

## Mech 3551

### *Chapter 3551: Unexpected Discovery*

After concluding his long and hearty discussion with Ves, Professor Benedict finally returned to the Cross Clan's fleet. His shuttle headed straight back to the Cyclical Engine, the Cross Clan's equivalent of the Spirit of Bentheim.

Ves reflected on what he heard and what he learned from the Senior Mech Designer.

"I should take everything he said with a grain of salt."

There was no way a man as devious as Professor Benedict would remain straight. Each of his words had a purpose. If he needed to lie or fudge the truth in order to gain more sympathy, he would do it without any hesitation!

Ves knew this quite well because he would do the same if he was in the other man's position!

The only problem was that Ves couldn't quite figure out Professor Benedict's angle. Sure, the older mech designer deeply wanted to become a Master, but how did that tie into the man's words and actions?

"Opportunities. It's about opportunities."

Professor Benedict claimed that he would be able to operate with much greater ease if human society went through great changes.

Ves could understand this argument from an abstract perspective, but he couldn't quite figure out if the professor had anything specific in mind.

"Anything that can disrupt the current order will produce a lot of ripple effects. Some of them can be quite disastrous to people."

He really hoped that Professor Benedict did not get embroiled in anything controversial.

This time, the man wasn't alone anymore. He was the second leader of the Cross Clan and an important component of the Golden Skull Alliance. Anything that affected him personally might also affect his allies in turn!

By now, Ves understood that there were lots of undercurrents in the Red Ocean. As the new focal point of human civilization, a lot of powerful interests had descended on the dwarf galaxy.

Many of them sought power through conquering territory. Others wanted to harvest as much phasewater as possible in order to build the amazing devices. The more

courageous among them wanted to explore everything that aliens had to offer before they became extinct.

Although these goals sounded simple, it was quite frightening what major powers could accomplish if they did well.

How much more powerful would the Terrans become if they conquered a third of the Red Ocean?

What would the New Rubarth Empire do if it managed to accumulate millions of liters of phasewater?

What kind of crazy contraptions would a rogue research institution develop after getting its hands on exotic alien technology?

"Everything will change!"

Ves understood the Big Two's overall purpose for engaging in the risky act of invading a dwarf galaxy that was already occupied by different alien races.

"It's a catalyst for change. It's a huge impetus that can push human civilization out of its rut and give us a reason to look outwards again."

He grew curious and used his comm to access the galactic net. He quickly found a database and searched for certain statistics.

It turned out that the amount of internal human conflicts that had erupted after the opening of the Red Ocean had already dropped by 30 percent!

Significantly less wars had erupted after humans found a better opportunity to realize their ambitions!

While it was still uncertain whether human states would keep their restraint after the hype surrounding the Red Ocean had calmed down, what had happened now was already a positive development to many people!

Ves could even see what the Big Two might wish to do next after the conquest of the Red Ocean had reached completion.

"A new frontier must open in order to keep humanity's attention outwards. If there is nothing more to conquer, then everyone will quickly turn their weapons back against each other!"

That was also one of the many lessons that the human race had learned during the Age of Conquest. When the explosive spree of conquests became more difficult to sustain,

people began to turn their weapons towards their closer human neighbors rather than their increasingly distant alien prey.

If the Big Two was truly determined to avoid the mistakes of the past, then Ves could easily imagine the MTA and CFA dangling new goals in front of every human's face.

"It's all building up to something, but what?"

Ves could make lots of guesses, but without any additional data, he could not come up with any solid conclusions.

For now, he just had to worry about whether he and his clan would be able to benefit from the rising tide. Professor Benedict maintained the right attitude to the trends sweeping through human civilization. No matter what happened in the future, there was always a chance to take advantage of the changes!

Time passed by as Ves threw himself back into his work. He not only spent time on designing his mechs, but also handled other miscellaneous matters.

The Larkinson Clan came closer to enacting its next spate of reforms to better adapt to their independent way of life. The introduction of its own currency was the biggest initiative and would definitely have a great impact on the lives of the clansmen.

As Ves thought over the specifications for the upcoming currency, the expeditionary fleet transitioned back into realspace as normal.

Though his body vaguely felt as if it was being squeezed through an invisible tube, he had felt this sensation so many times that he did not even interrupt his deliberations.

That was until he received an alert message.

"General Verle!" Ves greeted as he accepted the emergency hail. "What's the matter? Did we bump into hostile fleets or anything?"

"We are not under threat, sir. Soon after entering this star system, we have detected an unknown artificial presence floating in the inner system. After turning our best long-ranged scanners in this direction, our analysts have tentatively concluded that the unknown object may be a starship, an alien starship!"

"What?!"

Ves immediately straightened his back as all kinds of thoughts flowed through his mind.

"How big is the vessel? Is the alien ship active? Which alien race built her? Is she alone?"

General Verle took in all of the questions without any changes to his expression. The calm he exuded already signaled that he didn't think the expeditionary fleet had bumped into an acute threat.

"Barely a minute has passed since we have made our initial observations, so we are still gathering more data. From what we have inferred so far, the unknown vessel is not human. Her design and material composition is too different from what we are accustomed to seeing in human-built starships. In fact, the alien starship is biological in nature!"

That immediately reminded Ves of the Life Research Association and its obsession for replacing conventional technology with biotechnology.

"Are you sure about this conclusion?" He questioned. "What if you're looking at a human bioship?"

"We are fairly certain that the ship is not human, sir. I'll pass on the reports to you later so you can understand why we have made this determination. In any case, the biovessel is at least 5 kilometers long and is also thick and vaguely oval in shape. Despite her immense size, her sensor signature is fairly weak. We haven't detected any active energy sources inside her biological hull. Instead, we have detected many irregularities that suggest major damage. We believe that she is a derelict."

Ves calmed down a bit after he heard that. "She's dead?"

The general shook his head. "We cannot be certain of that, especially when we are looking at unfamiliar alien technology. For now, we can tentatively assume that she has lost operation, but we should never put down our guard. Our fleet will remain on yellow alert and our active mech pilots will all be ready to sortie with their machines should the situation deteriorate."

This caused Ves to think about how suspicious it was to stumble upon a random derelict alien capital ship.

Although the expeditionary fleet had already traveled far away from Vulit, its current location was still quite close to humanity's sphere of influence. There were lots of colonies being developed in the star systems around this location. None of them were particularly big or prosperous at the moment, but the surrounding region was definitely filled with local human powers!

How could a single alien vessel appear so deep inside human-claimed territory?

Although the apparent ruined state of the alien starship suggested that she had fought and lost against an unknown enemy, why did no one come and scavenge the wreck?

A biocapital ship that was at least 5 kilometers should be a major creation of any alien race! There were bound to be a lot of interesting alien technology and exotic materials locked within her broken hull.

With all of the resource scarcity that many organizations were suffering from, a human fleet would have never left such a bounty behind without stripping the entire vessel for everything that held value!

Either the alien starship got defeated by a human fleet that wasn't interested in the salvage, or maybe another alien force did the deed.

Whatever the case, Ves felt that General Verle was right to act so cautiously.

"We need to gather more data. The more we know, the better we can react to this situation. Try to detect other ships and dangers in this star system. I want to know whether there is an ambush force lurking in an asteroid belt or if another alien bioship is hiding underneath the cloud cover of a gas giant."

"Our men are already looking into those possibilities, sir. So far, we have detected no additional threats in the star system, but I will keep you posted on any new developments. The Blinding Banshee has already activated her full array of sensors to detect any stealthed ships or mines. The chance that this scenario might be a trap is not small. I have read reports of such schemes many times in the Red Ocean Digest."

The Red Ocean Digest was the most popular and authoritative news portal in the new frontier. Although it was a relatively bland and neutral publication, it had developed a reputation for trustworthy and reliable reporting. Its staff and journalists always verified their own news.

Reports about all of the battles that had taken place in the dwarf galaxy were always popular reading material. Those who kept track of them would soon develop a good understanding of how battles were being fought in the Red Ocean and which zones had turned into hotspots.

Even Ves had read about the reports of ignorant pioneers making valuable discoveries only to find out that it was just a means to lure them into well-prepared ambushes!

Ves thought over the situation. The fact that the alien derelict vessel happened to be floating in the inner system was a particularly troubling variable.

If Ves wanted to explore the strange new wreck, he would have to order the expeditionary fleet to go inwards, thereby denying the Golden Skull Alliance an easy escape out of the star system.

He could not make up his mind at this time.

"Please observe and analyze the situation as best you can." He instructed. For now, our FTL drives are still cycling, so it's not as if most of our ships can jump away in an instant. We have plenty of time to investigate the shipwreck and the rest of the star system to determine whether there is anything wrong."

General Verle frowned a bit. "Do you wish to explore the alien wreck?"

Ves responded with a chuckle. "Of course! Why not? As long as it's safe enough, I would love to explore and salvage this big vessel. Discoveries like these are exactly why I wanted to travel to the Red Ocean! It's much harder to stumble upon such an alien creation in the old galaxy. I'm not certain whether it will be of any use, but make sure to prepare boarding teams... I want our men to take a look inside if possible."

#### *Chapter 3552: Titania*

The presence of a large derelict alien capital ship in what should have been a quiet stopover point completely took the Golden Skull Alliance by surprise!

The distant alien bioship was massive in human terms. She was roughly 5 kilometers long and around 3 kilometers thick at her widest section.

Her overall shape was comparable to a rather slender beehive with flat ends. Her surface was either scarred with heavy battle damage or featured numerous strange cavities whose purpose remained unclear.

The bioship looked as if she had been drifting for at least a week based on the small trail of biotissue leaking from her hull. The vessel was already dead, but she continued to bleed as her orbit kept spiraling around the local yellow dwarf as if she was a satellite.

More details kept pouring in as the alien starship received more and more scrutiny. Although most forms of observation remained passive as it took hours for active scanning signals to travel back and forth across such immense distances, the analysts still figured out plenty of new information.

The mass of the alien derelict, the probable material composition of her enormous exterior and the likely weapons that had been used to disable her all became known as the minutes passed.

A few clever minds also came up with a probable reason why the alien derelict appeared in this star system out of the blue.

Ves invited General Verle and the leaders of the other members of the Golden Skull Alliance in order to discuss this major development.

Several familiar people appeared within the virtual meeting room in turn. Marshal Ariadne Wodin, Patriarch Reginald Cross and Professor Benedict Cortez all took their seats as usual.

A new figure had appeared, though. In place of Venerable Brutus, the Glory Seekers dispatched an unfamiliar woman in his place.

The woman directed an appreciative look at Ves. "Patriarch Ves Larkinson! I've been waiting to meet you, but you haven't visited the Glory Seekers once since you entered the Red Ocean."

"Uh, sorry?"

"It is of no consequence. Oh, let me introduce myself. I am Galina Rovon-Hartul, a recent member of the Glory Seekers! Currently, I am in charge of all of our mechs. This has allowed me to study one of your works for an extensive amount of time. Despite pouring hundreds of hours into examining your Valkyrie mechs, I still don't understand how they perform the way they do. You are a genius for designing such an amazing line of mechs!"

Ves had heard of Galina Rovon-Hartul. She was a former citizen of the Empire of the Lost that had been hanging around the Opalis System in the hopes of catching a ride to the Red Ocean.

Due to the fact the Golden Skull Alliance was still short a couple of million MTA merits, the Glory Seekers eventually decided to take in Miss Rovon-Hartul because she could conveniently make up for this shortfall!

Although Ves always wanted to examine this sudden arrival, all of the priorities that came after entering the Red Ocean had taken up all of his time. He left all matters of diplomacy to Minister Shederin Purnesse and his staff, who had doubtlessly met with the prominent new member of the Glory Seekers.

However, this was a rather inadequate response towards Miss Rovon-Hartul. She was not only a young Journeyman, but also capable of earning at least several million MTA merits by herself. That immediately marked her out as an excellent mech designer with better potential than most of her peers.

