

Mech 3671

Chapter 3671 Repeat Customer

The money problem was a big issue. Joshua and Ketis also didn't have to spend such an extravagant sum of money in order to conceive a baby. Many couples managed to do fine by spending far less.

However, the two Larkinsons weren't ordinary anymore. Their positions in the clan essentially catapulted them into the upper echelons of their society. They had the opportunity and the means to aim for better.

While it may not be justifiable for them to spend 4000 MTA credits to commission a designer baby, scrounging up a more modest sum like 1000 MTA credits was a lot more doable.

While Ketis promised to come up with the financing, the married pair also had to make a few important decisions.

"Girl or boy?"

"Boy." Ketis said.

"Girl." Joshua said.

Ranya crossed her arms. "You didn't talk about this before you arrived here? You can take your time to decide, but it's best to notify us as soon as possible. The preparation to develop a new designer baby will go a lot smoother if we know which one you desire."

The swordmaster furrowed her brows. "Why do you want a girl, Joshua?"

"I'm an only child. I never grew up with a sister, so I think it would be nice to raise a girl first. What about you, Ketis?"

"A boy would be a pleasant change for me." She answered. "I don't have anything against women, but I grew up in a woman's world among the Swordmaidens. I don't want to get too close to the Hexers so I think it would be great to focus on boys for a change. Besides, there's another good reason to aim for a boy this time."

"And what is that?"

Ketis turned to Ranya. "Ves and Gloriana are planning to conceive a girl for their second child, right?"

"That's private information."

"Heh, it's not much of a secret considering how much Gloriana brags about her present and future children. I think there's a lot of promise if we manage to raise a boy around the same time. If our two kids get along..."

The implications were obvious. They were also disturbing to Joshua.

"That sounds way too meddlesome, dear." Joshua replied. "If we raise a boy, I don't want his life to revolve around becoming the consort of one of the patriarch's children. Besides, the age differences do not matter as much. With how long all of our children get to live, it doesn't matter if one half of a pair is ten or even twenty years younger. Why must we insist on going through with this arranged marriage stuff? We don't live in a royal palace."

"The opportunity is there, Joshua. Why not take it? I will admit that it isn't likely that our two kids will get together, but it will be nice if it happens."

They both decided to get a boy at first. Ketis deeply wanted one and Joshua didn't have much of an objection to the choice. He could just wait a few years before he could spoil a baby daughter.

"Very well, then. A boy it is." Director Ranya confirmed as she made an internal note. "Do you have a plan for his future? As I've mentioned earlier, genetics do not determine everything, but they can provide extremely helpful boosts when they compliment whatever your child wants to do when he matures. It can mean the difference between becoming an average professional and becoming a leading figure. Just look at how Gloriana turned out. My former dynasty poured a lot of money into her development and the results have already exceeded expectations."

"I wouldn't call Gloriana a smashing success considering how much of it was only possible through the man she managed to capture..." Ketis said.

"You get the point. You may think of her what you will, but you should realize that out of every Gloriana, there are tens of thousands more female mech designers who have failed to advance to Journeymen. Her augmentations played a large role in that, though her strict upbringing also had a lot to do with it. There are many people who possess a lot of augmentations but have never accomplished anything in their lives. Child rearing is a comprehensive system that encompasses a lot of factors. Designer babies of different tiers need to be raised according to different strategies in order to achieve the best results."

All of this sounded like a maze to Venerable Joshua. He never thought that an ordinary process such as raising children could be so deliberate and complicated. He grew up in vastly simpler circumstances so he didn't have a good impression of what it would be like to raise his son in this fashion.

Ketis was able to understand Ranya a bit better. As a mech designer, she worked with complicated, interconnected systems every day.

"I think it would be best if our son can become a mech pilot or a swordmaster." Ketis said. "I don't mind it if he wants to become a mech designer either. It would be ideal if he chooses a profession in which we can train him and advise him on. What do you think, Joshua?"

Joshua looked more doubtful. "I haven't thought that far. Isn't there a more general enhancement package that doesn't push our child too closely into becoming a warrior or something?"

"There are certainly options, but they are always less efficient and effective than a more specialized approach." Director Ranya smoothly answered. "It's the same way with your mechs. Those machines that try to do everything are relatively mediocre at those jobs while a more specialized mech can perform a lot better when it does the job it is supposed to do. While one approach is not necessarily better than the other, I can tell you that parents that have chosen the general package usually regret it later on. If they were more decisive, they could have given their children a greater boost."

This was a difficult matter to decide. Joshua was much more reluctant to budge from his stance, but his wife made a persuasive case.

"Think of who we are." She told him. "We are not average people anymore. Your humble, down-to-earth impression is cute and all, but let's face it. With our status, capabilities and contributions, we are the new aristocrats of the Larkinson Clan. There is no reason why we should raise our children as if we are part of the rank-and-file. It's extremely likely that our son will follow after us, and since we are both warriors in a sense, we should go for a genetic package that is geared for combat."

Joshua sighed. "Fine. Let's do it your way then. To be honest, I hope our son will become a mech pilot. I can personally tutor him on piloting mechs."

"And I can teach him how to wield a sword as well." Ketis grinned in an anticipatory manner. "No matter what, our proud boy should be able to handle himself in a fight."

Neither parents recoiled at the thought of allowing their child to fight on the battlefield. Warfare was an intrinsic part of humanity and its culture as a whole revered the warriors who fought on behalf of others.

The Larkinson Clan also developed a warrior culture where its defenders, who played important roles, were always revered. Fighting for the clan was both an expectation and a duty.

Now that the couple decided to clear the way for their first child to become a warrior, Ranya accessed a database and picked out suitable choices.

"The most premier package that you can buy at roughly 4000 MTA credits is Witshaw & Yeneca's new Formula K-220505-TIL." She informed the couple. "There are many variations and other related formulas that slightly emphasize certain strengths over others, but this one fits the situation extremely well as long as you can afford the service."

"What makes this formula better than the other ones?" Joshua asked.

"In short, it is a comprehensive designer baby plan that seeks to raise powerful melee mech pilots. Whether they can become an expert pilot or not, any baby grown according to this formula will enjoy significant advantages of those of modest birth like yourself, Venerable Joshua."

The man in question did not think much of it. "We all become more than human once we advance to expert pilot. The differences between augmentations become a lot less important by then. Besides, we can always catch up on the implants and gene treatments that we previously lacked."

"That's true, but the cost and effectiveness of those later augmentations are severely reduced compared to when you can get them at birth or as part of a predetermined plan." Ranya replied. "If you want your son to become an expert pilot one day, then you should embrace this formula. Not only will it make him better in the period before he becomes a demigod, but he will gain numerous small but helpful advantages over other expert pilot once he has reached this level."

"What advantages can we expect?"

"Think of heightened reaction times, reinforced body structure, accelerated recovery, high metabolism, highly-reinforced brain and nerves, slightly higher chance of obtaining the right genetic aptitude, faster thinking speed and reaction speed, heightened concentration and improved memory."

Both Joshua and Ketis looked impressed! As soldiers and warriors themselves, they could envision a lot of advantages for their son if he chose to follow in their footsteps.

"You've mentioned both body and mind-related improvements. Will our child be strong in both aspects?"

"That's not possible unless your budget is a lot higher." Director Ranya shook her head. "You should take into account that Formula K-220505-TIL mostly emphasizes physical improvements over cognitive improvements. The only reason to make the mech pilot smarter is to help him learn all of the theoretical knowledge required to pilot first-class mechs. What truly matters is that the body is capable of keeping up with the speed and stresses of battle."

Ketis placed her hand on Joshua's arm. "I think this is a good package. It sounds helpful even if our son doesn't end up having the right aptitude. I can still do my best to train him into a swordmaster."

"I'm curious about the other variants. What other options do we have, director?"

Ranya Wodin briefly outlined the other formulas.

There were ones that sought to boost the sociability and the intellect of the mech pilot so that the designer baby could become a highly capable mech officer one day.

There were also ones that sought to pave the way to excel in different specializations.

For example, an augmentation package that was geared towards raising rifleman mech pilots would boost attributes related to precision, visual analysis, pattern recognition and consistency.

The formula that Ranya had selected was already oriented towards melee specializations. In these situations, the non-physical improvements were more aggressive in nature.

After considering the alternatives, the prospective parents settled on Formula K-220505-TIL as their goal. It was truly a good enhancement package and aligns best with their own wishes.

As Ranya posed other questions to the pair, their exploratory session suddenly paused when the Dragon's Den sounded an alarm.

Joshua quickly sprung up to his feet. "We've moved up to orange alert!"

Orange alert sat between yellow alert and red alert. It essentially signaled to the Larkinsons that while their fleet wasn't under attack, there were enough indications that battle may be imminent.

It was always better to be safe than sorry in these circumstances!

His wife also developed a sharper demeanor as she acknowledged the danger that they might be in. "Let's continue this discussion later, Ranya. We may have a battle to fight."

"Yes. Of course." The biotech expert and leader nodded. "I should go as well. My researchers will worry themselves to death if someone doesn't hold their hands at this time."

A thousand additional mechs had already deployed by the time that Joshua and Ketis boarded a shuttle back to the Spirit of Bentheim. More were clearly on the way as the Larkinson Clan did not want to get caught with its pants down!

Chapter 3672 The Pakklaton Race

The Golden Skull Alliance became engulfed in an uproar when its people heard that they bumped into real aliens this time!

It was only a matter of time before the expeditionary fleet came across genuine aliens. The Red Ocean was filled with them. Even if the Big Two eradicated a lot of vermin, a few mice always managed to squeeze through the cracks.

Everyone who could help tried their best to identify the race of the arriving aliens and estimate the approximate combat strength of the alien starships. Larkinsons, Crossers and Glory Seekers worked together to share their collected data and contact any external helpers that could provide them with expert opinions.

The Black Cats played the most prominent role at this time. While their contributions in actual battles was much more limited, they were always invaluable when the Larkinsons urgently needed to collect more intelligence!

The Blinding Banshee deployed her powerful sensor arrays and channeled lots of power to them. As a dedicated spying vessel, the observation readings she was able to gather were much more detailed and reliable than the readings made by other ships such as the various fleet carriers.

Her passive sensors played a particularly important role at this time. She was able to resolve a lot more visual details of the distant alien fleet despite the relatively distant range from the orange dwarf star that the star system centered around.

Even though the alien fleet was several light-hours away, the human defenders had to assume the worst and take into account that the alien threat might drop in the neighborhood at any moment.

This was because the alien warp drives were simply too effective at enabling sudden assaults.

They allowed for starships to literally outspeed light when traversing through realspace.

The biggest implication of this was that ships could arrive faster to a destination than the light of their passage!

Any fleet equipped with warp drives therefore possessed a lot more tactical flexibility in battle. As long as the drives could activate, the ships could sneak up to an unsuspecting fleet and drop out of warp travel only to open fire in an instant!

As warp drives were the most predominant method of superluminal travel in the Red Ocean, many intelligent alien races had adapted their warfare to the possibilities and constraints of this key tech.

Various strategists and officers came together in order to discuss countermeasures. Plans had been made in advance but no one truly knew whether their measures could keep their fleet safe.

The key problem was that the expeditionary fleet had been lingering in the star system called Orange Tulip for a while now. The light of its presence must have definitely reached the position of the alien fleet before the newcomers entered themselves.

In short, the aliens had advance warning that there was a large human pioneering fleet in the outer system!

This was a devastating difference and could easily provide the aliens with a great advantage as long as they struck while the expeditionary fleet was in the dark.

Though the aliens apparently hadn't struck during this critical window of time, no one knew whether the unknowns were already on their way. This was why it was important to deploy the mechs in space in advance.

