

Mech 4201

Chapter 4201 Grenade Mad

When the battle scenario ended, Ves transmitted a command that forcefully pulled Venerable Tusa and the Dark Zephyr out of the MSTs.

The reason why Ves visited the underground hangar bay in the first place was because he wanted to have a good talk with Tusa.

The expert pilot noticed what had happened and quickly powered down his expert mech.

"Heya Ves. Have you come to check out how we're faring after the latest upgrades?"

"That, and more, Tusa. First off, how are you doing in your personal life? Has becoming a father changed you in any way?"

A strained but loving expression appeared on his face. "Fatherhood can really change a man. I'm sure you know what I mean. I am not used to living my life while knowing that I'm responsible for a bunch of cute and needy little brats. I feel guilty each time I start my shifts when my kids are demanding attention. It doesn't help that my wife Ranya is even busier than considering that she needs to run an entire research institution."

As far as prominent couples went, Tusa and Ranya did not immediately come to mind.

However, the pairing between the sole expert light mech pilot and a director of the second-largest research and business operation of the Larkinson already elevated the pairing to the ranks of nobility in the clan!

Their children were bound to become exceptional due to all of the opportunities their wealthy and powerful parents were able to provide.

As much as Ves wanted to keep the Larkinson Clan as egalitarian as possible, situations like these were unavoidable over time. The higher-ranking

clansmen possessed a lot more expertise and also earned higher salaries and benefits. They could pass on much of their superiority to their offspring.

Ves was guilty of the same behavior. It was unthinkable for him to raise Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine as if they were ordinary clansmen.

After chatting about the woes of parenting for a while, Ves addressed a more serious topic.

"I'm glad to see that you have taken well to the Dark Zephyr Version 2.0, but I can't help but see that you have spent an awful lot of time playing with the new transphasic high-explosive grenades in the MSTs."

"Is there anything wrong with that?" Tusa asked as he crossed his arms.

"I think I have reminded you over a dozen times how expensive they are. We can't even build them in-house, you know. We have to order a new batch of them at Morton Tech. It will be rather difficult to replenish our stock when our fleet is in the middle of the Trailblazer Expedition."

"Then our clan should stockpile more transphasic grenades. Problem solved."

"..."

"Look, would you rather lose a kilogram of phasewater or an entire capital ship?"

Ves would lose the former any day. A capital ship was too precious to the clan, especially given the enduring shortage of shipyard capacity and the necessity to maintain as much strength as possible in the new frontier.

"I'll see what I can do on short notice, but it won't be long before we formally launch the Trailblazer Expedition. There are only so many transphasic grenades that we can obtain. You will have to learn to be more frugal and make more use of the other grenade types that we have stocked. It's much easier for us to replenish our stores of conventional high-explosive grenades.

There are also a couple of other useful grenade types that are useful in certain scenarios. Think of EMP grenades and particle cloud grenades.

"I'm already familiar with those grenades. They're easy to figure out and I've already mastered their use in my previous practice sessions. These transphasic grenades are much harder to use. They're powerful, I'll give you that, but they don't always work the same against different targets. It takes repeated practice to understand how to best put their power to use against different materials, different ship constructions, different alien defensive solutions and so on. You don't want me to toss a transphasic grenade against a weird alien starship only for it to get blocked because I did not know that this would happen, right?"

Ves grimaced. "I'll give you that, but don't let the ease of how many transphasic grenades you can toss around in the MSTTS give you the impression that you can do the same in reality. I will personally decide how many transphasic grenades your mech comes equipped with per deployment. If the enemies are not threatening enough in my judgment, then you will just have to make do with the more regular grenade types. Do you understand?"

"Crystal clear."

"Even if you don't have access to the transphasic grenades, you're still a lot better off than before. You used to be frustrated all the time because you only had your daggers to rely upon to deal damage. Now, you can enter into battle with a formidable amount of explosives that can deal massive damage against larger groups of particularly tough opponents. Turning your expert mech into a grenadier has completely transformed your role on the battlefield, especially when we have paired your Dark Zephyr up with the Stiletto Drive."

Tusa smiled in return. "I suppose that I've become too spoiled as of late. I am truly grateful that you have addressed all of my feedback and adapted my expert light skirmisher to the battlefields of today. It's quite amazing how the

addition of just two systems completely elevates my role. I am looking a lot more forward to putting all of my new possibilities to good use against our future enemies."

It pleased Ves to hear this. The Dark Zephyr was his first true expert mech design and one that would always have a special place in his heart.

Though Venerable Tusa had the privilege of being the first Larkinson expert pilot to obtain an expert mech, the subsequent machines that Ves had developed over the years heavily outclassed the Dark Zephyr with each subsequent addition.

Newer tech, higher design budgets, better skills and more extravagant materials all caused the Dark Zephyr to turn into the forgotten child of the class.

It didn't help that the Dark Zephyr was far short of reaching masterwork quality. Gloriana couldn't even give it hope of evolving into one because she needed to conduct a more thorough overhaul in order to turn it into a god body.

Given all of these disadvantages, Ves had done his best to shore up the value of the Dark Zephyr. Taking the additional steps of acquiring an expensive batch of transphasic grenades did much to dispel Venerable Tusa's dissatisfaction at his lack of power in battle!

Ves briefly wondered whether it was even wise for him to give Tusa another gift. He had already pampered his cousin a lot. From a management perspective, it might be best to keep any subsequent gifts in reserve and wait until Tusa needed to be placated again.

There were more factors at play, though. Ves had to take his safety and the safety of the clan into account as well.

Granting Tusa a powerful enlightenment fruit would power him up as quickly as possible, giving him plenty of time to master his new skills and abilities.

It would be too late to hand over an enlightenment fruit to Tusa on the eve of battle!

Ves decided to go through with this decision. He gestured for Tusa to follow him out of the hangar bay and move to the specialized isolation chamber that was built in the middle of the underground complex.

Once they reached the secure space, Ves made sure to close it up and deploy all of the jamming and other interference solutions.

Once he was satisfied, he raised his hand and conjured up a special enlightenment fruit. The dark and shadowy aura surrounding the fruit instantly caused the expert pilot to raise his vigilance.

"What is that, Ves? Is that one of the strange fruits grown by the T Institute that Ranya has mentioned to me lately?"

"It's not from the T Institute." Ves shook his head. "It's something different. This fruit... is a gift. I don't dare to explain what it is out loud, but I can guarantee you that it will be to your benefit if you eat it. This fruit will allow you to refine your combat approach and fight in a more specialized way."

Seeing that Ves was eager for Tusa to ingest the fruit, the expert pilot trusted his intuition that said that the patriarch did not mean to do any harm.

The fruit still made him feel uneasy, though. The expert pilot felt that more might change than he would like.

"What if I don't like what the fruit has to offer?"

"It is up to you whether you decide to accept everything. All I can say is that you should do your best to stay true to your heart. Absorb what you think is useful and helpful to you but maintain your skepticism against elements that

do not sound so great to you. This fruit will undoubtedly impart a lot of material to you in a short amount of time, so you need to act quick and put your trust in yourself."

This answer hardly reassured the expert pilot. "Can I think about it, Ves?"

"I was thinking about saving it up for Andraste when she grows old enough to handle the fruit. The fact that I have considered this option should tell you how much value this fruit possesses. It can grant someone a fantastic opportunity to become stronger, both inside and outside of the cockpit. I have extended a great privilege to you by reserving it for your use. Is that enough?"

Venerable Tusa decided to take the fruit at this point. He hesitated for only a brief moment before he munched on it. It only took a few quick bites for him to swallow the surprisingly light fruit.

Soon, a strange torrent of shadowy energy erupted from his stomach and attempted to go straight into his mind and spirit!

His powerful force of will and formidable mental defenses stopped the fruit from doing its work.

"Let it through, Tusa. It's mostly information that you're getting."

When Tusa carefully lowered his mental defenses, he understood what Ves meant by those words.

His eyes widened as he immediately understood what he was getting. All kinds of information and knowledge about a remarkable weapon style and philosophy started to pour into his mind!

"This...!"

The Shadow Dance Dagger Style Fruit did not just impart knowledge, though. As a fruit that existed to prime an individual towards an extraordinary fighting

style, it also injected Tusa with a quantity of shadow energy that attempted to merge with the expert pilot's spirit!

Ves paid careful attention to this process. He had already figured out that the Shadow Dance Style could only fully be utilized by a practitioner that possessed a large affinity with the element of shadow.

Even a less intensive use of this special fighting style also demanded at least a bit of familiarity with shadow energy!

Tusa's original domain consisted of evasion and freedom of movement. Shadow did not play an obvious role in his fighting style and his philosophy towards life.

He understood that he had to make a difficult decision. Should he embrace the power of shadows and make the best use of the fruit that he ingested, or should he preserve everything that made up his current self?

He closed his eyes and made his choice.

In the end, Tusa chose to integrate a bit of shadow energy but reject the remainder.

This was a compromise decision where he only accepted a minimal amount of influence from the shadow element. This was just enough for him to understand the essence of the Shadow Dance Style but not enough for his personality to change overnight.

It was a pity that his reluctant embrace of shadow would prevent him from using the Shadow Dance Style to its full potential. Not only would every extraordinary move be lacking in power, the expert pilot would also be unable to pull off the most advanced and intensive killer moves of this new fighting style!

Apparently, that was fine with Venerable Tusa. Just like many other expert pilots, he had already made a lot of progress into building his own fighting style and approach. He was confident that he could morph the Shadow Dance Style into a version that embodied his own strengths!

"How powerful!" Tusa uttered with amazement. "I finally understand why those Swordmaidens and Heavensworders are so obsessed with deep and profound swordsmanship. I can potentially defeat opponents that are twice or thrice as myself if I practice this new style!"

Chapter 4202 Upgrading An Expert Pilot

Ves smiled as he concluded that Tusa successfully absorbed the valuable Shadow Dance Dagger Style Fruit.

As the most valuable prize that he obtained from a golden lottery ticket, the fruit extensively set Venerable Tusa up to quickly utilize and master the new fighting style.

The expert pilot was so taken in by all of the new approach and techniques that he drew out his personal daggers and began to dance in the middle of the secure chamber!

Ves quickly took a few steps back as he saw that Tusa reenacted the new moves as if he was being possessed.

The charm of the Shadow Dance Style centered around how it was able to combine multiple different concepts into a cohesive fighting style.

As Tusa rapidly spun around while striking his daggers at multiple different angles, he managed to strike quickly while also being able to keep his body elusive and on the move.

Attacking Tusa was quite difficult when he was moving around a lot! His variable and disorienting movements made it a lot harder to predict his

trajectory while his quick dagger attacks constantly approached from slightly different angles.

While it was easy for a practitioner to look like he was flailing around, Tusa managed to make his varied and intensive movement look both harmonious and elegant.

What surprised Ves quite a bit was how deceptively silent Tusa moved. It was as if he surrounded himself with a blanket of shadow that muffled all of his sounds and other exertions.

Venerable Tusa even managed to minimize his spiritual and willpower fluctuations by applying a special technique!

This was probably one of the most valuable components of the Shadow Dance. As a method that was partially developed for assassination, it was of crucial importance that the practitioner set off the least alarms possible while pulling off these moves.

If Venerable Tusa ever fought in this fashion behind other people's backs, then the chance was great that no one would be the wiser!

"This is truly a fighting style that excels at assassinations and silent takedowns!"

Ves even guessed that if Tusa truly channeled the power of shadow while utilizing this new fighting style, he might even be able to sneak up on expert pilots in certain conditions.

Even if Tusa discarded everything else that the enlightenment fruit imparted to him, it was already worth it to retain this special dampening technique!

As time went by, Venerable Tusa began to experience a few difficulties. The enlightenment fruit might have given him the knowledge as well as the shadow energy needed to execute the Shadow Dance, but his lack of

experience combined with his lack of physical training meant that his body could not keep up with his intentions.

He started to fumble when he wanted to perform the most intricate jumps and dances. It became so bad that he decided that this was enough for the time being.

"So what do you think of your new gift?" Ves asked as he approached the winded expert pilot.

