

The Mech Touch

Chapter 4681: Spiritual Death

There were many differences between the two organizations that laid claim to the Larkinson name.

It would be too exhausting to go over each and every single deviation, but at the heart of it all Ves believed the root of it all was due to one factor.

"In the beginning, our two organizations had a lot in common." He told a silent and contemplative Melinda. "We were both third-rate organizations back then. Sure, I'm a mech designer who already started to get good enough to attract second-raters to my cause, but you had a high-tier command-oriented expert pilot who could easily earn the appreciation of the Garleners. Both of us became free from our former shackles that tied ourselves to the Bright Republic, so my clan and your family had everything they needed to rise to greatness. The difference is that our clan dared to dream big and did everything it could to fulfill it, while your family drifted about while only being concerned about staying afloat."

"Our circumstances were different!" Melinda woke up and defended the old family! "We did not have your earning ability! We had no economic engine that could fund the upkeep of our fleet and mechs and help us gain more. We did not dare to hire more retainers and workers for our clan because the Crown Uprising that broke out around that time made every new hire a potential bomb."

Ves did not accept this argument. "Plenty of organizations managed to survive and thrive despite all of these difficulties. You had Uncle Ark, a high-tier expert pilot that not only has a lot of experience with leading men and commanding armies, but can put up a good fight against any other high-ranking mech pilot short of an actual Saint! Plenty of ultra-large mercenary companies would have paid a fortune to have him fight for them, but instead your foolish desire to find a permanent new home for yourselves have led you to get embroiled in a bunch of petty turf wars in the perpetually unstable Garlen Empire."

"We needed a new second-class expert mech for Uncle Ark, and not many were willing to provide them to him while only accepting his services on a temporary basis." Melinda grumbled.

"Your negotiation ability sucks and you did not look far enough. You could have easily gotten a better deal if you approached the right people with the right attitude."

To be fair, Ves and his own clansmen at the time probably wouldn't have been able to do any better. It was only after his clan traveled to the Grand Loxic Republic and rescued the beleaguered Purnesse Family that the Larkinsons truly became competent in diplomacy, administration and other fancy stuff.

Even so, the Larkinson Clan at least made an effort to resolve this weakness. The same could not be said for the Larkinson Family which was still largely led by a group of decrepit elders who only knew how to cling to the past.

He suspected that Melinda recognized these shortcomings as well, but she did not wish to air her family's dirty laundry.

Knock.

Just as Melinda attempted to open her mind to divert the topic, Venerable Ark Larkinson gently knocked his fist against the garden table.

Goldie had already dispelled her spiritual manifestation by this time, but she had definitely managed to leave an unforgettable impression behind.

Ark gently laid the heavy tome on the table and expressed his own views.

"Ves has made a lot of good points. You don't need to argue with him on these matters. The fact of the matter is that he succeeded in what he set out to do, while we were barely getting by. I knew for a long time that our family wasn't going anywhere, but I thought that I could single-handedly solve everything by becoming an ace pilot. This was a good plan... as long as I succeeded in becoming a Saint. That hasn't happened, so we have become the losers."

"But—"

"—Stop, Melinda." Ark raised his strong palm. "Let it be. It would be one thing if we came to Ves as winners in our own right. We would have been able to prove through our words as well as our deeds that there is a different way of becoming successful. That has not happened, so we have no right to criticize Ves for his apparent faults. This is the way society works. No one cares about who is more just and honorable. People only care about benefits and results, and there is no doubt that Ves has managed to secure both of them during his tenure as the patriarch of his own clan."

The female Larkinson grew upset. What had gotten into Ark?

"Are you agreeing with Ves?"

"I do not agree with all of the decisions he made." Venerable Ark spoke. "Yet that doesn't matter, because my family under my leadership has failed to materialize the same benefits and results. The differences between the two of us are clear. I don't

expect us all to forget about everything and become loyal and obedient members of his clan, but this unnecessary division and antagonism has to stop. We are both Larkinsons. Let us start with this common ground and go from there without getting weighed down by all of our old baggage."

"What is the matter with you, Ark? Didn't we settle on a plan before we decided to meet and talk with Ves? We need to protect the interests of our family!"

"There is no reason to cling to the family anymore!" Ark astonishingly stated! "I value our heritage and history just as much as you do, Melinda, but it had already died from the moment we departed from the Bright Republic! I only realized fairly recently that we have been clinging to a rotten corpse for far too many years. The Larkinson Family we used to know and love was gone. There is no chance of reviving it as there is no place in the galaxy that is willing to accept us as we are without trying to exploit us to an unacceptable degree."

The family had received far too many offers that sounded nice and rosy at first, but turned out to be slave contracts in all but name.

High-tier expert pilots may be highly desirable assets, but their strong willpower and stubborn sensibilities made it hard to please them and retain their commitment.

Unless they had grown up in the same state they pledged to serve, a lot of powerful expert pilots that had become orphaned from their previous environment tended to be volatile and principled to a frustrating degree.

This was why states wanted to ensure that a foreign expert pilot committed to the long haul before funding the development of a powerful new expert mech.

"What do you want us to do then?" Melinda asked. "If you think the Larkinson Family has no future, do you want us all to get absorbed by the Larkinson Clan and come under this unrepentant adrenaline junkie's thumb? I can tell you that most of the older members of our family would rather riot and mutiny than submit to Ves."

"Then let them." Ark dismissively waved his hand.

"What?"

Melinda couldn't believe what she heard.

"As I have already said, our Larkinson Family is already dead. Didn't you hear what Ves said? Our family lost our dream and we never managed to replace it with another one. We've been moving around without much purpose like a zombie. It is time to put it out of its misery and free our family members so that they can pursue a better future in another organization."

"So you want us all to join the Larkinson Clan regardless of how much they want to maintain the family that our ancestor founded four centuries ago." Melinda flatly stated.

"I did not say that." Ark shook his head. "Every individual member of our family can make their own choices. It is not my right to dictate what they must do with their lives. I am only thinking that once I leave the family and join the clan under Ves, our family will have lost almost all of its backbone. The only reason to retain it is to hold on to the 1 percent stake in the LMC, but with the kind of people who are left, they won't be able to make good use of all of that money."

This time, it wasn't just Melinda who became shocked. Even Ves was taken aback by the nonchalant declaration that Ark would finally be joining the clan!

It should have been more difficult to persuade a high-tier expert pilot to join the clan. Ves expected a difficult struggle that would play out over multiple weeks or months. The speech he made today was only meant to set up building blocks to Ark's eventual acquiescence.

Instead of letting the scenario play out as Ves predicted, his powerful uncle skipped right to the end and declared his intention to join the clan without any further fuss!

This was unreal and Ves couldn't quite believe that it had been this easy. Had Goldie's charm offensive played a crucial role in encouraging Uncle Ark to defect?

If so, Ves owed a huge favor to the ancestral spirit!

Ark and Melinda argued for a few minutes. The latter saw her uncle's decision as an act of betrayal and an admission of defeat, and she couldn't stomach the drastic changes that his sudden departure would trigger.

Even so, Venerable Ark showed no guilt or remorse over his declaration.

"Melinda, just because I am an expert pilot does not mean I have to 'win' every battle." He told her. "There are times when we are better off if we retreat from a losing battle ahead of time. As I have already said, my breakthrough is critical for the family. My failure to do so is my responsibility, but also has consequences for the rest of us. In order to spare us from further pain, stagnation and wasted years, I am encouraging everyone to think deeply about what they want in their lives before choosing where they want to go next."

Melinda frowned. "So you are giving them the choice between joining a clan they do not want to support or staying in a family that is dead in all but name?"

"I am giving them a choice on which dream they want to pursue." The expert pilot corrected her. "Those who have second regrets and want to put their lives on the line to secure a much better life for themselves and their children can follow me into the

Larkinson Clan. They don't necessarily have to fight a lot, as the clan is split between a main branch and a side branch. The latter should serve as an adequate home for most of our members."

"And if they absolutely do not want to pledge their loyalty to Ves and his like-minded supporters?"

"Those who have grown tired of all of the fighting and moving can stay with the Larkinson Family and decide how to go from there. Whether the Larkinson Family decides to settle in Davute where it can count on the support of the Larkinson Clan is their decision. If they prefer to move to another planet in another zone is their prerogative. I will no longer interfere once I have surrendered my patriarch position."

"Those aren't the only choices available to the members of the family." Ves chimed in. "If there are Larkinsons who are tired of this and want to get away from it all, they can always quit the family and join one of the many organizations in the Red Ocean. I am sure you have heard that the rulers of Davute are on the cusp of founding a colonial state. A proper military organization will soon come into existence, and it requires a lot of experienced soldiers to staff its future armies. I think this is an excellent opportunity for Larkinsons who miss the life we had in the Bright Republic to serve in a similar fashion."

"That is an excellent alternative." Venerable Ark Larkinson agreed. "Do you see what I want us to do, Melinda? We are at a crossroads now, and I think it is best to give everyone another chance to make a decision on what they want to do and who they want to follow. No one will force them to do anything. It will be solely up to them to decide what dream they want to pursue. They can follow Ves if they want to fight their way to first-class citizenship. They can also settle for a quiet life without any further concerns by retiring in Davute while living off the pensions generated by the dividends earned by the shares owned by our family. I think this should please everyone the most without infringing on anyone's lives."

The patriarchs of the two Larkinson organizations had spontaneously formed a consensus on this issue.

More importantly, the single most important pillar of the Larkinson Family essentially wanted to defect from it, leaving the rest without adequate protection and support!

This was an awful outcome to the Larkinsons who still believed the Larkinson Family had a future.

If it wasn't dead already, then Ark's departure would surely kill it off, if not literally, then spiritually!

Chapter 4682: Gear Dependent

Melinda couldn't stand it any longer. She quickly left the back garden so that she could go back and inform the rest of the Larkinson Family on this explosive turn of events.

Before she left, she tried to persuade Venerable Ark to see reason and pledge to support the original Larkinson Family once again.

Unfortunately, her uncle refused to change his mind due to one simple reason.

"Human space is becoming more dangerous." He told her as they stood at the entrance of the back garden. "We've only traveled through a fraction of the vast territories occupied by humanity, but we have witnessed more fights, wars and suffering than ever before. I do not have any confidence in my ability to safeguard our family as a high-tier expert pilot and former mech colonel. During many instances in the past, the only reason why our family remained untouched was because our potential adversaries were deterred by the Larkinson Clan. As much as I appreciate this, we cannot keep living under its shadow forever. Not if we want to live more meaningful lives and build towards a better future for ourselves."

"We still have time, Ark. Let us go back to the elders and discuss a proper plan for our family."

"It's unnecessary." Ark shook his head. "As I have already said, our family won't get anywhere as long as I don't break through. I have wants and desires as well, Melinda. I do not want to fade into irrelevance as my strength stagnates and eventually wastes away as I grow older. I want to protect the Larkinsons in a much greater capacity than now, and the only way to do so is to break through. I can't do it by myself or while I am with the family. Only Ves and his amazing mechs give me hope of overcoming my bottleneck. He already has a history of doing so before and I have great confidence that he will be able to do so for me as well."

"You don't know whether that is the case! There are no hard rules when it comes to ace pilot breakthroughs. What worked for a couple of other expert pilots might not apply to your case."

The older Larkinson expert pilot sighed. "I am willing to give it a try. I don't particularly mind if I fail. I know the Larkinson Clan will be a good destination for me regardless of what will happen. I can still fight to protect my fellow Larkinsons, no matter what sort of blood flows through their veins. My wife and children will also become a part of a much stronger community that can help them live better lives and gain much better opportunities."

"You'll be thrown into battles that don't really matter to you or many Larkinsons."

"To me, that is little different from serving in the Mech Corps." Venerable Ark shrugged. "I fought during two different Bright-Vesia Wars in my lifetime. I value my time in service and I have always maintained the belief that I fought to protect my fellow Brighters, but that does not mean I was blind to the true motives that kept forcing our state to fight against the Vesia Kingdom so many times. Everyone wants to make use of mech pilots. It is a luxury for me to pick someone to serve who I trust. Ves may not be who you want to be, but he cares about the Larkinsons in his own way, and that is more than I can ask from other potential employers."

