

Mech 2541

Chapter 2541: How To Counter An Expert Mech

To be honest, designing the Bright Warrior Mark II was rather boring to Ves. As someone who enjoyed coming up with unique and creative visions for his mech designs, this design project felt too much like a retread.

He was adopting many of the same design choices as before. While there were plenty of challenges in trying to design a second-class version of the Bright Warrior, none of them were particularly stimulating to him.

It was as if designing the original was a rehearsal for the current project. Since Ves and his partner already overcame most hurdles, they didn't have to spend as much effort in jumping through the same hoops.

Even though the passage of time slowly pulled him out of his low state, his creative juices simply weren't flowing. His passion remained cold as he approached this project with the mindset of going through the motions.

It was too hard to get excited for an achievement that he had already accomplished. Designing the original Bright Warrior stimulated him a lot. It took quite a lot of thinking and ingenuity to design a base platform that was compatible with four different mech types.

Now that he had solved these interesting problems, there was nothing left to maintain his interest. His passion for the Bright Warrior Mark II Project never lit up beyond the size of a candle flame for this reason.

Was this bad? In some ways yes.

Was this enough of a reason to scrap or overhaul the project? No.

"Even if designing this mech is a chore, it's still necessary for the Larkinson Clan to obtain a versatile mech platform."

Designing the Bright Warrior Mark II was the same as designing four different mechs at once. Of course, the downside was that the four mechs in question were destined to be boring, mediocre and lacking in features.

It even lost the main redeeming feature of the original, which was its class-transcending armor plating. There was no way Ves was willing to clad the Mark II with Unending alloy or other first-class materials. Fabricating just a couple of mechs would probably bankrupt him outright!

"I need to save all of the best materials for my upcoming expert mech designs."

That was another area that Ves needed to address. Since he had started up six design projects, there was no room for any expert mech design projects.

Master Willix had to call him in person about the delay.

"The longer your expert pilots go without an expert mech, the longer they stagnate. It is very difficult to sustain their progression if they are continually constrained by their mechs."

Ves looked helplessly at her physical projection. The Darkbreak module continued to serve as his private channel to his new patron within the MTA.

"I want to do it right the first time, and that takes time." He answered. "I am not confident yet in my ability to design high-performing second-class mechs. I need more practice in order to become proficient in all of the quirks surrounding these kinds of mechs. Also, I have to obtain more high-quality materials first. Due to their rarity and difficulty in procuring them, I don't think it is wise to design an expert mech first. Who knows if we end up with a design that I can never build."

Master Willix actually looked approvingly at Ves. "You are quite prudent. This is good. My earlier words are still valid, however. When an expert pilot emerges, there is a certain window of time where they continue to grow their resonance strength. This will continue for a year or a couple years depending on the genetic aptitude and the potency released by the breakthrough. However, once this natural growth runs out..."

"The expert pilot can no longer grow that easily." Ves answered. "I'm familiar with this rule."

"Then you should know that your expert pilots are on the clock."

"Six months. Please give me half a year. I am confident that my team and I are ready to begin with designing not one, but multiple expert mechs."

This was quite a lot of time, but not too much considering the current situation. Master Willix carefully weighed his answer and faintly nodded.

"Very well then, Mr. Larkinson. Six months it is. Please be ready to take part by that time. My time is limited and I should not be at your beck and call. The sooner I complete my obligation, the better."

If Ves was in her place, he would feel annoyed as well. He wouldn't think about making life difficult for her if she was a faceless Master from the MTA, but it was different now. While they weren't quite friends, they were bound by mutual interests. She was not going to break their deal just because he wanted to delay his homework.

They began to discuss some preliminary matters about their upcoming expert mech design projects. She pointed out some areas that he needed to pay special attention to such as the need to include resonating materials.

Since Ves was already talking to a Master, he felt he might as well take advantage of the situation. While Master Willix was fairly open as a teacher, her patience wasn't endless. He rapidly thought over the questions that he might want to ask. He selected two which he really wanted to hear an answer from someone high in the hierarchy of the MTA.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but if it isn't too much trouble, can I ask you whether the MTA has ever succeeded in developing a method that allows standard mechs to defeat expert mechs?"

Though Master Willix's demeanor and posture hadn't changed, Ves instinctively felt more pressure from her projection. As someone who was very sensitive to life, he guessed he must have touched a nerve.

"What an interesting question to ask." She slowly drawled. "Are you asking this question because you wish to develop a solution to the Hexadric Hegemony's predicament in the Komodo War?"

Ves coughed. "I know it is unlikely that I will be able to succeed in designing a mech that can cause significant harm to an expert mech, but I'd like to know what others have accomplished."

Master Willix frowned. "First off, while we have extensively explored these ideas, I cannot tell you the results. Such research is highly confidential. You are welcome to perform your own original research, but don't think about obtaining any tips from us. Secondly, too many mech designers have tried to accomplish this. I think you know quite well how little they achieved. The only feasible way to defeat an expert mech without one yourself is to field a mech of a higher class."

A first-class multipurpose mech could easily demolish a third-class expert mech. There was absolutely no doubt about this outcome. As for smaller gaps, the answer was still in the air. It depended on the strength of the mechs and the strength of the mech pilots.

Her answer and attitude fell in line with his expectations. The MTA certainly poured a lot of research in this subject. Whether they succeeded or not, they did not want these methods to spread. The importance of high-ranking mech pilots to the Association was too great!

As for allowing Ves to research this topic on his own, this was only because Master Willix held no confidence in his ability to find a solution. Even if he somehow did, Ves bet that the MTA would come knocking on his doors to take away his research data and forbidding him from disseminating his results.

Even after receiving the answer he expected, he wasn't done yet. Ves asked a follow-up question.

"What if I take a step back. Instead of threatening an expert mech, what if there is a way to hinder or inconvenience them. For example, if it takes an extra second for them to destroy an enemy mech, then that can already change the results of the battlefield!"

"There are proven methods that can hinder expert mechs." Master Willix relaxed. It seemed that Ves had steered her towards a safer subject. "There are mech designers with abnormal specialties that can develop products that minutely affect some of the functioning of powerful machines. There are very abnormal exotics that can be used to disturb or weaken some of the functions of expert mechs. There are even a number of universal approaches that any mech designer can employ."

"Can you give me a specific example?"

"You will have to figure this out for yourself, Mr. Larkinson. I have already revealed too much. If you cannot extrapolate a viable method given the information I provided to you, then perhaps I overestimated your ingenuity."

Damn!

The communication session ended soon after that. Once Master Willix's projection disappeared, the Darkbreak module went dormant again.

Ves turned around and returned to the design lab. He ignored his assistants and fellow lead designers. They were all absorbed in their own work anyway.

Once he sat down behind his own terminal, he began to call up a document that contained all of the specifications for his second mech design project.

Since the Bright Warrior Mark II Project was such an uninspiring chore, Ves hoped that his other project might inflame his passion. He did not want to spend the next half year like a zombie!

"Let's see. How can I design a Hexer mech that can materially hinder the performance of an expert mech?"

He wracked his brains for ideas. None of them sounded very good. For example, he had already witnessed what would happen if he designed a mech that was meant to dogpile an expert mech to the ground.

"The designers of expert mechs have already taken these common situations into account. I need to find a trickier angle!"

Several minutes went by as he tried and failed to come up with a good angle.

Eventually, a different idea came to mind.

"Wait a minute. Why do I need to do all of the thinking myself? The galactic net must have considered this question a lot! There are bound to be some good suggestions!"

Though he despised gaining inspiration from the galactic net, he allowed it this time.

The key here was to find the right platform and source to gain his information. The galactic net united an unimaginably huge amount of humans, but that simply meant they uploaded an unimaginably huge amount of nonsense every day!

Ves first needed to identify a channel for quality information. It had to come from verified and reputable sources such as other mech designers.

"Browsing Commbook doesn't cut it." He muttered.

He came up with two different choices.

First, he could enter a closed club that gathered a lot of mech designers such as the Rim Exchange.

Second, he could browse the forums frequented by mech fanatics.

"Let's go with the latter for a change." He chuckled.

Aside from mech designers, mech fanatics knew the most about mechs. These nerds and fans of mechs could recite entire spec sheets by memory and boast about viewing hundreds of thousands of different mechs in person.

The mech fanbase was indisputably the biggest collective in human space!

Forget about religion. Forget about states. Forget about ideologies. No matter whether someone was a Rubarthan or a Brighter, chances were both of them shared the same passion for mechs!

As was usual with fans like these, they tended to talk endlessly about their love for mechs. They also came up with a lot of theories and swapped very odd ideas with their fellow compatriots.

Due to their lack of technical and engineering knowledge, most of these ideas were too unrealistic or impractical.

However, that also meant that mech fanatics were free from the mental blocks that constrained the thinking of actual mech designers.

Since they didn't know what was possible, mech fanatics simply sprayed out all of their ideas no matter how stupid they sounded!

As Ves frequented a random forum, it didn't take long for him to come across a viable idea!

[Expert mechs are much more powerful than normal mechs. Every part and every material is better. However, have you ever considered that the leap in performance is different for every element? Take defense for example. Expert mechs are notoriously hard to kill because their makers stuff them with the toughest materials they have. Can any other aspect be improved as much? No! Think about the specs that can't be improved that much, such as limb strength, power throughput, heat management and so on. In order to debilitate a mech, target these weaker aspects.]

[Pix or it didn't happen!]

[You fool! You fail to comprehend the majesty of expert mechs! They are invincible and inviolable. No mortal can ever hope to defeat a demigod!]

[You can blind them! Unless the expert mech utilizes sensors that are an entire class higher, they're not so easy to harden and improve. The resonance shields of expert mechs can negate a lot of attacks, but I doubt it can do much to stop against ECM attacks!]

Ves sat up straight in his chair. "That's it! ECM!"

In other words, the answer he might be looking for was to blind the enemy expert mechs!

His enthusiasm suddenly faded.

"It can't be that easy."

If some random mech fanatic could think about it, then the designers of all of those expert mechs could come up with the same possibility. They would definitely do everything possible to equip the best possible sensor systems onto their expert mech designs!

Was there a way for him to accomplish this feat without designing the most expensive electronic warfare mech in the star sector?

Chapter 2542: Electronic Warfare Mechs

Was it easy to blind an expert mech?

"It's possible." Ves guessed.

It almost never happened. Confrontations between expert mechs took place every day in the Komodo War, but Ves had never heard of a story where a bunch of electronic warfare mechs managed to interfere with the sensor systems of a powerful mech.

As Ves gained more interest in this train of thought, he began to research this topic more seriously.

Of course, he did not research this topic by himself. He commanded his new Product Research Department to deploy some manpower to study this topic.

With an army of analysts at work, Ves only had to wait a few days to obtain a comprehensive report. The document he received distilled everything he wanted to know without any superfluous data. If he wanted to dive deeper, he could easily follow up on the references.

As it turned out, blinding expert mechs was possible.

It was just hard. It got harder with each subsequent generation.

Sensor tech became more sophisticated over time. Competition relentlessly drove innovation. Component developers constantly sought to raise resistance against ECM, jamming, interference and other strange effects. Those who failed to keep up would not be able to sell their sensor systems anymore!

There were immense trans-galactic corporations who investigated every exotic, every tech and every combination to see if they could harden sensor systems more.

The most important criteria to judge a sensor system wasn't precision or range, but resilience!

"There is too much jamming on the battlefield!"

Weapons fire already made it difficult for sensors to resolve accurate readings. When thousands of mechs fired their positron beams at once, how could such an enormous discharge of energy not mess up any sensors that were sensitive to electromagnetic emissions?

On top of these chaotic discharges, a lot of modern mechs possessed at least some ECM functionality.

Most of the time, they were fairly weak and basic, granting them some ability to hide against long-ranged sensors.

However, once a large amount of mechs grouped up, the interference they generated overlapped, forming a stronger field that frustrated targeting systems, spoiled precise readings and generated other effects.

There were mechs that were designed to do more than throw up an interference field for self-protection.

These auxiliary mechs carried or integrated powerful directional arrays. Designed for electronic warfare, these machines were capable of projecting interference across a distance!

It was similar to how a person across the street waved at Ves before shining a very bright flashlight in his eyes. It was annoying as hell and disturbed his vision!