"It's... something else." Tusa said between breaths. "It's a method of assassination, but it's a lot more blatant than that. It looks like it should make a lot of noise, but it is remarkably silent. Whoever invented this style clearly hasn't adapted it to mech combat at all, but I think I can make it work after making a lot of adjustments. The downside to fighting like this is that it is too exhausting. I also need to be able to develop a deeper understanding of shadow to pull off the most outrageous moves."

Ves also noted how much exertion it took to dance and fight like this.

Translated to mech combat, that meant that the Dark Zephyr wouldn't be able to keep this up for long when locked into a duel against a powerful opponent.

This was quite bad because the Dark Zephyr's energy management was already strained at this state.

While Ves had made sure to equip the Dark Zephyr with much better energy cells that possessed much higher capacities, they were sorely needed as the Stiletto Drive expended a lot of power when it was being used!

The greater the warping effect, the more energy the Stiletto Drive demanded!

Nothing came for free. Even if the Stiletto Drive integrated a generous amount of phasewater, the entire module still needed to be powered by a lot of juice in order to keep working!

This meant that the staying power of the Dark Zephyr actually hadn't improved all of that much compared to its previous version.

If Tusa ever got the idea of starting to fight with the Shadow Dance Style, then the energy reserves of the Dark Zephyr would drain even faster!

"Utilize your new fighting skills carefully." Ves advised Tusa. "As much as I would like to upgrade your Dark Zephyr's energy capacity, I have already done the best I can for the time being. It is very difficult for me to give you more operating time because the internal volume of your light mech is already so small. The only way I can give you significantly more energy capacity is to pull out the emergency shield generator and put extra energy cells in its place. This will mean that your mech and especially your Stiletto Drive will become a lot more vulnerable to incoming damage."

"You think it's not worth it, then." Tusa concluded.

"I think the current configuration is enough for short but intensive operations. Just keep an eye on your energy expenditure and make sure to reserve enough of a buffer to return to the fleet for resupply."

Tusa did not like the sound of this, but there wasn't any way to solve this unless the Larkinson Clan was able to put much better energy cells into his expert mech.

Though Ves admittedly had access to ones that possessed even higher capacities, it would exceed the already-generous budget that he had set for the Dark Zephyr.

The Cross Clan may have been willing to pull out all of the stops to turn the Mars into a quasi-ace mech at the start, but Ves was not as willing to do the same for just one of the many expert mechs under his command!

Ves turned his attention to a more important topic.

"How will you proceed now that you have learned a powerful and extraordinary fighting style? Will you turn it into your main style and adapt it to your characteristics or will you break it up and use it to enrich your current combat approach?"

This was an important question and one that would have a lot of implications for Tusa's future development. The pilot had to pause and think about it for a dozen or so seconds.

"I think I will switch over to this new style and take it as the base of my new fighting approach." He eventually said. "While it has its flaws and shortcomings, it is just too powerful. I am a lot more confident in my ability to keep up in a duel against Venerable Dise if I am truly able to integrate the new techniques into my combat routine. That said, you're right that I should also change it up so that it better reflects my needs. There are movements and other parts about the Shadow Dance that need to be heavily modified in order to make it work for the Dark Zephyr."

"Well, you can do what you want. It's your choice, Tusa. All I want is to see you becoming stronger so that you will be able to save more lives in battle. How well are you able to pass on the new fighting techniques to other mech pilots?"

Tusa furrowed his brows. "That is difficult to say. This is not exactly a style for novices. Not every light mech is suitable to pull off the moves. I can say that the Ferocious Piranha will probably struggle with the more dance-like moves. The mech pilots also need to be proficient in a lot of skills before they can even get started."

That didn't sound too good, but Ves already came up with an idea that should make it easier.

"What if I design a stealthy light mech that is designed to pull off these moves to the greatest extent possible?" Ves proposed.

"That... sounds like it will help a lot." Tusa responded. "It will reduce the difficulty of adopting the Shadow Dance Style if the light mech is already set up to perform these techniques. You should pay close attention to the range of movement of the limbs and the ability to smoothly shift the direction of momentum. The new style also works a lot differently in space where the mech can't rely on the force exerted by its feet to spin around and such. I will probably have to work together with you in order to make sure you got everything right."

"I'll give you a summons as soon as we commence the next design round, then. I would like you to write down as much information and theory that you have obtained and pass on what you have learned to our other soldiers. The fruit I've given to you is the only one of its kind, you see. It would be a waste to keep all of the benefits to yourself."

Tusa was not a selfish expert pilot, so he easily agreed to this additional demand even though it added another burden on his shoulders.

"I will call up the current and former members of the Speed Demons to see which ones can take after this new style. If anyone is suitable to pull off the Shadow Dance, it will be among the premier light mech specialists in the Larkinson Army."

Ves smiled. "I will be expecting much from you in the upcoming Trailblazer Expedition. My clan and I have invested a lot of resources into you and your Dark Zephyr even though it was not necessary for us to do so. We did so because we believe in your ability to turn battles around and deal with difficult situations that other expert pilots cannot resolve. The trend in the mech industry has definitely shifted towards ranged mechs as of late, but I am still of

the opinion that there is an indispensable place for melee mechs on the modern battlefield."

"I won't let down your expectations, Ves. I truly appreciate everything you have done for me. I will definitely show that you are not wrong in doing so much for me. Just wait until we get into a pinch again. My Dark Zephyr and I will show you that even the smallest expert mechs can turn the largest battle around!"

"That's the spirit!"

Once Ves finished his dealings with Venerable Tusa, he dismissed the expert pilot and quickly went through his next appointments.

He called in Venerable Isobel Kotin next in order to gift her the Alfari Corps Detonation Code Manual Fruit.

Just like Tusa, Isobel became so impressed by the Detonation Code that she was willing to work with it. The difference was that she was more inclined to treat it as an auxiliary method rather than the new foundation of her fighting style.

Isobel's primary means of dealing damage had always been to rely on spreading flames to engulf enemies in torment. Her domain was already based on burning and it made little sense to switch to a substantially different fighting approach that was not as aligned to her specialization.

Even so, learning how she could shape her energy attacks to unleash powerful explosions was definitely helpful in fighting against expert mechs and other difficult opponents!

"I will try my best to write down the details of the Detonation Code, but I don't think I can teach others to apply the same principles." Venerable Isobel said.

"It's really complicated. If not for the fruit, I don't think I would have been able to make sense of it. Even if I explain everything, it takes a special mech pilot

to be able to apply it in battle. I think that certain expert pilots such as Venerable Stark and Venerable Joshua might be able to learn a thing or two about the Detonation Code, but it might take months if not years to see a difference."

"Just do your best, Isobel. The Detonation Code is way too precious for you to keep for yourself."

Chapter 4203 Ves The Gift Giver

Ves quickly handled the remaining fruits after he upgraded two of his expert pilots.

He handed over the weird Olthori Sacred Cleansing Ritual Manual Fruit to Lufa in the hopes that his design spirit was able to strengthen his specialty.

He wasn't certain on how to handle Imperial Thornix Salamander Breeding Manual Fruit, though.

The two most prominent names on his list was Director Ranya Wodin of the Larkinson Biotech Institute and Director Pesca Aduc of the T Institute.

The former was much more involved in biotechnology, which also included the rearing of mutated beasts. However, her personal specialty lay in researching and designing plant life. Her expertise in exobeasts wasn't all that great.

The latter also possessed a biotechnology background, but became increasingly more proficient in spiritual engineering. Pesca Aduc also possessed a lot more knowledge about exobeasts, though she had mostly worked in the context of ecology.

Neither of them were perfect candidates for him, but if he had to make a choice, he would have to lean towards Director Ranya.

"She's a Larkinson and she's also family in a way."

Though Ranya used to be a member of the Wodin Dynasty, she had fully assimilated into the Larkinson Clan. She also had kids with Tusa which cemented her place among the Larkinsons.

Ves called the director over and gave her a thorough explanation before feeding her the fruit.

"What do you think?" He asked after Ranya absorbed all of the new and specialized knowledge.

"Everything... makes a lot more sense now." She said. "I have learned more about qi and what this mysterious energy can do than I have in the years I've served in your clan. I understand a lot more about mutated beasts and I think I can do a much better job at breeding them and nurturing them into stronger specimens."

"You can do that even if you don't have a talent in this aspect?"

Ranya grinned. "Your suspicion that the manual possesses a lot of general knowledge is correct. Even though I don't have any Imperial Thornix Salambers to work with, much of the theory is general enough that I can apply to any exobeast. I can even apply some of what I learned on exoplants!"

"So can I expect better results from the LBI after today?"

Ranya's expression lowered a bit. "It will take time for me to adapt what I have learned to our current situation. It doesn't help that I don't have talent in this area."

As the Larkinson Clan started up the T Institute and became more involved in spiritual research, Director Ranya found that it was becoming increasingly more important to keep up with these developments.

Unfortunately for her, Ranya did not possess spiritual potential and was therefore incapable of getting started in this field!

Though the T Institute had already conducted several research projects on how to remedy this shortcoming, for now the results were either lacking or too risky to attempt on a key member of the clan.

As such, Ves was unable to help Ranya get started because her spirituality was too small and weak for him to implant her with a companion spirit.

Theoretically, it should be possible for him to implant her with a smaller and less intrusive companion spirit seed, but she was not as young and malleable as an unborn fetus.

Trying to change her spirituality to a large degree when she was already a grown adult was a recipe for disaster!

Ves still remembered the awful outcome of a relevant experiment at the T Institute. When Ves attempted to implant a companion spirit seed into the tiny spirituality of a talentless pakklaton test subject, the cleaner bots had to do a lot of work to clean up the operating theater!

"We're still working on the issue." Ves told her. "Talent should never be a hindrance for people to pursue their dreams. Everyone should have a way to achieve success in any field they prefer. I strongly believe in this, or else I wouldn't have worked so much on projects that have succeeded in leveling the playing field. With the help of specialized knowledge that you have just obtained, I hope we can find a way for you to overcome your current limitations."

His words caused Ranya's eyes to light up.

"You've just given me an interesting idea, Ves. We exobiologists usually work on animals, but who says we can't use the same methods on humans? This Imperial Thornix Salamander Breeding Manual of yours is all about stimulating the potential of a specific kind of powerful lizard species, but maybe I can find a way to adapt some of its universal methods onto humans!"

"Really? How high are your chances of success?"

"Not high, but I think this is truly worth the attempt. Let me go back to my lab so that I can organize what I have learned and formulate a plan. I will probably need to work together with the T Institute to conduct an experiment."

Ves was glad to see Ranya becoming excited about this new research project. Even if it didn't yield any positive results in the end, they would at least be able to learn a lot throughout the process.

They exchanged a lot of ideas before Ranya finally departed in order to get started straight away.

This left Ves with no more fruits to hand out. He had used and gifted so many of them that he felt remorseful that he had run out of them so quickly. It took quite a bit of effort for him to readjust his mood.

"I have lived many years without relying on these advantages. I can't let it all go through my head and become addicted to these powerups."

Ves and his clan would still have been fine if the System did not wake up during this period. The enlightenment fruits were all icing on the cake as far as he was concerned.

All of the work that he and his fellow Larkinsons had done in the last decade had built up a clan that was powerful enough to compete with the big boys. Ves was most proud of being able to affect major changes in society by virtue of his innovations and daring decisions rather than relying on the handouts from the System.

That did not mean that Ves would stop making use of enlightenment fruits and other attractive goodies. He just wanted to make sure that they supplemented his existing activities as opposed to replacing them entirely.

The remaining object that Ves needed to handle was the Makian Tree Bark that he had wasted one of his radiant lottery tickets on. To say that he was dissatisfied with this prize was an understatement.

He spent a few hours in his lab in order to study and experiment on the bark. He even chiseled away tiny samples of the hard bark in order to conduct more destructive examinations and experiments on the unknown material.

Ves didn't really obtain any useful results. The material was organic, extremely hard and gave a weird feeling to people.

Other than that, Ves hadn't been able to make it do anything special. He even called out Blinky in an attempt to probe its spiritual properties, only for the spiritual cat to return in defeat.

"Damn."

With no other viable options left, Ves retrieved a totem of Gaia and requested her assistance in figuring out the Makian Tree Bark.

Usually, the 'design spirit' acted rather aloof and rarely responded to his inquiries.