Now that she heard that Ark had not made a whimsical decision and truly weighed the merits before deciding to defect to the Larkinson Clan, Melinda knew she had no chance of persuading him at this juncture.

Maybe she might have another chance later on when her uncle was in a different mood, but this was a bad time.

Once she left the garden, Venerable Ark returned to the garden table and sat on the other side of Ves.

The idyllic environment calmed the spirit in a way that was nearly impossible to replicate in an artificial ship environment. Only the Aduc Family had managed to do so as far as Ves was aware of. Everyone else could never come close enough.

As such, both Ves and Ark were content to remain silent for a time and enjoy the break from their heavy responsibilities.

Eventually, Ark couldn't hold it any longer. He cared too much about his own future to let this moment drag out any further.

"I need a new expert mech."

"I heard." Ves simply said. "Don't you have a perfectly adequate second-class expert mech, though? The Masters from the Garlen Empire should have a lot of experience with designing effective high-end machines. You know what? Why don't you show me the machine. Can you project detailed images and transfer any design files you may have received along with your machine?"

"Sure. Give me a moment."

Ark fiddled with his comm and did as instructed.

Normally, it was extremely unwise for an expert pilot to expose the secrets of his sacred machine, but Ark unconditionally trusted Ves to handle the information in a responsible manner.

They were family, after all. The Larkinsons always covered each other's backs. That fundamental rule hadn't changed at all in the clan that had split off from the original family.

As Ves utilized his extensive knowledge in mech design and experience in working with expert mechs to analyze Ark's current machine, the expert pilot in question shared his thoughts in his own words.

"The team of mech designers who designed the Travon Exine for me made an earnest effort as far as I could tell. I could tell that it was a joy for the Masters to design a brand new high-tier expert mech for a different expert pilot than the usual ones they serve. Since I have adopted a different fighting style than was common in the Garlen Empire, my demands for my expert mech were different as well. That made the design project more interesting but also harder to get it right."

"Are you happy with how the Travon Exine turned out for you, Ark?" Ves asked as he carefully studied the specifications of the integrated weapons of the expert mech.

The demigod looked reluctant. "Yes and no. It's complicated. On one hand, the Travon Exine is my first true second-class expert mech that helped me fight against other second-class opponents on a level playing field. The designers did not cut any corners. My expert mech ran smoothly and fought at roughly the same level as any other high-tier machine in the Garlen Empire. It's just..."

It was not difficult for Ves to guess why Ark held mixed feelings about the expert mech he had come to pilot after leaving the Bright Republic.

"Your Travon Exine failed to help you break through to ace pilot, is that it? You feel let down by your machine."

"...Yes." Ark said, sounding much weaker and more defeated than before. "In my mind, I am aware that it is unfair for me to blame my expert mech for my failure. It is me who should be doing the work, not my mech. I know I need to work harder and push myself to my limits, but... a part of me hopes that a good mech can make it easier for me to break through. I have heard plenty of stories of how good mechs can make the impossible into a reality. The fact that you managed to make it happen with your powerful ally gives me a lot of hope that you will be able to do the same for me. This possibility has been hanging in my mind for such a long time that my confidence in my own ability has waned with each passing year."

This was a rather sad outcome. If Ves hadn't contributed to the design of Mars and turned it into a masterwork that was powerful enough to trigger Patriarch Reginald's breakthrough, then Ark Larkinson might not have been able to make such a poisonous comparison.

In Ark's mentality, the only difference between himself and Reginald was that the latter got to pilot a powerful living masterwork expert mech at the start.

Therefore, in the overly simplistic logic that far too many straightforward expert pilot employed, Ark concluded that it would be impossible for him to achieve his own breakthrough if he lacked the same kind of mech!

A truly powerful and confident high-tier expert pilot would not let this shortcoming get in the way of his own advancement. He would have adopted a tough attitude and continued to work towards his own breakthrough by relying on nothing else but his sheer willpower.

A good example of this was Saint Rebecca Andus.

During the Battle of Fordilla Zentra, the Hex Army and the Golden Skull Alliance launched an attack on a key colony of the Gauge Dynasty.

The Sundered Phalanx set up a defensive line and fought with many Fridayman civilians behind their backs.

When the Riot and the First Sword ganged up on her Shockshell, the then-high tier expert pilot did not complain about the unfairness of fighting against multiple opponents.

Instead, she did her duty, held the line and fought without any hint of cowardice!

Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise may have certainly erred when they fought against the powerful Shockshell, but Rebecca Andus fully earned her breakthrough by relying on her own strength!

This example showed how high-tier expert pilots did not necessarily have to rely on any crutches such as a masterwork expert mech to lower the difficulty of advancement.

Personally, Ves hoped that his Uncle Ark succeeded in breaking through while piloting a fairly normal high-tier expert mech like the Travon Exine, but that ship had soared away.

Ark failed one test too many.

For better or worse, Ark had become a pilot who acquired the same fault as Patriarch Reginald Cross.

He had become too fixated on the quality and features of his mech as an enabler for his growth.

It was not all bad, though. The upside to working with pilots such as Ark or Reginald was that it was actually rather easy to facilitate their breakthroughs.

Whether a good mech actually made a difference or not, the placebo effect of believing that a superior mech would trigger a breakthrough might actually make it happen!

In other words, there was a good chance that the only way that people like Reginald as well as Ark could break through was by turning their assumptions into a reality in the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy!

Ves grinned. He waved his hand and got rid of the projections. He had already gained a decent impression of the Travon Exine. While it was truly a fitting mech for an expert pilot like his Uncle Ark, it was not the machine that he was truly pining for, and that meant it was destined to get replaced in the future.

Even so, they couldn't get rid of it right away.

"I understand your circumstances now." Ves told his blood relative. "You are welcome to join my clan and fight with the Travon Exine for the time being. Although it is a pity that it hasn't been equipped with any luminar crystal weapons or transphasic mech systems, my fellow Journeymen and I can upgrade it in the short term so that it will be able to keep up with the standard of mechs in this dwarf galaxy."

"What about my next expert mech?" Ark asked as if it was a given that his nephew would already make sure to provide him with a better machine.

"We can't rush this project. I want to take my time on it to make sure we will do it right. I am currently working on a couple of projects that will have great implications for my future work. I need to finish them first and verify whether my new design solutions are as powerful as I think they are. Once I am done with them, I can properly design your future expert mech and make sure it is equipped with all of the features that can make it stand out against the crowd."

In truth, the real reason why Ves wanted to take a longer time was because he wanted to wait and see if completing his current design projects would finally enable him to advance to the rank of Senior Mech Designer!

Once he became a Senior, he would definitely become a much more competent and capable mech designer. That way, he would definitely be able to turn Ark's future expert mech into a work that surpassed all of his previous high-end mechs!

"How long will that take, Ves?"

"I can't say, but you will probably have to keep using the Travon Exine for one-and-a-half years to two years. The wait is worth it, though. I can promise you that your future expert mech will be several times stronger and more impressive than the initial version of the Mars."

The implication here was that Ark would have a greater chance of advancing to ace pilot with the help of a stronger machine!

"...Alright, Ves. I will trust you on this matter. Just know that I don't have an endless amount of time."

Chapter 4683: Awful Timing

While Ves had been holding an important talk with Melinda and Ark, his wife had quietly slipped away.

She left in order to check up on the children and give the trueblood Larkinsons more freedom to talk about sensitive matters.

It was only after Venerable Ark got what he wanted from Ves and left the garden that Gloriana returned.

"How are the kids?"

"They are having the time of their lives." The young mother smiled as she sat at the table again and poured herself another cup of tea. "They became acquainted with an entirely new set of cousins. I am sure that Aurelia is already thinking about befriending them and encouraging them to develop an adoration towards our clan. That way, these children can help encourage their stubborn parents to leave their decrepit Larkinson Family behind and enter our fold."

He snorted at that. "That's not necessary. I don't want these stubborn Larkinsons infecting my clansmen with their foolish and naive views. I should teach Aurelia that not every Larkinson is equally as valuable."

Gloriana steadily picked up the tea cup with her delicate hand and sipped it in a proper manner, much unlike her uncouth husband.

"Have you managed to get Venerable Ark Larkinson onboard your pirate ship?"

"Why do you have to phrase it that way?" Ves complained. "I don't run a pirate ship! I am leading a proper and upright clan that has engaged in productive pioneering activities. All of the MTA merits we've earned from our expeditions into the frontier proves that we are doing what is best for humanity! That is the opposite of piracy!"

His wife did not even deign to give her response to his argument. "Answer my question, Ves."

"Okay, okay. In truth, the conversation proceeded much better than I expected. Venerable Ark did not play coy with me or follow any convoluted negotiation strategies. He just did what he thought was best for himself and the Larkinson Family and proposed to join my clan right away."

He filled her in on the details that she had missed after her departure. Gloriana looked increasingly more surprised and impressed at the ease in which Ark surrendered himself.

"Your powerful uncle is an expert pilot." She commented. "Even among other expert pilots, he is remarkably honorable, principled and direct. His long service in the Mech Corps doubtlessly caused him to develop this sort of attitude and approach to decision-making."

"The Mech Corps has always been a practical military organization from my experiences." He said as he recalled his own brief service where he spent much of his time among the Flagrant Vandals. "Each mech regiment and mech division is different from each other, but most of them tend to favor efficiency, directness and honesty. You can't afford to play games when the Vesia Kingdom's Mech Legion is constantly trying to take over Bentheim and deprive the Bright Republic of its economic center."

"I see. In any case, you have overcome the most difficult challenge right at the start. You must probably feel incredibly relieved for gaining the services of a loyal and dependable ace pilot candidate. It is not as good as obtaining an ace pilot right away, but I am sure this difference will not hinder you for long."

"Let's not make too many assumptions, honey. There is no guarantee that we will be able to help my uncle become a Saint after designing a new mech for him. We need to be meticulous and thorough in every step of the way."

Ves briefly outlined his plan on how to tackle what may probably be the biggest and most important mech design project in the next decade.

Venerable Ark was one of the most important blood relatives of his life. As his father's brother, Ark had done his best to make up for Ryncol's absence and help Ves grow up in a warm and loving family environment during his teenage and adolescent years.

Though Ark couldn't visit Ves often due to his duties as an expert pilot and mech officer of the Mech Corps, the man had tried his best and cared more than many other Larkinsons.

The strong bond of affection that formed between the two was still as strong and pure as ever.

Even if Ark decided not put his skills at the disposal of the Larkinson Clan, Ves still would have chosen to design a fantastic new expert mech for his favorite uncle!

As Ves mentioned his desire to delay the start of this important design project due to various reasons, his wife surprisingly did not object to his decision.

"I am already swamped with work myself." Gloriana remarked. "The Dullahan Project, the Ghost Project, the Greenaxe Project and the Bloodripper Project all require my input and supervision. I have also needed to provide consultations to the designers over at the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan. Furthermore, I have to make sure to reserve enough time to raise my children and prevent them from developing too many bad habits like their father."

"Uh huh."

Gloriana's eyes began to gleam. "You know, you could help me lighten my schedule and increase my productivity if you accept my earlier request. I am not asking much from you. I only need you to spend 120 million MTA merits on behalf and exchange the first-class cranial implant that I need to design stronger and better expert mechs!"

"Oh, not this again. My answer remains the same. Don't bring this up again."

"YOU ARE THE MOST AWFUL HUSBAND IN THE RED OCEAN!" She screeched!

Once Ves finally managed to fend off his wife once again, he retired to the opulent main office of the Royal Mansion where he called a bunch of people.

He needed to spread the good word and make sure that every arm of the Larkinson Clan was ready to absorb any member of the Larkinson Family that arrived.

Minister Shederin Purnesse looked particularly impressed when he heard that Ark Larkinson readily decided to join the clan!