Ves nodded towards the woman. "I'd love to chat with you further, but we have more important matters to talk about today. Please take a seat so that we can begin our discussion."

Once the new Glory Seeker sat at the table, Ves quickly briefed the others on what the Larkinson Clan had discovered.

Of course, the Glory Seekers and the Crossers weren't blind. They must have certainly employed their own sensor suites to scan the alien shipwreck and the surrounding environment for any useful details.

The problem was that neither of them possessed powerful sensor systems. Their starships were predominantly fleet carriers that were mostly geared towards carrying and supporting mechs in battle. How could they accommodate enough capacity for powerful detection and scanning modules?

The Larkinson Clan was better off in that regard. Although many of its vessels weren't directly useful in battle, the Blinding Banshee was an exception.

Her powerful sensor arrays were mainly geared towards detecting human forces and stealth units, but they could also be utilized to investigate unknown and unfamiliar phenomena as long as they weren't too weird.

Since the alien vessel happened to be a bioship, the Dragon's Den also became useful at this time. Her sensor systems were much more geared to detect biological phenomena, and the Lifer research teams that had taken up residence inside were passionately trying to decipher as much of the data as possible.

It was because of those excellent biotech experts that General Verle was able to convey so much interesting information to everyone.

"The probability that the derelict biocapital ship codenamed the 'Titania' is of alien origin has reached 97 percent. All of our specialists in biotechnology state that there are simply too few signs of human elements in the distant vessel."

"That doesn't necessarily preclude human intervention." Professor Benedict remarked. "The ship may be alien, but humans might have attacked her in order to use it as bait for unwitting forces such as us. Are you certain that the battle damage she suffered is not caused by humans?"

General Verle nodded, but only lightly. "We can only tentatively make this conclusion. As you know, many different weapons operate according to the same set of principles. An alien laser weapon doesn't differ too much from a human laser weapon. However, we can state that the damage inflicted on the Titania is definitely caused by warship-grade weaponry. The battle marks are simply too big to be caused by mech-grade armaments. Since we are already familiar with the typical weapons an MTA or CFA warship employs, we can develop a rough determination whether the alien derelict was attacked by a human warship. Currently, our conclusion has remained the same."

A short moment of silence ensued as everyone chewed on the information.



"What can you tell us about the attacker?" Patriarch Reginald asked as he grew interested about the power brought to bear against this shipwreck. "Have you managed to identify whoever is responsible for leaving this broken alien capital ship behind?"

"We are still investigating this matter. While there is a chance that one of the 13 major races of the Red Ocean such as the Nunsers or Puelmers are responsible, we do not think that is the case. Many of the ships of these races have long been pushed out of this zone. Considering the magnitude of the firepower brought to bear against the Titania, the chance is small that such a powerful alien warship would have been able to roam around undetected this deep in human-occupied territory!"

Ves nodded in agreement. Though there were stories about isolated alien ships belonging to one of those prominent races showing up in these parts, they were mostly sub-capital ships that were not that powerful.

"Just look at those big holes in her hull." He gestured at the projection in the middle. "The vessel that inflicted such damage has to be at least a cruiser, but it's more likely that another battleship is responsible. The question now is whether this big and probable alien threat is lurking in a hidden corner somewhere."

"We have not detected any alien vessels in the star system at this time. We have also failed to find any clues that suggest that such ships have visited this star system in the last month aside from the Titania herself. In fact, the lack of debris and other battle traces in this star system leads us to guess that the Titania did not get attacked here. The more probable explanation is that she fought against another powerful alien warship in a different star system, only to suffer crippling damage that prompted her to flee madly. Whoever was in charge of the alien vessel may have programmed her warp drive to flee to this star system. However, once she arrived at her destination, she deteriorated to such an extent that she eventually succumbed to her grievous wounds."

That was an interesting theory. Although the story had a couple of holes, it certainly explained the lack of traces.

"If this is true, then the attacker of the Titania must still be out there somewhere." Marshal Ariadne observed. "If the aggressor is also an alien warship, then she might be following the trail of the Titania. The longer we stay in this star system, the greater the chance we may be confronted by an alien warship that is even bigger and stronger than the Titania!"

"And also a damaged one, hopefully. I don't know how good the Titania is in a fight, but a vessel of this size has to be able to hit back hard." Ves added.

No one knew for sure whether any of this was true. However, if this theory happened to be true, then a powerful enemy might come in at any time!

General Verle briefly swept his gaze around the virtual meeting room. "Before we decide anything further, we must make an important decision. Will we proceed with exploring the derelict alien wreck, or will we endeavor to leave this suspicious site as soon as possible?"

"I vote in favor of exploring the Titania." Ves immediately said. "We did not come to the Red Ocean only to avoid every interesting discovery just because there is the possibility of encountering danger. We can implement precautions that can mitigate the risks."

"If that's the case, I am in favor as well." Miss Galina Rovon-Hartul chirped. "This alien bioship is massive. Think of the resources and tech we can salvage from her. We might even be able to recover a database of some sorts that can contain a lot of useful information such as technical knowledge or detailed star charts."

Ves looked at the Crossers.

Patriarch Reginald did not look particularly interested.

"What is the point of investigating a bioship, and an alien one at that? We do not make much use of biotechnology. I cannot imagine that anything we learn from this wreck will strengthen our mechs in any way."

"I wouldn't be so quick to judge if I were you." Ves told the other patriarch. "Many useful innovations were originally derived from salvaging alien tech. A vessel as large as this one must certainly be filled with lots of goodies!"

Professor Benedict agreed with his fellow mech designer. "The Larkinson Patriarch has a point, old friend. Even if we cannot recover any useful tech, just deconstructing this biomass and recycling all of the high-value exotics will net us a great amount of profit. This will help us alleviate our debt."

The Larkinson Clan wasn't the only one that went deep into the red in order to upgrade its fleet. The Crossers had been just as extravagant!

The reminder caused Patriarch Reginald to soften his objection.

"Fine. Go and explore the Titania if you want. Be sure to guard against ambushes or surprise alien warships."

"General?"

Verle already had a plan ready. "We should deploy a number of combat carriers and sensor probes throughout the star system. If we are facing an alien warship that is native to this dwarf galaxy, then she will certainly be equipped with a warp drive. While they are slower than an ordinary human FTL drive, they allow for acceleration at

superluminal speeds in real time. In simple terms, that means that they can arrive faster than we can detect!"

It was like lightning and thunder. Even though both originated from the same phenomenon, the flash of lightning arrived at a distant observer much sooner than the sound of thunder!

In this case, an alien warship could actually appear beside the Spirit of Bentheim and fire her main cannons at short range without any forewarning!

This was the scary part about fighting against forces equipped with warp drives!

Fortunately, the Larkinson Clan and her allies invested in a solution back in Vulit that could reduce the effectiveness of these surprise ambushes.

#### *Chapter 3553: Precautionary Measures*

The Golden Skull Alliance couldn't pass off the opportunity to explore the first alien wreck it encountered since the start of their true expedition.

One of the main purposes of going on an expedition into new and unfamiliar territory was to search and plunder valuable treasures!

The large, 5-kilometer long alien biocapital ship should definitely contain a lot of valuables. Whether it was high-grade exotics, rare alien artifacts or completely foreign technological paradigms, the Titania should definitely be a treasure trove of goodies!

Shortly after the leaders of the alliance decided to go in, the huge fleet approached the inner system at a brisk but relatively cautious pace.

A core of capital ships including the refurbished Wild Torch accelerated forward under the protection of just over a hundred combat carriers.

Ves looked proudly at the large number of ships moving in unison. He used to worry about lacking too much combat power when the expeditionary fleet initially passed through the beyonder gate.

Though he still held concerns about the amount of deterrent that the combined fleet possessed, the addition of many combat carriers obtained through various sources came as an enormous relief.

Though the combat carriers didn't matter too much when confronted by human forces due to the 2-year protection period, it was still relevant in other cases.

They certainly came handy at this time as the aliens didn't play by humanity's rules. With thousands of additional mechs at their disposal, the three alliance partners

possessed a lot more confidence in dealing with any threats that might emerge in the process of exploring the mysterious alien wreck!

Ves briefly tallied the estimated mech capacity as he sat in the observer's seat on the bridge of his flagship. His hand idly stroked Lucky's back as he counted.

"Meow."

"Yeah, the Crossers have outdone themselves." Ves said. "They can almost field 6000 mechs if they want to, but I'm not sure they have filled all of their new ships. They need to produce or acquire a lot of mechs, and that doesn't come easy. It takes time and money to get that much assets."

"Meow."

"The Glory Seekers should be in a similar position, though their burden is lighter. They only gained 20 combat carriers from their Hexer friends, which is not that much. Perhaps they have already filled most of their mech hangar bays with the mechs they previously packed inside their capital ships."

He estimated that the Glory Seekers should only be able to field 2750 mechs at most, which made them equivalent to an oversized mech regiment.

"Meow meow."

"Our Larkinson fleet sits in between at the moment. We didn't acquire as many combat carriers as the Cross Clan, but we're better off than the Glory Seekers in that regard. We can field up to 4000 mechs if we take over a lot of spare cargo bays. Still, we lost a lot of the mechs we brought into the Red Ocean due to tournament attrition. Last I checked, our production halls are still in the process of rebuilding mechs from recycled materials."

As long as the alliance partners had more time, they could eventually raise their collective strength to a level just above a mech division. This was a much more respectable amount of combat strength and would allow the expeditionary fleet to safely roam a lot of general territories.

For now, Ves estimated that the expeditionary fleet was still short of several thousand mechs, which might or might not make a difference today.

"I hope we won't encounter any unpleasant surprises."

Lucky turned his head around in order to send a nasty glare at Ves. "Meow!"

"Hey, hey! That's just groundless superstition!"

"Meeeeeoow!"

"You're just upset because you don't like to eat organic materials. Hey, that reminds me. Can you eat alien flesh as long as it contains enough metals and exotics?"

"MEEEOOW!"

While Ves pondered whether Lucky was able to eat the Titania whole, the fleet continued to approach the derelict alien capital ship while maintaining a great degree of vigilance.

The different forces coordinated their actions and enacted a lot of precautionary measures to guard against ambushes.

The Flagrant Vandals moved their combat carriers ahead of the main fleet and spread out in different directions in order to guard against approaches from different angles.

The expeditionary fleet also deployed lots of listening devices that spread throughout the entire star system. Some of them were larger and contained cheap quantum communication nodes that could instantly transfer timely warnings back to the main fleet if they detected anything amiss.

This was an essential precaution to guard against hostile ships in warp travel. They were so damn fast that the light of their passage arrived far too late in many cases!

Fortunately, even if an alien ship in warp did manage to sneak up on the main fleet, the Larkinsons and its allies had a few surprises in store!

Special modules mounted on the Gorgoneion, the Wild Torch and other capital ships became active. They drained a considerable amount of power, but their effects were absolutely crucial.

They reinforced the surrounding space around them, making it much harder for warp drives to curve space.

The only downside to the commercialized dimensional smoother modules was that they were subject to the inverse-square law just like any other field generator devices. This meant that their effective range was fairly limited.

"Well, at least they can stop alien warships from closing in and unleashing their fire at point-blank range."

In fact, that wasn't the greatest danger to warp drive-capable starships.

The greatest nightmare that everyone in the Red Ocean worried about was what would happen if the incoming ships in warp did not slow down. What if they barreled into a hull at relativistic or superluminal speeds?

The results were not pretty, to say the least!

In fact, it was not that simple for ships to conduct suicide attacks with ease. It was hard for warp drives to curve space that contained a lot of matter and energy. Warp drive tech also hindered starships from crashing into obstacles such as random space rocks.

Even so, that did not prevent starships from warping forward only to shut down their drives moments before their trajectories intersected with other vessels!

There were many more dangers that pioneering fleets had to take into account. Ves would probably drive himself crazy if he had to address all of these risk factors!

"Well, that's what my underlings are for. I'm sure they have covered every angle."

As the distance between the expeditionary fleet and the Titania slowly shrank, the Larkinson mech units that weren't already out on patrol all geared up for deployment.

