

## Mech 3041

### *Chapter 3041: Purnesse Family*

As Ves and Calabast spoke about serious matters, Lucky leisurely sniffed around as he moved across the office. He smelled plenty of interesting devices in the office.

"The Grand Loxic Republic is a prosperous state, but one that has not seen much war as Winged Serenade does not see much open warfare." Calabast patiently explained. "That has caused a lot of contradictions to accumulate over time. The unexpected outbreak of the Crown Uprising has inflamed the existing tensions and frayed the nerves of every faction. Just recently, the crown terrorists managed to blow up the official estate of the Loxic President, killing both him, his family, his closest staff and many other officials who controlled the affairs of the state. The sudden beheading has left a large power vacuum at the top and prompted many organizations and factions to vie for power. If you want to understand the roots of this conflict, you will need to learn about the three main factions."

Ves yawned. "Let's just skip that. I don't need to know the details of their petty localized squabbles when we are just flying past this state. I'm just interested in this diplomat that you are serious about... Is he willing to join us wholeheartedly and can we pick him up without getting entangled in a massive power struggle?"

"Survival trumps all interests." Calabast said as she idly pampered Arnold by stroking his back. The furry creature arched his back in pleasure. "The chaos at the top has caused every individual and organization who staked their bets on the former head of the Grand Loxic Republic to lose their greatest assurance. The rival factions have all taken advantage of the momentary chaos to assail the greatest supporters and pillars of the former ruling faction."

Ves grew ugly. "So it's a repeat of what happened in the Life Research Association?"

He did not have good memories of his time at the previous state he visited! Even though he came away with an enormous harvest, that didn't mean he was ready to dive right into a similar situation!

"It's not as bad as you think. The power players of the Grand Loxic Republic aren't that stupid. They are much more prudent and don't want to set off too many waves. At the very least, the fighting hasn't spread to the cities or affected the lives of civilians all that much. The battles are all constrained to a narrow degree in order to determine which faction gets ahead."

One of the main faults of the Life Research Association was that much of the decision-making power rested with scientists who mainly specialized in biosciences rather than governance.

The Grand Loxic Republic was a much more normal state in comparison. The Winged Serenade Star Sector was always seen as an administrative and economic center of the Yeina Star Cluster. Every powerful second-rate state here was highly developed, and this prestigious state was no exception to that rule.

As the provincial snobs of this corner of space, there was no way the Loxians wanted to tear their own castle down just so they could plant their flag atop the rubble!

"I don't understand." Ves frowned as he tried to understand the situation. "If a civil war hasn't broken out, large-scale fighting shouldn't be possible. The moment anyone breaks out the big guns, all hell will soon break loose. No one rational enough would want their state to descend into the same chaos as we have seen in the Life Research Association."

"That is why the actual fighting has so far been limited to small-scale skirmishes and lots of secret operations." The spymaster let out a bloodthirsty grin. "Assassination and sabotage are rife within the state. Fathers wake up to find their sons killed. Wives fear their husband will never return home. Entire organizations are being disrupted as their trade secrets and financial dealings get spilled in public. Though the damage being done is not as bloody as we have witnessed in the past, don't underestimate the ferocity of this kind of war! Mechs and mech pilots aren't the only ones who can wage war, you know."

The conflict unfolding in the Grand Loxic Republic obviously made her excited. It was rare for her profession to show off its might during any conflict. Usually, the work of intelligence operatives always gets overshadowed by mech pilots. The latter was the ultimate protagonist of the Age of Mechs while spies like her were invisible at best and despised at worst.

While the current situation in the Grand Loxic Republic didn't change this equation, Calabast nevertheless directed a lot of professional interest in the conflicts taking place out of the sight of most civilians.

"Meow~"

Lucky landed next to Arnold and rudely pushed the eight-legged exobeast aside. With the gem cat's strength, the poor alien creature didn't stand a single chance. He dropped from the desk and fell onto the deck with a meaty plop!

"SQUEAK!"

Nobody seemed to notice Arnold's distress. Lucky squirmed his body onto the warm spot on the desk with a satisfied glint in his artificial eyes. Calabast's thin but strong fingers soon began to scratch his metallic plates at a comfortable rhythm.

"Meow!"

If Ves was the most powerful human in the Larkinson Clan, then Lucky was definitely the strongest pet! No cat, dog or any other creature could stop him from enjoying the pleasures he sought.

As for Arnold, he quickly adjusted himself and squirreled over to Calabast's boot and began to rub his face across its shiny black surface.

He felt more at home when he was below Calabast!

"Squeak~"

After she briefly outlined the current unrest in the Grand Loxic Republic, she activated a projection that showed a family emblem.

The emblem resembled a traditional heraldic shield with yellow and red stripes on one side and an orange fox on the other side.

"What am I looking at?" Ves asked as he observed the pretentious symbol.

This was the Age of Mechs. Heraldic shields went out of style millennia ago. The only organizations that used them to represent themselves were usually pretentious people who clung way too much to the glory of the past.

"This is the symbol of the Purnesse Family. Its descendants trace its roots to an aristocratic clan from the Greater Terran United Confederation. In fact, if all of their claims are to be believed, they even have a faint connection to Old Earth."

"Every human has a connection to Old Earth. If you go back far enough, our earlier ancestors all came from the birthplace of humanity." Ves flatly stated.

Calabast shrugged. "Regardless of whether the Purnesse Family is tied to the Terrans or not, it has been doing quite well for itself. The apparent pedigree of the Purnesses has given them a substantial advantage in their orientation towards public service. While the Purnesse Family is not one of the ruling powers of the Grand Loxic Republic, many of its descendants occupy influential middle-level positions in the state's expansive administration."

This was not a trivial accomplishment. Second-rate states were large, powerful and wealthy. Even if the second-rate states of Winged Serenade were not as large as the ones from the Komodo Star Sector, the higher degree of development meant that the military and economic might of each of the former was not inferior!

Under these circumstances, it was quite impressive that the Purnesse Family managed to hold on to so much power for such a long time.

"So the Purnesse Family is in trouble at the moment?"

The woman gave him a humorless smile. "The Purnesses lost their greatest backing. The ruling faction is in disarray due to the critical assassination and some forces have quietly stood up in order to prevent the Purnesse Family from surviving this small storm. As long as the Purnesses are eliminated from the stage, the influential positions they used to occupy will inevitably fall into the hands of their rivals."

In other words, this was just a bog-standard power struggle. Ves had witnessed plenty of them. He got caught in a few as well, much to his displeasure.

Humans were the same everywhere. As long as a group showed weakness, the hyenas would definitely enjoy another feast!

"What makes the Purnesse Family special is their professional focus. While it has over 2000 trueblood members who serve in many different government institutions, their emphasis leans towards foreign relations. Their family head along with many of their most prominent members are all diplomats or experts in foreign relations. Many Purnesses are actually serving in foreign missions abroad."

"Ah, so they are those kinds of diplomats."

Ves wasn't sure whether he should be interested in the Purnesse Family. These guys sounded like career diplomats who dedicated themselves to serving the state. They were much like the Larkinson Family in the past, and that made Ves wary. He knew it wouldn't be easy to shake their old loyalties. Credibility was one of the most valuable assets of a diplomat. None of them would be able to do their job effectively if they generated too much distrust.

"While Many Purnesses may be serving elsewhere, the family head and many important family members still reside on Treden II, their traditional home planet. Many families live there as well, which makes it very important to keep them all alive."

"If they're in trouble, why don't they leave?"

"They can't. They tried. Everytime the Purnesses attempt to escape from the planet, the shuttles or other vehicles they are traveling on somehow crashes or gets shot down by unknown assailants."

"Unknown assailants?"

"Black mechs that don't bear any identifiable marks." Calabast switched the projection to a shaky image of the mechs in question. "These mechs have been showing up every now and then to disrupt any actions initiated by the Purnesse Family that are too big to be stopped by a couple of operatives."

Ves carefully studied the designs of the black-coated mechs. He could already tell that their designers did their best not to leave any identifiable marks behind.

As someone who once tried his best to obscure his own personal touches in a design, he knew that it was extremely unlikely for Ves or anyone else to determine the true origin of the black machines.

"So what is the current state of the Purnesse Family?"

The family members who live and work outside of Trieden II have all evacuated from their original locations in order to reach a safe location in a different state. However, the core of the Purnesse Family still remains stuck on their home planet with no effective way out. The unknown enemies have effectively formed a blockade. This is also why the Purnesse Family can't pay a visit to us even if they have become desperate for help. They can only contact us by remote, but I'm not sure how long we'll be able to. The dark hand behind the scenes has already started to sabotage the planet's communications infrastructure."

"That... sounds pretty serious." Ves furrowed his brows. "We can't fight against a force that is powerful enough to dominate an entire planet. It's not worth it to provoke such a powerful enemy just so we can pick up a single useful family. There are plenty of other fish in the sea. We don't need to insist on grabbing one out of the jaws of a shark!"

His words did not make Calabast happy. She stopped stroking Lucky's back and leaned forward over her desk.

"Look, our clan is desperately lacking a diplomat. You always complained to me that we have been taking way too long to find one. We have now identified a golden opportunity to pick up not just an excellent career diplomat that has served for decades on behalf of a prestigious second-rate state, but we also have the rare opportunity of gaining the complete loyalty of a large collection of highly-trained foreign relations workers, middle-level bureaucrats and administrators, commerce managers and more! These are exactly the kind of professionals our clan is lacking at the moment."

Ves was aware of the strain the clan administration was facing. It was not so easy to foster the kind of managers and officials that were needed to control the middle and lower levels of the clan.

He understood why Calabast found the Purnesse Family so attractive. As long as the expeditionary fleet dropped by the Trieden System, the trapped Purnesses would finally be able to get out alive while the Larkinson Clan was able to fill some of its critical shortages!

It was a win-win arrangement that sounded quite attractive to both sides.

Ves became more intrigued. "Can we beat the aggressors at Trieden II?"

"Trieden II is a relatively modest paradise planet. While the standard of living over there is high, it isn't large or developed enough to host powerful outfits. With our strength, we

have the capital to smash aside the opposition. Since we are just performing a quick evacuation operation, we can be gone by the time the hidden enemies can muster reinforcements, if they are even willing to fight us in the first place."

There were always risks to any operation on foreign soil. Calabast's intelligence might be wrong and she might be underestimating the opposition the clan might face. Yet the reward was sufficiently attractive for Ves to take this matter seriously.

"Get in touch with General Verle and start making plans. If I think they are good enough, I approve them. The risks have to be controlled though and we need to minimize the negative impact as much as possible."

"It is not that difficult to accomplish this. We merely have to leave the sphere of influence of the Grand Loxic Republic and the Winged Serenade Star Sector to avoid all of the repercussions of rescuing the Purnesse Family." Calabast confidently stated.

He nodded. She made a good point.

"I guess it's time our mech forces go on another exercise. We have absorbed a lot of new mech pilots but none of them have been baptized in combat as a Larkinson as of yet. Those MTA mech pilots also need to be thrown into active combat in order to witness our power and stimulate their potential."

Since those mechers wanted to become expert pilots so badly, then subjecting them to battle was the best way to spark a change!

Hopefully these superior mech pilots knew how to pilot second-class mechs...

#### *Chapter 3042: Rescue Force*

The ships of the Golden Skull Alliance suddenly took a slight detour from its original route.

While the expeditionary fleet was still heading in the direction of the Antilla Star Cluster, its course change caused it to swing past several densely-populated star systems.

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers were straying deeper into the core regions of the Grand Loxic Republic.

If Ves wasn't in such a hurry, he would have wanted to slow down and visit a portion of the many famous planets and tourist destinations of the powerful second-rate state.

The Grand Loxic Republic possessed a different culture and set of customs from the states that Ves had visited in the past. It was a proud and cosmopolitan state that attracted many foreign people and organizations.