"As an expert pilot with aspirations to become an ace pilot, your uncle should not renege on his commitment." The old man remarked. "His entry into the clan is as good as assured. However, did you pay enough attention to the latitude he had given to himself?"

"Uh, what latitude?"

"When Venerable Ark said he would join our clan, he did not say which branch he intended to join. You automatically assumed that he would join our fleet and fight thrilling battles against the enemies we encounter away from civilization. However, depending on his ideas, he could opt to join the Davute Branch instead. This way, he would still be a member of our clan, but become a part of a group that aligns closer to the ideals and preferences of the Larkinson Family."

"Damnit! I missed that!" Ves frowned and admitted. "Still, when I talked to him just now, I did not get the impression that he was trying to pull the wool over my eyes. He

sounded quite sincere about serving the clan, and I think that an expert pilot who is eager to break through and grow stronger should seek every opportunity to seek battle."

Minister Shederin's projection directed a disapproving glance at Ves.

"You are overlooking a number of crucial variables. Do you recall what is happening around us, sir? Davute is about to found a colonial state. Shortly after that, Davute will most certainly collide against its archrival Karlach."

Ves widened his eyes as he figured out what the old man was alluding to. The timing of these geopolitical developments was awful!

"War will break out, causing everyone who resides in the spheres of both centers of power to become embroiled in this conflict." Shederin continued. "Our Davute Branch won't be able to escape its responsibilities either. The new colonial administration will most certainly expect our clan to make a contribution on that basis. I can think of no one better to lead our local contingent of mechs and mech pilot than a mech colonel who has abundantly proven his capacity to lead and fight in high-intensity wars in the Bright Republic and the Garlen Empire."

That sounded just like home to a consummate soldier like Ark Larkinson. People tended to gravitate towards what they were familiar with, and the same applied to mech pilots.

Unlike the majority of trueblood Larkinson mech pilots who were predominantly young and hadn't spent much time in the military,

Older mech pilots such as Ark who lived through two different Bright-Vesia Wars would definitely feel an attraction to participating in old-fashioned war as opposed to exploring and fighting the unknown!

Ves groaned and palmed his face. "I really don't hope that Uncle Ark will join the Davute Branch. I mean, joining this side branch is better than nothing, but what I really need is another ace pilot presiding over my fleet!"

"No." Shederin surprisingly said. "I do not agree with you. I may not be as versed in military affairs as General Verle, but from my observations our fleet has been doing well with Patriarch Reginald Cross as our only ace pilot. Now, our ongoing talks with the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family will soon bear fruit. This means that Saint Marissa Lewandowski and Saint Kalasandra Boojay shall lend their formidable strength to our fleet. Will adding Venerable Ark truly make a difference, especially when it will take many months before he obtains his new expert mech?"

"You... have a point."

A high-tier expert pilot was nice... if there wasn't already an ace pilot who could overshadow a powerful demigod.

Though Ves could never have too many powerhouses under his command, once three different ace mechs joined the lineup of the expeditionary fleet, he could do without his uncle!

At the very least, the strategic outlook of the expeditionary fleet would not change until Ark advanced to ace pilot, and that would definitely take a lot of time.

Ves no longer felt as distressed at the thought of bringing Uncle Ark into the clan only for the expert pilot to waste his time on a useless planet.

Although Ves did not like the idea of increasing the Larkinson Clan's involvement in a stupid war for regional hegemony, if doing this helped Venerable Ark get into the right mood and increase his chances of advancing to ace pilot, then so be it. A breakthrough was the highest goal. Anything else was secondary.

In any case, Ark Larkinson would become an expert pilot of the Larkinson Clan no matter where he chose to serve. Outsiders wouldn't be able to discern any division and Saint Ark would definitely come and rescue the expeditionary fleet at the greatest speed if Ves ever got in trouble!

This was because Ves was Ryncol's son.

"I think that Melinda Larkinson and many other members of the family will make the decision." Shederin continued to voice his views. "They are too attached to the identity of a Larkinson to go elsewhere, and they will automatically follow Ark into the clan because they are too accustomed to looking up to him. The family will turn into an empty shell if it loses its current patriarch. Turning it into a retirement home for the older generations of Larkinsons who are too opposed to our policies or prideful to admit their fault is not a bad development."

Ves didn't entirely look pleased with that idea. "A retirement home that is funded by a 1 percent stake in the LMC sounds like an exceptionally luxurious clubhouse for a bunch of old coots and lazy slackers who never contributed to my success and the success of my mech company."

Despite his complaints, if it kept his Uncle Ark happy, then he would gladly tolerate the freeloading.

The Larkinson Clan needed its own ace pilot, but they didn't exactly grow on trees.

Venerable Davia Stark was still a decade or so away until her resonance strength grew to the point where she had a faint chance of breaking through with the help of her Amaranto.

The actual Larkinson expert pilots had grown a lot over the years, but most of them were still low-tier expert pilots with only a handful about to mature into mid-tier expert pilots.

With a war between Davute and Karlach about to break out and greater conflicts on the horizon, Ves couldn't wait so many years for the expert pilots who were currently in his mech roster to evolve into Saints.

He needed to acquire an ace pilot in the short term, and only Venerable Ark gave him hope of acquiring one within a two-year timespan!

Chapter 4684: Useful Niche

Many events took place shortly after the expeditionary fleet returned to Davute.

The Larkinsons serving aboard the fleet started to enjoy their shore leave in shifts.

The Davute System continued to attract more and more traffic from every direction as my people wanted to participate in the historic process of founding of a promising new colonial state.

Many mercenary outfits and mercenary regiments signed lucrative contacts with the colonial administrations and began to prepare for war. They recruited more reserve personnel, they purchased more mechs, they stocked up on supplies and they even started to consolidate to an extent.

Today's mercenaries would become tomorrow's soldiers. At least, that was supposed to be the idea.

The powers that be accumulated a large war chest before they ever set foot in the Red Ocean. They anticipated the need to invest in a powerful military coalition and had already begun to increase their spending in the last few years.

However, it was only now that Davute truly opened up its coffers! Colonial envoys approached thousands of different mercenary companies and private organizations with sizable mech forces with tailored offers that were certain to make them move!

While the preparations to found a colonial state and build up a sizable mech horde that would become numerous to compete against the rival hordes formed by Karlach, a surprisingly large group of people pay attention to the arrival of a certain fleet.

Many different parties reacted in different ways to the momentary return of the famed and glorious expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance!

It couldn't be helped. The expeditionary fleet had accomplished a lot of astonishing feats as of late, such as destroying alien warships, killing phase whales, rescuing a first-class pioneer and earning an immense award from the MTA!

Not only that, but the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan had both expanded their presence in the local economy. The branches that these clans had set up became increasingly more visible to a growing number of Davutans.

Tristan Wesseling looked out of the window and gazed in the direction of Industrial District 2.

A part of him felt tempted to seek out his old friend once again, but... the differences in status between the two had grown even wider than before. Tristan had no right to stand on equal ground with Ves at this time.

"You have earned more MTA merits in a few months than I would ever be able to earn in a century." Tristan sighed as he stood with his arms folded behind his back.

The differences became even more magnified when he compared the Larkinson Clan's large and famous Cat Nest to his modest design lab that he had barely been able to afford.

After Tristan successfully made contact with Ves and convinced him to attack Pima Prime with the Hex Army, the balance of power in the Friday Coalition had changed.

The Gauge Dynasty had to rein in much of its unbridled ambitions, allowing the Carnegie Group, the Vermeer Group and the other smaller coalition partners to breathe easier.

None of that truly mattered to Tristan though as he had become so disgusted by all of the killing that he had indirectly caused. He could no longer in good conscience maintain his loyalty to a rotted coalition, so he had renounced his Fridayman citizenship and successfully applied to become a citizen of Davute.

With the help of the reward and hush money that the primary beneficiaries of the Battle of Pima Prime advanced to his bank account, Tristan bought a small plot of land and built his own design lab and workshop in order to start his independent mech design career on this booming planet.

Of course, Tristan had no chance of building his workplace next to the Cat Nest because Industrial District 2 had long become filled with construction.

In order to reserve enough money to purchase the expensive and frankly overpriced second-class lab and workshop equipment that his new mech company needed, Tristan had been forced to divert all the way towards Industrial District 12 that was situated all the way in the outskirts of Kotor City.

The high number already said much about the relatively new district's land value, priority, public service quality and proximity to the city core.

"At least this is mine." Tristan said with a touch of affection as his fingers brushed the surface of the window of his own workplace.

It was not easy to run a new startup in a highly competitive mech market like Davute.

Larger players such as the Living Mech Corporation and the branches of other mech companies that possessed strong foundations in the old galaxy immediately dominated the mech market. They made excellent use of their first-mover advantages to claim market share in advance and also dominated the supply side of the sector by signing exclusive contracts with scarce and picky material providers.

Most independent mech designers couldn't even get started in Davute because there was no demand for their shabby works and not enough access to affordable raw materials!

This was why Tristan Design Services mostly stuck to offering miscellaneous design work in the first year of its operation.

Tristan knew he needed to build his mech company step by step. His mech company had no reputation or brand awareness at all, and his design skills weren't anything impressive compared to the likes of his old friend or the many ambitious Masters and Seniors who fought for market share with tooth and nail!

Instead, he relied on his certified apprenticeship with Master Katzenberg to offer specialized design services to the mech companies that needed immediate assistance to solve certain problems.

It was hard to persuade different companies to accept his services, but once Tristan successfully completed a few commissions, word of mouth began to spread throughout Industrial District 12.

Right now, Tristan Design Services received enough commissions to pay the bills, but not much more. Tristan couldn't even think about designing original mechs anytime soon!

He needed to spend all of his time on completing commissions relating to finding adequate substitutions of materials in different mech designs and other equipment designs.

"Master Katzenberg's lessons are really coming in handy these days." Tristan smirked.

Despite the fact that he was 'just' a Journeyman, he had learned the core theories of Master Katzenberg's specialization.

Finding ways to replicate the effects of exotics by forming combinations of cheaper and more accessible materials was her bread and butter, and Tristan had learned much of the essence of her methods!

The demand for such services was already high in the old galaxy. The desire to cut costs and simplify logistics constantly drove mech designers and mech companies to seek out ways to produce more mechs at lower prices.

However, it turned out that the industry circumstances in the Red Ocean were much more favorable!

Countless industrial companies who thought they could reuse their existing designs from the old galaxy and produce the same products in the new frontier immediately encountered all kinds of material constraints!

The supply of low-quality materials had become more abundant as of late, but incoming shipments of high-quality exotics continued to remain frustratingly scarce!

As such, many companies who experienced difficulties in securing enough raw materials to produce their goods urgently needed to fix this problem.

The best way to do so was to reduce their dependence on high-quality exotics by increasing their usage of low-quality materials, preferably without reducing the performance of their products in the process!

This was difficult, but not impossible.

If Master Katzenberg set up shop in the Red Ocean, she would probably earn a fortune from all of the high-paying commissions she would receive!

"I bet she will arrive in the Red Ocean sooner or later. Her skills are wasted in the Milky Way."

Though Tristan was nowhere near as effective as his Master, he was better at it than many older and more knowledgeable mech designers who did not specialize in this specific field of materials science.

Although Tristan did not delude himself into thinking that Senior and Masters were unable to do the same, none of them were willing to spend their valuable time on this tedious work.

If their design teams couldn't efficiently complete this kind of task in a short enough time frame, then Tristan Design Services could easily handle these problems on their behalf!

So far, the commissions that Tristan completed were relatively simple issues related to low-end mechs, but it was a start.

Once Tristan earned more trust and recognition from the local sector, he was sure he would be able to attract more lucrative commissions.

The former Fridaymen relied on this service to carve out a place in Davute's fast-growing mech industry.

Though there was still a long way to go before his mech company could start selling actual mech designs or mechs, he was still better off than the vast majority of independent mech designers who never managed to get off the ground in the first place.

Still, as much as he was confident that his Master's teachings would help him soar in a dwarf galaxy where there should be a high demand on his services, Tristan still lacked the confidence that he would ever catch up to his old friend.

