

## Mech 3101

### *Chapter 3101: Five Long Days*

Despite the novelty of Blinky's design network and its profound effects, the expert mech was far from complete.

The first couple of days flew by in an optimistic frenzy. The mech designers were all full of energy and eager to complete their first actual expert mech while benefiting from an unprecedented state of mind.

The closest equivalent to the special condition induced by the design network was the rare instances where Ves and Gloriana entered into a rare inspired state.

Those powerful and precious moments were something that every mech designer sought but few ever had the pleasure of experiencing. Every mech designer and every creator who entered into an inspired state was able to surpass their previous limits and perform their craft at a level that was previously unattainable to them. Many created their finest works when all of the stars lined up for them during these lifetime events.

The mech industry had expended a lot of effort into trying to reproduce this supercreative condition, but yielded very little results. Every drug or other method of influencing someone's mind only caused the test subjects to enjoy different artificial highs. No matter how good these people felt, the pleasure that coursed through their minds and bodies was always hollow and lacking in substance.

Ves knew from personal experience that a true inspired state went far beyond a purely physiological reaction induced by a complex cocktail of chemicals. The real version affected someone regardless of their physical state because it was mainly a mental and spiritual phenomenon related to creativity.

On the surface, the special state that Blinky's design network was able to induce sounded remarkably similar to that. However, the cause and effects were considerably different. Creativity had nothing to do with the times when Ves and the others were able to share their talents. The principal reason why they felt so good and improved their output was because they were able to leverage the abilities of other mech designers to come up with better solutions and approaches.

In other words, they were mostly borrowing the strength of others as opposed to drawing out more strengths from themselves. While they were able to absorb and internalize a small proportion of the abilities they borrowed from the other participants in the network, this ultimately did not represent an evolution of their own methods.

"It's a pity." Ves briefly sighed. "For a moment, I thought I found a way to artificially induce an inspired state."

He felt tempted to drag over the Statue of Transcendence and see whether it could help with inducing an inspired state on demand, but he quickly rejected this monumentally dangerous idea!

"I shouldn't dream too much and just get on with my work." He muttered.

Despite the benefits brought about by Blinky, Ves and Gloriana were nonetheless disappointed that they never even came close to becoming affected by an inspired state.

This was the key to creating a high-quality mech. As long as one of them entered this mystical state, it was practically guaranteed that they would be able to produce a masterwork mech.

During a rare moment of downtime where the Journeymen enjoyed a quick lunch, Ves and Gloriana shared their thoughts on the matter.

"I think we all underestimated how difficult it is to fabricate an expert mech." Gloriana explained. "In the times when Blinky isn't available, all of us are struggling to complete a lot of difficult tasks. Our lack of experience and technical fluency in what we are doing is causing us to stop and think too many times. It would have been better if we were able to make continuous progress without stopping along the way because we became stumped by a problem that we have never encountered."

Ves nodded in agreement. "I think you're onto something. Inspired states never come about to those who do not possess enough technical ability and fluency. We all need to become sufficiently competent to fabricate a good mech. If we were working on a regular mech, then I think our chances of entering into an inspired state is much higher. Our masteries in the relevant fields are high enough that it is unlikely that we would crash into a wall during the fabrication run. It's unfortunate that this is not the case at the moment."

Expert mechs were ultimately higher-level products that should really be made by Seniors or higher. All of the Journeymen had to work past their regular limits in order to meet all of the demands of constructing such a potent machine.

Everyone owed a lot to Gloriana at the moment. If she didn't take it upon herself to fabricate the most technically-challenging components and subcomponents, it was very likely that this run would end in failure!

Perhaps Gloriana's affinity towards these challenges was why Master Willix allowed the Journeymen of the Design Department to create the expert mech by themselves. His wife was the only one in the team who was qualified to assume this essential responsibility.

If Ves tried to shoulder this burden alone, he had little confidence that the end product would match the design. The most likely outcome was that he would screw something up and try to fix it by kludging together a lot of messy, improved solutions.

While that did not necessarily translate into a defective mech, the performance of whatever abomination he brought to life would definitely be questionable.

In any case, because everyone depended so much on Gloriana to carry them to success, the burden on her shoulders was taking a heavier and heavier toll on her mental state.

"I don't know if I'll be able to last five whole days." She softly said. "We haven't slept at all and the only times when we enjoy any breaks is when we have to eat. We don't even have to visit the bathroom anymore as our smart clothing takes care of that."

Technology can solve many trivial problems including the need to visit the bathroom. Of course, many humans were unaccustomed to dealing with their bodily waste in this manner. Most stuck to the traditional method of dealing with it unless it was an emergency and there were no better options.

"We're making decent progress, though. I don't think we should be disappointed with what we have."

They both looked at the neatly-sorted array of parts that they had just produced. None of the ones laid out on the deck fell below Gloriana's standards, though the mech designers were forced to scrap and try again whenever they slipped up in some fashion.

Other than that, the mech designers managed to keep up with the schedule and avoid any major problems that threatened to break the current pattern.

Everyone soon went back to work to complete the long and extensive fabrication phase. With Blinky lending a hand at regular intervals, every mech designer became more and more adept at taking advantage of the options that the design network enabled.

Finally, almost four days went by until they completed the last part. They only slightly ran behind schedule at the end despite having to fabricate less components due to the smaller size of the Disruptor Project. Some of the parts turned out to be so difficult to make that even Gloriana had to slow down and employ a great degree of caution in order to avoid a worse outcome.

"We're ready to assemble the mech." She announced with a slightly weary voice. "I know we're all tired, but we have one more day to go. We have already left the hardest part behind us. Just don't grow too inattentive. The Disruptor Project is an exquisite puzzle and not a single piece must end up in the wrong place."

Everyone nodded. They all understood the challenges better after they encountered numerous difficult problems in the previous days.

Soon enough, the Disruptor Project started to take on a concrete form. The internal frame or skeleton went up first in order to provide a base for the components that filled it up and covered it all in a thin but resilient protective shell.

Without any of the mech designers noticing it, Venerable Tusa quietly entered the workshop. He became fascinated at how the four mech designers all worked together to create his personal new machine.

"These four are truly impressive. Our clan is lucky to have them." He softly said.

"Meow."

"Miaow."

Both Lucky and Clixie nodded.

"How powerful do you think it will be once it is complete? Will I be able to win against a Crosser expert mech? Will I be able to put up a good fight against Patriarch Reginald Cross?"

"Meow!"

"Miaow miaow."

Venerable Tusa smiled wryly. "Hmm, maybe I'm just dreaming. A hybrid mech is almost as difficult to fight against as a striker mech for light skirmishers like mine."

The Disruptor Project could perform many different roles. It didn't necessarily have to be the strongest duelist, though it would definitely help the Larkinson Clan if it could put up a good fight against an expert mech.

Yet despite listening to so many explanations, Tusa still didn't have a good idea of how powerful his machine would actually turn out. No one dared to say for certain how the true resonance element would empower his mech beyond its technical parameters.

The expert pilot watched on as the mech gained more definition. A host of bots, lifting cranes and individual mech designers crawled all over the surface of the incomplete work as it kept gaining parts and definition.

The more it approached completion, the more it came to life. Tusa could clearly feel the birth of something indescribably warm and close to him as the light mech soon began to take on its slim and slender shape.

The light skirmisher was designed and built exclusively for his own use. This had profound effects, one of which was that the expert pilot gained an immediate connection and affinity for the powerful machine in question.

The Disruptor Project was calling to him. The mech was already beckoning for Venerable Tusa to come closer and use it for its intended purpose.

Tusa stayed put. The mech was not done until Gloriana said so and he did not want to interrupt the tired but highly-motivated mech designers in their current business.

"We're almost done! We just need to fit the last pieces together and verify whether our construction is sound."

Assembling the expert mech was easier than fabricating the parts. As long as the quality of the latter was good enough, they should be able to fit in with each other without too many major issues.

Of course, the mech designers didn't settle for average. They either tried to employ the highest precision they could manage or made very minute tweaks on the fly depending on the circumstances.

However, everything must come to an end.

After almost five whole days, Gloriana solemnly affixed a golden plate into the cockpit of the expert light skirmisher. When she exited the cockpit, she slowly floated down to her other three colleagues and turned around to behold their collective work.

Though they had grown so tired that they wanted to collapse into a soft bed right away, they forced themselves to stand upright in order to inspect their completed work and appreciate what they had managed to create.

"We did it." Juliet softly whispered. "We actually managed to complete our first expert mech."

"It's so unique and alive. I can't wait to see it come to life and utilize its unique abilities." Ketis smiled in anticipation.

"The mech is more than just alive." Ves stated as he threw a glance at Venerable Tusa. "It is intricately tied to the expert pilot that is meant to use this powerful machine. The two are already acquainted with each other."

Gloriana remained quiet for a moment. Both pride and disappointment surged in her mind.

She was proud of successfully concluding a challenging process that ordinary Journeymen had little chance to pull off due to lack of technical ability.

She was disappointed because the quality of the expert mech was merely good. The distance to masterwork was a little bit too far and even Lucky's gems wouldn't be able to make up for the shortfall.

She sighed and let her darker feelings pass. "This is a good first attempt... I expect better next time we do this. Now that we know what it is like to fabricate an expert mech, we must become a lot better prepared next time!"

### *Chapter 3102: The First Completion*

The Disruptor Project had finally reached completion. Both the project as a whole and the expert mech in particular were over and done. Gloriana and the rest of the Design Department had all completed the objectives that they had set from the start.

It took a few more minutes for the implications to set in. They had completed and delivered the first true expert mech for the Larkinson Clan.

The greatest benefit of this expert mech was that it was mainly designed by the Larkinsons themselves. Though the entire project would have never been able to get off the ground without the help of their incredibly overqualified technical consultant, Master Willix had never once attempted to take charge.

She only did what was truly necessary and provided the young, eager and naive Journeymen with enough space to give full play to their respective specialties.

If Master Willix truly employed one of her own design philosophies, then her domineering influence would have obliterated the much weaker contributions of the others!

In the end, the project proceeded in a fashion where Ves, Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis fully identified with their respective contributions to the mech design.

Juliet exhibited the most happiness because the dominant mobility systems of the expert light skirmisher was mainly her own handiwork. She left the most fingerprints behind in the mech, followed closely by Gloriana who made it all possible in the first place.

The perfectionist needed a bit of time to make peace with the fact that they hadn't ended up making a masterwork mech. She would be lying if she claimed she held little expectations on this matter. Creating a masterwork mech was one of the greatest pleasures in her life and it was something that she spent months preparing for with each mech design project she worked on. Her emotional attachment to each of her works was quite prodigious, but that also made the fall much harder for her to endure.

The only reason why she was able to remain calm and composed was because this wasn't the first time she reached this outcome. The many failed attempts of her past had toughened her up and given her a greater tolerance towards missed expectations.

"In hindsight, it is clear that we should have tempered our expectations." She softly said to Ves. "I initially thought that embarking on designing and making a new kind of mech would excite us to such a great degree that we would be able to ride on those emotions, but the issues that we came across threw us way outside of our comfort zone. We simply weren't in the right condition to get into the zone."

That was an apt description of what had happened. Her guess concurred with Ves' own thoughts.

"Inspired states only come to those who possess both luck and skill. Serendipity is a precious opportunity that only falls upon those who have already mastered their craft to a sufficient degree. When we began to fabricate an entire expert mech, it was as if we had gone back in time to the start of our careers where we were fabricating our very first mech. It is impossible for us to create a masterwork when we are so lacking in knowledge, skill and experience."

Gloriana's face grew determined as she crossed her arms. "We must do better next time. All of you, including myself, must polish our fabrication skills. While our current level is sufficient to make any Journeyman-level mech, we are not dealing with that anymore. I understand some of Master Willix's warnings and advice now. We truly didn't know what we were attempting to do until we actually did it. We still have much to go before we are fully ready to create mechs of this caliber."

Despite her regrets, she didn't let them affect her for too long. As her eyes gazed at the expert mech from the perspective of a client rather than its designer, she became a lot happier.