As one of the central nodes of the Yeina Star Cluster, its military forces were extremely developed by the standards of the surrounding star sectors. A robust and long-established mech industry played host to intense competition at every single level of the mech market.

Since the Living Mech Corporation didn't compete in any second-class mech markets, the Larkinsons knew far too little about the exact conditions of the Grand Loxic Republic... While Calabast and many other clansmen were doing their best to do their research and shore up their understanding of the Loxians, the Larkinsons were ultimately strangers to this grand but divided state.

Fortunately, the established factions and powers of the Grand Loxic Republic had no attention to spare for the travelers that passed through its space every day. As an open state that depended heavily on trade, commerce and influence to thrive, the locals did not have a habit of accosting foreign visitors.

Not even the Crown Uprising was able to turn this policy around. At best, the Loxians just imposed more restrictions on its visitors and prevented them from bringing too many dangerous assets to settled planets and space stations.

The distance to the Trieden System was not that long. General Verle and all of the forces under his command had to make hasty preparations in order to prepare for their upcoming operations.

According to the preliminary battle plan, the bulk of the mech forces would remain in space in order to guard against threats directed towards the fleet.

Only a smaller rescue force consisting of several thousand mechs would descend from orbit and reach the Violet Estates, the ancestral home of the Purnesse Family.

During one of the planning sessions of the upcoming operation, a very important matter emerged.

Who would be the ones to dive from the heavens aboard combat carriers that might or might not encounter hostile fire?

Who would be the ones to fly over the Violet Estates and carefully escort the evacuating Purnessers back to orbit?

Who would be the ones to fight directly against the hidden hand on Trieden II, whose strength was still unknown?

The Glory Seekers and Crossers wouldn't be taking part in this private action.

This was purely the business of the Larkinson Clan. It wasn't shameless enough to drag its allies into a conflict that did not involve them directly.

The Larkinson Clan had to earn all of the gratitude of the Purnesse Family in order to earn the respect of its members.

As for the Infinity Guards, they were solely paid to protect the Larkinson Clan and its fleet. Engaging in offensive operations was not under their purview. Besides, their contract would soon run out at the end of the month and the clan did not intend to renew it any further.

"Who do we send down to the surface?" Ves asked.

A wave of silence followed among the gathered commanders.

"I am favoring two different options." General Verle's projection stated. "First, we can take the safe route and send in a mix of our established mech forces. With the Avatars, Vandals, Penitent Sisters, Swordmaidens and so on leading the way, they can show off the might of our clan in a splendid fashion as long as the opposition is within our expectations. With their current level of strength and completely armed with the latest Bright Warriors, our elite mech forces will be able to make a profound impact on not just the Purnesse Family, but also the tens of thousands of new clansmen who have yet to witness our might in battle."

That was a good idea. Too many clansmen who originated from the Life Research Association or the Heavensword Association did not have a solid idea of the strength of the Larkinson Clan.

They heard stories and watched lots of archival footage of past battles. Yet witnessing these battles after the fact simply didn't convey all of the fears, hopes, desperation and exaltation of victory of seeing a fight unfold up close!

It was only when the observers had an actual stake in the battle that they would truly appreciate the outcome of victory or defeat!

"What is the second option, then?"

"We could send in our new Swordmaidens and sword associates. Miss Ketis has brought ten-thousand mech pilots into the clan. Even if not all of them have their own dedicated mechs, they are still a force to be reckoned with. If these new Larkinsons along with the recent recruits of our other mech forces are dispatched to the surface, they will gain an opportunity to get bloodied under controlled circumstances. We only need to dispatch enough veterans to keep the rookies in line."

"That sounds risky." Ves said in a hesitant tone.

"Swordsmen do not fear danger." Commander Sendra's projection firmly spoke up. "The Heavensworders are all highly-trained warriors. They might not be accustomed to fighting under the banner of our clan, but that does not mean that they lack any mettle."



General Verle briefly paused before he gave his opinion. "I do not doubt the skill of the Heavensworders, but I am less confident in their readiness. They have yet to master how to fight as a Larkinson. Many of them are still assigned to their original Heavensworder mechs. Performing this rescue operation with non-Larkinson mechs will send the wrong message. We need to make absolutely clear that we are sending our best."

This meant that they would have to consider the first option presented by General Verle. The issue that followed was determining the force composition of the roughly 2000 mechs that would break the invisible blockade of Trieden II.

The mech commanders spent ten minutes advocating for their men to take part in the upcoming action.

Only Commander Casella Ingvar remained silent. The Living Sentinels weren't suited to perform a rescue operation. Her mech pilots were better off sticking close to the fleet in order to guard against any threats in space.

As the competitive discussion progressed, Commander Valerie Chancy of the Penitent Sisters and Commander Abis Firelight of the Flagrant Vandals were making a good case for their respective mech forces.

"Our Valkyrie Redeemers are built for war and operate well under atmospheric conditions. They excel in quick and devastating strikes. No cowardly black mech will be able to escape our gaze of death." Chancy argued. "Don't forget that we are still the most highly-trained second-class mech pilots of our clan. Sending in my women will maximize the odds of success of this rescue operation."

The projected form of Abis Firelight slightly shook his head. "While I respect the battle prowess of your women and your fantastic mechs, the conflict taking place in this state and on this planet specifically mostly takes place in the shadows. Your Valkyrie Redeemers may excel at defeating open targets, but so what? Will you be able to detect and take down a hidden sniper mech that is about to shoot down a transport carrying important VIPs? Will you be able to scout the terrain around the Violet Estates and root out every trap and hidden enemy in time?"

The Penitent Sister Commander sent a displeased glance at the leader of the Flagrant Vandals. "What are you suggesting, commander?"

"Our Flagrant Vandals haven't enjoyed a good exercise for a long time. Let us take the lead! We have received the largest quantity of Ferocious Piranhas. Only we can reach our objectives the fastest and respond to unexpected incidents with the least amount of delay. We can also deploy a sufficient amount of slower mechs to cover the main evacuation vessels."

Ves looked back and forth between the two projected commanders. He was not sure who to rely on more for this operation. While he could give equal weight to both, he had a suspicion that this would lead to an excessive amount of division. In order to ensure the Purnessers were rescued as smoothly as possible, the rescue force had to be unified in command, and that meant giving much more room for one mech force in particular."

It was at this time that the projection of Commander Melkor stood up. He looked calmly into everyone else's face before he made his case.

"The Avatars of Myth must be the ones to lead this operation. Ves, let my men prove their worth. For a long time, we have been overshadowed by others. While I do not begrudge the Penitent Sisters and the Swordmaidens for performing fantastically in battle, I don't want my men to be left behind! We are the first elite mech force of the Larkinson Clan and we represent its values and ideals the closest! We are the iconic fighting force of our clan and it is only right for the Purnesses and any outside observers to witness our exclusive Bright Warriors overpowering all opposition and giving the Purnessers a golden sight that they will never forget in their lives!"

He was right as well. Ves knew that he had been neglecting Melkor and the Avatars of Myth for a very long time. The expert pilots, the Penitent Sisters, the Swordmaidens and so on had all become shinier toys to him in recent times. This had caused him and other Larkinsons to subconsciously decrease their regard towards the Avatars of Myth.

Ves did not make a decision, though. He instead directed a look towards General Verle.

The most qualified person should be the one to make the decision. Ves was just a layman in these matters so he did not think it was wise for him to make such an important decision.

It took a minute for the general to make up his mind.

"This operation is not just an opportunity to rescue and absorb the Purnesse Family, but also to accomplish other objectives, such as raising the morale of our clansmen and impressing outsiders of our combat prowess. In light of these additional goals, the Avatars of Myth are the most suitable soldiers to take charge this time. We need to show our Larkinson demeanor in the best possible fashion, and fielding thousands of Bright Warriors will certainly do that. Commander Melkor is also right in that the Avatars of Myth are most in need to validate their identity in battle, though I could also say the same for the Flagrant Vandals."

The Penitent Sisters did not need any pepping up. They were doing quite well in the Larkinson Clan and it would take a very long time before their morale began to erode.

In the end, General Verle chose to allow the Avatars of Myth to act as the main force and the Flagrant Vandals as a secondary force for this operation.

Both Commander Melkor and Commander Firelight smiled in satisfaction. They quietly stared at Commander Chancy and Commander Sendra. The men felt a great need to show that the clan did not need to rely completely on its female warriors to fight its battles!

Melkor soon made a sincere bow. "Thank you, General Verle. Thank you, Ves. My men and I truly need this opportunity. We will not disappoint your high expectations. I will be entering the field myself in order to ensure my Avatars will perform up to standard. Better yet, we won't fight like Hexers or Heavensworders. We shall fight like Larkinsons!"

That was a good enough reason for Ves.

### *Chapter 3043: The Only Truth*

The Grand Loxic Republic was a proud state. Though the Winged Serenade Star Sector was divided into seven second-rate states, each of which possessed their own strong heritage, the Loxians rightfully felt pride in their own prosperity.

Much of that had to do with their favorable and central location. With multiple highly-developed port systems in its grasp, the Grand Loxic Republic stood out as a nexus of trade and influence-building.

Many organizations whose influence stretched across the entire galactic rim or even the galaxy chose to establish their branch offices in the Grand Loxic Republic. The concentration of so many powerful but distant companies, foundations, research institutions, foreign offices and more caused the state to consider itself more cosmopolitan than the rest of the Yeina Star Cluster.

The Winged Serenade Star Sector and more specifically the Grand Loxic Republic was much more connected to the rest of the galaxy than anywhere else in the vicinity!

Other star sectors such as Komodo, Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal may have developed their own strengths, but the Loxians pretty much considered those regions to be the backwater star sectors.

With so many interests intertwined with the Grand Loxic Republic, a lot of competition had formed between the locals who were qualified to take a piece of the pie.

Still, for a long time, the Loxic President and the Hegenarion Party he led for decades remained in power...

The Hegenarion Party had long been in power in the grand republic. It advocated for a conservative policy that attempted to rock the boat as little as possible. As long as everything went well, there was no need to go out of their way and introduce too many changes to their society.

The Hegenarion Party's emphasis on wealth generation and influence-building led to many decades of stability and peace. The residents quite liked that and only rarely elevated others in power.

Yet the longer the Hegenarions grasped the levers of power, the more eager their rivals wanted to pull them down!

The problem with that was that the Loxic President was immensely capable. As the greatest Loxian statesman, he not only ensured slow but constant growth for his state, but made sure that every crucial stakeholder benefited from the status quo.

It was very difficult to shake his position when he made so many people happy.

In the end, it took outside intervention to pull him off his throne. The inexplicable Crown Uprising had caused the state which had long been quiet to turn restless and unsafe.

The frequent terrorist attacks that erupted on many different planets disrupted a lot of the trade and influence-building that the Grand Loxic Republic relied upon to remain prosperous.

This had immediate effects on its short-term economy. A recession had swept over the state without any warning, causing many people and organizations to be caught off-guard!

Though the Hegenarion Party did everything it could to stem the losses and give comfort to those who lost their relatives or their jobs, the downside to staying in power for so long was that they always took the blame for everything!

The Loxic President and his inner circle faced the greatest challenge of their careers. Their plans all became outdated as the galactic storm ignited by a hidden organization more powerful than anything they had dealt with easily swept aside the status quo!

Yet just as the Loxic President was about to tackle the ongoing crisis without backing down, the crown terrorists managed to infiltrate his presidential palace and blow him up along with many other important ministers!

The consequences immediately became apparent. With the Hegenarion Party in disarray due to the loss of so many important leaders and its inability to determine a new leader in a short amount of time, the other political parties smelled weakness and struck!

Though the Grand Loxic Republic could not be allowed to descend into civil war and scare away all of the foreign allies and business partners it heavily relied upon, that did not mean the killing stopped!

It just moved into the shadows. Though no insider in the powerful state was ignorant of the fact that a lot of fighting took place, the fact that the fighting was mostly contained in the shadows ensured that everyone had enough reason to pretend the state was doing fine and dandy.