Commander Melkor Larkinson oversaw his Avatar mech pilots getting briefed by their officers. A particular focus of these lectures was how they should respond against new and unfamiliar developments concerning alien ships and forces.

"Spread out." A mech captain emphasized as she pointed at a projected battle scenario between a human mech company and a generic alien vessel. "If you encounter any alien vessel of any size, chances are that she is armed. Since these ships come in far larger dimensions than any mech, they can easily accommodate weapons that can crush not just one, but multiple mechs at the same time. Therefore, it is crucial for you to start off with dispersed formations and be ready to separate even further depending on the opposition that we face."

If the mech pilots didn't understand the mech captain's message, then the projected simulation battle made her point abundantly clear.

The first simulation run showed the mech company flying forward in a typical defensive formation. This granted it excellent defenses against melee assaults, but it also allowed the alien warship to blast all of the mechs to pieces with a single salvo of her main cannons!

"Defense doesn't matter. No matter how tough your space knights are, none of them are designed to cope against firepower of this scale. If you get hit, then I hope you ejected your cockpit from your doomed machines a second before. If I were you, I would keep your hand on the ejection lever at all times. We can afford to replace a mech, but we

cannot bring back human lives. Even if you made a mistake and ejected prematurely, it's okay. We can just put the cockpit back into the mech afterwards."

It was too intimidating for any mech pilot to fight against warships head-on. The Larkinsons should know as they already fought against one before.

The rules of battle were much different. Not only did mechs have to contend with the risk of getting annihilated in an instant, the ships of the expeditionary fleet also had to prepare against direct attacks that were much more threatening than anything a mech could unleash!

The different circumstances caused Commander Melkor to question whether it was appropriate for him to deploy with his men. As a leader, he could still do his job in the command center of the Gorgoneion.

He grimaced as he adjusted the visor on his face. "No! I shouldn't think this way. I need to retain my fighting urges. Besides, Gloriana has already begun to design a custom mech for me. It would be a waste for her to do all of that work only for me to retire from the field."

Though he did not think he was the second version of Casella Ingvar, he had his own pride as a man and a mech pilot.

An older man soon reached Melkor's side.

"How are our mechs, major?"

"All of the mechs assigned to our mech legion are ready for deployment, sir." Major Cardano Belsir reported. "Some of the older machines that have become less reliable due to frequent damage and repairs might not perform up to par, but they should be able to keep up with maneuvers."

"And the men?"

"They're... scared more than they are excited."

The newly appointed major was one of the more recent hires of the Larkinson Clan. Major Belsir brought much-needed structural leadership and management ability to the Avatars of Myth.

As a graduate of a military academy and someone who had climbed up the ranks of a military organization until his 50's, Major Belsir neatly compensated for all of Commander Melkor's shortcomings. He particularly excelled in the more boring aspects of leading a mech legion such as administration and logistics.

Melkor had assigned other officers to take charge of these responsibilities, but it was nice that there was someone above them that knew what should be done.

The only shortcoming that prevented Major Belsir from gaining more respect from the Avatars was that he was not a mech pilot. Even though the ability to fight with mechs was not related to leadership ability, mech pilots were much more willing to entrust their lives to those who understood their plight and experienced the same dangers.

"A bit of respect towards alien threats is healthy." Commander Melkor said as he considered the state of his men. "We can't let their fear of the unknown affect their courage too much, though. This is just the start of our great adventure into the Red Ocean. If we get spooked just because we came across something new, then how will we be able to confront other dangers?"

Major Belsir did not look comfortable. "The dangers we need to take into account in the Red Ocean are much greater, commander. There are Avatars who think we do not even need to explore such a large and potentially dangerous alien shipwreck."

"They are allowed to think that way, but they must follow their orders regardless. The decision to explore the Titania does not lie with us. We are Avatars. We fight the enemies of the clan. Nothing more."

That said, Commander Melkor also had his misgivings about approaching the alien shipwreck. Giant capital ships, even alien ones, shouldn't remain undisturbed for long. Why hadn't other pioneering fleets explored the wreckage already? Why was the Titania even alone?

There were so many question marks surrounding this event that Commander Melkor feared that the Larkinsons might be blundering into another situation they could not control.

If that happened... then the Avatars needed to show what they were capable of once again.

"Our men must be ready."

#### *Chapter 3554 - Readyng The Living Mechs*

Venerable Joshua Larkinson was bursting with excitement.

After a long time of waiting, he could finally take out his Everchanger on a real mission for the first time.

Although no one knew whether the expeditionary fleet would encounter any actual threats that required the intervention of expert pilots, Joshua would eagerly respond if his clansmen needed his help.



Since it took at least several days for the expeditionary fleet to approach the alien wreck, the Larkinson Army had plenty of time to conduct its preparations.

The only downside to all of the preparation time was that Joshua was the only expert pilot assigned to the Spirit of Bentheim these days. Although this allowed him to experience living mechs being designed and produced up close, there weren't any other expert pilots for him to interact.

It allowed him to remain close to his girlfriend whenever she completed her design work, so Joshua never thought about getting reassigned.

Ketis even dropped by the hangar bay in order to check up on the Everchanger and perform a quick tune-up of her systems.

"It's a pity that we haven't produced her mounted wargear yet." She said as she carefully manipulated a few robotic arms doing work on the Everchanger's exterior. "If we are able to mount it with the artillery loadout, we could have granted you access to firepower greater than the Amaranto."

Joshua shrugged. "I don't mind. The Everchanger in its base form is already powerful enough. I think it is best if I master her purest battle-ready incarnation before I think about piloting it with additional wargear. If I start out with the big guns right away, I'm afraid I won't be able to control my expert mech as if it is my second body."

This was an understandable concern, though expert pilots such as Joshua were much better at adapting to different mechs than ordinary mech pilots.

Ketis turned to her boyfriend. "I hope nothing happens during the exploration, but if a hidden alien fleet does drop out from warp all of the sudden, take care, please. Your expert mech might be alive on top of being a masterwork, but neither of those traits can stop it from getting blown to pieces when it is struck by a battleship main cannon. There are threats in the Red Ocean that mechs simply can't fight against."

She truly felt a lot of concern for the man she loved. However, she never contemplated the notion of asking him to stay back. He was an expert pilot who possessed more power than almost any other soldier. Though he received lavish treatment and one of the best machines an expert pilot could ask for, the price for all of that was the obligation to step up when needed.

Alien warship or not, Venerable Joshua and the Everchanger had to go out there and confront whatever was waiting for them without any hesitation.

"You studied the data on the Titania, right? Do you think she is... alive?" Joshua idly asked as his girlfriend continued to work on the Everchanger's frame.

Ketis shook her head. "The Titania is equivalent to a broken carcass that has been put into an irradiated freezer. While I am not an expert in alien biotechnology, organics work the same way in every circumstance. When an organic construct of this size has that many holes and structural damage, the circulation systems and other mechanisms that ensure the bioship remains alive simply stop working. The lack of heat signatures and other active energy emissions support this conclusion. On top of that, electromagnetic radiation from the local yellow dwarf and the rest of the cosmos is constantly pumping the exposed fleshy bits with lethal rays."

"So you're sure the Titania is dead?"

"I honestly can't say." She said. "I think you can get a more accurate answer if you stop by the Dragon's Den. Those Lifer researchers over there must be chomping at the bits to step foot inside the derelict bioship."

"Well, I hope they wait until after we have secured the area and verified the Titania is harmless."

The couple continued to chat about the alien ship and other topics. Meanwhile, Ketis also completed her last-minute tweaks on the Everchanger.

When the couple stepped back and beheld the powerful masterwork expert mech, they both sighed in admiration.

The design, craftsmanship and power of the Everchanger ranked among the best in the Larkinson Clan!

"It's truly amazing how much you and Ves managed to accomplish." Joshua wistfully said as he embraced his girlfriend at the hip. "I haven't gotten many opportunities to pilot it yet, but I am always amazed at how alive and intelligent it is. I truly feel like I am cooperating with another living body rather than piloting it. Ves is an absolute treasure for being able to design mechs that provide such a radically different piloting experience. He has made a huge amount of progress since he started his career with designing virtual variants."

Ketis pinched his arm. "And what about me? Have you forgotten about the other mech designers that have contributed to the Everchanger's design and fabrication?!"

"Oh, Gloriana did great work as well. She has spent many hours working with me to make sure the configuration and feel of the Everchanger completely fits my preferences. The Quint and the Valkyrie Prime are both nice mechs, but neither of them were designed for my operation from the ground up. I never really understood what a difference this can make until I received the Everchanger. This is the first mech that she has truly tailored its entire design to my preferences. She even incorporated touches that I didn't even know I would like!"

"Joshua..." His girlfriend began to agitate her powerful will.

"We can't forget about Juliet either. She's alright for a Penitent Sister. My Everchanger would never be as quick, agile and maneuverable without all of the work she has done to the flight system and the other maneuvering systems. I think my expert mech is the third-most maneuverable of its kind in the Larkinson Clan. The First Sword might be a little faster, but the difference shouldn't be great."

"JOSHUA!" Ketis smacked his side with her fist!

"Ouch! You don't have to hit me so hard! I was just kidding!"

"That wasn't a funny joke, you dolt. Now apologize by kissing me this instant."

"What?"

"Like this!"

The two embraced and expressed their adoration for each other in an intimate fashion.

The mech technicians and other staff that were working in the same hangar bay smiled coyly when they witnessed this enchanting sight.

Elsewhere aboard the Spirit of Bentheim, another living mech was being prepared for battle.

Though the power and features of this particular machine could not be compared to any of the expert mechs, its value was still great due to several important traits.

First, it was a masterwork mech.

Second, it had facilitated the breakthroughs of multiple mech pilots.

Third, it had become a symbol of living mechs.

All of these reasons and more prompted Ves to spend his limited time on checking it and preparing it for action with its newly designated mech pilot.

"This mech urgently needs another upgrade." Ves frowned as he looked up at one of his older but still magnificent works. "As the threats we face keep getting stronger, it becomes more precarious to pilot a relatively modest mech."

If the mech had an opinion about what Ves had said, it certainly did not issue its response out loud.

"How is the Quint, patriarch? Will it pilot even better after you are done with it?" An expert candidate asked.

Ves nodded. "I can tune the Quint to perform more to your liking, but I am limited in what I can do. The mech has a say as well, and it doesn't agree with all of my decisions."

If another mech designer heard what Ves had just said, they would probably think he was crazy, deceptive or lazy!

Mech designers were expected to control almost every aspect of all of their products within their reach. A mech designer who could not change all of the important parameters of one of their existing works was usually regarded as incompetent!

Of course, the people who set this standard had never met a powerful living mech like the Quint. The normal rules didn't apply to this situation anymore!

Isobel Kotin did not show any outward excitement, but Ves knew better. Just like many other pilots, she looked forward to taking part in a real mission as opposed to participating in boring and fake practice sessions.

The Quint was a mech designed to fight, not to look pretty and impress an audience. The mech was quite eager to confront any enemies that might emerge. Whether they were human or alien didn't matter to the living machine. It was confident that it possessed enough power to handle any heat!

"How has the Quint been treating you so far?" Ves asked. "Has it been difficult to work with? That had always been Commander Casella Ingvar's main complaint."

"I know, sir." Isobel replied. "She has given me extensive tips on how to manage the Quint's personality. While I did find it to be rather stubborn and opinionated, it was not as uncooperative as I thought."

He looked a bit surprised. "That's good to hear. I guess that working with Commander Casella may have mellowed it out a bit. We'll have to track its behavior over time and in different situations to be sure, but I think you're right. The efforts of your predecessors have continually boosted its growth and development. Considering the personality of its last mech pilot, the Quint should have grown a lot smarter. Let me check it up close to be sure."

The two continued to chat as Ves proceeded to inspect and tweak the mech.

