

## Mech 3681

### *Chapter 3681 Last Flight of the Shortwings*

Once, the pakklaton race prospered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All of that changed when the pink hides attacked.

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

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

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

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the shortwingers and the other alien races were able to observe from the Great Star Hive was not much and horribly outdated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The larger avian nodded and swept her articulated wings to the young bird. "Oh yes, my dear. Though our flight has been long, we are moving closer to our goal. The entrance to the Ancient Refuge is close. The pink hides will never be able to reach us once we

pass through the legendary Gate of Death. We managed to bring enough godblood from our homes, so we have enough to pay the toll."

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

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

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

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

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

Where could the shortwing refugees flee to next?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He cawed, drawing the attention of his council.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"May our race fly for eternity!"

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

Would it work?

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

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

#### *Chapter 3682 Instrument of Vengeance*

The fight gradually entered a heated stage. The two fleets started to get close enough to enable a measure of precision and focus from both sides!

The damage continued to pile up until the ships in question started to suffer more serious damage!

In order to prevent the incoming attacks from concentrating the damage on weak points, the vessels continually changed their orientation.

This made it considerably more difficult to launch successive attacks on vulnerable sections.

However, the pakklaton ships were less capable of employing this tactic due to the damage they had already sustained. The wounds sustained in previous battles along with the incredibly persistent infestation of voribugs severely affected their mobility.

The most immediate consequence of that was that they were considerably easier to damage!

After piling up damage on two of the nine alien warships, the alien fleet finally displayed true vulnerability.

"Warship Gamma's armor integrity has dropped across the board. The alien vessel's weak points have also expanded. If we can land one or more numerous powerful attacks on this section to the upper side of her hull, then there is a chance we can

detonate the nearby electrical systems and weaken the structural supports over there, thereby inflicting major internal damage to the forward section of the warship."

"Venerable Stark, do your best to target this weak point."

"With pleasure." The expert pilot grinned.

Throughout this battle, Venerable Davia Stark had been holding back for a long time.

Unlike the soft-minded Larkinsons who were acting squeamish about targeting an alien refugee fleet that was on the ropes, Stark only saw an enemy that needed to be eliminated at all costs.

After witnessing her entire state and almost all of its population being scoured by the sandmen, she had developed a lifelong vendetta against aliens of all kinds.

Though the Big Two belatedly wiped out the sandman race from existence, it wasn't enough for Stark.

She realized that humanity would always be vulnerable against the predations of other jealous, cruel and callous species.

There was no justice in the galaxies.

Therefore, she had made it her mission to enact retribution to any race that could one day rob human children of their parents.

No one deserved to endure the unimaginable scale of loss that took place in the Sand War!

Even though the pakklatons were by all accounts weak and relatively unimportant by human standards, Venerable Stark did not look down on these supposedly weak aliens.

After all, wasn't that what people said about the sandmen as well?

While the Big Two could easily roll over the sandmen whenever they wished, they instead allowed the vermin to prosper and accumulate strength.

When the rats flooded out of their nests, their aggression quickly overwhelmed the third-rate states in their way.

Though Venerable Stark was a second-rater now, she could never forget her roots as a humble third-rater.

At that level, the enemies that the MTA and CFA considered to be too trivial to clean up had killed trillions of hapless human victims before they finally got the end they deserved!

Just thinking about those dark days that had almost broken her to pieces caused the dark flame of retribution in Venerable Stark's heart to burn hotter.

Her eyes sparked with the spark of vengeance as she condemned the remnants of the pakklaton race to death.

"The aliens must die so humanity can live in peace."

She did not concern herself with the fact that humanity invaded the Red Ocean first. She also did not care that this initiative was led by the Big Two to whom she harbored deep grudges.

In any situation where humans were under threat or potential threat by an alien race, her answer to the problem was simple.

"Death!"

As her powerful emotions surged, the Amaranto surged in turn.

The masterwork expert mech that she had partnered with for many months had not only fed off her strength, but also took in her hatred of the alien and developed the same drive to rid the cosmos of inhuman threats.

Mech and mech pilot fell in sync as their stimulating emotions brought their cooperation to a new level!

Stark's elevated force of will produced so much resonance with the Amaranto that the two actually broke a new record for themselves!

The expert pilot did not pay attention to that, though. Her entire mind and will was focused on her immediate task.

Thousands of energy beams lanced from the expeditionary fleet to the distant pakklaton refugee fleet.