As a well-educated mech designer, he knew it was harmful to compare himself to his better peers all of the time.

Yet Tristan couldn't help but do so every day. Had he made the right decision to settle in Davute and stay in close proximity to a large production complex owned by his old friend?

He soon stopped his musings and prepared to handle the work assignments for today. He also needed to hand out new instructions to the growing team of Novices and Apprentices on his payroll.

However, just as he was about to get to work, his secretary bot notified him that an unexpected guest had arrived at his design studio unannounced.

Tristan's expression immediately turned grave when he learned who visited him. "Bring our esteemed visitor up to my office."

It only took a short moment for a woman wearing an impeccable blazer and pencil skirt to pass through the door.

Tristan immediately put on a low posture and humbly greeted the new arrival.

"Miss Kernsk, welcome to my humble design studio. Forgive me for not preparing the appropriate refreshments. We did not expect someone of your importance to visit my humble office."

The female visitor stopped and did not show any emotion. "Dispense with the pleasantries. I have come for one purpose only. My direct superior requires your input on the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan. We need as much information as you can tell us about him. We have learned that you happen to have known him during the time when the two of you were still residing in the Komodo Star Sector."

Tristan knew there was only one superior that Reina Kernsk answered to. She was publicly known as the chief of staff of the man who was rumored to have won the secret competition to become the first head of state of the future colonial state centered around Davute!

For someone of her import to undertake this chore in person already revealed how much Davute's upcoming ruler valued Ves Larkinson!

Though Tristan was obviously afraid of getting on the bad side of such a powerful figure, that didn't mean he was ready to sell out his old friend!

"Multiple people have tried to pry out Ves Larkinson's secrets from my mouth. They never succeeded. I may have abandoned my identity as a Fridayman, but I am still an alumni of Master Meredith Katzenberg. The local community of mech designers will not react positively if it becomes known that the upcoming head of Davute has employed coercion on one of their colleagues to force out secrets of another of their kind."

"You misunderstand." Reina Kernsk shook her head. "We are not looking to do anything untoward. The Larkinson Clan and its brilliant leader is a valued asset and business partner of our planet and our future state. We merely want to gather general information about his personality, his behavior, his likes and his dislikes in order to build a more accurate personality matrix on him. This way, we can ensure that our upcoming talks with him will proceed more pleasantly than before."

"Oh. That... is not as problematic. That said, I don't want to put my friend at a disadvantage. I am sorry, Miss Kernsk, but I truly do not wish to say anything about Ves behind his back."

The woman did not show any irritation at his response. Instead, she pulled out a small data pad from her suit pocket and placed it on Tristan's desk.

"Please take a moment to read through this document before you make a decision."

Though Tristan resolved to stick to his principles and reveal nothing about Ves no matter how innocent his remarks may be, his eyes almost shot out of his sockets when he read how much MTA credits and other benefits the colonial administration was willing to pay!

"We value your mech company, Mr. Wesseling. We are willing to provide you with a grant to help you become an established contributor to our growing industries. Are you interested in hearing more?"

The former Fridayman's resolve quickly evaporated.

"...Well, if you put it that way... I guess I can tell you my shallow impressions of Ves. I am not a close friend of his, but I hope my comments may be useful."

Reina Kernsk finally showed emotion and grinned after hearing this response. "Perfect."

Chapter 4685: Consortium Growth

Chairwoman Calsie Doornbos had come a long way from her days in Cloudy Curtain.

As someone who regularly held talks with second-class CEOs, directors and other important officials, it was difficult to believe she used to be a third-class law student when she first got hired by Ves Larkinson.

It had not been easy to keep up with the meteoric growth of the clan. As the Larkinsons became more connected with the higher layers of human society, the difficulty and complexity of all of the work that needed to be done constantly grew as well.

Calsie needed to work harder and spend all of her free time on studying many different subjects in order to barely keep pace with the growth of the clan.

Even then, as the clan began to hire highly qualified second-class professionals and university graduates, she found herself unable to keep up with the rising standards.

Not even her augmentations could help her close the enormous gap in knowledge and skills between herself and those who were born as second-raters!

If not for the fact that the Larkinson Clan expressly rewarded the early employees who worked for Ves in his early career and proven their loyalty many times over, Calsie doubted that she would have been able to serve as the chairwoman of the increasingly more influential Open Consortium of Krakatoa.

When she started to lead this new business cooperative that operated on an entirely new membership model, she experienced a lot of hardships and difficulties in her work.

Fortunately, she already learned how to delegate and managed to pass on a lot of important responsibilities to her much more capable and specialized subordinates.

It was only after she had settled into her position for several years that she started to feel at home as the head of the Open Consortium.

She painstakingly raised her qualifications as a business leader and gradually accrued enough experience to be able to talk competently with the members of the Open Consortium.

Though she would not claim to have done the best possible job at leading the business and trade consortium, Calsie felt confident she could justify her continued tenure at 'her' organization!

That was until the expeditionary fleet finally returned from its latest adventure. From the moment she received a summons of the clan patriarch himself, her blood froze for a moment.

Would Ves approve of her stewardship of one of the daughter organizations of the Larkinson Clan?

Would he be happy with how many members the Open Consortium managed to attract?

Would he have any objections to the changes and expansions to the original rules of the trade organizations?

All of these questions and more swirled in her mind as her shuttle brought her out of the Open Consortium's headquarters in the Financial District and took her to the Cat Nest in Industrial District 2.

Not much time had passed since Calsie last met with the fellow Cloudy Curtainer in person.

However, much had changed due to a combination of internal and external developments. It shouldn't surprise her that much that Ves would want to receive a report so quickly after his return to the port system.

When her shuttle finally touched down on the expansive and busy landing zone, she stepped out and met another old friend.

"Gavin!"

"Hello again, Calsie."

The two long-time friends hugged each other for a moment before they began to chat in a familiar manner.

"How was the frontier?"

"Terrifying as always." Gavin gulped. "I will never get used to this sort of life, but... I don't want to stay away from Ves either. Our latest operations have been particularly fruitful for us. It would be too much to mention all of the direct benefits that we have obtained in the Boryan System and the Ramage Repulsor System, but our expeditionary fleet is about to undergo a massive string of upgrades as a result."

"That sounds nice. It almost makes me wish I was serving in the fleet instead of remaining stuck here in this safe and increasingly crowded city."

"Don't. Davute is heaven compared to the hell that is out there. There is nothing like getting targeted by alien warships to make you appreciate the safety of a heavily developed and heavily defended star system."

She supposed he was right. Calsie couldn't be any braver than her friend Gavin, so she would definitely not fare well under the same circumstances.

As they slowly made their way to the Blue Cat Estates on foot, Calsie quickly brought up a more relevant topic.

"Do you know why Ves wants to meet with me on short notice?" She asked.

"To be honest, I am not entirely certain." Gavin answered. "Although our business ventures remain important to our clan, I have noticed that Ves is paying increasingly less attention to them. Entire days and weeks go by where he has nothing else on his mind aside from raising his children, conducting secretive experiments and working on his design projects."

"That sounds like what any good father and a mech designer would do. Does that mean your workload has dropped."

"On the contrary. I need to handle a lot more work behind the scenes." The personal assistant sighed. "Ves had given me the authority to make small decisions on his behalf. I have spent enough time with him to know how he thinks and become familiar with his attitudes towards different topics. He trusts me to handle the issues that are too small for him to bother."

"What about larger decisions?"

"That is what the chief ministers are for. I only have to bring up the truly crucial issues to Ves, which doesn't happen that often these days. Our clan can handle most problems by itself and our patriarch is becoming less and less interested in managing anything that does not directly impact his own work."

That caused Calsie to frown. "If that is the case, I should be meeting with Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse instead. He is the person I report to most often these days, as he is the one who appreciates my efforts in Davute the most. What do you think Ves wants from the Open Consortium?"

"I told you that I don't know, but if I have to make a guess, it may have to do with the changing landscape of Davute. Once the colonial state is founded, we will unquestionably become a key link in its economy. I think Ves is wary about increasing our dependence on Davute."

"We are already highly dependent on Davute." Calsie replied. "If we get cut off this planet all of a sudden, our clan wouldn't instantly fall, but we will lose access to a lot of

goods and services that help with making sure our fleet runs smoothly. You can't imagine all of the logistics required to keep a fleet consisting of numerous capital ships and hundreds of sub-capital ships afloat."

After a bit of walking, they finally walked up to the mansion situated on a small hill. Calsie passed through a couple of security checks and followed Gavin inside.

They walked up the stairs and eventually arrived in front of the double doors that led into the grand office of the patriarch.

"Here we are. You are on your own from here. Good luck, Calsie."

"Thanks."

When Calsie Doornbos entered the large and exaggeratingly sized office, she strode across the empty floor and stopped at a respectful distance from the wooden desk.

Ves appeared to be reading a report projected from his desk terminal. Still, he possessed enough concentration to greet the new arrival.

"Please take a seat, Calsie."

"Yes, sir."

As Calsie sat down on a chair that rose up from the floor, the mechanical cat laying on the desk flew over and landed on her lap.

"Meow..."

She restrained the urge to giggle. "Oh hey, Lucky. Long time no see. Oof, you have grown a little heavier than last time. Are you okay?"

"Meow meow..."

As old friends, Calsie and Lucky seamlessly got along like old times. It was a pity that she was rarely able to meet with Ves these days, so she no longer got to pet and play with the gem cat as much as in the past.

So much had changed, both for the better and for the worse.

Eventually, Ves was done with reading the report and could direct his full concentration on the meeting.

"It is good to see you again, Calsie." Ves gave her a genuine smile. "You look as if you are doing well for yourself."

"Thank you, sir. You look much better than before. The differences are really noticeable."

Ves had changed more than she could ever know, and that was when he was doing his best to suppress his outward changes!

After a bit of chatting, Ves quickly brought up a more serious topic.

"Give me a summary of the current state of the Open Consortium. How many members have signed up at this time?"

"There are 203 formal members of the Open Consortium, sir. 12 of them are large organizations whose business activities are on the same level as our Living Mech Corporation. 50 of them are medium organizations whose businesses are not as impressive, but still significant on a more regional and local level. The remaining members are on the smaller side, but each of them are still useful due to the specialized goods and services they offer that are always in high demand. My staff and I have always been careful about controlling our expansion and preventing any deadweight from joining our trade consortium."

"How popular is the Open Consortium these days?"

"Very popular." Calsie grinned. "The amount of applications we have received in the last month has multiplied by 7 times. Your expeditionary fleet's successes have turned our clan and our consortium into much more desirable business partners."

"I see. What about the suppliers of the consortium? The original purpose of the consortium was to pool different companies together so that we can attract the cooperation of material suppliers. Have you noticed any progress on that front?"

"We did, but the LMC and the other institutions of our clan no longer need to rely on the Open Consortium to gain the cooperation of suppliers. We have already grown past that stage, and the latest changes only make that more obvious." Calsie honestly reported. "Right now, it is the members of the Open Consortium that benefit a lot more from all of the suppliers that we are working with. The biggest benefit that we can derive from the consortium right now is all of the internal trade that we have been able to foster between the members."

That was an interesting shift in importance and one that intrigued Ves.

"Tell me more. What is the value of the current Open Consortium to us if we have no need to make use of collective power to attract suppliers."

"Well, think of it this way. The majority of small and medium members cannot survive in Davute on their own. The Open Consortium is their only lifeline. If they get kicked out, it is unlikely they will remain afloat. This grants our clan a lot of power and influence over

them. It is not wrong to say that almost all of the members of the Open Consortium have become the defacto vassals of our clan. We indirectly control a small but significant chunk of Davute's local industries."

Ves' eyes seemed to flash when he heard her description of how powerful the Open Consortium had become.

"Would you describe the Open Consortium as a major player of the local economy?"

"I wouldn't say that. We cannot make too many waves in Davute. It is also hard to corral so many unique members as they are all different from each other. Still, as long as we expand further, we can gain a substantial voice in the business community."

"I see..."

Calsie still had her mind on deepening the reach of the Open Consortium in the regional economy, and thereby turning the Larkinson Clan into an increasingly more important player in the process!

