

Mech 3061

Chapter 3061: High Born

Nyaaaaaa.

Goldie's lovely furred expression looked up at him from within the Larkinon Mandate. She not only looked completely innocent, but also cute in a way that appealed to any cat lover.

She was just too adorable!

When Ves faced his own creation, he couldn't help but soften up and calm down to an extent.

"What did you do?"

Goldie blinked.

Nyaaaa.

"I see."

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The explanation was actually not that complicated. Ves had always wanted Goldie to be a network facilitator, but he also wanted her to become something more.

One of his more ambitious goals for Goldie was to enable her to pass on valuable piloting-related knowledge, experience, instincts and other benefits to those connected to the Larkinson Network.

This promising feature never panned out the way he wanted to. It was too much to ask for Goldie to permanently instill the valuable accumulation of a veteran expert pilot to someone new and inexperienced.

The only instance where this piloting knowledge transfer somewhat worked was with the Chiron. However, the Chiron only really reached its full potential when Ves set up a special circumstance where an expert candidate transferred a portion of his or her elevated piloting ability to a less capable pilot.

Though Ves was already happy with the way his understated Chiron design accelerated the training of the future generation of Larkinson mech pilots, it was still a training mech. Its actual standards and fighting prowess was so far below the Bright Warrior that even the thought of putting it on the battlefield would spark a mutiny among his men!

Outside of these limited scenarios, the so-called Ancestral Learning ability that Ves had devised in the past never really saw any play.

Until now.

Ves remembered that while he designed the Chiron around this new and unconventional knowledge transfer method, he also hoped that the Bright Warrior turned into a suitable vehicle.

However, nothing came out of it. Whether it was the original Bright Warrior or the second-class version, neither of them enabled one mech pilot to transfer his skill and experience to another mech pilot.

He gradually forgot about it as the Bright Warrior already performed well enough to make him satisfied. While he would have been happy if it could do more, its primary purpose was to serve as a user-friendly starter platform for his Larkinson mech pilots.

His evaluation changed today. Seeing the Avatars figure out how to activate the Ancestral Learning ability on their own without his assistance showed him that he had made his conclusions about this issue too early.

Nyaa nyaaa nyaaa.

Goldie did not hide anything and explained the process clearly to Ves. It turned out that she always knew what Ves wanted, but that the conditions weren't right in the past.

First, Goldie was a lot younger and weaker in the past. There weren't as many people connected to the Larkinson Network and she had barely developed her abilities at the time.

Second, the method also imposed serious requirements on the part of the mech pilots. They had to adopt the right mindset in order to enable the knowledge transfer.

Third, Ves had been too focused on segmenting spiritual networks into different categories. Kinship networks were meant to instill loyalty and watch out for betrayal. Battle networks were solely designed to enable a short but extremely powerful boost in combat.

He failed to anticipate that a group like the Avatars was able to achieve an effect that was similar to that of a battle network but to a lesser degree.

As Ves observed the empowered Larkinson mechs rolling over the capable but uninspiring Diyast mechs, he clearly felt that the Larkinsons that had borrowed the power of the Golden Cat could have sustained this state a lot longer!

This was nothing less than revolutionary in his eyes. Wasn't this what Ves had been trying to achieve? Though the activation of a battle network could achieve a drastic impact in battle, the downside was that it lasted too short and the power might be too exaggerated for certain battles.

A lesser but more lasting empowerment like the current state of Avatar mech pilots was much more practical in most battles! Ves could already observe from various pieces of data that the mech pilots did not look significantly drained after the experience.

They could still put up a decent fight even after they strained their minds earlier! This was much different from the aftermath of activating a battle formation!

Ves was eager to explore this new facet of spiritual battle methods, but this was not the time for him to indulge in spiritual engineering.

After smashing the Diyast Family's aerial mech force, the enemy did not launch any follow-up attacks. It was already difficult and expensive to form a secret mech force on a quiet paradise planet with no inherent industrial infrastructure. Their backers might be generous, but it was a bit too far-fetched for this secret remnant to receive enough resources and manpower to build up an entire mech regiment!

It became a lot more trouble than usual for the Larkinson mechs and ships that had descended into the atmosphere to return to the expeditionary fleet.

The loss of several combat carriers and the crippling of several more meant that the Larkinsons had less space for mechs.

On the other hand, the amphibian black mechs and the aerial Diyast mechs also exacted a serious toll on the Avatar and Vandal mechs. Many expensive machines had sunk to the bottom of Trieden II's warm and deep oceans.

Salvaging the wrecks was out of the question. As far as Ves was aware of, the entire Larkinson fleet did not carry a single aquatic mech.

However, a quick search revealed that the Graveyard actually carried a few specialized vessels that could theoretically retrieve the broken mechs and debris from the depths.

There were way too few of them though. It would take weeks to fish out all of those broken Bright Warrior and Ferocious Piranha mechs and that was way too troublesome for his liking.

"Don't bother with picking up our wrecks." Ves told General Verle. "I want to leave this stupid star system as soon as possible."

"Are you sure, sir? The broken hardware we're about to leave behind is very valuable. We'll also risk exposing the designs of the Bright Warrior IB and Ferocious Piranha IB."

Ves winced when he heard the latter. General Verle raised a valid strategic concern. One of the ways that mechs gained an edge on the battlefield was by hiding their strengths and weaknesses.

However, as long as someone fished out enough broken wrecks and reconstructed them, it became possible for others to make detailed analyses about their designs.

This was no different from revealing the blueprints of the Bright Warrior and Ferocious Piranha to the public!

Even if the people who studied his mechs didn't dump the data on the galactic net, they could probably trade it to the Larkinson Clan's enemies like the Friday Coalition for a good price.

Ves looked grim but decided to stick with his current decision. "Nothing can remain hidden forever. We have already deployed these two mech models enough times for observers to glean enough clues about their performance. Even if our enemies can obtain a lot more details about those two mechs, it's not as if this is a crippling disadvantage. I bet the Friday Coalition has long analyzed our Valkyrie mech designs to death, but that hasn't stopped the momentum of this product line. Besides, we'll be replacing those models with updated versions at some point in the future, so we won't have to worry about this problem forever."

The expeditionary fleet had to keep moving. The Larkinsons had already stirred up trouble in the Grand Loxic Republic by deploying so many mechs for battle and intervening in a local power struggle. The longer his fleet remained in the state, the greater the chance that the Loxians would come and drag him even deeper into the local quagmire!

The Purnesse Family might be happy to settle some old scores, but the Larkinsons couldn't care less about these squabbles!

"Bring the Purnesse Family aboard the Spirit of Bentheim as soon as possible." Ves spoke as he stood up from his chair. "We need to receive them as quickly as possible while they are still in shock. Those pampered Purnessers look as if their entire mentalities have been subverted. If we wait for them to regain their mental balance, they'll be much more composed and much more difficult to influence. We need to strike while the iron is hot and make an indelible impression on those snobs."

Ves was not ignorant of their behavior. As soon as they evacuated from the Violet Estates and entered one of the combat carriers of his fleet, he directed some of his attention on monitoring the folk that would soon play an important role in the Larkinson Clan.

It turned out the Purnessers were a lot more elitist than he expected. They were much like the Tovars of the Bright Republic. Ves did not want these Purnessers to maintain their picky attitudes once they joined the Larkinson Clan.

From the beginning, Ves had done his best to avoid his clan developing in the direction of the Tovar Family and other cold-hearted organizations. He had made many policy decisions that served to reduce the power distance between the clansmen.

A normal rank-and-file member should always be able to speak to a patriarch like him on a normal if respectful basis.

If the Purnessers were allowed to impose their stamp on the Larkinson Clan, his clansmen risked becoming stiffer when they interacted with each other!

This did not align with his vision of the Larkinson Clan as a giant brotherhood. Every Larkinson must be able to extend a sufficient amount of trust to each other. If this simple rule no longer held true, the Larkinson Clan would pretty much be dead in his eyes!

When Ves left the bridge of his flagship, Lucky silently floated off the armrest and followed suit. Calabast also chose to accompany him as the issues surrounding the Purnesse Family also merited her attention!

As they walked through the corridors, Calabast voiced another warning.

"The people we're about to receive are different from our other recruits." She started. "The thousands of people that have previously flocked to our banner are mostly young, adventurous, eager to make a new start and impressionable. Their backgrounds vary, but the overwhelming majority of clansmen originate from the middle class."

Ves nodded in understanding.

There were still plenty of clansmen who came from humble backgrounds, but those were very rare. The clan maintained a high recruiting standard, which meant that those with less means were usually unable to afford the education required to make them useful and desirable enough to get any further.

On the other hand, the number of upper class people in the clan was small as well. Most scions were very comfortable in their current lives and had no desire to abandon all of their privilege to go on a risky adventure to the Red Ocean.

In a way, the Purnessers also fell into this category. Despite almost facing annihilation, these sorry bastards still held themselves up as high born leaders and aristocrats. Ves had no doubt that if the Grand Loxic Republic adopted a feudal governing system, the Purnesse Family would have transitioned into Purnesse House!

"We need to make it clear that the Purnessers need to get off their high horses and sincerely embrace our culture and values." He stated. "Do you have any good ideas?"

"That is not an easy demand, you know." Calabast smiled wryly. "I know their type. Their arrogance is rooted in their bones. They're similar to the batch of MTA mech pilots you've picked up. Their privileged upbringing and superior capabilities instill them with a sense of pride and confidence that is difficult to erode. The only way to reform them is if you break their old mentalities entirely. This... is not advisable, though."

Chapter 3062: Greeting the Purnessers

Though the logistics had become a little more complicated, the Larkinsons succeeded in bringing their damaged ships and mechs back to the Larkinson fleet.

Ves still regretted the fact that he had to leave his broken and sunken mechs and ships behind, but the Larkinson Clan could easily build or acquire replacements.

The material losses of the Battle of Trieden II were substantial, but the loss of life was well within a tolerable range.

The Bright Warriors were designed to be sturdy machines so the chance that the enemy could breach the cockpit straight away was fairly small. Even if the mechs eventually succumbed from all of the damage, the Avatars usually managed to eject their cockpits without any serious issue.

The casualties among the Flagrant Vandals were a bit more serious on a proportional basis, especially at the start of the battle, but that was the downside to piloting light mechs.

It was quite difficult to land a hit on them, but once they received a solid blow, it was a lot easier to penetrate their chest armor and kill the pilot on the spot!

Still, as much as Ves lamented the losses, the figure was within a tolerable range. With tens of thousands of pilots at his disposal, the clan wouldn't even feel a difference. The Avatars and Vandals could easily recruit replacements for the dead...

This was no longer a matter that Ves needed to pay personal attention to. The Larkinson Clan already developed its human resource capabilities to the point where it could automatically recruit the most suitable personnel at their next port of call.

The only troublesome consequence of suffering these battle losses was that Ves had to go out and attend yet another tedious burial ceremony. He had gone through so many of them that it became increasingly more difficult for him to play his role.

Unfortunately, as the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, presiding over these ceremonies was mandatory. If he gave his men the impression that he no longer cared as much, his approval rating would probably dip by at least 20 percent.

Ves was much more preoccupied with determining how the Larkinson Clan should integrate the Purnesse Family.

First impressions were important, and he keenly recognized that traumatic events the Purnessers had gone through had made them more receptive to change than usual.

It was important for the clan to seize this moment and ensure the Purnessers smoothly identified themselves with the Larkinson Clan instead of their old lives!

"It's quite troublesome to make the Purnessers embrace our clan seriously." Calabast explained her thoughts as they continued to walk all the way towards one of the hangar bays of the factory ship. "From our observations, it is clear that the Purnesse Family lived very different lives from the rest of us. For example, you came from a privileged but relatively sober background. I grew up as a member of one of the most powerful matriarchal dynasties of my state, but my relatives piled up extremely high expectations on me. Everyone else in our clan had to struggle one way or another. This is also why we are so driven by our ambitions."

