

The Mech 6081

Chapter 6081 The Double Sentencing

Guilty.

Lanie's eyes grew hazy as she received this sentence.

While Taon managed to get away with his attempts to kill her because the special tribunal thought he engaged in an act of attempted justified homicide, Lanie got stuck with attempted voluntary manslaughter!

This was undoubtedly worse as it effectively communicated that the clan thought that Lanie unambiguously acted wrongly under this circumstance!

Not just Lanie, but also many other Larkinsons did not quite agree with this verdict!

Unlike Taon, Lanie attracted greater sympathy from the Larkinsons due to several reasons.

First, Goldie did not entirely abandon her. The female expert pilot retained her connection to the Larkinson Network, and every clansman could sense that. The fact that the ancestral spirit of the Larkinson Clan remained sympathetic towards her cause was a big deal, even if it could not materially affect the decisions of the special tribunal by itself.

Second, Venerable Lanie had undoubtedly been wronged first. Her mech got struck by a super-massive high-velocity transphasic hyper gauss round in the back! The fact that she managed to get stronger and better should not rule out the fact that she could have died if she was a bit less lucky! It was unreasonable to expect her to act with restraint after suffering such a huge blow.

Third, Venerable Lanie did not sound as nihilistic and unsympathetic as the other accused. The former still expresses her earnest intention to fight on behalf of the Larkinson Clan and atone for whatever crimes she may be guilty of by making a lot more contributions on the battlefield. She still regarded her fellow Larkinsons as brothers and sisters. The only notable exception was Venerable Taon, but that could be excused.

Therefore, most Larkinsons thought that Lanie deserved a bit of punishment, but not too much.

The question now was whether the special tribunal expressed the same willingness.

Before Venerable Jannzi could continue to explain the special tribunal's rulings, Venerable Vincent Ricklin stood up and waved his arms yet again.

"You wish... to speak again?"

Vincent leaned forward on the bench. "I can tell you that if I was put in a similar position as Lanie... I may actually respond in the same way. Expert pilots may be larger than life to many of you, but we are still human in many ways. As Taon and Lanie have proven, we can go mad and lose all reason when we are pushed beyond the brink. Can we truly judge Lanie harshly when she has clearly been driven beyond the limits of her sanity? I do not think so. To expect her to fight against her instincts as a warrior and resist the overpowering desire to take revenge on Taon is not possible. Only unfeeling AIs are capable of behaving in such a logical manner. Don't be too harsh on Lanie. She is a good kid that has been dealt a bad hand. She needs counseling, not punishment."

"Yeah! I don't object to the decisions when it comes to Lanie, but the way you explain it is not good enough. I am worried that you do a good job at elaborating because you need to be careful about using the correct terms and phrases. I think I can do a better job at making our fellow Larkinsons understand how we will deal with Lanie's guilt."

Surprisingly enough, Jannzi did not disagree with Vincent. The chief judge nodded towards the other judge.

"You may speak."

"Thank you, Jannzi." Vincent briefly smiled. "Now, Lanie may be guilty of a bunch of stuff, but... who can blame her? She almost got killed. Are we supposed to ignore that? No. Regardless of whether it is the Emperor Tree or Taon that is ultimately responsible for this, mech pilots such as myself are trained to be decisive and aggressive. Under normal circumstances, we are also expected to control ourselves, but how can you possibly expect us to do so in the heat of the moment? Lanie is insane. Lanie was also heavily provoked and threatened during the incident. Do you think it is reasonable for her to stop fighting, sit down and think really carefully about the cause and effect that resulted in her Elegant Rage getting separated into two damaged pieces?"

Humans were ultimately emotional creations. Their rationality may be able to temper their worst excesses, but what if it could no longer do so? Any human could easily turn into a beast if that happened.

Vincent leaned forward on the bench. "I can tell you that if I was put in a similar position as Lanie... I may actually respond in the same way. Expert pilots may be larger than life to many of you, but we are still human in many ways. As Taon and Lanie have proven, we can go mad and lose all reason when we are pushed beyond the brink. Can we truly judge Lanie harshly when she has clearly been driven beyond the limits of her sanity? I do not think so. To expect her to fight against her instincts as a warrior and resist the overpowering desire to take revenge on Taon is not possible. Only unfeeling AIs are capable of behaving in such a logical manner. Don't be too harsh on Lanie. She is a good kid that has been dealt a bad hand. She needs counseling, not punishment."

"Ahem."

"The insanity defense should not serve as a carte blanche that can allow Venerable Lanie to escape total culpability in her crimes. As much as I respect Venerable Vincent's opinions, I must respectfully disagree. The Larkinson Army is a military organization that is governed by rules and regulations. While there is room for initiative and improvisation, there should be much less room for disobedience. Lanie has been given a clear and unambiguous order to cease her fighting and disengage. No matter how hot headed she has become, it is unacceptable for a pilot of her stature to ignore Venerable Joshua's lawful orders."

Another judge wanted to interject. Vincent looked aside and reluctantly sat down again.

Commander Casella Ingvar conveyed a lot more intelligence and authority than her fellow judge.

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disengage. No matter how hot headed she has become, it is unacceptable for a pilot of her stature to ignore Venerable Joshua's lawful orders."

Venerable Lanie looked glumly at the Sentinel Commander. It was as if the latter was stabbing the former in the back with words!

"Venerable Lanie Larkinson is a champion. A hero. An expert candidate turned expert pilot." Commander Casella emphasized. "Her elevated status allows her to enjoy greater autonomy on the battlefield and fight however she wishes. However, her status also imposes greater demands and expectations on her. Our clan rightfully holds her along with every other champion to a higher standard because they would turn into loose cannons if left unrestrained."

She made a good point. Expert pilots received exalted treatment from the Larkinson Clan. They had an obligation to reciprocate what they received and uphold people's expectations.

Lanie undoubtedly failed to do so when she became lost in her madness and tried to kill Taon without restraint!

"I fear that incidents such as this may not be the last time a champion of the Larkinson Clan commits crimes in the throes of their own extreme and abnormal mental states. Regardless of how they justify their own decisions, their willful disregard of our laws and their own instructions should not be tolerated. Venerable Lanie should not be treated as a mental patient, but as a convicted criminal. Only by demonstrating that we are willing to treat our champions to a higher standard than ordinary soldiers will we be able to send a message that those with greater power must bear greater responsibility."

That was a well-reasoned argument, though it was not quite clear whether Commander Casella would get her way.

In any case, the chief judge took the word yet again.

"Let us address Venerable Lanie Larkinson's remaining charges before we proceed with the sentencing of both of the accused."

The special tribunal ruled that Lanie was guilty of a bunch of other crimes, though just like behaving in a manner unbecoming a champion, they were not that as severe as the initial charges.

Venerable Lanie listened to Jannzi's announcement with a more stoic expression. The new expert pilot undoubtedly grew disappointed with the clan for judging that she acted incorrectly.

Lanie still believed that she had made the right calls. Taon deserved to die for having her blood on his hands. The fact that he was still alive was the biggest travesty in the courthouse!

By the time Lanie was deemed guilty of a bunch more crimes, Venerable Jannzi's expression grew sterner as she approached the end of the short but dramatic trials.

"Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson and Venerable Lanie Larkinson have been exonerated from some charges, but are convicted on many other charges. Under both circumstances, our special tribunal has taken into account that they acted under extreme provocation and that they are not sound in mind. While these mitigating factors have given us strong reasons to reduce the severity of the punishments that we must impose on them, let me reiterate how we form our decisions."

She turned around and looked up to the large statue of the Golden Cat. The sculpture dominated the courthouse.

"Nyaaaaa~"

Many Larkinsons became surprised when the Golden Cat actually decided to manifest herself!

Her much smaller form emerged from the statue and slowly descended until she perched on Jannzi's shoulders. The spiritual cat lovingly rubbed her cheek against Jannzi's head.

Goldie unambiguously expressed her support for the chief judge.

"Our special tribunal works on behalf of the Larkinson Clan as a whole. We can be sympathetic towards the interests of individual Larkinsons, but we must always make decisions that will benefit our clan in the long run. We have set a precedent today that should hopefully lead to less confusion and greater certainty about where our clan stands on various issues. We also hope that our sentencing will successfully protect our clansmen while making sure that we do not treat Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson and Venerable Lanie Larkinson unfairly."

Everyone fell silent as they wanted to hear the punishments levied towards the two offending Larkinson expert pilots.

Venerable Jannzi briefly paused before she spoke the most crucial words. "Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson. Venerable Lanie Larkinson. Your culpability and crimes may vary, but the special tribunal has decided to impose the same punishment on the both of you for multiple reasons."

"Starting from the 5th day of the 3rd year of the Age of Dawn, the Larkinson Clan formally severs or annuls all oaths, contracts, obligations and other bonds, both formal and informal, with the two convicted criminals! They have one day to settle their affairs and bid farewell to the clansmen they are familiar with before a vessel deposits them on the surface of Bortele III. They may depart with their personal belongings as well as a fairly generous severance package as a reward for the services they have rendered. Let the records state that Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson and Venerable Lanie Larkinson are both exiled from the Larkinson Clan!"

Exile!

Many Larkinsons including Ves and Ketis widened their eyes when they heard the sentencing!

This was not the punishment they expected to hear, but it was one that did not sound unsuitable for the pair of malignant expert pilots.

Lanie looked devastated at this announcement. As a trueblood Larkinson, she still possessed a strong belonging to the Larkinson Clan. Getting exiled was the same as losing all of her family!

As for Taon, the morose expert pilot showed very little reaction towards his punishment. It was as if he had already written off the Larkinson Clan in advance. Getting exiled made no difference if that was the case.

Venerable Jannzi raised her hand in order to quiet the unrest among the audience. "Let me explain why we have resorted to exile for both offenders. First, the special tribunal acknowledges that the ultimate guilty party is the calamity plant known as the Emperor Tree. It is the true cause of this incident. Everything else that proceeded from the initial deception should be regarded as chain reactions. If the Larkinson High Court had its way, we should have dragged the Emperor Tree in

front of the bench. In fact, it is not necessary for us to bring it to trial, as it is not human and does not enjoy the right to have a trial. I am told that our clan is already planning to retaliate against this calamity plant in the coming weeks."

That sounded nice, but it did not change the fact that Taon and Lanie became affected anyway.

"Second, as powerful as Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson and Venerable Lanie Larkinson have become, our clan does not welcome them anymore. The plain and simple truth is that our soldiers cannot trust their backs to either of them. We also cannot count on the two to follow orders and fight for our clan without any complications. We are not desperate enough to obtain more expert pilots to forgive their crimes, tolerate their anti-social speech and ignore the fact that they still want to murder each other! According to our own recruitment standards, both convicted criminals are most definitely not eligible to join our clan anymore. Since that is the case, let us sever our ties with them without levying any further punishment onto them. This is our mercy to the pilots that have once risked their lives to defend our clan."

The dramatic court session had finally come to an end.

From tomorrow onwards, neither Taon nor Lanie could be considered as members of the Larkinson Clan anymore!

Chapter 6082 Fairness

"Are you satisfied?"

"I don't think any member of the Larkinson Clan is truly satisfied with how this ended up." The physical projection of Ves responded to Venerable Jannzi.

"It isn't fair." The physical projection of Ketis spoke. "Everyone knows that the Emperor Tree is the mastermind that caused two of our Larkinsons to turn against each other. Taon and Lanie are not criminals that intend to do harm against our clan. They are victims of unfortunate circumstances. We shouldn't treat them this way. It is not right considering everything they have done to help our clan over the years. Besides, is it wise to discard two promising and powerful champions who have just started their careers as high-ranking mech pilots? Perhaps their mentalities are not in the right place, but from what I can tell, they are absolutely not weak among low-tier expert pilots."

The chief judge of the former special tribunal still wore her red robes. She had just exited from the courthouse right after she had concluded her responsibilities. She removed her red headdress and held it in her arms with clear frustration on her expression.

"I am of the same opinion, Ketis, but I cannot base my decisions on what is best for Taon and Lanie alone." Jannzi spoke in a much less formal and uptight tone than when she addressed the public. "Every member of the special tribunal had to do what was best for the clan as a whole. That meant that we had to respect our laws and send clear signals that we do not tolerate any behavior that harms our fellow Larkinsons. We needed to show that regardless of what you do, we will never tolerate anyone who hurts his or her family."

