

## Mech 3291

### *Chapter 3291: Open Targets*

In the later stage of the battle, the balance had shifted decisively in the favor of the Golden Skull Alliance.

After losing numerous comrades, the dwarven expert pilots endured one setback after another. During the time when the warnet was taken down, the enemy expert mechs received no backup and little support from other friendly dwarves.

Certainly, several nearby dwarven mechs attempted to come to the rescue of their heroes and use their own frames as a barrier against the deadly firepower of the Amaranto, but it was all in vain.

Even though these hindrances gave Venerable Stark a bit of trouble, it was nothing that she could handle. She just slowed down her firing rate and took more time to resonate and charge her powerful weapon. The bright and powerful beam it fired when the crystal gun had accumulated a significant amount of energy was so unreasonably powerful that it was easily capable of punching through most mechs while still retaining enough power to damage another machine!

Throughout her one-sided firing spree, Venerable Stark kept the Amaranto's weapon in its kinetic beam setting.

She found it to work most effectively in dealing significant structural damage to the more vulnerable components of the dwarven expert mechs.

The laser and positron beam mode were not good at inflicting a large amount of immediate damage. The slicer beam mode excelled in penetration, but much of its energy was concentrated far too narrowly for Stark's liking.

The kinetic beam was different. It was a beam that hit like a solid slug. Its penetration characteristics were rather moderate but as long as it struck anything vulnerable like the components of a flight system, a lot of kinetic energy transferred over and shattered many other components besides the elements that had been directly struck by the beam.

It was the perfect beam type to cripple the flight systems of enemy expert mechs!

While other ranged expert mechs such as the ones deployed by the Slug Rangers were only able to fire their projectiles straight forward, the beauty of the Amaranto was that it was not confined to a single firing angle.

The Opticonium that Master Willix had integrated into the luminar crystal rifle was finally showing its value as Venerable Stark actively resonated with it for the first time.

Although it cost Venerable Stark a fair amount of energy and time to activate the Beam Bending resonance ability, it was worth it every time.

Soon enough, the Amaranto had single-handedly changed the outcome of the fight between the Riot and its three attackers.

Venerable Orfan grinned and laughed at the pathetic state of her opponents!

"Hahahaha! Look at you now! Your stumpy wings have all been clipped! How does it feel to pilot a crippled mech? Oh, are you angry, shorty? Then come at me if you can! Just don't take too long. I don't have all day to exchange blows with your slow-as-snails mech!"

In a battle environment with no solid land or surface anywhere in the immediate surroundings, any reduction in flight capabilities was highly impactful.

Spaceborn expert mechs usually boasted superior mobility for that reason. Aside from heavy mechs such as the Bashravar, every other expert mech was capable of keeping up with other fast mechs or moving quickly from one side of the battlefield to another side.

Yet now that Venerable Stark dealt with the three Molten Hammer mechs, the frustrated dwarven mech pilots could do nothing as their heavily damaged prey steadily flew back to the Larkinson fleet without fearing any further reprisal.

An escort of friendly space knights even covered its back so that enemy artillery mechs wouldn't be able to exacerbate the wounds of the Riots!

The Trementine, Bashravar and Firemason fell into a similar predicament to the one that Lucky was suffering from. Though the expert mechs still retained limited flight capabilities, what little they had left was not adequate enough to pose a threat to the human expert mechs!

The sight of these three impotent expert mechs looking ready to attack an opponent but unable to move fast enough to get close to any of them was downright surreal!

The Larkinsons and their allies laughed at the sight. Their confidence boosted even further when they saw that the Amaranto had effectively neutralized three powerful expert mechs including the fearsome Bashravar!

The latter's reinforced flight system withstood a lot more damage than the other targets, but the Amaranto's firepower was simply too much.

It performed exactly as Ves envisioned. Though his body felt weak and Blinky had practically turned comatose due to channeling so much Worclaw energy, he was

incredibly pleased to see that his work was finally performing well in the circumstances where its value was the greatest.

He had long imagined how much impact an expert rifleman mech could have when it was designed with extreme firepower in mind. The earlier situation where Venerable Stark had to keep her expert mech alive while being hounded by two dwarven expert mechs showcased the downsides of his design choices.

Now that the Amaranto was no longer suppressed, it finally had the opportunity to display its strengths, and it immediately made a difference!

The only other intact dwarven element that could stop the Amaranto from supporting other friendly expert mechs at a distance was the Gatecrasher.

The offensive space knight was one of the most effective counters of the Amaranto. The Gatecrasher's all-rounded defenses were still formidable even after getting battered by the Bolvos Rage, so whether it was attacked from the front or rear, a ranged expert mech would never be able to cripple it fast enough before the Gatecrasher had charged over!

However, when Venerable Orthox De Massie tried to disentangle his Gatecrasher from its current duel and charge over towards the enemy fleet, Patriarch Reginald Cross refused to let the old dwarf leave!

"You're mine!" He cried as his Bolvos Rage surged forward and swung its axe in a threatening motion that forced the Gatecrasher to cease its advance.

The Cross Patriarch was completely obsessed with beating the Gatecrasher! He did not allow other friendly units to interfere with his 'duel' and made sure that his opponent had no choice but to meet his challenge!

How could Venerable Orthox care about this stupid duel, though? Unlike Reginald who had completely lost sight of everything else, the old dwarf had constantly been paying attention to the progression of the battle. When he saw that it had taken a turn for the worse for the dwarves, the war hero realized that he needed to do something quickly or risk allowing the continuous setbacks to trigger an adverse chain reaction!

"GET OUT OF MY WAY!" He roared as his Gatecrasher exploded with power!

The powerful expert space knight seemed to have found new strength and channeled most of it to its flight system! The Gatecrasher gained an instant boost of acceleration and was just about to fly out of the reach of the Bolvos Rage, only for the expert hybrid mech to get in the way while firing all of its weapons!

Patriarch Reginald was even willing to risk a collision in order to keep the Gatecrasher in place!

With the constant interference from the Bolvos Rage, Venerable Orthox was rendered with no other choice but to continue its duel.

His heart wasn't in it, though. His duty as a protector compelled him to do more for his comrades, and getting pinned down by this persistent but extremely difficult human expert mech was not doing his fellow Vulcanites any favors!

While this went on, the Amaranto proceeded to snipe the mechs attacking the First Sword.

The expert swordsman mech was in a better condition than the Riot. After Ketis and Sharpie had assisted it at a crucial time, the First Sword entered into the same stalemate against its opponents as before.

Venerable Dise wanted to do nothing more than to defeat the Paravad, Morko Mark II and the Domingo Daren, but her condition and the condition of her expert mech wasn't the best anymore.

The same applied to her opponents. All three dwarven bestial mechs incurred significant damage and their expert pilots had also strained their wills and energy to get to this point.

To Venerable Stark, the exhausted Hivar Roarer expert mechs had turned into sitting ducks!

Even before the Amaranto aimed its rifle at the right flank, the Paravad and Morko Mark II had already pulled back from the First Sword in order to beat a steady retreat.

The damaged Domingo Daren also attempted to pull back. However, it was in a sorrier state than the other expert mechs as its shell was incomplete!

Compared to the tough and hardy Molten Hammer expert mechs, the defensive capabilities of their Hivar Roarer counterparts did not impress Venerable Stark. She didn't even bother to employ the Beam Bending resonance ability this time.

"You're first."

The Amaranto fired a powerful kinetic beam that struck the Domingo Daren!

Though the expert turtle mech had cleverly oriented its relatively undamaged underside towards the Amaranto at an angle, the kinetic beam was not a solid projectile that could be bounced off with ease!

The bottom of the Domingo Daren was not as resilient as its top, so the kinetic beam managed to deliver a powerful impact that destroyed most of the layers that protected the expert mech's internals from damage.

To its credit, the Domingo Daren reacted quickly and changed its orientation to the side.

However, this did not deter Venerable Stark from attacking. The Amaranto fired a couple more shots, each of which smashed through different parts of the mech. Its gun ports, its underside and other vulnerable openings incurred serious damage to the point where the Domingo Daren eventually lost power and shut down!

Seeing that there was no hope left, the dwarven expert pilot ejected from the doomed expert mech. Venerable Stark let it go as she had already moved her sight to another target.

It took eight rapid shots and one powerful shot to cripple the Morko Mark II. The avian light skirmisher did not boast much armor to begin with and it was already damaged in previous bouts.

The reason why Venerable Stark had to fire that much was because the Morko Mark II was still fast and agile enough to evade most of her shots!

It was unfortunate that the avian expert mech's evasive parameters were not comparable to the Dark Zephyr. To someone that focused most of her efforts on increasing her accuracy and her ability to read her opponent's movements, the Morko Mark II might as well be a medium mech in her eyes!

The Paravad was a lot trickier for Venerable Stark to immobilize or disable.

Venerable Merek Bulfuron was the most skilled expert pilot among the Hivar Roarers and was able to confound Venerable Stark's aim by making unpredictable movements that were much more mature than what Venerable Tus was able to perform!

This was the benefit of greater skill and experience.

Still, no matter how much Venerable Merek pushed his evasion capabilities, it only took one failure to collapse his scheme!

After firing a steady cadence of shots, the Amaranto finally managed to nail the Paravad's flight system with another bent kinetic beam!

Though the Paravad had cleverly angled its bird frame so that its underside was facing the deadly ranged expert mech, Venerable Merek learned just like his other dwarven colleagues that his measure ultimately failed to stop the inevitable!

"No!"

The Paravad's loss of mobility made it a lot more vulnerable to follow-up shots, which was a fatal outcome to any mech that relied on evasion to stay alive!

As the proud expert mech of the Hivar Roarers was enduring continuous hits, Venerable Merek did not wait until the Paravad was close to falling apart. With a regretful sigh, he pulled the ejection lever as well.

Another dwarven expert pilot had been taken off the board!

"How many dwarven expert mechs are left?" Someone wondered.

In just a brief amount of time, the overbearing Amaranto had taken six more enemy expert mechs out of play!

This was such a shocking result that even the Larkinsons themselves were rendered speechless. The Amaranto seemed to be inexhaustibly lethal. Both its firepower and endurance had made a profound impression on both sides!

"So this is the might of a masterwork expert mech..."

General Kebrinore, who had largely been reduced to a spectator aboard his sabotaged flagship, could only shake his head as he learned of this result.

"Maybe... Vulcan is on their side after all." He whispered.

None of the dwarven officers around him possessed enough confidence to refute their superior's argument.

#### *Chapter 3292: Tipping Point*

The Ferril Provincial Army started off with a total of around 30,000 mechs and 13 expert mechs.

The attacking Vulcanites had every reason to be confident. They were fighting on their home ground, their fleet was tight and condensed to just their combat vessels, the professionalism and development of their military mech divisions exceeded that of any private armed force and they were led by old, veteran war heroes who achieved great success in defeating enemy humans in the past!

Yet... the Ferrils miscalculated. Not every enemy human force is the same. Some of them were better-equipped than most. Others had a lot of friends who could not be provoked.

As for the Golden Skull Alliance? The Larkinson Clan alone was a giant anomaly in itself. The apparent strength it possessed on the surface was a complete smoke screen. The infamous clan hid one surprise after another.

From the inexplicable battle formations that wiped out thousands of Molten Hammer mech pilots at once to the Unending alloy armor plating that made the Larkinson expert

mechs nearly unkillable, all of these unexpected surprises caused the dwarven battle plan which previously looked so ironclad to crumble apart.

Though General Kebrinore and the other dwarven officers added plenty of assurances to their plan, they realized far too late that they had not respected their human opponents enough!

The final and most crucial miscalculation which caused the entire dwarven offensive to falter was the unexpected burst of strength from the Amaranto!

Without any warning and without any sign that the expert mech contained any powerful component that could explain where its strength had come from, the radiantly glowing expert rifleman mech drew from an unknown power source and overpowered the expert mechs assigned to contain this extreme threat!

Now, this masterwork expert mech which had always exerted a lot of dread towards the Vulcanites was completely unleashed!

Its subsequent actions conformed with General Kebrinore's worst nightmare. In just a relatively short span of time, the Amaranto removed 8 dwarven expert mechs off the board.

That was more expert mechs than what the humans fielded from the start!

The dwarven general did not even have to look at the list in order to know which ones were gone.

The Molten Hammers started off with 4 expert mechs, but now only the Gatecrasher was left.