"Are you suggesting that the Purnessers are less hard-working and ambitious?"

"That is not what I am trying to imply, Ves. I am trying to paint different pictures for different kinds of people. The Purnessers can also work hard. It is just that their ambitions and their ideas about how they should live their lives are different. These people will arrive in the Larkinson Clan with preconceived expectations about the treatment they should receive and the responsibilities they must bear. Do you recognize the potential dangers in what I have said?"

Ves mulled over her words. She was obviously hinting at something but expected him to stumble upon the answer himself.

He mulled over the situation and made a tentative guess.

"Our original goal for grabbing the Purnesse Family is to acquire a diplomat. The need to forge new relations and grow existing ones has become more and more important to our clan. As a result, the importance of this job is extremely critical. As long as one of the Purnessers performed well, that person would gain a lot of say in the running of the clan!"

Calabast nodded in affirmation. "It's actually more extensive than that. Didn't you tell us that our clan is lacking a lot of mid-level managers and administrators? All of those Purnessers and their retainers can't remain idle once they become a part of our clan. They need jobs as well, but they are all civilians and completely unsuitable to serve in a

military capacity. Instead, our clan will do its best to allocate them to positions where their prior learning and job experience will be put to use. Many of the Purnessers happen to hold impressive positions in the past."

The Larkinson Clan did not have a habit of wasting someone's potential. The clan organization was expanding every day and the list of vacancies grew longer. There were definitely a lot of influential jobs in the clan that the Purnessers could perform with ease!

Though Ves didn't mind it if new recruits immediately started off with vital, important positions, he became a lot more guarded to the idea of giving the Purnessers cushy positions without having to work for them. Competence was one thing, but contribution was another!

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "I think we may need to revise our original plans towards the Purnesse Family. We can wait with appointing diplomats and other important jobs. What is more important to me is to make sure that the Purnessers enter the Larkinson Clan with the right mindset."

He knew that the Larkinson Network could do much to alter the mentalities of the Purnesse Family, but its influence was too subtle and gradual to produce major results.

This was partially intentional as Ves did not want to get accused of brainwashing his own people. At least the current degree of influencing made it clear that every clansman still retained enough of their original identity and thoughts.

However, this also left the clansmen to pursue their own ideas. As long as they did not plot any direct betrayals, they were allowed to pursue a lot of different agendas.

Since both Ves and Calabast recognized that this would probably lead to undesirable consequences if the soon-to-be-former members of the Purnesse Family rose to power, they had to derail the expected process in some fashion.

While Calabast was in the process of hatching numerous covert plots, Ves had a more direct solution in mind.

A smirk slowly appeared on his face as he came closer to the hangar bay.

Lucky recognized his expression. Ves always became swept by devious thoughts when he smirked in this fashion!

"Meow."

"Oh, quiet, Lucky. My ideas are not that bad!"

"Meow meow."

"Okay, I admit that the plan I have in mind might be a bit extreme, but it's not as if the Purnessers can turn away at this point. They're not like regular recruits who are eager to become a part of our clan. They need to... learn to appreciate what we are all about before they are truly ready to become Larkinsons."

A short time passed before the carriers that carried the evacuated members of the Purnesse Family reached the core of the Larkinson fleet.

Numerous transports and shuttles brought the members of the Purnesse Family over to one of the hangar bays of the Spirit of Bentheim.

Ves deliberately did not opt to guide the newcomers to one of the fancier compartments located on the upper decks of his flagship. He instead commanded a large number of guards to stand guard in the hangar bay and prevent the rescued Purnessers from walking away.

The sight of all of those armed and armored troops chilled the hearts of the well-dressed Purnessers. The posture of the Larkinson Clan did not appear to be friendly at the moment.

Only the wiser among them such as Ambassador Shederin Purnesse recognized that the Larkinsons were engaging in a power play.

The elder man's expression remained impassive, but inwardly he already began to sigh. He could read a lot of clues about Ves and the Larkinson Clan's intentions from these actions. Combined with what he had witnessed from the clan during the Battle of Trieden II, the head of the Purnesse Family suspected that the objections voiced by his son might ring true.

If Ves knew what the head of the Purnessers was thinking about, he wouldn't change anything. No matter what kind of pejorative labels the newcomers threw at the Larkinsons, they would become a part of the clan one way or another!

Once the Purnessers had all been ferried over to the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves finally made his entry.

At first, a loud impact rang through the hangar bay as the Bright Warriors stationed in the cavernous compartment all stomped the deck with their feet!

The Purnessers and their retainers immediately fell silent.

The entrance at the opposite side slid open in order to allow for the entry of Ves, Lucky, Calabast and an honor guard.

The latter two did not attract too much attention but Ves definitely did. He marched forward while being shadowed by a formidable squad of bodyguards. Though Ves opted

to greet the Purnessers in his uniform, he exuded a martial and domineering air that was common to military leaders such as Patriarch Reginald Cross.

The Larkinson Clan was not an aristocratic organization. It was not a military organization either, but it definitely leaned in that direction.

The behavior of the Bright Warriors, the guards that were keeping them in place and the method of entry chosen by Ves all emphasized these differences!

Shederin Purnesse and Novilon Purnesse stood in front of their family members. They both bowed but did not take the initiative to open their mouths.

As diplomats, they recognized the power imbalance between their almost-ruined family and the prosperous Larkinson Clan. Ves enjoyed all of the initiative by virtue of grasping all of their lives!

When Ves reached an appropriate distance, he surveyed the crowd in person. Studying their behaviors through the monitoring system already gave him a good idea what he was dealing with, but inspecting them in person allowed him to observe them in other ways.

The Purnessers felt scared, lost and traumatized. However, they still clung to their own pride and insisted on keeping their heads high in front of their future leader.

Their feelings towards the Larkinson Clan were mixed.

On the one hand, they were very grateful that the foreigners took the initiative to rescue them at a considerable cost.

On the other hand, they never wanted to abandon their comfortable lives in the Grand Loxic Republic and become a part of a nomadic, space-faring fleet.

The latter began to weigh more heavily in their minds now that the reality of the situation started to settle in. Hundreds of Purnessers had even begun to cry!

Ves did not pay much mind to them, though. He still maintained his superior smirk.

"Purnessers. Welcome to the Larkinson Fleet. While I would like to welcome you as Larkinsons, I'm afraid you are not ready to adopt the Larkinson name. Before you become a part of our clan and start your new lives in our fleet, you must go through a process of adaptation. Right now, I'm afraid that few of you are aware of what becoming a Larkinson exactly means. That must be corrected."

A lot of Purnessers began to frown.

Novilon Purnesse cautiously raised his hand. "Patriarch Larkinson, pardon me for asking, but what must be done in order to satisfy your requirements."

"It's quite simple, Mr. Novilon. You and the rest of your family simply have to go through a short training program in order to become familiar with our culture."

"Are you talking about... military training, patriarch?"

A lot of Purnessers shuddered at this mention!

Fortunately, Ves denied this possibility.

"Have no fear. I don't intend to push you beyond your limits. I just want you to go through a brief and gentle training regime in order to help you deal with your trauma. It will also encourage you to move on with your lives and embrace what our clan can offer to you. At the same time, the experiences you will go through in the next weeks will help you gain a greater understanding of your fellow Larkinsons!"

Even though Ves did not say anything extreme, the smirk on his face hinted that the training program he had in mind would definitely be fishy!

Chapter 3063: Boarding a Pirate Ship

After Ves issued his brief announcement, he didn't give the Purnessers a lot of opportunities to ask any questions. Other Larkinsons stepped forward in order to organize and sort the rescued people into different groups.

None of the clansmen cared about the complaints of the Purnessers or their exact identities.

Who cared whether someone claimed to have been a former planetary minister of Trieden II?

He was just an old man now that he had fallen into the grasp of the Larkinson Clan!

It didn't even matter if some of the Purnessers or their retainers were mech pilots. None of them received any special treatment.

Of course, the Larkinsons might be tough, but they weren't cruel. They did not set out to bully the Purnessers or inflict any harm on them. They just performed their jobs without any extraneous thoughts.

A group of Larkinson school teachers began to receive the children of the Purnesse Family... Some of the latter cried for various reasons, but the teachers efficiently injected a small drug in their bodies to calm them down.

Some old fogeys and veterans of the Larkinson Clan took away the elderly, disabled and retired members of the Purnesse Family. Pregnant women and other vulnerable people also joined this group.

Even though these people did not add much value to the Larkinson Clan, their presence and views were still important in many ways.

The clan would never kick them off the fleet!

The Larkinson Clan was supposed to be one big family, and caring for the older generation was an important facet of this ideal.

In short, Ves did not impose any excessive demands on the weak and less capable members of the Purnesse Family.

His focus remained on the healthy, able, competent and clever members of the Purnesse Family. As long as these able-bodied Loxians recovered from their traumas, they should immediately be ready to slot into their new jobs in the Larkinson Clan.

Ves did not intend to make their transition too easy, though. He was afraid that the Purnessers were too spoiled and entitled to appreciate the new chance they received.

In order to rectify these possible traits and ensure the Purnessers didn't make any undesirable waves in the Larkinson Clan, they had to go through a mandatory training program.

The point wasn't to turn them into soldiers. That was a huge waste of time considering that they had already chosen their paths in life.

Ves merely planned out a series of... introductions and experiential activities in order to encourage them to forget about their old ways.

Once these able-bodied Purnessers were sorted into several subgroups, a series of passenger craft arrived to take them to their first 'training site'.

"They're on their way to the Swordmaiden contingent of our fleet, right?"

Calabast hesitantly nodded. "They are, but... a lot of us are questioning whether it is wise to subject them to the tender mercies of the Swordmaidens. You know how demanding those women can get. Their backgrounds as pirates also ensures that they will not develop any good impressions of the blue-blooded Purnessers."

What Ves had done was little different from throwing a well-dressed noble into a pack of beggars!

There was no way that both sides would be able to achieve harmony!

The grin on his face did not abate, however.

"That's exactly why I think the Swordmaidens are the best people to receive the Purnessers first." He enthusiastically replied. "I can trust those women not to get too enamoured by the former identities of our upcoming members. I also trust that they are professional enough not to break their charges."

"What if you are wrong?"

Ves shrugged. "Oh well. It's not a big deal if a large shipment of goods contains a few defective products. We have already received more than enough Purnessers to last us a while. How many did we gain, exactly?"

"According to our current count, we registered 1879 trueblood members of the Purnesse Family and 16,754 employees and retainers."

The latter were not technically Purnessers, but they were raised and sheltered by them, so they possessed similar mindsets. This was why Ves did not intend to treat them differently from their former employers.

As Ves and Calabast continued to oversee the transfers of the different groups of Purnessers, a pair of guards brought forth an old but stately-looking Loxian.

The older man regarded the two leaders with a humble posture. The man's inherent dignity could not be hidden, but the way in which the Purnesser leader conveyed humility was highly convincing.

If Ves didn't know that he was dealing with a professional liar, he would have been sold by the performance!

Of course, the niceties still had to be followed, so he replaced his devious smirk with a friendly smile.

"Ambassador Shederin Purnesse, welcome to the Larkinson fleet. Again, I apologize for not being able to induct you and your family members into the fold straight away, but unlike the rest of our recruits, your people have not yet proven to be worthy to become a Larkinson. I hope you understand."

The former head of the Purnesse Family made a brief but humble bow. "You do not have to call me ambassador, patriarch. My old titles have lost their meaning the moment I have brought my family to your domain. I am no longer a citizen of the Grand Loxic Republic."

Ves felt satisfied by the former ambassador's smart response. It had been worth it to obtain someone like Shederin Purnesse!

"Very well, Mr. Shederin. Now, the reason why I summoned you here is because you seem to be the wisest among your bunch. Do you have any questions about the future of your men?"