At the level of mechs, this flashlight actually consisted of very sophisticated components that operated along principles that were countless times more complicated than projecting a simple beam of light in someone's eyes.

What Ves found curious was that electronic warfare mechs constantly faded in popularity.

In the earlier mech generations, they were quite a regular sight on the battlefield. It was worth fielding them because they truly did interfere with the aim of long-ranged mechs.

However, as the Age of Mechs progressed, sensor development continued to overtake electronic warfare development.

It made less sense to deploy mechs dedicated to electronic warfare.

They weren't necessary in small-scale combat. Mercenaries almost never bothered with them as it made more sense to field an extra mech that possessed actual teeth.

If a hundred electronic warfare mechs all focused on disturbing the sensors of an enemy mech company, then they might be able to disturb most but not all sensor systems.

"This makes no sense. It is much more straightforward to deploy a hundred combat mechs and wipe out the enemy mech company the old-fashioned way."

After all, electronic warfare mechs dedicated most of their capacity towards their interference capabilities. There was hardly any power or space left for self-protection.

Only larger organizations such as mech armies fielded these kinds of mechs as only deploying them in greater numbers allowed them to achieve substantial effects.

To be honest, Ves wasn't too well-versed in how mech militaries fielded these auxiliary mechs. There were major differences in third-class and second-class EW mechs that strongly affected their use. There were also a lot of different tech and methods that targeted specific sensor systems.

"There are too many variables!"

A mech contained at least several dozen different sensor systems. Was it easy to blind all of them at the same time? No! An EW mech simply didn't have the capacity to accomplish such a feat by itself.

The story was a bit more complicated when there were more mechs in the equation, but generally most combatants on the battlefield considered EW mechs to be a nuisance. It was already good enough if these unassuming machines were able to reduce an enemy's sensor range by 10 percent or drop their resolving power by 15 percent.

"These effects hardly make a difference in small-scale battles." Ves shook his head in disappointment.

Of course, these results mainly applied to situations where both sides maintained technical parity, which wasn't always the case.

"The Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony are roughly equal in this regard."

He was sure the truth was more nuanced, but he was just an outsider. Perhaps some mechs designed by specialists in electronic warfare achieved more stellar results, but Ves didn't have access to this kind of information.

What he did know was that no Hexer electronic warfare mech ever succeeded in blinding a Fridayman expert mech.

"It's futile!"

When Ves read this part of the report, he learned the main reason why expert mechs were so darned hard to interfere with. It was not necessarily their tech.

A second-class sensor system was still a second-class sensor system. No matter if the tech and materials cost 10 million hex credits or 10 billion hex credits, they were still inferior to first-class sensor systems.

Just because the more expensive system was 1000 times more expensive didn't mean it was 1000 more effective. Diminishing returns played a very important role!

"It's actually just 10 or 20 times stronger or something." Ves muttered.

He didn't have enough information to know the exact disparity.

Whatever the case, if it was just the quality of sensor systems alone, then it should have been possible for 100 EW mechs to heavily interfere with the sensor systems of an expert mech.

Yet this didn't happen. If it worked, then the Hexers wouldn't have hesitated to employ this solution!

"It's energy!" Ves uttered. "Expert mechs have too much energy!"

Expert mechs were incredibly powerful machines, but that wasn't solely due to resonance. In order for a high-performance mech to hit hard and move fast, it was essential to supply enough energy to sustain these exertions!

With their incredibly luxurious power reactors, expert mechs were able to supply an abundance of power to every function. Their flight systems were able to accelerate a lot faster. Their rifles unleashed much more devastating beams. Their swords hit several times harder!

Sensor systems also enjoyed this bounty. When they were designed with elevated power supplies in mind, they became so effective and so resistant against interference that only thousands EW mechs could ever hope to hinder their performance!

Who would ever be so extravagant to deploy so many EW mechs at once? It was impractical!

It didn't matter if one form of electronic warfare was a little more effective than another form. Specialties didn't matter either. An expert mech's resonance that was infused with force of will naturally resisted a range of harmful effects.

"In conclusion, blinding expert mechs is not cost-effective."

The Hex Army either had to field thousands of EW mechs or deploy a single first-class EW mech.

This was a galaxy-wide consensus. Perhaps there might be exceptions such as luring expert mechs into pockets of warped or anomalous space, but such instances simply didn't happen in the Komodo War.

"The Hex Army is in a real bind." Ves grimaced.

It was truly difficult to overcome the disparity in expert mechs. Ves wasn't sure how much additional foreign expert pilots the Coalition managed to pressed into action. Estimates ranged from 10 percent to 30 percent.

What was worse was that difference was widening over time!

With their superiority in numbers, the Fridayman expert mechs were able to defeat more Hexer expert mechs!

If 1 Fridayman expert pilot died for every 2 Hexer expert pilots, then the Coalition would occupy an unstoppable advantage in just a couple of years!

Ves already read reports that the Hexers were adjusting how they deployed their expert mechs. While their survival rates increased when they grouped up in greater numbers, they weren't able to cover enough units anymore.

The absence of just a single expert mech exposed thousands of regular mechs!

"In other words, the Hex Army is trying to keep as many of its expert pilots alive by trading the lives of many more ordinary Hexer mech pilots."

This was a painful and unsustainable trade! No matter how much assistance the Blessed Squire and Valkyrie mechs provided to the Hexers, they were only effective against mortals!

The Hex Army already attempted some experiments where hundreds of Valkyrie Redeemers activated their Marked For Death abilities against a Fridayman expert mech.

The sight was exceptionally grand. The third eyes of the Valkyrie Redeemers projected hundreds of beams in the direction of the enemy expert mech!

Unfortunately, the enemy demigod did not pause. Instead, it soared forward until it entered into the midst of the Valkyrie Redeemers and proceeded to slaughter them with unrelenting sword strikes!

Not even unleashing simultaneous Shock And Awe Pulses managed to do more than cause the expert mech to pause for a fraction of a second!

Ves looked dismayed when he learned of this disastrous trial. "My products simply aren't designed to confront expert mechs."

There was no shame in admitting this fact. It wasn't as if other mech designers achieved anything better. Not even dignified Masters solved this problem!

This was why the Hexadric Hegemony continued to lose the advantage in the Komodo War. The Hexer Masters must all be wracking their heads over the Friday Coalition's crucial advantage.

What about him? What power did he possess to affect this unfavorable situation?

"Regular glows don't affect expert pilots.. do they?"

Ves didn't actually know the answer. He became so intrigued by it that he left the design lab in order to perform a study.

While his expert pilots did not have any expert mechs, it was enough for him to conduct some simple tests on Venerable Joshua while he was piloting the Quint.

"What do I have to do, sir?" The expert pilot asked while his Quint was standing in the middle of a giant test chamber.

"Just stand still."

A number of different LMC mech models approached the Quint. Ves had already unlocked the restrictions of their glows so that they were able to act against a friendly Larkinson.

What he found out was that expert pilots weren't actually immune to glows. Their willpower was just too strong. Fear and other emotions simply weren't strong enough to shake their convictions.

"It's like stopping a battleship by putting a frigate in the way. There's no way the latter can slow down the former!"

Yet the fact that glows weren't blocked at the gates gave Ves an opening.

Was every glow ineffective against the Quint?

As LMC mech after LMC mech attempted to influence the masterwork mech piloted by an expert pilot, Ves perceived no noticeable drops in performance in either of them. Not even the Sanctuary managed to dampen Joshua's lively will!

Ves had already lost hope at this point. When the first production copy of the Crystal Lord Mark II marched forth, he hardly paid attention to the proceedings. His mind was already following another tangent.

"Sir!" Venerable Joshua called over the communication channel. "I think I'm feeling something. It's faint, but this new Crystal Lord makes me feel as if I'm looking at a sparkling gem."

"What? Please confirm that, Venerable."

"It's not enough to interfere with my perception, but there is definitely something strange about this Crystal Lord!"

Ves sat up straighter in his chair. Was there more to the Crystal Lord Mark II than he initially thought?

He felt a bit absurd. As the lead designer of this recent mech model, how could he be ignorant of this interaction?!

Chapter 2543: Blinding Mech

His excitement didn't last long.

The Crystal Lord Mark II's effect against Venerable Joshua's was incredibly weak. It was the equivalent of parading a shiny gem in front of the expert pilot's eyes.

Ves retrieved one of Lucky's gems from his hidden pouch. He swung it around and allowed its facets to shine in the brightness that illuminated the observation room.

These twinkles might be able to distract an expert pilot in certain situations, but truthfully the effect was negligible.

Ves could perceive much more hindrances just by walking on a street on a sunny day!

The Crystal Lord Mark II's glow wasn't harmful enough to be considered a weapon. Let alone regular mech pilots, there was no way that expert pilots would let themselves get distracted by some spiritual glinting!

In order to explore the exact effects of the Illustrious One's glow, Ves began to perform more tests.

He continually changed the Quint and the Crystal Lord Mark II's settings in order to explore the rules of this newly-discovered phenomenon.

He discovered a couple of interesting rules.

First, the Illustrious One's ability to affect Venerable Joshua's perception somehow acted on a spiritual level.

In other words, the design spirit affected Joshua's spirit, not his eyeballs.

The exact consequence of this remained unknown as the glow was too weak to produce a concrete result.

Second, the luminar crystals incorporated in the Crystal Lord Mark II played an essential role in enhancing the effects of the Illustrious One's glow.

Ves already knew that luminar crystals amplified the Illustrious One and vice versa. Their synergistic relationship was so clear and obvious that he couldn't help but mess with the crystals.

He brought some bots and tools and carefully removed them whenever possible. He then performed the same test over again.

"It's weaker now."

"It's weaker than before."

"I don't notice anything anymore."

It was too bad that the current testing environment only allowed Ves to remove or disconnect the luminar crystals embedded in the Crystal Lord Mark II. It did not allow him to add more luminar crystals because that would require him to modify the design. The crystals needed to be connected to the systems of the mech.

Once Ves dismissed Venerable Joshua and the Quint, he fell into thought.

"According to my observations, the Illustrious One can definitely affect an expert pilot, bypassing both the mech and the man-machine connection. This is the greatest and most hopeful sign that I can fulfill my goal of designing a mech that can debilitate an expert mech on the battlefield.""

He thoughtfully rubbed his smooth-shaven chin.

Lucky floated around his head and landed on his shoulder.

"Meow."

"Yeah. It's no use if the effect is not good enough. The Crystal Lord Mark II failed to affect my test subject's combat effectiveness for two reasons. First, the mech's isn't designed with a blinding function in mind. Second, its glow is too weak in this aspect."

The Illustrious One used to be a weak design spirit until Ves forced it to merge with the spiritual remnant of the Blinding One.

Not only did the design spirit of the Crystal Lord line gain a massive power boost, it also inherited much of the properties of the fallen dark god.

"Blinding One..."

Weren't the names of the dark gods indicative of their greatest or most defining strengths?

The naming scheme of the Hallowed Abyss Temple was hardly a mystery. Ves could tell or guess what a dark god was capable of just by studying their labels.

As ancient alien entities that had lived for many eons, their actual names were probably incomprehensible or lost in history. The Watchers who named the dark gods could only come up with simple descriptive names in order to make sure they prayed to the right entity.

After all, wouldn't it be embarrassing for a Grey Watcher to ask for help from the Unending One only for his prayers to reach the Blinding One due to translation errors?

In these cases, simple but straightforward descriptions worked best!

Having witnessed three of the dark gods in battle, Ves could easily understand their labels.

The Unending One likely referred to the tentacled whale's endless hunger. His label was a bit more abstract than the other ones, so Ves wasn't completely sure the 'Unending' part referred to the dark god's appetite, bulk or something else.

The Inexorable One was easy to explain. Ves accessed the dictionary stored in his implant and called up a definition.

[Inexorable - impossible to stop or to prevent.]

The huge avian exobeast was not only fast, but difficult to slow down. Ves found it curious that the Hallowed Abyss Temple chose this particular strength to describe the Inexorable One. Did this mean that speed wasn't its forte, or that some other dark god had beaten the big bird in terms of speed?

Compared to the labels of the aforementioned dark gods, the Blinding One couldn't be simpler.

This dark god's very presence was too bright!

Bedecked with crystals and shining with bright, white light, the Blinding One seemed to defy the stereotype that evil creatures needed to be surrounded by a gloomy, dark aura.

