

The Mech Touch

Chapter 4731: Consolidating Support

"Did I go overboard?"

Ves wondered whether he wasted the time he spent on modifying and upgrading his Unending Regalia.

He could have allocated his time on a lot of other productive pursuits.

For example, he could have visited the Larkinson Army and interviewed a few soldiers in order to get up to speed on their sentiments towards the upcoming war.

He could have spent his time on designing his mechs so that they would become ready when he needed their capabilities.

He could have invested more time into setting his own stamp on the Larkinson Clan's participation in the upcoming founding ceremony.

Instead of doing all of that, he holed himself up in his private workshop in his Genesis Lab working on a suit of combat armor of all possibilities.

He could not recall any instance where the protection offered by his Unending Regalia made a substantial difference.

He had only made it after his clan had concluded the Nyxian Gap Campaign. The terrifying threats and crises he experienced during that harrowing expedition had caused him to overreact and develop the strongest form of personal protection that he could make at the time.

That also happened to be the last time he came under acute personal threat.

As more and more expert pilots broke through while his mech legions grew in size and strength, he no longer became subject to any personal threats any longer.

Hardly any enemy could get through his mechs and honor guards nowadays!

In fact, his protective detail became so numerous and overgeared that assassins did not even bother to make another attempt at his life anymore!

Given all of these measures, Ves felt increasingly more ridiculous for paying such unreasonable attention to an unreasonably expensive piece of gear that would never get the chance to fulfill its primary role.

The only use that Ves got out of the Unending Regalia nowadays was to shroud himself in a martial mantle and assume a more intimidating demeanor!

If Ves wanted to pretend he was a warlord instead of a nerdy mech designer, he could have stuck with the previous version of his combat armor. The spiritually charged Unending alloy armor plating significantly enhanced his stature during face-to-face meetings!

He frowned. "I need to share my thoughts with another person. I can't keep letting my messy thoughts dictate my actions."

A sense of unease and uncertainty welled in his stomach as he cleaned up his workshop and stowed away the parts that still held a lot of value.

He then moved to the underground complex underneath the Cat Nest and headed over to a highly secure section.

A lot of signal-dampening materials shielded this part of the base from observations and eavesdropping. Ves had to go through an extensive security check before he was able to enter the branch station of the Black Cats.

After navigating through a few corridors, he entered the office where Calabast awaited for his arrival.

"Who's a good boy? Who's a good boy today?"

"Squeak~"

A plump and dappled gray exobeast laid on her lap.

The eight-legged creature had grown a lot over the years, both physically and spiritually.

A plentiful diet that did not require Arnold to hunt inside dark and dangerous tunnels allowed his young body to grow without impediment.

This allowed him to grow a little larger and more massive than a well-fed cat.

Ves found the creature's spiritual growth a lot more remarkable. Through mechs such as the Dark Zephyr and the Devious, the octopod became more intelligent and more familiar with humans.

Though Arnold's relatively small and weak organic body still constrained his spiritual development, he nonetheless managed to make a lot of progress in catching up to the other design spirits!

"Hello, Arnold." Ves smiled as he stepped closer. "How are you doing these days? Are you growing well?"

"Squeak squeak squeak!"

"I know, I know. I will try and tie you in with more diverse mech models in the future. The Hexers still make plentiful use of the Devious mech line as far as I know, so you I know you aren't short of spiritual feedback."

"Squeak!"

The eight-legged exobeast made a disgruntled alien sound before turning around his chunky body so that he wouldn't have to look at Ves any longer.

"You should do as he requested." Calabast spoke as she stroked Arnold's back. "I think the constant contact with Hexer mech pilots is driving him mad. The only reason he remains grounded is because he has developed close relationships with Venerable Tusa and the Dark Zephyr."

"Mhhmm. I will be starting a couple of projects in the future that might make good use of Arnold's strengths. I need to think more about this as your pet is mostly relevant to trickier mechs."

"My Black Cats can always use another mech that is good at subterfuge."

"Noted. That's not why I have come today. Not directly, at least. I wanted to talk to you about another matter."

"Are you concerned about Larkinsons colluding with the Davutans behind your back? I already told you that my monitoring efforts do not work on key officials of the colonial administration. Prospective President Yenames Clive is routinely enveloped by the Saint Kingdoms of ace mechs. Even if he is not, he is most definitely carrying an impressive suite of protection and anti-monitoring equipment that he or the Clive Consortium directly exchanged from the MTA. His ministers, advisors and assistants such as his chief of staff might not be as well-protected, but their personal anti-monitoring gear are just as impressive. The only way to eavesdrop on them is to break through this protection by force, but that would reveal what we are doing."

"I am not blaming you for your failures." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "I already got over your inability to discover that Ark had been making promises and commitments on his own initiative during his initial meetings with the colonial government. I hadn't been in a hurry to induct him into my clan so he was still a member of the Larkinson Family or

an independent back then. Now that I have finally roped him into the clan, he can't get away with as much anymore."

Calabast leaned back on his chair while she massaged Arnold's head. "You know that won't stop him from doing what he really wants and strongly believes in, right? The downside to bestowing your clansmen a certain degree of initiative and autonomy is that their solutions don't always align with your intentions. As the new vice director of the Davute Branch, Ark can do damn near anything as long as it does not directly contradict our existing rules. In fact, there are rare situations where he can override your policies as long as he can argue that he is benefiting the clan."

One of the peculiarities of the clan was that it granted a lot of initiative to its members and leaders. Though the clan administration had implemented a lot of rules and regulations over the years, there was never an expectation that they were absolute.

Ves had seen too many societies with strict laws that completely failed when it mattered the most because the existing regulations no longer fit the situation at hand.

Rather than make his clansmen cling to useless or detrimental rules, Ves implemented a general principle that encouraged people to think for themselves and act according to the situation at hand regardless of whether it was strictly legal.

This stood in stark contrast to the old principles and customs of the Larkinson Family, which completely allowed itself to become enthralled by an uncaring and exploitative Bright Republic.

In order to prevent the Larkinsons from becoming caught like this again, Ves went in the opposite direction.

He did not regret this decision, but he understood that it also gave people who possessed radically different ideas a lot of openings to pursue other strategies.

The scenario that Calabast warned about fell into this category.

Ves strongly wanted to keep his clan as detached from states as possible.

Ark on the other hand believed the clan would gain a lot more if it entered into a mutually beneficial relationship with Davute and earn a lot of rewards in the process.

Uncle Ark's stance happened to directly contradict Ves' personal stances, but he was permitted to think and even act this way because it was another possible way to make the clan more successful.

Though Ves still did not agree with Ark's initiative, he did not want to force his clan to follow only a single vision. It had grown large enough to allow the Davute Branch to go

its own way and see whether its bet on the colonial government would pay off in the end.

He sighed. "I am affording Ark the same treatment that I would have wanted back when I initially pleaded to take the Larkinson Family in a different direction. Back then, I tried so hard to persuade the stodgy elders that letting me in charge would reinvigorate the family and make it prosper at least ten times more than if it continued to follow the same direction. I only founded the clan out of helplessness. If I couldn't implement my plans with my existing family, then I thought I might as well create a new one, and you see how that went."

Calabast understood his message and softened her tone. "It is good of you to hold onto your principles. They are what keeps you together when everything starts to change around you. Besides, you haven't made the wrong choice in my opinion. Our clan's strategic shift has come in a timely manner. By letting the Davute Branch enact a different development strategy, many of the clansmen that have grown dissatisfied with spaceborn life have decisively transferred to the recently empowered side branch. This will have a positive influence on the main fleet."

She referred to the fact that those who chose to stay in the fleet overwhelmingly consisted of clansmen who believed in Ves and his vision. Dissent and hesitation were much less likely to occur because a lot of potential naysayers had already moved away.

Turning the Davute Branch into a viable alternative for the Larkinson Clan meant that Ves was able to tighten his control over the fleet he cared so much about!

"I'm not here to talk about how extensively Ark and the Davute Branch will pursue a different course from mine." He said. "I am here to talk about my concerns with the colonial government. I don't know about you, but I don't trust that constricting bastard at the top one bit. That guy is a snake. He is just good at hiding it under his guise as a businessman-turned-statesman."

The attractive spymaster directed a critical look at him. "I can see where you are getting at, but you do know that leaders at this level all have to be ruthless and pragmatic to a degree, correct? What President Clive has shown so far does not exceed the boundaries of an effective leader of a large and rapidly-changing state."

"That does not reassure me at all, Calabast. In fact, it is the opposite. I have met multiple statesmen and government leaders who ended up saying one thing, only to do the exact opposite! I swear it is baked into their professional DNA somehow."

"That... is completely illogical and a product of bias, Ves."

Ves frowned at the skepticism he received. Shouldn't Calabast be more supportive of his suspicions?

"I would rather be safe than sorry. I am more than happy to be proven wrong in my concerns, but if there is a nonzero chance that our good friend Yenames Clive has any nefarious designs on our clan, I want to know about it in advance instead of getting bushwhacked by it because I did not get any warning in advance."

Calabast raised her eyebrow. "Are you asking us to investigate the leadership of the colonial government?"

"I am not asking you. I am ordering you. I know it is difficult to penetrate their tight security perimeter, but I am not paying your Black Cats so much to develop a regular information network. Show what you are made of and find out what that snake truly thinks about our clan."

The spymaster looked upset. This was a huge request, and one that could easily backfire on the Larkinson Clan if the Black Cats got caught!

"...I need to borrow Lucky from you. He is still our best infiltration asset in our possession."

"You will have him. Lucky is still busy with digesting his latest meal, though, so it will take a bit more persuasion to put him into action.'

Chapter 4732: The Government District

The Government District was the oldest and one of the most central districts of Kotor City.

It held a high concentration of government institutions and offices. Many politicians, bureaucrats and other public officials regularly worked in this area. The district featured a high concentration of government employees who worked with sensitive information.

Given the large number of public officials who possessed the power and authority to alter the way that Davute was run, the security levels in this district happened to be the highest!

An entire mech regiment was permanently stationed in an underground fortress that was built underneath the surface.

This not only placed a lot of nearby mechs on standby, but also allowed the military to patrol the streets and airways of the district on a constant basis.

Every mech patrol included at least one dedicated auxiliary mech that was dedicated towards scouting.

As tensions between Davute and Karlach continued to rise, the colonial government equipped the scouting mechs tasked with patrolling the crucial Government District with newer and more advanced sensor systems.

An unknown proportion of these scout mechs even received secret upgrades that replaced their second-class sensor systems with first-class models!

The colonial government exchanged a number of them from the MTA, but most of the powerful sensor systems came from different first-class groups and states.

The backers of Davute such as the Clive Consortium had been in business long enough to develop multiple ties to rich and powerful first-class powers.

It was not that difficult to obtain batches of advanced technological products.

Of course, this was bad news to any parties that sought to spy on the core institutions of the colonial government.

The Karlachs had tried to infiltrate the Government District many times in many different ways.

While no one knew for certain whether they succeeded, Davute strongly believed that these attempts had never succeeded!

A certain gem cat equipped with a black cat-sized infiltrator suit was learning this as well.

"Meow."

Lucky tried his best to remain discreet as he phased his body through a tree in a park in a neighboring district.

He did not dare to act casually when the Government District came into sight. The cat's electronic senses detected many forms of surveillance up ahead. Some of these measures were so powerful that Lucky did not feel confident in his ability to stay hidden!

When the cat silently phased through the tree trunk and traversed through the thick floor, he managed to avoid most of these detection methods.

Neither visual sensors nor other sensors could detect the gem cat when he was in this special state.

The only issue was that Lucky could not navigate by vision alone, but he had already memorized detailed maps that helped him estimate his position at all times.