"I do, patriarch." Shederin looked grave. "If I may ask, is it truly necessary to put most of my former family members through immediate ideological training? They have just bid farewell to their homes, their friends, their jobs and the rest of the structure that supported their lives. They need time to heal and process."

"They can heal and process their grief while they are running laps around the interior of a combat carrier." Ves heartlessly replied. "You probably know what I am trying to do, so I won't mince words with you. The fact that the structure that you are referring to is broken at this moment is a great opportunity for our clan to erect a new structure in its place. It is much easier to replace a broken and ruined house than an intact one. Why should I give your former family members the opportunity to erect their own houses? Their designs will be all over the place! If we are the ones who are building your new houses, we can ensure that their architecture falls in line with the rest of our clan."

"I can understand your desire to mold us into your image, but there are gentler and more sophisticated alternatives. I can pass on these methods to you or refer you to some bestselling books that can explain the theory behind them. There is a whole body of academic literature behind the best ways to... teach and indoctrinate humans."

Ves directed a sharp look at the former ambassador. "How many of you Purnessers have read those books? Don't answer this question. While I am sure that all of those proven methods are effective, our clan have our own unique ways to transform any random recruit into a sincere and loyal Larkinson. You'll get to know them in the coming days and weeks."

There was no need to flood Shederin Purnesse with all of the whackier aspects of the Larkinson Clan right away. Ves found that new recruits adjusted better to the unique traits of his clan if they comprehended them one by one. It would be incredibly abrupt for him to introduce the Purnessers to an entity as mystical as the Golden Cat straight away!

Seeing that the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan insisted on this harsh and strict treatment towards his family members, he dropped his protests. Now that he and his family boarded a pirate ship, it was not wise for him to contradict the pirate captain!

"What do you intend to do with us after we have... adjusted to our new conditions?"

"As long as your people successfully get accepted in the Larkinson Clan, we will treat them as our brothers and sisters. You Purnessers will truly be regarded as Larkinsons from that point onwards. We'll not treat you differently from other clansmen either, so they will follow our usual procedures that will help them find their new places in the fleet. Their prior education, work experience and qualifications will finally become relevant

then at that time. I can promise you that we will not misuse the talents of your former family members."

Shederin loosened up when he heard that. He conveyed a substantial amount of relief and gratitude with his posture.

"Thank you, patriarch. I hope that my son and the rest of my family can lend all of their abilities to you. You may not know much about the Grand Loxic Republic, but you can trust that its standards are high."

"I have never questioned the competence of your people." Ves smiled. "Let's just do our best to leave all of these unpleasanties behind and do our best to look towards the future. All of us are looking for a new start in the Red Ocean. Walk with me. I'll bring you up to speed."

He moved to the exit of the hangar bay while Shederin Purnesse followed suit. Calabast didn't feel the need to follow. Instead, she silently waved at Ves before moving off to attend to her other duties.

Lucky gazed back and forth between Ves and Calabast.

On one hand, he could follow Ves who would likely be talking about a lot of boring stuff to a boring old man.

On the other hand, he could follow Calabast and supplant Arnold as her favored petting instrument.

It didn't take long for him to resolve his dilemma.

"Meow."

Lucky quickly zipped towards Calabast!

Fortunately for the cat, Ves did not notice Lucky's absence. Instead, he had become fully engaged in providing Shederin with a brief overview of his clan and its various relations.

Though Shederin Purnesse only possessed a shallow understanding the Larkinson Clan, he had already formed a number of preliminary conclusions.

"The Golden Skull Alliance has great promise in my eyes." He slowly said. "It is just that your clan is not tapping its full potential out of an abundance of caution."

Ves looked puzzled. "Why would you say that, Mr. Shederin."

Now that the conversation turned to more familiar territory to the former ambassador, Shederin finally raised his head a little.

"There are many reasons why I think this way. First, your clan cannot do everything. You have already established this yourself. It is best if you can combine forces with other organizations that possess different competences. This way, you can each benefit from the strengths of your partners without investing a disproportionate amount of effort into expanding your own capabilities. If you just want to grow your clan quietly and over a span of a few centuries, then you might consider this approach, but you are looking to achieve a good start in the Red Ocean. The pace of development and competition in the dwarf galaxy is so high that you cannot bank on long-term plans to achieve success."

"The early bird gets the worm." Ves succinctly said.

"Just so, patriarch." Shederin sagely nodded. "I have studied the conditions of the Red Ocean extensively even if I never held any intentions to enter it. When I compare the current trends with what has happened in past colonization waves, I have found that collective action has a much higher chance of success than trying to achieve everything by yourself."

"You don't have much hope that we'll be able manage in our current conditions."

"Oh, heavens, no. According to my preliminary estimates and calculations, the chance that your clan will be able to survive ten years after entering the Red Ocean is 8.7 percent!"

Ves almost had a heart attack when he heard this figure. "8.7 percent? Isn't that too low?!"

The old man shook his head. "In fact, this is a rather optimistic estimate based on rosy projections of your future growth and development. In my more pessimistic scenarios, the chance of survival can dip as low as 0.3 percent."

0.3 percent!

Chapter 3064: Shederin's Theory

Ves became quite shocked when Shederin Purnesse issued a depressingly poor verdict on the chances that the Larkinson Clan would succeed in its grand expedition.

He deeply wanted to reject the low odds. He bet so much on his journey to the Red Ocean and thought he was making good progress in building up his clan and network of allies.

However, Ves could not dismiss the authority of someone who possessed a greater vision on these kinds of matters. As much as he had grown into his role and tried his

best to steer the Larkinson Clan in the right direction, he was well aware that he wasn't cut out for these matters.

It was why he always desired to acquire the experts who could do the thinking on his behalf.

Now that the Avatars and Vandals sacrificed a significant amount of hardware and numerous lives to save the Purnesse Family, he finally accomplished one of his major goals!

He just didn't expect the former head of the Purnesse Family to start off with a grave prediction.

"Well, you certainly have guts." Ves lightly said...

"You seek my counsel, not my flattery." Shederin Purnesse calmly replied. "From what I have observed about your Larkinsons, you prefer to be direct. That is quite in line with your straightforward military heritage. When in Rubarth, do as the Rubarthans do. I can adjust myself to multiple personality types. It is my vocation, after all."

The pair had moved to a private lounge on the upper decks. Ves wanted to speak frankly with Shederin Purnesse. All of the showmanship that he displayed at the hangar bay was mostly meant to guide the sheep.

The head of the Purnessers was no sheep, though. He was a herder, and many of the usual tricks that Ves employed to dazzle and manipulate people didn't work on such wise and farsighted individuals.

As Ves looked at Shederin Purnesse sitting casually on a divan, the former ambassador of the Grand Loxic Republic exuded a distinctive mix of dignity and authority that only senior statesmen possessed.

It made the old man come across as authoritative and someone who absolutely knew what he was talking about.

Whether this was actually true remained to be seen, but so far Ves did not doubt Mr. Shederin's competence or sincerity.

The man used to lead a foreign diplomatic mission on behalf of one of the most powerful second-rate states of Winged Serenade. There was no way that anyone assigned to such a position was a dummy!

In addition, the Larkinsons almost completely grasped the surviving members of the Purnesse Family. Other than the careerists who had been assigned to work at foreign embassies and so on, the main body of the Purnesse Family had effectively fallen in the hands of the Larkinsons.

Since the Purnessers were stuck aboard several ships in a vast and powerful fleet, there was no way for them to escape!

Rather than resisting this reality, Shederin Purnesse instead chose to acknowledge it. In any case, they no longer had any future in the Grand Loxic Republic anyway, and the Larkinsons had shown enough intention to make use of the talents of their family members.

After the remnants of the Diyast Family almost came close to wiping out the Purnesse Family, the former ambassador had lost most of his objections to abandoning his original heritage.

What did it matter if he and his family members forgot about their ties to Old Earth? Their illustrious family legacy did not offer any protection when the black mechs assaulted the Violet Estates for weeks!

After receiving this much-needed reality check, Shederin Purnesse no longer viewed the cosmos with rose-tinted glasses.

He began to treat potential risks and dangers more seriously. This was also why he answered with such low odds. He felt that the Larkinson Clan was just as naive and unguarded as the Purnesse Family at the start of the Crown Uprising.

Shederin saw that his audience had a lot of trouble accepting his judgement, so he stood up and began to pace around the spacious lounge. He curiously studied the decorations in the room.

The strange cat emblems, martial banners and glorious projections of great battle moments reinforced his impression that the Larkinsons were both militaristic and eccentric. Though Shederin silently bemoaned the lack of culture and refinement in the clan, he had to admit that the clan could at least provide him with the comfort of strength.

Yet that alone was not enough for them to survive the perilous Red Ocean.

"To explain my views, let me start from the beginning." The old man said as he subtly gained the initiative in this conversation. "Patriarch Ves, what do you think about the Red Ocean?"

"It is humanity's latest frontier." Ves answered from his heart. "It is a great expanse of space that is devoid of any existing human powers. It is a paradise for pioneers and adventurers. Many seek to become rich or elevate themselves above their stations by taking advantage of the opportunities that the Red Ocean can bring. It is also a region of death where many dangerous humans and aliens can possibly annihilate an entire fleet."

The old man slowly nodded towards Ves. "All of those descriptions are true, but they do not stray close to what I am truly trying to convey. To understand the Red Ocean, we must shift our perspective to the organizations responsible for opening up to colonization."

"You mean the Big Two?"

"Just so. Now let us ask some critical questions. Do you truly think the Big Two is too lazy or incapable of keeping the Red Ocean and its rich bounty of phasewater to themselves?"

Ves frowned. "The MTA and CFA aren't that incompetent. I think if they truly wanted to occupy the dwarf galaxy to themselves, they could have done so. We no longer live in an ancient period where we turned to feudalism in order to govern realms that are too vast to rule from a centralized position."

The issue was actually more complex than that, but neither of the two questioned this assumption at the moment.

"Then what possible motives do the Big Two have in mind by giving up such a fruitful piece of the pie?" Shederin Purnesse continued to ask. "You have to be aware that they are effectively giving up a huge quantity of phasewater to 'indigenous people' like us. All of that phasewater won't be used on powerful mechs and warships that can be employed against hostile alien empires, but will instead be put into mechs that are subsequently sent to fight against rival human polities! Do you actually think that makes sense?"

"Well, when you put it that way, that does sound stupid." Ves lamely said. "The only other explanation is that the Big Two have a greater plan in mind."

The former ambassador smiled. "The Big Two are not stupid, Patriarch Ves, so let us assume that the latter is true. Now what possible reasons did they have in mind when they deliberately chose to open the Red Ocean to every ambitious desperado that is seeking a greater future?"

Ves paused in order to formulate his answers.

"Well, the main reason why the MTA and CFA are able to maintain their hegemony over human space is because our population is divided into many different states that constantly squabble with each other. Lately, the first-rate superstates slowly show signs of consolidating and returning to their former glory. That is bad news to the Big Two. Opening up the Red Ocean might give them a chance to break this dynamic by empowering other human groups that do not fall into the camp of the Terrans or the Rubarthans."

Shederin chuckled. "That sounds plausible, but have you heard about the rise of alliances in the Red Ocean? The Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact have caused many pioneers to fall under the sway of the first-rate superstates. If the Big Two wanted to weaken the first-rate superstates, then they completely failed!"

Ves frowned at this statement. "You just said the Big Two aren't stupid. They should have been able to predict this would happen somehow. Yet they still allowed the Terrans and Rubarthans to play their games in the Red Ocean. What do the MTA and the CFA actually have in mind?"

"Ah, that is the real question." Shederin's eyes grew hazy. "Discussing possible answers was a favorite pastime of mine and my old colleagues. Would you like to hear my personal guess?"

"Please do."