Chapter 4686: Expansion Strategy

Ves did not like what he heard from Calsie.

When he initially founded the Open Consortium, the Larkinson Clan was still a small player in Davute. It was hard to get any company and material supplier to take the Larkinsons seriously.

Much of that had changed. The reputation of the clan had grown so much that the Larkinsons may have become among the most famous and renowned groups associated with Davute!

That along with years of rapid growth had improved the business circumstances of the various companies and institutions of the Larkinson Clan.

That said, the Open Consortium still played an immensely useful role to the Larkinson Clan and especially the Davute Branch.

Calsie made a good case for why the Open Consortium should not only continue to exist even after its original purpose became redundant, but also expand its membership so that it could increase its weight in Davute!

Although her proposals all made sense, the problem was that it made the Open Consortium and by extension the Larkinson Clan a more integral part of Davute's industrial economy!

This was yet another important contributing factor why the colonial administration paid so much attention to the Larkinsons these days.

He did not immediately respond to her proposals, but instead held out his hand. "Give me the Open Book. I want to take a look at it and see how it has grown."

"Ah, certainly. Here you go, sir."

Calsie had been attentive enough to bring the relic that has made the Open Consortium so successful.

Modeled after the Larkinson Mandate, the Open Book was a silver ancestral heirloom that contained the written contracts and commitments of all of the members of the trade consortium.

Presided over by the Solemn Guardian, every signee of the contract received constant encouragement to abide by the terms of the organization and never double-cross its members!

With the swelling of the membership ranks of the Open Consortium, the Open Book had grown a lot more powerful as of late.

Ves could feel how the hopes and good intentions of most of the signees had positively affected the development of this living artifact.

As he opened the book and browsed through his pages, he noticed that the earlier ones were occasionally crossed out, but that it stopped taking place the further he went.

"How many members have left the Open Consortium since its founding?" He asked.

"Dozens." Calsie replied. "Some members have clearly entered our consortium in order to get over a rough patch. Once they have reached a healthier state, they no longer want to meet the obligations of our organizations, so they eventually submit applications to leave our organization. Luckily, they have also done so in an orderly manner. There were only a few times where we had to strike a member off the book because they had become bankrupt. Lately, neither of these two events have happened because we are only taking in successful and promising companies."

Ves hummed and nodded. "How often have disputes arisen between the members?"

"Not often." She said. "It happens a few times every year, but everyone is remarkably honest towards each other. Much of that has to do with the Open Book, but the companies are also increasingly more afraid of getting on the bad side of our clan. Compared to a year ago, our deterrence has doubled if not tripled."

"I see."

Even though the Open Consortium was no longer entirely aligned with his goals, its operating model was still a smashing success. It was too useful for Ves to get rid of, and that made him feel a bit mixed.

"Sir, about our expansion..."

"Stop." Ves raised his palm. "I have my own ideas, Calsie. Let's not rock the boat too much. I think we have been focusing too much on quantity in the past few years. That has been useful to us, but I think it is time to elevate the quality of the Open Consortium. I don't mind if its membership numbers decrease as long as the participating companies become more useful to us. Let's focus more on building a support network rather than an empire, alright?"

"I see..." Calsie replied.

She couldn't hold in her disappointment. Her importance was tied to the size and significance of her organization. If the Open Consortium could no longer expand any further, she would remain stuck without making any further progress.

However, this wasn't all that Ves had in store.

"Calsie, all of the members of the Open Consortium are based in Davute, correct?"

"Ah, yes." She said. "There are a number of exceptions, but the rule that states that every company must send their effective leader to sign the Open Book makes it difficult for organizations based in other zones to join us. Besides, the Open Consortium's main business network is based almost entirely in this region. It is not so useful for companies who are entirely based in other zones such as Magair to randomly become a member."

Ves looked thoughtful. "Does that mean that our clan and trade consortium does not have a strong footing in any of the other middle zones of the Red Ocean?"

"I thought you already knew that, sir." Calsie said. "While we have explored possibilities to found new open trade consortiums in the Magair Middle Zone and so on, we are hindered by two factors. One is the fact that we have only a single Open Book that can only stay in one physical location. Another is our non-existent foundations in the other zones."

The Larkinson Clan in the past was still too small to set up a strong presence in multiple zones. Ves wanted to focus on building up a stable foundation in Davute first before looking outward.

Now that his clan completed the first time, it was high time for the Larkinsons to build up a more visible presence in the other zones!

"These problems shouldn't be an issue to us given how much we have grown. Calsie, I want you to lead the initiative to found new open trade consortiums in several nearby middle zones. I want you to focus on setting up modest groups in the Magair Middle Zone and the Torald Middle Zone in particular."

Both zones directly neighbored the Krakatoa Middle Zone. The importance of Magair Middle Zone didn't need to be stated. If Ves ever decided to move his expeditionary fleet to a different zone, then he would probably move to the much less stable but more exciting Torald Middle Zone.

Calsie understood these reasons as well. "The Magair Middle Zone is relatively familiar to us. We have many members that have set up branches of sorts over there. We need to think carefully about where we want to place the headquarters of the regional consortium."

"Let's not make it more complicated than it needs to be. Just set it up in the New Scimitar System of the Hex Federation."

That got a reaction out of the chairwoman. "The Hex Federation!? Are you sure, Ves? I thought you disliked the Hexers. If we found an Open Consortium over there, its members will consist entirely of Hexer companies. It won't be able to spread its influence outside of the borders of the Hexer state. Besides, I just looked up New Scimitar and it isn't a port system."

"I am sure." Ves said. "Your concerns are valid, but the Hexers are our most reliable allies and partners. The Wodin Dynasty will take excellent care of the consortium based in Magair. If we establish the headquarters anywhere else, the Fridaymen are liable to come and blow it up. I don't want that to happen, so I would rather forgo the choice of a port system in order to ensure that our best Hexer allies will keep watch over our holdings. As for the membership problem, just institute a special rule that at least half of the signees must be non-Hexers. This should at least encourage those women to open up its borders if they haven't already done so. The Hex Federation needs to develop more trade ties in order to accelerate its growth."

Setting up the regional consortium in the Hex Federation was anything but ideal, but the Hexers would probably complain if Ves chose a different location.

Besides, it should be a lot easier to gain the cooperation of large and powerful Hexer companies. The Open Consortium of Magair should be able to gain easier access to rare and maybe even strategic goods and materials as a result!

"Do you have any special instructions about the trade consortium that you wish to found in Torald?"

Ves nodded. "This will be a much more difficult task as we don't have any obvious friends in the middle zone. Try and see if the existing members of your consortium have

built a strong presence in Torald. Try to take advantage of that to build a headquarters that won't get knocked down. Don't worry about attracting a lot of business yet. I want the Open Consortium of Torald to function as an outpost for our clan. If my expeditionary fleet ever operates in the Torald Middle Zone and needs to make a pitstop, I would prefer it if we can stop at a port system where we have existing business relationships with a bunch of local suppliers and service providers."

"Understood. I will make sure to prioritize that for the Torald consortium."

Ves smiled and leaned back on his chair in satisfaction. "Good. Once these two regional consortiums are up and running, we will have gained enough know-how to make it easier to set up similar organizations in other zones. I want you to keep this up until we have formed a small but permanent presence in every middle zone."

"That will take a long time, Ves." Calsie cautiously said. "The further we go, the harder it is to control our actions in the distant zones. We will need to expand by layers."

"I understand. You can settle these matters on your own. I can be patient, so you don't need to complete this right away. I want you to make sure you are doing this correctly because I don't want to see our Open Consortiums get uprooted, do you understand?"

"I understand, sir."

"Great. Do you have any questions?"

The woman hesitated for a few seconds before she decided to bite the bullet.

"It would help in my job if you can tell me your purpose or strategy for trying to establish an open trade consortium in every middle zone."

"It's not about the money." He told her. "I don't mind if their balance sheets are in the red, though I at least want them to break even over time. What I truly want is to hedge our clan's business activity and reduce its geographic concentration. We can't keep returning to Davute whenever we want to do anything big. I want our expeditionary fleet to be able to resupply in a friendly and familiar star system in every zone. I want the LMC to diversify its business activities so that if Davute ever loses the war or kicks us out, our support network won't be significantly impacted."

"I see. We will need to open up small branches of our clan in each of the star systems where we set up our regional open trade consortiums."

"That is a given. You can work this out with the chief ministers of our clan. The Davute Branch carries too much weight now. Also make sure to talk with Director Calabast to ensure that the Black Cats set up regional intelligence networks in each of those zones. It would be nice if we can spread our branch members far and wide. We may not be

able to protect them all if they are more dispersed, but the loss of a single branch won't turn into a calamity for our clan."

It became abundantly clear what Ves was trying to accomplish with these new initiatives.

He wanted to spread the Larkinsons across the stars!

Not only would the clan become less beholden to the outcome of the eventual war between Davute and Karlach, the expeditionary fleet would also have a much easier time operating in regions that were far away from Krakatoa!

"Our clan is about to go galactic!"

Chapter 4687: Flagship Store

The Commercial District was the most vibrant area of Kotor City.

As one of the first and most central city districts in the colony, the Commercial District possessed the highest concentration of upscale retail outlets in Davute!

Those who managed to get in early and buy the rights to construct buildings on land and in the air had a figurative phasewater wellspring in their hands.

The sheer amount of visiting shoppers this prestigious district attracted was mind boggling!

Although the ironically named Austere District surpassed the Commercial District in wealth and prestige, the former exclusively catered to the ultra-wealthy who weren't all that numerous.

As such, the combination of decently wealthy shoppers combined with the large quantity of visitors caused the Commercial District to produce the highest amount of revenue out of all of the districts on the planet!

Much had changed since its initial inception. Many smaller parties who were unable to keep up with the rising requirements set by the city administration had opted to sell their real estate at extravagant prices.

As such, a lot of larger players managed to muscle their way into the coveted districts and open up premier flagship stores that not only gained access to a lot of well-heeled customers, but also put their brand on the map in the regional economy!

Due to the elevated profile of this location, it had become a mark of prestige to be able to set up a store in this coveted district.

It was already hard for a large company to be able to set up a store in the Commercial District.

The weaker organizations that were unable to resist the pressure and temptation of selling their property had already been cleared away.

The survivors who managed to cling on to their valuable real estate were all tough bones who could not be bribed or bullied so easily.

As such, the instances where property changed hands had slowed down to an enormous degree compared to just a few years ago. An unofficial ranking had formed where the companies with a presence in the Commercial District were unanimously regarded as the heavy weights in Davute.

The Larkinson Clan happened to be on this ranking.

Although its real estate was not the largest and did not occupy the most desirable locations, the eccentric pioneering organization's presence in the Commercial District stood out due to two separate reasons.

First, the Larkinson Clan actually owned two separate landbound properties in this expensive place.

Second, one of those properties did not necessarily cater to end consumers!

The Larkinson Clan therefore made its mark in Davute in yet another unusual manner.

In a time where it was already difficult for older and larger organizations to obtain a small store in this district, the Larkinsons extravagantly held two different properties that served two separate purposes!

The most prominent of the two Larkinson properties was of course its mech store.

No form of business was more intrinsically tied to the Larkinson Clan than its mech business.

It made a lot of sense for the Living Mech Corporation to construct its flagship store in the Commercial District.

Ever since it went up, hundreds of customers ranging from deep-pocketed mercenaries to representatives of large security companies visited the exclusive store in order to experience a sample of the LMC's diverse catalog in person.

Anyone who learned anything about the LMC's distinct products knew that the best way to evaluate them was to see them in person!

Looking at their images and footage on a projection did not do them justice. As such, the LMC actually sold a higher proportion of its products inside physical stores as opposed to accepting orders on the galactic net.

Not many people knew that this flagship store welcomed an extremely august personality today.

A group of four mechs flew through the air while escorting a black armored shuttle.

The glows and the markings of the armed machines in question made it clear that they were not only living mechs, but belonged to the Larkinson Clan.