As the cat's advanced processors calculated that he had crossed over into the Government District, Lucky slowed down and proceeded with much greater care.

The entire ground layer of the Government District was artificially constructed. An innumerable amount of functional systems and detection systems were active at all times.

If not for the fact that those detection systems lacked optical sensors that could spot a translucent mechanical cat passing through lots of solid matter, Lucky would have never been able to remain undetected up to this point.

As Lucky continued to move closer to the center, he detected a powerful presence that was rapidly closing in from a distance.

The cat panicked and immediately turned around to create as much distance as possible!

Above the ground, a powerful ace mech gently floated to a position where the pilot thought he detected suspicious activity.

It turned out that Saint Yorvick Clive, pilot of the powerful and renowned Indormeon, had a hunch that someone was up to no good at this location!

As his powerful Saint Kingdom swept across the underground area where his strong intuition warned him about, he grew suspicious and confused.

Saint Yorvick found no trace of infiltration, though he was certain that his intuition had not led him astray.

"Strange."

Instead of dismissing this false positive as a fluke or a mistake, the ace pilot treated this incident with utmost gravity.

As the date of the founding ceremony drew closer, it became more important than ever for the Davutans to guard against any hostile actions.

The founding ceremony mattered a lot to the prospective president. This was his big day and the moment where he would definitely prevent any rivals from snatching his seat of power.

Yorvick and Yenames shared more than just the same family name. They were cousins from the same generation and spent much of their childhoods in each other's company.

Though the two eventually saw each other a lot less often when Yenames entered a business track while Yorvick entered the mech piloting track, they continued to maintain their friendship as they advanced up the ranks.

When Yenames Clive transferred to the Red Ocean in order to take charge of the Davute Project, the ambitious leader personally invited his good friend turned ace pilot to join forces and protect the fragile colony.

Yorvick therefore treated his service in Davute as more than just an ordinary assignment. This was personal, and as such he did not leave anything to chance.

He first transmitted a message that notified the security forces of his suspicions. He then proceeded to patrol the Government District at a much higher level of alertness than before.

The Indormeon, a large and imposing ace knight mech, most definitely made its presence known as it flew past many government buildings.

As Saint Yorvick still had a hunch that a possible enemy was trying to infiltrate the colonial government through the ground, he kept his ace mech low and no longer tried to make his presence as unobtrusive as possible.

The domain field projected by his strong and resilient ace mech swept through nearby the office buildings without any restraint!

Although the public officials working inside those structures most definitely experienced varying degrees of disruption as the powerful will of an ace pilot judged their loyalty and behavior, the workers tried their best to continue with their routines.

Each of these workers were carefully selected for their loyalty and competence. They had already been trained to endure the invasive scrutiny by ace pilots.

This allowed the Indormeon to keep using its Saint Kingdom as an all-purpose detection system for hours at a time!

While this was taking place, Lucky had managed to retreat far enough that he could poke out his head from a nearby monument.

A brief glimpse from afar revealed that the amount of mechs patrolling the Government District had doubled!

Many more scout mechs scoured the streets and the air for any suspicious activity.

They particularly put a lot of effort into detecting any intrusion in the air surrounding the large blue palace that was floating a few meters above the surface of the planet!

The Skyline Palace was the residence of the head of the colonial state.

Though it wasn't supposed to serve this function before the founding ceremony, Prospective President Yenames Clive had already moved into the floating palace in advance.

Even though it was clearly exposed in the air, that also made it virtually impossible for spies to approach it without revealing their traces!

Not only was there a complete lack of cover, but the large amount of sensor systems and scout mechs could detect the approach of damn near any stealthed object!

Lucky did not possess true stealth capabilities, so he had no shot of sneaking inside the Skyline Palace!

His phasing trick did not work at all as there weren't any solid objects connecting the Skyline Palace to any other solid objects!

Even if Lucky managed to sneak into the palace by hiding inside an approaching shuttle, the cat knew that he would most definitely expose himself one way or another.

Not only was Saint Yorvick Clive's intuition sharp enough to detect anything sneaking around from an impressive distance, but Lucky also felt that there may be another ace pilot residing inside the Skyline Palace!

"Meoow..."

The gem cat didn't sign up for this. There was no way he could do anything in the Government District when the Davutans employed so many different security precautions.

Fortunately, Calabast had anticipated that Lucky might not be able to sneak his way inside this highly guarded district.

The spymaster had given Lucky a few alternative destinations where he could spend his time instead.

"Meow..."

After a quick moment of thought, the cat turned around and moved to another direction while phasing through the ground.

The cat eventually arrived in the Austere District.

Many of the most powerful government officials and other powerful and wealthy individuals resided in one of the many mansions built in this enclave.

It was a lot quieter and more subdued here. No ace mechs patrolled the streets as its residents did not like it when they got disturbed. They liked it even less when ace pilots unscrupulously invaded their privacy!

Although security was not light, much of it was private and confined to individual mansions and estates.

Of course, the large and luxurious residences of the various ministers, CEOs, board directors, senior professors and so on still weren't easy to infiltrate.

After cautiously exploring their security suites, Lucky found that any sign of abnormality or intrusion would immediately trigger a lot of alarms!

Lucky could not cut through a single cable or phase out of a wall at any moment without leaving behind clues of his presence.

This frustrated the cat yet again. There was no way he could collect any intelligence from the movers and shakers of Davute.

He could only settle for lesser targets. The Austere District featured plenty of smaller and more affordable estates that were occupied by people who were slightly lower on the totem pole.

Lucky found that the security suites were rather mixed. A few of them were just as secure as the bigger estates, while the others happened to be a lot easier for him to infiltrate.

Unfortunately, Lucky did not pick up anything significant by poking around these lesser estates. Most of their occupants knew better than to leave sensitive data within reach. The logs and security footage also showed that they took a lot of care in refraining from talking about work while they were at their homes.

After a long and fruitless day of poking around, Lucky only gathered miscellaneous data on various companies and government institutions.

Though the scattered intelligence would probably be of great value to the Black Cats, the cat did not come close to fulfilling his primary objectives!

It wasn't until the cat randomly sneaked into another modest and less secure estate that he inadvertently managed to gain more results!

The cat detected that a resident of the mansion hacked its monitoring system in order to create false records that showed that nothing special was taking place.

The reason for that became clear when Lucky slowly approached the bedroom which was strangely covered by a powerful jamming field and other anti-surveillance effects.

Although these measures were quite effective at preventing others from learning what was taking place inside, it also happened to invalidate any detection systems that might still be active, including ones that were sensitive enough to pick up Lucky's sneaky approach!

Once Lucky confirmed multiple times that nothing should be able to detect his presence, he poked his eye out of the wall and immediately found out that he intruded upon an intimate moment.

"...Oh... that is the spot..."

"You are so soft..."

"My husband isn't nearly as big of a man as you..."

The uniform of a military general laid haphazardly on the floor. A loose dress along with other feminine articles of clothing laid in another pile!

As the two secret lovers continued to share a moment of intimacy, Lucky kept moving closer while listening to anything important that the pair might say in the throes of their passion.

At the same time, the cat slowly phased his way to a cabinet where the lovers had placed their comms.

If Lucky was able to touch the comm of the general, he might be able to crack its security and access whatever data was stored inside!

Chapter 4733: Scattered Clues

"...So that's it?" Ves furrowed his brows as he visited Calabast's underground again. "The only useful and relevant intelligence that we have managed to gain are a bunch of non-critical messages from the comm of a general who happened to be committing adultery!"

Calabast smirked as she sat behind her desk while stroking Lucky behind the ears. "That is not all. Your cat also managed to record the exchange of words between the general and the wife of a business executive of a major company."

Ves took another glance at the text log of that 'conversation'. He had no desire to listen to the audio that Lucky managed to pick up with his ears.

"I don't know about you, but the only information that I am getting out of this exchange of words are claims that the general satisfies his lover a lot better than the husband of the woman in question!"

The spymaster shook her head in disappointment. "That is true, but you are not examining them deep enough. Let me select a handful of excerpts that happen to provide us with vital clues."

She pointed her arm and caused the projected text log to magnify and highlight a few sentences spoken by the general of Davute's armed forces and his lover.

[..Enjoy this moment, babe... because I won't be coming back in the following weeks...]

[Why? ... You always come in time...]

[..Extra shifts...]

Ves crossed his arms. "What's so special about this? It is not unusual to work overtime to guarantee the security of the founding ceremony and the festival that follows."

"That is true, but we have looked up the gentleman in question. General Declan Urillian is not in charge of one of the many mech units that are tasked with guarding and securing this planet and star system. He is actually in charge of a military department that is responsible for studying Karlach's territories, identifying targets of high strategic value and military planning. He is responsible for helping Davute's military forces strike the right targets."

"Okay... I see why that might be important, Calabast." Ves said as he thought about it more. "That doesn't necessarily mean anything, though."

"That is true. On its own, this does not constitute proof that anything further is happening, but that is why we tried to combine it with other notable intelligence. Take the man's schedule for example."

The woman projected a calendar that showed the man's itinerary for two different weeks.

In the week before the founding ceremony, the general scheduled plenty of meetings and events. The man not only held regular meetings with other public officials, but also maintained an active social life.

Absolutely nothing about this looked out of place for a man of this position.

It was the agenda after the founding ceremony that looked odd.

Aside from obligatory work-related meetings that had been scheduled in advance, the calendar showed that the general did not intend to catch up with any friends and acquaintances!

This not only persisted during the week-long festival that should be the perfect time to deepen relationships with other people, but also the month that followed!

"Okay..." Ves slowly said. "This shows that the general anticipates that he will be incredibly busy, but that matches what he has already said to his lover."

"It is different. The man's agenda contextualizes his words. His verbal statements in the meantime also clarifies the noticeable absence of meetings planned after the date of the founding ceremony. Let me show you a third clue. This is taken from a brief exchange of text messages between the general and a military advisor that is working directly under Prospective President Yenames Clive."

The projection changed to show an excerpt of the log of the messages transmitted over two months ago, making it rather old and easily overlooked.

[Amiyan Metal Trading is playing hardball again. I wish I could pull out my service firearm and shoot that sniveling **** between the eyes.]

[Amiyan?]

[I do not know what Y is thinking when he thinks he can turn Amiyan into a serious investor.]

[I remember now. Amiyan's seats have recently been reassigned to block E.]

[Ok.]

This exchange of messages looked rather strange to Ves. By itself, it did not seem suspicious, but if Calabast found it important enough to direct his attention to it, then there might be more to the story than he realized.

"What am I looking at?" He asked.

"From what I have gathered, Amiyan Metal Trading is a large resource wholesaler." Calabast explained. "It is a large company that is expanding rapidly throughout the Red Ocean. It has established branch offices in both Davute and Karlach and does not see the need to pick one over the other."

"I see. That must be frustrating to President Yenames Clive."

Calabast nodded. "It is the latter sentences that peak my interest. 'Block E' can only refer to the seating arrangement of the founding ceremony. Block A is where the

representatives of the founders and main investors of Davute are seated. Its security is exceptionally high as it will be covered by an ace mech at all times, likely the Indemeon piloted by Saint Yorvick Clive."

"That makes a lot of sense." Ves remarked. "The biggest bosses of Davute have all gathered in the same place, so it deserves full-time protection from the most defensive ace mech in the colonial state. Where are we seated, by the way?"

"We have been assigned to Block L."

"Does that make us more or less important?" Ves scratched his head.

"Neither. All of the other invited parties have been randomly assigned to the remaining seating blocks. The Glory Seekers are assigned to Block B, the Boojay Family are in Block G, the Cross Clan is in Block M and the Adelaide Third Fleet is in Block R."