It would have been too late to launch them afterwards if the alien fleet dropped on top of the Golden Skull Alliance!

Fortunately, the threat wasn't too acute. The expeditionary fleet came equipped with dimensional smoothers and other high-tech modules that created numerous highly abstruse effects which generally solidified the material dimensions when simplified to the extreme.

Since warp drives worked by distorting the space surrounding the starships, plunging into solidified space made it a lot harder for them to work.

Unless the power and tech disparity was too large, a typical warp drive would no longer be able to function properly when crossing a zone that was under a dimensional smoother field.

The expeditionary fleet was already spreading out its vessels in order to expand the envelope of this field and make it more difficult for ambushers to take them out all at once.

The alliance partners also did more than that. They deployed thousands of small, disposable observation drones that were meant to keep an eye on the outer perimeter.

With the help of larger drones that were equipped with quantum entanglement nodes, the fleet could effectively get a brief advance warning on the approach of any hostile fleet traveling through warp.

This advance warning might only give the Larkinsons and their allies thirty seconds to get ready for imminent battle, but that was better than nothing.

As Ves headed into the conference room, a cloud of concern and even fear hung over the gathered leaders and commanders.

Once the last attendees arrived via projection, the virtual meeting commenced.

"Director Calabast, tell us what the Black Cats found." Ves instructed.

The former Hexer did not smirk or waste any time. She called up a number of projected images that showed fairly detailed images of the distant alien fleet that had clearly been processed.

"We have detected around thirty clearly alien hulls at this time. We cannot rule out the possibility that the aliens have more vessels than that, either hiding behind their larger vessels or deployed elsewhere in the Orange Tulip System. If the aliens have done the latter, then we have not detected any of them as of yet. Our scanners are still combing through the star system as we speak in order to make sure we have not missed any that are relatively close to our position."

Thirty hulls. Each of them looked fairly large as well, though there were still variations in length and outward appearances. They all looked vaguely triangular in appearance with some of them looking fatter while others looked sharper.

"After consulting with both external experts and the MTA database, we have managed to identify the alien race that operates these vessels." Calabast continued. "With all of the data we collected and analyzed, we can say with certainty that the fleet belongs to the pakklaton race."

"Pakklaton... race?"

"Who is naming these alien races anyway?"

"That's not important at this moment."

Calabast knew that no one knew much if anything about this minor indigenous alien species, so she prepared a brief presentation.

Another projection appeared that displayed large, intelligent birds that operated advanced equipment with their articulating claws.

"The pakklaton race consists of large avians that are 66 percent taller than the typical human on average. They originally evolved on a planet with a gravity of 0.76 g. One of the implications of that is that their bodies are relatively soft. They are not dependent on exotics for their growth so they are not constrained by them either."

"What are they like compared to humans?" Ves asked. "What can you tell me about their culture?"

"The pakklatons may look fearsome, but they tend to be non-aggressive in nature. They are highly communal and care a lot about their fellow pakklatons. Their unity is high and they are usually led by the oldest pakklaton that is also respected. We do not have any information on how the pakklaton leaders are elevated to office, but we do know that the pakklatons will always obey the commands of their superiors."

"I see. What of their territory?"

"They managed to build up a decent empire for themselves in the Red Ocean that was located in the Torald Middle Zone, which is closer to the center of this galaxy."

"The Torald Middle Zone?"

Calabast nodded. "Correct. The Big Two have recently swept through this zone, so all of the wounds are still fresh. The pakklatons have essentially lost all of their territory as recently as a year ago, so you can imagine the state this fleet is in. After we have distinguished that 21 of their ships are civilian in nature, we believe we are looking at a refugee fleet at the moment. It may have been on the run for a year as the state of many of its alien ships are not optimal."

A lot of tension drained out of the virtual meeting chamber as Calabast announced her conclusions.

Though her analysis could be wrong, there was a large chance that the threat wasn't as imminent as they thought.

"Wait. This doesn't quite make sense." Commander Melkor stated. "If the pakklatons are refugees that are trying to survive, why would they flee from the Torald Middle Zone to the Krakatoa Middle Zone? They are heading deeper into human-occupied space!"

Calabast acknowledged this observation. "You are correct in pointing that out, commander. Most pakklaton fleets have indeed fled away from newly-conquered human space, but there are always exceptions, not just for this race, but others as well. They either fled too late, did not want to get anywhere near the frontlines, are led by irrational leaders, are on a holy mission or are seeking sanctuary in places of extreme danger. Any of these reasons and more can explain why this particular pakklaton refugee fleet is traveling in what we consider the 'wrong' direction."

It was impossible to ascertain the motives behind the alien refugee fleet's decision to head this way, so the Larkinson Clan's director of intelligence quickly moved on with her presentation.

"Let me briefly explain what we know of their combat capabilities. First, like nearly every other civilized race in the Red Ocean, the pakklatons mainly rely on warships and orbital defense platforms for space warfare. We don't have to worry about the latter so let us concentrate on the former."

She activated a projection that displayed clips and still footage of many of the Pakklaton starships that humanity had encountered in previous contact incidents.

Understandably, much of the archival footage and images came directly from the Big Two. The alien vessels rarely met a good end as they quickly got skewered by human warships or mechs, but they provided everyone with a decent impression of how the Pakklatons built their ships.

"General, would you do the honors?" Calabast nodded towards their highest military official.

"Certainly." General Verle said as he began his own presentation. "I've studied the material on how the aliens fight their battles, and I can say that the pakklaton combat doctrine is fairly simple."

He summoned a projection that showed a number of pakklaton warships in combat. They utilized their powerful thrusters and relatively light frames to gain superior positioning and choose their fights carefully.

What impressed Ves a lot about the triangular bird-shaped warships was that they mounted a lot of laser weapons.

"As you can see, the pakklatons make almost no use of projectile or missile armaments. Instead, they have specialized in developing and utilizing laser weapons. Though their weapons are worse than that of any of the major alien races, the pakklatons still enjoy substantial advantages compared to their regional alien peers."

"How good are these laser weapons against our own fleet?"

"We cannot say for certain, but the alien warships pose a definite threat to any of our starships if they are fully operational." General Verle replied. "Make no mistake. Confronting even a single alien warship will lead to painful losses because the pakklatons always arm their combat-oriented vessels with a full array of primary laser cannons. Unlike our race who favors the use of turrets, the pakklatons have mounted all of their main cannons in forward-facing positions. This means that if these ships ever orient in our direction, they can unleash their full power towards any targets in front."

The firepower that even a single alien warship could unleash in front was devastating to say the least. The primary laser cannons were so powerful that they could probably skewer through the hulls of large civilian vessels in relatively quick order!

Even heavy-armored vessels such as the Graveyard and the Gorgoneion would not last long if the alien warships were able to concentrate their fire!

"And this pakklaton fleet has nine of these warships?!"

"Not... exactly."

Chapter 3673 Lion Pride

"What do you mean by that remark, Calabast?" Ves asked as he turned his attention to the spymaster's projection.

"Look at these images and data sets." She said as she projected them all. "I am aware that this is technical for all of you, so I will direct your attention to a couple of key observations. First, look at these energy readings. The emissions of all of the pakklaton starships are lower than was recorded in the MTA database. Unless the aliens are trying to feign weakness, this is a prime indicator that the condition of their vessels are not in good shape."

Commander Casella Ingvar agreed with this assessment. "No refugee fleet can possibly remain fresh after being on the run on a continuous basis for a year. It must have fought against numerous hostile fleets during its flight and may have even lost a lot of ships during each encounter. What we may be looking at is the remnants of a much-larger fleet."

Professor Benedict Cortez of the Cross Clan spoke for the first time. "That's not enough. There is still a chance this could be a ruse. What other clues have you gathered that can support your conclusion?"

"The alien fleet is likely performing extensive repairs on its starships." Calabast answered as she brought up a few sensor readings. "According to our analysts, this data tracks the changes to the various parameters of the different starships. Their mass, dimensions, material composition and so on are varying slightly over time. This is a typical sign that the aliens are performing emergency repairs on their hulls. These jobs are substantial as we have detected numerous signs of heavy battle damage and missing parts."

There was so much data that pointed in this direction that the pakklaton fleet was undoubtedly vulnerable!

"If they're performing active repairs at the time, then they should not be in a good shape to launch an imminent attack on our fleet." Patriarch Reginald Cross stated the obvious.

This made everyone relax even further. Though the chance that they could get jumped by a surprise alien fleet was always present, at the very least the pakklatons should be more concerned with rescuing their own vessels rather than taking any offensive actions!

Of course, that was assuming they were rational and were mainly concerned with trying to survive.

If any of these assumptions weren't true, then the Golden Skull Alliance may have a difficult fight on its hands!

Ves knocked his fist against the table. "Don't underestimate the pakklatons even if their ships are in poor shape. I've been in situations where the fleet I was traveling with has suffered great losses, but could still defeat opponents that thought they could take advantage of easy prey. Those warships with all of those warship-grade laser cannons look incredibly scary."

"The alien warships are not completely unmanageable." Patriarch Reginald Cross judged. "The power of their larger warships is indeed formidable, but the ones that are a part of this fleet are smaller ship classes that are more suited for patrol and escort duty rather than participating in major battles. How big are they?"

"Around 300 to 850 meters in length. The tech level of the pakklaton race is not exceptional and is roughly on par with that of a second-rate state. We only truly need to worry about their laser weapons. Even if their vessels are sub-capital ships by our standards, the firepower they possess can still destroy our capital ships if we attempt to approach their position."

Ves frowned. "Can we even approach their position?"

"What do you mean by that, sir?" Calabast asked.

"We don't have warp drives." He stated. "The alien fleet is also located in the inner system, so we can rule out the use of our FTL drives to approach the pakklatons. The only way for us to proceed is to rely on our sub-light propulsion system, which is not fast to say the least. With heavy capital ships like the Graveyard in our fleet, the speed of our advance will be so slow that the aliens will have plenty of time to form their welcome party!"

"Wait wait wait, are we actually thinking about attacking this alien fleet?" Melkor asked with considerable consternation. "Just look at the size of those laser cannons."

"Commander Melkor is right. We should decide whether we want to attack or evade the pakklaton fleet first before considering what we do next." Commander Casella said.

Ves turned to Marshal Ariadne Wodin of the Glory Seekers. "You women haven't said anything so far. What do you think?"

The older woman was not ready to form a proper answer. "This is a difficult question given that we are working on too many assumptions and hazy long-ranged observation readings. The risks are too great. Even if we can overwhelm this alien fleet, as long as the pakklatons have enough cannons operational, we can actually lose three to five capital ships, which would more than invalidate any possible gains we can make."

Ves still saw numerous reasons why they should take advantage of this rare opportunity to confront a damaged alien fleet.

"If we can succeed, we can obtain either intact alien ships or salvage enough valuable debris to do a lot of interesting stuff with them. The pakklatons don't use materials as haphazardly as the Titania."

"We have safer ways of earning money." Commander Melkor argued. "It's not worth it to exchange lives, mechs and ships for alien salvage. These pakklatons aren't even a big deal in the Red Ocean so how valuable could their tech and materials truly be? We should fight for a more worthy cause."

Ves disagreed. "I think the risks aren't as great as they appear. If their ships work similar to human ships, then this degree of battle damage and attrition is absolutely serious. General Verle, given what you know so far and assuming the pakklaton fleet isn't in a state to attack us, how would you go about attacking it without suffering significant losses?"

"Hmmm..." General Verle thought for a moment while studying the intelligence on the target. "I have a hunch that the pakklaton fleet is in such poor shape that at least one or more of their alien starships are not fit to engage warp travel. If we have enough supporting data to back up this assumption, we can try to prey on their weakest elements while chasing away their stronger ones."

