

Mech 3531

Chapter 3531: The Simile Halifax

The fleet was ready.

The new Journeymen were settling into the clan.

The Larkinson Clan's allies had completed their own business.

There was nothing preventing the Golden Skull Alliance from departing the Vulit Central Star Node.

After undergoing a final round of inspections, the expeditionary fleet had already lined up in front of a Langrange point in order to make their way out of this busy and prosperous star system.

"I'll miss this place." Ves sighed as he looked at the projection of the highly-developed star system.

"Meow." Lucky shook his head.

His cat didn't quite agree with this assessment. The biggest issue to him was how extensively the MTA controlled and monitored the entire place!

Perhaps an ordinary person wouldn't feel bothered by that, but the need to constrain his behavior was practically a nightmare for Lucky!

The cat was more than happy to leave this heavily-restricted place behind. He yearned to return to the old days where he was free to roam around as he wished and poke whatever he found interesting.

Ves rubbed Lucky's disgruntled head. "We'll be out soon enough. We just have to wait until the MTA escort ship arrives.

It did not take too long for the MTA to finally dispatch its representative.

The ship arrived with blazing fast speed that none of the ships in the Golden Skull Alliance could possibly match!

The Big Two were the primary users of phasewater harvested in the Red Ocean so it made sense that all of their ships had already been upgraded with the new superdrives.

"Damn, that's fast."

Ves envied the sheer amount of speed that these ships could reach in realspace. Just the ability to zip around inside star systems granted the Big Two a huge tactical advantage that the rest of humanity couldn't possibly catch up to until at least a couple of centuries had passed!

As the ship disengaged the space warping function of her superdrive, the sensors of his ships could finally get a solid look of the new MTA vessel.

The ship was an armed frigate. Though she was quite small compared to the warships that lingered all over Vulit, she was still a force to be reckoned with due to all of her advanced tech.

In fact, the warships that the MTA employed in the Red Ocean were more modern, powerful and advanced than the ones in the old galaxy.

Even without accessing any records, Ves could clearly recognize that the Simile Halifax had only been completed up to half a year ago. She was practically brand-new and completed her trials not too long ago.

Despite her relatively tiny mass and size compared to all of the ships of the Golden Skull Alliance put together, the Simile Halifax probably possessed enough capabilities to destroy entire second-class pioneering fleets!

Ves could easily imagine how such a slaughter could take place. The Simile Halifax was probably armed with long-ranged warship-grade weapons that could easily pick off enemy starships one by one at distances where many mech-grade weapons were ineffective!

In order to make sure that the Simile Halifax did not risk any encounter with expert mechs or taboo weapons that could pose a considerable risk to such a small vessel, she could make fantastic use of her superdrive to maintain the perfect distance at all times!

"What a deadly little package."

This was the power of a warship. While a frigate was no match to a battleship, they were still far bigger than a typical mech! If all of that capacity was allocated to combat-related functions, then such a vessel could easily match or exceed the power of a juggernaut!

"The Simile Halifax is hailing us, sir."

"Accept the hail." Ves instructed.

The projection of a highly familiar figure appeared in front of him. Ves practically sat up straighter in his chair as soon as he recognized his old acquaintance.

"Jovy! What the hell are you doing here?!"

"Hahaha!" The young MTA Journeyman laughed. "Surprised to see me? It took a lot of effort for me to complete my final assignments in a rush so that I could make it to the Red Ocean in time. I had to do a lot of pleading to replace the original officer assigned to this mission."

Ves was quite happy to be watched over by someone friendly and familiar instead of a complete stranger.

At the very least, Ves could trust that Jovy would not slack off or try to hinder the Larkinson Clan in any way.

Jovy also revealed a few clues in his words. Apparently, he wasn't supposed to be on this assignment, but worked extremely hard to obtain the chance to accompany the Golden Skull Alliance for the next 23 months.

"I'm glad to have your company while we take our first steps into the Red Ocean, but... I don't understand why. Are you truly sure about this, Jovy?"

The young MTA Journeyman responded with a smile. "If I make a mistake, I would only waste two years of my life at best. I am certain that I have made the right decision, though. You're always interesting to be around, Ves. Even if nothing blows up around your fleet, you always come up with an interesting new mech or invention. I want to be in the vicinity whenever something like that happens. I can't live an exciting life as yours, but I think I can get much of what I want if I follow you around."

In other words, Jovy was hoping to gain inspiration by accompanying the expeditionary fleet. It was certainly a much more exciting option than remaining in a place like Vulit and working in a design lab every day.

"I can't promise you anything, but I'll do my best to give you a reason to be grateful about your choice."

The two talked to each other a bit. Both of them already knew each other and neither of them were big on formality.

Of course, Ves always reminded himself that he was dealing with someone of great importance. Their status was so far apart from each other that he always had to make sure he stayed within the boundaries of what was permissible.

"For the time being, my Simile Halifax will constantly shadow your Spirit of Bentheim." Jovy explained. "You don't have to transmit your route or navigation data to us. We'll make sure we keep up with your ship no matter where she goes. Other than that, let me tell you that we are not allowed to interfere in any incidents between you and other human forces unless the latter are the aggressors. We won't allow you to use us as an

excuse to attack random pioneers. Lastly, we won't initiate any hostilities against alien forces unless there are other reasons. There are more rules that I will send to you later, but those are the main points. Do you understand what I've said?"

Ves nodded. "I'm already clear about the rules. I don't think that any human fleet will want to mess with us as soon as anyone detects the Smiling Halifax. People would have to be stupid to confront us with your ship in the middle of our formation."

"Hey, you'd be surprised what kind of stupidity our Association faces on a daily basis. You fell victim to the Vulcanites yourself for example. Now, their state has been taken back into human hands."

No thanks to the MTA. Ves had put too much faith in the MTA's willingness to enforce its own rules.

Though he thought highly about Jovy, Ves could never assume that the Smiling Halifax would react in a timely manner!

The two talked a bit more. Jovy and his crew made it clear that they were quite limited in what they could do. They were not allowed to meddle in the Golden Skull Alliance's affairs and Jovy was prohibited from providing obvious assistance!

This ruled out actions such as collaborating on a mech design or providing technical solutions for difficult problems.

Jovy smiled. "We can still hang out and exchange our views from time to time. We're both mech designers so we can still exchange with each other. I just have to be careful not to provide anything specific or proprietary to the Mech Trade Association."

"I see. Well, we can still gain much from each other even if we don't go into too many details."

Jovy possessed a different design philosophy from pretty much anyone else. Despite the difficult and abstract nature of his primary research interest, he somehow managed to transform probability manipulation into a real phenomena in relation to mechs!

An average mech designer could never make this accomplishment. Ves was eager to learn Jovy's methods and approach towards his work.

"I have a question, Ves."

"Please ask."

"Although I said that my frigate will be able to keep up with your ship, it would be convenient if you can tell me your first big destination. Where do you intend to travel first?" Jovy asked.

Ves paused for a moment. "We'll likely pay a visit to the Magair Middle Zone first."

"Good choice. Magair is relatively close to Vulit and has become a scavenger paradise. There are many ruined planets that used to host indigenous alien settlements. They're all gone, and many scavengers are digging holes in the ruined planets in order to recover treasure that hasn't already been recovered or destroyed."

"Digging through alien ruins sounds fun, but only for the first couple of times. I don't intend to stay in Magair for too long. Once my men become accustomed to alien civilizations, we can go deeper into the Red Ocean where the odds of encountering actual aliens is higher."

"Your plan is sound. Magair is a good starting point for many pioneering fleets. It has become a lot safer over the years as most of the real valuables that people are willing to fight for have already been retrieved. Now, many fleets treat it as a transit zone."

"The more powerful and daring pioneers head out as quickly as possible, but I'm glad you are exercising caution, Ves. The deeper zones are much more volatile."

Ves received another signal. It turned out that the Golden Skull Alliance finally received its turn to leave the star system.

"We're about to enter into FTL travel, so we'll have to continue this discussion another time. I'll talk to you later, Jovy."

"Goodbye and see you on the other side."

The Spirit of Bentheim and every other ship in the Golden Skull Alliance successfully transitioned into the higher dimensions, thereby marking their actual departure from one of the safest human strongholds in the Red Ocean!

"From now on, we'll be traversing the real frontier!"

"Meow!"

Despite traversing into a dangerous region of space where friendly ports of call were a rarity, the presence of the Simile Halifax meant that his fleet shouldn't encounter too many threats in the next two years.

This effectively gave the Larkinson Clan a buffer period to build up its own strength.

"Within two years, my clan not only needs to possess a lot more carrier vessels, but also be equipped with newly-designed mechs that will put my troops on par with the standards of the Red Ocean!"

These were large and ambitious goals. The biggest difficulty was that he had to get it all ready by the time that Jovy and the Simile Halifax had to go back to the MTA.

"It's doable."

Taking care of the mechs should be easy enough. Ves just had to make sure that the four new Journeymen did their jobs and designed a lot of mechs.

It was a lot harder to expand the fleet with additional carrier vessels. Ves had to build up a relationship with a power that owned a bunch of shipyards in the Red Ocean. That was not easy considering that many different pioneers were trying to do the same!

"Ugh, I'll think about it later." Ves pressed his fingers against his temple... "There has to be a better way to expand my fleet."

Chapter 3532: Welcome to the Larkinsons

The Golden Skull Alliance finally made its way out of the Vulit Central Star Node!

This was a new beginning for the people who originally came from the galactic rim of the Milky Way. Though the Larkinsons and their allies had all become fascinated at the fact that they entered a brand new galaxy, the exceptional degree of civilization and development in Vulit gave them the illusion that they were still close to home.

It was only after the Golden Skull Alliance truly left the star system managed directly by the Big Two that everyone soon realized that they had entered the true new frontier.

The basic rules of the Big Two still applied throughout the dwarf galaxy, but everyone understood it was the pioneers who made most of the laws.

As long as they possessed enough power, they could implement their own rules!

Some organizations used this power to build their own states. The citizens and associates of the first-rate superstates had already claimed large swathes of territories in order to expand the influence of the Terrans and Rubarthans in the Red Ocean.

Anyone entering these regions of space had to submit to the regime of whatever Rubarthan principality or Terran ancient clan was in charge!

The Golden Skull Alliance made sure to steer clear of these territories. Neither the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers or Crossers were eager to join one of these two super influences.

Though the benefits were great, the prospect of getting ordered around by arrogant Rubarthan princes or spoiled Terran dignitaries did not sit well with people like Patriarch Ves and Patriarch Reginald!

The Red Ocean was quite big and offered more than enough room for people of many different inclinations. There were still many different zones and regions where unaligned pioneers could roam without worrying about encroaching on the space claimed by the big traditional powers.

Of course, the absence of strong powers also led to a lot more conflicts between smaller parties!

As the expeditionary fleet continued to journey deeper into the Red Ocean, the Larkinsons frequently encountered remnants of past battles.

Mech wrecks, derelict starships and occasionally even entire debris fields floated in the cold of space, but never for too long.

Human scavenging fleets zealously lurked around in many corners of space. They immediately descended on the aftermath of a ruinous battle whenever the original combatants had already left!

The sheer amount of scavenging fleets the expeditionary fleet encountered was mind-boggling.

The Golden Skull Alliance had only just stepped out of Vulit and already encountered so many signs of past battles. Each of them had been fought rather recently if there was still debris left to scavenge.

The Larkinsons would have been a lot more reluctant to head even deeper into the Red Ocean after witnessing all of these sordid sights. The further they traveled away from civilization, the greater the likelihood of getting ambushed!

The actual situation was different. The people of the Golden Skull Alliance were still tense, but did not exhibit too much fear.

The expeditionary fleet frequently encountered other pioneering fleets along its route. Whenever the latter spotted the Simile Halifax traveling in the midst of the Larkinson fleets, they always made sure to keep their distance!

