

## **The Mech Touch**

### **Chapter 4721: Tailored Incentive Programs**

The Larkinson Clan's delegation became completely stumped.

Aside from Minister Shederin Purnesse who currently looked as if he appreciated President Yenames Clive's masterstroke, Ves and the other Larkinsons looked gobsmacked!

They already received intelligence beforehand that the representatives of Davute had approached various parties within the network of the Larkinson Clan.

It had been difficult to determine what the different parties talked about. At most, Ves only thought that the discussions went no further than exchanging information or making a few minor deals at most.

This was because the visits did not happen frequently. The talks also did not seem to last that long or produce any major ripple effects.

However, Ves had underestimated the power of diplomacy. Yenames Clive was a businessman by nature, and he had invested much of his political capital into gaining the full-blown support of the likes of Patriarch Reginald Cross and Venerable Ark Larkinson!

The future ruler of Davute showcased an excellent understanding of the relevant parties and individuals. Yenames Clive understood that he did not necessarily need to convince the organizations as a whole. He just had to be meticulous about targeting the weak spots of the most powerful and influential personalities among their groups!

In the case of Reginald, it was too easy to lure him into a war by promising to set up as many duels against other Saints as possible.

The self-absorbed ace pilot did not really spend any time thinking about morality, causes or other nonsense. He just wanted to get stronger and become famous in the process!

In that sense, fighting in a major war and getting involved in epic duels against other prominent human heroes was the best way to get what he wanted!

This was a much more attractive prospect to him than pounding alien warships or spending months at a time on traveling through empty star systems or sitting around to explore an abandoned alien ruin.

"Damn Reginald and his one-track mind." Ves cursed.

It would have been much better if Master Benedict Cortez led the Cross Clan. At least the jaded and highly intelligent mech designer possessed enough wits to avoid getting baited into a war that had nothing to do with the Cross Clan as a whole.

As for his dearest uncle, Ves could guess the motivations of Ark Larkinson easily enough.

A good old-fashioned war between two different states sounded right up his alley. Ark had trained to fight in wars for his entire life. It was where he attained his greatest victories, earned all of his glory and pushed him to advance to expert candidate and expert pilot in quick succession.

Just like many other trueblood Larkinsons, Venerable Ark only truly felt at home when he was part of a much greater mech military.

The disciplined structure, the camaraderie, the esprit de corps and the awareness that they were all fighting for a common cause truly appealed to a consummate soldier like Ark.

Aside from that, fighting in a war on behalf of Davute also facilitated the integration of the Larkinson Clan's Davute Branch into the local community and power structure.

If Ark and the Larkinsons under his command made enough notable accomplishments in the war against Karlach, then the side branch he was a part of would definitely be pushed to the forefront among all of the stakeholders of the so-called Davute Project!

Although Ves disagreed with this path to power, he did not deny that it was a viable way to grow an organization. A state possessed an immense amount of territory, wealth and other resources. Pledging one's loyalty and troops in exchange for a share of those goodies might not sound like a bad deal as long as the price was right.

Ves narrowed his eyes. Though it became clear that Davute managed to convince both Patriarch Reginald Cross and Venerable Ark Larkinson to play along, the two weren't complete fools.

They would not have agreed to throw themselves into an impending war that would most assuredly produce a lot of casualties if the compensation wasn't good enough!

"What did you promise to Patriarch Reginald Cross and Venerable Ark Larkinson, exactly?" Ves straightforwardly asked.

"A similar arrangement that I am about to extend to you." Yenames Clive smoothly answered as if he already expected this question. "Our colonial state is willing to reward every group that adds to the strength of our armed forces with a comprehensive compensation package. There are multiple components to the rewards, and everyone is allowed to pick and choose what they desire the most. Think of it as a different version of a merit exchange."

The man gestured to his chief of staff, who projected a list of rewards and added a bit of clarification.

"The most popular and practical reward that we are willing to offer are starships." Reina Kernsk explained. "For every standard-sized mech regiment that you contribute to our defense, we will immediately transfer a single fleet carrier along with enough combat carriers under their control. These starships will remain on loan, but as long as your mech regiment has made reasonable contributions during a war, our state is willing to surrender the ownership of the surviving carriers to the units that have utilized them for years."

"That sounds a little vague." Ves complained.

Madame Kernsk nodded in acknowledgement. "What I have described is our general policy towards military contributors. In actuality, we apply it differently on a case-by-case basis. Every mech regiment is different. The size, cost, features and other parameters of the starships loaned to a mech regiment will depend on the quality, training, strength and presence of high-ranking mech pilots. The stronger the mech unit, the better the fleet carrier and combat carriers we are willing to provide."

"Can you give us an idea of what that looks like?"

"Certainly, patriarch. The Cross Clan has readily agreed to commit an ace mech to our cause. This is one of the greatest forms of help that we can receive from a pioneering organization. As such, we are preparing to hand over one of our best military-grade fleet carriers we have in reserve. On top of that, we have agreed to add a specific provision to the contract that awards his clan with other fleet carriers of similar value for every ace mech he defeats in battle. The Cross Clan is also entitled to receive other rewards and bonuses such as economic subsidies, ownership of territories, access to our full military technologies, phasewater bounties and more."

What a deal!

Davutans knew exactly what they were doing. It was incredibly clever for Yenames Clive and his team to tailor a customized incentive program for every individual group.

The best way for the Larkinson Clan to contribute to the war effort was to design highly influential living mechs for the armed forces of Davute. This was why Yenames Clive

was willing to trade entire fleet carriers to persuade Ves to collaborate on a number of mech design projects.

The Cross Clan had Master Benedict Cortez, but his work and design philosophy weren't as capable of affecting the balance of an entire war. It made no sense for the colonial government to extend the same deal it had formulated for Ves to the Cross Clan.

Instead, the Cross Clan had an asset that the Larkinson Clan did not possess, which was a genuine ace pilot and ace mech that may be relatively new, but had already proven themselves in actual combat!

From the perspective of a colonial state that had scores of shipyards under its sway, it was more than worthwhile to give up one or several military-grade fleet carriers to reinforce Davute's unit roster with additional mech regiments as well as a genuine ace mech!

"What about my uncle Ark?" Ves asked. "What did you do to get him to agree to fight in your war on behalf of your state, Madame Kernsk?"

"He can share the full details of his preliminary agreement with us, but as a high-tier expert pilot with proven command skills, his value is only slightly less than that of a Saint. Given the high-quality mechs and well-trained mech pilots fielded by your clan, each of your mech regiments is worth one moderately valuable military-grade fleet carrier. One of the capital ships will be better in order to reflect the value of Venerable Ark Larkinson."

"That is not all." Yenames Clive spoke up again. "Your uncle possesses an illustrious war record, and it is wasteful to treat him as an ordinary high-tier expert pilot. Venerable Ark Larkinson has responded positively to our proposal to commission him to the rank of mech general. This will enable us to appoint him as the head of a new mech division, where he will enjoy considerable autonomy to lead his troops as he sees fit. The composition of the mech division under his command will ideally be composed of members of the Golden Skull Alliance, though our colonial state is always ready to reinforce any shortfalls with our own mech units."

The Davutans practically rolled out the red carpet for his uncle Ark!

"And what does he and our side branch want in return for these services?"

"Aside from the carrier vessels that we have previously mentioned, Venerable Ark is especially keen on expanding the political clout and the territory of the Davute Branch." Yenames Clive personally answered. "I approve of his ambition. It is always pleasant to work with earnest investors who wish to take greater ownership of a territorial development project. Depending on the war results of his mech division, we are willing to bestow real power to your branch."

"Can you give any concrete examples?"

"Why certainly, patriarch. We may bestow your uncle with a permanent position in our highest military council. We may also transfer ownership and management rights of an entire planet or star system taken from Karlach to your Davute Branch. If Ark Larkinson happens to advance to ace pilot and makes much more significant contributions to our war effort, then we are even willing to award him with an entire province from our conquered territory. It goes without saying that this only applies if we attain a decisive and total victory in the upcoming war."

The colonial government was willing to empower and entrust Ark with a lot of power and responsibility. This was a gutsy and extremely costly move!

Of course, given that Ark was already an expert pilot with a strong reputation for integrity, it was not that difficult to trust his word.

The territories promised by the prospective president also weren't worth as much considering that they would most definitely be taken from the Karlarchs first! These planets and star systems were essentially stolen plunder that Davute could easily divvy up to its many 'investors'.

Ves could see a lot of upsides to these comprehensive arrangements. The mech regiments committed by the Davute Branch and the Cross Clan should ideally stick together as they had already cooperated many times before.

It was also a bit difficult for them to trust their backs to complete strangers. Davute had managed to sign on a lot of opportunistic mercenary outfits whose battle readiness and ability to endure difficult situations may not be up to par.

If anyone got to lead this crucial mech division, Ves would rather entrust command to one of his own clansmen rather than an idiot like Patriarch Reginald or an uncaring stranger such as a commanding officer from the Clive Consortium.

"How many mech regiments has the Cross Clan and our Davute Branch committed so far?" Ves critically asked.

"The final numbers are not finalized as the discussions are still ongoing." Reina Kernsk replied. "For now, it appears to be likely that your Davute Branch and the Cross Clan will put forward two mech regiments each. We already have a clear understanding of the unit composition of the Crosser mech regiments, but the same cannot be said for the mech regiments hailing from your side branch. Your uncle wishes to hold extensive discussions with you and your military leaders, as he believes that many mech pilots, expert candidates and expert pilots of your Larkinson Army may choose to fight in the war under his command if given the choice."

That... actually sounded plausible to Ves.

## Chapter 4722: Invest In Us

After Ves gained enough clarification on the prospective deals that Davute had struck with Patriarch Reginald Cross and Venerable Ark Larkinson, he wondered who else had joined the merry party.

"Are there any other notable individuals and groups that I am acquainted with that have decided to throw their hats into the ring? Did you manage to make inroads with the Adelaides and the Boojays as well?"

Yenames Clive responded with an unhelpful smile. "We are regularly in talks with parties that can field a sizable amount of mechs. The Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family have both expressed varying degrees of interest, but our negotiations with them have not progressed as quickly as we have hoped. Unlike your Davute Branch and the Cross Clan, the aforementioned groups are new to our colony and have yet to establish any significant holdings in our region, so it will take more effort to persuade them to invest in our Davute Project."

That was more informative than Ves thought, but the prospective president had already made it clear that he was not letting go of the future partners of the Golden Skull Alliance either!

The news disrupted much of Ves' future arrangements. He previously thought that his expanded expeditionary fleet could boldly enter the deep frontier and smash aside any opposition by relying solely on brute force!

Ves had to throw that assumption away now that he learned that his expeditionary fleet may be missing out on entire mech regiments as well as a number of crucial high-ranking mechs!

From what it sounded like, Ves could already cross out Patriarch Reginald Cross and a significant portion of the Cross Clan's mech force from his list!

As for his clan, his Davute Branch may be the one that was looking to sign a lucrative agreement with Davute, but it looked as if a lot of strong soldiers and assets from his core mech legions wanted to take part in this circus as well!

"Anyone else?"

"We are already in talks with the Murphy Family to invest in the expansion of their shipbuilding company." Yenames Clive responded. "Once we have concluded an agreement with them, we will help Murphy & Sons double the number of shipyards under its control within a year. Expanding the total shipbuilding capacity of our colonial state is one of our highest priorities for obvious reasons."

"What else?"

"We have opened a secret dialogue with the Hex Federation in order to explore the possibility of holding a mutual exchange between colonial states. Forming a military alliance is out of the question, but the Hexers may be more receptive to trading technologies, strategic materials and military know-how. If our talks progress well enough, we may even be able to persuade the Hexers to send their experienced military officers to our state to serve as our consultants and advisors."