"Not even when it was not their fault they went mad and targeted each other?"

"Even then." The pilot of the Bastion grimaced. "Look, I will be the first to admit that it is not perfect, but what else can we do? If we let Taon and Lanie off with a slap on the wrist, then we will permanently put the sacred trust between Larkinsons into doubt. Once the two controversial expert

pilots resume their duties, everyone will steer clear of them. They will be treated as pariahs within our own clan. The harmony and brotherhood that we have built up over years of struggle and celebration will crack and show flaws. As a guardian of the Larkinson Clan, I cannot in good conscience let the two convicts corrode the unreserved trust that each fellow soldier holds towards other compatriots."

She made a good point. Though Ves was not a professional soldier, he spent enough time among them to understand that the soldiers serving in the Larkinson Army developed close bonds between each other.

There was nothing inherently spiritual about these bonds. It was just a universal manifestation of brotherhood that every large group of soldiers formed after serving alongside each other for a while.

Each brotherhood was slightly different from each other, but they also possessed many common elements.

The existence of the Larkinson Network directly boosted the intimate trust and friendship among the soldiers of the Larkinson Army, making it so that they exhibited particularly good teamwork!

This was one of the many intangible qualities that set the Larkinson Army apart from other military mech organizations.

Every well-developed army or outfit developed their own distinctive advantages. The Larkinson Army was too young and had not received enough time to build up a long and elaborate martial tradition. This was why it needed to cling onto any specialty that it could get. It was rare for soldiers to hold such unreserved trust in each other.

In that sense, the continued inclusion of Taon and Lanie may definitely do more harm than good.

"Jannzi is right, Ketis." Ves spoke. "The value of two young expert pilots with distinctly powerful abilities and lots of development potential is great. It would be foolish to kick these two assets out of the Larkinson Clan without even attempting to recoup our investment. However, it is necessary for us to engage in loss prevention. The way I see it, the two have turned into huge liabilities. You have seen them. You have heard what they think. Do you truly think it is a good idea to keep them in our clan? They want to murder each other! Not only that, but Taon even wants to kill some if not all of our design spirits! There is no way we can restrain their behavior and keep the rest of our clan in harmony. Getting rid of them is the most expedient way to solve this problem."

"It is also a mercy to them both." Jannzi added. "Sending them to prison for crimes they have committed but cannot be blamed for is a form of injustice in itself. Regardless of their mental problems, both Taon and Lanie are in a sensitive period in their newly ascended states as demigods. They need to pilot their own expert mechs and exercise their resonance strength as soon as possible in order to make good use of their talents and abilities. If they cannot do so in our clan, then let them do so at another employer. There are many states and organizations that are more than willing to pick up uncommitted expert pilots for a steal. Their poor psychological states may be a deterrent, but I do not think that too many people will care during wartime."

Although it was still unfair to kick Taon and Lanie out of the clan when they initially did nothing wrong, at least they would not end up in destitution once they regained their independence.

This was also why there were Larkinsons such as Ketis that questioned the wisdom of getting rid of a pair of expert pilots.

Both Taon and Lanie had the potential to become powerful high-tier expert pilots or even ace pilots in a decade or two! They already overcame one of the most difficult hurdles of their careers. Both of them had reached a stage where they could truly begin to yield a lot of profit to the Larkinson Clan.

Still, the clan also had to pay attention to the interests of its existing soldiers. Venerable Taon and Venerable Lanie had become so distorted that they were clearly out of sync compared to any other high-ranking mech pilot of the Larkinson Clan. There was no way they would be able to get along well when serving alongside each other.

Ves figured that it might still be possible to make use of the two powerful deviants. There was no need to assign them to the expeditionary fleet or the Premier Branch. He could just order them to hold the fort at different branches or strategic locations.

For example, he felt that assigning Venerable Lanie back to Reticula Corein V may be a good idea.

When he examined her Elegant Rage, he found out that the living mech integrated a lot of organic materials from the Emperor Tree.

It also happened to absorb a bit of Solus Gas!

Continuing to deploy Venerable Lanie and her Elegant Rage on the untamed planet would allow her to develop in an environment where she could develop her strengths to the fullest.

The relatively isolated location and the lack of people meant that Lanie would not serve as a disruptive influence to the clan as a whole. At worst, she would just become an annoyance to the Larkinsons stationed at Chimera Base.

As for Taon, he was a little more difficult to assign. His open hostility towards Ylvaine was a big liability, and it was clear that he no longer held as much affection towards the Larkinson Clan as before.

It may be better to toss him into the Davute Branch and make him General Ark's problem. The Larkinsons serving on behalf of the Colonial Federation of Davute were still part of the clan, but they had also integrated into the state.

Perhaps Taon might be able to rebuild his life if he mixed in with the Davutans.

However, neither of these plans could be realized now that the Larkinson High Court had spoken.

Exile was not a perfect solution, but it was the best way for the clan to wash its hands from this unfortunate affair.

"I think that giving the two expert pilots a clean break is probably the fairest way we can treat them. It is a good way to give an explanation to the rest of our clan." Ves concluded. "This is not the first time we have exiled our clansmen, right?"

Jannzi nodded. "It has happened before, but the individuals involved were relatively minor figures. They have all committed transgressions that made it untenable for them to remain in our clan. Exile is a severe punishment to most because our clan is a paradise to most members. We are growing larger and wealthier with each passing year. We are able to provide more benefits and promotion opportunities than many other states and organizations. Everyone has great expectations towards your future, Ves. They have great faith in your ability to climb to the top of human civilization.

Missing out on this period of rapid growth is a heavy punishment in itself. They will also miss out on your living mechs, which is another massive penalty."

"Not according to Taon." Ves said with a frown. "Killing the Zeal was uncalled for. This act alone has gotten the third order living mechs up in arms. He is much less welcome among the two deviants. It is rather sad to see how he has ended up after he returned from the mission, but... I am not as sorry to see him go. It is better for him to leave so that we can show that we are attentive to the demands of our living mechs."

The Anima Order had secretly become a growing interest group of the Larkinson Clan.

While there were multiple reasons why it could not be allowed to operate in the open, that did not mean that their power was negligible. They could still disrupt the operations of the clan if they took collective action. That was why it was best to placate them whenever possible.

Other organizations did not have to deal with these additional complications, but then again, they weren't able to benefit from the additional advantages of living mechs either.

Everything had a price, and the Larkinsons were more than willing to cater to the needs of living mechs in order to leverage their power.

Ketis turned to Ves. "That reminds me, when you exile Lanie, will you bestow her the Elegant Rage?"

"No." Ves stated.

"What? Why not? She has clearly imprinted herself onto her living mech! As guilty as she may be of attempting to kill Taon, you know as well as I do that anyone would have done the same in her place. Exiling her should be enough of a punishment. Depriving her of the Elegant Rage would be like cutting off one of her arms. She won't be nearly as effective of an expert pilot without the ability to pilot a machine that pairs so well with her newly developed abilities."

"I don't disagree with you, Ketis, but the Elegant Rage holds a lot of research value to me." Ves responded while crossing his arms. "I can make great progress in one of my side projects if I figure out the Elegant Rage is able to assimilate wooden parts while retaining full functionality."

"You do not need to keep the altered mech forever in order to complete your research. Why don't you give her back to Lanie after you have exhausted the living mech's research value?"

"The Elegant Rage doesn't belong to Lanie to begin with, you know? She is the property of the Larkinson Clan, the same as the Zeal. Now that Lanie is exiled from the clan, she needs to sever all of her ties, including the one she formed with the Elegant Rage. I am sure I can find a way to refurbish the mutated mech and turn her into a special machine that can empower another Larkinson mech pilot."

Neither Ketis nor Jannzi looked like they agreed with this decision.

"Please give her a break. Lanie used to be a good kid." Jannzi argued. "Don't forget that she is one of the few trueblood Larkinsons in existence. We may be able to sever her ties to our clan, but we can never take away her bloodline. Just give her the mech on account of our shared lineage. None of the Larkinsons will begrudge you if you do this. I still want to see Lanie succeed outside of our clan. What about you, Ves?"

"...I'll think about it." He hesitantly replied. "I am still in favor of keeping the Elegant Rage in my possession. None of you understand how well this mutated mech aligns with my design philosophy. I can make a huge amount of progress if I thoroughly decipher her mysterious workings."

Ves did not really want to give up the Elegant Rage. The benefits of keeping the living mech in his possession was a lot more direct and concrete than bestowing the machine to an exile.

Chapter 6083 Separate Futures

"Maaow."

Venerable Lanie exuded a desolate air as she sat on the best of her guest cabin in the Spirit of Bentheim.

A bunch of bots had already packed her possessions into a few floating luggage coffers.

She did not really have too many possessions. She spent most of her time in training, in battle or asleep. Even if Lanie took a day off, she rarely lingered in whatever place she called home.

"I'm sorry, Syrcy. I won't be able to stay any longer."

"Maaow maaow."

A grey shorthair cat huddled tightly between Lanie's arms. Syrcy did not appear to experience any discomfort inside Lanie's prickly aura. The young woman's love and affection towards her pet still allowed them to enjoy each other's presence without any barriers.

Whether that would last was in question. Lanie hadn't exactly been the most attentive cat owner. Syrcy also spent much of her time roaming about and finding company in the thriving cat community of the factory ship.

However, now that Lanie had no choice but to depart from the Larkinson Clan by tomorrow morning, she grew concerned about her existing relationships.

Exile meant that Lanie had no choice but to say goodbye to her friends and family.

Neither she nor the members of the clan were allowed to interact with each other anymore. Lanie had no intention of violating the terms of her sentence.

Still, Lanie figured she could take away her cat if she wanted to. Syrcy was her possession, after all. The only question was whether the feline was willing to accompany her on the next step of her journey.

"Do you want to stay with the Larkinsons, or come with me?" She asked as she picked up her cat.

"Maaow. Maaow. Maaow."

"Is that a yes?"

"Maaow!"

"I love you, Syrcy!"

Lanie embraced her cat with a more intimate hug. At least she wouldn't be left alone and surrounded by strangers. Having Syrcy by her side would remind her of the good times she experienced while she was still a part of the Larkinson Family and the Larkinson Clan.

"To think that I would be cast out like a piece of trash..."

As she continued to think about what she should do next, an alert sounded in the cabin.

Lanie looked up and accepted the incoming communication request.

The physical projection of Ves appeared in front of the distorted expert pilot.

The patriarch looked as authoritative as ever while wearing his high-quality patriarch uniform.

The only sign that he wanted to talk to Lanie as a family member as opposed to the leader of the Larkinson Clan was his soft and sympathetic expression.

"You look... better." Ves spoke first. "I see that you have lowered your guard and contained your instinctual hostility. That is good. You will need to learn to restrain yourself once you go out into society. A lot of people will respect you on account of your combat effectiveness, but you will have to make new friends in order to survive on the battlefield."

"..."

"What's wrong?"

"I... I don't know if I am able to trust others to have my back again." Lanie spoke as her force of will became a little more defensive than before. "What Taon has done to me continues to haunt me in my dreams."

"You can't blame him for that. Not entirely. It is the Emperor Tree that manipulated him into striking your mech."

It was impossible for Ves to convince a stubborn expert pilot to change her mind, so he dropped this futile attempt and addressed another topic.

Lanie did not open her mouth to refute that statement, but it was clear that she believed in her heart that Taon was still responsible.

It was impossible for Ves to convince a stubborn expert pilot to change her mind, so he dropped this futile attempt and addressed another topic.

"Are you upset about your sentence?"

"I am." Lanie frowned. "I do not think I did anything wrong, though I admit that my actions don't look particularly good. I am... disappointed that so many Larkinsons look at me as if I am one step away from going on a killing spree. I am not that dangerous. I only want to kill Taon. Once I am able to crush his neck and toss his body out in the vacuum of space, I am perfectly okay with treating other Larkinsons as family like before."

It was attitudes like these that made Lanie a poor fit for the clan.

In one moment, she sounded remarkably similar to the old Lanie.

In the next moment, her dark obsession towards Taon took over!

How could other Larkinsons possibly feel comfortable while serving and fighting alongside such a mentally ill pilot?

