

Mech 3511

Chapter 3511: Too Much Heat

The Wild Brawl Bowl had entered its most exciting period. Though the third and fourth place winner of the tournament had to be decided as well, there was only one match that all of the viewers truly wanted to witness.

[Team Larkinson shall battle it out against Team Hammerfall for the honor of winning the Wild Brawl Bowl! In two hours, this great collision between mech designers shall finally unfold!]

[Team Larkinson's Heart of Victor has slowly proven itself worthy to reach the finals. Initially, its performance was good, but not exceptional. That slowly changed over the course of four battles against four difficult opponents. This exceptional machine has demonstrated a capability that is practically unseen in any other mech. It is able to enhance the piloting and fighting skills of an ordinary mech pilot to that of an expert candidate!]

[The Heart of Victor has hid its true strength quite well in the runup to the finals. Miss Ketis Larkinson has fully vindicated herself as one of the most remarkable and promising young Journeymen in the Red Ocean! While there is much confusion and speculation on how she is able to combine her swordmaster abilities in her mech designs, it is undeniable that she is one of the few mech designers who is able to give normal mech pilots a taste of what it is like to be one step away from becoming an expert pilot!]

From the moment that word spread about the Heart of Victor's fourth match, interest in the Wild Brawl Bowl instantly exploded!

The momentum surrounding this rather low-budget mech design tournament abruptly soared as the news rapidly spread to many corners.

A lot of mech pilots instantly bought tickets in order to witness the final match. The seats for the live tournament had already been sold out within minutes while the virtual attendance numbers had multiplied by at least three times!

While it was true that a majority of people dismissed the news or did not consider it relevant to their own interests, the Wild Fighter Association was already happy with all of the increased attention. The curious viewers who were either gullible or open-minded enough to believe in the claims were more than willing to observe the Heart of Victor's last public performance

"Can a mech designed by a swordmaster truly turn me into an expert candidate?"

"No, you idiot. Look at what happened when the staff pulled Lyain Kepper aside and tested his current state. He hasn't broken through and he didn't retain any of that great skill and timing when he piloted another mech."

The Wild Fighter Association held an immense interest in the strange phenomenon surrounding the Heart of Victor. The organization obtained the assent of Team Larkinson to conduct a public examination of the mech and mech pilot.

The inspectors found no instance of cheating. At the very least, the two Larkinson Journeymen didn't break any rules.

They also confirmed that the Heart of Victor was truly the variable responsible for increasing Lyain Kepper's effective fighting abilities!

This news would have been more explosive if not for the fact that Team Larkinson issued a statement that tempered the excitement.

[First off, don't get too excited.] Ketis said in a hastily-organized press conference. [The Heart of Victor may be a competition mech, but it is mainly a custom mech that is fully tailored to Mr. Lyain Kepper. This mech will not work on anyone else. Its ability to increase Mr. Kepper's performance is mainly because I have programmed my own understanding of swordsmanship and his specific sword style into the mech design. As an officially-certified swordmaster, this is well within my power. That doesn't mean I can offer the same treatment to every swordsman mech pilot. It takes too much time for me to help everyone. While I do have ideas about designing a swordsman mech that is able to provide a fraction of Heart of Victor's benefits to the masses, this project is still in its early stages.]

She continued to temper the overblown expectations and hype surrounding the Heart of Victor and her design philosophy. Of course, she didn't miss the opportunity to plug her upcoming commercial mech designs.

Ves and Ketis had briefly discussed whether they should address the public at all, but both of them eventually agreed to issue a clarifying statement.

The heat was getting a bit too high for Ves. Though publicity was generally good, he didn't want people getting the impression that Ketis could turn every mech pilot into an expert candidate, if only temporary! The Larkinson Clan simply couldn't handle the massive amount of demand if the more overblown rumors continued to spread.

For her part, Ketis also thought it would be good to temper everyone's expectations. She was still a relatively young and new Journeyman who could never replicate what had happened with the Heart of Victor on a wider scale.

Though one of her ambitions was to accomplish this exact feat, that was a matter for the far future. She did not think she could do anything of the sort unless she had advanced to Master Mech Designer.

Until then, she sought to develop her methods, solutions and techniques at her own pace. She did not look forward to getting crushed by the gigantic expectations that everyone set upon her shoulders.

While it was still uncertain how effective the press conference managed to dial down the hype, it was undeniable that Ketis was truly the star of the show today!

Ves scratched his head as he saw that Ketis was still preoccupied with answering questions in front of many reporters from famous mech-related publications.

A part of him even grew jealous at all of the attention that she was attracting. Had these idiots forgotten that the Heart of Victor was his own work as well? His work wouldn't have been able to improve Lyain Kepper's effective performance to such an exaggerated degree if it wasn't a living mech!

"Oh well, let her have her moment."

Turning Ketis into a star did not harm his interests. As a Journeyman himself, he was already confident in his own work. He was a much more versatile mech designer who could design all sorts of wondrous mechs.

Ketis was not a competitor as long as she belonged to the same camp as him. It was actually better for the Larkinson Clan and the Living Mech Corporation if their success no longer depended solely on himself.

What Ves latched onto the most was Ketis' ability to appeal to a different market segment. The interest she had managed to generate today confirmed that she had the potential to become a superstar among dedicated swordsman mech pilots. This was a huge slice of the entire population of mech pilots and would undoubtedly become a lucrative customer base for the LMC into the future!

Money was one of the most valuable resources to any pioneering organizations in the Red Ocean.

While connections were arguably more important, a lot of problems became manageable as long as the Larkinson Clan was able to throw enough money around.

Now that Ketis had proven herself to be an enormous marketing asset, Ves saw a lot more hope of acquiring the expensive toys in his shopping list.

He could imagine that she could easily command the attention of the mech market with her revolutionary swordsman mech designs!

This was an advantage that Ves could never obtain from Gloriana!

Ves sighed. "I've been so consumed by expert mechs lately that I've been blind to the commercial side of mech design."

The last round of mech design projects still played a crucial role in the evolution of his design philosophy. With all of the gains he made, he became a lot more adept at designing high-end mechs and custom mechs.

He learned so much about custom mech design from Gloriana that he credited her with much of his current success in the tournament. Many of the small details that allowed Lyain Kepper to adapt and leverage the strength of the Heart of Victor so well were largely derived from Gloriana's theoretical framework!

Yet for all of his gains in custom mech design, Ves had not achieved a lot of breakthroughs that were relevant to mass market mech models. He truly needed to pick them up again as the vast majority of his clients would never have the opportunity to receive his personal attention.

This was also why neither Ves nor Ketis attached too much importance to the Heart of Victor. Sure, these kinds of machines were insanely useful for winning mech-related tournaments, but their utility in actual battles were much more limited.

The Larkinson Clan attached much greater importance to improving their ability to win large battles where the survival of its fleet was at stake. Ves still looked down on these trivial tournaments where people reveled in the glory of winning artificial duels where the threat of death was absent.

"It's nice to win additional carrier vessels, though."

This was the true reason why he and the Larkinson Clan even bothered to participate in these circuses.

Ves reoriented his thoughts back to the final match. A lot was at stake. Not only would Ves and Ketis lose a lot of reputation if the Heart of Victor unexpectedly faltered in its upcoming fight, the Larkinson Clan would also miss out on a fleet carrier!

"I'm so close to winning a fleet carrier! I can't let this opportunity slip past my fingers!"

There was another reason why he needed to win the next match.

The finals became a lot more controversial due to the rise of an unexpected dark horse.

"Team Hammerfall." Ves whispered.

Mr. Rondal Crenstin and Mrs. Gisella Crenstin didn't look that remarkable at first, but their Fallen Retribution managed to topple one mech after another to reach the fifth round!

Just like the Larkinsons, the Crenstin couple had hid the capabilities of their hammerman mech until it was finally forced to expose a lot of additional strength in the fourth round!

Ever since then, Team Hammerfall attracted the interests of a lot of dwarven people!

The dwarves were infamously close to each other and eagerly supported their own in events like these. Millions of them had bought virtual tickets to witness the finals and more were still tuning into the broadcast!

There were two reasons why they all flocked to the Wild Brawl Bowl.

First, they wanted to see their fellow dwarves defeat all of the tall folk and earn first place!

Second, they wanted urge Team Hammerfall to crush the Larkinsons and ruin their ambitions to become the champions of this mech design tournament!

"Kill the dwarf killers!"

"Slap those war criminals in the face!"

"Make them pay for spilling the blood of our brothers and sisters!"

Many of the deeds of the Larkinson Clan in the Vulcan Empire were not secret. Dwarvenkind throughout human space had already heard about Ves in one way or another, and not in a good way.

He had become an incredibly demonized figure in the galactic dwarven community!

This made it even more important for Ves to crush his final adversary in the tournament.

"I can't show weakness in front of these dwarves."

Although Ves was confident in his Heart of Victor, the Fallen Retribution was not weak either.

The final match of the Wild Brawl Bowl would not turn into one-sided beatdown like the previous fight between the Heart of Victor and the Thornbearer.

The Fallen Retribution not only displayed a lot more versatility than expected, but could also burst out with a surprising amount of power!

Whereas Team Larkinson sought to win the tournament by elevating the performance of a mech pilot to the greatest extent, Team Hammerfall invested all of its efforts into designing the most powerful mech!

Even if the mech pilot assigned to the Fallen Retribution wasn't exactly stellar, its base specs were so high that it didn't matter!

The finals of the Wild Brawl Bowl therefore turned into a confrontation between two opposing design approaches.

Chapter 3512: Opposite Design Approach

After an extended break, the fifth and final round of the mech design tournament finally commenced!

The viewership numbers had exploded as well. Not only did a lot of visitors in Chance Bay head over to the venue in order to view the match in person, tens of millions more tuned into the remote broadcast.

Many of the newcomers came because they were interested in one of the two teams remaining in contention.

The swordsman mech pilots who came to support Ketis and see the Heart of Victor repeat its brilliant performance had already started to clash with the dwarves who arrived to support their own compatriots!

"You damn dwarves should go back to the dirty mines where you belong! That crappy mech of yours is completely useless!"

"You ignorant tall folk don't know what you are talking about! The Larkinsons are war criminals that deserved to be tried and executed for what they have done!"

"The Heart of Victor has already won this duel as far as I'm concerned. No matter how strong the Fallen Retribution performs, it can never beat a mech piloted by an expert candidate!"

"Hah, who cares about all of those fancy moves? Did you see how long it took for the Heart of Victor to penetrate the armor of the Thornbearer? This time, this overhyped swordsman mech will have to fight against a mech that won't get hit at all, especially by a swordsman mech that is weighed down by all of that armor."

Much of the audience had already begun to divide in two different tribes. Neither side wanted to see the mech and team they supported lose in such an important battle!

Emotions ran high, and the Wild Fighter Association was happy to fan the flames. Their commentary and marketing efforts successfully drew in a lot of impassioned fans who became invested in the success and failure of their chosen side!

Meanwhile, the two mechs slowly appeared onto the arena, indicating that the much-anticipated fight was just about to start.

[Welcome to the final showdown of the Wild Brawl Bowl! Within a couple of minutes, the Heart of Victor designed by Team Larkinson and the Fallen Retribution designed by Team Hammerfall shall duke it out for one last time. Our panel of experts have thoroughly discussed the strengths and weaknesses of both mechs, so I will not test your patience by reciting all of their features. However, regardless of which mech will ultimately prove superior today, nobody can deny that they are both championship material! Win or lose, none of these two fine machines deserve to be forgotten!]

The announcer basically emphasized that both finalists were strong and that neither competition mech would succumb so easily.

This was good as far as the tournament organizers were concerned. It was a lot harder to generate interest in a match if its outcome was already decided!

Though many members of the Wild Fighter Association supported the original tournament favorites, Team Hammerfall played a crucial role in validating whether Team Larkinson deserved all of the hype.

Up in the VIP section, Director Thaprim Kadar was grinning like a shark. Not only did this event bring in a lot more revenue than he could ever hope for, he also had a prime opportunity to establish a favorable business relationship with Ketis Larkinson and the Larkinson Clan!