Ves seriously questioned the wisdom of listening to any advice from a Hexer officer, but he believed that the Davutans possessed enough common sense to make their own judgment.

"Is that all or did you miss someone?"

Yenames Clive finally shook his head. "That is all for the time being. We are constantly seeking ways to understand the needs of different groups and open up a dialogue with them in order to conduct a productive and mutually beneficial exchange. In my experience, I am convinced that there are always opportunities to cooperate. We can even negotiate with Karlach in order to prevent the outbreak of violence. We simply choose not to do so as we are unwilling to bear the burden of conceding a war before it can commence."

Ves felt grateful that the prospective president did not mention any more groups around the Larkinsons that the Davutans managed to rope into their upcoming war.

That did not mean that he was happy with the number of partners of the Larkinson Clan that had already been mesmerized by the colonial government!

He frowned deeper and deeper as he became more cognizant of how extensively the colonial government had constricted him and his clan.

"Invest in us, Patriarch Larkinson." Yenames Clive urged. "Join your compatriots and reap the benefits of helping a powerful state come to power. Starships, technology, resources, phasewater and even entire territories are up for the taking. Such opportunities are difficult to come by and can only be found during the early days of colonizing a new region of space."

"You can say that about any colony that is working to form its own state. More and more zones will become available in the Red Ocean over time. I can continue to wait until our clan is ready and willing to play this game."

"That may be true, but since this opportunity is already in front of you, why not take it? You do not even have to bet your entire clan on this partnership. Your expeditionary fleet already has more than enough mechs at its disposal. Transferring a few mech regiments and numerous expert mechs will not drastically reduce the combat strength of



your fleet, but it will allow your clan to diversify its overall development and become one of the more significant founders of our prosperous state, second only to the starting investors such as the Clive Consortium."

Ves was getting overwhelmed by the momentum that President Yenames Clive had formed with his shocking series of announcements. It became more and more difficult for him to keep up a straight mind and shake off the emotional turmoil that was raging in his mind.

He shared a deep look with Minister Shederin Purnesse. The old diplomat and advisor conveyed an urgent signal that called for halting the current dialogue. The Larkinsons needed to take stock of the latest revelations and verify the details by checking up on their sources before making any serious decisions!

There was no way that the Larkinson Clan could make a well-reasoned decision within this charged atmosphere!

Ves abruptly stood up and bowed his head. "My apologies, president, but we have heard enough for one day. We would like to end our talks for this day so that we can deliberate more extensively on the information that we have received. It will take time for us to process what we have learned and decide on our answer to your comprehensive offer."

"Understandable. We will give you all of the time you need to form your decision." Yenames Clive said with a satisfied expression.

The man was anything if not confident, especially after he deployed his well-prepared trap!

Right now, it felt as if Ves had ignorantly blundered into a bear trap that had firmly clamped onto his leg.

Not only did the trap hurt his leg a lot, it also kept his body stuck in the same place!

No matter how much Ves attempted to drag himself away from this precarious location, there was no way he could escape this targeted trap!

As such, Ves did not exactly have any good feelings left towards Davute.

Though he understood that President Yenames Clive had personally come in order to demonstrate how sincere he was and how far he was willing to go to gain the cooperation of the Larkinson Clan, nobody liked being plotted against.

Ves still had to keep up appearances, though. He dutifully approached the future ruler and shook hands while maintaining a pleasant smile on his face.



They chit-chatted for a few minutes on a few trivial topics, but Yenames Clive still had other appointments on his agenda.

"Please deliberate as long as you want." The older gentleman smiled. "Once your clan is ready to issue a formal reply to our latest offer, my chief of staff here will represent our colonial government in any subsequent talks. I hope that you will see the wisdom of working together with us to build a shared legacy in the Krakatoa Middle Zone. In this way, no matter how far your travels take you, your clan will always have a strong and welcoming safe harbor to return to if there is any need for one. We are not asking you to become an indoor cat, but even the most adventurous outdoor cat occasionally needs the shelter of a proper home."

"Meow!" Lucky nodded his head in agreement as he casually hovered over everyone's heads.

"Oh, shut up you." Ves hissed towards his cat.

After President Yenames Clive, his team and his large procession of guards finally made their way out of the Cat Nest.

The complex became a lot more relaxed now that the powerful officials no longer put the Larkinson Clan in the spotlight.

It went without saying that many arms of the Larkinson Clan became incredibly busy in the next few hours!

The Black Cats, the personnel working for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Branch Director Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and many more Larkinsons were frantically trying to confirm the latest news!

They also sought to obtain further information in an attempt to forestall any future surprises that the Davutans might spring onto the Larkinsons.

Ves decided to do his part by seeking out his dearest uncle in person!

"Ark!" He shouted as he entered the underground mech hangar where the Travon Exine was currently stationed.

"Meow!" Lucky echoed as he rested in Ves' arms.

The Garlen-developed expert mech was a pretty powerful machine, though it was nothing special by Red Ocean standards. His wife still had to get around to planning a hasty refit of the high-tier expert hybrid mech in order to give Ark a much better chance of winning any battles in the near future.

"Ves." The older Larkinson calmly spoke as he turned his attention away from the gaggle of Larkinson mech pilots that he had been lecturing. "I see you have just concluded a meeting with the government."

"I did. They revealed a lot of unexpected news to me, of which one of them happens to pertain to you and our Davute Branch!"

Ark let out a sigh and waved his hand to dismiss his subordinates. "I suppose you have come to hear my account, is that correct?"

"It's a start."

"Then let us head somewhere more private so that we can hold a frank discussion."

They moved to the nearest meeting room in the underground complex that had been built to hold highly confidential briefings.

Ves did not blindly assume that the entire place was free of bugs. He let go of Lucky so that the gem cat could quickly sweep through the modest chamber with his advanced senses.

"Meow meow meow."

After eating a few microscopic bugs that had somehow evaded the latest routine security sweep, Ves finally settled down on a plain metal seat and expressed his displeasure.

"I hear you have been meeting with new people as of late."

Venerable Ark Larkinson shrugged and smiled at his brother's son. "I am new to this port system. Many colonists have made their home here, and the sheer amount of visitors who have come to trade and do business is astounding. I have already received dozens of invitations to join a diverse array of pilot clubs that gather many different expert pilots together. I can easily meet with a dozen different respected warriors and soldiers every day."

"I am not talking about your social life, Ark. I hear you have been talking to a woman who hails from a much greater and more official institution. I don't know how it goes in the old Larkinson Family, but please remember that we have a chain of command in our clan. You are supposed to direct those kinds of speakers to Larkinsons who are empowered to speak on our behalf. In your case, that is Branch Director Raymond-Billingsley-Larkinson. He is the only man who can make major diplomatic decisions on behalf of his branch. I entrusted him with this power because I know he wouldn't pull off a stunt like you have just done."

Surprisingly enough, Ark did not show any degree of contrition.

"Is there a problem with what I have done, Ves? Because I do not think there is an issue. Do not forget that while I have recently resigned from my position in the Larkinson Family, I have yet to sign all of the paperwork that formally finalizes my entry into your Larkinson Clan. I am currently a private individual and I have the right to speak for myself. I understand that you are upset at my actions, but just because you are family does not mean you control me. Please respect my boundaries and allow me the freedom to choose my own path in my life."

"..."

Ves had a feeling that talking to Ark was going to be a lot more troublesome than he anticipated this time!

## **Chapter 4723: Defending A New Home**

As much as Ves disliked confronting Ark on an unpleasant matter, they had to do what was necessary to clear the air between them. They could not afford to remain divided in opinion.

Ves crossed his arms and broached the matter directly. "I thought we had an understanding, uncle. You would join our clan and either hole up in the Davute Branch or join me in my expeditions in order to seek your opportunity to break through in battle. In the meantime, I would start work on a new expert mech design project that will replace your current expert mech with a supermachine that is far more powerful than the initial version of the Mars. What happened?"

Ark did not immediately answer. He looked up for a few seconds as if he needed to think on how to phrase his answer.

"Nothing happened." The older Larkinson eventually replied. "I was approached by a representative of the colony and heard out a generous proposal that just happens to fulfill all of my needs, including the ones that I was not aware of until recently. Before this meeting, I already chose to settle into the Davute Branch for several years. Joining you on your expedition makes little sense when it takes at least a year or two for me to receive your promised living expert mech. I thought I may as well reside on this planet and help the members of the Larkinson Family integrate into the clan."

"Why didn't you stick to that, then? Why throw yourself into another group's war?"

"Because it is no longer someone else's war to us, Ves. From the moment I chose to join the Davute Branch, I am also slated to become a citizen of Davute. In other words, this state will soon become my new home."

"The Larkinson Clan is supposed to be your new home. It is not a fully functioning state as of yet, but it is getting there. Davute is only a supply point in my perspective."

"I am sorry, Ves, but I have to disagree with you on this." Ark replied. "Citizenship is a serious matter. It bestows me with both rights and responsibilities. There is a universal expectation that the strong and the capable of any state must step up and come to its defense. Since I am more than able to fight in a war between different states, I feel obligated to lend my considerable skills to my new home state."

Bang!

Ves slammed his fist against the metal table in frustration! "Our clan also needs your considerable skills, you know! What happened to the notion of putting family first?! What you are doing is nothing less than favoring a stranger's fight over the legitimate needs of our clan!"

His arguments did not sway the expert pilot.

"That is where I have to disagree with you again, kiddo." Ark calmly responded as he took no notice of his nephew's outburst. "While I may be in limbo at the moment, I am constantly keeping the best interests of the Larkinsons in mind. Mind you, that does not necessarily equate to your personal interests."

"Are you just saying that in order to excuse your break in policy with me, or are you actually being serious about this, uncle?"

Ark shook his head. "Ves, Ves, Ves. You should know that I would never joke around serious matters like these. As I have stated earlier, I take my responsibilities extremely seriously. While I am looking to serve Davute as one of its new citizens, I have not forgotten my obligations to our fellow Larkinsons. I merely believe that I can best serve both of their interests by taking the generous offer extended by the government."

Ves let out a sound in frustration. "You will have to explain that to me, because from what I am seeing, your decisions will take away valuable combat assets from our expeditionary fleet."

"That is a one-sided characterization of what will happen. Let me give you the other side considering that you have conveniently neglected to mention it. First, I am bringing in more carrier vessels and more particularly fleet carriers into our clan. This is extremely important as you well know. It is almost impossible to buy them on the open market as every state is mainly concerned about deploying them into a war that will determine their future status in the Red Ocean. The best way to get more ships in this climate is to promise to help a state fight its war."

This was a simple win-win arrangement. Davute would get to deploy more forces and increase its chances of winning the war while the Larkinson Clan hopefully retained a lot of carrier vessels at the end!

"There are two flaws in the scenario that you have sketched." Ves responded in a gruff tone. "First, there is no guarantee that Davute can win the war at all. From the intelligence that I have read, Karlach is gearing up to be a considerably more militaristic state. The armed forces of Karlach will certainly not be weak and will certainly exhibit greater unity and coordination against the scattered troops of Davute."

Uncle Ark shrugged his shoulders. "The same has been said of the differences between the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony. You know very well who won the war between the two states in our home star sector."

"Pff!" Ves snorted. "This is hardly a valid comparison! There are way more circumstances that have affected the outcome of that stupid war. If you want to bring in the conflict between the Fridaymen and the Hexers as an example, then think about this. Despite siding with the Hexers in the Komodo War, all my clan and I have done is to provide assistance by remote in the form of fulfilling mech design commissions and giving them my moral support. When the Hexadric Hegemony eventually fell, I remained safe and largely unaffected because I did not accept the invitation of the Hexers to settle my clan in their doomed state."