That was a pretty random spread. Ves found it rather disappointing that he wouldn't get to sit near his close allies.

"Ves."

"Yes?"

"Think back on the earlier exchange of words that took place two months ago. When the military advisor informed the general that Amiyan's representatives in Davute had been reassigned to Block E, the latter replied with 'Ok' before they stopped sending messages entirely."

"So?"

Calabast leaned forward. "This implies a number of possibilities. First, Block E is special. Second, transferring the representatives of Amiyan Metal Trading to this Block satisfies the general who was previously upset with this resource wholesaler. The conclusion that we can draw from this is that Block E may turn into a site of misfortune when the founding ceremony finally commences."

Ves slowly frowned. "Wait a second... are you telling me that Davute intends to kill everyone assigned to Block E?!"

"It is unclear who will commit such a possible attack and who is responsible for it in any fashion. At the very least, the messages suggest that the general and the military advisor know more than 'Y', which likely stands for President Ynames Clive. This implies that the president is ignorant of this development, but that the people who are supposedly under him are working behind his back."

This was starting to get murkier and murkier. Though Ves found Calabast's guesses to be rather far-fetched and difficult to believe, it still showed that the colonial government was anything but squeaky clean behind the scenes.

To think that Calabast managed to derive all of this out of a few pieces of scattered information!

"I don't really understand what is going on." Ves said.

"Let me give you a fourth clue. This is the personal stock portfolio of the general. Note a series of transfers that he made more than three years ago."

The next projected image showed a list of stock purchases and sales. It looked pretty normal to Ves.

"I see he bought and sold a bunch of stocks at that time period. At most, he is engaging in insider trading."

"That is true, but that is not the entire story, Ves. Of the stocks that the general over the span of a couple of months, two of them happen to be companies whose guests have been assigned to Block E. It indicates that the general has received privileged information that told him that these companies will drop in value in the future. However, the strangest part is that both BTR Trust and Ulliver Med have benefited substantially from the boom in Davute. Their stock prices have increased by 15 and 27 percent respectively over the next three years."

"That... could either be a giant coincidence or it could not..."

The spymaster lifted Lucky up and placed him on the top of her desk.

"Meow!"

"Imagine this scenario. You are a stakeholder that is involved in founding a colonial state, but you are not quite satisfied with its state. The man in charge of leading it is so engaged in fostering a business-friendly environment and making as many allies as possible that he is neglecting to unite all of these parties and giving them a more powerful motivation to wage war against Karlach than profit. What can you do that can address these apparent problems?"

The answer was fairly obvious to Ves now that Calabast had led him on like this. "You attack! Striking some of the groups attending the founding ceremony is a great opportunity to do so. So many important figures will come out at once, making it easy to threaten them all. Once this tragedy is over, they will most likely develop a lot of personal hatred against Karlach for committing this attack!"

"Exactly, Ves. The most insidious part about this scheme is that both sides stand to gain from letting a tragedy happen. We all know that Karlach definitely wants to ruin the party. Not only will it be able to showcase its strength and paint Davute as weak, the rival state can also weaken or eliminate figures and groups that are important to Davute's national strength. Yet as long as Davute is willing to pay this price, it can stand to gain just as much if not more! By galvanizing all of the investors and business partners into a united front against the attackers, the colonial government will ensure that it has the support to wage a long and brutal war!"

Ves almost couldn't believe what he heard!

"Wait, that is messed up! Won't Karlach refuse to play along if it just ends up benefiting Davute more?"

"That is anything but certain. It depends on how well Davute is able to contain and direct the damage. I believe this is a game that is being played by certain elements of both sides. The masterminds don't even need to clearly communicate their plans to each other. The only action that Davute needs to take in order to let this attack happen is to leave a deliberate hole in the security arrangements. Just a small vulnerability is enough to enable a highly sophisticated enemy to launch a painful attack!"

As Ves thought back on all of the clues that Calabast mentioned beforehand, it all started to tie into a horrible conspiracy.

The key was the seating blocks of the founding ceremony. Certain people may have already marked them for death without anyone outside of this small cabal knowing the truth.

A lot of different groups were mixed together in those blocks, making it harder to identify any clear patterns.

Ves realized that it would make it more difficult to figure out if a potential decapitation strike sought to eliminate a specific group!

It also deflected suspicion away from the colonial government!

"Wait wait wait!" Ves said in a panicked tone. "If a group of Davutans is hatching a conspiracy to allow the Karlachs to commit a horrible attack, how the hell can they keep it a secret from the honorable ace pilots who regularly patrol the Government District and monitor everyone's loyalty? It's impossible to fool those sensitive Saints for long given that one of them almost managed to catch Lucky."

"Isn't it obvious, Ves?" Calabast smirked at him. "The ace pilots may be involved in the conspiracy. As long as the justification is good enough, they can tolerate all kinds of misdeeds."

"What?!"

It was hard for Ves to imagine that these honorable and principled ace pilots would deliberately cooperate with a plot to allow an enemy force to attack the subjects that were under their protection!

"From what we know of strong loyalties who had been brought up by their respective groups, people such as Saint Yorvick Clive are not fighting for justice, peace or President Yenames Clive's policies. They all answer to the leaders of the main organizations that reside in the old galaxy. If those distant elders want to use a Karlach terror strike as a motivating force, then they have most definitely instructed their ace pilots to stay quiet about the conspirators!"

As Ves mapped out this scenario in his mind, he could see how the ace pilots could still retain their honor by knowing nothing about the specifics of the enemy plan.

Once an incident occurred, the ace pilots could all move into action and earnestly neutralize the threats without holding back.

This was because if the Karlachs had prepared their attacks correctly, they should have already completed their attacks on the occupants of the vulnerable seating blocks!

Chapter 4734: Snake Pit

"So these are the 'honorable' and 'trustworthy' pals that Uncle Ark wants to get in bed with? He sure chose wisely."

Ves scoffed after he took in the incredible act of duplicity, hypocrisy and outright betrayal that a group of Davutans might possibly commit.

Sure, Calabast's speculations may be off the mark, but it would be pretty dreary if the conspiracy truly existed!

"To be fair to the colonial government, not every Davutan is involved in this possible gambit." His spymaster reminded him. "Only a small subgroup is plotting this scheme behind the backs of more earnest and honest colonists. I am reasonably confident that President Yenames Clive remains clueless. He needs to maintain a clean and trustworthy reputation so that he can continue to attract new allies and investors for the Davute Project."

"Pfff! That doesn't change the fact that Davute is just as bad as all of the other damned states that I have encountered. The colonial government is a giant snake pit. To think I actually thought that Yenames Clive's sincerity accurately reflected the goodwill of his entire state. Nothing could be further from the truth!"

"Where there are people, there are interests. The greater the population, the more pronounced the divisions become. This applies to both Davute and our clan. You can't stop people from having different ideas on how to proceed, Ves."

"I guess you're right, but it would be nice to learn about these kinds of shenanigans in advance."

He was glad that Calabast managed to sniff out this possible plot before it happened for a change. She had redeemed herself for her earlier misses and proven her value once again, if only barely.

Ves would have never been able to deduce that this kind of conspiracy might be in the works if he was on his own. Just the work and judgment required to identify and tie together a few random clues from a substantial trove of ordinary data collected by Lucky was unthinkable!

His spymaster still cautioned him about putting too much stock in her analysis.

"You need to be careful not to dictate your actions based on a prediction derived from scarce and low-quality intelligence. The confidence value of my theory is low. The main reason why I mentioned it to you anyway is that it makes sense if you factor in the motives of the parties who invested in Davute. Schemes like this have taken place many times in the past. Directing the attention of the citizens and stakeholders of a state to an external enemy is a surefire way to condense everyone's unity and sense of purpose."

This was a tried-and-true formula for humanity. Ves recalled the discussions he held with General Verle on matters such as morale and esprit de corps.

The Bright Republic relied on these intangibles in order for its Mech Corps to resist the numerically superior Mech Legion of the Vesia Kingdom in each and every generational war.

Even though Ves had good suspicions that the Bright-Vesia Wars were at least implicitly rigged from the start, the powerful nobles of the Vesia Kingdom did not mind taking over the Bentheim when they had the chance!

The fighting was therefore very real in that sense.

Without creating a noticeable disparity between the morale, ferocity and dedication between the combatants, the Brighters would have never been able to fend off the Vesians for so many years!

This example illustrated the difference that purpose could make.

"An army without a driving reason to spur them onto fighting is no army at all." Ves quoted one of the general's words. "It is a mob of profiteers who are only good at bullying the weak and running away from the strong. If you want to condense an actual army, you need to condense a common will that can motivate soldiers into standing their ground no matter the personal risks to their lives."

A qualified army had to meet many different requirements in order to compete against other armies, but the most important ones were a commitment to duty, a belief in victory and a spirit of self-sacrifice.

Calabast nodded at those sage words. "The armed forces of Davute are currently split into two broad categories, namely the Internal Group and the External Group. The core forces that originally hailed from the founding organizations such as the Clive Consortium have completely been absorbed into the Internal Group. Every mech unit has agreed to put down their previous loyalties, adopt a common standard and take part in a unified command structure. It is a professional mech military in the truest sense."

The Internal Group was also responsible for guarding the Government District and all of the other core areas of the colony.

"Uncle Ark and his future mech division will fall into the External Group, right?"

"That is correct, Ves. As you can imagine, the External Group is much larger but can also be described as a mixed bag. The lack of consistency, the complete absence of standardization, the shaky cooperation and an unwillingness to obey commands from other private individuals no matter their rank will likely cause this group to underperform on the battlefield as a whole. This is detrimental to the war effort as the impact of defeat and chaotic routs can completely turn winnable battles into catastrophic defeats."

This was the sort of mess that Ark Larkinson hoped to fight in. If the expert pilot had any expectation that the External Group that provided the bulk of the mech forces would fight as professionally as the old Mech Corps, then he would be in for a rude awakening!

Given how the upcoming war could end up into an absolute disaster for Davute due to the lack of unity and will among the scattered mercenary forces, it made more and more sense to create an 'incident' that could successfully trigger a common hatred against Karlach!

Ves groaned as he tried to figure out how Davute ended up in this awful situation.

"Since we can foresee this scenario, so should President Yenames Clive. Why the hell isn't he doing more to unite the will of the mech forces that had pledged to fight under the External Group?"

"He isn't as smart as you think he is." Calabast replied as she played with Lucky who she had placed on the desk. The cat rolled over and presented his tummy. "You've studied his record. He's a through-and-through businessman who never stepped close onto a battlefield. His head is filled with business and management theories such as negotiating tactics, incentive structures, agency problems and so on. His modus operandi so far leads me to believe he puts too much stock on tangibles over intangibles. To Yenames Clive, every mech force is a defined war asset that can be put on a balance sheet. So long as your war assets exceed that of your enemies, you will automatically win the war."

"That's stupid."

"It is the way he has been raised to think, Ves. His complete lack of experience or exposure to the vagaries of war has left him with large holes in his understanding of people and organizations. While that is not a disadvantage if he is put in charge of a commercial enterprise that operates in a peaceful and law-abiding sphere, a state that is about to get embroiled in a major war is entirely different. You and I know better due to our own training and personal experiences, but try and convey that to a highborn scion who never had to endure any physical struggles in his entire life."

It was instances like these that made Ves appreciate and look fondly at the ordeals that the Bright Republic put him through.

Being drafted into a war and being thrown into a mech regiment that went on to undergo a wild journey through the Vesia Kingdom and the frontier had given him a front-row seat on what life was like for those who fought in the trenches.

In fact, he had been forced to fight in them himself at times!

This not only helped him design better mechs as he endured some of the same struggles as their pilots, but also gave him an undeniable sense of superiority towards pansies like Yenames Clive.