"We are willing to offer extensive support to your clan with regards to the commercialization of any swordsman mech models." He told Venerable Dise who was sitting next to him. "No requirement is insurmountable to us. We are willing to offer a generous amount of compensation if we can gain the exclusive usage or selling rights of Swordmaster Ketis Larkinson's mech models. Even if your clan is not willing to sign an exclusive agreement with our association, we would still like to obtain priority access to her work."

Venerable Dise, who sat in the seat of honor, largely ignored most of what the director had said. The man became a lot more annoying ever since the fourth match had concluded.

"Minister Shederin Purnesse would be more than happy to discuss your proposals." She replied in a measured tone. "You'll have to get in line, though. Last I heard from the clan, dozens of interested organizations have already approached our foreign office to discuss business deals."

The Larkinson Clan already noticed the increased attention from the regional community. Ves and Ketis weren't the only ones responsible for this positive turn of events. The Larkinson Battalion led by Commander Casella Ingvar was also making a lot of strides, and so did many other Larkinsons participating in other tournaments.

The clan was bound to gain a solid footing in the Red Ocean after this tournament run. Venerable Dise was pleased to see this happen as it would make the Larkinsons happier and more secure in this dangerous new frontier.

Meanwhile, the staff completed their inspections of both mechs. Due to the importance of this final match, the tournament organizers had to show they were being extremely thorough about maintaining the fairness of their event.

Nothing must taint the outcome of the finals! No one should be able to cast any legitimate doubt about whether there was any cheating involved!

Lyain Kepper and Zirine Fessel, the mech pilot of the Fallen Retribution, even went through public examinations in order to confirm they were still the same people as before.

The thorough inspections confirmed that they weren't bots, clones, remote controlled or expert candidates. The Wild Brawl Bowl conclusively confirmed that they were both eligible to pilot their respective mechs for this final confrontation.

The entire venue slowly grew silent as the tension built up. The two mechs both radiated a strong posture.

The Heart of Victor's glow had become a bit more intense than before. Each and every victory fueled its strong and invincible posture. The swordsman mech already looked like a champion!

The Fallen Retribution did not possess the advantage of a glow, but the dwarven mech did not look weak in the slightest! Its thick and heavy frame along with its formidable greathammer looked quite intimidating.

And this was just what was visible on the surface! Many of the spectators who watched its fourth round match already knew that the hammer-wielding mech hid quite a few surprises!

The suspense seemed to go on forever until the announcer finally broke the spell.

[FIGHT!]

The two mechs instantly exploded into action!

The Heart of Victor tested the waters by throwing its chainsword at the Fallen Retribution.

Of course, the Fallen Retribution easily blocked the sword with its heavy hammer. Even if the chainsword managed to strike the armor of the dwarven mech, it wouldn't have been able to deal any significant damage.

The dwarven mech was quite tough!

Not only that, but the mech was also capable of moving at a fast pace!

A part of that was due to the previously-hidden boosters installed on the back of the mech. While the boosters weren't particularly large or powerful, they provided the mech with a helpful push that allowed it to catch up to mechs that were ordinarily supposed to be faster.

It was impossible for the Heart of Victor to maintain its distance from the Fallen Retribution because of this reason!

"I'm not running anyway!" Lyain Kepper exclaimed as his mech kept throwing its chainsword at the approaching machine.

Even though these attacks failed to inflict any damage, they still allowed him to gain a better read of his opponent.

He did not know Zirine Fessel well. She was a Wild Fighter who hung out with a different crowd.

What he did know was that Zirine was not as skilled as the best mech pilots of the tournament. Team Hammerfall consisted of a married couple of dwarven Journeymen who were already closing in on the age limit of the Wild Brawl Bowl. This meant that the Crenstin couple could never rely too much on the mech pilot to carry them to victory.

What they did instead was to invest all of their efforts into designing a strong mech. Their overall design concept revolved around winning battles through brute force rather than superior skill!

Since Team Hammerfall possessed an abundant amount of design experience, they easily managed to turn the Fallen Retribution into a powerhouse mech.

Currently, its superior advancement speed along with its power presented an acute threat towards the Heart of Victor!

Lyain Kepper did not dare to meet the dwarven mech's unstoppable charge. His swordsman mech tried to dodge aside.

While the Heart of Victor successfully managed to jump out of the charging line of the Fallen Retribution, the latter still had an extra surprise up its sleeve!

Just before the hammerman mech was about to miss its charge attack, the hammerhead of its weapon detached from the shaft and shot outwards on its own!

The Heart of Victor hastily contorted its frame in order to avoid getting hit by this dangerous weight!

The Fallen Retribution stopped its charge as soon as it passed by its target. The hammerhead slowly retracted back to the long shaft, but did not completely settle back in place.

Instead, it continued to hang on a chain connected to the shaft, which essentially turned the dwarven mech's main weapon from a greathammer into a flail!

The flail was an unusual weapon that was quite effective in a number of situations. Its advantages was that it extended the reach of the weapon and was also handy at circumventing physical shields.

The power of the Fallen Retribution turned every hammer or flail attack into a serious threat to the Heart of Victor.

Ketis had already warned Lyain that his mech should never risk a direct impact!

This severely constrained the mech pilot's options, and it showed.

Even as Ketis had quietly begun to augment the Heart of Victor by slipping Sharpie in its chainsword, there was little the swordsman mech could do against the lethal onslaught of the Fallen Retribution!

The dwarven mech swung its flail with deadly intent as it pressed towards the Heart of Victor. The Fallen Retribution's stocky frame and thick arms allowed it to wield its formidable weapon with sufficient speed to make life difficult for the swordsman mech.

[The Heart of Victor is being suppressed by the Fallen Retribution's rain of blows. Team Larkinson's mech has yet to show any remarkable swordsmanship thus far. The truth is that even if Lyain Kepper is able to perform as well as an expert candidate, he is still rendered helpless because his mech is limiting his options!]

[We are witnessing the limits of how much an excellent mech pilot can make a difference. Both of the Larkinson mech designers have invested a great amount of effort into improving the piloting experience of their mech, but that has come at the expense of other possible improvements. This didn't matter in the previous match as the Thornbearer's spear was light enough to deflect. It is different this time as the Fallen Retribution's weapon is too heavy to divert in the same manner!]

[The Heart of Victor has met its nemesis in this tournament. Skill is no match for raw power. If the swordsman mech was faster or tougher, it would have been able to present an answer to its current predicament. As it is, Mr. Kepper must constantly work to maintain a healthy distance!]

The difficult situation prompted Lyain to resort to throwing its chainsword again.

However, the problem with that was that the Fallen Retribution constantly tried to entangle the thrown weapon!

After the Heart of Victor almost lost control of its weapon because the dwarven mech's flail almost managed to capture the chainsword, Lyain no longer risked another throw.

"This weapon is too difficult to deal with!" He gritted his teeth.

For now, he had no choice but to adopt a more defensive posture. He knew that the Fallen Retribution's intensive movements and frequent attacks expended a lot of fuel and energy. The dwarven mech could not possibly sustain this wasteful approach for long!

Zirine Fessel knew that as well. The mech pilot of the hammerman mech did not relent, though.

Instead, she intensified her attacks in the hopes of landing a lucky hit!

"You can't run forever, Kepper!" She roared!

Chapter 3513: Superior Parameters

Hot air began to cycle through the back vents of the Fallen Retribution as it expended a lot of energy to sustain its attack runs. The flail in its hands continued to swing back and forth with so much force that it had forced the Heart of Victor back time and time again.

The unpredictable trajectory of its chain-linked hammerhead forced Lyain Kepper to concentrate most of his attention on evading the enemy's attacks.

He did not dare to use the Heart of Victor's chainsword as a means to block or parry the incoming attack!

"My sword will crack if hit by such a heavy object!"

That didn't mean he gave up on counterattacking. After adjusting to his opponent's rhythm, Lyain became confident enough to begin hitting back by throwing the Heart of Victor chainsword at the legs of the opposing mechs!

The mech pilot had made a clever decision. If the Heart of Victor threw its chainsword at the upper body of the Fallen Retribution, its weapon was bound to get trapped or entangled!

Although the risk of that happen still existed if the swordsman mech targeted the thick and sturdy legs of the dwarven mech, it was a lot more awkward for the latter to defend against such attacks!

"The Fallen Retribution can't defend against attacks from below when it is in the process of launching an attack!"

The heavy flail was a weapon that gained its deadliness from its mass and momentum. This also meant that it was hard to divert when it was already swinging.

Normally, this did not bother the Fallen Retribution all that much because it was a short and squarish dwarven mech that was considerably easier to defend than taller humanoid mechs!

The Fallen Retribution only had to make a small adjustment to the angle of its large weapon in order to block or batter aside any incoming sword attack.

Even if the dwarven mech chose to ignore the Heart of Victor's weapon, it still didn't matter as much because its armor was substantial enough to take the blow. In the meantime, the Fallen Retribution could just proceed with its original attack and land a much more serious blow onto its opponent!

That was a lot harder to pull off when the chainsword flew at a downwards angle and began to chip away at the ankles of the dwarven mech.

Zirine Fessel began to experience a bit of pressure herself as her mech informed her that the armor integrity of ankle sections were slowly being chipped away.

The legs of a landbound mech were ordinarily thick and strong. They had to be in order to support all of that mass!

Yet no matter how much protection they received, there were still limits on how thick they could be without unduly compromising mobility.

A partial repeat of Team Larkinson's fourth match took place. Whenever the Fallen Retribution launched an unstoppable flail attack, the Heart of Victor grasped the right timing to launch a throw attack that was impossible for the dwarven mech to defend against!

While the thrown chainswords were only capable of inflicting minor damage onto the dwarven mech's thick ankles, the problem was that Lyain employed great skill with every throw!

His control over his mech and its sword was so high that many of the throw attacks landed on the same exact plates of ankle armor!

This rapidly amped up the Fallen Retribution's pressure as the annoying chainsword slowly chipped away at the buffer around its legs.

The inability of the Fallen Retribution to defend against these kinds of attacks was one of the demerits of its design.

While it was capable of accelerating quite quickly in its current state, it was not necessarily an agile mech! It was especially difficult for the flail-wielding mech to defend against high and low attacks depending on its stance.

Combined with the abnormally high precision of the Heart of Victor's throw attacks, it seemed as if the Fallen Retribution was destined to have its ankles nibbled to death!

The emotions among the crowd ran even higher as Team Hammerfall entered into a disadvantageous position.

"Hahaha! So what if your powerful dwarven mech can't be blocked? All of that strength doesn't mean anything if it can't hit its target!"

"You fools! The Fallen Retribution is just warming up for now. This dance is about to become a lot more dangerous soon!"

A competition mech that had managed to overcome four different opponents without fail should never be so weak. Even as the supporters of the Heart of Victor were happy with the current moment, they still held back a bit as they waited for the Fallen Retribution to repeat what it had done in its last match.

As the ankles of the dwarven mech became increasingly more ragged, Zirine Fessel finally couldn't take it any longer.

"Fine! I will fight you in my mech's true form!"

The Fallen Retribution's boosters abruptly burned the last of its fuel at once, causing them to become damaged but at the same time propelling the machine forward at an unprecedented pace!

This time, the Heart of Victor was not quite able to evade the charging mech! No matter how much Lyain was able to read the enemy's movements in advance, his own mech simply didn't possess the speed to evade it entirely!

He made the best response that he could do in his situation. He instructed the Heart of Victor to lift up one of its arms to block the incoming flail attack, knowing that absorbing the hit on the torso would lead to a more severe performance drop!

Crunch!

The Heart of Victor's arm not only sustained severe damage after colliding with the chained hammerhead, but it also bounced inwards as the limb failed to block the attack completely!

Clang!

The hammerhead continued to strike at the chest of the Heart of Victor, causing the mech to rattle from the kinetic impact.

Fortunately, the concussive damage was not too severe due to the Heart of Victor's earlier action.

However, Lyain Kepper did not relax at all. He already knew what was coming!

"ARMOR PURGE!" Zirine Kessel roared as she activated a key command!

The Fallen Retribution instantly exploded as almost all of its armor plating ejected outwards!