Granted, pretty much every expert pilot could be described as mentally ill. What made Lanie different from her peers was that her conviction was much less noble and upright.

That would not only make her unsuitable to remain in the Larkinson Clan, but also generate problems when she worked for another employer.

Alas, there was little Ves could do to help. This problem was Lanie's burden to bear.

"If you want, I can recommend you to a few groups that would love to hire an expert pilot." Ves spoke. "I have a lot of influence, so a good word from me can open up a lot of doors."

"No need. I can take care of myself, sir. I only have one request. She isn't mine, but... can you give me the Elegant Rage? She is my battle partner and the living mech that literally saved my life. I... don't want to pilot another mech. My exile will become a lot more bearable to me if I can still count on one trustworthy partner..."

That was a difficult question to Ves.

"I haven't decided." He spoke. "Objectively, you don't deserve to take the Elegant Rage along with you. She also holds a lot of research value to me. I will think about your request, but I won't pass her along in the short term. Tell you what. I will keep the Elegant Rage in her current state. You can approach me in the future and exchange her as long as you think you can give me a fair trade in return. I will not make it difficult for you to redeem your living mech, but I will not give you a discount just because you have Larkinson blood flowing through your veins. Getting exiled truly means that we are cutting off all existing ties with you. I will treat you just like any other third party."

The young expert pilot frowned as she continued to hug Syrcy. It would not be easy for her to redeem the Elegant Rage if that was the case. She did not know how much the living mech was worth in her mutated state, but she had to be at least ten times more valuable than her original production cost.

Lanie did not complain, though. It was only fair for Ves to impose these conditions. He had no obligations to gift her the Elegant Rage for free. At least he did not beat around the bush and plainly stated the redemption conditions.

"Make sure to keep my battle partner in her original state. I will do my best to take her away as soon as possible."

The two trueblood Larkinsons spoke a bit further. They briefly reminisced about old times and spoke about the future.

"The start of the Age of Dawn is a time of heroes and gods." Ves spoke in an encouraging tone to the young woman. "New technologies and greater conflicts have set a magnificent stage for champions such as yourself. As a New Elite, you have already benefited from the societal shift that is taking place. I highly recommend you keep fighting. Your value to human civilization is directly correlated to how well you can beat up the aliens. The more you fight them, the faster you will grow. Just make sure you don't die in the process."

"The aliens won't be able to kill me." Lanie sneered. "I am more concerned about getting attacked by other humans. It is much harder to guard against their treachery..."

Ves helplessly shook her head. "If you ever want to go further in your career, then you should find a way to build a team of reliable troops. This is just a suggestion. You will have to make your own decisions."

"..."

"I will see you off tomorrow for the final time. Make sure to say goodbye to everyone in the clan you care about."

Ves ended his call with Lanie, causing his physical projection to disappear from her cabin.

A moment later, his physical projection appeared in another guest cabin.

The atmosphere in the chamber was a lot less pleasant. This was because Ves had decided to pay a visit to Venerable Taon Melin.

Unlike Lanie, Venerable Taon had become a lot more isolated. No one took the initiative to visit the male expert pilot.

The members of the Eye of Ylvaine had conspicuously avoided Taon like the plague. This was understandable as the former pilot of the Zeal had openly renounced Ylvaine. He even expressed his desire to kill the design spirit for whatever reason!

Taon had become such an unwelcome presence in the Larkinson Clan that even Goldie withdrew her connection to the outcast.

In fact, even if Goldie wanted to maintain a bond with the former Ylvainan, it wasn't possible to sustain it anymore.

"Hoot. Hoot."

An ethereal owl continued to hover around Taon and project a strange repulsion field. The companion spirit not only kept everything spiritual at bay, but also made the fallen expert pilot harder to perceive.

This was quite an impressive feat. Expert pilots possessed such a strong presence that everyone around them could feel their blazing willpower.

When Ves looked at Taon, he had the feeling that he was looking at a dying star.

"So... do you regret leaving the clan?"

"No." Taon responded as he looked up from the deck. "It is... a liberation. I have no place in the clan anymore. It is best for everyone if I part with the Larkinsons. A new start is exactly what I need. It is not as if you will allow me to kill Lanie while I am still a member of your clan."

"Do you hate us, Taon?"

"I do not. I... simply do not belong here anymore. I have changed too much. A part of me is grateful that I am able to leave. The mission has opened up my eyes to many truths. I have peered beyond the veil of falsehood and discovered that everything I have believed in is... false. I do not begrudge my fellow Ylvainans for believing in a false prophet, but I cannot respect them anymore for refusing to take my warning seriously. Since I cannot convince them of the truth, it is better if I set off and spread my revelations elsewhere. A day shall come when I return and teach them that my truth is stronger than theirs."

That sounded rather ominous. Taon's words could even be construed as threats.

Ves did not intend to do anything about it. A part of him felt guilty that his clan wasn't able to help Taon more. The former legion commander of the Eye of Ylvaine deserved better.

"I am glad to hear that you have made peace with your departure from the clan. We will miss you, I suppose. With the skills and strength that you have gained over your service, you should have little trouble finding employment elsewhere."

"I have gained the power to break the false gods that exploit and deceive our race." Taon grinned as he raised a fist. "I respect you too much to turn my power against you, sir, but know that I shall never waver in my determination to bring them all to ruin, even if they are hiding among your 'design spirits'. No one should ever be deceived and betrayed by them as they have done to me. One day, I shall gain the power to liberate red humanity from their invisible tyranny!"

Chapter 6084 Punishment or Reward?

The clan remained restless long after the trial had ended.

Debates took place on every ship, every base and every home.

Many Larkinsons formed their own opinions about the trials as well as the sentences that the convicts had received.

A lot of people argued that Taon and Lanie got off way too easily. Exile had no bite to them as they had just advanced to the rank of expert pilot. That meant that they had become highly desirable talents that could easily join another powerful organization that was willing to invest in a ready-made powerhouse.

Unemployed expert pilots did not exist because every mech force was in desperate need of high-level talent. Even the ones with clear problems could easily join an outfit because of the demands of the Red War.

In fact, ever since the special tribunal announced the decision to exile Venerable Taon and Venerable Lanie, the Larkinson Clan soon received offers from various military organizations to take over the supposed burdens.

In truth, there was no need for these groups to approach the clan administration. Taon and Lanie would become independents starting from tomorrow. They should be more than capable of selecting an offer that appealed to them the most.

Ves soon figured out that these groups not only contacted the clan as a matter of courtesy, but also wanted to get ahead of the competition.

It appeared that there were plenty of people who appreciated the strength of Larkinson champions!

The expeditionary fleet had racked up a lot of victories before and after the Great Severing. More and more people wanted to learn from the Larkinson Army's example and figure out its success formula.

Perhaps these third parties hoped that Taon or Lanie could act as instructors or advisors to their own mech organizations.

They would inevitably get disappointed. There were many reasons behind the success of the expeditionary fleet. Money was the main reason. The Larkinson Clan earned so much capital from plunder as well as mech sales that it could invest in the production of a lot of powerful quasi-first-class mechs.

Of course, there were other factors that contributed to the persistent success of the clan. Maybe the exiles might be able to teach a thing or two about them, but their new employers may not be receptive to their suggestions.

That was none of Ves' business. He was ready to wash his hands off the two problematic expert pilots and get back to his design and research projects.

Yet before he could do so, he received an unexpected visit from one of his friends and recent collaborator.

"Jovie! Why did you decide to stop by my lab? According to the schedule, you should still be working with Gloriana to expand the specifications of the Riot Mark III Project. My input on the project at this stage is limited."

"This is not about our collaborative project." The mecher explained as he entered Ves' design lab. "I am here to serve as a liaison. Two of the expert pilots of your clan are about to depart tomorrow, is that correct?"

Ves turned away from his desk terminal and turned around his seat to face his friend. "Word spreads quickly, huh? I am sure you know all about it, so your question is redundant. It is true that Venerable Taon Melin and Venerable Lanie Larkinson are on their way out. What's it to you? Wait, are you thinking about..."

"It is not me who is soliciting your clan." Jovy corrected. "I am here on behalf of a much more important figure within the Red Association. He has expressed a strong interest in hiring one of your soon-to-be-exiled expert pilots. He wishes to hear your stance towards the possibility of recruiting one of your former champions into an elite mech unit that will serve directly at his behest."

"...Are you being serious?"

"We are being very serious, Ves."

"If you have paid any attention to the trials, then you should know how mentally unstable they are! I cannot see how either of the expert pilots are a good fit for the Red Association. They are fundamentally broken, Jovie. Don't you guys have expert pilots of your own that are much better trained? Why do you need to go out of your way to recruit one of ours?"

"We can never have too many expert pilots, Ves. We are different from the RF in that we understand the importance of injecting fresh blood in our Association every once in a while. Good pilots can come from any background. What matters is that we recruit enough mech pilots from diverse places to increase the chance that we get lucky once in a while. Maybe our investment in your exile will pay off. Maybe it will not. We have the resources to afford this commitment either way. You do not need to worry whether we will be satisfied with taking in one of your clan's former expert pilots."

That was certainly a strategy that a large and wealthy organization was able to afford!

"I see. Which of the two problem cases are you interested in anyway?"

"Venerable Lanie Larkinson. The Mace of Retaliation has expressed an interest in recruiting her. Given your good relations with the Survivalist Faction, he is willing to speak with you about this subject."

"What?! The Mace of Retaliation?!"

That was a bigshot of the Red Association!

Although he was merely a 'peak ace pilot', he was often regarded as the voice and representative of the Fist of Defiance, who also happened to be his father!

"Does this request come from the Mace, or the Fist?"

Jovie shrugged. "I cannot tell you the answer. I am merely a messenger. If you want to hear my opinion, then I think it is the Mace of Retaliation that has developed an interest in Venerable Lanie Larkinson. You only need to think about his title and learn how well it matches your exile's inclinations."

From the logs and footage of the battle between Taon and Lanie, Ves noticed that the latter had developed an ability to absorb the energy of incoming attacks and use it to hurt her enemies.

That... actually sounded like a close match to how the Mace of Retaliation fought!

Even if the two possessed distinct differences in their combat approaches, their commonalities meant that the Mace of Retaliation may be able to act as a mentor to Venerable Lanie!

"Is the Mace... thinking about offering an apprenticeship of sorts to Lanie?"

"I am not sure. You will have to speak to him yourself." Jovie responded. "He has cleared up his schedule for today. I can connect you to him at any time. It is best if you do not keep him waiting."

Ves did not dare to waste the time of such an important leader. Jovie stood by as he facilitated a connection to one of the high-ranked figures of the Survivalist Faction.

The entire design lab became filled with the willpower of an ace pilot that was just a few steps away from transcending to godhood.

Ves slightly widened his eyes as he could actually sense clear similarities between the willpower of Venerable Lanie and the Mace of Retaliation!

Of course, the latter was way stronger and more developed, but it was like seeing what Venerable Lanie could become in the future.

"Professor Larkinson." The physical projection of a man wearing a RA military uniform in red greeted with a stern and controlled voice. "Professor Armalon here should have already conveyed my request. Due to the difficult circumstances of your former subordinate and the personal nature of my solicitation, I am here to offer clarification so that you may send her off to me without any further concerns. Are you willing to let Venerable Lanie Larkinson enter my service?"

Well, the peak ace pilot was certainly direct. Ves liked that as he did not have to waste time on dancing around the subject.

"I do not object to letting you take Venerable Lanie under your wing on principle. She will soon turn into a freelance expert pilot. It is up to her to decide who she wants to work for. You can have her as long as she does not oppose the prospect of working for you." Ves responded. "Will she join the RA as a general recruit, or will you place her in a special unit?"

"The latter. As you may have guessed, I am interested in training and tutoring her. Venerable Lanie Larkinson's power expression after becoming an expert pilot is rare. It is similar enough to my own

that I can pass on many of my skills and experiences to her. This will benefit her enormously as she can avoid many pitfalls and progress much faster as an expert pilot. You should already have an understanding of the resources and methods that we possess. I am confident that the training program that I am devising for Venerable Lanie can quickly forge her into a high-ranking mech pilot that can catch up to me, and potentially go even further."

That was an ambitious goal!