This time was an exception, though. The totem that Ves had placed in front of his work table began to glow with power as a powerful presence channeled a small part of her attention to the private laboratory!

"VES LARKINSON." The air vibrated with the ethereal voice of the most powerful creation that Ves had made up to this date! "BRING THE TREE BARK CLOSER."

"Uh, okay."

Ves obediently did as directed. He could feel that Gaia grew more curious about the properties of the strange organic object. Her powerful senses

studied it carefully for a few seconds before she had learned what she needed to know.

"PLEASE TRANSFER THE TREE BARK THE GREEN DREAM. THE ADUC FAMILY WILL TAKE IT FROM THERE."

"The Green Dream is not in the Davute System as far as I recall." Ves spoke. "I will have to entrust the bark to a courier service in order to ship it over. Although they have grown a lot more reliable in the past couple of years, plenty of shipments still go missing from time to time."

The terraforming ship was often on assignment as stationing it in Davute meant that she wasn't earning money on behalf of the Aduc Family!

"SEND IT ANYWAY. MAKE CERTAIN TO INCLUDE A TOTEM OF MY LIKENESS IN THE SAME PACKAGE."

"Okiedoki. Can I ask why you want it sent to the Green Dream? Are you... trying to integrate it into your physical body?"

"THAT REMAINS TO BE SEEN."

"Can you keep me appraised of what you are able to learn from it and how you will eventually put it to use? It's value is probably extremely high, so this is a massive gift."

"I WILL OWE YOU A FAVOR. I SHALL RECIPROCATE WITH ASSISTANCE THAT IS COMMENSURATE TO YOUR GIFT."

"That is all I wanted to hear. Thank you for giving me this commitment, Gaia."

"DO NOT BOTHER ME WITH IRRELEVANT QUESTIONS."

"I'm your creator, Gaia! Can't you give me more respect considering that I've brought you to life in the first place!?"

"..."

Gaia had already retracted her presence from the totem. God or not, it was not easy for her to manifest in this way. It was even more strenuous for her to transmit her voice through the air.

Ves just rolled her eyes. This kind of behavior was already typical for the powerful design spirit. He already figured out that much of the reason why Gaia had little patience for him was because she was still preoccupied with her ongoing evolution and transformation.

With the understanding that he possessed today, Ves did not blame Gaia all that much anymore.

Becoming a True God was an immense challenge to any individual, let alone a design spirit that was only five years old!

"I hope she'll remember everything that I've done to her once she has become more powerful than ever." Ves sighed.

He spent a bit of time arranging the Makian Tree Bark to be transported to the Green Dream.

Normally, he would have felt inclined to assign a couple of Larkinson ships to escort the precious cargo over to where the Aduc Family was terraforming its latest planet, but right now was a sensitive time.

"It won't be long before we can finally kick off the Trailblazer Expedition!"

The Golden Skull Alliance had prepared for this massive endeavor for many years. This was plenty of time to get everything ready and prepare everything the three alliance partners intended to bring on this expedition.

There was no case of missing essential materials or running short on supplies.

If Ves wanted to, he could order the combined fleet to start off the expedition early and depart within a matter of days!

"Have I truly taken care of everything? What did I still miss?"

As Ves spent his time on preparing for the approaching start of his much-anticipated journey to the deeper parts of the new frontier, Calabast dropped by his office to inform him of a surprising development.

"An old friend of yours has arrived in Davute."

Ves looked up from his desk with a questioning glance. "I have a lot of so-called old friends. Some of them even traveled to Davute over the years in order to freeload off my clan. Which one are you talking about?"

The spymaster smirked as she leaned on the side of his desk. She reached out her hand to stroke Lucky's back.

"Meow..."

"This friend is a little different, Ves. He's a Fridayman that you know personally. Does that narrow it down enough for you, or do you need more hints?"

Ves fell silent as he quickly went through a list of names. There weren't many male Fridaymen that he knew in person, and many of them had turned into his enemies.

"Given your words and given how few of them I considered as my friends, I can only come up with two possible names. It's either Oleg Vorn or Tristan Wesseling."

"It's the latter."

"Oh."

Chapter 4204 Exchange Of Interests

Ves picked up a data pad and skimmed through the intelligence that the Black Cats had gathered about the Fridayman presence on Davute.

He had always been aware that the Friday Coalition might not be finished with him, but he never took the state seriously as a result.

Despite winning the Komodo War, the Fridaymen lost a huge amount of strength, wealth and manpower.

They needed to allocate almost everything they had left just to take possession of the former territories of the Hexadric Hegemony and integrate them into their growing state.

Given all of their needs at home, how could the Fridaymen possibly transfer so many troops, resources and qualified manpower to an entirely different dwarf galaxy?

Starting a colonial adventure should never come at the cost of losing one's foundation at home!

Ves bet that pretty much all of the leaders and powerful stakeholders of the Friday Coalition still resided in the Komodo Star Sector.

Each of these leaders came from lineages that had built up their own commercial and political empires in their home state. It was in their best self-interest to avoid compromising their existing assets just to be able to plant more flags in the Red Ocean.

Ves never took the Fridayman colonies as a result. The Golden Skull Alliance had grown too strong for his old enemies to attempt another raid like the one that resulted in the Battle of Reckoning.

He expected the Friday Coalition to mind its business and stay in its own lanes while Ves went on with his business like normal.

To be honest, he couldn't care less about the hostile state. While there were still harsh feelings between the two, the heat of the moment had already passed after the Komodo War had passed.

Years had passed since the Hex Army launched millions of Valkyrie mechs and other living mechs at the mech armies of the coalition partners.

Back then, there was a real rationale for taking out Ves as his removal would directly reduce the losses suffered by the Fridayman mech forces.

Now that this was no longer the case, the Fridayman shouldn't be so eager to invest so much resources into neutralizing him. They had much better things to do with their depleted forces.

Though Ves and the Friday Coalition still had some remaining entanglements, they shouldn't be enough for either side to continue to obsess over each other.

He never expected the Fridaymen to take the initiative to contact him, though. Not this soon and not through an unexpected spokesperson like Tristan.

"Why him? Why did he come here? Shouldn't he be building up his career all the way in the old galaxy?"

Ves still possessed a decent impression of Tristan. As one of the direct disciples of Master Meredith Katzenberg, he had access to a lot more wealth and opportunities than almost every other mech designer.

Such a mech designer did not need to build a mech company from scratch nor go through desperate measures in order to carve a place in the mech industry. He just needed to follow the arrangements of his Master or use her network to gain a head-start in his own career.

A soft mech designer like Tristan Wesseling did not belong in a harsh and wild environment like the Red Ocean!

The new frontier was a turbulent place for mech designers. Plenty of them who did not possess opportunities at home had risen up from nowhere, but

even more of them were beaten down by the overwhelming competition from the dominant market players.

Rather than trying so hard to achieve success in one of the most competitive mech markets in human space, Tristan would have a much better time if he competed in a market he was familiar with and could take maximum advantage of his existing connections.

However, according to the intelligence report, it did not seem that Tristan had traveled to the Red Ocean in order to start his own business or lay the groundwork for Master Katzenberg to extend her tentacles to the new frontier.

"The Friday Coalition has turned Tristan into an envoy." Calabast succinctly explained. "The goal is to secure an opportunity to bring you to the negotiating table in person in order to hold a deep and serious discussion with you. Previously, the Fridaymen had dispatched their diplomats to us, but Minister Shederin never let them go any further."

"I imagine that's for good reason. Shederin would have notified me if there was any use to talking with the Fridaymen. Is this why they decided to send Tristan this time?"

The Director of Intelligence grinned as she squished Lucky's face. The cat luxuriated in the pampering that he received.

"Correct. In truth, the situation of the Fridaymen has changed over the years. As their position has worsened, they have become more desperate to negotiate with us. Sending Tristan is a sign that they are willing to be sincere about concluding a deal that satisfies both sides."

"Oh? Tell me what's going on. Anything that makes the Fridaymen feel uneasy should be advantageous to us." Ves leaned forward in anticipation of hearing a good story.

Calabast did not disappoint on this front. The Black Cats had gathered a heap of intelligence. Combined with the analysis conducted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Larkinson Clan possessed a pretty clear picture of how the Friday Coalition was doing these days.

The spymaster quickly went over the aftermath of the Komodo War, the increasing tensions between the 'winners' and 'losers' among the coalition partners and the increasing importance of securing colonies in the Red Ocean.

The rise of phasewater technology most acutely affected the new frontier, but also had massive implications for the old galaxy.

Every state and established power that was rooted in the Milky Way needed to establish a colony in the Red Ocean in order to gain an 'internal' channel for phasewater.

If a state like the Friday Coalition was unable to found and keep their colonies in the new frontier, then it would not only have access to less phasewater than other rivals, but also be forced to buy it from alternate channels at a hefty premium!

It would not surprise anyone at all that states without their own supply of phasewater would have to pay triple the amount of money to obtain this valuable substance!

This was a massive expense and one that could seriously affect the balance of power in many star sectors and star clusters.

Now that Ves thought about it, the colonization fever had picked up as of late. A lot more pioneers had poured into the Red Ocean despite the price of passage remaining as high as ever.

Building up a presence in the Red Ocean was no longer seen as a luxury. It had become a matter of survival!

Given the increased importance of maintaining a solid presence in the Red Ocean, it made a lot more sense why the Fridaymen wanted to hold a serious talk with Ves.

This was especially the case considering the vengeful Hexer exiles could not let go of the fact that they lost the Komodo War!

His wife may have told him stories about the Hexers stirring up trouble against their Fridayman rivals in the Magair Middle Zone, but he never expected that it had reached this level!

"They're still going on about this?" Ves puzzlingly asked.

"Yes." Calabast stated. "Many of the dynasties that previously reigned over the Hegemony have successfully managed to transplant the essence of their forces and liquid assets to their new holdings in the Magair Middle Zone. They currently possess a significant force advantage over their old enemies, and have not been shy about exploiting this disparity."

"Why don't the Hexers roll over the Fridaymen colonies entirely if this is the case? I can imagine that those angry women are more than eager to exact their pound of flesh."

"They can't, Ves. The Magair Middle Zone is bigger than the Fridaymen and Hexers. There are many other pioneers that have founded their own colonies in the same region. Each of them have formed their own power blocs that each put the other in check. The reality of the situation is that every colony must constantly be protected by a sizable garrison in order to deter opportunists from launching raids."

"I see."

The Hexers probably would have loved to do nothing more than to kick the Fridaymen out of the Red Ocean, but they could not afford to deploy the majority of their mech forces away from their own holdings.

Many of the powerful dynasties essentially had nothing left now that they had fled to the new frontier! The colonies that they had founded a few years ago represented the last bastion of these dynasties. There was no escape route left after they had sacrificed so much already.

This led to the current impasse. The Hexer raiders might not be strong enough to topple the Friday colonies outright, but they still made the lives of their old enemies hell by harassing the weaker and more vulnerable settlements.

However, it just so happened that the weaker Fridayman colonies happened to belong to the less well-off coalition partners!

While a number of the colonies founded by the Carnegie Group, the Vermeer Group, the Vanguard Group and the Puffer Clan all suffered serious losses and setbacks, the stronger ones founded by the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan were mostly spared from harassment!

Ves began to comprehend the nuances behind the latest development.

"Not every Fridayman is eager to negotiate a cessation of hostilities, is that what you're saying?"

"Correct. Nominally, the Friday Coalition wishes to stem the losses by negotiating with you." Calabast said after clarifying the context behind the new development. "In reality, only a part of the Coalition wants to form a resolution of the problem. The other part is not in a hurry to stop the Hexer raids. The more the current situation proceeds, the more the balance of power will tilt towards the most dominant members of the state."

Ves cynically chuckled. "I knew these backstabbers wouldn't be able to remain united. Those Gaugers have always been too full of themselves. Why the hell should we intervene in the first place? Let them fight and suffer!"

He was not particularly sad to hear that the Friday Coalition was starting to show its fault lines.

A sense of schadenfreude overtook his mood. He derived a lot of pleasure from imagining how the Friday Coalition might fall apart one day!