The Larkinson Clan truly gained a powerful and unique asset. Even though she had yet to see the mech in action, just looking at it gave her a sense of awe and might.

The expert mech that they had just completed was almost as slim and modestly-sized as any other light mech. Its matte black coating caused the expert mech's presence to take on a muted form, but that did not detract from its strength to those who possessed a basic understanding of mechs.

The lines and contours of the light skirmisher were neither too angular nor too curvy. It cleverly mixed both elements to yield an optimized layout that offered good defense while not weighing down the mech too much.

The Unending alloy that the armor system consisted of was already familiar to the Larkinsons, but applied to a true expert mech, it took on a much greater meaning.



Ves had already charged the mech with a portion of spiritual energy from Trisk and Arnold. The only troublesome part was that the former was too new and had yet to be used as a design spirit for any other mech design. That meant that the newborn avian design spirit did not really have that much spiritual energy to spare at the moment.

All of this meant that the expert mech was not in its strongest form at the moment. Ves could have forced Arnold to cough up more spiritual energy, but that would unbalance the spiritual makeup of the light skirmisher and make it lean too heavily on escape.

For this reason, the pressure exuded by the expert mech was but a fraction of that of a prime mech. It was not as loud and intolerable as the glow of the Piranha Prime, which did not exist any longer.

Ves briefly spent a few seconds thinking about the passing of one of his first prime mechs. The Piranha Prime was a fine machine and served its purpose well during the Battle of Reckoning and the Prosperous Hill Campaign, but its Unending alloy was too precious to leave it on a mere custom second-class mech.

The fantastic prime material was put to much better use now that it was cladding the frame of an expert mech!

He paid special attention to the knives of the expert mech. Though they were currently sheathed, the twin weapons were not only sharp enough to cut through heavy armor, but could also be empowered in two different ways. The liberal proportion of Unending alloy integrated in the weapons would allow Venerable Tusa to leverage prime resonance to empower them. If he engaged in true resonance at the same time, then Ves could scarcely predict how many solid solid barriers it could break!

"We need to see it in action." Ketis said with an eager tone. "I'm so tired that I want to take a rest right now, but I haven't worked so long just to leave me with uncertainty."

Gloriana looked at everyone and saw that they were all of the same mind. "Very well, the mech is technically done. Let's allow the bots to perform some final inspections and safety checks before we allow Venerable Tusa to enjoy it for a brief moment of time. Don't forget that we cannot be sure the design is completely sound. We always worked with theoretical models and mathematical formulas up until now. This mech is both the prototype and the end product of the Disruptor Project. We should employ an appropriate amount of caution."

Though she said the words that needed to be said, inside her heart she was supremely confident that nothing was fundamentally amiss with the design. She spent so much effort optimizing it while getting rid of as many faults as possible that it really shouldn't be possible for the mech to blow up or something. At the very least, she did not believe that Master Willix would stand idle and allow an undiscovered fault to go through only for the expert mech to blow up in front of their eyes!



The checks proceeded quickly. In order to hasten the work, Gloriana called over a dozen assistants in order to accelerate the final safety inspections.

Suffice to say, the assistants were all floored by the sheer quality and power that they were able to identify from the freshly-completed expert mech.

Rina Orion sat in the cockpit and inspected the programming of the expert mech while caressing the metal panels of the clean but luxurious black interior.

"So this is what it's like to enter a mech that cost over 200 billion hex credits to build."

As the assistants inspected and prepped the mech for deployment, Venerable Tusa quickly moved to the changing room in order to change into his new black-themed piloting suit.

Everyone nearby took a step back when he walked past them. The presence he exuded when he wore the suit had become darker and more threatening. Even though he was a Larkinson, the other clansmen didn't really find his presence reassuring anymore.

It was as if Tusa had transformed himself into a lurking beast!

When the expert pilot walked up to the Journeymen, his anticipatory grin grew wider. "I'm all ready now. When will I be able to take my new expert mech out into space?"

"Soon." Gloriana replied. "It will take ten more minutes to complete the inspections and a bit more time for us to move it over to the hangar bay."

"You look quite sharp, Tusa." Ketis complimented.

"Thanks. I'm not sure why I needed a new piloting suit, though."

"Your new suit is much superior to the standard ones that we have been using across the entire clan." Ves clarified. "Gloriana doesn't want to miss a single detail, so she insisted on working with me to design a custom suit that is completely tailored to your body measurements and your needs."

"What are the benefits, exactly?" Tusa asked. "So far, I feel nothing except more weight, more stiffness and as Ketis already mentioned, a sharper look."

"Don't mistake it as a simple suit. There is loads of tech packed into it. First and foremost, the middle layers are actually composed of Unending alloy plates. It's the same material used to form the main armor system of your mech, but formed into very thin plates to minimize their impact on your body movement and comfort. In its fullest defensive setting, you stand a good chance of surviving a cockpit breach."

Venerable Tusa didn't know whether he should take this seriously. A cockpit breach mostly happened when a mech weapon pierced it directly. With the power that mech weapons possessed, not even the best infantry armor was able to withstand a casual attack!

"What else does this suit possess?"

"It offers advanced survival functions in an extremely compact form." Ves answered. "We had to import the hyper advanced components from a specialist vendor in order to obtain all of the miniaturized life support systems needed to increase your survival odds in case you ever get stranded in space. You have access to enough oxygen, food, water, warmth, electricity and medicine to survive an entire month in space!"

An entire month! That was practically a miracle for a suit that was so slim and tight. Only the back featured a slight bump in order to cramp all of those powerful systems in the least obtrusive place.

Venerable Tusa looked a little dizzy at the thought of surviving an entire month in deep space with just his suit. "I don't think it is likely that I will ever end up in this scenario. Aren't you going a little too overboard?"

"You're a precious asset, Tusa. I won't allow you to die until you have fully provided as much value as possible. You are just in your thirties now so you have many decades ahead to perform your duties to our clan!"

"Is this the sole reason why you built a custom suit for me? You just want to ensure that I'll survive?"

Ves grinned. "That's not even the best part. The fact that I handmade your suit and that I incorporated a material as useful as Unending alloy in it meant that I have instilled it with a few surprises. I'm sure you have felt them already. While their presences are a little weak right now, I believe that your suit will likely be able to enhance your connection to your expert mech!"

The piloting suit was an extension of the expert mech as far as he was concerned. Letting Tusa wear the suit directly increased his connection with his machine!

The expert pilot glanced at the expert mech again. "Everything you have said has made me even more impatient to interface with it. Hurry up. I can't wait."

"You don't have to wait much longer. By the way, have you thought up a name for your expert mech yet? This is the right time to christen the Disruptor Project with a proper moniker."

Venerable Tusa did not hesitate to announce his choice. "Dark Zephyr. I want my first expert mech to be known as the Dark Zephyr!"

Ves and the other Journeymen remained still.

"That's... certainly a succinct name."

### *Chapter 3103: No Comparison*

Ves partially regretted giving Venerable Tusa the opportunity to name his new expert mech.

The Dark Zephyr sounded too generic to Ves' tastes. It was a fine enough label for a custom mech or a prime mech, but as the creator of the expert mech in question, he felt it did not encompass the full might and potential of this deceptively thin machine.

"Perhaps that's the point." He whispered.

Venerable Tusa's expert mech was designed with deception, evasion, obfuscation and misdirection in mind. While not a true stealth mech, its rather understated appearance and its slippery nature made it easy for enemies to dismiss its power.

While the Dark Zephyr was most definitely an expert mech, its unique strengths weren't too obvious on the surface. Only people who knew its design well just as the Journeymen and Venerable Tusa were much more able to appreciate its awesome capabilities.

Ves smirked. "I hope our enemies won't find out the truth too soon."

He didn't have to worry about that. As long as his enemies didn't receive any forewarning, it was hard for any other mech designer to figure out the depth of the Dark Zephyr. The Perfidious Steel and other signal-dampening materials integrated in the frame made it much more difficult for sensors to get a detailed look at the mech. The longer the distance, the more vague it appeared.

The expert mech was loaded onto a large moving platform that slowly crawled across the deck. The large main entrance to Gloriana's workshop slid open, allowing the impressive machine to march straight towards the main mech hangar bay.

Every other Larkinson in the vicinity moved to the side and stood still. All of them gazed at the black-coated expert mech in wonder.

Even if the Design Department hadn't publicized the completion of the Dark Zephyr to the rank-and-file members of the clan, everyone pretty much knew that Ves and the other mech designers were working on a bunch of expert mechs.

After all, the expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan had gone on without their own expert mechs for too long. It would be a disservice to them if Ves wasn't able to supply the

appropriate machines to them. The continued absence of expert mechs was even a justifiable reason for them to leave the clan!

Even if the Larkinsons didn't want to let its expert mechs go, the MTA more often than not sided with the expert pilots. These extraordinary individuals possessed a special identity and were entitled to special care from the Association.

The completion of the Larkinson Clan's first expert mech laid all of the uncertainty to rest. Now that Ves proved that he was able to supply one expert mech, he could supply other expert mechs. The top-level combat strength of the clan had become a lot more secure with this development.

While Venerable Tusa accompanied his new personal machine to the hangar bay, Ves, Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis all proceeded to the main design lab.

The journey was not short, but they accelerated their progress by moving onto floater platforms that rapidly zipped through the middle of the corridors. With their rank and authority, all other traffic had to move to the side.

When they reached the entrance to one of the key compartments of the factory ship, every assistant mech designer had already gathered. Even Maikel, Zanthar, Maisie Ann and Rennie had shown up. Each of these people wanted to witness a moment of history, and where better to examine the performance of the completed Disruptor Project than in the design lab where they could access all of the telemetry of the expert mech?

If the expert mech was fully prepared for battle, it would never transmit so much sensitive data to a ship. If a sophisticated enemy managed to intercept and decrypt the data transmissions, then the secrets of the Dark Zypher would become a lot more transparent.

This time was special because the Design Department never tested a real prototype of the expert mech. It was necessary for the expert mech to transmit as much data as possible during its initial activations and test runs in order to continue to tweak and debug the complicated machine.

Its current state might look excellent to Ves, even if the results from the simulations told him that everything was working fine and dandy, he reserved his judgement until the physical version of the expert mech worked as expected.

As the mech designers were setting up their workstations in order to examine the Dark Zephyr's performance in real time, a lot of other people began to move as well.

Thousands of mechs launched into space and began to surround a wide area of space just beyond the defensive perimeter of the fleet.

The Larkinson mechs all formed a sphere that gave enough play for an expert mech to exercise its capabilities. Numerous mechs that carried an extra module began to activate their gear, causing them to form large fields of interference.

The overlapping fields soon covered up every gap and blind spot, making it extremely difficult if not impossible for other onlookers in the star system to observe the upcoming live test.

Even the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan wouldn't be able to see much despite their relatively close proximity. It would have been a different story if their fleets included a starship that specialized in surveillance.

The allies of the Larkinson Clan weren't impatient enough to demand a clear view of the upcoming deployment. If anything went wrong, the clan would be a lot more embarrassed if others found out about its blunder.

Since the recently-completed expert mech was the first of its kind to the Larkinsons, not everyone possessed enough confidence that it would perform at its best right out of the gate.

Patriarch Reginald Cross and Professor Benedict Cortez both gathered on the bridge of the Hemmington Cross. The latest development of the Larkinson Clan was of high interest to them both.

"What are the odds that anything goes wrong in this initial test?" The powerful expert pilot and leader of the Cross Clan asked.

"It's hard to say without taking a look at this much-anticipated expert mech." The Senior replied. "Master Willix acted as the technical consultant for this design project, so there shouldn't be anything egregiously wrong. It is probable that minor issues might surface during its first deployment due to oversights or production faults."

"I hope the expert mech lives up to the reputation of Ves Larkinson." Reginald said with an intensity in his voice. "As long as the expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan are amazing, my own new expert mech will become even more groundbreaking!"

Patriarch Reginald Cross had shown great patience towards the Larkinson Clan. The Crossers even fought alongside the Larkinsons in order to make sure that its most innovative mech designer would remain able and willing to contribute to the expert mech that would one day replace his Bolvar Rage.