The armored shuttle that flew in their midst had no obvious markings, but it stood out from all of the other high-end shuttles flying over Kotor City for several reasons.

Any knowledgeable observer would be able to tell that its exterior and most likely its interior was made out of first-class alloys!

Not only that, but the vehicle also possessed a lot of other powerful technical features. From an ECM system to presumably a transphasic shield generator, this black passenger vessel clearly put a lot of effort into protecting its passengers!

In fact, anyone who was willing to invest so much in a mere shuttle would have almost certainly installed a small-scale warp drive as well!

The vehicle did not actually attract that much attention, though. Davute had grown large and prosperous enough that such vehicles may not be common, but could still be seen once or twice a day on average.

As this vehicle came closer to the LMC flagship store, it smoothly landed onto the landing pad built on top of the flat roof of the multi-storied structure.

The mechs that escorted it remained close by while making sure not to hover too close and make themselves too conspicuous.

A gaggle of armed guards wearing subtler and more compact black combat armor stepped out of the armored shuttle first.

After that, a small family came out next.

Ves stepped out first and enjoyed the fresh air. The city administration put a lot more effort into managing the air quality of the Commercial District. None of the fumes generated by flying shuttles and vehicles were able to linger too long as a consequence.

He did not wear his usual patriarch uniform this time. The iconic colors along with the golden embellishments attracted way too much attention for his liking. He wanted to maintain a lower profile this time as he set off to tour the different properties of his clan.

His wife stepped out next. Gloriana had put a bit more effort into doing her makeup, even going as far as to use the brushes herself as opposed to letting a makeup bot do all of the work. She also wore a sundress that conveyed enough matronly vibes while also looking slim and fashionable enough to turn enough heads.

Naturally, she did not forget to carry her Pop Cult Tote Bag as well. The smooth, velvety-like suede made out of high-quality nuns leather looked so delicate and shiny that even Ves could feel how soft it was just by looking at it from a distance!

"Yay! We're finally here! C'mon, Lucky!"

"Meow..."

Andraste hopped out of the shuttle hatch and ran to the edge of the roof while carrying a certain gem cat in her arms.

The red-headed girl looked quite impressed as she gazed across the Commercial District. Floating structures combined with stately buildings on the ground made for an intricate shopping nexus where people had to navigate in three dimensions in order to fully experience this location.

Practically everyone who visited or worked in the Commercial District wore at least some form of smart clothing.

Although second-raters were pretty much accustomed to it, Ves never really got used to it. What if the smart clothing malfunctioned? What if someone wanted to snipe him from the air?

There were so many risks and dangers to flying in the open that he preferred to keep his feet firmly planted on a solid surface.

As Ves took a moment to admire the view, his other two children stepped out as well.

"Miaow~"

Clixie followed after Aurelia as the oldest daughter walked up to her mother and held hands.

Marvaine meanwhile held up his hands until Ves picked up his son and held him in his arms.

"You've grown bigger and heavier. You're growing up so quickly."

"I'm not fat!"

"Hahaha, That was not what I meant. Anyway, let's head inside and see how the store fares today."

This was not the first time that Ves and his family visited the flagship store, but it had been a couple of years since they last toured the facility.

As a store that primarily sold mechs, it had to offer enough space to accommodate at least a dozen different mechs on display.

Due to the diverse amount of glows of living mechs, the LMC flagship store needed more space in order to give potential clients the opportunity to experience them in isolation.

Though the amount of horizontal space was limited in the Commercial District, the flagship store solved this problem by building high.

Each tall, mech-sized floor had been transformed into an immersive environment that complemented specific mech types well.

For example, as the little family stepped onto the top-most shop floor, they entered a large chamber that looked as if it was located in deep space.

Distant stars and planets provided a backdrop for the spaceborn mechs that hovered above the floor utilizing strong antigrav modules.

Andraste quickly became impressed by the nearest machine. "Wow, is that a Ferocious Piranha Mark III Version B? I never saw one that was coated in neon purple. It even glows in the dark!"

"Wait, darling!" Gloriana called out. "Don't get too close! Watch out for its glow!"

The little girl ignored her mother and continued to move as close as she could until she hit an invisible energy barrier.

She showed no discomfort at all despite the fact that the Ferocious Piranha's infamous disorienting glow was most certainly active, if constrained to a much smaller range than normal.

Other guests who received the qualifications to enter the store and tour this floor looked surprised as they stood further apart from the neon purple light skirmisher.

Among the dozen clients and customers that chose to 'sample' the glow in order to weigh the merits of placing an order, at least half of them were active mech pilots or mech officers who possessed plenty of combat experience.

Even they had to respect the strangely alternating glow that forced them to alternate between calm and fury in rapid succession.

How come a girl who didn't look to be older than 5 or 6 years old manage to get so close where the suppressive glow became more intense?!

Only high-ranking mech pilots and the most elite soldiers could equal her performance!

Ves didn't worry at all. His daughter stood out from many other people due to many reasons, but her abnormally strong and activated spirituality was the main reason why she had the capital to resist glows!

To be more specific, Yaika resisted much if not all of the pressure on Andraste's behalf.

When Aurelia and Marvaine carelessly stepped forward as well, their own powerful spiritual traits allowed them to ignore the Ferocious Piranha's infamous glow with just as much ease.

"It's okay." Ves said as he patted her arm. "Our children are special."

As Ves and Gloriana joined their kids at the front, several guests wondered who they were and how they could all be immune to the Ferocious Piranha's glow.

"It's... it's the boss of the Larkinson Clan!"

"He has brought his family as well!"

"Quiet! Don't disturb these honored figures."

Ves briefly grew amused at the reaction that his appearance had generated, but he paid more attention to what his children thought of his commercial offering.

His wife on the other hand lifted up her chin and made sure to flash her expensive handbag as if she was afraid that the people around her would overlook its value.

"Wait, is that a Pop Cult Tote Bag? You can buy an entire mech regiment with that designer bag!"

"What a classy lady!"

Meanwhile, the manager of the prestigious store had arrived at this time. The problem was that his ability to resist the glow of the Ferocious Piranha was not as good, so the man had no choice but to stand further away like the rest of the crowd.

News about his arrival had already started to spread in a small circle, but Ves was not concerned that he would get mobbed. Not everyone was allowed to step into this flagship store.

Chapter 4688: War Needs

"Papa?" Andraste asked as she gazed up at the strikingly colored mech with admiration and adoration. "Why aren't the Ferocious Piranhas in our fleet as pretty? They're so boring in comparison to this model!"

"There are multiple reasons for that." Ves patiently replied. "Marvaine, what do you think?"

The younger boy scrunched his face. "Is it because we don't want our light skirmishers to get shot more often?"

"That is part of the reason. You are indeed correct that mechs that look more ostentatious tend to attract more fire. Scientific studies have shown that mechs coated in plainer and more earthy tones tend to look psychologically less oppressive, which is why many serious light skirmisher models look like they really don't want to stand out in the crowd."

"If that is the case, then why sell a mech like this in the first place?" Andraste curiously asked.

Ves grinned. "Well, for a mech company like us, applying special coating and making a few cosmetic changes to the exterior to the mech doesn't cost that much. What it does do is turn the same mech into a 'limited edition' variant that can help us earn a lot more profit per unit sold. Look at the price tag for an individual unit of this particular version. What does it say?"

"It... it sells for 5.5 MTA credits!"

"And how much do we charge for a regular Ferocious Piranha?"

Andraste tried to jog her memories. "Ummm... I think it was 2.6 MTA credits last I saw."

"The LMC raised the list price to 2.7 MTA credits earlier this year." Ves corrected his daughter. "It all comes down to how much a customer is willing to pay for a mech. A standard commercial version of the Ferocious Piranha Mark III has become more popular as of late, especially now that war is on the horizon. This is why we were able to get a lot of customers to pay 0.1 MTA credits more than before. As for this special edition machine, a small proportion of customers want to feel more special than others.

They don't mind paying more than double the price for what amounts to the same mech in terms of performance."

All three children looked confused.

Marvaine looked especially dumbfounded. "Can't they buy a cheaper Ferocious Piranha and paint them purple at home? They will be able to save 2.8 MTA credits if they do that."

"That is what I would do as well, but not every customer is as stingy." Ves answered. "Special edition and limited edition mechs are more valuable due to their scarcity and legitimacy. Sure, anyone with a decent workshop can modify a normally-priced mech to look exactly the same as this one, but what makes this particular model worth 5.5 MTA credits is because it is included in the official mech catalog of the LMC. To be honest, this isn't the most expensive special edition version of the Ferocious Piranha that is on sale. The Living Star Club offers more extreme cosmetic variants that are so exclusive that they get sold for 15 MTA credits or more!"

The wonders of modern marketing. The Living Mech Corporation made use of plenty of psychological tricks in the book to extract more profits from the same work.

The LMC wasn't even the worst offender in the mech market. There were plenty of unscrupulous businesses that resorted to more ethically dubious practices.

Examples of that ranged from bundling a bunch of worthless products with a mech to jack up the prices, to offering temporary 'discounts' that lasted so short that they pressured a lot of customers into making impulsive purchase decisions.

While these aggressive business practices certainly succeeded in encouraging customers to open up their wallets even further, the reputation and long-term brand value of the mech companies would inevitably suffer.

The LMC valued its long-term development far too much to risk its reputation on aggressive and deceptive sales practices.

As Ves continued to teach his children about the business side of mechs, he led them to another display model that was not as aggressive.

"This is a Buzzy Bee!" Marvaine quipped as he recognized the machine's distinctive ECM modules.

"That is correct, my dear." Gloriana replied and brushed her little boy's hair with her fingers. "I do not like the name that your father has given it, but his collaboration with an external ECM mech designer has proven to be a great success."

The sales of the Buzzy Bee model started off slow, and it took at least a year before it started to pick up steam.

As an auxiliary mech, the Buzzy Bee featured low offensive and defensive power, but made up for it with a good set of ECM systems.

The third party mech designer from Davute that Ves teamed up with specialized in developing active ECM systems that remained effective and reliable for several hours.

While this was not the most spectacular specialty that Ves had ever encountered, it was more than enough. The Buzzy Bee only needed to be competitive enough in its ECM capabilities.

What truly made this machine valuable was its communication capabilities!

"Do you know why I went against the opinion of your mother and called it the Buzzy Bee?" Ves asked his children.

"Uhm, it's because it is an annoying bee that is difficult to swat from the skies!" Andraste replied.

"Hahaha, that is a part of the story, but not all of it. What else?"

Aurelia offered another possible answer. "Is it because bees are part of a hive and are meant to work with other bees?"

Ves nodded. "That is also a part of the reason. You see, bees and many insects that are part of hives have developed surprisingly sophisticated communication methods to send signals to each other. Many of them are so strange or subtle that someone who knows little won't be able to recognize or block these signals. The Buzzy Bee's true value is its ability to communicate with each other across varying distances in an unconventional manner. They do not make use of electronic communication methods that can easily be blocked, intercepted and jammed."

His wife nodded in agreement. "We have only discovered a handful of reliable measures to block the alternate communication method of the Buzzy Bee. The easiest solution is to destroy them. That is one of the reasons why the ECM systems are so badly needed. Adversaries who are aware of its strategic value will prioritize its takedown as much as possible. Another effective solution is to cut off the communication channel with the help of a high-ranking mech. Expert mechs and especially ace mechs have a way of disrupting or outright blocking these invisible channels, but they are few and far in between."

The manager of the flagship store had reached their side in the meantime. This provided Ves with a handy source of information, especially with regards to customer trends!

"How are the sales of the Buzzy Bee model?"

The manager immediately gave an answer. "Sales of all of our mech models have increased, but the Buzzy Bee model especially stands out to us. The amount of units that our customers have ordered in the last three months have quintupled. More and more customers have become aware of the unique benefits of our jointly developed ECM and communication mech. Positive word of mouth has helped much to prove its effectiveness. Now that every serious mech force is preparing to conduct long campaigns on wartorn planets that are saturated with jamming, our Buzzy Bee line should provide the Davutans with a massive advantage in coordination."