Slug Rangers lost 3 out of 4 expert mechs. The remaining ranged expert mech which had been taking part in the successful offensive at the enemy's left flank had retreated back to the fleet in time.

The Hivar Roarers brought a lot of expert mechs as well, but it had lost 3 of its proud machines as well. The remaining bestial expert mech that had been so pivotal in pushing the other flank had no choice but to retreat as well. There was no cover in open space and using the frames of existing mechs as shields was just delaying the inevitable!

The Great Ram was not connected to the warnet anymore, but her sensor suite was still powerful enough to keep track of the changes on the battlefield.

It became clear that once-proud Ferril mech forces no longer possessed a viable road to victory. In fact, if the remaining surviving expert mechs threw every other



consideration aside and initiated a suicide assault against the Amaranto, there might have been a chance to salvage this situation.

Unfortunately, the other Ferril commanders were unwilling to make this choice. In absence of central command, they made a conservative choice as they lacked the stomach to make the hard choices that were necessary to win against powerful humans. They did not wish to gamble their remaining surviving expert mechs and expert pilots and recalled them before they too fell victim to the Amaranto's tyrannical firepower!

Was it the right choice? Many dwarves had different ideas about it, but from the moment the surviving expert mechs removed themselves from the battlefield, General Kebrinore knew that his side had unquestionably lost control of the battle.

The surviving dwarven mech units were still putting up a good fight against their human counterparts.

Previously, the flank where the Amphis and the Dark Zephyr had been trying and failing to prop up the hard-hit Larkinson and Glory Seeker mechs only needed a single push before the Ferrils conquered this side!

Yet the sudden retreat of three dwarven expert mechs robbed the remaining successful Hivar Roarer mechs with their strongest form of support! The morale of the mech pilots plunged while the Amphis and Dark Zephyr were unleashed as well!

Though the two human expert mechs were in bad shape and their expert pilots had already exhausted much of their strength, they did not have to do much in order to reverse the situation!

The Dark Zephyr bypassed every enemy avian mech and rapidly sunk its daggers through the surfaces of every Crumbleshell it came across. By now, the Larkinson Clan had thoroughly managed to figure out the internal layout of this enemy mech model. Venerable Tusa was always able to stab in the places which guaranteed an instant kill!

"I might not have the guts to fight another round with your expert mechs, but killing your turtles is as easy as going on a walk!" Venerable Tusa taunted as he did his duty, not hesitating to overstrain his will to project greater strength. "Where's your courage now, dwarves?!"

The Amphis did not brazenly plunge behind enemy lines. The Cross Clan's expert space knight had already taken a considerable beating in an attempt to stall the three dwarven expert mechs that had just run away.

Therefore, instead of doing anything, Venerable Linda Cross chose to fly her mech alongside friendly units and supported them while they launched their counter-attack.



Her expert mech still held its battered and half-crumbled shield up front while throwing out its chainsword at various Hivar Roarer mechs within reach. Not a single dwarven machine was able to withstand the unnaturally high force transmitted by this remarkable weapon. They all shattered apart as if they were struck by a giant hammer!

"None who oppose our Cross Clan shall escape our retribution!"

Without the support of the spinning turtle mechs and with the continued rampage of the Amphis and the Dark Zephyr, the remaining Hivar Roarer mechs lost a lot of their bite. Like a deflated balloon, the dwarves not only lost all of the advantages they previously accumulated, but also showed a tendency of breaking.

The mass confusion, the rapid reversal in fortune, the higher-than-expected casualties and early retreat of their remaining heroes all pushed the remaining dwarven mech pilots to the brink!

It was a testament to their training and their commitment to their service and respective causes that they did not break on the spot.

"Stubborn dwarves." General Verle frowned as he watched the situation unfold from the Graveyard's command center. "They just won't break."

He was happy that his forces finally managed to gain a decisive advantage in this battle, but that did not mean he was ready to lean back and sip his favorite drink.

Many clansmen could still perish while they attempted to secure their victory. The fact that most dwarven mech pilots hadn't broken from all of the pressure was the biggest issue weighing on his mind.

He believed that if the dwarves really got desperate, they might do something desperate such as trying to destroy the Larkinson fleet at all costs or dragging down as many human lives with them as possible!

Verle decided to open a private channel to Ves.

"Congratulations, general." Ves smiled. "We made it through."

"Don't be so quick to celebrate yet, sir." The general immediately cautioned. "The Ferrils can still do a lot of damage to us. They still retain over ten-thousand mechs that can all do a lot of damage to our fleet."

Ves understood what Verle was worried about. His tired smile dropped in response. "What are you suggesting, then?"

"It depends on what you wish to accomplish, sir. What is the objective that you are striving for? Do you want us to take revenge on the Ferrils that have launched an

unprovoked attack on us, or do you want to preserve as much of our lives and battle strength as possible and maximize our chances of escaping the Vulcan Empire?"

Though General Verle's questions offered Ves two seemingly-equal choices, his underlying message was clear.

Though Ves and many other Larkinsons were incredibly angry at the Ferrils and wanted payback for all of the comrades that had fallen over the course of this battle, was exacting their vengeance truly important at the moment?

Ves did not want to risk his freedom and survival. There were still well over 10,000 dwarven mechs left. Even in a situation where they were at an absolute disadvantage, they could still destroy a lot of mechs and ships if they were truly pushed into a corner!

"Also... take a look at the Gatecrasher." Verle slowly said. "Do you think that Venerable Orthox will just stand by while seeing his fellow dwarves get slaughtered?"

Ves narrowed his eyes as he observed the Gatecrasher showing an increasing amount of desperation in trying to get rid of the Bolvos Rage.

As someone who was highly sensitive towards life and emotions, he could sense the growing urgency from the formidable high-tier dwarven expert mech.

A sinking feeling emerged from his stomach. "Are you saying..."

"Do you know why high-tier expert pilots are so feared?" General Verle helplessly smiled. "It's not just because of their individual combat effectiveness. The true reason why opponents dread their appearance on the battlefield is because there is always a risk that a losing engagement might provide them with the stimulation they need to break their final bottlenecks. I don't think I should tell you what the consequences will be if Venerable Orthox undergoes his second apotheosis.

The emergence of a brand-new ace pilot would change everything! Not only was an ace pilot supremely powerful in a way that Ves couldn't even properly describe, but the other dwarven mech pilots whose confidence had nearly reached their lowest point would suddenly regain their full morale!

Even if the Golden Skull Alliance managed to block or defeat the newly-ascended ace pilot at great cost, the maddened dwarven mech pilots that threw themselves onto their human opponents could inflict massive damage to the expeditionary fleet!

Ves had many important goals in mind. Crushing his current opponents until there was nothing left was not one of them. He and his clan wouldn't gain anything meaningful out of persecuting the Ferril punitive fleet. Instead, they would just suffer a lot more preventable losses and even give their opponents a chance to reverse their losing struggle!

The Larkinsons experienced many times when opponents pushed them to desperation, only for that to be the catalyst of a miraculous breakthrough or the unveiling of a desperate and extremely dangerous countermeasure.

In fact, that was exactly what the Vulcanite soldiers had done to the Larkinson Clan! Their insistence on annihilating the entire human fleet left Ves and his clansmen with no choice but to go all-out and employ much of their trump cards.

Though the dwarven mech forces looked as if they had nearly exhausted all of their options, they still had a few cards left to play.

"Sir!" A sensor officer yelled! "The Great Ram and several other dwarven fleet carriers have begun to increase their acceleration. They are overloading their propulsion systems!"

Ves immediately switched to a view of the dwarven capital ships in question. Each of them were in the process of disgorging escape pods, shuttles and other vehicles en masse.

There was only one particular reason why the large and expensive fleet carriers exhibited this behavior.

"They're attempting to ram our fleet! The Great Ram is on a collision course with our flagship while their other fleet carriers are on track to ram into the Hemmington Cross, the Indigo Tremor and several other friendly capital ships."

"What's their ETA?!"

"The closest time until impact is 15, no 9 minutes! The fleet carriers are dumping all of their cargo and supplies to reduce their mass and their engineers are overloading their propulsion systems to a ruinous degree!"

The decisions made by the Ferril commanders showed that they recognized their impending loss. In order to create an opportunity to evacuate as many dwarven lives as possible, they did not hesitate to sacrifice their proud capital ships!

"These damn dwarves!" Ves cursed!

*Chapter 3293: Shameful Dwarf*

The stubborn dwarven soldiers were driving Ves crazy!

On one hand, he admired their bravery, their discipline and their willingness to keep fighting under unfavorable circumstances.

On the other hand, these were exactly the qualities that caused the Larkinsons and their allies to keep losing mechs and lives even after the outcome of the battle was unlikely to change!

The Ferril punitive fleet even decided to send their capital ships on a suicide charge in order to create an opportunity for the dwarven soldiers to escape from the battlefield with their lives intact.

The Great Ram was one of those vessels. Her command center had become a lot more somber than before after General Kebrinore issued the order that would likely doom the vessel.

The various officers and operators all faced their leader as he addressed them for the last time.

"Our courier vessels are ready to load our most crucial personnel in order to evacuate them from this star system." He announced. "Our expert pilots, our engineers and our other talents must be preserved. As for the remainder of our personnel, they will have to take their chances on our combat carriers."

The dwarves no longer sought to achieve victory. Instead, they attempted to minimize their losses as much as possible.

The greatest priority lay in the personnel that represented the core of the three mech divisions. The Molten Hammers, the Slug Rangers and the Hivar Roarers did not want to be erased from existence after this battle.

The surviving expert pilots who either managed to retreat in time or managed to return alive after ejecting from their expert mechs shouldered a great burden of propping up their mech divisions while bearing the shame of a catastrophic defeat.

General Kebrinore did not have the mind to pay attention to the stigma that would likely haunt the fleeing survivors for the rest of their lives. As someone who had lived through the worst of the original rebellion, he cherished the lives of his fellow dwarves a lot more than preserving their illusionary 'honor'!

Though some of their fleet carriers possessed dual FTL drives that allowed them to transition out of the star system in an instant, the current chaos on the battlefield created too many gravitic disturbances that made it impossible for them to escape.

Any ship that wanted to enter FTL travel had to distance themselves from the action, and that was impossible to accomplish for the capital ships!

They were far too prominent to the enemy. The vengeful humans would never let them go, so the dwarves decided to use these great ships as decoys in order to allow hundreds of dwarven combat carriers to split up and run in many different directions.

It was unlikely that the human force would be able to chase after so many sub-capital ships and take them all down in time for them to finish cycling their FTL drives and successfully making it out of the Fordilla Zentra System!

This was what the dwarves were fighting for. If they did not do everything in their power to stall the advancing humans, then there was a great likelihood that no Ferril soldier would be able to make it out of this battlefield!

"The Vulcan Empire shall never fall as long as it has enough soldiers to defend its sovereignty." He told his men. "I never wanted this outcome to happen, but dwarves like us are never graced with luck. The way for us to survive is not to stubbornly fight to the last man, but to preserve the essence of our strength so that our dwarven state is not deprived of all of our soldiers."

This was why as soon as secure communications had been restored with the rest of the fleet, he ordered his forces to prepare for an all-out counterattack just so that they could maximize the chances of evacuating their key personnel!

General Kebrinore looked down onto the deck. "This is the cruelty of warfare in space. The winner usually gets everything while the loser risks total annihilation. We can't settle for half-measures. We must cut our losses and make use of any assets that will be lost to the enemy anyway."

He sighed as a bot floated towards his position. The sturdy bot began to do something that shocked all of his staff.

The bot shaved off his giant, majestic grey beard!

The beard that conveyed so much authority and prestige to the old war hero was pretty much a national treasure to the Vulcanites. To see the famed and celebrated general shave off his entire beard was a mark of shame was that so consequential in Vulcanite culture that several dwarves even came close to fainting!

"Noo!"

"General, stop!"

"This isn't your fault!"

General Kebrinore did not command the shaving bot to stop. He ruthlessly kept his head still as the bot not only cut off his impressive facial hair that pooled all the way to the deck, but also held his broad and masculine chin still as the bot shaved it clean!

The simple change caused General Kebrinore to look almost unrecognizable to the servicemen. A clean-shaven dwarf was an extremely rare sight in Vulcan society. Only

the most detestable failed dwarves would ever go as far to remove their beard to this degree.