It was fascinating to study a single living mech on a periodic basis in order to see how their growth affected their combat value. The Quint was a particularly good machine to track because the imprints and power left behind by its powerful mech pilots had fueled its growth far past the point of many other living mechs!

The only mech that could rival the Quint in this regard was the Shield of Samar, which possessed an even longer history.

Even so, the Shield of Samar had already been upgraded to an expert mech, so the comparison was not quite fair.

As far as Ves was concerned, the Quint should be the role model of what living mechs aspired to become. It was the widely-recognized king of standard mechs in the Larkinson Clan.

Now, Isobel Kotin of the Avatars of Myth had received the right to become its third long-term user.

Expectations were high. Whether the clansmen were right or not, they all believed that the Quint was a breakthrough machine. Out of all of the expert candidates in the clan, Isobel Kotin should have the highest chance of breaking through in the short and medium term!

"You know why we picked you and persuaded the Quint to accommodate you, right?" He asked as he supervised the heavy assembling arms carefully putting the masterwork mech into its rifleman mech configuration.

"The clan has a shortage of ranged expert pilots. You need me to break through so that you can add another powerful ranged expert mech to the Larkinson Army."

She was quite aware why she received this precious opportunity out of all of the other expert candidates.

While it was true that some of her peers had already tried to pilot the Quint only to be rejected by it, she still felt fortunate for possessing skills that the clan urgently needed but to a greater degree.

It made her feel valued. It also made her feel burdened by responsibility.

She needed to break through as soon as possible in order to alleviate the Larkinson Clan's shortfall in ranged solutions!

*Chapter 3555 - Bizarre Bioconstruction*

The expeditionary fleet had finally come close enough to the Titania to get into action.

Naturally, the Golden Skull Alliance wasn't stupid enough to park all of its valuable capital ships right next to the unknown alien capital ship. What if she was rigged to explode? What if the space and her were mined?

There were so many possible dangers that it was best if the main fleet maintained a healthy distance from the Titania.

The ship still needed to be investigated, though.

The good news was that the relative proximity gave the expeditionary fleet's sensor systems a much more detailed look at the motionless biovessel.

A lot of additional data and information emerged, but very few of it actually changed the considerations and approach of the alliance.

They still expressed an interest in exploring and plundering the silent vessel.

There was one major question that had wide-ranging effects on what might happen in this star system.

Should the Golden Skull Alliance adopt a cautious or speedy approach?

The more the Larkinsons and its allies took their time to explore the unknown alien vessel, the safer they would all be. Their abundance of precautions would allow them to respond adequately to any unforeseen moments.

On the other hand, the longer the Titania and the Golden Skull Alliance kept lingering in this star system, the greater the chance that outsiders would drop by and crash the party!

Of course, Ves wasn't worried about human forces. Jovy Armalon and the Simile Halifax should take care of that. What he was really worried about was whether the alien attackers of the Titania would arrive.

The longer it took to examine and plunder the Titania, the further this possible alien fleet traversed through warp travel!

Alien warp drives were substantially slower than human FTL drives, so they might not arrive anytime soon if they were on the pursuit. Yet their ability to speed up and whizz about much closer to gravity wells such as planets and stars gave them a great advantage in most combat situations!

In short, the expeditionary fleet truly had to gamble on how to proceed.

Should they act with haste and risk suffering damage when the Titania or the surrounding environment suddenly exploded?

Was it better to speed up their exploration and get out before any possible follow-up parties arrived?

These questions and more constantly plagued Ves and the other leaders. They could make lots of guesses but simply didn't have enough clues to know for certain which answer was right.

Perhaps the best answer of all was to just turn around and leave this potential danger zone as soon as possible!

Ves never thought about this option. The Titania hooked his curiosity and he was determined to explore it one way or another!

Fortunately, all of the scans made so far pretty much ruled out a lot of possible threats. As far as the Larkinsons were concerned, the chance of encountering hidden mines and other weapons were fairly low.

If the Titania ever mounted any warship-grade weapons, then the attackers must have blasted them off the organic hull. The Lifer biotech researchers over at the Dragon's Den had already concluded that the bioship did not contain any dormant weapon systems.

This tempted Ves to go for a speedy approach, but he was too afraid that his clan would expose itself to hidden threats. This had happened many times so Ves truly felt it was better to go for a cautious approach.

"Sir, we're about to dispatch our first probes." General Verle's projection informed Ves.

"Understood. Don't be in a hurry to proceed with the next steps. Let's see how the ship will respond when we poke her hull with our drones."

Hundreds of little unarmed drones launched from the capital ships and whizzed forward at rapid speed.

These drones were cheap, lightly-armored and disposable, but they were packed with sensors and scanners that could examine a fair amount of details up close.

It took a bit of time for them to approach the distant alien vessel. This was a result of the safe distance the main fleet adhered to. Ves and everyone else had to wait impatiently for the drones to traverse many kilometers until they finally began to reach the Titania's silent hull.

"The drones are beginning to examine the wreckage, sir!"

"Don't focus too much on her exterior. Get those drones through the holes in the hull and record what's inside. Our long-ranged scans never delivered any clear answers on what's inside."

Ves carefully studied the footage transmitted from the drones. The signals coming back remained mostly clear as the dead biocapital ship did not throw up a lot of interference.

All he saw from the projections were walls and bulbs of strange, grayish flesh interspersed with massive structural components in the form of bones.

"What a macabre image."

"Meow."

Lucky didn't even want to look at the disgusting flesh ship. If the derelict was a CFA warship or something, his mouth would have been watering by now. However, the sight of all of that cold and fleshy matter caused him to grow sick.

He wasn't the only one who found the footage disturbing. Few Larkinsons were accustomed to seeing such a huge organic construct in such poor condition!

Ves turned to the projection of Directo Ranya Wodin. Given the nature of the main subject of this exploration mission, he could not rely on his technical knowledge to figure out what was going on. He had to lean on the expertise of a biotech scientist in order to understand what the probes were seeing at the moment.

"Is there anything new?"

"It's difficult to say." Ranya said as she quietly studied all of the footage. "My research teams and I have developed a number of expectations based on the data that we have gathered earlier. We believe that even if we encountered a bioship of this size that was grown by an unknown alien race, there should be enough similarities between human and alien-built biovessels to know what we are getting into. It appears that our assumptions were wrong. I am not spotting any obvious compartments, hatches, discrete biomechanical parts and so on. It could be that the alien race who developed the Titania is further removed from humanity than we assumed."

Now that she mentioned it, Ves also failed to spot any obvious compartments and so on, though he did recognize a couple of corridors of different sizes. Some of them were large enough to fit several mechs at once while others were only large enough to accommodate dwarves.

There were considerably more of the smaller ones, and they were spread across any open section of the Titania.

Their weird round cross-sections caused Ves to grow confused. Which orientation was up or down on this vessel?

"What kind of alien race would grow and inhabit such a strange ship, Ranya?"



"There are still too many possibilities for me to pin down an approximate answer." She replied. "I am currently leaning towards a non-humanoid race that are extremely small but numerous such as the sandmen. Perhaps this large shipwreck is even more enormous in the perspective of her original owners. It could be a gigantic ark ship just like the ones that many alien races in the Red Ocean have started to build."

The alien societies in the Red Ocean were all undergoing an existential crisis after the Big Two accelerated their invasion.

The alien civilizations that were in humanity's way didn't sit around and do nothing as the MTA and CFA blazed through their star systems and wiped out their populations.

The alien races all diverted an immense amount of resources in building evacuation ships that could safely bring as much of their population out of their doomed star systems as possible.

All of them pretty much fled in the direction away from the Big Two's advance, but a few starships tended to get lost or suffer major damage that somehow caused them to go in the wrong direction!

This might explain why the Titania ventured this deep in human occupied territory, but the damage she suffered did not seem to be made by human weapons.

As a mech designer, Ves witnessed plenty of mechs sustaining damage in battle. He became quite good at identifying the cause of their battle marks.

Yet when he was confronted with the large and strange holes riddled throughout the Titania's structure, he had to scratch his head.

There were few apparent signs of heat and burning, so she obviously hadn't been struck by laser beams or positron beams. Ves was also sure the Titania hadn't been struck by missiles or explosive weapons for that matter.

She hadn't been struck with solid kinetic projectiles either. Even if he did not play around with biomechs, he had seen enough bodies getting struck by kinetic weapons to know how flesh and bone reacted to getting impacted by large and heavy rounds.

The wounds seemed too... clean, for a lack of a better word. Perhaps the unknown assailants used a form of high technology to literally void oval-looking portions of her hull.

It was as good of an explanation as any, but Ves lacked enough proof to feel any confidence in his conclusion.

Several minutes passed by as the drones continued to transmit bewildering footage that featured a lot of unfamiliar and indecipherable alien biotechnology.

Fortunately, none of the drones encountered any active threats. The Larkinsons became more and more certain that the Titania was safe to explore.

That was until the Lifers over at the Dragon's Den began to recognize what they were seeing!

"WAIT!" Dr. Ranya's projection burst. "According to one of our experts, the Titania is too natural to be a bioship. There are too few signs of logical and artificial structures for us to state with certainty that she is a purpose-grown asset."

"What are you saying, Ranya?"

"The Titania... is not a bioship at all. She... it... may be the carcass of an immense astral beast!"

"What?!"

Not just Ves, but everyone else who she was connected to reacted with great shock at this revelation!

Just as the Larkinsons and the others were trying to wrap their heads around this bold but increasingly more likely guess, a mutation had occurred!

Alarms began to ring throughout the ships as many sensors detected abrupt spikes in activity deep inside the Titania's hull!

"Our most inward probes have been destroyed!"

"The Titania's entire structure is convulsing!"

"Our sensor arrays are detecting multiple spikes of heat and energy generation throughout the Titania. The energy and heat is quickly spreading throughout her structure!"

Half a minute later, many of the open 'corridors' began to spray out large spurts of strange and hot gray liquid!

Director Ranya gasped. "That's blood! The Titania is reviving by resuming the circulation of blood throughout its body!"

"That's it." General Verle stated. "We cannot let this alien 'creature' wake up. Even if there is a chance that this living is friendly, we can't take the risk."

Fortunately for him and everyone, the Titania soon made it clear what it thought about the humans.

Some of the holes that looked more natural than the others began to pinch and squeeze as if they were giant mouths.

While everyone was wondering about the purpose of these motions, the mouths soon spat fleshy bullets that were at least twice the size and mass of a typical medium mech!

The Titania quickly spat out over 80 of these grayish 'flesh bullets'. They all looked alive because of all of their squirming and because the sensors detected that they each contained a high amount of energy.

"The unknown bioprojectiles are adjusting course! They're heading straight towards our fleet!"

"We're under attack!"

Much of the ambiguity had disappeared. The Titania may look awful, but the apparent astral beast was still alive and possessed plenty of hostility towards the human fleet that sought to pick apart its corpse!

All of the mechs that had already been deployed as a precaution were all prepared for battle.

While the melee mechs didn't have much to do at the moment, the ranged mechs all opened fire at the Titania and the fleshy projectiles were rapidly soaring towards the expeditionary fleet!

"Intercept those bioprojectiles! Don't let any of them hit our ships!"

*Chapter 3556 - Huge Mass*

The Golden Skull Alliance turned out to have made a mistake!

Everyone who looked at the seemingly cold and derelict alien construct thought that it was a bioship that had encountered a deadly opponent.

It shouldn't have been a surprise that they all defaulted to the assumption that the Titania was some sort of alien organic capital vessel.

Starships were humanity's frame of reference of anything floating in space. Aside from space stations and other fixed platforms that were clearly anchored in strategic positions, everything else of this size was always a starfaring ship.

Many alien species in both the Milky Way and the Bed Ocean utilized starships to move around. While the exact style, purpose and usage of starships may differ slightly among the species, their universal value all made them ubiquitous whether the aliens called

them ships, homes, fortresses, or whatever unique word they made up in their incomprehensible languages.

