

The Mech Touch

Chapter 4671: Flawed Investment

Though there was much about the Boojay Family that Ves liked, he did not embrace them right away.

Every group came with its fair share of problems and complications. The Aidelaide Third Fleet had its flaws and the Boojay Family should be no exception.

When Ves asked his two advisors to list the possible downsides to letting the Boojay Family join the Golden Skull Alliance, he received plenty of points of concern.

Calabast started first by explaining the conclusion she had drawn from analyzing the behavioral patterns of the current subject.

"The Boojays are clearly uncomfortable with the life of a pioneer. They are unaccustomed to the high degree of uncertainty, the fast-changing environment, the frequent and ubiquitous conflicts and the lack of territory to fall back upon. What they seek from the Golden Skull Alliance is an easy ride to success, and not necessarily a life of hardship. They won't take losses well."

That sounded like a potential problem down the road, but it was one that Ves was willing to deal with in exchange for strengthening the expeditionary fleet.

"What else?"

"The Boojay Family may be slow to grow over time." Minister Shederin mentioned to him. "Think about how fast our alliance has grown since its founding. Our Larkinson Clan and our allied Cross Clan have opened up our doors and relied heavily on recruitment to facilitate our rapid growth and expansion. The Glory Seekers meanwhile rely on steady reinforcements from the Hex Federation to fuel their own growth. The Boojay Family on the other hand has always remained closed to outsiders. It has relied on the reproduction of its own members as the sole source of its manpower for many centuries."

That indeed sounded like a potential problem, especially when the Golden Skull Alliance was able to maintain its astonishing growth rate in the coming decades.

"What if we can change that?" Ves proposed. "We managed to convince the Cross Clan to change its ways after we granted them a spiritual network of their own that can quickly assimilate and imbue loyalty to large numbers of new recruits."

Minister Shederin's expression became skeptical. "It is highly unlikely that the Boojay Family will change its ways so easily. You have to remember that the Cross Clan at the time was at its lowest point. It had lost many of its long-standing leaders, including Lord Hemmington Cross. Patriarch Reginald Cross is not an effective administrator and likely did not understand the full repercussions of adopting a part of our unique tech. The leaders of the Boojay Family are not so easily fooled or persuaded. Their decision-making process has always leaned towards restraint."

Ves furrowed his brows. This could indeed lead to a greater problem down the line.

"In other words, the Boojays would rather get left out than to take a serious risk that could lead to great profits, is that right?"

"It is not impossible for organizations to change, sir. The most effective way for old, established groups with highly centralized leadership structures to make a radical course change is to initiate a change at the top. However, that is unlikely to happen in the current state of the Boojay Family."

"Calabast?"

"Why are you asking me, Ves? Are you fantasizing about initiating a coup on a future ally? Don't think about it. Not only will it cross a line, it is highly unlikely to succeed. From the intelligence I have gathered, the Boojays are incredibly hierarchical. The younger generations that possess more flexible minds don't have close to the experience, knowledge and seniority they need to take over leadership."

Ves looked at the spymaster with an expression that conveyed his lack of amusement.

"I was not asking for that. I wanted to hear your input about other problems concerning the Boojays. Your Black Cats have dug into their history, right? What skeletons are they hiding in their closet?"

The spymaster smiled. "Surprisingly, not that much. Don't get me wrong. A family that has been around during the Age of Conquest has definitely experienced its fair share of controversies. The thing is that the Boojays are so boring and cautious most of the time that they hardly do anything outrageous, and even their lowest acts are fairly tame compared to what we are accustomed to. The best way to describe it is that they have plenty of skeletons in their closet, but they all come from animals instead of humans."

"I see."

"It is one of the reasons why the Boojay Family successfully survived to this point." Minister Shederin approvingly said. "Certainly, an unwillingness to take risks may have caused it to stagnate, but its continuity will always remain secure unless a drastic external factor comes into play."

That could be both good and bad depending on the circumstances.

Shederin and Calabast provided a few more stories to Ves, but none of them sounded particularly important. The Boojay Family experienced little drama over the centuries as it had always maintained a well-structured hierarchy and a clear line of succession. Every member of the Boojay Family knew his or her place and there were clear paths to promotion for them as long as they were willing to invest many decades of their life to a specific vocation.

Ves asked one more question about the Boojays.

"How does this family earn its keep these days? You told me earlier that it sold all of its previous holdings in the old galaxy. Have they built any industries in the Red Ocean?"

"Surprisingly, they haven't." The old man replied. "The Boojay Family's extensive heritage has allowed them to amass a gigantic investment fund. The family's investment arm has long pursued a strategy of investing in small but promising startups. It does not take much cash to get them up to speed, and while many of them fail in years or decades, the few companies that succeed end up growing so large that they can repay the cost of thousands of failed investments. Of course, the Boojay Family has also amassed a large amount of shares in many old and stable trans-galactic corporations. The dividends they earn from them is considerable after hundreds of years of buildup."

Calabast crossed her arms. "This is a typical way for old money to earn more income over lots of time. It's not quick, but it is safe and it is almost guaranteed to work in the long-term. All it takes are leaders who are willing to make a lot of sacrifices in the early stage so that their later generations can live in prosperity."

The Boojays had not gotten rid of its humongous investment portfolio. While their current spending levels were not sustainable, they at least enjoyed a substantial buffer that could tide them over for a period of time.

The massive amount of profits they earned from Operation Lighthouse should have eased their financial position and extended their longevity.

"The Boojay Family have not stopped their investment activities after entering the Red Ocean." Shederin added. "The Boojays have already started to invest in numerous local businesses in the Red Ocean. Thousands of family members have also left their main fleet and settled down on different planets in order to set up their own businesses. None of these wholly-owned companies amount to much at this stage, but a few of them may become so successful that they may be able to lighten the family's burden in the distant future."

"Well, the Boojays are clearly good at it, so I can understand why they have resorted to this. I don't think that the frontier will be patient enough to give them a century or so to expand its investment portfolio. What they need is lots of immediate income that they

can invest in their own mechs and ships so that they can expand their forces and boost their combat strength."

Shederin nodded. "That is what we think as well. The leaders of the Boojay Family recognize this reality to an extent, so this is why they see the merits of joining the Golden Skull Alliance. Our expeditions have always been profitable and the Boojays clearly recognize how good of an investment we are, though I believe they are less charmed at the volatility of our stock."

"The line between investment and gambling has always been blurred." Calabast quipped.

In the end, Ves' enthusiasm for the Boojay Family cooled down. He still welcomed their entry into the Golden Skull Alliance, but he would do so with clear awareness of their numerous faults and limitations.

He soon wrapped up the meeting by giving his current verdict.

"I have no issues with letting the application process proceed at its current pace." Ves spoke. "I am sure the negotiations will address some of the problems that might occur in the future due to the individual circumstances of the candidates. I'm not sure whether the Adelaide Third Fleet or the Boojay Family will stick with us for the long run, but I do not insist on it. I am already happy if they stay for the duration of the Trailblazer Expedition and decide to leave after they have met their initial goals. We can certainly use the help as the security of our expeditionary fleet will drastically rise with the addition of two ace mechs and two mech divisions."

Minister Shederin Purnesse shared this sentiment.

"Those are our thoughts as well, sir. We are currently proceeding with the negotiations on the assumption of letting the candidates join as junior partners. We will still treat them as equals for the most part, but we will also hold back to an extent to make an eventual separation much less painful. We can deepen our cooperation with them if they have proven their willingness to commit to the alliance in the long-term."

That was fine with Ves. He asked a few more questions and found that Shederin and his team of diplomats had extensively covered every possible angle. This was their job, and they were much more thoughtful in this aspect than an amateur like himself.

"Do you have anything useful to report about other potential candidates?"

Shederin shook his head. "So far, we have yet to encounter a third potential candidate that satisfies our heightened criteria. If you are truly desperate to increase the size and effective combat strength of our expeditionary fleet, then we can accept five or six more applicants that have barely failed to make the mark. Their qualities are at the same level

of the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family, but they are held back due to the fact that we have never fought alongside them in battle."

"That is good. Don't be afraid to turn them all down. We can afford to be more picky, and we should be careful not to expand our alliance too quickly. Too many newcomers will make it difficult for us to absorb all at once."

Once the meeting ended, Ves went back to his other duties while the talks with the Adelaides and the Boojays continued to progress at a steady rate.

The fleet had already drawn close to the Davute System. One of the handy aspects about it was that it was a port system, which meant that the expeditionary fleet could hone in on this destination at a much further distance.

This was why the return journey was significantly shorter than the initial trip to the border region!

With plenty of cargo holds that were filled with loot and salvage, the Larkinson Clan eagerly looked forward to settling down for half a year so that it could digest as much of its gains as possible.

During this time, Ves made use of his network to find a good way to convert a part of his gains into a powerful and highly effective active stealth system for the Ghost Project.

The development companies that he already had business with before all presented him with mixed options.

Only a couple of them bothered to develop stealth systems to begin with, but their expected performance did not meet his standards.

He needed to look elsewhere. After pumping a few contacts for helpful leads, he finally learned of a powerful new product in development that would definitely turn the Ghost Project into an invisible terror!

Chapter 4672: Cashing Favors

Ves had almost forgotten about Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik.

He couldn't be blamed for it. Time moved quickly for him as he had invested much of his attention on progressing the Ghost Project.

He had already moved on from the Second Battle of Ramage Repulsor. The fight against the Fractured House of the Collapsing Star and her formidable nunser phase lord seemed like ancient history in his memories.

As Ves continued to go down his list of contacts, he had yet to receive a positive result.

It couldn't be helped. Most of his friends, business partners, acquaintances and etc. were second-raters like himself. How the hell could they possibly have any involvement with a highly advanced first-class or quasi-first-class active stealth system, one that was suitable for high-ranking mechs no less?

After ringing more than a dozen different parties, Ves eventually realized his mistake and started to direct his attention to more powerful names.

The obvious candidates he could ask for help was the MTA. He was on speaking terms with Jovy Armalon as well as several of its renowned Masters. There was no way they could fail to provide him with what he needed, either directly or indirectly.

"There's no way I am going to ask the mechers for help."

They would definitely be willing to help, but their services never came for free. He and his clan already formulated a spending plan that had ballooned to hundreds of millions of MTA merits.

Though it felt incredibly tempting for Ves to take the easy way out and license a first-class active stealth system from the MTA's extensive library, he stayed true to his original intentions.

If he could resist the urge to give his wife 120 million MTA merits, then he should easily be able to stop himself from spending a smaller fortune on equipping his Ghost Project with a highly effective stealth system!

Fortunately for Ves, the mechers weren't the only first-raters on his contact list.

One of the reasons why he took so many risks and spent so much effort to rescue Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik was to open up another channel for first-class goods and services!

Ves didn't want to develop an overreliance on the MTA for anything fancy, and it had been well worth the trouble to establish a favorable relationship with Pearian and his first-class clan.

"Is it too soon for me to contact Pearian again?" He wondered.

"Meow..." Lucky wearily responded as he laid on the desk.

Ves glowered at his cat. "Hey, if you don't want to suffer from such a persistent stomach ache, then you should exert better control over your portion sizes. It's your own fault that you are taking such an awfully long time to digest all of those hard and tough first-class metals!"

The cat rolled over and laid on the side. "Meow meow..."

"I'm willing to give you more time to digest your latest meal, but don't take too long. I still have a chunk of B-stone on hand in case you need to unclog your pipes, so you better get to work, buddy."

"Meeeeeeoow!..."

After giving his cat his regular reminder to be productive, Ves had made up his mind.