Ves would have thought that the Mace was exaggerating, but a Saint of his stature never lied.

"That sounds... really generous, maybe too generous. Are you not afraid that you will spoil her and ruin her future as a high-ranking mech pilot?"

"No." The Mace said with absolute certainty. "Trust me on this, professor. I will not repeat the mistakes that have adversely affected my own progression. I have first-hand experience on what can go wrong. I am confident I can do better. The Red Association possesses a much greater understanding of what it takes to successfully train and nurture a high-ranking mech pilot. Compared to mentoring other mech pilots who possess different talents and abilities, my familiarity with her inclinations will allow me to accelerate her development. It will take much less time to turn her into a powerful combat asset."

Ves felt rather conflicted about the offer after hearing this. Lanie's exile was supposed to serve as punishment.

Getting recruited by the Red Association and receiving the mentorship of the Mace of Retaliation sounded more like a reward!

What would the Larkinsons think after they heard how Lanie managed to climb her way up in society?

Perhaps more Larkinson mech pilots would attempt to get themselves exiled just so that they could get poached by the mechers!

"You do not need to be concerned that your exile will be rewarded for her crimes." The Mace clarified after he read Ves' growing concerns. "My training program will push her past her breaking point. She must be remade as extensively as possible. Once she has satisfied my minimum requirements, I will throw her onto the most active and grueling battlefields of the Red War. Each mission shall involve life-and-death challenges that she must overcome in order to survive and participate in the next one. I will not be lenient to her on account of her relative youth. She will either die or transform into a pillar of red humanity. There shall be no middle ground."

That sounded a bit more acceptable. Ves had greater confidence in the Mace's ability to properly guide and train Lanie.

"Okay. I think I am okay with that. I have one more question. Since she will be spending a lot of time with you, will she... will she also have an opportunity to get into contact with your father?"

The Mace's expression stiffened a bit. "That depends. It is not necessarily a good idea for a young expert pilot such as herself to come into contact with a god pilot too soon and too often. Once she has developed her strength and formed her own combat style, she may perform well enough to earn my father's appreciation. If she wants to, she may request personal tutelage from him. It is an opportunity that she can strive for. I will not object if he wishes to take over her training."

Damn... if it was possible for Venerable Lanie to hook up with the Fist of Defiance, then this recruitment would definitely be interpreted as a massive reward!

The chance to receive guidance from a god pilot just once was an opportunity of a lifetime!

Lots of mech pilots would definitely grow green with envy if Venerable Lanie became one of the few lucky expert pilots to receive such high-end instruction!

Chapter 6085 A Bright Prospect

Ves felt both flattered and annoyed that a bigshot like the Mace of Retaliation expressed interest in one of 'his' expert pilots.

Most people who received this kind of request from one of the highest-ranking figures of the Red Association would immediately say yes!

The problem was that Ves did not fall into the category of 'most people'. He felt quite troubled by what this would mean to the clan.

Ves might have a weird perspective on the Red Association, but most Larkinsons still looked up to it as one of the largest and most powerful human organizations.

Joining the Association and becoming a mecher was a dream to most people! Even the Larkinsons were not immune to its allure as they had been yearning to experience an instant leap in class and become a small part of one of the hegemony of human civilization!

What message would it send if Lanie left the Larkinson Clan in disgrace, yet immediately joined the Red Association through a backdoor?

Not only that, but what if the Larkinsons found out that Lanie did not receive the regular treatment afforded to expert pilots recruited from outside, but directly became the latest protege of the powerful Mace of Retaliation?

They would most definitely think that the sentence of the Larkinson High Court had become a joke!

Still, what did it matter if the Larkinsons believed that Lanie failed to suffer the punishment she deserved after turning her arms against a fellow clansman?

Unlike Venerable Taon who could at least justify his attempt at homicide, Venerable Lanie had been convicted of attempted voluntary manslaughter!

Still... when Ves was thinking about the little girl that used to act cute back when she lived at the Larkinson Estate, he couldn't help but feel an obligation to take care of his younger cousin.

"Lanie..."

Blood ran thicker than water. While the Larkinson Clan recruited so many outsiders that the proportion of trueblood Larkinsons had become ridiculously small, they still enjoyed an identity that was a little bit more special than others.

Adopted Larkinsons such as Gloriana, Joshua, Ketis, and Alexa all differed from the truebloods by the fact that they used to live with other families.

Gloriana originated from the Wodin Dynasty. Joshua used to be an ordinary Brighter. Ketis was already part of a close sisterhood in the form of the Swordmaidens. Alexa came from the powerful Streon Ancient Clan.

Each of them grew up under vastly different circumstances that had nothing to do with the Larkinson Family or Larkinson Clan. Even if they got exiled one day, most of them could just return to where they came from and resume their old lives alongside their original friends and family.

Lanie lacked this advantage. Her life literally revolved around the Larkinsons since the moment of her birth. She would truly be bidding farewell to her family once she began her exile.

Ves already considered this to be a heavy punishment. He did not want to prolong her suffering further by making it difficult to realize her potential and find success elsewhere.

Besides, from a practical perspective, the Larkinson Clan stood to make a lot of gains if Lanie joined the Red Association and managed to develop a close relationship with the Mace of Retaliation.

Even if Lanie could no longer be considered a member of the clan, she could not get rid of her bloodline. Her family name alone permanently associated herself to all of the other Larkinsons.

As long as the Mace of Retaliation did a good job and helped the exile grow into a powerful hero and leader in her own right, she might still remember all of the help and favors she received from the Larkinsons and do the clan a favor!

His eyes lit up as he grew more enthused about this possibility. Ves would have to make a bet that would not pay off until a few decades had passed, but he was more than willing to make it as the cost was fairly minor when compared to the massive amount of profit he could earn!

Of course, the most important part about this gambit was that he needed to make sure that he and Lanie parted on good terms.

"I have made a decision." He told the Mace's physical projection. "We should meet with Venerable Lanie in private to present the offer to her. The final decision lies with her. I can't do anything if she refuses."

The two decided to make a late visit to Venerable Lanie's cabin.

The soon-to-be-exiled pilot briefly became bewildered as the physical projection of Ves dropped by again. Shouldn't he be sending her off tomorrow?

Her expression quickly became composed when she noticed the arrival of a powerful and well-dressed ace pilot.

The Saint Kingdom of a peak ace pilot was nothing to slouch at. It was so powerful and reality defying that the Mace of Retaliation was even able to extend it through the communication link to a more powerful degree than usual!

Venerable Lanie's thorny force of will quickly raised its defenses as a response. The expert pilot quietly resisted the vastly more powerful but also more distant willpower of a pilot who had progressed much further up the path of godhood!

"Interesting." The Mace smiled in appreciation. "You are truly as similar to me as I thought."

Although Lanie never really cared about following galactic politics, she was not ignorant to the point where she was unable to recognize one of the most prominent peak ace pilots of red humanity.

Her pride may rankle at the thought, but Lanie forced herself to give in and make a bow. "Saint. You honor me with your presence. To what... do I owe your visit?"

The wheels in her mind already started turning from the moment she detected the willpower of an ace pilot that was much different from that of Saint Tusa.

The similarities between her thorns and his much more mature willpower even allowed her to guess the truth.

"The Mace of Retaliation here has approached me with a very interesting offer in relation to your sudden availability on the job market. Let me explain."

Ves quickly summarized the offer and provided his own thoughts on what it would entail.

The woman looked quite receptive to the idea. She had never dared to imagine that the Red Association would be willing to recruit her directly. To be able to receive the care and attention of a powerful god pilot candidate such as the Mace of Retaliation was an exceedingly valuable privilege!

So long as Lanie made a good impression on the Mace of Retaliation, was it possible for her to earn the appreciation of the Fist of Defiance as well?

The thought sounded sacrilegious, but Lanie couldn't help but get past this idea!

Both Ves and the Mace smiled knowingly as they clearly guessed what was on the young expert pilot's mind.

The woman eventually snapped out of her daze. She made a much more sincere bow towards the projection of the Mace of Retaliation.

"It would be an immense honor for me to receive your guidance and instruction, Saint. I am willing to become a member of the Red Association and fight on behalf of all red humans, not just the Larkinsons. What requirements do I have to meet in order to become your sword?"

The physical projection of the Mace continued to smile in satisfaction. The reports he read indicated that Lanie had become a lot more mentally unstable, but her conduct so far made it clear that she still maintained a lot of reason and decorum. That made everything easier.

"You do not have to pass any tests. You have already proven yourself on many battlefields, including the last one. Expert pilots such as yourself are already qualified soldiers or warriors. What I require from you is to keep up with my exacting demands. Make no mistake. You will not live a life of comfort when you come under my reign. You must be willing to fulfill the missions that I assign to you without question. You will not have the option to refuse any life-threatening assignment that I impose on you. You will remain under my regime until you have grown powerful enough to challenge my authority or transfer to the command of a different leader. Is that understood?"

To her credit, Lanie did not exhibit any sign of doubt or reluctance. "I am eager to prove myself, Saint. Your wish is my command. If there is one lesson that I have learned from my last mission, it is that I will always remain a victim if I am too weak to defeat my enemies, both the ones that are positioned in front as well as behind. As long as I become as strong as you... there will be a lot less enemies who are willing to strike me from either direction."

"What if they strike you regardless?" Ves curiously questioned.

"Then I will make them bleed and suffer tenfold of what they have dished out to me!" Lanie grinned as her willpower briefly flared!

"Bravo!" The Mace of Retaliation clapped. "That is the spirit! No matter how many setbacks you have suffered, you must always maintain your desire to bounce back and make your enemies regret their decision to target you. The greater your desire for vengeance and retribution, the stronger your counterattack. Once you have reached a state of ultimate deterrence, you can evoke so much fear in your enemies that they will already collapse and beg for mercy before you have taken action."

It was clear that Venerable Lanie and the Mace of Retaliation thought along the same wavelength. The two already started to look as if they managed to hit it off. Their philosophies had become so similar that it was as if Lanie had already become a member of the Fist of Defiance's lineage!

There was just one question that Lanie really wanted to ask before she was willing to serve the Mace in an unreserved fashion.

"I have a question, Saint."

"Ask."

"Why exactly are you so willing to spend so much time and effort on instructing me?" She asked.

"A powerful ace pilot and leader such as yourself should be as busy as the patriarch here, if not more so. What makes me worth your precious time?"

The Survivalist leader's expression grew a bit more intense as he stared into her eyes. "You are familiar enough with my public record that you should have already guessed the answer."

"Is it... because you no longer think you can survive another breakthrough and wish for me to make up for your inadequacy?"

Ves awkwardly coughed. That was a bit too direct!

Fortunately, the Mace was made out of sterner stuff.

"You can believe that." The two-and-a-half century old ace pilot spoke. "My glory days are already behind me. The Age of Dawn is the stage for upstarts such as yourself. You have already become a hero, but that is not enough. Red humanity needs gods, particularly those that can fight. As incredulous as it may sound, I see the seed of greatness in you. I used to have it myself. You are not the only prospect of the Red Association. Far from it. I have scouted and tutored dozens of promising heroes before you. The only trait that sets you apart from the rest is how similar you are to me. This coincidence is both a gift and curse."

It was easy to understand why that would be a gift, but why was it also a curse?

Venerable Lanie did not have a concrete answer, but that did not stop her from embracing this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!

She began to kneel and make a solemn pledge. "Whether your instruction is a gift or a curse, I shall bear it either way. I give you my unconditional loyalty. I shall obey your every command without doubt or hesitation. This I vow."

Ves widened his eyes. This was a heavy promise, and one that the Mace of Retaliation could easily abuse if he ever had the desire to betray Lanie's trust!

She had made the biggest bet of her life! It took a huge amount of courage for her to bind her loyalty to a stranger that she only knew by reputation and official sources.

The Mace could completely screw Lanie over by sending her on a suicide mission against an ancient phase whale.

He could also command her to betray the Red Association or even attack the Larkinson Clan!

Lanie had already thrown away the freedom that she stood to gain once she officially began her exile.

Was it worth it? Perhaps. The Mace was clearly a man who was worthy of her trust. Lanie could have picked much more awful personalities to sell her loyalty to. Her extreme act of devotion instantly won the Survivalist leader's trust and appreciation.