With a name like this, Ves did not doubt the ascended luminar alien's ability to blind those looked directly at him. Of course, the Blinding One was capable of doing more than that. The light beams he released possessed enough strength to threaten starships!

Yet at the root of their existence, luminar aliens appeared to be masters in manipulating light, or more precisely electromagnetic radiation.

The luminar race developed a civilization based around distinctive crystal technology that allowed them to do a lot with light. For some reason, any light unleashed by a luminar crystal possessed additional properties that increased their lethality in unfathomable ways!

"It's not gamma radiation!"

If luminar technology was based around raising the frequency of electromagnetic radiation, the MTA would have never allowed Ves to publish his Crystal Lord models. What actually took place when a luminar crystal became excited and released a light beam even caused the MTA to scratch their heads!

According to the classified research files that Master Willix once transferred to him, one of the principal reasons why the MTA studied luminar technology was because of its potential to qualitatively improve directed energy weapons.

If a regular laser weapon outputted 100 points of damage, then one that incorporated the principles of luminar tech might be able to output 200 or 500 points of damage!

It was too bad that the alien crystals the luminars left behind were too complex! The MTA only deciphered the most basic portions of their incredibly complicated internal circuitry at this point.

While it was possible that Master Willix hid the MTA's success in reverse-engineering luminar technology, but Ves had a hunch that the MTA researchers were not too far ahead.

This was because Ves discovered that luminar crystals were spiritually reactive!

The crystals were much less impressive if they hadn't come in touch with spiritual energy.

Ves also achieved modest improvement gains with the Crystal Lord Mark II for this reason. By letting its luminar crystals get in touch with the mech's spiritual foundation, the crystals were able to absorb more energy and unleash slightly stronger light beams.

The more the Crystal Lord Mark II grew over time, the greater the amplification!

The reverse relationship also held true. The greater the luminar crystal, the stronger the glow. The quality of the crystal also played a very significant role.

"Unfortunately, Master Willix didn't give me the good stuff."

Frankly speaking, the luminar crystals integrated in the Crystal Lord Mark II were equivalent to third-class components.

If the MTA passed on its research on stronger luminar crystals, then Ves would readily be able to embed them in his counter against expert mechs!

He scowled. "I'm still in trouble. I have no choice but to work with fragile third-class crystals. Fridaymen mechs can easily break them with casual attacks, especially if they employ physical force."

Yet Ves had very little alternatives. While he could seek out other ways to hinder expert mechs, he would merely be following up on solutions that were already proven to be bad. The costs were simply too great to make them viable.

Ves spent hours thinking over whether he should follow up on basing his anti-expert mech around luminar crystals.

"Fragile or not, I have several unique advantages when it comes to implementing luminar tech."

He bet that the MTA probably hadn't been able to arouse the full potential of luminar technology due to their limited expertise in spirituality.

He also bet that combining the Illustrious One and luminar crystals in a more targeted fashion might deliver greater results.

Maybe Ves might succeed in drawing out the Blinding One's strength over the course of the design project!

"It won't be easy, though."

The glow of the Illustrious One was sparkling and beautiful, but its offensive properties weren't apparent. Ves would have to transform it just like he did with the Valkyrie Redeemer.

Without its ability to narrow its glow into a narrow beam, the Valkyrie mechs would never have been able to affect enemy mechs at range!

Ves hoped that a similar concentration attempt might be able to cause someone like Venerable Joshua more discomfort.

This was one direction of strengthening the main effect of his anti-expert mech.

The other direction was to integrate more crystals onto the mech frame. The Crystal Lord Mark II was far from saturated when it came to this aspect. Back when he designed it, there was no need to increase its production cost and unbalance the mech by piling on an excessive amount of crystals.

Now that Ves wanted to do the opposite, how would his anti-expert mech look like?

His imagination immediately conjured up the image of a mech bedecked in crystals. Its entire chest glittered in the light as the crystals embedded on its surface were impossible to ignore!

The imaginary mech carried a powerful energy rifle that integrated numerous crystals.

Yet before this mech was able to discharge a light beam with the aid of all of its crystals, a single enemy rifleman mech fired its gauss rifle at the attention-grabbing machine.

A powerful gauss round immediately punched the chest of the obvious, glittered target! Almost a hundred different crystals shattered as the incredible kinetic energy transferred by the projectile was too much for them to cope!

"This is not good!"

Then what if Ves adopted a more defensive design?

The ruined mech disappeared from his mind. In its place was a bigger, fatter knight mech. While it did not show many crystals on the surface, its internals were filled with them! Ves also made use of special cushioning materials and shock-absorbing systems that mech designers usually employed in lancer mech designs.

If these systems were able to protect the mech pilots and the delicate internals of a mech from impact damage, then they should also be good enough to protect the fragile luminar crystals!

The knight mech held no weapon. Instead, it carried a single, broad tower shield.

When the same enemy ranged mechs fired a couple of gauss rounds at the defensive mech, its sturdy shield withstood the blows while only incurring a couple of dents!

Once the ranged mech stopped firing, its target began to activate a setting.

The surface layers of the tower shield parted to reveal an entire surface of luminar crystals!

Like a giant mirror, the crystal-encrusted shield projected the Illustrious One's powerful, focused glow at the enemy!

The ranged mech instantly froze as the mech pilot closed his eyes and moaned in pain!

"I can't see!"

The illusion ended after that. When Ves pulled himself back to reality, he evaluated the ideas he just considered.

"Can this even work?"

The mech he just imagined looked so silly and impractical that Ves didn't have much in the concept. Yet according to understanding, the mech might be able to affect an expert pilot.

"Maybe not by itself, but what about a couple of hundred?"

Ves briefly imagined a majestic shield wall consisting of hundreds of mechs.

As an enemy expert mech swaggered forward, the shield wall suddenly turned bright as the tower shields all revealed their crystal surface!

So much light poured in a single direction! Even if the shields didn't precisely land on the expert mech, at least it left the target with few escape routes!

The expert mech stumbled and dropped altitude for a few seconds. Though the expert pilot quickly managed to recover from the unexpected disturbance, the blinding effect continued to hammer at his mind!

Chapter 2544: Reconciliation

The design he codenamed Blinding Mech was one of the most unusual mechs that Ves had ever come up with. It depended so heavily on strange and alien principles that Ves felt as if he had entered the rabbit hole.

On the surface, it sounded ridiculous. Whether he designed it as a rifleman mech or a knight mech, the entire concept of stuffing as many luminar crystals into a mech as possible made him feel ashamed!

Yes, ashamed!

What self-respecting mech designer would ever develop such a silly-looking mech?

"Still.. If it actually works, who cared how stupid it looks?"

Ves actually held a bit of confidence in this mech concept. The Crystal Lord Mark II may have failed to affect Venerable Joshua in any meaningful way, but that was just a limited test.

What if he deployed a hundred Crystal Lord Mark II at once?

What if he replaced the Crystal Lords with his Blinding Mechs?

He did not believe the Illustrious One's glow was easy to shrug off in this instance!

Once he embraced this mech concept, he became more passionate about trying to make it work. He did not need to achieve drastic results. As long as 100 to 200 Blinding Mechs were capable of interfering with the perception of an expert pilot, this was already good enough for the desperate Hex Army!

"In fact, according to my existing understanding, the Blinding Mech's effects should be quite mixed towards weaker mech pilots!"

The majority of humans, mech pilots included, were spiritually weak. Their spirits were so small and weak that they were in a permanent elusive state. They weren't able to affect reality, but in turn it was very hard for reality to affect them in turn. This was for their own protection.

Therefore, if his Blinding Mechs all tried to 'light up' a random mech, chances were the mech pilot in question would only experience a bit of brightness.

"It's like looking into the direction of a sun on the surface of a planet. You just have to squint your eyes and shade your eyes in order to cope with the light."

Yet what if the targeted mech pilot happened to possess spiritual potential? What if the pilot just happened to be an expert candidate.

Ves shivered. Without the strength of an expert pilot, they were much more vulnerable against spiritual attacks!

He had no idea how much the spiritual illumination effect would impact mech pilots. He had too little data to make an educated guess.

At best, allowing some Blinding Mechs to shine on a mech pilot might reveal whether he or she possessed spiritual potential.

"This is quite a handy invention if this is the case."

While Ves already possessed the means to identify spiritual potential, he was just one person. If this particular capability could be reproduced with a simple standard mech, then he didn't need to use his perception in person!

His clansmen might be able to discover this quality among themselves with the help of a Blinding Mech.

In fact, the Hex Army could employ the Blinding Mech in this fashion as well! As long as the Hexers knew which particular mech pilots possessed the capability to rank up, they would be able to nurture them in a much more targeted manner.

This would definitely help them produce more expert pilots over time!

"There is another possibility."

What if Blinding Mechs could do more than agitate mech pilots with spiritual potential? What if the Illustrious One's glow was strengthened and concentrated to such an extent that it was able to harm these promising mech pilots?

Perhaps it might be possible to kill the future expert pilots of the Friday Coalition by lighting them up with hundreds of Blinding Mechs!

This was a very frightening possibility! Even though Ves believed it was unlikely that a glow could directly kill anyone, he reminded himself that the Illustrious One assimilated some of the strengths and techniques of the Blinding One.

A highly-developed dark god who lived for a very long time should have definitely sublimated its spiritual existence. Such an entity was on a whole other level than his design spirits.

Not even Qilanxo came close!

"She hasn't lived long enough." He muttered.

If his design spirits grew naturally, then they might catch up to Qilanxo's level of strength.

Yet how long would it take to grow to the point of matching a dark god?

A thousand years? A million years? A billion years?

That was way too long! The Age of Mechs would probably be a vague historical record by the time his design spirits ascended to that level.

To Ves, the only way to hasten their growth was to rely on spiritual feedback. Ever since the Nyxian Gap Campaign came to an end, a couple of design spirits such as Qilanxo and the Golden Cat grew considerably stronger.

The Larkinson Clan may have lost thousands of clansmen from the gruelling battles, but the overall quality of mech pilots had risen!

To his design spirits, this exchange was a net positive. The spiritual feedback supplied by an expert pilot such as Venerable Jannzi was at least a billion times more valuable to a powerful spiritual entity such as Qilanxo.

As long as the mech pilots of his clan continued to progress, it would only be a matter of time before his design spirits attained the strength of a dark god.

Naturally, he wouldn't be so crass to call them by that nefarious-sounding moniker.

"Should I turn the name around and call them bright gods?"

His face immediately turned ugly.

This was a bad idea!

Design spirits weren't gods! Everyone who equated them to such were completely delusional, his wife included!

"I'll have to come up with another term." He muttered.

In any case, it would probably take decades before any of his design spirits reached this point. Even the Illustrious One had a long way to go, though Ves guessed that his path to ascension might be smoother because of his better foundation.

Ves put down his research on the Blinding Mech for the moment. He devoted enough time on this problem. Now that he obtained a solid direction, he was no longer when it came to this tricky project.

He stood up from his chair and decided to check up on Gloriana's progress.

"Let's go, Lucky."

"Meow!"

When he dropped by Gloriana's office at the design lab, she looked up from her terminal in irritation.

"I'm working, Ves."

"I know. That's why I came." Ves smiled and sauntered forward. "Can't I visit my own wife?"

She gritted her teeth. "This wife of yours is very upset at a certain insensitive husband."

"Hey, don't misunderstand my intentions. I'm only looking out for our interests and the interests of our clan. It was inevitable that we would expand the Design Department this way. Juliet truly isn't as bad as you think she is. At the very least, she doesn't pose a threat to our marriage."

They both talked about this several times already. Gloriana was not in the mood of retreading the same arguments.

She sighed. "Do you love me, Ves?"

"I do. Do you know how much it pains me to be so apart from you? We are only married for less than a month, but already we're sleeping in separate beds. Do you want the rest of our marriage to proceed in this pattern?"

A bit of regret showed on her face. "No. This isn't what I've hoped from our perfect marriage. It's just.."

Ves moved closer. He walked around her desk and put his hand on her head. "Gloriana. I know you're upset with me, but can we get back to how we used to be before? Where is the trust we had for each other? Where is the joy that we used to feel?"

"I want to return to those days too, Ves."

"Then why are you hesitating? Just throw aside all of your concerns. They aren't helpful at all. Can you do that?"