What was the use of becoming the savior of a wealthy scion if he wasn't willing to take advantage of the man's extensive gratitude?

Ves had already exchanged contact information with the rescued first-rater, so he soon initiated a request for contact.

It took a few minutes before the other side accepted the request. The physical projectors in the office came to life in order to depict the current state of the man that was still in the process of recovering from his months-long captivity at the hands of cruel aliens.

Lord Pearian looked a lot better than last time. He wore a looser green and yellow outfit that still allowed him to maintain a refined appearance.

"Are you on vacation at the moment?"

"You can say that, Mr. Larkinson." Pearian responded with a genuine smile. "My clan insists on putting me on a paradise planet and keeping me here for at least a year before I can do anything else. My relatives say that I should not think about returning to any duties or responsibilities until I have gained enough separation from recent events."

Ves managed to pick up a lot of clues from this treatment. It appeared that the Yorul-Tavik Clan genuinely cared about Pearian's well-being.

Of course, his relatives may have wanted to dump this failure on a harmless planet so that he would stay out of the way as long as possible.

"You're still young." Ves encouragingly commented. "You will easily be able to live for two or three centuries even if you don't receive any further life-prolonging treatments. With that much time on your hands, there is no hurry for you to go back to work."

"As if my clan is willing to let me become responsible for anything." Pearian snorted. "I have already been told that I will have to go through an extensive learning track in order to learn the skills I need to become useful. Granted, I would have taken these classes regardless of anything else, but it rankles me that I have so little control over my life. I feel as if I am reliving my teenage years."

As Pearian shared his frustrations about his current treatment, Ves smiled and spoke a few supporting words.

The man's willingness to talk to Ves in an open and unrestrained manner was a good sign. It showed that Pearian not only trusted his rescuer, but also considered Ves to be a friend.

In any case, Ves had seen the first-rater when he was at his weakest and most pathetic. The former pioneer had exposed so much to the Larkinsons that it was not as if he could feel any further shame.

What Pearian said only further confirmed Ves' suspicions that the Yorul-Tavik Clan still had plans for their descendant.

What that may be, Ves had no clue, but it was enough to know that developing a closer relationship with Pearian was a worthwhile endeavor.

"I believe you did not call me to allow me to air my frustrations." Lord Pearian eventually spoke after he felt a lot more unburdened. "What is the reason that drove you to contact me at this time?"

Ves made a brief judgment call and decided to address the matter of his children's education first.

"I have several requests for your clan. One of them is a matter concerning my children. You see, each of them are designer babies who have proven to be highly intelligent and highly developed for their age..."

He quickly explained the circumstances of his three children and expressed his hope that Pearian's clan would help them get accepted by good first-class schools."

Of all of the possible requests he expected to hear, Pearian did not anticipate that the first one would be about sending kids to school.

He fell silent for a short moment after Ves was finished because he needed to compose his thoughts.

No one in his social circle ever asked for this sort of help because they were usually wealthy and powerful enough to send their offspring to the desired schools on their own power.

Besides, Pearian would be the last person they would want to approach with this kind of matter.

"It's been years since I last attended a school or had anything to do with them." The first-rater admitted. "I can't tell you much or do any of this myself, but I know someone in

my clan who can fulfill your requirements with great attention and care. Don't worry. You're my benefactor. I will make sure my clansmen will do a proper job in allocating your children to a couple of good schools. By my knowledge, our clan has close ties to dozens of good and reputable schools, both in and outside the Omer Republic. We send many of our own kids to them and even donate grants to them every once in a while. It should be easy enough for us to open a backdoor."

A matter that seemed insurmountably difficult and expensive to Ves and Gloriana turned out to be a trivial problem to Pearian. The way he casually dismissed the many hurdles showed how wide the gap was between the two men!

Still, Ves was grateful that Lord Pearian granted the request without any fuss.

"Thank you, Pearian." Ves sincerely bowed in front of the projection. "My children mean everything to me. I want them to receive the best possible learning opportunities so that they can get a better head-start in their lives. Allowing them to study alongside other first-raters will definitely set them up for life."

Pearian looked taken aback at the emotion displayed by Ves. The first-rater was not a father so he did not entirely understand the feelings of a parent.

"I hope they will do better than me." The Yorul-Tavik scion softly said. "If these kids of yours are as intelligent and adaptable as you claim, then it won't take much effort for my clan to get them into excellent first-class schools. I have never bothered to understand the academic sector, but from what I have learned, every good school needs a mixture of rich kids and geniuses in order to flourish. It usually doesn't matter too much where the latter comes from. The fact that they are second-raters won't mean a damn as long as they can outscore all of their classmates in a test. I certainly felt that way when I was sitting in the benches myself."

That was fascinating to hear. Ves felt more reassured, though he still reined in his excitement as nothing was confirmed as of yet. A single verbal promise from a disgraced and recovering clansman did not carry that much weight.

"Alright, then. Thank you again for doing this favor for me. I will transmit the relevant files to your comm so that you or your relatives can help my children get into the best possible schools that are willing to accept them. If there are any doubts about the standardized test results that my kids have obtained, they are always available to complete whatever additional tests may be needed to make a convincing case."

With that handled, Ves moved on to his main request.

"After the battle that has allowed us to defeat that alien battleship and free you from her bowels, we were left with a lot of valuable loot and plunder. I happen to be working on a special expert mech design that was originally supposed to be a second-class machine, but is now slated to become a quasi-first-class mech. That has introduced many new

problems, one of which is the need to find a more powerful first-class active stealth system that can provide my upcoming expert mech with high protection as well as remaining undetectable at the same time."

As Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik did not have a technical background, Ves skipped all of the complicated science and engineering stuff and explained his requirements for an active stealth system as simply as possible.

The first-rater on vacation did not immediately respond. He picked up a glass that was previously out of view and took a few sips of his cocktail.

"This is a more serious favor that you are asking from me." He told Ves. "I can give you a choice. If you want an active stealth system that can fool most first-class passive sensor systems, I can press my clan to share advanced tech with you. It won't be of a standard that we use ourselves, but it should be more than enough for your needs. If you don't want to cash in that heavy of a favor, I can ask one of my relatives to supply you with a purely commercial stealth system. It might not be commonly available, but it should definitely be widely used among a certain clientele. Its performance will not be as good, but it should still outfox almost all second-class sensor systems, even the active ones unless the range is too small."

This was a difficult choice to make for Ves. There were pros and cons to both options and he found it hard to decide whether it was worthwhile to get the good stuff!

Chapter 4673: The Worth of a Favor

The choices presented by Lord Pearian put Ves into a difficult condition.

Stealth systems were not common. At least, the good ones were not easily available on the open market.

Stealth mechs and other stealth assets possessed a lot of strategic value. Anyone who was able to evade the detection of an enemy state could run roughshod over the latter's territories!

For example, if the Hex Federation developed an innovative new stealth system that was beyond the ability for the Friday Coalition's detection systems to penetrate, then DIVA and the other Hexer intelligence agencies would make the Fridaymen miserable!

It was not difficult to imagine that the Friday Colonies would be thrown into chaos as stealth mechs and infiltrators eagerly made use of their stealth advantage.

The goal of all of these units was to commit as many acts of theft, sabotage and assassination as they could get away with before the Fridaymen finally cracked their tech!

As such, the best stealth systems were those that no one learned about in the first place. States and individual covert operations units usually kept them extremely close to their chest because any distribution of the tech increased the risk that enemies and rivals would crack the means of detecting them in the field.

This was why there was a substantial difference between commissioned stealth systems and commercial stealth systems.

Most highly competent units employed sensors and scanners that received regular updates that taught them how to employ specific tricks to increase the detection chance of known stealth systems.

That made commercial and more widely available stealth systems largely ineffective against well-organized opponents.

Of course, high-end stealth systems such as those designed for expert mechs were still a lot more reliable and effective due to their higher-quality parts and materials, but they always fell short to the stealth systems employed by more professional and institutional parties.

As Ves was aware of these differences, he thoroughly understood how great the implications would be if he chose for one or the other.

The choice of a stealth system directly impacted the effectiveness, utility and applicability of the Ghost Project!

Ves needed to think about his goals and aspirations for the Ghost Project. Was it important enough for him to cash in one of his bigger favors with the Yorul-Tavik Clan, or should he keep his request modest and make do with a lesser stealth system for the time being?

The Ghost Project was more than a simple expert mech. Though Ves valued its ability to attack unsuspecting enemy mechs and ships on the battlefield, he valued its ability to engage in covert operations against targets that weren't openly hostile!

The Larkinson Clan might have the Black Cats, but Calabast's pet organization mostly excellent at subtle infiltration and intelligence gathering work. Her agents were not as good as DIVA when it came to more serious acts of interference. She also lacked a good stealth mech that could reliably sabotage or destroy targets that were too difficult to infiltrate for normal operatives.

If Ves had a highly effective expert stealth mech under his command, then he could sabotage and put pressure on persistent enemies without provoking them in the open!

For example, if his clan and another pioneering organization competed for the same mech design commission, then openly attacking his rival would be out of the question, but messing with his enemy in secret would be much safer!

There might also be situations where the expeditionary fleet encountered a large alien warfleet in the frontier.

Ordinarily, the Golden Skull Alliance would never dare to confront a fleet that consisted of at least five or so battleships.

Even if the alliance could field multiple ace mechs, the casualties suffered by the expeditionary fleet would be horrendous.

However, if Ves was able to dispatch an expert mech that was stealthy enough to fool the sensors of the modern battleships, then the Ghost Project would be able to sabotage some if not all of the alien battleships in advance!

In the most optimistic scenario, the shenanigans pulled off by the Ghost Project would soften up the alien battleships to the point where they became a lot more vulnerable to an attack launched by the Golden Skull Alliance!

This was how much an expert stealth mech equipped with a highly effective stealth system could accomplish.

As such, equipping an expert stealth mech with better tech was a lot different from equipping a normal expert mech with better tech.

As much as Ves adored his previous high-end machines such as the Amaranto and the Everchanger, neither of the two could hide their existence from others!

Both expert mechs were extremely bright and easy to detect. They produced a lot of emissions whenever they did anything meaningful and their expert pilots couldn't hide their true resonance from resonance meters even if they tried!

Perhaps the versatile Everchanger might be able to minimize its presence and emissions by running cold while switching its active design spirit to Kalo, but it was absurd to believe it could sneak close to an enemy fleet carrier without tripping a thousand different alarms!

As Ves thought how much the Ghost Project could expand his range of options in many different situations, he felt a lot more tempted to request a good active stealth system.

"Can you tell me anything specific about the high-end stealth system that you are offering?" Ves asked.

Lord Pearian's projection frowned. "Not exactly. Even I know that transmitting any solid data on any stealth system on a normal communication channel is unwise. What I can tell you is that it will be a stealth system developed by one of the long-term trading partners of our clan."

"Oh?"

"Optaar Integrated Solutions is one of the many development companies hailing from the New Rubarth Empire that is active in the export market." Pearian explained. "While there are no sane Terrans who have any demand for a Rubarthan stealth system, there are enough customers from other first-rate states that may have an interest in the products sold by this company."

Ves had never heard of Optaar Integrated Solutions before, but he discreetly used his cranial implant to search for information on the galactic net.

It was definitely an established Rubarthan development company, one that sold its products far and wide outside of its home market.

Optaar didn't appear to be a major player, which was why it focused so much on exports. Customers outside of the highly competitive Rubarthan market were much less demanding and considerably easier to please.

One of the more interesting facts about Optaar was that its outwards focus had put it in a better position to expand its operations in the Red Ocean.

This allowed the company to get ahead of its slower and less nimble competitors and start figuring out effective applications of phasewater in different technologies early enough.