"My voices in the media constantly refer to the tension and contradictions between the Big Two and the first-rate superstates. Many pundits and news personalities love to exaggerate the rivalry between the current protagonists of this age and the empires of the past. Yet when we look deeper into their sources, we find that there is very little substantive evidence of their claims."

"Are you saying that this rivalry is a fabrication?"

"Not necessarily." The former ambassador shook his head. "You can assume that the Big Two will definitely not shed a tear of the Terran Confederation and the Rubarth Empire collapse one day. The Terrans and Rubarthans also wouldn't mourn the fall of the Big Two. The conflicts of interest between these two pairings are very real, but that does not mean that it is a serious concern. At the very least, the Big Two does not act as if it feels threatened by the relics of the past. From what I can analyze of their movements, the Big Two are worried about greater concerns."

"You mean greater threats." Ves supplied.

Threats like the Five Scrolls Compact, maybe.

Shederin Purnesse nodded slowly. "This is the basis upon which I model the Big Two's behavior. If you assume that the Big Two are preparing for a grand conflict against a great enemy that not only matches their collective strength, but actually surpasses it, then much of their actions start to appear more logical. For example, now that you have heard my little theory, what do you think about the opening of the Red Ocean?"

A brief moment of silence followed as Ves entertained all kinds of ideas.

"It sounds... as if the Big Two has turned the Red Ocean into a giant crucible. The high barrier of entry ensures the best and most ambitious members of humanity can lead

their forces into this region. However, that is just the beginning. By locking us into a cage and letting us duke it out, they will know that whoever survives at the end will be the strongest of the bunch!"

"The blood of the weak will feed the strong." Shederin uttered as he admired a projection of the Larkinsons pummeling the Gravada Knarlax during the Battle against the Abyss. "The losses resulting from the infighting will be horrendous and doubtlessly lead to an enormous amount of waste, but if you look at this development at a timescale that stretches across centuries, the gains outweigh the losses. Ships and mechs can always be rebuilt and the growth rate of our race is so high that any population of humans will explode after it attains stability."

The people who plotted this possible plan must possess extraordinary vision in order to implement such a great plan!

"Why though?" Ves asked. "Why does the Big Two seek to foster stronger groups in the Red Ocean?"

"I cannot determine their exact reason, but I speculate that they may have become desperate enough to seek a comprehensive strengthening of humanity beyond their own ranks. The unknown threat in their sights might be so formidable that the Big Two cannot achieve victory without the support of the rest of humanity. Perhaps the old model of dividing humanity into states and keeping us preoccupied with fighting against each other has become outdated. Only by activating the entire potential of every human may human civilization stand a chance against the danger that looms over the horizon."

Though Ves continually reminded himself that Shederin Purnesse could not back up his guesses, he felt that this story made a lot of sense.

One clue that supported Shederin's frightful theory was that Master Willix always alluded to the need to rise above local conflicts and fight against the common enemies of humanity.

She never treated external enemies lightly. Ves suspected she might have other great enemies in mind than the Five Scrolls Compact!

Chapter 3065: A Grand Game of Chess

Ves always had the suspicion that there was more behind the Red Ocean than what the Big Two and everyone else revealed on the surface.

The dwarf galaxy was virgin territory that offered great riches to any human organization. The first thought that anyone would develop when faced with this bountiful region was how difficult it would be to lay claim to everything!

If Ves asked himself whether the Big Two was capable of swallowing the entire Red Ocean with its huge number of star systems, there was no way the MTA and CFA were that incapable.

Then why did they pass off increasing their immediate interests in favor of letting the 'lesser' humans obtain the bulk of the pie?

Everyone knew the Big Two looked down on states and the people who lived in them as space peasants. After the debacles of the Age of Conquest, the current controllers of human space pretty much regarded everyone outside of their own ranks as irresponsible children who could not be trusted with powerful weapons and great responsibility.

They were like female Hexers who treated boys with contempt and distrust. Instead of basing their biases and prejudices on fallacious, unfalsifiable theories, the Big Two instead referred to past historical events as justification for their constrictive policies.

The human empires of the past almost made humanity extinct. Allowing them to field warships and weapons of mass destruction without limit would just lead to an inevitable return to horror days where admirals nuked entire planets to oblivion!

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At least that was the consensus.

"Yet what if the Big Two no longer held this stance?" Shederin Purnesse threw out a radical question. "What if the MTA and CFA are prepared to let the children run free again?"

Ves was shocked yet again! For so long, people like him had become accustomed to living under the hegemony of the Big Two. So many generations had gone by with the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance taking care of all of their 'big boy' problems that people simply took it for granted that this pattern would likely continue throughout their entire lifetimes.

The mere thought that the Big Two would revoke some of the taboos that prevented humanity from descending into a spiral of death and destruction sent a huge shudder through his body.

"What you're saying is difficult to believe." Ves shakily responded. "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof."

"I'm afraid I have to disappoint you, then." Shederin sheepishly smiled. "I do not have possession of proof that can convince you and the public that the Big Two is prepared to loosen the reins. However, in my own professional judgement, I can read and predict the Big Two's movements over time in the same way I do with other states such as the

Garlen Empire and the Bucher Federation. Groups of this scale never move quickly. They are large, ponderous machines that need to plan well in advance and make specific, targeted movements in order to achieve their objective. By recognizing and analyzing the first steps of their grand plans, we can infer where their next steps will lead to. This is why I am reasonably confident in my prediction."

All of this went over Ves' head. In the end, his background and his specialization caused him to lack the vision that someone like Shederin Purnesse possessed. The old man used to be a part of the ruling class of a large and influential state. He was accustomed to seeing and thinking in terms of huge, societal shifts.

Ves became more convinced that roping in someone like Shederin Purnesse was a good idea. As much as Calabast had proven herself to be adequate in fulfilling the role of a diplomat, she simply lacked the vision that separated true experts in statecraft and foreign relations to those that merely dabbled in these fields.

Of course, he was also aware that Shederin Purnesse was putting up a show of some sorts. As a consummate salesman, how could Ves not recognize that he was being subjected to a sales pitch?

He didn't mind. He set out to rescue the Purnesse Family in order to recruit a diplomat to begin with. It was natural for the most likely candidate to fulfill this role to show off his chops.

Ves still remained skeptical of this train of thought. It sounded too grand and far-reaching.

"Even if the Big Two are plotting something like this, I don't see how this is relevant to our clan. We just want to carve a place for ourselves in the galaxy. Whether our society remains the same or is shifting into another form, we don't have the power to influence these enormous changes."

"That does not mean it is pointless for us to see and think ahead, Patriarch Ves. Let me put it this way. The Big Two are chess players and the Red Ocean is a new chessboard that they have just prepared. Where do you think pioneers such as you fit in this picture?"

Ves lowered his eyes. "Smaller people like us can only become their chess pieces if we wish to take part in this game."

"That is an apt way to describe the situation. The game revolving around the Red Ocean changes as the Big Two continue to pursue their own strategies. Chess pieces such as you can only obediently move to the squares we are directed to. We can do anything we want as long as we abide by the rules of the games and stay within our respective squares. The moment we act out of turn, move to a square where chess

pieces like us aren't meant to go or break some other game rule, we endanger the integrity of the entire chess match."

"We don't intend to do anything of the sort." Ves insisted. "I don't have any illegal or improper intentions in mind. I just want to escape the confines of the stagnant power structure in this old galaxy and compete at the same starting line as the rest."

"What are your goals, exactly? I believe it is best that you establish this first."

Ves raised his finger. "First, I want to achieve long-term stability for the Larkinson Clan. I want to establish my own sovereign power base in space because I have suffered too many betrayals from powerful states. I think the only way to achieve this goal is to form a nomadic fleet that is not subject to the rule of any state and can always move away from dangerous threats."

He raised a second finger. "Second, I want to achieve success and prosperity for myself and my clan. Becoming a Master Mech Designer or dare I say Star Designer has always been my highest ambition. I have great confidence in my ability to make it this far, but it will take a long time and great effort to succeed where so many of my competitors and rivals have failed. The Red Ocean offers so many new opportunities that I will definitely receive the stimulation and new experiences that can propel my creative journey in mech design."

This was a rather difficult argument to convey to laymen, but surprisingly Shederin Purnesse nodded in understanding. He had worked with plenty of high-ranking mech designers before.

Seeing that he didn't need to explain his last point any further, Ves raised his third finger.

"Third..." He trailed. He hesitated for a moment, but decided that Shederin was worth at least a measure of his trust. "Let's just say that I have very powerful enemies. To be honest, part of the reason why I am so eager to leave for the Red Ocean is to escape the net of this enemy."

Shederin could immediately tell that Ves was sharing sensitive information. The old man lowered his voice and leaned forward.

"How powerful is this enemy of yours?"

The ambassador cleverly did not ask for the identity of the adversary, knowing that Ves didn't want to touch upon that subject today.

Ves always found it pleasant to speak to smart people. Then again, he also felt very paranoid that he would reveal way more about himself than he intended to. Fortunately,

Shederin Purnesse would become a Larkinson soon enough, so there shouldn't be too many risks involved with revealing a portion of his ongoing concerns.

"Let's just say that my archenemy has a reach that spans across all of human space and perhaps beyond." Ves carefully stated. "The Milky Way is pretty much its entire backyard. I simply don't feel safe enough staying in the territory that the enemy has entrenched itself so deeply."

This was especially after the Crown Uprising raised the curtain on how many splinter organizations and hidden moles the Five Scrolls Compact had raised! They had agents everywhere and it was incredibly frightening how they could even insert traitors within the ranks of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan!

Shederin looked thoughtful. "If the reach of your enemy is that great, then you won't escape it by running to the Red Ocean."

"I'm aware of that, but at the very least they're starting off on the same foot as other pioneers. The disparity in power won't be so big over there. Besides, the Big Two's attention is squarely placed in the Red Ocean. You just said that any improper and insubordinate chess pieces will be eliminated by the chess players, so the rules of the game actually affords me great protection."

A lot of thoughts passed through Shederin's mind. Ves had revealed a lot of clues about himself and the supposed enemy he feared. If the former ambassador came to any conclusions, he kept them to himself, though.

"I see." The Purnesser eventually said. "So safety is your primary motive. You think the rules will protect you against those who don't intend to play the game from the start. That's a workable solution. However..."

Ves crossed his arms and raised his eyebrow. "What is the matter?"

"Have you ever thought that the chess game you are jumping into can be just as dangerous as your current situation?" Shederin challenged Ves. "It's called jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. The Red Ocean is not as safe as it sounds. While I am glad to see that you recognize the surface-level dangers, what is taking place in the dwarf galaxy is only the opening act of what is to come."

"This..."

"The Big Two absolutely did not open up the Red Ocean for exploration and colonization in order to give us 'lessers' freebies. The crucible is still in the process of heating up. Once it reaches the right temperature, that is when the true forging begins."

Now Ves understood why Shederin started off with explaining his grand theory about the Big Two's actual intentions for the Red Ocean. By knowing the possible context of

the chess game, he had a much greater awareness of what future chess pieces like his clan might be going through in the future.

Though Ves constantly reminded himself that the narrative weaved by Shederin was purely based on speculation, his own cognition of what the MTA and CFA were like caused him to feel it might have a basis in truth.

"Not every chess piece gets taken off the board over the course of a match." Ves noted. "Depending on how the match proceeds, at least some pieces will be able to stay sound. What makes you think our odds of remaining on the board are so low?"

"Because at the current state of your clan and alliance, you can only be treated as a dispensable pawn that can be sacrificed, forgotten or discarded whenever it is convenient. You do not even come close to matching qualifications to become anything greater such as a knight, bishop, rook or queen."

"According to the rules of chess, any pawn that has reached the opposite side of the board can be promoted into a greater chess piece." Ves pedantically stated.