"I'll try."

The two spent some private time together. Both of them left for the lounge in order to cuddle up against each other.

While their cats were chasing each around the compartment, Ves and Gloriana hardly spoke as they reveled in each other's scent and body warmth.

Though they hadn't fully hashed out their differences, they grew more comfortable in each other's presence.

Ves no longer felt as if Gloriana was one step away from exploding. She visibly calmed down as she continued to enjoy his presence.

"Are you better now?" He gently asked as he rubbed her shoulder.

"I.. don't know. I think so. I enjoy these times."

"That's because we aren't talking much." He explained. "We have a lot of differences, but as long as we don't voice them, we won't enter into a conflict."

She sighed. "We've been getting into more and more arguments. That's not good. We both need to adjust if we want to keep our marriage intact."

Ves pressed his lips. He did not mention that their recent problems were largely her fault. If she wasn't so paranoid and irrationally afraid of Juliet, she wouldn't have stirred up so much tension!

Still, he was confident this issue would blow over. Time seemed to work quite well in calming Gloriana down. He didn't dare to approach her like this a week ago. He only tried to reconcile with her now because he judged she was in a more receptive mood at this time.

"Let's talk about something we are more aligned with." He suggested. "How is your mystery Hexer mech project going? Have you determined some more criteria for our sixth mech design project?"

She nodded. "I've studied the Komodo War and identified several opportunities for us to influence its course by introducing a new mech. To be honest, the Hex Army's mech roster is quite rounded and already covers every essential role. Even with your glows, it's hard to come up with a vision that can add unique value to the Hex Army's lineup."

"There is more to my design philosophy than glows, you know."

"I know. You've explained that to me already. It's just that in a war situation, glows have the most immediate effect. All of those other benefits such as growing a living mech or increasing the compatibility between mech and mech pilot just isn't fast enough. By the time those other benefits come online, the Fridaymen may have taken over half of the Hegemony by then! We need to focus on delivering immediate benefits to the Hex Army."

"So what is your best idea? What Hexer mech do you think can revitalize the Hexers?"

A devious grin appeared on her face. "I want to design a stealth mech."

Ves blinked. "A stealth mech? Uhhh.."

"Are you about to say that stealth tech is classified? You aren't wrong, but it's not a problem for us. With how much the Hegemony adores us, we can easily gain the right permissions as long as it is for a good cause. Let me tell you that my cause is definitely worthy."

He scratched his head. "I don't know, Gloriana. How can a stealth mech designed by us be more useful than the Hegemony's existing models? We don't specialize in stealth tech and glows are kind of the opposite of what you want. Any invisible mech that emits a noticeable glow will doubtlessly be detected before it can get close!"

"That's the thing, Ves. Your glows have a variety of effects. As you say, most of them draw attention. What if you can achieve the opposite? What if you can develop a glow that causes people around it to avoid attention instead of drawing it? As long as we implement such a glow into a serviceable Hexer stealth mech, it can probably sneak into more sensitive areas!"

"The idea sounds impressive. It's just... most if not all forms of stealth detection purely relies on tech. It's the sensors that trip the alarms, not people. A glow doesn't act on equipment."

"Are you sure about that?"

Chapter 2545: Incoming Shipment

As Ves and Gloriana slowly patched up their relationship, the Design Department almost completed the preparations for the second round of design projects.

He knew that the Braves and Erudites had to work harder than ever this time. All of them were just third-class mech designers not too long ago. Though they had prospered greatly after gaining access to the abundant learning resources of the Larkinson Clan, they had yet to receive any significant augmentations.

This meant that the assistant mech designers wouldn't be able to provide as much help as before. With their insufficient knowledge and judgement, their design choices simply couldn't be trusted.

The three lead designers who were qualified to design second-class mechs had to take on a much more hands-on approach as a result. Not being able to delegate a lot of challenging work to their assistants meant they had to commit a lot of time in order to complete the projects within the deadline.

While Ves wanted to obtain some great mech designs, he did not want to sink an excessive amount of time in their development. Designing mechs was not just about coming up with the best products. It was also about completing their designs in a timely manner. Every mech designer had to make compromises in order to balance these two priorities.

This time, he prioritized haste. He was lagging behind schedule when it came to designing second-class mechs. His mech forces urgently needed some second-class LMC mechs and he was very keen on completing his obligations to the Hexadric Hegemony as soon as possible.

"Attaining the greatest possible quality is not a big concern this time." He muttered.

Lucky, who was lounging on his shoulder, issued a warning.

"Meow."

"It's fine. It won't hurt as long as I don't say anything to Gloriana."

He knew his new wife would not be pleased if she found out that Ves intended to rush his projects. This was why he was determined to stay mum and pretend to design his mechs as usual. Once the deadline came close, he would keep urging her on and force her to end her work.

No matter how much she wanted to perfect her work, she always surrendered to his persuasion in the end. This was because he always held more say when it came to designing mass-produced mechs.

However, once they started to design some custom mechs and expert mechs, Gloriana would certainly insist on spending more time to optimize them. This was fine to Ves as it was very important to achieve the greatest possible quality for these high-performing machines.

"That's something to consider for the future."

Once he completed the current round of projects, he intended to design his first expert mechs. With the help of Master Willix, Ves had very high expectations for his first batch of projects.

In the meantime, he tasked the LMC's Procurement Department to be on the lookout for exceptionally valuable materials that conformed to the criteria he set. Many of the exotics Ves was looking for were regarded as strategic materials by states, so obtaining them was anything but trivial. The chances of any of them showing up on the open market or semi-open venues such as auction houses were too slim.

Still, as long as there was a chance, there was hope of obtaining enough materials in the next half-year. The Procurement Department hired or dispatched agents throughout the Yeina Star Cluster in order to approach various states and institutions for their strategic materials. Perhaps it was possible to make some private deals with them. The Larkinson Clan possessed a lot more clout these days.

With the establishment and expansion of several new departments, Ves felt assured about delegating more tasks to others. It was completely unnecessary for him to waste his precious time on performing market research or begging for strategic materials. The LMC hired plenty of professionals who could do a much better job of performing these tasks.

Ves and his fellow mech designers just needed to design their mechs, and that suited everyone fine.

Speaking of procurement, the Larkinson Clan's initial batch of purchases finally arrived. Large amounts of starships entered the Cinach System and flew to the inner system.

Many of them were massive cargo haulers. Their large, cavernous cargo hulls stored rows and rows of large-sized containers.

When the cargo haulers delivered them to a large civilian space station, Ves and his mech commanders eagerly visited one of the warehouses to inspect the new goods.

Large teams of mech technicians were already crawling over the containers. They inspected the goods and began to open some of the containers.

Soon enough, the mech technicians swiftly assembled the mechs stored inside. Several different mechs stood before the Larkinsons.

These were the imported products that the Larkinson Clan had ordered. The initial shipment brought over a thousand second-mechs, which significantly alleviated everyone's security concerns.

"So these are our next fighting machines." Commander Melkor observed as his visor continually scanned the hastily-assembled mechs. "No offense, Ves, but they look a bit more basic than I expected."

"The mechs of the Cross Clan are at least four times as impressive." Commander Cinnabar grunted.

Ves helplessly spread his hands. "These are stopgap mechs. We're just using them until my Design Department completes some suitable second-class mechs that you can use. Once you get your Bright Warrior Mark II's, we'll have to dispose of these mechs in some way. Whether we resell them, recycle them or hand them down to someone else, we won't be able to recoup the cost of procuring them in the first place. It's best to go cheap under these circumstances."

The newest mech commander nodded. "I believe it is good to start with basic models. The high-end mechs used by the Cross Clan, the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony are challenging to control. Most of our mech pilots won't be able to utilize more than a fraction of their potential. We might as well make use of something easier and get accustomed to piloting second-class mechs before we move up to better models."

Commander Sendra snorted. "Don't equate your Living Sentinels to the rest of us, Casella. The Swordmaidens don't need training mechs. We are more than ready enough to harness real battle machines!"

The argument continued for some time until Ves raised his palm. "Quiet down. The choice lies with me. While I am aware of your requirements, it simply isn't possible to fulfill all of them, especially since I have opted to purchase these products in bulk this time. Be patient and wait for some time. Once we have freed some design capacity, I will start some projects that are tailored to the needs of your troops."

That shut them down. Each mech commander knew that a mech designed in-house was the ultimate product they could get their hands on. With all of the advantages they conveyed, the Larkinson Clan would definitely soar in strength once it obtained more LMC mech models.

The newly-released Transcendent Punisher model already gave them a nice preview! The Larkinson Clan's new artillery mech might be incredibly unwieldy and difficult to fabricate, but its power and functions were undeniable!

In the initial test run of the first production copy, the mech was capable of tracking even the trickiest practice targets!

Its uncanny 'Ylvainan' targeting and aim assistance allowed it to nail distant light mechs with a surprising degree of success.

If the other LMC mechs possessed similar features, then the continued rise of the Larkinson Clan was assured!

Of course, all of that took time. For now, the mech forces had to settle for what passed for budget mechs in the second-class mech market.

The first model that Ves and his commanders inspected was a rather slim swordsman mech.

"This is the Princess Jecka AR-0005-PMSE." Ves presented to the others as he called up a projection of the model's spec sheet. "It's designed and produced by Merrin Systems, which is based in Vicious Mountain. Its performance is moderately slanted towards offense. Its armor system isn't very impressive, but that is also the reason why it is priced at 59 million hex credits per copy."

Everyone turned to Commander Sendra. As the new leader of the Swordmaidens, she would be relying heavily on these foreign-made mechs.

"They look.. usable." The tall and athletic woman stated with a hint of reluctance. A grimace formed on her tanned face. "I've seen better second-class mechs. I give credit to Merrin Systems. The mech designers there truly know what swordsman mech pilots want to see in their machines. It's just that these Princess Jecka mechs are too damned cheap!"

Compared to the mech models of her dreams, the Princess Jecka model possessed lackluster armor, average mobility and a lack of interesting modules. Its budget was simply too small to accommodate more features.

It still had a few good upsides, though. Otherwise, Ves wouldn't have spent his money on this particular model.

Just like many of the other mech models he procured, the Princess Jecka was cheap, easy to maintain, easy to pilot and possessed surprisingly high arm strength. The offensive power of this spaceborn swordsman mech model allowed it to burst out a considerable amount of damage.

That last bit barely placated the Swordmaidens. The other mech forces would also be making use of the Princess Jecka, though to a lesser degree.

The commanders inspected another model.

At 48 million hex credits per copy, the ANX Corp Vima Sun RT-556L was even cheaper than the Princess Jecka.

The Vima Sun was a classic second-class spaceborn rifleman mech model. It boasted high firepower, above-average mobility but very poor defense.

The ranged mech excelled in wielding laser weapons. Its high-powered laser rifles boasted high alpha damage, allowing it to vaporize or melt through tougher obstacles.

The tradeoff was that the Vima Sun's energy reserves drained quickly when the rifles fired continuously at their highest setting. The rifleman mech's shape did not offer that much capacity, and its affordable energy cells weren't known for their abundant storage.

The heat management of this model was also rather poor, especially in open space. The only mitigating factor was that the Vima Sun was fairly good at shunting its excess heat into any starship hull, asteroid or other solid object it came into contact with. Therefore, these Vima Suns were destined to take cover behind combat carriers in most combat situations.

"These Vima Suns are completely inadequate for Avatars of Myth." Melkor distastefully frowned. As a rifleman mech specialist, he had a better feel for ranged mechs. "Their defense is so poor that their good mobility doesn't matter."

"They are serviceable to the Living Sentinels." Commander Casella Ingvar judged. "While I agree with the Avatar Commander, the needs of my Sentinels aren't as high. We can make due with the Vima Suns."

Ves already expected to hear such answers. "You don't have to settle for the base model. If your men have enough spare time, you can tell them to upgrade or modify your new mechs as you wish. Part of the reasons why I chose to procure the Princess Jecka and the Vima Sun models is because they're easy to modify and improve. Their relatively simple and uncomplicated designs lend themselves well to extensive upgrades."

That mollified the mech commanders a bit more. Personally, Ves felt it was a waste of time to upgrade these stopgap mechs, but he did not forbid it. The mech forces each needed to keep themselves busy somehow. Upgrading the new products also allowed the maintenance departments of the different mech forces to accrue more practical experience.