Of course, a more pertinent reason why Ves vehemently rejected any notion of getting further entangled with the Hexadric Hegemony was because he disliked and disagreed with the Hexers and their original culture with a passion!

Ark leaned forward and assumed a serious expression. "I understand what you are trying to say, but I am not as distrustful towards states as you, Ves. I sympathize with your bad experiences, but not everyone is at ease with pursuing a nomadic and rootless lifestyle that you are trying to propagate."

"You are anchoring yourself to a planet! You are making it harder for you to flee and escape doom in a galaxy that is filled with dozens of races that can commit genocide at a much greater scale than the sandmen back in our old star sector!"

This agitated the powerful force of will of the Larkinson expert pilot!

The discussion had reached a point where his conviction was at stake!

"If the aliens come to take away our homes, I will fight to defend the lives and livelihoods of everyone rather than forsake my duty and abandon the citizens that look up to its protectors in their time of need. Some people can only feel comfortable when they are part of a large, fixed community and when they have a life and family on a large and expansive planet. They desire this future so much that they are willing to fight

for it. To you, it may seem stupid, but to individuals such as myself, this is what gives meaning to our lives."

The two Larkinsons possessed diverging perspectives. Their life experiences were too far apart from each other, causing them to develop widely different opinions and preferences.

The problem was that neither of them were the kind of heroes that conceded more easily than ordinary people. It was hard for them to give ground.

Seeing how serious and determined Ark had become about fighting for Davute, Ves was afraid that his uncle might break with the Larkinson Clan if he became stymied.

Ves took a deep breath and tried to rein in his anger and frustration.

No matter how amiable Ark behaved most of the time, he was still an expert pilot, and one that was close to becoming an ace pilot at that. This meant that he shared all of the common flaws of high-ranking mech pilots, which was that they were incredibly confident and self-righteous about their decisions!

Trying to force them to change their minds when they were set on an issue was nearly impossible. The best way to deal with them was to accept their own choices and try his best to work around their stubbornness.

"Fine." Ves spat out. "Go fight in this petty war if that is what you want. I am not going to play along with it, though. I am still preparing to resume my Trailblazer Expedition. There is an entire dwarf galaxy out there that is still untouched by humans. It would be remiss for me to miss all of the opportunities to explore the unique curiosities that the new frontier has to offer. I will be taking my starships and troops with me as well."

His uncle crossed his arms and smirked. "Not all. The Davutans should have told you already that I need to bring my own troops to the fight. I have already scoped out the rank-and-file mech pilots of the Davute Branch that are ordinarily assigned to defend our holdings on this planet. I think I can rally at least a thousand or so volunteers to fill up the positions of the two Larkinson mech regiments that will fall under my command. I still need 3000 more mech pilots along with tens of thousands of support personnel to fill up the remaining vacancies. I hope to be able to borrow them from your Larkinson Army."

Ves felt sick to his stomach. "No! Those soldiers are mine!"

"Those soldiers are not yours, Ves. Not truly." Ark shook his head in disapproval. "They are servants of the clan. They have their own wants and needs. Have you ever approached them lately and polled what they think about your current expeditions? Not all of your precious pilots are happy with the current direction of the clan. When given the choice between taking part in your expeditions and taking part in the upcoming war,

I estimate that at least 15 percent of our troops are more than willing to fight by my side."

"What?!"

That was too much! Ves thought he had made certain that his clansmen learned the futility of taking part in petty squabbles between rival states. There was no reason for them to die in what amounted to a simple turf war!

However, for all of Ves' opinions, even he could be wrong at times!

"You are a fantastic mech designer, Ves, but you do not understand mech pilots like I do. I used to be like them. We trained for this, you know. There is comfort in fighting in a war that we have prepared for since the first day we stepped into the mech academy. Aside from that, the more structured battles between mech forces also gives us more consistent opportunities for us to grow our strength and break through in battle. This is not only important to myself, but also the other expert pilots in your clan."

"You talked to my expert pilots about taking part in the war?!"

"I have told you before, they are not 'your' pilots. They are members of the Larkinson Clan. They have the freedom to choose to either remain in the expeditionary fleet, or transfer to the Davute Branch. Numerous expert pilots I have spoken to have taken serious consideration on doing the latter if that is what it takes for them to put down their obligations to the expeditionary fleet and join me on my attempt to build a greater future in Davute!"

"...I think I am going to feel sick."

## **Chapter 4724: Splintering**

Ves felt betrayed!

The expert pilots that he had painstakingly nurtured and showered with powerful expert mechs no longer wanted to help him out on his expeditions.

Instead, they thought about joining the Davute Branch so that they could fight the Karlachs in order to increase the profits of major investors of Davute like the Clive Consortium!

"These ungrateful bastards." He grumbled under his breath. "What are they thinking? At least you won't abandon me for another Larkinson, right Lucky?"

"Meow~"



It turned out that after Lucky had swept the room clear of bugs, he had slowly drifted over to Venerable Ark.

Right now, the lazy gem cat was luxuriating in the ministrations performed by the expert pilot!

The man knew just how to scratch Lucky's head!

Ves palmed his face.

"Your fleet has grown too big, Ves." Ark straightforwardly told his nephew. "Many mech pilots do not feel they can make a meaningful difference. This is especially the case when they are fighting against extremely powerful alien battleships. On top of that, they often get overshadowed by the abundant amount of expert mechs that are crowding the same battlefield. In turn, your expert pilots possess increasingly less agency with the appearance of Saints. With the impending expansion of the Golden Skull Alliance, your expeditionary fleet will gain two ace mechs at once."

"We will also be losing the Mars to this blasted war."

"That still leaves you with a net positive of two ace mechs, Ves. Most pioneering fleets already make do with just one, you know. What matters is that expert mechs matter less in your expeditionary fleet these days. Expert pilots can gain many more opportunities to test their mettle when they are fighting against their counterparts from Karlach."

Ves looked skeptical. "Won't the same situation repeat itself? If they join the mech division helmed by you and Patriarch Reginald Cross, they will still get overshadowed by the Mars."

"Not necessarily." Ark shook his head. "You do not have a full understanding on how large wars are waged at this level. Once the war breaks out, multiple war theaters will open up where the fighting will take place at many points in space and on land. Ace mechs such as the Mars cannot always babysit the mech division it is embedded in. Mech regiments and mech battalions may be separated by tens of kilometers or hundreds of kilometers on a planet with rough terrain. Isolated mech units and any expert mechs attached to them will have to depend on their own. Reinforcements may take precious minutes to arrive."

Ves could imagine how these sorts of deployments could give mech pilots more chances to excel. Low-level flashpoints and skirmishes often provided much better stages for weaker pilots to outfight their opponents and turn the tide.

"What about the ace mechs? Are they just going to hover around?"

"Many times, that is the case. They are trump cards and should not be thrown into a battle lightly. Ace mechs are generally used to cover a wide region and keep enemy ace

mechs in check. They will only intervene when it is necessary and if there are assurances that they will not be thrown into a losing situation. As battle hungry as Reginald may be, even he should know the value of restraint. His father got baited into an ambush, so he should not be prone to making the same mistake."

Ves seriously doubted that. Reginald seemed a lot more likely to bull his way into an obvious trap! After all, President Yenames Clive had played him like fiddle!

Well, it was not as if Ves had to bother with this anymore.

Once Patriarch Reginald and his Mars left the expeditionary fleet, it was no longer up to Ves to clean up their messes. That would become Ark's job from that point onwards.

After a bit more clarification, Ves understood why certain mech pilots and expert pilots in the Larkinson Army wanted to throw themselves into the upcoming war.

It all came down to accelerating their growth and breaking past their bottlenecks. Davute promised to give them a higher frequency of actual battles, smaller and more engaging missions as well as familiar human opponents.

All of these factors were much more conducive to the growth of mech pilots that tended to thrive in times of war.

Expert pilots ultimately sought to become stronger. While they also valued loyalty and duty, they were not devoid of ego and selfishness.

In actuality, they could be more selfish than many ordinary people!

It was just that nobody could distinguish the truth when they were kept happy. It was only when they thought they could do better elsewhere that they started to become troublesome!

Ves realized that for a long time, he had done a good job at meeting the needs of his growing expert pilots. He granted them opportunities to fight serious battles on occasion and he also fulfilled their desire to obtain powerful expert mechs.

"Do you understand now, Ves?" Ark softly spoke up again. "If you truly care about your expert pilots, then you should give them the chance to contribute to the Larkinson Clan in a different manner. Let them choose their own way forward. Your main fleet already has enough expert mechs as it is, especially when we consider that you are working on adding three new expert mechs to your lineup. I think you can manage with four or five fewer expert mechs."

"You are asking for too much, uncle! You're talking about taking away more than half of the currently active expert mechs of the Larkinson Army!"

"Will your fleet be able to tell the difference when it is operating under the direct protection of the Jedda Sandivar and the Royal Jeem?"

"..."

"Thought so." Ark smiled as he scratched Lucky under the chin in just the way the cat preferred!

"Meow meow~"

Though Ves still had to verify Ark's claims about his mech pilots, there was no way his uncle would lie about such a matter.

A part of Ves had already acknowledged that the clan and expeditionary fleet had grown too large to stay together all of the time.

It simply wasn't practical or advantageous anymore to put every egg in a single moving basket.

The rapid rise of the Davute Branch reflected the unstoppable tendency for the clan to splinter over time.

That didn't necessarily mean that the Larkinsons were completely separating from each other. Ark had already made it clear that he had no intention of leaving the clan unless it was truly necessary.

The clan just became too big to keep everyone happy by keeping them in a single place. Life inside a fleet was much different from life on a planet.

The larger the population of the clan, the more people emerged who developed a rejection of the life of a nomad.

In that sense, the local branch served its intended purpose. Uncle Ark merely came in and sought to elevate its status and weight in Davute.

Once it became clear that Ves would have to let go of a bunch of mech pilots unless he took extreme measures, he let go of his frustration and made peace with this development.

"I always expected the pivotal figures of our clan to diverge in the future." He sighed. "I just didn't expect it to happen so soon and that a stupid grudge match between two colonial states would be the catalyst to this event."

They talked more frankly after that. Ves could sense and respect the determination of his uncle. If fighting for Davute made him happy, then so be it. The Larkinson Clan still

stood to gain a lot of benefits from the colonial state by taking a more active part in the war.

"Can you tell me the expert pilots who are thinking about ditching the Trailblazer Expedition so that they can play soldier?"

"I can't tell you that, Ves. The expert pilots themselves haven't made up their minds as this is still a recent development. They still need more time and information to make an informed decision that has major implications on their future career. While I have a decent idea on which Larkinson expert pilot will ultimately go over, I owe it to them to respect their privacy."

"I see. I hope you at least don't pull away anyone crucial to my expeditionary fleet, Ark. I would like to keep Venerable Davia Stark, Venerable Joshua Larkinson, Legion Commander Casella Ingvar and Venerable Isobel Kotin. They can all play useful roles in battles against formidable alien warfleets even if there are already ace mechs on our side."

"I think you will be satisfied for the most part." Ark reassured his nephew with a smile. "From what I have gathered in the brief moments I was able to chat with them, Davia isn't interested in fighting ordinary opponents. She longs to challenge the strong. Joshua is an earnest kid who is fanatically loyal to you. Casella is best employed by your main fleet to ensure that both of our groups both enjoy the services of a command expert pilot. I do not know much about Isobel, but her specialization is much more effective when fighting against vulnerable alien warships."