A shuttle crashed into the body of a powerful mayor of a major trading city?

The crown terrorists were at fault!

A huge space station that belonged to a major backer to one of the political parties broke in half?

The crown terrorists were at fault!

Some weird black mechs were killing off the descendants of a family that was noted for its public service?

The crown terrorists were at fault!

The Crown Uprising was a trans-galactic event that happened in every settled part of human society. The flood of terrorist attacks appearing in the news was so torrential that people soon grew numb to the mass-produced tragedies.

The sheer quantity of destructive events also caused many investigative bodies to stop looking into the truth behind the incidents.

There were simply too many of them to investigate all of them properly!

This was why the tragedy befalling the Purnesse Family made so few ripples in the Grand Loxic Republic.

"How come we have fallen to this point, father?" A sophisticated voice asked with a touch of despair.

The light of the local star shone warmly on the glittering oceans that covered much of Trienden II. The small but pleasant paradise planet was famed for its aquatic bounty and luxurious resorts.

The Violet Estates occupied one of the more noteworthy islands that dotted the planet. The series of structures were designed for beauty rather than defense, so they occupied a relatively high hill that took great cost to erect.

The different estates could easily be recognized from afar due to its eye-catching location and brightly-colored facade.

Right now, the Purnesse Family felt that it had been a very foolish decision to place their main homes on such an open and vulnerable site.

The family had to remove powerful shield generators from their other properties and move them all back to the Violet Estates in order to protect it from long-ranged bombardment!

Even now, the Purnesses were still in the process of setting up fortifications across their island. The rather limited number of mechs under their control were looking out at the water, on guard for any danger that might emerge from below the surface.

Within the solar of the main structure of the Violet Estates, a man wearing an elegant but understated business suit looked towards the older man seated next to the high windows that looked out over the island and the seas beyond.

Former Ambassador Shederin Purnesse was tired. As a man who was 140 years old, he had gone through several major waves in his long and accomplished life. He slowly adjusted the green robe that helped him convey a calm and peaceful demeanor.

Yet the current wave sweeping towards the Violet Estates was like a tsunami that could potentially sweep across the entire island!

"Has the Riedholm Corporation responded to my inquiry?" The ambassador's light but dignified voice asked.

"No, father. Our communication capabilities have become increasingly intermittent, but the few times we succeeded in sending a message to the company representative, we have not received any acknowledgement."

The ambassador smiled wryly as the filtered sun rays streamed down on his face and body. "It is to be expected."

"Expected?!" Counselor Noliven Purnesse momentarily lost control. "We have worked hard to introduce the Riedholm Corporation to the local industry and helped forge several favorable trade deals over the years. Director Asfelt-Riedholm owes several favors to our family!"

The former counselor that had followed in the footsteps of his prestigious father managed much of the important communications of the family during this crisis. The lack of favorable replies had frayed his mind. The burden of saving the Purnesse Family largely relied on the success of his mission.

Shederin Purnesse directed a lazy eye towards his son. "What is the fastest way to get rid of a debt?"

"Repay it straight away?"

Obviously, this was the wrong answer. Fortunately, Novilon was not stupid at all. It took less than a second for him to realize a more frightening answer.

"By defaulting on it..." He trailed.

"Indeed." Shederin's smile grew more humorless. "In the rules that previously governed our society, credibility was the primary currency that formed the basis of every transaction. Regrettably, the rules of the game have changed. Do you know what has supplanted the importance of credibility in this new and turbulent period?"

Novilon Purnesse thought for a moment. "I would say value. Though centuries of loyal and diligent service has given us a great reputation, much of that is built upon the glories of the past. If we no longer consider this factor, our actual value has severely plummeted. Our great friendship with the former Loxic President and our comfortable status in the Hegenarion Party are no longer worth anything now that both of them no longer have any meaning."

The Hegenarion Party was not going down quickly, but it had too many enemies. No one was willing to bet on its future when there weren't any strong leaders who could rise up and unite the former power base of the assassinated president.

The old and stately ambassador let out a deep breath. "All of our work into deepening and fostering our bonds with the Hegenarion Party has gone to waste. Should it be any surprise that the wealthy Riedholm Corporation no longer values what we can bring to the table? In fact, Director Asfelt-Riedholm benefits most from seeing our family fall. The debts he owes to us has long worn down his shoulders."

Novilon clenched his fist. Such a disgraceful turn would have caused the director to fall into disrepute at any other time! Credibility was everything, and no one wanted to do business with traitors and ungrateful bastards!

Ambassador Shederin seemed to accept the Riedholm Corporation's abandonment with few emotional fluctuations.

"Let us move on, then. What of the Primdal Family? Bonds of blood are often more dependable than written contracts and unwritten favors. The marriages between our families are not trivial."

"We..." The son of the older man hesitated. "We did not receive any response either, but I managed to obtain word of one of our agents within the Primdal Family. According to what I heard, the Primdals are willing to lend a hand to us, but the patron they answer to has put a stop to those attempts."

The expression of the old ambassador sank. "We can count the Primdals out as well, then. They are at the mercy of greater forces just like us. At least they are lucky enough that their backers still retain their power."

The Purnesse Family had worked hard to forge several bonds with the Primdal Family. Even though the two answered to different political parties, there was no rule that stated that they had to avoid each other. As long as they did not make any major moves together, a few marriages between their family members never caught much attention.

The Purnesses befriended the Primdals as a form of insurance. If the Hegenarion Party ever faded from power, the Purnesses could rely on the help of the Primdals to swing to a different influence.

The reason why the Primdals were willing to play along was because they had the same intentions! If the Primdal Family ever got in trouble one day, it could request the Purnesses to bring them into the Hegenarion Party!

It was too bad that the Loxic President and the rest of his powerbase fell too quickly to make the transition worth it. The Purnesses had become poison and not even bonds of blood could persuade the Primdal Family to fulfill its original obligation!

"Do you know where we have gone wrong as a family?" Shederin asked his son.

"We are good at making friends, but our friends can't be counted in this dangerous time." Novilon steadily answered. "We shouldn't have focused so much on forging bonds based on nebulous concepts such as credibility or blood ties. We would have been much better off right now if we established ties based on solid interests!"

The father let out a disappointed sigh. "You still don't get it, son. You keep approaching the problem from the same lens that you have been trained to view in our society."

"What did I get wrong?"

The old ambassador looked out the window and raised his head to gaze at the cloudless blue sky.

"We should have developed our own strength. Do you think we would be bullied as heavily as now if we invested more attention and resources into building up our military might? Our family has been too naive! All of the years of peace in our state and the stability offered by the Loxic President has made us complacent! We have relied so heavily on borrowing the power of others that we never sufficiently developed our own might. In the end, the only truth in security lies in strength!"

Strength was the only truth in the galaxy!

*Chapter 3044: Times Have Changed*

Though Ambassador Shederin Purnesse recognized that strength was the only truth that could be counted upon, his family did not have the qualifications to act on this basis.



It was too weak. The Purnesse Family was only a small cog in the giant machine of the Grand Loxic Republic. It was not easy to cultivate a large force of mechs especially when the Purnesses lacked a foundation in the military and other related sectors.

The main foundation of the Purnesse Family had always rested on its many interconnected relations. Even if the turbulent wave that had struck the Grand Loxic Republic caused all of these bonds to fray, the family had no choice but to continue to rely on them. The Purnesses really had nothing else to rely upon to tide them over this crisis.

It was their own fault for not taking enough contingencies into account and preparing for a devastating turn of events like the one that had recently destabilized human space!

The Purnesse Family developed over a hundred solid ties to different families, companies and other organizations. Novilon Purnesse had already reached to each and every partner that could lend a hand to them, but as he and his father went through the list, they received distressingly little good news.

"The Markham Family has promised to assist us..." Novilon formed a rare smile, but it quickly turned brittle. "Alas, they are dealing with their own challenges. From what I have heard, the Markhams can only secretly transfer funds into our accounts. While that will help with alleviating the huge debt that we have incurred in order to erect our hasty defenses, it will not help us climb out of our hole."

"It is better than nothing." The stately father replied with a whisper. "Ambassador Grovin Markham is a good friend of mine. He still holds himself to the old ways even if there is no compelling reason to give us a hand. Accept his grace. We truly need the funding and we cannot ask for more."

This remark caused his son to feel even more frustration. The Markham Family was substantially stronger than the Purnesse Family and could have absolutely offered more aid.

What was even more notable was that Shederin Purnesse and Grovin Markham used to be friends since they attended the same university more than a century ago. They never drifted apart after they entered service.

They were practically brothers at this point. Yet even that wasn't enough for the Markhams to do more than lift a finger to aid the Purnesses!

"Grovin Markham..." Novilon spoke the name between gritted teeth.

"Leave it be." Shederin spoke in a stronger tone of voice. "The Markhams are in danger of getting toppled at any time. If I were in their place, I would prioritize my own safety as well. After all, no one can deny the fact that our Purnesse Family has become dispensable."

Novilon Purnesse had no choice but to go even further down the list of friendlies that they had called upon for assistance.

Yet no matter how much energy and effort the Purnesses had expended into courting them, the situation facing the family was so unfavorable that few provided any significant assistance.

Multiple generations of Purnesses painstakingly formed hundreds of friendships with many different economic, industrial, political and ideological powers. Even a fraction of them were more than powerful enough to relieve the crisis that had beset the family.

Unfortunately, what little token help that Novilon Purnesse got back was as useless and feeble as trying to douse a star by throwing a bucket of water in its direction!

Ambassador Shederin Purnesse patiently listened as his son detailed the exact responses of the family's former relations. The answers ranged from bad, awful and total silence.

Even though the head of the Purnesse Family could already predict all of the responses, he still had to hear them in person in order to carve this monumental failure to his weary heart.

If he and the Purnesse Family ever survived this great crisis, he would ensure that the Purnesses would never make the same mistake twice!

Once Novilon finished the exhaustive list, he looked as if he had drained all of his energy. This was their only lifeline, yet no matter in which direction they cast the line, no one picked up the other end!

"Keep contacting all of our old friends and acquaintances." Shederin commanded. "Their answer will likely remain the same, but there is always a chance the situation might change, though we shouldn't bet on this outcome."

The Purnesses could do little else than that. Solving the crisis with their own feeble power was wholly out of the question!

"We need a real solution, father. I've spoken to all of those contacts and representatives and I have not heard any sincerity in their tones. I know for certain that some of them know who is behind the black mechs that are blocking our way out, but the fact they are keeping mum despite our prior friendships is an ominous sign."

The older man paused before slumping in his comfortable seat. "The Hegenarion Party is completely over. What currently stands for it is already rotting from within. Forget about relying on the partners who are tied to it. We need to set our sights further. We must put our emphasis on obtaining outside help."

"About that, father..."

"Go on."

Novilon Purnesse hesitated a bit. "We have put some effort into doing as you just said. In every situation, we received a negative reply. No foreign organization wants to meddle into the internal affairs of the Grand Loxic Republic or get in the middle of a power struggle."

"Of course this is the case. The Grand Loxic Republic and whoever gets to rule it controls the gateway into the Yeina Star Cluster. Any local power will find themselves choked out of many favorable trade deals and greater networks if they put themselves opposite against the rising trend!"

"We did get one oddly positive response, though."

"Hmmm?" The older man directed a serious look at his son. "Since you decided to bring this to my attention, it must be credible. Tell me. Which fool is stupid enough to value a worthless family like ours and is willing to offend many powers who will soon have a great say over the star cluster."

"It's the Larkinson Clan. To be honest, we merely cast a wide net and contacted many random foreign organizations. Even if the chance of winning the jackpot is just one out of several billion, it is still worth it for us to make repeated bets. It doesn't cost us much except for a moment of our time to spam our help requests."

Novilon Purnesse sounded genuinely surprised that such a braindead plan actually bore fruit. However, when the son of the family head beheld the spiky fruit he grasped, he didn't know whether he should take a bite. Who knew if it could make him sick!