The third important model they checked was a space knight model.

"This is another product of Merrin Systems." Ves introduced. "I took a fancy to the Tamris Stellar

TR-1013-TLAZ because it features the same clean and basic design style as the Princess Jecka. It's a generic offensive mech model that boasts relatively high defense, decent mobility for a hefty mech and poor offensive capabilities."

"Is there anything special to this space knight?" Commander Abis Firelight asked. The Flagrant Vandal Commander was not impressed by the model. "Its shield looks rather thin."

"That's why it is priced at just 67 million hex credits. That's a bargain in my eyes. There are no gimmicks to this mech worth noting. If you aren't satisfied with its shield, then you can easily replace it with something better."

Every mech commander knew that their troops had a lot of work on their hands. Even if they wouldn't be using these affordable mechs for a very long time, none of them felt assured by their factory specs!

Chapter 2546: Ves the Cheapskate

The Larkinson Clan obtained a number of other mech models, but they were just as disappointing as the first three ones.

"Why so glum?" Ves frowned as he turned around. "The commercial mechs I've ordered may not be impressive compared to other second-class mechs, but they are solid, reliable products with proven track records. Don't forget that each of them perform far better than any of the third-class mechs we are getting rid of. You can finally say goodbye to your paltry and outdated Desolate Soldiers, Doom Guards, Deliverers and Aurora Titans."

His mech commanders grew even more morose.

"We may have outgrown those mechs, but they're special to us." Melkor voiced. "I know we don't have room for them anymore, but it feels wrong to part with them. They're living mechs, are they not? Shouldn't we treat them better?"

Ves responded with a rueful smile. "In an ideal reality, I would like that as well. It's not possible, though. Carrying capacity is one of the scarcest and most precious resources of any fleet. Each additional starship we acquire increases our burdens and slows us down. We cannot justify bringing along too much junk. I'm willing to retain retired mechs that are either exceptionally valued or possess a lot of historical significance. Everything else must go. You should at least be grateful that most of the mechs we are parting with will have a second life under another owner."

As long as the mechs weren't exclusive to the Larkinson Clan, Ves was willing to put them up for sale. The second-hand mech market was willing to accept any used products as long as they were in decent shape.

"It's a shame the performance of these mechs can't match up to your existing second-class mech models. Why can't we use some of them instead?"

"Do you want your Avatars to pilot Hexer mechs?" Ves raised his eyebrow at the Avatar Commander. "As long as your men are willing to pilot Blessed Squires, I'll supply as many as you want."

"Uhm, no thanks." Melkor quickly replied.

He would rather remove the visor from his face than to force any of his men to pilot such an insulting mech model!

Besides, the Blessed Squire was primarily a landbound mech design. It was troublesome to adapt them for space combat.

"Sir, we are still slated to receive our Valkyrie Redeemers, correct?" Someone asked.

Ves nodded to Commander Valerie Chancy. "Correct, but it will take some time. Every mech company in the Hegemony is running at full capacity. They're busy churning as many mechs as possible to replenish the Hex Army's losses. From what I've been told, the Hegemony will bundle the shipments of Valkyrie mechs with the delivery of our starships."

Both the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seekers were allowed to field the Hexer mechs he designed for the military. Both of them had already approached him in the past about procuring the highly-acclaimed Valkyrie mechs.

Since both of them wanted to obtain hundreds of them, Ves was forced to order them from the Hegemony. Without his factory ship, his fleet simply didn't have enough production capacity to make so many mechs. The Valkyrie Redeemers were high-end military mech models that boasted incredibly complexity for their size.

These problems only increased Ves' yearning for his factory ship. Though the additional upgrades he recently ordered made his future flagship more impressive, they also delayed her completion by a couple more weeks.

It was worth it though! With 20 high-end production lines, his factory ship could spit out 20 Valkyrie Redeemers every 3 days once they fully ramped up. If Ves added in the mech workshops, then his new industrial vessel was capable of outputting even more products!

Of course, it took a lot of effort to get to this point. His mech technicians had to be retrained to operate the advanced second-class production machines. His fleet also had to procure all of the raw materials needed to produce so many mechs.

To be honest, his clan still lacked too much qualified manpower. It would be great if the LMC managed to activate 10 production lines within the first month of receiving the factory ship. This was only possible by relying on the trainers supplied by the Hexers and by borrowing the mech technicians hailing from the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seekers.

Ves was already satisfied if he could operate his factory ship at half or even quarter capacity. He not only wanted to produce more Valkyrie mechs, but also a lot of very crucial Transcendent Punishers.

As the primary fleet defense mech of the Larkinson Clan, Ves would never contract its production to another mech company. It wasn't all about keeping the design schematics confidential. While it was important to hide the weaknesses of the artillery mech, Ves had a more important reason to rely on internal production.

Only his own production crews were able to produce better LMC mechs. While the LMC stopped using its label system as much, that did not mean it had become irrelevant.

Ves was a bit dissatisfied by the impersonal and efficiency-oriented production approaches adopted by many third-party manufacturers. The LMC wasn't able to force them to change their methods just so that they could output slightly better LMC mechs. The tradeoff simply wasn't worth it for many companies.

Only the mech technicians and production workers of his own clan abided by his standards. As long as they followed his methods, the Transcendent Punishers produced by his factory ship should come with stronger spiritual foundations, thereby giving more play to its distinctive spiritual qualities.

This meant that The Transcendent Punishers became drastically more accurate as a result! The difference might save the lives of hundreds if not thousands of clansmen down the line.

During the remainder of the inspection, Ves explained some of these logistical considerations to his mech commanders. They needed to know that it would take time to supply their troops with excellent mechs.

"You don't have to wait that long to get some better mechs. In half a year, the Bright Warrior Mark II will become available. With our factory ship, we should quickly be able to supply each of your forces with the new backbone of our clan. Just remember that the Mark II's role is different from the Mark I. Its standing is lower than that of specialized mechs."

Melkor frowned. The Avatars of Myth adored the original Bright Warriors. Many of them even owed their lives to its amazingly strong defense.

"I get why you did that, but won't this shift go against the original purpose of the Bright Warrior model?"

"You can make an argument for that." Ves admitted. "It's inevitable that the role and purpose of a mech will change when classing them up. It's folly to keep everything identical."

"Still, you're turning what used to be the most premier mech of the Larkinson Clan into a version that is only one or two steps up from the Princess Jeckas and the Vima Suns. You'll be breaking the hearts of many of our mech pilots."

"They won't cry for long once my Design Department starts rolling out more specialized mech designs. Right now, we are about to design a very good light skirmisher. All of the light mech pilots in our clan will stop complaining once we complete it. The Penitent Sisters can look forward to something even better."

Commander Valerie Chancy was very pleased to hear that. She may have lost her former head designer, but she gained a very powerful supporter in the LMC's crucial Design Department. With Juliet in charge of the design project, the Penitent Sisters shouldn't have any worries!

The round of inspections finally ended. Major Verle had already divvied up the shipment of mechs. Each mech force received a variety of mechs depending on their force makeup and mech doctrines.

For example, there was no need to transfer any Vima Suns to the Swordmaidens. Commander Sendra was already content with receiving a lot of Princess Jeckas.

The Living Sentinels obtained the most mechs because they had the most mech pilots, each of which needed hands-on training. Showering them with second-class mechs would also do wonders in repairing their damaged self-esteem.

Commander Melkor acted like a spoiled kid who got an apple from his mother when he actually wanted to eat some sweets. The Avatars of Myth was supposed to be an elite mech force. Piloting the second-class equivalent of budget mechs did not conform to its style!

The remaining mech forces were just as dissatisfied, though it was hard to argue that the new shipments represented a downgrade from what they had before.

Overall, the strength of the Larkinson Clan started to rise again. Shipments continued to trickled in in the coming days. While the trading companies charged a hefty fee for importing mechs across star sectors, the Larkinson Clan saved a significant amount of money by taking advantage of bulk discounts.

A lot of people were secretly dissatisfied with Ves. He was the main driver behind procuring so many budget mechs. There wasn't a single decent second-class mech in any of the shipments!

"The men aren't shy about complaining about the disappointing specs and lack of features of their new second-class mechs." Gavin reported to him during a routine briefing.

Ves leaned back in his office. "You can't please everyone, Benny. I thought you should know that since you're a marketing expert. There are good reasons behind our frugality. Aside from reserving our funds for the production of LMC mechs, we also have to build up our war chest for some big expenditures."

"Meow meow."

On his desk, Lucky pounced on the Larkinson Mandate and tried to draw out the Golden Cat.

Nyaaaaa.

For some reason, Goldie didn't want to come out today. When Lucky became a little too insistent, the Larkinson Mandate unleashed a strange kinetic blast!

"MEOW!"

The gem cat soared across the stateroom and slammed straight into the bulkhead!

Gavin spoke up once this distraction passed.

"We know you are prioritizing the future, boss. There is nothing wrong with that. It's just that some of us believe you're going overboard with hollowing the present in order to accomplish your ambitious goals."

Ves leaned forward. "I don't like to be wasteful. We need to make the best use of our resources. Know that we will be getting rid of many of our ships and mechs once we reach one of the beyonder gates. The Gate Consortium only allows a limited amount of ships to pass, so it's impossible to bring everything. We will be in the best position to start our adventure in the Red Ocean if we focus mostly on building up our capital ships and expert mechs."

"Is that safe? I heard the stories about the Nyxian Gap Campaign. A lot of mech pilots and other personnel lost their lives because their mechs weren't up to the talk."

"You don't have to worry about that, Benny." Ves chuckled. "Our mechs might not amount to much, but we've ordered a lot of them. Being able to field thousands of mechs is already intimidating enough. If that's not enough, we can borrow the strength of our upcoming allies."

"You mean the Cross Clan, sir."

"Correct. Do you have a problem with them or something?"

"We know too little about them. They're foreigners and they have their own ideas. They're also stronger than us. The quality and quantity of their mechs are much greater than ours."

"The Crossers won't do anything. There is hardly any benefit. If their new guest designer is able to exert enough influence, then I am pretty sure the Cross Clan will cover our backs."

It was a bit of a gamble, but one he was willing to take. The negotiations between the Larkinsons and the Crossers had reached the final stages. The two clans formed an elaborate treaty over the past few weeks.

What was remarkable about this treaty was how many opportunities it opened for cooperation.

The Larkinsons agreed to make some of their formidable production capacity available to their allies.

In turn, the Cross Clan promised to dispatch some highly-experienced mech instructors and trainers to the Larkinson Clan.

These were just two of the exchanges stipulated in the treaty!

Chapter 2547: Purplefeather

Soon after the shipments of mechs arrived, the Larkinsons received another delivery.

Dozens of combat carriers and logistics ships transitioned out of FTL. The emergence of so many second-class ships initially alarmed the local authorities, but soon they relaxed once it became clear the vessels were Hexer-built.

The Larkinson Clan already expected their arrival. Their Hexer architecture did not dampen the enthusiasm of the clansmen.

It didn't matter whether these vessels used to be owned and operated by Hexers. After some thorough refurbishment and applying some brand-new coating, the incoming second-class starships ought to be just as serviceable in the hands of the Larkinsons!

As the Hexer crews of the arriving ships handed over command to the Larkinson Clan, they didn't leave immediately. The Larkinson spacers that entered the vessels and touched the elaborate controls quickly became overwhelmed by all of the advanced functions.

It took time for the mariners to become accustomed to operating these advanced vessels. Second-hand or not, Ves already knew from ships such as the Barracuda and the Scarlet Rose that it was at least five times more difficult to control them! Certain ship components such as the FTL drives were so much more complex that the Larkinson Clan had to contract some Hexer chief engineers on a long-term basis.

The thought of having Hexers in charge of the most critical parts of the starships made many Larkinsons nervous. While the chance of anything going wrong was small, it was best if the Larkinson Clan's own chief engineers got up to speed as soon as possible!

As Ves was more preoccupied with working on his new mech design projects, he only spared some time to inspect a couple of new ships.

He first headed over to the newly-christened Purplefeather. As his shuttle landed in the busy hangar bay, Ves and Lucky stepped out and took in the frenetic activity taking place inside.

The Hexers may have delivered their starships with complete loadouts, but the Larkinsons still had to bring their own supplies and other equipment. Various shuttles and small transports continually delivered different goods.