The fact that the general went as far as cutting off his mark of honor and accomplishment signified that he was taking full responsibility for this defeat!

The general kept looking down. The once-proud beard that had graced his body for decades lay dead on the deck as if it was a fallen warbanner.

The shaving bot picked up the beard and moved over to a younger dwarven officer.

"Please bring my beard back to headquarters and tell high command that I am sorry."

Though the dwarves around the respected dwarven general tried to persuade him to come with them, Kebrinore adamantly refused.

"Someone must take the fall for this defeat, and I will not allow any of you to bear the greatest fault!" He retorted! Even without a beard, he was still a legend in the Vulcan Empire! "I am old and have already done my part for my people. There is little more that I can do to help our state in the times to come. Let me make one final contribution before it is too late."

Nobody was able to sway the old general. The staff eventually left the command center and joined many of the other crew in evacuating from the ship. The Great Ram slowly emptied to the point where only stubborn old fools and personnel who played an essential role in keeping the fleet carrier on a collision course were left.

Just as the beardless old dwarf settled into his command chair in order to face his impending death with dignity, the opposing humans changed their approach.

Much to the surprise of many Ferrils, the enemy human mechs no longer advanced as aggressively as before.

Previously, they held the upper hand. The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers had all suffered badly in the previous phases of the battle.

Now that the demoralized dwarves had lost a lot of strength, the human mech pilot rabidly pressed their advantage in order to make sure their enemies did not make a comeback!

The restraint also applied to the expert mechs of the human forces. The Riot had already retreated to the Spirit of Bentheim, but many other powerful machines still had enough fight left to butcher the vulnerable dwarven mechs.

Yet upon receiving a surprising order, the Dark Zephyr, the First Sword, the Amphis and the Conavis Mer all ceased their advance and remained static as they allowed the befuddled dwarven mech pilots to pull back their machines without getting hounded.

"What is going on? Why have they ceased their counter-attack?"

"I don't care! Let's just thank Vulcan for giving us a break!"

"Why have humans stopped?"

Not even the Amaranto continued to fire its incredibly lethal crystal rifle!

After the dwarven expert mechs had mostly cleared the field, Venerable Stark no longer fought as intensively. However, even the Amaranto's regular, most efficient shots were still able to down a single regular mech with ease!

The Amaranto had mostly directed its firepower towards eliminating the remaining artillery mechs of the Slug Rangers. The Steel Rain mech regiment had sustained steady losses throughout the entire battle but managed to bombard many human to pieces as well.

As long as the Steel Rain no longer existed, the Eye of Ylvaine would be able to bombard the enemy carriers with impunity! The Slug Rangers simply didn't have any other ranged solutions left to destroy the surviving Transcendent Punishers.

Yet in a time where the Amaranto should have made maximum use of its firepower supremacy, it had put down its rifle and went on standby!

Although the fighting between the two forces had stalled in every part of the battlefield, there was one clear exception.

The Gatecrasher and the Bolvar Rage were still going at it! Patriarch Reginald Cross ignored every message transmitted to his expert mech. He only cared about a single goal, and that was fighting his current opponent to the death so that he could find his chance!

Even though the Cross Patriarch had not experienced any breakthroughs as of yet, the furious battle against Venerable Orthox had allowed him to advance his battle methods further and push his limits to the point where he had slightly managed to exceed his previous performance!

Patriarch Reginald was so addicted to these gains that he never thought about stopping! His constant aggression was continually pressuring Venerable Orthox to fight back with equal fervor lest he fall against this powerful human expert pilot!

Despite this ugly exception, the remaining mechs no longer continued their struggle.



Soon enough, a familiar sight appeared into view. The giant projection of Ves armored in his Unending Regalia and holding a very distinctive hammer appeared in front of the expeditionary fleet.

This time, the surviving dwarven mech pilots no longer jeered at the sight. They were all tired, defeated and even afraid of their lives.

Though not many of them took the armored human's claim that he was Vulcan seriously, their mental states were so low that the more traumatized and less stable of the dwarven soldiers began to develop weird thoughts as they watched the giant projection.

"Soldiers of the Vulcan Empire. You have fought bravely and with honor today. Even though I do not agree with your cause, I respect your willingness to fight for your state, province and beliefs. You are true soldiers and I admire your willingness to fight to the end. I encountered a lot of human trash that don't possess a tenth of your courage." Ves began in a generous and forgiving voice.

The dwarves expected to hear gloating from the human pretender. They didn't expect the pretend Vulcan to speak in a different way from all of the stories they heard about evil and violence-loving tall folk!

"I think there has been enough fighting for today, Vulcanites. There is no need to sink to our lowest points. Our fleet just wants to survive and leave this state in peace. We aren't interested in your destruction. Don't forget that you started this battle on your own accord. Think about the cause you are fighting for. Are you truly fighting for the right reasons?"

It was clear what Ves was trying to do. Many dwarven senior officers already recognized that the human leader was trying to erode the fighting will of the dwarven mech pilots.

"Are we attempting to launch an attack on your planets? That's absurd! We're not an invasion force and we are far too weak to pose a threat to your state! What you are actually trying to do is to advance the goals of a select group of politicians who want to profit out of your misfortune. Is it truly worth it to fight and die to the bitter end just so that a cabal of Vulcanite leaders can take advantage of your deaths? You are not protecting the Vulcan Empire when you have chosen to fight against us! You are endangering it instead!"

Previously, a lot of dwarves reacted to the giant human projection with deficiency or denial.

It was different now. Ves no longer tried to question the beliefs of the devout Ferril soldiers and instead appealed to their reason and desire to live.

He was a lot more persuasive this time.

#### *Chapter 3294: Cooling Temperature*

Part of the reason why Ves was so persuasive was because he truly believed in his words. He was not putting up an act, nor did he try to channel Vulcan by putting on a mask.

He was too tired of that. His stunt with Blinky caused him to become mentally and physically drained. In fact, he was in an uncommonly sober and calm mood after his emotions became dull due to his current state.

If he retained a lot more energy, then he might have been inclined to order his troops to keep pushing their advantage and to pay back the dwarves tenfold for the losses they inflicted on the Larkinson Clan!

As it was, Ves did not see any purpose to that. Destroying all of enemy mechs would yield nothing except for useless salvage and satisfying some pointless urges.

Destroying or capturing the enemy ships also yielded little use. Though Ves and his clan were always hungry to acquire more combat-oriented capital ships, it was impossible for them to get what they wanted today. The dwarven fleet carriers were probably filled with traps and didn't even offer ceilings that went high enough to accommodate tall folk!

Ves fully agreed with General Verle that their goals lay elsewhere and that there was little to gain from persecuting the Ferril punitive fleet anymore.

They achieved the basis of victory at this point. Ves did not think about continuing his ill-advised trip to the Paramount Province anymore. Compared to doing the System a favor, he much preferred to preserve his life, his clan and his fleet!

He could figure out another solution later. First, he had to bring the expeditionary fleet out of the Vulcan Empire as fast as possible!

His giant projection made a compelling case to the dwarves, but it was time for them to make their choice.

"Well, what have you decided, dwarves? We humans are willing to give you a reprieve, but not if you insist on continuing this fight. If you agree to a cease fire, we will not only let you disengage without any further attacks from us, but we will also let you retrieve your fallen and trapped soldiers from the various wrecks. Of course, you must extend the same courtesy to us. If you agree, then pull back your mechs and ships."

A tense mood descended over the battlefield. Many human and dwarven mech pilots had fallen into thought as they tried to remain as alert as possible. This temporary pause in hostilities could easily resume if one side or the other began to open fire again!

"You have thirty seconds." Ves spoke to whoever was in charge in the enemy fleet. "If you don't order your fleet carriers to slow down and abort their suicide charge, then we will not mind slaughtering more Vulcanites for no good reason except for your stubbornness. Choose well."

After he issued his message, everyone waited and prepared for the response of the dwarves.

At this stage, no dwarven mech pilot chose to defy the humans out of their own initiative. Even the most fanatical believers of the Dwarven God Cult were too shocked and traumatized by the successive blows to their confidence and beliefs.

Some of them even started to wonder whether they had been believing in the wrong version of Vulcan all along! The power displayed by the mechs of the Larkinson Clan were truly unreal! They had never seen anything like the mechs deployed by this strange human organization.

"I'm tired..."

"We can't win anymore. Let's just go back."

"Wait for instructions. It's not up to us to decide whether to throw in the towel."

As the dwarves waited for their superiors to make a choice, the humans were still on guard.

The mech pilots of the expeditionary forces had already gained a measure of their opponents. The Ferrils they fought against were tough and stubborn soldiers who never gave up easily.

There were plenty of human mech pilots who wanted to punish their opponents for attacking their fleet and killing their comrades, but there were even more who had grown tired of the killing. They hoped that the dwarves would make the most prudent choice.

After twenty seconds had passed since Ves last spoke, the dwarves finally showed their response.

Their surviving dwarven mechs all drew back at once. Some of the more damaged machines that weren't as mobile as before were being helped by more intact mechs.

More remarkably, the Ferril fleet carriers all cut their forward acceleration and even began to turn away from the expeditionary fleet, thereby causing them to undergo a slow turn that made it impossible for them to continue their ramming course.

Even the Great Ram which looked ready to put her giant head to use had moved away from trying to ram the Spirit of Bentheim head-on!

Perhaps the observers who were eager to see the two animal-headed capital ships collide against each other were disappointed, but many people on both sides felt a lot of relief!

Though the dwarves never transmitted any official correspondence to the expeditionary fleet, their actions rang loud and clear. Now that their forces had all drawn back, it was impossible for them to pose a significant threat to their opponents anymore.

Considering the current situation, the Golden Skull Alliance held a decisive firepower advantage. The Slug Ranger mech division had been savaged to such an extent that there was no way they could stop the Transcendent Punishers, Eternal Redemptions and other human ranged mechs from bombarding much of the dwarven fleet and mech units to pieces!

The Amaranto alone served as a powerful deterrent to the dwarves. This powerful and seemingly inexhaustible masterwork expert rifleman mech not only posed a lethal threat to all of the dwarven expert mechs, but could easily bring its prodigious firepower to bear against other dwarven assets such as their surviving artillery mechs or even their starships!

"It's over..." Commander Melkor sighed in relief.

"Indeed." Commander Casella smiled.

Many other Larkinsons and humans expressed clear relief at this rather boring but welcome ending to the battle.

The MTA mech pilots who had been trying their best to survive while all of the madness took place around them had practically collapsed into their piloting seats.

"Finally!" Jessica Quentin let out a deep breath. "These Larkinsons are too crazy, but at least they still know when to stop."

General Verle was relieved as well. He already predicted that Ves had a high chance of succeeding in his attempt to persuade the Ferril punitive fleet to end hostilities. It was the most logical choice that best served the interests of the Ferril Provincial Army and it was also a decision that the demoralized dwarven soldiers wanted the most. They hardly had any fight left in them and pushing them to sacrifice their lives for their state would be a futile gesture.

"Commence search and rescue!" He ordered. "Don't focus too much on picking up salvage. We don't have the ships and cargo space to carry all of the valuables anymore. Prioritize the rescue of our trapped but living mech pilots and the evacuation of any

heavily-damaged starship that is no longer spaceworthy. Speed is of the essence. Our situation can turn around in an instant if a second hostile dwarven force arrives, so make sure that we are always in a state to transition out of this star system with our core vessels!"

Only one more fight had to be resolved. Ves, General Verle and many leaders in the expeditionary fleet knew that Patriarch Reginald Cross could not be easily restrained.

This was why they opted to go for this approach without expressly consulting the Cross Patriarch.

The effect of seeing both sides cease fire and backing off from each other was profound. Now that the combatants had switched over to performing search and rescue activities, the temperature in the battlefield had cooled even further.

The battle fever generated by tens of thousands of mechs trying their best to destroy each other was no longer present!

This made it a lot harder for the two high-tier expert pilots to maintain the same degree of urgency and desperation as before.

Venerable Orthox De Massie quickly cooled down as he saw that many of his comrades might not perish on this worthless battlefield after all. A sense of peace, resignation and contentment overcame his mind that caused him to care less about overcoming his current opponent.