Not only that, the mech also got rid of a lot of other redundant components. Boosters, artificial musculature and other components that previously served a purpose had now been rendered redundant!

A rain of solid metal spread out in all directions!

Though most of these materials simply sailed through empty air before landing onto the arena floor, much of it still managed to collide against the Heart of Victor with enough force to dent its own exterior!

The dangerous part about this unexpected armor purge protocol wasn't the fact that the Fallen Retribution had turned itself into a fragmentation grenade.

The real threat was the heavy and weighed-down dwarven mech that suddenly lost a lot of mass!

A short and rather skinny mech had emerged from behind the rain of metal. It held the same weapon as before, but the difference was that it had ditched its heavy hammerhead!

This turned the hammer and flail combination weapon into a staff that was considerably lighter and easier to handle!

"It's charging!"

The downsized Fallen Retribution rapidly dashed towards the unbalanced Heart of Victor and put all of its momentum behind a killer thrust attack that had successfully impaled its previous opponent in its previous match!

Of course, Lyain Kepper already anticipated this move. Even though the Heart of Victor experienced a lot of difficulties at the moment, the mech still retained enough control to move aside and parry the incoming staff thrust!

Unlike the previous heavy flail or hammer, the Fallen Retribution's weapon was no longer as unstoppable as before. Parrying the staff would not break the Heart of Victor's chainsword!

Now that the Fallen Retribution had turned itself into a light mech with drastically different performance parameters, it utilized its exceptional speed and agility to take advantage of the damage inflicted on the Heart of Victor and finish off the swordsman mech in a frenzy of staff strikes!

Although the staff weapon did not seem dangerous at first, its true lethality became apparent when it was used to attack.

Sharp blades extended along its shaft or from its ends whenever the staff was close to striking its target. This extra feature added a lot of penetration power to an otherwise plain weapon.

The bladed staff posed enough of a threat to the Heart of Victor that Lyain Kepper did not dare to let the Fallen Retribution succeed in its attacks.

The battered Heart of Victor exhibited a lot of strain in its attempts to keep up with the dwarven mech's constant circling maneuvers. Lyain had to prevent his opponent from targeting his mech's undefended rear at all cost!

Fortunately, the Heart of Victor's turning speed was not shabby. The only downside was that it could not turn as quickly when it was moving forward.

The Fallen Retribution possessed all of the initiative at the moment. Though its physical strength and defenses were much weaker than before, it made up for it with mobility!

It could compensate for its lack of strength by building up momentum and using its movements to enhance all of its attacks.

It could make up for its lack of defenses by moving as quickly as possible while using its fairly long staff as a defensive tool.

The latter became quite handy whenever the Heart of Victor threw its chainsword at the slimmed-down dwarven mech!

Now that the staff was no longer burdened by a hefty hammerhead, the Fallen Retribution easily moved its weapons in place to block the incoming threat.

Though not all of its defensive attempts succeeded, the Fallen Retribution nonetheless moved quickly enough to punish the Heart of Victor with a rapid strike before the latter could retrieve its chainsword!

[The Heart of Victor is in quite a bit of trouble again! It doesn't appear to be equipped to handle fast and agile opponents, especially now that it has sustained damage.]

[At the start the Fallen Retribution managed to gain the upper hand by virtue of its superior mechanical strength and thicker armor plating. Now, the dwarven mech has managed to regain control of this duel by relying on its crushing mobility advantage!]

Lyain Kepper tried his best to fend off the Fallen Retribution's constant harassment. Unfortunately, the Heart of Victor was just a little bit too slow and sluggish to defend against the constant staff attacks.

Even if he was able to read his opponent's movements in advance, the Heart of Victor was unable to move as he intended to in a few instances.

Each time the Heart of Victor put up its guard too late, the Fallen Retribution's bladed staff already punctured another shallow hole in the swordsman mech's exterior!

Lyain even commanded the Heart of Victor to swing its chainsword like a whip. He hoped to capture the fast-moving mech with this move, but his opponent was being way too careful to fall for such a gambit.

"If this goes on, my mech will be stung to death!"

The main reason why the Heart of Victor was able to hold out for now was because its substantial armor was still largely intact.

As long as the swordsman mech prevented the Fallen Retribution from striking its rear, it could still hold out for a time!

Lyain also made sure to move his swordsman mech in a way that prevented his opponent from concentrating its bladed staff attacks on the same damaged sections. This considerably increased the longevity of his mech.

Many people began to assume that this match would turn into an attrition battle.

Would the fast and unburdened Fallen Retribution be able to gnaw the Heart of Victor before it ran out of energy?

Would the Heart of Victor's defenses hold out long enough before the dwarven mech ran out of steam?

Nobody knew, but the match became more tense than ever! Fans who were rooting for either side became more nervous than ever as they waited for one of the mechs to show weakness first.

While all of this took place, Ketis began to sweat as she exerted her willpower with great effort. Sharpie had been inhabiting the Heart of Victor's chainsword for over ten minutes now and this imposed an increasingly larger burden on her mental strength!

She did not yet put in her full effort, though. She was still able to play one more card that could achieve a wonderful effect in this match.

She hesitated. Was it worth it to make this move? The consequences of pulling it off in public were quite severe.

Her head turned to Ves.

"Do it." He said. "It's too risky for us to gamble on the Heart of Victor's staying power. Whatever price we must pay is worth it as long as we can add an extra fleet carrier to our fleet."

Ketis closed her eyes. Her concentration reached another level as she leveraged her full willpower to power her next move!

The tip of the chainsword wielded by the Heart of Victor gained a faint glow as Sharpie became more active than ever!

In fact, Sharpie wished it could do more, but augmenting the very tip of the weapon was the limit of what it could do at the moment. The companion spirit wasn't able to sustain this state for long, so it was crucial that the swordsman mech made its move at this time!

Lyain already knew what to do after being informed by his mech. The Heart of Victor tossed its chainsword straight towards the sprinting Fallen Retribution with uncanny accuracy!

Zirine Fessel could already tell that her mech couldn't dodge the incoming weapon, but so what? The Fallen Retribution quickly moved its staff into place in order to block this futile attack.

Yet when the tip of the chainsword struck the middle of the shaft, the staff neatly parted in two as the chainsword unexpectedly cut through the sturdy material.

"What?" Zirine Fessel uttered as the chainsword merrily pierced through her mech's guard before it plunged straight into the thin and fragile structure of the Fallen Retribution!

Time in the arena seemed to freeze for an instant before the damaged dwarven mech lost control of its frame and tripped onto the arena floor!

Since it was in the middle of a run, the Fallen Retribution continued to slide forward for a few seconds before it finally came to a stop.

The fallen mech, which was still impaled by a chainsword, did not move.

Seconds passed by as the mostly dwarven supporters of Team Hammerfall waited for it to pick itself up again, but nothing of the sort had happened.

[Team Larkinson... has won this match. Team Larkinson... has defeated Team Hammerfall. Team Larkinson... has become the champion of the Wild Brawl Bowl!]

As soon as the announcer's words sunk in, over half of the audience in the venue erupted into cheers!

Chapter 3514: Targeted Directive

Ves Larkinson and Ketis Larkinson won first place in a mech design tournament!

This news not only shocked the entire Golden Skull Alliance, but also made other people in the Red Ocean take note!

The extraordinary performance of the Heart of Victor in its final match had already turned into a legendary moment.

This mech duel turned into one of the rare instances where a regular mech pilot managed to wield the power of an expert pilot!

Even though it only lasted for an instant, this was an opportunity that countless mech pilots dreamed of experiencing!

Everyone thought that getting exposed to the power of an expert pilot in advance would help put them on the right path of becoming one themselves!

Though this theory had never been proven right, just the inkling that it could increase the chance of a breakthrough generated a lot more interest in Ketis Larkinson and the Larkinson Clan!

The sheer amount of interest attracted by this instance threatened to overshadow the Wild Brawl Bowl!

Not that the Wild Fighter Association minded it. The organization was making a killing since the news had spread!

Hardly anyone paid attention to the award ceremony and instead paid money to watch or rewatch the high-quality footage of the entire duel.

When Director Thaprim Kadar personally handed over the so-called Wild Bowl to Team Larkinson, Ves was already thinking about how he could convince the organization to give him a bigger cut of the profits of the tournament.

After all, it was only due to Team Larkinson's efforts that the Wild Brawl Bowl's viewership numbers had exploded!

Before Ves could even bring up the topic, the director threw him a grin and patted him on the shoulder.

"I've taken the liberty of replacing the fleet carrier in the prize pool with a larger and more powerful one. The original fleet carrier we intended to award you has a mech capacity of 400 mechs. The new one has a mech capacity of 650 mechs. Not only that, she also possesses other advantages. Consider this a 'thank you' for all of the publicity that you have generated for the Wild Fighter Association."

Ves became pleasantly surprised. It appeared that Director Kadar was quite clever and good at interpersonal relationships. A man in his position certainly had to know how to maintain relationships in order to do well in a central location like Vulit.

"Your gesture is much appreciated. I look forward to receiving this larger fleet carrier." He responded.

"There's just one complication, patriarch. The fleet carrier that I intend to award to you is a pre-owned vessel. To be more exact, she is a ship that is currently in service on behalf of the Wild Fighter Association. I am still in the process of convincing headquarters to bequeath her to your clan. This cannot be done in a couple of hours. Even if we rush the administration as much as possible, it will still take at least a week to round out the paperwork. It will take even longer to clear out the entire vessel of crew, mechs and cargo. I believe we should be able to hand her over to you before your fleet departs the Vulit Central Star Node."

Fleet carriers were strategic assets that organizations rarely wished to part with. The ship that Director Kadar was talking about must definitely have been brought over to the Red Ocean from the Milky Way. Such vessels were precious even for large entities like the Wild Fighter Organization because there was a huge bottleneck in local production of capital ships.

Large and well-built fleet carriers were even more crucial in the early stages of the colonization of the Red Ocean! Each of them was a powerful means for pioneers to project their power while on the move.

Though Ves suspected that this fleet carrier was not the best that the Wild Fighter Association could part with, it was already a pretty nice upgrade. Expanding the mech capacity of the Larkinson fleet by 250 mechs was an extremely precious gift!

"We do not mind waiting a couple of weeks to obtain a larger fleet carrier. My clan will assist however it can to assist with the handover process." Ves told the regional director.

"That will certainly be helpful. Do you need help with staffing your capital ship?"

"No need. We have a surplus of spacers in our clan after we offloaded all of our old sub-capital ships."

The two chatted for a short while afterwards. Through these talks, Director Kadar clearly conveyed the desire to pursue greater cooperation with the Larkinson Clan.

Ves was quite happy to conduct business with the Wild Fighter Association, but he was not eager to get into bed with strangers.

He knew little about this organization. What was its size? Who was its leader? What were its policies? How much influence did it wield? What was its military strength? What were its objectives in the Red Ocean? Who were its enemies?

There were so many unknowns surrounding this large association that Ves did not dare to make any solid promises on the spot.

This was a job best suited for professionals. Someone as experienced and wily as Minister Shederin Purnesse would definitely be able to avoid all of the traps and pitfalls that were inherent with these kinds of talks.

"Please have your representatives contact the Foreign Affairs Ministry of the Larkinson Clan." He spoke with an easy smile. "We are open to many forms of cooperation, though we are primarily interested in forging business-related ties at the moment."

"Understood. I hope our Wild Fighter Association will be able to receive your mechs one day."

The director soon moved on to chatting with Ketis. The older man became a lot more enthused with talking to the star of the show.

Fortunately, Ketis was smart enough to know what she was allowed to say and what she should withhold. Ves had no worries that his fellow mech designer would spill anything inconvenient or make promises that she wasn't allowed to make.

He looked down at the large 'bowl' in his hands. This was the symbolic reward for his first-place finish in the tournament.

The bowl looked as if a random mech technician took a piece of scrap from a mech wreck and crudely bashed it into the shape of a bowl. The object was made out of worn, uncoated metal alloy that only received a shallow cleaning cycle that failed to wipe away all of the oil stains and scorch marks.

"Typical."