"What a busy ship." Ves remarked to Commander Melkor.

"Breaking in a ship is a momentous effort. It will take months before we're comfortable with running our new flagship. I'm just happy that we're finally obtaining second-class ships of our own. Do you know how much I envied the Penitent Sisters during our journey through the Nyxian Gap? The ships we had before hardly provided us with any sense of security!"

Ves smiled as he reminisced about the past. "It hasn't been a lot of years since we initially procured the Redfeather and the Greenfeather. Do you know how much it pained me to spend a few billion bright credits back then? All we could afford was a pair of light carriers."

"Yeah, I remember. You were too much of a cheapskate to supply my Avatars with a proper combat carrier." Melkor grumbled.

"Hahaha! Don't kid me. You wouldn't have been in favor of buying a combat carrier either. They were just too damned expensive. Back then, we only guarded ourselves against pirates, gangs and Vesians. We never thought we would get pulled into a conflict against the Friday Coalition and a powerful Nyxian pirate alliance. We have come so far to get to this point. Be proud of that, Melkor."

"I don't feel very proud. Too many of our brothers and sisters have lost their lives to secure all of this prosperity. We all feel a little guilty for being among the survivors."

Ves frowned. That sounded rather troubling. "Hey, that is what counseling is for. It is absolutely not your fault."

"I know, I know. I have been talking to a counselor from the Larkinson Veteran Foundation as of late. It has helped, but.. it's harder to set aside responsibility when you are a commander. How do you cope with the guilt of leading some of your men to their deaths?"

"By not feeling guilty at all." Ves answered.

"...Are you serious?"

"Ahem, I know that sounds rather insensitive, but really, don't get too hung up over the past." Ves quickly coughed. "While the dead deserve your regards, don't let your obligations towards the slain override your obligations towards the living. If your guilt negatively affects your judgement and performance, then it is best to relinquish your command. The Avatars of Myth pursue excellence in all forms. You'll only hold your own men back if you let them get affected by your moping."

Melkor's body shook a bit. Ves had given him quite a shock. Not even his counselors dared to be so direct!

"I.. can't do that yet, Ves. It's too callous. While I agree with your logic, the dead must be remembered. Didn't you say that in one of your speeches?"

"Well yes, but.. that is mostly meant to keep everyone moving forward. Don't take it too literally. It's much more important to keep your productivity high. You need to stop any behavior that goes against that goal. The Avatars who are still alive are all counting on you to lead them with a sober mind."

This was not something that Melkor could easily accept. To him, what Ves was asking of him was tantamount to forgetting the sacrifices of the dead. This did not conform with his sense of honor!

It was too bad that Ves was unsympathetic towards Melkor's attitude towards the dead. He was chiefly responsible for all of the recent losses. While he felt a bit regretful about the thousands who died, he did not allow himself to go any further.

As long as he felt any guilt, his efficiency in designing mechs would definitely drop! This was self-defeating behavior in his eyes.

The simplest solution to this problem was to wipe away all of his guilt. He did so. Problem solved.

Ves and Melkor exited the hangar bay and inspected some of the compartments. They toured the engineering bay, the mech stables, the mech workshop before ending up at the bridge.

An engineer was already affixing a large plate that proudly declared the name and serial number of the combat carrier.

"The Purplefeather, huh? Your naming sense is as bad as ever."

Commander Melkor chuckled. "It gets the job done. I'm saving up the Goldfeather for when our Avatars finally receive our fleet carrier. Speaking about capital ships, how long will it take to receive a proper vessel?"

"Don't be too impatient. The Purplefeather is already impressive enough to tide your men over."

The Purplefeather was a large-capacity combat carrier that was able to hold up to 60 mechs. She featured moderate armor, moderate mobility and terrestrial landing capabilities. She also contained a dedicated command center that was suitable for coordinating large amounts of mechs.

The combat carrier once served as the flagship of a Hexer mercenary corps a few decades ago. He didn't go through a lot of combat back when she sailed the stars under a different name. This meant that her condition was still excellent for a ship that was over half-a-century old!

What Ves especially valued about the Purplefeather was that she boasted 12 highly-reinforced bunkers. The combat carrier's former owners upgraded their plating so that they did an even better job of protecting mechs hunkering inside!

The Purplefeather was actually quite an impressive vessel even among modern Hexer combat carriers!

Ves hadn't skimped too much when it came to investing in his sub-capital ships. He fully recognized the value of strong and defensive ships after seeing how well the Penitent Sisters fared with them. Without their tough and resilient combat carriers, his task force would have never been able to damage the Gravada Knarlax!

"You don't understand, Ves. It's one thing to wait for a fleet carrier. It's another thing to wait for a fleet carrier while we have a good view of the Antonio Cross and the Hemmington Cross!"

"Ah. I see."

Even Ves envied the fleet carriers of the Cross Clan sometimes. Though both of them were quite flawed in his eyes, that did not stop him from desiring them for himself!

Luckily, his factory ship would soon be on the way. Ves didn't have to wait long before he obtained his biggest toy.

"When?" Melkor asked in a more insistent tone.

"I really can't say. There are too many variables at play."

"Can you at least tell me if my Avatars are at the top of the list?"

"I can't tell you that either. It depends on the fleet carrier we are able to procure and the needs of our clan. Don't worry too much. Even if your Avatars don't get the first turn, your troops will definitely obtain something soon."

Ves was actually thinking about granting the first fleet carrier to the Living Sentinels. They fielded the most mechs and possessed a higher demand for a large and solidly-armored capital ship.

The Avatars of Myth were already doing well enough without a capital ship. Ves did not expect their confidence and fighting spirit to rise once they received their own fleet carrier.

Of course, Ves didn't tell any of this to Melkor. It was enough to give his cousin some hope.

As they continued to chat, Melkor eventually brought up something personal.

"So, Ves. I hate to sound impatient, but when are you prepared to design a custom rifleman mech for me? Will it be after you've completed your current projects?"

Ugh. Not this again. The pressure on Ves didn't abate after half a year. He already promised Master Willix to begin with the development of some expert mechs and he also had to design at least 3 more Hexer mechs to close out his current commission.

Aside from that, Ves didn't have an existing base to design Melkor's ideal custom mech. He had to design a dedicated rifleman mech first.

"Your custom mech will come in time." He perfunctory replied. "The longer you wait, the better it will be. I promise you the end product will absolutely blow your mind."

"I'm getting older, Ves. We're not as young as we used to be. We're both over thirty years old. I'm afraid I'll be nearing forty when I finally receive this promised custom mech of yours. Do you know how much of a difference that makes to mech pilots? We age faster than you mech designers."

Designing mechs was a purely intellectual occupation. As long as a mech designer's mind remained sharp, it didn't matter if his body grew wrinkled and his hair turned white.

It was different for mech pilots. While the use of neural interfaces allowed soldiers to pilot mechs with their minds, a strong body was still essential for certain reasons.

Not only that, but piloting mechs inherently stressed the brains of their pilots. Ves once learned a dark secret about mechs. Mech pilots gradually accumulated brain damage as they interfaced with their mechs. In most cases, this damage was irreversible. It could only be slowed, but never stopped.

This was one of the reasons why it was a lot more troublesome to extend the lives of mech pilots. Without any biological augmentations or treatments, a mech pilot's peak gradually declined over time.

Though Melkor and many other mech pilots didn't know that much, they were still aware of the gradual decline in performance. They just chalked it up to the loss of youthful vigor or something.

Ves placed his hand on Melkor's shoulder. "You don't have to wait until you're a grandpa before you get your custom mech. I promise you that. Just be patient. The demand for other mechs are too great to address your needs. You don't want to leave our expert pilots hanging, do you?"

Commander Melkor bent his head. "You're right. I'm being too selfish. It would be bad if the completion of one of our expert mechs is set back just so that I can obtain my dream mech."

Despite saying that, he still yearned to pilot a mech as impressive as the Quint. He sacrificed so much to lead the Avatars of Myth to this point. When would he ever be able to reap his cherished reward?

Chapter 2548: Consumable Starships

The Purplefeather was but one of many starships arriving from the Hegemony. Batches of second-class combat carriers and auxiliary ships kept pouring into the Cinach System at regular intervals.

The Avatars of Myth, Living Sentinels and other mech forces embraced the presents and eagerly unpacked them. Though the Hexer-built vessels were far more advanced than anything the Larkinsons had ever touched, they had made plenty of preparations.

Aside from pre-training the ship crews, the clan also solicited the help of the Glory Seekers and the Penitent Sisters. Both Hexer forces graciously loaned their engineers and specialists to help the underqualified crews make sense of the new systems.

Together with the trainers supplied by the Hegemony, the Military Bureau believed it wouldn't take more than a year before the Larkinsons no longer required any external aid.

It wasn't necessary for the Larkinson spacers to master their new vessels from top to bottom. They only needed to achieve enough proficiency to control the ships under normal operation and be able to react to the most common emergencies. They could slowly learn the ins and outs of the new ships later on through gradual study and practice.

Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon became incredibly busy as of late. As the most senior naval officer in the clan, she needed to sort out the incoming vessels and juggle the demands of every mech force.

The Living Sentinels developed a preference for sturdy and well-armored combat carriers.

The Flagrant Vandals desired vessels with better FTL travel characteristics and superior sub-light propulsion.

The Avatars of Myth wanted to obtain both fast and resilient combat carriers and did not want to settle for less.

There was no way for Ophelia to please everyone. When Ves paid a visit to her office, he immediately sensed a lot of stress from the former Ylvainan officer.

"We're getting some fine ships, but they're not good enough for the Avatars." She complained.

A small turtle emerged from an aquarium placed on her desk. The clever little reptile climbed out of the top and passed through a gate that blasted all of the water from his body. The turtle vigorously waddled up to his owner's hand and tried to offer some comfort.

"Blub blub."

"Thanks, Foba."

Sadly, her new pet couldn't wave all of her problems away.

"Tell me honestly." Ves began as he crossed his arms. "What do you think of the vessels we are receiving from the Hegemony."

"As I have said, they are fine second-class vessels. While these used goods are not up to par against their state-of-the-art equivalent, to be honest the differences are not that concerning. In the field of naval development, real generational differences are measured in centuries instead of decades. A starship commissioned over a hundred years ago is still competitive. What truly matters is the value of the vessel. More expensive ships not only feature better tech, but also better materials."

An old but expensive starship could easily crush a new but cheaper vessel. Ves was already familiar with this premise as the same largely applied to mechs as well. It was just that mechs never lasted that long.

"In terms of price, where do our combat carriers lie?" Ves curiously asked.

"The price we paid for our combat carriers range from 2 billion to 5 billion hex credits. There are a couple of outliers such as the Purplefeather, but the bulk of our vessels fall into this serviceable category." She explained. "From my understanding of the Yeina Star Cluster's starship market, this price range is below average."

"So our combat carriers are rather flimsy compared to the vessels of other second-class outfits?" Ves frowned.

"Not exactly, sir. The quality of our vessels are quite satisfactory if we bought them new, but we didn't. They have all been used for decades. While the Hegemony has been nice enough to service the mothballed starships, there are still many areas left which exhibit a considerable amount of wear-and-tear. Repairing these parts is too difficult without putting the vessels in drydocks."

"So essentially, the performance of our vessels is good, but their longevity is questionable."

That sounded similar to what the Penitent Sisters used to deal with before they sacrificed all of their combat carriers.

Ophelia nodded, pleased that Ves understood her point. "As a mech designer and an engineer, I believe you are aware of what this means for our clan. The vessels are older and more temperamental. Parts will break down at higher frequencies and emergencies will happen more often. These incidents can ramp up quite quickly the longer the ships operate without undergoing deep maintenance."

Starships were no different from giant machines. Just like other machines, their conditions degraded over time. While it was a lot more troublesome to fix their various issues, the better-built vessels were usually capable of operating without receiving any serious maintenance for decades.

Yet this couldn't go on forever. While starships came with a huge amount of redundancy, some ship components such as FTL drives still represented single points of failures. As long as any of these ship components broke down, the ship in question would end up in a lot of trouble!

"How is the outlook of our vessels in a span of five years?" Ves inquired. "Will we have to take this problem seriously in the immediate future?"