"The Friday Coalition isn't made up of stupid people, Ves." Calabast cautioned him. "It is impossible for the Fridaymen to let external parties take advantage of their infighting. The Coalition is unlikely to break up completely, but it is a realistic possibility that the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan will become a lot more dominant than before. From our analysis, we believe that as long as the weaker coalition partners are willing to make concessions to the Gaugers and the Konsus, the latter two will do more to protect the outlying colonies that are under pressure."

Ves frowned. This situation sounded increasingly more complicated.

"So the primary conflict is not between the Fridaymen or the Hexers, but between these dummies themselves. The Hexers and myself are simply external factors that the Fridaymen wish to leverage in order to manipulate their domestic political landscape."

The overarching message that Calabast wanted to convey was that everything revolved around interests. The Gaugers and the other coalition partners were solely trying to secure their own advantages without letting their feelings and sentiments interfere with their calculus.

Tristan's surprise arrival in Davute had nothing to do with trying to reconcile a strained relationship. The Fridaymen who supported the negotiation effort just wanted to hold an exchange of interests.

"The Gaugers and the Konsus might not be so eager to forge a new deal with you, but the remaining ones are much more desperate to enact changes." Calabast noted. "You should expect them to offer a considerable amount of

concessions to you in order to obtain your agreement. This alone makes it worthwhile to listen to their proposals."

"I don't know, Calabast. The Trailblazer Expedition is due to start. I don't need any further distractions in my life. More importantly, I'm pretty sure that my wife will vehemently oppose any deal I make with the Fridaymen."

He could already imagine his wife screaming in his face!

Chapter 4205 Meeting The Envoy

In the end, Ves grew too curious at what Tristan and the Fridaymen had to say. He agreed to the suggestion of meeting the Fridayman envoy in person.

Even if Ves held no interest in reconciling with the Fridaymen, he still wanted to get in touch with Tristan again and learn how the man was doing these days.

Perhaps it might not have been appropriate for Ves to regain contact with Tristan while the Komodo War had entered its hottest period, but that was already in the past.

Seeing as certain elements of the Friday Coalition no longer treated the Hexers as strictly enemies, it should be okay for Ves to renew his personal friendship with Tristan!

It did not take long for the diplomats from both sides to hammer out the details. Since the Larkinsons held the dominant position in this negotiation, it was up to them to decide the meeting venue and circumstances.

"Let's invite him over to the Cat Nest, Benny." Ves decided. "I think it would be best if we meet him at a site where we are able to exert maximum control."

"Which structure or area of the Cat Nest do you prefer to sit down with Tristan?" Gavin Neumann asked. "The exact site will have a large influence on the atmosphere and setting of the upcoming talks."

"Hmm. Let's go with the fanciest option. We need to impress the Fridaymen, after all. Schedule an appointment at one of those fancy ceremonial meeting rooms on the upper levels of the Ascension Gallery. Tristan will definitely gain a deeper impression of our power once he tours the different wings underneath."

"Good choice. We will schedule the appointment as soon as possible."

The Fridayman diplomats had no objections to this choice. It was not as if they could change anything anyway. They were already happy that Ves finally deigned to speak with them in person.

On the fated day, Ves had dressed up in one of his more ceremonial outfits. Though he wanted to meet with Tristan as a fellow mech designer, the stakes were too high for him to take this meeting too lightly.

By putting up a costume that was not only bedecked with symbolic icons but also increased his stature by adding a rich maroon cape, Ves automatically assumed a different attitude and demeanor.

Lucky also received a bit of care and attention. A special bot hovered over his metallic form to clean and polish his exterior plating to a shine.

"Meow."

Minister Shederin Purnesse, who had dressed himself up in a more muted brown business suit, was also present at this time. He had already spent an hour coaching Ves on how to approach the coming meeting.

"It is up to you to decide how to approach your first formal talk with the Friday Coalition, but I suggest you put your personal whims and feelings aside, at least for this session. You are not only representing yourself, but also a clan that encompasses over half a million members, many of which are highly skilled and highly educated. Each of them have entrusted their lives and their futures to you. Don't betray their trust by fooling around and conceding more

than is necessary. In fact, it is best not to make any agreements in the first meeting. You should always come back to us in order to hold rational discussions on how we should best proceed. Decisions taken at the heat of the moment rarely work out well."

"I understand." Ves said as he examined his dashing and heroic appearance in front of a mirror projection. "I will be speaking with Tristan alone, right?"

"Yes. Representatives from both sides will be listening in, but we will all be staying in another room. We will always be able to provide clarification or answers should you ask."

"Good. Let's get this going."

Ves moved to the ceremonial meeting room that the clan had prepared for this occasion.

Totems of the Golden Cat along with other custom decorations significantly elevated the rich decor. Dramatized paintings of the glorious battles that the Larkinson Clan had fought and won along with the pristine banners of every mech legion gave the room a martial vibe.

Everything in this ceremonial chamber was designed to project the strength of the Larkinson Clan.

The implicit message was anything but subtle. The time where the Larkinsons had to cower and run away from the Fridayman had passed.

This time, it was the visitors who had to grovel in front of the host!

While Lucky jumped onto a table and settled in a comfortable position, Ves approached the wide and ornate windows and looked out over the expansive campus of the Cat Nest.

The large and expansive compound situated in Industrial District 2 had been his home for the past five years.

He gazed at the Blue Cat Estates where many of the clansmen resided. The idyllic houses and apartments had charmed so many Larkinsons that many of them had applied to transfer to the Davute Branch in order to make this part of their lives permanent.

The massive Hammerworks Manufacturing Complex dominated much of the space of the Cat Nest. The amount of industrial activity that took place within its productive halls had ramped up so much after successive investments that over 2000 mechs rolled out of the production lines each standard day!

The Genesis Lab where the entire Design Department had worked at for 5 years also turned into a formidable institution. Hiring over a thousand mech designers and a bunch of other specialists had turned it into a mecca of mech design in this neighborhood.

Aside from these prominent structures, the surface of the Cat Nest was also prized by many Larkinsons and visitors. The green parks and plazas not only granted people an opportunity to relax and enjoy the pleasant sights, but also granted them the opportunity to interact and play with all of the cats that made the place their home!

The abundance of cats and other pets that resided or regularly dropped by had turned the Cat Nest into such an eccentric site that it had practically become a tourist attraction of Davute!

"How fun."

He would be lying if he said that he hated his time here. Davute had done wonders to give him and his clan the rest and stability that they craved. The rigors and dangers of space travel could wear away the sanity of any human.

Perhaps Ves truly needed this vital period of rest and recuperation. He noticed that he had become a lot less restless and prone to making extreme decisions as of late.

"This can't go on much longer." He whispered to himself.

Returning to sanity and normality might be great if he wanted to live a normal life, but that was not his goal. He wanted to become a Star Designer and reach the pinnacle of mech design. It was impossible for him to work his way up this height without exposing himself to a sense of urgency and pressure.

Ves increasingly missed all of the stimulation he received back when he was still journeying from one dangerous place to another. The Trailblazer Expedition was primarily meant to ignite his drive again so that he could design much more brilliant mechs in the coming years.

A chime sounded in the room. Ves turned around just as the double doors automatically slid open.

Two guests had arrived at the upper levels of the Ascension Gallery. The smartly-dressed woman that accompanied Tristan up to this point had carefully schooled her emotions and body language, but the same could not be said for the man of the hour.

Ves knew that the little ploy to give Tristan a brief tour through the Cat Nest and the Ascension Gallery had succeeded.

Hardly anyone could remain calm after touring all of the impressive display mechs and large depictions of every design spirit. The power and accomplishments of the Larkinson Clan exceeded that of many organizations that had arrived in the Red Ocean in the past few years!

Though Tristan had already read and heard a lot about the rapid growth of the Larkinsons, the impact was much greater if he became exposed to the splendor up close.

However, Tristan was not a dummy who could be fooled so easily. He not only received expert instruction, but also possessed the maturity and life experience to recognize the game that was being played.

Journeyman were clever and observant people as a rule. Tristan may have been affected by the earlier displays, but he did not want to let down the people who invested him with responsibility.

The Fridayman took a deep breath and steadily strode forward.

Just like Ves, Tristan dressed up by wearing a ceremonial dress uniform. While his outfit was not as opulent as that of a clan leader, he looked handsome as his neatly combed blond hair paired well with his white ensemble.

The double doors closed, giving the two men the illusion of privacy.

"Welcome to the Larkinson Clan, Mr. Wesseling." Ves greeted his visitor in a slightly officious tone. "I hope that your visit to the Cat Nest has been pleasant."

"It is definitely a unique experience, Patriarch Larkinson." Tristan mildly replied. "The Red Ocean has presented me with many new sights. It is interesting how visiting this new dwarf galaxy makes one realize how small their home states actually are. Places such as the Friday Coalition and the Garlen Empire do not carry as much weight all the way over here. One of the lessons that I have learned is that everyone who has arrived in the new frontier has to start from scratch."

"That is both the charm and the pitfall of the Red Ocean. Many dreams have come true in this dwarf galaxy, but many more have been relentlessly crushed by the ruthlessness that dominates this region of space."

Tristan swept his gaze around the ornamental room. "Your clan doesn't appear to have been crushed at all. Starting anew in the Red Ocean has done you and your clan a great favor."

"No thanks to the Friday Coalition." Ves pointedly said.

History could have proceeded a lot differently if Ves and his clan never got into conflict with the Fridaymen. So much death and misery has ensued after the Bright Republic abruptly turned against one of its prestigious military families due to receiving instructions from their unofficial masters.

Of course, it didn't help that Ves started to hook up with a Hexer, but that was besides the point.

Ves was growing tired of this dance. He decided to address the reason for this meeting.

"My people have been telling me that you have come to me in order to convey the Friday Coalition's words, is that correct?"

Tristan nodded, though he did not look particularly firm while doing so. "That is... correct. The central government has turned me into an envoy and has invested me with certain powers, rights and responsibilities. The state that I am representing wants to hold a serious discussion with you and your clan."

"What kind of discussion?"

"About peace."

"Hasn't the Komodo War ended a long time ago? The Hexadric Hegemony who I have supported is gone."

Tristan did not look amused. "You know what I am talking about, patriarch. The war back at our home star sector may have ended, but the war that is boiling in the Magair Middle Zone has continued to intensify over time. Fridaymen and Hexers are still fighting against each other in a time where it makes little sense to pursue old grievances. We may have driven the Hexers out of the Komodo Star Sector, but don't forget it is ultimately them that have started the entire conflict in the first place. We were never the aggressors. We have always maintained a defensive posture and only attacked when we were

compelled to retaliate. Even you should be able to acknowledge that we have always been saner than the Hexers."

Ves snorted. "I am not interested in the rights and wrongs of the long-standing rivalry between the two sides. From my perspective, you Fridaymen have screwed me over time and time again while the Hexers have always supported me. Nothing you say can change that. Given that your state has tried to wipe me and my clansmen out, I don't feel like being generous to you. Don't think that the fact that quite a few years have passed since then will make me look at the Friday Coalition with rose-tinted glasses. I still take pleasure in imagining the demise of your state."

What could Tristan say to that? While the Friday Coalition had managed to achieve real progress by getting to meet with Ves in person, his harsh tone made it a lot more difficult to achieve reconciliation between the two sides!

Chapter 4206 Terrible Offers

Tristan felt quite a bit of pressure as he finally exchanged words with the renowned patriarch of the Larkinson Clan.

The Ves who he met in the past presented himself in a completely different manner today.

It started with his appearance. While the Ves in the past not only looked and behaved in a casual manner, the Ves in the ceremonial meeting room stood as if he owned the very air that Tristan breathed!

The ornate caped uniform along with the confidence built from achieving incredible successes in multiple domains had transformed Ves into a leader that exuded the demeanor of an actual head of state.

The tone and words adopted by Ves further cemented his dominant position. This was a man that did not forgive past grievances and always maintained his hostility towards the Friday Coalition.

Even Lucky gave him a sense of pressure. The mechanical cat looked as if he was lounging casually in the same room, but the Fridaymen had collected enough intelligence about the cat to know that it was quite formidable in battle!

Tristan needed to respond carefully in order to maintain the hope of holding a fruitful conversation with the resentful patriarch.