The deterrent of this single MTA frigate was incredibly effective and never failed to keep other humans on their toes.

This allowed the Larkinsons and its allies to relax their guard and focus their attention on other priorities.

Right now, the Larkinson Clan's main preoccupation was completing the reorganization of its expanded fleet. The mech legions also had to sort out a lot of different affairs after they all stationed their mechs in different carrier vessels.

The Wild Torch was a particular focal point to the Larkinsons. Her new crew were still in the process of learning and mastering her advanced tech and functions. The fleet carrier possessed a lot more depth than the Gorgoneion and could even operate independently if needed.

Still, the 36 combat carriers that he and his fellow Larkinsons had won in various tournaments also deserved a lot of attention!

Each of them were capable of hosting 60 mechs, which was the standard capacity for heartland-level combat carriers.

Aside from that, several of them diverged quite a lot from each other. Each different ship class was designed and built by different shipbuilding companies.

The 20 combat carriers that the Larkinson Battalion had won in the G-Aena League were all identical, but there were many other instances where a single combat carrier had to be operated in a substantially different way than the rest!

The Larkinsons adapted as best they could. No matter what oddities the shipbuilding companies had developed over the course of their existence, every human starship still shared a lot of traits. The crew quickly managed to figure out the basics, but they needed a lot more time to master all of the individual nuances of every ship class.

During these days, many new Larkinsons who had recently been recruited in the clan began to acclimate themselves to their new homes.

The most prominent among them were the new four Journeymen who would soon undertake one of the most important responsibilities of the Larkinson Clan.

Due to their great importance, many Larkinsons eagerly welcomed them aboard their ships. The different mech legions all understood the importance of establishing strong connections to the mech designers who would soon design their new combat machines.

Currently, a pair of female Journeymen looked gobsmacked at someone who looked like a genuine priestess!

"Let me get this straight." Janassa said in a disbelieving tone. "The strange capabilities to achieve an extremely high degree of accuracy and target prediction is not based on an advanced targeting system or even any technological component for that matter. It's instead derived from 'nudges' that is mentally passed on by your 'god' through the medium of your mech."

"Not just any mech. A living mech!" Priestess Samandra Avikon piously claimed! "Each of the living mechs of the Eye of Ylvaine are machines of faith. They respect and revere the Great Prophet. It is because of their unquestionable belief that they are graced with

the ability to hear his gospel! Whenever a believer is in need of deliverance, our prophet will always reward the faithful. Would you like to hear the sermon of Ylvaine yourself?"

"Uhhhh..."

"If you wish to become like our patriarch and design mechs that are blessed with divine power, then you MUST familiarize yourself with our scriptures. Come! Let me lead you to our prayer compartment aboard this ship. I will personally teach you the secret of designing mechs guided by Prophet Ylvaine's foresight.

Janassa and Tifi helplessly followed the enthusiastic priestess to a compartment that had been transformed into an indoor church!

Though the pair of Journeymen had already heard that the Larkinson Clan wasn't completely secularist and accommodated other beliefs, they underestimated their importance!

"Hey." Janassa quietly transmitted to her bosom friend through their private implant connection. "Do you buy the story this priestess is selling?"

Tifi adopted a contemptuous expression. "These Larkinsons are more crazy than I thought. Why does the patriarch even accommodate all of this nonsense? Mechs blessed by gods? This is not a credible explanation! There has to be a logical and rational explanation why these powerful heavy artillery mechs are consistently able to achieve near-perfect accuracy in different battles. I bet the secret lies within the neural interface. The Larkinsons may have added something to it that makes these mech pilots significantly more accurate than normal."

Though Janassa and Tifi respectfully listened to Priestess Avikon as she explained the history and development of the Ylvainan Faith, they found the stories difficult to stomach.

When the woman began to praise the Bright Martyr, the mech designers simply couldn't take it any longer.

"Are you serious?" Janassa frowned. "You claim that Patriarch Ves Larkinson is some sort of 'Bright Martyr' that is no less important than Prophet Ylvaine?"

"He is our guiding light and our savior who can bring us out of the coming dark! He is the trusted friend and confidant to the prophet in all of his incarnations! He is the god whose hands can lift you into the heavens and turn his mechs into gods!"

There was only so much nonsense that Janassa and Tifi could take.

The rest of the tour in the prayer compartment proceeded in a daze.

They only managed to regain their wits and their interests in the Ylvainans once they approached a couple of dormant Transcendant Punisher mechs.

The heavy artillery mechs not only looked heavy and imposing, but also carried an inexplicably pure and sacred presence.

"So this is one of these glows that all of the Larkinsons are raving about." Tifi commented.

The two newcomers couldn't help but become impressed by what the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan had accomplished. They had never heard of any mech designer who could implement something comparable in mechs!

"Ves Larkinson is the real deal." Janassa said with a touch more respect. "He didn't win the Wild Brawl Bowl for nothing, though that swordsman mech designer is also impressive."

The Eye of Ylvaine allowed their guests to study the Transcendent Punishers up close.

The two women generously took advantage of this offer. They brought one of them to a small workshop and partially dismantled the heavy mech.

They inspected every part they came across for any oddities that might explain where its glow and mystical capabilities came from. They even access the complete design schematics that they recently gained access to after they received their new credentials.

None of these studies provided the two with clear answers. The secrets of the Transcendent Punishers remained inaccessible to them despite inspecting a copy from top to bottom!

"Do you think... the Ylvainans may be right?" Tifi asked.

"Hah! As if! I don't believe any of their claims. There has to be an explanation for all of this. We're just missing it because we don't know where to look. Once we meet with our new boss again, we should ask him the truth. We need to understand where these glows and other capabilities come from if we want to collaborate with him in the future. We can't remain in the dark!"

By the time the two Journeymen ended their first day with the Eye of Ylvaine, they sat in their guest cabin questioning everything they had learned today.

"Well, it shouldn't matter too much." Janassa eventually shrugged. "With our specialties, we'll mostly be assigned to melee mech design projects. We won't get involved in the design of ranged mechs. Since these Ylvainans are so good at target acquisition and tracking, they should pilot ranged mechs exclusively."

Her friend nodded. "From what I've seen so far, the Eye of Ylvaine is shaping up to be an excellent artillery outfit."

"Mech legion."

"Yeah, mech legion." Tifi said. "Whatever these Ylvainans rely on to achieve such stellar accuracy, this is clearly a proprietary method of the Larkinsons that can grant their forces an unquestionable advantage in any battle. It's quite impressive how well the Larkinsons have managed to protect this valuable method for so long. In hindsight, it shouldn't have been a surprise we found nothing during our inspections. It would have been too easy if we managed to identify the source of all of that predictive targeting in a single pass."

"Maybe we should try again tomorrow and look more closely at suspicious parts."

"Let's do that, then. I won't leave this ship until I get to the bottom of this secret!"

Janassa and Tifi wasted three more days on fruitless investigation before they finally gave up on this matter. They left the Eye of Ylvaine in disgust and chose to visit the Swordmaidens next.

The Swordmaidens were secularists, at least. They should make more sense, right?

"Ahhhh! Why did that woman just cut off the arms of those trainees!? Are you women crazy?!"

"Relax." Commander Sendra smirked as she led the two new Journeymen around.

"We're used to it. None of these injuries are fatal. See? Our medical bots are already in the process of putting the arms back into position."

"Even if that's the case, why would you even do something so barbaric?!"

"We are warriors. When we go out and fight with our lives on the line, we need to be able to bear the pain and death that comes with every battle. If our trainees can't even bear the loss of a limb, they're not strong enough to become our sisters!"

Madness... This was madness. The entire Larkinson Clan was filled with crazies!

Chapter 3533: Unclear Explanations

Janassa Pellier and Tifi Colson weren't the only ones undergoing culture shock at the moment.

The Voiken siblings were also introduced to the variety of different subcultures that had settled into the Larkinson Clan!

"Are you being serious, commander?"

Commander Valerie Chancy of the Penitent Sisters gave them a rueful smile. "Oh, we are completely serious about this matter. We do not expect you to embrace our words, but that does not make them any less true. The Superior Mother is real. The Superior Mother is a Supreme that is more powerful than any god. The Superior Mother is also the mother of our patriarch and the grandmother of his child. If you don't believe us, then ask Patriarch Ves. If he is in the mood, he may be willing to call down his mother to you. The sooner you get acquainted with the Superior Mother, the sooner you can start with designing our new mechs. Our Valkyrie Redeemer model could use an update."

The legion commander began to recite a whole list of issues that the Penitent Sisters wanted the mech designers to address for the next iteration of this famed model.

Many of the issues mentioned by the Penitent Sister Commander sounded reasonable to Sara and Dulo Voiken. They pertained to ordinary technical specifications such as the range of motion of the Valkyrie Redeemer's arms or the inadequate defensive properties of its round shield.

The two Voiken mech designers both possessed specialties that could offer a lot of potential improvements to the Valkyrie Redeemer design.

Sara couldn't do too much as the Valkyrie Redeemer was an offensive mech model that was on the lighter side of its weight class.

Nonetheless, she could overhaul its armor system and implement a new solution that offered more damage resistance without substantially increasing the mass of the mech.

Dulo Voiken could do a lot more. As a spearman mech specialist, there was much about the Valkyrie Redeemer that he could improve. While he found the mech design to be good in many ways, he could still tell that its designers did not possess a deep understanding of spear-wielding mechs.

If he had free reign over the Valkyrie Redeemer design, he would turn it into a much more formidable combat machine that did not have to rely on charge attacks in order to slaughter its foes!

Yet as Sara and Dulo continued to learn more about the properties of this mech models and its users, it became more difficult for them to accept everything they heard.

They did not try to refute the Penitent Sisters, though. They grew up in a family that was filled with many different mech designers, each of which developed their own unique perspectives on reality. The two Voiken mech designers were a little more accustomed to abnormal behavior.

"Can we examine one of these Valkyrie Redeemers, commander?" Dulo requested.

"Why certainly." Commander Chancy said. "I'll lead you over to our workshop. If you wish to disassemble it, make sure not to strip it down completely."

"For whatever reason?"

"Our Valkyrie Redeemers are living mechs. We have found that they can only truly remain alive if there is a bit of them left intact. Our mech technicians can tell you more about this. Just make sure to never pull our mechs apart completely. Think of them as living bodies. They can only sustain life if there is enough of a basis to do so. This is why we must always care for them and why we do not easily mix and match parts from different mechs together."

That is certainly weird to mech designers such as Sara and Dulo. Of all of the mechs they worked with, they never encountered a situation where they needed to treat mechs as if they were living, breathing organic bodies!

Though the Penitent Sisters generously allowed the Voikens to peek inside one of their Valkyrie Redeemers, there were always mech technicians hovering nearby.

"These Penitent Sisters are too protective of their mechs." Sara frowned as she studied the programming code of the Valkyrie Redeemer's operating system. "They're more than machines to them. They truly buy into Patriarch Ves Larkinson's vision."

"Well, you know what design philosophies are like, sister. They have a way of creating new possibilities."

"I understand that, but there has to be a limit to what is possible with mech designs! How can a mech designer grant life to what is supposed to be a lifeless machine? Where do these glows come from and how can these mechs induce so much fear in enemy mech pilots?"

The Voikens had done their homework so they knew that this mech model and its variants were successfully being employed in a distant war that consumed an entire star sector.

The fact that the two leading mech designers of the Larkinson Clan managed to design a mech that was able to compete against other military mechs was a great accomplishment!

Yet now that they finally got to tinker with a Valkyrie Redeemer, they came no closer to a satisfying answer!

"I can understand what Madame Gloriana Wodin has brought to this mech design. Her design approach is easier to follow." Sara frowned. "What is less clear is what Patriarch Ves Larkinson added to this mech design. I can clearly feel its glow, but there is no obvious source of this effect!"