Ambassador Shederin knew his son well. "Do you have faith in the Larkinson Clan?"

"Their representatives sound sincere enough." Novilon spoke. "In fact, they sound downright enthusiastic. Apparently, their clan has grown too quickly and urgently needs the diplomatic and administrative personnel that we have in spades. Considering how unsophisticated they all sound, I have the impression that they do need our help."

A brief moment of silence followed as Shederin dredged up what he knew about the Larkinson Clan. He dug up a few news articles about notable events surrounding both the clan and its very brazen patriarch, but that was not enough for him to weigh this development.

"Give me what I need to know about the Larkinson Clan." He commanded.

"Yes, father."

A very quick wireless transmission followed. Novilon Purnesse knew exactly what information his father sought, so he already collected and condensed every relevant piece of data into a succinct and easily-digestible report.

It only took a minute for Shederin Purnesse to absorb all of the information and process the many implications of what he had just received.

"The Larkinsons are certainly... colorful." He mildly stated.

"That's an understatement." Novilon contemptuously scoffed. "They are too young, too brash and too reckless. Their shallow foundation originated from a tiny family from an inconsequential third-rate state. Though I have no doubt that their leader is a talented mech designer, his ability to govern and make wise decisions leaves much to be desired. Yet for some inexplicable reason, all of the other members of his clan are all supportive of his deficient leadership!"

Ambassador Shederin softly chuckled. "The Larkinsons are not ordinary, that is for certain. Perhaps it will help if you view them as a mutated version of a Vicious Mountain clan. The two operate in much of the same manner. Aside from the lesser emphasis on expert pilots, the person at the top is still the greatest authority regardless of whether he actually knows how to run a clan of this scale."

There were many questionable points about the Larkinson Clan. How in the hell did it remain stable and coherent after absorbing over a hundred-thousand people in the span of just a couple of years? How did they keep growing stronger instead of weaker by integrating so much diversity? How did the Larkinsons keep pulling off miracles in battles that were so unfavorable that defeat was the expected outcome?

"The Larkinsons are strong, I will grant them that." Novilon begrudgingly said. "However, their meteoric growth and progression resembles a shuttle helmed by a drunk fool. It can crash into other ships at any moment and I'm not sure if it will be able to dock at its destination without crashing into a space station."

Obviously, Novilon Purnesse took a dim view on the upstart clan. From the perspective of his family, the Larkinsons were like shooting stars. There were many of those in the galaxy, but they never lasted long enough to stand the test of time.

Only stable, long-lasting organizations led by wise and steady figures like his father were worthwhile enough to befriend!

"You need to cut those thoughts out, son."

"Pardon?"

"You are still operating by the old rules. Stop that. Times have changed and our family's situation has changed as well. Perhaps in the past we have ample justification to look

down on this eccentric clan, but we are living in the present now where everything is different. They have strength while we have none. We have diplomats and administrators while they have a lot of vacancies in those positions. Even someone who lacks our training can tell this is a win-win arrangement. Our ship is breaking apart, son. We need rescue from every avenue we can get, and if the shuttle dispatched by the Larkinsons looks shaky, it doesn't matter because it is better than dying in space!"

"The Larkinsons don't actually intend to rescue us, father! They intend to annex us and make the Purnesse Family disappear!" Novilon raised his voice! "They are like pirates stumbling upon a derelict ship. Upon finding us, they want to drag us back into their pirate ship and force us to become one of them! In every single round of negotiation, they have not let up their excessive demands. They intend to swallow us entirely and absorb us into their clan in total!"

The Purnesse Family and its long heritage that stretched back all the way to Old Earth would become history if that happened!

Shederin Purnesse merely shook his head. "We are at the cusp of losing all of our lives. What will happen to our family, do you think? The only difference from what you have said is that no one will remember us when we become history. If we accept the goodwill extended by the Larkinson Clan, we will at least be able to honor and remember who we descended from. In addition, it would be nice not to lead all of our sons and daughters to their deaths."

The Larkinsons were brutes whose minds were filled with martial thoughts. They exhibited a distressing lack of culture and refinement and clashed against the Purnesses in many other ways.

Yet the current situation made it so that the Purnesses had no choice but to take shelter underneath those uncouth mech-obsessed muscleheads!

#### *Chapter 3045: Pre-Battle Planning*

The Larkinson Clan did not immediately look forward to rescuing this unknown Purnesse Family.

Ves and the clan had already stumbled several times when they became involved in great, state-wide affairs.

The clan and its twenty-thousand mech pilots may be incredibly powerful compared to many other private organizations, but it was impossible for its forces to catch up against the military might of entire states!

The Larkinsons only had to make one mistake before they set off the military of an entire state against them! Seeing as how the Purnesses were likely under attack by

forces that might become the next ruling power of the Grand Loxic Republic, the probability that the military might intervene was not zero!

"It will be fine." Ves consoled himself. "The Loxians really don't want to escalate the unrest in their state too much. There are several other rival second-rate states in the Winged Serenade Star Sector that can easily attract a lot of organizations that might get cold feet if they think that the Grand Loxic Republic is no good anymore."

Besides, dispatching a lot of official military units against the Larkinsons might end up in disaster as the latter had already toppled a military strike force in the past!

This time, the effective strength of the Larkinsons and its allies had grown drastically. Any reasonable military strategist who studied all of the information available in public would conclude that not even an entire mech division would be enough to destroy the entire expeditionary fleet!

It was not worth it to dispatch even more forces and suffer guaranteed losses in return for allowing a troublesome family to leave the sphere of influence of the Grand Loxic Republic...

At least, that was what Ves hoped. Who knew if the masterminds behind the attacks on the Purnesse Family were irrational or had other goals. The Larkinsons might not even be able to complete its operation without suffering substantial losses if the opposition was much greater than expected.

"If we had more mechs, we wouldn't be stuck in such an awkward position." He muttered.

The fundamental strategic problem was that the safety of the expeditionary fleet had to be guaranteed at all cost. If the clan dispatched all of the mechs that it could field down to the surface, who would protect all of the immensely valuable and vulnerable ships in orbit?

Any assailant could easily deal crippling damage to the Larkinson Clan by downing lots of sub-capital ships or destroying just a single capital ship!

"Meow." Lucky sagely commented as he clung on Ves' shoulder.

"You're a cat. What do you know about our strategic considerations? Stop thinking about stuff beyond your expertise and worry about the next time you need to use the toilet!"

"Meow!" Lucky hissed.

Ves ignored his cat's displeasure and exited his shuttle now that it had touched down.

The Graveyard was a big ship, and one that possessed a distinctly different architecture and atmosphere than Hexer-built vessels like the Spirit of Bentheim.

The best way for him to describe the overall interior design of the Graveyard was that it was quite basic and industrial. Even though she was a thick and heavily-armored capital ship, her original owners did not spare much thought or attention on increasing her splendor.

Though that made the Graveyard unsuitable as a platform to receive foreign visitors and dignitaries, she possessed a no-nonsense air that ensured that everyone aboard remained focused on their respective tasks.

Right now, there were no opportunities to put much of her salvaging capabilities to use, so the combat side of the Graveyard was the most active at the moment.

An abundance of mech pilots and combat crew were moving about. They were working a little harder than before as they had all received word that they would soon take part in a new combat operation.

The Graveyard wouldn't be descending from orbit, though. Her formidable defenses were essential in defending the fleet and she was too big and massive to survive atmospheric descent anyway.

Ves moved past the hangar bay and navigated to the upper decks on his own. He had downloaded the complete map of the Graveyard and visited the vessel enough times to know his way around. He didn't require any special guidance from the crew either.

"Hello, patriarch."

"Hi, Lucky!"

"Whoa, the boss is here!"

The Larkinsons he came across greeted him with varying degrees of formality. Ves merely nodded to each of them before moving past. He was not obligated to do anything more and he was on business anyway. Gloriana did not allow him to stay out of the design lab for long so he had to make sure he could conclude his upcoming meeting and return before he exhausted his quota.

He eventually entered a spacious strategic planning compartment. Dozens of Larkinsons who specialized in many important areas such as logistics and tactics were already planning and gaming out their upcoming deployment on Trieden II.

It was rare for the Larkinsons to hold the initiative for once. Since they weren't getting ambushed by enemies coming out of the blue, the clan was determined to make extensive preparations!

"Over here, sir." Commander Melkor Larkinson waved from the other side of the giant projected battle map in the middle of the compartment. "You came just at the right time. We have just settled most of the details."

Ves approached his cousin while Lucky jumped from his shoulder and explored another area of the compartment. He carefully looked over at the projection which seemed to show the entire globe of Trieden II.

He could see the entire expeditionary fleet maintaining orbit while staying as far away from other artificial satellites over the paradise planet. Since Trieden II did not attract a lot of business, it only had some commercial space stations and some other inconsequential assets above its skies.

The threat posed by these civilian-oriented assets was minimal, but that didn't mean the Larkinsons could afford to get complacent.

A brief animation played. It displayed a score of combat carriers separating from the main fleet before descending to the surface. Their entry was rather hot as the ships all had to reach the Violet Estates as quickly as possible in order to prevent the black mechs from launching a preemptive attack on the Purnesse Family.

When the combat carriers came close enough, a substantial swarm of mechs emerged from the hangar bays. Their markings made it clear that 75 percent of them consisted of Avatar mechs while the remainder belonged to the Flagrant Vandals.

The latter all began to split up and fan out over a wide area. The light mass and swift speeds of the Ferocious Piranhas allowed them to cover a lot of distance. This was very useful as the mechs were very suited to act as scouts and monitors. Their sensors had even been modified to increase their ability to scan for large objects beneath the surface of Trieden II's oceans.

However, the Avatars unquestionably played the main role. They were the ones to approach the Violet Estates. They were the ones who escorted the evacuating family members back to the combat carriers of the Larkinson Clan. They were the ones who flew alongside those same combat carriers until they reached a high enough altitude to eliminate most opportunities to intercept the escaping Purnesses.

"Looks like you have everything well in hand." Ves commented.

"Don't be fooled by this display, Ves. This is just the ideal scenario. There is a substantial possibility that the black mechs will not let the Purnessers leave just like that. Even if the hidden force lurking in the depths of Trieden II cannot contend against our entire expeditionary fleet, they still have a chance of killing lots of Purnessers during a chaotic evacuation."



The prestige and reputation of the Larkinson Clan was at stake in this operation. Failing or botching the rescue operation would not only affect the attitude of the rescued people towards the clan, but also affect the public's perception of the clan's combat prowess!

Therefore, a lot was riding on Melkor's shoulder. He assumed the main responsibility of keeping as many Purnessers alive as possible!

"What is your greatest worry?" Ves softly asked.

Melkor pressed his lips. "I have many worries. What if there are ten times as many black mechs than we anticipated? What if there is a second or third force lurking in the vicinity? What if the Purnessers get eliminated before we even arrive? I have to think about so many scenarios that I can't single out any of them. They are all bad in their own way."

"Will you be able to cope?"

"Oh, certainly. I trust you, Ves, so I am not afraid to voice what I am really feeling. I'd be lying if I told you that I am not concerned."

"If that is the case, why not bolster your rescue force? We still have plenty of enthusiastic Larkinson mech pilots who are jumping to take part in the rescue operation."

"No. I've already discussed all of the reasons. The Avatars really need a moment to prove their worth. They need to burnish their credentials as elites by completing their mission and defeating any opposition in the most effective manner possible. Bringing along the Flagrant Vandals is already the limit that I can bear."

Ves turned to Melkor with a frown. "I recently heard that you have rejected the support of our expert pilots. Are you sure about that? Just one of them in their prime mechs can still serve as a powerful backstop."

The air between the two trueblood Larkinsons grew a little tense.

"I have not made this decision on an impulse. Even though this will likely lead to greater casualties among my men, it is necessary for them to learn how to stand up for themselves. This is one of the few operations that I can afford to apply additional pressure on my Avatars without getting bothered by the additional losses."