The benefits did not stop at this point.

Once Lanie made this solemn pledge, her willpower and aura condensed further. It was as if she had cast aside all of her hesitation by occupying herself with a new fixation!

"It is not necessary for you to bestow me with your loyalty so soon, but I am touched by your gesture." The Mace said in a more welcoming tone than before. "I shall endeavor to prove myself deserving of your allegiance. I believe that this will be the start of a fantastic mentorship."

Chapter 6086 The True Value of First-Class Multipurpose Mechs

Ves was genuinely happy for Venerable Lanie.

She had found a new purpose in her life. She had also managed to make an excellent first impression of her new backer.

Although the Mace of Retaliation did not exaggerate when he shared his intentions to push Lanie past her limits, at least he had her best interests at heart. That was more than he could say for many other potential employers.

If the Mace truly regarded Lanie as the heir that could possibly fulfill his deepest desire on his behalf, then he would definitely not exploit her and discard her later on. That completely went against his implied goal.

Ves no longer had to torture himself with concerns on whether Lanie found a good employer. She had pretty much won the lottery today.

Before Ves was ready to leave the two alone so that they could discuss arrangements that had nothing to do with the Larkinson Clan, he offered the lucky expert pilot one more parting gift.

"Lanie."

"Yes, sir?"

"Considering all of the hard fights ahead of you, I cannot in good conscience let you go without a trustworthy and reliable mech at your side. I am willing to transfer ownership of the Elegant Rage to your name. Just give me a month or two to complete my research on your living mech."

A brilliant smile bloomed on the young woman's face. "That... is wonderful!"

"I have a proposal, Professor Larkinson." The Mace of Retaliation turned to face Ves directly.

"What is it you require?"

"The Elegant Rage is not a particularly powerful mech, but it, or rather she, is an excellent complement to Venerable Lanie here. Since I desire for her to overcome more difficult challenges that can stimulate her growth to a greater extent, she will need to pilot a machine she can trust with her life. There is no better choice than a living mech that has already done so once before. Let us raise the stakes. Let us make it so that each time she deploys on the battlefield, she can either return alive and her mech intact, or not at all. If she ever falters and loses her mech even once... then she has ultimately failed to live up to my expectations. There is no further need to push her limits any further."

Ves widened his eyes. "Are you requesting me to convert the Elegant Rage into a Carmine mech?"

"I am. Will that be a problem, professor?"

"No. I can do it. In fact, it matches well with one of my new research initiatives. I have been thinking about developing an upgraded version of a Carmine mech. The Elegant Rage in her current form already matches the specifications of what I have in mind. I can promise you that once I am done with converting the Elegant Rage to a new generation Carmine mech, Venerable Lanie will be able to attain even greater synergies with her battle partner. Just... try to preserve what makes the living mech unique when your own mech designers begin to upgrade my work. It may be wise to consult me first before you mechers go crazy."

"I shall take your warning into consideration."

This plan worked out quite well for Ves. He lamented the loss of the Elegant Rage, but researching the mutated mech before upgrading her to the first Woodsap mech in existence should allow him to maximize her short-term value!

Ves was confident that as long as he successfully modified the Elegant Rage into an improvised Woodsap mech, he would be able to design a proper Carmine mech based on the wood element from the ground up without too many complications.

By that time, there was no need for Ves to feel sorry about giving up possession of the Elegant Rage!

A few minutes passed before Ves chose to end the communication link. Venerable Lanie and the Mace of Retaliation had already begun to discuss details such as undergoing extensive augmentations and signing up for a crash course in piloting first-class mechs at one of the RA's top mech academies.

As a second-class expert pilot, Lanie possessed many 'deficiencies' that needed to be made up before she earned the qualifications to fight alongside other mechers.

Fortunately, the Red Association integrated so many external recruits every year that it had a well-developed training and adaptation program for cases like her. Demigods also mastered the art of piloting more advanced mechs much faster, so it shouldn't take too long for Lanie to earn the minimum qualifications.

Of course, Venerable Lanie would only be able to competently pilot specialized first-class mechs for the time being.

There was no way to compress a decade of intensive training and studying on how to pilot the most modern iterations of first-class multipurpose mechs in less than a year.

That was fine for Lanie. She did not think the Elegant Rage was perfect, but RA's excellent mech designers should be able to expand the mutated melee mech's armaments on a gradual basis over time.

"First-class multipurpose mechs are mostly designed with the elimination of weaknesses in mind." The Mace of Retaliation shared his own wisdom and perspective on the subject. "Their greatest advantage is strategic in nature. It is virtually impossible to develop a truly effective counter against them, so most of our enemies do not even make the attempt."

"Are first-class multipurpose mechs that difficult to fight against?"

"Let me put it this way, young lady. The Terrans are famed for their Destroyer weapons, so they have always developed a bias for melee combat. The Rubarthans are reluctant to compete against their archrivals in this aspect, so they have developed a bias for ranged combat. Centuries of directed mech development has made both groups strong in either areas. Do you understand?"

Lanie slowly nodded. "If you, I mean us, ever fight against them, we can adapt our mechs and loadouts to avoid their strengths and target their weaknesses. At the same time, the Terrans and the Rubarthans cannot counter RA mechs as effectively because they are true all-rounders."

The Mace grinned. "That is correct. As the only legitimate trade organization related to mechs in human space, we have the right and the means to absorb much of the strongest innovations of both first-rate colonial superstates. We do not always succeed, but we can count on our own formidable mech designers and R&D teams to fill up the gaps and stay at least one step ahead of the masses."

"How does this relate to first-class multipurpose mechs, mentor?"

"I have just described the main reason why first-class multipurpose mechs have become the dominant template in first-class mech combat. They offer far greater strategic depth. They do not truly excel in any area, and we recognize that. What we truly value is their inability to get countered with ease. We have great confidence that our frontline mech units will never collapse in a short amount of time. They may lose against an enemy that possesses an overwhelming advantage in speed, as they recently did in a practice match against Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson's Dark Zephyr, but a war is never decided in a single battle. I can guarantee you that the next time we confront such an adversary, we will quickly be able to field mechs that can counter a powerful light skirmisher."

"That is a personal decision that every expert pilot must make. No mech designer or superior should ever pressure you or coerce you into piloting a mech of a configuration that you do not agree with. This is the machine that will not only determine the heights of your career, but also the odds of coming back from the battlefield alive. Experienced pilots recruited from outside such as you tend to stick to what you are already familiar with. This is a legitimate choice, but it is also one that comes with consequences."

Lanie immediately frowned. "If my enemies want to target me in particular, they will especially target my weaknesses. The current configuration of the Elegant Rage is optimized for melee combat. My living mech also relies more on evasion than armor and energy shields to mitigate damage. I can see how the right sort of opponent can make life difficult."

Damn, the Mace of Retaliation knew about that?! He must be well-versed in the intelligence related to the Larkinson Clan!

"I see." Venerable Lanie's eyes opened up. "Does that mean that the Elegant Rage should be converted into a multipurpose mech as well?"

"That is a personal decision that every expert pilot must make. No mech designer or superior should ever pressure you or coerce you into piloting a mech of a configuration that you do not agree with. This is the machine that will not only determine the heights of your career, but also the odds of coming back from the battlefield alive. Experienced pilots recruited from outside such as you tend to stick to what you are already familiar with. This is a legitimated choice, but it is also one that comes with consequences."

Lanie immediately frowned. "If my enemies want to target me in particular, they will especially target my weaknesses. The current configuration of the Elegant Rage is optimized for melee combat. My living mech also relies more on evasion than armor and energy shields to mitigate damage. I can see how the right sort of opponent can make life difficult."

The Mace smiled at her. "It is not a major concern most of the time. Our Association possesses better tech and materials than any other group. As long as we apply enough upgrades to your Elegant Rage, your machine's advantages will become so dominant that most adversaries will not be able to effectively target your weakness. This is the strategy chosen by many god pilots. You will find that many of them have chosen to specialize in one mode of combat to the exclusion of other approaches. Powerful enough ranged mechs have their means of repelling enemies at point blank range. Strong enough melee mechs can endure the firepower of distant enemies long enough to close the distance."

That was true in the case of many powerful ace mechs and god mechs. The usual rules and guidelines concerning mechs no longer applied to them. This was a good example of how powerful enough mechs and mech pilots were able to change reality in their favor as long as their martial might reached a high threshold.

"Will my Elegant Rage be able to become strong enough to do what I want on the battlefield?" The young expert pilot asked.

"No. Absolutely not." The Mace instantly shot her down. "Our Association has learned many lessons on the sustainable development of high-ranking mech pilots. Foisting mechs that are so technologically superior that they can wipe out all enemies in front of them right at the start will lead to adverse effects. The most common among them are the development of bad habits and the premature stagnation in the growth of resonance strength. We must maintain a reasonable degree of parity between man and machine in order to stimulate your comprehensive growth while still giving you an acceptable chance of surviving your coming battles."

Given that the Mace of Retaliation intended to throw Venerable Lanie straight into the meat grinder of the main battlefields, this was not an easy choice to make!

There was a decent probability that Lanie might bump into an enemy that she was not equipped to deal with and get wiped out with ease due to the weakness of her mech.

Although the phase whales and phase lords generally made themselves scarce, they were more than willing to employ their best warships and superweapons against the formidable warfleets of the Red Association and the Red Fleet.

Plenty of first-raters fighting on behalf of the two hegemonies of human civilization perished like dogs since the start of the Red War!

These were all highly trained first-raters that received a fortune's worth of augmentations and developed a lot of competences that would have allowed them to utterly dominate second-raters in their areas of expertise!

Yet even the most privileged mechers and fleters could never guarantee that they would be able to survive against the more fearsome and terrible phasewater weapons employed by the major alien races of the Red Ocean.

There was no fairness on the battlefield!

A low-tier expert pilot such as Venerable Lanie may already be regarded as a powerhouse in the expeditionary fleet, but she was nothing more than slightly stronger cannon fodder if she participated in the most intensive battlefields!

Venerable Lanie needed to adapt quickly if she wanted to acclimate to her new role. Battles involving the top forces of the Red Ocean were much different from the battles involving peripheral forces.

As powerful as the Larkinson Clan had become in the past few years, it could only be regarded as a peripheral force from the perspective of galactic geopolitics.

For a young Larkinson expert pilot to jump from a small pond in a big ocean all at once would definitely strain her survival ability, and thereby stimulate her growth like nothing else!

This might not be the best way to nurture a true powerhouse, but it was undoubtedly the fastest way to produce drastic results!

Chapter 6087 Another One

Now that Venerable Lanie pledged herself to the Mace of Retaliation and was set to become a mecher, Ves had very few concerns anymore.

Sure, the Mace would definitely not be lenient on Lanie in order to strengthen her as quickly as possible, but this could be regarded as a form of atonement for her crimes.

The only concern that annoyed Ves was that he needed to reshuffle his schedule and allocate more time on the examination of the Elegant Rage and the development of his first Woodsap mech.

"I will have to postpone a few design projects." He sighed.

Just as he was ready to turn in for the night, he received another high-priority communication request.

Ves raised his eyebrows as the physical projection of another powerful ace pilot appeared into view.

The Inferno Spear Prince chose to initiate a direct conversation with the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan!

"Well met, Professor Larkinson. You clearly lived through a short day, but I am afraid I must impose on your time. The—"

"—Stop." Ves raised his palm and brazenly interrupted the Rubarthan prince. "I'm too tired of this crap. Let me guess the reason why you insisted on speaking to me at this time. The Rubarthan Pact learned about the very public trials conducted by our clan. Now that our court has decided to exile two of our new expert pilot, you have developed an interest in one of them. Instead of approaching the exile in question directly, you decided it would only be polite if you gave me a courtesy call. Am I close to the truth?"

A few awkward seconds passed as the only peak ace pilot among the Rubarthan princes was taken aback by this unconventional response.

"You are indeed close to the truth." The prince stiffly responded. "It appears that I have been late in contacting you. Who managed to solicit you first?"

"The Mace of Retaliation has decided to employ Venerable Lanie Larkinson on behalf of the Red Association."

Understanding dawned on the Inferno Spear Prince eyes. "I see. That is an inspired choice. I approve. Are you aware of the reason why the Mace of Retaliation wishes to take your exile under his wing?"