"Have you tried asking the Penitent Sisters?"

"They all say that we're basking in the presence of the Superior Mother."

There was no way the Voikens could embrace this claim at face value.

"What about their so-called battle formations?" Dulo asked. "Is there a reasonable explanation for their ability to unleash giant combination attacks that can bypass every form of defense and snuff out the lives of hundreds of people?"

Sara grimaced. "Their answer is the same. The Penitent Sisters don't attribute this capability to their mechs or themselves. They all believe it's the Superior Mother at work!"

Suffice to say, Sara and Dulo Voiken did not gain as much as they wanted. The Penitent Sisters were some of the strongest and most effective soldiers of the Larkinson Clan, but the source of much of their impressive combat strength sounded like fantasy rather than a serious design solution!

As the Voikens spent time among the other mech legions, they couldn't get used to the other quirks of the Larkinson Clan.

One of the cultural aspects that they were not accustomed to was how close and casual everyone behaved around each other.

Though the clansmen serving in the Larkinson Army behaved with decorum whenever they needed to, many times they just threw aside all formality and joked around with each other as if they were buddies drinking in a bar!

This sort of behavior wasn't only confined to the lower ranks.

There were plenty of instances where Sara and Dulo Voiken had seen officers joking around with enlisted personnel and vice versa.

The boundaries within the hierarchy were especially blurred when they paid a visit to the Flagrant Vandals!

"You're back, Rosa!"

"Heh, did you think you could keep me away for long?" Venerable Rosa Orfan grinned. She lifted up the bottles that were intertwined between her fingers. "I brought presents this time! Let's open these up and see whether the Rubarthans know their beer."

Sara and Dulo were not unaccustomed to seeing expert pilots. The Voiken Family raised several of them and had even more on retainer.

The expert pilots working for the Voiken Family were all treated with great respect. It was impossible to see anyone casually walking up to them and engage in small talk in their former family!

"This..." Dulo trailed off. "The Larkinson Clan sure handles matters differently."

Sara remained quiet for a while. Once she got over the shock of how the members of the Larkinson Clan treated each other so casually despite the differences in rank and status, she figured out an explanation.

"Family."

"What?"

"The reason why these Larkinsons behave so close is because they genuinely treat each other like family." She clarified.

"I can see that, sister, but the Voikens we spent time with back home are family as well, but we always respected our elders without fail."

"The Larkinson Clan is different. Many of them are inducted into it like us, but they aren't treated as outsiders at all. It's amazing if you think about it. This is what a true family should look like. I can see that the higher ups genuinely love and respect the people they lead."

Dulo looked impressed. "That does sound amazing."

"It's because of this weird network that the Larkinsons connected to our heads. It allows them to open up to each other in a way that is more truthful and direct than any other familiarization method that I have heard of. It is incredible to see how one unique feature can completely change the dynamics of this clan. We're part of a new kind of society, one that can better bind different people together."

The people who were part of the Larkinson Clan in the early stages were all used to this phenomenon, but the new recruits always became shocked at how easy it was to get close to other clansmen.

Dulo grew shocked as he realized another important implication!

"Sister!"

"Yes, brother?"

"Have you noticed that none of the Larkinsons have ever displayed any fear or suspicion whether anyone here is a Crown terrorist?"

Sara Voiken widened her eyes. "You mean... they can't stay hidden within the Larkinson Clan?"

They followed up on this matter by quizzing a few Larkinsons on this topic.

It turned out that the clansmen never worried about this possibility!

"Heh, those other orgs might worry themselves to death, but our clan is different." An officer of the Flagrant Vandals spoke with pride. "It starts with recruitment. We don't let in any shady people, you see. We've become extremely good at stopping any suspicious people before they can enter our clan. They have to gain the approval of the Golden Kitty, you see."

"The Golden... Kitty?"

The officer pointed at the emblem of the Golden Cat that had been painted on the surface of a bulkhead. "Our mascot! Don't you know? The Golden Kitty is watching over all of us! Just ask the Avatars of Myth. They erected their own statues of her in order to deepen their relationship with her, and I don't blame them. The Golden Kitty is the heart of our family."

Every Larkinson had a high opinion of the Golden Cat. No matter who they asked, they not only believed this mystical cat was real, but also helped them out in battle!

"Is the Golden Cat a god?"

"Of course not! She's the Golden Cat!"

"And that is different from a god?"

"Yes! Gods don't exist."

"Then how do you describe the Golden Cat when everything I've heard about her sounds as if she is a god?!"

"She's the Golden Cat! I can't explain it any better than that. She's just... there whenever I close my eyes and think about family or the Larkinson Clan. She's not one of those non-existent sky gods who people made up in order to spread a false belief. The Golden Cat is a real cat, but an invisible one. You can feel her but you can't observe her. Well, I've heard some Larkinsons who have claimed to see the Golden Cat with their own eyes, but I haven't received this honor yet. I hope I'll get my chance one day."

As the Voikens kept rotating from mech legion to mech legion, they became more aware of certain kinds of existences that the Larkinsons couldn't clearly define but were apparently real!

All of them sounded like gods, and several groups such as the Penitent Sisters and the Ylvainans literally treated them as such.

What surprised the Voikens quite a lot was that even the secularists treated these strange and powerful existences as gods even if they did not use this exact term!

All of this generated a lot of questions and confusion for the Voiken siblings.

"Are the Larkinsons really consorting with gods or are they all being deceived?" Sara Voiken wondered.

Chapter 3534: A Few Answers

After going through an acclimation process, the four new Journeymen learned many new aspects about the clan that they didn't realize earlier.

Though they gained a lot of answers, they also gained a lot of questions as well. Many of them were related to the patriarch one way or another. Whether it was his living mechs, his glows and the strange entities which he somehow turned into the Larkinson Clan's pet gods, none of this made sense to the new Journeymen!

They became quite happy once they ended their tours and shuttled over to the Spirit of Bentheim.

The factory ship had become their main home and workplace for the foreseeable future.

Janassa and Tifi were fairly impressed by the factory ship, but Sara and Dulo had seen better back when they lived in the galactic heartland.

Nonetheless, it was the people who worked and lived on the ship that were truly remarkable to the new recruits.

"These Larkinsons are truly different." Sara observed as they all gathered in a small conference room.

"That's an understatement. I've studied all of their mechs and I still can't figure out where their glows come from or how some of the mechs are able to exhibit far greater power than they should!"

Tifi Coslone turned her head to the only empty seat in the room. "I think we'll have answers soon. The source of many of the Larkinson Clan's unique features comes from its patriarch. Our patriarch."

The more they learned about the strengths of the clan, the more they admired and respected the principal person who made it all possible!

Certainly, there were plenty of impressive individuals among the Larkinsons. Its expert pilots, its mech commanders and its other leaders had all contributed a lot to the clan, but none of them were as pivotal as Ves Larkinson!

In the opinion of the four Journeymen, none of them could ever replicate what the current patriarch had accomplished. The main reason for that was because they lacked the ability to grant so many advantages! Their design philosophies weren't so exaggerated!

Though they had already read a lot of impressive stories about Patriarch Ves, seeing how much he had done for the clan caused them to develop a lot of awe and admiration for this impressive mech designer.

This was decidedly unusual as they were all Journeymen who belonged to the same generation. Even if one of them enjoyed more success than others, it was hard for other Journeymen to bow their heads to a fellow peer.

This situation no longer applied here. Ves had the record and the accomplishments to prove that he was better than all of them. Mech designers always judged each other by their ranks and by the impact of their work, and Ves clearly scored exceptionally well on the latter!

When Ves entered the conference room with his pet Lucky in tow, the four Journeymen all stood up in respect.

"Please return to your seats." Ves said as he casually waved his hand. "We're all colleagues and work partners here. I may be the leader of the Larkinson Clan, but when we engage in mech design-related topics, we are all fellow Journeymen."

"That's hard to maintain so long our contribution isn't able to catch up to yours." Tifi spoke.

"I've heard you have all shown a lot of curiosity in my work."

"Yes."

A short moment of silence ensued. The four Journeymen had so many questions that they simply didn't know where to start.

"I can guess what you're wondering about and what kind of answers you are seeking." Ves smirked as he spoke up. "I can't explain everything I do in words. I've done that a lot of times and people don't seem to be able to accept all of my claims. I think the best way for you to truly accept what you have already heard from others but can't acknowledge is to experience them in person."

The patriarch lifted up a heavy tome with a hard metal cover and an impressive medallion at the front.

"Meow." Lucky hovered next to the book and licked its cover.

"Goldie? Can you come out here and introduce yourself more directly to these fine Journeymen?"

Nyaaaaa!

To the utter amazement of the four newcomers, a bright, golden presence manifested above the Larkinson Mandate!

The beautiful and ethereal golden form that had just appeared into view was unlike anything the Journeymen had seen before.

They came from different parts of the old galaxy and had all enjoyed an excellent upbringing.

Yet nothing they had witnessed before could ever compare to this brand new life form that made the claims about Larkinsons consorting with actual gods a lot more plausible!

"This... isn't a projection, right?" Dulo questioned.

As Goldie proudly presented her form, Ves grabbed a hold of her body and rubbed her head sily.

Nyaaaaa! Nyaaaaa! Nyaaaaa!

"She's not a projection." Ves said with a grin. "The Golden Cat here is a real living being. Just look closely at her and feel the bond that exists between the two of you. Each and every clansman is tied to Goldie, and that makes her special."

He threw Goldie towards Dulo Voiken who reacted with surprise as the cat phased through his chest and came out of his back.

This was a pattern that conformed to projections, yet during the moment Goldie passed through his body, Dulo could somehow sense that she was much more than a computer animation!

The other Journeymen received their own opportunities to interact with the much-beloved Golden Cat. The closer they got, the more they sensed how she truly functioned as the heart of the Larkinson Clan.

Nyaaaaa~

After Goldie had done her job, she cutely wiggled her tail before diving back in the Larkinson Mandate.

Another silence fell over the conference room.

"Are they ghosts of dead cats and other creatures?"

"No. Don't call them ghosts, Janassa. They're not dead. Well, mostly."

"Then should we call them gods? Some Larkinsons have no problem with doing that." She remarked.

Ves shook his head. "Don't listen to them. Not every Larkinson knows what they're talking about. Call them... spirits. That's what I call them at least. They're powerful and possess capabilities that are vastly different from organic, corporeal beings such as you and I, but that doesn't mean they are gods. My spirits simply resemble them in a superficial manner."

"How... how many spirits are there in the Larkinson Clan?"

"Uhm, let me count." Ves briefly tallied his design spirits in his mind. "We have 11 active spirits at the moment. There's one more that's inactive and another one that has perished. More will continue to join us over time, so if there isn't a spirit that suits your needs, I'll make sure we get one one way or another."

"Can we have a list of them and an explanation on what they do for the Larkinson Clan?"

Ves shook his head. "No. I would like to, but I don't want to put too many details in a document that might end up in someone else's hands. You've already talked to our mech pilots and studied my mechs. You should be able to get a pretty good idea of what each design spirit is all about. You just need to put aside your skepticism and accept what you have learned."

"That... won't be easy, sir."

"Well, there's plenty of time for you to understand the value of our design spirits. I'll fill you in on any details you should know as we begin to work on our design projects. Other than that, I prefer you just perform your own research and make your own conclusions. That is how most people in our clan have come to accept their existence."

This was also the reason why many different Larkinsons developed their own interpretations of the design spirits.

"Design spirits, glows and so on are all related to my design philosophy." He continued. "It's inevitable that you won't be able to comprehend everything surrounding them. In practice, you should just leave it all to me when we work on different design projects."

Ves continued to explain a few more basic details about his design spirits before he moved on to another item on the agenda.