Yet not all constructs in space were space stations or starships. There was a third category of deep space superstructures that showed up from time to time. Though this category of massive objects were rather rare in most parts of human space in the Milky Way due to massive overhunting, they were a bit more prevalent in the Bed Ocean!

"Astral beasts!"

These were wondrous forms of life that varied in size but usually leaned on the larger size. Most of them were one form of space bug that had miraculously evolved in different star systems due to various circumstances. The overwhelming majority of them were local pests who never left their star systems because they simply couldn't survive the long, cold and dangerous trip to other places.

However, across millions if not billions of years of evolution, life found a way.

Whether it was through the absorption of phasewater, the mutation of a sophisticated organ or the reckless experimentation of an ancient alien empire, a small proportion of astral beasts managed to escape from the boundaries of their origin systems and succeeded in spreading across the stars!

Each of them were miraculous forms of life that could inherently develop the ability to travel at superluminal speeds through growth alone. They also tended to be on the larger size as scale was one of the best ways for these organisms to survive all of the different threats in space.

Most successful species of astral beasts tended to have emerged a long time ago. They were stable, powerful but did not tend to develop any sentience because there was never a need for them to grow any smarter or make use of tools.

Of course, exceptions always existed. The most prominent example of an 'astral beast' species gaining sentience in the Bed Ocean was the phase whale!

The Titania's physical properties did not resemble that of a whale, so at least the Golden Skull Alliance hadn't provoked this infamously powerful species.

That did not mean it was weak. As the apparent astral beast continued to rouse itself from its hibernating slumber, the Larkinsons and their allies realized that the situation continued to deteriorate.

Not only was the Titania continuing to spit out dozens of large fleshy projectiles at the human fleet that had poked it awake, its entire organic body structure was continuing to morph in ways that no one understood!

"The Titania is continuing to heat up! The amount of energy being generated across its form is continuing to rise over time!"

"The open arteries are being closed at a rapid pace. The Titania's biological tissue has displayed rapid healing and morphing capabilities. Some of its smaller surface cavities are already being plugged."

"The Titania is showing greater adaptability towards our weapons. Her surface volume has shrunk by 2.7 percent and is continuing to contract even as her fleshy surface is growing denser and tougher. The astral beast's exterior has already become 6 percent more resistant to energy damage and 7 percent more resistant against physical damage!"

The astral beast was transforming before everyone's eyes. The Titania showed through all of its actions that it was far from dead as it initially appeared!

As thousands of mechs opened fire against the distant Titania and the approaching bioprojectiles, Ves grew immensely more uncertain about the whole ordeal.

What was going on? Was the Titania truly an astral beast rather than a bioship?

He turned to the projection of Director Banya Wodin.

At this moment, she was receiving a lot of different reports from different research teams and experts. It was not easy for her to judge whether a theory had any credibility or not. A number of research teams even submitted opposing conclusions about the nature and properties of the Titania!

Ves didn't care about any of that stuff. He just wanted solid answers at this time.

"Dr. Banya! Tell us what we're dealing with! What is the threat level of the Titania? What kind of shape is it in? What is the best way for us to kill this monster?"

Though Banya wanted to defer her explanations so that she could make more conclusions, time was short and the Larkinsons urgently needed answers.

"We are still analyzing the Titania's actual state, so everything I'm about to say should be taken with a grain of salt." She quickly said her disclaimer. "According to our researchers, the Titania is most likely an astral beast. It is a single creature that is not being run or operated by lots of smaller individual aliens. We have seen no sign of the latter and the Titania's internal structure does not accommodate them either."

"What of the intelligence of this astral beast?"

"We cannot say at the moment, sir. Size does not correlate with sentience or intelligence, but astral beasts of this size are typically simple-minded and driven by

instincts. What we are seeing at the moment might be a pattern of behavior that astral beasts of this species employ when heavily damaged. After running away from an opponent, they go dormant and shut down as many of their organs as possible in order to preserve their precious energy reserves. When a prey or predator stumbles upon the hibernating beast, it quickly rouses and launches as many attacks as it can to quickly overwhelm whoever triggered it awake. If it succeeds in overtaking its opponent, it may be able to eat the nutrients it requires to heal its wounds and resume its life."

In other words, the astral beast was desperate and needed to consume sources of energy and materials in order to replenish itself!

"What of its power level?"

"We cannot make an accurate estimate at the moment, but keep in mind that the creature is most certainly injured to the point where it was unable to heal itself by consuming the resources of this star system." Banya quickly said. "What that tells us is that it is overdrawing its already-strained resources in order to launch its attack on us. The Titania's contracting body is not just a defensive measure. It is a direct consequence of its attempt to burn its own biological matter to generate the energy it needs to sustain its attacks."

"The more it tries to kill us, the more it brings itself closer to its own demise." Ves summed up her point. "What is it doing with all of the energy it is generating?"

Banya frowned for a moment. "Large parts of the Titania's body and 'organs' are damaged beyond repair, so there are a limited number of uses for the energy. Ror now, we believe that it is using much of it to toughen up its body and merge active organic tissue into large, biological missiles that it is launching at us as its main form of attack."

Ror now, the Titania had yet to display any typical warship armaments such as cannons, energy weapons and so on. This was a massive relief for the expeditionary fleet as any of these weapons could inflict massive amounts of damage to any capital ship!

That said, the flesh torpedoes that the Titania had formed by rearranging parts of its own body did not look trivial. They continued to accelerate forward as their biological thrusters continued to burn some kind of organic juice.

The torpedoes did not appear to be too maneuverable but they were distressingly large and considerably resistant against damage!

Hundreds of energy beams and projectiles slammed against the noses of these flesh torpedoes. Though they always managed to burn or blast away portions of organic tissue, the flesh torpedoes still possessed plenty of matter, allowing them to endure a lot more hits until their bodies eventually fell apart.

"Damn, each of these flesh torpedoes are as tough as an expert mech!"

The astral beast itself was also an immensely tough opponent. Even if every weapon was able to inflict noticeable damage to it, the Titania's immense size and volume meant that a couple of salvos did not affect its integrity at all! It took far more salvos or the use of weapons of much greater scale in order to inflict major structural damage to the creature.

In effect, the mechs of the Golden Skull Alliance were like bees poking a giant human body. While it was possible for a large swarm of bees to eventually kill a human, they were so small that they needed to employ an immense amount of effort to complete their goal!

"Concentrate our fire on intercepting the flesh torpedoes!" General Verle ordered the mech legions. "Do not let them get within ten kilometers to any of our ships. The consequences of any of them impacting our hulls may very well spell their doom!"

The difference this made was considerable. The increased concentration of fire quickly began to neutralize the flesh torpedoes one by one. These odd biomissiles could take a lot of punishment, but as soon as certain important organs sustained damage, it could no longer propel itself forward or simply lost so much integrity that they broke apart in a messy fashion.

Out of all of the mechs that opened fire on the flesh torpedoes, the Transcendent Punishers and the Eternal Bedemptions inflicted the most damage by far! The weight and volume of firepower of these two mech models granted them a better advantage against large and tough constructs than other mechs!

Though Ves was proud of seeing two of his works performing so effectively at the moment, he wished he could have brought at least four times as many mechs.

"We don't have enough artillery!"

The rifleman mechs such as the Bright Warriors in their ranged configuration tried their best to make up for the shortfall.

Even though their rifles were accurate and fairly powerful, their weight of fire was simply incomparable against the previous two mech models.

While their advantages such as a decent firing rate and good accuracy worked well when employed against small and maneuverable mechs, the Titania and its flesh torpedoes didn't care about that. Only brute force could fell hostile entities of this scale!

As Ves focused on how well his forces were able to whittle down the flesh torpedoes, Director Banya and the Lifer research teams carefully studied the internal organs spilling out of the broken flesh torpedoes.

"Those 'flesh torpedoes' are not explosive in nature." Banya stated. "Any explosions that you see when successfully intercepting the organic objects are mostly generated by setting off their volatile propellants. The actual threat they pose is much different because they are full, living organisms just like the Titania!"

"Are you sure about that, Banya?!"

Once again, Ves became shocked at what he heard.

"We're not shooting missiles. We're shooting down the Titania's offspring." She stated with an increasingly more definitive tone. "Whether they are its clones or its children, each of these incoming fleshy creatures will likely be able to destroy our ships by rampaging across their hulls as if they are actual beasts!"

This was a frightening prospect... What would happen if a few of the Titania's 'children' landed on the Spirit of Bentheim? They could probably chew through the hull of his flagship before wreaking havoc inside!

#### *Chapter 3557 - Meager Firepower*

The researchers over at the Dragon's Den played a crucial role in helping everyone understand what they currently faced.

Before, they thought that the Titania was a derelict bioship and that its flesh torpedoes were akin to conventional projectiles.

Now, they understood that both of them were actually complete living organisms that could think and act for themselves!

The Titania clearly proved its living qualities by adapting to the current situation. Not only was it squeezing out more and more 'offspring' from its body in an attempt to overwhelm the expeditionary fleet, its contracting exterior was constantly being hardened in order to resist more and more damage!

The current state of the battle did not look that good at the moment. Even if a biocreature as enormous as the Titania had almost perished after fighting against an unknown adversary, it still possessed so many resources that it could probably keep up its offensive actions for a long time!

Currently, the mech forces deployed by the Golden Skull Alliance found itself at a considerable disadvantage in this battle.

There was no helping it. The Larkinsons, the Glory Seekers and the Crossers had all formed their respective combat units with human opponents in mind. While they were all aware that they might have to fight against alien forces if they continued to roam in the Red Ocean, they did not expect that day to come so soon!



The fact of the matter was that the expeditionary fleet had been caught with its pants down. Almost half of its combat assets consisted of melee mechs, which were considered essential in fighting against other mech forces but were seriously inadequate in this situation!

No one thought about dispatching melee mechs to the Titania in order to tear her enormous body apart up close. From what they could observe, the astral beast possessed a high degree of control over its own biological structure.

Any mech that dared to attack its flesh would probably get swallowed whole by many tons of flexible and responsive biomatter!

Even if that wouldn't happen, there was little point in dispatching them anyway. The damage they could do to the surface of the Titania was as trivial as a bunch of ants trying to chew their way through a human body.

The best way they could perform their role was to drill past the surface and deal damage to the Titania's internal organs. If the melee mechs could quickly work their way deeper and reach the areas where the ranged mechs couldn't damage, perhaps there was a way for them to cut off the Titania's energy supply.

Yet who would possibly take the risk to order such a dubious action? The most likely consequence of sending melee mechs on this suicide mission was that the enormous astral beast's bulk would crush any of the annoying mechs that attempted to dig into its body!

Just like how human bodies possessed immune systems that destroy foreign germs, General Verle and many other humans were afraid the Titania would have a similar answer against intruding mechs!

Fortunately, the melee mechs did not have to sit out this battle entirely. The alliance partners had stockpiled a sufficient amount of basic energy rifles in case they confronted supermassive threats such as the Titania.

The Larkinson Clan still retained a lot of old rifles that its Bright Warriors used to wield before switching over to their new luminar crystal weapons.

The melee mechs all returned to their motherships and quickly returned to space with rifles in their hands.

This was the advantage of fielding humanoid mechs. Even if they weren't built with ranged combat in mind, they could still manipulate an ordinary rifle with decent effectiveness!

Ironically enough, the rather lackluster Bright Warriors possessed a considerably greater advantage in this aspect than other mech models such as the Ferocious Piranha.

With ranged combat capabilities already built into its base platform, its targeting systems and other relevant systems easily synced up to the familiar rifles without any friction or technical complications.

"The last time I fired a rifle was years ago."

"It doesn't matter. Those squishy torpedoes aren't evading our fire at all. Just fire straight ahead. If your aim is so bad that you can't even hit these obvious targets, then fire at the Titania instead. That beast is much bigger but it hasn't moved at all. There are no excuses if your shots go wide!"

The weight of fire from the expeditionary fleet increased as a result of arming all of the melee mechs with ranged weapons.