What did it matter if this hateful human expert pilot wrecked his Gatecrasher and took his life? Just like his old friend General Kebrinore, he was more than willing to sacrifice his life if that was what it took to appease the angry humans and satisfy their desire to take revenge!

As long as enough of the dwarves he vowed to protect would still be able to return home with their lives intact, he would not die unjustly!

The Gatecrasher no longer fought as intensely as before. It slowed down and put up less of a fight as it became increasingly clear that Venerable Orthox no longer needed to go all-out to save his fellow Vulcanites.

"Kill me if you want." He transmitted to the Bolvar Rage. "I don't care anymore. If you want my head so badly, then I'll give it to you on a platter."

Patriarch Reginald, who had previously been so engaged in this peak duel against an opponent that was equally as powerful as him, frowned as he sensed the diminishing fighting will from his opponent.

The resonance affecting the Gatecrasher grew weaker and weaker until the damaged expert mech no longer exhibited any form of empowerment anymore!

In this state, the expert mech's performance was no longer amplified in any way. Reginald could easily defeat the dwarven expert space knight if it remained in this powerless condition.

"Tch! There is no glory to be found in this duel anymore!"

Patriarch Reginald felt sick to his stomach as he saw that his chance was being denied to him. He felt unfulfilled in a way that momentarily caused him to harbor a lot of resentment towards the Larkinsons who must have been pushing for an end to the hostilities!

However, as his temper cooled down and his powerful will no longer dominated the entirety of his mind, he began to remember his responsibilities as the patriarch of the Cross Clan.

When he looked up how many Crosser mech units had survived and how many of them were taken out of action, he looked a bit pained.

"More brothers have died..."

Patriarch Reginald was no longer in the mood to fight, especially when everyone else had already ceased hostilities. He allowed the Gatecrasher to turn around and fly away without any further interruption on his part.

The two high-tier expert pilots observed each other's machines as they moved further and further apart.

Eventually, the Bolvar Rage raised its axe. "Good fight."

"I never want to see you again." Venerable Orthox responded.

As time went by, it became clear that neither side had any intentions of breaking the unwritten cease fire agreement. Some of the dwarven and human mechs no longer retreated back to their surviving motherships.

Instead, they lingered on the battlefield in order to assist with the search and rescue efforts.

Some carefully took hold of wrecked mechs and dragged them back to their fleet. Others carefully pried open the ruined frames of fallen mechs so that their cockpits gained enough clearance to eject.

In some cases, ejected cockpits that sustained damage or mech pilots who somehow managed to float in space with just their piloting suits had to be picked up as well.

A shuttle even went out on its way to pick up an aggrieved Lucky!

"Meowwww!" The injured gem cat complained as his shivering body settled on a padded chair.

When the cat got back to the ship, he intended to ask for a huge amount of compensation from Ves! The mission that he performed and the risks that he took was way too much this time!

"Meow!"

#### *Chapter 3295: Opportunistic Salvaging*

With temperatures cooling, the post-battle activities proceeded smoothly.

Neither side let down their guard, but neither of them had a reason to continue hostilities either.

The dwarves were not entirely unwilling to die for their cause, but they didn't want to throw away their lives for abstract gains when the alternative was much more attractive!

Even the strongest believers in the dwarven god suddenly learned that keeping hold of their precious existences in the face of all-out warfare was a far higher priority than proving their zeal!

Ves continued to stay on the bridge as he observed the search and rescue operation unfolding before his eyes. A lot of Larkinsons had already died, but there were more who were trapped or injured who could still be saved. All kinds of mechs and shuttles were strung out across the debris field which stretched for quite a distance. Several combat carriers even had to travel all the way towards the other end in order to facilitate the retrieval of personnel in a timely manner.

The Larkinsons also did more than picking up lost clansmen. Ves paid special attention to the salvaging operation. Though his fleet had lost a lot of ships and therefore a lot of cargo capacity, he did not let off picking up high-value debris.

"Make sure you pick up every scrap of Unending alloy or pieces of our expert mechs as possible!" Ves transmitted his command directly to the salvaging parties for the seventh time. "Our strongest scanners have tracked each and every fragment of Unending alloy that has broken loose. Don't return until you have swept them all up to the last dust particle!"



This was a highly inefficient command, but Ves didn't care. There were only so many mechs, shuttles and other vehicles that could be allocated to salvaging missions but even a single finger's worth of Unending alloy was far more valuable than picking up a hundred Bright Warrior wrecks in his eyes!

One of the many lessons he learned from this battle was that he and his clan developed an overreliance on Unending alloy. This strange material that originated from the Nyxian Gap possessed both top-notch defenses and enabled an extra form of resonance. The combination of these features resulted in such a huge amplification of performance for his expert mechs that the expeditionary fleet simply couldn't have won this battle without its existence!

He only needed to compare the performance of the Dark Zephyr, the Riot and the First Sword to the expert mechs fielded by the Cross Clan or the Ferril Provincial Army.

"The performance gap is too wide."

Though the three Unending alloy expert mechs were designed with mid-tier performance levels in mind, each of them had actually approached the level of a high-tier expert mech in real battle circumstances!

"This is quite impressive."

There were two caveats, though. First, the performance parameters were too uneven. Second, their pilots were still inexperienced and underdeveloped compared to most of their peers.

When Ves tried to imagine a matchup between his current expert mechs and genuine high-tier machines such as the Bolvar Rage or the Gatecrasher, he would have to put his bets on the latter two. Perhaps their defense might not be so exaggerated, but their performance was almost uniformly high, which effectively translated into no exploitable weaknesses.

The fact that the duel between Patriarch Reginald and Venerable Orthox lasted so long with neither of their expert mechs incurring critical damage was a testament of their battle prowess!

"Well, even if my expert mechs can't beat the likes of the Gatecrasher, at least they're better than the average. That counts for something." He muttered.

The Larkinson Clan didn't have enough expert mechs relative to its total size. The best way to strengthen the champions of the Larkinson Army was to strengthen their expert mechs as much as possible, and Unending alloy was an excellent means in that regard!

Ves wasn't worried about the performance of his Unending alloy expert mechs at the moment, but that might change over the years as they got into more scraps.

This battle had already showed that Unending alloy was not invincible. While it was too difficult for regular mechs to crack this material, the same did not apply to expert mechs. Their ability to empower their attacks with true resonance caused them to acquire reality-defying properties. This was the most effective way to break the unbreakable!

"Expert mechs and expert pilots are too unreasonable!"

Therefore, each battle in which an Unending alloy mech incurred battle damage was another instance where their armor coverage diminished.

The Riot lost three limbs and incurred a lot of other battle damage. It was likely impossible for the salvaging parties to pick up all of the scraps of Unending alloy that got loose.

The Valkyrie Prime was also in an awful condition. Considering that an expert axeman mech hacked it apart, there were bound to be a lot of shards that had flung loose! If they blended with other wrecks or battle debris, then there was a significant chance that the Larkinson fleet's sensors lost track of them. It was too troublesome to scour the entire debris field just to search these missing scraps! This was especially the case when they only had a limited amount of time!

Ves glanced at the timer and saw that the expeditionary fleet didn't have nearly enough time to complete all of the post-battle operations that should be done.

The Larkinsons had to concentrate on their greatest priorities and leave many other goals behind.

For example, there was no way his clan could pick up all of the broken Larkinson mechs. There simply wasn't enough time to salvage them and hull space to store them in. None of the Larkinsons forgot that they were still operating on hostile turf and that they were not welcome in these parts!

In contrast, the Vulcanites owned the entire space and could dispatch large salvaging fleets to sweep up all of the valuable salvage at their leisure. This was also why the Ferrils did not bother to perform too many salvaging operations. Their fleet largely comprised combat vessels and they had neglected to bring their logistical ships.

As the two sides continued to retrieve the people and goods that they prized the most, a slight moment of tension arose when numerous Larkinson salvaging parties attempted to pick up the remains of dwarven expert mechs.

Ves specifically had to instruct General Verle to claim the valuable dwarven expert mechs.

"Are you sure you want us to do this, sir?" Verle frowned.

"We beat them fair and square. We aren't leaving the Vulcan Empire empty-handed. Although I don't have much use for the wrecks, their materials are still valuable."

"We shouldn't lack high-quality materials."

"I know, but I won't say no to more. Who knows whether those dwarven mechs contain any specialty products that aren't available anywhere else. Just grab as many as you can, general. The dwarves won't kick up a fuss. They're afraid of us. They're not going to restart a battle that they will surely lose just because we're claiming our rightful spoils. Besides, just look at the battlefield. The damned Ferrils can gain a lot more broken salvage from our fleet and mech forces! At least this way we can obtain a measure of satisfaction."

Though General Verle did not think it was wise to provoke the dwarves in this manner, he reluctantly instructed the salvaging parties to pick up the broken dwarven expert mechs that were still ripe for the picking.

It began with the enemy machines closest to the fleet. Several shuttles escorted by a squad of replenished Avatar mechs proceeded to the two Slug Ranger expert mechs that had been keeping the Amaranto in check for a long time.

The crews aboard the shuttles secured and brought back the smaller fragments while the Avatar mechs took hold of the broken expert mechs themselves before steadily dragging them back to the Spirit of Bentheim!

"Sir, the Ferrils are lodging a complaint! They are protesting our theft of their expert mechs!"

Ves dismissively waved a hand. "Tell them to stuff it. If they want to stop us, then they're welcome to pick up their weapons again!"

He was confident in his judgement that nothing would come from the enemy fleet, and he was proven right.

The Ferril mech soldiers were mentally beaten and their numbers were no longer sufficient enough to crush the tall folk.

The Amaranto had returned for a quick resupply and flew back into space in order to make it clear that this nightmare from a distance was more than ready to go for a second round!

When it became clear that the dwarves didn't intend to do more than lodge complaints, the Larkinsons became more scrupulous. Multiple reinforced salvaging parties fanned out and began to approach their targets as fast as possible in order to beat their dwarven counterparts!

Different wrecks and major chunks of broken parts quickly fell into the hands of the Larkinson Clan. At the end of this brazen operation, the salvagers brought back the remains from the Burza Fens, the Paravad, the Morko Mark II, the Domingo Daren as well as the aforementioned Slug Ranger expert mechs.

"It's a pity we missed out on the Trementine, the Bashravar and the Firemason." Ves regretfully shook his head.

The three Molten Hammer expert mechs that previously ganged up on the Riot had never fallen. Venerable Stark merely crippled their mobility on account of their high defense parameters.

When the cease fire was announced, the numerous friendly Molten Hammer mechs had approached the crippled dwarven expert mechs and helped drag them back to the dwarven fleet.

"Still, getting 6 out of 13 high-value prizes doesn't sound so bad." Ves muttered.

The utility of those expert mech remains wasn't so big to him, though. He still had a couple of broken Fridayman expert mechs in storage that he had never really touched. Now, he was about to dump more broken expert mechs into his storage bays.

"I should really think of a way to make use of them." He muttered.

Several hours quietly went by. The Golden Skull Alliance slowly completed its rescue and salvaging operations. The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers also sorted out their fleet in order to make sure that they moved all of their personnel and important assets to the starships that were still space worthy.

The Larkinsons had to abandon and scuttle many of their ships. Ves winced when he saw that his fleet eventually had to say goodbye to over 60 sub-capital ships.

The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan also had to bid farewell to around 20 or 50 ships respectfully.

"Well, we still have enough carriers left to accommodate our surviving mechs, so at least that's not a concern."

After making sure they scuttled every ship that was still reasonably intact but not spaceworthy, the expeditionary fleet finally departed the Fordilla Zentra System without any further interruption.

Aside from the Ferril fleet, only a couple of other starships remained in the system.

Aboard the Dented Coin, Olivier and Utha Persham along with the rest of their crew had remained in shock long after the battle had concluded.

The director of the Persham Chamber of Commerce sat next to his daughter as they watched a rerun of the raw battle footage.

"We managed to broadcast this footage to the galactic net without hindrance, right?" Olivier shakily asked her daughter.

She nodded. "Yes, father... I'm not sure whether we made the right choice. The things we have seen... if I don't know any better, I would have seriously thought that the human clan leader was truly Vulcan."

"HE IS VULCAN!" Olivier shouted as he grabbed onto the shoulders of his daughter. His eyes went wild with fervor! "He's just like the god described in the old stories! Just look at the miracles performed by his mech forces! Just look at the supreme craftsmanship of that colorful expert rifleman mech! Those aren't the works of mortals. Only a god can bestow so much power on second-class mechs!"