"Let's talk about a more interesting and relevant topic to all of us. What are your thoughts on the mech models utilized by the Larkinson Army? Don't pay too much attention to their metaphysical properties. Instead focus on their fundamental roles and their value to our forces. How well do you think our mech legions can compete against other human forces?"

The new Journeymen all exchanged glances with each other.

Janassa Pellier, who possessed a bolder personality so far, spoke up first.

"I think we can all agree that our... mech legions are strong in specific scenarios. The isolated standard defensive battles that the clan has fought against several military forces in the past showcases the unique strengths that allows our troops to wipe out stronger mech forces."

"Not every enemy will fail as badly as the Fridaymen and the Vulcanites, though." Tifi Coslone said. "The pioneering fleets of the Red Ocean are often stronger, more advanced, better equipped and more numerous. They also put actual thought into their mech rosters that allows them to have an answer for many different battle scenarios, from encountering ambushes to being forced to conduct groundside assaults."

Ves crossed his arms. "I understand what you mean. Expanding and diversifying our mech roster is our highest priority for our upcoming round of mech design projects. I already developed a few new ideas to grant every mech legion a mix of models that should be able to synergize with each other. If you have any ideas on how to better accomplish this, then feel free to offer suggestions."

Dulo Voiken immediately voiced one. "I think we should provide spearman mechs for the Living Sentinels, sir."

It made sense for him to propose a new spearman mech design. Ves found it notable that Dulo wanted to dedicate this mech design to the weakest mech legion in the Larkinson Clan.

"Explain, please."

"The Living Sentinels is the equivalent of a state militia, more or less. They consist of mech pilots who are either starting out as active servicemen or are not willing to adopt

the stricter regimes of the other mech legions. That means that the Sentinel mech pilots always fall behind the others in terms of piloting skill."

"That is all true. What does this have to do with your spearman mech?"

"When we studied the Living Sentinels, we all noticed that they have adopted the Bright Warrior model as their all-purpose mech. While the mech stands out for being easier to pilot, it is still difficult for the Sentinels to make the most out of their Bright Warriors. I can't speak for their use in ranged combat, but when they are deployed as swordsman mechs, you can notice a clear difference in effectiveness when the performance of the Living Sentinels are compared to the Avatars of Myth and most notably the Swordmaidens."

The difference in performance when they were all piloting the same model was too big! The Avatars fought considerably better than the Sentinels, but both were grossly overshadowed by the Swordmaidens!

Dulo continued to explain his proposal.

"The Living Sentinels under the leadership of Commander Casella Ingvar are constantly improving, but there is a limit to how good these second-line mech pilots can become. There is a better and more convenient method to increase their battle effectiveness. If we replace their swordsman mechs with spearman mechs of my design, we can quickly make them more effective in melee combat! This is because I can design a spearman mech that excels at stabbing and doesn't necessarily need to do more. Such a machine is associated with a much lower skill floor as mech pilots aren't expected to perform several different sword techniques in the middle of an intense battle. They only have to stab repeatedly!"

That was quite an intriguing proposal... Ves seriously weighed the merits of this suggestion. Were the Living Sentinels better off with ditching all of their swordsman mechs?

Chapter 3535: Useful Proposals

The Design Department turned idle for a couple of months. The completion of the Everchanger marked the formal end of the last design round.

Many changes had occurred since that time. The Golden Skull Alliance shed its sub-capital ships before passing through both a lesser and greater beyonder gate.

Once the expeditionary fleet arrived in Vulit, the Larkinsons and its allies did their best to adjust to the environment and acquire as many additional carrier vessels as possible.

Ves and the other mech designers had to perform so many different tasks that they simply could not spare any time to start a new round of mech designs.

It was different now. The Larkinson Clan's exit from Chance Bay meant that there was no possibility for the clansmen to participate in any reality-based tournaments.

Sure, the Larkinsons could always choose to participate in one of the many virtual tournaments held on the galactic net, but the prize pools were much worse and entry requirements were too harsh.

The tournaments held in Chance Bay were more generous than usual because they served additional purposes. Competitions held in realspace also held greater attraction because none of the action was fake.

While Ves found it a pity that his clan wouldn't be able to win anymore combat carriers with relative ease, he finally had time to return to his original purpose.

There was nothing better for him than to go back to designing mechs, and right now he enjoyed the process of preparing for the next design round.

Right now, his highest priority was to make sure the four new Journeymen became productive as soon as possible. This was why he gathered them together in a small conference room in order to hear out their ideas.

After spending several weeks among the different mech legions, Janassa, Tifi, Sara and Dulo should have come up with a lot of useful design concepts.

If they failed to come up with any good ideas, then Ves would seriously question whether he hired the right people. He expected better from mech designers of this caliber!

Fortunately, the Journeymen who participated in the Wild Brawl Bowl didn't lack for ideas. Their minds were nimble and they had plenty of time to think on how they could best leverage their design philosophies.

The entire reason why Ves went through the trouble of hiring four talented and capable Journeymen was to give more options to the Larkinson Army, after all. He did not really need their help to design additional commercial mechs though he still looked forward to collaborating with them on that end.

The mech concept that Dulo Voiken was presenting at the moment sounded quite intriguing to Ves. He never thought about having the Living Sentinels exchange their swordsman mechs for spearman mechs.

While Ves understood the logic of this proposal, it was still a massive change that would disrupt a lot of arrangements.

"By my knowledge, every mech cadet undergoes basic training in swordsmanship." He spoke. "Even if they don't have a talent in swordsmanship, every cadet has to pour

years of training in order to become proficient at wielding swords before they are allowed to graduate. No melee mech pilot should be bad at piloting swordsman mechs."

The other Journeymen including Dulo all nodded. This was already the case for third-class mech pilots. Second-class pilots had to undergo much more rigorous training, but they were often able to keep up as long as they received at least one augmentation.

"I agree with what you said, but will these mech pilots actually be able to display the full range of their swordsmanship skills in the middle of an intensive battle?" Dula responded. "An elite or highly disciplined mech pilot should easily be able to keep his cool, but a typical Living Sentinel mech pilot doesn't possess those qualities. To them, real battles are so chaotic and dangerous that they may not be able to match their performance in their training sessions."

This was a reasonable point. While Ves did not pay too much attention to the Living Sentinels as of late, he could still guess what their mech pilots were like. All of the better ones should have joined one of the more elite and prestigious mech legions instead, so the ones that remained were ultimately not good enough.

Ves still harbored doubts, though.

"If these mech pilots can't fight well with swordsman mechs, why do you think they'll be able to do any better with spearman mechs?" He asked. "I don't think spearmanship is a standard course in the curriculum of a mech academy. Will the mech pilots be able to transition successfully to a mech of your design?"

"Definitely." Dulo confidently answered. "I have worked with many mech pilots before, not all of whom trained with spearmanship. It is easy for them to get started with spears, especially if they have already gained proficiency in a more advanced weapon such as a sword. Spearmanship is easy to start with. It only takes a few weeks of training for mech pilots to know how to best perform a basic stab. While such a mech is not a great individual threat, the beauty of spearman mechs is that they perform a lot better when fighting alongside each other. Forming a wall of spears will result in a qualitative improvement in battle power!"

"That's assuming the enemy doesn't bombard this tight and static formation." Janassa added.

Dulo frowned at the woman. "That applies to every mech formation. Even if it isn't viable to adopt a tight formation, they can still achieve good and consistent performance. Sure, they probably won't fight too brilliantly, but they can pose enough of a threat to stop any incoming melee mechs, especially when they are designed in the hoplite configuration."

Ves wasn't so sure about that idea.

"The Living Sentinels should be our only defense-oriented mech legion, so I plan to provide them with an excellent defensive space knight design. That already covers their defensive needs. What the Sentinels require on top of that is an offensive instrument that can take out enemy mechs rather than stop them in their tracks."

The spearman mech specialist smiled. He did not get upset because Ves shot down one of his suggestions.

"Then we can go in the other direction. What if we can design a spearman mech that can complement this defensive mech? The Living Sentinels can deploy their super-defensive space knights in front and place their spearman mechs right behind. The latter should be able to stab their polearms forward through the gaps between the shields. It is a classic formula that has worked for many different forces."

This is one of the oldest combination tactics in existence. It was used by human armies in antiquity and saw a resurgence when the Age of Mechs commenced.

Such formations possessed many known weaknesses, but their strengths were undeniable. As long as enemy units only approached from the front, any basic spear-and-shield formation could stop them in their tracks and grind them down at a steady pace!

The Larkinson Army might not even have to dispatch flanking units in order to roll up the stalled enemy mechs.

Ves smiled at Dulo. "I like this idea. Please work out your proposal further and we'll discuss it at a later date. You will need to discuss this matter with Commander Casella Ingvar as the Living Sentinels must be willing to adopt this new spearman mech model. That said, this also means the Living Sentinels must obtain an adequate defensive space knight model. Does your sister have any ideas?"

"I have." Sara Voiken spoke up. "The Living Sentinels are currently using the Bright Warriors in their defensive configurations to serve their purpose, but this is merely an adequate solution. Though the Bright Warriors possess balanced specs and are easy to pilot, their ability to withstand damage is not as optimal. I can design a medium space knight that can truly excel at blocking enemy mechs or resisting massed firepower. With my specialty, these knight mechs can easily resist three to five times as much kinetic or explosive damage than your Bright Warriors!"

This was definitely an attractive option to Ves! He knew that the Bright Warriors didn't actually perform that badly in their roles, but they possessed unnecessary modules that were more relevant to offensive mechs than ones that were designed to take a lot of punishment.

"A defensive mech for the Living Sentinels should have more features than that." Ves said. "Does your mech concept possess any other features that allows it to stand out further?"

Sara furrowed her brows for a moment. "I can think of five or six ideas, but I will need to perform further research before I am ready to present them to you. A defensive knight mech design can perform drastically differently depending on how we allocate its capacity. We can make it more mobile by fitting it with a larger flight system. We can increase its defensive options by equipping it with a shield generator, though that introduces many other complications."

"I understand. I think that equipping them with shield generators is worth the effort. They are also a bit more efficient at blocking energy attacks, so they can adequately compensate for your weakness in this area."

There wasn't as much to discuss about this defensive space knight mech proposal. Such mechs were inherently simpler and Ves already wanted to provide the Living Sentinels with a sturdier defensive option.

Seeing that Sara Voiken was willing to undertake this project, Ves shifted his attention to another Journeyman.

"It's your turn now, Janassa. What kind of mech do you think you can provide to one of our mech legions?"

The woman blinked. "Well, as you know, I share the same design philosophy as my friend Tifi, but I work better with lighter mech designs. I have formed many ideas on how to upgrade the offensive strengths of our clan's current melee mech roster, but I also prepared a few proposals for new mech designs. The Swordmaidens currently don't have a swordsman mech that matches well with them. I've already talked to them and learned that Swordmaster Ketis is already preparing to design a true spaceborn swordsman mech for them, but I'd like to collaborate with her to make it even stronger in combat. There is no other area where my design philosophy can be of greater use at this time."

Ves looked thoughtful. "Are you sure about working on Ketis' new mech design for the Swordmaidens? Maybe Tifi would be a better partner for this project instead."

"No. I've already discussed this with Swordmaster Ketis. She intends to design a fairly mobile medium mech that is light enough to flank and maneuver around the battlefield. Such a design will have more limited capacity which is not as constraining to me. I am confident I can strengthen this greatsword-wielding mech in an efficient and effective manner."

"I like your confidence. Since you've already started to talk with Ketis about this, then you are already working on this project. You can continue to work with her, but keep in mind that she will always be in charge."

"I can accept that." Janassa nodded. "She intimately understands the needs of the Swordmaidens. I would never presume to know better."