However, the effectiveness of the additional fire was marginal. The marksmanship skill of the mech pilots were wildly inconsistent and they were unable to concentrate their fire on specific weak points. This led to a lot of dispersed shots that haphazardly hit different surfaces without achieving much.

It was better than nothing, though. As time went by, the melee mech pilots slowly became accustomed to handling ranged weapons and sharpened their aim, not that it was difficult to do so. The continued lack of lateral movements from their targets meant that they were hitting the equivalent of stationary targets.

"It's just like target practice, except there are real stakes in play this time!"

The difference they made was noticeable. The organic torpedo creatures were being blasted apart at a faster rate than before. None of them had ever come close enough to threaten the expeditionary fleet.

However, that did not make the humans happy. They were successful in intercepting the Titania's flesh torpedoes, but the astral beast simply sent out additional waves!

The big creature possessed so much organic matter that it could keep this up for hours. At this point, the human mech forces couldn't divert a lot of firepower in order to damage and accelerate the collapse of the Titania.

The torpedoes would just get closer if they stopped intercepting the incoming biomissiles as hard!

General Verle and every leader realized that they had landed in a battle of attrition against their alien opponent. Many of their ranged weapons could not sustain their rate

of fire forever. Heat buildup, energy depletion, increased wear and tear and other factors would slowly cause these weapons to fall silent in an extended battle.

Which side would be able to outlast the other?

This question weighed in the minds of many mech pilots.

Even the mechs that were much more effective in ranged combat than others were finding out that their advantages didn't mean much against an immense creature that could easily absorb a lot more damage.

The Amaranto performed particularly dazzling in this battle. Even if the masterwork machine was a slender rifleman mech instead of a thicker and beefier artillery mech, much of her design was geared towards maximizing her firepower and precision.

Venerable Stark had set her powerful machine in a prepared defensive emplacement on the hull of the Gorgoneion.

There, the Amaranto calmly fired one resonance-empowered energy beam after another.

Considering that inflicting as much destructive energy as possible was more important at the moment, Stark chose to fire positron beams against the Titania.

Every few seconds, the Amaranto's impressive luminar crystal rifle burst out bright and radiant positron beams that almost instantly struck the same weakened section of the Titania.

Large pieces of flesh burned to a crisp if they hadn't been vaporized already. The heat and energy damage also affected the flesh surrounding the immediate impact area, thereby softening up this weak point for the subsequent strike!

After several minutes of intensive fire, the Amaranto had already managed to burn 120 meters into the enormous body structure of the rousing astral beast.

Sadly, the Titania still had many more layers in the way that could prevent the weapons fire from going any further. What Venerable Stark was doing was the equivalent of drilling a tunnel through a mountain with only a single hand pick at her disposal!

Was the Amaranto's luminar crystal rifle weak? No! Many mechs had personally suffered at the hands of this potent weapon.

Yet even if Venerable Stark was able to bend its energy beams, there was no point in doing so. The Titania was well-protected from all sides and did not easily allow any attackers from damaging its crucial internal organs.

Not too far away, the Everchanger was not doing much better. Venerable Joshua thought that his debut battle would proceed a lot more gloriously than... this. While this was a serious battle, the expert pilot could not help but think that his efforts didn't yield much results.

Sure, his hero expert mech's damage output was pretty close to that of the Amaranto, but they were still pinpricks as far as the Titania was concerned!

"We need to do more! We can't keep sitting back like this!" Joshua gritted his teeth.

Coincidentally, Venerable Joshua wasn't the only expert pilot who was debuting in this battle with a new mech.

The Glory Seekers finally solved their inability to field an expert mech by launching a brand new machine that allowed Gloriana's brother to channel his full might once again.

Venerable Brutus enjoyed the feel of his new expert mech. The Star Dancer Mark II was designed by a Hexer Master but also received contributions from Ves and Gloriana.

This not only made the mech alive, but also fit Brutus to a much better degree!

The Miracle Couple had recently fabricated the expert rifleman mech in the month after the expeditionary fleet departed from Vult.

Though Gloriana found it regretful that she failed to create a masterwork mech for her brother, Brutus had nothing to complain about. The wonder of piloting a new expert mech and a living one at that was already sufficient in his book.

Still, as much as Venerable Brutus and the Glory Seekers celebrated the completion of the Star Dancer Mark II, the expert mech was clearly fighting the wrong opponent at this time!

"The Titania is a poor dance partner and my aiming skills are largely irrelevant in this battle." Brutus frowned.

The Star Dancer Mark II was not a sniper like the Amaranto. It was a mid-range duelist that could dogfight and outmaneuver its opponents while steadily whittling them down with sustained energy fire.

All of that meant nothing as the Star Dancer Mark II's repeated fire from its unique luminar crystal rifle simply sank into the Titania without much result.

None of this was truly working. The Crossers weren't doing any better either as their clan still hadn't made up for the loss of its last expert ranged mech specialist during the Battle of Reckoning.

As Ves and many people tried to figure out how they could break this unfavorable status quo, General Verle finally grasped a viable solution.

"Battle formations!"

"Pardon?" Ves asked as he turned to Verle's projection.

"Think about it, sir. We have fielded well over 8000 mechs between us and our alliance partners. However, quantity doesn't account for much as most of their rifles are geared towards fighting other mechs."

"So you're thinking about going for quality instead?"

"Somewhere along these lines." General Verle replied. What makes us different from other forces is that we have battle formations that can potentially allow us to launch attacks that are massively more powerful than any single mech can unleash. Think about how many mechs and ships have met their end at the hands of our battle networks."

Ves' eyes lit up. He should have thought about this solution sooner. He developed multiple different battle networks for the Larkinson Army's more cohesive mech legions.

Although he never developed them with the intention to circumvent the prohibition against warship-grade armaments, they effectively functioned like one! There was no other way they could unleash so much death and destruction in a short span of time!

Warships were best fought with other warships. That was the general consensus among humans in both the old galaxy and the new galaxy.

Though the Larkinsons didn't possess any of these great and powerful vessels, it could simulate the damage output of one under the right circumstances!

"Which battle formations should we employ against this beast?" Ves wondered as he rubbed his smooth-shaven chin...

#### *Chapter 3558 - Light The Way*

The battle formation was one of the trump cards of the Larkinson Clan. Enabled by battle networks which were entirely spiritual in nature, they essentially allowed spiritually powerful entities to channel their prodigious might directly into the material realm!

The odd part about battle formations was that they should technically be illegal. The key to enabling them from outputting the massive damage they were known for was by aligning and combining the minds of many different mech pilots connected to the network.

This was in effect a combination attack that allowed mechs and mech pilots to exceed their hard firepower limitations!

In fact, people had attempted similar means in the past. For example, there was a case where a mech designer came up with a purpose-built machine that could merge together and combine their weapons in order to form a huge laser weapon that was the equivalent of the main cannon of a cruiser!

Suffice to say, the MTA did not allow this combination mech to persist for long. If everyone else followed suit, then the taboo against weapons of mass destruction had no meaning anymore!

There was no way the MTA was ignorant of what the Larkinson Clan could do with its battle formations. Public footage of some of its powerful attacks had already spread throughout the galactic net. The Larkinson Battalion under the leadership of Commander Casella Ingvar had even employed it during the G.Aena League!

Ves also knew the mechs could move quickly if they wanted to. They had been remarkably fast in revising the tournament rules to prevent abnormal mech designers like Ketis from relying on non-mech designer powers to influence the outcome of competitive mech duels.

That happened only a little over a month ago, yet battle formations appeared much earlier!

Why hadn't the MTA issued a ruling that forbid this exceptionally powerful solution?

If it was before, Ves wouldn't have just scratched his head and thank his luck that the MTA's bureaucracy was as slow and distracted as always.

Now, he knew better.

"The MTA must be split on this issue."

Ves could imagine that major factions such as the Unbounders, the Mech Supremacists and especially the Warship Abolitionists loved the fact that mechs and mech pilots could inflict far greater damage than one would expect from a group of mechs.

On the other hand, the Preservers, the Guiders and several other factions concerned with the stability of human civilization must be hating battle formations with a vengeance.

Although Ves had no clue how the discussion on battle formations proceeded within the MTA, the opposing factions either failed to come to a consensus or the side that supported battle formations somehow gained the upper hand.

"It is truly a good way for mechs to display power comparable to warships without actually fielding any of the latter."

If Ves was able to develop this method further and elevate it into a more universal technique, then the MTA could potentially apply it to many of its own mech units, thereby giving each of them the power to fight against actual battleships!

Why would the MTA even have to continue with maintaining its own warships when one of the biggest shortcomings of its own mechs had disappeared?

Of course, it was not that simple, though. Battle formations had harsh requirements and were usually effective in just a single burst.

Warships were much more versatile because they could fight continuously without tiring out so soon. They were also capable of moving independently in space and could fulfill so many other functions.

Regardless, Ves knew that the Larkinson Clan could utilize its battle formations without concern. The fact that an MTA frigate in the form of the Simile Halifax was observing everything with her sophisticated sensors did not make the Larkinsons more reticent!

Orders soon flowed to different mech pilots.

When Commander Melkor received notification on what the Larkinsons were planning, he did not exhibit much surprise.

"Figures. We don't have any other attacks that can punch through this giant beast's body. It's a pity that my men can't take part in this action."

The Avatars of Myth had to continue fighting as usual. Their mech pilots may have developed a technique that enabled them to invoke different design spirits, but this was not comparable to real battle networks.

The focus once again lay on the usual suspects. The Penitent Sisters, the Glory Seekers and the Swordmaidens were already experienced in this regard and were already moving into position.

The Eye of Ylvaine had yet to show off their full might, but would have an excellent opportunity to do so in this crucial moment!

Commander Taon Melin of the Eye of Ylvaine was under a lot of pressure this time. He and his fellow Ylvainan mech pilots had yet to employ this method in a high-pressure situation like this where their efforts could mean the difference between victory and defeat.

Though he tried to seek guidance from the Great Prophet in order to calm his nerves, Ylvaine did not resolve his doubts this time.

He knew he shouldn't be looking to Ylvaine to reassure him all the time, but the habit was difficult to break.

"I must have confidence in my own men. They can do it because we all share the same faith."

Taon no longer let his doubts plague his mind and coordinated with the other mech pilots to prepare for their great move.

Even as the Transcendent Punishers began to turn their powerful cannons at the distant astral beast, the Eye of Ylvaine also played another card.

The Rod of Ylvaine that Ves had made as desperate experiment in the past began to serve as a catalyst for the Eye of Ylvaine's battle network.

It became significantly easier for the Ylvainans to align their minds to each other and therefore reach the uniformity required to bring Ylvaine closer to them than ever!

"Praise Ylvaine!"

"Seek the path to victory!"

"Let the light show the way!"

The Transcendent Punishers stationed in bunkers on the Spirit of Bentheim and other nearby capital ships each moved with united purpose. As the silhouette of a giant robed figure vaguely hovered above the Larkinson capital ships, the cannons of the heavy artillery mechs all seem to adjust their aim as if they were guided by a divine will.

As the only expert candidate in the battle network, Commander Taon retained a bit more awareness and control this time.

Although he was tempted to close his eyes and bask in how close he had come to the Great Prophet, he knew he had a job to do. The crisis still needed to be dealt with especially when the loss of suppression from the Transcendent Punishers allowed the flesh torpedoes to press closer to the expeditionary fleet!

Since time was of the essence, Taon tried to urge the battle formation to display its power as quickly as possible!

"Guide us, prophet. Tell us where to aim."



The Transcendent Punishers kept adjusting their angles as they aimed at different sections of the distant Titania.

Although it seemed as if the entire astral beast was an enormous dam that could take a lot of punishment without crumbling, no creature or object was perfect.

The Titania had already incurred a lot of damage beforehand and the measures it took to repair its damaged exterior wasn't perfect.

What the Eye of Ylvaine sought was the best weak point to concentrate everyone's attack. The Larkinsons had to know in which direction they had to attack in order to destroy the Titania's most crucial internal organs. Not all parts of the astral beasts were essential to its survival. If the Larkinsons could blow up the brain of the massive creature in a concentrated attack, then they would be able to end the threat in an instant!