"What is done is done." He said carefully. "We cannot undo the mistakes of the past. The only way we can proceed is to look towards the future and make sure that neither of us will continue to make more people suffer regardless of the side that they are on. Let's bury the hatchet. We barely have anything to do with each other anyway. We should agree to keep our weapons cool if we ever bump into each other again. We would also like you to use your influence among the Hexer colonists to ease up on their animosity. If they no longer make use of your mechs to attack our settlements, we can all live in harmony so that we can focus on the other threats of the Red Ocean. Don't you want to provide a safer and more carefree life for your children?"

Ves erupted in laughter. "Hahahaha! What a joke. Is this the sincerity of the Friday Coalition? Do you think it is so easy to forgive all of the Larkinsons that you have killed during the Battle of Reckoning?! If I was in a weaker position, I might be open to your offer, but since this is not the case, I am not inclined to lighten my stance at all. The Friday Coalition is still on my list of targets, and my children will most definitely inherit my hatred. Their mother will make sure of it I think."

The obstinacy shown by Ves made it clear to Tristan that he could not continue to rely on aspirational words to make any meaningful progress. He needed to show a more concrete willingness to achieve reconciliation.

The Fridayman raised his palm. "Please hear me out, patriarch. Our state is willing to make significant reparations to earn your forgiveness."

"What sort of reparations are you talking about?"

"For one, we are ready to transfer back a significant amount of shares in your Living Mech Corporation."

Tristan had started with the biggest and most profound concession that he was allowed to present!

He knew that he needed to start this off on a firmer footing in order to maintain the interest of his counterpart.

Though Ves already expected the Fridayman to put the shares under discussion, he did not expect that Tristan would be that straightforward.

"How much?"

"12 percent." Tristan responded.

That was a lot! With the continued rise of the Living Mech Corporation, the value of owning 12 percent of a booming mech company that was based in the Red Ocean had skyrocketed to an amazing height!

Any sane investor would never be willing to give up so many shares without obtaining a massive prize in return.

It appeared that the Friday Coalition regarded Ves as such an enormous threat to their interests that the state would rather give up a whopping 12 percent of the outstanding shares of the LMC!

"If I recall correctly, that does not encompass all of the shares held by the Friday Coalition. You still owe me 4 percent."

"I have already quoted our bottom line to you." Tristan replied. "Your former Master has generously agreed to put up most of the shares that are in her name, leaving her with 2 percent which we view as a guarantee for our new and more productive relationship with you. Master Toqueman Huron has not

agreed to put his own 2 percent stake in the LMC at our disposal. He has already conveyed his desire to continue to hold onto his shares."

That was a weird message if Ves didn't know better. He had already been briefed about the internal divisions within the Friday Coalition.

Master Carmin Olson belonged to the Vermeer Group, which was much more eager to reconcile with Ves.

Master Toqueman Huron belonged to the Gauge Dynasty, which actually had a vested interest in the current status quo.

Ves slowly frowned. "I don't care about guarantees and continued relationships. The shares don't really belong to those Masters and your state to begin with. You guys stole the ownership stakes from the Bright Republic. Either you surrender your stolen goods or else I will put an end to this discussion."

"Don't be in such a hurry to close the door to further talks. My state is also willing to revoke the ban on selling your products in our markets. As long as we sign a new agreement, the Friday Coalition will not only lift this ban, but actively encourage our customers, particularly those who reside in our colonies, to purchase your mechs. There are many groups that have been waiting to purchase the Pacifiers, the Hymenopteras and the other popular models that have won over many fans over the years."

This concession did not impress Ves in the slightest.

"I don't care." He flatly said. "It makes no difference for me whether I can sell my products to your Fridaymen or not. Most of my products are exclusive to the Red Ocean so being able to service the needs of an entire star sector in the old galaxy is not that relevant. As for opening up my mechs for sale to your colonies, that sounds even less attractive to me considering I have serviced many larger customers."

"The Friday Coalition is willing to give your mech company privileged access to our mech markets in the Red Ocean. This might not sound like much at the moment, but you will be able to sell a lot more mechs in our colonial state once it has reached a much more impressive scale in the future. On top of that, we are even willing to talk with you about commissioning specialized mechs from you in order to enrich our military forces."

Now that was a peculiar concession!

"I have armed and empowered the Hex Army for years." Ves said as he raised his eyebrow. "Why would you entrust me with doing the same for your troops?"

"Why not? Although our relationship is not the best, we have seen how much you have managed to strengthen the Hexers and prolong their participation in the Komodo War. We genuinely respect and appreciate your living mechs. We shouldn't have banned them in our space at all. As long as we can start over with a clean slate, we have no objection to allowing you to do the same for our armed forces."

Ves did not believe that the Fridaymen veterans who had fought against so many Valkyrie Redeemers and other living mechs were willing to see this happen.

Of course, the leaders of the Friday Coalition would force the decision onto them anyway. As long as their interests got ahead, who cared about offending their own troops?

"I am not enthused about designing mechs for you Fridaymen at all." Ves shook his head. "No matter how interesting the projects can be and no matter how much money I can earn from this deal, you can't bribe away the harm that you have done to me and my clan. We have our principles, and one of them is that we abide by our friendships and remember our enemies."

The talks continued even though Tristan did not have much else to give. He was not a professional negotiator so he did not handle this increasingly more awkward situation in the best possible manner.

Ves eventually received a message from Minister Shederin Purnesse that it was best to end this session at this time.

"Stop." He said as he raised his palm. "Nothing you have said earlier is enough. While I admit that your state has put up numerous attractive concessions, they are not enough for me to feel moved. I suggest you go back and tell your bosses to be serious. I don't want to hear any further jokes from you. If you cannot give me a serious offer, then I will continue on my day while enthusiastic Hexer raiders continue to degrade your colonial ambitions."

The first session had clearly come to an end. Tristan had failed to attain the breakthrough that he had been tasked with securing.

At this point, Tristan should be saying his goodbyes.

Instead, he lingered and opened up a different line of discussion.

"I knew you wouldn't let go of your hatred of us so easily." Tristan sighed.

"Since this is your stance, I'm allowed to present an alternative offer to you that is smaller but perhaps more attractive to you. I seriously urge you to hear me out before you pass any judgment."

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Are you speaking on behalf of the Friday Coalition as a whole at the moment, or are you only representing a part of your great and victorious state?"

The Fridayman mech designer shrugged. "I guess you know about that already. My advisor did tell me that your clan is pretty good at figuring out this kind of stuff. I won't dance around the truth, then. Your remark is correct. I have already done my duty as a representative of the Coalition. I am now

speaking as an unofficial envoy of Vermeer Group, Carnegie Group, the Vanguard Group and the Puffer Clan."

"My two favorite coalition partners along with two other losers from the Friday Coalition. What a surprise."

"Since you know about our state's internal contradictions, I don't think I need to explain why the coalition partners that I represent at the moment are not that pleased with the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan. Leaving aside the latter, it is the Gaugers that are truly presenting a threat to the continuation of the Friday Coalition."

Ves crossed his arms. "All of that sounds interesting and all, but what does that have to do with me? I have no interest in fixing the problems that plague your state."

"I am not asking that of you, patriarch. I am not asking you to bury the hatchet or persuade the Hexers to cease their raids on our colonies. In fact, I was about to request you do the opposite. We want to invite you to attack certain colonies that belong to a certain coalition partner that has been annoying the rest of us lately."

Now that was a surprising development! Ves never expected that Tristan would blatantly request Ves and the Hexers to launch an open attack on the colonies of the Gauge Dynasty!

"That sounds crazy. As inviting as your offer sounds, we're not stupid, Mr. Wesseling. How will I be able to know that your suggestion isn't a trap? It would be too easy to hide a lot of forces at a Gauger colony and spring the trap once an attacking force has arrived."

Tristan Wesseling did not answer immediately. Instead, he took a deep breath before pulling out a large but flexible information sheet from his white dress uniform and offering it up to the Larkinson Patriarch.

Ves did not sense much of a threat from this printed sheet, so he grabbed it and quickly scanned the contents.

His eyes widened.

"These are detailed defensive plans of several major Gauger settlements!"

The sheet contained a surprising amount of details. They not only showed a complete map of all of the defensive turrets, fortifications and bases of numerous key settlements, but also mentioned the amount and models of mechs tasked with defending the colonies.

Not only that, the sheet also showed a hint of the designs of the prevailing mech models of the Sundered Phalanx. The document explicitly mentioned their weaknesses as well as how to best exploit them all as if its creator was afraid that the Larkinsons couldn't figure this out themselves.

If that wasn't shocking enough, the extremely information-dense sheet also contained the full designs of most if not all of the expert mechs that were assigned to the defensive garrisons! The full details of their expert pilots were also mentioned!

This critical sheet pretty much exposed almost all of the defensive layouts of the most prominent Gauger strongholds in the Magair Middle Zone!

Anyone who made use of this information could launch an extremely effective attack on the most critical and most strategic assets of the Gauge Dynasty in the Red Ocean!

Ves' expression grew a lot graver after taking in this information.

"What is the meaning of this, Tristan?"

"It's exactly what it looks like, Ves. We want you to pass this on to the Hexer colonists and encourage them to redirect their firepower towards the Gauger settlements that we have exposed with this leak. We are inviting, no, begging

your Hexer friends to ruin the Gauge Dynasty's day. I can unequivocally promise that no forces hailing from the Vermeer Group, the Carnegie Group, the Vanguard Group and the Puffer Clan will ever move to come to the aid of the Gaugers. They are completely on their own as far as we are concerned."

Ves was truly aback at this point, but Minister Shederin who had been listening in the background remained sharp. The old man urgently gave the patriarch a recommendation.

"We will need time to verify the authenticity of this generous package of information that you have given to us." Ves eventually said as he carefully rolled up the flexible sheet. "We will require a bit of time before we are ready to hold another round of talks."

"That is understandable." Tristan politely nodded as if he hadn't stabbed the Gaugers in the back. "Let me warn you that we have still withheld a certain amount of information. In addition, the content on the sheet that you are holding will become increasingly out of date as time passes by. While we have sources that can continue to supply you with information about ongoing developments, we are only willing to do so if you and the Hexers have agreed to act."

"Understood. Please wait until we call you up again."

Chapter 4207 Extending Family

Ves never expected his first meeting with Tristan Wesseling in years to end this way.

He could not even catch up with Tristan on a personal basis. The critical defense information that the Fridayman mech designer had nonchalantly leaked to one of the known enemies of his state demanded too much attention!

The hardcopy that fell into Ves' hands turned into a priority matter that needed to be dealt with as soon as possible!

After waving Tristan goodbye, Ves immediately left the Ascension Gallery and headed down to the underground base complex where he could securely handle the hot intelligence that he carried on his person.

"Please verify the information printed on this sheet." Ves said as he carefully handed over the item in question to a Black Cat officer. "Make sure to be careful with dissemination of what is inside. Also, notify Director Calabast right away. I need her here in order to deal with the intelligence that we have received in the most prudent and respectful manner possible. I am about to call for a meeting with the highest leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance and I do not want us to make decisions based on lies and misdirection."

After tasking the Black Cats with verifying the sensitive information package, Ves proceeded to inform numerous people whose input he valued.

People such as General Verle, Commander Casella Ingvar, Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse and Chief Minister Magdalena Larkinson all received a call from him that caused them to put down their current duties in order to address this new surprise.

One of the more interesting personalities he tapped was Chief Minister Abigail Evern.

After Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson finally retired from the second-highest position of the Larkinson Clan, Ves had thought a lot about who he should replace him with. His sights eventually fell on a candidate that he had passed over the last time, the former commodore of the Penitent Sisters.

Abigail Evern's appointment did not come without controversy. Her name not only betrayed her origin as a scion of the infamous Evern Matriarchal Dynasty, she also came from the military wing of the Larkinson Clan.

In the past, the three chief ministers each came from the military wing, the government wing and the business wing of the clan. This ensured that every major pillar of the Larkinsons had a representative at the highest level.

This pattern became invalid after Ves decided to replace Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson with Abigail Evern.

Although it sounded as if the business wing of the clan was being marginalized, Ves did not see it that way.

"The chief ministers aren't supposed to stay in their own lanes. Their background and work experiences may be useful in handling specific affairs, but they are meant to serve every part of the clan."