After hearing Janassa out, Ves turned to the fourth new Journeymen.

"Last, we turn to you. What have you been thinking about in the past few weeks?"

Tifi Coslone finally received the opportunity to present her proposal.

"The Avatars of Myth is supposed to be the assault legion of the Larkinson Clan, but they do not possess the right tools at the moment. I believe I can help them with that by designing a powerful offensive axeman mech that can break through shields and tear through any defensive formation."

Now that was new! Ves hadn't even thought of providing this kind mech to the Avatars!

Still, axeman mechs were completely new to the Larkinson Clan. Ves needed to hear more before he was willing to embrace this proposal.

"Please explain further, Tifi. Why do the Avatars need an axeman mech?"

Chapter 3536: Design Project Planning

"Do you envision this axe-wielding machine as a medium mech or a heavy mech?" Ves asked Tifi just as she started to elaborate on her proposal.

"I would love to realize it as a heavy mech, but..."

"An assault unit needs to field mechs that can close in on the enemy in a timely manner."

"Correct, sir. In order to keep the mech mobile enough, it is best to stick with the medium weight class. I can still turn it into a mech that is sturdy enough to undertake the dangerous act of assaulting enemy lines while at the same time providing it with enough offensive power to tear up defensive formations."

"A lancer mech can break apart defensive formations much more effectively." Dulo Voiken remarked. "The greatest advantage is that their shock power is so great that they can punch open holes immediately at first contact. These axemen mechs of yours need time to launch repeat attacks."

"Axeman mechs aren't as limited as lancer mechs." Tifi Coslone defended her idea. "Axeman mechs do not have to build up momentum and they can block an enemy unit's advance with their own frames. They also fight much better in confined spaces or in areas where maneuverability is limited."

Everyone here was a Journeyman, so they already understood the pros and cons of axeman mechs. What Tifi said was indeed correct, but that did not necessarily mean the Avatars should rush to accept an axeman mech.

Ves said his own piece. "I think the Avatars of Myth may require a lancer mech in the future, but for now I am already considering one for the Eye of Ylvaine in a future design round. If I think about how the Avatars of Myth are utilized in previous battles, I think it is important for it to be able to stop or pin down enemy units. Lancer mechs can't do that because they spend most of their time building up momentum and finding the right angles to perform their charge attacks. I think equipping the Avatars with an axeman mech fit their needs much better. The only issue is that this mech legion never has a history of utilizing these weapons. Unlike spears, axes have a higher skill floor. It takes considerably more training to become proficient at wielding such dangerous weapons."

There was no way that Tifi missed this fact. She already thought about this issue and formulated an argument.

"Axes are indeed more difficult and uncommon than swords and spears, but the Avatars should be able to handle this weapon type." Tifi calmly responded. "Melee mech pilots who prefer to master the sword are better with the Swordmaidens. Those who are more flexible and do not possess a passion for swordsmanship should be able to master the use of an axe, especially a large and heavy one that emphasizes brute force instead of exquisite techniques."

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "I see. You want to design a mech that isn't flexible enough to fight one-on-one duels but possesses enough mechanical power to tear through shield walls, is that what you're suggesting?"

"Yes. The spear-and-shield combination that you have discussed earlier? My axeman mech is an answer to that. They can chop apart spears and hack through shields as long as they possess the initiative, which they should as shield walls are highly rigid and inflexible mech formations. Axeman mechs can also be utilized to rip through starships and large facilities. They just need to be equipped with a greataxe that is large and sharp enough."

Unlike the other suggestions that Ves had heard so far, he wasn't sure whether he should support this idea.

He knew how effective axeman mechs could be when he recalled one of his previous battles. The Avido Berserker Mech Regiment used them along with even heavier mechs

that were equipped with hammers to smash through the lines of the Golden Skull Alliance.

While the hateful Vulcanites failed to crush the Larkinson and Crosser mechs that resisted the Avido Berserkers, that was because other variables came into play.

If the Larkinsons and Crosser mechs had to fight against the Molten Hammer Mech Division including the Avido Berserkers on equal terms, Ves would actually bet on the dwarven mechs!

The main reason why he was so eager to supply so many new specialized mech designs to his mech legion was to bring their effective combat strength on par with proper military mech divisions like the Molten Hammers.

The dwarves had taught the Larkinsons a good lesson about the power of combined arms!

Therefore, the main criteria that Ves used to determine whether a mech proposal was good was whether it helped a mech legion improve its own fighting system.

Right now, Ves used his imagination to envision how the Avatars of Myth would fight if they were equipped with Tifi Coslone's axeman mech.

The Avatars of Myth would probably fight similar to the Molten Hammers. Offensive space knights led the charge and crashed into enemy lines first.

Following up on the space knights were axeman mechs. The latter would either attack the stalled enemy lines from the flanks or just squeeze through the friendly space mechs in order to attack the enemy defenses up front if there were no other alternatives!

Combined with the right glows and a powerful axe, this simple approach could achieve considerable success.

Of course, these axeman mechs were not strong in everything. They were less efficient in defensive combat and were usually a bit more sluggish than swordsman mechs.

Yet as long as they possessed enough striking power, these weaknesses were more than acceptable!

The only real concern that Ves had was whether the Avatars of Myth could actually stomach piloting axeman mechs.

Ves wasn't sure whether the Avatars should even replace all of their swordsman mechs for axeman mechs or whether they should split their mech pilots evenly between the two mech types.

This was not his concern, though. These were decisions that were best left to the Avatars themselves.

"I'm mildly supportive of this proposal but I need to receive a detailed plan before I am willing to take it further." He eventually told Tifi. "You need to work together with Commander Melkor to flesh out this mech concept and explain how this will strengthen the Avatars. I won't approve of a mech design project that does the opposite. Is that clear?"

Tifi Coslone nodded in understanding. "Clear, sir."

Ves didn't think that any of the four new Journeymen would fail in this task. They were all competent mech designers who clearly made a serious effort into understanding the fighting approaches of the different mech legions. They were professionals who didn't need any handholding.

He was just mentioning more than he needed to in order to make sure that everyone was on the same page. They all came from different organizations where mech design projects were handled differently. Ves needed to instill his own process into them so that they did not do anything weird.

He took a look at his internal notes. Aside from Janassa Pellier, the new mech designers all proposed good and interesting mech concepts that could provide a lot of value to the Larkinson Army.

This was good. The mech legions did not have to wait as long as before in order to receive their promised new mech models.

"Let's adjourn this meeting for now." He said. "I need to go back and sort out all of the proposed design projects that we will be working on in the upcoming design round. I want us to be productive so we'll be starting up many different projects, but not to the point of overwhelming us. Some of them are solo projects but the majority will require collaboration, so I need to sort that out as well. We cannot have eight mech designers working on the same mech design."

The ideal amount for every mech design was five mech designers. The Design Department was now capable of reaching this target, but in the interest of maximizing output Ves might choose to assign less Journeymen to a project.

It all depended on many factors and it wasn't easy for a head designer like Ves to choose between power and expedience.

Once everyone left the conference room, Ves was left with Lucky who rolled his body around in the air.

"Meow."

"Yeah. It's great now that we've gained additional lead designers, but it's going to take a lot more work to make sure they use their abilities as productively as possible."

Journeyman were powerful creatives that could design all kinds of mechs, but not all of them were useful to certain clients. The Larkinson Army mainly needed spaceborn mechs at the moment so there was not much demand for a landbound or aquatic mech.

Fortunately, the four newcomers were all proficient in designing spaceborn mechs, so Ves didn't have to worry about that. He loved working with competent mech designers.

Ves continued to spend time on planning in the next few days. He regularly consulted with Gloriana and the other Journeyman to figure out which projects they were willing to get involved in and who could take charge of them. He also talked to General Verle and the legion commanders to make sure their mech pilots were actually willing to pilot the proposed mech models.

His discussions with them didn't entirely go smoothly as some of the upcoming mech designs entailed a lot of changes. The Avatars and the Sentinels both had to retrain large amounts of melee mech pilots and reinvent their tactics in order to make good use of the new mech models.

Still, the cases for the axeman mech and spearman mech were strong. The Swordmaidens were just so good at piloting swordsman mechs that it seemed redundant for the other mech legions to utilize them as well.

The only issue was that the Swordmaidens mainly worked with female mech pilots. The Larkinsons had to find an answer for male mech pilots who were also passionate about piloting swordsman mechs.

"What a headache." Ves pressed his fingers against his forehead. "I'll deal with this issue another time."

Even if the Avatars and Sentinels adopted their new melee mechs, they could still make use of swordsman mechs to a smaller degree.

By the time he sorted out the planning, he convened all of the lead designers together.

This was the first time that all eight Journeyman of the Design Department sat together in a single room. Everyone else had been busy following up on their own duties before this point.

There was clear separation between the mech designers. Ves was clearly the head. Gloriana possessed the second-highest seniority within the department and already managed to impress that onto the newcomers.

Right now, Janassa, Tifi, Sara and Dulo had yet to truly contribute to the Larkinson Clan. Until they managed to prove themselves, they would not receive the full treatment that they were due.

"Alright, everyone. Now that we have gathered today, let us settle on our plan so that we can truly begin our next design round with a clear idea on what we should be doing."

Ves activated a projection that listed out numerous different design projects.

"We will be working on 14 different mech design projects in total for the next 6 to 8 months. Of the 14 different projects, 1 of them centers around an expert mech, 3 of them are based around custom mechs while the remaining 10 focuses on mass production mechs. Not all of you will be working on the same amount of mech design projects. This is because your workload differs per project and because I'm not certain how much work that some of you can handle. Nevertheless, I am confident that we can complete all of these projects within time as long as we aren't disturbed by outside factors."

He had to mention that last point because there were multiple times where Ves had to pause his design work because the Larkinsons encountered another crisis.

In a place as dangerous as the Red Ocean, this was bound to happen again!

Chapter 3537: 14 Mech Design Projects

Being able to work on 14 mech design projects in a single design round was a massive jump compared to before!

This was one of the most direct benefits of doubling the amount of Journeymen working for the Larkinson Clan.

Although time would tell if Ves made the right decisions, for now he was optimistic about the future. The four newcomers may need time to integrate fully in the Larkinson Clan, but for now they made enough progress to begin working.

"Let's quickly go over the mech design projects one by one in order to clarify your responsibilities." Ves said as he pointed at the projected list. "As you can see, many of these projects differ by a lot, so your responsibilities are different for each of them. Some are also more important than others so I made sure to assign more mech designers to them in order to maximize their potential."

His finger tapped the top-most project on the list.

"The big one this time is also the only expert mech design project for this round. As you all know, Commander Casella Ingvar recently managed to break through to expert pilot. While we have decided to keep her in her current position, she cannot pilot the same

mech as before. We must design a suitable battle partner for her that can keep up with her growth for a long time."

The announcement to design a new expert mech did not alarm Gloriana, Ketis and Juliet that much, but the remaining four were different.

Expert mech designs were still new and uncharted territory to them! None of them had contributed significantly to the design of such a powerful and high-end machine.

"Commander Casella Ingvar is a rare expert pilot whose strengths mainly orient around command, communication and maybe control." He told them all. "This means that we will primarily be designing a command platform, though it will also be able to function as a rifleman mech should she be forced into combat against another expert mech."

The mention of an expert command mech with ranged combat capabilities already gave the other Journeymen a clue of who of them will be involved this time.

"I have already contacted Professor Benedict to find out whether he is willing to collaborate with us on this project, and he has already conveyed his willingness. We'll have to flesh out many of the details later, but he is open to the idea of taking care of the aspects of the expert mech design that only Seniors and higher are able to implement."

This was a considerable relief to Ves. If Professor Benedict refused to take over the role that Master Willix previously fulfilled, then he would have to search further and involve strangers who might not be as trustworthy!