Shederin Purnesse responded with a contemptuous smile. "Let me respond with two questions. First, what are the odds that you and your clan can reach the eight rank of the chessboard? Second, how does doing this align with the goals that you have stated?"

"..."

Those were highly pertinent questions, and ones that Ves couldn't easily answer.

Chapter 3066: The Lamentations of a Pawn

Ves never held a discussion about his future ambitions to this extent with anyone.

Sure, he shared a few of his dreams and aspirations to his inner circle and his trusted companions. He told Gloriana plenty of fanciful-sounding hopes, and she always responded with a smile and a clap of her hands.

Though Ves could always count on his wife's unflinching support, she did not offer that much help when it came to questioning his assumptions and asking some critical questions.

She was a mech designer, just like him. While both of them could talk for many days about the strengths and weaknesses of any given mech design, statecraft and grand geopolitical shifts fell well beyond their area of expertise.

No one in his inner circle specialized in these vastly different fields because he never recruited anyone who was good at this to begin with. Perhaps it would have been a

different story if he managed to rope in people like Senator Tovar or some fancy noble from the Sentinel Kingdom, but the recruitment priorities of the Larkinsons had always been aimed at mech pilots and mid-level professionals.

Though Ves always treated upper class snobs with contempt, he might have to revise his stance towards them. The rulers and shakers of a state had to be good at something in order to remain in power...

At the very least, their vision alone was worth keeping around. This was what separated people like Shederin from Calabast and everyone else in his clan that sounded smart.

"What is the point you are trying to make?" Ves frowned.

He decided not to answer the two questions posed by the former ambassador. He felt that they were very thorny because he had no clue how to answer them. They were too open-ended and subject to interpretation.

Shederin sighed. "You hold great responsibility as the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan. Now that you preside over an organization that encompasses more than 100,000 members, you cannot afford to view everything on a surface level. You must learn how to look deeper and grasp the truth that everyone else routinely overlooks."

"How can I do that?"

"There are no easy solutions, patriarch. Some are born and raised to rule. Others acquire the ability after long years of trial and error. This is a more uncertain path because any error can easily become fatal to you. This is your current path, and it is not advisable for you to continue in this direction. This is my preliminary judgement based on what I have learned about your clan and observed from your responses."

In other words, Shederin pretty much thought that Ves was no good as patriarch!

Ves curled his lips into a wry smile. "What is your solution?"

"You should leave this to the professionals. As a mech designer, you should not be forced to spend day and night on solving problems outside of your area of expertise. There are ways to maintain control over the clan without surrendering supreme authority. There are many possible people in your clan that can adequately govern and direct the clan on your behalf."

Of course, Shederin Purnesse was obliquely directing Ves to the members of the Purnesse Family. No one else in the Larkinson fleet came close to matching the sheer governing qualifications of a group of former officials!

Ves deferred this matter by waving his hand. "Let's not get too specific this early. Right now, I am wondering what suggestions you might have in order to increase our odds of

survival in the Red Ocean. If it is anything like the crucible that you describe, how can we ensure we won't get eliminated in the coming struggle?"

"I cannot give you any specific solutions." The old man carefully replied. "That is your prerogative so long as you continue to hold your position as patriarch. I am also not sufficiently versed in the circumstances of your clan to formulate any specific advice. I can speak on general terms, however."

"Please share your wisdom."

"Very well. Let me begin with asking what you rather prefer. Do you want to surpass the majority of the pioneers in the Red Ocean and reach the other shore where you can be promoted from the status of pawn to a greater chess piece?"

Ves shrugged. "It sounds nice if we can move up from a pawn to a knight. I don't dare to ask for anything greater. My ambitions don't lie there. I don't think this is the best course of action, though. I don't want to treat the Red Ocean as a competition where I have to climb on top of the bodies of the losers. Why can't I just find my own niche and focus on my mech design and mech sales activities? My greatest priority is to become a Star Designer. Nothing else is comparable. As long as I become one of the best mech designers in human space, I will naturally be able to fulfill many other goals at that time."

"If your ambitions only stretch this far, then you will have to settle with the identity of a pawn for a long time. Considering how long it takes for mech designers to become a Master or Star Designer, you will not be able to elevate your role on the chessboard for the duration of this chess match."

"And that is bad?"

"Not necessarily. Some chess pieces are more valuable alive than dead. The Big Two and any other big players that can reluctantly take their place around the board do not have a habit of wasting their pieces at will."

"Are you referring to the first-rate superstates?"

Shederin nodded. "The Terrans and Rubarthans have made their own mark on this chess game by forming their respective alliances. If you believe that either of them have something to offer to you, then it is not a bad idea to shelter under their wing. Of course, the Red Ocean Promise issued by the Terrans is a rat race in itself. I do not believe you are interested in becoming a part of the Terran ruling group."

Ves vigorously shook his head. "I don't have any intentions to rule any states or bark on the orders of the Terrans. I already told you that I don't trust any states."

"Does that mean you are not in favor of joining the Rubarthan Pact either?"

"If it means taking orders from a stuffy Rubarthan prince, then forget about it. One of the attractions of the Red Ocean is that it was supposed to be devoid of entrenched powers. I don't want to escape the old power structure of the Milky Way just so that I can take part in its mirror version."

Shederin's expression twitched. "The two major alliances impose many restrictions and expectations upon its members, but the shelter they offer is quite substantial. If you reject them both, your future road will become a lot more arduous. The Red Ocean Union lacks too much cohesion. No matter how it develops in the future, it will never be able to turn into a monolithic entity. That is good if you want to maintain the independence of your clan, but that also means that it is just as vulnerable as before."

"Then what can we do to raise our chances of survival under these conditions?"

"You become a bigger, meaner pawn or you band together with other like-minded pawns." The ambassador loosely answered. "Right now, I favor the latter. I think that you can impart a greater meaning in the Golden Skull Alliance. For now, it sounds as if it mainly exists in order to split the cost of a beyonder ticket and share responsibilities once you reach the Red Ocean. It can be more in my opinion."

"What are you trying to suggest?"

"Who says that you are not allowed to expand your alliance once you have planted your roots in the Red Ocean? Size matters. The larger your alliance, the more misgivings that enemies will have when they contemplate attacking you. Unlike the greater alliances led by the Terrans, Rubarthans and so on, a collective group led by you and your clan is much less conspicuous and much more controllable."

"We'll have to find trustworthy, useful and willing allies, though." Ves frowned. "We never had much success on that front."

Shederin responded with a confident smile. "Leave that to me and my team. Though I do not think highly of every aspect of your clan and alliance, I do think that they have the basis to become greater. Great enough to turn you into a strong and mostly-independent pawn that can survive on the chessboard long enough for the Big Two to obtain the results they want. Does that sound desirable in your ears?"

Ves nodded. "If you can deliver such an outcome, then I am willing to embrace your advice. It all sounds a bit too distant and complicated to me. If you didn't tell me all of this, I wouldn't have pictured myself and my clan as a dispensable pawn."

"Your dream of embarking on a grand expedition while earning your keep by designing and selling mechs as a neutral mech business is a pleasant illusion, but reality will not allow you to operate in this fashion." Shederin pointedly said. "The Red Ocean is much looser when it comes to competition. You cannot assume that everyone will behave as if

they are taking part in a well-regulated mech market because the region is still far from reaching this level."

Ves lowered his head and rubbed his nose. Now that the former ambassador plainly pointed out the many flawed and overly-optimistic assumptions of his future plan, he felt like he was a child who had just received a reality check from an adult.

It was never pleasant to hear someone deconstruct his future aspirations, but Ves did not reject this brutal dose. His future and the future of his clan was at stake. It would be incredibly short-sighted to allow his pride to get the better of his good sense.

He plainly recognized that while he had the right to set his goals for the future, that did not necessarily mean he was the best person to realize them all! There were many other knowledgeable experts like Shederin Purnesse who could form much more comprehensive and secure plans.

Ves tiredly rubbed his face. "I get what you are saying. Your suggestion to expand the Golden Skull Alliance has merit, but a lot can go wrong if we go down this road. Let's do it like this. I will give you a couple of weeks to acclimatize to the Larkinson Clan, understand our exact conditions and perform a lot of research. Once you are ready, I'd like you to present a more thorough, detailed and rational plan on how my clan and I can survive and thrive in the Red Ocean. Whether you take the Golden Skull Alliance as a basis or not, I want a solution that is workable to us. Keep in mind that we can't do everything and that there are some measures that I will never take no matter what. For example, you can forget about trying to convince me to found a state."

"Understood." Shederin steadily smiled and nodded his head. "I shall endeavor to deliver a comprehensive roadmap to you within two or three weeks. It is not essential for you to follow the plan I lay out. As long as you become aware of all of the potential dangers of the Red Ocean and the intentions of those who have a stake in its development, you are better off than other pioneers who solely believe in their own strength."

In the former ambassador's opinion, the Larkinson Clan may possess a considerable amount of might, but it never even came close to matching the energy of the bigger players such as the Terran Confederation, Rubarth Empire, the Big Two and so on. Those were the true movers and shakers of the Red Ocean!

"I may be content to remain a pawn for now, but that won't remain true forever." Ves quietly vowed.

He did not have any realistic expectations of changing his current status. He was just a Journeyman and his clan did not possess the capital to leap above the heads of other pawns.

However... the situation might be different in a couple of centuries!

"Every pawn yearns to be promoted." Shederin affirmed.

He did not mention that most of them ended up discarded to the side over the course of a match.

Chapter 3067: Melkor's Satisfaction

The Larkinson Clan proudly departed from the Trieden System after achieving a fairly costly but decisive victory against the Diyast Family.

Though the short and relatively limited engagement did not come close to matching the scale and stakes of prior battles, the victory proved crucial in uniting and lifting the confidence of every Larkinson.

The more established members had no doubts about the success of the operation, but they still felt a lot of relief. Their mech forces had not grown soft during the long months of reconstruction after the Battle of Reckoning!

The newer members all became impressed at the superiority exhibited by the Avatars and Vandals. They had all heard stories and reviewed footage of the Larkinson Clan's previous battles, but now that they witnessed the powerful Larkinson mechs in action, they gained a much more emotional appreciation of the advantages that a mech designer like Ves could bestow.

"I underestimated these Bright Warriors. I thought that they were just boring old starter mechs, but the Avatars somehow manage to make the most out of their capabilities!"

"Piloting a Ferocious Piranha is a lot safer than using another light mech. Their strange glow did not turn out to be completely effective against those Diyast pirates, but the disturbance it causes already imposes a considerable handicap on the enemy. This is absolutely crazy!"

"I thought that the women of the clan called the shots around here considering that everyone is raving about those former Hexers and those sword-mad women... I'm glad that the Avatars have shown that they can put up a good fight as well. Men like us need a destination as well!"

The last sentiment was especially important. Though the Larkinson Clan did not emphasize any gender, its entanglement with Hexers along with the notable strength of the Penitent Sisters and Swordmaidens caused many male clan members to develop anxiety about their place in the clan.

The brief but decisive show of force by the Avatars and Vandals laid many doubts to rest. Even if those two mech forces did not specifically cater to men, their broad member base gave every ambitious mech pilot enough assurance that they had a place where they could develop their potential to the fullest.

Of course, the proudest and most satisfied members of the Larkinson Clan had to be the Avatars of Myth!

Across the entire fleet, the Avatars practically broke out in celebration. While they did not accomplish anything as drastic as saving the Larkinson Clan from the brink of annihilation, they gained a lot of capital to lift their heads high again!

Perhaps the only other regret aside from leaving so much valuable salvage behind was that expert candidates such as Tamarin Larkinson and Isobel Kotin failed to find their breakthrough opportunity.

Still, this was not a factor that they could control. All of the expert candidates of the Larkinson Clan failed to find their opportunity during the Battle of Reckoning as well so this was a fairly normal outcome.