Ves smiled. That was just as he predicted. "Do you think that sales levels will rise even further in the future?"

"It depends on how well they perform on different battlefields." The manager replied. "From the user feedback that I have received, our Buzzy Bees should be able to maintain stable communications where many other mechs are cut off. This includes auxiliary mechs with powerful antennas and transceivers. I have been told that the LMC's Production Department is already anticipating the need to set up additional production lines to increase this model's production volume. Even then, there is a good chance that we will be unable to increase our rate of production even further due to material supply limitations."

"Don't overlook the effect of a war on the supply lines that we are dependent on." Gloriana insightfully warned. "If the Karlachs manage to disrupt many of Davute's supply lines, then our ability to produce this relatively complicated mech will be curtailed even further. These ECM modules are certainly effective enough, but they require dozens of specialized exotics that need to be sourced from many different locations in order to build. This is a potential weakness that any enemies of Davute will most definitely be able to deduce."

That caused Ves to frown. This was not a vulnerability that was exclusive to the Buzzy Bee. Many advanced mech models that rely on sophisticated technical solutions to perform well derived much of their effectiveness on the special properties of powerful but relatively scarce exotics.

This was normally not a problem in a region that was at peace. It was rare for a state to experience massive supply disruptions during peacetime.

The story was different once a full-blown war broke out between different states. It was difficult to outright block the supply of specific materials, but it should still be possible to raid enough trade convoys to heavily limit the supply of certain strategic materials!

If Karlach really wanted to hinder the production of the Buzzy Bee model, then it could do so as long as it was willing to forgo the opportunity to curtail the supply of other exotics.

Ves and his family continued their tour through the flagship store. They observed several other mechs on display that were on sale.

All of them consisted of familiar models that sold extremely well such as the highly useful Pacifier law enforcement mech and the humble Hymenoptera industrial mech.

The store manager relayed an important development about both bestselling mech lines.

"What is notable about our Pacifiers and Hymenopteras is that the colonial administration have already ordered tens of thousands of customized units."

That caused Ves to look surprised. "Are you saying that the colonial government itself wants these mechs?"

"Yes, and this may be the start. Both of these products can play an immensely useful role in war. The Pacifier mech can utilize its calming glow to help a conquering mech force suppress the population of an occupied planet, thereby preventing many terrorist acts from occurring. The Hymenoptera on the other hand encourages a lot of diligence, and is suitable to be piloted by reluctant industrial mech pilots."

Gloriana frowned. "That doesn't make much sense. The Hymenoptera can be useful if the work is monotonous and if the pilots are of low-quality stock, but any government should be able to hire better workers. There are other industrial mechs that are cheaper, more efficient or strong in another useful capacity."

"It will be difficult to persuade or compel many of these workers to engage in construction or reconstruction work on volatile planets." Ves said. "I think... the government may want to stock up on the Hymenoptera because the machines may be reserved for prisoners of war."

"What?!"

It was a risky and daring scheme that could potentially free up a lot of precious manpower under the right circumstances!

There was no doubt that construction work would play a strategic role in the coming conflict.

"Have government institutions also placed orders on our other mech models?" Ves asked.

"Plenty. The Crystal Lord has proven itself as an excellent ranged mech model on land. Its luminar crystal rifles may not be as good as the ones employed by our mech legions, but they are relatively affordable, compact, efficient and reliable while still retaining a

good amount of attack power. Of course, the government wants to order specialized variants that are more rugged and resistant to damage."

"I see."

It appeared that the Living Mech Corporation had already turned into one of Davute's many military contractors!

Chapter 4689: Giorno's Ridebashers

Although the Living Mech Corporation did not supply as much mechs to the colonial government as the bigger local players, it was undeniable that the Larkinsons offered substantial support.

It would have been nice if Ves became aware of these activities much earlier, but that was the downside to delegating a lot of decisions to other people.

The Larkinsons working in the Marketing Department, the Relations Department and the Production Department had all made important policy decisions on their own without thinking whether Ves had any objections to their proposals.

Although the government not only paid for all of the mechs at full price if they were delivered on time, it also made sure to supply all of the necessary raw materials needed to complete the large orders!

As such, he would have probably assented to these public contracts anyway, but he should have been the one to have the final say!

His wife merely crossed her arms when she heard his futile complaints.

"You are suffering from a bad case of tunnel vision again, Ves. You always fixate far too much on individual projects that you wouldn't have paid attention to even if someone brought up this matter to you. I believe that your assistant Gavin Neumann may have addressed this matter to you several months ago. You must have signaled your approval without paying full attention to the matter at hand."

That sounded a lot more plausible than Ves wished.

"You may be right, honey. I guess I need to pay more attention to this boring stuff from now on. Now that there are more indications than ever that a war is about to break out, our clan needs to be more mindful on how to navigate the worsening political landscape."

As much as Ves enjoyed a tour through his company's flagship store, this was not the principal reason why he thought it was worthwhile to pay a visit to this location.

His real purpose was to connect with his clients and customers. It had been far too long since he paid any attention to his customers on a more personal level.

It was not just about himself either. He purposefully brought his children along because he wanted them to get up to speed on how his customers utilized his living mechs and what they thought about their features!

Ves and his family eventually retired to a well-furnished room used to entertain VIPs and sat down on the comfortable and roomy couches.

Soon enough, the store manager brought in the first regular customer that he selected with great care.

The middle-aged woman wore a uniform that marked her as a mech officer from one of the many mercenary outfits headquartered in Davute.

The woman clearly felt nervous and excited, but she possessed enough control over herself to maintain a formal demeanor.

She saluted to Ves. "It is an honor to be able to meet with you in person, Patriarch Larkinson. I am Salica Yontrus, mech captain and second-in-command of Giorno's Ridebashers."

"Hihihihi!" Andraste giggled as she couldn't hold in her amusement. "Ridebashers! What does that mean!?"

For her part, Captain Yontrus responded with a smile. "There is a long story behind it. I would love to explain it to you, but I think your parents would prefer it if I talk about other topics."

"That is correct." Ves said as he picked up Andraste and sat her down on his lap to keep her in check. "First off, how long ago did your outfit buy its first LMC mech?"

"Oh... that must have been four or so years ago. It happened not too long after we arrived in the Red Ocean." The mercenary officer answered. "When we came, we noticed that the old mechs we brought from the old galaxy are serviceable, but that it would be best if we replaced them with better machines. We started our search here in Davute. We had a clear idea on what we needed. Since we prefer to complete missions on land, we mostly focused on finding good landbound mechs for us to buy. As our name suggests, we like to move quickly, so we also sought mechs that could run at good speeds."

The LMC did not have a large catalog of pure landbound mech models. Its selection was relatively limited compared to the offerings of other established mech companies. This meant that it was not the first choice that came in mind to many mech buyers who wanted to buy a large and varied batch of landbound melee mechs.

Ves continued to hug his second daughter as he asked another question.

"How did you come to consider the products of the LMC?"

"It was a coincidence, really." Captain Yontrus replied. "My boss and I had already spent days researching the mech market and visiting the showrooms of the biggest mech companies in town. We already drafted up a decent list of models that we considered looking into further, but then everything changed."

"What changed?" Marvaine curiously asked as he snuggled up to Clixie.

"Miaow?" The cat echoed.

The mercenary captain waved her arm in a half-circle. "We were walking on the streets when a pair of Planetary Guard mechs flew above our heads. They normally travel in the higher air bands, but for some reason they flew much lower than usual, causing my boss and I to become affected by their glows for the first time. It was... a life-changing experience."

Her eyes misted over as if she was recalling a cherished memory.

There was definitely a greater story behind odd reaction, but Ves didn't pry into this matter. He already had a good idea why Giorno's Ridebashers turned to the LMC.

"So our Pacifier model brought you to this store?"

"Yes." The captain replied. "When we asked around, the locals pointed us to the LMC. That was when we decided to drop our plan and head straight over here to see if all of these living mechs can produce an effect as magical as your Pacifier mechs. When we came in and explored all of the mechs on display... you can't imagine how much your work expanded our appreciation of mechs. We truly felt as if we were looking at giant, living monsters instead of plain metal machines that function like clockwork."

The woman praised the qualities of living mechs a bit more, though Ves had already heard these reasons many times before.

"Tell me about the mech models you decided to order first. Which ones did you go for as a start?"

"Well, your company does not have a lot of different mech models for sale, but it just so happened that we fell in love with the kind of mechs we needed the most. We first

decided to buy your Crystal Lords. As we have mentioned earlier, we need a fast-moving ranged mech that can pose a threat at a distance. Your Crystal Lords have this weird vibe that initially made us feel weirded out, but once we got used to it, we discovered that they make their pilots more attentive and more in tune with their luminar crystal rifles."

"Interesting. Did you buy copies of any other mech models?"

"Yes. We opted to buy a single Monster Slayer. We became attracted by its relative affordability and its excellent kinesthetic design. Anyone who specializes in melee combat can just tell that whoever designed this mech understands real combat. The only fly in the ointment is the fact that it is optimized for greatswords, which we have never used in our mercenary outfit. We were skeptical whether such a large and unwieldy weapon can keep the Monster Slayer mobile and agile enough."

"And?"

"We learned that most of our assumptions were wrong." Captain Yontrus said with a happy expression. "When our melee mech pilots all tried out the single machine we ordered, they fumbled around with the greatsword at first. Yet by the time they got a few hours in, they already became a lot better at wielding this big weapon than at the start. The mech became so popular that everyone was fighting to get a turn to pilot her during live practice sessions!"

Even then, Giorno's Ridebashers managed to resist the calls to purchase additional Monster Slayers until they had proven this unique and quirky mech in actual battle.

The female mercenary officer quickly shifted her story to the first mission where her outfit had to make use of their new purchases.

"So there we were. We had been hired to reinforce a colony that was located further away from Davute on short notice. Our employers told us that they learned information that their colony would get raided by a mech force that sided with Karlach. Something about wanting to burn the settlement down to push back Davute's borders. Our Ridebashers weren't the only mercenary companies that accepted this mission. Hundreds of machines arrived and joined the defense of the colony. One of the mercenary outfits even specialized in static defense. We installed so many heavy anti-air and anti-orbital defenses that any assault from above is doomed to fail."

This was interesting. Ves already figured out that this was probably a border skirmish. In essence, the war between Davute and Karlach had already begun at this time. They just didn't announce it in a grandstanding manner for development reasons.

"Karlach eventually arrived, am I correct?"

A bloodthirsty expression appeared on the mercenary captain's face. "They did. Despite all of the reinforcements on our side, Karlach's mercenary mechs outnumbered ours by at least 5 to 2. We couldn't do much but stick close to the main settlement and rely on its favorable terrain and heavy static defenses to hold out. We couldn't defeat the invaders by ourselves. Our instructions were to hold the line and wait for additional reinforcements from Davute to arrive and drive the invaders away."

Hard fighting ensued. Though Captain Yontrus did not wish to go into too much graphic detail about the fighting, she described how well the new LMC mechs fared compared to their other machines or those from their colleagues.

"The other mercenaries on our side fought well when they were manning the walls, but sheltering them would just give the enemy to bombard us into rubble." She said. "We needed to sortie out and harass their elements further away from the settlement. This required us to approach quickly, strike hard and run away before the surrounding enemy mechs converged and cut off our escape routes. We found that many of the mechs of our rivals were only good at moving quickly or launching powerful attacks, but not both."

"Yours were different."

"Yes, to varying degrees. We found that while our old galaxy mechs could still move as quickly as always, their weapons couldn't overpower the defenses of the enemy machines as well anymore."

"Did you suffer the same problem with the Crystal Lords and the Monster Slayer?"

The captain grinned wider. "No. They are not the strongest, toughest or fastest mechs deployed on the planet, but they are just good enough in each of those areas to beat our opponents. We quickly found that our Crystal Lords can easily outfight other rifleman mechs, especially if the latter utilizes energy weapons. Our sole Monster Slayer on the other hand has turned into a beast in the hands of our best melee mech pilot. We turned it into the centerpiece of our formation."