Commander Sendra grinned. "Like a lion pride stalking a large herd of herbivores."

Verle nodded. "Correct. It does not matter that we do not possess warp capabilities of our own. We should just proceed with initiating a normal advance towards the pakklaton fleet. If the aliens are paying attention to their surroundings, then they will definitely notice our approach. It is not as if we can hide our movements anyway."

"Then... we will be slow-marching towards the alien fleet? In open sight?"

"Yes. This will only work if the pakklaton refugee fleet is not able to regain its strength quickly and if no additional vessels arrive. If that is the case, then our advance will mostly proceed without a problem until we reach a certain range."

General Verle tapped towards the projection of a pakklaton warship. "These ships are designed and built for long-ranged combat. Laser weapons are the most accurate weapons to use at longer ranges since the beams they fire travel at the speed of light. Theoretically, they can hit predictable targets that are light-minutes or light-hours away. In practice, diffusion and other effects can quickly dissipate the power of these weapons. You should be able to tell us more about that, patriarch."

"With the way that laser weapons are built, a bit of skewing and scattering of firepower is always inevitable." Ves said. "At relatively shorter ranges, this divergence is

practically unnoticeable. Laser weapons can reliably hit targets that are hundreds of kilometers away without any significant loss in power. However, when you start firing at ranges that are 100,000 kilometers away, you get confronted by a bunch of problems. The divergence of a laser beam becomes extremely severe at that point. In addition, slight deviations in alignment can make a beam go wide from its target by many kilometers."

"How would you judge the long-ranged striking capability of this damaged fleet, sir?"

"We would need more detailed observation data to be sure, but with all of the knocks these alien warships have endured, it is practically untenable for their laser weapons to be in perfect alignment and condition." Ves said. "Unless their alien technology is freakier than I thought, the constant fleeing and frequent fighting must have induced a lot of wear and tear on the ship systems. Not just the laser weapon systems, but also the sensors and power transmission systems should be compromised to different degrees. Oh, I'm sure they can still be deadly at shorter ranges, but they should be a lot less reliable at more extreme ranges."

"We can also hit them back as well." Commander Taon Melin of the Eye of Ylvaine spoke. "The guns of our Transcendent Punishers and other mechs aren't nearly as impressive as that of the alien warships, but we have quantity on our side. With the Prophet's blessing, our artillery mechs may be able to pick off their exposed laser cannons before the enemy warships can get much use out of their working weapons."

This was a good idea, though Ves wasn't sure it would work as well. The Transcendent Punishers were not fantastic at long-ranged precision because they not only had to account for the inherent variables of their mech frame, but also take the movement of the ship they were stationed on into account.

Still, the plan may still work if a large quantity of ranged mechs fired their weapons at the pakklaton refugee fleet.

Even if 99.99 percent of shots missed their mark, that 0.01 percent of attacks that managed to strike a warship would still amount to a lot of damage!

Over time, no pakklaton starship could bear that amount of damage.

General Verle made another important observation. "The pakklaton race mostly build their starships light and fast. Their naval doctrine does not place a heavy emphasis on defensive combat. If their ships are truly in a poor condition, then their mobility must also be affected. This will not only make it easier for our mechs to land hits on their starships, but also pressure them to make a painful decision."

"And that is...?"

"The aliens can either stand their ground and attempt to defend their entire fleet, or they can cut their losses and run with the starships that are functional enough to warp out of the battlefield."

It was the same concept as lions or wolves preying after herd animals.

Whenever the predators chased after their prey, the old and weak usually fell behind. Their only fate in this circumstance was to end up in the bellies of the successful hunters.

This was part of the cycle of nature on many different life-bearing planets. It was so ubiquitous because it was a successful formula.

Ves and the others could easily envision this formula working in this circumstance as well!

"All of this sounds good, but we need to ensure the alien fleet will truly leave with the majority of its ships." Melkor stated. "To do that, we need to pose enough of a threat. Do we have enough firepower to make these aliens back off, or will they choose to gamble on a last stand?"

No one could give a definite answer. Not only did they lack a lot of information about the strength and condition of the alien warships, they also couldn't predict the reaction of the pakklavons themselves.

General Verle gave everyone a reminder. "Don't forget that we are dealing with real sentient aliens this time. We cannot blindly apply our understanding of how humans will react to certain events in this case. What if the aliens are compelled to answer to any challenge? What if the idea of abandoning a heavily-damaged starship is intolerable to them? What if they have reached their breaking point and seek a fight to the death in order to honor whatever alien gods they worship? Let us try and figure that out first before we commit to a fight."

Chapter 3674 Limited Usefulness

After an important conference call, the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance came to a surprising decision that caught many people off-guard.

Instead of remaining on guard against a maybe-imminent alien assault or trying to get away from the Orange Tulip System as fast as possible, the expeditionary fleet actually chose to launch an attack on the pakklavon fleet!

"What?! Why would they do that? The aliens have warships!"

"According to what I've heard from above, those warships aren't as scary as they look. The pakklavons are not a strong race to begin with, and their ships must have gone through a lot of hardships after fleeing from their collapsed empire non-stop."

"Even if they're down, they're definitely not out. They have genuine warships, you know. Even damaged ones can still burn our mechs into ash!"

"I've heard that those big laser guns must be worn out or damaged by now. With our fresh and well-functioning mechs, we can definitely overwhelm the pakklavon ships at range."

"Have you lost your mind? These are warships you're talking about! Our mechs can't fight against them on even ground. All of those virtual training sessions where we're pitted against different alien warships always end up badly for us. If any of their combat systems are still reasonably intact, they can still chew through hundreds of mechs before we can finally defeat one of their warships."

"The brass will think about that problem, not us. We just do what we're told."

Opinions on the fleet's apparent course of action were decidedly mixed to say the least.

Just the thought about going out of their way to provoke a fight against an alien fleet with nine formidable warships was enough to make a lot of Larkinsons shake in their boots!

"Hahaha!" A veteran Avatar mech pilot slapped the back of a younger colleague. "What are you fellows scared about? This isn't the first time we Larkinsons faced warships head-on. Have I ever told you about the Battle against the Abyss?"

"Who hasn't? That battle is legendary!"

"It also caused a lot of clansmen to fall in battle..."

Many mech pilots in the Larkinson Clan had no real experience fighting against any warships. As a consequence, many of them became unstable in the following hours as their nerves and all of the negative propaganda against warships sapped their confidence.

It took a lot of effort to get these mech pilots back on track. A lot of mech pilots were kept busy by putting them through meetings, quick simulation training and frequent patrols.

As everyone geared up for battle, Venerable Jannzi sought out Commander Melkor.

"What's going on?" Jannzi questioned as she pinned her cousin with a glare. "Why exactly are we choosing to provoke an unnecessary complication? The alien refugee

fleet clearly isn't interested in attacking us, so we are not under threat. That will definitely change once we enter into battle with them. Is Ves so determined to repeat the debacle of the Battle against the Abyss!?"

"Hey, to be fair, our situation is much better than before." He told her. "Our alliance can field more than 12,000 second-class mechs, many of which are armed with ranged weapons or can wield a spare rifle. The power disparity between our forces is much more tilted in our favor. The alien starships are riddled with damage and I bet they are also low on supplies. The morale of these pakklaton aliens must be low as well due to traveling deeper into human-occupied space with no safe harbor for them to find shelter."

Jannzi didn't look assured at all. "I'm only hearing guesses and assumptions from you. That's always the problem with Ves. He's way too overconfident and always thinks the enemy will fit his preconceived notions. Then he gets all surprised when the enemy does something that falls outside of his expectations. Look, I'll be happy if this pakklaton fleet doesn't end up as bad as I think, but what if my fears are closer to the truth?"

The Avatar Commander carefully approached and put his arms on the female expert pilot's shoulders.

"We aren't going in blind. We all thought about the concerns you've mentioned. Before we get anywhere close to maximum engagement range, we will keep collecting as much information on the pakklaton ships as possible. The closer we get, the more our sensors can resolve the true state of the enemy fleet. We're also consulting with lots of outside experts and consultants that know more about the pakklaton race and their combat capabilities. If we ever find out that a battle will lead to severe losses, we'll turn around without hesitation. That is what we all agreed upon during the meeting."

Though Venerable Jannzi didn't feel reassured by this, her momentum subsided a bit. She lifted her steely arms and held onto Melkor's outstretched limbs.

"I hope you are right, but I will stay on guard as long as possible. Take care and don't let you or your men die just because Ves is greedy to conquer another warship."

She pushed aside his hands from her shoulders and marched away. She had a bad feeling about this attack. She could feel it in her bones that Larkinsons would die today. Those alien warships all looked formidable and their primary weapons could easily breach the hulls of the Larkinson fleet's combat carriers if they were accurate and functional enough.

Her thoughts lingered on one key question at this moment.

"Can my Shield of Samar and I block a warship attack?"

Elsewhere, a trio of other expert pilots came together in one of the pilot ready rooms of the Wild Torch to share their thoughts on the upcoming battle.

As the latest capital ship to join the Larkinson fleet, the Wild Torch distinguished herself from the Gorgoneion by hosting a lot of wilder, rougher and more aggressive soldiers.

The concentration of Flagrant Vandals, Heavensworders, Swordmaidens and Penitent Sisters aboard the vessel also led to a noticeable increase in female mech pilots aboard the fleet carrier.

As the expert pilots suited up, two of them did not look excited about the upcoming action.

Venerable Orfan let out a frustrated grunt. "We won't be playing much of a role in this next battle. Everyone is saying that this battle will be decided at ludicrous ranges. Even if our expert mechs are powerful enough to chew through hundreds of opposing mechs, my spear isn't long enough to cross a distance of thousands of kilometers!"

"My Decapitator will fare no better either." Venerable Dise said in a resigned tone. "My sword will stay sheathed in this battle, I think. Both of us will have to make do with the luminar crystal rifles the clan will hand out to our mechs."

"These stupid aliens! All of them are using warships as if they are the best ways to kill their enemies. Why have none of them converted to fielding mechs?"

"I would imagine that they don't have the time to make the conversion. Their territories have already been razed by the Big Two." Dise dryly responded.

The spearman mech specialist turned to the only ranged mech specialist in the ready room. "Stark, you'll probably have a really great time soon. Out of all of our expert mechs, yours is the most useful by far. That Amaranto of yours is the closest thing to a warship-grade cannon that we possess. The only way we can output higher damage than your expert rifleman mech is if we employ a battle formation."

Dise shook her head. "It won't work. Battle formations can be powerful, but their effective range is too short. Those powerful energy attacks rapidly lose cohesion the longer they are active. We need to get into spitting distance of the alien warships in order to hit them. That is also the range where they are most effective."

The reason for that was because nearly every warship was armed with secondary weapons. Their calibers were substantially smaller than the main guns, but that also made them a lot more suitable to intercept lots of smaller targets such as missiles and warships!

If a fully-functional warship was able to unleash the firepower of all of her secondary guns, then the vessel could easily output as much damage as hundreds of Transcendent Punishers if not more!

This was the main reason why the Golden Skull Alliance did not count on its melee mechs to fight this time. The chances were too high that hundreds if not thousands of mechs would collapse without even being able to sink their weapons into the hulls of the enemy vessels.

"Don't expect too much from me either." Venerable Stark spoke up. "It's true that my Amaranto's firepower is greater than anyone else's, but don't count on me to disable the enemy warships by myself. It takes a great amount of effort, concentration and energy to fire continuous powerful resonance-empowered energy beams. The most I can do is exploit any weak points generated by the attacks of other mechs and hasten the elimination of our priority targets. The Avatars, Sentinels and our allies will all have to do the heavy lifting for this battle."