As for Professor Benedict, his interest in the upcoming expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan leaned in a different direction. He had a faint thought that he might be able to solve the greatest issues that held him back from advancing to Master if he collaborated with Ves on a major mech design project.

Though he did not have solid proof that he would be able to gain the insights he wanted, his powerful intuition told him that working together with the Larkinson Patriarch would definitely expose him to a different perspective and approach to mech design.

If this wasn't the case, Professor Benedict would have never shown as much patience to the Larkinson Clan.

This was also why he envied Gloriana so much. Benedict knew that the Hexer woman had already reaped a ton of benefits from her close collaboration.

He was curious to see how the new expert mech looked once it launched from the hangar bay of the Spirit of Bentheim. At his level, Professor Benedict only needed a single glimpse of the powerful machine in order to determine the overall skill and design approach of the mech designers involved in its development.

He didn't have to wait for long.

When the Dark Zephyr had been moved to the hangar bay, Venerable Tusa finally received permission to activate his mech.

The anticipation in his mind had already risen to a peak. His will had become noticeably more condensed as one of his dreams had finally come true.

"I have a real expert mech now."

Even if he had yet to turn his new expert mech online, he could already feel a strong bond between him and his new primary war machine.

As his force of will expanded across the entire cockpit and beyond, he felt as if his influence encountered a receptive audience. This was the first time in his life where he felt completely at home as an expert pilot. No longer did he feel as vulnerable and hollow as before.

While the Piranha Prime provided him with some comfort, the magnitude was incomparable. Only the Dark Zephyr was able to make him feel that he could exercise his will to its full potential.

"My strength is no longer limited by my mech!" He gleefully observed. "This mech will definitely be able to keep up with me for a long time. I don't need to pilot any other mech as long as I have my Dark Zephyr!"

Just as how Venerable Tusa gained an instant love for the Dark Zephyr, the mech also responded to the presence of the pilot it had always been designed to serve. While the living component of the mech wasn't able to do much while the expert mech was in its dormant state, that was about to change very soon.

When Venerable Tusa went through the brief but thorough identify verification procedure, he formally activated the mech for the first time.

The cockpit began to light up as projections and data screens lit up. All kinds of technical readouts scrolled past Tusa's eyes as the Dark Zephyr finally awakened for the very first time.

A soft humming noise spread out across the entire hangar bay as the slender beast rose up from its slumber. An undefinable pressure emanated from the expert mech that forced every mech technician and other clansman inside the large compartment to take a few steps back.

The Larkinsons observing the expert mech from the sides only endured a fraction of what the expert pilot was experiencing.

As an expert mech that incorporated the principles of a prime mech, its boot procedure alone was absolutely remarkable. The first activation of a mech and its initial pairing with a new mech pilot were always significant, but what took place inside the cockpit of the Dark Zephyr surpassed anything that Venerable Tusa had ever experienced.

His entire mind and will seemed to open up and merge with a new and strangely intimate presence. A huge amount of data streams passed through the customized neural interface, but Venerable Tusa's extraordinary head was easily able to handle the potent influx.

What Tusa truly found remarkable was how the expert mech connected to him at a level beyond pure data. His will had already found a comfortable home in the Dark Zephyr, but once the expert mech truly came online, he found to his delight that his will fully merged within the entire frame of the mech!

A soft light blue glow even began to surround the mech. If Tusa wanted to, he could effortlessly activate a resonance shield that was many times stronger than the half-baked version that surrounded his former mech.

The gap between the Piranha Prime and the Dark Zephyr was a lot more immense than he realized!

"If my prior mech is a chicken, then this one is a phoenix!"

There were even more wonders that Venerable Tusa was just beginning to grapple with. The mech possessed a potent presence of its own that began to merge with him in a way that reminded him a lot of a prime mech. Yet due to the properties of the expert mech, this bond went a lot deeper, causing him to literally feel that he and the mech were of the same mind!



Although it did not reach the level of the mythical unity between man and machine, it was well on its way of reaching that point!

Venerable Tusa spent several more minutes to acclimatize himself to the new sensations bombarding his senses and the powerful controls at his disposal.

Once he succeeded in calming himself down, he began to issue his first command.

The expert mech took a powerful step forward.

#### *Chapter 3104: Extreme Acceleration*

The Larkinsons in the hangar bay all held their breaths as the Dark Zephyr began to move.

When the black-coated machine, a soft but suppressive footstep echoed across the compartment.

When the Dark Zephyr took another step, it was as if a beast was just about to step out of its nest.

The Larkinsons present in the chamber all gained an increasing sense of awe as they became exposed to some of the extraordinary traits of the Dark Zephyr when paired with its intended expert pilot.

The mech hadn't even activated all of its combat systems yet, but already the hearts of the clansmen in the hangar bay could not even muster a single sense of resistance against this great and terrible machine!

Elsewhere on the Spirit of Bentheim, Calabast stood in the middle of an intelligence gathering room. Though her understanding of mechs did not even come close to that of a mech designer, what she witnessed so far did not disappoint her in the slightest.

"This is definitely not an average light expert skirmisher." She murmured.

This was a good sign. Much of the success of the Larkinson Clan was due to her strategic partner's astounding ability to come up with powerful new surprises. Being able to carry this trend through to an expert mech vindicated everyone who decided to bet on Ves, including herself.

"What do you think about the mech, Arnold?"

"Squeak squeak."

The eight-legged creature sidled up to the side of Calabast's left boot. The chubby animal had entered a strange mood ever since the Dark Zephyr first came online.

Though he didn't look like it, Arnold was also a design spirit, a mutated exobeast who extended a portion of his consciousness and extraordinary capabilities to the mechs and mech designs that were bound to him. The Dark Zephyr was definitely one of them and he could clearly feel as if he was connected to it in an intimate fashion.

"Squeak squeak squeak."

It was unfortunate that Calabast did not understand Arnold's speech. She could only go on information that she had gathered from other sources.

According to her own judgement, the upcoming demonstration of the Dark Zephyr would soon prove whether all of the investment put into the expert mech designs was worth it. The cost and effort to develop the Larkinson expert mechs absolutely surpassed that of regular ones that were suitable for low-tier expert pilots.

"We can do so much more once we field proper expert mechs." She grinned.

While expert mechs weren't needed for an organization to stand out, those that were able to field one were absolutely remarkable. Average organizations simply weren't able to get their hands on an expert mech or retain a pilot that was dedicated enough to fight for them. It was a clear indicator of strength if the Larkinson Clan was able to field not one, but several potent high-level machines.

By now, the expert mech had approached the end of the hangar bay. A double layer energy screen separated the interior of the space to the vacuum of space beyond.

As soon as the mech passed through the first energy screen, the artificially gravity that pulled the mech onto the deck was no longer present.

The expert mech started to float due to its motion.

Before the machine even came close to drifting out of control, Venerable Tusa smoothly engaged the flight system.

A pair of powerful flight 'wings' came online and began to emit both light and heat. The Dark Zephyr instantly regained control and smoothly began to fly out of the Spirit of Bentheim.

Once the expert mech emerged into open space, a lot more people were able to view its inaugural deployment.

"Is that it? The expert mech is so dark. It's difficult to distinguish its details."

"This is a real light skirmisher. The Ferocious Piranha is like a toy compared to this expert mech!"

"We haven't seen anything yet. Let's wait until it is put through its paces."

Venerable Tusa might be eager to exercise the full capabilities of his expert but he knew he had to be a little patient for a moment longer. As an expert pilot, he was fully capable of disciplining his mind and impulses.

Instead of flying to the blockaded test area at full speed, he deliberately accelerated the Dark Zephyr forward at a sedate pace.

The mech was gliding to the checkpoint as opposed to racing towards it. The maximum straight-line acceleration parameters of the Dark Zephyr was valuable intelligence and should not be given to the public for free.

At the very least, it was much more beneficial if the Larkinson Clan was able to keep this data under wraps until it stumbled into a battle where the Dark Zephyr had to show its full strength for the first time. Any opponent that was strong enough to force the clan to this extent should not be able to prepare to fight against the full capabilities of Venerable Tusa's expert mech in advance!

While the onlookers who didn't have the authority to view the performance of the Dark Zephyr felt disappointed when the expert mech clearly wasn't trying to do its best, they did not complain too much.

If they were in the position of the Larkinson Patriarch, they would make the same choice.

It wasn't until the expert mech passed through the massive interference zone that it began to speed up a bit. Within this signal-blocked envelope, Venerable Tusa didn't have to act so restrained anymore.

Though he had yet to employ the full speed of his expert mech, the Dark Zephyr reached the center in remarkably little time. It would have taken a Ferocious Piranha its maximum effort in order to reach the checkpoint at the same amount of time. The fact that the Dark Zephyr did not look anywhere close to burdened hinted that it was still far from its limits!

As the Dark Zephyr came to a complete stop relative to the sphere of Larkinson mechs, half a minute went by as the mech designers in the design lab analyzed the data they had received so far. No one dared to be sloppy at this time.

"The temperature and heat distribution of the Dark Zephyr are working well. We have detected no dangerous heat pockets or overheated sections so far."

"Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson's life signs are all stable if elevated. He is excited and actively engaged in controlling the mech. The resonance meter has yet to reach a strong level."

"The bridge informs us that the fleet has yet to detect any spy drones, stealthed vehicles or other observers within a light-second around our fleet. However, the ships of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan have engaged some of their active sensors."

"The Dark Zephyr's systems are all green. Every active component is operating within their expected ranges. No fault indicators have been triggered up to this point."

"You can proceed with the first test, Tusa." Ves said after everything checked out.  
"Show us how fast your Dark Zephyr can fly."

Venerable Tusa finally grinned. "With pleasure."

Mobility was the core of the Dark Zephyr. Without the ability to outspeed and outmaneuver its opponents, it could not perform its role!

Due to the confines of the interference zone, Venerable Tusa couldn't accelerate forward in a straight line. Just like runners competing in a stadium, his Dark Zephyr had to run laps in a circular trajectory in order to avoid exposing its full capabilities.

The mech sped up remarkably quickly. The emissions released by its flight system ramped up as Tusa began to push his mech more and more.

The greater the acceleration, the more Tusa and the Dark Zephyr felt at ease. Both of them possessed a high affinity towards speed and movement so it was natural that they would feel more comfortable when they were on the move as opposed to remaining stationary.

The Dark Zephyr continued to accelerate. This not only caused it to endure greater stress to its flight system, but also caused it to circle around faster and faster with each completed lap.

Soon enough, the mech had reached its top acceleration! The mech vibrated as its flight system was outputting much more forward push than a normal second-class light mech could ever reach.

"Now this is true speed!" Venerable Tusa grinned!

Both he and his mech felt great joy at being able to traverse forward at such a blazing pace. The expert pilot had never experienced this level of speed!

The Ferocious Piranha was already decent, but its speed was completely inadequate for an expert pilot. Now that Tusa was finally piloting a more powerful mech, he felt fully confident that he could leverage all of his skills without any concern at being limited by the technical constraints of his machine!

"Tusa." Ves spoke over a communication channel. "You've run enough laps now, but you have yet to show how fast the Dark Zephyr can really move. Try and resonate with your mech and activate the resonance ability that is associated with the flight system."

"Roger that, Ves."

Venerable Tusa had received prior instructions on how to activate a resonance ability. He not only had to send a specific command via the neural interface, but also had to hone and excite his will in a way that allowed it to connect with a specific component or section of the mech.

While the Dark Zephyr incorporated two key resonating materials that defined its greatest extraordinary capabilities, the expert mech also incorporated some lesser resonating materials.

They were mostly responsible for empowering the expert light skirmisher with more basic and standard resonating abilities.

One of them was boosting the performance of the flight system at an extraordinary level. While the resonating material responsible for enabling this capability wasn't particularly strong or valuable, anything that enabled an expert pilot to empower a portion of a mech with willpower was already useful.

The rear of the Dark Zephyr began to glow a lot brighter. The visible emissions escaping from the flight system grew larger and began to glow in light blue as the entire section became affected by true resonance!