The other expert pilots such as Venerable Rosa Orfan and Venerable Vincent Ricklin would probably feel much more at home in a battle against normal human mech forces.

Ves could already see that by recalling how much the expert pilots enjoyed themselves when they sparred against their counterparts during the Battle of Pima Prime.

The Sundered Phalanx units in that important Fridayman port system served as an excellent benchmark and growth engine for the Larkinson Army.

Though Ves still felt somewhat peeved at the thought of depriving the expeditionary fleet of lots of mech pilots, expert pilots and an ace pilot as well as their associated mechs, the ones he had left should be more than sufficient to defeat most threats that he might encounter in the frontier.

"Your clan has long maintained a policy of maintaining a surplus of mech pilots anyway." Ark pointed out. "Even if I take a couple of thousands pilots from your main ranks, your mech legions still have enough reservists on call to fill up the vacancies. At most, your Spirit of Bentheim and your Hammerworks Manufacturing Complex will have to get busy producing replacement mechs."

That hardly sounded like a problem considering that mech production was the Larkinson Clan's strong suit!

As Ves and Ark relaxed in each other's presence, the latter continued to pamper Lucky while the former asked a more personal question.

"Do you intend to use Davute as a way to fill the gap created by our forced departure from the Bright Republic?"

"...That is a good question, Ves." The expert pilot slowly replied. "I honestly cannot give you an answer yet. I need to see more of Davute and what its government is trying to build. I need to fight alongside its soldiers and observe how much they believe in the colonial state that they are risking their lives for. I need to wait and see whether the citizens develop a love and attachment to their new homes. It is anything but certain whether Davute can pass all of my tests."

"And what if it does?"

"Then I shall do my best to follow, no, exceed the example set by the Larkinson Ancestor."

Ves threw a dubious look at his uncle. "I hope that you will learn from his many mistakes. The man was strong in his own right at the time, but he and his descendants ultimately ended up getting used as glorified cannon fodder over many generations."

"I am not blind, and I know our family's history better than you do. I am not so naive, and there are enough people around us to warn us of any impropriety."

"You don't very concerned."

Venerable Ark grinned. "One of the lessons that I have learned over the years is that strength is the ultimate variable that determines the treatment that you receive. If I am able to fight hard enough and receive the powerful expert mech that you have promised, I am convinced that I will be able to undergo my second apotheosis. Once I become an ace pilot, Davute shall never misuse us. This I can guarantee!"

## **- Chapter 4725: Aurelia's Political Acumen |**

### **Chapter 4725: Aurelia's Political Acumen**

"I think your uncle is doing what is best." Gloriana said.

"Not you too." Ves groaned.

"Regardless of whether his gambit succeeds or fails, at least he is broadening the foundation of the Larkinson Clan. Compared to many other pioneering organizations, ours has always refrained from building a large footprint on a planet or in a colonial state. That may not make much of a difference in the short term, but it will cause us to fall behind to other pioneers who have earned a lot more state support through their actions."

Ves, Gloriana and their children had settled into the living room of the Royal Mansion. They had just finished dinner and chose to settle down in order to play and relax.

Aurelia sat on her mother's lap. She paid close attention to the frontier news broadcast projected in the middle room even as Gloriana combed and braided the little girl's hair.

Meanwhile, Andraste stood a bit further away and threw a glowing and blinking ball to the other side of the room.

"C'mon, Lucky. Fetch my ball for me, just like I trained you to do. I will give you extra cuddles if you get it back within three seconds!"

"Meow..."

The gem cat directed an unamused look at the red-headed girl and promptly turned his body around as he laid on a soft and plushy hovering cat bed.

"Miaow!"

In contrast, Clixie showed a lot more enthusiasm. She raced off and bit the colorful ball before heading over to Andraste and dropping it before the girl's feet.

"Miaow miaow miaow~"

"Oh, I know you're a good girl, but it is Lucky that needs to be trained."

As Andraste futilely tried to get Lucky to move, her younger brother was playing with his latest toy.

The small child looked fascinated at the hammer that looked to be a little large in his undersized hands. After he studied it for a moment, he carefully held it in both of his arms and began to swing the hammer against the latest Mekanos that he had assembled.

Thunk.

"Huh?" Marvaine's expression morphed in confusion.

Dnk.

Pmpth.

Trkk.

He tried to strike the strange hammer against his Mekanos in multiple different angles, but no matter what he did, the impact sounds were nowhere close to his desired result!

"Why can't I make it sound nice?"

When his father had pulled out the Hammer of Melody and used it to give a firm tap onto the Mekanos, the sound produced upon impact was beautiful!

How could his father make it so easy to generate a harmonic sound? Marvaine became determined to figure out the secret behind the funny hammer!

Of course, Ves knew better than most people how difficult it was to wield the Hammer of Melody in the correct way.

Without harvesting the deep expertise and understanding of acoustic resonance from Master Blacksmith Rogha Dunnerholm, Ves would have never been able to create a song with the hammer no matter how many years he spent on studying its properties!

He already came up with several new plans to use the latest batch of trade secrets that he had acquired from the dwarf to enhance the mech design projects in subtle ways.

Ves would have loved to go further in depth on this latest curiosity if not for the fact that the latest developments concerning Davute completely disrupted his mood!

He still found it hard to stomach that some of his Larkinsons and allies colluded with the Davutans in order to form an agreement to fight in the upcoming war!

Even if his wife expressed sympathy towards Ark and his like-minded Larkinsons!

"You need to get over your hard feelings and think about this situation from a dispassionate point of view." She told him as she continued to braid her oldest daughter's hair. "Right now, our clan has expanded its population to 500,000 clansmen, of which the majority reside in our growing fleet while the remainder have chosen to live a more steady life in Davute. Does it matter if tens of thousands of them decide that they want to follow a different plan? You still have many clansmen left who largely agree with your approach and ideals."

Ves sighed once again. "It's not as simple as that. Sure, I can tolerate the defection of ordinary clansmen. Even the transfer of several thousand mech pilots is not that big of a deal as we have maintained an ample pool of reservists and can always put a bit of effort into recruiting more. What I truly have an issue with is the separation of key talents and assets."



"Ark is right about them, Ves. I am familiar with the needs and wants of our expert pilots, and I too have made the same observations as him. Even without your uncle as a catalyst, I have already predicted that the most restless and dissatisfied among our demigods would have approached you to request a transfer sooner or later. It is better to let this process take place in a more systematic fashion."

It was indeed better to let his clansmen fight under the command of a competent and battle-proven commander such as Venerable Ark. The fact that he was a true-and-true Larkinson also made Ves reassured that his people would end up in good hands.

His true problem was with Davute.

"I don't like how President Yenames Clive and his administration has exploited the openings of my clan and pushed us in this direction." Ves confided to his wife. "It is one thing for the colonial government to approach me from the front door and discuss my options in advance. It is another thing for Davute to go through the back door of my house and mess around with my stuff without asking for my permission!"

Aurelia took her attention away from the news broadcast and became more interested in her father's complaints.

"Are you angry, papa?"

"Yes. Maybe. It's complicated, dear."

Gloriana patted her daughter's head. "Your father is upset that other people had the temerity to do what was best for them all. He thinks there should be no question that he should be the one to make all of the decisions. Just because he is the patriarch of our clan doesn't mean he is allowed to steer people's lives to this degree. If Ark and many other soldiers want to fight in the war and help the Davute Branch become a major power in the colonial state, then let them. They are fighting for a good cause and they will ultimately help our clan become much stronger and more diversified if they do well in the war."

Their daughter looked impressed. "Ohh..."

"You need to think more critically, Aurelia. Your mother may be right, but she is making the mistake that many people make, which is that she is only looking at the more attractive side of the equation. There are always winners and losers in wars. If Karlach overruns Davute, all of the fighting and all of the sacrifices will come to nothing. Ark and the Larkinsons who followed him into the breach may get buried on a foreign battlefield."

His words caused his oldest daughter to wake up. Aurelia furrowed her brows as she harnessed her developing analytical mind to process the information.

"We already have lots of family." She said in an adorably serious and professional-sounding voice. "If we put all of them in our fleet, then if we suffer a single accident, our entire clan will be gone. The side branch in Davute may survive, but without the deterrence and protection of our main forces, the clansmen won't be able to protect all of our assets in this star system and beyond. Our rivals may even decide to get rid of them entirely!"

That sounded like a remarkably mature and realistic answer!

It would not be surprising to hear such a response from the likes of his advisors, but Ves found it jarring to hear that from a girl who looked young enough to be playing with dolls instead of serious political dossiers!

"So what do you think we should do in order to reduce this vulnerability?" Ves gently asked.

Aurelia became more animated and started to gesture with her cute little arms.

"We make the Davute Branch stronger! It needs to be strong enough to support itself without needing to rely on our fleet anymore. If this side branch increases its cooperation with the local government and is able to earn enough merits during the war, it can exchange them for lots of power and territory! This way, both our fleet and our side branch can support our entire clan by themselves if necessary."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I get what you mean. You want to turn the Davute Branch into a strong pillar of our clan. If our main fleet ever suffers an accident, our Larkinson lineage can still continue through the Davute Branch that is left over. If this side branch ever gets affected by trouble provoked by the colonial state, then our fleet which should be far away will remain unaffected."

Seeing the situation from this angle made it a lot more palatable to accept the splintering of his clan.

Although Ves mainly cared about the state of his fleet for obvious reasons, he did not want his legacy to be erased due to his own hubris and mistakes.

It would be better if he did not drag down his entire clan in the process if he ever encountered a calamity on his journey.

"We can also execute two different development strategies at once." Little Aurelia continued her analysis. "Papa can continue to lead our main fleet on different expeditions in order to seek more windfalls that can quickly make our entire clan stronger. This is a development strategy that is characterized by high risks and high rewards. Great-uncle Ark can take over our Davute Branch and seek ways to grow it by cooperating with Davute and building up a portfolio of territorial claims and business

holdings. Since a state can protect our side branch from many threats, this development strategy is characterized by lower risks and lower rewards."

This way, the clan would be able to have its cake and eat it too.

"What a marvelous argument, my dear!" Gloriana praised her daughter and hugged the girl tighter against her body! "I am so proud of you, Aurelia. Our clan will be in good hands when you grow up. If you are already capable of doing this, then I can hardly imagine how much better you will do than your dummy of a father in a decade!"

"Hihihih!"

Ves was just as impressed as his wife.

The problem was that he had become horrified as well.

There was a point where young geniuses exceeded the realm of praiseworthy. If their performance became too high, then they started to barge into the territory of a monster!

He was already aware that Aurelia had become unnaturally smart. He was accustomed to testing her and teaching her about different social and political issues.

However, Aurelia's recent intensive tutoring had accelerated her mental development even more, causing her to look outright alien as she spat out a high-level analysis from her underaged mouth!

Still, Aurelia was his daughter, so his love and affection ultimately trumped his apprehension.

"So what do you think of the views espoused by our girl?" Gloriana asked Ves.

"I think she makes a lot of good points." He admitted. "I guess it is not that bad of an idea to let Ark lead the Davute in his own way. Our clan would in effect split in half and be run as two concurrent branches. While our fleet will always be considered the main branch, I do not mind it if the Davute Branch seeks to become a regional powerhouse in this colonial state."

"So you are truly willing to share power with your uncle Ark?"

"I don't quite see it that way. It is more correct to say that I am willing to grant Ark enough autonomy to make his own choices without receiving too much interference from our fleet. In the future, our clan can take this parallel development strategy a step further. We can set up similar branches in the Magair Middle Zone and the Torald Middle Zone, put strong and visionary leaders in charge of them and let them do whatever they want. Whether they end up building an extensive business alliance or

find a way to take over a colonial state by displacing its original rulers, it will all be fine as long as they don't carry their problems back to my fleet!"