Ves didn't want to give up, though. "While I am sure that those are good reasons, it makes me feel ill at ease if you don't have any immediate backup within reach. It takes too long for one of our prime mechs to reach the Violet Estates from orbit."

"So what?"

"At least allow the Bright Beam Prime to ride on one of the combat carriers on reserve. Venerable Davia Stark can instantly intervene from afar if anything goes seriously wrong."

Melkor frowned. He felt that bringing in a prime mech as a reserve would serve as a safety blanket for his men. He didn't want them to pray for rescue from Venerable Stark when they should have sought to get out of trouble themselves!

However, he knew that Ves was making too much sense for him to deny the request.

"I will allow it. She should not take action unless we risk getting overturned, though. There is no need for her to go into action to rescue individual Avatars."

"That's understandable. I think General Verle will be quite happy with your assent."

The current Bright Beam Prime was not exactly like the old one. When Ves developed the enhanced version of luminar crystals, he had already squeezed enough time to fabricate some mech-grade batches before integrating them into the rifle of the prime rifleman mech.

If it ever had to go into action, the ranged mech would be able to catch many enemies by surprise!

After they decided on this topic, Melkor asked one more question.

"You didn't take the trouble to come all the way over to the Graveyard to ask me if I would be okay with bringing a prime mech. You wanted to ask me something else, is that correct?"

"You guessed correctly." Ves raised his eyebrow. "To be honest, I wanted to do something for you before you enter the field in person."

"Oh?"

"I don't have time to design a custom mech that is exclusively tailored for you, but would you be willing to participate in a little experiment of mine? I think it will be quite helpful in making you stronger!"

Melkor looked oddly at Ves. "Why would I possibly say yes?"

"..."

## *Chapter 3046 - Humility*

The Avatars of Myth may have faded from prominence in the Larkinson Clan, but they were not out. As the original elites of the Larkinson Clan, the Avatars all had pride carved into their bones.

Sure, the Penitent Sisters fought like banshees, but were they fighting on behalf of the Superior Mother or her son?

The Swordmaidens, at least the original ones, truly sacrificed much for the Larkinson Clan, but the strong-willed women were only willing to pilot a very limited section of mech types.

Right now, the prestige of these two female-dominated mech troops far surpassed that of the Avatars of Myth, but Commander Melkor intended to change that. He knew that the competition was ferocious, but as a Larkinson, how could he back down from a challenge?

He did not put his all into this goal just to prove he wasn't a failure of a commander. It was more than that. As a Larkinson, he felt duty-bound to propel a mech force that best represented the Larkinsons in their totality as their premier elite soldiers!

Perhaps the greatest criticism directed towards the Avatars of Myth was their lack of defining characteristics. Everyone immediately knew what the Penitent Sisters and the Swordmaidens were like, but no one was quite able to identify any common labels to the Avatars of Myth other than that they were elite and made up of Larkinsons.

This was quite bad and Melkor had thought long and hard about this problem.. He did not wish to rashly define an identity to his men for fear that it would box them into a corner.

He eventually constructed a grand if tentative vision for the mech force he led. In his greatest ambition, the Avatars of Myth distinguished themselves from the other Larkinson mech pilots by living up to their name!

Of course, defining what this meant and turning it into reality was incredibly hard. This was Melkor's driving mission, and he knew that he would need several decades in order to fulfill his dreams and complete an accomplishment that would allow him to be remembered.

What complicated this outlook was that there was no guarantee that Melkor would remain as the head of a force that had already surpassed the size and strength of an entire military mech regiment!

In the Mech Corps and other professional military branches, the people who were qualified to lead such huge and powerful units were senior officers with the rank of colonel or similar.

These leaders had worked hard to stand out from the officer class. They rose up the ranks through merit and expanded their competences through both academic study and learning from experience.

Only the best — or the most politically connected — were able to climb over the heads of countless other officers and gain the power and authority to affect the future of an entire state!

When Melkor thought about the power he wielded, he felt unworthy of the huge amount of responsibility thrust on his shoulders.

He didn't deserve his current position. He knew that very well. He originally started off as a drop-out from the Mech Corps. Perhaps his original Larkinson heritage allowed him to command a couple of dozen or even a few hundred Avatar mech pilots without too many issues, but the current mech force was incomparably greater nowadays.

A mech regiment did not just center around its mech pilots. There was a vast hierarchy of combat and non-combat personnel under his command. Numerous officers took charge of essential and highly-technical matters such as ship command, mech maintenance, supply management, pilot support services, finances and many other matters.

Did Melkor have the experience, knowledge and competence to lead all of these departments? Nope!

Even though he had done his best to study in his free time and build up the vast quantity of knowledge required to lead such a huge and powerful military organization, he was not particularly talented in leadership and management.

He was just a mech pilot.

If he didn't join the Larkinson Clan at the beginning and witnessed its meteoric growth in size and scope, he would have just been serving as a regular mech pilot for a security company or something!

This was why he always approached his increasingly more important responsibilities with humility. He distinctly recognized that he wasn't the best at anything. This prompted him to copy Ves' approach and find capable officers who could do the jobs he could not with skill and confidence.

So far, it was working. The Avatars of Myth remained stable and there were few problems that were truly concerning. Everything was running fine, but that was not enough.

Any decent leader could offer stability. A great leader accomplished more. The Avatars may function well enough to contribute to the strength of the clan, but they failed to live up to their promise!

As long as this was the case, Melkor would continue to look for more solutions. There had to be a way for the Avatars to distinguish themselves and adopt a fighting method that was wholly theirs!

The upcoming battle was not only meant to bloody the Avatars and ignite their fighting spirit, but also served as a trial where they could test some of the new ideas that Melkor had painstakingly worked upon.

His mind was almost completely occupied by the surprises he had in store.

He did not expect to consider a brand-new variable in the form of an offer from Ves!

"As much as I respect your accomplishments, you do not have a good reputation when it comes to your experiments." He slowly responded to his powerful cousin.

Ves looked taken aback at Melkor's skepticism. "People talk about my experiments? That's impossible! Much of what I do is confidential!"

"We Larkinsons aren't blind, you know. A few clever clansmen can roughly guess what goes in and what goes out of those labs of yours. I don't know if any of these ridiculous-sounding rumors have any merit, but what I do know is that you have shown fewer and fewer scruples over the years. You're the guy who would gladly push the button to nuke an entire planet if you can accomplish your goal!"

If every problem could be solved by pushing buttons, then Ves would gladly press them as many times as needed! He was tired of dealing with intractable issues all the time.

"Look, I'm not trying out something completely new and unknown here, Melkor. I have come up with various ways to strengthen people and I would just like to give you a gift in return for all of the hard work you have done over the years."

The Avatar Commander shook his head. "I don't deserve any gifts. At least wait until I have completed this mission and come back from Treden II before offering me any rewards."

"That.. is kind of late. The reason why I came here is because I want to improve your odds of success."

"I don't need the help. Look, I have personal as well as professional reasons to reject your offer. You know what I think about my current position. I have to prove I am still the right person for the job. I need to prove my own worth without cheating or taking the easy way out. In addition, any changes I experience might affect my performance or distract me from the overall situation in the field. I can ill afford to deal with new variables when I already need to keep track of so many existing ones."

All of the arguments that Melkor presented sounded logical, but Ves had a feeling that his cousin was afraid of what would happen if he said yes.

To be sure, his fears weren't unfounded, but Ves felt upset that he was being blocked.

He looked steadily at Melkor. The Avatar Commander calmly made his stance clear and continued to stand his ground without any sign of flinching.

Ves could have pushed harder if need be. He was the Devil Tongue for a reason.

Yet... Melkor was more than just an average Larkinson. He was a blood relative and a supportive helper who had always backed Ves up. The least he could do was to reciprocate the respect he received.

"Fine.." Ves replied in a glum tone. "Have it your way. We'll talk more about this after we have concluded the upcoming operation."

They eventually returned to the main topics at hand. They discussed how to configure the Bright Warriors taking part in the operation and how to respond against varying levels of resistance.

"There is a possibility that most of our preparations might go in vain." Melkor mildly remarked. "While the Grand Loxic Republic is quite large and very powerful, most of their military assets are concentrated elsewhere. The Trieden System simply isn't strategic or valuable enough to merit a lot of attention. Whatever black mechs are lurking underwater might only amount to a handful of mech companies or something. There isn't really any need for more to inflict a slow and gradual death upon the Purnesse Family."

Melkor had a good point. Human space turned into a much more dangerous place after the Crown Uprising began. Mechs and mech pilots became the prime guarantees of safety. Many powers tried their best to gather as many of them as possible in order to ensure their own survival in these trying times.

Who would be stupid enough to dispatch many hundreds if not thousands of mechs to conduct a very slow and sluggish extermination campaign? The Purnesse Family may have been influential once, but according to the latest intelligence, their prestige and importance had fallen off a cliff. The Purnesses wouldn't be able to do anything meaningful for a long time.

Ves shrugged. "If we don't get the fight we expect, then just treat this excursion as a light exercise. We should show off some of our might in order to make others take us seriously. The further we travel from the Komodo Star Sector, the less our reputation is able to impress the locals. The news just doesn't radiate well across further distances."

It couldn't be helped as the galaxy was too big. There were so many different celebrities and famous organizations in every star sector that the residents all tended to favor local powers.

After all, compared to a strange and foreign clan like the Larkinsons, a local organization exerted a lot more influence on their daily lives!

The Avatars of Myth didn't just have to complete the mission perfectly. They also had to look good while doing so. Image mattered and the Larkinson Clan still had a lot of work to do in order to establish their credentials as powerful warriors who should never be provoked.

"I kind of miss one of the quirks you used to add to your mechs."

"Hmm?"

"Do you remember the festive cloud generator you often integrated in your mechs? You imparted all kinds of cool effects to your early mechs with the help of the colorful mist it generates."

Ves briefly cast his mind back to the past. "Ah. I forgot about that myself. I know what you mean, but I've matured since then. My mechs don't need to work so hard anymore in order to attract attention. The modern signature look I've established is a much more elegant and less obtrusive way to brand my mechs."

"You mean the third eye that is always surrounded by a hexagon for some reason?"

"That last part is Gloriana's signature, not mine."

"You know that's kind of disturbing, right? Some of my men complain that everytime they deploy into the field, they feel like they are parading around while wearing a Hexer brandmark. I thought we were supposed to be a part of the Larkinson Clan instead of the Hexadric Hegemony."

"It's just a small design element. There is no underlying message behind this visual element." Ves insisted. "You should stop worrying about irrelevant matters and focus on the matter at hand. According to our current schedule, we should be arriving in Treden II in a couple of stops. If you need to make any further preparations, you need to get everything done quickly because we'll be going into a fight quite soon."

Ves looked forward to seeing his men in action again. It always gave him a rush of power to see his subordinates piloting his own mechs in a serious operation.

Hopefully, the black mechs that they would likely be fighting against wouldn't get scared off too quickly! His thirst for blood needed to be sated!

*Chapter 3047 - Treatment Editions*

"So we're actually doing this?" Gavin Neumann skeptically asked.

"Yes, we're actually doing this." Ves affirmed with a grin as he looked up at the results of his latest completed side project. "While most of our clan has been investing its energy on growing and expanding its combat capabilities, I have not forgotten about our commercial activities. The sales of my mechs continue to support our growing ambitions, but with the way our expansion is progressing, our income is gradually unable to keep up with our expenditures."

There were many mech pilots waiting to receive their own mechs. While Ves intended to limit this expansion because he did not want to add more useless sub-capital ships to the already-bloated expeditionary fleet, there were plenty of combat carriers that had yet to fill up their capacity.

The mech models that the Larkinson Clan adopted were all premium second-class mechs.

Suffice to say, they weren't cheap!