Still, the problem now was not that Yenames Clive was soft, but that his wiser and more knowledgeable superiors in the old galaxy intended to correct this problem by employing violence!

Ves normally shouldn't care about this nonsense, but the fact that he and his family were obliged to attend the founding ceremony in a VIP area that would likely turn into a disaster zone truly triggered his fury!

"Calm down. You're a clan leader, not an impulsive kid." His spymaster said. "As I have stated before, none of this is confirmed. I have already tasked my Black Cats to follow every possible lead that we can pursue. Although time is tight, I hope we can receive corroborating evidence that can either prove or disprove that Davute deliberately intends to incite its partners."

That wasn't good enough for Ves!

"Screw that, Calabast. I have a better way of receiving confirmation."

He called over one of his honor guards who passed him a small totem of Ylvaine. He held it in his palms and concentrated his mind in order to send a query.

"Will the upcoming founding ceremony that is scheduled to take place in Kotor City descend into violence?"

Ves winced as the totem in his hand pulsed like a wobbly light.

"Well? What answer did your pet prophet provide?"

"Ylvaine can't make any predictions about the event." Ves regretfully replied. "It is an event that affects too many people, not just in Davute but also across the Krakatoa Middle Zone and beyond. A lot of the people whose lives are drastically impacted by the ceremony are thousands of leaders who wield a huge influence. If that is not enough, a bunch of ace pilots are also directly involved. They are so resistant to foresight that they actively hinder Ylvaine's attempts at forecasting the future."

The only way for the Great Prophet to get a read on the Saints was to grow a lot stronger to the point where he could overcome their inherent resistance by force!

Ves lamented Ylvaine's weakness once again. The design spirit was nowhere strong enough where he could supply the stupendous amount of energy needed to divine the fates of so many people and powerhouses.

Calabast meanwhile fell into thought.

"If Ylvaine cannot make such costly predictions, then try and narrow the scope of your inquiry. We only need a slight clue in order to draw our conclusions. For example, try and ask Ylvaine if the representatives of Amiyan Metal Trading are still alive in the days or weeks after the date of the founding ceremony has passed. Try and do the same for a handful of individuals hailing from other companies that have been assigned to the same block."

She called up a public document that displayed a diagram of the final seating arrangements of Block E.

When Ves passed on the smaller and more manageable queries to Ylvaine, the totem in his hands began to glow a lot brighter, injecting a sense of certainty in Calabast's office!

"Dead." Ves whispered as a pit sunk into his stomach. "Ylvaine says... the local representatives of Amiyan Metal Trading will all be dead."

Calabast grew a lot more intense when she heard that. She leaned over and held Lucky in a tighter grip.

"What of the delegates hailing from BTR Trust and Ulliver Med?"

"Their path cuts off on the day of the founding ceremony." Ves replied as he became more in tune with Ylvaine. "There is only darkness before them. Only a few minor figures managed to preserve their futures... they may have been dispatched elsewhere. Everyone else in Block E... is marked for death."

These revelations pretty much confirmed their worst fears about the much-hyped event!

Both Ves and Calabast turned incredibly serious as they became privy to a plan that they weren't supposed to learn!

Chapter 4735: Threatened

Since Ylvaine could apparently glean whether certain individuals were still alive after a certain date, Ves and Calabast took advantage of this capability to glean the fates of other attendants.

"Ylvaine can't predict anything from the people assigned to Block A." Ves frowned as he held the glowing totem of the Great Prophet. "Those are all bigshots that are also regularly shielded by ace mechs. It is impossible for Ylvaine to overcome the excessive interference."

Calabast shrugged her shoulders. "At least we tried. Let us take a look at the status of the people assigned to the other blocks."

The answers they received were rather mixed and not entirely satisfactory.

Ylvaine had to strain a lot in order to foresee the futures of so many different people that got mixed up in so many different variables.

The design spirit expended a serious amount of energy in order to provide the answers that Ves and Calabast sought.

The most troublesome factor was that the movements of all of the high-ranking mechs during the founding ceremony adversely impacted the ability for Ylvaine to foresee anything that crossed their paths.

"Ylvaine can't say much about Block L where our clan has been assigned." Ves said.

"Block L should be positioned well away from any possible outbreaks." Calabast concluded after a few seconds of thought. "I don't need a cheat machine like your pet prophet to deduce that Davute will not want you to come to harm. Your death does not benefit the colonial government. You are much more valuable to them when you are alive. Not only have you agreed to accept their mech design commissions, but you are also a tier 6 galactic citizen that is backed by the MTA. The conspirators may be bold enough to plot against their own stakeholders, but they cannot withstand the scrutiny from both the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction."

This was one of the few moments where his galactic citizenship actually played a positive role for once. Ves was not accustomed to such a situation.

"I think you are right." He said. "That said, battles rarely if ever go according to plan. Who knows if collateral damage will cause attacks to splash onto our seating block. We need to be prepared for every eventuality."

Ves now understood why he felt driven to invest his time into upgrading his Unending Regalia. Perhaps a part of him became so sensitive to a possible future threat that he felt compelled to bolster his own protection.

They tried to check up on the fates of the people assigned to the other seating blocks.

It turned out that it was much harder for Ylvaine to get a solid read on them. The eruption of violence and the sheer amount of chaos that ensued from that caused many seating blocks to come under varying degrees of risk.

"It makes sense." The spymaster commented. "Unlike Block E, the other blocks probably aren't supposed to be targeted. That does not mean they are safe. Depending on the nature of the danger that will emerge during the founding ceremony, a threat can go out of control and destroy a number of other blocks before it is finally taken down. Ylvaine is struggling to cope with this cloud of uncertainty."

All of this meant that Ves and Calabast only possessed a vague understanding of how a possible incident might unfold and affect the VIP sections.

Ylvaine only managed to make more solid predictions about the futures of those assigned to Block M and Block Y.

Just like Block E, it appeared that Block M and Block Y were similarly targeted from the beginning!

"Block Y will be hosting the leaders of Yovo Processing." Calabast explained. "This is an ore refiner and alloy producer that plays an outsized role in supplying companies such as the LMC with high-quality metal alloys that are used in the construction of mechs, starships and military infrastructure. Decapitating the leaders of this company

will allow Davute to place more supportive executives in the top positions, thereby allowing the state to exert more control over its strategically important foundries."

While that sounded interesting, Ves paid no attention to the circumstances of Yovo Processing.

He instead fixated his attention on the mass casualties of the other block that was marked for death!

"What are the conspirators thinking?! Why are they plotting to kill off everyone assigned to Block M?! That is where the representatives of the Cross Clan are seated!"

"Think about it from the eyes of Davute." Calabast said. "Do these Crossers matter to the colonial state? Not necessarily. The Crossers still have many mech pilots that are nowhere near the danger zone. Is Master Benedict Cortez valuable? No. Davute already enjoys the services of many Master Mech Designers who are older, more capable and more experienced. Instead, it will benefit the colonial state more if a purported attack from Karlach inflicts severe harm onto the Cross Clan."

Ves widened his eyes. The story made a lot of sense.

What was the most valuable part about the Cross Clan?

Its ace pilot!

What Davute sought from the Crossers was the loyalty and commitment from Patriarch Reginald Cross.

Right now, the cooperation between the two sides should be rather decent but not reliable enough.

However, if the Karlachs succeeded in pulling off a ploy that killed a lot of important Crossers at once, Ves could easily foresee how the temperamental and volatile Cross Patriarch would react against this terrible affront.

"Reginald will go berserk! He will only have red in his eyes when he is facing the Karlachs in battle. He won't stop until he has wrecked his way to the Karlach System!"

The fury of a Saint was limitless, and it could be of great value as long as it was directed towards the enemy!

"Damn it! These are the people I talked to and cooperated with for years. I can't just let them all die because a secret group of masterminds want to drive Reginald mad!"

The only consolation was that Ylvaine had a lot of trouble reading Master Benedict's future. Not only was he strong and influential enough to resist Ylvaine's intrusive

actions, he was also a former pirate lord who definitely invested as much attention in his personal safety as Ves!

Out of all of the people assigned to Block M, Master Benedict should have the greatest hope of surviving.

That didn't mean Ves was happy with this situation. His own allies came under threat!

"We need to warn the Crossers right away!" Ves urged.

"NO!" Calabast shouted and shot up from her seat. "Do not act impulsively, Ves!"

"What?! Why not?! They're our comrades, Calabast! They have supported me and saved me many times. It is only fair for us to return the favor."

"I do not disapprove of that sentiment, but there are greater concerns at play."

Once Calabast became certain that Ves would not impulsively call or send out a message to the Crossers, she sat down again and explained her perspective on this matter.

"How do you think the Cross Clan will react to this possible conspiracy? Patriarch Reginald will absolutely refuse to fight for Davute if he learns that he is about to work with people who have plotted against his people! With his personality traits, the chances that he will blurt out the news are high. If the momentum of the resulting scandal is great enough, Davute will enter into a serious crisis. President Yenames Clive's strategy will become completely defunct. At that point, there is no need to guess at the outcome of the upcoming war anymore. Karlach will easily be able to steamroll what little forces that Davute has managed to retain!"

This was a disaster for every investor in the Davute Project!

This also happened to include Ark and the rest of the side branch based in the current colony!

"However, this disaster won't happen because the conspirators will try their best to take action before we can spark a scandal." Calabast mercilessly continued. "It is one thing if we remain ignorant to these dark dealings. It is another thing now that we have guessed the truth. We have turned ourselves into liabilities that need to be silenced. Unless you can magically wipe out our memories of the conclusions that we have just made, we are constantly at risk of getting attacked by the secretive forces that are plotting to energize the partners of Davute."

"That's not fair!" Ves complained.

"Clandestine operations are never fair. Innocents and unrelated people always get dragged into the mess against their will, but that comes with the territory."

He cursed for a moment. They had stumbled into an awful situation. The conspiracy ran so deep and involved so many powerful actors that making just a single wrong step might doom his clan and get a lot of friends and family killed!

"How the hell are we supposed to navigate this troublesome situation?" He wearily asked his spymaster. "Can we skip the founding ceremony? No. We have no excuses to do so. I also can't bring myself to condemn the attending Crossers to their deaths. How will we be able to save them while at the same time prevent any passing ace pilot that is in collusion with the plot from silencing us in advance?"

He had no answers at the moment as he completely felt out of his element.

It was the opposite for Calabast. She remained unflappable as the current scenario fell right into her ballpark.

"I have an answer for you, Ves, but you will not like what you are about to hear."

"Hit me with it. Anything is better than doing nothing."

"Since staying neutral or opposing this conspiracy are unacceptable to us, there is only one other choice we can make that can prevent us from drawing the ire of the masterminds. We can take their side."

"What?!"

The woman raised her finger. "Before you say anything further, let me finish my story. Instead of trying to oppose an initiative that is being hatched by a powerful faction on the side of Davute, it is better for us to adopt a supportive stance. This has several advantages. First, it deprives the Davutans of a reason to silence us. Second, it preserves the bonds of trust between our Davute Branch and the colonial government. Third, it allows us to make the best possible use of the information that we have obtained, which is taking advantage of the chaos to advance our own interests."

Her calm and logical reasoning caused Ves to rein in his fury. It was much better to employ a rational answer to this situation as opposed to an emotional one. The stakes were far too high for him to make a thoughtless decision!

"You will have to clarify that last point."

"Think about it, Ves. No matter what happens during the founding ceremony, a fight will certainly break out. I am not sure how long the ace mechs on guard will remain indisposed or split between too many priorities, but there will be at least a small window of time where people are under threat. Doesn't this sound like the perfect moment for

the mechs that are taking part in the parade to step up and play the heroes of the moment? As long as our participating mechs respond to the unfolding incident well enough, our reputation will skyrocket!"