In an instant, the Dark Zephyr accelerated 40 percent faster, and it was only ramping up as Venerable Tusa began to get accustomed to exercising his willpower in this manner. Even though the strain was starting to get to him, he became swept up by the rush of zipping around even faster!

In the end, the Dark Zephyr's acceleration had peaked at 80 percent beyond its regular maximum. While this was far from record-setting, it was still a game changer if Venerable Tusa employed this capability well!

Gloriana frowned as she noted some worrying signs from the telemetry transmitted by the expert mech.

"It's not advisable for Venerable Tusa to sustain this extreme degree of acceleration. The flight systems are starting to show actual strain. The Dark Zephyr will require extensive servicing if Tusa keeps pushing it at its limits."

Ves shrugged. "This is a small price to pay compared to the alternative. Speeds like this can win battles."

In fact, the Dark Zephyr was circling around so fast at the moment that it was faintly having difficulties trying to maintain its circular path.

"Alright, now try out the maneuverability of your new expert mech! Let's see how well you can dance around the battlefield."

"I was waiting for this!"

The Dark Zephyr no longer ran boring laps. Instead, it started to follow a more irregular path. It zigged and zagged around while still being affected by its active resonance ability. Though Venerable Tusa found it surprisingly hard to control his expert mech, its movements were both quick and agile!

Its evasion ability became even stronger once Tusa activated the boosters placed throughout the frame of the Dark Zephyr. The small but powerful boosters only had to activate briefly to push the entire mech in a completely different direction!

The performance of the boosters was so great that Venerable Tusa was confident that he could dodge nearly every incoming attack that he was aware of! With multiple boosters placed on the back, front and sides of the mech frame, he could fully choose which direction to evade.

"Hahahahaha!" Venerable Tusa laughed even as his brain came under a lot more stress than before. "I'm untouchable in this state!"

"Are you willing to put that to the test?" Ves spontaneously asked.

"Sure!"

"Then get ready."

Ranged mechs armed with specially-prepared laser rifles began to take aim.

The energy output of the weapons had been deliberately lowered to an extremely low magnitude. Not even a third-class mech would sustain any significant damage from getting hit by a low-energy laser beam.

This allowed the Larkinson mech pilots to feel free to fire their weapons with abandon. Even if their weapon discharges hit the mechs holding position on the opposite side of the sphere, no harm would be done.

"Fire!"

Hundreds of colorful but mostly harmless laser beams converged onto the Dark Zephyr!

### *Chapter 3105: Perception Distortion*

Armed with modified low-powered laser rifles, the Bright Warriors configured for ranged combat all fired at the Dark Zephyr with no restraint!

A forest of bright beams lit up the surrounding space as they instantly attempted to strike the Dark Zephyr.

However, much to the surprise of the Larkinson mech pilots, most of the beams that were supposed to strike the expert mech simply surged past without hitting anything solid!

"Impossible!"

"What? The expert mech didn't even move!"

The rifleman mechs fired additional volleys at the elusive target. Though the Dark Zephyr kept zipping around the cordoned space like a nimble sparrow, the mech wasn't trying its best to dodge incoming attacks at the moment.

As long as the mech pilots worked together and fired their weapons in unison in a grid pattern, the chances of at least one of them striking their targets always went up. With enough mechs firing their weapons in a coordinated fashion, they could box in nearly every possible target!

Yet even when the Avatars, Sentinels and others leveraged their training to increase their hit rates against powerful opponents, not a single laser beam managed to land for real!

Every laser beam that reached the mech actually phased through it without encountering any hindrance. The ineffective beams innocently traveled further until they either hit something else or dispersed at extreme ranges.

"What is going on?! Are we fighting against a projection or something?!"

"My sensors are telling me the expert mech is certainly where I aimed my weapon at. My attack should have struck the chest plating!"

To their credit, the Larkinson pilots soon figured out that they were affected by some sort of trick. They began to disperse their fire and attempted to cast a wider net.

It was at this point that the Dark Zephyr was feeling truly pressured. With hundreds of mechs firing in its vicinity, it took Venerable Tusa a considerable amount of effort to become aware of the attacks before they came and activate the right boosters in order to quickly displace his expert mech from the path of an incoming attack.



"We're firing at an illusion!"

"Keep dispersing our fire. The real expert mech must be under stealth or something!"

The hundreds of ranged mechs tried their best to poke in the dark, relying on random chance and coincidence to succeed in landing a hit.

So far, none of the ranged mechs managed to strike the Dark Zephyr, and that was a considerable embarrassment for the well-trained mech pilots!

Even if they were targeting an expert mech, it should not be this difficult to land at least one lucky hit. Yet the fact that the coordinates where the mech was visible and emitted plenty of heat and other energy emissions turned out to be empty was a considerable frustration to them all. The mech pilots simply didn't know where to aim their weapons!

Back at the design department, no one showed any confusion. The mech designers were all smiling as one of the strongest features of the Dark Zephyr was making full play at the moment.

"The resonance ability derived from Perfidious Steel is amazingly effective." Ketis remarked in an impressed tone. "I would hate to be the enemy who is tasked with intercepting this expert mech."

It didn't actually matter if the Dark Zephyr got hit by a shot in the dark. The fact that the expert mech's actual coordinates deviated extensively from its apparent coordinates meant that it was difficult to score continuous hits.

The way that Perfidious Steel took effect was not a straightforward distortion that could be expressed with a neat mathematical formula. There was an element of randomness in it, especially when Venerable Tusa adjusted the magnitude of his resonance with Perfidious Steel.

He could dynamically make the distortion weaker or stronger, which according to the telemetry he was currently using to good effect.

"The strain on Venerable Tusa and the Dark Zephyr has reached a peak, though." Gloriana spoke in concern. "I'm happy that the expert mech lives up to its promises, but according to the data I don't think he can keep up this state for long, especially when he is also doing his best to keep his mech as evasive as possible."

Indeed, Venerable Tusa was not feeling as relaxed as before. His mind and will came under great strain as he had to concentrate fully on the movements of his mech as well as that of all of his opponents.

He continually resonated with both the flight system and the Perfidious Steel integrated in the mech in order to maximize the Dark Zephyr's evasion ability to the limit.

Occasionally, a number of boosters activated in order to quickly push the expert mech out of the firing line of an incoming laser beam.

These boosters were amazingly fast, responsive and effective, but they were also constrained by the limited amount of potent booster fuel the Dark Zephyr was able to carry.

More than five minutes passed before Venerable Tusa and his expert mech started to flag. While it was incredibly admirable that the pair had succeeded in remaining untouchable for such an impressive period of time while under heavy fire, neither of the two were omnipotent.

However, seeing that neither Tusa nor his new expert mech showed any alarming signs, Ves and Gloriana decided to expand the stress test.

"General Verle, is the Eye of Ylvaine ready?" Ves asked with a grin.

"They are ready, sir, but the risks are considerable."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "I don't think we need to worry about that. With all of their advanced targeting and firing systems, the Transcendent Punishers won't hit one of our own mechs."

"What if they succeed in hitting our expert mech?"

"Heh, you'll see what happens then. Don't worry. Everything is under control."

Under his instructions, the Transcendent Punishers stationed inside the bunkers on the hulls of the Spirit of Bentheim and the Graveyard activated their twin positron cannons.

Unlike the rifles held by the Bright Warriors floating in open space, the energy weapons of the artillery mechs were not depowered. While the Eye of Ylvaine pilots had set the power setting to its lowest possible point, there was no way for them to weaken the output of their weapons any further.

Still, the mech pilots led by Commander Taon Melin did not show any concern. They simply began to wait until their artillery mechs were ready before beginning to fire straight into the sphere!

Amazingly enough, even though they were denied any clear view of what was going inside due to the interference zone, the positron beams they discharged came dangerously close to hitting the Dark Zephyr!

"What the hell?!" Tusa yelled in alarm as he hastily managed to evade an array of over a hundred positron beams. "Those damned Ylvainans are cheating again!"

Just like how most ranged mech pilots would feel frustrated if they were tasked with trying to intercept the Dark Zephyr from range, it was Tusa's turn to feel as if he was being treated unfairly.

No matter how good the Dark Zephyr was able to remain untouchable when it engaged its Perception Distortion resonance ability, the Eye of Ylvaine was able to pierce through every lie and find the truth within the fog.

The characteristic ability of Ves' Ylvainan mech line had struck down countless sandman admirals in the past. The fact that the Eye of Ylvaine was able to rely on the same ability to come close to hitting the Dark Zephyr despite the lack of accurate coordinates was a testament of their unique strength.

The only reason why Venerable Tusa and the Dark Zephyr was able to avoid getting hit was because they were using their full strength and capabilities to evade attacks at the last second.

The Ylvainan artillery mech pilots may have been able to pin down the true position of the incredibly elusive expert mech, but they were limited by their piloting skill. Even Taon Melin was unable to match up against a genuine expert pilot in this little competition.

It wasn't until the Dark Zephyr began to run out of booster fuel that the situation abruptly changed.

"Damn! This is way too quick!" Venerable Tusa cursed.

Both he and his new expert mech felt frustrated that they were no longer able to evade attacks as easily anymore.

Denied an easy solution to move out of the way of incoming attacks at the last moment, the Transcendent Punishers finally started to achieve results.

Positron beams occasionally began to hit the expert mech, exposing its true coordinates to the other Larkinson mechs for just a moment.

It was quite strange to see how the Dark Zephyr got hit. The energy beam that struck the mech at its actual coordinates seemingly hit empty space. Yet the surface of the illusionary expert mech heated up despite the beam not getting anywhere close to it. The mech pilots all had to take the time to adjust their mentalities in order to rationalize what they were observing through the sensors of their own machines.

Still, despite getting hit, the Dark Zephyr exhibited no damage at all. The beams discharged by the positron cannons had been powered down, but even if multiple attacks hit the expert mech at once, its relatively thin but still resilient Unending alloy layer was able to withstand the incoming energy with ease!

Even after the Dark Zephyr got hit over a dozen times, it did not even show a single indication of damage!

"Venerable Tusa, let's test your defenses further. Activate your resonance shield and let us see how many attacks you can block."

When a bubble-shaped light blue corona surrounded the Dark Zephyr, the incoming attacks no longer hit the surface of the expert mech. They struck the shield and stopped without seeming to accomplish anything significant.

Many more attacks began to strike the resonance shield. As if guided by the attacks of the Eye of Ylvaine, the other ranged mechs followed suit and fired in the direction of the actual mech instead of where its distorted image was flying.

The resonance shield excited by the Dark Zephyr came under increasingly greater strain. While the attacks of the regular rifleman mechs were negligible, the positron beams discharged by the Transcendent Punishers were much more concerning.

Yet the resonance shield still managed to remain remarkably solid and stable despite enduring enough attacks that would have wrecked a regular mech at least ten times over!

"How powerful." Gloriana sighed in admiration. "A resonance shield formed with true resonance is incomparably more powerful than one formed by prime resonance."

Ves smirked. "The resonance shield surrounding the Dark Zephyr should be even stronger than that. Even though its current prime mech abilities aren't strong, if you look closely, you will see that its resonance shield is actually augmented with a bit of prime resonance."

If he hadn't predicted this and watched out for it from the beginning, he would have missed this as well. While he was unable to make any firm conclusions about the combination of the two different types of resonance, he had a feeling that the Dark Zephyr was able to rely even more on its resonance shield than usual.

Unfortunately, all of this power came at a price. As Venerable Tusa and the Dark Zephyr were continually pushed to their limits, they eventually faltered.

The resonance shield soon began to dim and crack. After getting struck by another volley of accurate positron beams, the shield soon broke, causing subsequent attacks to hit its Unending alloy exterior!

When Ves glanced at the projection displaying the pilot telemetry, several readings had reached levels that did not look great.

"The test ends here. Everyone, cease fire." Gloriana decisively commanded.

The Transcendent Punishers and the other ranged mechs all stopped firing. The Dark Zephyr no longer bounced around and started to slow down. The actual expert mech emitted a considerable amount of heat due to a combination of getting hit a lot of times by energy attacks and expending a lot of energy to maximize its evasion capabilities.