For example, the two main mech models that the Larkinsons intended to deploy on Treden II were the Bright Warrior IB, which cost around 500 million hex credits per copy, and the Ferocious Piranha IB, which cost around 400 million hex credits per copy.

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The Living Mech Corporation had to sell several hundred if not a thousand third-class mechs to fund the production of those expensive second-class mechs!

With over 20,000 mech pilots and counting, the Larkinson Clan had to spend an enormous sum of money in order to equip them all. This did not even take into account the more expensive specialized models such as the Eternal Redemption which cost a whopping 800 million hex credits per copy!

This was not the only major economic pressure that the clan had to cope with. Maintaining and supplying hundreds of ships, including several enormous capital ships the size of cities had become even more burdensome now that the Larkinsons had to feed the hungry Graveyard and the Dragon's Den.



Of course, with several empty capital ship slots, the Larkinsons were obliged to invest trillions of credits in acquiring new capital ships! Whether the Larkinsons ordered the construction of brand-new vessels or spent their money in the second-hand market, ships this size that were still space worthy were never cheap!

The surprisingly huge influx of personnel and assets from the Life Research Association and the Heavensword Association didn't help either. While Ves was very glad to see the clan double in size and strength in one go, such an explosive expansion also entailed and explosive growth in expenditures!

Even if Ves rarely checked up on the business side of the clan these days, he was well aware that the growth of the LMC had reached a plateau.

Aside from saturating the market with living mechs, the main cause of this was that the company had set up too many branches in too many star sectors as of late. Not enough time had passed for the LMC's local branches to develop a strong identity and sense of loyalty to the parent company. A lot more time had to pass before the dust settled down.

"I can't deny these mechs are effective, Ves, but..." Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson looked dubiously at the two latest products that the LMC was supposed to bring to market. "These are very different products from the ones we sold before."

Ves and a small group of influential Larkinsons had all gathered at one of the large storage compartments of the Spirit of Bentheim. They did so in order to view the two new mech models that were supposed to insert some vitality in the stagnant LMC and direct a lot of much-needed cash back into the clan coffers!

"It's strange to look at a mech designed by you that isn't designed to fight." Gavin commented. "This is a deviation from your usual style, do you know that? Previously, you were all serious and principled about sticking to the primary intent of mechs, which is to make war machines that are explicitly designed to fight."

What could Ves say to that? He merely shrugged. "Times have changed, Benny. Our circumstances have changed as well. Our clan has grown too quickly and we need more funding immediately. Rather than waiting for at least two entire design cycles to come up with a commercial mech design with high earning potential, it's easier and more convenient to design some variants of one of my existing designs."

"About that, boss, I still think you could have settled with publishing the original Sanctuary design. Our various departments have already prepared for an eventual launch and mass production of the new Sanctuary. While you initially designed it to counter glows, it performs the same functions as one of the variants here."

"You're not looking at this the right way. My original Sanctuary design is purely designed for combat. Whatever non-combat purpose it might be able to fulfill is secondary. That is

not suitable for our current situation since the latter has become a lot more important than the former to the mech market."

As a mech designer, Ves couldn't stand his products being used outside of his original intention. A specific need should always be fulfilled by a product meant to address it whenever possible!

"I think the patriarch has made the right choices with regards to these new variants." Raymond waved his hand at the pure and holy white-coated variant and the warm and welcoming green-coated variant. "These Sanctuary variants are more long-lasting and more marketable to non-combat organizations. The latter is quite important as many hospitals and medical groups won't even consider the possibility of purchasing a war machine."

Repackaging the war-purposed Sanctuary into two 'peaceful' variants was mainly meant to encourage the market to treat them differently.

The ultimate goal of going through this trouble was quite ambitious.

Gavin finally couldn't hold it any longer. "Boss."

"Yes, Benny?" Ves curiously turned to his assistant.

"No offense, but I am growing more and more uncomfortable with the pricing strategy of these new Sanctuaries. There's a difference between earning honest pay and shameless profiteering. I know I sounded a bit more supportive in our previous meetings, but now that I look at them, I feel like we are crossing a very big ethical boundary. I won't deny the utility of its different glows, but..."

Ves looked annoyed. "I have already compromised on this issue twice. I originally planned to charge 200 million hex credits for a copy of one of these variants, but you guys managed to convince me to pare it down to 100 million hex credits. When that also proved to be too controversial, I agreed to lower it to 50 million hex credits. What do you want now that I have made these concessions? Do you want to lower the price to 25 million hex credits? Our clansmen will soon begin to starve if we sell our mechs that cheap!"

Both Gavin and Raymond looked at Ves with dubious expressions.

25 million hex credits might not sound like much for a second-class mech, but the problem was that the new treatment editions of the Sanctuary product line cost a total of 3 million hex credits to produce!

This was actually a million hex credits more expensive than the base model. Ves had generously allocated extra money to incorporate more durable components, more long-lasting systems and additional cosmetic finishes.

What was important to note was that the so-called treatment edition mechs were still fully combat capable! Though they were too weak and fragile to take part in second-class mech battles, there shouldn't be too many problems for them to participate in third-class battles!

The main complication was that Ves had to limit their glows for safety reasons.

"Have you tested whether the five-minute interval is both practical and safe enough to make these Sanctuary variants usable?"

The five-minute interval referred to the times when the glows of all of the treatment editions were active. In order to prevent the glows from being misused or generating too much addiction, Ves artificially limited the time they remained active.

The rule was very simple. The glows stayed online five standard minutes before switching off for five standard minutes. After that, it switched back on for the same period of time.

Though Ves had initially experimented with more complicated timings, he felt it was simpler and more user-friendly for everyone if he stuck to a single, consistent time interval.

"Tests conducted with the prototypes show no major issues." Raymond steadily responded. "It's not really a comfortable middle-ground, though. Any shorter and no one ever enjoys the glow long enough to feel satisfied. Any longer, and the delays grow too annoying. Five minutes is just barely satisfying and the rest interval is short enough that people can still grow addicted if they insist on staying within range."

The COO of the LMC directed a lot of attention to this matter. Risk assessment conducted by the company showed that there was great potential that these new treatment editions could spark a lot of controversy that could muddy the brand reputation of the company.

What was even more dangerous was that the new Sanctuaries could even make Ves and the LMC liable to any serious injuries or other forms of damage that the new glows could cause!

Even though the glows of the so-called Tranquility and Healing variants were purely meant to be benign, everything turned into poison once they exceeded specific limits.

This was a very new and untested business direction for the LMC. While the Larkinsons possessed extensive knowledge and expertise on mechs, entering the alternative treatment industry was like stepping onto a new continent!

The small group of Larkinsons test drove the new glows. They spent five minutes under the influence of the Tranquility variant before waiting five minutes so that they could briefly enjoy the Healing variant.

"Ahhh.." The oldest among them sighed in relief. "That feels good. It's like I've reversed my age by a few decades."

Ves snorted. "You aren't that old by today's standards. You might belong to the same generation as my grandfather, but you have access to a lot of new treatments now that we took on a lot of clever Lifers. Not even age-prolonging treatment is out of your reach nowadays."

Raymond sighed. "I am quite aware of that."

"You sound hesitant."

"I am not. My grandson will be happy to see me around a few more decades longer, that is for sure. It's just... unnatural. Do you know how much time I have spent on contemplating my own mortality? I have lived through a nearly-complete life cycle. I have outlived many Larkinsons who are much more deserving than me but died on the battlefield or all kinds of other causes. I have passed on my bloodline and even see one of my greatest grandsons become a hero. I would not feel sorry if I hung up my cap and went to sleep forever."

Ves narrowed his eyes at Raymond. Did his brief session with the Tranquility and Healing put the elder Larkinson into a suicidal mood or something? He did not want Raymond to go too soon! Even if the old man was no longer the best choice to effectively lead the LMC, he was still a familiar relative who was worthy of trust.

"Don't retire too soon. There is still much more work to be done. For example, is our company ready to bring these new variants to market within the month?"

Raymond slowly nodded. "It will be tight. We have a large number of branches in multiple different star sectors. Every local market and every different locale has different customs and laws, so I cannot guarantee that the Sanctuary variants will be available everywhere we can reach. We might need a couple more months to introduce them to the more difficult and less accessible markets."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "That's not a big problem. Right now, we need to prioritize earning money quickly. I don't want this to be a problem until we have successfully reached the Red Ocean. Have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal, sir."

*Chapter 3048: Future Business Concerns*

Ves officially published the Treatment Editions of his unavailable Sanctuary mech design.

Both new variants immediately sparked controversy among market watchers due to the insane prices the LMC listed for the new mech models.

A lot of people thought that the Living Mech Corporation had gone mad after trying to sell its new third-class mech models at second-class rates!

Everyone with a passing familiarity of mechs could figure out that the product margins of the Tranquility and Healing variants were insanely high.

Third-class clients thought that the new mechs were way too expensive for what they claimed to accomplish.

Second-class clients were not pleased at all to find out that the Sanctuary was completely incapable of withstanding the pressure of second-class mech combat.

Since no one liked the thought of getting scammed, initial sales of the odd new mechs were abysmally low!

Ves didn't feel concerned, though. The LMC's reputation had grown more than enough to cultivate a group of diehards who would always try out a new product regardless of its qualities.

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"The Living Star Club is having quite a lot of success in marketing these Sanctuary variants." Calsie Doornbos reported to Ves during a morning briefing. "Though not many of our members have a need for the benefits offered by the two variants, they are still willing to acquire the mechs for reasons other than necessity."

"Well, as long as our fans are enthused about our new products, they can help drive up the hype."

The Living Star Club was an important tool to promote the new and odd mech models. Just like the LMC, Ves hadn't paid attention to the growing club. He initially set it up just to prevent him from paying greater compensation. Yet now that it brought together hundreds of thousands of very loyal customers, it had taken on a life of its own!

"How is the club doing in general? Do you have any concerns about the future?"

"It's doing well enough, but it will be a lot harder to keep up the enthusiasm once we leave this star cluster or the entire galaxy for that matter. Once you travel away far

enough, there will be fewer and fewer people who will be able to remember that the LMC is native to the Yeina Star Cluster. Eventually there will be more people who think of the LMC as a foreign company rather than one that is native to the region."

"It's fine." Ves did not look concerned. "These matters are trivial compared to the value my mechs can bring. That won't change no matter how far I travel from this star cluster. The mainstream mechs sold by giant trans-galactic mech companies are popular here as well despite the fact that their headquarters are situated all the way in the galactic center. What matters is that my mechs continue to get used and that we keep earning money from doing so. Just do your best to convert our customers into loyal fans."

"We'll do our best, though I think we need to consider how to break into the Red Ocean's mech market instead."

"Hm?"

"What is your business strategy for the Red Ocean?" Calsie asked.

"Uhh... I haven't thought that far yet. I know that others in my company have already viewed this issue from different angles, but the situation over at the dwarf galaxy is still in flux. Who knows if the plans we make today are still relevant in a year."

"Even if that is the case, we should still settle on an overall approach. For example, will you continue to service the third-class mech market once you reach the Red Ocean?"

Ves leaned back on his chair and thought about his answer. Lucky didn't help much as he floated down to his shoulder and patted his ears for some reason.

"Meow."

"You're only saying that because you want us to buy more expensive food."

"Meow meow."

"Yes, yes, I know!"

"Uhm, what is Lucky talking about?" Calsie asked.

"He thinks it's time for me to sell my mechs to the second-class mech market. I'm very hesitant about that. I think I explained the reason for that during an earlier meeting."

"You told us that you wanted to avoid encroaching on the interests of other, more powerful mech designers and mech companies."

Ves nodded. "Those reasons will still remain valid when we reach the Red Ocean. In fact, they will become even more relevant. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because competitors in the Yeina Star Cluster must show a lot of restraint when they plan to do something for us, but business rivals in the Red Ocean can just seek us out and destroy us outright! Do you think it is possible for a bunch of pissed-off mech companies to band together and track us down in order to eliminate us entirely?"