This sounded plausible!

The viewers of the founding ceremony would be able to see Larkinson mechs doing their part to save the day. The Larkinsons would gain a more virtuous, brave and heroic impression in the eyes of the public!

In addition, all of the VIPs whose lives the Larkinsons had saved on that day would bear a lot of gratitude to the Larkinson Clan. This would make it a lot easier to forge new business relationships with powerful local influences.

The Larkinson mechs should also showcase a lot of strength and abilities that other mechs simply couldn't replicate. Ves' reputation as a mech designer would definitely soar! The products sold by the Living Mech Corporation would probably become a lot hotter on the market as many envious customers sought to wield the same kinds of advantages as they had witnessed during the founding ceremony!

Calabast began to smirk again. "Do you understand now, Ves? Chaos is a ladder. We can fall if we are not prepared, but as long as we cling onto the rungs tight enough, we can reach a higher position than before."

This was still a horrible situation for the Larkinson Clan, but at least she found a way to navigate through this murky swamp.

Chapter 4736: Limited Resources

Ves crossed his arms as he adopted a skeptical expression.

"So let me get this straight. Your highly measured and well-thought answer to a conspiracy that might lead to the deaths of hundreds of important figures is 'if you can't beat em, join em', is that right?"

The woman who proposed their clan to employ this funny-sounding strategy stood by her response.

"I am being serious about this, Ves. Besides, it is not a complete certainty that any violent incident will take place on that day. Even if the Karlachs have managed to execute a plan, it is still in question whether anyone on the side of Davute is responsible. The clues that we have gathered do not constitute a smoking gun. Few people will take our theories seriously when they are all based on a chain of indirect clues along with vague predictions made by a prophet who died several centuries ago.

Even I am not fully convinced that this plot will take place. The chances are too great that this incident may spin out of control."

Though Ves agreed with that sentiment, he felt increasingly more certain that the conspirators wanted Davute to take a painful hit.

After all, no matter what disaster unfolded in Kotor City that day, the true masterminds should all be safely residing in their castles all the way back in the old galaxy!

This was all a high-stakes game to them. It was easy to gamble with the lives of many people when none of the losses affected the conspirators on a personal basis.

All that mattered was making the Davute Project succeed.

As long as the damage was controlled, a wounded Davute would definitely be able to bounce back stronger and more united than ever!

"Who can we inform?" Ves asked.

"No one." Calabast immediately replied.

"Oh, come on! We should at least inform the pilots who are taking part in the parade!"

"It's too risky, Ves. The only people who can know are the individuals in this room, and that is already too much, in my opinion."

The spymaster swept her arm across her office. Ves, herself, Lucky and the silent honor guard had all become exposed to this deadly secret!

Oh, Ves should add Goldie and Ylvaine to that list as well.

"It is hard to plan a proper response with just us. What do you expect us to do? Shall we whip out our guns in advance and fire them as soon as we spot a threat?"

"No one else can know, Ves. I mean it. Informing Ark, our expert pilots or our allies will do more harm than good. This is because the more we spread this secret, the less it will remain that way. We cannot afford to expose this possible conspiracy for the reasons that I have explained to you earlier, so we must keep our mouths shut and prepare in our own ways."

This made the situation incredibly difficult for Ves. He could not give overt warnings to the mech pilots that had received the privilege to take part in the parade that would bring them close enough to intervene in any possible outbreak of violence.

Ves thought about circumventing this rule by giving advanced warning to the living mechs instead, but he doubted that the machines could hide this secret from the all-powerful ace pilots.

What frustrated him the most was he couldn't even tell Uncle Ark about the duplicity of the Davutans.

He and his followers would continue to make the Davute Branch more dependent on the colonial state, not knowing that the people at the top would not hesitate to discard their pawns if the benefits were attractive enough.

The members of the Davute Branch needed to make this realization on their own. Perhaps Goldie might help them out with that, but as long as a powerful personality like Ark was in charge, the opposite viewpoint would likely remain dominant.

Words would never sway the Larkinsons who still held an idealistic view towards states. The only way to convince them was to make them taste betrayal in person.

There was a chance that this may never happen. Nobody engaged in treachery and backstabbing for the fun of it. As long as Ark did well enough and as long as the Davute Branch retained enough value to the colonial state, all would remain well.

He could think about these implications later. Right now, Ves needed to concentrate on getting over the impending crisis.

Ves waved his hand and called up the virtual brochure that briefly detailed the arrangements of the founding ceremony.

He needed to gain an overview of the resources he had at his disposal during the event.

"As a significant contributor to Davute, our clan has received and accepted an invitation to take part in the central parade which is one of the highlights of the ceremony." Ves explained. "Given our importance, we not only received the privilege of showing off 24 standard mechs, but we also received a special invitation to show off all of our masterwork expert mechs at once."

Masterworks were already fairly special in the Golden Skull Alliance, but they were much rarer in the rest of Davute!

In order to make more people admire the mech design prowess of the Larkinson Clan and attract more attention to Davute as a result, the masterwork expert mechs had to be shown for this important day!

That was good news because it allowed the Larkinsons to deploy three powerful machines that each had their strong points.

Ves smiled. "We weren't permitted to equip the Amaranto with the Instrument of Doom, but her Instrument of Vengeance should still pack a sufficient punch against most possible threats."

"Venerable Stark and her expert mech can provide excellent ranged precision support." Calabast nodded in agreement. "Power is important, but the speed of reaction is also important. I predict that the first minute and the first ten seconds of an outbreak are crucial. Our melee mechs won't be able to respond quickly enough, and most of our ranged mechs are probably unable to arm and aim their weapons fast enough. Only a snapshot from an unnaturally skilled ranged mech specialist may be the only way for us to stave off a greater tragedy."

The woman sitting on the opposite side of the desk agreed with his assessment.

"That sounds nice, but none of the mechs on parade are allowed to arm their weapons due to well-founded safety considerations. How long will it take for the Amaranto to power up her primary weapon?"

"...Too long." Ves furrowed his brows. "The Amaranto is a marksman mech by nature. She never excelled at speed. The Instrument of Vengeance will need at least a dozen seconds to power up to a useful charge when commencing from a cold start. I can cut this down by a few seconds with a few radical modifications, but I doubt that will make a difference."

"Can you equip the Amaranto with another weapon that can fire faster?"

"I can, but they will still take a couple of seconds too long. Let me think... wait! I got it! I can temporarily reassign the Gray Lotus to the Amaranto! It is a small and handy pistol. The power of this gun is not that strong from a quantitative perspective, but its special qualities can still make it extremely potent in specific situations."

Calabast smiled. "Then equip the pistol to the Amaranto and make sure that Venerable Stark makes use of it as quickly as possible. That took care of the fast response. Now we need an asset that can suppress any potential enemy units if they are in the field."

"The Everchanger can take care of that as long as the individual enemies aren't too strong." Ves threw out. "The expert hero mech has never tried it on an actual battlefield, but he can replicate the disorienting glow of Ferocious Piranha and use a resonance ability to extend its range so that it encompasses the entire incident area. Joshua and the Everchanger just have to make sure that they control this incredibly sickening glow well enough that it doesn't adversely affect any allies and innocent bystanders."

It was too bad that the authorities denied the Larkinson Clan the permission to equip the Everchanger with a powerful mounted wargear loadout.

"Sounds good. The Everchanger's greatest advantage has always been its ability to switch between different glows and amplify their effective range. It might be a good idea to prep the Everchanger to switch to Lufa's glow as well. That can be useful for deescalating a tense situation and tamping down the panic spreading through the crowds."

"We also need a way to effectively take down several stronger threats or many weaker threats." Ves continued. "The Amaranto and the Everchanger can already help in that regard, and so will many other friendly mechs in the immediate area, but if there are too many enemies, then the Minerva can play a crucial role in Commandeering the 24 accompanying standard mechs. This way, all of the mechs we bring can fight with extra power and direction, making them much more effective than normal."

"You need to put careful thought into the composition of those standard mechs, Ves. What restrictions did the authorities impose on your selection?"

"Well, they have foisted a bunch of rules on our clan. One particular rule is that all of the mechs should look beautiful and pristine to the point where their exteriors are gleaming. Another rule is that we cannot bring in any heavy mechs, especially heavy artillery mechs."

The Larkinsons still had a lot of choice, though. After putting careful thought on the matter, he decided to go for a mix of offensive and defensive machines.

"I think I will settle for bringing in 12 Nullifiers as they are our most effective ranged mechs. I will take 4 Second Swords as they are our deadliest melee offensive mechs. For defense, I will bring 4 Rigid Walls to provide a lot of physical defense and 8 Bright Warrior Mark II's with modular loadouts that are geared towards utility and remote energy shielding functions."

The latter could play a crucial role in saving a lot of lives, including that of Ves and his family.

After the latest revision of the Bright Warrior line, the balanced and versatile modular mech platform gained even more modularity.

This allowed Ves or any other reasonably competent mech designer to develop and equip the Bright Warrior mechs with damn near any modular and external equipment provided there was enough capacity!

With regards to the Bright Warriors assigned to the parade, Ves intended to strip them completely of any offensive equipment so that they could carry the most powerful and effective remote energy shield modules that he could obtain on short notice!

"Your uncle will be part of the ceremony as well, but he and his expert mech are grouped together with the other military volunteers." Calabast noted.

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "Ark is a high-tier expert pilot, a highly experienced war veteran and a newly instated mech general. His ability to respond to a crisis should be excellent. I am not worried about him at all. His only major shortcomings are that he will get caught off-guard like almost everyone else and that his expert mech is a little weak. His Travone Exine is a fresh old galaxy import and has incorporated none of the advances of the Red Ocean, most prominently transphasic parts."

Aside from that, Ves also couldn't really control his uncle, especially if the stubborn expert pilot remained oblivious to the truth.

This was why Ves would rather focus on the variables he could control. He needed to work with what he had in order to navigate the upcoming crisis.

"All of this sounds good, but I am afraid it will not be sufficient to save the representatives of the Cross Clan." Calabast told him. "What if they are taken out by a hidden bomb planted in advance? What if an energy beam strike from orbit precisely overwhelms their coordinates? Our ability to solve this problem is severely hampered by our inability to predict the nature of the threat. That is unless Ylvaine can give us another answer?"

Ves shook his head and waved the totem in his hand that had gotten dull. "We've already strained Ylvaine above his capacity. It was too hard on him to foresee possible futures when there are so many powerful elements at play. We are not out of options, though. We still have a secret weapon."

"And what is that?"

He smirked. "We have our cats."

"Meow...?"

Chapter 4737: Just In Case

Ves felt sick to his stomach when he thought about the disaster that might unfold during the founding ceremony.

He could not say for sure whether the dreadful scenario that Calabast predicted out of scattered evidence would turn into reality.

Yet the possibility alone caused him to generate the urge to leave Davute entirely.

"Why would you want to leave Davute all of a sudden?" His personal assistant questioned. "You are one of the VIP guests of the founding ceremony, remember? I have heard that we will even get a special shoutout from the new president. It would be

a horrible embarrassment for all of us if you have snubbed the most powerful man in Davute. General Ark Larkinson's life in the military establishment of the colonial state will experience a lot more inconveniences as a result. Our various business operations will also encounter a lot more hindrances from the authorities."

"Can we do it if we really want to, Benny?"

Gavin directed a strange look at Ves. "Davute isn't a prison, boss. I am sure we can find a way to generate a legitimate excuse, though it will be difficult to do so on short notice. I highly advise against it, though."

"Forget I ever asked."