Ves didn't mind the crudeness of this trophy. Though it looked sloppy at first glance, his craftsmanship perspective recognized that it was actually quite harmonious.

Every chaotic element and every rough mark seemed to come into a whole. While the bowl was not elegant, there was a savage beauty in this artwork that resonated with Ves' sense of craftsmanship.

"Whoever made this bowl is a true artisan, that's for sure." Ves muttered.

The quality and artistic value of this trophy far exceeded that of the cheap bronze cup that he received in his previous mech design tournament.

Although it was only a small gesture, Ves truly became impressed by the thoughtfulness of the Wild Fighter Association.

Despite their crude image and behavior, the Wild Fighters were relatively honest, sincere and straightforward. Ves became more open to entering into a business relationship with them as long as they negotiated in good faith.

A lot happened after the conclusion of the Wild Brawl Bowl.

First, the MTA issued a rare directive that prompted every tournament held after the Wild Brawl Bowl to amend their standard rules.

The key sentence of this directive directly popped Ketis' bubble.

[A mech designer is not allowed to provide active assistance to the mech or mech pilot that is performing in a competitive event. Barring any exemptions, a mech or mech pilot must solely rely on the elements within the boundaries of the staging area.]

A small bomb exploded in Chance Bay after the MTA made this announcement.

It became pretty clear that the directive was a direct response to Ketis Larkinson's actions in the final match of the Wild Brawl Bowl!

Apparently, she utilized her formidable swordmaster powers to amplify the performance of her competition mech!

Though a lot of people already figured this out, they never obtained confirmation from a reputable source until now. This was absolutely astounding and would have created a greater ripple effect if the MTA hadn't put its foot down.

If the mechers didn't restrict Ketis from using this power, she would have been able to sweep every mech design tournament she signed up for! Not only that, her competition mechs would have become a lot more life-threatening once they began to wield the power of an expert mech.

For better or worse, she had to be stopped.

"Aw..." Ketis looked despondent after she received the news. "How am I supposed to compete in the next tournaments I signed up for? I was looking forward to winning more ships!"

"Don't be surprised. You basically cheated, you know." Ves pointed out. "It's just that the mech community never anticipated that something like this was possible, so they never wrote anything in the rules that prohibited your behavior. You should be lucky that the MTA and the Wild Brawl Bowl did not retroactively apply the new rules and invalidate our final win. This means we get to keep our new fleet carrier."

Ketis looked a bit happier after that. To be honest, she found her previous conduct to be a bit dishonorable. She did not become the champion of the Wild Brawl Bowl by virtue of her design capabilities. She won because she leveraged her non-mech designer powers.

Team Hammerfall was truly the better design team in that tournament. The dwarves should have won first place if she fully abided by the spirit of the rules.

The fleet carrier was too important, though. Though Ketis cared about her honor, she cared about her fellow sisters and Larkinsons even more. If she had to play dirty in order to strengthen the Larkinson Clan's ability to defend itself, then she was more willing to roll in the mud!

"I see you understand." Ves smiled. "You did good back then. Don't let anyone take that away from you. As for your subsequent tournaments, just do your best and challenge yourself. Even if you don't manage to win any prizes, you will still be able to accrue a lot of experience. That is invaluable for you since you lack so much of it at the moment."

Ves, Ketis and many other Larkinsons did not rest and continued to participate in other tournaments.

Though Ves attracted a lot more attention whenever he signed up for a mech design tournament, his results were relatively mixed.

He failed to win the subsequent tournaments he took part in with the time he had left.

He admittedly overestimated his capabilities and tried to compete in larger tournaments where the competition was substantially stiffer.

Ves did not regret his choices. Even if he did not succeed in beating all of his opponents, he still managed to pass on a few extra combat carriers to his clan.

What was also important was that Ves and his fellow Larkinsons fully introduced themselves to the Red Ocean community.

He fully realized that one of the reasons why so many tournaments took place in Vulit was because they were great opportunities for pioneers and organizations to familiarize themselves with each other.

The better performers often proved themselves worthy for greater cooperation. It became easier and easier for the Larkinsons to get their foot in the door when it came to accessing new markets, forging new trade agreements and getting in touch with potential strategic partners.

As the weeks went by, the time of the Golden Skull Alliance's stay in the Vulit Central Star Node was soon coming to a close.

The fees the Larkinsons and its allies had to pay in order to stay in this haven of civilization had become increasingly more unbearable. It was not worth it for them to stay in this star system any longer.

As the Larkinson Clan was about to prepare for the start of its true expedition, the clansmen became busier than ever!

Chapter 3515: Naval Ambitions

In the later weeks of the expeditionary fleet's stay in the Vulit Central Star Node, the Larkinsons mainly became preoccupied with two different priorities.

The first priority was the abrupt expansion of the Larkinson fleet.

From the moment it entered the Red Ocean, the Larkinsons had just gotten rid of all of their sub-capital ships. That downsized their previously abundant ship roster down to just 9 capital ships!

This was completely insufficient for the clan to safely roam the Red Ocean. The Larkinsons were desperate to expand their mech capacity and offload all of the packed mechs that were sitting uselessly inside vessels that didn't have space to accommodate them properly!

The frequent tournaments held in Chance Bay were a godsent to the clansmen. Though the clan had to expose way more details and trump cards to the public than it wished, those secrets were useless if the Larkinson fleet wasn't able to field a lot of mechs into battle!

If Ves had to choose between keeping his secrets or fielding more mechs, then his choice was pretty clear!

The trickle of carriers entering into service provided a massive amount of relief to the Larkinson Army. It was quite painful for the mech legions to retire all of their combat carriers and much of their mechs.

Now that a lot of mech pilots finally regained the opportunity to pilot actual mechs, much of the pressure among the soldiers had been relieved.

Though there were still a lot of mech pilots that were also waiting to get back in the saddle, the clan could only do so much.

Not a lot of mech designers and mech pilots among the Larkinsons were good enough to rank high in the tournaments. People like Ves were the exception rather than the rule in the clan.

Still, everyone was happy with the amount of progress they had made in the past month. An opportunity to obtain so many ships without paying a huge amount of money was extremely rare.

"It's a pity we can't stay any longer." Ves sighed as he looked out across the hotel window.

Chance Bay was truly a place where the powerful, capable and lucky got their chances. The Larkinson Clan's position in the Red Ocean used to be a lot worse before it started to win a steady amount of carrier vessels.

The Larkinson Clan managed to obtain so much additional mech capacity that it actually suffered a shortage of mechs to fill up all of those empty berths!

Part of the reason for that was because all of the mechs got lost due to attrition. Big events such as the Larkinson Battalion's participation in the G-Aena League had effectively wiped out hundreds of living mechs alone!

Still, lacking enough mechs was a much more manageable problem than lacking enough carrier ships. It was a lot easier for the Larkinson Clan to make up for the shortfall of mechs than to acquire additional starships going forward!

Ves met up with Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai and Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon in order to discuss the new additions to the Larkinson fleet.

"How many ships have we gained so far?" He asked.

"At this moment, we have gained possession of 36 combat carriers and 1 fleet carrier." Vivian replied.

"What is your evaluation of the new combat carriers?"

"They are quite good." Vivian smiled. "The combat carriers all come in several different ship classes, each of which differ in configuration, performance and appearance. They all have a standard mech capacity of 60 mechs, so you don't have to worry about that. Each of them are brand-new and built in shipyards across the region. The tech and materials used in their construction roughly correspond to the level of the galactic heartland. They're not top-of-the-line, but they are considerably better than the Hexer combat carriers that we used to possess."

That was good news to Ves. Heartland-level starships were currently the mainstream in the Red Ocean, so the Larkinsons did not have to worry about getting outclassed when fighting against other second-class opponents.

The people of the Red Ocean had become accustomed to grading the overall tech and degree of sophistication of any technological asset.

For example, the Spirit of Bentheim was considered a rim-level factory ship. There were a lot of other factory ships in the Red Ocean that possessed considerably better tech and were also made out of stronger alloys.

Though Ves felt a bit envious of all of the pioneers who owned superior factory ships, that didn't mean he was ready to get rid of the Spirit of Bentheim.

There was nothing wrong with his flagship's performance. The production halls were more than capable of producing large amounts of mechs as long as they were fed with sufficient raw materials. They were just a bit slower at it than their equivalents aboard other factory ships.

Besides, it shouldn't be too difficult to upgrade the production lines in the future.

More thorough upgrades required the cooperation of a shipyard, though, and that was a lot more difficult to secure.

"What of the new fleet carrier that we've acquired from the Wild Fighter Association?" Ves asked.

"Ah. She's certainly an impressive fleet carrier." Vivian responded with a lot more enthusiasm than before. "With a length of 2.9 kilometers, she is only marginally smaller than the Gorgoneion. Her specs are relatively balanced and she does not possess any glaring weaknesses. One of the advantages that she brings to our fleet is her excellent support facilities. As a heartland-level fleet carrier, she possesses much more modern repair and servicing facilities."

"Does it come with any superfabs?"

"Ah, unfortunately not. We have found signs that the ship used to carry one in her main workshop, but her former owners evidently removed it before handing the vessel over to our clan."

"Figures."

To be fair, superfabs were too valuable to be given away as freebies. The Larkinsons should already be glad that the Wild Fighters didn't strip the fleet carrier of her other valuable systems.

Vivian continued to explain the new fleet carrier's capabilities.

"Our new capital ship is more advanced than the Gorgoneion in many aspects. She comes with potent power generators that can supply an abundant amount of energy to a hungry superfab or set of demanding shield generators."

"She comes with shield generators as well?" Ves reacted with surprise.

"Yes, but don't expect too much from them. They are copies of a relatively basic, wide-area model that is primarily used to block space junk from scratching the hull but can block moderate damage in a pinch. They are not designed to defend a capital ship during heavy combat."

"Oh. Oh well. That's another system that we should upgrade in the future."

The Larkinson Clan already formulated an enormous list of pending upgrades. There were so many items on this wish list that it would probably take decades to address them all! By then, the Larkinsons would have undoubtedly added a lot of other items on the list.

Once Vivian finished explaining all of the essential details about the new fleet carrier, Ves asked an important question.

"What about her name?"

"The Wild Fighter Association has taken the liberty to strip her former name. She has officially reverted to her serial number at the moment, but that is no proper name. We can christen her with a new name at any time."

"Then let's wait until we've wrapped up all of our business in Vulit before we hold the ceremony. It's a good way to start our upcoming journey."

Once Ves finished quizzing Vivian about the new starships, he turned his attention to Ophelia Kronon.

"I hear that you and General Verle have come up with a new proposal related to our fleet."

"We did." The Ylvainan official nodded. "We believe we must implement a more unified command structure in our fleet. Right now, the chain of command is not entirely clear because authority in the clan is split up between several different leaders and sub-organizations within our clan. Now that we are starting anew upon entry into the Red Ocean, I believe it is time to professionalize our fleet and bring them under a more unified command structure."

Ves could already guess what Ophelia wanted to propose. "You're saying..."

"We are proposing the formation of a navy, one that is led by an admiral, sir." The woman said.

Ophelia Kronon just mentioned two words that were quite controversial in human society. Ever since the Age of Conquest had passed, a lot of humans went out of their way to avoid the words 'navy' and 'admiral' at all costs!

Aside from the CFA and sometimes the MTA, hardly any other organization was eager to parade these loaded terms.

Ves did not think it was a coincidence that the fleet coordinator used these two words to describe the formation of a new armada.

"Explain." He spoke.

"First, think of where we are right now, sir. We have arrived in a new galaxy, a small one, but one that is filled with powerful alien civilizations. Do you think the nunsers, puelmers and so on have agreed to abolish all of their warships?"

"No." Ves shook his head. "I don't see why that is relevant, though. The Big Two still enforces the same taboos in the Red Ocean. I have heard nothing about any exemptions."

"That is true, but I've spoken to a number of people including General Verle, Minister Shederin Purnesse and high-ranking personnel from other organizations. The general consensus among them is that the Big Two will eventually relax these rules sooner or later."

That was an enormous subject that Ves had no interest in discussing today.

"What if all of those people are wrong?"