Commander Melkor Larkinson beheld the reactions from his subordinates and felt as if a weight lifted from his shoulders. As long as the Avatars kept making progress, his leadership should not fall into question for the time being.

"I still have to do more to lift my Avatars up." He muttered to himself.

A round of briefings, planning and lots of problem solving ensued. The Avatars lost a substantial amount of mechs and combat carriers. The loss of the latter was especially painful because this meant that they permanently lost a portion of their maximum combat effectiveness.

Acquiring replacement combat carriers in order to restore this lost mech capacity turned out to be a lot more difficult than in the past.

"What is the problem, Vivian?" Melkor asked.

"We live in a period that is just beginning to respond to the Crown Uprising." The projection of the Chief Ship Designer responded. "You've seen what happened to organizations like the Purnesse Family. Their lack of priority in investing in their own security almost resulted in their demise. Do you think that other organizations in the same position are willing to wait until it is their turn to put their heads on the chopping block? These groups have deep pockets and an even deeper appreciation for their lives. You can imagine what that will do to the demand for mech and other relevant combat assets."

A large proportion of civilized space featured a fairly high degree of security. This was especially the case in highly-regulated planets and star systems which imposed strict restrictions on private ownership of mechs.

However, with crown terrorists emerging from every part of human society, the rules that limited the potential for collateral damage also left civilians without the ability to defend themselves and their community against madmen with nothing to lose!

"Are you saying that we will permanently be down a couple of combat carriers?" Melkor frowned.

"The construction of combat carriers is a lot harder than other vessels." Vivian calmly reminded Melkor. "They are complicated engineering projects that have to be tough and heavy enough to withstand enemy fire but also need to be light and mobile enough to make landfall and ascend to orbit. Only a portion of shipyards are capable of building starships of this caliber, and most of their order books are already filled with orders from important clients."

Melkor was afraid of that. "What about the second-hand market?"

"Every ship of decent quality has already disappeared from there. The good ones have either been bought at inflated prices or removed from listing as their owners reconsidered the wisdom of selling a strategic asset that can provide them a critical amount of security. As for the remainder... it would be irresponsible for you to assign your men to these damaged goods."

In other words, the Avatars wouldn't be gaining any additional ships to carry their mechs anytime soon.

This was good because the Larkinsons planned to get rid of their sub-capital ships anyway, but before they reached this destination the Avatars would not be able to contribute as much as before!

Commander Melkor fell under a difficult dilemma. According to his own judgement, Ves and the expeditionary fleet tended to careen from one crisis to another on a fairly regular basis.

Though the patriarch promised everyone that he did not intend to provoke trouble anytime soon after surviving a difficult ordeal on Prosperous Hill VI, the credibility of this statement was seriously suspect.

In the following days, Melkor dealt with the other consequences of the battle. He had to make arrangements for the dead, consider various nominations for promotions and also judge the implementation of the new combat method employed by the Avatars.

Of course, the Avatar Commander could not avoid a discussion on this issue with the person who laid the foundation for the new method.

When Melkor sat down in his office aboard the Graveyard and tried to make a call, the projection Ves soon appeared above his desk.

"Melkor. It's about time we talked about what your Avatars have accomplished in the previous battle." Ves began. "What you just did could have ended up badly. Even if you did not do anything too extreme this time, experimenting with anything related to the mind and onto humans in general is very dangerous. Those Avatar mech pilots that have managed to draw strength from Goldie could have easily bitten off more than they could chew."

Melkor frowned. He expected Ves to start this discussion off with praise or a jealous rebuke. This was a different response.

"Are you displeased?"

Ves shook his head. "Not this time. I just didn't expect that you and your men would dabble in this field without knowing what you were getting into. I didn't expect you to unveil this kind of surprise either. You are lucky you cooperated with Goldie this time. If you tried to accomplish something on your own, then you could have easily endangered your own men."

He spent a few more minutes emphasizing the many risks involved with messing with spirituality. He refrained from going into the specifics, but what he said was enough to get the message across.

Commander Melkor felt a lot less satisfied after he became aware of so many risks.

"I see. I'll tell my men to curb their experimentation. That said, we can't give up this new method. It worked excellently in battle and the cat's already out of the bag. Our Avatars have become more motivated than ever to embrace our Larkinson values in order to meet the requirements to invoke the Golden Cat in battle. Taking this away from them will not only produce a lot of misunderstandings, but also rob us of one of our main points of pride."

Ves reassuringly gestured with his hand. "I have no intentions to prohibit the new method that you have developed. I already figured what is going on and I don't see any unacceptable risks at the moment. Just make sure you don't spread it out and keep it at its current form. It works best if the mech pilots are paired with the Bright Warrior and attempt to reach out to the Golden Cat. Any other combination will not only be a lot less effective, but also open up your pilots to dangerous external influences."

If he didn't warn them off, who knew if the Avatars would attempt to forge a connection to a dangerous design spirit such as Zeigra?

Even attempting to bond with an abnormal entity such as Lufa and the Illustrious One could easily go wrong!

After making all of this clear, Ves began to compliment the Avatars.

"What you guys did was dangerous, but fruitful. You managed to accomplish a goal that I have always wanted to reach. I suggest that you refrain from exploring new territory and try to consolidate and impart this method to as many of your mech pilots as possible. If you can enable most of your mech pilots to establish a powerful combat boost in battle, then the overall performance of your Avatars will definitely make a substantial difference in battle!"

"Our boost lasts longer than that of the other mech forces. "Melkor recognized the greatest advantage of the method. "We haven't performed too many extensive tests as of yet, but it should be no problem to maintain the empowered condition for at least 20 minutes."

20 minutes! This was an eternity in a high-intensity battle!

Though the mentalities of the Avatar mech pilots in question slowly wore down over this period, it was still worth it as even a modest boost in combat effectiveness could tilt a battle towards a decisive victory.

The Battle of Trieden II clearly proved this was the case!

"Do you have any questions or requests regarding this topic?" Ves asked.

"Yes. You just stated earlier that this method works best if our Avatars are piloting Bright Warriors. Is it possible for it to work while piloting other mechs?"

Ves briefly paused. "Theoretically, it should be possible. The basis of this method lies in the Golden Cat. Without her assistance, your men would have never been able to perform so well. However, the Bright Warrior is specifically suited for this method. It features targeted accommodations that are absent in my other mech designs. Perhaps your Avatars may become proficient enough to perform the same trick while piloting another mech model, but it had better be one of ours."

"Got it. I'd like to explore this possibility later on once my men master the initial method. Of course, we will fully cooperate with you. I don't want to expose my men to undue risks."

This was just the start as far as Melkor was concerned. He had always wanted the Avatars of Myth to live up to their name in truth, and now he finally saw hope of realizing this ambition!

"You're doing a good job, Melkor." Ves affirmed. "I'm pleased with the initiative that you and your men have shown. Even if you acted foolishly by dabbling in a field that you have no idea about, I don't want you to stop finding ways to strengthen yourselves. Everyone else is doing their best to do the same."

Melkor was well aware of this. The Avatars may have caught up to the other elite mech forces, but they could easily fall behind again. He had to make sure that his men continued to close the gap!

Chapter 3068: Larkinson Boot Camp

"Move faster, you lazy dolts!"

An electric whip raked across the back of Novilon Purnesse. The former counselor of the Grand Loxic Republic uttered an undignified cry of pain in response, but he tried his best not to tarry in his run.

Before the Purnesse Family departed from the Violet Estates, the proud son of Ambassador Shederin Purnesse had always lived a life of luxury and comfort.

As an up-and-coming foreign relations official, Novilon was accustomed to relying on his mind to achieve success. The outcome of a strategic business deal or the establishment of a vital alliance depended heavily on his ability to reach an understanding with his counterparts and finding clever ways to bring two different sides together.

Though he still had a lot to go before he was able to match his impressive father, Novilon was already a capable diplomat and negotiator in his current state!

It was too bad that all of his rhetoric fell onto deaf ears.

As he and many of his fellow well-spoken family members got carted off to the Swordmaidens, they immediately had a taste of Larkinson hospitality.

Within an hour after arriving onboard a Swordmaiden combat carrier, he and the rest of his batch were forced to remove their high-tech smart clothing as well as all of their equipment such as comms, shield generators and other gadgets...

The only clothes they were allowed to wear were plain, synthetic grey clothing that completely stripped the dignity of all of the Purnessers!

"We look like prisoners!" One of his cousins complained.

"Where did this fabric come from? It doesn't regulate my body temperature at all and it doesn't adjust its shape to mold my shoulders!"

"Give us back our clothing! This treatment is inhumane!"

As the Purnessers started to express their dissatisfaction, a handful of tall, imposing Swordmaidens entered the changing room.

Their large, imposing forms caused all of the Purnessers to quiet down.

All of their courage had instantly drained. Their response might have been different if they were still on familiar territory while wearing garments that allowed them to stand above the masses.

Yet this was a completely different situation. The Purnessers assigned to this combat carrier were all stuffed inside an unfamiliar, bare metal locker room. Their current outfits did not flatter their soft figures at all. Instead, they emphasized their vulnerability, especially when they stood in front of the muscled women who all carried their greatswords behind their backs!

One of the lead Swordmaidens spat onto the deck. "Huh, you disappoint me. At least have the guts to complain in front of my face! Didn't you want your old clothes back? They're right next door. If any of you think that the shirts and pants that we've provided to you are not up to your standards, then tell me now. If not, I'll assume that none of you mind wearing your current outfit for the duration of your stay aboard our ship."

Though very few Purnessers felt pleased by this news, none of them were stupid enough to speak out. They recognized the situation they were in and knew better than to challenge the authority of their new hosts.

The lead Swordmaiden looked disappointed. "Anyway, I'm in charge here. I've been assigned to kick you all into shape, and I am going to do my best to turn you into a semblance of a soldier."

This time, some of the Purnessers couldn't hold themselves back anymore.

"What?!"

"I'm too old!"

"QUIET!" The Swordmaiden trainer roared!

Her voice reverberated throughout the entire locker room. Her lungs were so powerful that Novilon and the other Purnessers felt as if her shout physically pushed them back!

The woman in question gestured towards her fellow Swordmaidens. A couple of them subsequently strode forward. They immediately approached the loudest of the complainers before striking their stomachs with underhanded punches!

"Ahh!"

"Ohh!"

"It hurts!"

The Swordmaidens appeared to have acted utterly without mercy, but they carefully controlled their strength. If they employed their full force, their victims could have easily suffered crippling or even fatal internal damage!

They instead employed enough force to prevent any permanent damage but cause their victims to collapse onto deck while wailing in pain.

The Swordmaiden trainer smirked. "Every time you disobey my instructions, you'll get beaten. Every time you talk back to us, you'll get beaten. Every time your mind gets filled with useless thoughts, you'll get beaten! Have I made myself clear to you all, or do you need a more physical demonstration to prove my point?"

"Madame, we did not sign up to be soldiers!" A female Purnesser mustered her courage and took a step forward. "We all know what you are trying to do. We are not ignorant, young teenagers who are unfamiliar with how loyalty is forged. Your approach is not only needlessly cruel, but completely inappropriate to our current situation. According to the theories of Professor Esther Hamelin, indoctrination is considerably less effective if the target audience is aware of what is taking place. Dr. Peter Volon recommends a more intellectual approach in order to convince people of our station to identify with a group. I humbly suggest that—"

"You talk too much!"

The Swordmaiden trainer abruptly surged forward and closed the distance within a blink of an eye. Before the Purnesser woman could finish her sentence, she received a painful wallop against her cheek that caused her to cry out in pain before falling onto her back!

An ugly bruise had already formed on her flawless, corrected skin.

"Let me make one thing clear to you all." The formidable warrior addressed the crowd. "You people have no say here. You either obey or keep your mouths shut. You're not Larkinsons to us yet. With attitudes like yours, our clan wouldn't even be willing to take you in! For some reason, the patriarch really wants you to give you a chance, so it is our duty to make sure you meet our minimum standards. Here in the Larkinson Clan, we don't care about what a bigshot you used to be. That part of your lives is over. From now on, you need to learn to become one of us, and I know just how to do that. Let's begin with a warm-up!"