The strategy of the Ridebashers was simple. Their Crystal Lords restrained the enemy's ranged mechs while their melee mechs mostly focused on blocking the enemy melee units as best as possible.

In theory, this allowed the Monster Slayer to move around wherever it needed to land the killing blows on vulnerable enemy machines!

"It was glorious." The woman spoke as if it was the happiest memory of her life. "The Monster Slayer ran around and evaded a lot of attacks in the process. Each time it attacked an enemy mech from the side or rear with a full swing, its greatsword dealt crippling damage. Either a limb got chopped off or the sword inflicted so much internal

damage that the enemy unit became a lot weaker out of a sudden. Our other mechs easily finished off the damaged machine."

This was the horror of the Monster Slayer! Its sharp and heavy greatsword was such a formidable weapon that a good strike could overcome many defenses in an instant!

"We managed to reach the tipping point quickly. The battle started out even for both sides, but after our Monster Slayer managed to hack at four different enemy melee mechs, our adversary's frontline collapsed. After that, our Monster Slayer pursued and eventually managed to catch up to the enemy's fleeing ranged mechs."

Andraste's eyes lit up as she imagined this amazing fight in her active mind. "You chopped them all up, right!?"

"We did. Without any melee mechs forming any organized position, our greatsword-wielding machine easily struck down one ranged mech after another. We brought back so much salvage and claimed so many lucrative bounties that day that we already decided to spend every MTA credit we earned on ordering as many Monster Slayers and Crystal Lords as possible. That is the battle that started our hardcore fascination for your company's mechs."

This was a gratifying story to hear for Ves. He was happy that his company's products truly made a positive difference in the lives of his customers.

What made him even more satisfied was that he knew that this was not a unique case!

There were many more customers like Giorno's Ridebashers that managed to soar with the help of living mechs!

Chapter 4690: The Life of a Merc

As Ves kept interviewing Captain Salica Yontrus of Giorno's Ridebashers, he kept getting personal and insightful answers on the uses of different LMC mechs.

The woman knew how to tell a good story. The presence of children in the room also caused her to modulate her words and tailor her narrative to make her units sound cooler and more awesome in action.

"So you managed to achieve a 7.3 to 1 takedown ratio for your Monster Slayer mechs?!" Andraste said with astonishment in her childish voice.

"That's right." The mercenary captain bemusedly replied. "It is mainly due to how this mech fits into our system. We know of other outfits that like to use their Monster Slayers as maneuverable frontal battle units. That allows them to take down a lot of enemy

mechs by storm and cause a lot of morale damage to the enemy. However, these mechs also tend to get damaged and destroyed more often, so their kill ratios are a lot lower as a consequence."

"How difficult was it for your mech pilots to get good at fighting with the Monster Slayer?"

"It's a mech that is surprisingly easy to learn for our melee mech specialists. Anyone with a good foundation in swordsmanship can get started on learning how to wield oversized bladed weapons easily enough. It is mastering it that is the real challenge. The Monster Slayer somehow helps with that, but it is ultimately up to the individual pilots themselves to do the hard work. The further they go, the more they need to rely on their own practice and talent to excel. Only our best melee performers have the right to pilot this model. Others are better off piloting knight mechs or other regular machines."

The Monster Slayer's status within Giorno's Ridebashers was similar to the Second Sword within the Swordmaidens. Both machines served as highly effective elite machines that stood out for their amazing potential and high skill ceiling. The more skilled the mech pilot, the more drastic the performance!

This aligned with how Ketis always envisioned her mechs to be used. She explicitly designed the Monster Slayer as a duelist machine where trained and experienced mech athletes could best utilize its advanced movement and attack capabilities on solid ground.

Ves was happy to hear that the Ridebashers managed to make good use of the Monster Slayer model in the field as opposed to a controlled mech arena.

Although this forced the mercenaries to work around several limitations such as its thin and lightweight armor system, the benefits were absolutely worthwhile as long as the mech pilots liked to live dangerously.

From the way that Andraste constantly expressed excitement at the stories about the Monster Slayer, she looked as if she was ready to hop into the cockpit as soon as she became 10 years old and tested her genetic aptitude!

Ves patted the girl that was resting in his arms. "Calm down, pumpkin. The Monster Slayer is a great mech, but it is a more commercial and budget-focused machine. It performs well relative to its production cost and material requirements, but it is not exactly a machine that can easily keep up against the elite mechs deployed by professional military organizations. The Ridebashers mostly fight against other mercenaries and the like, so the opposition is not as fierce."

Captain Yontrus readily admitted this fact. "That is true. We know our limits. I think we will soon be leaving Davute because once total war breaks out, outfits like ours will get

thrown to the meat grinder. No amount of compensation and pensions promised by the government will ever make up for our deaths and material losses."

Mercenaries weren't stupid. Their noses for death were extremely sensitive. Employers needed to offer vastly greater sums of money and other benefits in order to persuade them to put their lives at risk.

It was quite interesting to hear an ordinary mercenary's insights about the upcoming war between Davute and Karlach. Captain Yontrus already fought with the soldiers fighting on the opposite side so she possessed a much more grounded perspective towards this escalating conflict than the usual people that Ves talked to these days.

Aurelia recognized this as well and already began to ask questions to satisfy her own curiosity.

"Are there any differences between the mercenaries hired by Davute and the mercenaries hired by Karlach?"

"We are all the same, so it is hard to see any differences that apply to us both." The mercenary captain replied. "Davute and Karlach have slight differences in how they treat and manage the mercenaries they hire. Davute doesn't pay much in cash, but they offer compensation in different forms such as mechs, phasewater and even land, especially if you sign long-term contracts. A lot of smaller outfits signed up in Davute. As long as they survive, they stand to earn a massive profit."

"What about Karlach?"

"Karlach prefers to work with a smaller number of strong mercenary organizations to ease coordination and limit the chaos. What is special about Karlach is that it is much more willing to promise land, cities, planets or entire provinces depending on how much you are worth. The catch is that much of those territories are currently based in Davute. Only by winning the war will the Karlach mercenaries be able to become the new aristocrats of their colonial state."

Aurelia widened her eyes until they became saucers.

"How... how devious!"

It was an excellent way to motivate mercenary organizations that always wished to start their own colonies but never had the means to do so. By making these promises, the cooperating mercenaries would definitely fight tooth and nail in order to fulfill their dreams!

"Doesn't Davute make these promises as well?" Ves asked.

Captain Yontrus tentatively nodded. "They are available to us as well, but we all get the impression that Davute isn't so eager to pass on so much future territory to mere mercs. I think those snobs have already carved out Karlach's star systems for themselves."

That sounded plausible, though the Davutan rulers would truly regret it if their stinginess caused their side to lose the war!

"I would think that many more mercenaries would flock to Karlach as a consequence, captain." Gloria noted.

"It's not that simple, madame. Sure, it is nice to rule over your own colony, but you need to fight damn hard over it. The biggest fault is that once the war is lost, the Karlach mercs will not only incur a lot of battle losses, but they don't obtain all of the colonial properties they were fighting for. Davute on the other hand is much more willing to pay in cash or in tangible goods that we can pack up and take away whenever we are able to leave."

"Doesn't that make the mercenaries who are fighting for Davute less willing to stand their ground?"

"We will for the right price. If the current batch of mercenaries won't fight, others will come to take their place."

That was the advantage of Davute's mercenary strategy. It was much easier and more straightforward to attract mercenary outfits with generous pay and tangible benefits that they could obtain in a realistic timeframe.

Aurelia asked another insightful question. "Do you care whether Davute will win or lose this war?"

"No." Captain Salica Yontrus immediately replied. "We are only doing our jobs. Davute offers some of the highest rates for mercenary outfits at our level, so we all flock here and do whatever we need to do to earn our keep. The biggest mercenary organizations all have more skin in the game since they have all agreed to become a part of Davute's military establishment in the future, but Giorno's Ridebashers won't be a part of that. This place is only a source of work for us, nothing more."

She sounded cold and callous, but Ves knew that was what true mercenaries were like.

He patted Andraste on the head, eliciting a soft complaint from his cute daughter. "When mercenaries start to care, they are no longer soldiers for hire. They will turn into the pawns of the state."

Captain Yontrus grinned at Ves. "You get it. Mercs like us who do the actual fighting don't care about ideals, statehood, building a stronger power base or forming a new home for all of the people we know back home. It's the bigwigs at the top that worry

about these matters. They're not even treating this as a life-and-death issue. It's all game to them. They treat the Red Ocean as a giant colonial board game where everyone underneath them are disposable chess pieces. No matter which side wins or loses, the players will always survive to play another game."

That was an interesting way to describe the dynamic in the Krakatoa Middle Zone and the rest of the Red Ocean.

"You have an overly cynical view of the rulers of different colonies." Gloriana remarked.

"That's because it's true. Back in the old galaxy, many employers at least put their own lives and wealth at stake. When they lose a war, they often get killed or lose most of their foundation. Here in the Red Ocean, the real owners of Davute and Karlach are the same wealthy bastards who are still safe and sound in the old galaxy. The old money groups from both sides only have to funnel a lot of money, people and stuff in the hopes of conquering lots of colonial territories. As long as the galactic net continues to tie the Milky Way and the Red Ocean together, this dwarf galaxy will continue to be treated as a high-stakes casino by all of the old money parties whose foundations will always remain safe."

That was a heavy statement and one that Ves did not expect to hear from a mere mercenary captain from a rather modest-sized mercenary outfit.

"Did you go into the Red Ocean knowing that you will have to play the role of a pawn?" Ves asked.

Salica Yontrus shrugged. "Most of us already had a good idea what will happen here, but it is not as if the scene here is that much different. We were already risking our lives in the old galaxy, but jobs are harder to come by and don't pay as much. The mercenary industry back home has also grown so stale and stuck in its own ways that it is difficult for us to seek greater benefits."

"So it is better in the Red Ocean?"

"Yes. Here, the old money groups are willing to spend so much to claim their precious phasewater that they are willing to spend their generational wealth in order to grab more star systems. Business is booming, our pay is at least thrice as high as before and we get easier access to newer and more modern toys like your company's fantastic living mechs. If we take part in this game and win, we stand to become richer and powerful than we could ever dream of in the old galaxy. If we lose, we die, simple as that. That's the life of a merc in the Red Ocean."

Mercenaries played a major role in this early stage of the colonization of the Red Ocean. Even the older colonial states such as the Friday Colonies and the Hex Federation had to rely on soldiers of fortune to cover up their weaknesses and buy more time for them to raise more military divisions.

"Thank you for sharing your opinions and teaching us the circumstances of mercenaries like yourself." Ves eventually said as he wanted to wrap up this meeting. "Before you go, do you have any suggestions that you want to make to my mech company and I? What do Giorno's Ridebashers require the most that the LMC currently cannot provide?"

"It would help us a lot if you take landbound mechs more seriously." Captain Salica Yontrus replied as she stood up from her seat. "I get that a lot of important battles are fought in space, but control over planets and defending important installations on land are also important, especially when the threat of getting bombarded in space by huge alien warships disappears."

"We are working on it." Ves said. "Our mech company is still relatively new and we don't have a lot of lead designers in our employ. We have been prioritizing our own clan's needs, and since we mainly fight in space, our design work has been overly biased towards spaceborn mechs. This will change in a decade once we have designed more than enough flight-capable mechs to have a solution in almost every situation."

The mercenary captain nodded and accepted that statement.

"While I am here, I want to say that all of the mercs in my outfit would love it if you can fill up the many gaps in your company's mech coverage. It would be even better if you can create a single mech ecosystem that can help us save money and minimize the space dedicated to storing spare parts and materials."

"We are working on that as well, but that will take more time and a lot more consideration, captain. Quality is extremely important to us so we don't want to rush any of our works and diminish our brand by publishing generic mech designs."

Ves wanted to wait until he became a Senior and developed a more cohesive scheme and framework for the LMC's first comprehensive mech ecosystem.

It needed to be revolutionary and provide unique benefits in order to justify its creation!