"Even if the MTA and CFA decide against this course of action, it is still useful for our clan to adopt a more formal fleet structure, sir. We need to become cognizant that we are constantly treading into dangerous territory when we roam across the Red Ocean. We cannot allow confusion to reign, which could easily happen if multiple leaders issue conflicting orders."

"I think it is pretty clear that General Verle is the ultimate authority when it comes to the disposition of our fleet in battle."

Ophelia grimaced. "With all due respect, General Verle is a mech officer, not a naval officer. While he knows the basics and is qualified enough to formulate our objectives, the real decisions should be made by leaders who have served on starships for their entire careers."

"Someone like... you, perhaps?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"Absolutely not." Ophelia shook her head. "This responsibility is too heavy for me, sir. I cannot in good conscience become the admiral of our new navy. This is why I recommend you seek a much more qualified candidate among the people in Vulit or elsewhere in the Red Ocean. While I can manage this new office in the interim, We must do our best to place a much more capable individual in this seat."

"Is there anyone in our clan that can fulfill this function?"

"No. Otherwise I wouldn't have made this suggestion to you. The closest naval officer that I can think of is Commodore Abigail Even of the Penitent Sisters, but she still lacks the experience and knowledge to command an entire fleet."

In the end, Ophelia Kronon convinced Ves of the necessity to form a proper naval organization.

The main purpose of doing so was to improve the coordination and maneuvering of all of the capital ships and sub-capitals in battle.

As for the eventual notion that pioneering organizations like the Larkinson Clan be allowed to field warships, Ves completely ignored this possibility. There was no way the

MTA would ever allow this to happen. Such a radical policy reversal directly damaged the Association's interests!

"Alright, please work with General Verle and other relevant people in the clan to make this happen. Also try and find a suitable candidate for this admiral position."

"We have already begun our search."

Chapter 3516: Commercializing Ketis

The Larkinson Clan had made clear progress in expanding its fleet. The addition of the new fleet carrier along with all of the new combat carriers made Ves feel a lot more confident about heading deeper into the Red Ocean.

Though he didn't intend to travel to any hotspots, he did not want to spend all of his time holing up in a boring area. There were so many curiosities and wonders in the new frontier that any of them could give him the inspiration he needed to boost his progression towards Senior!

The clan was already doing well enough in prepping the new carriers. Ves did not need to supervise this process.

The same could not be said for another priority of the Larkinson Clan.

Over the course of the Larkinson Clan's stay in Vulit, Ves and several other clansmen succeeded in building up their reputation in the regional community.

Many people learned of the existence of the Larkinson Clan. Even more were able to recognize individual stars such as Ketis Larkinson and Commander Casella Ingvar!

The successes they achieved attracted a lot of attention to the clan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to work overtime in order to follow up on all of the parties that had approached the Larkinson Clan in recent weeks.

Ves managed to meet with his busy foreign minister in order to discuss the most promising entreaties.

"You look better than I thought."

"Heh. Don't be fooled." The old diplomat responded. "I have been running on stimulants on a regular basis. Ordinarily, I try to avoid this measure as I do not wish to impair my judgment with artificial chemicals, but the current situation leaves me with no choice."

"How so?"

"You should realize that all of the interest in our clan is not permanent. People's memories are fickle. Once we depart Chance Bay, the public will soon shift their short attention span away from us and direct it towards the next big idol or success story. In a single month, ninety percent of the people who are fans of us will have forgotten our existence."

That was a harsh and cynical description of human behavior. Though Ves wanted to believe that people were better than that, he agreed with Shederin's assessment.

Chance Bay would continue to hold a lot of tournaments after the Larkinsons left the central star node. New heroes and winners would emerge soon after and the press would doubtlessly focus intensely on their latest toys!

"What does this mean for us, exactly?"

"It means we need to take advantage of the heat of the moment." The minister answered. "Our apparent value in other people's eyes has currently reached a peak. This is the time when our leverage is the highest and when our negotiating power is strong enough to extract favorable concessions from potential business partners."

"I see. I take it that you have already worked on a number of deals for our clan."

Shederin nodded. "My staff and I have already facilitated dozens of minor deals. None of them are too significant. They amount to giving us access to material suppliers to giving us access to exclusive marketplaces."

"Are there any deals that give us an opportunity to acquire more starships?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but starships and especially carrier vessels are still out of our reach. Don't let the current situation warp your expectations. The organizations that hold tournaments are much more powerful than you can imagine. They often own and operate their own shipyards. While there are various reasons why they are willing to give them away as tournament prizes, they are much more reticent about selling them to third parties."

"They also need the ships." Ves guessed.

"Correct. Not only that, they also wish to avoid strengthening too many strangers. It's an open conspiracy if you can call it that. Those with the capability to build starships seek to widen the gap between themselves and others. Currently, our clan firmly falls in the category of 'other', so don't expect anyone to build up a future rival."

This was not good news to Ves. It appeared that it was a lot more difficult to convince a shipbuilding company to produce additional combat carriers for the Larkinson Clan.

"Okay, let's put this topic aside. Can you present anything promising to me? Surely we must have succeeded on other fronts."

Shederin smiled. "We do. Let's start with the biggest potential trade deal. Do you recall the Wild Fighter Association?"

"I do. It's not easy for me to forget the only mech design tournament where I managed to reach first place. Admittedly, Ketis contributed the most back then, but it is still a highlight of my stay in Chance Bay."

"Well, Director Kadar and his negotiators have been in touch with us. The Wild Fighter Association and more specifically the regional director is highly interested in obtaining our mechs."

"I know. The director mentioned that to me at the end of the Wild Brawl Bowl. He talked about the possibility of selling or using our mechs."

"We have learned much about each other during our talks over the last weeks. It has become clear that our clan is mainly interested in generating revenue while the Wild Fighter Association wishes to acquire one of Ketis Larkinson's swordsman mech designs. We have regularly consulted with the young woman in order to see what kind of arrangement that we can make."

The Wild Fighters were much more enamored with Ketis than Ves! Living mechs alone didn't hold their interest. They wanted to get their hands on a mech that could visibly improve their swordsmanship like the Heart of Victor!

"What are the results of all of these talks?"

Minister Shederin projected the outline of a contract in front of Ves. "We have developed a basic framework for a lucrative business deal. For now, the scope of this agreement is limited, but as long as both sides are happy with it, there is always a possibility for follow-up deals."

Ves quickly skimmed through the document. He quickly understood that it centered around commercializing one of Ketis' mech designs.

"She's found a market for her Monster Slayer design!"

He knew how much she cared about this upcoming design project. Ketis became inspired to design a landbound swordsman mech that excelled at dueling after surviving a battle in the Nyxian Gap.

Back then, she didn't have the confidence to design the mech of her dreams, but it was different now that she had become a Journeyman!

There was no reason for her to delay this project any further. The only major uncertainty was how she could put her work in the hands of mech pilots. That had always been a question mark to her. Ves was happy now that she found a readily available market for her first solo commercial mech design.

As Ves continued to study the document, Shederin began to explain the highlights.

"We have formulated a number of different proposals. Each of them differ by how extensively you are willing to cooperate with the Wild Fighter Association and how much control you wish to retain over Ketis' work."

"Tell me about the most lucrative plan in monetary terms."

"The plan that can potentially maximize our earnings is also the most difficult to realize." Shederin warned. "In summary, it entails retaining the rights to the Monster Slayer design and mass producing its copies through our own efforts."

"Do we even need the Wild Fighters for that?"

"We do. If we wish to mass produce the Monster Slayer and distribute it to customers across the Red Ocean, we will have to cooperate with partners such as the Wild Fighters. They can help us purchase land and set up a large manufacturing complex on a friendly industrial planet. They can also assume responsibility for selling and distributing the Monster Slayers. Currently we lack the capability of doing this ourselves, so this is a good solution."

Ves frowned. "I thought I already told you guys that I don't want our clan to set up any facilities at fixed locations. A manufacturing complex on a planet that we don't own is bound to anchor our fleet!"

"It doesn't have to go that far, sir. If you do not agree with this measure, then we can change to a variation of this business plan. We can either set up a subsidiary company that will mass produce our commercial mech models on our behalf or we can outsource production to one of the affiliated companies of the Wild Fighter Association. The downside of these options is that we will have to reduce our share of the profits of this venture."

That was logical. The less the Larkinsons did themselves, the more they had to pay others to do the work.

Though Ves wanted to control everything, he knew quite well that it conflicted with his desire to keep his entire clan mobile. With all of the bad experiences of the past, he strenuously objected to any plan that entailed leaving behind Larkinsons on vulnerable planets!

"It sounds like you have formulated additional options." He said. "What is the least troublesome plan?"

"Well, if you truly wish to minimize as much risk and entanglement as possible, then we can simply treat this trade agreement as a commission. In short, the Wild Fighter Association will commission a second-class landbound swordsman mech from Miss Ketis. Once she has completed the design, we will transfer all of the rights pertaining to its production, distribution, sale and use to the Wild Fighter Association. It is up to our business partner to decide what they wish to do with the Monster Slayer design. The Wild Fighters can choose to commercialize it themselves or retain it as one of their exclusive member-only perks. Regardless, we will receive a generous lump sum in addition to royalties each time they produce a copy of the Monster Slayer."

This was the laziest and least profitable option. It essentially reduced the Larkinson Clan's role to a design studio. Once Ketis handed over the completed design, the Larkinsons did not have to do anything else except sit back and collect the royalties!

That didn't mean it was a bad plan, though. The Larkinson Clan already had a lot of issues on its plate. The LMC might be a ubiquitous presence in the Yeina Star Cluster, but it was a complete newcomer in the Red Ocean!

The mech company had no permanent offices, no manufacturing complexes, no distribution networks, no sales channels and no brand presence in this completely new area!

It would take an inordinate amount of time and effort to build all of this up, especially if Ves wanted to outsource almost every responsibility to third parties.

Rather than go through all of that effort, Ves vastly preferred to shove all of this trouble to a willing partner such as the Wild Fighter Association.

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "I think... it's best to start with a more modest plan. This is our first major business deal in the Red Ocean. We need to build up our reputation and make sure that we can deliver on our promises. I don't think it is wise to make too many commitments. What if we cannot uphold our end of the deal due to unexpected problems and incidents? Let's not forget that the situation in this dwarf galaxy is a lot more volatile than in the Milky Way. In my opinion, we should follow up on the latest plan you've mentioned. I prefer to expand it a bit and add additional clauses to the contract, but in general, I'm in favor of just letting Ketis treat this job as a one-time commission. The burden on her will also be much less as a result."

All of this was quite new to Ketis. He did not wish to overwhelm her with too many distractions.

"I will pass your decision on to the relevant parties." Minister Shederin promised. "Do keep in mind that we will forgo the opportunity to earn up to ten times more profit if we

treat this deal as a commission. The royalties that the Wild Fighter Association are obligated to pay to us will only amount to a couple of million hex credits per copy."

That was quite a meager sum. If the LMC chose to produce and sell the Monster Slayer themselves, then the company could easily earn a profit of 50 million per copy!

Chapter 3517: Price of Neutrality

Ves was quite glad to learn that at least one of their upcoming mech designs possessed high commercial potential.

The debt of the Larkinson Clan kept piling up with few changes in sight. Though he knew that this burden was not a big matter of concern with the current state of his organization, Ves was preferred not to make himself and his clan vulnerable to the demands of external creditors.

The banks and financial institutions that the clan borrowed money from would definitely meddle in his affairs as long as they didn't get their interest payments on time!

Though Ves was still confident in his ability to design a new cash cow that would sell well in the Yeina Star Cluster, he was much less certain that his products would catch on in the Red Ocean.

The competition was much more intense and the locals were much more accustomed to utilizing more advanced heartland-level or even center-level mech models!

Together with the fact that the LMC did not even set up a single branch office in any of the major trading planets of the Red Ocean, it would be an uphill battle for Ves to get his footing in the regional mech market!

Although it sounded as if that Ves didn't need to achieve quick success in the local mech market, this was a short-sighted view of the situation.

Ves and his clan came to the Red Ocean in order to find success. How could they do so if they hardly did anything meaningful in the new frontier?

