and prevented anyone from wasting too much time on fruitless endeavors.

Her leadership style caused her to treat every subordinate like an automaton. As long as a mech designer worked as quickly, efficiently and effectively as a well-oiled machine, Gloriana would have no problem.

The downside was that as long as anything went wrong, she got triggered. She had a very low tolerance to failure, excuses and inability to comply with her instructions.

"Ves you idiot! I told you to lay off with the idea of adding a missile launcher module on the Chimera Project. Venerable Joshua doesn't need it and it will only introduce a number of structural weaknesses into the frame. Now remove that stupid module or I will remove your bedroom privileges!"

"Nonono! Don't do it like that! You might have become a Journeyman, Ketis, but you're a long way into mastering the art of mechanics. The center of mass is too low here. That might not be an issue if we're talking about a landbound mech, but we're talking about an aerial and spaceborn machine! The Decapitator Project relies a lot on evasion and maneuverability to fight, so it is pivotal to keep the center of mass closer to the middle."

"You are completely letting down your Hexer heritage, Juliet. It is no wonder you got exiled from the Hegemony! While I admire the solution you have applied to the Disruptor Project's flight system, you took thrice as much time to come up with this answer than you should have! Next time, don't explore so many alternate options. Figure out the best way forward first next time!"

Fortunately, Gloriana had a sense of measure when dealing with the Apprentice Mech Designers. She didn't expect too much from them to begin with, so she only did not raise her voice all that much.

The high pressure she exerted on everyone increased their stress levels. Yet none of the lead designers and the assistants hired by the LMC were average.

Journeyman were quite competent or they wouldn't have been able to advance to begin with. The Apprentices hired by Ves and Gloriana both had their good points.

For example, the Braves might not be the smartest and most inventive of the bunch, but they fared quite well under pressure. They were quite suited to complete lots of smaller and easier tasks within tight deadlines.

As for the Erudites, Gloriana knew them best. She depended on Miles Tovar, Mayer Torto, Merrill O'Brian and other clever heads to solve the more difficult and time-consuming tasks.

What especially helped was that the Apprentices all started to receive their cranial implants.

With the addition of lots of Lifer implant surgeons and other related specialists, the Larkinson Biotechnology Institute was able to perform a lot of implantation procedures at once. The excellent and abundant treatment facilities aboard the Dragon's Den increased the capacity of operations even further.

Ketis was the first of many mech designers and professionals who fused their minds with life-changing, quality cranial implants!

The difference in cognitive abilities was drastic. Even the most average Apprentice Mech Designer became something akin to a genius after receiving a high-quality brain implant.

The result of all of this was that the Design Department under Gloriana's lead got more work done in remarkably less time!

As long as people got used to the pressure, it didn't feel all that bad to meet Gloriana's high expectations. True mech designers never shied away from challenges and they always sought to surpass their limits. Everyone in the Design Department confirmed this description.

This was the benefit of maintaining strict and thorough hiring criteria. The Design Department may be too small and short-handed for the projects they were working on these days, but none of the mech designers were total letdowns.

During one briefing, Gloriana focused her attention on the Disruptor Project.

"How much speed and acceleration can I expect from Venerable Tusa's expert mech?" She asked.

Juliet Stamos pointed to the flight system and additional booster modules mounted onto the most recent draft design.

"The forward acceleration of the Disruptor Project is not the best, but this tradeoff has allowed me to implement powerful short-term boosters that can near-instantly push the expert mech in other directions. The impulse that these boosters modules can exert is

formidable for their size, but the downside is that they are expensive and use up materials that are not easily found. However, as long as we stock up on the necessary exotics, we won't have to worry about running out for years."

That was going to cost a lot of money, but nobody cared about that. Ves had already made it clear that they did not need to limit their budget allocation too much. As long as they didn't buy wildly-expensive first-class materials, everything else was fine as long as it could be sourced.

Gloriana studied the contextual parameters of the booster modules. By necessity, they had to be placed on the sides and front of the light skirmisher in order to push it in directions other than forward.

"I don't like how there are so many of them placed in positions that a frontal enemy can easily attack. These boosters are more than adequate when it comes to allowing the mech to evade quickly, but they are not particularly known for their toughness. A single decent attack can knock them offline or even shatter them entirely. We'll quickly go through our stock of spare materials after every intensive battle if that's the case."