Therefore, it was one of the earlier commercial parties that developed effective transphasic stealth systems in the Rubarthan sphere.

While its larger and much better funded competitors had overtaken Optaar in this field, the latter still managed to remain competitive to an extent!

The most important implication of all of this was that the advanced transphasic stealth system developed by Optaar Integrated Solutions would probably be ineffective against formidable Terran and Rubarthan detection solutions, but a lot more effective against anything lesser!

This was fine with Ves. It was not as if he wanted to provoke anyone hailing from the first-rate superstates.

"Have these stealth systems been tested against alien opponents?"

Lord Pearian shrugged his shoulders. "You are asking the wrong person. I can ask around, but in general the native aliens are behind when it comes to stealth tech and anti-stealth tech. Those damn cosmopolitans will probably do their best to close this gap, but it won't be easy to make the aliens catch up to humans in this field. We are just too good at it as the Milky Way is a much better engine of growth for stealth tech."

There was a greater amount of conflict as well as a larger variety of tech and exotics in the old galaxy. All of these factors caused humanity to become extremely good at developing stealth systems that could fool damn near any sensor system, even the more unorthodox ones invented by oddball alien races.

The Golden Skull Alliance would definitely stumble upon alien warships again in the frontier. The Red Ocean was still filled with indigenous aliens!

As such, making sure that the Ghost Project could sneak into the security perimeter of alien warfleets while remaining completely undetected was of unparalleled value!

When Ves weighed all of these benefits to the cost of cashing in a major favor, he had already made his decision.

"Can you hook me up with Optaar Integrated Solutions?" He requested in a serious tone. "If their transphasic stealth system is as effective as you suggest, then I would be happy to apply it to my expert stealth mech design. Will it come with continuous updates to make sure it remains effective against newer detection systems that might come out in the future?"

Pearian nodded. "That goes without saying. This is an essential service. Even if Optaar doesn't provide after-sales service as a standard benefit, I will make sure the company will take care of your later needs."

"Thank you for your effort."

Ves became reassured. Constant updates weren't mandatory as a good stealth system would still remain effective against weaker opponents, but it was the stronger ones that concerned him the most.

"Ah, I just passed on this request to my relative who knows more about this tech. He told me to ask you whether your upcoming expert mech can meet the energy demands of a fully-fledged first-class active stealth system."

"That is difficult to say." Ves admitted. "I won't be able to equip my expert stealth mech with a first-class power reactor, because that would no longer be a 'quasi'-first-class mech anymore. I will try to make it as powerful as possible by relying on advanced materials, but it simply won't be able to supply as much energy as I wish."

"That complicates this selection."

"I am aware of that, Pearian. I am fine if the active stealth system can only be maintained for a short interval of time when it is operating at full power. I would like its performance to be scalable so that it can run for longer periods of time if it is running at lower power settings. I design all of my expert mechs with the intent to upgrade them many times in the future. The starting state of my expert stealth mech does define its final form. I will put a first-class power reactor inside the machine sooner or later, so it would be helpful if its existing stealth system can already make full use of all of the extra juice that becomes available."

Ves and Pearian's contact corresponded a bit more about this topic. This ensured that the Yorul-Taviks would supply an active stealth system that could not even activate properly because it demanded too much energy in order to hide a mech from detection!

Lord Pearian grinned at Ves. "You will have what you want by the end of the week. You can rely on Optaar Integrated Solutions to deliver a reliable stealth system that you can easily work with. One of the characteristics and selling points of the development company is that its products are designed with a lot of versatility in mind. They have wider tolerances and offer great compatibility to many different mechs. This is a necessity as Optaar sells its products to customers from many different states where the technical standards may be different."

"I see. That is good to know."

This would help with speeding up the integrating the active stealth system into the Ghost Project, allowing Ves to complete it sooner!

He was more than happy with the results of this call. He had no more need to cash in any other favors, so he chatted with Pearian a few minutes longer and ended the call.

It just dawned upon him how much he may have given up due to his decision to secure a quality first-class active stealth system.

In hindsight, Ves may have gotten a bit too enthused about the benefits provided by a singular solution.

He felt he had become too irrational when he convinced himself that it was a good idea to go for the more expensive option.

"Wait a minute."

He suddenly realized why he did not hesitate when he made such a far-reaching decision.

"I've been treating my Ghost Project as a passion project this whole time!"

The significance and meaning of his first expert stealth mech surpassed that of a normal mech design project!

Chapter 4674: Lopsided Energy Requirements

It took a lot faster than a week before a developer from Optaar Integrated Solutions made contact with Ves.

After a short and highly informative talk, they quickly found that while the Larkinson Clan did not possess nearly enough of the exact first-class exotics needed to make any of Optaar's transphasic active stealth systems, they could still work around this limitation.

"There are numerous materials in your inventory that can substitute the materials utilized in our standard designs without heavily impacting their performance." The first-class developer spoke as if this was a trivial task for him and his company. "As for the remaining materials that cannot be substituted without designing a new line of products from scratch, you will have to procure them through other means. Be warned that their cost may be more than you are comfortable with, but they are vital to the functioning of our stealth systems."

Ves did not look concerned. "We have so many different varieties of salvaged first-class materials on hand that we should easily be able to swap them for the key exotics for the stealth system. I'll just post a trade notice in a trading forum in Davute so that savvy traders will come and fulfill my requests. I may have to trade at a loss and wait a month or two before I get everything on my wish list, but I will make sure to have all of the materials in stock before I begin to fabricate my expert stealth mech."

This did not concern the developer from Optaar Integrated Solutions. He was merely tasked with helping his latest client develop a custom variant of one of his company's existing active stealth systems.

Such requests were not unusual for development companies. In fact, it was often where they earned the bulk of their revenue. Clients who tended to request these sort of personalized services cared more about maximizing performance than cutting costs.

Every major client's circumstances were different and unique. A one-size-fits-all approach rarely satisfied them, so the better and more desirable development companies always adopted business models where they were more than willing to customize and design variants of their standard products.

Naturally, the price for this service was anything but cheap, but the Yorul-Tavik Clan had already covered all of the expenses. What was even more important was that since the clan maintained a long and fruitful business relationship with the development

company, it had been able to secure help immediately without needing to be put on a waiting list.

Ves continued to discuss his overall requirements and expectations for the active stealth system with the company's developer. Neither of them dared to go into any specifics, as mentioning anything concrete about the stealth capabilities of an extremely crucial expert stealth mech over an unsecure communication channel was the height of foolishness!

Optaar had already promised to send one of its specialized engineers to Davute in order to work on the stealth system in person, but Ves would have to puzzle out a lot of elements on his own in the first few weeks.

As the two continued to exchange general knowledge and insights, both sides became impressed with each other.

The first-class developer did not expect a second-class Journeyman who never had a history of designing a serious stealth mech to possess so much knowledge and mastery of mechs in general and stealth systems in particular!

Although Ves clearly sounded like a second-class Journeyman, his problem-solving skills and his broad theoretical basis matched the capabilities of first-class mech designers!

Ves relied heavily on his comprehensive evolution as well as the Senior-level Stealth and Cloaking Enlightenment Fruit that he coincidentally won from a past lottery ticket draw.

The former boosted his cognitive capabilities as well as his affinity and intuition towards mechs and all of the tech around it. These improvements were so far-reaching that Ves had essentially relied upon his own mysterious evolution to substitute and in some cases surpass the expensive suite of augmentations that first-class mech designers took for granted!

For his part, Ves clearly experienced the differences between talking to a first-class developer and a second-class developer.

He worked plenty of times with people who fell into the second category. He was on a first-name basis with many engineers who worked for familiar companies based in Davute such as Melmen Advanced Systems and Morton Tech.

While those engineers possessed an astounding amount of depth in their narrow fields of expertise, none of them could match the depth and breadth of a developer working for a Rubarthan company like Optaar Integrated Solutions!

The latter's much more transhuman intellect and cognitive functions easily allowed him to outperform an entire second-class development team!

The difference in productivity was so high that Ves gained a much better understanding of how the tech industry worked in superior environments.

The demands imposed by extremely complicated high technology were so vast that baseline humans simply couldn't get a grip on it anymore.

If any form of augmentation became prohibited, then a team of dozens of highly educated and accomplished engineers could barely match the work of a single transhuman first-class engineer.

Even then, the former would still exhibit much lower productivity due to the complications of communication, knowledge sharing, friction, personal conflicts and all sorts of other messy stuff.

Ves realized that humanity had progressed its technology base so quickly that heavy augmentations became mandatory in order to maintain the existence of its civilization.

This was a scary notion. Too many humans at the upper end of society pursued drastic augmentations that purposefully distanced themselves from their own humanity.

In other words, the thinking and data processing capabilities of people like Ves and the engineers working for Optaar Integrated Solutions reached inhuman levels by design!

This raised all sorts of ethical and sociological questions. While the upper layers of human society became increasingly more alienated from the original form of their species, the bottom layers mostly remained true to their race.

This was rather ironic, especially to an individual like Ves who started off from the bottom and steadily climbed his way up the layers.

He understood the perspectives of both sides and recognized how the divide between the two groups became even worse over time.

Perhaps one day the society of today would blow up because the disparity had grown too wide. Ves hoped the Big Two remained on top of this issue to prevent this disaster from happening.

"Very well, I have what I need to make the necessary preparations on our end." The developer eventually said after a lengthy exchange. "It is not every day that we are asked to provide a stealth system for such a low-powered mech such as yours. We normally work with machines that can supply at least ten times as much energy. You will have to make a large number of adaptations in order to support the demands of our

tech. In particular, I would look into adding secondary short-duration power sources to your machine."

Ves nodded in confirmation. "I have already added that to my agenda. I will be working on this issue for the coming weeks. Hopefully, I will have a complete framework ready by the time your man arrives and begins to work on adapting a first-class stealth system to my Ghost Project."

As the call finally came to an end, Ves went over all of the changes and modifications he needed to make in order to make the Ghost Project more receptive for a highly advanced active stealth system.

The choice to go for a powerful and highly effective stealth system came at a hefty price. The products offered by a Rubarthan development company like Optaar were entirely geared towards first-class customers. Even if the occasional second-rater dropped by to place a specialty order, those instances were far too rare for its engineers to make a standard product that met these needs.

When Ves visualized the final state of his first expert stealth mech, he imagined a complicated, overengineered machine that was much more lopsided in its technical capabilities than was customary.

As Ves met with his wife at a later time and discussed how they needed to make substantial alterations to the Ghost Project to accommodate a new stealth system, Gloriana looked less than satisfied.

"Your greed for a first-class stealth system is presenting us with all kinds of problems." She said as she placed her hands on her hips. "This is no different from trying to mount a battleship cannon on a small and inadequate destroyer-class hull. The proportionality is gone as the energy demands of our expert mech is completely out of balance. Why couldn't you have stuck to marrying second-class stealth technology with first-class materials? In that way, you can still get a more resilient and combat capable expert stealth mech that you so badly wanted without increasing its energy requirements."

She had good reasons to get pissed. The drastically increased demand for energy meant that the expert mech needed to remove important internal components to make room for additional energy cells and other related parts. This would cause the Ghost Project to become slower, weaker and less effective in direct confrontations.

Ves was fine with this little sacrifice. "The immense increase in durability will more than compensate for the decrease in offensive power. In any case, the Ghost Project was never designed to beat the Dark Zephyr in a straightforward mech duel. It will be much better if it can leverage its distinct strengths, namely the Geist System and its first-class active stealth system, to defeat its opponents through asymmetrical warfare."