The Amaranto was only one machine and Venerable Stark was only one expert pilot. Even though she was arguably the strongest among her peers in the Larkinson Clan, a stronger ant was still an ant in the face of a human!

The only way for the ants to topple the giant human was to dispatch the entire swarm to overwhelm the massive entity. This was essentially what the Golden Skull Alliance was hoping to accomplish.

Every mech pilot knew that mechs were ultimately fragile and vulnerable before warships. Unless mech technology improved to a point where their offensive or defensive capabilities experienced a transformational leap, this condition was unlikely to change!

Elsewhere aboard the Wild Torch, a pair of expert candidates held a similar conversation.

"Damn. Why did my mech come with so many physical guns? My B-Man won't hit anything in the ranges that people say will decide the battle!"

"At least your mechs are still tuned to fight with ranged weapons." Imon Ingvar said. "My Blade Chaser's debut battle won't see me doing anything of importance. My new custom mech can only wield a spare rifle like the other useless melee mechs."

"Hm, you never know, buddy. These aliens are all unique. Minor races like the pakklatons have to depend on something in order to survive in a galaxy dominated by the thirteen major races. This fleet has been on the run for a year according to what I've heard. If that is so, how come it still exists?"

Imon shrugged. "Alien warp drives are more convenient when it comes to hiding in deep space. Any ship or fleet can warp travel to the void between star systems and stop at a random coordinate. Unless we possess extremely advanced and powerful long-range sensors, it's too hard to detect any ships at these ranges. I've heard the aliens have even built entire secret bases at these void hideouts!"

"Aren't the Big Two supposed to track down and demolish these places?"

"Maybe that is where this refugee fleet came from, though it may very well come from their original territory." Imon reminded Vincent. "Don't forget that these alien warp drives are much slower compared to FTL drives when it comes to traversing a lot of distance. A journey that takes a few months for us can easily take more than a year for these aliens."

"Wow. You sound smart. Did you learn all of that by yourself?"

"No. My sister explained it to me when I called her earlier."

"Oh."

A brief moment of silence ensued before Imon spoke up again.

"Do you think we're doing the right thing?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we're actively attacking a fleet of refugees that were driven out of their homelands. They are hardly an honorable target."

Vincent threw his friend a serious look. "We're talking about a fleet of hostile alien remnants. Sure, they may look weak and pathetic right now, but the pakklavons would not hesitate to do the same thing to us if our positions were reversed. It's kill or be killed in this dwarf galaxy. If we let these aliens go, they'll eventually bump into other humans and get wiped out anyway. The only variable is how much damage they could do. Since we are big enough to pick a fight with the pakklavons, we might as well do our part and make the Red Ocean safer."

Chapter 3675 Carnation Heavy Rifle

As the expeditionary fleet closed in on the apparently vulnerable pakklavon refugee fleet, the Larkinsons weren't the only ones gearing up for a hard fight.

The Cross Clan and the Glory Seekers also made their own preparations.

Though all of the attention in the expeditionary fleet went to the Larkinson Clan these days, that didn't mean the other alliance partners had been sitting on their thumbs.

As the heir of an ace pilot and the former ruler of a territory, Patriarch Reginald Cross still possessed a modest degree of clout in certain circles. He worked hard to get his clan established in the Red Ocean and attract the specialists the Crossers needed in order to develop a more rounded organization.

Professor Benedict provided even more assistance to the Cross Clan. After joining the Cross Clan's new kinship network, he had increased his commitment and used his status and capabilities as a Senior to the limit in order to make life better for the Crossers.

From hiring a batch of Journeymen willing to work under him to completing projects that injected both money and MTA merits to the Cross Clan, he did more to support the clan than anyone else. Not even the Cross Patriarch was able to do so much to pay the bills and keep every ship and mech unit supplied!

Of course, the man who used to be known by a more notorious name understood that he could not gain ownership of the Cross Clan through these efforts.

So long as a strong and heroic expert pilot who rightfully inherited the Cross Clan from his mythical father occupied the patriarch position, the Senior stood little chance of gaining the upper hand.

Unlike the Larkinson Clan where mech designers distinctly enjoyed a higher status than its warriors, high-ranking mech pilots definitely had more say in the Cross Clan.

If Patriarch Reginald wasn't around, then Professor Benedict would most definitely try to contest for leadership, but so long as the powerful expert pilot was alive, it was pointless to make the attempt.

Though both leaders implicitly understood that they were in a competitive relationship with each other, they still respected each other as men who wanted the best for themselves and the Cross Clan.

As the powerful expert pilot approached the side of the Senior Mech Designer, they looked down over the catwalk to observe the preparations in the hangar bay of the flagship of the Cross Clan.

The men below briefly paused their work and cheered as they spotted the presence of their leader and idol!

In response to their adulation, Patriarch Reginald Cross grasped the ancestral heirloom that hung on his neck and raised it in the air.

"The Cross Shall Rise Again!"

"VICTORY FOR THE CROSS CLAN!"

Just a single cry was enough to skyrocket everyone's morale!

This was the power of a leader who everyone admired. The Cross Clan's mech pilots did not understand anything about mech design and would never be able to comprehend the full magnificence of Professor Benedict's work.

Patriarch Reginald did not suffer from that problem. Mech pilots understood each other the best, so the rank-and-file soldiers all idolized the expert pilot because he was their goal!

After he finished inspiring his own troops, the Cross Patriarch lowered the Cross of Rebirth. He gazed at it with mixed feelings.

Ves had made the object to house the nexus of the kinship network. Salvaged metal from the ace mech of Saint Hemmington Cross had been used to make the relic.

Each time Reginald carried it on his person, he felt as if he was truly carrying on his father's legacy. The Cross Clan must prosper under his leadership, and the upcoming battle was a test to see whether it had made any progress.

"How fare our mechs?" He asked.

"We are still working with the original rim-level mechs that we've brought from the Red Ocean, but that should not play a significant factor in this battle." Professor Benedict answered. "The condition of our mechs are close to optimal. We have maintained them well and they have yet to be subjected to any significant ordeals. They will serve their pilots well."

The Cross Patriarch grunted and nodded. "What of our new solution against warship-level threats?"

"With the help of the Cyclical Engine, we have managed to fabricate enough Carnation heartland-level heavy energy mech rifles to equip all of our dedicated ranged mechs with them. This also frees up thousands of ordinary mech rifles that we can pass on to our melee mechs. The accuracy and firepower of the latter will not be impressive, but at least they will be able to contribute to the battle at an early stage."

The Carnation rifle was one of the latest homegrown products of the Cross Development Center, the new mech parts company founded by Professor Benedict.

The company had been in operation for a while now and developed numerous different projects, many of which wouldn't be unveiled for many months.

However, the Senior rushed the development of the Carnation rifle model because the expeditionary fleet needed an urgent boost in heavy firepower.

Though the weapon was not large and powerful enough to be classified as a cannon in mech terms, the Carnation model was the answer to the Larkinson Clan's exclusive luminar crystal rifles.

"Will the Carnations do our clan justice in this coming battle?" Reginald asked his mech designer.

"Oh, I have no doubt about that." Professor Benedict grinned. "While I admit that the Larkinson Clan's alien-derived luminar crystal weapons are truly powerful, the Carnation model does not fall behind. The main way we have been able to increase its performance is to scale it up to a heavy rifle. It is thicker, longer and heavier than more average weapons, which allows us to integrate larger and more powerful sub-components."

Both of them looked down the hangar bay where a number of ranged mechs grasped their new heavy rifles before flying through the main exit hatch.

Anyone looking at the heavy rifles would know that they packed a powerful punch! With two different attack modes, the dual-type rifles could fire a laser beam, which was more accurate and sustainable, or a positron beam, which possessed greater damage potential and penetration power.

Though Patriarch Reginald respected the firepower of the new guns, he did not entirely approve of them. "These heavy rifles will fare better in battles against warships than against mechs. Their size and mass makes them too slow and unwieldy. The mechs that wield them will have trouble fending off enemies at shorter ranges."

"That is true, but remember who we are fighting against, sir. The pakklavons have no history of employing either mechs or starfighters. We do not expect our mechs to dogfight the alien units. At longer ranges, the advantages of the Carnation model heavily outweighs the disadvantages. The additional firepower, the higher precision and the excellent efficiency of my work will result in a weapon that can keep bombarding larger targets from a distance without interruption. They are also relatively affordable and not that difficult to produce in large numbers."

The entire reason why the Carnation heavy rifle was able to compete with the Larkinson Clan's luminar crystal rifle was because the former was bigger in every way.

Another way to look at it was to regard luminar crystal rifles as weapons with miniaturized components. The luminar crystals used to make them provided much better performance at smaller sizes.

This was why scaling up was the easiest way to catch up to the power of luminar crystal weapons.

Though Professor Benedict would have preferred the more elegant solution of relying on superior tech to outfit the Crossers with more potent guns, the requirements were too high at the moment. The Cross Clan needed to obtain a lot more funding and expertise as well as a supply of higher-quality exotic materials.

Both men knew that it would take time to fulfill these conditions. Until then, coming up with stopgap solutions like the new Carnation heavy rifles served as adequate substitutes.

After discussing the readiness of the Cross Clan's mechs, the Cross Patriarch addressed another topic.

"The Minerva Project you have been working on with those Larkinson brats is nearly complete, right?"

The Senior nodded. "Yes. It's a fine project, and one that has turned out better than I initially expected. It is a pity that we chose to take our time on optimizing it. If we decided to finalize its design sooner, then we could have fabricated it already and have it ready to debut in the upcoming battle."

"It is primarily a command mech, correct? I do not foresee a situation where Commander Casella Ingvar is required to lead her men in battle. If this fight turns into a long-ranged artillery duel, then the most she can do is raise everyone's morale and use her rifle to disable the enemy warships a little faster."

Professor Benedict crossed his arms. "The Minerva Project is not what you think. After working on it alongside someone as unorthodox as Patriarch Ves Larkinson, I am already certain that it is far more than a simple machine. I have truly seen first-hand how this remarkable Journeyman has steadily turned this expert command mech design alive. While I have already witnessed this in his other work, seeing it happen step-by-step in real time is much more admirable. I have learned plenty of insights from him, which is impressive considering he is still a Journeyman. His perspective on mechs is radically different from that of his colleagues."

"Your praise of this design makes me more eager to see it in action. It is indeed a shame that we cannot see it in action this time." The Cross Patriarch said. "Once this project is over, I expect the Larkinson brats and you to work on designing my long-awaited successor of my Bolvos Rage. How ready do you think they are for this project? Don't forget that my future and the future of my clan is at stake."

"You have made that abundantly clear, Reginald. I am mildly optimistic about the Larkinsons. Patriarch Ves and Madame Gloriana are both excellent for their ages. Ves is absurdly passionate and while his excitement occasionally encourages him to make extreme design choices, I can temper his excesses. Gloriana is highly detail-oriented, which is good in many cases but can also lead to tunnel visioning. I can tell she has

made efforts to constrain this trait, but she will still need guidance to remain on the right track."

"That is good to hear. What of their other Journeymen?"

"The remaining six Journeymen Mech Designers are not as good." Benedict plainly replied. "Ketis Larkinson excels in designing swordsman mechs and may be able to design an excellent mech sword for your next machine if you are willing to switch from using an axe as your preferred melee option."

The Cross Patriarch shook his head. "No. I can see the attraction and I am confident that Swordmaster Ketis will be able to forge even sharper swords in the future, but I have dedicated all of my melee training towards mastering the axe. I have fought too long with axes and destroyed many of my most memorable opponents with their help. I do not have a heart for swords."