Utha looked at her father as if he was an idiot. "You're crazy! That's a human boy! He wasn't even born when Vulcan first enlightened the first dwarven rebels. There's no way this makes any sense."

"The means of a god are unimaginable for humble mortals like us! I'm telling you, my dear." Olivier shouted before despair marred his face. "We have been graced by our god, but our fellow Vulcanites were simply too blind to realize the truth. Now we have driven him away. What a disaster!"

The middle-aged dwarf couldn't imagine what might happen now that the Vulcan Empire had unwittingly spurned their god!

*Chapter 3296: Battered but Unbroken*

"Meow!"

"Hey, what gives, Lucky?!"

"Meow meow meow!"

Lucky flew over and smacked his hard tail against Ves' head on a continuous basis. The injured gem cat had been holding back his resentment for a long time that it felt good for him to vent his frustrations this way!

"Stop that already! What did I do to you, anyway?!"

"Meow meow meow!"

"Hey, you managed to get out okay."

"Meeeeeeooooow!"

"You know I would never abandon you. I would have found some way to pick you up no matter how the battle proceeded."

"Meow!" Lucky hissed for a final time before he dived through the deck to get away from the source of his misery.

Ves shook his head to rid himself from the sting of the tail slaps and tried his best to direct his attention back to the matter at hand.

Though the damaged and reduced expeditionary fleet had successfully managed to leave the Fordilla Zentra System, their flight from the Smiling Samuel Star Sector was far from assured.

Just like back in the old days, the Larkinson fleet operated under yellow alert conditions. Every serviceman had to wear a hazard suit or combat suit while the civilians at least needed to wear vacsuits at all times.

During the previous battle, these protective, vacuum-sealed suits had saved hundreds of lives! In times when the Larkinsons didn't know when the dwarves were able to launch another attack, it was highly prudent for everyone to wear sufficient protection.

At the very least, the sight of every crew member wearing combat-oriented garb instead of their normal uniforms kept the Larkinsons in an alert state of mind.

As much as many of them wanted to unwind, grieve or process the battle that they had just survived, this was not the time for them to let down their guard.

The expeditionary fleet was still behind enemy lines!

This was also one of the topics that Ves was about to discuss with his core advisors.

Since Larkinson was busy at the moment and Ves didn't want to waste any time on irrelevant details, only a couple of key figures attended the small meeting this time.

The projections of General Verle, Calabast, Minister Shederin and Chief Minister Magdalena appeared around the conference table.

Each of them were still clad in their protective suits with only their heads exposed. Their demeanors were serious and it seemed that none of them revelled in the victory they obtained.

"We look like we've just suffered a defeat." Ves began.

"A battle doesn't necessarily have to produce a winner." General Verle in a tired voice. "We may have forced the dwarves to suspend their mission to wipe us out, but we haven't made any substantial gains either. This was a completely unnecessary fight for us. We fought to survive, not to fulfill any of our ambitions."

His words exposed a cruel reality. This battle was indeed an incident where the Larkinsons would lose more than they could gain no matter the outcome.

Though there were lots of soldiers who gained valuable combat experience and witnessed the might of the Larkinson Clan, these benefits didn't compensate for the loss of lots of starships, mechs and clansmen.

Ves sighed. "We need to look on the bright side of how the battle ended. We avoided the worst outcomes and that should be enough."

Everyone nodded. At least they could agree with that. The Ferrils could have done much worse to them than eventually letting their surviving fleet leave the Fordilla Zentra Star System undisturbed.

"Let's get the ugly news out of the way first. How many people did we lose?"

General Verle briefly glanced at a list. "We are still tallying the numbers. We evacuated rather hastily and there are still many injured personnel who might or might not be able to pick themselves up again. In short, we lost 3700 mechs, but only 1400 mech pilots. A lot of ejected mech pilots were able to make it back to our fleet as the Slug Rangers generally didn't bother to waste their firepower on our defeated mech pilots. We lost a lot more ship personnel though. Over 6000 are dead or unaccounted for. Our rescue parties have acted as thoroughly as possible to rescue every living body on the battlefield but it's possible that they may have missed a couple of survivors."

A heavy mood hung over the conference room. The lack of time to scour the various shipwrecks was a major limitation that prevented them from performing a more thorough search.

Ves turned around and reached out his hand. The Larkinson Mandate that hung on Nitaa's side automatically flew into his grasp.

He briefly closed his eyes, soothed the saddened Golden Cat and tried to scope out the Larkinson Network.

"It's fine." He finally said when he was done with his examination. "We didn't leave any surviving clansmen behind. Our rescue parties did a good job."

No one around the conference table questioned the accuracy of this statement. Even if Ves was lying, there weren't any good reasons to contradict him. The clan needed as much good news as possible.



"How many ships did we lose?"

"Over sixty. Most of them were poorly-armored non-combat sub-capital ships. Our direct battle effectiveness doesn't depend heavily on them, but their absence will significantly slow down our efforts to repair and recover from the damage we've incurred." The general answered. "Also, we are thinking about evacuating three or four more vessels before our next hop."

"Why is that the case?"

"The vessels we had to leave behind were either destroyed or crippled to the point where making them spaceworthy and FTL capable requires way more repairs than we can quickly perform in the field. That doesn't mean our remaining starships are all in good condition. You should look at the Graveyard for example."

The general summoned a projection of the capital ship in question. As the only true defensive capital ship in the Larkinson fleet, the Graveyard had shouldered the most important burden of withstanding enemy fire.

Without the Graveyard performing her essential function, the Steel Rain artillery mechs could have directed their firepower to more vulnerable capital ships such as the Dragon's Den or the Vivacious Wall!

Though the Graveyard served her role without any complaints, her hull looked as if it had been exposed to a meteor storm!

Almost her entire surface was marked with damage. Cracker mechs along with numerous ranged expert mechs had all pounded her thick but inconsistent hull plating that was originally made out of heterogeneous battlefield salvage. The Graveyard lost a lot of fused scrap metal plating and some of her outer compartments had even been caved in after suffering direct hits!

"Will she hold?" Ves gestured his head at the worrisome projection.

"According to Vivian Tsai, the Graveyard's tolerance for damage is high. Though many of her parameters have dropped, her FTL drives are still in good condition. The biggest risk to our defensive ship is that the heaviest blows from the Gauss Cannon may have cracked her keel or other critical structural parts. The engineers aboard the salvaging ship are already scanning her interior to detect she is at risk of collapsing in the near future."

"I see."

Ves did not really care about the loss of all of the sub-capital ships at this point. The expeditionary fleet was so close to the beyonder gate that it was actually good that they were able to get rid of some of their redundant sub-capital ships ahead of time. It was

well worth the price to trade them away to preserve the existence of more valuable assets.

The Graveyard was much more crucial to his plans. The Larkinson fleet had an abundance of non-combat capital ships, so every large vessel that was useful in a fight was essential to his future success in the Red Ocean!

"I have one more piece of bad news for you with regards to the Graveyard. Depending on the severity of her structural damage, we might have to send her to a drydock in order to restore her long-term integrity and spaceworthiness."

Ves scowled. "That's certainly not what I want to hear!"

Shederin Purnesse concurred. "I have already inquired where we can perform essential starship repairs. Every shipyard and drydock in the star cluster is fully booked. Unless you are able to convince those in high places to make an exception for us, this will not change."

"We might not need to resort to any third parties." General Verle smiled. "As long as the Graveyard lasts long enough for us to reach the Tarnished Crown Star Sector, we can pick up the Diligent Ovenbird. Though she's not a fully-featured mobile drydock, her large-scale repair and construction capabilities should be more than capable of performing moderate repairs."

As long as the Graveyard wasn't apart at the seams, they might not have to leave her behind.

"Prioritize repairs on the Graveyard as much as you can. Transfer over additional engineers and repair crews if you have to. She has already shown her worth in the prior battle. We absolutely can't do without her defenses. Her formidable salvaging capabilities are also essential in a place like the Red Ocean."

Once Ves gained a decent understanding of the condition of the Larkinson fleet, he moved on to his next concern.

"General Verle, Chief Minister Magdalena, how are our clansmen doing?"

The two senior Larkinsons looked at each other before General Verle spoke first. "Our mech pilots and many of our other active servicemen are tired, relieved and even traumatized to a degree. This battle has not pushed our veterans to the brink, but the same can't be said for our rookies. Many of them joined our clan after we fought the Battle of Reckoning, so they have never experienced a pitched battle of this scale. We threw them straight into the fire without giving them too many opportunities to prepare."

"Will there be a problem?" Ves directed a steady stare at the general.

The general hesitated a bit before shaking his head. "There shouldn't be. Our mech legions and our headquarters are well-staffed and are able to offer plenty of counseling and psychological support. We... are already accustomed to handling these issues from our men."

That was good, because Ves didn't want to waste any time on them. He had more important priorities.

"What about our civilian population?" Ves turned to Magdalena.

The chief minister looked concerned. "The general clansmen are glad to be alive, but far too many of them have been displaced from their old berths without much warning or preparation. They are living under basic conditions aboard our capital ships. Crowding is becoming a problem and it will take at least several weeks to provide higher-quality shelter to them. It will take even longer to give them something to do again."

"Well, we were planning to transfer all of our personnel from our smaller vessels to our capital ships anyway. We just started with this operation a few months ahead of schedule. Don't bother with transferring them back to their old berths if the ships still exist. Even if it is a little chaotic, do your best to help our civilian population settle into our capital ships."

"I shall pass that on. We were already discussing this option before you called this meeting." Magdalena Larkinson said.

"Are there any other personnel concerns that need to be brought to my attention?" Ves asked.

There were a few issues.

Venerable Joshua suffered a major defeat and his prime mech was broken.

The Larkinson Army lost a couple of expert candidates but did not gain any new ones that were still alive.

None of the current roster of expert candidates had broken through to expert pilot.

Vincent Rickling was loudly demanding a new prime mech for himself.

Ves did not show much concern to these issues. Some of them were genuine problems but he didn't need to address them in person. The clan had plenty of people and institutions to solve these lower-level problems. He just asked in order to gain a better picture of the overall state of his clan.

From what he could gather, his clansmen weren't particularly happy, but they were far from blaming him for their losses... That was all Ves needed to know.

### *Chapter 3297: Streaming Celebrities*

Once the people attending the meeting finished their discussion on the state of the Larkinson Clan, they moved on to their next priority, which was trying to make it out of the Vulcan Empire alive and intact!

"Tell me how we stand with regards to our flight from a dwarven country."

"The Vulcanites are in the middle of an upheaval." Calabast immediately spoke up. "Have you checked the galactic net lately?"

Ves shook his head. "No. I have my hands full with managing other affairs. Several of our expert mechs are in bad shape and need to be repaired as soon as possible to restore our top-level battle effectiveness. How can I spare any time to browse the galactic net?"

Calabast pressed her lips into a line. "Well, you might want to take a look at the regional news portals. Not just the Vulcan Empire, but the entire star cluster is buzzing about our battle!"

A sinking feeling overcame Ves. He tapped his fingers and called up a projection that displayed a selection of the current news in the star cluster.

[THE DWARVEN MENACE HAS RETURNED]

[LARKINSON CLAN - THE POWERHOUSE FROM THE KOMODO STAR SECTOR]

[REVIEW THE STUNNING FOOTAGE OF THE BATTLE OF FORDILLA ZENTRA WITH ANALYSIS FROM ESTEEMED TACTICIANS AND MECH DESIGNERS]

[MAGIC OR SCIENCE?! WITNESS THE DEBATE ON THE LARKINSON CLAN'S MASS ENERGY ATTACKS AT 20:00 STANDARD TIME]

[THE VULCAN EMPIRE MUST AVENGE THE EVIL DEEDS OF THESE INTRUDING HUMANS!]

[VES LARKINSON: BLASPHEMER AND LIAR. THIS EVIL HUMAN SORCERER MUST ANSWER FOR HIS CRIMES!]

Suffice to say, the headlines did not put Ves in a good mood. When he looked a little deeper, he realized that footage of the entire battle had ended up on the galactic net!

From start to finish, the entire progression of the engagement from the initial blows of the dwarven fleet to the eventual halt in hostilities was captured by several different long-ranged optical sensor feeds.