Though the unrest of this appointment had been considerable at first, the controversy subsided as the Larkinson Clan still ran as smoothly as ever.

There were plenty of executives that were more than competent enough to address many kinds of issues. The chief ministers were mostly needed to make high-level policy decisions in order to make sure that the Larkinson Clan developed in the right direction.

Abigail Evern also turned out to be a more qualified leader than Raymond. This was due to the vast disparity of their backgrounds. Whereas Raymond used to be a third-rater, Abigail had received plenty of leadership and management training as she grew up in one of the six most powerful dynasties of the Hexadric Hegemony.

What was also helpful was that Abigail's former naval career granted her the insight and motivation to improve the Larkinson Clan's starship situation.

The Larkinson Navy, which previously existed more in name than anything, received a lot more funding and manpower, allowing the clan to turn it into a real and formidable institution.

The new chief minister put a lot of emphasis on upgrading and overhauling the starships of the new clan navy. Every ship needed to be beefed up in order to withstand more attacks, particularly those launched by large caliber weapons mounted by alien warships!

All in all, Ves was glad that he had made this appointment. Chief Minister Abigail Evern might not pay as much attention to the business activities of the clan, but the other two chief ministers were more than capable of picking up the slack.

Since the Golden Skull Alliance was preparing to undertake a multi-year expedition through the more dangerous reaches of the Red Ocean, it was much more important for the Larkinson Clan to bring its military affairs into order.

Who cared about the efficiency of the Living Mech Corporation's production operations when dozens of alien warships were bearing down on the expeditionary fleet?

In any case, the appointment of a new chief minister inevitably meant that an old one had to move aside.

Just as Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson thought that he could enjoy a leisurely retirement as an ordinary clansman in Davute, Ves had approached him with an interesting proposition one day.

"I want you to become the director of our new branch on Davute VII." Ves straightforwardly said. "While our central administration is in charge of most of its affairs right now, this can not go on forever. Once we set off our Trailblazer Expedition, this branch has to be able to stand up on its own. I need Larkinson in charge who I can trust to keep my interests at heart while at the same time command respect from every clansman."

Raymond frowned. "There are many Larkinsons that can do this job. I am old, Ves. I have already reached the twilight of my life. Not only that, the clan has grown way too quickly for me to keep up. I was already struggling to keep on top of all of the complicated developments of the clan. I don't think I can lead the branch, not when I have been looking to put down my work and leave everything to the younger generation who are more eager to make their mark."

Though Raymond made his yearning for retirement clear, Ves was not willing to let him off that easily.

As the grandfather of an expert pilot and one of the few trueblood Larkinsons who grew up under the ideals of the old family, there were few people that Ves trusted more to lead the Davute Branch in a good direction.

"Don't be in such a hurry to refuse, Raymond. I need you in charge of the branch. It doesn't matter if you don't know how to deal with the specific affairs. You can just delegate all of the work but maintain the final say over everything. What is important is that I need you to ensure that the Davute Branch will never go astray once our main fleet goes away. It is all too common for distant branches to become estranged from their mother organizations, so I need a man who has been a Larkinson longer than almost anyone else to occupy the top position and remind everyone of our values."

Though Raymond was mentally and physically tired, Ves appealed so much to his sense of duty that the old man began to reconsider.

Still, he didn't think it would be much use considering his advanced age.

"You should look for someone younger, Ves. My health is already declining and the doctors do not think I can live much longer. I won't be able to lead your branch for long before I have to make way for a replacement."

"That won't happen." Ves stated.

"It won't?"

"Yes. I've already scheduled an appointment with the MTA about your upcoming life-prolonging treatment session. Congratulations, Raymond. You get to live 100 years longer!"

"What?!" Raymond looked shocked. "Do you know how much that costs us?! You could spend your MTA merits on much more useful endeavors! My life isn't worth that much sacrifice."

Ves shook his head. "You're family, Raymond. Our clan is growing bigger by the day, but the amount of people who can trace their line back to the old family is continuing to shrink as a result. I don't mind playing favorites in order to keep you around for a longer time. I've already paid the merits from my personal account. Don't worry. The cost is still bearable to me. The first round of life-prolonging treatment is always the easiest, and I have opted for a cheaper package as well. There is a small risk that the operation will get botched, but hey, your lifespan is already short so hardly anything will change."

Fortunately for the both of them, the life-prolonging treatment proceeded smoothly. Ves actually bet that due to his good relationship with the MTA, the doctors and specialists working for the organization would direct more care and attention to Raymond's operation.

Whether this was true or not, Ves managed to save millions of MTA merits and still get what he wanted.

Raymond's entire life changed after his successful rejuvenation. He caused a lot of people's heads to turn as he returned to the clan with a younger and smoother appearance.

Ves could feel the vitality that the MTA had somehow stuffed inside Raymond's body and most importantly his spirit.

This was a process that even Ves couldn't perform!

The reaction from Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was especially appreciative.

"Thank you for doing this, Ves." The expert pilot earnestly said. "You always say that family matters, but I didn't think you would put your money where your mouth is. Being able to spend another lifetime with my grandfather is a privilege that not many people get to enjoy."

Ves smiled in return. "I originally founded the clan to give us exiles from the old family a new home and a way for us to get ahead. While all of the new and talented adopted clansmen have impressed me a lot, I haven't forgotten about the dreams and aspirations of our original gathering. I owe much to Raymond and other original Larkinsons for the successes that we have achieved throughout the years."

Now that Raymond had become younger and full of life again, the rejuvenated man no longer had any desire to retire and let everyone else do all of the work. He eagerly assumed his position as the branch director and started to implement more high-level policies that would hopefully ensure the Davute Branch would remain prosperous and orderly for many decades.

Though Raymond had retreated from the main branch of the Larkinson Clan after this move, Ves still decided to bring him in to discuss the intelligence that Tristan had leaked.

If anything happened to the Gauge Dynasty's holdings in Magair Middle Zone, the Gaugers would certainly be looking for vengeance. The Davute Branch might get targeted as a consequence, so it was vital for Raymond to get involved.

A busy day passed by before everyone involved decided to meet in the secure chamber underneath the Cat Nest.

Numerous Larkinsons as well as the highest delegates of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan converged to discuss the most explosive development of the Golden Skull Alliance in years!

The expressions on the leaders who attended the meeting were mixed.

A few faces showed concern. The risks and dangers associated with the leaked intelligence were considerable. Who knew whether it was all a trap.

Others showed a sense of weariness. The Komodo War as well as the Larkinson Clan's entanglement with the Hexers should have already ended as far as they were concerned.

A handful showed eagerness, though. They relished the opportunity to hit back at the Fridaymen and set back the interests of the most powerful and domineering coalition partner.

All of these people gathered together for a hasty meeting to discuss what the Golden Skull Alliance should do about the sensitive information package as well as Tristan's less-than-proper invitation to attack one of his supposed allies!

"This is going to be troublesome." Ves predicted as he thought about all of the contentious decisions that they would have to make.

He briefly thought about inviting his wife to this leadership meeting as well, but he concluded it was best for her to remain in the dark for the time being. Gloriana was far too biased and intense to make fruitful contributions to the discussion.

Ves wanted to exchange opinions with grown adults, and he had a feeling that bringing along his spouse was counterproductive to this goal.

"Oh well. I'll tell her what happened afterwards." He shrugged.

Chapter 4208 Friday Colonies

"Meow."

While Lucky performed his duty and sniffed out any possible bugs and listening devices in the room, everyone else settled down in their seats.

The presence of numerous strong individuals cast a strange air in the secure meeting chamber.

Patriarch Reginald Cross had to sit a bit further away from the Larkinsons due to his strong and overpowering domain.

Though the powerful ace pilot did his best to tighten his domain field in order to cause the least amount of disruption possible, it was impossible to remove his influence entirely.

High-ranking mech pilots were supreme warriors who were not accustomed to holding back. They were strong and had a constant need to make that clear to everyone.

Sitting next to the patriarch of the booming Cross Clan was its head designer.

Master Benedict Cortez looked almost invisible as he sat next to the eye-catching ace pilot.

That was deliberate on his part as he did not particularly wish to attract attention.

Few people could deny that he was weak or trivial, though.

After he successfully realized his design philosophy by following-up on the inspiration that he had gained during the fabrication of the Mars, he visited the MTA and disappeared for a few weeks before returning as an officially-certified Master Mech Designer!

Compared to the rapid transformation of the leading figures of the Cross Clan, the ones from the Glory Seekers hardly looked different than before.

Marshal Ariadne Wodin looked a bit older than before, but it was almost impossible to notice this as Hexers tended to put a lot of effort into their appearances.

Venerable Brutus exuded a calmer impression. Becoming a father had significantly changed his life. He did not even look that eager to act on the intelligence.

After Ves swept his gaze across all of the people invited to the meeting, he finally kicked off the emergency meeting.

He first picked up the original sheet of information and rolled it out so that it openly displayed its contents on the surface of the table.

"Everyone here is aware of why we have convened today, so let's skip all of the pleasantries and get onto business. I think the first question that most of us have is whether the information that we have obtained through an unusual channel is accurate. The circumstances of this leak is anything but normal and we must ask serious questions whether the origin of this package can be trusted. Director Calabast, please present your findings."

The spymaster stood up from her seat and waved her hand in order to activate a projection.

"Before we proceed with this discussion, it is helpful if I quickly summarize the overall situation of the colonies of the two major colonial groups in question."

The projected image displayed a map of the Magair Middle Zone. Hundreds of star systems belonging to both the Fridaymen and the Hexers shone prominently on the map.

Although the amount of colonies belonging to both sides looked impressive, many of them didn't actually amount to much. They were rather minor colonies that did not hold high expectations. They mostly existed to prevent others from

settling near the Fridaymen and Hexers and to take care of future agricultural and industrial needs.

The tentatively-named Friday Colonies and Hex Federation both pursued similar strategies where they invested most of their resources into building up a dozen or so core colonies.

These colonies were each founded by the major groups and factions of their respective sides and were much more heavily defended than the other settlements.

While the advantages of this approach were clear, the downside was that there were a lot of colonies that were still stuck in a relatively rudimentary stage even after years of development.

"The Friday Colonies have done their best to bolster the defenses of their outlying settlements, but the weaker coalition partners are less capable of doing so. They have already been forced to abandon numerous expensive investments because the Hexers have undone years of work with their raids."

Marshal Ariadne Wodin grinned with pride at this news. Anything that made the Fridaymen feel bad was a cause for celebration to the Hexers!

Calabast waved her hand again in order to zoom in on the territory of the Friday Colonies. The map began to highlight the occupied star systems in different colors. It became clear that many of the Hexer raids tended to target the weakest and most vulnerable colonies, which was bad news for the weaker coalition partners but largely spared the ones belonging to the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan.

"As you can see, the colonies founded by the Gaugers and Konsus have rarely been struck by attacks. This is despite their higher investments and better development. Even their outlying colonies are better protected, which means that the cost of raiding them is considerably higher."

The Hexers might have an enormous hatred for the Fridaymen, but they weren't stupid. The ones that managed to get evacuated to the Red Ocean were often considered to be the brightest and most competent citizens of their former state.

They would rather bully the weaklings and make off with less gains than to crash their precious mechs into walls by targeting the better-defended colonies.

Calabast finally reached the more interesting part of her presentation.

"Now, the leaks that we have recently obtained from what we presume to be the weaker coalition partners largely concern three specific planets located in three different star systems. Each of them happens to be set up as the core colonies of the powerful Gauge Dynasty."

She pointed towards the most important star system.

"The Pima Prime System is one of only several port systems of the Friday Colonies and its strategic value is inestimable. It is the crown jewel of the Gauge Dynasty's holdings in the Red Ocean and has received the greatest amount of investment. It is already being set up as the head of the Gauger colonies and may also become the capital of the entire colonial state if the current trend continues. It is conceivable that not every coalition partner would be pleased at this development."

That was probably an understatement. The Gaugers were already powerful enough. If they were able to make it so that the Friday Coalition's colonies would center around the Pima Prime System, then there was no way to stop the Gauge Dynasty's rise!

This alone made the leaks a lot more plausible. The Carnegie Group and the Vermeer Group urgently needed to stall the Gauge Dynasty's ambitions, and apparently weren't above resorting to dishonorable deeds!