As a mech designer, Ves needed to validate his efforts by pushing his mechs into the hands of other people. The Red Ocean was filled with mech pilots who could benefit substantially from piloting his products!

The biggest reason why he had to make a name for himself in the regional mech market was to increase his reputation. Already, Ves could see how Ketis suddenly received numerous lucrative offers now that she finally built up a reputation as a mech designer.

Ves could not let his former student take all of the limelight. He was the top mech designer of the Larkinson Clan and his pride would not allow him to get outshined by one of his own subordinates!

Though he preferred it if he was the one to blaze a trail for the Larkinson Clan, the current reality did not allow it yet. Even if he performed quite well in a few of the mech design tournaments he participated in, his design philosophy was difficult to translate and explain to the masses.

In contrast, Ketis designed swordsman mechs that possessed capabilities that no one had even seen!

Many swordsman mech pilots became instantly attracted by the prospect of 'inheriting' a portion of her transcendent swordsmanship. If they had to pilot her mechs in order to receive this benefit, then they would definitely try to get their hands on them one way or another!

Ves could not ask for a better chance for the LMC to introduce itself as a brand in the Red Ocean. He didn't even really care about the profits that his clan could earn from commercializing one of Ketis' future mech designs.

What he truly sought was to build a brand and increase the Larkinson Clan's reputation!

This was the only way he could get powerful organizations to take the Larkinsons more seriously. Over time, Ves had no doubt that he would receive the opportunity to acquire more carrier vessels.

Expanding the fleet was the Larkinson Clan's highest priority at this time! Its fleet must at least reach its former height back when it was still in the Milky Way in order for the Larkinsons to possess a basic measure of security.

Once the Larkinson Clan was able to field an entire mech division's worth of machines into battle, Ves would feel a lot more confident about heading deeper into the Red Ocean.

Now that he gained a personal interest in this potential trade deal, the Larkinsons and the Wild Fighters made a lot of progress in their talks.

Ves talked to numerous people in order to figure everything out and make sure that this agreement benefited everyone involved.

One of his biggest concerns was what would happen if the Larkinson Clan began to associate with the Wild Fighter Association. No organization truly stood alone and all of them tended to belong to a specific camp.

Ves did not want to wake up one day and find out that the Wild Fighter Association was actually an ally of the infamous Dissolution Faction of the MTA!

He met with Minister Shederin in order to pick his brain on this matter.

"What is your understanding of the Wild Fighter Association?"

The old man looked up from his terminal in his temporary office. "The Wild Fighter Association has a relatively clean history, if that's what you are worried about, sir. It was originally a club set up by a group of mech athletes in the galactic heartland. This happened back in the first decades of the Age of Mechs. The mech community was much rougher and more rudimentary at the time."

"I can imagine that many mech organizations rose up at the time."

"Correct, but few have managed to withstand the test of time. The Wild Fighter Association was not the most brilliant or successful among them, but its steady growth and stable stewardship allowed it to surpass nearly all of its former rivals. After four centuries of unceasing growth and expansion, it has gained a powerful voice in many circles."

"I see. Do they have any ties to any political entities that might be of concern to us?" Ves asked. "Are they close to the Terrans or Rubarthans, for example?"

"As far as my research goes, the Wild Fighters have always tried to project an image of neutrality." Shederin replied. "They did not always succeed in doing so, but they have successfully maintained branches in both first-rate superstates. They cannot get away with it if they explicitly picked a side."

Ves became more reassured. "That's good to hear. Does the Wild Fighter Association have any enemies?"

"Certainly. They should not be of much concern to us, though. The Wild Fighter Association's ultimate ambition is to become the premier club and advocacy group of all melee mech pilots in human space. Most people generally aren't affected by this, but there are certain other advocacy organizations that do not take kindly to this goal. Think of societies that try to instill proper knightly virtues in defensive mech pilots. They despise the undisciplined and uncontrolled values that motivate the Wild Fighters."

Though this conflict sounded fairly troublesome, none of these ideological and competitive disputes involved the Larkinson Clan. If the Wild Fighter Association went down one day, Ves had no problem cooperating with its rivals!

This made it even more important not to get too close to the Wild Fighters. Treating this upcoming trade deal as a one-time commission was the safest way to stay out of this irrelevant turf war.

After all, the Larkinsons wouldn't suddenly become die-hard allies of the Wild Fighters just because they provided a single service!

As Ves continued to discuss his plans and intentions with Minister Shederin, they also talked about what they should do next if this trade deal became a success.

"If the Monster Slayer truly achieves commercial success, then you must know that the Wild Fighter Association will insist on building up on this success." Shederin told Ves. "We need to make a careful decision on how to respond to this demand."

Ves snorted. "Isn't the answer clear, my dear minister? If we want to emphasize our own neutrality, we have to do the same thing that the Wild Fighters have done with the Terrans and Rubarthans. We propose a similar trade deal to one of their rivals!"

"That... can be quite risky, sir. Proceeding with this course of action may reduce the heat we've accumulated from external organizations, but it will also destroy much of the goodwill that we've built up with the Wild Fighter Association. Our old business partner will not grant as much access to their network anymore and you can say goodbye to any hopes of commissioning carriers from any of the shipbuilding companies tied to the Wild Fighters."

Ves grimaced when he heard that. There was always a price for every decision. All of these entities with shipyards in the Red Ocean were extremely stingy about choosing their customers. They would never accept a commission from an unreliable or double-dealing business partner!

"I think... we'll just have to accept the consequences in that case." He sighed. "Don't get me wrong. I don't want to miss this opportunity either, but let's not forget about lessons we've learned in the past. We are only pawns in the eyes of the big boys like the Wild Fighter Association. Who knows whether it will sell us out one day? Without a strong power base, we can't really put too much trust in any of the major players in the Red Ocean."

The new frontier was an enormous treasure land that drew in a lot of greedy and ambitious people. These kinds of folk were probably willing to go far in order to fulfill their goals, and Ves did not dare to put too much faith in their sincerity!

While Ves had a good impression of Director Thaprim Kadar, the man did not lead the Wild Association. He was merely an underboss within the massive trans-galactic organization.

This meant that anyone who ranked higher than Director Kadar could easily upset the man's original plans and screw over any deal that the Wild Fighter Association had made with the Larkinson Clan!

"You don't trust easily, do you, sir?" Minister Shederin pointedly asked.

"Why do you ask a question if you already know the answer?"

"A question doesn't always revolve around the answer. Sometimes, the point of a question is to make people think. Right now, you are displaying an excessive lack of trust in potential business partners. That is not conducive to enduring success."

Ves ignored Shederin's advice. His mind was already set and nothing would change him from this course.

In any case, it was too early to go through this strategy. The Larkinsons still needed to conclude their first deal with the Wild Fighters.

Ves frequently met with Ketis in order to make sure she was willing to do her part. When she heard about the likely terms of the final contract, she seemed happy enough.

"It's not my business to decide how my mechs will be produced or sold." She told him as she manually wiped the surface of her greatsword with a cloth. "I just want my Monster Slayer model to have meaning, unlike the other mechs I've designed by myself. I originally designed it to be a dueling mech, and putting it in the hands of an organization that is really big with mech athletes sounds like a great way for my Monster Slayer to show up in the mech arenas. The more mech pilots I can help with my work, the better. For this reason, I hope the Wild Fighter Association won't keep my product for itself but also sell it to the public."

"We'll make sure the Wild Fighters do so." Ves promised to her. "Seeing one of your works achieve commercial success is one of the greatest forms of validation that mech designers like ourselves can receive. It is always difficult to evaluate whether you have done good work, and trying to compete against other mech designers in an open mech market is a clear way for you to know the truth."

Ves had built up a lot of confidence for himself because of the same reason. The Desolate Soldier, the Doom Guard and the Ferocious Piranha had all proven without a doubt that his work could add value to his customers! The time he spent on progressing design philosophy was not in vain!

One of the reasons why Ketis always lacked confidence in her own products was because she never went through the same experience.

This time, Ketis must definitely succeed!

Chapter 3518: Upcoming Custom Mechs

It did not take long before the Larkinson Clan and the Wild Fighter Association finalized all of the details and came to a consensus.

One of the biggest hurdles in the round of negotiations was determining how much money the Living Mech Corporation should earn per produced mech.

Obviously, a strong mech was much more valuable than a weaker one. Yet how could anyone determine where the Monster Slayer design fell in this spectrum?

Not even Ketis knew how good her solo mech design would be! Her track record was too small to make a reasonable assessment on the value of her upcoming work!

Eventually, both sides decided to wait until Ketis completed the Monster Slayer design before defining the exact sums. This was the fairest way to settle this question and also provided additional motivation for Ketis to do her best for her debut commercial mech design.

To commemorate this important cooperative venture, the Larkinsons and the Wild Fighters gathered together in order to hold a modest ceremony.

Ves and Director Kadar both signed the virtual document that represented the contract that they had agreed upon.

Both of them smiled and shook hands before exchanging pleasantries.

"I hope Miss Ketis will be able to deliver a complete mech design within a year." Director Kadar said.

"We will make sure of that." Ves promised.

The Monster Slayer was not supposed to be a complex mech design. Ketis wanted to design a clean and simple landbound swordsman mech that was affordable and maximized the impact of piloting skill to win its battles. There was no need to burden its design with needless and expensive gimmicks.

Ves estimated that Ketis should be able to design a basic, low-budget swordsman mech model in four to five months.

However, the Wild Fighter Association demanded a heartland-level mech design that performed well enough to impress most crowds.

This meant that it had to incorporate more advanced materials and components than what Ketis had been working with in the past few years. This meant that she needed to learn a lot in order to master all of these new resources!

That would definitely add a few additional months to the project duration, so it was prudent to set a more generous deadline. Who knew what would happen in between that might cause the design project to be delayed.

Once the ceremony had ended, Ves happily returned to his hotel. He was pleased now that there was finally another mech designer who could take over some of the burden of financing the Larkinson Clan.

"Ketis is finally turning a profit for me." Ves smirked. "It was worth it to invest all of that time and effort into nurturing her. Once she makes a name for herself, we can earn a lot more money from her second commercial project!"

Though Director Kadar saw a lot of promise in Ketis' work, he did not dare to go all out. Ketis still needed to prove herself in the commercial arena before the Larkinson Clan was able to demand higher prices from its business partners.

Even so, the loose estimates he heard from the financial experts of his clan were quite optimistic. The Living Mech Corporation could potentially earn as much as 5000 MTA credits on an annual basis!

Of course, all of this money came in the form of royalties. Since the Wild Fighter Association was doing most of the work, it was natural for it to receive a much bigger cut of the profits!

There was a huge difference between earning 5000 MTA credits and 50,000 MTA credits per year!

Yet Ves did not let his greed overcome his better sense in this instance. He knew quite well that earning the latter amount was much more troublesome than he could handle.

"It's good to sit back and just watch the money roll in by itself." He muttered as he returned to his upscale hotel suite.

"Meow." Lucky greeted as Ves returned to his temporary home in Chance Bay.

"Miaow~" Clixie blinked at Ves as she rested beside the crib where little Aurelia was napping.

Speaking of earning money, while Ketis was taking her first steps to put money in the Larkinson Clan, his wife had been doing the opposite!

"You..."

"Welcome back, Ves." Gloriana smiled as she carefully brushed her brand-new personalized designer handbag. "Look what I've got! It took a few weeks for Hoenbach to fulfill my custom order, but I've finally received my long-awaited handstitched two-toned lavender-and-white puelmer leather Giarna handbag! Look at this leather! You have to feel its texture. Look at these seams. They're so precise and dense that it is hard to believe it is all done by hand! Look at how the artisans have managed to form my initials with precious red jewels. Hoenbach completely delivered what I asked!"

Ves wanted to puke when he saw the handbag.

The most generous term to describe the design of this designer item was that it was 'fashion forward'.

The idea of using the skin of a sentient alien race to produce a new form of leather and dye it in bright tones before turning it into a handbag was certainly not a normal idea!

Only a pretentious fashion company like Hoenbach could turn stupid ideas into highly desirable luxury goods!