"That sounds far-fetched, sir. I think we just have to make enough precautions to avoid getting cornered."

"You can't hide a fleet as big as ours. I would still like to be able to travel freely in the Red Ocean without needing to look over my shoulder all the time."

"We could earn vastly more money if we enter the second-class market. We'll be able to use the proceeds to rapidly increase our strength to the point where the scenarios you have painted become infeasible."

"We would have to grow huge for that to come to pass." Ves skeptically answered. "If we had a million clan members, then maybe you're right, but we simply can't grow that fast without losing control. Look, it's not that I am opposed to earning more money, but we have to guarantee our safety first before we have the capital to give in to our greed. Our strength must always be proportional to our earnings in order to avoid attracting retaliation from any rivals. This is a lesson that I have deeply carved in my bones."

"Then what do you intend to do instead? I'm not sure we will be able to fuel all of our ambitions if we sustain ourselves solely with third-class mech sales." She said. "The biggest issue is that the Red Ocean's mech market is still very rudimentary and fragmented. It won't be so easy to establish a lot of branches that can serve as reliable sales channels."

The Red Ocean was still a frontier in many senses. The Larkinsons would have to get used to operating in a region of space where they couldn't buy and sell the goods as easily as before.

Ves had a tentative plan for that, though.

"I have long been considering the idea of relying on direct sales to pay the bills." He waved across the entire compartment. "We acquired the Spirit of Bentheim for a reason, Calsie. Our factory ship can pump out a steady amount of mechs a month and probably more if we upgrade her production lines with higher-tech versions once we reach the Red Ocean. That will allow us to sell substantial batches of high-end mechs to private clients. I am sure that we can convince enough people to embrace our living mechs."

He didn't need to state that he would be inserting many safeguards into the living mechs sold to others. He didn't want his clients to turn around and use the mechs he designed against the Larkinson Clan!

Ves thought quite highly of this strategy, but Calsie did not seem in favor.

"I know something about different mech markets ever since I have become the director of the Living Star Club. I believe there is a limit to how many overpriced mechs you can sell by going from customer to customer like an ancient door-to-door salesman."

"Then what would you have us do instead?"

"I think you should really consider taking a plunge." She recommended. "If you are so worried about getting attacked or something, then try and find a backer. There are large trading alliances and other cooperatives that are meant to address these concerns. In fact, our Golden Skull Alliance could grow into such a cooperative union as well if you add in more mech companies."

"I don't trust easily, Calsie. We have a history of getting betrayed. I don't want us to depend on others to remain safe. One of the major reasons why we have unshackled ourselves from any state is because we don't want to dance to the tune of others!"

Ves was being very intractable towards one of his earliest employees. Calsie's persistent loyalty and contributions from the early days was the only reason why he was willing to be patient enough to explain his arguments.

Calsie wasn't satisfied with that. She was convinced that the Living Mech Corporation and the Larkinson Clan could do much more if it adopted a bolder business strategy!

The problem was that she wasn't clever enough to find a solution to the various issues that Ves had posed. All she could hope for was to wait until the Larkinsons rescued and integrated the Purnesse Family.

From what she heard, the Purnesses were good at making deals, including business deals. Perhaps the business-minded people of the family would be able to present much more tolerable choices to a stubborn leader like Ves.

The two eventually concluded their briefing. Calsie left his office while Ves shook his head before preparing to head to the design lab.

Before he was ready to complete another intensive but fulfilling design session, he briefly paused and allowed Blinky to appear from his mind.

Mrow!

The purple cat swished his black-tipped tail with great enthusiasm now that he got out again. His star-streaked purple fur rippled as Ves grabbed his latest cat and brought their faces closer together.

Mrow?



"I'm not going to kiss you. That would be like kissing myself! Yuck!"

Blinky didn't seem very comfortable at the moment, which was strange since the companion spirit was essentially another part of Ves.

"You've been growing and getting accustomed to your new form for a while. Have you made any substantial progress in figuring out how to control the Worclaw crystal that you've absorbed."

Mrow...

That did not sound like a confident answer. "Can you show anything to me that won't lead to injuries or anything?"

"Mrow!"

Blinky squirmed from his grasp and floated higher in the air. The spiritual cat adopted a pensive expression as he tried to channel something.

Ves patiently waited as a dozen seconds passed by. Soon enough, the miniaturized Worclaw crystal that was stuck on Blinky's forehead began to glow in a dazzling fashion.

The high-level energy cycle inside Ves' chest began to fluctuate, causing him to grow a little nervous.

"What are you doing?"

Blinky was concentrating too much at the moment. Fortunately, the energy cycle still remained under control. What the companion spirit did was not that drastic.

As the forehead-embedded crystal became brighter, Blinky was eventually ready to channel his newly-invented move.

Mrow!

Boom!

A loud and violet thud echoed in his office. Ves immediately dove behind his desk as his past trauma reminded him of an attack.

"Get down, sir!" Nitaa yelled as she and a handful of bodyguards standing quietly by the sides immediately moved forward in order to cover their charge.

"It's okay! Calm down! I'm not under attack!"

Though Ves was incredibly surprised at what had happened, he knew that he wasn't the target.

Ves carefully peeked his head over the desktop and looked at a distinctly cat-sized hole in the bulkhead.

It was as if someone fired a railgun that was aimed straight at the side of his personal office.

"This attack..." Nita looked astonished as she put down her heavy assault rifle. "It... it looks strong enough to pierce through a mech!"

Mrow...

The living projectile responsible for damaging his office slowly flew out of the hole. The cat looked a lot dimmer than before. The crystal on his forehead looked faded and the star trails running through his body had also dimmed to an extent.

Evidently, this primitive but destructive attack took a lot out of the companion spirit.

"Good job, Blinky."

#### *Chapter 3049: New Field of Study*

Ever since Ves created Blinky, he developed a hope that he would finally have a way to utilize and solve the hidden dangers of the high-energy energy cycle in his chest.

Though it initially sounded amazing to possess a special organ that was capable of producing the same type of energy as one of the most powerful sentient species in the galaxy, the problem was that Ves was still a human by nature.

Not only that, he was also a mech designer, not a gun-toting warrior!

Therefore, the Worclaw energy running through his body posed a serious long-term threat to his health. Who knew what kind of sick and crazy ideas Dr. Jutland had in mind when he developed his crazy organ.

With the man's death, Ves was forced to explore his unnatural capabilities on his own. This was difficult because Dr. Jutland's inventions were so far beyond conventional biotech science that most doctors simply didn't know what to do with them. The main organ that had somehow taken over his heart was such a giant puzzle that the LRA could probably spent centuries trying to figure out its depths!

This was why he was glad that Blinky and his Worclaw crystal was able to interact with the energy cycle in some way. As long as there was a solution, it didn't matter if his

companion spirit had to start from scratch... He was grateful that he was finally starting to move forward on this issue.

"I didn't think I would crash head-first into a bulkhead, though." Ves muttered as his guards slowly relaxed.

Ves stepped closer and studied Blinky's exhausted form. When he tried to sense what his spiritual cat had gone through, he only got a confusing mess of unexplainable thoughts and emotions. Whatever his cat did was largely instinctual and devoid of systematic methods.

In other words, Blinky had just blindly channeled the Worclaw crystal in some way and let nature take its course!

The result of this stupid and reckless approach was apparent. If Ves was the one who became the vessel to all of that expended energy, then maybe his body would have smacked against the side of his personal office compartment!

Unlike Blinky whose body was entirely spiritual and therefore not subject to inertia, Ves suspected that he would not be able to make a clean person-sized hole through the solid metal barriers!

It depended on what exactly happened when Blinky turned into a cat-sized projectile. Due to Blinky's spiritual form, his body should have phased through the bulkhead without damaging anything material.

However, as Ves tentatively brushed his fingers alongside the torn metal, Blinky had somehow been able to affect physical matter.

It was unlikely that spiritual energy could accomplish such a drastic result. Worclaw energy was the second energy type that Blinky was able to harness, so this was the only answer that made sense.

Ves knew he had made a major discovery.

Spiritual energy was good at affecting the immaterial, but not that great at affecting physical reality. While he had witnessed a lot of powerful spiritual entities do so anyway, he was nothing like his mother or a dark god.

Worclaw energy therefore provided him with a possible answer on how he could affect the material realm without relying on any external sources.

"It's just..."

Ves sighed. This was yet another useless ability. He did not need to possess the capability to pierce through mech armor by using his own companion spirit as a projectile.

If he wanted to shoot something down, he could always rely on his trusty Amastendirra.

Since Ves had disavowed himself from getting embroiled in the middle of dangerous crises, there was no way that he would ever be in a position where he would send out Blinky in this fashion. He had an army of bodyguards and tens of thousands of mech pilots between him and any enemies that wished to do him harm!

"Good job, Blinky." Ves smiled and stroked his purple cat's head. "You can go back and rest now."

Mrow...

When the companion spirit returned to his home and fell into slumber, Ves spent a brief moment of time analyzing the brief event. He pulled up the security footage and any relevant sensor readings and calculated the attack power based on the physical damage dealt to the bulkhead.

Though the interior of the Spirit of Bentheim was not made to be as tough as actual mech armor plating, certain sections enjoyed more protection than others. The bridge and engineering bays were good examples. Their importance was so critical to the functioning of the ship that it was worth it to splurge a lot of money on wrapping them up with thick and strong protection!

Ves knew for a fact that the grand staterooms were also luxuriously protected. In fact, after he and Gloriana claimed one of themselves, the crew had quietly bolstered its defenses and made sure that anyone who wanted to attack the clan patriarch in his moment of weakness would have a very hard time getting through all of the layers!

"And now, a single cat nearly managed to burst through all of that in an instant!"

"Meow."

"Oh, I haven't forgotten about you as well, Lucky. No barrier can stop you from going through."

"Meow!" The gem cat arrogantly lifted his head.

In truth, Lucky had a harder time going through energy barriers than physical matter. If every point of entry was surrounded by active energy shields, then Lucky might not be able to go through depending on the energy levels!

Ves wondered if Blinky also suffered a weakness against energy shields. He suspected this might not be the case considering the very clear evidence.

"I should get someone to fix this hole."

In the end, Ves dismissed this brief attempt as a preview into the usage of Worclaw energy. From all of the amazing stories that humanity had documented about the mighty Alshyr race, he knew for certain that there were a lot more sophisticated ways to channel this potent energy type!

It was similar to how he started off with spiritual engineering. He started off with the X-Factor. Then he moved on to creating rudimentary design spirits. Now he had blossomed to making highly impactful spiritual constructs spiritual networks!

The only factor that made him feel a bit depressed was that he was at the starting line when it came to exploiting Worclaw energy. It would probably take years or decades for him, or rather Blinky, to develop any useful applications.

Fortunately, Ves himself did not need to spend much time and effort on this matter. Blinky could figure most of it out himself. Even if his companion spirit mainly had to resort to trial and error and using himself as his test subject, all of this would eventually bear fruit!

Once he wrapped up his brief analysis, he left his office and went down to the design lab. Though Gloriana looked upset that Ves was slightly tardy again, she soon went back to business.

"Out of the six expert mech design projects that we are working on, we agreed we would prioritize the Disruptor Project first. It's the smallest expert mech and its compact dimensions means that it takes less work to complete it. I've just finalized the final draft for its design after Master Willix got back to me with her proposal on how to integrate the resonating exotics into the expert mech."

"Oh? Let me take a look."

Ves had observed expert mechs before. He even had the opportunity to study partial or complete ones as well. His gains were limited, though. While he was able to figure out the more conventional design aspects of these powerful machines, the ones related to resonating materials and other abnormal elements were no different from black boxes in his eyes.

When Gloriana projected a fairly detailed and thorough draft design, he meticulously scanned through every wireframe detail.

He already recognized the changes that Master Willix had made. He was surprised that she managed to limit her influence on the design to a very high degree.