"The Rotes Cewma System is also an important holding of the Gauge Dynasty." Calabast pointed towards a second core colony. "This star system might not be a port system, but it is one of the richest sites in terms of resources. It not only offers an abundance of low-grade exotics, but also contains plenty of confirmed deposits of medium-grade and even high-grade exotics. The Gaugers recognize the value of this star system and have invested heavily in it so that Rotes Cewma can serve as the industrial heart of the Friday Colonies."

Everyone recognized the importance of raw materials, and the Gauge Dynasty keenly understood the need to extract as much of them as possible.

This was why the Gaugers invested a huge amount of resources, manpower and industrial machinery to quickly put as many resource extraction and processing facilities online as possible.

After years of priority investment, the efforts of the Gauge Dynasty finally started to pay off as Rotes Cewma constantly shipped many tons of industrial resources to the busy factories of Pima Prime and beyond.

Calabast pointed towards a third star system. "Compared to the previous two colonies, New Rammes does not look important at first. It is most notable by how large it is and how many colonizable planets it contains. The abundance of available space as well as the adequate availability of basic resources has caused the Gauge Dynasty to designate it as a self-contained population center. It will probably hold the highest number of colonists out of any holding in the Friday Colonies if nothing goes wrong."

These were the three core colonies that the Gauge Dynasty had painstakingly built over the years. Each of them form the nucleus of numerous more outlying colonies that would soon form a more cohesive and united power bloc.

Each of the colonies were led by different influences that held all of the power in the dynasty, but Calabast did not feel it was necessary to explain this much.

After she clarified the major holdings of the Gauge Dynasty, she finally addressed their defenses.

"As you all know, the plans that have fallen into our hands allegedly contain a large amount of critical information that corresponds to the three aforementioned colonies. I have consulted with our agents and informers that have either visited them on a temporary basis as traders and contractors or have taken up permanent residence. Pretty much all of their findings and observations match up with the intelligence. The few minor discrepancies we have noticed can be chalked up to recent changes."

"Interesting..." Ves softly spoke as he rubbed his smooth-shaven chin.

He didn't even know that the Black Cats had managed to infiltrate the Friday Colonies to such a degree. Calabast never found it important enough to mention this crucial little detail to him during their past meetings!

"There are many differences between these three core colonies, but I will quickly mention the most important of them. The Pima Prime System is treated as the colonial capital of the Gauge Dynasty and is the best defended of the three. The Rotes Cewma is almost just as well-defended because it has the highest concentration of capital assets in the Friday Colonies. The New Rammes System might not be as attractive as the other two but the number of colonists who have settled there is the highest."

Each of them played a key role in the colonial ambitions of the Gauge Dynasty. As long as one of them got attacked to the point where almost everything was razed, then the powerful coalition partner's plan to dominate the Friday Colonies would most certainly have to be thrown in the garbage chute!

Ves turned towards the Glory Seekers.

"Marshal Ariadne Wodin, I believe you managed to get in touch with the Hex Federation. What do the Hexers say about the contents of the information sheet?"

The leader of the Glory Seekers did not dare to issue any solid judgments. "Not much time has passed for the Hexer intelligence agencies to verify all of the leaked intelligence. However, I can say that when they compare the details to the information that they already know, much of the claims add up. Our preliminary conclusion is that the leaks are accurate, though I should caution you that it will take time to be truly certain."

"I think that is the best answer that we can get for the time being." Ves nodded in understanding. "Let us proceed with this meeting with the assumption that the sensitive information is fully accurate from the moment it was printed on this sheet. The questions I have is what the Hexers intend to do, and what our own role should be. Marshal Ariadne, have you heard any word about how the Hex Federation intends to proceed should its agents verify the intelligence?"

The woman frowned. "I have not received any official word, so I cannot say anything for certain. However, based on my contact with the matriarchal dynasties as well as my own personal understanding of their goals and motivations, I think it is likely they will be tempted to act. The Friday Colonies represent a significant thorn in the Hex Federation's side. Any chance of weakening their archenemy under favorable circumstances is worth pursuing. I have already received informal indications that the Hexers have already begun to lay the groundwork of a massive surprise assault."

The conflict between the two colonial states was bound to heat up due to this development! The Hexers were so fixated on the Fridaymen that they simply couldn't resist the bait!

Chapter 4209 Aggressive Motivations

"What is the likelihood that this is all an elaborate ploy that is designed to entrap the Hexer raiders and eliminate them in one fell swoop?" Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse asked with great concern.

Though not everyone appreciated the Larkinson Clan's close relationship with the Hexers, the reality was that enjoying the backing of a strong colonial state could be incredibly useful in numerous situations!

The Hex Federation was not only an exceptionally friendly and profitable market to the LMC, but could also serve as an escape route for the Larkinson Clan.

If the Larkinsons ever made too many enemies and got driven out of Davute, they could flee pursuit by traveling to distant places.

However, if this was not a viable option, then Ves believed that he and his clan would always be able to take refuge within the Hex Federation.

It would be a lot harder for pursuers to persist in their chase if they had to make enemies with an entire colonial state!

This was why Ves held a decent amount of concern to the future rise and development of the Hex Federation. The stronger its colonies, the more advantages the Hexers conveyed to the Larkinsons.

The last thing that anyone wanted to see was the Hexers becoming a lot more vulnerable due to suffering a massive military defeat!

"My words might be premature, but I have a high degree of confidence that we truly obtained a thorough glimpse of the defensive plans of the three key colonies." Calabast said in a confident tone. "All of you should know about the Friday Coalition's increasing amount of internal contradictions. The Gauge Dynasty has shown increasingly less restraint as its relative power over the others have grown. The Carnegies, the Vermeers, the Vanguarders and the

Puffers all have a strong and united interest in weakening the hand of the Gaugers. It would be best if the Gauge Dynasty is kicked out entirely from the Red Ocean. This way, the balance of power will no longer be as skewed as before."

Several people nodded, but General Verle still maintained a skeptical expression.

"I can see how the weaker colonial partners may have a vested interest in putting down the Gauge Dynasty, but the Hexers are no friends of theirs. The Carnegies and the Vermeers wish to put down the Hexers just as much as the Gaugers. It wouldn't surprise me if they have prepared an ambush that is intended to strike the Hexer attack force just as the first battle has already ended. It would allow the marginalized partners of the Coalition to hit two birds with a single stone."

Such a scheme sounded exactly what Ves would want to pull off! It was so efficient and got so much done that the weaker partners of the Friday Coalition should also be tempted!

"It is fairly easy to determine whether the weaker Fridaymen are preparing an ambush of their own." Marshal Ariadne Wodin spoke up. "We are roughly aware of the existence and locations of most of their fleets and mech forces. Each of the ones that are being tracked at this time are exclusively assigned to defensive missions. The Fridaymen have no leeway to launch offensive operations. They simply don't have the numbers to start any wild adventures."

"The Fridaymen may be hiding a secret fleet or two for just these occasions."

The Marshal shook her head. "That may be possible, but not enough to pose a threat. The Hexer intelligence agencies have been quite thorough in tracking down the mechs and carriers that are at the disposal of their enemies. It will be easy to verify whether there are any secret fleets that are preparing to

respond to any major Hexer incursions by keeping a close eye on adjacent star systems."

"I think that the parties behind Mr. Wesseling will also provide additional guarantees if the Hex Federation has shown a willingness to act on the leaked intelligence." Calabast provided her own opinion. "In fact, the Hexers don't necessarily have to make a move. This incident is already a strong sign that the Friday Coalition has already begun to rot from within. The state will almost certainly be worse off if the Gauge Dynasty keeps fighting against its own partners."

That was true, but maybe not. If the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan become the de facto rulers of the Friday Colonies, then the colonial state might end up stronger in the end!

As various people tried to figure out whether this was a trap, one of the people attending the meeting did not look at ease.

Branch Director Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson had listened quietly throughout these discussions but became increasingly more disturbed by what he heard.

He eventually raised his hand, which interrupted the current discussion.

"Yes, Raymond?"

"I have a question for you, patriarch. Why are we holding this discussion in the first place? Shouldn't we hand over the leaked information to the Hex Federation and be done with it? I see no reason why we must talk so much when we have no obligation to do anything further. Tell us honestly, Ves. Have you decided to take part in a potential attack against one of the Gauger colonies?"

Raymond asked an incredibly important question, and one that should have been asked a lot earlier.

Everyone turned to Ves. Most of them looked curious but others already knew his intentions.

Ves slowly stood up from his seat in order to make his stance clear.

"I have to admit that I have been considering the possibility that our forces will take active part in such a major raid. We have grown stronger than ever and we can inflict serious damage to the Sundered Phalanx elements that have been transferred to the Red Ocean."

"What?! Why, Ves?! Why take the risk?! Why revisit old hatreds?! Can't we just bury the hatchet and move on with our lives? What can we possibly gain out of participating in such a massive attack? If this is solely about acting upon your hatred and your grievances against the Fridaymen, then I cannot in good conscience support such an endeavor."

Ves remained calm even as Raymond vehemently expressed his desire to avoid any unnecessary conflict.

"It is true that I don't like the Fridaymen. It is also true that I would love to grab any opportunity to undermine their interests. However, it's not just about me. I believe that participating in this operation will benefit all of us. Have you seen how much our mech legions have grown as of late? Our Larkinson Army has grown much stronger than before. Ordinary military forces can no longer compete against us anymore. The Fridayman troops are unable to acquire mechs that are as expensive as ours. They are also incapable of matching our training results, especially once we started making use of the MSTs."

"I think it is dangerous for us to put too much stock in the advantages of the Larkinson Army. You might be right, sir, but don't forget that we are merely a private organization while the Gauge Dynasty has the resources of a massive state at its disposal. The Gaugers have numbers on their side."

"Our Hexers also have numbers on our side." Marshal Ariadne interjected. "If the Hex Federation, it will make certain to deploy more strength than what the Gaugers have at their disposal at our chosen attack target. If our Golden Skull Alliance is willing to pitch in, then we can increase our numerical disparity and crush the hostile forces with overwhelming might!"

"Previously, launching a major assault on any of the three exposed core colonies was not viable." Marshal Ariadne stated. "The main reason for that is because the Hex Federation simply cannot anticipate how many defenses they will face. This is no longer the case after this massive exposure. We know almost exactly what the Gaugers have deployed in these star systems. We not only know their numbers and positioning, but also obtained critical blueprints as well as information that exposes the weaknesses of their combat assets."

The Gauger colonies were completely exposed if the leaks were accurate, while the potential attackers were largely in the dark.

The result of this was a massive intelligence gap that could heavily tilt any battle in the favor of the Hexers!

Calabast nodded in agreement. "The marshal is correct. Good intelligence can mean the difference between victory and defeat. The exaggerated amount of information we have obtained not only allows our operatives to assassinate critical personnel and sabotage key defensive installations before we commence our major operation, but also employ targeted attacks throughout the battle that can easily take out core defensive assets with half difficulty as before."

The overall message was clear. The Gauger colonies had become easy targets. So easy in fact that they were practically begging to get attacked!

Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson was not satisfied with what he had heard so far, though.

"I can understand why you wish to pounce on the vulnerability of those three major colonies, but I have yet to hear a justification why our clan in particular should go on the attack. Can you explain your full motivations why you would even consider this in the first place?"

Ves sighed. He supposed he should be more forthcoming.

"Do you want to know the truth, Director Raymond? Because we can."

"...That's it, sir?"

"It's more than that, but this is the best way I can sum up my answer. Look, we're strong now. We are stronger than ever before. We have spent five long years building up our Larkinson Army and Larkinson Navy to prepare for the upcoming Trailblazer Expedition. That also happens to put us in a great position to launch a major assault on one of these colonies. Besides, the Hexers have already promised us that we can earn a major share of the plunder that is proportional to our contributions. The more forces we commit, the greater the amount of goods, strategic materials, valuable salvage and most importantly captured starships we can obtain!"

"An assault against a well-defended human colony is different from plundering a poor alien planet!"

"That is true, but my point still stands. To be honest, I really want to bloody our troops, many of whom have joined us only recently and have never fought in a serious battle against a competent military force. This is one of the few opportunities to target an enemy that we can predict and calculate based on all of the intelligence that we have obtained. I would rather test our mech legions against a known enemy than against one of the many unknown alien forces that we may stumble upon in the future."