"I will note that down. If this is the case, we will likely proceed with designing your new high-tier expert mech with the same design team of the Minerva Project. Now that we have worked together for several months, we have learned much about each other. Our cooperation has reached a higher level and we will retain much of our advantages once we begin to work on the new project. The only substantial difference is that I shall be leading the project instead of the Larkinsons. I prefer to handle my mech design projects differently so the Larkinsons must adjust to my regime."

Patriarch Reginald looked nonchalant. "I don't care how you manage your work. I only pay attention to the results. Give me a high-tier masterwork expert mech and I shall lead the Golden Skull Alliance to greatness!"

The Larkinson Clan may have the limelight at the moment, but once he advanced to ace pilot, the dynamic of their alliance would definitely change for the better as far as he was concerned!

Chapter 3676 Our Cause

"Our sisters in the field are as well-equipped as they can be." Galina Rovon-Hartul explained to Marshal Ariadne Wodin. "The new model luminar crystal rifles equipped by the Valkyrie Redeemers and other mechs are not optimized to fight against warships, but they are better than ordinary weapons. They will be decently effective as long as they can concentrate their fire on the damaged sections of the alien warships."

As the new head designer of the Glory Seekers, Galina's trajectory was anything but normal. She was not a Hexer by birth and was initially reluctant to embrace the ideas of what was clearly a fringe culture in human space.

Then she began to live and work alongside the Hexers. Slowly but surely, she began to accept or at least tolerate the many beliefs and idiosyncrasies of this expeditionary force.

She looked up at the Valkyrie Interceptor that the Glory Seekers preferred. Compared to the base model, this variant performed significantly better in space at the cost of worse performance in planetary environments.

Although the designs of the Valkyrie mech line were already several years old, they were still impressive in their own right.

As a proud and independent Journeyman, Galina Rovon-Hartul did not easily look up to the work of her peers, but the Valkyrie mechs did not give her any other choice.

The living mechs were completely fascinating! Their additional properties were amazing and their ability to allow their mech pilots to form so-called battle formations was practically a game changer if it was allowed to spread!

What truly turned her to the Hexer cause was her frequent exposure to the glows of the Valkyrie mechs.

This was strange. Galina grew up in a secularist state and never took religion all that seriously. She never imagined that she could believe in a deity, but with every other Hexer alongside her professing their undying faith to the Superior Mother, she began to change her stance.

She always felt more confident and assured when she experienced this mysterious phenomenon. After learning more about the Superior Mother, she developed a greater understanding and connection with the glow.

The transition did not happen in an instant. She gradually came to believe in the Superior Mother's existence and power over many days.

Rewatching the archival footage where the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seekers utilize their battle formations numerous times convinced her that the Superior Mother was not a figment of anyone's imagination.

Seeing both mech units employ the power of the Superior Mother against the Titania completed her conversion.

She had become a worshipper of the Superior Mother.

The Hexers were glad to see her embrace the Supreme in her life. She became a part of their sisterhood and found true belonging in them. This was much different from her past circumstances.

There was a reason why she was so eager to leave for the Red Ocean.

As her worship of the Superior Mother deepened, Galina inevitably grew more curious about her supposed 'son'. His ability to tie the Supreme to his mechs was proof of his special connection to her. His other feats and accomplishments earned her a growing amount of respect.

On some days, she quietly cursed Gloriana Wodin-Larkinson.

If Galina came across Patriarch Ves a few years earlier, perhaps she would have become the mother of his children.

It did not matter that she was more than a decade older than the man she was fascinated with. In fact, it might even be an advantage considering what people say about him and older women.

"The greatest factor that will limit our effectiveness against the alien warships is our lack of numbers." Galina continued to explain to Marshal Ariadne. "We are only able to field half as many mechs as the Cross Clan at the moment, which means our weight of fire will be substantially constrained. In addition, We do not have many mech pilots that excel in long-ranged marksmanship in our mech force. They will struggle to target the weak points of the enemy vessels as long as the range remains extreme."

Marshal Ariadne Wodin was well aware of this shortcoming. "We must rectify this in the future. This will not be the last time we encounter alien warships. The Red Ocean is filled with them so we must be better prepared to fight against threats of this nature."

"Hey, I can try my best to solve this issue, but I cannot do much without obtaining the necessary support from your parent organization." The recently-joined Journeyman asserted. "The last time we received a major supply drop from the Hexers in the new frontier was back in the Vulit Central Star Node. It's been months since then and all we have received are small batches of containers."

This was one of the biggest factors that determined the state of the Glory Seekers. The expeditionary force was not self-sufficient and still derived all of its funding and support from the Wodin Dynasty and other friendly Hexer organizations.

Marshal Ariadne knew exactly why the additional aid she applied for hadn't arrived as of yet. "I am sorry to say that we must learn to subsist by ourselves for a time longer, Galina. More and more Hexer pioneers have fled the Komodo Star Sector and come to the Red Ocean, but they are mostly preoccupied with building their own colonies. Their demand for resources and funding is immense, and they are not that eager to contribute to our common cause."

Galina did not look surprised at all. She found the Hexers to be a lot less united once they left their big state and started anew in the new frontier. Each of them still showed

interest in banding together, but they also recognized that they could have a greater say in a possible new successor state if they built up their strength during this critical early period!

"Well, good luck getting any support from these Hexers."

"They will have their reckoning sooner or later." The marshal said. "The matriarchal dynasties that wish to keep the Hexers in the Red Ocean are already starting to make adjustments. They have promised to provide us with much more substantial support in the coming months and years once their own colony settlements have attained a limited degree of self-sufficiency."

"Do you believe them?" Galina asked with obvious skepticism in her tone.

"They will if they want to stay in the good graces of the Superior Mother. Her son is a part of this fleet, so the stronger we become, the more we are able to protect him. Aside from that, it is also imperative that Patriarch Ves Larkinson continues to appreciate our presence. We cannot fall behind while the Larkinson Clan keeps building up its numbers. Every Hexer on this side of the beyonder gate will have to depend on his work to fight for a place in the Red Ocean."

Founding a state was not a trivial matter. The Hexers not only had to found numerous colonies in the same zone, but they also had to tie them together into a cohesive collective that was able to lay claim to all of the star systems within their stated borders with no exceptions.

Numerous struggles would definitely ensue!

As Ariadne continued to enlighten Galina of the challenges the Hexers face in founding a new state in the Red Ocean, they stopped in front of the only expert mech in the Glory Seeker mech lineup.

The Star Dancer Mark II was a magnificent expert mech. Designed by a Hexer Master Mech Designer, the fast and agile rifleman mech had not yet been tested in the situations it was designed to excel in. No one thought it was weak, though.

Venerable Brutus Wodin instantly came to attention as the pair of women approached. "Marshal. Head designer."

"Are you ready for battle, Brutus?"

"I am always ready to fight our enemies, ma'am."

"You do not sound that eager. Speak freely, boy."

Brutus grimaced. "Though I will not object to this action, I can still think. I question the necessity of attacking an alien fleet that still retains a degree of battle effectiveness. We should save our strength for more worthy battles in my opinion."

"Many soldiers share your sentiment." Ariadne said. "That does not change our decision. You have seen how our mech pilots are reacting to the prospect of fighting against warships, correct? Your fellow sisters are intimidated by the prospect of confronting them. They are more scared of fighting against heavily-damaged warships than entire Fridayman mech divisions. This has to change, and the best way to do that is to get it over with under controllable circumstances."

"I see."

As an expert pilot himself, he understood what the marshal was getting at. As long as the Glory Seekers successfully got past this hurdle, they would no longer exhibit an excessive degree of fear when confronting other warships in subsequent battles.

The presence and absence of this fear could have a large influence on the overall battle effectiveness of the Glory Seekers!

As long as the Golden Skull Alliance made the right bet, they could come away from this incident without suffering too many losses.

"Will your mech be able to play a major role in the coming battle?"

Venerable Brutus shook his head. "No. Do not expect too much from me. My mech excels at dueling other expert mechs. Against larger threats, my Star Dancer Mark II lacks the caliber and staying power to repeatedly burn through the thick hulls of those alien warships."

"We will make sure your mech can keep fighting while in the field." Galina told him. "I have already arranged a squad of mechs to carry extra energy cells and assist with any demands you might have."

"That will be helpful, Galina. Thank you for arranging that. It will not turn my Star Dancer Mark II into an artillery mech, sadly."

"We need more expert pilots and expert mechs." Venerable Brutus stated the obvious.

"That will be difficult to arrange." Marshal Ariadne replied. "Unlike the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan, we do not have many expert candidates on our pilot roster at the moment. We cannot easily ask for high-ranking pilots from the other Hexer pioneers in the Red Ocean either because they need them more. Besides, their expert pilots are highly loyal to them instead of us. The only real solution to this problem is to nurture expert pilots from within our ranks. Brutus. Give us your opinion. How likely do you think our mech pilots can break through in the near future?"

The expert pilot frowned in thought. "I cannot say. Our mech pilots are well-trained and eager for new challenges. What I am not as certain about is their reasons for fighting."

"What do you mean by that, Brutus?"

"Look at us." Brutus swept his hand all around. "Nominally, we are part of the Wodin Dynasty. Our initial mission was to accompany and protect my sister Gloriana. Over time, our objectives have changed, and as we have traveled further and further away from the state we came from, it is clear we have become more than just a bodyguard unit. What are we fighting for? Who are we fighting for? What is our place in the Red Ocean and who do we pledge our allegiances to? Will the other Hexers in the Red Ocean truly follow through with their commitments or will they join their other rivals in withholding support?"

Marshal Ariadne Wodin narrowed her eyes. "Careful, Brutus. This is dangerous talk. We are and will always be an arm of the Wodin Dynasty. Your mother and your siblings are relying on us to maintain close ties to Patriarch Ves. We have a special relationship with him and his mother and we cannot afford to drift away from the Larkinson Clan. Ultimately, we are all fighting for the Hexer cause."

"You are wrong, ma'am." Brutus shook his head. "We aren't fighting for the Hexers anymore. We are fighting for ourselves. There's a difference."

Chapter 3677 Conqueror's Heart

The expeditionary fleet steadily advanced in the direction of the orange dwarf that gave this unremarkable star system its iconic name.

So far, the pakklaton fleet had yet to move from its position. Unless the alien sensor systems were truly wrecked, the aliens should have noticed the human fleet coming closer.

The Blinding Banshee continued to operate at high power as her sensor arrays kept observing more details on the alien targets.

The Black Cats along with other analysts slowly came up with well-reasoned estimates on which pakklaton starships were in worse shape than others.

They also consulted with ship officers and ship designers to come up with detailed strategies on where to focus their firepower.

With the help of the public MTA database, the planners were able to obtain detailed blueprints of many different pakklaton ships that the Big Two had managed to capture in the past. They also learned how the large bird aliens ran and operated their starships.

All of this helpful information allowed the humans to craft a detailed set of plans on how to dismantle their targets.

The goal was to achieve the most lopsided possible victory while suffering the least amount of losses!

Thousands of mech pilots grew more nervous than ever. Each of them had received enough rest and attended enough briefings to enter this battle with sufficient preparations.

Through the efforts of General Verle and other leaders, the morale of many of the soldiers improved in the final hours, but there were still a lot of people who questioned the necessity of going on the attack.

Ves wasn't satisfied with this. After all of the battles the Larkinsons had fought, his mech pilots ought to be more fearless in the face of adversity.

This was why he decided to hold another speech. As he stood in the center of the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim, he went over the speech he prepared in his mind while his wife and daughter tried to keep him company.

"Guuuaaa...?"

Aurelia wore a different outfit than usual this time. Instead of wearing a onesie or other form of baby clothing, Gloriana had outfitted her daughter with a pink, custom-built protective suit.