"That is true, but these are the only booster models that provide the performance we need." Juliet replied. "I have implemented two solutions to reduce their chances of getting damaged. First, every booster is covered by a grid made of Unending alloy. While this grid is relatively thin and fragile compared to the rest of the armor system, it should be enough to withstand casual physical strikes by other expert mechs."

"That doesn't help much with energy attacks." Ves pointed out. "A grid can easily block solid slugs and sword attacks, but most of the energy of a laser or positron beam will just slip through the many gaps."

Juliet nodded. "The Disruptor Project is not the most suitable mech to fight against mechs that utilize energy weapons. Striker mechs, laser rifleman mechs and any artillery mech that utilize very precise energy cannons can more easily land their attacks on light mechs. This is not a weakness that we can fully negate."

She had a good point. Light mechs and light skirmishers depended heavily on evasion to stay alive. Weapons that affected a wide area such as flamethrowers or weapons that were pinpoint accurate with muzzle velocities that equaled the speed of light such as laser weapons possessed an inherent advantage against these elusive mosquitos.

"We can't make too many compromises. I can get behind the choice you've made, Juliet. It is not ideal, but it is truly important that Venerable Tusa gets the power he needs to survive on the battlefield in his own way. He will just have to rely on his superior evasion abilities to prevent his boosters from getting eliminated by energy attacks. I hope he can also make use of his resonance shield to save us the trouble of repairing these finicky boosters." Gloriana reluctantly affirmed.

Weaknesses were undesirable, but not completely unacceptable as long as they could be compensated in some fashion. It didn't matter if the booster modules were relatively fragile compared to the rest of the expert mech as long as Tusa was able to use the capabilities he had at his disposal to prevent them from ever getting hit!

There were other downsides to the booster modules, though. Part of the reason why they were so powerful and so fast-acting for their dimensions was because they burned a very potent type of high-grade second-class booster fuel.

It was quite difficult and expensive to source this fuel. The Larkinson Clan would have to make sure to spend big and buy it in bulk so that Venerable Tusa didn't have to worry about running out of this essential combat resource anytime soon.

Ves quietly sighed. He already knew that expert mechs were expensive and difficult to maintain, but it was only now that he started to experience the headaches that others in this position suffered.

High-end machines were completely different beasts from standard mechs. They required very different logistical approaches.

Regular mechs came in lots of copies so it always made sense for the Larkinsons to buy a lot of necessary supplies and raw materials in bulk. The more copies of a single mech model the Larkinson Clan fielded, the easier it was to provide the right support.

Still, all of this trouble was acceptable as long as they fully complemented Tusa's fighting style. Juliet was practically gambling on the hope that Venerable Tusa possessed enough skill and piloting acumen to keep the precious boosters out of harm's way.

"He'll become an excellent dogfighter and duelist with this choice." Ves smiled as he mentally mapped out the probable performance of the Disruptor Project. "This expert mech will be able to fight at a considerable advantage against other melee expert mechs up close. It is also deadly against larger and more sluggish expert mechs that can't keep up with its speed."

Gloriana didn't look as optimistic. "The fuel capacity of these boosters isn't much, though. I agree that its performance is excellent as long as it is fresh and fully charged. However, if it fights too intensively, it can quickly run out of steam in just 15 minutes in the worst case. Once the booster fuel runs out, the Disruptor Project can only rely on its flight system to remain untouchable. Suffice to say, that is not an ideal situation."

"I don't think it will come to that unless Venerable Tusa is an absolute moron." Ves quickly commented. "Tusa is skilled and experienced enough to know how to conserve the use of the boosters. He won't squander the fuel when he's not being focused upon or not locked into a duel against an expert mech. In any case, many parts of his expert

mech can take a lot of hits, so he doesn't have to evade every attack that comes in his direction."

The mech designers would have to instruct Venerable Tusa carefully about these considerations. It wouldn't do for him to have the time of his life on the battlefield only to lose half of his evasion capabilities because his expert mech already ran out of booster fuel!

"What else do we need to talk about concerning this project?"

"I have some questions regarding the possible resonance materials that you plan to attach to the boosters." Juliet spoke up. "Do we use them to integrate an ability that increases the impulse of the boosters at all cost or can we implement a solution that can reduce their fuel consumption and increase their longevity? Right now, the running time of this expert mech is the shortest out of the six. If we continue in this direction, it will be the first expert mech to enter the battlefield and the first one to exit it as well."

"Hmm... that is indeed a problem. Light skirmishers are actually expected to last longer on the battlefield so that they can chase after fleeing enemies and perform other crucial tasks that require a quick response." Gloriana frowned... "Let me think about it further."