Though Gloriana had continually reminded him that she could easily get a Hexer Master Mech Designer to cooperate with the Larkinsons, Ves never seriously considered her offer.

Ves looked at each of the Journeymen in turn.

"The involvement of Professor Benedict leaves room for only four major contributors. Gloriana shall be the lead designer for this expert mech design project. She works best with custom mechs, high-end mechs and expert mechs, so she will be in her element."

His wife preened when she heard this praise. She arrogantly lifted up her chin as if to proclaim that none of the others could possibly do a better job.

Ves wanted to palm his face when he saw her reaction, but he refrained from doing so. No matter how pretentious she behaved, as long as Commander Casella's expert mech came out alright, he was willing to endure these small antics.

"I have chosen three more mech designers to empower different facets of this expert mech. I will be on hand to make this mech alive, arm it with a luminar crystal rifle and

ensure she can employ her distinct resonance abilities to the utmost. Juliet here will make sure the command mech can move fast enough in space while Sara will work on its defensive systems to make sure it can withstand attacks from other expert mechs."

Sara Voiken looked pleased when she heard her name. She would be the first of the newcomers to contribute to an actual expert mech design project!

"Congratulations, sister."

"Thanks, Dulo."

Ves smiled at the rest. "Don't worry. As long as our clan keeps growing, more expert pilots will continue to emerge from the ranks. Each of you will receive a turn sooner or later. It all depends on the mech type of the expert mech that we will have to design next."

Right now, it made little sense to assign Janassa, Tifi and Dulo to a ranged expert mech design project.

This instance actually illustrated that the current lineup of Journeymen was too slanted towards melee mechs. The Design Department still lacked a suitable specialist in ranged weapons!

"Moving on, let's talk about the mech designs that I shall be taking charge of." Ves moved down the list. "Since none of you excel in designing ranged mechs, I have taken it upon myself to lead these two projects. One of the projects aims to deliver a specialized ranged mech to the Battle Criers while the other one seeks to deliver a harasser mech model to the Flagrant Vandals. I'll be working on them by myself as I need to exercise my individual design ability."

This was a risk and might lead to the completion of a pair of mech designs that could have become stronger if he involved other collaborators.

For example, Ves could easily think of pulling in Juliet and Sara to enhance the mobility and defensive properties of the two mech designs.

However, their design time was valuable and Ves had made the judgment that he didn't need additional help to design good mechs.

Though Ves actually wanted to design a commercial doom crawler mech model as well, he simply wasn't able to free up enough time in his schedule to handle an additional project. He reluctantly decided to leave it for a future design round.

"Alright, moving on to Gloriana, in addition to leading the expert mech design project, she will also be responsible for designing custom mechs for three of our Larkinson mech pilots, namely Commander Melkor, Vincent Ricklin and Imon Ingvar."

Not all of the names sounded familiar to the newcomers, but that didn't matter.

"These mech pilots are long overdue their custom mechs. Our Design Department shouldn't neglect individualized mechs entirely." Gloriana stated.

"Agreed." Ves said. "Next, Juliet has agreed to design a light scout mech for the Flagrant Vandals and an auxiliary mech for the Penitent Sisters. Both are relatively simple in scope so it should be no problem for her to work on them by herself."

"I will need your help to provide them with glows." Juliet added. "The Penitent Sisters will probably refuse to pilot my mech if it is not blessed by the Superior Mother."

Ves smiled in response. "Sure. This is not a difficult chore for me. If you need any more help, feel free to ask the others. This counts for all of you. Even though this design round places more emphasis on individual work, it has to benefit our clan in the long run."

Everyone nodded in understanding.

"Ketis, you already know what to do. You'll be leading your own two pet projects. The Monster Slayer will be your first big commercial mech design project. While I'm reluctant to leave its entire design over to you, I recognize that it will be better for your development that you shoulder the entire burden yourself this time."

The swordmaster looked grave. She fully realized that her work would significantly impact the Larkinson Clan's future.

According to the current agreement between the Larkinson Clan and the Wild Fighter Association, the Monster Slayer that Ketis wanted to design might be sold to many mech pilots across the Red Ocean!

Though there was a chance that Ketis might jeopardize this lucrative cooperation by botching her first true commercial mech design project, Ves valued her development over this commercial deal. If she failed to fulfill her promises, then this project would be a valuable learning experience for her. This would ultimately help her in the long run.

Ketis also planned to work on another mech design project that she didn't want to ruin.

"I've heard that you have agreed to collaborate with Janassa for your second swordsman mech design project, right?"

The swordmaster glanced at the other Journeyman. "I did. Janassa has impressed me with her ideas and I want to make use of her specialty when designing a mech for the Swordmaidens. Physical strength is an important quality for a mech that wields a large and heavy greatsword and it's always better to have more."

"Will you need my assistance as well?" Ves offered.

Ketis shook her head. "Probably not. While everyone in our clan is accustomed to your living mechs, I think I have my own way of making my swordsman mechs alive. I want to rely on my own experiments to make this true."

"Well, I know you have already been able to achieve a few results, so I'm looking forward to seeing how well you can adapt this concept."

"I hope I'll be able to make their swords sing."

Ves turned to Dulo. "Mr. Voiken, you'll be working on two different mech design projects, one of which is fairly simple while the other one is more complex in nature."

The only man among the newcomers sat up straighter. "Yes. I will be designing a spearman mech for the Living Sentinels and a lancer mech for the Eye of Ylvaine."

"I will contribute to both of those mech design projects in order to make them alive and grant them their unique advantages." Ves stated. "Our mech pilots are all used to piloting living mechs and they won't pilot any machine that is not comparable. While my wife and my former student have learned enough from me to be able to come up with something comparable, you are completely new to living mechs, so you definitely require my input."

There was no way for Dulo to refuse the patriarch's aid. He wasn't a Larkinson until recently so he wasn't fully attuned to the needs of the Larkinsons. In addition, Ves was truly right when he stated that the Larkinson mech pilots preferred to avoid lifeless mechs!

"Sara, you'll lead a single mech design project in the form of a defensive space knight for the Living Sentinels. Be sure to compare your notes with your brother from time to time in order to make sure your space knight cooperates well with his spearman mech."

"Understood, sir."

"Aside from that, I haven't assigned any further solo projects to you, but many of us might call upon your assistance during various stages of our own projects. We also expect you to contribute significantly to the expert mech design project that I've mentioned before."

The latter was a heavy responsibility so Ves did not burden Sara with too many projects this time.

"Janassa, you won't be leading any mech design projects this time, but your main responsibility is to collaborate with Ketis on designing a new swordsman mech for the Swordmaidens. This is one of our strongest mech legions so the importance of this

project cannot be overstated. You'll definitely have time left over, so I will leave it up to you how you will spend it. There are plenty of melee mech design projects that could use your input."

"I won't remain idle." Janassa promised. "Not when we are working on so many different mech design projects. I can even contribute to ranged mech design projects if needed."

"Alright. That leaves Tifi. You will mainly be focusing on designing a new axeman mech model for the Avatars of Myth, but just like Janassa you should roam around and provide assistance whenever possible."

The final woman grunted in acknowledgement.

Those were the projects that Ves wanted to work on for this round. While his workload was the heaviest, he looked forward to working on all of the different mech designs!

Chapter 3538: Fearless Project

A new design round had started!

Though the Larkinson Clan started up a lot of new initiatives since it had entered the Red Ocean, the start of 14 fresh new mech design projects excited the clansmen!

Everyone knew that the mech models designed by Ves and his handpicked Journeymen were bound to be powerful, suitable and alive. Each of these qualifiers were already valuable in themselves, but combining them all in every mech design would definitely result in a comprehensive strengthening of the Larkinson Army!

Ves immediately became swamped with work. Though he tried to reserve enough personal time so that he could keep his wife and daughter company, he was definitely driven by a need to be as productive as possible!

There were so many projects going through his head that he initially had trouble keeping track of everything.

As a mech designer, he loved to work with mechs, but this was starting to get ridiculous!

"I need to control myself!"

After realizing that he would just go crazy if he continued to try and keep track of every project, he decisively distanced himself from numerous projects that did not require his input or oversight.

For example, Ves did not have to worry about Gloriana and Ketis going astray. They were competent and capable enough to take care of themselves for the most part.

Even other mech designers such as the four newcomers already possessed an existing track record of completed mech designs. This kind of work was nothing special to them. The only thing that was different was that Ves might need to come in at a certain point in order to make the mechs alive.

This was something that was non-negotiable in the Larkinson Clan. Though it was best if Ves became involved in these projects from the beginning, he recognized that he did not have the time to engage in unnecessary work.

This was why he decided to let the lead designers of this project manage everything while Ves would just work as a consultant on specific matters.

This was a win-win arrangement for both sides. The new approach not only granted the lead designers greater autonomy and freedom to implement their visions, but also minimized the amount of time that Ves had to spend on these other projects.

Once he shed a lot of obligations, he began to narrow his focus to a handful of mech designs. These would be his babies that he would carefully raise to maturity with his own hands.

The first mech design that he wanted to invest in was the Fearless Project. This was the codename that he bestowed on the 'rational' rifleman mech that he intended to design for the Battle Criers.

The band that originally consisted of Kinners did not receive a lot of love from the Larkinson Clan in the last few years. Ves even considered disbanding the Battle Criers entirely before thinking that they still had a lot of uses in other areas.

For example, they could serve as excellent test subjects for some of his more unconventional ideas, of which the Fearless Project was one of them! If he was able to make this ambition mech design deliver upon its promises, then he would definitely gain a killer weapon against enemy expert mechs!

He grinned. "None of our enemy's precious expert mechs will feel safe when they face us on the battlefield!"

"Meow."

Lucky yawned as he chewed on a little snack that Ves had thrown at his cat.

Before the Larkinsons departed from Vulit, Ves made sure he ordered a large variety of exotics native to the Red Ocean.

He did not acquire them because he wanted to serve an exotic diet to Lucky. His real intention was to familiarize his gem cat with the taste and smell of every new precious

material. Hopefully, his gem cat could become an effective exotic tracker that could lead his clansmen to rich material deposits!

The more 'snacks' he threw at Lucky, the more the cat turned into a mobile mineral tracker in his eyes!

"Hehehehe..."

It was too bad that Ves couldn't get his hands on any phasewater during his stay in Vulit.

He vaguely heard of high-end auction houses and exchange meetings where the rich and powerful had a chance to bid on small batches of phasewater, but Ves lacked the identity to enter this circle.

His hopes of seeing how Lucky would react upon ingesting phasewater would have to wait for another day.

"Well, before I can get my hands on any phasewater, I need to make sure my clan is strong enough to harvest and keep the stuff!"

The Larkinson Clan urgently needed to upgrade its armed forces before the 2-year MTA protection period had passed. Ves wouldn't be able to reach this target if he kept going on different tangents all the time.

There were still many other priorities that demanded his attention. The formation of the Larkinson Navy, the introduction of a new bank and currency for the Larkinson Clan and the expanding biotech research activities started up by the Larkinson Biotech Institute were also high on his mind at the moment.

The latter was especially relevant now that Ves sought to expand his collection of design spirits to accommodate his new mech designs!

"The Fearless Project definitely needs a new design spirit."

He thought about using Lufa as the design spirit for this rationality-based project, but felt that wasn't good enough.

"Lufa is the Angel of Tranquility. I designed him to be an instrument of peace." He muttered.

That was his strength, but also his flaw.

One of the greatest shortcomings of Lufa was that he wasn't aggressive enough compared to the other design spirits. Lufa was more suited to be implemented in defensive or auxiliary mechs than anything else due to his non-aggressive character.

It would be better if his anti-expert mech solutions received the backing of a design spirit that was dedicated to felling demigods and more powerful entities. A more purpose-built spiritual product would also be able to specialize itself further in this aspect, thereby leading to more powerful expert mech killing solutions in the future.