As a rational mech designer, she possessed the capability to dampen her passion to a very low degree. One of the consequences was that Master Willix was able to tinker with any mech design without imposing her design philosophy on the work.

This was quite impressive as Masters were usually too strong to eliminate their powerful influence! Just touching a mech design a few times was enough for them to leave an unremovable imprint behind!

Ves wasn't here to study this method, though, so he quickly turned his attention to the design elements of the draft design.

It largely matched up with the earlier drafts that Gloriana had made with input from others.

The only major difference was that a considerable proportion of the original structural materials used in the design were replaced by resonating substitutes.

Perfidious Steel featured prominently in the inner structure of Venerable Tusa's future expert mech. This treacherous-sounding material would enable the expert mech to evade a lot of long-ranged attacks by distorting the perception of its actual coordinates!

"What the eye can see is a lie." Ves muttered to himself. "This is a powerful ability, though a costly one as well."

The cost of Perfidious Steel was not the highest, and only a couple of hundred kilograms were enough to impart the Disruptor Project with a powerful resonance ability.

However, the availability of this resonating alloy was rather low. Only specific companies made this product, which meant that Perfidious Steel could only be found in the areas where those companies operated!

This was a common downside to many resonating alloys. Special niche products were often localized because they weren't developed and marketed by huge trans-galactic corporations. It was extremely hard to push any product onto the galactic market so most smaller companies didn't even try.

Besides, the raw materials required to make specialty products like Perfidious Steel were rarely available in every star sector.

"I'm a bit concerned about the robustness of the inner structure of our expert light skirmisher." Ves spoke after he had made some estimates based on the draft he was looking at. "Perfidious Steel is not the hardest or toughest material. It is actually weaker than the Breyer alloy and all of the other materials that make up the internal architecture of our mech."

His wife pointed her finger towards some key components. "We have some key structural components made out of Unending alloy to make sure the mech won't collapse too easily on the inside."

"I can see that, but this is a limited solution, honey. The fact of the matter is that our light mech is weaker on the inside than before. It used to be a hard-boiled egg. Now it has turned into a soft-boiled egg."

Gloriana looked unfettered." You don't think I know that? I don't like this tradeoff either, but we have to live with it. Don't forget that the Disruptor Project mainly relies on evasion to avoid getting hurt. Enhancing this aspect at the cost of suffering more damage if it receives a powerful knock is worth it most of the time. I even took the trouble of making detailed calculations based on all kinds of battle scenarios. I discovered that Master Willix has struck the right balance."

Was it worth it to sacrifice 10 percent defense in exchange for 50 percent better evasion? What about giving 20 percent of the former in exchange for 150 percent of the latter?

These were the kind of tradeoffs that they had to contemplate when working with a resonating exotic like Perfidious Steel.

In the end, Ves did not object to this implementation. Master Willix herself was responsible for establishing the current balance, and she must have good reasons to select this particular compromise.

The implementation of the other key exotic was not as controversial. Bissonat paired well with the daggers. Unending alloy still remained as the main material for the weapons, but combining it with Bissonat allowed Venerable Tusa to empower his blades with a very sharp cutting edge!

"Ketis will be happy to work on the daggers." Ves smiled.

#### *Chapter 3050: Gloriana Therapy*

Perfidious Steel and Bissonat weren't the only resonating materials that Master Willix integrated into the Disruptor Project. They were the most potent and prominent ones that would determine how the expert light skirmisher fought and became known for. They were the reasons why the work on the project would result in a middle-tier expert mech rather than a low-tier product!

"The materials we invest in not just the Disruptor Project but all of the other ones as well are not common at all." Gloriana self-satisfyingly explained. "Though our expert pilots will have to endure greater challenges in mastering their upcoming machines, in time they will realize the potential that we are painstakingly trying to add to their designs."

Their approach differed from convention. Military organizations like the Mech Corps and the Hex Army always started off with designing an easy and basic expert mech for newly-promoted demigods.

Though it would be nice to hand over more powerful machines to them, the cost and effort required to do so was excessive at a larger scale.

Therefore, expert pilots had to make do with low-tier expert mechs and steadily train until they outgrew their first expert mechs.

As long as they survived and performed well enough to prove they deserved a greater machine, the military would eventually come around and provide them with a middle-tier expert mech...

Though this was not the most luxurious treatment, it ensured that the military and the state did not waste an excessive amount of money on an expensive expert mech only for it to get trashed in the first battle!

There were many differences between expert pilots. While they started off at roughly the same level of strength at the beginning, their growth over time might have followed wildly different trajectories!

One of the reasons why Venerable Foster received so much attention was because her talent was exceptionally high compared to the vast majority of other mech pilots. Even advancing to expert pilot was not enough for her to exhaust her potential!

In those cases, it was not a mistake to hand her a better expert mech!

The expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan were not as talented as Venerable Foster, though. Their genetic aptitudes definitely did not come close to matching her A-grade. Even if this factor became less relevant after undergoing apotheosis, the advantages that the most talented mech pilots enjoyed in the past did not disappear so easily!

What all of this meant was that Ves and Gloriana had no guarantee that the expert pilots they were servicing would ever live up to the potential of the expert mechs in development.

Still, Ves had his own thoughts on the matter. Unlike their peers who served in other organizations, the expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan had the benefit of receiving special assistance.

Whether they powered up with the help of Ves' spiritual engineering or other forms of aid from his helpful design spirits, the Larkinson expert pilots did not have to figure out everything on their own!



As Ves and his wife continued to discuss different aspects of the Disruptor Project, they did not see much reason to reconsider the major design choices that they had already made.

Sure, they had plenty of disagreements about the smaller details, but they could steadily work them all out when they commenced with the main phases of the design project. What mattered most at this point was to lock in all of the essential, high-level decisions that could not be changed once the project progressed past this point.

"The lack of defenses can be excused by the fact that it is good at evasion and is clad with a layer of Unending alloy." Gloriana eventually concluded. "This is not a mech for the faint-hearted, which Venerable Tusa is definitely not. From the moment he chose to specialize in piloting light mechs, he committed himself to a career where he needed to dance on the edge of a knife every time he deployed into battle. That won't suddenly change now that he has become a lot more valuable than before. He wants this. He thrives when he knows that his mech cannot afford to take too many hits."

Ves sighed. "I know all of that. I guess I'm just too nervous about dispatching one of my relatives to battle in a relatively fragile shell."

He recognized that he was being irrationally worried about this issue. Unlike many other light mechs, the Disruptor Project was clad with sufficient Unending alloy to fend off most attacks.

The biggest concern was that enemies might come up with all kinds of strange and unusual attacks that could bypass the protection of this hardy material. Gravitic weapons for example could completely ignore physical defenses and deal substantial internal damage unless protected by special materials.

Fortunately, gravitic weapons that were effective enough to be used in battle were not common in second-class mech battles. The wielders of these fragile and expensive weapons had to get very close to their targets in order for them to be lethal enough, and that was quite dangerous!

Expert mechs were able to wield other strange effects. Humanity had lots of different resonating materials at its disposal. Both natural and artificial ones could achieve amazing effects when they resonated with the right expert pilots.

One of the main reasons why the combination of expert mech and expert pilot earned such a high regard was that it could break the rules!

Common sense and the regular laws of nature no longer applied as strictly as before once expert mechs began to clash. Though the strong willpower of expert pilots granted them some protection against reality-defying effects, Venerable Tusa would definitely get into a lot of trouble if he faced a high-tier expert mech!

"You need to trust in your men." Gloriana softly said. "As mech designers, we can implement as many safeguards as we want, but all of them come at a cost. It is not our purpose to surround our customers with dozens of layers of protective materials. You'll just end up with a big, fat ball of metal that is so unwieldy that it is slower than the Shield of Samar! The established design conventions exist for a reason and there is no reason why we should deviate from them for this project."

Ves closed his eyes and pressed his fingers against his face. "I know you are correct, but we are talking about family here. Each and every decision we make will directly affect whether Venerable Tusa will be able to survive a future battle. If he inadvertently falls against a strong opponent because of a compromise we made or a vulnerability that we have overlooked, I don't know if I will be able to forgive myself."

He thought he had lost the ability to feel guilt. It turned out that he was wrong.

Gloriana recognized that Ves was going through a difficult moment. Her expression softened further. She sat down next to Ves and pulled him into a warm and loving embrace. Her pleasant fruity scent peppered him up a bit.

"I know what you're going through, Ves. I feel the same way whenever I prepare to work on my brother's expert mech. The work we do have an enormous influence on the performance and the survival chances of the people who use our work. That has always been a part of a mech designer's life. You never felt this way when you designed Larkinson-exclusive mechs like the Bright Warrior and the Transcendent Punisher, but the outcome is similar. Why do you not feel nervous when you worked on those past projects?"

Ves shrugged as he enjoyed his wife's attention. "I guess it's more personal this time. Back when I designed both versions of the Bright Warrior, I always had a more abstract audience in mind. Sure, I was designing a mech that would have a huge influence on the lives of a lot of Larkinson mech pilots, but when I treat them as a group, it is kind of hard to imagine the consequences to any single individual. I mean, just think about the last round of design projects we completed. Tens of thousands of clansmen will be piloting our Larkinson mechs while millions of Hexers are depending on the new mechs we designed for their use."

"In contrast, our current round of design projects will only service six individuals. Seven if we count in my brother."

Ves nodded. "Exactly. We will spend months, maybe even a year on just a small number of mechs. No other copies will be made after we have created the originals. I don't know about you, but I don't want to invest so much time in trying to design an expert mech only for it to be an outcome that I have tried my best to avoid."

Gloriana smiled and grasped his hands with her own tender fingers. "You're not wrong for having this worry, Ves. The fact that you are worrying yourself sick means you care."

That is an important quality to have for a mech designer, especially one who designs custom mechs for individual mech pilots. Don't think you are wrong to doubt yourself. You just have to push yourself harder in order to minimize the possibility that your fears come true."

She had gone through a similar moment as well in her career. It was quite frightening to realize that one's work on war machines would have far-reaching consequences to the survival of those who operated them. Yet mech designers and any other weapon developers for that matter could not allow these fears to cripple them. From the moment they chose their professions, they threw away their right to feel guilty about this issue.

Empathy was important, but what mattered more was performing their jobs!

At this point, it was too late for people like Ves or any other mech designer to feel guilty or concerned about the consequences of their decisions.

Gloriana did not say anything more, but her silent presence provided enough comfort in itself for Ves to get back into gear.

Though he had not managed to get rid of all of his concerns, he resorted to a solution that had often worked for his problems.

He shoved them to the back of his mind and tried his best to forget about them. As long as he didn't actively think about any unpleasant thoughts, his mood no longer deteriorated!

"Are you ready to get back to work?" Gloriana asked.

"Sure."

Ves kissed Gloriana's cheek, causing her to release a pleasant giggle. She soon switched back to work mode though as she returned to studying the latest documents on the Disruptor Project.

"I have already gathered enough feedback from Juliet and Ketis to know what we have to watch out for when we design this expert mech. In general, we always have to make sure we prioritize its mobility but not to the extent of sacrificing too much in other areas."

"That's easy to say." Ves scoffed. "We have very wide ranges to consider, especially since the performance of expert mechs are so good. Who determines what level of performance is good or bad?"

Gloriana smirked and crossed her arms. "That's my job. You don't need to worry about that. I already ran a lot of numbers and have set some overall guidelines on the performance of every expert mech in development. Don't dip any lower than the

minimum specifications that I have set and you'll be fine. Just try and do your best to exceed them if you can. Anything extra that we can get will give us a lot more leeway."

At the end of the day, the Disruptor Project was the first one to pass to the next design phase. While Ves and the others aimed to progress the other expert design projects as well, there was no doubt that they wanted to complete the expert light mech design first!

According to Gloriana's estimates, they might be able to finish the design in just four months if they poured all of their attention on it. However, a more realistic completion date was six months as they could not afford to neglect their other design projects.