Ves already knew that it was not that wise for him and his family to bail out of this important commitment. The Larkinsons were expected to attend and it would raise way too many questions if they avoided it entirely.

For example, Calabast had already mentioned the cloud of suspicion that would descend upon the Larkinson Clan after a devastating terrorist attack.

When a lot of powerful, influential and well-connected people died, the remnants would be gunning for a target. The Larkinson Clan would definitely be subject to a lot of suspicion.

People and organizations yearning for revenge might take drastic action and attack the Larkinsons despite lacking definitive proof!

Ves could not allow his clan to open themselves up to retaliation. It was best for him and his people to take part and bear the same risks as everyone else in order to put the Larkinsons firmly in the camp of victims.

Of course, he wouldn't have opted to proceed with this course of action if the risks were too high. He already received a tentative prediction from Ylvaine that Block L should not be the target of a conspiracy.

That didn't mean that accidents, collateral damage or out-of-control threats could still destroy the VIP seating block, but at least Ves and his clan had a chance of making it out alive.

At least Calabast had been correct about all of the positive gains the clan could make. By making sufficient preparations and setting up his parading mech units to play the heroes, he could boost the reputation of his clan and open up a lot more doors in the process.

This would not only help the clan climb the hierarchy of Davute, but also make it a lot easier for the Larkinsons to set up branches in other zones. The reputation earned from incidents like these could easily carry over to the rest of the Red Ocean!

With only several days to go before the big event took place, Ves had far too little time to make additional preparations.

He first worried about his children. The safest option would be to transfer them to his fleet in orbit. He even offered this suggestion to his wife over dinner.

"Absolutely not!" Gloriana insisted as she spooned a bite of food into Marvaine's cute little mouth. "I will not deprive our children from an important ceremony. They need to experience it in order to learn how to behave in future occasions like these. Aurelia also needs to introduce herself to important dignitaries and their heirs that will be present on that day."

That didn't sound as important when at least a part of those important figures would be dead by the end of that event!

Ves let out an exasperated sound. "Gloriana, our children are too young, and Davute isn't that important to us in the greater scheme of things. Lets pack them off to the Vivacious Wal. I am sure we can organize a couple of fun, kid-oriented events while Kotor City becomes more crowded and dangerous than ever. There are all kinds of crazies out there that are trying their hardest to spoil the party."

"UNACCEPTABLE! We will bring our children and that is it, Ves! I have always known you are paranoid, but you are taking it way too far this time! Nothing has happened to us in many years and Davute is one of the safest places in this zone! Security is tight as there are not only multiple military mech regiments providing security at the site, but also dozens of expert mechs and five ace mechs. I have even received news that the Mars is one of the machines that will join this illustrious lineup! Nothing will happen with one of our closest and strongest allies keeping watch over the event site."

Gloriana looked inordinately proud when she mentioned the Mars. She had a small but crucial hand at developing the powerful machine, so any instance where the ace hybrid mech got paraded was another validation of her work.

As a rare masterwork ace mech that attracted a lot of admiration and envy each time it appeared in public, there was no way that Davute could resist the urge to show off such a fantastic work!

This news should have reassured Ves, but the opposite was the case.

Ves suspected that the conspirators had a more nefarious purpose in mind when they included the Mars in the security forces.

If his suspicions about Block M getting blown up at the start of the outbreak of violence turned out to be true, then Patriarch Reginald would have a direct view of his own people getting killed!

This would surely trigger Reginald's absolute fury and hatred towards the Karlachs, whom Davute would definitely paint as the culprits behind the deadly attacks!

As Ves continued his efforts to persuade his wife to take their children elsewhere, Gloriana continued to dig her heels.

"We are not leaving, Ves! We will attend the founding ceremony and give our children a clear view of what it is like to found your own state!" The mother insisted as she hugged and cuddled the little boy on his lap. "If our children ever have the desire or opportunity to do the same, they will know what they have to do and what is in store for them because they have these memories at their disposal!"

He wanted to groan. While he was worrying about safeguarding his children from unknown threats, his wife was mainly thinking about raising their children into future sovereigns!

This was an incredibly absurd situation to him. He felt tempted to ignore Calabast's extremely important advice and spill the beans to Gloriana so that she became aware of the impending threat.

Then again, if he did this, the public would probably know all about rumors of a planned attack the next day!

He turned to his adorable children. "What do you think, little ones? Would you like to go out on a fun day out at our entertainment ship? I think we recently opened up a new theme park in Dawn City."

"Booooooring." Andraste drawled as she munched on a bite of high-calorie potato. "I want to go see all of the awesome mechs that will be shown off. Our mechs are the best, but the other ones should be cool as well."

"Don't speak when you are chewing, young lady!"

Aurelia at least had the presence of mind to swallow her bite before she opened her own mouth.

"I also want to attend the ceremony, papa."

"Me too! Me too!" Marvaine chirped as he hopped on his mother's lap!

In the end, Ves ultimately failed to persuade his children to be elsewhere by the time the founding ceremony commenced.

Since this was the case, he decided to invest extra effort into improving their security.

He not only put extra effort into upgrading the equipment of his honor guard. He wanted each of the guards that were allowed to stay close to the seating blocks to wear quasi-first-class combat armor.

Though Ves wanted to upgrade the weapons of his guards as well, that was a lot more difficult to arrange in a short amount of time. He had no choice but to give up on this additional step.

Aside from upgrading the gear of his personal guards, he also spent a lot of time meddling with the arrangements of the Larkinson mechs that were assigned to take part in the parade.

A number of mech designers had already been tasked with prepping the selected mechs.

They did not react pleased when they heard he wanted to change the entire lineup that had been in the works for weeks.

"We have almost completed the tweaks and cosmetic overhauls on the mechs that we have designated in the past." The defensive specialist spoke as she put her hands on her hips. "They look gorgeous after we have embellished their exteriors and added custom-formulated flowers and other decorations to their frames. If we change the lineup right away, we do not have the time to beautify the replacement mechs."

Ves didn't care about that anymore. "Then skip all of the time-consuming work and do what you can in the limited time frame we have left. Our living mechs already look good enough in their original forms. We just have to polish their surfaces and add a cape to them in order to make them dashing."

"What is this all about, sir?" Sara Voiken asked as she wondered why he wanted to throw out the old plan all of a sudden. "I have noticed that your new selection no longer consists of our most photogenic mechs. They look more suitable for defense. Are you expecting anything to happen during the ceremony?"

He wanted to say yes, but he had to do the opposite in order to maintain a grip on the variables.

"I just feel like we need to manage our risks a little better." He offered a vague response. "You should have studied my past, so you know that I have gotten embroiled in difficult situations on the ground in the past. This is why I prefer to be overprepared than underprepared. It shouldn't inconvenience us too much to make this switch. If nothing happens, then nothing is lost. If a situation arises where stronger and more combat-ready mechs are needed, then we may have saved our lives with this prudent decision."

The logic was strong enough to convince Sara to play along, even though she thought that security on that day would be too tight to allow for anything to go wrong.

Ves could only shake his head at this. Too many people around him put an unreasonable amount of faith in Davute's ability to safeguard the founding ceremony and prevent any incidents from taking place.

Normally that would be the case, but if a small but powerful group of Davutans wanted to do the opposite, then it was the height of foolishness to entrust their safety to others!

Ves had learned time and time again that the only forces he could rely on to put his safety first was himself and his own troops.

He could not count on the Davutan security forces to prioritize the security of the representatives of the Larkinson Clan when so many other important figures demanded protection as well!

"Let us rush the upgrades to the armor systems and any additional physical defensive equipment in the time that we have left." Ves proposed to Sara Voiken. "If we work fast enough, we can ensure that the defensive mechs will at least be able to resist a higher amount of transphasic damage than before."

"You are asking for much, sir. It is impossible for us to make the replacement armor and physical shields look clean and polished."

"I know, but don't you think our mechs will look more intimidating if they are covered by the salvaged hull plating of defeated alien warships? The rustic charm will help with reinforcing our image as frontier explorers."

Chapter 4738: The Weight of a Secret

Ves completely skipped out on sleep as he forced himself to work day and night to apply as many upgrades and modifications as possible.

Though he and his colleagues did not have time to apply any substantial upgrades to the participating expert mechs, they should still be able to armor up all of the standard mechs that were about to take part in the planned parade.

The work wasn't pretty or refined. In order to save as much time as possible, the mech designers straightforwardly cut out armor plating that possessed the same dimensions as the existing armor plating of the mechs in question.

This enabled the mech designers to easily plug out the old armor plating and put new ones in their places, but the mechs experienced various technical difficulties as a result.

Mechs were much larger and more complex than a suit of combat armor like the Unending Regalia. The drastic changes made to the tall and massive frames produced so many disruptions that their mobility and fluidity had dropped by as much as 10 percent!

The mech pilots assigned to the hastily modified mechs had to acclimate to the changes to the machines in record time. Ves forced each of them to go on marathon training sessions with the MSTS in order to ensure they became familiar with the changes and remastered their ability to control their battle partners.

"One more day to go." He wearily spoke as he noted that dawn had arrived again.

For all of the prep work done so far, Ves felt nowhere close to getting his forces ready enough to meet all of the possible threats that might emerge during the big day.

Much of his work went into bolstering the defenses of his mechs and guards. That might allow them to withstand much stronger hits, but it did not directly help them take out particularly strong and resilient threats.

Ves had no choice but to place his hopes on stronger elements such as the Amaranto and the Minerva to neutralize any acute threats.

As the work in one of the workshops of the Genesis Lab completed the rushed transformation of a large amount of mechs, Sara Voiken voiced her skepticism on this string of rush jobs.

"Don't put too much stock in their defensive prowess. Their outer plating may be able to resist several times more damage than before, but their internal structures remain virtually unchanged. They can withstand and absorb plenty of energy damage as the heat capacity of these first-class alloys are astounding compared to what we previously worked with, but they won't fare as well when struck by physical attacks. Blunt strikes from heavy melee weapons and strong kinetic projectiles will shake the internals if they exceed a certain level of force."

In other words, the defensive schemes of the modified standard mechs all resembled that of an egg. Their outer shells had become a lot harder but the parts that were deeper inside were painfully soft and fragile in comparison.

Ves nodded in understanding. "I am already aware of these shortcomings. It is not as if we can do anything about it. The only way to strengthen the internals is by completely disassembling the machines so that we can replace all of the internal structural components. That takes way too much time and effort. We can think about doing this after the festivities have concluded."

He really hoped that whatever trap got sprung that day did not unleash a horde of enemies that excelled at breaking eggs with overwhelming force.

They talked about a few other peculiarities about the altered standard mechs. The balance of the mechs was off. The increased mass of the stronger alloys also had a negative impact on mobility. There was too little time to adjust the operating systems to compensate for all of the altered physical attributes.

"The mechs will be able to fight when it matters, right?" Ves asked.

"Uhm, they can do so if necessary."

"Then that is all that matters as far as I am concerned. It doesn't really matter what other people think once our machines will show up in public."

"Your wife will not react well to their sight, sir. We have done our best to polish their surfaces and apply thicker coating in order to obscure any rough and uneven areas, but anyone who knows mechs as well as us will be able to see the glaring lack of refinement and optimization."

"She can complain all she wants, but that won't change anything."

In the end, Ves became decently satisfied with the work he and his team had been able to do. The Nullifiers and the other potent Larkinson mechs looked ready for business. The flowing red capes that hung from their shoulders added a nice touch of civilization to a bunch of machines that looked more at home in the middle of a battlefield in space.

Before he concluded his marathon session, Ves took the time to visit Calabast in a more secure meeting room.

Due to the extreme sensitivity of the topics they intended to discuss, they no longer met at the spymaster's office but instead chose to gather in a special purpose-built room.