Ves pulled out one of his P-stones. The rock currently stored a small spiritual fragment taken from one of the masterwork mechs on display in the Chance Bay Masterwork Gallery.

The masterwork copy of the BDX-35F-3 model impressed him in its ability to dampen the emotions and heighten the rationality and calculating power of its mech pilot.

"This is a good base for the Fearless Project."

Ves wanted to achieve a similar effect that the designer of the BDX-35F-3 had once accomplished, but through a different method.

"I can't mess with neural interfaces and I don't have a specialist on hand that is capable of altering them to my needs."

This was no issue as a suitable design spirit should be able to achieve this effect without relying on any technological support.

The only issue at the moment was that Ves did not feel he had enough spiritual ingredients to create the design spirit that he envisioned. He still needed to gather more compatible ingredients to create a spiritual product that could become the definite answer against expert mechs, ace mechs, dark gods, spiritual sorceresses, ancient alien warlords and other weird entities!

Ves chuckled underneath his breath. "I might not be able to become as powerful as you guys, but that's okay. I'll just make a friend that will become your nemesis!"

There was no way he would stop bumping into powerful entities that could not be solved by mechs and technology alone. He attached a great amount of importance to the Fearless Project and its associated design spirit for that reason. Once the Battle Criers gained their new signature mech, they would truly be worthy to call themselves his personal guard force!

"I should start with a draft design."

As Ves sat behind his terminal and brought up a design interface, he began to draft a basic outline of a second-class medium spaceborn rifleman mech.

Before he filled in a couple of details, he paused as he became unsure how to balance out its attack, defense and mobility parameters.

"First, I need to set a baseline by determining the design budget of my mech."

The Fearless Project shouldn't be too shabby, but it shouldn't be too precious either. The mech was foremost designed to fight against enemy expert mechs. This meant that it should be strong enough to withstand at least a casual blow from a powerful machine but also had to be economic enough for the Larkinson Clan to be able to afford substantial losses of this mech model.

Ves accessed the Spirit of Bentheim's database and studied the footage taken during the Battle of Fordilla Zentra.

He paid specific attention to the performance of each individual expert mech and how well they slaughtered the ordinary mechs that were in their way.

Although no standard mech could possibly last a long time against an expert mech, certain machines turned out to be a bit more troublesome to eliminate than others.

For example, the best way for a group of mechs to frustrate a melee expert mech was to spread apart as far as possible and force the powerful enemy to spend precious time chasing after its prey.

As for mechs fighting against a ranged expert mech, evasion was the least effective means to preserve their frames as expert pilots were simply too accurate with their shots.

Instead, they were better off relying on hard cover such as space knights and starship hulls in order to prevent themselves from getting shot to pieces.

This was how Venerable Stark managed to keep her powerful masterwork expert mech alive after getting hunted down by two dwarven expert mechs. The Graveyard may have suffered grievously to keep the Amaranto alive, but it was definitely worth it in the end!

When Ves finally studied the footage of the Battle Crier mechs confronting the Burza Fens of the Avido Berserker Mech Regiment, he winced at the performance of his own troops.

There was nothing wrong about the courage and valor displayed by the mech pilots. The Battle Criers managed to retain their courage and cohesion even as they confronted a deadly dwarven expert axeman mech by themselves!

"The problem doesn't lie with the mech pilots. The main issue is that they're hastily being thrown into this unfavorable confrontation without the right tools for the job."

If the Larkinson Clan had prepared itself better against this kind of opponent, then the Battle Criers may not have been needed to fight against an expert mech without further support.

If the Battle Criers piloted a stronger and more suitable mech than a Bright Warrior armed with new model luminar crystal rifles, then they may have been able to succeed in their nearly-impossible mission!

None of this applied during this battle, so the eventual outcome was a slaughter. It took the intervention of Venerable Joshua and Venerable Tusa to bail the Battle Criers out. In the end, all of those mech pilots only managed to stall the Burza Fens rather than defeat it entirely.

As the final footage reached its end, Ves felt angry and frustrated at himself.

"Not again. This won't happen again!"

He was unwilling to see a repeat of this awful incident. Perhaps he did not possess the means to effectively defeat expert mechs in the past, but this time was different!

"I have enough time, resources and design ability to turn the Fearless Project into a mech that should be able to shoot the Burza Fens to pieces if it was put in the same situation!"

This was his main aspiration for this project!

He did not dare to aim too high and claim that his Fearless Project would be able to slaughter high-tier expert mechs or ace mechs by itself, but it should at least be able to hold its own against the typical low-tier expert mechs that every formidable mech force brought into battle!

"The more low-tier expert mechs the Fearless Project can clean up, the more our own expert mechs can concentrate on fighting the real enemy powerhouses!"

Chapter 3539: Heavy Luminar Crystal Rifle

After studying the performance of both expert mechs and the standard mechs that confronted them, Ves gained a much better idea on how to balance out the Fearless Project's performance parameters.

Of course, he could not derive all of his conclusions from the Battle of Fordilla Zentra alone. This battle may be representative of the galactic rim, but the caliber of opponents in the Red Ocean was considerably higher!

"There's also aliens to consider!"

It was difficult to account for alien forces. There were so many different species that all fought according to vastly different paradigms. They also relied on warships to wage war.

Against enemies like these, it was best to either run away from them as fast as possible! If that wasn't possible, then the Larkinson Army needed to bring as much firepower to bear as possible in order to pound alien warships into scrap!

Ves shook his head. "I'll consider them later. There shouldn't be too many alien warfleets roaming around in conquered territory."

Human enemies were much more numerous and threatening to the Larkinson Clan. If his people couldn't even survive against human aggressors, then it was useless to think about defending against alien threats!

He conducted further research into combat between expert mechs and standard mechs.

He mainly sought out recent footage of such confrontations that had taken place in the Red Ocean.

Even though the dwarf galaxy had only opened up relatively recently, the friction between different pioneering organizations had already produced many different clashes!

The mechs involved in these battles were clearly superior than that of the mechs employed in the Fordilla Zentra. The heartland-level mechs all incorporated superior parts and materials that granted them a comprehensive advantage against rim-level mechs.

Though the Larkinson Clan already obtained limited access to superior tech and resources during its productive stay in Vulit, Ves knew he still needed to close the gap by raising the design budget of his Fearless Project.

After a bit of wrangling, he decided to aim high and set a generous figure.

"The Fearless Project won't be a pushover if it has an average production cost of around 4 MTA credits."

This made the Fearless Project substantially more expensive than the Bright Warrior. Its latest iteration had a design budget of 500 million hex credits, which was roughly equivalent to 2.6 MTA credits.

By spending more money on the Fearless Project and completely dedicating it to ranged combat against expert mechs, Ves hoped that this ambitious design project would truly become a permanent staple in the Larkinson Army's mech roster.

He glanced at the loose sketch of his rifleman mech's contours and decided to fatten it up a little.

"A little extra armor will force enemy expert mechs to consume more energy and effort to eliminate them." He determined.

Just because any expert mech could easily slice, crush or shoot apart standard mechs didn't mean that it was useless to bolster the defenses of the latter!

The tougher the target, the more an expert mech had to put serious effort into destroying the annoying flies!

Over the course of a battle, this not only left the expert mech with less resources to defeat other expert mechs, but also kept more of the standard mechs alive since they couldn't be destroyed as quickly!

To that end, Ves began to sketch out an armor scheme that uniquely suited the needs of the Fearless Project.

He bolstered its frontal armor to a substantial degree and did not hesitate to sacrifice its side and rear armor to stay within his mass limit.

The rationale for amping up its frontal armor was simple. The rifleman mechs would mostly be engaging their targets from a respectable distance. This meant that it was unlikely for the rifleman mechs to get attacked from the flanks.

Even if there were other attackers harassing the Fearless Project from different angles, there should be friendly Larkinson machines around in order to handle those threats.

"I can't account for every scenario, but a typical confrontation against an enemy expert mech is not that complicated."

Would the Fearless Project mechs still get destroyed by a single attack from an expert mech? Probably. At the very least, they would certainly get crippled after eating a powerful resonance-empowered blow.

Yet expert pilots weren't able to unleash resonance-empowered attacks without limit! It took quite a lot of mental strain to form true resonance with an expert mech, so even they would get exhausted if they had to launch the same powerful attacks against a thousand sturdy machines!

"Of course, melee expert mechs can just circle around a Fearless Project mech and easily take it out from the side."

That still took a bit of time and effort though, which meant the Fearless Project's radical armor scheme still served its purpose.

As Ves sketched out this change, he began to place a bit more emphasis on the chest and cockpit area of his draft design. He concentrated the most armor in that area in order to make sure that the mech pilot had a higher chance of staying alive!

"I can stomach the loss of these mechs, but broken lives cannot never be put back together!"

If an expert mech not only wanted to destroy the Fearless Project mechs but also slaughter their pilots, then this powerful foe would have to expend significantly more time and energy than usual.

As long as the expert pilot wasn't stupid and consumed by irrationality, he or she shouldn't waste so much extra effort on killing the people controlling the Fearless Project mechs.

Anyone who did do so would just give the Battle Criers a greater advantage by slowing down their loss rate!

As Ves continued to beef up the armor of his draft design, it did not escape his notice that his mech became more sluggish and less maneuverable.

Typical rifleman mechs tended to be maneuverable enough to become dogfighters. They needed to be light and maneuverable enough to reposition quickly and maneuver around enemies at varying distances.

The Fearless Project gave up this capability due to all of the additional armor plating installed on its front.

"It's almost as sluggish as a cannoneer mech."

Ves still wanted the Fearless Project to be a rifleman mech, though. It needed to retain enough maneuverability to reach its positions in a timely manner and also had to be able to retreat against most incoming enemy units.

He already knew what it was like to handle cannoneer mechs on the battlefield. The Eternal Redemption model possessed a lot of firepower but it required a lot of assistance in order to fulfill its job!

The Fearless Project shouldn't need too much babysitting in his opinion. They needed to complete their jobs without involving other precious mechs that were better off fighting against other units.

"The entire purpose of this mech is to unburden other mechs with the responsibility to fight against expert mechs. We can't keep throwing Bright Warriors, Ferocious Piranhas and Valkyrie Redeemers against these monstrous machines."

Each of those mech models were much better suited to fight against other mechs! None of them were optimized to fight against expert mechs quite like the Fearless Project.

Once Ves finished drafting the armor layout of his rifleman mech, he turned his attention to its offensive capabilities.

The luminar crystal rifle was the most important part about the Fearless Project. Without a weapon that was considerably more effective at dismantling resonance shields than the alternatives, it became a lot more difficult to turn this mech design into an expert mech killer!

As Ves sketched out the luminar crystal rifle, he quickly figured out that it needed at least two different firing modes.

"The luminar crystal rifle needs a rapid-fire mode to make it easier to track and hit maneuverable expert mechs. It becomes a lot harder to land a hit against an expert mech like the Dark Zephyr if the rifle's firing rate isn't fast enough!"

A faster firing rate was a lot more forgiving to the mech pilots. It made the price of a miss less severe while also making it easier to track a fast-moving opponent.

This was particularly useful for stripping expert mechs of their resonance shields.

However, what then?

Expert mechs did not solely rely on resonance shields to protect them against massed attacks. Their armor systems were also resilient against lots of ordinary fire!

The problem here was that weak, rapid-fire attacks were substantially less efficient at damaging armor. Harder defenses could easily bounce away weak attacks.

"The luminar crystal rifle needs to be able to switch its firing mode to a hard-hitting setting that can output substantially more powerful energy beams per salvo." Ves determined.

The hit rate of these shots might not be as high as before, but as long as they were powerful enough, a single successful strike could deal significant damage to an expert mech!