To be fair, the craftsmanship of Gloriana's new handbag was truly good. If Ves ignored its unconventional design, the workmanship was truly worth a lot of money.

He would never pay 120 MTA credits for this bag, though!

The more he thought about how much money Gloriana had spent in her shopping spree, the more Ves became upset at how much the Larkinson Clan's debt burden had grown.

He had to shift his attention away from this infernal bag as soon as possible!

"Ahem, our clan has gained a new expert pilot." He said as he turned away in order to remove the overpriced handbag from his sights. "Commander Casella Ingvar needs an expert mech. We can't cooperate with Master Willix this time, so we need to turn to another helper in order to design such a high-end mech."

"We've already cooperated once with the Hexer Master Mech Designer who should almost be done with completing the new expert mech design for my brother!"

"No!" Ves immediately barked. "We're not going to work together with the Hexers! I've been thinking about working together with Professor Benedict Cortez of the Cross Clan. He might not be a Master, but he's an excellent Senior. We're bound to design a high-tier expert mech for Patriarch Reginald Cross in the near future, so we can treat this instance as an exercise to help us get accustomed to working together."

Though the Cross Clan had become increasingly eager to deliver a masterwork expert mech to its patriarch, this job could not be rushed.

After entering the Red Ocean, the Larkinsons weren't the only newcomers who had to get accustomed to all of the new tech, materials and methods.

Though Ves had no idea what Professor Benedict was doing these days, the ambitious Senior was probably doing his best to expand his own design and production capabilities!

Even a Senior needed time to absorb all of the new possibilities available in the Red Ocean. As long as Professor Benedict invested a year to get up to speed, he would assuredly be able to design vastly superior mechs!

Of course, all of those new toys also cost a lot more money. Just like the Larkinson Clan, the Cross Clan needed time in order to generate a source of revenue and gain access to all of the resources necessary to construct the best possible expert mech for Patriarch Reginald!

While neither Ves nor Gloriana were eager to cooperate with mech designer that was less capable and less trustworthy than Master Willix, the Larkinsons had little choice.

Ves simply didn't know enough high-ranking mech designers. He hadn't managed to befriend a single Senior or Master during his stay in Chance Bay.

Even if he did acquaint himself with these higher figures, he would be quite reluctant to involve them in the design of one of the key strategic assets of the Larkinson Clan. What if they sold him out to his enemies?

While Professor Benedict was anything but harmless, Ves was confident that the man was currently on their side. Past incidents had brought the Larkinsons closer to their allies. There should not be a compelling reason for the former Skull Architect and the Crossers to abuse his trust.

Though Gloriana tried to convince Ves that the clan was better off if they cooperated with proper Masters like the ones from her former state, he remained unmoved.

"Fine then!" Gloriana angrily said as she hugged her expensive new handbag. Her slim palm lovingly rubbed its unique textured surface. "If you want us to collaborate with Professor Benedict, then go ahead. Just know that a Senior will never be as good as a Master!"

Ves crossed his arms. "That's not necessarily a bad thing. Master Willix only contributed the bare minimum to our expert mech designs. If she added anything more, her powerful design philosophy would have overwhelmed ours! When we cooperate with Professor Benedict, we need to make sure that he restrains himself. Commander Casella's first expert mech ought to be a Larkinson mech, not a Crosser mech."

Now that he made his decision, the couple moved on to discussing their other future projects.

"Have you decided what you will be doing for the upcoming design round?" He asked.

"I plan to design three custom mechs for individual Larkinsons." She answered. "There are a number of Larkinson mech pilots who have waited too long for a reward. They've

collected a lot of Larkinson merits and are willing to spend most of it to obtain a powerful custom mech."

"Who?"

"Commander Melkor Larkinson, Vincent Ricklin and Imon Ingvar."

Ves fell into thought as he heard those names. "One regular mech pilot and two expert candidates."

Although he wasn't sure whether Vincent and Imon needed a custom mech from his wife, Commander Melkor had waited too long to receive a personal reward.

Ves felt a bit guilty about neglecting the Avatar Commander. He never had enough time and there were always greater priorities on his mind.

It was ultimately good that his wife could take over this responsibility. Melkor truly deserved better.

Gloriana briefly outlined her preliminary ideas about her custom mechs.

"Commander Melkor is a ranged mech specialist, so I intend to design a rifleman mech for him." She said. "Although I mostly want to design this mech on my own, I will need your help to pair my work with a good luminar crystal rifle."

"I can do that."

"Good. As for Imon Ingvar, he's a melee mech pilot but fights best with swords. I'll have to design a swordsman mech for him, and I intend to call upon Ketis to contribute to this project."

That didn't sound like a solo project anymore, but Ves did not mind all that much. The mech pilots would never reject the opportunity to pilot a stronger and better-designed custom mech!

"What about Vincent's custom mech?"

"He works best with a hybrid mech design, so I intend to develop a more powerful incarnation of his old Adonis Colossus."

Ves looked surprised. "Are you sure you're okay with designing a masculine mech?"

His wife did not deign to reply. She merely snorted as if she was offended by his doubts!

"Er... okay. I look forward to seeing how you'll complete this design."

It would certainly be an interesting design! There had to be a reason why Gloriana took it upon herself to design a mech for one of the most masculine mech pilots in the Larkinson Clan!

What was interesting about this custom hybrid mech design was that Gloriana intended to rely on herself to complete this project. She even chose to avoid luminar crystal technology so that she did not have to ask for his assistance!

Chapter 3519: Command Mechs

It had been weeks since Commander Casella Ingvar broke through.

She spent much of her time recovering from her previous overexertion and learning everything she needed to know as an expert pilot.

Fortunately, she received plenty of assistance in that regard. The other Larkinson expert pilots freely inducted her into their circle and shared many useful tips.

Casella also paid a visit to the MTA's main headquarters in Chance Bay. The mechers over there warmly welcomed her and provided an abundant amount of information to her. They even dispatched one of their own authorities on command-type expert pilots in order to guide her how to develop her rare abilities!

When Ves finally visited her in person, she was lounging leisurely at a private park while holding a data pad in front of her face.

She had to learn a lot more about leadership and how to command larger units in order to make the most of her capabilities in battle!

Casella wasn't alone when Ves arrived. It turned out that her brother was keeping her company as well.

The male Ingvar sibling looked a lot more subdued compared to his sister.

This was no surprise to Ves. The two had broken through to expert candidate at the same time, but their trajectories increasingly diverged over time.

Casella Ingvar not only became the legion commander of the Living Sentinels, but also became the designated mech pilot of the Quint.

When she participated in the G-Aena League, she quickly made a name for herself by leading the Larkinson Battalion to victory.

Undergoing apotheosis during the semifinals of this massive tournament was her greatest and most glorious accomplishment up to this point!

Her future was undoubtedly bright now that she had broken through. As a transcendent mech commander, she was bound to contribute massively to any major battles fought by the Larkinsons!

As for Imon Ingvar, he was still an expert candidate who had yet to stand out in any way.

He couldn't command any troops.

He got rejected by the Quint.

He never managed to perform well enough in any tournaments.

He was too burdened by doubts and uncertainty to sublimate his willpower.

Ves could clearly see that his sister's unexpected advancement had a negative effect on Imon's confidence. It was always hard for people to compare their efforts to their peers. It was especially difficult if the object of comparison was a particularly close friend or relative!

Though Ves felt pity for Imon, it was pointless for him to assuage the expert candidate with empty words.

Gloriana could probably do much better! She would surely be able to cure Imon's malaise once she completed her custom mech design!

"Patriarch."

"Patriarch."

"Hello, Ingvars." Ves greeted as he approached the siblings.

He hesitated whether he should tell Imon to wander off, but he decided against it. He didn't intend to discuss anything too sensitive this time.

"First off, congratulations for breaking through, Casella. I always thought you and your brother had promise when I initially recruited you back in Kinner Tribe territory. I'm glad to see that you have managed to bloom under the Larkinson Clan's care. Now that you have become more powerful, I hope you will be able to shoulder a greater burden in defending our clan going forward."

"I will always do what I can to protect our fellow Larkinsons." Casella spoke.

The two began to chat a bit about her new status and responsibilities in the Larkinson Clan.

While Ves listened to her responses, he studied her carefully with the help of his spiritual senses.

Her vibe was a lot different from the other Larkinson expert pilots.

One of the biggest differences between Casella and her peers was how her willpower was a lot softer and more subtle than he expected.

Expert pilots such as Venerable Orphan and Venerable Jannzi were like blunt instruments. It was completely obvious what they were all about. Their goals and conduct were so aligned that they came across as one-dimensional in many cases!

Even a more complicated individual such as Venerable Joshua still possessed an open and transparent personality. He possessed a strong will that constantly drove him to pursue the wonders of life.

That didn't mean that Commander Casella was a scatterbrained expert pilot. Ves could readily sense a lot of drive in her. She felt responsible for the Larkinsons and wanted to protect them to the best of her ability.

While Ves found it curious that Commander Casella was motivated by the same reasons as Venerable Jannzi, it quickly became clear that the Sentinel Commander did not suddenly turn rude!

Casella retained much of her calm, thoughtful and considerate personality. Ves found it a pleasure to discuss important matters with her.

In contrast, he wouldn't have been able to remain calm if he talked to Jannzi!

The more time he spent in Casella's presence, the more he sensed the differences in her force of will.

Her willpower might not be as hard and tough as that of the other expert pilots, but it possessed a much more gentle character.

Ves even felt her force of will attempting to embrace and connect to his mind as if she was a spiritual network!

This was a fascinating observation. It looked as if her force of will partially imitated the Larkinson Network!

The implications were massive. Though Casella's force of will was too weak to form any solid connections to any clansmen, the story would be completely different as long as she piloted an expert mech that designed to facilitate this process!

Ves already had a good idea on how he should tackle his next expert mech design project.

"Let's talk about your upcoming expert mech." He said, eager to broach this topic. "I'm sure you know what expert mechs can do for you. Each of them are designed and built to amplify your power by allowing you to resonate with them. We'll have to visit an exotics warehouse in order to find out which resonating materials you are compatible with, but once we find a couple of matches, our Design Department will do its best to provide you with an expert mech that maximizes your ability to influence a battle."

The Sentinel Commander nodded. Every expert pilot was entitled to receive a compatible expert mech. It was one of the ironclad customs of the mech community and this matter was especially pertinent to a clan led by a mech designer!

She had no doubt that Ves would do his best to provide her with a strong expert mech. She knew her own worth. With her command-oriented abilities, she could provide an immeasurable amount of assistance to the thousands of regular mech pilots fighting in the field!

The Larkinson Clan would be stupid to neglect her potential as a powerful force multiplier!

"I am not too well-versed in expert mechs, so I can only give my general thoughts." Casella said. "If possible, I want to pilot a mech that can function as both a rifleman mech and a command platform. I primarily need the former in order to protect myself and my clansmen against enemy expert mechs. As for the latter, I need to gain the best possible overview of a battlefield no matter how chaotic it becomes. My expert mech should also possess powerful communication systems to make sure I can stay in touch with everyone."

These were all standard demands that Ves had already expected from her. None of them were difficult to realize in an expert mech.

Ves looked forward to designing his first true command mech. Such mechs rarely showed up in skirmishes and incidental battles. They were only prevalent in large-scale military campaigns where a lot of different mech forces blended together in a war theater.

In fact, the use of command mechs was something of a controversial topic in the mech community.

On one hand, they provided battlefield commanders with excellent tools to command a battle and communicate with different units.

On the other hand, they were obvious targets that enemies loved to eliminate in order to decapitate a mech force's leadership!

In general, their use depended on the culture, history, mech doctrine and customs of a state. They were also much more useful in certain environments than others.

Though the Larkinson Clan did not make use of command mechs so far, that didn't mean that Ves hated them. He just didn't see the need to field them considering that the Larkinsons fought most of their battles in the vicinity of their fleet!

The command centers aboard ships such as the Gorgoneion and the Graveyard were able to establish much greater command and control than any command mech!