"It is well-known that the Mace has remained stuck at the junction of peak ace pilot for over 5 decades." Ves cautiously responded. "He is continuing to grow older without having made any progress. I figure that he has lost too much momentum and no longer possesses the indomitable courage that can encourage him to step onto the road of no return. His progression... has come to an end. Since that is the case, he may as well turn Venerable Lanie into his heir and help her succeed where he has failed."

A difficult expression appeared on the Inferno Spear Prince's face. The road to no return was an exceedingly intimidating test for peak ace pilots. They were exceptionally sensitive to this heavy subject and never dared to take it lightly.

The reward of reaching the end of this road was massive. Which ace pilot did not want to ascend to a much greater height and become a god pilot?

However, a growing pile of dead and almost forgotten ace pilots proved without any doubt that only the greatest of them all had a chance of passing the most difficult test imaginable!

Every ace pilot that had reached the limit of their resonance strength needed to undergo careful preparations before they could even think about making the next step.

These preparations could easily take several decades!

However, there was a contradiction that peak ace pilots had to face. The more they prepared for the tough challenges ahead, the faster they began to lose their momentum.

Their willpower still remained as strong as always, but the person that drove it inevitably started to grow weaker and more measured.

This was always an adverse development as ace pilots who became plagued with doubts and worries no longer possessed the qualifications to become a god pilot.

This was why everyone who was able to step onto the road to no return had to spend their time carefully. No one else could make this decision aside from the god pilot candidates themselves.

In fact, one of the fastest ways to commit suicide was to taunt a peak ace pilot about how they were too afraid to step onto the road to no return!

As far as Ves was aware of, the Inferno Spear Prince should still have a chance, but it was dwindling with each passing day. The powerful Ruburthan had his own problems and considerations that stopped him from stepping onto the road of no return.

"That is his primary motivation, but it is not the extent of his plans." Prince Antonius spoke with a coy smile. "He has more reasons for taking Venerable Lanie Larkinson under his wing, but this is not my secret to share. His full intentions shall be revealed in time. Only when his latest protege has met all of his expectations and reached the limit of a halfgod that the truth shall be revealed."

Ves had a bad feeling about this. "Will Venerable Lanie be in danger?"

"Let me state that it is not without risk, professor. However, I can assure you that the Mace does not harbor any malice towards her. The lineage of the Fist of Defiance is among the most honest and honorable in the Red Ocean. It is regrettable that His Divinity harbors very little interest in the intricacies of keeping a civilization together."

Everyone knew that the Fist of Defiance was a blunt instrument. How this man managed to thrive in an organization as refined and sophisticated as the Red Association was a mystery.

Ves stared deeply at the physical projection of the Inferno Spear Prince, but the latter did not volunteer any further information.

How mysterious.

"Let's get back to the original topic, then." Ves proposed. "Since you don't sound upset that the Mace of Retaliation took the first step and headhunted Venerable Lanie Larkinson first, I take it that your target is not her. You should be eying Venerable Taon Melin instead."

The 2016th Prince made a dignified nod. "That is so. We would appreciate it if you consent to allowing us to take Venerable Melin in our service. We can promise you that he shall be treated according to his strength and potential. He may be rough around the edges, but expert pilots are not as fragile as ordinary mortals. They have an excellent capacity to rebound and regain their optimal fighting condition. We are born for warfare. A few good battles should pull him out of his slump and shift his focus to more immediate matters."

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "You know, if the Rubarthan Pact or just your principality really wants to recruit a single freelance expert pilot, it is already enough to send out one of your many envoys or diplomats. It is overkill to dispatch a high-and-mighty prince like yourself on such a trivial errand. The only reason why it makes sense for you to step forward and make this request is because the Destroyer of Worlds has developed an interest in Venerable Taon Melin."

The Inferno Spear Prince frankly admitted the truth. "It should not be too difficult for you to infer the truth based on the information you possess. You are correct. The Destroyer of Worlds is unable to approach you directly due to strategic obligations, but she has maintained a limited degree of awareness of current affairs in civilized space. Her Divinity has expressed an interest in training Venerable Melin into an excellent heavy artillery mech specialist. It is too premature to turn him

into her protege, but the Rubarthan Pact is more than willing to cooperate with her and assist with the training and development of your exile."

He knew it. Ves knew it. Since the Mace of Retaliation went out of his way to recruit Venerable Lanie, it was not that big of a leap for the Destroyer of Worlds to take Venerable Taon Melin under her wing.

What a lucky bastard!

Lanie only had a small chance to get in direct contact with the Fist of Defiance, while Taon would most certainly be able to develop a mentor-student relationship with the Destroyer of Worlds in time!

Ves almost felt sick at the thought that a Larkinson who had abandoned all of his principles and killed a precious third order living mech had won one of the greatest lottery imaginable!

Plenty of mech pilots would kill their own mothers and fathers in order to receive a single chance to obtain guidance from a genuine god pilot.

Now, Venerable Taon would most definitely be able to receive repeated guidance as long as he progressed further and displayed whatever qualities that caught Divine Irene Mox's attention!

Given how much more of a scumbag Taon had become after his breakthrough, Ves did not agree as easily as he did in the previous case.

Although the two deviants received equal punishments from the Larkinson Clan, Ves personality felt that Taon deserved harsher punishment. The former Ylvainan not only killed his own living mech, but also harbored open hostility towards Ylvaine and other design spirits.

He would definitely become a troublesome obstacle if he grew any stronger!

The fact that Taon no longer expressed any sort of kinship or affection towards the Larkinson Clan also bothered Ves a lot.

"Can you tell me why exactly the Destroyer of Worlds wants to pull Taon into her orbit?" Ves asked the physical projection of the Rubarthan prince. "You Rubarthans have a lot of mech pilots among you. The Pact should have no shortage of expert pilots, and there are definitely those who excel in artillery warfare among their kind."

"That is not the case, professor. First-class mech pilots break through at a lower rate than their lesser counterparts. Mech pilots with an artillery focus also find it more difficult to break through for obvious reasons. This is why our superstate is more receptive towards poaching second-class expert pilots who specialize in piloting heavy artillery mechs. They are harder to produce, but they also have a higher survival rate. It is not a waste of time for me to go out of my way to recruit Venerable Melin. I am more surprised that your clan is willing to let him go with such ease."

Ves twitched his lips. He began to harbor a bit more regrets after hearing that, but he ultimately did not change his stance after hearing how desirable Taon had become.

"Venerable Taon Melin has broken through under extremely adverse circumstances. His traumas have become too deeply rooted into his psyche and willpower. He is no longer a good fit for the Larkinson Clan. I don't know how it is for you Rubarthans, but we value harmony very highly. If his continued presence will just make a lot of other Larkinsons upset to the point of breaking their

sacred bond of trust with each other, then it is better to cut him off. If your Pact thinks that it can handle this ticking time bomb in human form, then you are welcome to take him out of our hands."

The Inferno Spear Prince grinned. "No matter what problems your expert pilot may have, we can handle them. Have faith in our ability to train him into a productive member of society. If our normal trainers are unable to keep him in check, then the Destroyer of Worlds will most certainly be able to suppress him in an instant. No expert pilot is able to defy the will of a god pilot."

Since that was the case, Ves had a strong feeling that Taon would not be having an easy time among the Rubarthans!

The Rubarthan prince patiently gave more assurances to Ves. The Rubarthan Pact intended to put Taon through an intensive regime that was similar to what Lanie would be going through. The purpose was similar. Taon needed to speed up his growth and become a powerhouse as soon as possible.

"Expert pilots and even ace pilots are not enough to shift the balance of this war or the next. We need god pilots, the more, the better. Since Venerable Melin not only favors the same mech type as Her Divinity, but also possesses a companion spirit that is similar to her own, he should quickly be able to replicate some of her feats. That will put him far ahead of other heavy artillery mech specialists."

Chapter 6088 Solarium

Unlike with Lanie, Ves saw no need to witness the Inferno Spear Prince's attempt to recruit Taon.

Ves did not enjoy the company of the former Ylvainan anymore. Their last meeting had already been awkward, and he did not think he would gain anything useful from hearing from him again.

Though Ves honestly did not think that Venerable Taon deserved to become a protege of the legendary Destroyer of Worlds, it was not his business to interfere with their business.

Venerable Taon would be able to work for the Rubarthans regardless of what Ves thought once he officially severed his ties with the Larkinson Clan. His opinion towards the Larkinsons would only deteriorate further if he was met with obstruction.

As for the Destroyer of Worlds, Ves had no power to influence her decisions. She may owe a lot of gratitude towards him, but she was a lot older and wiser than him. If she thought that it was worthwhile to take Taon under her wing, then that was her prerogative.

He really wanted to call her and hear exactly why she went out of her way to issue a recruitment call for Venerable Taon, but the looming alien offensive caused her to become unavailable again.

If he really wanted to know, he may be able to ask the Inferno Spear Prince to relay his request, but that was far too excessive.

Ves did not want to disrespect the Destroyer of Worlds. As friendly as they may be since they last talked to each other, he still became affected by her majesty and her overwhelming willpower.

In any case, the Larkinson Clan had no more exiles left to give away. He briefly made arrangements to ensure that any parties who wanted to solicit Lanie or Taon would learn that they had already been reserved.

The mechers and the Rubarthans had already come first!

There was no way that anyone else could override their demands. Not even the Terrans could do anything that the Rubarthans would never give in to the demands of their archrivals.

Besides, Venerable Taon Melin had much more to gain by learning from the Destroyer of Worlds. The Terran Alliance only had the Light of Sol, and he was much more specialized in speed and maneuver warfare as opposed to firepower and artillery warfare.

When Ves returned to his abode and reunited with his wife, he briefly shared the 'good' news.

His wife looked thoughtful as she processed what she heard.

"Well? What do you think, Gloriana?"

"I can see the political advantages of trading away exiles to them." She spoke. "Even if the mechers and the Rubarthans did not promise any direct remuneration, your acceptance of their proposals has deepened your relations with them. It will be easier for you to contact the Mace of Retaliation and the Destroyer of Worlds directly and ask for favors in the future. The faster Lanie and Taon grow, the greater their gratitude. The value of this transaction will constantly rise over time."

That was an astute observation. Ves hadn't seen it in such a utilitarian way, but he recognized its validity.

"It's a shame, though. If I really wanted to, I could have worked to keep them in the clan. I even thought about setting up an independent black ops unit or shell organization that will allow me to command them in secret. I could have used various means to ensure that Venerable Lanie and Venerable Taon will remain at my disposal, though no longer under the banner of the Larkinson Clan."

His wife shook her head as she prepared to go to bed. "That is likely to backfire sooner or later. Expert pilots are not stupid. They will hate the deception and they do not appreciate operating in a clandestine manner."

"I am not so sure about that. The two exiles are anything but normal, you know. They are much more ruthless than the typical honorable idiot."

"Regardless, there is no need for us to fuss too much over them." Gloriana insisted. "There is never an instance where we have enough expert pilots, but our resources and attention are limited. We already have plenty of high-ranking mech pilots who are much more honorable and reliable than the two aberrations. The benefit-to-cost ratio of investing in the two troublemakers is much lower than allocating the same resources to the likes of Venerable Jannzi or even Venerable Vincent. More breakthroughs occur every couple of years or so, and I expect the rate to increase as we expand the size of our armed forces."

He understood and agreed with her perspective. Venerable Lanie and Venerable Taon acquired so many negative labels that they were no longer worth the trouble of retaining.

Instead of wasting a lot of clan resources into trying to make them work somehow, it was better to foist them on the mechers and the Rubarthans.

The Mace of Retaliation and the Destroyer of Worlds had far more wealth, resources and expertise at their disposal. They should be more than capable of straightening out the two deviants. Their values were also a lot higher to the right parties.

"Hmm, I guess you're right. We don't have to be so stingy about high-ranking mech pilots anymore. We already have plenty of talents that are doing well. I expect a bunch of high-tier expert pilots to break through soon enough after receiving personalized guidance from Saint Tusa. If that is not enough to push them over the edge, then they will definitely break through shortly after receiving their new machines."

"Tell that to General Ark."