The secure meeting chamber was already fairly secure, but Calabast had directed her Black Cats to thicken its signal-blocking walls and install additional high-powered jammers and interference devices.

Once Lucky made his rounds and verified that no hidden microscoping spy bugs had managed to sneak inside, the two spoke frankly about the progress that they have made.

As Ves filled Calabast in on the hasty upgrades he had managed to apply, the director of the Black Cats outlined the results of her investigations.

"If you expect me to provide you with confirmation, then you won't like what I am about to say. I have tasked my agents to pay more attention to the parties that are responsible for organizing the events that will take place tomorrow. They were unable to get close enough to gather any important data. Their security has all been heightened to the point where not even Lucky can poke around too much without triggering an alarm."

"Meow..." Lucky echoed.

Calabast had dispatched Lucky to various different key locations, but these fishing trips yielded little of value.

At best, the investigations ruled out possible instances of sabotage and destruction.

"I can say with absolute certainty that no one will be able to place any bombs inside the VIP seating blocks." She said. "There are multiple safeguards and security layers. A multitude of different people from different organizations and government branches are constantly checking on each other's work. The chances that anyone can slip in a bomb unnoticed is low. That said, I cannot completely rule out this option."

Ves grimaced. "It would be nice if this was the case. I have multiple different ways to disarm a planted bomb."

"Meow."

The spymaster mentioned a few other possibilities that she looked into. Though her Black Cats weren't able to gather nearly as much information to form any solid conclusions, so far it did not appear that anyone with nefarious purposes intended to employ the most obvious ways to launch an attack during the founding ceremony.

"This is the expected result." Calabast patiently explained. "It is too suspicious if a hostile party is able to circumvent all of the obvious security precautions and slay hundreds of important figures with ease. My conclusion is that the threat will come from an unexpected angle. There is so much exotic tech available in human space and beyond that nearly anything is possible. We cannot possibly guard against every possibility unless we have gained more specific information. Is Ylvaine...?"

Ves shook his head. "The design spirit has recovered a bit from his previous exertion, but I think it is best to save up what little reserves he has until the ceremony has started. The way that Ylvaine works is that it is much less costly for him to make predictions closer to the present. The further he casts his sight, the more fuzzy his sight becomes. It becomes a lot more difficult for him to foresee anything specific. I hope that by the time the ceremony is about to start, Ylvaine can finally push through all of the interference and reveal to me the reason why Block M is marked for death."

He owed it to the Crossers to save the lives of their important representatives. Though Ves only really cared about Patriarch Reginald Cross and Master Benedict Cortez, both of them would suffer substantial setbacks in growing their clan if all of their best people died at once.

In addition to that, Ves really did not want the conspirators to get away with successfully planting a seed of hatred inside Reginald's heart.

The war between Davute and Karlach must never become too personal for the volatile ace pilot!

"There is a significant chance that you will fail to figure it out in time." Calabast pointed out. "Also, even if you do find out the truth, you may not have the ability to act on it. Will you be able to accept the outcome of failure?"

He threw her a sore look. "You were the one that impressed me on the importance of keeping my mouth shut. I am at the point where I have serious issues with your reasoning. No matter what, we need to do right by our allies. It feels so dirty to possess critical information that is vital to their survival and wellbeing but refrain from saying anything due to vague and abstract reasons."

"They are anything but abstract from my perspective. Make no mistake, Ves. We have possibly become embroiled in a conspiracy that not only affects the future of the colonial state centered around Davute, but also the entire political landscape of the Krakatoa Middle Zone and the fortunes of all of the groups that have invested in this corner of the frontier."

He let out a tired breath. "You don't need to remind me of that. I will stay quiet, but that doesn't mean I want to do nothing and let the scenario play out without interfering. I am tired of high-and-mighty manipulators who keep thinking that they can get what they want by using people up as if they are consumables."

In the past, Ves lacked the strength, resources and agency to go off script.

This time was different. Enough years had passed for Ves and his clan to grow strong enough that they gained the ability to affect the outcomes of major political developments.

"What will you be doing tomorrow?" Ves curiously asked.

"I will try my best to make myself scarce." She responded. "I think I will go on a long retreat to the Blinding Banshee. My Black Cats will try and lay low as well. It is not our job to investigate the culprits responsible for trying to disrupt the founding ceremony. That is up to the authorities. Our clan must show itself to be above suspicion."

"Understood. I agree with you. Sneaking around is a bad idea when so many angry people are out for blood."

They talked a bit more about what they could do to increase their chances of coming out ahead.

There was not much they could do, though.

"The colonial government has already imposed heightened security rules on the entire planet." Calabast told Ves. "Not only are most mechs driven out of the metropolitan area, but numerous powerful machines that are not a direct part of the armed forces have been forced to accept lucrative guard contracts that place them well away from Kotor City. The Jedda Sandivar and the Royal Jeem are both obliged to guard a pair of large industrial cities that are located at least several hundred kilometers away."

Davute did not fully trust the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family as they had yet to sign any formal cooperation with the colonial government.

This meant that the ace mechs of those organizations could not be trusted.

This was bad because those ace mechs could do a lot of damage if they wanted.

In order to prevent these exceptionally powerful machines from ruining the founding ceremony, it was best to pay off their owners and send them far enough away.

It would take far too many minutes for the two ace mechs to race back to Kotor City at their highest speeds!

By the time they arrived, Ves predicted that the show would already be over.

"Oh well. I guess we can only rely on ourselves."

Chapter 4739: Rison GK-22

As morning began to dawn, the rays of the local star began to shine through the windows that had become increasingly clearer in the last hour.

The bright and warm rays of light lit the bed in the center of the large and opulent bedroom.

As the two figures sleeping on the bed just started to awaken from their slumber, the door to the chamber unexpectedly slid open!

Three different munchkins wearing cute and colorful pajamas stormed inside and ran straight to the bed!

The three kids climbed onto the soft and bouncy surface and began to jump on it in unison!

"Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!"

"The ceremony is starting in a few hours!"

"I love you, mama! I love you, papa!"

"Meow..." Lucky tiredly floated inside the room.

"Miaow." Clixie looked more enthusiastic as she looked forward to witnessing a grand show.

The two girls and boy jumped so much that Ves and Gloriana had no choice but to rouse from their slumber and calm their overexcited children.

"Quiet down, my darlings." Gloriana said as she embraced both her daughters at once. "The main show starts at noon local time. We still have more than enough hours to do our makeup and dress in the custom ensembles that I have commissioned for you all. Each of you will look so pretty!"

As his wife continued to talk about the upcoming founding ceremony as if it would become a joyous occasion where she could show off her offspring, Ves maintained a more sober mood.

He held his youngest child in his arms and cuddled with him for a moment. Marvaine looked so small and delicate that Ves could not bear the thought of seeing any harm befall his only son!

"Today is an eventful day, Marvaine. While I want you to have fun, don't get distracted by all of the shiny and impressive looking mechs. There is more to this ceremony than what is obvious on the surface."

His pajama-clad son tilted his head in confusion.

"What are you talking about, papa?"

He sighed. "I will explain it to you when you are older. For now, make sure that no matter what happens later today, make sure to stick close to me. I will always keep you safe."

Now that they had risen from their beds, Ves and Gloriana along with their children proceeded to prepare for the day.

An elaborate team of bots, cosmeticians, tailors and other beauty experts did their best to elevate the appearances of their subjects as much as possible.

Each of them looked more dignified, professional and beautiful than any previous points in their lives!

Though Ves did not see much of a difference to be honest, his wife constantly gushed how gorgeous she and the others had become.

She bent down and touched Aurelia's shoulders. "You are so pretty now! Do not let anyone tell you that you are ugly. I can already see that you will be able to wrap any boy around your finger once you have grown into a big girl."

"Hihihi!" Aurelia giggled. "I already have boys wrapped on my finger, mama."

During breakfast, Ves decided that the time was right to give his children an unexpected but welcome surprise.

He clapped his hands, which not only caused his wife and children to quiet down, but also caused a trio of bots to float into the dining room.

"I know that none of your birthdays have arrived just yet, but I decided to give each of you a birthday present."

"Ohh? What is it, papa?! Is it a new toy?!"

As the children all lit up when they heard the word 'present', the bots that each carried a decoratively wrapped box stopped close to them. The shiny wrappings were just begging to get torn!

As the present boxes tempted the kids into action, Gloriana threw a puzzled look at her husband.

"What are you doing, Ves? We haven't talked about giving them any presents."

"I know. I am sorry about that, honey, but I had to take care of this on short notice. The presents that I have ordered for them have only arrived late last night."

Meanwhile, Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine all wanted to receive their presents so badly that they found it difficult to control themselves as they had been taught by their mother.

Gloriana let out an exasperated sigh. "Very well, children. You can open your presents now, but be sure to control yourselves!"

"Yes, mama!"

Andraste promptly ignored her mother's advice and tore at the paper like a cat that went crazy!

Once she threw away the wrapping and opened the composite box, her eyes displayed confusion as she pulled out a small metal belt-like contraption.

Aurelia and Marvaine looked similarly perplexed as they obtained identical gifts.

"What is this, papa? Is this a comm?"

"No, honey." Gloriana replied as she studied the advanced devices with increasing consternation. "They are not communication devices. They are personal shield generators, similar to the ones your parents always wear."

"Huh? But these are smaller!"

Ves smiled. "That is right. These are copies of the Rison GK-22, a first-class compact transphasic shield generator that I have carefully selected from the catalog of the MTA. Compared to the shield generators that we are currently using, these ones make use of phasewater to generate significantly stronger protection in a much smaller form factor. You will hardly notice the weight at all once you have worn them for a while."

He moved forward, took the shield generators and clasped them onto their bodies one-by-one, replacing their older second-class models while he was at it. The nature of their designs allowed them to function as belts if necessary, but Ves preferred to keep them underneath a layer of clothing to avoid drawing attention to the advanced technology.

His wife meanwhile looked increasingly more suspicious as she crossed her arms.

"Ves...?"

"Yes, my dear?"

"How much did it cost for you to exchange these first-class shield generators from the MTA?"

"Only 5,000,000 MTA merits each. I would have liked to go for a more expensive one that can resist greater hits, but it will eat too much in my budget if I have to buy three of them at once."

His wife immediately grew still when she learned how much Ves had spent on these goods. Her eyes narrowed in a dangerous manner.

"You refused to contribute 60 million MTA merits to an essential upgrade to my design capabilities, but you did not hesitate to spend a quarter of that sum on protection that is largely redundant? They already have the shield generators that we bought for them a few years prior!"

"Hey, I would do anything for our children! Those merits are mine to spend, and I chose to buy protection that better reflects their value. Any enemies that are determined to mess with us will most certainly employ a heavy arsenal to take us all out at once. It is better to minimize the risks and upgrade to a proper first-class shield generator while we still can. Besides, the new Rison GK-22 is modern enough to satisfy our children's

security needs for a long time. I will replace these kid products with larger and more higher-capacity versions once they grow up and are ready to attend university."

His wife looked as if she still couldn't get over the fact that Ves spent his merits on anything aside from her precious first-class cranial implant.

The only reason why she hadn't blown up yet was because she did not want to disrupt what should have been a joyous day for their children.

"We will speak later about this." She leaned forward and hissed into his ear. "I will not tolerate any more delays on this matter. If you are willing to spend 15 million MTA merits, you can keep your account open long enough to spend an additional 60 million MTA merits."

"Later."

It didn't matter to Ves. If the found ceremony unfolded as he and Calabast guessed, then he bet that Gloriana would no longer be in the right state of mind to follow up on this matter!