A lot was riding from this opening, but Commander Taon did not rush the battle formation too much. The ability to find just the right angle and coordinates to attack was a capability that was exclusive to Ylvaine. Every devout Ylvainan continued to pray to the Great Prophet for guidance.

They received it. In one single moment, each of them adjusted their cannons for the final time.

The Rod of Ylvaine also adjusted its angle even as it began to grow brighter and brighter.

For a single instance, the entire battlefield seemed to still.

"Fire." Taon instructed.

Then, a bright flash exploded from the Larkinson fleet and surged towards the Titania within an instant!

In fact, the gauss cannons of the Transcendent Punishers fired a fraction sooner than the positron cannons. This allowed the physical projectiles to gain a head start so that they would strike the target at the same time the positron beams also landed.

The effect was amazing. The extreme burst of damage inflicted on a position that was a bit to the rear of the body of the Titania quickly overwhelmed the local defenses!

Not only was the aim of all of the Transcendent Punishers so exquisitely precise, but their damage output all arrived in just the right timing to drill a deep hole in the great beast's side!

The Ylvainan mech pilots all pulled out of the battle network as their minds all grew weary. Though they were still able to make sure their Transcendent Punishers kept firing at a large and stationary target like the Titania, they were unable to do anything intensive for the time being!

Commander Taon looked towards the Swordmaidens, who had already gone ahead of the rest.

"It's your turn now."

The Swordmaidens exclusively piloted melee mechs, but that did not stop the brave and battle-hardened elites from closing in on the astral beast!

Once they received their orders, they accelerated their mechs forward but made sure to avoid intersecting with the flesh torpedoes.

While it was definitely useful to destroy the offspring of the Titania, it was better to cut them all off at the source!

Just like the Eye of Ylvaine's battle network, the Swordmaiden battle network began by aligning the minds of the Swordmaiden mech pilots together.

The difference here was that the nexus of the battle network was not a design spirit. Instead, Venerable Dise took over that role! Ever since Ves had implanted her with her own companion spirit, Respa had been quietly growing in her mind.

Though Respa was not as strong and flexible as Sharpie, it excelled at one specific job.

Facilitating a battle formation.

With Respa's existence, Venerable Dise did not have to do a lot to support the battle network. She only needed to condense the minds of every Swordmaiden and use that to fuel her next resonance-empowered attack.

"Come on, you big beast!" She taunted at the Titania even as the Swordmaiden battle formation closed in on her recently-damaged side. "Hunting beasts is my pastime. After this battle, you will become the greatest prey in my hunting record!"

The thought of slaying such a huge and powerful beast aroused her savage desires. She imagined that she was back in one of the hunts that she used to do as a hobby.

It had been so long ago that she had been so carefree. The Decapitator held by her expert mech hummed as if it yearned to spill the Titania's grayish blood!

As much as Venerable Dise wanted to stay true to the Decapitator's name, she knew it was unrealistic to behead the gigantic astral beast. She couldn't even identify its head!

"It doesn't matter. The Ylvainans have already pointed out the way!"

She prepared one of her own sword techniques. It was a lot different to do so when she was connected with so many fellow Swordmaiden mech pilots.

As their mechs rapidly closed in on the Titania's massive body, the illusionary greatsword hovering above the Swordmaiden battle formation glowed before launched forward in a powerful thrust!

The tip of the giant energy manifestation sank straight through the Titania's already injured wound.

This time, the sword sank deep! The enormous blade made out of unknown energy continued to part through hard and tough alien flesh until the crossguard almost collided against the Titania's surface!

"Wow!"

"That sword went deeper than any of our attacks!"

Even as everyone admired the handiwork of Venerable Dise and the Swordmaidens, the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seekers were almost ready to unleash the coup de grace.

Two different formations approached the Titania at the same time! Even though they moved separately, they all consisted of Valkyrie mechs!

"The Superior Mother shall purge the wicked!"

What was even more remarkable about the two formations was that each of them were led by different expert mechs!

The Everchanger led the Penitent Sisters while the Star Dancer Mark II led the Glory Seekers!

Both expert mechs would be showing off what they could do as part of their respective battle formations for the first time since they were created!

*Chapter 3559 - Star Dancer Mark II*

"She's so adorable."

Venerable Brutus Wodin gazed lovingly at the squirming and bubbling baby cradled in his arms.

Though Gloriana did not casually allow others to hold her infant daughter, she held unreserved trust for her brother.

"Guuu... buuabawaaaaa..."

The protective aura that Brutus had tried to dampen as much as possible couldn't help but flare out a bit. Nevertheless, the adorable girl did not feel bothered by his presence at all. In fact, she basked in it given how she began to make encouraging sounds.

Brutus gently stroked and played with the baby's tiny hands. Her soft skin was so delicate and seemed to glow in the bright light of the hangar bay of the Indigo Tremor.

Gloriana did not pay a visit to the Glory Seekers in order to let Brutus play with his new niece. She came for a more important purpose.

Currently, she was completing her inspection of the new Star Dancer Mark II. Venerable Brutus already performed numerous trials with his new expert rifleman mech. The data gathered on its performance when moving its limbs, engaging its flight systems and performing target practice all indicated whether the powerful new machine performed as it should.

In general, the Star Dancer Mark II was a well-designed and well-built machine. Gloriana had poured her love for her brother into its design and creation, so the mech did not show that much discrepancies or unexpected faults.

That wasn't enough for Gloriana, though. She wanted the best for her blood relative and closest sibling in the Wodin Family. She could not forgive herself if her negligence caused her brother suffered an accident in a future battle!

"Are you finished, sister?"

Gloriana nodded as she stepped away from the workstation. "I didn't need to make a lot of adjustments to your new expert mech, but I wanted to be as precise as possible. I've already written up instructions that your maintenance crew needs to follow. The Star Dancer Mark II is not designed to require frequent maintenance, but it is always helpful if it is being attended to on a daily basis. This is a mech that will maintain its strength and maybe even grow stronger if it is treated as a valued treasure."

"Don't worry, sister. Marshal Ariadne assigned the best mech technicians of the Glory Seekers to care for this expert mech. It's the only one we have after all. still can't believe that I obtained an expert mech that is much more powerful than my previous Star Dancer."

Venerable Brutus would always remember his former machine that had served him well for a time, but by all measures his current expert mech was leagues better.

Its design budget was much more generous. This allowed for the inclusion of two fairly powerful and special resonating exotics that were compatible with Venerable Brutus.

A Hexer Master Mech Designer who specialized in evasive mobility had seriously put a lot of effort into the design project. Her work elevated the mobility of the Star Dancer Mark II near the top of its category.

The luminar crystal weapon was another custom work from his brother-in-law. The beautiful crystal rifle was fairly slim but packed a surprising amount of punch for its dimensions. Though it used up energy at a more rapid rate, Brutus found this to be a worthwhile tradeoff if it meant that his mech could more easily overcome the defenses of enemy expert mechs.

That was the primary purpose of his Star Dancer Mark II, after all. It was not a machine that was meant to defeat a lot of regular mechs, though Brutus always had the option to do so if there weren't any better targets in range.

Brutus looked up at his new machine that he hoped would serve him well for many years.

The expert mech's exterior was covered by a gleaming blue-and-black coating that added a lot of class and mystique to the machine and paired well with its crystalline rifle. Its overall contours were fairly slim and resembled that of light mech though its mass and dimensions conformed to that of a medium mech.

Even the signature looks of the mech designers were added with loving detail. Ves had added an elegant third eye made out of high-quality luminar crystal to the Star Dancer Mark II's forehead. Gloriana had surrounded it with her usual hexagon though in a blue rendition to fit with the color tones of the expert mech.

The Master who led the project also added her own touch to the machine by marking a portion of the flight system with red-and-blue stripes. They were meant to symbolize the power of the expert mech's flight capabilities.

Of course, the appearance of a mech had little to do with its actual performance. Brutus had already piloted the mech a few times and what he experienced initially blew him away.

He was not unaccustomed to piloting living mechs. During the time he was left without an expert mech, he had piloted the Valkyrie mechs in the hands of the Glory Seekers plenty of times.

The mechs brought him closer to the Superior Mother and also responded lovingly to his presence.

Yet the experience of piloting a truly tailored living mech like the Star Dancer Mark II was leagues better!

The expert mech was not only a lot more responsive to him, but it was also easier to develop a mutual understanding with it. The two were figuratively and literally made for each other and that allowed the both of them to bring the best out of each other when they got serious!

The Star Dancer Mark II was not perfect though, much to Gloriana's regret. Its high maneuvers and its powerful rifle all consumed a lot of energy. This was a problem because the rifleman expert mech did not contain a lot of space for energy storage.

This was not a problem in short-duration fights, but Venerable Brutus would have to make tough choices if a battle stretched out longer.

Still, these faults did not detract from the Star Dancer Mark II's excellent dueling and battle potential.

The mech could outfight many other expert ranged mechs at medium range. It was blisteringly fast and as long as Venerable Brutus utilized excellent judgment, he could probably evade most incoming attacks!

However, the Star Dancer Mark II performed even better against expert melee mechs. As long as the powerful enemy machines were not as fast, they would never be able to catch up to Brutus' swift new expert mech unless there were special circumstances.

All in all, Brutus could already imagine having a much easier time defeating the Charlemagne and many other enemies that he fought against in the past with this new machine!

When Gloriana returned to her brother's side, she took back her baby within her arms.

"Did you miss me, Aurelia?"

"Boooboowaaa..."

"Miaow~"

Clixie sidled up to Brutus and rubbed her side against his legs. The expert pilot smiled and bent down in order to cradle the cat instead.

Gloriana was in absolute bliss at the moment. She reveled in the company of her baby, her latest expert mech and her dear brother. The only way her day could go any better if Ves and her remaining direct relatives in the Wodin Dynasty were here as well.

"The true power of the Star Dancer Mark II does not solely lie in its basic performance parameters." She explained. "Its key resonating exotics can completely turn around a losing fight in the right circumstances. We selected and incorporated them in order to make your expert mech stand out as machine that can rescue itself and others."

Brutus nodded. "I know. I do love the abilities that come with my expert mech. They compliment me well and I can easily find uses for both of them. The only ability that I truly lack is to amplify my attacks to the power of that of the Amaranto, but I don't expect you to achieve that in an expert rifleman mech of its configuration. My mech might not be able to match the Amaranto's firepower, but its mobility and dueling capabilities are leagues ahead."

The two were quintessentially different rifleman mechs. Though they shared the same mech type, they performed substantially differently which meant that their pilots had to fight in vastly different ways.

Though Venerable Brutus figured he could perform decently well if he switched over to piloting a ranged mech with a sniper configuration like the Amaranto, it would be a waste of his talents. His long-ranged marksmanship was not as good and he wouldn't be able to make proper use of his advanced evasive skills.

"What are your experiences with the two main resonating abilities of the Star Dancer Mark II?" Gloriana asked.

"They both worked well, though I only tried them out a few times. They're powerful and extremely useful, but they impose such a strain on my mind that I can't activate them repeatedly. For now, I can only comfortably trigger each ability once. Any more than that and I will not be able to maintain as much resonance as before."

That did not sound good to Gloriana. "I hope this problem will alleviate over time. Now that you've obtained an expert mech, you should be able to exercise and progress your resonance strength again. Try your best to grow quickly. This is the only way for you to utilize the resonance abilities multiple times."

When Brutus looked back at his expert mech, he imagined how he could turn around a battle if he activated those new and amazing abilities.

One of them was the Maestro Mode. This resonating ability was a fairly simple amplification of his expert mech's mobility. The Star Dancer Mark II's flight system and boosters could become up to 300 percent more effective for a short amount of time.

While Brutus was aware that there were other expert mechs that could obtain even greater amplifications, he was already happy with what he got. It was always harder to pull this off in a ranged mech as opposed to a melee mech.