His wife still remained skeptical towards this vision. "I thought you wanted to turn the Ghost Project into a battlefield assassin that can effectively take out unsuspecting expert mechs. Your latest changes will make this expert mech worse in this aspect. You are putting an inordinate amount of faith in that Geist System of yours. Not only is it a completely new and untested offensive system, but it is unlikely to work against other high-ranking mechs as they excel at defending against and repelling metaphysical attack methods."

"You make a good point, Gloriana, but I believe the Geist System can partially overcome this advantage. Don't forget that the best way to defeat an expert mech is another expert mech. This is because both of them are amplified by willpower and true resonance."

"So?"

"If the Geist System is working by itself, then what you said is true." Ves said. "However, if it is empowered by not one but two different sources of extraordinary willpower, then I have a theory that it can overcome the inherent defenses of an opposing expert mech! Just think about it! What would happen if dozens of resonance-empowered fiends torment an isolated expert mech? The latter's resonance shield will come under enormous pressure, especially if its expert pilot is still young and inexperienced."

"You're mad! That is impossible!"

He shook his head in disagreement. "It is not as outlandish as it sounds. I have modeled the Geist System after Commander Casella Ingvar's domain and the Minerva's iconic Commandeering resonance ability. The principles are roughly the same, but the subjects and the underlying tech are different this time. The Minerva has proven to us that a large number of weak and negligible standard mechs can whittle down powerful enemy expert mechs as long as they are imbued with true resonance. Why should it be any different when the same is applied to a bunch of spiritual fiends?"

Try as he might, his wife still did not approve of the weird direction that he was taking the Ghost Project. The current plan for their expert stealth mech had deviated so much from its original vision that she practically suffered whiplash from her husband's habit of chasing after shinies!

She let out a sigh in exasperation. "You know what? Go do what you want. I will minimize my involvement as much as possible so you have all of the room you need to follow your whims. This way, the success and failure of the Ghost Project will largely depend on you and you alone. You cannot blame anyone but yourself if Venerable Zimro Belson receives a bloated monstrosity at the end of this project."

"That won't happen. I know what I am doing. Everything is going according to my design." Ves confidently claimed.

Chapter 4675: Standing In Solidarity

Ves barely had time to start on making the necessary changes to the current state of the Ghost Project before the expeditionary fleet finally returned to the Davute System once again!

He set his design work aside so that he could witness the moment of arrival on the bridge of his flagship. Ketis decided to join him for whatever reason.

"We're back." He whispered.

"Yup." Ketis echoed.

"Meow..." Lucky echoed as the cat rested in her embrace.

As the swordmaster cradled the cat like a baby, she took note of the substantially increased traffic and activity within the star system.

"Is it me, or has Davute become at least three times busier than before?" She wondered. "We've only been away for a couple of months, but the amount of traffic is much greater than before. The proportion of inbound traffic is also a lot higher than before!"

That meant a lot more starships were moving towards Davute VII than getting back out again.

This was highly unusual as a healthy trading hub normally matched its inbound traffic to outbound traffic.

Ves already knew what was going on due to the daily briefings he received. "The reason why so many people want to get inside is because the date of the founding ceremony is approaching."

The swordmaster raised her eyebrows. "You mean the powers that be who built Davute are finally prepared to found a colonial state?"

"Yep. It's all over the news. It's going to be a massive historical occasion. The bigger and grander the ceremony, the more momentum the state will gain in its early years."

"Do you know how they will name the state?"

Ves shrugged as he leisurely adjusted his posture on his observer's chair. "Beats me. The power bloc wants to keep it all a surprise in order to increase the hype for the ceremony. Everything will be revealed at that time. We don't even know what sort of

political system and government structure they will adopt. All we can do is formulate guesses. Personally, I think the founding parties will permanently try to concentrate a decent amount of power on themselves. If the common citizens get any say, it will be minor at best. The new state needs to keep just enough appearances to avoid generating too much discontent among its large and mostly disunited population."

A contemptuous expression appeared on Ketis' face. "That sounds like a feudal kingdom. Will Davute turn into a playground for royals and nobles who can take whatever they want from their subjects?"

"Meow.." Lucky hissed in a low tone as not even a cat approved of too much concentration of power!

"They probably won't go that far." Ves speculated as he tried to analyze Davute from the perspective of its original investors. "The colonial state will probably encompass at least hundreds of different colonies in the surrounding regions, but there is no doubt that this port system will play a central role. It is essential to ensure that it remains a free, open and inviting trading destination. If Davute becomes too unattractive, a lot of trade and revenue will flow to rival colonial states instead, which in this case means Karlach. The existence of a powerful direct competitor means that the rulers of Davute won't dare to go too far."

As far as property rights were concerned, most founders who invested a lot of capital and took a lot of risks to develop a successful colony wanted to treat it as if it was their personal possession.

This sometimes worked, but too much pushing would breed resentment among the vast number of commoners who served as the backbones of the state.

Tyranny became a lot more viable in a fairly closed society that was largely self-sufficient, but that didn't apply to the current situation.

Trade was a powerful engine of growth and had already been responsible for accelerating the development of the Davute System!

With neighboring rivals like Karlach nipping at its heels, Davute needed to surrender enough benefits to other stakeholders to expand its strength as quickly as possible!

Ves waved his hand at the projection showing all of the ships and fleets moving in the star system.

"Look at how many different pioneers and other people are eager to attend the founding ceremony. The colonial state will definitely become home to a lot of players and organizations. They believe in its future potential and are willing to commit to it in order to be a part of its founding generation. Everyone knows that the people who are involved in a state from the beginning will often become its new aristocrats, no matter

whether they explicitly use this term or not. It's similar to what happened with all of the families who founded the Bright Republic."

Ketis nodded in understanding as she rocked Lucky in her arms. "So how does our clan fit into the picture? As far as I recall, we have set up a large branch in the Davute."

He frowned at this mention. "I have always maintained the stance that the Larkinson Clan must retain its sovereignty. We should never become beholden to any other state or organization."

"I don't think that will work for the people we left behind on Davute VII. Lots of side branch members have completely settled in the capital city of this planet and they completely love it over there. I think many of them have already developed a growing sense of belonging for the upcoming state."

"You don't need to remind me of that." Ves grumbled. "I am still trying to figure out what I should do about this. I can't dissolve the branch because that would cause us to lose our foundation here, but I don't want a large portion of my people to maintain double loyalties."

This was a serious risk and one that would definitely create a lot of tension within the clan!

"I may not be following the regional politics of the Krakatoa Middle Zone that closely, but even I have heard that Davute and Karlach are on a collision course. War is on the horizon and the founding of their respective states will bring that one step closer to reality."

"That's true." Ves nodded. "I received a report not too long ago that states that the LMC is already making a lot of preparations for an impending conflict. Our assets may come under attack, our suppliers may lose or suspend their shipments and the new colonial government may try to impose wartime rules and requirements onto our Davute Branch. The upside is that the demand for effective combat mechs will balloon so much that we stand to make a killing from this war!"

War had always been the time where good mech models soared in popularity and where bad mech models got brutally exposed.

Right now, the amount of bad mechs in circulation should not be much as conflict was all too common in the Red Ocean.

However, there were still a lot of differences between occasional skirmishes and brutal, months-long military campaigns!

Mechs that had largely been designed for the private sector often fell short in this area. Their fancy gimmicks, their overly complicated structures and their brittle internal

architectures were more likely to break down when the machines were continually used without adhering to their recommended maintenance schedules!

Although the LMC's commercial products had not been optimized for total warfare, Ves believed that popular models such as the Buzzy Bee and the Ferocious Piranha Mark II would prove themselves adequate enough to keep up with high-intensity use and abuse.

Ves also had a lot of hope that less flashy products such as the second-class versions of the Desolate Soldier and the Crystal Lord would enjoy a renaissance in Davute!

The Desolate Soldier and especially the Crystal Lord had never caught fire in the new frontier. Their glows were nice but not particularly game changing in the current environment and their ability to turn around an entire battle was limited.

However, their relatively balanced, economical and solid constructions would definitely show their value as the war dragged on! The more mech pilots fell in love with the underappreciated strengths of these relatively 'boring' mech models, the more orders the LMC would receive!

The company's Marketing Department already anticipated these scenarios. The Living Mech Corporation should quickly be able to adjust its operations to adapt to the rapidly changing market circumstances.

As Ves and Ketis talked about the consequences of a possible war, the swordmaster looked confused.

"You are putting a lot of weight on private mech forces." She said. "Shouldn't wars be fought by professional mech armies? They usually make use of mech models commissioned by the state."

Ves shook his head. "That is normally true, but that only applies to established states. The colonial state around Davute will need at least several generations to build up a fully-fledged professional mech military. Before that happens, Davute has no choice but to rely on private mech forces such as those owned by mercenary organizations and family organizations to do the bulk of the fighting. Do you see all of those ships heading towards Davute VII? At least a part of them belong to groups that are willing to fight for the colonial state in exchange for land, political access and more."

"Will we be joining that line?"

"No. Absolutely not." He declared. "I don't mind signing business deals, but anything that causes us to bear responsibilities on behalf of a state goes too far. I will stop anyone who tries to pull that off, no matter whether it applies to our clan as a whole or a single side branch. The clansmen who have chosen to reside in Davute VII must always keep in mind that they only serve a single 'state', and that is the Larkinson Clan."

He definitely had a lot of work in store to ensure that remained the case. Ves had spent enough time with people to know that his stance towards sovereignty and states was not natural or popular.

Too many humans wanted to live on solid ground. Too many people saw no problem with pledging an oath to defend a large and impersonal state. Too many people didn't even consider the Larkinson Clan to be a sovereign entity in the first place!

He couldn't blame them. Pretty much every member of his clan grew up in a normal state and always assumed that there was no real alternative.

As Ves continued to chat with Ketis, he suddenly became interrupted by a communication request.

"Sir." Minister Shederin Purnesse greeted the patriarch. "I just came from a talk from a representative of the future colonial administration. Davute has officially invited you to attend the founding ceremony in a place of honor."

Ves grimaced in response. "You know my stances on this statehood stuff. I have no desire to associate myself with this pageantry. Did you politely decline the invitation as you should have?"

"I accepted." Shederin declared.

"You what?!"

"Let me explain, Ves." The old man quickly said. "Attending the founding ceremony is a harmless act. You will do nothing but confirm your existing association with Davute, because our branch and its growing economic activities in the star system have already done that first. Your absence will make people regard you as a volatile leader and the Larkinson Clan as an unreliable actor. It makes much more sense to attend the ceremony and improve the relations between the colonial administration and our Davute Branch. The government and the colonial state's many stakeholders will also become more encouraged to purchase the products sold by the LMC, as the company will be seen as a strong supporter of their side in an upcoming war."

"I don't care about that! The point about maintaining our distance is that we maintain our neutrality and avoid making too many unnecessary enemies!"

Shederin scoffed. "That ship has sailed in this regard, sir. Karlach already considers us an enemy and believes we are deeply in bed with Davute. There is no possible way that you can convince the Karlachers that our clan is impartial enough to do business with them. Since that is the case, we may as well make a cheap and easy show of support that may boost the sales of our mechs by as much as 10 or 20 percent."

As much as Ves wanted to reject this course of action, Shederin's arguments had strong logic.

There were more upsides than downsides in pretending to stand in solidarity with Davute, at least in the short and medium-term.

Chapter 4676: I'm Just A

The returning expeditionary fleet quickly felt the consequences of all of the increased traffic.

Traffic control became swamped and many space lanes had become completely occupied.

The number of inspection ships on duty had multiplied by 10 as all of the incoming visitors needed to be checked in case they were terrorists or saboteurs who intended to ruin the founding ceremony.