She took great care to achieve a good balance between defense, comfort and bulk.

"Wooooooaaaaa...!"

Currently, her daughter became engrossed by the wonder of flight. The small antigrav modules built into her protective suit allowed her to float while exerting extremely limited control of her flight with her arm motions.

So far, Aurelia had yet to discover the correlation between the two, so she was uncontrollably floating towards the ceiling of the massive bridge.

"Meow~"

Lucky swiftly flew upwards and prevented Aurelia from colliding against the surface. Though Aurelia's suit would have brought her downwards anyway, the cat still felt it was his duty to correct her flight!

"Hihihihhi!"

While Aurelia was having the time of her life in the air, her parents were holding a worrisome discussion.

"I still can't believe you're still insistent on going through with this plan. This attack makes little sense. Don't you realize that you're putting our daughter at risk?!"

She walked up to her husband who was currently wearing his Unending Regalia.

Ves pushed away her suited form from his body. "I've already heard your arguments. I still think it is worth it to proceed. The Red Ocean is a shark tank, Gloriana. It's kill or be killed. The aliens are our enemy and it is our duty as humans to eradicate them so that we can claim this dwarf galaxy for ourselves."

"Don't mess around with me, Ves! The real reason why you are so eager to attack the pakkletons is because you want to earn more glory and prestige. You want to add another accomplishment to your record that states that you confronted real warships in battle and gained the upper hand. Isn't once already enough?!"

"Hey, I thought you would be more supportive of this considering you pay so much importance to reputation. One of the problems we're suffering from ever since we entered the Red Ocean is that no one takes us seriously enough. What we have recently managed to do will help with that, but the best way to stand out among the other pioneers is to show we have what it takes to survive in the new frontier. Confronting and besting one of the most concerning threats in occupied space is a great way to show that we aren't weaklings who will fall over after suffering a single blow."

Gloriana rolled her eyes. Men. "That's not all there is to it, am I correct? There has to be more behind this attack. What are you after, really? Wait. Those pakklaton starships all utilize warp drives to travel through the stars. Are you going after their phasewater reserves?"

"Maybe..."

"You know that won't work, right? As soon as they decide to get out of here, they will transfer their personnel and phasewater to one of their more functional starships. Even if these aliens have completely different thought processes than us, the pakklatons should still be rational enough to know how important it is to retain as much phasewater as possible. They wouldn't have been able to flee for so long without this critical substance."

"We have plans for that, Gloriana. They might not work, but they're worth a try. It would be great for us to get our hands on phasewater this early. We can perform a lot of research on it and see how this material can help our own endeavors. I already have numerous ideas that I want to try out with it. I always had the feeling that it is a lot more versatile than we think. Since it is similar to water, it can probably produce all kinds of new effects when blended with other substances."

His wife could complain all she wanted, but if she could get her way with buying a Hoenbach handbag for 120 MTA credits, then he should be able to get away with his intention to attack a vulnerable alien refugee fleet!

"Sir? We are ready to broadcast your speech."

"Understood. We'll start in thirty seconds." Ves said.

He quickly brushed aside his irate wife and quickly checked his appearance before the recorders broadcasted his speech in front of over 200,000 clansmen.

"My fellow Larkinsons. Each of you are aware that we are likely about to enter into battle against a fleet that belongs to a race called the pakklavons."

He waved his arm, causing a projection that displayed archival footage of the large avian aliens. The birds managed to look both savage and sophisticated at the same time.

"Now, we have all heard your questions and doubts. Why are we going on the offensive? Why have we decided to pick a battle that isn't forced upon us? Is there any honor in assaulting a fleet that clearly contains refugees who have lost their homes, their loved ones and their entire empire?"

These doubts indeed haunted many clansmen since the initial announcement of their attack.

"Know that we have good reasons to launch an attack on these aliens. I won't mention them all because that would be too exhaustive. What I truly want to address to you today is our place in this dwarf galaxy. Since you have joined our clan, you have all learned what it means to be a Larkinson, but we are more than that. Have you forgotten the roots that each of us have in common?"

Ves glanced at the projections showing images of the pakklavon race.

"What separates us from the pakklavons and the other races in the Red Ocean is that we are human. We are invading the territories of aliens that don't pose a threat to us, yes. We have destroyed their homes, yes. We are essentially committing genocide on the original occupants of this galaxy on a wide scale, yes. What I am about to tell you should not be a surprise. Everything humanity is doing towards the aliens is... okay."

He gave his audience a gentle smile.

"None of us are used to doing this, but what we are doing is not only what our predecessors have been doing for millenia, but is also the best way for our children and grandchildren to live in a galaxy without fearing total annihilation from alien threats. Though we have learned throughout our history that our fellow humans can also be

dreadful towards each other, we are ultimately brothers and sisters to each other. We will always show a measure of restraint and tolerance for each other. The same cannot be said when different species consider us to be their archenemies. It has often been the pattern in both the old galaxy and the new galaxy that each race and civilization will try to wipe each other out if they are able to gain the upper hand."

Ves changed the projection to show footage of alien on alien violence. The major and minor alien races of the Red Ocean had already waged countless wars against each other before humans arrived to scene!

"What we are about to do to the pakklatons is nothing different from what the natives have been doing to each other for eons. As I've said, war and extermination are universal patterns that are not absent in any galaxy or society. As members of the human race, we have an obligation to perpetuate—, no, exemplify the values that have made us great!"

He adopted an understanding expression. "I know it is difficult for you to get past this hurdle. Each of us are children of the Age of Mechs, which has produced four centuries of relative peace where we have never been threatened by hostile alien races. Yet just because none of the aliens have launched a serious attack on human space doesn't mean they have reconciled their differences. Far from it! Each alien race can turn into our enemies one day. There is no middle ground in the cosmos!"

His words were having an effect. The clansmen on the bridge began to look at themselves from a different perspective. They weren't just Larkinsons anymore. They were also humans. Each of them recalled that they were members of a larger and immensely powerful civilization!

"For better or worse, each of us needs to awaken the conqueror's heart that every human possesses." Ves said as he thumped his armored fist against his chest plate. "We can revive the glory of the Age of Conquest without repeating the mistakes we have made. We can become a part of the second wave of conquerors and victors who will help pave the way for humanity's dominance. Under my leadership, I will not allow the Larkinson Clan to miss this wave. We are not civilians who need to be shielded from the ravages of war. We are warriors who embrace it because we are strong enough to take on greater responsibilities!"

He instilled the idea that the Larkinsons were more than selfish warriors. They were humans who were ready to step up and contribute to the advancement of the human race!

"Let me hear it, Larkinsons! Are you ready to defend your fellow humans?!"

"WE ARE!"

"Are you ready to defeat humanity's enemies?!"

"WE ARE!"

"Have you woken up your conqueror's heart?!"

"WE HAVE!"

"Then do your best to slaughter the aliens! For the clan!"

"FOR THE CLAN!"

Mechs deployed by the thousands. Many of them had gone on patrol earlier, so they each had returned in order to replenish their supplies and make sure they were in excellent fighting condition.

As the different mech units began to form together and huddle behind the hulls of the fleet's armored vessels, the Golden Skull Alliance was ready to commence the fight.

Ves looked at the local plot of the battlefield and noted that there was still a huge distance between the two fleets.

"This is going to be a challenging firefight."

Chapter 3678 Without Honor

What were they doing?

Melkor had been asking this question ever since he deployed in battle with his fellow Avatars.

Certainly, he was glad to be fighting alongside his men and women. Their Bright Warriors gleamed bright and gold as their surfaces had been polished up to an exquisite shine. The mech technicians responsible for caring for them had little else to spend their time on due to the lack of battles as of late.

The new model luminar crystal rifles silently barked laser beams into the distance. Since the pakklaton fleet was so distant, the attacks all seem to converge in a single point.

In truth, much of the extreme-ranged attacks missed their mark by hundreds of meters or numerous kilometers. It was just too difficult to land consistent hits when the margin of error was so miniscule.

The Avatar Commander wasn't bothered by that. The marksmanship of his ranged specialists were satisfactory and he could hardly ask more of them. They actually outperformed every other mech legion in the Larkinson Clan.

Not even the famed Transcendent Punishers of the Eye of Ylvaine fared any better in this regard. Their mechs were predominantly designed to output massed firepower at medium to long ranges and were not built with too many supporting systems that could help them achieve pin-point accuracy.

Sure, they had the help of their big guy Ylvaine, but from what he could see, the Ylvainans already fell back to relying on themselves after seeing that the extreme range effectively rendered the prophet's guidance useless.

What Melkor actually found disturbing was the nature of their target.

"Since when has the Larkinson Clan stooped so low that it considers a refugee fleet to be a legitimate target?"

There was no denying that the alien fleet not only carried a lot of civilians, but had also suffered from a lot of deprivations over the course of its flight from its original home in the region that humanity designated as the Torald Middle Zone.

While there were many alien races where the concept of a civilian population didn't exist, from what Melkor had researched on the galactic net, the pakklaton race had a lot in common with the human race.

Just like humans, the pakklatons cared for their young, expressed a lot of love towards each other, cared for their fellow avian beings, experienced sadness when their relatives died and possessed a strong sense of duty towards the defense of their weak and vulnerable.

The pakklaton refugee fleet exemplified that latter principle when the Larkinsons finally detected movement.

"Sir, the warships are moving! They have engaged whatever sub-light propulsion systems that are still operational!"

"What are their headings and what are they doing?"

"The warships... the warships are moving in front of their civilian ships. They are using their bulk to cut off our line of sight from their more vulnerable vessels."

Melkor would have admired this decision if the adversaries were humans. Since they were aliens, he felt a lot more mixed about this. It was weird to associate honor and duty to aliens.

Just like any human, Melkor had been inundated with lessons on how the aliens were evil and wished nothing more than to wipe out all of humanity.

That may be true in an abstract sense, but he could hardly imagine how this sad and ragged-looking alien fleet could pose a threat to anyone.

Even if the fleet successfully made it away, the surviving pakklatons could not possibly make a comeback. The Red Ocean would fall into the hands of humanity sooner or later.

Was it really vital for the new owners of the dwarf galaxy to wipe out the natives to the last alien?

Surely human civilization should be powerful enough to grant mercy to these helpless refugees.

The Red Ocean may be smaller than the Milky Way, but it was filled with star systems, many of them barren and not worth the effort to colonize.

It wouldn't take much effort to allow the alien remnants to settle on these worthless territories. As long as the Big Two maintained an outpost in these places, they could make sure that the colonies built by the pakklatons and other conquered aliens remained isolated.

So long as the aliens were not allowed to arm themselves again, their threat to human society would be nil.

Melkor, Jannzi and the other clansmen he had spoken with considered this the most realistic compromise they could make under the circumstances.

Humanity would grasp the Red Ocean with or without their support. This was an inevitable trend that no one could stop due to the huge level of commitment to the invasion and the enormous amount of interest groups that profited from the conquest.

No one could stop an avalanche once it started.

However, as the stronger party in this conflict, the human race could still hold true to its noble values and ideals even as it expanded its territory.

Yet instead of trying to coax the fleeing pakklatons into surrendering, the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance only had destruction in mind.

Melkor had attended the top-level meetings and tried to steer the leadership in this direction.

His suggestions never found purchase. They might as well be rocks sinking into an ocean.

What disturbed him the most was that he heard no inkling of doubt or guilt from Ves.

Though Melkor always knew that the patriarch had always been more of a realist than other Larkinsons, Ves did not even pretend to pay lip service to honor this time.

Was Ves even a Larkinson?

"Maybe I am being foolish." He muttered.