"We can do all of that." Ves told the new expert pilot. "I think we can do more, though. Every expert mech that we have designed so far all possess distinct advantages that give them an extra edge in battle. The Dark Zephyr is able to create illusionary clones of itself. The Amaranto can bend its beam attacks. The Riot is surprisingly resilient despite being an offensive mech. The First Sword can cut through anything. The Shield of Samar can manipulate gravity. The Everchanger... well, let's just say that our enemies will regret confronting it in battle."

Casella's eyes lit up when Ves mentioned the distinctive advantages of the Larkinson expert mechs. As a mech pilot herself, how could she not be attracted by these possibilities?

She sighed. "I don't know what is possible for expert mechs."

"Me neither. While I already have a few ideas, I need to conduct research in order to determine whether they are viable. We also need to find out which resonating materials you are compatible with. Hopefully, we'll be able to find a match with a resonating exotic that can amplify your leadership abilities."

Chance Bay was a huge trade nexus. A lot of new and existing resonating materials could be found in one of its many marketplaces.

Though there wasn't enough time to visit all of them, he could still bring Casella to a couple of them in the time they had left.

"Once you begin to design my expert mech, I hope you put most of the emphasis on command rather than combat. My expert mech doesn't have to be as good as the Amaranto. I can perform a much more useful role if I can reach more clansmen in battle."

Ves frowned a bit. "Are you sure you want to take this route? Expert pilots like you are powerful combatants regardless of your specializations. So far, our clan is still a bit short on expert mechs."

"Isn't that what the Battle Criers are for?" Casella responded. "Even if our next opponents field more expert mechs than us, we will not be as disadvantaged as before."

"That's... true."

"There will always be more expert pilots, sir. Each of them can become a champion or a powerhouse." She said as she directed her gaze towards her silent brother. "However, I doubt they can become powerful commanders like myself. I think it is best if I am able to excel in my role."

She had a good point. Her logic was sound and this was definitely in the best interest of the Larkinson Clan.

Once they agreed on the basic framework of the Larkinson Clan's next expert mech, Ves turned to a different subject matter.

"How's the Quint?"

Casella's mouth twitched into a smile. "The living mech is... different. I think I managed to teach it a profound lesson."

"Now that you've become an expert pilot, it's not that appropriate for you to pilot it anymore. It's best if we give the opportunity to pilot it to another expert candidate."

"I understand." She nodded. "Even though the Quint has become a lot more well-behaved as of late, I'm eager to move on to a different mech. Not all living mechs are pleasant company. Some are too irritating to spend time with. I would rather pilot an ordinary Bright Warrior until I receive my expert mech."

Ves hastily shook his head. "We don't need to go that far. If you want, we can purchase a specialized command mech from the local mech market... It's not going to be a living mech, but it will allow you to exercise your leadership capabilities in advance. What do you think?"

Chapter 3520: The Gate of Heaven

Starting a new expert mech design project was not an easy task. Fortunately, Ves already completed them before and knew what was needed in order to start them up. Finding compatible resonating materials was usually one of the first steps to designing expert mechs.

Every expert pilot depended on resonating materials to generate true resonance with their powerful machines.

An expert mech without suitable resonating exotics or alloys could not be called an expert mech at all! It would merely be regarded as an overpriced custom mech!

Ves therefore brought Commander Casella on a quick tour through several different material warehouses and marketplaces.

A lot of visitors — mostly mech designers — frequented them as these locations sometimes held the key to their advancements.

Ves decided to visit the marketplaces for another reason besides finding suitable resonating materials for the Larkinson Clan's latest expert pilot.

He wanted to see if he could discover new spiritually-reactive materials.

The Red Ocean was a dwarf galaxy that emerged under different circumstances than the Milky Way. It was filled with brand new satellites that generated a wealth of different substances that each possessed properties that were rare or nonexistent back in humany's home galaxy.

Not only that, the Red Ocean was also filled with brand new alien civilizations!

Ves was curious to see whether any interesting alien races managed to develop any materials and technology that interacted with spirituality in any way.

So far, it sounded as if only the mysterious phase whales might have developed applications in this direction, but the problem was that they were way too elusive.

During his tour of the marketplaces, he surprisingly failed to find any materials that responded to his spiritual probes.

This disappointed him a lot. He had a lot of expectations about the Red Ocean. He hoped that the resources available in the Red Ocean would be more spiritually sensitive than the resources back in the old galaxy.

Still, Ves consoled himself that these public marketplaces only held a sample of all of the diverse materials available in the Red Ocean.

"Meow~" Lucky excitedly gestured his paws at a shop that sold wreckage of alien starships.

"Not now. I'll promise I'll buy you a snack when we get out, but for now I need to save my wallet for business expenses."

"Meow!"

It was torture for Lucky to gaze upon all of these yummy new materials! Each of them looked and smelled delectable to his artificial senses. Why did Ves even bring him along if he wasn't allowed to snack whatever grabbed his fancy?!

It was too bad that Ves remained unsympathetic to his gem cat's plights. The main reason for taking Lucky along was to 'update' his database.

As long as Lucky encountered a specific material once, he should be able to find and recognize it more easily.

There was one special substance that Ves wanted to seek out the most.

"Let's head to the upper floor." He told Casella.

"Isn't that the..."

"Yes. We're not going to buy any of it, but it would be good to see it in person."

Ves, Casella, Lucky and their small entourage of guards floated up to the top floor of the market building.

Not everyone was allowed to enter this special place, but Ves easily made it through due to his pioneer status.

He entered a small chamber where dozens of other pioneers were standing or floating around a transparent cage which contained a highly remarkable material sample.

"Meow?!"

The cat twitched and acted as if he was in the presence of a furnace.

Ves looked curious at his pet's reaction. He found it strange that the special material was able to elicit such a weird reaction from Lucky while he felt nothing different.

It was only when he stepped a little closer that his body began to react in a strange way.

His flesh and bones seemed to shake as if they were being massaged by a faint pressure wave.

"You must be feeling it now." A pioneer remarked as the older woman glanced at the newcomers. "What you're experiencing at the moment is a sign that you're in the presence of a good that can change humanity."

Humanity already sang so many praises about this wonder material that people even began to refer to it as the gate of heaven or the instrument of conquest!

"Your body isn't actually shaking. What is actually happening is that the material dimensions around you are warping due to the activity of the precious exotic captured within this cage."

There was only one natural material that could achieve this effect.

"Phasewater."

A gravity cage suspended 10 mL of pure, unprocessed phasewater above a pedestal. If anything happened, a hard cage would instantly form around the floating drop to prevent it from threatening the lives of the people who visited this exhibit.

Phasewater was an extremely dangerous and toxic high-grade exotic that should never be handled without protection!

For this reason, no one was allowed to step within 20 meters of this tiny drop of phasewater!

Ves was a little disappointed at this excessive safety measure. Though there was plenty of documentation surrounding the dangers of phasewater, he still wanted to get closer because he felt a subtle connection to this material.

To be more precise, his Jutland organ and the strange high-level energy cycle it maintained in his body both began to react from the faint dimensional warping taking place around the phasewater sample!

A lot of different thoughts rolled through his mind. While he wasn't able to confirm that his Jutland organ had any special relations with phasewater, it at least reacted to destabilizing effects of this liquid exotic.

"That's not why I'm here, though."

There was another for him to seek out phasewater. What he truly wanted to know was whether phasewater was spiritually reactive!

The implications of phasewater interacting with spiritual energy in any way were massive. Not just Ves, but also the Five Scrolls Compact and many other powerful organizations would look at this exotic in a different manner if it could be manipulated with metaphysical power!

Ves needed to act extremely cautious here. Although it was a risk for him to attempt this exploration in a settlement that was under the complete control of the MTA, he simply didn't want to wait until he stumbled upon phasewater in the wild.

Who knew how long it would take for that to happen!

Though phasewater was supposed to be relatively prevalent in the dwarf galaxy, that didn't mean it was easy to find. Many alien races already understood the value of this exotic and exhausted a lot of easy sources.

Even then, the horde of human pioneering fleets flooding into the new frontier already uprooted a lot of them. Humanity's hunger for phasewater was as insatiable as Lucky's desire to fill his stomach with exotics!

All of this meant that the zones closest to the central star nodes such as Vulit had already been drained of phasewater. The Big Two along with the earliest waves of pioneers had already scoured them clean of every accessible drop of phasewater in all of those star systems.

Though there were probably more deposits of phasewater hidden in those areas, it probably took a lot more effort to uncover them. Even if the Larkinson Clan possessed the advanced prospecting tech that were sensitive to phasewater, it was unlikely that Ves could intrude into other people's turf and steal away the bounty unnoticed!

If the Larkinson Clan wanted to harvest phasewater in peace, it needed to range much further beyond the starting point of humanity's invasion of the Red Ocean!

All of that would take a lot of time. If Ves and Lucky didn't get in touch with phasewater in advance, who knew when they would actually have the chance to get close again!

This was why he decided to try and reach out to the phasewater sample today. He just couldn't hold himself back anymore.

Of course, he tried to act as discreetly as possible. He pretended to explain a few basic properties about phasewater to Casella while he quietly extended a minute spiritual projection towards the silent drop.

Just like regular water, phasewater was completely transparent and possessed the same fluidity.

If not for the fact that phasewater generated increasingly greater dimensional fluctuations up close, it would have been difficult to tell them apart!

As Ves brought his spiritual probe closer, he increasingly felt the effects of the dimensional warping.

It was as if he was walking on smooth pavement only to go offroad. The trail he traversed became increasingly difficult to traverse as it led straight into wild country!

When his spiritual probe approached a distance of around 13 meters of the sample, it became a bit more difficult for Ves to maintain it. The warping effect became more turbulent as his probe continued its way to the center of the cage.

Ves could already imagine that a lot of tech would malfunction when subjected to this dimensional turbulence. Moving parts would get misaligned while electronic signals might no longer convey their original messages!

"This effect is familiar."

The effect these strange dimensional fluctuations could have on technology reminded him of the hazardous conditions that Ves and the Flagrant Swordmaidens once endured on the surface of Aeon Corona VII.

He did not forget that the planet-wide dimensional warping effect was originally created by a crashed CFA battleship!

The Starlight Megalodon's malfunctioning FTL drives created such a powerful spectacle that a completely different ecosystem appeared on that cursed planet!

With all of the knowledge and insights he acquired since that time, Ves began to develop a different understanding of this incident.

His eyes minutely narrowed.

Did the CFA already possess abundant access to phasewater long before the Big Two secretly invaded the Red Ocean?

The fleeters put enough phasewater into the FTL drives of the Starlight Megalodon that their partial ruptures completely changed the environment of a heavy gravity planet!

Ves doubted that this could be done with just a single drop of phasewater!

The Starlight Megalodon last operated over three centuries ago. Humanity had just climbed out of the Age of Conquest and the Age of Mechs was just getting into swing.

Did humanity already reach the Red Ocean back then? What did the MTA or CFA do over here? Why did it take several centuries for the Big Two to finally open up the dwarf galaxy to the public?

Ves generated so many questions in his mind that he almost lost focus of his spiritual probe!

He quickly shook his head in order to clear his head of irrelevant thoughts. Though all of this speculation might have grave implications, he didn't have enough information to answer them. Whether the Big Two secretly came into contact with the Red Ocean centuries earlier was not even relevant to his interests.

Once he cleared his mind, he soon tried to complete his little test.

When his spiritual probe came as close as 6 meters to the drop of phasewater, the dimensional fluctuations became more severe.

Even though the space around the suspended drop of phasewater looked completely calm, Ves discovered that it was anything but tranquil! Strong dimensional turbulence

along with strange tears in the fabric of reality either battered or siphoned away the structure of the spiritual probe!

Ves hastily reinforced his fragile probe in order to prevent it from collapsing too early.

The longer his probe lingered in this area, the more damage it sustained, so Ves hastily pushed it closer to the phasewater drop.

The closer it got, the more he began to feel as if he was nearing something powerful and profound.

What would happen if his spiritual energy came into contact with phasewater?

Would it become disturbed? Would it pass on harmful energy to the spiritual probe? Would it become volatile and explode?

Ves already came up with many different answers, but when his spiritual probe finally reached the phasewater sample, it passed right through as if it was regular matter!

"What...?"