What proceeded from there was like a training camp from hell. All of the Purnessers, no matter what kind of shape they were in, had to follow the instructions of their new trainers!

Blood, sweat and tears literally flowed from their bodies as the heartless Swordmaidens continually forced them to squeeze every bit of strength from their muscles.

It was insane!

Though there were a number of Purnessers who kept their bodies in shape for professional or personal reasons, most family members led placid lives.

The last time that Novilon broke out in a run was at least a decade ago! If he ever needed to go somewhere quickly, it was much more elegant and efficient to rely on his smart clothing to propel him forward.

Running was practically foreign to him! Even if his body was kept fairly fit through a combination of genetic modification and routine medical treatments, there was only so much that they could do. His complete lack of exercise and his familiarity with all of the pain and discomfort associated with heavy physical exertion caused him to collapse onto the deck numerous times.

His reprieve never lasted long.

Whenever Novilon seemingly lost all of his strength, a Swordmaiden would come along and either kick his side or strike him with an electric whip.

"You lazy bum! Your training is not over yet! Get back up to your feet and finish your assignment!"

The Swordmaidens did not completely rely on primitive methods to whip the Purnessers into shape. They had borrowed the assistance of Lifer medical experts in order to determine the exact physical condition of the new arrivals. The Larkinsons subsequently composed individually-tailored training programs for everyone.

Though the Purnessers initially thought that this measure meant that they wouldn't be pushed too much, the truth was very much different!

This was because the Swordmaidens did not give them any slack at all! If the data stated that Novilon was able to run three laps around the interior of the combat carrier, then he better complete the laps before he was allowed to rest!

The absolute limit that every Purnesser was capable of turned out to be so difficult to reach that it was no different from torture if they tried to squeeze out the final portions of strength from their abused bodies.

What was worse was that none of them enjoyed any proper rest if they managed to run the laps or lifted the weights according to their instructions.

During mealtime, the only food and drink the Swordmaidens were willing to serve to them amounted to a mug of water and a nutrient pack.

Those that couldn't take the indignity of being fed space peasant food quickly learned to keep their objections to themselves.

No one spoke during these relatively quiet periods. They were simply too tired and in pain to socialize with each other.

In the past, even the least important member of the Purnesse Family was accustomed to eating five or seven-course meals prepared by the professional chefs under their employ.

Now, the only way to fill their stomachs was to tear open the packet of their nutrient pack and spoon the dry, dense and crumbling contents into their mouths.

The less he could say about the taste, the better!

What got to Novilon and many of his fellow Purnessers was that the nutrient packs weren't even of the good variety!

Higher-quality nutrient packs not only put an actual effort into making their contents taste adequate, but also heated up their contents.

The ones that the Swordmaidens supplied to the Purnessers were made by third-class brands that sought to package all of the essential nutrients that humans needed with the least amount of cost!

Everyone learned to bear with it, though. They needed the sustenance to give them the energy to keep up with their next form of training.

Though the harsh and repetitive training sessions caused many Purnessers to become so weary that they could barely form any coherent thoughts, people like Novillon still maintained at least some awareness at times.

What he found perplexing was that the Swordmaidens weren't even doing their best to reform the thoughts of his fellow family members.

They rarely held lectures on how great it was to become a part of the Larkinson Clan or the ideals they should follow.

Instead, these female brutes kept pushing them to exercise their bodies and drain all of their energy without resorting to any fancy measures.

While this approach lacked sophistication, Novilon slowly realized that it was not ineffective.

As they slowly gained strength, the Purnessers started to feel more pleased with their own fitness.

The constant torture and exertion toughened them all up. Whether it was mentally or physically, they all improved at a modest rate.

Of course, the Swordmaiden instructors were used to seeing much better results from their trainees, but it was already fairly impressive that non-soldiers were able to make noticeable progress.

What was even more important was that the Purnessers slowly unlearned their old habits and thought patterns. They no longer spoke out without thought or demanded luxuries that they didn't deserve.

They also shed the pride or identity of the upper class. The Larkinsons hated stratification. Every Purnesser had to get accustomed to a militaristic culture that stood in stark contrast to the culture of the Grand Loxic Republic.

It didn't matter if they weren't cut out to be soldiers!

Even if they were most suited to fulfill civilian functions, everyone in the Larkinson Clan was expected to put up a fight if necessary. There was no escape if an enemy cornered the fleet and vanquished the Larkinson mech forces in battle.

Novilon realized that the military roots and battle-laden history of the Larkinson Clan had thoroughly warped its members to the point where they did not know any peace!

Only battle was on the minds of the Swordmaidens and the rest of the clan. Even if there was no hostilities on the horizon, the Larkinsons all behaved as if it was only a matter of time before they entered into another scuffle.

What did the Purnessers get into?

Chapter 3069: Changing Cross

Time continued to pass. After the excitement on Trieden II, the entire expeditionary fleet avoided any further incidents as it made its way out of the Grand Loxic Republic.

While there were a number of people like Ves that were afraid the Loxians would somehow take issue with what the clan had done in the Trieden System, nothing actually happened.

The Larkinson Clan and its allies smoothly passed through Loxian space without getting approached by any state-wide authority.

It seemed that no one who currently held power in the large state was interested in confronting the Larkinsons or taking them to account.

Just as many had predicted, the Grand Loxic Republic was too preoccupied with more immediate concerns. There was little to no benefit to confronting the Larkinsons, and the rude visitors were already on their way out anyway.

It would have been a different story if the Larkinsons opted to stay in the state, but since this wasn't the case, there was no point in investing any manpower, resources and assets into dealing with the powerful guests.

The grand expedition was back on track... The previous battle provided a lot of benefits to the Larkinson Clan. Not only did the Avatars and Vandals test out their new strategies and fighting approaches in a serious engagement, the other Larkinsons also gained a better appreciation of the potential of the Bright Warrior model.

Ves gained a heap of data on the performance of the prototype enhanced luminar crystals that he had installed in the rifles of a small number of mechs.

Though he had very little doubt that the tough, second-class luminar crystals would perform reliably, he still gained a lot of assurance that his latest innovation would fully meet the needs of his future expert mechs!

Though the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan basically acted as spectators to this recent incident, the two organizations did not remain idle.

In truth, both of them had become preoccupied with getting used to their new 'kinship networks!'

"It's quite interesting to see what the Larkinsons are capable of with these strange networks of theirs." Professor Benedict Cortez stated as he approached a balcony and looked down at a large design lab where over a hundred low-ranking mech designers quietly worked on their assignments.

As a Senior Mech Designer, how could he not have his own design teams?

Different from the Larkinson Clan's Design Department, Professor Benedict had yet to hire any high-ranking mech designers. Journeymen weren't easy to find, especially the good ones that he could tolerate.

As Benedict quietly tried to figure out how he could make up for this shortcoming in the coming months, Patriarch Reginald Cross joined him in looking down below.

The vision of the powerful expert pilot and leader had changed after the Crossers forged its latest agreement with the Larkinsons.

When Reginald observed each and every Crosser mech designer at work, he sensed a small flame in each of them. This flame provided both warmth and comfort to him and anyone who was a part of the Cross Clan.

It was an interesting phenomenon and one that had brought every Crosser closer to each other.

The fact that the latest changes also completely wiped out the spies and crown terrorists among the Cross Clan also did much in restoring everyone's trust in each other!

"What we are just getting to terms with is only a fraction of what the Larkinsons currently enjoy." The Senior Mech Designer spoke. "Everything we've witnessed and everything we've heard about their unique combat capabilities makes me feel jealous sometimes. Patriarch Ves Larkinson is breaking new ground every couple of months. His ability to churn out one innovation after another makes me feel the urge to crack open his head in order to see what kind of abnormal mind is capable of producing so many oddities."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Reginald gruffly responded. "I'll crack open your skull myself if you kill one of the contributors of the mech that will allow me to reach and surpass my father."

"I was just joking."

"Good, because I wasn't. Nothing will stop me from achieving my goal. Not even you, my friend."

Professor Benedict sighed. "I miss being in charge of my own organization. No one dared to talk to me like that in the past."

Even though he said that, he still preferred his current life. Compared to slumming it outside of civilized space and designing mechs for awful and incompetent pirates, he much preferred to tailor his products for highly-trained second-class soldiers. Benedict no longer had to force himself to dumb down his own work in order to make his mechs usable to his current target audience.

This alone was worth accepting the Cross Clan's terms!

In order for him to accomplish his own objectives, Professor Benedict acquiesced to joining the 'Cross Network' and permanently tied his future to that of the Crossers.

He was the most prominent outsider to join the Cross Clan and a model to anyone else that came afterwards.

Meanwhile, Patriarch Reginald Cross was silently relieved that his good friend and guest designer truly committed to his clan. The mech designers that previously worked for the Crossers had all cut and run once everything started to go downhill.

The existence of this network provided him with a lot of guarantees that this would never be repeated.

Even though the actual power of the network was not able to impose any constraints or exert any influence to someone as formidable as a Senior Mech Designer, it was still reassuring that Professor Benedict allowed himself to form a bond with the Cross Warlord.

Reginald pulled out a hefty metal cross from his coat. The industrially-forged object deliberately lacked refinement, but that was just the way the former citizen of the Garlen Empire liked it. The Cross of Rebirth and the living soul that resided inside uniquely matched the temperament of the Cross Clan.

They were proof that Ves Larkinson was truly capable of designing the expert mech that Reginald yearned for. He eagerly awaited the introduction of the first expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan. Their design and performance served as a nice preview of what he could expect from his own future war machine.

Professor Benedict glanced at the imposing cross and stretched out his hand. "Can I take another look at this trinket?"

"Here." Reginald directly shoved the cross at the other man.

When the Senior held the cross, he quietly winced at the creative choices that Ves had made to design this object. There were more palatable ways to create a symbol that matched the Cross Clan's aesthetics.

It's design wasn't his focus, though. When Benedict tried to look deeper, he sensed a response from the Cross Warlord.

His thoughts turned into a very weird direction as he contemplated the existence of this so-called 'nexus'. What Ves had been able to achieve with the Cross of Rebirth and the Cross Warlord went far beyond mech design.

"What do you think?" Reginald asked.

"I have an idea that this Cross of Rebirth is at least a century too young to impress us. Ves Larkinson's products have a tendency to grow more impressive over time. I believe the Cross Warlord will already become a lot more notable in a year. I can sense that it has grown remarkably stronger since the last time I inspected it. Him. Whatever."

"Treat the Cross Warlord with more respect, professor. He might not be my father, but he is watching over us all. He is our only guard against traitors and suspicious individuals."

Professor Benedict twitched his mouth. Reginald only saw the benefits, but not the cost.

For example, how exactly was the Cross Warlord able to differentiate between loyal and traitorous Crossers?

The only logical answer that made sense was if the nexus was able to read the thoughts of everyone connected to the Cross Network!

The Senior Mech Designer was not unfamiliar with network administrators and their duties. Those who monitored any network of any kind usually had direct access to many systems. This caused their positions to become very sensitive as the wrong person could easily steal a lot of valuable data from their positions!

Right now, Professor Benedict deeply felt uncomfortable about allowing a new and unfamiliar lifeform to have complete access to the minds of every Crosser.

Fortunately, Benedict was pretty certain he was able to prevent the so-called Cross Warlord from lifting too much information from his own mind.

When the mech designer returned the Cross of Rebirth to the patriarch, the two eventually discussed more immediate business.

"The Larkinson Clan has churned out a number of impressive mech models. When will you be able to completely renew our entire mech roster?"