Ves and many other clever-sounding leaders rationalized their actions as contributing to humanity.

The Avatar Commander recognized that wiping any stray alien survivors was in the best interests of humanity.

None of the fleeing aliens would forget about the race that had driven them from their homelands and slaughtered their fellow kin. If they ever regained their power, humanity would definitely bear their wrath!

"It makes sense to eliminate the hidden threats."

If Melkor was a bot, he could easily accept this argument without hesitation.

He was not, though. He was a human. He possessed emotions and had been raised as a soldier by the older generation of Larkinsons.

Times were simpler back then, but Melkor still cherished them all the same. Aliens, warships, the Red Ocean and all of the other headaches he contended with these days were of no one's concern in the past.

He did not yearn to go back to those days, though. The Larkinson Clan had stepped up and became exposed to the wider reality and all of the messiness associated with it. He would rather be a part of this initiative than force others to bear this burden.

"It's hard, though. There is no satisfaction in victory this time."

The dying pakklavons wouldn't be the only ones to mourn this course of events. A lot of Larkinsons would need to reconcile their ideals with whatever might ensue over the course of this battle.

"Are we truly doing the right thing?" He asked for the umpteenth time.

His new mech wasn't able to provide him with an answer.

That was another issue that made him feel more lost than usual. It had only been a short time since he received his long-awaited custom command mech from Gloriana.

The Gold Beacon certainly diverged from the Bright Warriors he had previously piloted. Though its capabilities, features and overall feel fit him a lot closer, the mech was not as alive as other living mechs.

Having piloted Ves' work for years, Melkor had developed a certain amount of understanding and expectations for them. They were like children that started off weak and innocent but slowly developed stronger personalities as their mech pilots educated them with each piloting session.

Melkor had to start all over with the Gold Beacon, which meant this battle came at an awkward timing. He still needed to 'wear in' his resplendent command mech in order to truly be able to pilot it like it was his second skin.

"That's also something that is different."

Now that he was able to make comparisons, Melkor was able to distinguish the works of Ves and Gloriana more clearly.

Gloriana's vision of mechs was a lot less chaotic and more neat. She designed the Gold Beacon more as an extension of Melkor rather than a more independent partner.

The Gold Beacon's sense of personality and self was much weaker, which meant that he could not interact with it the way he did with his previous mech.

Although it was not a necessity for mech pilots to have access to back-talking mechs, Melkor only began to miss what he once had access to now that he had transitioned to a different mech.

"Well, I shouldn't complain. My new Gold Beacon is much more powerful in its own right."

He loved its new rifle which Ves had custom-designed for his mech. It was more powerful and tailored to his preferred marksmanship style.

As he kept firing shots at the distant alien warships, his hit rate was noticeably higher than average. His shots also dealt a bit more damage, though that wasn't always noticeable considering that the enemy warships were so large and covered with thick hull plating.

"Control your firing rate!" He reminded his troops as he noticed that they became increasingly more obsessed with raising their precision. "This battle can take hours. Don't wear out your systems and build up your heat levels so quickly. We need to wait until we get closer before we go hard. Until then, show restraint!"

This pattern dragged on for many minutes. After the initial excitement had died down, the battle turned into a routine where every mech pilot numbly pulled the trigger after minutely adjusting their aim.

Even the contests that the mech pilots held to attain the highest hit rate was no longer enough to make them more enthusiastic about this engagement.

The only variable that could truly cause a ripple in their numbers was whenever the enemy warships managed to inflict real damage with their powerful but inaccurate primary laser cannons.

Dozens of heavy laser beams lanced in the direction of the expeditionary fleet. Many of them went so wide that no one even paid attention to them, but four of the violet beams managed to strike different targets.

Two of them happened to burn through the bow of the Gorgoneion. After suffering repeated hits, the fleet carrier's forward shield generators had reached their limits and needed to cool down and receive emergency repairs before they could be put to use again.

Fortunately, the Gorgoneion was designed to absorb a lot of blows with her impressive hull armor. Her bow was like a solid nose of metal that could endure sustained bombardment without damaging anything of importance.

Another beam glanced the side of the Spirit of Bentheim, which wasn't a big deal either due to the factory ship's adequate protection.

What truly triggered a reaction out of Melkor was that an Avatar mech happened to stand in the way of a large laser beam that missed its intended target.

Instead of damaging a ship, the powerful warship-grade attack engulfed an entire Bright Warrior mech!

By the time the beam faded away, only charred and half-vaporized remnants of the machine remained. The cockpit hadn't been able to endure this immense energy onslaught and turned into a molten mess.

Melkor didn't even want to imagine what the mech pilot went through during this brief interval of time.

"These cannons are only going to get deadlier."

The pakklavons had nine warships. While they weren't as tough as the ships of other races, they were still able to withstand a lot of damage before succumbing.

How many Larkinsons must die before they neutralized the main threat? Melkor feared that the aliens would show much more tenacity than before.

If the pakklatons intended to fight to the death, Melkor was sure his clan would pay dearly!

Chapter 3679 Last Flight of the Shortwings

Once, the pakklaton race prospered.

Of course, the bird-like aliens did not call themselves pakkletons. This was a human word that an exobiologist had ascribed to the large, intelligent avian aliens that used to occupy a corner of the Torald Middle Zone.

In the language of the pakklatons, the large avians generally referred to themselves as shortwingers.

Back in their ancestral home planet of Traiss, the pakkletons possessed shorter wings than comparable bird species.

As they evolved, the shortwingers preferred to live in forested environments where they found shelter and protection from the many predators of their home planet.

Even after they grew smart enough to develop a civilization and tame their own planet, the shortwingers still preferred to live in traditional 'nests' that were based in tall and thick trees.

"Our homeworld was beautiful, once." An older shortwinger explained to the gaggle of chicks in the sonorous, chirpy language of the shortwingers. "I did not have the honor of owning a nest in Traiss, but I visited our grand home planet often enough. Now, it only exists in our memories."

The old bird's feathers and wings drooped. She had lived the equivalent of around 210 years and experienced much in her life.

The Red Star Hive which was the home of the shortwing race had experienced little changes during most of her life.

Sure, the neighboring alien species stirred up trouble every so often and the more powerful species played their games with each other.

On the whole, the shortwing civilization was in a good spot. It might not be large, but its territory was not attractive enough for other species to fight over.

All of that changed when the pink hides attacked.

These small, bipedal aliens who lost their fur and only retained patches of them on their heads had not risen from the Red Star Hive where every other species the shortwingers knew of called their home.

The 'humans' instead came from another, much larger star hive that had long been the subject of folklore, myth and speculation!

The light from the Great Star Hive took hundreds of thousands of light-years to reach the smaller Red Star Hive.

Whatever the shortwingers and the other alien races were able to observe from the Great Star Hive was not much and horribly outdated.

If the red hivers knew that the Great Star Hive harbored such a large and powerful scourge, the pink hides probably wouldn't have been able to make so many gains since they started their invasion!

With the help of immensely advanced warships and small but incredibly powerful war machines that were largely made in the likeness of their makers, the pink hides toppled one alien nation after another, often within weeks rather than years!

All opposition was met with overwhelming destruction. From what the elderly female shortwinger learned, the red hivers opposing the pink hides comprehended the true nature of the threat too late.

Not only that, but the pink hides must have apparently infiltrated all of the alien nations in advance because a large quantity of assassinations and sabotage attacks occurred just before the main wave of pink hide fleets descended upon the affected star nations!

The shortwing star nation fell in an identical fashion to the other ones. Even though their race received advance warning of what might happen, no amount of precautions prevented the pink hides from assassinating their leaders and disabling the planetary defenses and infrastructure needed to repel an invasion!

In fact, even if the shortwingers were in their best state, they still couldn't have put up a decent fight against the overwhelming power of the pink hides.

What the old shortwinger lamented was the fact that her fellow avians hadn't received more time to evacuate their people from their doomed star nation.

The female bird shed a feather at the thought of all of the family and friends she had left behind.

"Great mother." One of the younglings chirped. "Will we... will we be able to live on a planet like Traiss again?"

The larger avian nodded and swept her articulated wings to the young bird. "Oh yes, my dear. Though our flight has been long, we are moving closer to our goal. The entrance to the Ancient Refuge is close. The pink hides will never be able to reach us once we pass through the legendary Gate of Death. We managed to bring enough godblood from our homes, so we have enough to pay the toll."

The younger shortwingers all looked fascinated when the myth of the Ancient Refuge was brought up. Though it had been relegated to a children's tale in the current eon, the doom that had befallen the red hivers had caused many aliens to put renewed attention on this pan-species tale.

Some of the aliens native to the Red Star Hive considered the Ancient Refuge to be their heaven and afterlife.

Other aliens regarded it as an ancient base built by an ancient race that led to a different dimension or star hive.

Then there were those who thought it was imaginary. Those voices existed among the shortwing refugees as well. They criticized Ssorraich, the broodfather of the remnant fleet, of giving false hope to the survivors of their fallen star nation.

Personally, the old woman deeply clung to this faint hope. There was nothing else for them to live for. Though she knew that there were many other shortwing fleets that had fled away from the pink hides, it would only be a matter of time before the invaders grasped the entirety of the Red Star Hive.

Where could the shortwing refugees flee to next?

Flying straight into the enormous dark that separated the galaxies was not realistic at all. A journey would take so many years that the ships would either fall apart or freeze as their power reserves slowly dwindled to nothing.

No. Broodfather Ssorraich was right. The best way to flee from the scourge of the pink hivers once and for all was to find the Gate of Death and pass through it, thereby moving far out of the reach of these soft but incredibly powerful mammalian aliens!

The playground compartment they were in suddenly shook. The trees planted by the shortwings shed a number of their leaves while the young chicks huddled against each other until their wings blended into a single whole.

"Hush now, my little birds! It will be okay. The pink skins will not be able to destroy our ships. The ones attacking us are not their premier troops. Instead, we are just being harried by their scavengers and vultures with their weak and tiny metal hides."

"Great mother! Watch out! I think a devourer is coming!"

The old bird turned around and saw that a section of the metal bulkhead began to part. The female shortwinger froze, but only for an instant.

Predatory and protective instincts welled up inside of her. Despite her age, she was still a member of a race that originally hunted their own prey with the power of their claws and beaks!

A glint shone in the old bird's eyes as the matronly figure spread her wings and launched into the air.

As soon as a black, insectile creature dug its way through the bulkhead, the old bird cawed before swooping down to attack with her claws!

The equipment she wore came to life as a metal sheath covered the lower limbs. Then, the protected limbs glowed as a sharp energy field covered their surface!

In an instant, those sharp claws tore through the shell of the devourer, spilling alien blood while completely beheading the four invaders!

Through her predatory senses, the old bird sensed that more devourer bugs were approaching the cavity.

"Go!" She called towards the small chicks. "Fly along the evacuation route! Don't stay!"

The frightened chicks did not argue and flapped away with their short and stubby wings. While the young birds weren't ready enough to fly on their own, it was enough to give them a burst of speed while they waddled towards an exit.

In the meantime, the old shortwinger deployed her old war gear. Metal covered her entire body as she turned into a fearsome avian soldier.

Her wings were no exception. They were too vulnerable if they were left out in the open, so the protective armor covered them as well.

Though this prevented the armored bird from being able to fly under her own power, her armor activated a setting that levitated her body.

"You will not devour our chicks, you insects!"

The female bird uttered another loud caw as the ballistic weapons mounted under the armored wings began to blast the emerging space bugs to pieces!

Under ordinary circumstances, the shortwingers preferred to make use of laser weapons, but the devourers resisted them too well.

She was not the only shortwinger to repel the intruding devourer insects.

The shortwingers stationed in many other sections of the civilian vessels also fought against the devourers that had made themselves home!