Ophelia paused for a moment. "Only the Great Prophet can say for sure, sir. According to my judgement, we will certainly have several major breakdowns and failures in the coming years. This can't be avoided considering we have procured hundreds of vessels. What I can tell you is that these isolated incidents are manageable provided we are not in hostile space or being pursued."

If a ship just happened to suffer a crippling breakdown, then the Larkinson Clan had several options.

Repairing the vessel took too much time and effort. It might take months to restore the damage.

"It's better to abandon any ships that break down along the way." Ves decided after contemplating his options. "None of our sub-capital starships are worth retaining. We are only making use of them so we can reach a beyonder gate safely. We can also train our clansmen in the use of second-class hardware. The core of our fleet consists of our capital ships. They're the only vessels that are worth bringing to the Red Ocean."

The fleet coordinator agreed with his sentiment. "Treating our sub-light vessels as transient, consumable assets is the right choice to make. However, the premise is that we are able to bear the cost of doing so. Every major breakdown means we will be losing a lot of value. At best, we are able to find a buyer who will take the crippled vessel off our hands at a hefty discount. At worst, we might have to write off our losses entirely."

Ves had already made his choice. Despite reserving more and more money on various priorities, the profitability of the LMC was able to bear the burden.

The Crystal Lord Mark II and the Ferocious Piranha were already building up momentum.

The latter especially began to catch on due to its incredibly useful glow. Sales of the Doom Guard had actually cratered as many mech buyers preferred to obtain the more user-friendly alternative!

The discussion continued for some time. Ves gained a better insight on the state of his fleet upon the moment of departure. While the starships the Larkinson Clan obtained wouldn't impress any second-class power, their performance was not weak.

That was enough.

It didn't matter if they became more troublesome a decade later. By the time the Larkinson Clan reached a beyonder gate, Ves intended to sell every sub-capital ship without exception.

The Barracuda, the Scarlet Rose, the Stellar Chaser, the Purplefeather and so on would no longer be a part of the Larkinson Clan's story. Despite memories that Ves and his clansmen formed with the starships, they had to go. The clan would either find new owners for them or have them scrapped to recoup some of their value.

The future of his clan no longer lay in these smaller vessels. While his clan would definitely acquire a lot of new sub-capital ships on the other side of the inter-galactic beyonder gate, there was no way that any of the new purchases would resemble the older ones in price, quality, features or looks.

The Red Ocean was a hodgepodge of many different human cultures and customs. Ship and mech builders from every corner of human space in the old galaxy had converged in a very tiny area in the new dwarf galaxy.

This resulted in continuous collisions between different design philosophies and product styles!

The combat carriers put for sale in the Red Ocean were very different from the combat carriers sold in the Yeina Star Cluster. The latter were simply too shabby and basic to perform well in the new frontier.

This was why Ves was not sorry to say goodbye to ships like the Scarlet Rose. They simply couldn't keep up with his demands.

Once Ves finished his fruitful discussion with Ophelia, he left her office and paid a visit to Major Verle.

"Hello. How is it going, major?"

"You're giving me a lot of headaches."

Ves chuckled. "I've been hearing that a lot."

"Don't misunderstand me, sir. It's great that our clan is finally building up our strength again. Once we are able to take control over our new assets, we will gain enough strength to protect ourselves as we travel from star sector to star sector."

"That sounds good, because we'll have quite a journey ahead of us. Have you and your staff already charted some routes to the nearest beyonder gates?"

"We did. Let me show them to you." The major answered.

Some projections came to life. They showed off several star charts centered around the Komodo Star Sector.

Ves could easily observe the colorful translucent borders that delineated different star sectors and star clusters.

Animated dotted lines extended from Komodo and began to follow several different curving paths.

The galactic rim was a sparse and underdeveloped region. The Gate Consortium couldn't justify building a lesser beyonder gate in every single star cluster. This meant that the Larkinson Clan had to cross through at least several different star clusters in order to reach any gate.

"This one." Ves pointed towards a specific chart. The projection grew larger while the others shrunk in size. "We'll take this route."

Verle was alarmed!

"Let's not be too hasty, sir. We still need to discuss the merits of each route with the Larkinson Assembly and some other relevant leaders. We also need to consult with the Cross Clan to find out whether they have any objections to our choice. This is not something that we can decide in a short amount of time."

"Then make it happen." Ves crossed his arms. "I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. I won't accept any other route."

"Can you at least tell me why?"

"I'm not choosing this route on a whim. I'm familiar with some of the star sectors along the way. They're all worth paying a visit. I don't want to spend the next months and years cooped up in my factory ship."

"Very well, then. We will explore this route further and check whether there are any hazards along the way. Total safety can't be guaranteed in space, but we can minimize the risks by avoiding unstable regions."

The route that Ves prematurely settled upon threaded through four different star clusters. It started from the Yeina Star Cluster and passed through the Bardo and Fermi Star Clusters until it finally reached the center of the Antilla Star Cluster.

The latter hosted one of the new-fangled beyonder gates developed by the Big Two and managed by the Gate Consortium.

The mysterious Temple Protector might have passed through this very gate!

To be honest, this wasn't the shortest or fastest route. Yet Ves did not want to travel in any other direction for one important reason.

The Smiling Samuel Star Sector was part of the Fermi Star Cluster!

Chapter 2549: Catching Up

"If we follow this route, it is challenging to estimate how long it will take to reach the beyonder gate at the end." Major Verle. "The more stops we make along the way, the more time it will take to traverse our route. Our fleet composition also affects our speed. The larger our fleet, the more unwieldy it becomes."

"A group of ships is only as fast as the slowest among the bunch." Ves commented.

"Exactly."

Ves smiled. "It's good that we're getting rid of all of our third-class vessels. Keeping them will only drag our feet."

Third-class ships with cheaper FTL drives couldn't even pass through the gravitic barriers separating star sectors from each other.

Even if they could, their FTL drives possessed shorter ranges, thereby forcing any fleet that included these vessels to undergo more downtime.

In contrast, second-class ships with decent FTL drives could aim for more distant star systems. At a minimum, the range was doubled. Their speed in FTL travel was higher as well, which meant that they reached their destinations in half or a third of the time.

Faster vessels were vitally important to reaching a beyonder gate in a timely manner. The Red Ocean developed rapidly as the pioneers who arrived early were picking up treasures left and right.

While Ves might have cheaped out a bit when it came to procuring the starships of the Larkinson Clan, he did not cut too many corners when it came to their FTL drives!

"What are the FTL characteristics of our fleet once we set off?" Ves asked. "I need to know the minimum and maximum cycling times."

Major Verle activated another projection. It listed out all of the starships that the Larkinson Clan ordered. Some of them had already arrived while others were still on their way.

"The list is ranked by tonnage. As you can see, a small vessel such as the Barracuda can cycle her FTL drive as fast as 3 hours, while our largest logistical ships need at least 6 hours. In fact, the FTL drives of our upcoming factory ship actually require 18 hours to cycle a heavy-duty FTL drive, and that is only when it operates at peak condition!"

That was way too long! Fortunately, the situation wasn't as bad as it sounded.

"My factory ship comes with three FTL drives." Ves smirked. "It doesn't matter if it takes an entire day to get a spent FTL drive up and running again. We can just switch over to another one in an instant."

This actually resulted in the strange situation where a gigantic capital ship was able to traverse more distance than a swift corvette!

While the range of the Barracuda was better than that of his upcoming factory ship, the differences weren't decisive. The quality of FTL drives mattered a lot more.

In that aspect, none of the second-class ships of his fleet came up short. Insisting on this demand was actually one of the reasons why it took so much time for the Hegemony to prepare the used starships. Some of their FTL drives had to be replaced because their condition was too poor or their quality did not meet his standards.

"Don't confine your vision to our own vessels." Verle warned. "We also have to account for the Crossers. Their ships will also factor in how fast we can reach the beyonder gate in the Antilla Star Sector."

"Oh. You're right. What do you know about their fleet?"

"The Black Cats have sniffed out quite a lot of details by tracking the flight of the remnant fleet. What I can tell you with certainty is that their current fleet almost entirely consists of their faster vessels. Any ship that couldn't keep up would have fallen into enemy hands. You don't have to worry about any of their ships dragging us down, at least in the short term. Many of their vessels accumulated significant damage and their engineers may have overstressed their FTL drives by cutting short their cycling times."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "This is not important. Just like us, the Crossers can just throw aside their sub-capital ships if they ever become impaired. I care more about their capital ships. They should have at least two FTL drives each, right?"

"Correct, sir. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to outrun their pursuers. Their characteristics are fairly interesting. While the Cross Clan doesn't publicize any specs, it is easy enough to make some estimates based on the historical movements of the two fleet carriers. There is enough data on the galactic net to tease out the approximate FTL travel characteristics of the Antonio Cross and the Hemmington Cross."

The major activated yet another list of specifications. Though there were many question marks and vague estimates, the document nonetheless gave Ves a better understanding of his future allies.

The Hemmington Cross was a big and fat fleet carrier. Her FTL drives had to exert a lot of effort to move the metal giant across the stars.

The cycling time of her FTL drives likely lasted around 32 hours!

Ves felt like vomiting when he spotted this detail. "This is way too long!"

"It's not that much of a problem if both of her FTL drives are functional. We will only start to feel the consequences if one the two FTL drives of the Hemmington Cross gets knocked out. While we cannot tell if the large fleet carrier possesses a third FTL drive, the possibility is very slim. Her existing FTL drives already cost a fortune for being able to act on a ship that is more than 3 kilometers."

This meant that the Hemmington Cross was only a single point of failure away from crippling the traversal speed of their combined fleet.

This was not a big deal if the critical breakdown took place in a safer region.

However, if the two clans attracted a powerful enemy or ended in the middle of a warzone, then the Hemmington Cross' excessively long timeout would certainly pose a serious threat!

If such a calamity ever took place, the Cross Clan would have to make some very hard choices!

"What about the smaller fleet carrier."

"Ah, the Antonio Cross. While her mech capacity is quite underwhelming, we know where most of her value lies. Some of her traversals are so far apart that only long-range FTL drives are able to accomplish such distant hops. These drives are not only powerful, they can cross considerably greater distances in the same amount of time. In fact, if you really care about reaching a beyonder gate as fast as possible, then you should travel aboard the Antonio Cross. No other ship can compare in this aspect."

That was a surprising detail. Ves was very impressed by the FTL drive parameters of the smaller fleet carrier. Her existence fully made sense to him now. The Crossers would definitely be able to obtain a lot of advantages in the Red Ocean as long as they made clever use of the Antonio Cross.

Ves even felt a bit jealous. It would be great if the Larkinson Clan possessed a fast capital ship as well. Still, he knew that it was unlikely that his fellow Larkinsons would agree. They paid much more attention to the total mech capacity of a larger fleet carrier.

He began to discuss some other related matters with Major Verle. They discussed the state of their growing fleet as well as the potential stops they could make along the proposed route.

While there were many interesting states, star sectors and star clusters along the way, it was not worth it to linger too long in each of them. The Red Ocean was much more interesting than some local regions. Ves had to restrain his urges and keep his fleet moving forward as much as possible.

That said, they also needed to plan their stops so that their crews could get a breath of fresh air every once in a while.

After some quick investigations, Ves casually selected several random star sectors that he wished to experience.

The Smiling Samuel Star Sector happened to be one of them. Yet just as Ves brought up the name, Major Verle immediately frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"Have you read up on Smiling Samuel?"

"Uhm, I'm doing that right now. It has an interesting name."

To be honest, Ves had overlooked the star sector shortly after he completed his latest Mastery experience. Since it would take at least a couple of years to reach the Smiling Samuel Star Sector, there was no immediate hurry to get up to speed on the current state of the region.

After all, only a couple of decades since Ves entered the mind of Rion Aaden. The local situation shouldn't have changed that much, right?

He began to have a bad feeling.

Just as Ves began to read some articles on the galactic net, Major Verle briefly summarized what he knew.

"The Smiling Samuel used to be a fairly unremarkable star sector. It was just that some sort of unknown incident took place that caused the native dwarf populations there to rise up and fight against the normal humans who used to call the shots in this region."

Ves snorted. "What can a bunch of dwarves really do? They're perennially repressed and their numbers can't catch up to that of humans."