"I am sure he will break through in the near term." Ves confidently said as he slipped under the covers of his bed. "He only needs one more spark. The upcoming alien offensive should give him plenty of breakthrough opportunities. If he fails to trigger his second apotheosis under all of that stimulation, then I will begin to doubt whether he is worthy to pilot the Lionheart."

The Lionheart was a ridiculously strong quasi-first-class expert command mech. It might not be as cutting-edge as it used to be now that the Dark Zephyr Mark III overshadowed its existence, but that did not mean it was weak.

As a so-called second skin mech, Ark was able to embody it to a much more extensive degree than normal, giving him unparalleled control over his actions. It also helped him to control the power of his machine when it came under the effect of his signature Morale Empowerment ability.

Though Ves was a bit annoyed that General Ark insisted on playing army with the Davutans, it didn't matter too much as expert pilots were no longer as rare to the Larkinson Clan as before.

His wife had the right idea when she suggested that it was better to focus on quality as opposed to quantity. Trying to nurture the existing high-tier expert pilots into ace pilots should be a much greater priority to the Larkinsons.

Everyone had to play their part in this endeavor, including Ves himself.

The Amaranto Mark III Project and the Riot Mark III Project still had a long way to go before they reached completion. The unique demands imposed on both projects presented a lot of challenges that made it harder to achieve smooth progress.

At the very least, Gloriana found it difficult to make a lot of progress at the beginning.

"The Amaranto Mark III and the Riot Mark III both need to be made out of novel combinations of materials." Gloriana briefly explained to her husband as they both laid down in the same bed. "The workload for the Riot is not too burdensome. Your friend Jovy Armalon is making good on his promise by enabling us to gain access to the extensive resource database and reserves of the Red Association. I am sure we will be able to find enough interesting hyper materials that possess a high enough chaos factor that is also highly compatible with archetech."

"That is good to hear. What about the Amaranto? Are you having trouble finding enough light-attributed hypers?"

His wife nodded. "Somewhat. There are enough low to mid-grade hyper materials available that are aspected towards the light attribute, but the ones that are high-grade have become scarce. The demand for at least one of them has skyrocketed."

"What? Why?"

"What makes high-grade hyper materials superior from the other variants is not only their stronger capacity to interact with E energy, but their superior toughness and damage resistance. It is quite hard to find hypers that satisfy each of these requirements. However, one special variety of hyper material has emerged that scores particularly well in either of these areas. It has become so desirable that many first-raters are buying it up in droves. There is even a shortage of it in the Red Association, so even Jovy cannot get his hands on more than just a small test sample."

"Oh? What material are you referring to?" Ves curiously asked.

"Solarium." Gloriana answered in a reverent tone. "It is one of the few hyper materials that can truly serve as the principal material for the armor system of a first-class mech. It is a very rare metallic hyper material that is only found in limited quantities on hot planets that are in close orbits to their stars. Nobody has deduced the conditions required to producing Solarium under artificial conditions, so there is a scramble for this wonder material. Its market value has already surpassed phasewater and it is continuing to rise."

"It's that valuable?! What does it do that makes it so desired?"

"Solarium is already a tough and damage resistant material when it is immersed in darkness. When it is illuminated by a source of electromagnetic radiation of the visible light and infrared wavelengths, it undergoes a temporary transformation that somehow makes it drastically more resilient. The tests conducted by the RA have discovered that Solarium can resist up to 300 percent more damage when illuminated by the light of a star at close range!"

"What?!"

Ves almost jumped out of his bed when he heard that! A 300 percent amplification in defensive power was a humongous deal!

That sort of defensive amplification was already enough for Ves to think about integrating it in the next iteration of the Bastion!

"What... what is the catch?" Ves shakily asked.

"I have already mentioned a few of them. It is scarce. It is expensive. It is also not fully understood. There are many material scientists that are scrambling to understand why it can become so much more powerful when it is exposed to a strong light or heat source. It may yet possess other hidden properties that red humanity has yet to discover. Even so, the surface properties of Solarium are already outrageous enough that I have to add it to the Amaranto!"

"How much?"

"30 percent of the total volume of the Amaranto should comprise of Solarium. I can make do with less, but that will severely reduce its effectiveness on our expert rifleman mech."

"That is too much! You are talking about acquiring tons of a very desirable hyper material that is already more valuable than phasewater! If we can find a purchasing channel, we will have to exceed the already generous design budget for the Amaranto Mark III Project and go deep into debt!"

"It is worth it!" Gloriana claimed.

"I don't think so." Ves firmly shook his head. "From what I have heard from you, Solarium is a material that is more suitable for defensive mechs. If they get struck with a lot of energy attacks,

they will only become more resistant towards damage. The Amaranto was never supposed to be a defensive powerhouse. If Solarium doesn't have an exceptionally high sensitivity towards light-attributed E energy, then it is not a good fit for Venerable Stark's mech. We can buy a limited amount of Solarium to form the outermost armor layer, but it is better to look for a hyper material that is much more sensitive to light energy to build the rest of the mech frame."

Chapter 6089 The Sendoff

Solarium!

The light-attributed hyper material had become one of the latest fads in the first-class mech community.

Although it was still difficult to obtain in greater quantities, a lot of mech designers were eager to get their hands on enough to build entire mechs of. The magical property of amplifying its defensive properties by up to 300 percent when irradiated by a strong light or heat source was so dazzling that there was even talk about integrating Solarium into first-class ace mechs!

Though Gloriana had instantly fallen in love with this hyper material, Ves became aghast when he thought about how much the clan would have to pay to acquire tons of Solarium.

"I am not going to purchase this overpriced crap for you." Ves definitively stated.

Naturally, his wife did not give up so easily.

"I refuse to accept your decision! Do you know what you are missing out on?! Other hypers are far too fragile compared to Solarium. With this amazing hyper material, we can turn the Amaranto into an invincible counter against any enemy that is reliant on energy weapons. This will grant our only expert marksman mech a crushing advantage in long-ranged combat. No matter whether they are hostile mechs or warships, so long as they are reliant on laser weapons, they have already lost the battle before it has begun!"

Ves furrowed his brows as he tried to imagine this scenario. He found that Gloriana might actually have a good point.

"Think about it." She urged. "At extreme ranges in space combat, kinetic weapons are ineffective due to the limitations of their muzzle velocities. Laser weapons are the most effective since their beams travel at the speed of light. According to our design proposal, the Amaranto Mark III will also excel at sniping at extreme range. If we can make the living mech practically impervious to returning fire at the same range, Venerable Stark will absolutely dominate any opponent at such distances!"

According to her description, if the Amaranto Mark III truly integrated a lot of Solarium, then the expert marksman mech would be able to outfight one or even multiple warships at extreme ranges.

After all, Venerable Stark and her battle partner would easily be able to launch powerful but also uncannily accurate attacks more than a light-second away, while their adversaries had very little chance of dealing effective damage in return!

As long as the enemy was not able to get closer or further away from the Amaranto, then it was theoretically possible for the expert mech to terrorize an entire alien fleet by herself!

However, Ves did not get swayed by this prospect. He still remained unreceptive to Gloriana's pleas.

"As attractive as this sounds, it is not too compelling for me. The Amaranto's defensive advantage is conditional. She will still remain vulnerable when attacked by enemies at close range. Solarium also doesn't fit the emphasis on extreme firepower that is supposed to characterize this living mech. Adding extra defenses is a luxury, not a necessity. I am not opposed to strengthening her hard defenses if the opportunity costs are low, but that is not the case here. The price is too high for a hyper material that doesn't outperform other first-class hypers in E energy sensitivity."

His wife made an ugly expression.

"Then what do you want instead?"

"The Amaranto doesn't need to be reinvented!" Ves shouted back! "She just needs to double down on extreme firepower. Our clan will never deploy the expert marksman mech by her lonesome. She will always be accompanied by the Bastion or other defensive assets. There is no need for us to convert her into a machine that can undertake independent operations."

"Forget about obsessing too much on enhancing the defenses of the Amaranto Mark III. You are the one that originally came up with the idea of going all-out on using hyper materials to enhance the offensive power of this machine. Instead of getting distracted by the latest toys that do not align with the Amaranto's original concept, let's just stick to finding first-class hyper materials that can boost the firepower of Instrument of Vengeance and the Instrument of Doom. I do not believe that there are no hypers available that outperform Solarium in this aspect."

"If you reject the option of integrating Solarium into the Amaranto, then you are neglecting an opportunity to reinvent one of our best creations!"

"The Amaranto doesn't need to be reinvented!" Ves shouted back! "She just needs to double down on extreme firepower. Our clan will never deploy the expert marksman mech by her lonesome. She will always be accompanied by the Bastion or other defensive assets. There is no need for us to convert her into a machine that can undertake independent operations."

"But—Ack!"

Ves threw a pillow in her face.

"Go to sleep, Gloriana. I am too tired of this crap. I won't deny the value of Solarium, but I think you have become too blinded by its amazing properties to consider whether it is a good fit for the Amaranto Mark III. You need to rest and revisit this topic when you have sobered up. I think that once you perform a proper cost-benefit analysis, you will be able to conclude that there are better alternatives available."

Seeing that Ves refused to budge on this matter, his wife resentfully grumbled her breath while trying to fall asleep.

The next morning, Gloriana did not revisit the topic immediately. Perhaps Solarium was still on her mind, but she knew she would not be able to convince Ves to go out of his way to procure this strategically valuable hyper material.

Ves hoped that she would regain enough sanity to understand that it was not wise to get caught up in all of the hype surrounding the discovery of fantastic new materials.

He did not underestimate the power of Solarium, but it was clearly a hyper material that was more suitable for mechs that confronted their enemies more directly.

For example, Ves believed that Solarium was an excellent fit for the Lionheart. General Ark's expert mech relied a lot on the light of the Illustrious One in order to become a more radiant presence on the battlefield. The Lionheart should therefore be able to achieve much greater synergies with this new light-aspected hyper material.

When Uncle Ark finally managed to advance to ace pilot, then Ves might think about exchanging valuable resources or favors in exchange for enough Solarium to turbocharge the Lionheart's defenses.

At that time, Ves would be able to justify the expense and trouble of procuring this highly desirable material. The Lionheart in its ace mech incarnation possessed so much frontal combat power in large battles that General Ark may be able to slaughter lesser phase lords all by himself!

The Larkinson Clan needed such a powerhouse. No matter whether Ark decided to keep Patriarch Reginald Cross company over at the 77th Warborn Mech Division, he should still be able to earn a huge amount of war merits and boost his reputation to a much greater height.

That would ultimately benefit the clan in a roundabout way.

He mentally shook his head. There was no need for him to think about procuring Solarium right away. He should at least wait until Ark broke through first.

"Venerable Lanie and Venerable Taon will be departing very soon." Ves mentioned. "Since the two misfits are being recruited by the mechers and the Rubarthans, we won't hold a farewell party for them, as we don't want to draw too much attention to their destinations. Do you want to come and say goodbye to them, Gloriana?"

"Forget it." His wife rejected the offer. "I do not have much of a relationship with the two. I have nothing to say to them, and the reverse should be true as well. You are much closer to them both. You can go without me, Ves."

"Suit yourself."

An hour later, his physical projection appeared inside the hangar bay of the Spirit of Bentheim.

Two different unmarked shuttles had already arrived and docked inside. Their outward appearances did not show anything special, but Ves knew that they had been dispatched by two different first-class starships belonging to mechers and the Rubarthans.

As soon as Lanie and Taon stepped inside their respective shuttles, they would immediately start their new journeys in life.

At this time, a small group of Larkinsons had already arrived. Each of them consisted of the friends and family that Lanie was most familiar with. There was a high proportion of trueblood Larkinsons among them, showing that there were still a lot of clansmen that valued blood ties.

Different from before, Lanie regained a bit more of her old cheer. Perhaps her brighter future had given her enough reasons to become optimistic again. Her thorny willpower did not repel the presence of the people she loved and trusted for much of her life.

Though not all of the visiting Larkinsons were able to attend this sendoff in person, each of them were sincere about how sad they were to see Lanie depart.

"We will miss you, Lanie." Commander Melkor Larkinson spoke without any airs. "Your recent breakthrough has come at a good time, I suppose. Plenty of groups will scramble to hire a rising talent like you. Maybe we will eventually be able to learn about your exploits in the news one day."