"I can deliver much of the designs our clan needs by the end of the year. Compared to the works of the Miracle Couple, my products might lack the gimmicks that the Larkinsons depend upon, but their efficiency and absolute performance are clearly superior. Their mechs are designed for battle. Our mechs are designed for war."

Compared to the Larkinsons mech models, the machines designed by Professor Benedict were able to equal or surpass their peak performance being able to last longer at the same time.

This was an area that Professor Benedict had always been good at. The high efficiency of the systems of his mechs resulted in less waste and greater efficiency.

In other words, his mechs were able to accomplish substantially more with less energy.

"That's good." Reginald nodded in satisfaction. "If a battle ever stretches on to the point where the Larkinson mechs falter, we shall be the rock which will carry them to victory. It is too short-sighted for them to focus purely on short-term engagements when battles are always unpredictable."

Both of them felt tempted to collaborate with Ves more extensively, but it was not that good to become too dependent on another person.

If the Crossers all became accustomed to piloting living mechs designed by the Larkinson patriarch, didn't that mean that the latter held a huge amount of leverage over the Cross Clan?

It wouldn't even take Ves a lot of effort to take over the Cross Clan if that was the case!

Though Reginald Cross did not mind if his men started to pilot living mechs, he did not want the clan of his parents, grandparents and ancestors to end under his leadership!

He owed it to everyone who fought and died to keep the Cross Clan alive to preserve his heritage.

Besides, who said that the mechs designed by Professor Benedict were weak? They were already more than adequate on their own, and they would only grow more formidable if the Senior finally managed to achieve his own breakthrough!

The two leaders spent a bit more time discussing various matters. Though Reginald was adamant about imposing his will on the Cross Clan, that did not mean he was deaf to the counsel of others.

As much as he tried to reject the notion that Saint Hemmington Cross was not as flawless as he imagined, Patriarch Reginald recognized that it was better if he solicited the views of others before he made a major policy decision.

In fact, Professor Benedict played a huge role in this shift. As someone who hitched his wagon to the Cross Clan, he did not want it to lead down the same abyss as before!

"The Larkinson Clan is constantly acquiring new specialties." Benedict noted. "They not only picked up a lot of good swordsmen, but also obtained a lot of Lifer researchers. This means that they will eventually become the leader in the field of biotechnology in our alliance. If we don't want to get overshadowed by the Larkinsons entirely, we need to develop a couple of industries ourselves. The more services we are able to provide to ourselves and our allies, the more our position remains stable in the alliance."

Reginald frowned. "We lost most of our original industries during our flight. We'll have to start from scratch if we want to develop a new sector."

"You don't need to worry about that. I'm a Senior. I can solve many difficulties."

"What sort of industries do you have in mind, then?"

Professor Benedict grinned. "I was thinking about getting serious in developing our own mech component designs..."

Chapter 3070: Misunderstood Product

The expeditionary fleet went back on track as far as Ves was concerned.

Nothing exciting happened in the weeks after leaving the Treden System and departing the Grand Loxic Republic.

A part of him thought it was a pity to leave the state like this. There was a lot of wealth, connections, knowledge and so on to be found in this large and well-connected state.

Ves particularly generated interest in establishing connections with the large trading companies, research institutions, nonprofits and other large human organizations.

"Who am I kidding? I probably won't even be able to get my foot in the door."

These massive organizations didn't have eyes for small, private individuals like Ves. Their headquarters were either established in the galactic heartland or the galactic center where they could cooperate with individuals who could offer a lot more than a single Journeyman.

Besides, shackling himself to these large organizations was not that much different to attaching himself to states... He would basically put himself and his clan at the mercy of the whims of a large, powerful organization that did not have his best interests at heart.

After handling the aftermath of the Battle of Trieden II, Ves quickly handled the remainder of his administrative duties. He either dealt with every important item on his agenda or assigned other people to take care of the various issues.

For example, one issue that hung on the back of his mind was the recent release of the Sanctuary Treatment Editions.

Ever since he came up with the Four Aspects of Lufa, Ves always imagined what it would be like to mass produce and market their glows.

The commercial release of two variants that weren't primarily designed for battle represented a major shift in the Living Mech Corporation's product strategy.

As with any change, people had a lot of difficulty adjusting to something that did not fit an established pattern.

While the customers of the LMC were accustomed to receiving innovative products, the Sanctuary Treatment Editions were something else!

"The market isn't reacting well to the new variants." Gavin reported during a routine briefing session. "In fact, even our people don't quite know what to make of it. The new models can't be marketed like normal combat mechs. Even if the Tranquility variant is great at neutralizing glows employed by enemy mechs, the ridiculously high asking price of 50 million hex credits for what is pretty much a third-class mech is prohibitively expensive. The reaction of the market falls exactly in line with the scenario that I previously told you about. Third-class customers can't justify the expenditure while second-class customers think we have engaged in a scam."

Ves frowned a bit. He already expected that the new models would experience a bit of turbulence, but this went on a bit too long.

"Haven't we satisfied a lot of customers already, Benny? As long as people obtain a copy and experience the new glows, I bet their tune will change quickly. Did we loan a few copies to reviewers and medical institutions?"

"We did. The reaction has been positive, but not as much as we hoped."

"What's the matter?"

Gavin sighed. "The price-per-performance disparity is too big for most people to accept. It would be one thing if our Sanctuary was priced at 4 million hex credits, but that is not the case here. A more important issue is that the market can't accept the notion that a mech can be used to heal and treat people. This is a foreign concept to every human and it takes a lot of effort to convince them that the two models are actually useful."

Ves thought that word of mouth would have been able to overcome this instinctual resistance, but the truth turned out to be very different. As Gavin brought out graph after graph, the data clearly showed that the various downsides of his new Sanctuary variants heavily weighed it down to the point where it never gained momentum!

"Have we developed any following for the new models?"

"We do, but only a small one so far." Gavin answered. "A small but highly enthusiastic group of second-class customers have steadily purchased more and more copies from us. Unfortunately for us, the mechs do not really appeal to those outside this group. One of the problems that we have bumped into is that its price is mainly aimed at second-class customers, but they are not very familiar with our mech company."

"Oh."

Though Ves designed a bunch of second-class mechs, he had yet to release any of them to the second-class mech market. While he had good reasons for doing so, one of the negative consequences was that the brand awareness of the LMC in second-class states such as the Garlen Empire and the Grand Loxic Republic was too low!

After all, Ves never put a single exciting product on the second-class mech market before. Even if he gained a bit of fame for his second-class mech designs due to the widespread use of his Hexer mechs in the Komodo War, not everyone paid close attention to this regional conflict.

It didn't help that the Sanctuary Treatment Editions did not have much in common with the useful, war-oriented Hexer mech designs!

For these reasons and more, the introduction of the Sanctuary Treatment Editions had been botched!

Ves glowered and pressed his fingers against his temple. Lucky lazily swishes his metallic tail as he lounged on the desk.

"Meow."

"Yeah yeah, gloat all you want. I don't see you doing any better. How about you try to release a new mech model to picky second-class customers?"

"Meow meow."

Gavin ignored the interaction between the two and provided an estimate of the future sales potential of the two models.

"We know the new Sanctuary variants are useful, and more and more customers will realize this as well. We think that sales will slowly ramp up over time as people will begin to realize that they are worth their prices. However... it might take months or even years for the mechs to become successful. For now, selling a couple of thousand Sanctuary Treatment Editions doesn't even cover the cost of contracting third-party companies to fabricate and distribute them. At the scale we are operating these days, selling a couple of thousands copies a month is terrible."

The three best-selling models right now were the Desolate Soldier, the Doom Guard and the Ferocious Piranha IC. It had been a long time since he designed them and their capabilities no longer reflected his current design ability.

The Crystal Lord Mark II was also gaining momentum, particularly after Ves upgraded its old design spirit to create the Illustrious One. Even then, the rifleman mech's relatively marginal performance advantages compared to other market offerings allowed it to become a sleeper hit as best, selling only a few hundred-thousand copies a month.

While Ves was proud of this sales volume, the sad truth was that the LMC's business model relinquished a lot of profit to its third-party business partners.

If the LMC followed a more traditional business model and based itself in a state, then it could have invested in its own distribution and sales networks. While not every company was able to succeed in those endeavors, the effect of cutting out the middlemen was often good!

What was peculiar about the Sanctuary Treatment Editions was that its margins were ridiculously high even if there were a bunch of middlemen taking their own cuts of the profits.

However, this was mostly irrelevant if the sales volume remained way below expectations!

As Ves and Gavin continued to discuss this issue, it became clear that the reception of the Sanctuary Treatment Editions was unlikely to improve in the short term unless they made a couple of painful decisions.

"The single biggest factor behind the poor initial reception of the variants are their prices." Gavin directly addressed. "The obvious way to remedy this is to lower the price of a mech. If we can cut it in half, we project that sales will likely quadruple right away. Further cuts will result in dramatically more sales."

Ves adopted a stubborn expression. "I don't want to back down like this. We'll just be proving to every critic that we have indeed been ripping off our customers."

"You can address this problem easily by applying temporary discounts to the new models."

"That helps, but if the discounts are too frequent, they will not only disrespect the customers who have been paying full price, but they will also develop a pattern that customers will expect from our next products. Just forget about it. I only released the Sanctuary Treatment Editions to earn some extra money and do my part in contributing to society. It is not a big deal if I don't immediately get the payday I sought."

The LMC still earned plenty of profit, so it was not as if Ves felt devastated. Every mech designer released a flop now and then. While Ves still believed that the Sanctuary Treatment Editions were good products, it was sad that everyone else didn't possess the same understanding.

Ves eventually shrugged. "Let's wait a year or two before we contemplate any changes in price. Perhaps people will begin to recognize my brilliance during this period."

"What if the market still doesn't pay so much money for overpriced third-class mechs?"

"Then just shove it into the corner and forget about it. I can always design other mechs."

The success or failure of a single mech model no longer concerned him that much. This was especially after he transitioned to designing a batch of different mechs by rounds. As long as one of them achieved critical success, it didn't matter if the rest failed to live up their promise.

Of course, he could not use this same mentality towards the current round of mech designs.

Thinking about the expert mech designs that awaited his care and attention made him eager to be done with all of his other business. After discussing a few more issues, Ves quickly shooed Gavin away.

Before he left for the design lab, he wanted to deal with one more issue.

He picked his cat from his desk and brought his pet close.

"Hello? Is there any activity taking place down there? When was the last time you produced a gem, Lucky?"

"Meow meow meow!"

The gem cat did not appreciate being picked up this way! His tail quickly moved to cover his backside.

"Hey, your diet hasn't decreased at all. Why haven't you gone to the toilet yet? Your efficiency has worsened! Maybe I should drop you off at the Skull Architect in order to give your systems a tune-up."

"MEOW!"

"Ouch! That hurt!"

Mrow!

As Lucky freed himself from Ves' grasp, Blinky materialized into view. The companion spirit took offense at what had happened.

"Meow meow."

Mrow mrow!

"Meow!"

Predictably, the two cats entered into another scuffle in mid-air. It didn't take long for the older and more experienced cat to gain the upper hand. Blinky could only crawl back into Ves' mind after suffering another wound to his pride.

Ves looked exasperated at Lucky. "I hope you'll produce something soon. Our expert mechs could really use all of the help they can get. My current collection of gems is not enough."

His cat didn't make any promises. "Meow."

The reason why he was so eager to obtain more gems was because too many of them were weird and abnormal. Ves did not want to gain another 'special' gem like the Supreme Comprehension one that had unleashed sheer chaos in the Life Research Association.

Part of that was his fault for making his last gem alive. Ves wasn't sure if he wanted to repeat this trick. Perhaps a gem might gain a lot more potential after undergoing this unique transformation, but if the mech it was applied to did not gain any additional benefits, then it wasn't worth the trouble for him to intervene.

"Should I do it again or should I leave it?" Ves idly wondered.