## **Chapter 4726: Difficult to Stomach**

Ves had an entire night to sleep and think over Aurelia's suggestions.

The parallel development strategy that she espoused to him last evening already lined up with his prior thoughts.

He already developed a desire to establish lots of branches in as many zones of the new frontier as possible.

The difference was that he did not really pay much attention to the size and scope of those branches.

Whether those branches amounted to a single rented office on a rural planet or a massive industrial empire in a more developed colony, their importance did not fundamentally change in his eyes.

This was because Ves always held the psychological expectation that his main fleet would always maintain unquestionable primacy over all of its branches.

By concentrating a large quantity of elite mechs and mech pilots as well as maintaining a firm hold over all of the expert mechs, the fleet would always remain synonymous with his clan.

That assumption would definitely start to break down once the Davute Branch not only started to field several military mech regiments, but also gained its own expert mechs!

His daughter was right that the main fleet had the mechs and mech pilots to spare for this side branch.

Aurelia was also right about the virtues of pursuing a parallel development strategy.

It just left a bad taste in his mouth that he effectively had little choice in the matter. It was other people that forced this decision onto him and his clan.

As he commiserated with Minister Shederin Purnesse, Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse, General Verle and Director Calabast during a high-level meeting, his advisors showed broad acceptance of this course change.

"As long as we allocate more resources to the Davute Branch, we can transform it into a symbiotic element of the local colonial state." Novilon shared his opinion. "We will need

to implement numerous administrative changes in order to accommodate this development, but in the end our clan will become stronger and more diverse in the end. With the Golden Cat watching over us, we do not have to fear a more permanent split. The different groupings of Larkinsons should always be ready to support each other."

His father Shederin nodded in agreement. "It is similar to the dynamic between the Larkinson Clan and the Larkinson Family. The former had always been stronger than the latter, but due to the unbreakable ties between the two, the clan has always subsidized and supported the much weaker family. We can apply the same strategy between the main fleet and its various branches. Today it is the branches that need the fleet's assistance. Perhaps in a decade from now it is the fleet that requires the aid of the branches."

Calabast — who also happened to be Novilon's spouse — directed her attention towards Ves.

"You feel pissed, right?"

"Wouldn't you feel the same way if you were in my place?"

"That I do, but I would also possess the maturity and logic to understand that the pros outweigh the cons. The issue that you are struggling with is that you have treated the clan and its people too much as your personal possessions. I get it. The clan originally started off this way, but it has grown to the point where its leaders and talents need space and freedom to develop on their own terms. Venerable Ark Larkinson may have different ideas on what the Larkinsons should do, but he can still be trusted to stand up for the Davute Branch and lead its forces in a responsible manner."

Ves crossed his arms and snorted. "Hah! The Larkinson Family under his leadership barely managed to stay afloat! Without the support of our clan, those relatives of mine would have gone under within a year."

"That was because they were out of their element." His spymaster retorted. "People such as Ark Larkinson and the original members of your family are all accustomed to living in a proper state. Once they join the Davute Branch and return to a more familiar life pattern by fighting for the local government, it is highly likely that they will show their strengths once again. Even if I am wrong, it is still worth it to give them all a chance."

It seemed that everyone else except Ves had no problem with Ark's initiative at all. This was funny because his uncle hadn't even formally joined the clan at this moment!

Ves turned to his trusty military general. "What do you think, Quinlist?"

"I would prefer it if you do not call me by that name." General Verle coughed. "It is not my place to espouse my own political viewpoints. You and your group can settle that yourselves. As the head of the Larkinson Army, I can tell you that the years of peaceful

development in the Red Ocean has made many of our servicemen eager for action. Those same years has also allowed us to accumulate enough reservists to quickly make up for any transfers and shuffling."

"Is Ark correct in his suspicion that he is able to attract enough clansmen to his mech regiments?"

"I can foresee that our clan's participation in the war will attract enough interest to give Venerable Ark the mech pilots and support personnel that he needs without issue. We will not have to force our clansmen to fight in the upcoming war. The same applies to our expert pilots. I think it is an especially good idea to allow any willing expert candidates and expert pilots to hone their skill in a conventional war. We still have enough left over to meet the needs of our fleet. If that is not enough, we can also pursue a more targeted strategy to increase the rate of breakthroughs in our mech legions."

Ves and General Verle had talked about that in the past. If a situation ever came about where the Larkinson Clan scraped through a difficult battle and lost much of its expert pilots, then they might decide to seek out battles that were especially conducive to producing new expert candidates and expert pilots.

Perhaps other groups may find this to be a slow and difficult process to complete, but the Larkinson Clan was much different.

As long as the Everchanger changed to Lufa as its design spirit and began to radiate the transcendence glow throughout a large section of the battlefield, the probability of producing breakthroughs would definitely skyrocket!

For example, Ves had been keeping a closer eye on Lanie Larkinson. The young woman who used to be an adorable little girl had shown an abundance of talent. Her growth and development had also been impressive even among other talented Larkinson mech pilots.

The only issue now was that she had grown so quickly that she was having trouble overcoming her first bottleneck.

The transition from ordinary to extraordinary was the first and most difficult step that any mech pilot could take in their careers.

His recent heartfelt talk with his grandfather Benjamin had given Ves a more serious understanding of the limitations and dangers of pursuing this path of transcendence.

No mech pilot should ever make this transition casually or without making sufficient preparation.

Even if Ves possessed the solutions to enable Lanie to overcome her bottleneck and become an expert candidate in an instant, he refused to employ this option. It was better for her to gather her strength and defeat this obstacle through her own efforts.

This was the only way to ensure that Lanie would continue to build her strength step by step without incurring any flaws that could stop her hopes of becoming a god pilot.

Still, if the Larkinson Clan suffered an acute shortage of expert pilots, then Ves may have to make the difficult decision to produce premature breakthroughs.

The pilots that would advance through this easy process may be able to become expert pilots with ease, but Ves believed that this may also reduce their chances of becoming an ace pilot!

Of course, nothing was impossible, and the strong always had a way of compensating for their flaws by relying on sheer willpower.

This made Ves feel a little better about this desperation option. Anything was possible as long as the clan and its mech pilots still had a future.

The discussion in the secure meeting room continued. The various leaders exchanged their opinions on how extensively the clan would become affected if the Davute Branch ever rose to prominence in its own right.

They needed to make a lot of changes and adjustments in the clan in order to make this course change work. Ves left the actual work to the others. All he cared about was how his expeditionary fleet was supposed to proceed now that Ark and his supporters intended to go off and play soldier again.

"We have started to exchange more information with the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family." General Verle informed Ves. "We have a more extensive understanding of their military strength and capabilities. They are more than capable of pulling their own weight in an expedition, as we have already seen during Operation Lighthouse. The arrival of the Jedda Sandivar and the Royal Jeem will compensate for the departure of the Mars for the most part."

"What do you mean by 'for the most part'?" Ves suspiciously asked.

"Well, as you know, the Mars is primarily a ranged ace mech. Her powerful ARCEUS System gives us the ability to take out acute threats from longer distances and assault enemy warships without getting too close to a powerful enemy's security perimeter. I would say that it is the ace mech that is best adapted to combat alien warships."

"Oh, that. I understand what you mean now, general. You have indeed raised a good point. The Jedda Sandivar is an ace light skirmisher, so its ability to punch through transphasic energy shields is among the weakest. The Royal Jeem is an ace spearman



mech that can partially imitate the function of a lancer mech, so it is much stronger in this aspect, but it can only deliver a single powerful impact per attack run."

These were major limitations that necessitated a change in planning, preparation and doctrine.

Ves had no illusions that the Fractured House of the Collapsing Star was the last formidable alien battleship that his expeditionary fleet might confront.

This was especially the case when he desired to actively seek them out so that he could strip them of all of their juicy first-class bulk materials!

The entire Golden Skull Alliance had to find solutions to maximize the ability for the two incoming ace mechs to break open these gigantic metal treasure coffins.

"Didn't you complete a series of commissions to upgrade the main armaments of the ace mechs in question?" Calabast reminded Ves.

"I did." Ves smiled as he thought of how he turned the twin daggers of the Jedda Sandivar and the potent spear of the Royal Jeem into blessed weapons. "It should help us out a lot. Unlike Reginald who is incredibly insistent on rejecting external help, I think that Saint Marissa Lewandowski and Saint Kalasandra Boojay may be more open to the need to call upon the power of the Phase King to drastically enhance the penetration power of their attacks."

General Verle looked satisfied. "That should ultimately give our expeditionary fleet a greater chance of breaching the defenses of alien warships. The two ace pilots may have to learn how to work together and coordinate their actions in order to defeat the tougher enemy vessels."

There were many ways to compensate for the loss of a bunch of mech pilots and expert pilots.

When Ves thought about his ambitious plan to slowly upgrade all of the standard mechs in his fleet to quasi-first-class standards, then the shortfall of numerous expert mechs might not make much of a difference in the end!

As long as the expeditionary fleet could field 10,000 quasi-first-class mechs, they should gain the capital to put up a good fight against most alien warships without requiring any further support!

## **Chapter 4727: Personnel Transfers**

In the end, Ves and the other leaders of the Larkinson Clan had come to a consensus on the Davute issue.

The Davute Branch was about to become a more engaged supporter of the Davute Project.

The news came as a huge surprise to a lot of clansmen!

A torrent of discussions ensued as many clansmen became more interested in joining the side branch that previously held a marginal status in the clan.

The prospect of earning greater status, respect and prosperity in the Davute Branch if its armed forces performed well in the upcoming war produced a lot of transfer applications.

Tens of thousands of clansmen who were previously assigned to the main fleet had chosen to take up permanent residency in Davute!

Many of them had also volunteered to take up positions on the brand-new Davutan fleet carriers and combat carriers that the colonial state had promised to provide to Ark Larkinson's future command!

The sheer scale of personnel transfers messed up a lot of roster and generated a lot of extra work for managers.

Fortunately, the Larkinson Clan was already numerous and professional enough to handle these disruptions without producing any significant delays.

The overwhelming majority of personnel were easily replaceable. No matter how many starship engineers, mech officers, mech pilots, mech technicians and low-ranking mech designers transferred to the Davute Branch or registered to join Ark Larkinson's future command, each of them could easily be replaced once they had left the fleet.

The clan's recruiters had become a lot busier once again as they lowered their standards and acted more proactively in order to increase the intake of new Larkinsons.

The rapid growth of the clan along with its recent successes made recruiting a breeze. As long as the recruiters weren't too picky, they could easily make up for the shortfalls in a matter of weeks rather than months.

As all of these movements took place, Minister Shederin Purnesse and his negotiation teams held multiple talks with their Davutan counterparts.

Any major agreements with regards to the military service of Ark Larkinson and his fellow Larkinsons mainly pertained to the Davute Branch. This was a term that Ves and several other important Larkinsons insisted upon.

This would allow Ves to maintain the polite fiction that he and his fleet were not officially enemies of Karlach.

Though Ves couldn't care less about his relations with a single colonial state, he wanted to make sure to set a precedent and preserve his clan's ability to trade with many different trading partners in the future.

For now, there was no need for him to step forward and talk to that smug bastard President Yenames Clive again for the time being. The two sides needed to hash out an extensive agreement that spelled out all of the necessary terms in great detail.

If the Larkinson Clan was about to go in bed with a colonial state that already showed a penchant for scheming against others, it was best to err on the side of caution!