Despite not having deployed in space for a long time, the Dark Zephyr and its expert pilot were already largely spent!

"The staying power of the Dark Zephyr isn't great." Gloriana disappointingly said.

Ves shook his head and smiled. "We already accounted for this, remember? This is a deliberate design choice on our part. It's unfair to judge the Dark Zephyr's performance on how it performs under these extreme circumstances. In a real battle, all of those ranged mechs need to make a careful consideration whether it is wise to pour all of their firepower towards it. In the time they are preoccupied with taking down an untouchable expert mech, our other combat assets will be free to take action under much less suppressive fire!"

In the greater scheme of things, what the Dark Zephyr had just demonstrated during this test was that it would likely take thousands of regular mechs to threaten it at range! This was an amazing accomplishment and one that would likely be of great use in an actual battle!

Though the mech designers wanted to test the offensive capabilities of the Dark Zephyr as well, the expert mech and its expert pilot were no longer in peak condition.

"Sorry Ketis." Ves apologized to her. "We got a little bit carried away. We'll test the sharpness of the knives another time."

"It's okay." The Swordmaiden mech designer shrugged. "I can wait, and I am already confident enough that the Dark Zephyr can cut through anything seeing how well it has performed so far."

Though this was just the first trial, the Dark Zephyr had already proven its chops as far as the mech designers were concerned!

#### *Chapter 3106: Fulfilled Need*

The Dark Zephyr impressed every Larkinson who had the privilege of witnessing its inaugural deployment.

The expert mech not only performed well without exhibiting any unanticipated faults, its strength blew everyone out of the water.

The base performance of the Dark Zephyr was unimaginably high. Of course, the extremely high-quality components and materials incorporated in the design of the

mech had much to do with it. Even a mediocre mech designer would have been able to come up with a mech design that vastly overpowered against regular mechs with a design budget that surpassed 200 billion hex credits!

This sum did not even include the monetary value of its rare Unending alloy system. Ves did not even dare to put a cost estimate on this precious aspect alone for fear of it leaking out and attracting a whole host of greedy robbers.

The ultimate result of cramming all kinds of high-performing parts into a relatively thin and modest frame was a highly mobile package that simply blew other mechs of its class out of the water.

The closest direct comparison to the Dark Zephyr was the Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version B. From a cost perspective, the Dark Zephyr cost the equivalent of 500 Ferocious Piranhas to build.

It was unimaginable to think how much power was contained in every square meter of the Dark Zephyr. If the mech was sliced up into even blocks, each single piece could be sold for an incredible sum!

Of course, the performance of the Dark Zephyr was not literally 500 times stronger than the Ferocious Piranha. Diminishing returns took extreme effect, causing the performance of the expert mech to be much more manageable.

However, this was not necessarily bad. The value of an expert mech was difficult to quantify because of their many uses. They were not only able to block enemy expert mechs, but also served as powerful morale boosters and rallying symbols.

The Battle of Reckoning had fully taught Ves and the rest of the Larkinson Clan that neglecting expert mechs would eventually lead to a dead end!

It was unacceptable for a large combat-oriented fleet like that of the Larkinsons to lack the protection of an expert mech. The addition of its first real expert mech provided the clan with a lot of relief!

What delighted General Verle and the other military planners even more was that the performance of the Dark Zephyr exceeded that of a typical low-tier expert mech!

While much of the power of the expert light skirmisher was front-loaded, the key was that Venerable Tusa was finally able to duel against other expert mechs and not fall into a disadvantage.

Perhaps some might argue that the sheer amount of investment put into the Dark Zephyr was still too much in relation to its battlefield performance, but such a shallow evaluation overlooked one important point.

"Expert mechs and expert pilots continually improve."

As long as the Larkinson Clan kept iterating and upgrading the Dark Zephyr over time, its technical performance would continue to become stronger. Different from its initial design project, any subsequent modifications would not require a vast amount of effort. Just one or two Journeymen along with a single design team was sufficient to add more functionality or power to the existing expert mech.

The expert pilot was able to improve as well. One dimension of this was growing more familiar with all of the nuances and capabilities of the Dark Zephyr.

Though Venerable Tusa obviously performed well right out of the gate, this was actually just the start. As long as he continued to pour many hours into mastering the Dark Zephyr, the efficiency of his piloting performance would probably rise by a considerable degree, especially in the first couple of months.

Another form of growth entailed polishing his will. Though the Piranha Prime allowed Tusa to exercise his willpower and improve his resonance strength, generating true resonance was by far the most effective method for expert pilots to grow their core strength.

The profession of expert pilots was specifically matched with expert mechs. This was something that Ves believed to an even stronger degree after witnessing how much better Venerable Tusa resonated with the Dark Zephyr.

While it helped that the expert mech was designed solely for Tusa's use, the fact that the expert pilot's willpower was naturally able to resonate with the entire machine was much more correct.

As Ves and Gloriana wrapped up all of the raw telemetry data and sensor readings, they smiled at each other.

"We've learned so much about expert mechs now that we have completed our first project." Gloriana happily stated. "Once we analyze the data, we'll be able to use our findings to improve our implementation of our next expert mech design projects!"

"The Dark Zephyr serves as an excellent model for what is about to come. Even though every expert mech is unique, we can derive a lot of common elements from our first completed expert mech." Ves concurred.

This was especially the case for his attempt to merge true resonance with prime resonance. His only regret was that Trisk was too young and immature to provide much assistance to the Dark Zephyr.



That would change over time as Tusa continually provided the newborn design spirit with potent spiritual feedback, but that wasn't enough for Trisk to catch up to the older design spirits.

"I'll have to design another light mech to boost her growth." Ves murmured.

This was something to consider for later. He was already satisfied with the current strength displayed by the Dark Zephyr.

Its overall performance level was already on par with the Cross Clan's mid-tier expert mechs. In fact, the Dark Zephyr possessed an advantage in terms of extraordinary abilities due to extravagant use of Unending alloy, Perfidious Steel and Bissanot.

However, the Larkinson Clan's first expert mech was slightly deficient in terms of efficiency, stability and staying power.

From what Ves was able to observe from solid expert mechs such as the Amphis and the Conavis Mer, the Cross Clan's expert mechs did not come with as many bells and whistles, but made up for it with strong, consistent performance.

Even if the Crosser expert pilots exhausted their resonance strength, they were still able to exert a lot of power by relying on the base performance of their stable machines!

This was a considerably different design approach from the one that the Larkinson Clan had adopted.

"The staying power of the Dark Zephyr is too short." Ves frowned. "It's fine if Venerable Tusa is able to conserve his strength during a battle, but if the conflict drags out, he'll eventually run out of steam. While the expert mech can return to a carrier in order to replenish its spent fuel and energy cells, it is not that easy to recharge an expert pilot."

"This is what we decided upon from the conception stage, remember?"

Ves sighed. "I know. We have to solve one problem first before we are ready to solve the next one. Right now, being able to deliver expert mechs that excels at dueling other expert mechs provides the greatest amount of help to our clan. We can consider the matter of designing expert mechs that can function as durable presences on the battlefield another time. We've got a whole host of expert candidates so we'll probably have an opportunity to design more expert mechs in the future."

As the Journeymen finished wrapping up their work, they returned to their staterooms and subsequently collapsed on their beds.

After five continuous days of high-intensity work, they were bone-tired!

Meanwhile, the Dark Zephyr returned to the Spirit of Bentheim's hangar bay in a victorious fashion. The Larkinsons in the compartment all applauded Venerable Tusa for gaining a new expert mech and conducting a successful test!

"What a powerful expert mech!"

"No one will be able to run away from you anymore!"

"Our fleet is invincible now!"

Though Venerable Tusa felt very weary after exerting his piloting abilities to the utmost, he nonetheless took the time to smile and nod at the enthusiastic Larkinsons.

As an expert pilot, he was an influential figure in the clan. Raising the morale of the clansmen and boosting their confidence was one of his essential responsibilities.

He quickly moved past the crowd of admirers and entered the nearest ready room.

He already sensed the wills of the other expert pilots even before he entered the smaller compartment. As Tusa slumped onto an empty chair and loosened the collar of his thick protective piloting suit, he threw a glance at his four colleagues.

"I guess you want to hear all about my first experience, am I right?"

Venerable Joshua, Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise all nodded. Even Venerable Jannzi looked impatient to hear what it was like to pilot a living expert mech.

The only resident expert pilot that was missing from this gathering was Venerable Davia Stark, but that was to be expected. The guest of the Larkinson Clan was much more patient than the others. She was willing to pilot any mech that Ves saw fit to put in her hands. It was only a matter of time before she received a suitable expert mech.

"What's your impression of your new expert mech?" Joshua asked.

Tusa's eyes turned hazy. "It's... indescribable. There are so many new options, variables and sensations that I can't even list them all out. Resonating with my Dark Zephyr is much, much easier. The mech is literally made for it. I was barely able to do the same with the Piranha Prime. I had to force myself to resonate with my old prime mech."

The other expert pilots looked quite impressed. As Tusa began to describe more details about his piloting experience, his audience became more and more eager to get their hands on their own expert mechs!

Venerable Orfan asked another question. "So what was it like to activate the resonance abilities of your expert mech?"

"It's like casting magic. I've noticed that I don't need to exert too much manual control when I want to boost the acceleration of my flight system or make my mech frame a lot harder to hit at range. I just have to resonate with the right parts and let the mech do most of the work. It's quite user-friendly, but I still have the option of changing the details if I wish."

"It's exhausting though, right?"

Tusa nodded. "It depends on the strength and effect of the resonance ability. You can choose to hold back in order to lower your consumption, but the effect isn't as good. Still, this is not a big issue if you fight against regular mechs. The only instance where I need to utilize my full strength is if I'm being targeted by more than a thousand mechs or fighting against another expert mech. It's not necessary to employ so much strength against weaker opponents."

"How about... the living aspect of your expert mech?"

Joshua cared about this attribute the most!

Venerable Tusa smiled. "I kind of feel why Jannzi is so adamant on sticking with the Shield of Samar. The Dark Zephyr is much more than an expert mech. I feel like it can become my permanent partner. It is just so responsive and compatible with me that I no longer have the desire to pilot another expert mech. I kind of wish that Ves keeps updating it so that I can keep using it for many decades. If my Dark Zephyr can keep growing, I can hardly imagine how strong it will be a couple centuries later."

What he just heard caused Joshua to shudder with anticipation. For a moment, he felt tempted to ask Tusa whether he could take the Dark Zephyr out for a spin!

Unfortunately, he knew better than to voice this desire. Unlike other Larkinson mechs, the Dark Zephyr was undeniably bound to Venerable Tusa. It would be extremely disrespectful for Joshua to pilot it when he knew it was never meant to be piloted by someone else.

"I can't wait to receive my own expert mech."

#### *Chapter 3107: Inadequacies*

Not even Gloriana argued against the need to take a break. The entire Design Department enjoyed a few days worth of vacation as the four Journeymen needed plenty of rest after completing a marathon fabrication run.

Though it was impossible for Ves, Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis to stop thinking about the Dark Zephyr. They frequently accessed the data and drew their own conclusions.

There was no hurry, though. The Golden Skull Alliance had already halted its journey long enough in order to give the Larkinson Clan enough time to fabricate and test the expert mech. The expeditionary fleet still had to reach its next stop in time in order to conduct the business transactions that it had already agreed upon.

Once the fleet transitioned back into FTL travel, it was impossible for the Dark Zephyr to take a stroll outside of the protective envelope that shielded the starships from the dangerous and unpredictable environment of the higher dimensions.

This was a huge bummer for Venerable Tusa who had already become addicted to piloting his impressive new machine.

The only thing he could do was to keep the Dark Zephyr company while it was parked in the hangar bay. Even if he didn't interface with the expert mech, just spending a sufficient amount of time with it already increased his affinity and familiarity with his chosen war machine.

Later on, the Design Department would gather a sufficient amount of real data to create an accurate simulation of the expert mech. While it was not possible to simulate true resonance or any other form of resonance in a virtual setting, it was very helpful for Tusa to master the basic traits of the Dark Zephyr.