"How bad is it, Calabast?" Ves whispered as he saw a giant projection of himself talking nonsense to the dwarven fleet.

The spymaster smirked. "I wouldn't be so worried if I were you. We looked good during the battle. You can't say the same for the dwarves, who not only bear the fault of initiating hostilities, but also failed to achieve their objective. Sure, we exposed our trump cards to everyone who cares, but with how often we make use of them this outcome would have happened sooner or later. At least this is one of the best ways to insert fear into anyone who thinks they can employ massed mechs to tear us down."

"You call this 'the best way'?! " Ves angrily gestured at the footage.

"If you look closely at the footage, you'll see that they only consist of a few long-ranged optical sensor feeds from a relatively cheap third-class commercial vessel. The resolution of the footage isn't high and smaller details are difficult to distinguish due to distance and interference. The Dented Coin uploaded this footage to the galactic net live in order to discredit the Dwarven God Cult and strengthen the traditionalists in the Vulcan Empire. The ship did not transmit any other sensor readings."

Ves calmed down when he heard that. "Has it actually helped us in any way?"

Calabast looked pleased. "Director Olivier Persham succeeded in his goal. A lot of controversy has erupted in the Vulcan Empire. There are Vulcanites who are for or against this battle and there are a lot of angry leaders who don't want their worst nightmares to come true. This unprovoked attack will have repercussions on their entire state and the last thing they want is to worsen their case in front of the MTA. Although this news isn't public, a couple of my sources tell me that Grand Regent Habidas Aaden himself is in talks with the Association."

Shederin Purnesse smiled as well. "According to my own understanding of the local political situation, a large and intense opposition has broken out from the more traditional and dovish parts of the Vulcan Empire. There are still many Vulcanites who dread a war against the powerful tall folk and want nothing more than to enjoy their current level of power and prosperity in this star sector. The warmongers threaten to tear this all down. The fact that the Ferril Provincial Army provoked a battle with superior numbers only to lose badly has embarrassed and discredited the fanatical Dwarven God cultists."

"And that means...?"

"A follow-up action is highly unlikely to happen. The controversy is too big and the traditionalists within the Vulcan Empire will not allow their younger and rather short-sighted Vulcanites to make this problem worse."

That was good news to Ves. The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers all lost a lot of battle effectiveness and could never win against a similar opponent in their current condition.

Of course, Shederin's judgement was not absolute. There was still a chance that the crazy dwarves organized another pursuit force and were on their way to intercept the escaping human fleet before it left the star sector!

Therefore, until the Larkinsons actually left the reach of the Vulcan Empire, Ves and the others did not intend to relax!

Calabast and Shederin continued to explain their take on the developing political crisis in the Vulcan Empire. The Vulcan Faith and the dwarven leaders who were aligned to it had long shown great concern at the Dwarven God Cult's unceasing growth.

Up until now, the rise of the cult had long been unstoppable! More and more dwarves of the younger generation were not content with worshipping a human god.

The Vulcan Empire's population skewed heavily to the younger side. The vast majority of its citizens had been born in a time when the Vulcan Empire was already established and in its ascendancy.

The proportion of Vulcanites who lived during the time of the original rebellion amounted to less than 5 percent of the empire's booming population!

This was the strongest reason why the much more appealing Dwarven God Cult managed to displace the traditional Vulcan Faith!

Due to this age distribution, the traditionalists had constantly been losing ground, yet all of that changed after this battle!

Even though a single battle did not say much, the battle was so embarrassing and emotionally-charged to the Vulcanites that the people aligned to the Vulcan Faith were justifiably angry at their more short-sighted and impulsive dwarves!

The infighting that had erupted between the two major Vulcanite factions would cause their attention to be directed towards each other. This was why both Shederin and Calabast did not anticipate any further trouble up ahead.

Shederin predicted that a lot more changes were in store, but all of this speculation and analysis could wait until later. Right now, Ves and the other Larkinsons had to take care of their immediate concerns first.

"Will we actually be safe once we leave Smiling Samuel?" Ves questioned. "Even though we still retained a lot of battle effectiveness, we are weaker and more vulnerable

than ever. Many of our trump cards have been exposed, and some of them can't even be used because we don't have the means anymore."

Shederin grinned. "You don't have to worry about that. One of the consequences of livestreaming the footage of our battle is that we have become heroes to the citizens of the Empire of the Lost. We are one of the first group of humans who has fought a real, standing battle against the Vulcanites and managed to hand them a defeat. This is something that many of the Lost have been dreaming of. Considering their loaded past and culture, they would never do anything to us. In fact, I am already in talks with their diplomats. They are willing to send a military border fleet to escort us back to the Amswick System where we can recuperate under the local authority's explicit protection."

Ves did not look assured. "What are the chances that this is a trap? We've been stabbed in the back by government forces way too many times to count."

"You didn't have someone like myself in your staff back then." Shederin Purnesse plainly replied. "You can trust my judgement. There are no major factions in the Empire of the Lost who benefit from attacking us. The downsides are too great. Still, if you are truly concerned, then we can refuse most of their offers and simply accept the more basic ones that put more separation between us and the Lost."

"Do that, then. I don't want any entanglement with any governments. Even if the Lost applaud our victory against the Vulcanites, that does not necessarily make us friends."

With all of his prior experiences with governments and politicians, Ves would be a fool to embrace the entreaties of any official authority!

Though Shederin did not agree with this overly-cautious stance, Ves was in charge and he was not. As a minister, the old man still had enough sense of propriety to bow his head.

"I need a better guarantee of protection." Ves said. "There ought to be a lot of mercenaries based in the port system of a second-rate state. Can we hire the services of a large-scale security company like we did before? I have good impressions of the Infinity Guards back when we were recovering from the Battle of Reckoning. Now that we are in a similar position, I think it is best we employ the same solution."

Everyone in the meeting agreed with his suggestion. Compared to the goodwill from the Empire of the Lost, Ves much preferred to put his faith in a mercenary contract!

"I shall work on it." Minister Shederin said as he bowed his head. "It is best to contract a large, cluster-wide mercenary organization. That way, we will not be beholden to citizens who are loyal to the Empire of the Lost."



"Getting enough protection to deter immediate attacks on us is our highest priority. If possible, also try and see if you can persuade the mercenaries to keep escorting us all the way to the beyonder gate at Tarnished Crowd. I don't want to take any more chances and I'm willing to pay big to rule out any further attacks."

"What budget do you have in mind, sir?" Chief Minister Magdalena asked. "Our financial position is stable, but don't forget that rebuilding our strength will require a huge amount of investment."

Ves waved his hand. "You can discuss the exact figure among yourselves. I don't want any half-measures though. If we have to pay as much as 1 billion hex credits or more in order to receive the best form of protection, then just do it. With all of the publicity that we've gained from showing off our combat prowess, we can't rule out that someone interested in our mechs or methods is planning to do something to us. If we can travel together with an entire mercenary mech division, I would feel a lot safer!"

"That... is highly unusual, sir. The vast majority of security companies can never field so many mechs together at the same time. There are simply too few clients who need such extravagant protection and are willing to pay the exorbitant fees." Shederin warned.

"Then contract multiple mercenary organizations if needed. Who says we only have to go in bed with one of them? In fact, I would feel safer if we don't put all of our eggs in one basket."

The amount of paranoia that Ves was displaying throughout the meeting was excessive.

However, not even Calabast dared to roll her eyes.

In a time of weakness, they all needed to show a lot of caution. Only a single mistake or oversight was enough to ruin the Larkinson Clan and everything that they had worked for! No one attending this meeting was willing to see that happen. They invested too much in the clan to lose it all at this point!

After discussing a few more topics, the meeting finally came to an end... Everyone knew what they needed to do now that they had formed a basic plan on how to get out and where they should go next.

#### *Chapter 3298: Unfavorable Comparisons*

As the victorious but battered expeditionary fleet made its way out of the Vulcan Empire like a pack of beaten dogs, the Larkinsons all got to work.

After establishing a basic plan for the future, the different leaders within the clan all took charge and made sure that everyone was doing something productive.

Mechs were being repaired.

Mech pilots were being prepared for an eventual second bout.

Engineers and repair crews were doing as much as they could to repair their damaged ships.

Logistical personnel were organizing and allocating all of the goods and supplies that had been shifted over to the capital ships in a hurry.

Administrative personnel were doing their best to house and meet the needs of tens of thousands of extra passengers on the same vessels.

And these were just the short-term assignments that could be done right away.

There were also many other Larkinsons who were liaising with the Empire of the Lost, managing public relations now that the Larkinson Clan had unveiled its astounding battle prowess to the public and vetting various large-scale mercenary companies that could be trusted to protect the Larkinson Clan and its allies during their time of weakness.

The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan were also busy with their own recoveries. Both of them had taken a battering during this battle as their burden was no less than that of the Larkinson Clan.

Perhaps the only benefit they gained from the battle was that they both gained additional expert candidates.

The Glory Seekers originally didn't have any expert candidates, but the breakthroughs of two notable female mech pilots during battle attracted a lot of attention!

Unlike the Larkinson Clan, the Glory Seekers were much more prepared to guard their human assets. As soon as a new expert candidate emerged, nearby Glory Seekers immediately converged upon the individual in question and used their mechs to form a wall that drastically increased the survival chances of their potential new hero!

Sometimes, this worked. Other times, the concentrated firepower from the Slug Rangers was too overwhelming. The Glory Seekers were already happy to have gained two surviving expert candidates from this battle.

The previous two battles had already shown that it was no longer sufficient to depend on just Venerable Brutus Wodin to represent their top strength. They urgently needed to nurture their own batch of expert pilots in order to stop falling behind the Larkinsons and Crossers!

"The root of our problem stems from our home state's shortage of expert candidates and expert pilots." Marshal Ariadne Wodin told her staff during a meeting. "Our original intention was to maintain the strength of a mech regiment. It was only later that our

mission expanded in scope and that we gained the option to recruit a vast amount of external personnel. It is easy enough for us to expand our ranks of mech pilots, it is not possible for us to expand our expert pilot roster in the same way. Our only choice is to put much more effort into developing our expert candidates. We cannot surrender all of the initiative in top-level combat to the Larkinsons and the Crossers. We are Hexers, and we are superior!"

The Hexers all stood up and saluted! "We are superior!"

While the Glory Seekers were discussing plans to foster the growth of expert pilots, the Cross Clan was considering different matters.

As a former ruling power, the Cross Clan's depth was deeper. It already had five expert candidates who had always maintained a low profile and now another new talent had joined their ranks. Even so, none of the Crossers expected these promising individuals to grow up quickly.

The fact that none of the expert candidates of the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan underwent apotheosis in the previous battle showed that it was not that easy for them to break through when needed!

At this time, the general officers and leaders of the Cross Clan were busy with arranging all of the routine matters that needed to be addressed.

Their leader, who should have been presiding over the meetings, was absent at the moment.

Every Crosser knew why this was the case. Patriarch Reginald Cross fought so hard and so long against another high-tier expert pilot that it became difficult to accept the outcome.

"We were so close." He whispered as he sat close to the entrance of the inner shrine aboard the Hemmington Cross. "That tough old dwarf was one step ahead of me. I could feel my will being grinded by his determination to save his people. The more we threatened his battle buddies, the more he strained himself. I actually thought he would have broken through to ace pilot if we fought for another minute!"

Professor Benedict stood close to the moody expert pilot and leader and crossed his arms. "And you thought that it would be a good idea to fight against a newly-promoted ace pilot? You should know that the outburst of forced resonance at this level is far more than what you and your men can handle!"

"That is exactly why I needed Orthox to break through!" Reginald stood up as his deflated will flared up again! "Only by challenging an opponent that is at least as good as my father will I be able to prove myself that I can be his equal!"

The Senior Mech Designer frowned. "You're being too impulsive, and you know it. I am fully aware of how much you yearn to become an ace pilot, but the way you are going about it is too selfish. If Orthox broke through, the damage that he could do to us is no less than what the Larkinson Clan's battle networks have done to the dwarves. Think about it clearly, patriarch. Are you willing to exchange the lives of thousands of brave Crosser mech pilots who put all of their trust in you so that you can gain a slight chance of undergoing your second apotheosis?"

"..."

The Crosser Patriarch looked stormy. He must have been aware of this consideration but he refused to think it through. What the professor was doing ruined Reginald's attempt to claim ignorance.