Raymond couldn't believe what he was hearing. He always knew that Ves possessed aggressive tendencies, but this was something else!

He glanced towards the Glory Seekers. It was not difficult to predict that they would fully support any attack on the Fridaymen.

Perhaps he might find relief by turning to the Cross Clan instead.

"Patriarch Reginald Cross, where do you stand? Do you support an initiative to attack a major colony?"

"I do." The powerful leader spoke for the first time since the meeting started. "The Fridaymen have the blood of many Crossers on their hands. They deserve retribution, but we were too weak to do anything about in the past. That is no longer the case. With my strength, our assault will assuredly succeed."

Not everyone expected the Cross Patriarch to have already made the decision to take part in a potential assault!

Master Benedict Cortez did nothing to soften his patriarch's declaration. "I concur with all of the reasons that everyone has mentioned here. The gains outweigh the costs. Our cumulative advantages are so great that the risks that should have caused us to reconsider are no longer a great concern. Too many of our Crosser mech pilots are still relatively green. It is best to let them fight against the enemies that we know well before we pit them into battle against enemies we know less about. The Gauge Dynasty... is a suitable target."

If even someone as smart and clever as Master Benedict was willing to support his impulsive friend, then the Cross Clan was truly united behind this plan!

Patriarch Reginald grinned as he stared at a particular star system.

"According to what we know, the Gauge Dynasty has stationed an ace pilot on Pima Prime. I am eager to test my mettle against a fellow Saint. His ace mech looks good, but mine is undoubtedly stronger. There is no way I will lose a

duel against this worthy opponent! He shall be the first of many champions that I shall fell with my Mars!"

The battle-hungry ace pilot clearly made his motivations known. It sounded as if his sole motivation in going along with all of this was to secure a duel against a powerful and dangerous Gauger ace pilot!

This was an exceedingly dangerous proposition! A single failure could cause the Cross Clan to fall into ruin again!

However, despite all of the ways that such a confrontation could go wrong, neither Patriarch Reginald nor Master Benedict showed any indications of retreat!

The latter even started to rub his palms in anticipation!

"Whatever you do, don't crush your opponent entirely. Save the skull if you can." The Master grinned.

"Don't forget about me!" Ves reminded the two Crossers. "I want to claim the ace pilot's spirit if he perishes!"

The Larkinsons and the Crossers hadn't even discussed a plan for attack but were already in the process of dividing the potential spoils!

Chapter 4210 Mad Calculation

The Golden Skull Alliance wished to take part in a possible assault on a Fridayman colony!

This was a shocking piece of news to numerous leaders who had not been a part of the original decision-making process!

People like Branch Director Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson found it difficult to understand why the Larkinson Clan should even take part in such a risky venture, but Ves had made his voice clear!

He understood quite well how controversial this decision might sound. Not many people signed up for the Larkinson Clan with the intention of helping Ves pursue his vendetta against a powerful state-level entity.

Even if the Friday Coalition was not that big of a factor in the Red Ocean, it still possessed much greater resources than many other pioneers!

Although it was not quite fair for these Larkinsons to get caught up in a game that they never wanted to play, Ves was determined to go through with it. The opportunities were too great and the profits he could earn from this bold action were immense!

The secure meeting chamber turned turbulent for a while as a small group of more risk-averse Larkinsons such as Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse openly voiced their doubts to the necessity of this action.

"Every battle is inherently dangerous." Novilon Purnesse stated. "There are no certainties on the battlefield. No matter how well we know the Fridaymen, there is always a chance that they have a surprise or two up their sleeves. The damage we can suffer may be far greater than we anticipated. Our capital ships may be put in danger as well, which would have calamitous consequences to the family who reside on them. Is it truly worthwhile for us to participate when it means that we have to put our friends and children under the crosshairs of the Fridaymen?"

He raised an important point. Participating meant that the Golden Skull Alliance would have to deploy with its full expeditionary fleet, which included several non-combat vessels such as the Dragon's Den and Vivacious Wal.

The alliance could not leave them behind in Davute or in a hidden corner because the valuable vessels would become way too vulnerable to attacks!

The civilian vessels were safest if they accompanied the main fleet, which in effect meant that they would have to take part in the offensive operation as well!

If the Larkinson Clan was larger, stronger and more established, then this measure wouldn't have been necessary. It was a pity that the clan was far from reaching this point.

This was why the civilian side of the Larkinson Clan did not support this course of action. Hundreds of thousands of noncombatants, many of which became Larkinsons only recently, would get a rude reminder that their patriarch tended to drag his own people along wild and crazy adventures!

"General Verle, you are known to be a sensible leader. What do you think about the possibility of participating in a major assault?" Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson asked. "What is the stance of the Larkinson Army? Are you truly supportive of launching an attack against a formidable and competent opponent that has hundreds of thousands of mechs at its disposal?"

The highest commanding officer of the Larkinson Army did not give Raymond the answer he wanted to hear.

"The attack is viable as long as the Hex Federation takes the lead in this assault." Verle stated his opinion. "It is not my place to determine whether we should fight alongside the Hexers in a possible operation against the Gauge Dynasty. I can merely observe that if the Hexers are at least willing to match the numbers of the Sundered Phalanx, the addition of up to 27,000 mechs can prove to be a decisive factor in a possible attack. This is especially the case when we have obtained the support of an ace pilot in the form of Patriarch Reginald Cross. He and his Mars alone are worth at least an entire mech division in terms of combat power."

Normally, the defending side enjoyed a considerable advantage, but the intelligence gap was so immense due to the leaks that it was the Gaugers who were in trouble this time!

Only a moderate numerical advantage should be enough to defeat the colonial defense forces outright or at least conclude a devastating raid!

"If you are so eager to attack one of the important strongholds of the Gauge Dynasty in the Red Ocean, shouldn't we select a target where our assurances of victory are higher?" Raymond asked in a skeptical tone. "I cannot understand why you have decided to attack Pima Prime without much discussion. The colonial capital is not easy to reinforce due to the fact that it is a port system, the intelligence also makes it clear that it is guarded by an ace pilot and an ace mech! Why must we challenge the most difficult colony when we can pick on considerably easier targets such as Rotes Cewma or New Rammes?"

Novilon Purnesse nodded in agreement. "From an infrastructural perspective, both Rotes Cewma and New Rammes are almost just as valuable as Pima Prime. If the Hexers can break open Rotes Cewma, they can destroy all of the large, valuable and difficult-to-replace mining machines and industrial processing plants. This will immediately shut down the bulk of the supply of raw materials to Pima Prime and New Rammes, thereby crippling the Gauger colonial ambitions. Meanwhile, New Rammes holds a majority of the Gaugers who have emigrated to the new frontier. Capturing them or neutralizing them will not only deal a severe morale blow to the coalition partner, but also set back the long-term growth of their colonies."

The argument that Novilon Purnesse tried to make was that if Ves and the others were out to do as much damage to the Gauge Dynasty as possible, they could achieve the same magnitude of effects by attacking the softer colonies.

There was no need for them to throw themselves head-first into the defenses of Pima Prime, the crown jewel of the Gauge Dynasty!

General Verle most certainly knew all of this, but his perspective on the matter was different from what the naysayers expected.

"I believe that there is additional merit to targeting Pima Prime over the other two colonies." He said. "According to the leaked information as well as other sources of intelligence, the Gaugers have invested the most into fortifying their new port system. They have allocated less resources to the defenses of Rotes Cewma and New Rammes, but is this truly the case?"

"What do you mean by that, General?"

"Put yourself in the place of a Gauger leader. If you think that the Hexers may eventually be willing to commit an assault on one of your core colonies, do you think those women will be crazy enough to attack Pima Prime or settle for the easier targets?"

"You are relying too much on speculation and assumptions..."

General Verle smirked. "Much of warfare is based on guesswork and assumptions. The difference is whether you know the enemy better than the enemy knows you. Think about how the Hexer raiders have behaved up until now. They have spent years harassing the outlying colonies of the weaker coalition partners in the Magair Middle Zone. They have never deviated from this pattern even though a lot of weaker colonial settlements have pretty much been hollowed out due to suffering repeated attacks. What does this tell you about the Hexers?"

"That... the Hexer raiders behave like bullies that pick on the weak but fear the strong?"

"Exactly. According to this pattern, the likelihood that the Hexers would actually choose to attack the Gauge Dynasty is low. However, if this unlikely

possibility ever comes true, then the Hexers will not stray too far from their previous pattern and opt to attack either Rotes Cewma or New Rammes. Personally, I think the former is most likely because crippling the supply of raw materials will delay the development of the Friday Colonies the most. I believe it is possible that the Gaugers may have deployed secret forces on those planets that might give us all an unwelcome surprise in battle."

"That... sounds a bit out there, general..."

"This is a plausible theory." Marshal Ariadne Wodin supplied. "The Fridaymen like to be clever. They think us Hexers are easy to fool. This leak may even be a part of a deep, multi-layer ploy that is meant to weaken both us and the Gauger. Well, this ploy won't work because the Hex Federation agrees with the decision to target Pima Prime. Since it is already known that it is the most fortified star system in the Friday Colonies, the Gaugers probably expect that we are deterred from ever launching an assault on it. The only way to fight against an ace mech is to bring another ace mech, but to do so, the Hex Federation would have to bring one of their own, thereby making one of their key colonies vulnerable to attack. That is unacceptable."

Ves openly chuckled. "That is what makes our participation so helpful. The assumptions of the Gaugers are correct as long as the Hexers can only launch an assault by themselves. The picture becomes a lot different once we get involved. Our willingness to bring forth an ace mech of our own makes it a lot more viable to target the Fridayman core colony that should be the least likely to get attacked. The Gaugers will not be psychologically prepared to fight an actual battle in Pima Prime, and the odds that they have prepared a hidden layer of defenses should be low as well!"

In other words, this was a big mind game.

Since Pima Prime was so strategically important, the Gaugers fortified it the most. The idea was to make the prospect of attacking it so costly that the Hexers would be deterred from ever thinking about launching an attack.

However, the Hex Federation along with the Golden Skull Alliance wanted to take advantage of this thinking pattern by acting exactly against the expectations of the Gauge Dynasty!

If their gambit succeeded, then the Hexers as well as the Golden Skullers would not only win one of the largest and most dramatic battles in the Magair Middle Zone, but also set the Gaugers back the most!

"I am certain that the Gaugers have stockpiled a lot of valuable assets in Pima Prime." Ves enthusiastically said. "Even if we can't plunder them all, we can bombard them into pieces, thereby causing untold losses to the Fridaymen. However, our true prize from this victory is the glory and prestige we can attain from a decisive victory. Our Golden Skull Alliance will not only make a greater name for ourselves, but remind our allies and rivals that we have lost none of the fire that made us great in the first place!"

Ves cared about this a lot. Earlier on, the Golden Skull Alliance was able to earn a lot of respect and deter many potential rivals from acting against it due to its short but rich track record of vanquishing numerous powerful opponents.

The passage of time had caused that illustrious record to lose some of its luster. Though the Larkinsons and Crossers had made sure to display glimpses of their strength by undertaking many different mercenary missions over the years, none of them ever involved major battles like the ones the alliance fought in the past.

An assault on Pima Prime would completely refresh the Golden Skull Alliance's battle record!

Not only would Ves and the others be able to demonstrate how much stronger they had grown over the years, they would also demonstrate a willingness to put it into use by launching a risky assault!

This was a mad calculation that was bound to stir up a lot of unrest in the Larkinson Clan.

It did not matter whether Ves' justifications sounded a bit feeble.

The fact of the matter was that the most powerful individual combat asset of the Golden Skull Alliance had only set his eyes on Pima Prime since the projection displayed the map of the Friday Colonies.

"I will not agree to take part in any assault on the Gauge Dynasty unless we target Pima Prime." Patriarch Reginald Cross forcefully declared. "Rotes Cewma and New Rammes are defended by pushovers. I take no pleasure in crushing hostile expert pilots. The only opponent worth fighting is the sole ace pilot that has taken up residence in Pima Prime. Fighting him is the only way I can test my new strength and prove my enduring convictions. It is Pima Prime or bust!"