The orbit of Davute VII had actually become a lot less busy as the colonial administration had already pushed most fleets and ships away.

The only ships and mechs that were allowed to linger within a certain distance from the planet were those that already pledged to serve the colonial state as part of its future mech military.

For now, most of those mech forces still belonged to many different private organizations. Their diverse colors and markings remained unchanged which made for a chaotic and disorganized impression.

Even so, as Ves read the opinions on the galactic net and observed how eager so many people wanted to travel to Davute VII, he recognized that optimism was high.

"People really believe in this future state."

This was a good sign. The people who invested in Davute from the beginning made plenty of preparations. They formulated a detailed plan and made many moves to address problems before they had a chance to break out. The fact that the settlements in the port system grew into highly developed cities and metropolises in a matter of years showed how well they built up its foundation.

The smooth development of Davute gave a lot of people a lot of confidence in its future potential. Its leaders and statesmen demonstrated an abundance of planning, foresight, preparation, wisdom and generosity. Even Ves felt tempted to join the party if he hadn't experienced betrayal at the hands of their hypocritical kind in the past.

He felt as if he was one of the few people in the entire star system who remained sober enough to recognize that the primary goal of the upcoming colonial state was to exploit its future citizens.

Just like how the descendants of the Larkinson Family had fought and bled for a Bright Republic that never properly rewarded them for their centuries-long service, a lot of fools and romantic idiots were already falling into line just so that they could get used in the exact same way!

The only people he could have a proper conversation about this topic was Calabast and a handful of Purnessers.

Ves felt pretty upset at Minister Shederin Purnesse for accepting an invitation against instructions, so he took his frustrations to his strategic partner.

"I don't blame Shederin for making this decision." Calabast's projection stated. "You need to grow up and look outside of your perspective. You may aspire to turn our clan into a fully independent, nomadic and spaceborn fleet, but that doesn't work out in practice. We need branches like the one we have in Davute to give our people a chance to live on a proper planet and to provide the LMC with the ability to produce its own mechs en masse. Since we cannot avoid entanglement with states, we have to accept that this is a necessity and properly manage our relationships with them. Grow up, Ves."

That was not what Ves wanted to hear. He crossed his arms in a petulant manner.

"I feel tempted to turn our expeditionary fleet around and head over to an entirely different port system. Maybe it is time we leave Krakatoa behind and explore a newer and fresher middle zone."

"That is not a wise decision, and your allies are unlikely to agree with you. I know the Cross Clan will insist on reorganizing its fleet here. Just like us, the Crossers have founded a sizable branch on Davute VII and built up a lot of trustworthy and reliable business relationships in this industrial hub. It will be several times harder and more expensive for the both of us to reorganize our forces and recover our strength. Don't disrupt everyone's plans due to purely personal and subjective feelings."

She was right. Ves could not afford to let too much of his selfishness mess up his clan and alliance.

He needed to be a responsible leader and stick to making rational decisions. The larger his organization had become, the more important it was for him to project stability.

Once he calmed down a bit, he accepted her words.

"I guess you are right, Calabast. That doesn't mean I like it. No matter what, nothing can make me develop a sense of belonging to Davute. I will continue to work to minimize

our entanglements and commitments to the upcoming colonial state. I think we should also move our fleet away from this zone sooner or later in order to remind everyone that the endless void of space is our true home."

The spymaster smirked and threw a coy glance at him. "That may be easier said than done. My intelligence network has already received rumblings about a massive deal that the colonial administration is preparing to offer to our clan."

"Huh? What is this about a deal? I take it that it encompasses more than stuff like taxes and permits."

"You are correct in that." She replied. "It has to do with what you do best, which is designing crazily effective mechs that are strong enough to affect the balance of war."

He looked confused. "What? There are tons of Master Mech Designers in Davute. Why would the ruling powers ask for my help? I'm just a Journeyman M—"

Slap!

Calabast's physical projection actually dashed forward and slapped Ves in the face!

"Shut up. Don't finish that stupid phrase of yours." She growled. "Be serious for once. The people who built Davute aren't stupid. At least some of them have studied your record and history in great detail. They will easily be able to find out how extensively you propped up the Hexadric Hegemony during the Komodo War by providing a few highly impactful mech models such as the Valkyrie Redeemer. The Davutans will want you to recreate that miracle with their own mech forces so that they can gain a greater advantage against Karlach."

Now that Ves thought about it, that made a lot of sense. If he was in the position of the rulers of Davute, he would probably make the same decision!

Nonetheless, that didn't mean that he was eager to directly interfere in another war!

It was one thing to sell a lot of commercial mechs to the various paramilitary forces that would be fighting for Davute.

It was another thing to complete a formal commission from a colonial state!

"It's not that simple." Ves replied. "The Hexadric Hegemony lost the Komodo War. Remember? My living Hexer mechs failed to make a difference."

The spymaster shook her head. "Only those who make a cursory analysis of the Komodo War would come to that conclusion. Anyone who performs a proper examination will know that the Hexers have doomed themselves from the moment they fired the first shot. Your contributions have done much to prolong their fighting ability

and bought enough time for the Hexer dynasties to evacuate the core of their people and more liquid assets. Even to this day, the Valkyrie Redeemer and the Maiden of Adversity still do much to prop up the Hex Federation."

"That is because my Hexer mechs have a strong effect on the morale of the Hexer people. My unique capability to tie the Superior Mother and Helena, both of whom the Hexers literally revere as deities, to my works has energized all of their women and boys. Faith and fanaticism are some of the most powerful motivators in existence. There is no universal solution. What works well for the Hexers won't be nearly as effective for a more secularist and pluralistic state."

"Glows can have a major positive influence in wars without the involvement of religion, Ves. The Sand War is a great example of that. Your Desolate Soldiers injected a lot of duty among shaky and hesitant mech pilots who were ordered to hold the line against the advancing sandman fleets."

Ves didn't entirely accept this argument. "You may be right, but I recall that the Ylvainans got much more use out of the living mechs I designed for them. Again, their religion played a major role in giving me an opening to boost their effective performance. Look, during the Komodo War, the Friday Coalition never developed much of a desire for my products because they don't worship any of my design spirits. The same applies to Davute as it is almost entirely secularist as far as I am aware of. My products may be strong in specific situations, but it is still a stretch to claim they are powerful enough to swing the entire war in Davute's favor. The mechs designed by all of the local Masters are no joke."

"You underestimate your influence. You also underestimate the attraction of your mechs. The Davutans have most certainly studied all of the battle footage that is available in public. In particular, the Battle of Pima Prime where we helped the Hex Army defeat the Sundered Phalanx will serve as a highly informative case that demonstrated the great strength and effectiveness of our combat mechs."

Ves crossed his arms. "That's nice, but most of the mechs we fielded during that battle are exclusive mech models. The Valkyrie mechs and the new Maiden of Adversity mechs can only be piloted by Hexers. At the same time, our Bright Warriors, Transcendent Punishers, Transcendent Chargers, Second Swords and Redaxes are solely designed to be utilized by our mech legions. Only a few of the mech models such as the Ferocious Piranha have versions that are sold in public."

"Why must those aforementioned mech models remain exclusive?" Calabast shot back. "You can earn a substantial amount of easy money, resources and favors if you design variants of those standard mech models that are adapted for use by the mech forces of Davute."

"No way! You of all people should know about the importance of maintaining the secrecy and mystery of our staple mechs. Once the Davutans begin to use mechs such

as my powerful Nullifiers in large numbers, their strengths and weaknesses will be analyzed until they hardly have any secrets left! That means that once we fight against an opponent that has done his homework, he will immediately know to keep his expert mechs far away and combat the Nullifiers with large numbers of standard mechs!"

Calabast still disagreed with his stance.

"That may be true for certain key Larkinson-exclusive mechs, but you also have oddballs like the Lucid Rage that aren't really that important to us. They are nice to have, but it won't hurt us if you package it up and make it available to Davute."

She may be right in that, but Ves still disagreed with her stance, if only on principle.

"Repackaging my existing works in order to earn cheap profits from them is lazy behavior. If Davute wants my work, then I will do a proper job and start a brand new design project from scratch that is precisely attuned to their circumstances, from their material availability to the shortcomings they need to address the most."

The spymaster smirked at him. "That sounds like a good plan, Ves. Why don't you offer the Davutans this service? I am sure they will welcome your assistance with open arms!"

"Goodbye, Calabast."

Ves activated the command that ended the comm call.

He rubbed his face and strengthened his resolve to not get dragged into another stupid war, especially one he had no personal stake in. The escalating conflict between Davute and Karlach was nothing more than a mundane contest for hegemony in a region.

Such wars were a dime in a dozen in the Red Ocean. None of them had any meaning to them. Just because one such war happened to unfold in close physical proximity to himself didn't automatically mean that he should give a damn about who won or lost.

Chapter 4677: Return to Soil

"We're back! The air is so fresh!"

"Yay! We can go to the beach again!"

"Look look look! The sky is so blue and enormous. It's so much better than the fake sky in our ship."

A vast fleet of shuttles and transports still descended from the sky and landed directly on the vast fields of the Cat Nest.

The citizens and visitors of Kotor City must be wondering what the fuss was about. Security had always been tight and the city administration had recently tightened the traffic rules.

Many private vehicles descending from orbit could no longer travel directly to the main spaceport in the city and had to divert to more remote spaceports in order to reduce the danger of terrorist attacks.

However, the status of the Larkinson Clan in the Davutan community had always been considerable in the past few years. In addition, the explosive and dramatic successes of the Golden Skull Alliance during the Trailblazer Expedition had propelled its reputation and prestige to new heights!

Combined with the fact that the Living Mech Corporation had become an increasingly greater player in the regional economy, traffic control readily acquiesced to the requests for exemptions from its rules.

This was a clear sign of how much weight the Larkinson Clan carried in the Davute community. Outsiders who didn't know any better might assume that the Larkinsons were thoroughly waving the Davutan flag!

Due to the permissions the clan received, the expeditionary fleet began to bring down massive amounts of personnel and valuable plunder.

A portion of the sky looked as if an invasion was taking place!

Over 500,000 clansmen resided aboard the hundreds of ships of the Larkinson Clan.

Not all of them were scheduled to enjoy their shore leave on the surface at the same time, but there was no doubt that many of them would be occupying the empty but prepared houses and apartments in the expansive complex managed by the Davute Branch!

As such, the Cat Nest which was located within the bustling Industrial District 2 became a lot busier than before as many different Larkinsons returned to the planet they called home for several years.

It was as if they only went away for a lengthy vacation or business trip. Many of their old residential units hardly looked different, allowing them to make the transition from living in a completely artificial ship environment to living on a huge and expansive planet that offered much greater freedom of movement.

The children certainly seemed to enjoy it. Ves and Gloriana smiled indulgently as their kids had already run off to the old and familiar playgrounds. Many other children, mostly under ten years old, broke away from their parents as well and eagerly began to play as if they had been living in prisons only recently!

"Miaow miaow miaow!"

"Woof woof!"

"Squeak! Squeak!"

It wasn't just the kids that reveled in the return to wide open spaces. The many pets of the Larkinson Clan also ran off into the animal-friendly parks and playgrounds.

One of the reasons why the animals loved to return back to Davute VII was that they were no longer split up in many different isolated groups anymore.

The biggest limitation to living on a fleet was that it became extremely inconvenient for people and pets to move between different ships.

Inter-ship traffic could not be done whenever the fleet engaged in FTL travel, and even outside of it the need to take shuttles posed a massive inconvenience.

It might be acceptable for humans to transit from one ship to another, but no one would specially reserve space for pets.