When faced with this line of questioning, the ambitious Crosser leader had no choice but to provide a straight answer! An expert pilot never shirked back from a challenge!

"Look at the performance of the Larkinson Clan." The expert pilot slowly said. "When it comes to their mechs and mech pilots, they are not that different from ours. Yet why is it that their trump cards are far better than ours? Their expert mechs are more powerful than they should be and their so-called battle networks which have recently become famous and admired throughout the surrounding star clusters have achieved far greater results than any of our measures. How can we ever catch up to that level of strength?"

"I haven't remained idle, Reginald. I am still in the process of building up a chain of industries, so I haven't been able to deliver any immediate results. Just give me a year or two and that will change. I have gained a lot of inspiration from the methods of the brats over at the Larkinson Clan. While I cannot replicate their solutions, I can develop my own ones that will not lose ground!"

Although he felt a little ashamed to admit it, his work was not as impactful as that of a Journeyman. The reasons why were twofold according to Professor Benedict.

First, Patriarch Ves Larkinson's design philosophy was so unorthodox that it leveraged external sources of power.

Though these sources were too mysterious to someone like Benedict, he could still understand and even apply this basic concept himself!

Second, Ves and his team of Journeymen had a head start. Unlike Professor Benedict who had to abandon his old identity and much of his prior empire in order to start from the beginning in the Cross Clan, the Larkinson mech designers had steadily built themselves up to this point without interruption.

Time was the scarcest and most valuable resource of every mech designer. Professor Benedict just happened to have lost a lot of it due to displacing himself multiple times. If

he was still able to retain his original identity and status in the Friday Coalition, who knew whether its soldiers would have the support of one more esteemed Master!

Professor Benedict silently shook his head. He had made his choices in life and he was man enough to own up to them. In a way, he was glad to have gained the opportunity to unmoor himself of all of his past burdens and gain the chance to enter the Red Ocean alongside a remarkable young mech designer.

The battles he took part in, the mechs he got in touch with and the creative battle methods he witnessed up until now had thoroughly invigorated his staid and inflexible design philosophy!

If he continued with his old trajectory where he wasn't exposed to all of the dazzling sights, then he might have been able to advance to Master, only to have locked his design philosophy on an average trajectory with no further future.

Now, the inspiration he received and the insights he had gained from seeing a completely different mech designer at work had initiated a thorough renewal process that caused Professor Benedict to question, reform and rebuild many of his goals, theories and assumptions!

Although these changes would probably delay his possible advancement to Master, the Senior did not care at all. His wonder and awe for mechs had completely been reignited now that he witnessed how much more potential that they could hold!

Unfortunately, as much as Professor Benedict was having his best time in half a century, it was difficult for him to convey all of this to a bone-headed expert pilot.

"Whatever good you're doing will only allow you to catch up to the Larkinsons at best." Patriarch Reginald huffed as he largely discounted the prowess of a Senior Mech Designer. "What I am trying to accomplish will surpass them in one fell swoop!"

His fire had returned as he no longer dwelled on the opportunity that he had missed in the previous battle. Only by going forward would he still have a chance of fulfilling his ambition!

Patriarch Reginald turned to the second-most powerful member of the Cross Clan with a straight back.

"You accuse me of harming our men by focusing on my own advancement above everything else. I don't deny your point. However, do not think that I am disregarding the greater interests of our clan. I inherited this mantle from my father and I am still committed to making it thrive. It is just that we can't rely on you or our men to restore the splendor that we once enjoyed. It takes too much time for any of you to achieve any breakthroughs! Of all of the people in our clan, only I can revive our fortunes in one fell swoop! As long as I am able to advance to ace pilot, every sacrifice that we have made

so far is worth it! No matter how many Crossers fall, as long as I succeed, our Cross Clan will be able to grow ten times stronger!"

Professor Benedict couldn't do much aside from accepting that the Cross Patriarch would never change his mind.

It was quite frustrating for the Senior to work around the constraints imposed by such a pigheaded leader, but this wasn't the first time he worked under challenging circumstances.

"If that is your choice, then I will do my best to help you achieve your goal." Benedict sighed. "Just be a little more patient. We have yet to begin work on your new expert mech, but the time draws closer. We'll probably be able to satisfy your needs once we have established ourselves in the Red Ocean. There is an enormous array of brand-new exotics and advanced products available in the new frontier. The expert mech that we can develop will definitely outshine your current one by a large margin!"

This was the difference in environment, resources and tech. An expert mech that originated the galactic rim was not comparable to an expert mech that came from a more prosperous region!

Even if the Red Ocean was still in an early colonization stage, the concentration of the best pioneers of human space meant that the specifications of mechs had reached a much higher level than what the Cross Clan could reach!

Professor Benedict was already salivating at the opportunity to grasp all of these new possibilities!

"I can promise you now that not even the unusual expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan can come close to matching the power of your future expert mech!"

After all, the power of an expert mech wasn't solely contingent on its design, tech and material composition.

The strength of the expert pilot was also a key factor, and Patriarch Reginald's willpower and resonance strength were far more developed than any of the expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan!

As long as Professor Benedict completed this project, the Larkinson Clan would no longer be able to hog all of the limelight!

*Chapter 3299: Good and Bad Example*

The expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan processed the outcome of the Battle Fordilla Zentra in their own ways.

Each of them gained different experiences from the battle. Some achieved their goals with brilliant splendor while others suffered a complete letdown.

Venerable Tusa and Venerable Stark had plenty of reasons to be happy about. They each shone brightly during the different phases of the battle and played a crucial role in tipping the balance in the expeditionary fleet's favor.

Many clansmen expressed their gratitude and admiration to them wherever they walked.

"You're my hero, Venerable Tusa!"

"I want to catch up to you!"

"Thanks for saving my brothers out there, Venerable Stark."

In the close and brotherly culture of the Larkinson Clan, the clansmen did not feel too distant from their heroes. They all spoke towards the expert pilots without much reserve.

Venerable Stark did not respond too much to these remarks. She was not a Larkinson and she had her own reasons to fight.

As for Venerable Tusa, he fully enjoyed the recognition that he finally received. This time, he played an essential role in taking out the formidable Gauss Baron! Its quick and decisive elimination had lifted a huge weight off the Larkinson Army's shoulders and eventually led to the defeat of the Slug Rangers!

Other Larkinson expert pilots felt more mixed. They did not consider their battle performance to be stellar this time. Their actual effectiveness had fallen short of their prior expectations.

Venerable Dise did not blame herself too much. She faced difficult odds and was happy that she managed to hold back three dwarven expert mechs by herself long enough for the rest of the clan to grasp the key of victory elsewhere on the battlefield.

The Swordmaidens and Heavensworders fully supported and celebrated her performance. The battle formation attack she pulled off was legendary and her rapid improvement in swordsmanship while under siege had caused her to become an even greater hero to the sword fanatics!

In contrast to the dark-skinned expert pilot, Venerable Orfan was less than pleased by the role she played on the battlefield.

"My Riot got beat up and I couldn't do anything about it!" She complained.



This battle was her debut as a proper expert pilot. The power of the Riot was absolutely incomparable to her previous Bright Spear Prime, yet she thought that her contribution this time wasn't that much better.

Compared to what Tusa and Stark had accomplished, Orfan felt that her battle performance did not match up to her title as Venerable!

Of course, her disappointment was a lot less dramatic than what the remaining two expert pilots in the Larkinson Clan were going through.

Venerable Jannzi was practically invisible in the last battle. Though she loved her Shield of Samar more than anything else, she deeply experienced how much of a gap there was between her prime mech and an expert mech.

"If my mech was closer in power to the Gatecrasher, I could have saved thousands of more lives..." She muttered.

The performance of the Venerable Orthox De Massie and his high-tier expert mech completely impressed her. Though the two were too far apart to exchange blows with each other, Jannzi was still able to sense the old dwarven expert pilot's amazingly solid and condensed will.

Orthox possessed a much more developed heart and will to protect his fellow people! In comparison, Jannzi felt as if she was a toddler looking up at an adult.

She was glad that she was able to witness and examine a stronger and more developed defensive expert pilot in battle. To her, it didn't matter whether Venerable Orthox was a dwarf who fought on the wrong side. Their ideals and convictions were similar enough that she was able to learn much from Orthox's example!

"His journey is not my journey, but all roads lead to the same destination." Venerable Jannzi realized as she rewatched the footage of the Gatecrasher in combat. "Venerable Orthox is a truly selfless protector who has given up a lot of other choices in order to perform his only duty."

Despite his age, history and status within the Vulcan Empire, Venerable Orthox eschewed many of the honors and luxuries that a war hero like him was entitled to. It was clear that he only focused on progressing his strength and making sure his expert mech was good enough to keep up with his desire to protect his fellow dwarves.

Jannzi recognized that as admirable as Venerable Orthox might be, he wouldn't have become nearly as impactful in battle if he did not pilot an excellent expert mech!

The quality and performance of the Gatecrasher truly stood head and shoulders above the other expert mechs. Not even the Gauss Baron and the Paravad was able to measure up against the most powerful expert mech of the Molten Hammers.

Venerable Jannzi did not like it that her future ability to affect the battlefield was also contingent on the power of her expert mech.

The better the machine, the better her performance.

The better her performance, the greater her ability to fulfill her own duty!

After a lot of contemplation, she set Venerable Orthox as a target. Though her battle approach was not as offense-oriented, she wanted to achieve the same degree of strength and impact in battle as the dwarven expert mech!

"If I can't reach Orthox's level of strength, then I can forget about accomplishing real change in the Larkinson Clan!" She admitted.

She wasn't happy with the fact that the Battle of Fordilla Zentra happened at all. The Larkinson Clan lost 7500 clansmen last she checked the numbers. These people would have never died if Ves did not idiotically attempt to travel through a hostile star sector!

Though she wanted to convince her fellow clansmen to force a change in leadership so that senseless tragedies like this would not happen again, she had given up on this course of action.

"Nobody listens to me these days." She grumbled with a sour expression.

Too many Larkinsons believed in their patriarch and his approach. Her fellow clansmen were so indoctrinated that they no longer reacted as strongly to this level of casualties as before. The loss of just '1400' mech pilots was a natural outcome of any battle, which Jannzi thought was completely ridiculous!

If 1400 people died at once in a random city on an average planet, then everyone would become shocked and outraged! A lot of investigations would follow as many other people demanded accountability. Whoever was responsible for allowing this catastrophe to happen was bound to step down sooner or later.

Jannzi shook her head. "We've all become too desensitized for that to happen in our clan. Our motto practically enshrines this stupid belief that suffering casualties is normal!"

The only way to break this cultural inertia was to become strong or authoritative enough to make people listen! Ves was too prominent in the clan at the moment, but if Jannzi managed to become a lot more stronger, she believed that her fellow clansmen would finally begin to take her words seriously!

The fire burning in her heart grew stronger! Though she was not able to simplify her goals and outlook as much as Venerable Orthox, he still served as a good example of what she must do to develop herself as a space knight pilot.

"Our journeys are different, but our goals are the same!"

Jannzi also wished to protect her fellow Larkinsons! The only difference was that she was far more willing to protect her clan from its own leaders than Venerable Orthox!

This was the biggest reason why she thought that Venerable Orthox ultimately made the wrong decision. The case of the Vulcan Empire was a clear example of what might happen to the Larkinson Clan if someone like her did not guard the people against threats from within!

The dwarven expert pilot's decision to eschew politics had caused him to develop a blindspot of the danger that certain leaders posed to the commoners of the Vulcan Empire.

Venerable Jannzi was determined not to follow this bad example!

"I need to grow stronger. I can't let the other expert pilots overshadow me in battle all of the time." She clenched her fist.

If she performed as well as Venerable Stark, then she would already have a lot more weight in the clan than before! It was a pity that defensive mech pilots were not able to distinguish themselves on the battlefield as easily.

Still, all was not lost. Venerable Orthox and the Gatecrasher showed her a way for space knight pilots to become a lot more prominent during combat. She just needed to obtain an expert mech first!

While Venerable Jannzi was plotting a clear plan to achieve greatness in her own way, Venerable Joshua hadn't even gotten to that point.

His mental state was much worse than that of his ex-girlfriend.

He had locked himself up in his grand stateroom aboard the Spirit of Bentheim ever since the battle had been concluded and hadn't come out since. He missed the debriefings and other routine procedures and completely ignored everyone's calls.