The other ability was far more special. It might not define the Star Dancer Mark II like the Maestro Mode, but it uniquely fit his conviction and his inclinations. This rare ability would definitely allow him to differentiate himself from Venerable Stark and define his own identity in the expeditionary fleet!

"The key to using your offensive ability is confidence." Gloriana noted. "I don't know how it works exactly, but from what I have learned and inferred, its effect can only work if you believe wholeheartedly if you are doing the right thing. If not, this ability can easily backfire on you and mistakenly harm our own side."

As an expert pilot, Brutus never lacked any confidence.

That did not mean he wanted to be careless, though.

"I've successfully pulled it off in the first try, so it definitely works. I haven't tried it out in an actual battle, so I might not be able to maintain the right mindset. I already plan to activate this ability as many times as I can during my practice sessions. With repeated use, using it will become second nature."

"That's good to hear." She smiled. "I hope we won't encounter anything dangerous in the near future. You still haven't spent enough time piloting your new expert mech for my liking."

Unfortunately, events did not play out that way. As Gloriana and many of the other mech designers of the Larkinson Clan provided support to the Larkinson mech pilots from the design lab, she looked with great concern as her brother was about to lead a battle formation against a massive astral beast!

"Please be safe, brother. Don't get too close."

As a living Hexer mech, the Star Dancer Mark II possessed an intimate connection to the Superior Mother. This turned it into one of the best machines to channel the Supreme's power!

However, there was one other expert mech that was able to form an even better connection to the Superior Mother.

The Everchanger was not meant to be a Hexer mech, but at this moment it was hard to believe in this fact!

*Chapter 3560 - Born For This*

Of all of the expert mechs designed and built by the Larkinsons, the Everchanger was the most special one of all. At least that was what Ves thought.



The Everchanger was designed with several distinct themes in mind. Two of them were very relevant in this current battle.

The first major theme was adaptability. As a hero mech, the Everchanger was already flexible, but that was not enough for Ves. He wanted his work to be able to adapt in a different way that no other mech designer could accomplish.

Through his efforts, the Everchanger became capable of switching between design spirits.

While it was technically possible for Ves to do that for any of his living mechs, this was the first time he expressly developed a machine with this functionality in mind.

It required a substantially different approach to the Everchanger's spiritual design and Ves had to invent plenty of new solutions in order to make sure that the expert mech was able to channel each design spirit well enough.

All of the trouble was worth it, though. The Everchanger became a mech that was quintessentially a mirror of Joshua. It was 'nice' mech that possessed a lot of vitality and was open-minded to any design spirit no matter their character.

If Joshua wanted to, he could temporarily turn the Everchanger into an Ylvainan mech. He could also make it channel Bravo, Zeigra, Qilanxo and many other design spirits depending on the circumstances.

Right now, the Penitent Sisters needed to maximize the power of its battle formation, so Venerable Joshua performed a role that he had played several times in the past.

"It's time for me to become a Hexer once again." Joshua spoke. "Try and keep up, Everchanger."

I WAS BORN FOR THIS, JOSHUA.

Ves once told Joshua that the Everchanger was a third-order living mech.

Although the pilot didn't know why it was called this way, Joshua knew that his first true expert mech was vastly more alive and intelligent than the Quint and the Valkyrie Prime.

The previous two mechs he piloted were all great in their own ways, but he hadn't piloted the former for years while the latter had been cannibalized to fabricate the Everchanger.

Perhaps the Everchanger's Unending alloy still remembered what it used to be a part of, because the living expert mech synced up to the Superior Mother particularly well!

Joshua felt the distinctly strong presence of the Superior Mother descending on the Everchanger and suffusing it with her glow.

She even greeted him in a familiar way as if he was a good friend of her family.

"Please work with me to slay this astral beast. If we can't finish off this giant monster... then Larkinsons will begin to die again."

So far, the battle hadn't produced any casualties, but that was because the Titania apparently lacked direct attack methods.

However, once its living flesh torpedoes managed to get close to any ship, they would certainly be able to wreak a lot of havoc!

Though it certainly cost a lot of energy and resources for the Titania to generate and launch its flesh torpedoes, it hadn't stopped at all despite being impaled by a giant energy sword just a moment earlier.

Instead, the astral beast behaved as if it recognized the need for haste. As more parts of it became awake, the Titania accelerated its production of flesh torpedoes!

Aware of the importance of his mission, Venerable Joshua tried to channel and embrace the Superior Mother as best as possible!

"Penitent Sisters!" Transmitted to the hundreds of Valkyrie Redeemers that were flying behind the green-coated mech.

The expert mech looked especially grand, but not because of its white and gold accents.

The real reason why it looked so good at the head of the Penitent Sister mechs was because it was the only machine that wore a long red cape!

This giant piece of sturdy fabric was merely a decorative element that Ves had prepared for the Everchanger as an extra touch. The emblem of the Larkinson Clan emblazoned in the middle of the cape made its allegiance unmistakable!

Though the cape did not add any hard performance boosts to the expert mech, it complimented another theme.

Venerable Joshua and the Everchanger were both meant to serve as heroes.

They were the symbols of the Larkinson Clan and could inspire the Larkinsons in a way that allowed them to keep their morale high even during this challenging situation.

While Joshua was not able to inspire confidence by leading the troops like Commander Casella Ingvar, he was able to lead the Larkinsons from the front instead of the rear!

With the Everchanger acting as the tip of the spear, the glorious caped expert mech glowed brighter as Joshua became more immersed in his current role!

"The Superior Mother is with us, Sisters! Our purpose is clear and our enemy is straight ahead. Let us call down the Supreme so that she can smite this giant beast in person! For the Clan!"

"FOR THE CLAN!"

The Penitent Sister mech pilots found that they were able to sync up to each other and the Superior Mother a lot better than before.

This was not because Venerable Joshua was more experienced with leading the Penitent Sister battle network or because he was piloting a better mech.

The true reasons were related to the different mindsets of the mech pilots.

The Penitent Sisters trusted and accepted Joshua a lot more than before. He had proven his capabilities before and did not inspire any doubt from the women who ordinarily preferred to be led by one of their own.

Yet this was not enough for the battle formation of the Penitent Sisters to become more powerful than that of the Glory Seekers!

The biggest influence was one of the main resonating abilities of the Everchanger.

When Ves initially decided to adopt a resonating exotic known as Iridescent Mercury as one of the two key resonating materials of the Everchanger, he didn't really have a clear idea on its value.

After all, unlike other resonating materials, it did not provide a direct boost in combat capabilities to the expert mech.

That did not mean it was useless!

The effect of Iridescent Mercury was to enable to Joshua to amplify the Everchanger's glow by a drastic extent.

He had activated this new resonating ability at this moment, which not only caused his expert mech to glow brightly, but also envelop the Penitent Sister mechs around it with a much stronger, purer and livelier version of their own glows!

"This is amazing!"

"The Everchanger is such a good mech for us to follow!"

No other living mech designed by Ves was able to exude a glow as strong and far-reaching as the Everchanger in this state!

Two similar-looking energy manifestations of the Superior Mother appeared above the battle formations of the two different Hexer-related units.

Since they were flying side by side to each other, it became easy to make direct comparisons between each other!

"The Glory Seekers are faring worse."

"That's surprising. Isn't Venerable Brutus a genuine Hexer? How come he is doing worse than Venerable Joshua?"

"Cut Gloriana's brother some slack. This is his first time doing anything like this. Besides, the Glory Seekers aren't as familiar with our methods as our own Larkinsons."

Whatever the case, it was undeniable that the battle formation generated by the Glory Seekers was not as good in many aspects.

This was why the Glory Seekers went first. Their formation moved ahead of the other one even as the Superior Mother's energy manifestation began to prepare for a strike.

The formation they adopted was new. Instead of flying in a fixed shape, the Glory Seeker mechs all flew around in flat but random patterns. Due to the Superior Mother's influence, the Glory Seeker mech pilots always knew where to move.

Even the Star Dancer Mark II joined in. The graceful expert mech flew as if it was dancing its last waltz in space.

The chaotic movements of the mechs of the Glory Seekers resembled that of an insect swarm or a dust cloud.

Despite their lively movements, the mechs actually exuded a distinct lack of vitality, which caused them to present a stark contrast to the mechs of the Penitent Sisters.

The Valkyrie mechs began to slow down their random movements as they came into range of their target.

In the meantime, the Superior Mother's energy manifestation generated by the Glory Seekers began to break down into dust particles.

Fueled by the efforts of the Glory Seeker mech pilots, this large dust cloud propelled forward until it struck the side of the Titania.

The half-awake creature's massive body convulsed as the area that had been struck by the energy dust cloud visibly weakened!

The upper layers even began to transform from living flesh into ordinary dust!

Even though the intangible dust cloud did not penetrate any deeper than that, its effects did not end there. The flesh that hadn't been turned into dust but nevertheless became scarred by this frightening metaphysical attack began to inhibit the functioning of the Titania!

A significant portion of the dust cloud had flowed into the penetrating wound generated by the Eye of Ylvaine and the Swordmaidens a short time ago. This dust not only widened the narrow channel that led deep into the Titania's inner portions, but also damaged and strained some of the astral beast's internal organs!

Though no one knew for sure how this dust formation attack affected the Titania, it looked as if the astral beast had suffered such a severe shock to its own systems that it was unable to spit out as many flesh torpedoes or regulate its enormous body as well as before.

This was particularly relevant to the Larkinsons because the Titania had been trying to rearrange its own body to resist subsequent attacks to its deepest parts.

It was at this time that the Penitent Sister battle formation made its move.

Its larger, brighter and more vivid energy manifestation seemingly came alive as Venerable Joshua amplified it by lending his true resonance to the battle formation!

The Superior Mother seemingly looked at the astral beast as if its fate had already been sealed. Weakened and made vulnerable by her earlier attack, now she was prepared to launch the attack that many Larkinsons had been waiting for as soon as the Penitent Sisters first began their approach!

The Penitent Sister mechs all adopted a large and wide V-shaped formation with the Everchanger occupying the middle.

Joshua finally saw that the time was right.

"Unleash death!"

The Penitent Sister battle formation unleashed the power of its death formation once again!

The dark, greyish V-shaped energy attack surrounded by a green corona launched forward and struck at the weakened flesh of the Titania.

Much of the creature's biological tissue remained unaffected as the energy wave phased through the giant creature's body without encountering any obstacles.

In fact, it actually seemed as if the astral beast had not incurred any damage at all! The Titania did not convulse nor made any other apparent reactions.

However, the energy wave did not exit from the other side. It did not suddenly disappear, but was actually circling around and trying to pass through as much of the Titania as possible!

This proceeded for a short time as Venerable Joshua and the Penitent Sisters struggled to maintain the battle formation at its greatest intensity as long as possible!

Finally, the Titania exhibited a reaction!

The gigantic astral beast shook its massive body even as it grew less active!

According to the sensors that kept track of the energy activity inside the astral beast's body, many hotspots rapidly began to cool down as they no longer burned any flesh to sustain the creature's activities!

"Is it... dead?"

"No." Ves shook his head as he carefully scrutinized the projection of the Titania. "The astral beast is still alive. I can feel it. The difference... is that it is mentally and physically injured. It is more vulnerable than ever before!"

He had guessed that the Penitent Sister's infamous death formation attack might not yield the best outcome.

However, a part of him expected this result. Even though this space creature was probably stupid, the Titania's enormous body anchored and solidified its mind in a way that would make it difficult to assail!

Perhaps the Penitent Sisters would have been better off by utilizing the woman formation attack formation, but there was no guarantee it would kill the beast either.

At least now the Titania was crippled and impaired to an extent that left it completely open to follow-up attacks!

"Get in there and attack before the astral beast recovers! You have a straight channel to its internal body. Make use of it to land the killing blow!"

"Roger that, sir!"

This time, a number of Larkinson and Crosser melee mechs advanced forward!

The Riot, the First Sword, the Bolvos Rage and the Amphis all passed through the wide-open channel that led into the belly of the beast!