As a couple of days went by, the expeditionary fleet made rapid progress as they jumped from a distant star system straight to a commercially busy port system.

If everything went well, the Larkinson Clan would not only pick up a batch of new recruits, but also take possession of four second-hand capital ships.

Though Shederin Purnasse had yet to close the deal on this huge transaction, Ves figured it was only a matter of time before the Larkinsons gained the new vessels.

However, the addition of four large starships presented the Larkinson Clan with new challenges.

In order to discuss this issue and other matters, Ves met with a couple of Purnessers.

As Ves sat in his office, he idly played with Lucky. He threw a little floating ball across the room and gave his cat an expectant look.

"Well?"

"Meow?"

"Aren't you going to fetch the ball?"

Lucky continued to lounge on the desk and showed no indication of jumping off. "Meow."

Ves furrowed his brows. He tried something different this time. He retrieved a toy mouse and threw it on the other side of his private office.

His cat continued to stay put. Lucky even adopted a look of disdain as he lazily swished his metallic tail. "Meow."

"Fine! What about this, then?!"

Ves pulled out a precious mineral out of his pocket and threw it out. This time, he managed to elicit a reaction from his cat.

"Meow!"

Lucky somersaulted from his perch and flew straight towards the spot where the chunk of silvery substance had landed. The cat blissfully took a bite out of the ore and savored the taste while squinting his eyes.

"Meow~"

The gem cat did not show any intention of bringing the mineral back to Ves!

"Cats." Ves exasperatingly said as he rubbed his face.

Fortunately, the entry of a pair of Purnessers distracted him from his failure. Shederin and his son Novilon both approached the front of the desk before taking their seats.

The older man was a familiar presence to Ves by now. Ever since the former ambassador headed the Foreign Relations Department of the Larkinson Clan, he enabled and accelerated a lot of new initiatives due to his strong ability to befriend new people and forge new agreements.

The only blemish on his record so far was his failure to secure the new capital ships, but Ves didn't blame Shederin at all for that. Anyone would find it difficult to secure a deal around extremely precious assets that continue to rise in value in these turbulent times.

The meeting today was partially about this issue but also revolved around another important initiative.

Shederin saw fit to bring his son with him today. When Ves glanced at the middle-aged man that was supposed to succeed his father.

The younger Purnesse actually looked quite decent to Ves. Novilon Purnesse was one of the many able-bodied survivors that had been put through an indoctrination program.

Though many within the clan complained that the program had been crude and hastily put together, the results were quite satisfactory in his eyes.

Novilon did not exhibit a single arrogant bone. His pride had long been beaten out of him and he readily adopted a subdued and unpretentious posture.

When Ves studied him on a spiritual level, he was satisfied to see that the man forged a decent connection to the Larkinson Network. While it was not as strong as that of a more fanatical loyalist, the thickness of the current connection gave him enough confidence that Novilon was here to stay.

"Mr. Shederin, let's begin with the stalled capital ship acquisitions. Is there anything I need to know?"

The older man clasped his hands. "We are dealing with a typical profiteer. It is difficult to apply leverage to the potential seller because the company that owns the capital ships is a major player in the regional ship market. Any company that can buy, refurbish and sell ships of this size is formidable. Our clan does not have any fame in the Bardo Star Sector, so it is impossible to rely on our reputation and prior accomplishments to our advantage."

As far as Ves was aware of, none of his products had reached as far as the Bardo Star Sector. Even if they did, it wouldn't have mattered anyway as the LMC only supplied third-class mechs to the market.

This was still a rather unfamiliar situation to Ves. He had worked hard to put his name and the names of the Larkinson Clan and the Living Mech Corporation on the map so that he had become a household name in the Komodo Star Sector and beyond. The entire Yeina Star Cluster had become flooded with Doom Guards and Ferocious Piranhas as of late, which easily allowed him to remain prominent.

All of that had become invalid now that they entered a star cluster that had no intersection with Ves or his products.

"So what you're saying is that our lack of reputation in these parts causes us to look like a regular customer, is that right?"

"That is an accurate assessment." Shederin replied. "The only factor that distinguishes us from other customers or should I say bidders is that we are more willing to splurge money to obtain the starships. It is a pity that the seller is demanding more than money these days. It is difficult to buy political favors, protection, useful connections and other intangible benefits with money."

This meant that the company in question was likely receiving numerous inquiries from more powerful and more connected local powers. This was bad news to Ves, but he showed little concern in front of the Purnessers.

"We'll solve this problem one way or another. If necessary, we'll visit the ship dealer in person to make him acquainted with our clan." He dismissively said.

The Larkinson Clan of today was not the Larkinson Clan of a year ago. With over 100,000 members and a whole host of experts and specialists in the fleet, the Larkinsons were able to solve many different problems in many different ways!

They moved on to a newer but more impactful topic to the Larkinson Clan.

"Tell me about the reforms you've been cooking up." Ves smiled as he began to grow more intrigued. "From what I've heard, you intend to transform our entire governance system from the ground up. That is a pretty drastic measure and I'm not sure if we should tackle something like that when our clan is running fine at the moment."

Mr. Shederin gently shook his head. "I have a different opinion on the matter, sir. While you are correct that the current clan administration is running relatively smoothly with few signs of dysfunction, that is in spite of its governance structure, not because of it. The... remarkable sense of loyalty that our clan is able to instill in every member has played a huge role in this, but that is not enough to ensure our administration will keep running smoothly once we keep expanding. In fact, the early warning signs are already obvious."

"Like what?"

He gestured straight at Ves. "Forgive me for saying this, but you are an absent and derelict leader. This instance is a good example of that. You have been out of contact for more than a week while you have been preoccupied with making the first expert mech for our clan. I am not suggesting that you have done anything wrong, but because of the two identities that you assume, it is hard for you to do well in both. You clearly value your mech designer responsibilities more, so your clan patriarch responsibilities have suffered as a result."

The entire office fell into an uncomfortable silence after Shederin made his harsh but admittedly fair judgement. He would have to be incompetent if he did not recognize one of the persistent problems of the Larkinson Clan when he possessed an outsider's perspective.

His blunt and direct words showed that he was being sincere. He neither massaged the truth or exaggerated the problem. He simply described the situation from his own standpoint.

Of course, even if Shederin adopted a more negative tone, Ves still wouldn't mind. The old man may not have been a Larkinson for long, but the two already developed a good bond.



How could a former ambassador of a large, second-rate state ever be bad at befriending his new boss? Ves just found it natural to pull Shederin Purnesse in his inner circle.

Anyone who had become one of his closest advisors had the right to criticize him. Only by addressing the problem directly would Ves become aware of problems that needed addressing.

From what it sounded like, Shederin definitely wanted to share his opinion.

Ves waved his hand. "This is a known problem. I think none of us ever got around to addressing it because we don't want to make too many drastic changes and because the issue is not that acute."

"Muddling through may work for now, but it is a short-sighted approach. Instead of crashing into a mountain that you can already see far ahead, it is better to slow down or make a detour well in advance."

"What is the course correction that you are proposing then?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

Mr. Shederin smiled in response. "I have been working on a set of reforms that should address not just this problem but many other governance problems that I have ascertained. For ease of understanding, I've packaged my proposals in a single cohesive proposal that I call the Larkinson State Plan."

"The what?!"

"I am not alluding to a traditional state." Shederin quickly said. "What I mean to convey with this name is that our clan has already grown large enough to be governed as a state. However, up until now, the bureaucracy and hierarchy has only reluctantly moved in this direction. What I propose is to drag our clan completely into the structure of a proper state."

"What does all of this entail?"

"For one, it means fleshing out the executive branch of the clan administration. It currently has the most deficiencies, especially when it comes to your own official office. You don't even have a dedicated staff that is able to manage clan affairs on your behalf. The closest that comes to mind is your personal secretary, but even he cannot do much without sufficient authority."

"What is your solution to that, then?"

Mr. Shederin gestured towards Novilon Purnesse. "This is why I have brought my son. One of the key components of my plan is to invest in someone who can take charge of

clan affairs on your behalf. I believe my son possesses the qualifications to run an increasingly more complex space-faring clan."

"..."

### *Chapter 3108: New Head*

When Shederin Purnesse told him that he was a bad leader, Ves did not object to the accusation.

He held the same opinion for a long time, after all. He just didn't like any of the alternatives.

When Shederin told him that he drafted a set of reforms that was so drastic that he packaged it under the Larkinson State Plan, Ves did not reject the notion that the clan was overdue a number of changes.

Ves never imagined that the clan he founded under modest circumstances would grow to this scale so soon. The original institutions that he had set up such as the Larkinson Assembly and the Larkinson Court might have worked fine when every Larkinson knew each other by name and when their fleet hardly amounted to anything, but everything had grown too quickly.

Yet when Shederin pushed forth his own son as the acting executive of the Larkinson Clan, Ves finally had enough.

"You'll have to convince me why this is the wisest and most proper course of action." He said with a grimace. "Because to me, this stinks awfully of nepotism."

"I am quite aware of that." Mr. Shederin replied while maintaining a calm demeanor. It was as if this entire conversation was well under his control. "I have the best interests of the clan in mind, though I do not deny that I have a more personal interest in advancing my proposed plan. Let me explain further."

He waved his hand, activating a projection that grouped the proposals into several pillars.

"The way I see it, our entire organization is split up into three large groups. First, you have the Larkinson Clan itself. Then, you have the military forces of our clan. Last, you have the primary source of income for them both, which is the Living Mech Corporation. All three comprise the pillars that hold our entire expeditionary fleet together."

This was an easy enough division to understand. "So what's the issue?"

"All three pillars have become shaky. In fact, I would say that cracks have already emerged from within. They haven't showed up on the surface yet, but I do not doubt that

the pillars might collapse if we continue to proceed without enacting any corrective measures."

Shederin highlighted the pillar that represented the Larkinson Clan first.

"Now, it is clear that you have already had the structure of a state in mind when you initially founded the clan. You have tried your best to form the three branches of power that are present in any state. However, details matter, and the branches aren't completely set up to serve the clan well as it continues to grow."

Ves looked thoughtful. "You have already alluded to that several times. I need to hear specifics. What exactly are we doing wrong?"

"You, the clan patriarch, is the glue that should hold all of these elements together. Instead, your frequent absences have caused the clan apparatus to slow down and exhibit many inefficiencies. It has gotten so bad in fact that the other arms of the Larkinson Clan have become accustomed to solving major issues on their own without explicitly asking for your input."

"I don't need to deal with every trivial matter, Mr. Shederin. I prefer to delegate as many responsibilities as possible so that I don't have to stay stuck behind my desk all day when I could have been spending my time on designing mechs instead. I only have so many years of my life to practice my primary craft. Being able to design one more mech can make a considerable difference."

"Then why have you not delegated your remaining responsibilities?" Shederin asked. "Given your clear preference for designing mechs, the most optimal course of action is to shift all of your leadership duties to a capable agent."

Ves threw the old man an impatient look. "You know very well why I keep holding onto this office. The responsibilities that I am burdened with also convey authority to me. When it comes down to it, I created the Larkinson Clan and I'm continuing to fund nearly all of its expenditures through my work. Though I don't say it out loud, the clan exists to facilitate my own career ambitions. If I pass on my position to someone else, I am not certain whether this will remain this way. Only by maintaining my grip on the clan will I be assured that it will continue to serve its original purpose."

Both Shederin and Novilon shared a knowing look with each other. They already anticipated as much.

"This is fine when you are talking about a company, but a state is something different." Shederin gently said. "While there are instances where very large corporations have maintained their original governance systems even as they begin to resemble states, in the end they either fail or complete the transition. I believe the Life Research Association is an illustrative example of what could go wrong if a state does not go far

enough in adjusting to its new circumstances. The policy decision to turn biotech researchers into rulers has not turned out well for the state and its citizens."

Ves had a very profound memory of the dysfunction of the Life Research Association. Shederin was not exaggerating.

"I don't mind us being compared to the Life Research Association."