While there were actually a fair amount of heavy gravity planets in the galaxy, it wasn't cheap to exploit them. Any mining initiative had to invest a lot of funds to get started. Every exertion expended a lot more energy in heavy gravity environments. The minerals offered by these planets had to surpass a certain threshold to justify a mining operation.

For this reason, the population of humans heavily outnumbered the population of dwarves!

While it wasn't unheard of for the latter to rebel or lash out against normal humans, they always ended in failure.

"The dwarves succeeded in toppling the human states of the star sector."

"What?!"

"The story is quite remarkable actually. While the early history of the dwarven rebellion is mired in myth, rumors and disinformation, the dwarves somehow became unprecedentedly united. The so-called Dwarven Justice Movement somehow managed to rally many other dwarves across many nearby star sectors and star clusters. As long as any dwarf heard the call, they dropped everything and attempted to travel to Smiling Samuel as fast as possible."

"Even so.. these migrations shouldn't have been able to overwhelm the native humans."

"You would think so, sir, but what happened is simply astonishing." Major Verle replied. There was genuine admiration in his tone! "The dwarves did not collide against the human states right away. Instead, they kept to a certain corner and steadily attracted more compatriots. Meanwhile they also stirred up discord between rivalling human states. As the normal humans became embroiled in destructive conflicts, the dwarven revolution finally erupted!"

The tale sounded incredibly outlandish to Ves. How could the dwarves possibly succeed in pulling off their schemes against their human enemies? Were the humans of the Smiling Samual Star Sector that ignorant?

"What is also interesting is the reason why the dwarves managed to unite under a single banner. They formed a new religion based around Vulcan, who is supposedly the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship."

The major projected some historical footage.

Rows and rows of uniformed dwarves stood before a plaza. On a high podium, a robed priest-like figure ascended into the air and raised a very familiar-looking banner.

"Vulcan!" The bearded priest shouted.

"VULCAN!" The crowd roared back!

Ves could sense the energy and fanaticism from the crowd. His heart sank as he recognized how deeply the heavy gravity variant humans embraced their faith.

Each of them believed wholeheartedly in Vulcan!

"Vulcan has blessed dwarvenkind. The Paramount Kingdom lies in ruins. The tall folk are driven away. Now, their planets belong to us. More and more dwarves throughout the neighboring star clusters continue to arrive in order to fulfill our dream of creating a dwarven sanctuary. We are ascendant! We are blessed! We are the chosen people! From now on, these conquered territories will henceforth belong to our new dwarven state. Let us celebrate the founding of the Vulcan Empire!"

"Vulcan!"

"Vulcan!"

"Vulcan!"

Chapter 2550: Abnormal Star Sector

Ves awkwardly scratched his smooth-shaven cheek.

The footage that Major Verle displayed had given him a great shock!

The dwarves not only succeeded in conquering the Paramount Kingdom, but also went on to defeat every other state in the star sector!

While it was true that the states in the Smiling Samuel Star Sector were more impoverished and decadent than others, they were still formidable institutions. How could the dwarves possibly overcome all of their disadvantages and win against the established powers in so little time?

"While it sounds like a fairy tale, the Vulcan Empire truly succeeded." Major Verle said. "Oday, the Vulcan Empire is the only dominant power of its star sector. While it is not that strong compared to other dominant states, it is highly entrenched in Smiling Samuel, thereby making it difficult for its neighbors to dislodge the dwarven state."

The Dwarven Justice Movement rose up rapidly from its humble beginnings. It remained quiet while it began to accumulate followers. Once its numbers and strength grew formidable enough, the dwarves launched their attacks with great force.

The Paramount Kingdom did not account well for itself. Its rotten nobles and corrupted officials responded very poorly to the dwarven incursion.

In fact, the human rulers actually looked down on the dwarves! It took many painful defeats for the ruling houses to recognize that the dwarves actually had the power to depose them. By that time, it was too late, and the Paramount Kingdom eventually made way for the Vulcan Empire.

Even then, the rest of the Smiling Samuel Star Sector still did not recognize the threat posed by the dwarves.

It was normal for individual states to rise and fall. Despite its domineering name, the Vulcan Empire was actually in a pretty bad shape upon its founding. The Paramount Kingdom's industries had suffered a lot of damage due to all of the fighting and a huge brain drain took place as many humans who were able to afford passage on a starship had fled the conquered state!

Yet despite all of these problems, the Vulcan Empire grew incredibly fast. The moment the dwarven rebellion succeeded in founding a state dedicated to heavy gravity variant humans, the amount of dwarves pouring in from outside multiplied by ten!

Even the more skeptical and cowardly dwarves became swayed by the dwarven dream. Short-statured humans throughout the surrounding regions emigrated to the Vulcan Empire with much greater urgency.

The Vulcan Empire rapidly grew in strength. As it carefully picked its battles and continually accomplished victory after victory, the dwarven state's momentum rose.

As the momentum of the Vulcan Empire rose, even more dwarves abandoned their old lives. They traveled to the Vulcan Empire no matter the cost and integrated in the rising state remarkably quickly.

"The Vulcan Faith contributed a lot in uniting all of these foreign dwarves." Major Verle noted.

Ves couldn't help but grimace even further. This faith was based on a sham!

Yet no matter how stupid it was for the dwarves to believe in one of his disguises, he had to admit that religion was one of the strongest ways to bind different people together.

No dwarf was the same. Their origin largely defined their norms and values. Different dwarves embodied different cultures depending on the planet, state or star sector they came from. Randomly mashing them together in a single state shouldn't have worked if not for their belief in Vulcan glueing them together!

"These dwarven believers certainly look.. enthusiastic."

"That's an understatement." Major Verle shook his head. "All of the records state the Vulcan people are highly xenophobic towards other human variants. The majority of the 'tall folk' who used to reside in Smiling Samuel were either wiped out or transferred elsewhere. The immigrating dwarves all took over the lands, jobs and possessions of the original citizens. Nowadays, only a handful of planets still host a majority of baseline humans, and they are usually closed off and inaccessible."

This sounded quite cruel to Ves! The dwarves must have displaced trillions of normal human citizens over the years. The sheer amount of tragedy that took place in Smiling Samuel likely exceeded that of the recent Sand War!

At the very least, humanity managed to stop the sandman race a relatively short time after the invasion started.

Yet no one managed to stop the tide of dwarves. How could these vertically-challenged humans possibly get away with their excessive actions?

It was one thing to conquer a state and oppress the conquered locals.

It was another thing to drive those locals from their homes!

The sheer amount of people the dwarves kicked from the star sector must have come to the attention of the MTA.

While the Association normally did not pay attention to local conflicts, there was no way the mechers remained ignorant of the brutality the dwarves engaged in. It was as if Smiling Samuel went back to the days of the Age of Conquest!

Strangely enough, the galactic net did not provide any solid answers. Ves only encountered lots of speculation, guesses and analyses.

Yet not once had the MTA issued any official statement. The Big Two remained completely impassive throughout the rapid takeover.

Major Verle voiced his opinion.

"The most accepted explanation is that the MTA is secretly supportive of the formation of a dwarven star sector. The more radical theories even state that the MTA has actually been supporting the Vulcan Empire from the dark, but only crackpots believe in them. If you ask me, the fact that the MTA did nothing to stop the rise of dwarves means the Big Two tacitly consented to this development. Maybe they're tired that dwarves are constantly being oppressed throughout the galaxy. Letting them take over one of the poorest star sectors might be a way to compensate these variant humans for their suffering."

Ves had a different perspective on the matter. From his understanding of the MTA, the high-level leaders liked to see some variety. By allowing the dwarves to take over a star sector, the Association's research groups could probably engage in all kinds of comparative studies between societies.

This was what scientists desired the most! Some studies simply couldn't be performed if the samples were too homogeneous.

Dwarves were still humans in some aspects but very different in other aspects. Their distinctive identity, different physique and other traits turned them into very useful test subjects!

As expected of the MTA. Whereas Ves only experiments on hundreds of test subjects at most, the Association performed studies on entire star sectors worth of people at a time!

To Ves, it made a lot of sense to foster the rise of dwarves. Perhaps there were moral reasons to stop the dwarves from killing or displacing so many innocent humans, but who cared about those. Getting more experimental data was much more important!

Ves coughed. "Alright, let's not talk about how the dwarves took over the star sector. Now that they're in charge, are normal humans even allowed to enter?"

"The Vulcan Empire can't stop all human traffic. The Big Two's headquarters and outposts are still staffed by normal-sized humans. There are also other exceptions such as the aforementioned isolated planets. The baseline humans who live there are pretty

much caged there for the rest of their lives. Some dwarves even go on tours in order to see the tall folk in their supposed natural environment."

Ves pressed his palm against his face. Was this what he had wrought in his last Mastery experience? The Vulcan Empire sounded terrible!

"Do the dwarves respect any humans at all?" He feebly asked.

"No." Major Verle ruthlessly crushed his hope. "The Vulcanites are as dwarf-centric as Hexers are towards women. The dwarves are actually worse as they can't even tolerate the idea of living alongside the tall folk. Despite living in a galaxy that is dominated by humans that are taller than them, the dwarven supremacists constantly talk about killing the tall folk."

"Is there no faction of dwarves that are slightly more sympathetic towards normal humans?"

"I can't say, sir. We'll have to perform in-depth research in order to be certain. According to the galactic net, the dwarves only really respect one human."

"Who?"

"Their god. Despite being styled as the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship, the Vulcan Faith actually depicts its god as a human with normal proportions. This has always been controversial to the Vulcanites. With how superior they feel about themselves, more and more dwarves simply can't understand why they should worship a normal human god."

"Oh no..."

Ves could already predict what happened next.

"In recent years, it has become increasingly more apparent that a schism has formed within Vulcanism. The majority still believe in the orthodox interpretation of Vulcan as a human, but there is a rising faction that believes that Vulcan must be a dwarf. These radicalists have gained much more sway over the years. There are even rumors that the two sides have already come to blows against each other. The old guard continue to cling to the belief that Vulcan is a human god while the younger generation seeks to take them down."

What a disaster. Ves groaned as he considered how his careless lies and deception spiraled out of control.

"Forget about entering Smiling Samuel." Major Verle advised. "While it is certainly different from every other star sector, the locals are too hostile against humans with

normal proportions. Every dwarf will do their best to kill us once they see us travelling through their space."

"There has to be exceptions, right? How can the dwarves even trade if they kill off every trading vessel?"

"The Vulcan Empire has exempted certain individuals and organizations from persecution, but those are exceptions. They don't give any exemptions to tourists and passerbys like us. Just skip this star sector. There are no reasons for us to dive into this dwarf-centric region."

The major was right. There were way too many reasons why entering Smiling Samuel was a very bad idea. Ves wouldn't be able to convince any of his clansmen to enter this star sector because that would only invite endless trouble!

Still, there had to be a way for him to enter. He had no intentions of visiting any dwarven settlements. He just wanted to stop by a desolate star system and excavate the Timpala Steel that he had buried in an unassuming asteroid belt.

As long as he obtained his treasure, he would leave right away!

"Is there ANY way for normal humans to move freely through Smiling Samuel?"

Verle shook his head. "Not without an exemption. Maybe you can ask the MTA for help. Don't you have a good relationship with Master Moira Willix? She can probably arrange a pass for you. Still, my advice remains the same. Even with an exemption, we would not be safe. According to the recent news from the Vulcan Empire, the 'Dwarven God Cult' has been launching attacks on trading convoys operated by normal humans. As long as the vessels don't belong to the Big Two, they are fair game to the radicalists."

Damn. These deranged dwarves were truly going overboard!

Worst of all, Ves was largely responsible for fanning their hatred. If he hadn't attempted to rally the dwarves by shouting 'death to the tall folk' all the time, they may have been able to tolerate normal humans!

"Oh, there is another way for you to enter Smiling Samuel."

"And that is..?"

The major summoned another projection. It displayed an advertisement for a physical morphing procedure.

In the ad, a human entered a sophisticated-looking clinic. After being met by a doctor and put through some tests, the man paid some money and entered some kind of treatment chamber.

An instant later, a different-looking human exited from the chamber.

The normal-looking human had become a dwarf!

"You can turn into a dwarf." Verle smiled. "Smiling Samuel accepts any converted dwarves with open arms. As far as the Vulcanites are concerned, normal humans are lost and live in sin. Only by embracing the dwarven form will they be worthy to receive Vulcan's blessing!"

" ... "