Occasionally, the slower-firing laser cannons of the alien warships lanced back towards the expeditionary fleet.

With each devastating salvo, four to ten of the laser beams struck the vanguard of the human fleet, burning off more armor plating while dealing peripheral damage to their systems.



All of the energies being traded back and forth produced different levels of interference that made it a bit harder for the Amaranto to land a blow at the precise weak point designed by the Larkinson Army.

Venerable Stark had to fall back to her experience and intuition. She narrowed her eyes as she delved deeper into the man-machine connection.

At the same time, she resonated with the Amaranto's powerful luminar crystal rifle. Though she did not find it necessary to activate the Beam Bending resonance ability, she still resonated with it in a more general sense in order to empower its impending attack with a touch of her own will and hatred.

Infusing her luminar crystal rifle with the latter caused it to glow hotter and redder than before.

In fact, the entire Amaranto turned into an ominous specter that looked as if it had become the embodiment of hellfire!

As her hatred and animosity towards aliens reached a peak, Venerable Stark finally sensed that the right moment had come.

"TASTE MY RETRIBUTION!"

The Amaranto exploded in red as its rifle fired a powerful, high-powered resonance-enhanced laser beam that soared towards the pakklaton fleet at the speed of light!

Though the beam only flashed up the space it passed through for an instant, its effect was much greater than any other attack unleashed by the humans!

Though the fiery red laser beam was not as exaggeratingly wide and filled with energy as the attacks unleashed by the alien warship-grade weapons, the beam unleashed by the Amaranto was much more concentrated.

In order to exploit a weak point, applying brute force power was not necessary.

Stabbing it with a single scalpel was enough to achieve the desired effect, and the Amaranto's vengeance-fueled laser beam happened to play this role to near-perfection!

Though the beam deviated from its intended target by dozens of meters, the hot and destructive energies released upon impact completely blasted the affected compartments to pieces!

The overflow of destruction from the resonance-enhanced laser beam dealt far more localized damage than any other weapon employed in this fight!

Due to the structural damage this high-powered shot inflicted, the pakklaton's warship was unable to supply power to three of her powerful primary laser cannons.

Not only that, but the alien crew members and the various ship parts located in the bow section all became impaired in different ways, thereby lowering the combat effectiveness of the ship in question!

Nonetheless, a warship was not a pushover. The pakklatons did not excel at building warships but the ones the Golden Skull Alliance confronted today displayed a remarkable degree of resilience despite all of the hardships they endured since the start of their long flight!

Venerable Stark cared nothing for that. She instead grew irked because the attack she invested much of her power in failed to cripple the enemy warship to the degree she hoped.

It would have been great if targeting the weak point resulted in the ship blowing herself apart or knocking out all of the primary laser cannons instead of a couple of them. There were still eight more warships that also needed to be subdued, and she didn't have the reserves to knock them all out in this fashion.

She contemplated whether she should fire a subsequent high-powered attack but figured that the hole she had blown open with her earlier attack would suffice. Other mechs could easily take advantage of the opening to deal even further internal damage.

"I'll leave the rest to you!" She told the Larkinson Army before she set her sights on another warship.

At this time, the pakklaton fleet finally exhibited a substantial change.

On the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim, someone dutifully reported the latest changes.

"Sir, we are detecting a high number of shuttle transfers between the pakklaton starships!"

Ves quickly swept his gaze to the projections that displayed an increasingly more detailed image of the distant alien fleet.

"What are the pakklatons doing?"

"We believe they are preparing to evacuate a part of their fleet, sir. The shuttle traffic from all of their vessels are mostly converging onto five of the civilian ships that are in the best shape at the moment. The remaining enemy ships are also moving to prevent our firing lines from attacking the vessels that are likely being prepared for evacuation."

"I see." Ves said.

He and the strategists had been waiting for this to happen. Though the pakklaton fleet still possessed a high degree of threat, Ves judged that the aliens were not that enthused about fighting a battle where they could only attain a pyrrhic victory at best.

"Wait a minute." His train of thought suddenly froze as he looked closer at the activity taking place in the distant fleet. "There are way more transfers than we expected. They're not evacuating their weakest vessels. They're also pulling out their people from their more intact vessels, including their warships!"

Many others had noticed this taking place as well. It became increasingly clear that the aliens did not intend to evacuate most of their fleet this time.

This was quite a reckless move!

If none of their warships joined the evacuation attempt, then how would the pakklatons possibly be able to defend their surviving civilian vessels?