Devourer insect after devourer insect died, but there were always more. An infestation was hard to stop once it got going, but the shortwingers were not about to let the menace threaten their chicks!

Elsewhere, aboard one of the triangular warships of the shortwing race, the leader of this infested and beleaguered fleet perched atop a metal branch.

Broodfather Ssorraich observed the dense collection of screens as they conveyed all kinds of data. The condition of the ships under his command as well as the known properties of the pink hide ships and 'mechs' came under his purview.

His predatory eyes darted back and forth as he had to make a lot of hard decisions.

He cawed, drawing the attention of his council.

"We cannot go on like this much longer. The pink hides are too numerous. We cannot defend against both their mechs and the devourers that are constantly trying to eat our ships from the inside. In order to give the eggs of our race a chance to hatch in the Great Refuge, we must change our strategy."

The other elderly shortwingers shook their bodies and shed a couple of their feathers.

"Broodfather... if we do this..."

Ssorraich straightened his body and spread his majestic wings. Decorative, synthetic feathers were laced with his natural ones, causing his wingspread to be wider and more majestic than that of others!

"Listen to me! We are the only hope of the shortwing race left in the Red Star Hive. Our chicks and the eggs that have yet to be born must make it through. We have carried them this far, but the future of our race must make it to the Gate of Death by themselves. Transfer everything of importance to the three ships that are least affected by the devourer insects and can still take flight through the stars. They must leave regardless of who can follow!"

One of the elderly avians flapped his wings in panic! "Broodfather, isn't that too dangerous! If we do that, those of us who must fight the pink hides..."

Ssorraich closed his eyes and drew back his wings. "It will be our last flight."

Silence fell upon the chamber as the leaders of the refugee fleet took in the implications of this course of action.

Then, each and every bird raised their wings in unison!

"So be it!" The broodfather chirped! "We shall take flight for the last time so that our chicks may flap their wings for the first time in the Great Refuge! Let us show these greedy and murderous great hivers that we shortwingers will do what is right and protect the innocent against their foul and corrupting touch! As long as we have a single feather in our wing, we shall not fall! The righteous shall cleanse the Red Star Hive!"

"May our race fly for eternity!"

Ssoraich swept his wings in a grandiose fashion even as his eyes shook with uncertainty.

Would it work?

Would their chicks be able to find the refuge that he had promised for his followers?

Or would the merciless, genocidal pink skins crush their eggs to the last shell in this battle?

Chapter 3680 Good and Evil

As time went by, the expeditionary fleet flew closer to the pakklaton refugee fleet.

The latter still hadn't made any attempts to accelerate away from its attackers. Neither did the pakklatons choose to accelerate towards the humans in order to make their guns more effective.

Both sides experienced an increase in the rate of hits after a while. Not only were the marginally shorter distances making life easier for everyone, they also became more proficient in landing their shots under difficult circumstances.

The alien warships incurred more scars, especially the ones that the higher ups designated as priority targets.

However, despite their poor conditions, the pakklaton bird-shaped vessels were showing a lot of resilience.

Ves and many other people knew that this was largely because their firepower was being scattered across a larger surface area.

A mech would already be lucky enough to avoid another miss. It was a luxury to try and make the laser beams converge on specific weak points.

As a result, while the alien warships undoubtedly endured a lot of shots, the damage inflicted by thousands of mechs did not actually amount to anything substantial at this time.

Sure, their systems were deteriorating and the aliens were having greater trouble maintaining their earlier level of performance, but their powerful laser cannons still kept firing!

The alien attacks were slowly having an effect. Unlike the weaker and much more scattered firepower from the human mechs, the pakklaton warships did not experience as many challenges in concentrating their firepower.

As long as one heavy laser beam struck a human warship, the attack would certainly burn through a couple of armor layers if the shield generators had succumbed.

The consequence of this was that the bow sections of all of the human vessels in front were blackened and seriously compromised.

While ships like the Graveyard, Gorgoneion and Spirit of Bentheim still had plenty of matter for the aliens to burn through, their buffer was shrinking by the minute.

"Repairing all of this will be expensive!" Ves idly complained.

He did not begrudge all of the damage. He would rather end up with a more expensive repair bill than see more lives being lost.

Besides, with the Diligent Ovenbird in the fleet, the fleet did not have to detour to another pitstop in order to effect the necessary repairs.

As long as the Larkinsons weren't too picky about the materials, they could slowly restore the surface damage of the affected starships.

Ves feared that the damage wouldn't be constrained to this level. Once the alien warships began to pierce through the final forward defensive layers, a lot of compartments, ship components and lives would get lost soon.

There was little he could do, though.

Under ordinary circumstances, the Larkinsons could deploy their space knights in front of their more vulnerable vessels, yet that was not a realistic option.

Some of the laser beams were so large that they engulfed mechs entirely!

The Larkinson defensive mechs either melted into slag or deteriorated to such an awful condition that the mech pilot had no choice but to eject the cockpit!

As a result, a lot of defensive mech pilots felt useless at the moment. Aside from firing potshots at the pakklaton fleet with their spare rifles, they could not perform their traditional role of defending their more vulnerable comrades.

Not even the new Rigid Wall mechs, of which only a handful of copies existed in the fleet, dared to stand in the way of those warship-grade attacks.

The new defensive mech of the Living Sentinels might provide a lot more value in battles against other human forces, but it had not been designed to take part in this kind of battle!

As Ves observed all of this happening from the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim, he began to regret some of the choices he had made before the start of the current design round.

Back when the expeditionary fleet was parked in Vulit, he became so excited by the successful recruitment of four relatively young and capable Journeyman Mech Designers that he did not put as much thought into the kind of enemies he would face.

It couldn't be helped. He along with many other Larkinsons fought against hostile human forces for so long that they all defaulted to preparing for the next fight against a human opponent.

Though Ves was certain that the Golden Skull Alliance would exchange blows with other human forces sooner or later, right now alien fleets posed a greater threat to his fleet due to special circumstances.

What he should have done was to prioritize projects that were much more effective against large and individually powerful threats such as warships as opposed to smaller swarming threats such as mechs.

"We could really use more mechs with bigger guns." Ves wanted to palm his face.

The Larkinson Army didn't field a lot of Transcendent Punishers and Eternal Redemptions either. Both mech models might not be entirely up to date for the Red Ocean, but they still inflicted a lot more damage on average than other comparable ranged mechs due to the greater calibers of their weapons.

Yet because they only amounted to a couple of hundred machines, their collective weight of fire wasn't overwhelming enough. There were too many mechs in the Larkinson Army that would do fine in a fight against other mech forces but were relegated to sidekicks in this battle against alien warships.

Suddenly, one of his projected control panels flashed.

"What has happened?!"

"An enemy attack has managed to land on a heavily-damaged section of our hull and trigger a minor power surge. The efficiency of our remaining forward shield generators has dropped by 19 percent and will remain so until our damage control parties have remedied the faults."

Ves grew a bit more uncomfortable when he heard that. The Spirit of Bentheim was part of the vanguard of the fleet because she was substantially more armored than the other non-combat vessels of the Larkinson Clan.

Though he could have instructed his people to put the Spirit of Bentheim in the back, that was a cowardly and slightly illogical move.

He commissioned the factory ship so he knew how much damage she could take. If he insisted on removing her from the vanguard, then another and likely more vulnerable ship would incur damage instead.

As a result, Ves acquiesced to the decision to have the Spirit of Bentheim function as a shield even though he and many of the people he cared about were aboard.

He hadn't even ordered his wife and child to move to another ship!

Part of that was because he wanted to keep them close to him. If the Spirit of Bentheim ever became separated from the rest of the fleet for some reason, then at Ves he still had his immediate family by his side.

Another part of it was there was no clear alternative that was better.

He would never put his daughter on a vulnerable civilian vessel such as the Vivacious Wal or the Dragon's Den. Their hulls may be relatively thick compared to sub-capital ships but in relative terms they were the equivalent of giant tin cans!

If the alien warships were able to focus their firepower on any of them, then the ship in question would not fare well from the bombardment!

The more defensive vessels such as the Graveyard and the Gorgoneion were much more resistant towards damage, but they went out of their way to attract more firepower in order to fulfill their roles.

Ves felt it was just fine to leave Aurelia aboard the Spirit of Bentheim. He even wished he could hug her at this moment, but that would only distract him from the developing situation.

After a few minutes, he received a new hail. He accepted the call, causing Calabast's projection to appear by his side.

Just like every other Larkinson, she was wearing protection that could keep her alive in the event of vacuum exposure. She donned a familiar heavy infiltrator suit that was covered with modular equipment.

"Ves." She nodded towards him. "As you know, our Blinding Banshee has been scanning the enemy ships non-stop. It was only until recently that our more powerful active scans have started to provide us with more detailed observation data. Look at these results."

She called up another projected screen that showed vague snapshots of the alien starships.

Different from last time, their resolution was higher and the images were also projected with maps that measured heat, mass and other indicators.

What stood out from Ves was that certain weird bits were moving in and around the hull of the pakklaton ships.

In the visual images, they looked like tiny black blobs.

"What am I looking at, Calabast?"

"Voribugs."

"What?!"

Ves leaned closer in order to study the latest readings in greater detail. Now that she had pointed it out to him, he quickly found that her conclusions were quite plausible!

Practically all of the alien vessels showed strange activity that fit the pattern space bugs eating through their hulls.

The infection on some vessels was greater than others, hence the reason why the ships didn't dare to come too close to each other.

It also explained why the pakklaton fleet hadn't attempted to accelerate in any direction. The ships that were most badly affected by the Red Ocean's native menace were so riddled with metal-eating space insects that their sub-light propulsion systems no longer worked!

What Ves found peculiar about the pakklatons was that they sought to defend their entire fleet rather than leave the crippled ones to their fate.

This was not the most rational decision to make, and that made him feel uncomfortable.

Calabast noticed his discomfort and smirked. "Bad guys are not supposed to feel guilty about their actions, you know."

"I am not feeling guilty." Ves quickly shot back. "I just find it distasteful to clean up the leftovers of the Big Two. They could have been more thorough in wiping out the aliens."

"Then why did you choose to proceed with this attack?"

"You know very well why we are doing this. Aside from all of the rewards we can gain from defeating this fleet, we also need to harden and shape the mentalities of our clansmen. They don't live in a fantasy galaxy here. It's better if I expose the cruel reality of our invasion of the Red Ocean now than under more uncontrollable circumstances."

"You know this will make a lot of Larkinsons doubtful about themselves if they survive engagement." Calabast stated as she crossed her arms. "Since the start, you propagated a culture in the clan that is based around honor, compassion, integrity and all of those other nice buzz-words. Our days were much simpler back when we fought back against clear aggressors that we could paint as evil. It's a lot harder for us to maintain the high ground now that you are forcing them to commit an act that everyone regards as dishonorable."

"It has to be done, Calabast. Besides, we stand to gain tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of merits if we destroy these alien vessels. That is not as much as I'd like, but still worth the effort if we can minimize our losses."

The woman gazed deeply at him. "You don't care about the merits. Not really. You're enjoying this. You enjoy putting others into uncomfortable situations. Perhaps you don't go out of your way to mentally torment your own clansmen, but you don't mind taking advantage of this opportunity to throw them off-balance."

"I am not enjoying this!" He insisted. "I am doing what I think is necessary to mature my soldiers and make them ready for the struggles to come! Everything I do is logical. Our clan will grow stronger once we pass this hurdle."

"Even if it comes at the risk of painting us as the bad guys?"

"There is no good or bad in the Red Ocean. There's only the strong and the weak, and I would rather fall in the camp of the former than the latter." Ves answered.