"Maaow."

"That day may come sooner than you think." Venerable Lanie coyly smirked while holding Syrcy in her arms.

Venerable Jannzi on the other hand stared at the female exile with a scrutinizing expression.

"You seem much more relaxed than before. Have you truly made peace with your separation from our clan?"

"There is more to life for a Larkinson than the clan. I have learned to look on the bright side of this change. I will miss the Larkinson Clan, but I cannot help but look forward to traveling the new frontier and finding my fortune elsewhere. If you think about it, didn't our patriarch manage to rise up only after he got kicked out of the Larkinson Family. Maybe I can go on my own legendary journey that will allow me to surpass him one day."

"Well, you are not lacking in confidence. That is a good sign." Jannzi remarked.

When the physical projection of Ves came close enough, everyone ended their conversations and turned to face their patriarch.

"Sir."

"Good morning, sir."

As Ves examined the two expert pilots, he saw that Venerable Taon looked a lot lonelier in comparison.

Not a single Larkinson went out of his way to visit him and send him off! Even if the news of this sendoff had not been published on a larger scale, it was still telling that not a single Ylvainan saw fit to honor Taon with a solemn farewell.

Ves raised the large tome in his hands.

"Larkinsons. I am sure you recognize this. The Larkinson Mandate not only records the original rules and structure of our clan, but also contains the individual pages of its founding or most prominent members. There are two pages that correspond to Venerable Lanie Larkinson and Venerable Taon Melin."

He flipped open the book and searched for both pages. He had already memorized their positions before, so it did not take much time to find the first one that bore Lanie's name.

"Nyaaaaa."

The Golden Cat emerged from the Larkinson Mandate and turned around to witness what Ves was about to do. She already knew what would happen next.

Ves stared at Lanie's page for a moment before he grabbed it with a hand and ripped it out of the book!

Many of the attending Larkinsons grew shocked at this drastic gesture!

"Venerable Lanie Larkinson, from today onwards, you are cast out of the Larkinson Clan!"

He utilized a small spiritual spell to generate a flame that was powerful enough to ignite the page.

Soon, it turned into ash.

Ves repeated the ritual for Venerable Taon as well.

In contrast to Lanie who became emotional at the removal of her page from the Larkinson Mandate, Taon hardly reacted at all. It was as if he had already burned his page in his mind.

"You are free now. Both of you are exiled from the Larkinson Clan. You are no longer welcome among the members of our clan. You will no longer be allowed entry to any of our premises. We will not offer you any of the services that we extend to every clansman, and we will not go out of our way to rescue you if you are in distress. Wherever life may take you, it is no longer possible for us to accompany you anymore."

Lanie grew a little more morose after hearing that. Though she was about to become an elite mecher, the Red Association was nowhere near as warm and cozy as the Larkinson Clan.

Chapter 6090 Tree Heart

Ves remained in a subdued mood hours after the sendoff.

The Larkinson Clan only lost two members, but the impact was greater than that.

Both Lanie and Taon had become prominent in the clan in different ways.

The former had proven herself to be a courageous trueblood Larkinson mech pilot who appeared to herald a new wave of heroes among the Larkinsons.

The latter acted as the representative and standard bearer of the Ylvainan contingent within the clan.

Both of them used to be earnest and loyal Larkinsons who made many contributions to the clan. A lot of people used to look up to them. They enjoyed such renown that their sudden downfall affected the Larkinsons in profound ways.

Perhaps the impact on the clan would be less if Lanie and Taon died on the battlefield.

At least they would have died with honor rather than live on in disgrace.

"Well, they are not exactly doing worse at this time." Ves reminded himself.

Both Lanie and Taon arguably managed to step up. The Red Association and the Rubarthan Pact were massive employers that every space peasant dreamed of joining. The two exiles arguably managed to secure massive upgrades to their lives and careers!

Though Ves still felt conflicted about that, he did his best to set this matter aside and resume his old routine.

He needed to allocate his time on several difficult design projects. He also had to start his research on developing a Woodsap mech.

Considering that the Red Association wanted Venerable Lanie Larkinson to get back in action in a timely manner, Ves decided not to stall his research on a potential improvement of the Carmine System.

"Let's check out the Elegant Rage."

Now that Ves was no longer plagued by immediate distractions, he should have all the time he needed to examine and tinker with Venerable Lanie's mech.

The mutated melee mech had already been shipped to New Constantinople VIII. During the journey, the living mech remained obedient and still, though she also kept her systems running at a higher activity level than what was typical of dormant machines.

As Ves moved further underground and approached the workshop where the mech had been deposited, he began to sense the Elegant Rage's presence from afar.

"Interesting."

He could already feel the enhanced vitality and life of the Elegant Rage from afar. It reminded him of the Everchanger to an extent.

There were still a lot of differences between the two mechs. Aside from the obvious, the Elegant Rage possessed a very different character from Joshua's expert mech.

Though the mutated mech did not exude any active hostility at the moment, her rage was still simmering beneath the surface. The machine had clearly incurred just as much trauma as her battle partner.

"It's just as I thought. The word 'elegant' does not fit the current mech anymore."

When Ves entered the workshop that held the mech in question, he came face to face with a mech that embodied the more primal rage of nature and a woman betrayed.

"So this is what it is like for a living mech to get contaminated."

Ves could never design and produce a mech that could match the current state of the Elegant Rage. A deviant product like this could only arise from extreme growth conditions!

It was powerful, as expected of a mech that absorbed a lot of power from Lanie's breakthrough.

"Mrow."

Blinky emerged out of Ves' head and approached the Elegant Rage. The companion spirit was able to perceive a lot more details about the mutated mech's spiritual foundation.

It was powerful, as expected of a mech that absorbed a lot of power from Lanie's breakthrough.

However, what truly caught Ves and Blinky's attention was how the Elegant Rage had clearly managed to assimilate traces of other known sources!

There were strains of energy that reminded him of Venerable Joshua and the Everchanger.

The Heartsword had clearly rubbed off on the Elegant Rage. The mutated mech actively embraced as much energy from Joshua and the Everchanger as she could in order to integrate random bits of discarded wood into her mech frame.

Ves did not know how, but the Elegant Rage managed to transform all of the absorbed wooden matter into functional organic components that seamlessly operated alongside non-organic components.

Although the current internal layout of Venerable Lanie's mech looked like a disorganized mess due to the lack of central direction, somehow it all worked out. Ves had seen from the battle footage that the mutations did not cause the Elegant Rage to lose much of her flexibility and other strengths!

This was an amazing outcome considering that the mech reached her current state through a torturous and haphazard process.

"Is the Elegant Rage truly a product of Lanie's forced resonance?"

Ves couldn't help but doubt this assumption. Lanie knew nothing about mech design. How could her willpower reshape her then-broken machine into a functional machine consisting of both conventional and organic components?

He refused to believe that the current iteration of the Elegant Rage was a product of wishful thinking backed up by a lot of willpower!

If this was truly the case, then ace pilots and god pilots could put a lot of mech designers out of business!

This was an absurd notion. Ves would rather favor the idea that a mysterious entity spontaneously reformed Lanie's mech into a functional machine by taking advantage of the resources in the immediate environment.

The more he looked at the Elegant Rage, the more he had the feeling that it was the product of intelligent design.

The only problem was that Ves was unable to define the style or logic behind all of the design choices that he could identify.

As Ves continued to ponder about this mystery, another mech designer entered the underground workshop.

"Sir."

"Ah. It is good that you have come. Have you completed your cursory examinations of the so-called wooden mech as well as the fragments of the purple mech?"

"I completed my inspection of the two samples that Task Force Solus has shipped over yesterday." Alexa Streon replied before using her cranial implant to transmit a bunch of data files to Ves. "Here are my reports along with the raw scans. The products are certainly... intriguing, although I would not call them mechs at all. The Emperor Tree has imitated the form of our machines, but it has failed to understand their underlying essence."

"We can call them wooden constructs I suppose. It's not important. What can you tell me about their material composition?"

"The materials that comprise the... wooden constructs... are rather interesting, sir. The Emperor Tree does not have access to large deposits of high-quality exotics, but it is able to make good use of the materials it has available. My examinations have even discovered many traces of organic tissues belonging to many different exobeasts."

"Did the Emperor Tree produce its wooden constructs out of the organic matter of exobeasts?"

"That is a possible theory, but I favor another one. My personal theory is that the Emperor Tree produces the prototype of a wooden construct by shedding it from its main body. Once the initial form of the wooden construct has emerged, it is fed with a mixture of exobeast matter. So long as there is enough sustenance available, the wooden constructs can quickly absorb and digest both energy and organic matter. That will rapidly fuel their growth and prepare them for serious combat."

That sounded interesting!

Ves immediately went through the implications of what he just heard. "Does that mean that the Emperor Tree is able to raise an entire army of wooden constructs so long as it is able to lure over enough exobeasts?"

"That is most likely the case."

"Damn. You better pass on your findings to Ketis and the rest of Task Force Solus. Who knows whether the Emperor Tree is throwing tens of thousands of exobeast bodies into its growing army of false machines."

"I have already taken the liberty of doing so, sir. Task Force Solus should not be caught off-guard by this possible ploy."

The Larkinsons over there should have the situation well in hand if that was the case.

The two mech designers continued to talk about the properties of the wooden mechs. The Emperor Tree may be ignorant about human science, but it managed to develop its own form of wood-based biotechnology that presented a number of interesting possibilities.

"So how are these wooden constructs able to run on tree sap?" Ves questioned.

"According to the examinations and research conducted by the Larkinson Biotech Institute, the sap is a multifunctional organic liquid substance that is responsible for both energy and data transfer. It also promotes rapid regeneration and healing when they are exposed to the proper stimuli. What is interesting is that it contains traces of Solus Gas. In fact, this substance is also found all across the wooden construct. It is not entirely clear how the assimilation of Solus Gas affects the operation of the organic products."

"I am sure we will be able to find out in time. Let's talk about the sap. Is it toxic to humans?"

"That goes without saying." Alexa responded. "The biotechs have found out that the sap keeping the wooden constructs running should be a weakened and more diluted variant of the sap that circulates inside the Emperor Tree itself. Even then, there are heavy concentrations of toxic metals and other substances that should never be injected in a human body."

That caused Ves to frown. "We will need to develop a non-toxic version of the sap, though even then I am not sure whether I can use the resulting product as a substitute for blood for my next variation of Carmine mechs. People are not made of trees."

"Is it truly necessary for you to make use of tree sap for this project of yours?" Alexa skeptically asked. "You can do the reverse instead. You can keep using human blood, but transform the wooden components into a variation that is compatible with our life fluids."

That actually sounded like a viable suggestion.

Ves still shook his head.

"That would defeat the purpose. I need to develop a Carmine mech that possesses a strong affinity with the wood element. It should be able to regenerate quickly from any damage. This tree sap plays a vital component in it all. I do not think it is right to get rid of it and thereby move away from my intention of designing a mech that is partially made out of wood."

If Ves insisted on sticking to this course, then he would have to figure out a way for human mech pilots to circulate tree sap through their circulatory systems without causing them to collapse from getting poisoned!

He decided to think about that problem later.

"What is responsible for circulating the tree sap in those wooden constructs?"

"The LBI has managed to uncover a central organ that is somewhat reminiscent of the power reactor of one of our mechs." Alexa smiled and explained. "This 'tree heart' is a key organ to the wooden constructs. It is not only responsible for circulating tree sap, but it also functions as an intelligent control system. It can function as the pilot of the construct if the Emperor Tree has withdrawn its attention. The tree heart also functions as a source of energy. So long as it is fed with exobeast flesh, the tree heart can power many processes. It can produce more sap. It can upgrade existing organic parts so long as it absorbed a large amount of exobeast remains."

The more Ves learned about the tree heart, the more he understood that it would likely play a central role in his future Woodsap mechs!

"We will need more samples if that is the case." Ves judged. "What I find curious is that the Elegant Rage possesses two 'reactors'. There is the conventional power reactor, which has since received random improvements and modifications. There is also the tree heart, which solely appears to be responsible for feeding and regulating the organic parts embedded into the Elegant Rage. Lanie's mech is essentially powered by two separate and parallel power reactors." That was highly unusual for mechs!