Given the amount of progress the negotiators from both sides were making, the final contract should hopefully be finalized just before the much-anticipated founding ceremony commenced.

If they were lucky enough, mechs and soldiers of the Larkinson Clan may even play a small but active role in this historic ceremony!

This produced a sense of urgency among many Larkinsons, including the expert pilots that the clan treated as strategic assets.

Inside a hangar bay built into the expansive underground complex below the Cat Nest, they had all decided to gather in order to exchange their opinions.

"So what do you think about Ark's invitation, Jannzi?" Venerable Joshua asked as he sat down on a chair in front of his Everchanger.

"Not interested." Jannzi stoically said as she crossed her arms. "I can understand what Ark is yearning for, but to be frank he is going to lead us into a bloodbath that is just as worse as Ves' expeditions. Whether we go out and fight against human mechs or alien warships, the results will always be the same. A lot of good Larkinsons will get killed in order to fuel the ambitions of others. In this case, it won't be Ves' goals we are advancing, but that of my good uncle."

Venerable Rosa Orfan slapped her palm against her leg. "Show some more respect, Jannzi! A long time ago, everyone including me looked up to Colonel Ark Larkinson. He was one the bright spots of the Mech Corps. Those times may be over now, but I have no doubt at all that he will become a hero once again in this new war. Who knows, he may even become the first native Larkinson ace pilot. Soon, we will all be looking up to him again like old times!"

Most of the adopted Larkinsons did not know much about Ark Larkinson until recently. Few of them originated from the Bright Republic so they did not hold any prior

awareness of one of the most famed expert pilots and mech officers produced by the original Larkinson Family.

It was therefore jarring to hear that Venerable Jannzi Larkinson expressed disdain towards her blood relative!

"I swear there is something about this clan that is making so many people crazy for battle. I had a good talk with Melinda recently. Ark always disapproved of senseless fighting prior to arriving here and linking up with the Davute Branch. Yet now that he and the members of the old family have been in contact with our clansmen for over a month, the Larkinson who was supposed to be the most responsible among us has decided to pull off another Ves but on his own terms!"

"Who the hell asked for your opinion? You can't even fight anymore until Ves completes your new expert mech." Venerable Vincent Ricklin gave Jannzi a sour look. "Ark is a real man! He's the real deal and it will be great to fight under his command! Not that there's anything wrong with staying in the fleet, but I haven't been able to punch anything good with my C-Man lately. Those aliens aren't fun to fight against when you pilot a melee mech like I do. I think I have much better hope of finding good old-fashioned enemy expert mechs if I jump into this war."

Jannzi looked at Vincent with pity. "I sincerely hope you will find what you seek on the frontlines of the war between Davute and Karlach. War can be horrible. I thought you already knew that when you went through many hardships during the time you fought as a rebel and a scumbag."

"That was a different time! I received amnesty for what I've done. Besides, I was weak back then and got saddled with too many crappy mechs to count. It's a different story now. I have not only become a thousand times stronger than my old self, but I also have Bravo and the C-Man by my side. We're going to beat up tons of Karlach expert mechs!"

As Jannzi and Vincent continued to quibble against each other, Joshua turned to Venerable Dise.

"What about you? I think your First Sword will fare much better against the Karlachs as well since it is also a melee expert mech."

The Swordmaiden expert pilot did not look moved. "I will stay in the fleet. I did not take up the life of a mech pilot because I am looking for a fairer fight. Ves makes strange decisions sometimes, but he is always good at stumbling upon giant space monsters and titanic warships. Don't you think it is more meaningful to exceed our limits and defeat enemies that others consider unstoppable? These expeditions are hunting trips on a galactic scale. My Decapitator hungers to cut through stronger prey."

Venerable Dise had a clear reason to remain in her current position. She also felt she needed to stay and watch over the Swordmaidens who also remained attached to the fleet for the most part.

"Imon?" Joshua probed. "What is your decision?"

The young man looked conflicted. "I don't know, Joshua. I kind of agree with Rosa here. I think I can get a lot more combat experience outside the MSTS if I join Ark's command. I just can't bear the thought of separating from my sister, though. She needs my protection. We synergize too well with each other. What will she do if an enemy comes close and I'm not around anymore?"

Commander Casella Ingvar interrupted her professional demeanor so that she could smack her idiot of her brother on the back of his head!

"Ouch! What was that for, sister?!"

"I can stay and watch over the troops that are protecting the fleet without your help." Casella grumbled. "You have been growing far too dependent on me over the years. I am not a doll that needs your protection all of the time. My Minerva and I can defend ourselves quite well, and there will still be enough expert mechs by my side to cover for any enemy assaults."

"Yeah, but they can't channel your power like I can. Whenever you activate your Single Empowerment resonance ability on me, my Blade Chaser Mark II becomes powerful enough to give a high-tier expert mech a run for its money!"

"I think that the two ace mechs that will soon be joining the expeditionary fleet can help me out in a pinch. Just go with them, brother. Learn to fly on your own. Your psychological reliance on me has become too much of an impediment of your growth, and the easy availability of my true resonance is making you soft."

Imon did not like it when his own sister was pushing him away, but he was no match against her intellect. Her well-founded arguments broke down his resistance to the point where he became so muddled that he no longer questioned her recommendation!

Joshua meanwhile had already turned to the next expert pilot.

"Have you given any thought to the offer, Isobel?"

Isobel Kotin looked reluctant. "I want to fight in the war as well, but I owe too much to Ves to leave his fleet. Besides, my specialization makes me the most effective ship destroyer among us all. I was born to fight warships."

"Tusa?"

"Same as Isobel. I learned a lot of cool tricks with Ves' help." Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson replied.

"I thought you would really go over as your grandfather Raymond is in charge of the Davute Branch."

The light skirmisher specialist shrugged his shoulders. "So what? Ves is my cousin as well, you know. I think I will do fine either way, but as I said, I owe Ves too much. I respect and admire Ark a lot, but I don't owe him near as much. Besides, if I want to become more powerful in my own right, I shouldn't be looking up to Ark all of the time."

"Fair enough." Joshua said.

The remaining expert pilots including the ones that were still waiting to receive their expert mechs all made their opinions known.

Venerable Davia Stark had no desire to take part in a purely human conflict that did not seem important in the greater scheme of things.

Venerable Kolak Glendale that had broken through during a recent battle exhibited a clear preference for joining Ark. He felt it was much easier for him to get up to speed and survive when fighting enemies that were more on his level.

Venerable Zimro Belson also owed Ves a lot, especially when he recently learned that the patriarch vastly strengthened the technological features of his upcoming stealth expert mech.

If Venerable Ark Larkinson was added to the picture, that meant that the Larkinson Clan would be transferring 5 expert pilots and their expert mechs to the new military mech division!

There was always the possibility of more as the ones who decided to not to transfer may change their mind in the future.

All in all, Joshua and the others who decided to stay close to Ves and the fleet would have to bear a significantly greater burden, at least until more demigods emerged to relieve their burden.

## **Chapter 4728: Aurelia's First Ceremony**

In order to prevent Venerable Ark Larkinson from making any further decisions by himself, Ves wanted to rope him into his clan as soon as possible.

Once Ark and the clan administration took care of all of the necessary paperwork, Ves personally wanted to induct his uncle into the fold.

An ordinary oath pledging ceremony that was normally conducted in front of the nearest available Bright Warrior mech was not sufficient to welcome a Larkinson of such stature.

The clan did not organize a grand and public ceremony either. Ves did not want to hype up Ark any further. Since Ark was dead set on joining the Davute Branch, he essentially became a leadership competitor.

If Ves wasn't careful enough, his clansmen might drive him out of office and put an incredibly charismatic Larkinson like his dearest uncle in his place!

Of course, Ves did not believe that was likely to happen. He even saw Ark's arrival as a positive influence on himself. As the Larkinson Clan became larger and more unwieldy in size, it was good if he could share his burden and give his clansmen another figure to gain reassurance.

The growth and expansion of the Davute Branch due to Ark's cooperation with the colonial government also didn't sound so bad anymore.

Ves could not foresee how successfully Ark and his helpers would be able to extract concessions from Davute. The most lucrative reward by far was the promise of receiving claims of ownership of the conquered star systems and territories that currently belonged to Karlach.

The message was loud and clear. If the Larkinsons along with other groups fought hard enough to tip the war in Davute's favor, then the territories that would fall into its hands would get distributed to the greatest contributors!

The colonial government originally did not mention this possibility at all to its military partners, but Karlach's increasing momentum had forced President Yenames Clive's hand.

If Davute did not offer nearly as much sincerity as its archrival, then all of the large and powerful mercenary organizations would all flock to Karlach's banner!

It was Davute's willingness to reward military contributors with actual territories that fully convinced Ark to volunteer his services.

He did not necessarily have a strong emotional attachment to the Davute Project, but the cold hard promise of letting the Davute Branch take over a planet or two was enough to earn his support for the colonial state!

It was with that dream in mind that Venerable Ark Larkinson entered a peaceful estate and stepped into the bedroom that held his old and infirm father.



The high-tier expert pilot's strong and confident demeanor softened its edges as his love and affection for family surged into his mind.

"Father."

"...Come... my son..." A weak voice called out from the chair placed in front of a tall window.

This was one of Benjamin Larkinson's good days. Though the deteriorating former expert pilot had grown a little weaker compared to a week earlier, he was still lucid and comfortable enough to witness the upcoming ceremony.

Ves had already arrived fifteen minutes earlier. Not only that, but he also decided to bring along his oldest daughter in order to keep his grandfather company.

Aurelia had already been chatting with her great-grandfather for a while now. She held Clixie in her arms and offered the cat to one of her oldest living blood relative.

"Do you want to cuddle with Clixie? She's really warm and fluffy!"

Benjamin smiled warmly at the young lass. "Your cat is lovely, but I do not think my poor legs can bear her weight with any comfort. You can put her on the armrest if you want."

As soon as Aurelia placed the lovely Rubarthan Sentinel Cat onto the armrest that was barely large enough, Clixie purred and offered her furry back for pets.

As Benjamin slowly raised his feeble arm and touched Clixie's body with his wrinkly palm, the dying smile smiled brighter as he felt the love and warmth radiating from the feline.

"Miaow~"

"I think I understand a little more why your clan have become such avid cat lovers."

Meanwhile, Ark had come close enough to exchange greetings with Ves.

"I see you are doing as good as ever, Ves."

"You've come in time. Aurelia, come greet your grandfather's brother."

Aurelia adopted a gentle smile and bowed in respect. "Hello Great-uncle."

"You have raised a well-mannered girl, Ves."

"I don't deserve all of the credit for that. My wife did a much better job at that sort of stuff."

"You certainly found a lovely woman to share your life with, then. Gloriana compensates for many of your flaws and blindspots. You chose well."

After they got the casual chatter out of the way, Ves soon moved onto business and turned to his lovely little daughter.

"Aurelia, can you fetch the Larkinson Mandate for me? It is time to start the ceremony."

The girl nodded, though her braided hair hardly shook. She turned and ran towards one of the dozen honor guards that were silently and stoically trying their best to blend into the background.

"Hey, Nitaa. Can you unlock the big book?"

The harness that automatically contained and protected the Larkinson Mandate clicked open, allowing Aurelia to pry the heavy metal-covered tome from its resting place and bring it back to the other three trueblood Larkinsons.

If not for the antigrav module built into the ancestral heirloom, Aurelia would have found it a lot more difficult to lift up the book!

She soon stopped in front of her father and offered up the sacred-looking tome.

"Here it is, papa!"

"You can keep hold of it while we conduct the ceremony, dear. It is time for you to learn how to expand our clan. You need to verify the loyalty, compatibility, commitment and sincerity of those who wish to become a part of our expanding family. We shouldn't bring in anyone who sounds good on paper. Do you understand?"