"What the hell are these aliens thinking? There's no way their paltry number of civilian vessels can make it further across the Krakatoa Middle Zone on their own!"

It was too bad that none of the Larkinsons had access to the alien fleet's internal deliberations. They could only guess at the motives of the alien leaders.

Ves grew ugly. He wanted to drive away the majority of enemy warships in order to spare his own forces a hard fight.

Had the Golden Skull Alliance pressed the aliens too hard? Should he have ordered his troops to take it easy?

"Are there any warships showing signs of being readied for evacuation?"

"No, sir. Our long-ranged scanners have even detected the transfer of significant quantities of phasewater out of the warships. If our comprehension of their situation is right, then we believe the pakklatons are completely giving up on evacuating the majority of their fleet in order to maximize the chances of success of their remaining 5 civilian ships. If their warp drives are injected with additional phasewater, then that will directly improve their ability to traverse greater distances!"

"Damnit!"

He wanted that phasewater! He could not stand the thought of all of those valuables slipping away from him due to the actions of the aliens.

For a moment, he was tempted to order his fleet to focus on targeting these evacuation ships, but that would probably inflame the aliens even further.

Besides, the alien fleet was putting a lot of hulls in the way, so attacking the key vessels was far from simple.

"Keep focusing on the warships." He eventually instructed. "Quelling their ability to resist is our highest priority. "Once we have neutralized their ability to threaten our forces, we can do whatever we want."

The fight continued as the exchange of weapons fire continued to heat up. As the mechs and warships began to see further improvements in their hit rates, the casualty figures continued to grow higher!

### *Chapter 3683 Unfolding Strengths*

Commander Casella Ingvar suffered a profound stroke of bad luck this time.

The Golden Skull Alliance chose to initiate a fight against an alien fleet just before the Minerva Project was scheduled to be completed.

If the expeditionary forces decided to wait three or so weeks before starting a battle, the Larkinson Clan's latest expert pilot would have been able to debut on the battlefield with a fantastic new expert mech!

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case and she was stuck piloting the Bright Warrior that had been temporarily assigned to her. Though there was nothing wrong with the mech, her newfound expert pilot capabilities were so constrained by it that she constantly had to hold herself back from pushing the machine past its limits!

If she issued a request to allow her to pilot the Quint for this battle, General Verle would probably approve of her request. The masterwork mech had undergone enough upgrades for her to exert a considerably greater influence on the battle.

She did not opt to do so, though. It would deprive Isobel Kotin a chance to accrue valuable battle experience for this battle.

If the third user of the Quint was able to break through in the near future, then the Larkinson Clan would gain another powerful expert pilot who happened to excel in ranged combat!

She directed the sensors of her Bright Warrior towards the masterwork mech that had facilitated her breakthrough.

The Quint was performing decently enough in its rifleman mech configuration. Its custom-built luminar rifle fired bright golden beams towards the distant opponent at a steady rate.

Using the command privileges that had been handed over to her mech, she traced the shots fired by Isobel and found that the women had already integrated so well with the Quint that her hit rate was close to 80 percent, which was pretty impressive at this stage of the battle as there were other mech pilots that could only deal damage 20 percent of the time!

As for herself, Casella wasn't able to contribute much in battle so far. This was far from the pitched battles that she had trained and studied for. The G-Aena League that she participated in back in Chance Bay was much more to her liking as there was an endless amount of decisions she could make that could affect the outcome of the battle.

Here, the Living Sentinels only needed to take cover behind one of the armored vessels of the Larkinson Clan and try their best to use their luminar crystal rifles to hit the designated priority targets.

There was hardly any other complexity that needed her personal attention. The mech captains and support staff took care of all of the less important issues.

The only way she could provide meaningful help to her men was to speak with them in order to keep up their morale and ensure they stayed focused.

"Increase your firing rate." She instructed as she did so herself. "Our fleets have drawn close enough that our hit rate has increased. Less of our shots are going wide now. We need to disable these warships faster. They are already dealing substantially more damage to us than we wish!"

The horror of the enemy warships became more apparent as they were moving closer to real engagement range.

The problems related to minor faults in alignment and divergence of energy propagation no longer skewed the attacks quite severely anymore.

The ships from both sides began to incur increasingly more serious damage!

The Graveyard, the Gorgoneion, the Hemmington Cross and the Indigo Tremor bore the brunt of the damage. Each of them were large and prominent fleet carriers so they shouldered the greatest burden in protecting the train of ships sheltering behind their wake.