"Yet the parallels are too similar. Don't you see, patriarch? The LRA was led by a highly-accomplished academic that essentially supports the entire state while also using its manpower and resources to its own advantage. The Larkinson Clan is led by a highly-accomplished mech designer that essentially supports the entire clan while also using its manpower and resources to its own advantage. Do I need to go on or do you get the picture?"

Though it was hard for Ves to accept the comparison between him and the Supreme Sage, Shederin conveyed a very clear argument that he couldn't quite refute.

He sighed. "I get it. What exactly do you have in mind to prevent our clan from going down the same hill as the LRA?"

Shederin tapped the projection, causing it to zoom into the pillar representing the Larkinson Clan.

A pyramid-like structure came into view. It was a typical organizational chart that put the highest decision makers on top and the lowest worker at the bottom. It kept branching out as the different ranks assumed responsibility over different parts of the clan administration.

What Ves found notable was that the executive branch was a lot more elaborate than what was the case right now. The name of the person who was positioned directly below Ves was also very eye-catching.

"According to this chart... none of my leading subordinates who currently answer to me are directly connected to me anymore. Instead, they all have to go through this so-called 'vice patriarch', who Shederin happened to nominate his son to assume this powerful position."

From what Ves could understand, the vice patriarch would do the actual governing of the clan. He would make all of the major decisions and exercise broad authority with very few checks.

The only ones who could stop the vice patriarch from going wild was the Larkinson Assembly and Ves himself. Perhaps the Larkinson Court might also get involved if Novilon was stupid enough to do something that grossly violated the clan rules, but that should never happen.

The point was that Ves would have to delegate virtually all of leadership responsibilities if he agreed to accept this reform plan.

This did not sit well with him. "Why must we set up a new office called the vice patriarch?"

"Because the Larkinson Clan needs an actual leader and not an absent one, sir. Given your strong desire to maintain hold of supreme authority, I have come up with a simple compromise solution. In this scheme, you will always hold the final word, but you shouldn't have to speak out often under normal circumstances. The vice patriarch might not hold as much authority, but he possesses enough legitimacy to effectively make significant policy decisions with the assumption that you implicitly support them unless stated otherwise."

"I don't know, Shederin. It sounds too easy for me to become divorced from power. Before I know it, the vice patriarch becomes more respected than the actual one!" Ves voiced his concerns.

"There are numerous ways to prevent this outcome. Merely overstating your own importance while keeping the vice patriarch in the background is already effective enough. The position of vice patriarch does not need to be permanent either. You can set up a rotation where each vice patriarch is allowed to assume this powerful post for only five years at a time before they need to pass on the mantle to another clansman."

"That... sounds more manageable." Ves reluctantly said. "Who decides the next vice patriarch, though?"

Shederin pointed directly at Ves. "You. The authority to appoint or boot the vice patriarch is a strong reminder that you are ultimately in charge. It will also keep the vice patriarch accountable to you. In essence, this is a variation of the division between a head of state and head of government."

The head of state was the symbolic leader of a state. These were kings, presidents and other relatively powerless leaders whose only job was to look nice in public and strengthen the identity of the people.

The head of government was the effective person in charge. They may or may not be the head of state as well. Whatever the case, the head of government was able to make actual decisions and could wield a considerable amount of power.

If a random person on the street was asked which one they preferred to be, most would probably choose to become the head of government!

Even though it sounded nice to be a king, aside from the luxury, the role didn't have much meaning in a constitutional monarchy. People much preferred to wield actual authority and make decisions that could affect the lives of trillions of people!

Right now, Shederin Purnesse effectively told Ves to become the head of state of the Larkinson Clan while his own son got to take over the reins of power by becoming its new head of government!

Ves paused for a moment to think over this situation. "I can acknowledge that implementing your bold reform plan will improve how the clan administration will be run, but I am anything but comfortable about pushing me to a symbolic symbol. Powerless kings and presidents tend to become jokes in states where they can't or won't exercise any authority. You may say that I have the power to overrule any decision made by someone lower on the totem pole, but if the clan keeps going on while being run like this, over time the clansmen might not accept my veto or overriding decision."

"I doubt that will be a concern for someone as essential to our clan. No one in the fleet is ignorant of your importance. The scenario that you are afraid of will not happen as long as you occasionally issue directives on your own and exercise your authority in other ways. Just because the vice patriarch will take over all of your burdens doesn't mean you are prohibited from taking back your own responsibilities for a brief amount of time. You don't have to make as many decisions as now, but each one you make will be felt by the entire clan. This should be the best use of your limited time given your priorities."

Ves softened his expression. This was a much more palatable scheme to him. He strongly wanted to maintain the option to have his way regardless of what everyone else was doing.

Still, his reluctance to entrust others with matters of vital importance to the running of the clan kept him cool towards this proposal.

He gestured with his arm. "Let me think about this measure further. Please explain the other reforms you have in mind. I see that you have also decided to reorganize our departments."

"Ah, yes. I suggest that we no longer use this term to describe them. It makes the clan sound as if it was a corporation, and it is best to avoid that association. In order to distinguish the clan administration from the LMC, I suggest to refer to them as ministries in order to reinforce the truth that our clan has grown to become a proper state, if one without any permanent territory barring our own ships..."

Ves listened carefully as Shederin espoused a grander future for the Larkinson Clan... The former ambassador certainly possessed a bold vision.

*Chapter 3109: The Will of the People*

The vision that Shederin Purnesse painted of the future of the Larkinson Clan was bold.

As a former public servant and a regular in the halls of power of the Grand Loxic Republic, it was natural for the distinguished old man to base his ideas around his background.

It was his specialty. He might not know anything about mech design and only possessed a shallow understanding about military operations, but when it came to governance, the only people who surpassed him in this broad and deep field were other Purnessers!

Though the current state of the Larkinson Clan was considerably different from that of a second-rate state, there were enough parallels for Shederin to apply his framework. After months of constant observations and studies, the ambitious diplomat finally unveiled his grand plan that would hopefully make the clan more stable and prosperous as it expanded in scale.

"The Larkinson Clan cannot go on in its current trajectory." Shederin emphasized. "While there shouldn't be any issue in the short term, think of how much we have grown already and how much further the Larkinson Clan can go. What if it expands to a million members? What if the headcount surpasses 10 million? It might take years or decades to reach this point, but by that time the cracks will already become apparent."

Ves leaned back on his chair and clasped his hands. "I'm not arguing against the necessity of changing the governance structure. I don't want to lose control and allow my own clan to diverge from my original intentions. Right now, I'm not hearing a lot of reassurances. From what I can gather from the outline of your plan, you intend to formalize and expand the authority and autonomy of all of the ranks. This is why you have suggested transforming our departments into ministries."

The ministers in charge of these new ministries wielded a lot of power. While they had to answer to the patriarch, the vice patriarch and possibly the Larkinson Assembly, for the most part they possessed the authority to rule their own ministries as their own little kingdoms.

Shederin did not look concerned. "I do not see this as a change from the norm. Instead, it is more akin to formalizing what is already the case. Just think about it. General Verle in charge of the military. Chief Operating Officer Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson is in charge of the LMC. Director Ranya Wodin-Larkinson is in charge of the Larkinson Biotech Institute. While not all of them will become ministers according to my plan, there is no doubt that you have already been investing a considerable amount of authority and legitimacy in leaders you trust."

The unspoken premise here was whether this was a good model to keep as the Larkinson Clan continued to grow in scope. Executive positions became a lot more critical once they began to affect the future of millions or even billions of people.



The amount of damage a deviant could do when holding so much authority was quite devastating!

The Larkinson State Plan served to address these potential issues by adding more checks and balances to the governance structure of the clan.

The Larkinson Assembly gained more input into the appointment and dismissal of the ministers. This allowed the legislative organ to find pliable officials to enact the laws it passed.

Ves frowned when he thought about this detail. "According to your vision, the expanded executive institutions of the Larkinson Clan would become a lot more politicized. The ministries won't be led by strictly neutral or competent leaders anymore."

"Don't disparage the political process too soon, patriarch. While I am aware that your experiences with politicians are less than pleasant, in most of these cases you were considered an outsider who did not play the same game as theirs. This is different. You will not only be taking part in the same game, but you shall be doing so in the capacity as the game master. You can rig the game in your favor whenever you wish."

Shederin's basic argument was that politics would rise within the Larkinson Clan sooner or later. Anytime a lot of people gathered, disagreements quickly followed. The process of mediating these differences and deciding which stance to adopt was the basic process of politics.

"Politics is a noble and sacred process." Shederin summarized.

"Politics can be a noble and righteous process." Ves corrected. "In practice, as soon as anyone gets a sliver of power, they tend to get overboard with what they can do. It is human nature to enjoy wealth and power. While I don't mind if people indulge a bit, what if they go further?"

Shederin smirked. "That is what checks and balances are for. Humanity has spent millenia developing and perfecting different governance models. The right one for a given state depends on which stakeholders you take into consideration and what goals they possess. For example, a typical corporation answers to its shareholders, so it does not need to pay too much attention to the wishes of the workforce. A modern state mostly answers to the people and family who founded it, though the will of the population has become a lot more important. The balance of power between the ruling forces and the general population differs from state to state."

"How does the Larkinson Clan fit in this framework?" Ves curiously asked.

"In my judgement, the Larkinson Clan is a combination of a despotic state and a corporate state. It also has the trappings of a stratocracy, but not enough for it to be of any concern. I would call it a militaristic state instead."

"What the hell do these words mean?"

Shederin patiently extended his hands. "Let us consider them one by one. I'm sure you can already guess the meaning of a despotic state. It is simply a state that is dominated by a single individual. In our case, this obviously applies due to the immense amount of influence and decision-making power you hold. If you suddenly go missing, the rest of the clan will either collapse or fall into an immediate crisis. This is one of the clear indicators of a despotic state."

He was right. Ves had never shied away from the fact that the clan was supposed to be his personal kingdom. However, it was too crass to state this truth on the surface. This was why he marketed his clan in a manner that made it sound as if he was doing it for the good of the Larkinsons and that the average citizens were actually able to participate.

"L'état c'est moi." Ves quoted.

Shederin looked impressed. "Your pronunciation is horrible, but it is remarkable that you know this saying. You are more learned than I thought."

Ves shrugged. "I used to watch a lot of action dramas in my youth. A lot of bad guys tend to be evil kings and emperors and so on. Anyone who is pretentious and tries to be sophisticated quotes those words."

"..."

Novilon Purnesse softly spoke up. "I agree with my father's assessment. The Larkinson Clan is a state that is dominated by a single individual. This means that our clan shares the same disadvantages of any other despotic state."

"Like what?"

"Let us consider the states that you have interacted with in the past. The Bright Republic is a typical example of a relatively young state in the galactic rim. It is a state founded by a group of wealthy colonists who assumed great risk and invested their fortunes in the hopes of reaping great benefits. The ruling families that the colonists have formed have been controlling the Bright Republic in a disguised form. Though the state appears to be an enlightened democratic republic on the surface, in truth everyone knows who is in charge. We call that a plutocracy. The Vesia Kingdom is a more obvious form of this kind of state. At least nobles do not bother lying about their right to rule."

Plutocracies were common among newer states as the people and organizations who put all of their effort in founding new colonies did not go through all of that trouble to allow 'the people' to reap all of the benefits!

The only 'people' who were allowed to hold on to the reins of power were the founders of a state and their descendants or successors. If this wasn't possible, then who would want to spend so much money and take so many risks to settle new planets?

"Despotic states are founded with selfish intentions in mind. The implications of this is that their long-term futures are always uncertain. As long as the mismatch between the will of the despots and the will of the people grows large enough, the latter may overthrow the former."

Ves looked skeptical. "What about the Greater Terran United Confederation? What about the New Rubarth Empire? You can argue that both first-rate superstates are ruled by a small cabal of rulers as well, but they seem to be doing fine after all this time."

Both Shederin and Novilon chuckled.

"We do not share the same assessment. The ancient clans of Terra and the Rubarthan emperor may still cling to their thrones, but their seats are riddled with cracks. At the end of the Age of Conquest, the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance have humbled the first-rate superstates. No ruler can stay in power forever. Even the Big Two shall fall one day. The only uncertainty is the timeframe in which this happens. It may take a hundred years. It may take a thousand years. As long as the MTA and CFA become too detached to the people suffering under their oppression, a violent course correction cannot be avoided."