"Uhm!"

"Then follow my instructions. First hold the book in your hands like this. Uncle Ark is a lot taller than you, after all. Good. Now voice a pledge and ask Uncle Ark to repeat your words."

"Okay." Aurelia nodded as she held the ancestral heirloom aloft as if her arms were a pedestal. "Can you place your palm on the medallion on the front cover, uncle?"

"Why certainly."

The expert pilot looked bemused at what Ves had done. Though Ark did not expect to get inducted by a little girl of all people, he indulged his relatives and rolled with the situation.

"Now repeat after me..."

One of the secrets about the pledging ceremony was that the Larkinson Clan hadn't formed a standard oath at all. There were general guidelines on what it should include, but there was no single definitive text or phrasing that the clan recognized as the only valid oath.

This was because Ves and many Larkinsons believed that mere spoken words or lawyer-like phrases on a contract had no meaning by themselves.

As long as the new recruits did not hold any malicious intentions and earnestly wanted to become a part of the Larkinson Clan, they would be welcomed with open arms.

Therefore, neither Ves nor anyone else minded that Aurelia came up with an oath on the spot.

"...I shall care for everyone who bears the Larkinson name if they are in need of assistance."

"...I will protect and defend the people of the clan against all external enemies, both human and alien."

"...I promise to respect the rules and regulations of the clan and do my best to work within its governing system."

"...As a mech pilot, I pledge to never oppress the weaker members of the Larkinson by force."

As Aurelia and Ark continued to speak the same words, Ves and Benjamin quietly witnessed the ceremony from the side.

Though the event did not look very formal from an outsider's perspective, Ves knew that this was an extremely serious occasion.

As a serious expert pilot, Venerable Ark Larkinson meant every word he said. Though he had proven to be clever and flexible enough to take advantage of loopholes and obey his principles rather than the letter of the law, he could never outright lie or break a contract without a legitimate cause.

If Aurelia was able to get her uncle to obey the instructions of the leader of the clan on an unconditional basis, then Ark would most definitely turn into her strongest tool if she assumed leadership one day!

However, the girl was careful enough not to add any unreasonably strict terms to the oath.

Her social understanding was high and she knew quite well what she could get away with. Aurelia demonstrated her comprehension of the limitations of obedience by

formulating a pledge that mainly compelled Ark to pledge on promises that he already intended to follow anyway.

The important part was that Aurelia also added just a bit more to turn him into a more helpful addition to the clan as a whole.

It was a careful balancing act that the oldest daughter of Ves and Gloriana brilliantly executed!

At one point, the Larkinson Mandate glowed with more and more warmth until Goldie herself emerged from her primary resting place!

Both Aurelia and Ark smiled and took comfort in the appearance of the nexus of the Larkinson Network and the guardian spirit of the clan.

Nyaaaa~

"...I promise not to displease the Golden Cat and act in a way that makes her sad." Aurelia spontaneously added.

"I promise not to displease the Golden Cat and act in a way that makes her sad." Ark repeated in verbatim, though his smile grew a little wider in the process.

Once the little girl finally completed her long and extensive routine, she shifted her gaze to floating and glowing ancestral spirit.

"Well, Goldie? Did he pass your test?"

Nyaaaa!

The Golden Cat not only verified Ark's loyalty and sincerity, but also expressed her joy and anticipation for finally turning him into a formal member of the clan!

"Then do it! Turn him into your latest bosom buddy!"

Nyaaa nyaaa.

The Golden Cat circled around Ark's body, glowing brighter and brighter until she stopped right in front of the expert pilot's face.

Nyaaa nyaaa~

"You want me to open up for you? Sure..."

After Goldie put in a bit of effort, she began to extend one of the thickest and strongest spiritual bonds that Ves had ever witnessed!

He and his daughter watched on as the open end of the spiritual channel slowly advanced towards the latest member to join the Larkinson Clan.

Its progress was slower and more tiresome than normal. Expert pilots tended to reject a lot of outside influences. This was a source of strength as well as a source of hindrance depending on the situation.

This was why it was important for Ark to let down his guard and go against his strong instincts by sincerely opening himself up to Goldie.

As Ark and Aurelia stared into each other, they opened up to each other. They liked each other so much that they actually began to resonate with each other!

"...Amazing." Benjamin spoke as his atrophied senses picked up what was taking place.

Goldie supported and agreed with Ark's ideals, while the Larkinson expert pilot completely accepted and embraced the ancestral spirit's addition to the lives of his fellow relatives!

The bond that ultimately formed between them became even thicker and stronger as resonance caused them to become more in sync!

"You are in, now!" Aurelia cheered as she held the Larkinson Mandate closer to her body. "Goldie likes you a lot, so do not disappoint her, okay?"

"I would never dream of it." Ark smiled as Goldie continued to rub her manifestation against his cheek. "I think we will be able to accomplish great feats together. I cannot wait to fight by your side once my nephew finally completes my next expert mech!"

Nyaaaaa!

## **Chapter 4729: Hollowing Out**

Now that Venerable Ark Larkinson became a formal member of the Larkinson Clan, a few hundred original family members followed suit over the next few days.

As for the original Larkinson Family, a modest group of retirees and stubborn fools agreed to settle down and take care of what little was left of this centuries-old institution.

Whether the original family degenerated into a retirement home or rose from the ashes, nobody could say for certain.

Ves had taken the initiative to force the Larkinson Family to relinquish all of the shares it held into the LMC.

Given the current size and earnings of the Living Mech Corporation, a 1 percent ownership of this lucrative mech company was way too valuable to be left in the hands of a decrepit, hollowed-out family organization!

Though he hated to do this, Ves had to persuade his own grandfather to cooperate with the voluntary handover of most of the shares.

"Without someone like Ark to hold the fort, our original family has lost its ability to protect itself against malicious parties who want to steal those shares." Ves frankly explained to Benjamin during one of his visits. "The best way to go forward is to transfer those shares back into my possession where they will be safe."

"...The family...?"

"Don't worry, grandfather. I am not kicking the old family to the curb. I will replace the dividends they earned in the past with more modest annual cash subsidies. I won't shower them with wealth they haven't earned. I will give the people who are left behind just enough that they will have no worries about maintaining their current quality of life."

Benjamin did not immediately respond. He stared out of the same window for half a minute before he finally gave his answer.

"...Fine. It isn't good... if the family becomes overly dependent on handouts."

As a former expert pilot, Benjamin understood more than most people that true success only came through earnest effort. He did not want to see the remnants of the family degenerate into hedonistic good-for-nothings that only spent their time squandering other people's money.

The two Larkinsons possessed the same stance on this issue. This made it much easier for Ves to get back the shares he had initially granted to the Larkinson Family out of sympathy.

With that, the Larkinson Family truly became hollowed out. Once Benjamin Larkinson succumbed from old age and old war wounds, there would be nothing tying Ves to the family he came from any longer.

The Larkinson Clan completely succeeded the old family from that point onwards!

This development was no secret. Though many family members became indignant upon learning the news, this only encouraged them to hurry up with their applications to transfer to the Larkinson Clan.

There was no need for Ves and his daughter to induct this group into the clan in person, so the ordinary Larkinsons had to get in through the regular process.

Though plenty of family members complained about the lack of special treatment, the clan wanted to make a point that they were not royalty.

As far as Ves and many other clansmen were concerned, the adopted Larkinsons that had joined much earlier and made a lot more contributions over the years earned a lot more respect!

Predictably, the old family members including Melinda Larkinson instantly joined the Davute Branch without showing any further consideration to the main fleet.

As far as these stubborn trueborn Larkinsons were concerned, the main branch of the Larkinson Clan was almost entirely separate from this side branch!

They were practically two different worlds!

Once the old family members got in, they soon experienced numerous difficulties in trying to blend in and take up their new positions.

Pretty much all but their youngest had been born and raised as third-raters. Though the time their family spent in the Garlen Empire had allowed them to be promoted to second-raters, they were not as good as the overwhelming majority of clansmen who were born into this life.

Not only that, but the Larkinsons had also ceased to recruit ordinary second-raters a long time ago. Their recruitment standards had become so strict in the last six or so years that only the younger and flexible elites among their respective professions along with their immediate families could enter the clan!

The differences between the two groups were so much that they found it difficult to get along at first.

The older Larkinsons were not only less skilled and knowledgeable at their jobs, but they also held a lot of old-fashioned principles and ideals that hardly evolved ever since the Larkinson Family had been driven out of the Bright Republic.

A lot of friction came about due to the drastic differences between how the old family and the clan were run. The culture clash became so severe that many original family members had to go through refresher courses and extra schooling in order to become marginally useful to the Davute Branch.

Of course, the more talented and outstanding newcomers received better treatment. Ark was the most emblematic of how generous the Larkinson Clan could be towards those who had the potential to contribute a lot more.

Ves and Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson gathered in the main office of the Davute Branch to promote Ark to a higher position right away.



Raymond pinned a badge on Ark's new clan uniform. "I instate you as the Vice Branch Director of our side branch. You will gain greater authority but you will also have to bear many more responsibilities as a consequence. I hope that we can work together and lead our Davute Branch to a promising future."

Ark shook Raymond's hand. "We can make this branch strong by defending our new home state."

They all talked a bit on how they should proceed now that they had taken this step.

"Once we complete our negotiations with the colonial government, Yenames Clive will probably make you a part of his military establishment by appointing you as one of his mech generals." Ves said.

"I am aware." The new vice director responded. "I won't be able to become a part of the core power base of Davute right away. The real generals are in charge of leading mech armies that are completely loyal to the colonial state. For the time being, I will only be invested with authority over a mech division that is completely composed of mercenary forces as the government sees it. We will need to prove with our actions and victories that we are loyal and deserving enough to become a part of the core military establishment as well."

This was the game that Davute played with the hopefuls that aspired to become the first-generation aristocrats of the new state.

Ves did not trust Davute nearly as much as his uncle and the other hope-filled Larkinsons.

States and the investors who sacrificed a lot of resources into building them wanted to retain as much wealth and power for themselves.

President Yenames Clive also did not seem stupid enough to hand out unnecessary gifts!

It shouldn't be so easy for Ark and his unit to survive the war and earn enough merits in the process to exchange for a couple of territories.

However, no matter how much Ves expressed his suspicion and misgivings about Davute, he knew his warnings would fall on deaf ears.

The Davute Branch would have to see for itself whether the colonial government was trustworthy enough to work for. If this did not turn out to be the case, then Ark and all of his followers would have to pay the price for their decisions.

Of course, Ves could also be incredibly wrong about this situation. In that case, he would have egg on his face while Ark and the rest of the Davute Branch gained their own planets to develop and rule over!

Ves did not really mind it if he ended up the loser in this little contest. Most of his relatives would remain alive and his clan would be a lot stronger as a whole. What was not to like about this possible scenario?

After making sure that they maintained a united front when negotiating with the Davutans from now on, Ves left the branch headquarters with a lot more reassurance than before.

While Ves and many other people waited for the day that the much-hyped founding ceremony would commence, the Larkinsons made its own preparations.

Now that the Larkinson Clan and its Davute Branch were slated to become close collaborators with the colonial government, the Larkinsons received more prominent places in this historical event.

Mech technicians and mech designers were already beginning to make the appropriate modifications to the mechs selected to display themselves to the public. The additional polishing and cosmetic additions such as voluminous red capes made them look a bit more ceremonial than normal.

Ves also worked on his own outfits. Though he did not feel the need to transform the look of his most ceremonial uniform and his trusty Unending Regalia, he did not feel entirely secure about wearing them anymore.