In addition, expert mechs without the protection of a resonance shield became vulnerable to crippling strikes.

While their torsos were usually heavily-protected, their flight systems and weapon systems were much more vulnerable to damage!

A viable way for the Fearless Project mechs to rapidly render an expert mech ineffective was to focus all of their fire on its flight system. Once its wings became clipped, the powerful machine could no longer utilize its excellent mobility to evade as many incoming attacks!

"It will become a lot easier for the Fearless Project mechs to concentrate their fire on other specific sections!"

Penetration power was key to this second firing mode. Ves therefore amped up the maximum firepower of the luminar crystal rifle until he could not go further without excessively burdening the Fearless Project.

The result of trying to combine these two potent firing modes in a single weapon was a new luminar crystal rifle that was larger and more massive than the model that the Larkinson mechs currently utilized!

Though this rifle model was also capable of inflicting heavy damage against other kinds of mechs, that was not the best use of its capabilities.

"The biggest downside to implementing all of these intensive firing modes is that this rifle model will consume a lot more energy!"

There was always a price for everything!

Though Ves tried to make sure his Fearless Project carried a respectable amount of energy cells, there was only so much a rifleman could accommodate.

Unless he was able to get his hands on superior energy cells, the Fearless Project would have a limited uptime per deployment. It might need to return to its mothership and replenish its energy reserves in order to continue participating in large and expansive engagement!

This was certainly not ideal, but as long as the Fearless Project mechs managed to fell at least one expert mech during a single deployment, then this was a worthy tradeoff!

When Ves took a good look at his current draft design, its oversized rifle clearly stood out. Even laymen would be able to recognize that this beefy rifleman mech packed a mean punch!

"Hm, now that I've designed a new luminar crystal rifle, I should start naming them instead of just settling for calling them by their serial number."

This would certainly not be the last time he came up with a new luminar crystal weapon for his mech designs.

After thinking about the role this weapon would play in battle, Ves initially wanted to call it by a name that would leave no question to its purpose.

"Expert Mech Killer."

"Meow." Lucky swished his tail as the cat looked skeptically at Ves.

"Yeah. That's a bit too blunt. What about Demigod Killer?"

"Meow."

"I agree. It actually sounds worse. What about... Saint Killer? That certainly rolls off the tongue a bit better."

"Meow meow."

"Well, I guess you're right. If I want to be hyperbolic, I might as well go all the way."

Ves decided to add a new database entry for his yet-to-be-designed luminar crystal rifle.

The name he decided to settle upon for this model?

"Godkiller Heavy Luminar Crystal Rifle."

Chapter 3540: Low Yield Beasts

One of the downsides of traveling alongside an MTA frigate was that Ves couldn't get away with as many shenanigans.

For example, Ves did not dare to allow Director Ranya Wodin to proceed with the more controversial secret experiments that they had initially planned.

They even had to remain mindful of the words they said to each other lest they inadvertently ran afoul of the MTA sensibilities.

Fortunately, the Larkinson Biotech Institute was not short of research topics. One of the more relevant and interesting activities to Ves was the acquisition and rearing of mutated beasts.

When the expeditionary fleet last stayed in Vulit, the LBI acquired large batches of exobeasts and designer beasts to fill up the remaining biomes of the Dragon's Den.

It was only now that the large bioresearch vessel was truly being utilized to her fullest. The amount of animals her hull contained were so significant that it became a real challenge to recycle all of the alien waste products and make sure that the vessel did not require an excessive amount of resources to sustain all of these creatures!

As Ves toured one biome after another, he encountered many interesting beasts. Many of them were native to the Red Ocean while others were unique specialty products developed by renowned beast designers that had initially risen up in different parts of the old galaxy.

Yet despite all of the biodiversity in the Dragon's Den, many of the unusual and exotic abilities these creatures exhibited were ultimately mundane in origin.

Ves had little use for animals that derived their power from their biological structures or because of the strange exotics they ingested.

Ultimately, more than 99.999 percent of beasts acquired by the Larkinson Biotech Institute turned out to be duds. While many of them were so abnormal that they were worthy to be called mutated beasts by others, Ves had higher standards.

The only mutations that he was interested in were the kinds that could become the source of a new design spirit or spiritual ingredient.

In other words, Ves wanted to obtain more creatures like Arnold.

After completing his extensive tour, he ended up detecting just 12 individual beasts with activated spiritualities. They consisted of 9 natural exobeasts that had evolved from different planets and 3 artificial designer beasts that several biotech experts had cooked up in their labs.

Director Ranya looked quite relieved after hearing that Ves managed to find at least some suitable creatures among the ones her institute had recently acquired for over a hundred MTA credits!

"I was afraid our selection wouldn't yield anything. At the very least, we haven't wasted our budget."

"That's true, but the yield is too low." Ves frowned. "In effect, we spent a dozen MTA credits for each mutated beast. While our clan can still tolerate this spending rate, over time we need to develop a more efficient approach to this. I don't want to waste too much money on overpriced beasts that serve little practical value to us if they don't have any extraordinary powers."

Ranya sighed. "It would help if you could develop a tool or a detector that can facilitate our detection process."

"If I was capable of doing that, I would have already provided you with one. This matter is way more complicated than you think."

To be honest, with his current level of spiritual engineering, Ves thought it was possible for him to develop a detection device that could detect whether humans or beasts possessed active spiritualities.

He did not dare to make it, though. Ves was reasonably certain that the MTA did not possess this tech. If it did, then the higher ups certainly kept it close to their chest!

In any case, Ves wanted to keep this capability for himself for the time being. Ranya would have to wait a few years more before he would even consider changing his stance.

Ranya turned the discussion back to the detected mutated beasts. "What do you wish to do with the twelve?"

"Keep them alive and well for the time being. I don't have a use for them right now, but that might change in the future. Some of them are too weak and useless in their current states. If possible, try to train them to use their abilities more. The more they exercise their powers, the stronger they become. I will make sure to drop by at least once a month to track their progress. Once their value becomes high enough, I might make other arrangements."

Ves truly hoped the mutated beasts he detected would become more useful to him. While they did possess interesting capabilities, none of them were as potent as that of Zeigra or Arnold.

A typical example was a jumping twelve-legged lizard creature that could make the air around it vibrate at a high frequency.

What was the use of such a useless power aside from making a high-pitched noise? A simple sound speaker could generate a much louder noise with ease!

It seemed that finding good mutated beasts was a lot more challenging than he thought.

Buying lots of random beasts from the market in the hopes of winning the lottery enough times was not economically viable.

Visiting untamed planets and scouring their surfaces for unusual alien beasts was too inefficient and time consuming.

Developing designer beasts inhouse in order to breed new mutated beasts was likely to fail more times than he could count.

The problem was that Ves still didn't understand why certain humans or creatures developed spiritual potential. As long as he was not able to figure out the reason and replicate the process himself, he had little choice but to settle for one of the aforementioned solutions.

Ves placed his hand on Ranya's shoulder. "Keep researching the mutated beasts that I have pointed out for you. Try and find a common marker that only they possess. Whether it is biological in nature or not, as long as all twelve of them possess this particular quality, then we can go much further."

"Understood, sir. I suspect that one of those common markers is heightened intelligence and self-awareness. All twelve creatures that you've mentioned are either sentient or behave close enough to pass off as one. We still need to investigate further to see whether their thinking has actually evolved."

"Good idea, I can imagine it is difficult to test for heightened intelligence among lots of different beasts. This is not a marker that we can use to effectively find new mutated beasts. We need to find a more solid alternative."

That was a huge challenge and Ves did not think that Director Ranya would succeed.

Still, it was better than doing nothing. Maybe the LBI would give him a pleasant surprise.

He discussed various other matters with Dr. Ranya including one of a more personal nature.

"You're in a relationship?" Ves looked oddly at the former Hexer.

"Yes. Why are you surprised?" The doctor smirked. "I'm not the only Larkinson who made good use of the shore leave we enjoyed in Vulit. Everyone is growing older, so there are quite a few people who have started to think about relationships."

"Who is the lucky clansman who has earned your attention?"

"Tusa."

"Wait, what?!"

"It's Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson, if you want to be more precise."

"How did you manage to persuade him to enter into any fixed relationship, let alone with you?" Ves asked in a perplexed tone.

According to the impression of his cousin, Tusa was someone who prized freedom quite a lot. The man acted as if he never wanted to tie himself down to another woman.

Director Ranya already expected Ves to react in this manner.

"Sometimes, I question that myself." She said. "I think it helps that neither of us has started this relationship with too many expectations. I'm a busy person and so is he. Both of us occupy high positions and there are times when we may be unavailable for

days, weeks or even months. We have only gone on casual dates so far, but we continue to enjoy each other's company. Although I'm not sure whether this will last, I don't mind if we keep meeting each other from time to time."

"I see."

From what it sounded like, the relationship between the two was still fairly light. It could go anywhere really, but if Ranya and Tusa liked each other, then Ves could easily imagine them staying together for a long time.

Just because Tusa did not like commitments did not mean he eschewed them entirely. Perhaps it was good that he hooked up with a woman who didn't require his attention all the time.

Ranya briefly gossiped about the other couples that she heard of. She wasn't the prominent Larkinson to start dating with fellow clansmen.

So many new couples had formed now that the Larkinsons had reached the Red Ocean and come into their element that there were bound to be lots of marriages soon!

Ves ultimately welcomed this development. The Larkinson Clan constantly needed fresh blood and recruiting outsiders all the time was not a sustainable approach.

After he concluded his meeting with Director Ranya, he returned to the Spirit of Bentheim and checked the time.

"It's... now."

In one moment, he was standing in his office compartment aboard his flagship.

In the next moment, he had entered a luxurious compartment that displayed the distinctive aesthetic of the Mech Trade Association.

"Welcome aboard the Simile Halifax, Ves." Jovy greeted him as he waved his guest over. "Come taste this drink. It's a new kind of beverage that someone has adapted from alien swill."

When Ves approached his friend, he looked dubiously at the glass resting on the coffee table. He picked it up and sniffed it a few times.

"Smells like coolant fluid."

When Ves finally took a sip, he became bombarded by a combination of conflicting taste sensations!

"Ugh. The shock value is certainly there, but I can't imagine drinking this on a daily basis."

"A shame." Jovy set aside his own glass. "It's supposed to leave you wanting for more. Anyway, I'm not supposed to call you over to my ship, but I can get away with it as long as I don't tell you anything sensitive."

"I understand. I don't expect you to spill out information that you're not supposed to share." Ves said as he didn't want to put any pressure on his friend.

"Aside from wanting to enjoy your company, I thought it would be nice to talk about our work and bounce ideas off each other. I've been observing you working on a new mech design project. It didn't seem so special at the start, but the more you flesh it out, the more I realize how ambitious it is. You're truly serious about designing a standard mech that can contend against expert mechs, right?"

It did not surprise Ves at all that Jovy and the MTA knew what he was doing. What did he expect when the Simile Halifax permanently flew alongside the Spirit of Bentheim all the time?

Ves didn't even bother to use any signal jammers to increase the confidentiality of his work projects. It added a lot of inconvenience without actually hindering the MTA's attempts to snoop into his work at all. He might as well keep the windows open.

"If you know our clan as well as I think you do, then you should be aware that we have always suffered against enemy expert mechs." He said in a serious tone. "Our clan is relatively young and small so we can't bring out as many expert mechs as established forces. The only way for us to make up for the shortfall is to develop substitutes like the Fearless Project."

Jovy nodded in sympathy. "This is a logical response for you to make, and unlike many other mech designers, you are one of the few that might actually succeed in your goal. However... have you ever thought of the implications of putting your powerful new mech model to use against human expert mechs?"

Ves' expression fell. He realized that he had bumped into the biggest challenge of the Fearless Project.

Politics.