That little realization dampened his mood a bit. Though he had ensured that his children would not have to fear from any casual attacks, a determined mech could still power through the first-class energy shields through brute force!

Ves mainly equipped his children with the Rison GK-22 shield generators in order to increase their buffer and buy time for actual rescue to arrive.

Once the friendly Larkinson mechs in the vicinity came close enough to deploy their defenses, Block L should be in the clear.

After they finished their breakfast, the little family along with their cats boarded their armored shuttle.

The vehicle did not have to travel too far in order to reach its destination. The VIP seating areas were all located in the Government District where the security levels were the highest.

As the seat of power of the colony and the colonial state, it was only natural to make the announcement at this location.

All of the beautiful and well-designed government buildings looked even more impressive today as the Davutans covered their walls with vertically striped white-and-blue banners.

Occasionally, a wall displayed different symbols and colors. Each of them represented the organizations and individuals who had made significant contributions to the Davute Project.

Ves could even spot a red banner bearing a golden cat head adorning the structure that housed Davute's Ministry of Justice.

"Interesting choice."

He figured that the Davutans probably chose to hang the banner of the Larkinson Clan on this building as tribute to the bestselling Pacifier model.

Ves could see plenty of copies of this popular law enforcement model in the surroundings. No Planetary Guard force had made greater use of this odd but highly effective mech model than this colony!

After all, Davute was one of the home planets of the Pacifier model. Multiple mech manufacturing complexes owned by the LMC and other companies who licensed the design churned out copies of the mech day and night.

Ves felt a little more reassured when he saw how much Davute trusted the Pacifiers to keep the peace and control the crowd. Their calming glows should play a major role in quelling any full-blown panic and help with suppressing any hostile parties.

As the shuttle touched down at the designated landing pad, Ves and his family moved out and followed an attendant to a reception plaza where many other important figures had gathered.

A few groups moved into the indoor reception areas in order to sit down and get served.

His wife used this opportunity to drag her children to the acquaintances that she had made over the last few years and show off her children.

Before Lucky and Clixie followed suit, Ves bent down and touched both of their heads.

"I want you to stick close to my kids today, okay? No matter what, you stay with them, keep them together and make sure that they can always rely on you. I will try and do the same, but if I am not available for whatever reason, I am counting on you two to pick up the slack."

"Meow." Lucky sounded serious this time.

"Miaow?" Clixie on the other hand did not know why Ves was being more serious than usual.

The organic wasn't stupid, though. When she saw how Ves and Lucky behaved, she grew more vigilant as well.

As a genuine Rubarthan Sentinel Cat, her entire purpose in life was to protect the individuals that she was accompanying! Aurelia as well as Andraste and Marvaine all fell into the scope of Clixie's responsibilities.

This sense of purpose injected a jolt of strength into her body and caused the cat to become several times more alert than before!

"Miaow miaow miaow!"

Ves grinned and rubbed her head a few more times. "Thanks. I knew I could count on you. Now go and make sure they remain safe and accounted for. I need to catch up to a number of people."

Chapter 4740: New Friends

Not a single person invited to attend the founding ceremony exhibited any particular concerns.

No matter whether they developed an attachment to Davute or not, none of the individuals who would soon be taking their seats in the VIP seating blocks had any reason to suspect foul play.

Not even the bodyguards who were mostly instructed to stay at the edges of the venues exhibited any greater vigilance.

They all assumed a posture of routine alertness as if they expected a long day ahead of them where they would do nothing but stand and look menacing.

His own guards were different. The minds of Nitaa and his honor guard were exceptionally alert. They did not hesitate to activate a few more integrated sensor systems than usual in order to detect threats and inconsistencies as early as possible.

They picked up nothing so far. It didn't help that much of the guest areas fell under a subtle but pervasive interference field that blocked many forms of observation, but also interfered with communications.

Fortunately, measures like these did not stop Ves from communication with the other elements of his clan.

He felt inordinately pleased that he had developed the habit of wearing a toolbelt years ago. All those times he appeared in public with a hammer hanging on his side and a few other gadgets attached to his waist had essentially defined and normalized his look.

None of the security guards confronted him over this issue as it was too trivial to bother. As one of the most important guests attending this event, the patriarch of the rapidly growing Larkinson Clan earned a few allowances.

It was just one of many examples that humanity never applied its rules fairly.

In a dwarf galaxy where the old adage of 'might makes right' rang more true than ever, those perceived to be powerhouses no longer had to follow the rules set by society.

Instead, they could set their own rules!

As long as their fist was big enough to carve out a domain of their own, they could shape an entire society with themselves at the center!

That was what this day was all about, essentially. The founding of a new colonial state was an official declaration that the territory around the Davute System became the exclusive domain of its investors and its residents!

However, not everyone agreed with the unbridled claiming of territory.

Karlach sought to expand its own exclusive domain by nabbing the territories close to Davute.

This made it so that the two regional power blocs were on an inevitable collision course!

"All of these stupid power plays are incredibly dangerous and wasteful." Ves muttered under his breath.

Greed and ambition fueled the leaders of both sides. They just couldn't settle for the modest slice of territory that they could absorb with great ease. The owners of both colonies just had to go for broke.

To the original investors, the war was just a means to double up on their bet. They were willing to expend so much money, resources and manpower to multiply their colonial holdings that they never paid much attention to the human cost of their ambitions.

"Aren't I the same?" Ves briefly wondered.

He never really thought about all of the Larkinsons who perished during the battles that he provoked throughout his journeys.

Still, Ves had always been earnest and open about the risks. He never tried to deceive his own clansmen on what they had in store and opened up the Davute Branch to give an opportunity for more timid Larkinsons to live a semblance of a normal life.

Ves also felt he put more of an effort into rewarding and uplifting his own clansmen. He had put significant personal attention into making sure that his clansmen would never feel left out or discarded as the clan became more powerful as a whole.

There were still plenty of third-raters within the ranks who may not be as good as the second-raters who joined up later, but still managed to keep up in their own ways provided they put in the effort to learn new knowledge.

In contrast, the impression he got from Davute was that the colonial state only cared about the current benefits that it could derive from its subjects and investors.

As long as any party outlived their usefulness, the state was liable to kick it to the curb!

That made Ves feel better about himself. He believed he distinguished himself from these cold and unfeeling states by possessing actual integrity and genuinely wishing that his friends and allies benefited just as much.

"Patriarch Larkinson! It is good to see you again in the flesh!" A boisterous voice called from behind.

Ves turned around and greeted an older gentleman garbed in a ceremonial martial uniform.

"Ah, General Foraine. It is nice to meet you too. It has been a while since we last spoke in person. Operation Lighthouse seems like a lifetime ago. I am glad that our brief time fighting alongside each other has impressed you so much that you want to join the Golden Skull Alliance."

The other man smiled in a good-natured manner. "You can call Herman since we are about to become comrades-in-arms on a more permanent basis."

"You can call me Ves if that is the case."

The two chatted about various topics until they found themselves together. Ves found Herman Foraine to be a remarkably easy person to talk to. This should not be a surprise as a commanding officer of a large mercenary company had to master a lot of social skills.

Not only must General Foraine be proficient in managing tens of thousands of subordinates who came from diverse backgrounds, he also had to learn how to maintain relations with difficult and demanding clients.

Ves could definitely sense that Herman was making a deliberate act of developing a stronger and more intimate bond with the key figure of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Still, just because Herman was pursuing a course of action that constituted good business did not mean he was devoid of sincerity.

It was the opposite. Herman was genuinely a nice person. The impression he made was completely opposite of that of the likes of President Yenames Clive.

That snake of a future president might plaster a smile on his face and talk all day about friendship and mutually beneficial partnerships, but the man's inner personality was filled with ruthless calculations.

Though a man who ranked as high as General Foraine could never completely stop making calculations either, he at least retained his humanity. Ves couldn't say the same about many other people.

"I had to start from the bottom, you know." Herman casually spoke of his history. "Well, I received officer training while I was attending a mech academy, and chose to go mercenary rather than joining the military. My original intention was to accrue more experience in a more relaxed environment before entering a more professional force."

"I take it you did not go through with that plan." Ves guessed.

"I went off the rails alright. I fell in love with the mercenary lifestyle. Instead of signing up for military service, I applied to join larger and more interesting mercenary companies. Over the years, I fought under the banner of several different outfits, never sticking around for too long for one reason or another."

"What made you settle down with the Adelaides?"

"Hmm... I felt most at home with them." Herman said. "Due to their history, they were more professional and organized than other mercenary companies, but they also knew how to let go and ease on the formality. I think the biggest reason that attracted me the most to the Adelaide Mercenary Company is the brotherhood that they have formed. The old school members are the most tight-knit band of mercenaries that I have ever met."

That sounded similar to what Ves had built in his clan. He was curious how the Adelaides managed to pull it off without relying on a spiritual network.

"Has it been easy for someone who wasn't a part of the original deserting mech regiment to worm your way into this inner circle?"

Herman let out a breath. "You can argue that I have never joined this circle. Your clan is too new, so you probably haven't experienced this dynamic yourself, but here among

the Adelaides, we remain separated by many qualifiers. There are the generational differences that you have just referred to. There are also the fleets that cause us to become more unique over time. The fleets founded at a later date are especially different from the oldest ones."

Ves became more and more intrigued by Herman's descriptions. The growth and splintering of the Adelaide Mercenary Company may be a precursor of what the Larkinson Clan would be going through!

"Tell me more."

"The original old soldiers have largely died off or retired, but the ones that are still around watch the company and its people fiercely. Then there are the second and third generation of mercenaries that are just starting to take the reigns. I count myself among them. We may not have the experiences of the founding generation to call upon, but our lack of burdens and our fresh perspectives are beginning to steer our mercenary company into a different and arguably better future."

"That sounds interesting." Ves said as his interest remained high. "Do you think that the shifting of leadership from older mercenaries to younger mercenaries is a source of renewal within your mercenary company?"

Herman Foraine nodded. "Change is always necessary. As much as the original generation of Adelaides have laid the foundation of our mercenary company, they were also limited by their own choices. I arrived later and have experienced the growth of the company from a fresher point of view. I know what has worked and what still needs to be done. I think that one of the reasons why I was put in charge of the Third Fleet was because I am more open to shifting our focus away from pure mercenary work. I took the initiative to bring my fleet to the Red Ocean and explore the frontier without pursuing any explicit mission objectives."

"Did you encounter a lot of criticisms and objections within your own company?"

"More than you can know." Herman ruefully smiled. "However, I had a good talk with the old dogs who are largely retired by now. Even though they do not fully understand my own goals and vision, they believed just enough in me to give me a chance. They also have the luxury to make this decision because I am only in charge of a single fleet among a dozen others. Our mercenary company can afford to experiment. If my fleet is doing well, the other generals may decide to move to the Red Ocean as well. If my boys and I all perish due to a horrible mistake, well, at least the other surviving fleets can learn from my mistake."

That was an interesting way to grow and expand a company. Ves saw many obvious parallels with his own clan. Though he did not intend to make any of the side branches exceed the main branch in any way, he was still open to allowing the Davute Branch to step out of his comfort zone and pursue its own path of success.

That reminded Ves of another problem.

"How can you keep all of these intensifying differences from tearing the Adelaide Mercenary Company apart?"

General Herman Foraine raised his fingers. "We talk a lot. We make sure to stick to a common heritage and tradition. We improvise. We offer financial support to our weaker fleets. We swap personnel with each other. I can go on and on, but it is never any single thing. We continue to engage in each other however we can to keep the gang together. It doesn't matter how many cliques we form over time. As long as we recognize that we are Adelaides, we can always unite when it is needed."

"It sounds as if... you are one big family."

"That is as good of a description as any, patriarch."