All of this showed that neither the human race or their many pet species had adapted well to spaceborn life. Ves felt rather disappointed at how dramatically everyone reacted to making landfall again.

It was just a temporary stop on a planet. Did they have to make a big deal out of it? What was wrong with living on a safe and technologically advanced ship?

"Look at how happy our children have become." Gloriana continued to smile as a proud mother. "We should buy an entire planet for them. That would definitely make them pleased."

Ves immediately dropped his own smile. "No. Never. Don't mention this to me again. I am not changing my plans."

After a short time of bickering, a small but significant processing of Larkinsons walked up to their site.

"Patriarch Ves."

"Nephew."

"Cousin."

Three different Larkinsons stepped forward at this time. Their familiarity and blood ties immediately caused Ves to fall silent.

His wife thoughtfully ceased her nagging and stepped back to give the trueblood Larkinsons more space.

Though Ves rarely paid attention to what went on at the Davute Branch, he did receive reports from time to time that summarized its major developments.

One massive event stood out that made the expeditionary fleet's return to Davute a lot more significant.

Ves first nodded towards the Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson, the first generation Branch Director of the Davute Branch.

He still looked remarkably spry for his age. Ves did not regret spending a bunch of MTA merits to prolong his life and give him a lot more time to witness the meteoric rise of the Larkinson Clan.

"How is the branch doing these days, Raymond?"

"We are doing well." The happy and invigorated branch director responded. "Our numbers are growing, our businesses are thriving, we have improved our access to local goods and services and our finances are in the green. We still have our fair share of problems, though. A number of sensitive matters have piled up since the time you have left. I am not comfortable with handling them on my own as I do not have a good idea whether my decisions align with your goals, so I have scheduled a meeting with you so that we can go over them one at a time."

Given all of the recent developments in the region, Ves could already make a few guesses on what those issues may entail.

"I would love to go into detail with you, but I think we can address them on another day." He responded.

"I understand. There are greater priorities at the moment."

Two of them happened to be standing next to Raymond.

Ves first nodded towards the woman he had long treated as his older sister. "Melinda. You... you've matured."

"I could say the same for you, cousin." The softer and more matron-looking woman said. "When we separated from each other, I never imagined that we would be following

you into the Red Ocean. Neither would I have imagined that our family would be reuniting with your clan. Still many of our family members are glad to gain a chance of reuniting with their relatives. Just look at them. No matter how many times they can talk to each other over the galactic net, there is just something special about being able to hug each other for real again."

Many reunions took place. Though the vast majority of clansmen pretty much acted like bystanders, the trueblood Larkinsons had all gathered together in a giant crowd as mothers reunited with their grown children while grandparents met with all of the young and cute grandchildren that they never got to hold in their arms.

The love and affection radiating from the original Larkinsons became such a heartwarming sight that Ves could feel the Golden Cat swirling with glee and joy!

"I should introduce you to my children to you all." Ves proposed. "They are all different bundles of joy, and they have always grown curious and eager to meet the 'other' side of my family for a long time. The Larkinson Family has gained a mythical status in our clan nowadays."

Melinda chortled in a good-natured manner. "We are the outdated model of the Larkinsons. We are the relics of the past. We are the bad example that the clan regularly compares itself to. You don't need to prop up our family. Our attempts to find a new life in the old galaxy have not worked out as well as we have hoped. Some of us don't want to admit it, but the fact of the matter is that we have failed. This is why we are here, I suppose."

"No worries. I won't judge you. Family is family. I don't care whether you want to join our clan or follow another arrangement. I just want what is best for you all. We Larkinsons should stick together."

In truth, Ves could care less about what the members of the Larkinson Family wanted. The majority of them were stubborn fools who clung to their stupid and self-sabotaging traditions for no good reason except their forefathers had done the same!

The Larkinson Clan had completely surpassed the original Larkinson Family.

Even when the latter was at its height and counted multiple active expert pilots within its ranks, there was no way the family could come close to the power, prosperity and numbers of his homegrown organization!

There was only one reason why Ves hadn't thrown back the original rejection that he received from his family members when he founded his clan.

He shifted his gaze towards the most powerful expert pilot that bore the Larkinson name.

Compared to the likes of Venerable Davia Stark and Venerable Jannzi Larkinson, the strength and density of Venerable Ark Larkinson's force of will had reached an entirely different level!

Ves was reminded of the times when he met with the old Reginald Cross back when he had yet to receive the Mars.

A high-tier expert pilot essentially pressed up against the line between demigod and halfgod. Ark Larkinson's strength had already surpassed that of general expert pilots, but his current position was so awkward that any junior ace pilot could easily crush him in any battle circumstance.

This was the infamous bottleneck that had ended the dreams and ambitions of many expert pilots throughout human space!

Only a fraction of expert pilots met all of the stringent criteria to undergo apotheosis for a second round and completely transform their willpower into a force that was strong enough to distort reality at a greater scale!

Most people who met high-tier expert pilots would become completely awestruck at the opportunity to meet a vastly superior human warrior.

Other people such as Ves who recognized the uncomfortable truth about high-tier expert pilots looked at them with pity and regret.

Ves could clearly sense from Ark's dense but highly solidified willpower that his uncle had worked hard to break past his bottleneck in the past few years, but made little meaningful progress.

That was the painful part about the struggle to advance.

No expert pilot was inherently weak or feeble, or else they wouldn't have undergone apotheosis for the first time.

Unfortunately, the standards of becoming an ace pilot was so insanely high that many high-tier expert pilots who fell into stagnation couldn't accept the reality that they were one of the many 'average' demigods who ultimately did not pass muster.

Such torment could damage the will of even the most powerful of expert pilots, and Ves could already sense the stresses in Ark's amazingly strong willpower.

It was a testament to his faith in himself and his resilience in the face of adversity that his willpower had yet to show any obvious flaws.

In any case, Venerable Ark Larkinson was still on the younger side as far as high-tier expert pilots were concerned. He roughly belonged to the same generation as Patriarch Reginald and also accrued a lot of combat experience over his career.

Physically, Ark appeared to be in a healthy condition, showing that he had never suffered a critical battle injury that had forced his father to retire from the cockpit.

That meant that Ark still had at least a decade or two where his current evolved and lightly augmented state would keep him in a prime fighting condition.

After that, age would slowly take its toll, decreasing his odds of breaking through as his mind became less flexible and his body less vigorous.

"Welcome to my clan, Uncle Ark." Ves eventually greeted his father's brother.

Ark returned a smile that caused his force of will to spread and embraced every nearby Larkinson with a surprisingly gentle blanket of reassurance.

"I am happy to see you again, nephew."

"Come. Let us head to a more comfortable place so we can exchange stories with each other. I am sure our children would love to meet their cousins from the other side as well. They are all blood relatives, after all. Family is important."

"Family is important." Both Melinda and Ark echoed as they agreed with this sentiment.

Chapter 4678: Love for Larkinson

The Royal Mansion occupied the most desired location of the Cat Nest.

The estate reserved for the clan patriarch and his immediate family sat on a small hill surrounded by a luxuriously expansive forest.

As Davute VII continued to develop at a rapid tempo, the price of every square meter of space in Kotor City seemingly doubled every year!

It was hard to imagine that Kotor City had started out as a bunch of prefab structures that had been loaded out of the cargo holds of large colony ships.

The spread of human construction had been so rapid that any plot of land at Industrial District 2 had become at least an order of magnitude more valuable!

Ves and his clan had been lucky enough to get in early enough and buy a nice and large piece of land when it was still available.

Nowadays, the more central districts of Kotor City had become so densely constructed in such a short amount of time that there was no more space to build on the surface!

The only construction works that still took place in the city proper mostly happened in the air.

The amount and density of floating structures in the city constantly grew each day. Dozens of new structures weighing a vast amount of tons joined the evolving skyline at a constant rate, making the entire place become so busy that a number of early immigrants even decided to move out and live in one of the many other less congested cities on the planet!

Fortunately, the Cat Nest was large and expansive enough to avoid much of the hustle and bustle that went on in the city. Large sound isolation barriers had been set up around the borders of the land owned by the clan to ensure that none of the city noises would disturb the residents.

Though over a hundred-thousand Larkinsons had descended from orbit within the first day of the expeditionary fleet's arrival in the vicinity of Davute VII, not all of them landed in the Cat Nest.

The Larkinson Clan had grown too big to be confined in a single location. The Davute Branch managed a bountiful portfolio of other industrial and residential facilities spread across the entire planet. Many clansmen would have to make do with living in other cities during their stay in the Davute System.

Of course, none of that mattered to Ves. he was right back at the estate that he admittedly enjoyed during his years-long stay in Davute.

It was also the childhood home of Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine. Each of them had gathered a bunch of their equally young nephews and nieces and enthusiastically gave them a tour of the large back garden as well as the lush and beautiful forest!

"C'mon! There's a big treehouse up ahead that our papa built. You will love it over there!"

"Miaow! Miaow!"

As the gaggle of kids and pets ran off to play, the adults settled down in a lovely terrace garden that Gloriana had personally designed and arranged in the past.

A few bots flew in and put down trays filled with tea pots, snacks and other refreshments.

Gloriana picked up a tea pot and skillfully poured the cups that another bot had placed before the seats of the other Larkinsons.

"Thank you, madame." Melinda said as she picked up a cup and took a sip in a casual manner that remained unchanged since she was young. "Wow. This is good stuff! Is this what obscenely rich people like you drink all day?"

"That and more." Ves lightheartedly responded. "These little luxuries are nothing compared to what the first-raters get to enjoy."

Venerable Ark Larkinson leaned back on his seat and continued to gaze at the perfectly manicured garden.

"You have been doing so well in the last few years." The expert pilot and patriarch of the Larkinson Family sighed. "This place reminds me so much of our old Larkinson Estate back in Rittersberg. It could use more people, though. The retired uncles and aunts that sat in the back of the estate everyday made the estate warmer and more alive."

"I know. I miss that as well, uncle. There are different gathering points throughout the living areas of the Cat Areas where our clansmen can congregate. There are way too many people among us to fit in a single garden these days."

"Ah yes, the adopted Larkinsons. I have to admit that you have impressed me, nephew. I had heard many stories of how people who had never heard about us in the past transformed into diehard Larkinsons within a year after joining your clan. The sheer amount of people you've converted and the degree of loyalty you have instilled in their hearts are... unreal."

The expert pilot purposefully directed his gaze to Nitaa.

The tall and silent honor guard that had guarded the patriarch without any complaints over the years also bore another important responsibility.

She carried the responsibility of holding and guarding the Larkinson Mandate, the first and most important ancestral heirloom of the Larkinson Clan.

Ves followed the expert pilot's gaze and understood the man's concerns.

"You and the rest of your family have all felt her presence for years." He said. "Her bond with you may not be as strong as the connections she maintains with the members of my clan, but in her opinion every Larkinson is worthy of her care and protection. As far as I am concerned, she is a Larkinson just like each of us. Let me introduce her to you in person."

He stretched out his hand and transmitted a silent command.

The Larkinson Mandate which normally rested in a special case attached to Nitaa's combat armor came loose and flew towards Ves.

Once the heavy metal-covered tome reached his palm, Ves briefly admired the golden medallion on the front cover before he slammed the book onto the center of the garden table with a loud thud.

"Goldie, can you come out and say hello?"

Nyaaaaa!

A golden light bulb seemed to appear in their midst as a warm and glowing spiritual entity emerged from the Larkinson Mandate.

Melinda and Raymond immediately became fascinated by the sight of the totem animal of the Larkinson Clan.

The lovely cat made a playful loop in the air and flew closer to Melinda in an inviting manner.