Only his girlfriend was able to get through his isolation.

"Joshua." Ketis said as she sat next to him in her pajamas.

Her state wasn't so great either. Ever since she mysteriously channeled her strength through the Decapitator, she felt a lot more drained and exhausted than before. Sharpie was still in a deflated state and her mind had become a lot emptier than before.

She was in no condition to work at the moment, though Sharpie was already doing its best to recover from their previous exertion.

"I... could have done more." He sighed. "You already told me that the Valkyrie Prime isn't as strong as the Burza Fens, but I truly thought I had a chance of winning that fight. I should have pushed harder and defeated the dwarven expert mech sooner before its expert pilot found a way to make a comeback."

Ketis placed her strong and firm hand above his own. "You shouldn't dwell too much on these what-ifs. Ves doesn't think there's a point in questioning your past decisions when you can't change a thing about what has already happened. In my opinion, you made the decisions that you thought were best at the time. You couldn't have known that the enemy mech pilot was so tenacious. We all underestimated the Vulcanites a bit. Besides, we won in the end."

"No thanks to me. Other than saving some Battle Criers, I managed to ruin the Valkyrie Prime. I heard that Patriarch Ves is quite distressed at all of the Unending alloy that we possibly left behind in our haste to leave the star system."

"That's not your responsibility, Joshua. Let Ves worry about that. Your job is to fight, and you did that. Have you forgotten about how many dwarven mech pilots you and the Penitent Sisters managed to kill? That death wave couldn't have eliminated so many enemies at once if you weren't there to boost and guide this powerful attack. You also played an essential role in defeating the Burza Fens. Even if your duel isn't so stellar, you managed to distract it long enough for the Dark Zephyr to sneak up and stab it in the back! Tusa couldn't have pulled that off if you didn't fight hard enough to completely attract the hatred of the dwarven expert pilot!"

Her words caused Venerable Joshua to feel a little better about himself. Though he was still dissatisfied with his performance, he at least valued his contribution a little higher.

Ketis smiled. She leaned in and exchanged a gentle kiss with Joshua.

"Thanks. I really needed that." Joshua said as he basked in her affection.

"Will you finally act like a grownup now and go out to attend your meetings and stuff? Even if you don't have a mech at the moment, you can still do a lot to help out the clan."

"I suppose I'll get back to my duties."

### *Chapter 3300: Round of Refits*

Once the expert pilots all enjoyed a few days to rest and process their battle experiences, they gathered together in a meeting room located in the upper decks of the Spirit of Bentheim.

Every expert pilot that arrived in the compartment silently acknowledged each other but did not take the initiative to chat.

None of them were in the mood to joke around. The Battle of Fordilla Zentra still weighed heavily on their minds, and some of them needed more time than others to return to their old selves.

After several minutes of silence, Ves, who was still wearing his Unending Regalia, finally entered the room with a handful of his honor guard.

Even though the presence of the latter was completely redundant in this gathering, Nitaa and her colleagues still considered it to be their duty to guard the patriarch at all times.

Besides, if nothing else, the bodyguards made for convenient cargo holders. Nitaa's current armor was weighed down by the Larkinson Mandate, the Hammer of Brilliance and a few other useful goods such as a spare P-stone.

"Ladies. Gentlemen. I'm glad to see you're all healthy and alive." Ves began as he sat down at the head of the table. "The previous battle has taken a toll on all of you. Before we address the items on the agenda, let me apologize to you first. Each of you had to fight in unfavorable circumstances due to the numerous mistakes and misjudgements that I have made. This battle could have been avoided. Even if we did end up fighting the dwarves anyway, I should have at least made sure that Joshua and Jannzi already received their expert mechs."

"It's not your fault, Ves." Tusa said as he crossed his arms. "Well, it kind of is, but it's not as if you went out to punch the dwarves in the face. The most you're guilty of is negligence."

Jannzi sneered but she didn't speak up, which was a very welcome decision to Ves and the others. Everyone already knew her stance and she didn't need to repeat them in front of this small and closed audience.

"I'm not interested in going through this apology theater." Venerable Orfan said. "What I want to know is how soon you'll be able to fix my Riot. It's broken! If the dwarves ambush us again, I sure as hell don't want to deploy in space with only one intact limb on my expert mech!"

The others were curious as well. Of the four expert mechs, only the Amaranto was still in decent condition. The others were incapable of exhibiting the same peak performance as before!

Ves smiled at the expert pilots. He expected that to be the first topic that would come up today.

"Fixing your expert mechs isn't as easy as assigning a couple of maintenance crews to glue the broken parts back together. Your machines are tougher, more mechanically complex and more demanding in material quality than ordinary mechs. Out of everyone

in the Larkinson Clan, only my wife and myself possess the requisite skills and knowledge to fully restore your expert mechs. Given the complexity of their designs and how time consuming it can be to work with Unending alloy, it will take weeks before they're as good as news."

That did not sound like good news to the expert pilots.

"That's not a short amount of time. What if the dwarves ambush us in the next few days?"

"What are you saying, exactly?" Venerable Orfan scratched her head.

"Ves is saying that he and his wife can only do one thing at once." Jannzi said with a grim look. "If the two of them spend the following weeks repairing your damaged expert mechs, they won't be able to spend any time on their current design projects."

Understanding dawned upon Venerable Joshua. "It will take longer for Jannzi and I to receive our expert mechs?"

Ves looked quite impressed at Jannzi. He didn't think she was smart enough to catch the implications of his message.

"She's correct." He said as he gave both Joshua and Jannzi a measured stare. "Look, I understand that you don't want to wait any longer to receive your promised machines, but we all have to make sacrifices. Our clan's immediate priority is to restore as much battle strength as possible in the fastest possible timespan. It will take at least a month to complete another expert mech design and it will take more than a week to fabricate the actual machine. We can fix up all of our damaged expert mechs in at least half of our time and bring back three fully-functional expert mechs back to our mech roster. If the safety of our clan comes first, then this is the logical choice to make."

His logic was irrefutable. The Dark Zephyr, the Riot and the First Sword had already proven their amazing effectiveness before. Fixing them up provided the clan with an immediate and certain boost in strength.

Of course, Venerable Joshua and Venerable Jannzi had to accept the fact that they needed to wait longer until they received their presents from the Larkinson Clan.

"Work on your two expert mech designs isn't being suspended while we work on restoring our existing expert mechs." Ves told the two. "The Design Department still has plenty of design teams that are constantly working on solving low-level problems and optimizing our existing solutions. When we get back to full speed on the design projects, we will be able to finish them a little sooner."

This hardly provided any consolation to the two, and what Ves was about to say would make their moods drop even more.

"To be honest, the work on our damaged expert mechs might take longer than a couple of weeks. Gloriana and I... are thinking about doing more than return them to their original conditions. The Battle of Fordilla Zentra has clearly proven the excellence of those machines, but it has also exposed clear vulnerabilities that we can conveniently address now that we are performing extensive work on them anyway."

This came as a surprise to all of the expert pilots.

"Are you planning to refit our expert mechs?" Venerable Dise asked.

Ves nodded. "That's right. I don't think I need to show you any footage to make you become aware that your expert mechs aren't as durable as we like. While I'm already satisfied with the durability of the Unending alloy armor systems of your expert mechs, I'm not as happy with how vulnerable the internals turned out to be. In a duel against expert mechs, it is crucial for you to be able to put your trust in the resilience of both their insides and outsides. If you are constantly trying to avoid incurring damage because you don't want your internals to be subjected to too many concussive shocks, then that will inevitably shackle your performance. That is not ideal."

Though his audience agreed with his sentiment, there were still a couple of questions.

"I thought the designs of our expert mech are already as good as you can make them. How can you fit something better?"

"How much time will it take to design the refit? If it takes more than a month... then maybe you should postpone it for later."

Ves confidently smiled. "Don't worry about the practicalities of this round of refits. We just picked up the remains of six valuable dwarven expert mechs. Together with our other high-value salvage, we can send them over to the Graveyard in order to extract any high-quality exotics and materials that can still be reused. With a large batch of superior materials in hand, we can work towards replacing the more vulnerable internal components of your expert mechs with upgraded versions. Of course, we don't have time to research how to improve their technical performance, but simply substituting more fragile materials with tougher alternatives is not a time-consuming task. My wife has already begun to survey your expert mechs and the salvage that we can employ to perform this comprehensive durability upgrade round."

Venerable Tusa, Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise were all pleased with this initiative. The latter two especially valued this upgrade because they suffered the worst out of all of the four with actual expert mechs during the previous battle.

"So how much tougher will our expert mechs become after you're done?" Venerable Orfan eagerly leaned forward and asked.



"Beats me." Ves shrugged. "We haven't even completed a survey of the materials of the salvaged dwarven expert mechs that we can use. However, if I have to make a guess, then the upgrade will likely be quite substantial. The general dwarven mech ideology is to design their machines to be tough. Even their lighter machines are more resilient than normal. There are many cases where we can use harder materials or even repurposed dwarven armor plating to strengthen the internals of your machines. The balance and mass distribution will change as a result, but we will try our best to keep them as similar as possible."

"Can you give us a figure?"

"Hmmm... I would say that the durability of the internal architecture of your expert mechs will likely receive a boost of 20 percent on average. This is a generous upgrade that will allow you to fight with a lot more confidence against other expert mechs next time."

While this degree of improvement did not sound revolutionary, it was nonetheless a hefty increase that could definitely make a difference in combat. In circumstances where both combatants were roughly even, a difference of 20 percent could definitely lead to an edge where the Larkinson expert mech would be able to win 9 out of 10 times!

This was because the increase in defense not only allowed the powerful machines to increase their fault tolerance and last longer, but also granted their pilots greater leeway to perform risky moves!

Of course, only half of the expert pilots present in this meeting were happy with these changes.

Venerable Stark raised her hand. "What about my Amaranto?"

"You did a good job in preserving the integrity of your expert mech. It has hardly suffered from any direct damage. We only need a couple of days to perform light repairs on the components and systems that have endured excessive strain. We don't plan to upgrade the Amaranto, though."

"For what reason?"

Ves looked apologetic. "The value of your expert mech lies in its offensive power, and it has already reached the limit that our Design Department can achieve at the moment."

"You can do a lot to upgrade its defenses." Venerable Stark pointed out. "It's one of the reasons why I wasn't able to perform at my best for much of the battle. If my mech was as durable as the Dark Zephyr, those two Slug Ranger expert mechs wouldn't have hounded me for so long."

"We are aware of that, and we intend to do something about it, just not now. Refitting a masterwork expert mech is much more difficult than refitting a normal expert mech. We can't perform too many modifications at once and their quality has to conform to the same standard of quality as your existing machine."

"I see..."

Ves decided to give her a bone. It wouldn't do to neglect the MVP of the last battle and their most effective expert pilot at this point.

"We don't intend to keep your Amaranto as fragile as it is now. Much of the reason why we couldn't improve the defense of your expert mech is because we don't have access to any better tech and materials at a reasonable budget. That will drastically change once we reach the Red Ocean. Once we get there, we can slowly master new tech and procure stronger and more remarkable exotics to upgrade not just the Amaranto, but all of our other expert mechs as well. The development on your machines never stops."

"Does that count for our expert mechs as well?" Venerable Joshua asked with a hopeful tone of voice.

"Yup." Ves grinned. "It's easier to implement upgrades in designs that haven't been realized yet. I will make sure that it is absolutely worth the wait before you are able to pilot your new expert mechs!"

The recent battle had taught Ves and the other Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan a lot about all of the challenging battle conditions that expert mechs had to endure. Many of them had to revise their assumptions, which caused them to change their minds about some of the solutions they applied to the finished expert mech designs.

As long as they processed their gains, they could apply all of the lessons they learned on the Bulwark Project and Chimera Project without much hindrance! This would ultimately translate into a clear performance difference between the earlier batch of expert mechs and the ones that had yet to be made!

Venerable Jannzi directed a serious glance towards Ves. She was truly impatient to pilot a new and improved Shield of Samar, but her future goals relied too much on piloting a powerful expert mech for her to urge Ves to make haste.

If she had to wait a few months longer to get her dream machine, so be it! The power she would gain from piloting an excellent expert mech would more than make up for the lack of opportunity to practice with a powerful machine!