Ves frowned deeper. "This is too abstract for me. Let's take this back to the clan. Why is it bad that my clan is a despotic state?"

"It is too risky." Shederin replied. "Neither you or the clansmen will benefit if the clan has become too dependent on a single individual. This is its current state and that has resulted in too many improvisations and delays because of your frequent absences. If we can reform the hierarchy of the clan to shift more power and responsibility to the middle layers, the clan administration will be able to accomplish more without relying too much on you. Your personal intervention may be merited back when the clan only consisted of a thousand or so people, but it is no longer appropriate now that it has grown to this scale. The clan would be better served if professional politicians and bureaucrats run the various functions."

"On whose behalf?" Ves pressed. "On one hand, you have stated that the clan should still serve my interests. On the other hand, you also emphasize the need to let others have their say."

Shederin nodded. "Even you already understand the necessity of having the will of the people on your side. For now, you are still able to dominate the opinions of a hundred-thousand Larkinsons, but what about the future? The clansmen may remain loyal to you, but that does not stop them from having opposing opinions. There are already clear signs of divisions when you consider groups such as the Ylvainans, the Penitent

Sisters, the trueblood Larkinsons and so on. Each of them have distinctly different priorities, and many of them clash against each other. These divisions will only grow worse over time."

"That's what the Larkinson Assembly is for." Ves pointed out.

"That is true, but that is not enough. The Assembly is too dry and none of the assembly members wield any direct power. The people need to see a more direct form of representation, and the ministers are the most suitable people to advance the causes of the majority."

"So what your reforms are essentially trying to accomplish is to counterbalance my rule by empowering the average clan members, is that right?"

"Yes, patriarch."

"Why would I give up power in the first place?"

"Because you have no choice." Shederin said in a deceptively calm voice. "If the clan proceeds along its current course, your ability to control it will become increasingly more tenuous. Instead of leaving everything to fate and risk losing control, it is better for you to initiate a more deliberate power-transfer process. The benefit of doing so on your own initiative is that you can decide how much power you want to give up and what sort of rights you grant to the representatives of the people."

The general assumptions behind Shederin Purnesse's reforms were twofold.

First, the will of the Larkinson clansmen would eventually diverge from Ves' own intentions.

Second, the clansmen would continue to grow more powerful as a whole as they continued to rise in numbers.

Ves questioned these assumptions.

*Chapter 3110: Checks and Balances*

Lucky calmly dozed off as he rested on a nearby couch placed to the side of Ves' private office.

The richly-grown Prosperity Tree continued to sway its small, vibrant branches as if they were dancing in the wind.

The two Purnessers seated in front of Ves remained quiet as they had laid out their solution to a problem that Ves was reluctant to acknowledge.

"Our clan is different from other states and organizations." Ves retorted. "First, it is not a conventional state. It depends heavily on myself. It is impossible for the clan to sustain itself without me because my business ventures pay all of the bills. This probably won't change because the money that I earn will continue to play a pivotal role in expanding the clan. Second, the loyalty and cohesion of our clan is abnormally high. Even if there are differences among our people, they won't diverge to the point where the different sides will escalate their fights."

Shederin shook his head. "I wouldn't bank on that if I were you. Loyalty can take on many different forms. Some people's ideas of what is best for the Larkinson Clan may differ substantially from yours. I hear that Venerable Jannzi Larkinson is particularly opposed to your leadership."

"Ugh, don't remind me of that. She's a persistent thorn at my side."

"Well, if you continue to remain complacent, this thorn might grow into a stake that is driven straight through your heart." Shederin replied. "Be honest. Are you afraid that dissidents such as Venerable Jannzi might succeed someday? She is far from alone in the clan. While the opposition to your rule enjoys too little support at the moment, they might rise as soon as you start to make mistakes. Once the contradictions between you and the rest of the clan widens, the opposition will grow into a serious threat against your dominance. If the clan has also diversified its income sources at that time, the rationale to keep you in charge will no longer hold as much force."

Ves had to admit that the diplomat hit a sore point for him. He was always aware that his support among the Larkinsons was not as universal as he wished. Larkinson Network or not, it was hard for a mother to blame Ves for the death of her son. A lot of mech pilots and other servicemen had fallen in battle while fighting on behalf of Ves. If the clan suffered another damaging battle, his leadership might fall into further question.

At this time, Shederin voiced another argument.

"One of the advantages of implementing my reforms is that any reduction in responsibility is paired with a reduction in blame. If a minister commits a blunder, he or she shall assume primary responsibility. You will be shielded from most of the blame due to your distance from the principal agent who committed the fault."

"This is the kingly way to remain in power." Novilon Purnesse added, backing up his father. "Anyone who engages in politics will get dragged through the mud eventually. It is rare for any leader to remain completely blameless. However, as long as you take on a position that rises above the mundane matters of governance, it is much easier for you to remain stable and detached. This is the best way for you to remain in power for decades or centuries at a time."

The two made a couple of interesting points. If Ves moved on to a more ceremonial leadership role, it was a lot harder for others to criticize him. After all, the ones who made all of the mistakes were the people making the actual decisions.

"I recognize the logic in your arguments, but all of this has yet to allay my primary concern. How will I be able to ensure that my goals remain a priority?"

"By splitting the balance of power even further."

"You need to explain that further, Mr. Shederin."

The old man smiled and raised two fingers. "So far, I have only mentioned two major stakeholders of the clan, namely you and the general population of the Larkinson Clan. However, there are other stakeholders whose opinions carry great weight in the clan. Can you guess their identities?"

Ves fell into thought again. "Our expert pilots belong in a separate group. They are willful, not afraid to voice their opinions and very stubborn about the issues they care about."

"Correct. Even though you have largely contained their influence by pushing them towards the judiciary, even judges can practice politics. The Larkinson Clan is highly militaristic and as a result the clansmen hold expert pilots in high regard. While the degree of hero worship has not reached the level of the Cross Clan, it is not that much worse."

"In conventional states, the political power of expert pilots are largely constrained by keeping them isolated from the population." Novilon added. "That is not possible in the Larkinson Clan because we live in a fleet and because our military is too intricately tied to the rest of our clan. This and many other reasons mean our expert pilots can become powerful influences. You are fortunate that they have yet to take full advantage of that, but you cannot expect this to remain true in the long term."

"So expert pilots need to be accounted for as well in the power structure of our clan." Ves concluded.

"That is correct. In fact, not just the expert pilots, but also the ordinary mech pilots and any other soldier serving in the military must be taken into account." Shederin said. "If you lose too much support from either stakeholders, your position as patriarch will become a lot more shaky."

Ves already agreed with this, though he hadn't considered it through this framework.

So far, Shederin Purnesse outlined four major stakeholders. Ves, the civilian population, the military servicemen and the expert pilots all held sway over the Larkinson Clan.

Though power was mainly concentrated to the front at the moment, over time the others would grow more powerful as their numbers and weight increased.

"Are there any other stakeholders I should take note of?" Ves asked.

"There are different ways to divide our clan, but for the purposes of this discussion, the four that I have mentioned are the main stakeholders that you must consider. In order to ensure the Larkinson Clan remains solid, we must balance the powers between them in a more equitable fashion. None of them can be allowed to possess too much power, but it is not beneficial if any one of them lacks too much say."

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven cheek. He wasn't really sure if he wanted to buy this story, but there was a persuasive logic behind this framework.

He was aware of what was going on so far. The Purnessers believed it was best that he relinquish some of his power and invest much more authority in other organs in order to improve the long-term stability and governance of the clan. If he wanted to avoid the pitfalls that many other states had fallen into, it was vital for him to implement measures that prevented major issues in the future.

The introduction of two more major stakeholders made the picture a lot more complicated.

"I understand the need to keep the civilian population of our clan happy, but how do we handle the expert pilots and the other soldiers of our clan?"

Shederin manipulated the projection so that it focused on the military branch of the Larkinson Clan.

"Our military also requires reforms. In its current state, it is still adequate, but the size and strength of many of the mech forces have grown far beyond their humble origins. Do you truly think that the Swordmaidens with more than ten-thousand mech pilots directly or indirectly under their wing are politically inconsequential?"

Ves shook his head. Even though he didn't really pay attention to the politics within the clan, even he noticed how the Larkinsons enacted a lot of accommodations to the Swordmaidens and the former citizens of the Heavensword Association. The Lifers also received special treatment in order to keep them and their highly-educated biotech experts happy.

"I don't think it's appropriate for them to exercise direct power over the Larkinson Clan." Ves remarked. "In most states, the military is a separate institution that is subject to civilian oversight. The military serves the people, not the other way around. The same goes for the expert pilots. Otherwise, you get distorted states such as the Garlen Empire."



"You can argue that our clan is already leaning in this direction due to its heritage. The only reason why the expert pilots and the military hasn't taken a greater role is because you are even more dominant. You single-handedly prevent the military wing of our clan from taking over the clan entirely."

Ves smirked. That was a deliberate effort on his part. The entire reason why he wanted to split off from the original Larkinson Family and start his own clan was because he did not want to become constrained by a bunch of old fogeys and stubborn expert pilots.

Still, Shederin's warnings woke him up to the fact that the military could easily assert more power in the future.

"What do you propose, then?"

"We should introduce additional checks and balances between the different mech forces." Shederin suggested. "The most obvious way to do this is to direct them to compete against each other. By stoking the rivalry between the mech forces, they will aim most of their effort on climbing over each other's heads. They will direct less attention to gaining more influence over the rest of the clan or trying to usurp power from the other stakeholders."

Ves looked intrigued. According to the projected diagram, Shederin proposed to reform the military structure so that the mech forces became a lot more self-contained. The man even outlined measures designed to foster greater competition, such as implementing performance rankings where the top ones were entitled to a greater share of military funding.

General Verle would still remain as the highest military officer of the armed forces, but he nominally answered to the newly-established position of defense minister, not that this should matter all that much.

The point was that Commander Melkor, Commander Casella Ingvar and so on gained a lot more say. However, they had to compete against their commanders in order to channel more benefits to their units, and that would generate a lot of rivalry.

"You're even suggesting that we change their names."

Shederin smiled. "Mech force is a bland and generic term to refer to large and powerful units such as the Avatars of Myth. For a militaristic clan like ours, I believe it is much more impactful if we start to refer to them as legions. This is a loaded and weight term that will make a much more significant impression to outsiders."

The Larkinson Clan no longer fielded mech forces.

It fielded legions.

The titles of the mech commanders also shifted to legion commanders.

"Well, as long as they can muster enough power, our legions will certainly make a strong impression in the Red Ocean if nothing else." Ves predicted.

The military reforms encompassed more than just a simple name change. Shederin Purnesse proposed a large-scale expansion of the Military Bureau so that it was able to provide a lot more support and supervision of the newly-empowered mech legions. This entailed a massive expansion of staff.

All of this sounded fine to Ves. General Verle himself had already alluded to the need to expand the military administration.

What he was worried about was the person that General Verle must answer to. According to the current scheme, Verle had to report to the person in charge of the Ministry of Defense. This was a civilian position that was meant to convey the will of the civilian population.

Though Ves understood this was a normal arrangement, he did not feel at ease with letting a random politician make hugely influential decisions on one of the essential institutions of the Larkinson Clan.

He raised his finger and forcibly changed the projection.

"The military must remain independent." He self-righteously said as he wiped the link between General Verle and the defense minister. "For now, our armed forces have been nothing but loyal and devoted to our common cause, and I expect that to remain that way."

Shederin frowned as he saw Ves overriding one of his proposed solutions. "Who will keep the military in check, then?"

Ves drew a line that directly tied General Verle to the patriarch.

"I will take care of this myself." He grinned. "This arrangement has worked well for us so far, and I see no reason to change this. While I am aware that this cannot remain permanent, we can change the rules at any point in the future."

For example, if someone ever replaced him as patriarch, then there was no need for his successor to possess so much power over the military!