The clan had fought against incredibly powerful enemies as of late that could easily crush him. Many human groups also managed to get their hands on a lot more phasewater than before, and a lot of advanced development companies figured out better ways to break defenses that used to be a lot more dependable before the opening of the Red Ocean.

Though the Davutans strongly insisted that they would deploy the highest level of security across Kotor City during the event, Ves had experienced too many instances where claims like these had been proven horribly wrong.

He needed to prepare for the worst in the little time that he had left!

"My personal shield generators and Unending Regalia are both out of date." Ves frowned as he evaluated his most intimate sources of protection.

It was easy enough to get his hands on newfangled transphasic personal shield generators that mitigated incoming transphasic attacks at much greater efficiencies. Ves

just had to exchange a lot of money, phasewater or MTA merits in order to get his hands on defensive equipment of varying qualities.

He wasn't satisfied with those ready-made options, though. He preferably wanted to rely on equipment designed and built by himself, but that was not always a practical approach.

When Ves estimated the work he needed to do to develop his own custom transphasic shield generators that would carry the Phase King's blessing, he concluded that he would have to spend months on this project.

Much of this was because Ves did not possess a lot of depth in energy shield technology and its transphasic sub-specialization.

Even if his learning ability had skyrocketed recently, he still needed to absorb a lot of textbooks and academic journals in order to reach the minimum standard to build an ultracompact man-portable concealable shield generator!

"It will be easier if I don't have to miniaturize the tech as much, but I doubt I can look elegant if I'm dragging a dog-sized generator around."

The only person in the Larkinson Clan who was best qualified to develop a transphasic shield generator was Sara Voiken, but even she did not possess the expertise to build one right away.

"Just buy a transphasic shield generator from the MTA or your other contacts." Her projection said after he opened up a communication channel with her. "Even if I have mastered all of the theories, it takes too much time to develop and construct one according to your specifications. It is impossible for me to finish this project on short notice."

Ves looked disappointed. "Oh. Thank you anyway. I will figure out another solution."

With that option ruled out, Ves could either choose to stick with his existing shield generators or spend a lot of MTA merits on powerful first-class products.

The advantage of the latter was that he could get his hands on shield generators that were so powerful that even the mechers entrusted their lives to those models!

The disadvantage was that he would have to spend millions of MTA merits on products that he and his clan could eventually build by themselves!

## **Chapter 4730: Quick and Dirty Swap**

Ves decided not to exchange a lot of MTA merits in order to replace his outdated shield generators with modern first-class transphasic shield generators.

The ones he utilized at the moment were not weak and could still protect him against the vast majority of attacks that might be thrown in his direction.

To be honest, he put a lot more stock in his Unending Regalia. He much preferred to place his trust on solid armor, which offered solid and reliable protection even if all of its electronic systems had been knocked offline for whatever reason.

Aside from that, as a mech designer Ves was also much more used to working with armor as opposed to energy shields. Even if his expertise on armor systems could not match the depth of Sara Voiken, he was not a complete novice either!

Another reason for him to put more emphasis on his combat armor was because the Larkinson Clan still had enough stockpiles of first-class materials to apply a hasty upgrade to his Unending Regalia.

Even if he was short on a specific material that he would really like, he could still trade one first-class material for another one without incurring too much of a loss.

Though Ves eventually planned to transform his Unending Regalia into a true modern first-class suit of combat armor, he needed a lot more time, expertise and preparation because he could remold it into the indefatigable engine that he had conceived in his imagination.

"I guess I'll have to settle for a quick-and-dirty modification plan for the time being."

When Ves arrived at the Genesis Lab, he set his Unending Regalia on a workbench and scanned it thoroughly while he began to draw a list of components he could change on a small time frame.

Ves had designed the Unending Regalia with a high degree of modularity in mind. He had envisioned that he would end up in situations like these where he gained access to better tech and materials and wanted to upgrade his primary form of protection.

Therefore, it was easy for him to disassemble his combat armor and pull out a lot of modules from their slots.

There were limits, though. Ves ideally wanted to rebuild the entire inner structure from the ground up so that he could make it completely out of much more resilient first-class materials, but that was a project for another day.

"I need to stick to the essentials." Ves reminded himself.

There was also another complication that made it a lot more difficult for Ves to upgrade his armor.

As the scans slowly revealed, the Unending Regalia substantially deviated from its original design. It had been baptized with pure metal energy that had originated from Cassandra Breyer.

This transformed the combat armor in mysterious ways. The Unending alloy armor plating had especially been receptive towards metal energy and had become more capable of fending off spiritual attacks!

If Ves confronted a dark god or a spiritual sorcerer from the Five Scrolls Compact, he possessed ample confidence that his Unending Regalia would be able to preserve his life long enough to run away!

"The problem is that I'm not fighting against those freaks anymore!"

The Five Scrolls Compact hardly expanded their presence in the Red Ocean as far as he knew. Just getting past the stringent security checks in order to pass through the greater beyonder gate was a major impediment!

The most probable threats he fought against these days were conventional human forces, alien warships and alien bio monstrosities.

Each of them possessed their own combat characteristics, but what united all of them was their extensive use of phasewater applications!

Ves stared at his Unending Regalia. He intuitively tried to judge how well its spiritually charged Unending alloy exterior plating could withstand transphasic attacks.

The answer he got was not positive.

"It's a powerful tool, but it's the wrong tool for the situation."

It was as if he had obtained the strongest hammer in existence when he actually needed a welding tool instead!

"Even if the latter is inferior, it is much more useful to the circumstances at hand."

Ves decided to strip the Unending alloy armor plating entirely and replace it with the salvaged and repurposed armor plates taken from the hull fragments of the Fractured House of the Collapsing Star.

The Genesis Lab happened to have stocked up plenty of high-quality goods and materials, so it did not take long before a heavy-duty lifter bot arrived to deliver a large chunk of space debris.

Although the exterior of the hybrid alien battleship was largely made up of conventional human armor plating, the more important parts and systems had received varying degrees of transphasic reinforcement depending on their importance. The surrounding bulkheads had also been fortified with superior transphasic alloys.

It was extremely troublesome to develop and produce transphasic armor plating from scratch.

However, there was no need for him to go through all of that trouble when he could just cut away portions of existing transphasic alloys.

As Ves examined the debris he pulled out of storage, he became mildly dissatisfied.

"The phasewater concentration isn't much, but it's better than nothing I suppose."

The construction of a capital ship required huge amounts of materials. It was prohibitive to protect the most critical components with too much phasewater. The aliens had to spread out their limited resources and could only compensate for their sparing use of phasewater by relying on thicker and bulkier structural layers.

Ves obviously couldn't do that with his Unending Regalia as it was only an infantry suit. Its exterior layer had to be relatively thin in order to control its size and make it foldable.

"It's not like I have anything better at hand." He sighed.

He went to work. He utilized the advanced first-class workshop equipment and tools that he had brought over from Spirit of Bentheim to carefully carve out the armor plating.

He worked with unnatural precision as he precisely broke down the hardy piece of ship debris into an expanding collection of exquisitely shaped metal plates.

The entire set happened to correspond to the Unending alloy plating that he had previously removed!

Slotting in the new alien first-class transphasic armor plating should be a breeze as Ves had not made any changes in the shapes.

Although the mass, density and many other properties had undergone drastic changes, they did not fundamentally interfere with the functioning of his Unending Regalia.

At most, he needed to reconfigure its operating system and settings to adjust to the many changes.

Ves did not settle for replacing the armor plating, though. He also applied a few other targeted upgrades.

For example, he improved the ECM shielding, the sensor system, the communication systems and numerous life support systems to improve its overall survivability.

He also replaced its antigrav modules to enable faster and more powerful flight capabilities.

Many of these upgrades increased the power consumption of his Unending alloy, which was a serious problem.

"I can't do anything about it except to switch to better energy cells."

He could get his hands on superior high-capacity energy cells easily enough these days. He readily obtained the products and simply slotted them in place of the older ones that had performed well enough over the years.

After making the necessary changes and tweaks, he carefully assembled the new transphasic armor plating in their intended places.

Soon, a dull gray metal suit appeared in front of Ves.

He inspected it with scanners and his naked eye. Nothing looked out of place.

"All it needs is a coating." He smiled.

Once he covered up the bare metal with a shiny new layer of coating, hardly anyone would be able to tell the difference through sight alone.

However, those who were familiar with it would be able to tell that it was not the same as before.

This was because the spiritual signature of his Unending Regalia had grown drastically weaker!

It had lost a lot of spiritually charged components, so the amount of Ves of spiritual energy it was able to hold had weakened to a massive degree.

"A pity."

In return, the Unending Regalia not only gained numerous auxiliary upgrades, but also offered drastically better protection against both transphasic and conventional attacks.

Ves wouldn't bring it to a fight against a combat mech, but it should be more than enough to crush any opponent on the infantry scale.



His only major regret concerning this hasty upgrade job was that he had been unable to work the transphasic armor plating thoroughly enough to form a connection to the Phase King.

It was a lot harder to do this on an object that was different from a mech. As a mech designer, he lost a lot of advantages when he tried to make other products such as totems and combat armor.

He estimated that he needed to build the transphasic armor plating from scratch in order to make his Unending Regalia carry the blessing of the Phase King.

"Next time." Ves vowed.

The entire process left him with a batch of spare spiritually charged materials. As Ves picked up a spare shoulder plate made out of Unending alloy, he found that it had become special due to the baptism of potent metal energy and constant exposure to himself over several years.

"I can make something really good out of these parts!"

His imagination went wild as he envisioned various possible uses for these unique components.

One radical use would be to create a hollow, life-sized totem of himself!

Ever since Ves created his living divine artifact and became baptized by mystical lightning that came out of nowhere, he had undergone a fundamental spiritual transformation that caused him to acquire at least a portion of the traits of a design spirit!

Months after this weird and unexplainable change, Ves had tried his best to suppress this abnormality and prevent anyone from finding out the truth.

Only his closest relatives and work partners such as his wife and his fellow mech designers figured out a lot of clues.

They never spoke about it because Ves simply didn't want to address this topic at all. He was still freaked out about this abnormality.

Humans weren't supposed to possess glows.

Humans weren't supposed to be able to imitate design spirits.

Humans weren't supposed to be mistaken as gods.

Ves had an especially serious issue with the last point. He could already imagine what might happen if he went on a trip to the Hex Federation and blasted out his newfound glow at full power.

Thousands of rabidly fanatical Hexers would mob him in an instant!

"This is unnatural!"

Still, Ves had no way of getting rid of it. If that was the case, then he might as well try and learn how to harness it to his advantage.

"What will happen if I make a totem? More importantly, what will happen if I design a mech that carries my glow?"

As Ves played these scenarios out in his mind, he developed an inkling of what he might create.

He became so intrigued by the possibilities that he had to stop himself from tearing apart the spiritually charged components right away!

"I can't!"

He still needed to preserve these original parts in case he encountered a spiritual threat again. Unending alloy charged with his own power would play a much more helpful role in fighting against dark gods and the like than transphasic armor.

After all, pure spiritual attacks could not be stopped by conventional forms of defenses!

Even the mighty Fractured Star of the Collapsing House had no way of stopping multiple death energy battle formation attacks from sweeping through her entire hull!

Since the new outer layer of his Unending Regalia was made out of materials salvaged from the same alien vessel, Ves had no hope it would offer as much protection as before.

"I at least managed to preserve the inner B-stone layer."

The only issue was that it was far too thin to offer complete protection against spiritual attacks.

It even hindered his own spiritual perception and spiritual manipulation abilities, especially when he closed his helmet and completely sealed his body!