"She's so adorable! Amazing!" The mech officer and rising leader of the Larkinson Family spoke as she attempted to cradle the lovely looking cat. "I can't touch her. Is she real or is she a projection?"

NYAAA! NYAAA!

Goldie strenuously objected to being misunderstood as a projection. She was a true living entity and wanted every Larkinson to know it! She spontaneously strengthened her connection to Melinda until the latter undeniably felt the bountiful life contained within the deceptively small spiritual cat!

Once Goldie finished showing Melinda who was boss, the cat cautiously floated over to Ark Larkinson.

Unlike a normal human like Melinda, a strong expert pilot possessed a greater chance of causing harm to spiritual entities.

Though Ark had stepped out of the cockpit of his expert mech, he had developed his strength to such a degree that he already wielded a tiny amount of the power of an ace pilot.

The ancestral spirit wasn't the only one who grew nervous at this meeting.

Ves held a lot of worries on how his uncle would react. Ark Larkinson commanded so much respect and influence within the Larkinson Family that his opinions would largely determine the relations between the two groups that shared the Larkinson name!

If Ark and most of the members of the old family explicitly rejected Goldie and what she brought to every Larkinson, then closer forms of cooperation would be heavily limited.

However, as the Golden Cat drifted closer to Venerable Ark, the two didn't generate any tension.

The air between them actually became warmer and more comforting. Goldie's radiant glow that inspired love and affection among the Larkinsons did not get repelled by Ark's force of will.

Instead, they touched and eventually embraced each other as if they were siblings that had been separated from birth for a long time!

No matter how far apart they used to be, the two forces both shared a common root, which was a love and dedication towards the people who identified themselves as Larkinsons.

What differences they possessed such as their stances on who was qualified to be recognized as a Larkinson became utterly inconsequential.

After all, what they had in common was so strong for both Ark and Goldie that they might as well be soulmates!

"Let me take a closer look at you, cutie."

Nyaaa~

The spiritual cat fell more and more into Ark's physical and intangible embrace. Goldie did not hesitate to bear her entire being towards the expert pilot, allowing the other Larkinson who bore the title of patriarch to utilize his extraordinary willpower to develop a better intuitive understanding of the odd creature.

Ark did his due diligence and tried his best to study the Golden Cat. Thanks to the deep access that he had been given, he was able to discern a lot about the spiritual product.

He wordlessly learned about her intentions, her strange form of existence, her aspirations, her occasional pranks and above all her deep love of the Larkinsons.

The depth of Goldie's affection was so deep that she was probably the purest and most loyal Larkinson in existence!

This was not a surprise to Ves as her life was literally bound to the Larkinsons.

It was this quality that caused her to harmonize and even resonate with Venerable Ark Larkinson!

As a lifelong member of the Larkinson Family who came from a long line of Larkinson mech pilot who served with honor and distinction, Ark recognized that Goldie possessed

numerous traits that he had in common with her. The two were so alike in the issues that mattered that it was difficult to treat each other as strangers!

"I should have met you sooner." Ark softly said as he cradled the cute and lovely cat in his arms. "I never thought I would say this, but I don't mind that a cat like you holds so much sway over the Larkinsons anymore. As long as you maintain this pure and simple heart, I will always come to your aid. Let us protect our family together, Goldie."

Nyaaaa!

No one expected the two to get along so well with each other, though it should have been obvious to Ves in hindsight.

The unexpected embrace between the ancestral spirit and the expert pilot disrupted his plan for this reunion. Ves had to think quickly in order to improvise.

"I can lend you the Larkinson Mandate for a while." He offered. "The Golden Cat has been with the Larkinson Clan for a long time, but your Larkinson Family had always been distant to her, both physically and symbolically. It would be good for your side of the Larkinsons to get to know Goldie a little better. She is one of the most important elements that has made our clan so strong and united despite welcoming so many adopted Larkinsons. Her existence is completely benign and she will never have any cause to do you harm. The only people she is hostile against are traitors and those who wish to do us harm."

"Thank you for your entrustment." Venerable Ark spoke. "I will take good care of your book and your... cat."

If Ves wanted to bring his clan and the old family closer, then he needed to build bridges and extend his trust towards his estranged relatives.

Though the mood between the two sides was fantastic at the moment, Ves knew that this was largely due to the jubilation at being able to meet family members after a long separation.

What Ves was truly concerned about was what would happen once this 'honeymoon' period had passed.

If he wanted to absorb the old family into his clan and convert Venerable Ark Larkinson into his most loyal and reliable combat asset, then Ves needed to navigate these crucial meetings with great care and planning!

Chapter 4679: The Deficiency

With Venerable Ark Larkinson unexpectedly becoming engrossed in befriending Goldie and browsing through the pages of the Larkinson Mandate, it fell onto Melinda Larkinson to represent the interests of the Larkinson Family.

"Your family must have gone through a lot of trouble to get here, am I correct?"

Melinda let out a tired breath. "Don't remind me, Ves. We had to give up so much to pay for passage through that giant gate that we would have become bankrupt if it wasn't for plentiful dividends issued by your mech company. Maryun Ultima and the Vulit Star Node are filled with grifters and overpriced services. In the short time we have lived in this dwarf galaxy, we have learned that being poor in this heartless place is the greatest sin that you can commit."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." Ves lightly responded. "Literally betraying humanity by selling us out to the aliens is an even crime in these parts. I know that you haven't gone deep enough to encounter actual aliens, but the dynamic in the new frontier is vastly more complicated due to their proximity to us. It isn't just other humans that we need to be wary about anymore."

That caused Melinda to look amazed at him. "You can speak from personal experience about that, I suppose. It is still hard for us to believe all of the adventures you have been on and all of the battles you have fought during your time here. Whereas most pioneers crashed and burned within the first few years, your clan under your leadership thrived beyond our wildest expectations. How many alien species have you fought against up to this point?"

"Well, it depends on how you count and define them, but it should easily be more than 50 or so." He told her. "Some of the alien warships and organizations we fought against gathered aliens from many different species together. The main alien species that we have exchanged blows with are the phase whales, the orvens, the nunsers, the puelmers and the voribugs. Each of them are powerful in different ways, and you should be grateful that you never encountered them or their formidable warships in the field."

The actions that Ves described to her were so unimaginably far away from the Larkinson Family that Melinda had difficulty accepting that all of this happened to the Larkinson Clan.

However, she knew that Ves did not massage the truth. Many of the famed battles of the Larkinson Clan were a matter of public record. Even the less publicized battles such as the most recent one that took place in the Ramage Repulsor System had become known to the Larkinson Family due to the regular correspondence between the clan and the old family.

While the clan had gone off to fight against humanity's enemies in the more exciting parts of human space, the Larkinson Family had remained stuck in the Vicious Mountain Star Sector for an awfully long time!

The enormous disparity between the two groups of Larkinsons made Melinda depressed. It was inevitable for her and the rest of the family to develop an inferiority complex.

"I truly admire you, Ves." Melinda frankly said. "Don't get me wrong. I still don't agree with your reckless decisions and your habit of dragging your entire clan head-long into danger. However, it would be dishonest for me to ignore all of the ways that you have managed to make incredible gains with your risky development strategy."

Ves nodded in gratitude. "Thank you for the compliment. It must be hard for you to admit this truth. To be fair, we had plenty of close shaves. If not for all of the tricks we pulled off in battle, it would have been a lot harder to keep our casualties at a controlled level. My clan and I are constantly investing more in our preparations and combat assets in order to prevent us from ever suffering massive casualties like we did in the early days of our clan. While we are still relatively new at this, we are not weighed down by any baggage and we are also nimble enough to learn rapidly from our mistakes."

The two talked a bit more about the complexities and realities of leading organizations.

Though Melinda was not in charge of the Larkinson Family, she had risen so much in the hierarchy that she regularly exchanged opinions with Ark about governing issues.

"I have only met and observed your clan for a short time, but that is enough for me to understand what our family is lacking compared to your clan." She said in an even tone. "It is a quality that we have always lacked, much to our detriment. I never realized how much it mattered until I saw the difference it could make with my own eyes."

He grew more intrigued. "Oh? What is the deficiency that you are referring to? Is it an entrepreneur who can actually earn enough money to pay for all of your bills?"

"Well, that too, but that was not the missing ingredient that I was referring to." She responded and leaned forward. "I think our family lacked cohesion and drifted without aim because we have all lost our purpose. When we were forced to emigrate to the Garlen Empire, we fought and suffered on behalf of several bloodthirsty clans in order to support their callous ambitions, we never made any positive progress in terms of our mentality. We were becoming more broken and unhappy by the year, which was one of the reasons why we had to leave that awful state before we reached the tipping point."

The Larkinson Family had long centered its existence around serving the Bright Republic and protecting the citizens of the state.

After getting driven away by the very people they loved, the members of the old family suffered a betrayal that traumatized them in a deep and serious fashion.

As far as Ves was concerned, the Larkinsons of the old family had already become broken from the moment the Bright Republic no longer wanted them anymore.

When Ves looked at Melinda, he saw a tired woman who shouldered far too many responsibilities than she should. No matter how hard she tried to further the interests of the Larkinson Family, the harsh and cruel reality around her negated all of her efforts.

He pitied her and the other members of the old family. Even Venerable Ark Larkinson whose command prowess and personal combat ability was renowned among high-tier expert pilots had not been able to reverse the malaise among his people!

"I don't think you are being fully accurate in your description." He told her. "Your family certainly lacked a strong purpose, but what is also missing is spirit."

"...Spirit?"

He gave her a rueful smile. "It's difficult to describe in words, but you have lived at this branch for a while now, right? Have you seen how happy our Larkinson side branch members are? Did you notice how much they love, respect and more importantly trust each other? Although the reason for them to become so friendly with each other is related to a certain cat that has a habit of exuding a golden glow, these people who were overwhelmingly strangers in the past would not have assimilated so easily without a strong and sincere belief in our clan."

"Hmmm..." Melinda frowned and rubbed her chin in an oddly familiar manner. "I think I understand what you are referring to. What you are describing is close to an esprit de corps. I have noticed that your clan is good at fostering a common spirit between its members. From the moment an outsider gets inducted into the clan, he or she becomes immersed in an entirely new world where it is a habit and an expectation for every Larkinson to freely offer aid to each other. The unity and eagerness to serve the clan in any capacity is remarkably high."

That was certainly true, but a large part why this was the case was because the Larkinson Clan had the luxury of picking the vast majority of its members.

The trueblood Larkinsons that chose to follow Ves had always been among his younger and more proactive relatives.

The Larkinson Family on the other hand remained stuck with all of the stubborn and inflexible codgers who dealt poorly with change.

Meanwhile, the Larkinson Clan started to recruit thousands, tens of thousands and ultimately hundreds of thousands of unrelated people across the galaxies.

Despite the huge number of people that entered the clan year after year, the adopted Larkinsons quickly became assimilated in a culture and environment that encouraged trust, openness, friendliness and mutual respect.

Though the Larkinson Family remained largely homogeneous due to its much greater hesitance and difficulty in expanding its ranks, the personality faults of most of its members had caused the mood to grow more pessimistic and divisive.

Goldie played a major role in this, and setting a strongly defined culture that encouraged all of the desirable traits that Ves wanted from his people helped a lot.

However, Ves did not discount the immense value of being able to pick his own members. The majority of the clansmen were young, open-minded, flexible and tolerant to different ideas and lifestyles.

That may probably change once the early members of the clan grew older and less willing to take risks, but that was a matter for the future.

The inferior conditions of the Larkinson Family was a reason why Ves didn't exactly feel enthused at the idea of reabsorbing all of the Larkinsons who once decried and rejected his vision.

His favorite cousin eventually broached this topic.

"Now that we are all here, it is time to discuss our future moves." Melinda spoke as she stared into his eyes. "While it looks as if our family has come to Davute in order to beg you to take us in, that is definitely not the case. We regularly poll the opinions of our family members and many of them are still unwilling or reluctant to join your clan and start singing your praises."

"Uhm, I understand your concerns. You don't have to make a decision right away. You can take all of the time you need in order to make up your mind. The Davute Branch will continue to host your family members for as long as they need."

His cousin abruptly sneered. "Don't fool around with me, Ves. I can tell what you really want. You would love nothing more but to turn Uncle Ark into your obedient soldier than you can throw at any powerful enemy that stands in your way."

How did she know?

Melinda continued to press her point. "Much may have changed in a decade, but the reasons why my people and I chose to reject your invitation still remain as valid as before. Uncle Ark and I will not allow you to pressgang us in order to throw more bodies in your relentless attempts to satisfy your greed. We are willing to fight to protect our family, but we are not willing to fight for a selfish cause."

Whatever Melinda knew about Ves, he understood her better.

The weird illusionary test he experienced back when he created his living divine artifact caused him to talk to a weird version of Melinda, among other familiar people.

His talk with her ended badly at the time. Ves had learned the hard way that Melinda hadn't really changed her opinions after all of these years. She opposed risk-taking so much that she would rather ruin their relationship than agree with his stance.

This presented a rather interesting situation to Ves. A state of information asymmetry existed as Ves had already modeled a conversation with Melinda about this topic in the past.

He quickly noticed that she possessed no awareness that an alternate version of herself had argued with him. Nothing about the conversation appeared to have passed on to the real Melinda.

Ves inwardly grinned. He possessed a massive advantage in this negotiation!

Chapter 4680: Discounting Dreams

As Ves and Melinda spoke about the placement of the Larkinson Family, the latter kept pushing a confrontational tone.

"...We have studied the records of your past battles and interviewed the wounded veterans and the relatives of the deceased. Did you know what we discovered?" The woman who spoke for the Larkinson Family asked.

Ves calmly leaned back on his garden chair while finishing his cup of tea.

Ever since he completed his sublimation, his increased control over his biological form allowed him to restore the sense of taste that he lost.

Though his ability to alter his body remained limited for the time being, it was enough to pull off small tricks such as freezing his facial hair growth, allow him to enjoy more subtler tastes and making Vincent Ricklin jealous.

Though he preferred to remain on his ship, he couldn't help but admit that the Royal Mansion at the Cat Nest served as an adequate center of power.

The entire surroundings belonged to his clan, which in effect meant that the entire Cat Nest was his personal fief.

The Larkinson Clan clearly had all of the say here. The Larkinson Family may share the same name, but they bore a slightly different label that ultimately caused them to remain separate in a few ways.

The most common complaint that everyone thought about but nobody said out loud was that the old family were not only losers, but also freeloaders.

If not for the 1 percent stake in the incredibly profitable LMC that Ves had generously allowed the family to keep, people like Melinda would have long sold themselves out or died by this time!

It was too difficult for rootless people to maintain their independence and integrity in a highly competitive society.

The values and principles of the Larkinson Family might work out great so long as it remained attached to a state, but once it became unmoored, it completely turned into a fish out of water.

Right now, this little fish that was gasping for air and flapping its body without any sense thought it was a shark that could sit on the same negotiating table as the Larkinson Clan!

Melinda was not entirely wrong. Ves didn't care too much about the Larkinson Family and would not shed a tear if this relic of the past went away again, but the significance of Venerable Ark Larkinson was too great!

His uncle was the only diamond in the rough. It was a gem of such great value that Ves would feel a lot of pain if he missed this opportunity to secure this precious jewel for himself!

Just as with the Cross Clan in the past, once the Larkinson Clan gained a high-tier expert pilot of its own, Ves and his wife hoped to repeat their earlier success and trigger Venerable Ark's breakthrough by delivering a powerful new living expert mech!

Once his clan gained an ace pilot of its own, everything would change.

No longer would Ves have to rely on Patriarch Reginald whenever he needed the help of a Saint.

No longer would he have to cater to the whims of the Cross Clan to an excessive degree.

No longer would he be forced to look at an ace mech that he originally had a hand in designing but since shed his influence.

Ves wanted to have his own cooperative ace pilot under his command. He wanted to have complete authority and control over the ace mech that he designed from his own hand. Only by controlling such a powerful fighting force himself would he feel confident in growing his clan without worrying too much about incurring a backlash!

As such, Ves had to navigate this conversation carefully despite how pathetic the Larkinson Family had become compared to the Larkinson Clan.

"Let me make an educated guess about what you have discovered." He eventually replied to her question. "You found that no one really minds the losses all that much."

"Exactly! I don't understand how mothers are able to accept the fact that they have lost their sons, which is one of the greatest pains a woman can experience in their lives. I can't comprehend how children are okay with the fact that they can no longer feel the love of their mothers ever again because the women who nurtured them from birth died for someone else's greed!"

Ves folded his hands on top of each other. He tried to formulate an answer that remained respectful while still representing his stance.

"You didn't go deep enough in your investigations." He began. "Those people aren't fools, Melinda. First off, every single member of the clan except those who had been born in the past few years chose to join on their own accord. It wasn't easy to sign up for us as our recruiting standards are rising every year. Before they take on the Larkinson name, our people make it abundantly clear that they are signing up for a lot of danger and a lot of potential tragedies. We do that because we don't want to hoodwink them and make them regret their applications. We are too honest for that. If people still want to join us after learning about the risks we routinely take, then that is their prerogative."

His older cousin didn't accept this argument.

"You pretend to be transparent, but what you are really running is a casino. Just like a real gambling establishment, you dazzle all of those naive and unguarded recruits with stories of wealth, riches and power. Meanwhile, you conveniently downplay all of the death and pain that regularly accompanies your clan. Each time you suffer losses, you and your mouthpieces always dismiss them as a necessary price to pay for pursuing a dream. Your marketing tricks are so good that they can convert lots of skeptical mech pilots into becoming unwitting cannon fodder for your selfish ambitions."

"Let me interrupt you here." Ves interjected as he raised his hand. "First off, you are constantly using the word 'selfish' here, but have you seen the level of participation and ownership of the people around me? While I admit that I am claiming the lion's share of all of the profits we make, our clan is extremely generous in its treatment of its members. Ordinary people already receive several times the benefits of employees of other organizations, while our mech pilots not only receive a huge amount of hazard pay, but also get fantastic training, access to much stronger mechs than they would otherwise pilot as well as augmentations that would be far outside of their budget under any other conditions."

Melinda nodded as he said that. She had indeed heard a lot of the branch clansmen praise the excellent pay and benefits provided by the clan.

That made her only more suspicious and skeptical of what the clan had in store for them, though.

"To me, that sounds as if you are bribing them into playing along with your game." Melinda accused. "Making dissent and other related problems go away by throwing lots of money at them must be convenient for you, right? It may even be enough to make those bereaved families forget that the money was literally earned by the sacrifices of the loved ones that they have lost."

That was an incredibly cynical way to look at it! Ves grew tired at Melinda's repeated attempts to twist his clan's policies in the worst light.

Though Melinda might have a point here and there, Ves did not have any malicious intent in mind!

"C'mon, give me a break, please. Compensating people well is supposed to be a good thing. Why do you have to make it sound as if it is bad? Would you prefer it if I pay my people minimum wage and deprive them of as many benefits as possible? Because that is the impression you are making."

Melinda pulled back a bit. "That is fair of you to say. Maybe I have been getting overboard, but that does not invalidate my overall point. If you think that I sound bad to you, then wait until you hear from our older and more traditional family members. I am translating their words and opinions to you as best I can. It is them you need to persuade."

That was not actually true, but Ves felt no need to inform his cousin.

"Look, my clan operates on the assumption that a rising tide lifts all boats. The successes we achieve and the heavy investments we make are all pricey, but worth it, not just to someone at the top like myself, but also a normal mech pilot who bears the greatest risks. Every active pilot serving in one of our mech legions isn't just getting a lot of money. They get the chance to make their dreams come true by piloting increasingly stronger mechs and fighting against increasingly more challenging opponents."

"Hm." Melinda looked unimpressed. "Living the dream, huh? Again, that is your brand of trickery at work. When young potentates like myself first discover we have the ability to pilot mechs, we all dream of becoming the next god pilot of humanity and fight alongside the mechers against the evil aliens and such. It is only after we grow older and stumble upon the many constraints of reality that we put aside our unrealistic dreams and begin working towards our more realistic goals and aspirations."

Ves crossed his arms and shook his head. "That is where I have to tell you that I don't agree with that approach. Dreams are what drives humans like us to draw out our latent potential and maybe even exceed them. Do you remember our earlier discussion on what your family lacks? I think that your rejection of the value of the pursuit of dreams plays a key role in this. In contrast, My clan is driven by dreams and ambitions, and not just my own, but of every clansmen. Each of us are forged together by our shared

goals. No matter how different we are from each other, both Flagrant Vandals and Penitent Sisters can always count on each other on their shared journey to greatness."

That actually put Melinda on the backfoot. The logic that Ves utilized not only refuted her overly cynical answers, but also left her with little ammunition to form a decent retort.

He wasn't even finished yet as he continued to espouse his views.

"Do you remember who I was back when I was still a mere Apprentice back in the Bright Republic?"

"I do. You were much nicer, innocent and cuter at the time."

"Ahem. I was still a third-rater. How much time has passed since then? Look at me now. I am not only a second-rater, but hundreds of thousands of the people working for the organization that I built with my own hands have either been uplifted to second-class standards or started off at this height! Do you think that any space peasant from the poorest and most inconsequential kind of state in human space can accomplish this? No! I worked hard because back when I was still a poor Brighter, I dreamt that this life was not my limit, but that I could work hard enough to equal the Fridaymen and Hexers."

He thumped his palm against his chest. "Look at me now. I don't even need to look up at them anymore. Instead, I would argue it is the other way around. These days, it is the Fridaymen and Hexers who have to look up to me! What you are seeing is the personification of one of my early dreams!"

"You did extraordinarily well for yourself, Ves, but tens of thousands if not more people have died to pave your way to success. Have you forgotten about all of those sacrifices already?"

"I did not." Ves lied. "I remember our fallen and constantly value their sacrifices. Our clansmen do so as well. The best thing we can do is make sure that our buried Larkinsons did not give up their lives in vain. Let me tell you one of the gains that they have paid for. I recently came off a talk with a first-rater. Before you ask, I am on speaking terms with a wealthy citizen of a first-rate state. My expeditionary fleet rescued him from the jaws of an alien a short time ago. Do you know about one of the topics I discussed? It was about getting my three lovely children accepted into first-class virtual schools."

His cousin became overwhelmed by what she heard!

Ves smirked at her. "Yes, you heard it right. Little old me who used to be a humble third-rater has grown so much in a single generation that I can already enroll my children into some of the best schools in both the Milky Way and Red Ocean outside of the Big Two!

Even if I don't amount to anything for the rest of my life, my children will be able to carry the torch and uplift my clan to the same height sooner or later. Do you know what that means? All of the Larkinson in my clan will either be promoted into first-raters or get to see their offspring become galactic citizens within their lifetimes!"

These claims far exceeded what a fellow former third-rater like Melinda could imagine. She was so grounded compared to Ves that her ability to stretch her imagination was a lot more limited!

"That..."

"Let me ask you a question of my own." He said with a serious expression. "Do you think the Larkinson Family can ever make this modest dream come true for any of its members?"

"..."