Though the aliens had shown some cleverness by focusing their fire on the largest and lightest-armored among the aforementioned capital ships, namely the Hemmington Cross, the Golden Skull Alliance coordinated its fleet movements so that even the Cross Clan's flagship enjoyed a reprieve by moving behind another vessel.

Through these series of maneuvers, the expeditionary forces ensured that the damage would be spread out as much as possible, with the Graveyard actually bearing a greater share of the burden.

The Graveyard could take it, though!

All of the junk and battle debris that had been melted down and processed into improvised hull plating made the vessel particularly economical to use as a damage sponge. Even if lots of hull plating eventually got ruined beyond the point of recovery, the salvage vessel could easily use other materials to fill in the gap.

The pakklaton warships on the other hand did not enjoy this particular luxury. They were built for mobility rather than enduring bombardment, but because of the necessity to protect the evacuation ships from enemy attacks, the aliens were put in a difficult spot.

The infestation of the voribugs also didn't help. They chewed through so many systems that the mobility of several warships were severely compromised. They could only rely on weak positional thrusters to slightly change their orientations, and even those systems were under attack by the voracious bugs!

As a result, despite being built for combat against other powerful threats, the pakklaton warships were continually accumulating more damage.

Soon enough, the two vessels that had attracted the brunt of the firepower unleashed by the human mechs finally succumbed in quick succession!

"Warship Gamma has lost power throughout all of her hull! At least one of her power reactors is still online, but it cannot transfer energy to any other part of the vessel!"

"Warship Epsilon is breaking into half! She has incurred major structural damage and her keel has blown open after one of her internal fuel tanks exploded!"

"Warship Alpha has lost 40 percent of her power, though her exterior armor is mostly intact. We believe the voribugs have inflicted major damage to her energy transmission systems."

"Lower the priority on Warship Alpha." General Verle ordered. "Her relatively intact hull plating will take time to drill through, but with her loss of power, her laser cannons are not as threatening. We should direct our fire on the greatest offensive threats."

As the crippled and disabled pakklaton warships slowly drifted away, the mechs directed their firepower towards another pair of alien vessels.

The pakklatons weren't helpless, though. Even though less and less of their laser cannons were still operational, the damage they inflicted on the hulls of the human

vessels had slowly built up to a point where even the Graveyard was beginning to feel distressed.

There was a limit to how much the human vessels could spread out the incoming damage across their hulls.

Compartments breached and numerous ship systems situated in the forward sections malfunctioned.

Even crew members began to die as those who couldn't afford to draw back from their vital functions became affected by the attacks.

The time, effort and resources needed to fix all of this damage became increasingly more costly.

"These pakklavons are too stubborn and tenacious." Ves deeply frowned.

The decision to make a last stand fell outside of his expectations. He and his fellow leaders had miscalculated. Rather than fleeing with most of their fleet, the aliens looked as if they insisted on fighting to the death!

However, even if the aliens put up a better fight than usual, the combat power of the pakklavon warships were still within a tolerable range.

"We're not pushovers either. Now that we have drawn a bit closer, our mechs are more effective as well!"

Not only were the alien ships being struck by an increasingly more ferocious rain of small laser beams, other mechs showed their capabilities as well!

The expeditionary fleet shifted its formation and put the Spirit of Bentheim in front!

The ship, though not the biggest and most resilient capital ship in the fleet, was particularly tough to take down from the front.

With the giant head of the Golden Cat adorning her entire bow, it took a lot of frontal attacks to melt through all of the Breyer alloy and other relatively strong materials!

Though previous attacks had caused the head of the Golden Cat to look scorched and disfigured, the factory ship could resist considerable damage as long as the attacks came from the front.

The point of putting the Spirit of Bentheim in such a prominent position wasn't to rely on her to soak all of the remaining damage, though. Resilient or not, the firepower of seven alien warships was no joke!



"It's Venerable Jannzi Larkinson!"

"The Shield of Samar is moving into action!"

After a long time of sitting on the side, the only true defensive expert mech of the Larkinson Clan finally received orders to exert its power!

Though the Shield of Samar in its current incarnation had already fought in prior battles, it had never found the opportunity to showcase its majestic capabilities in a true sense.

This time was different. After launching so many powerful laser beams, the pakklaton warships had worn down the defenses of the expeditionary fleet to the point where subsequent damage could inflict real losses.

This was intolerable to Venerable Jannzi!

"More lives being lost due to greed." She gritted her teeth.

She has strong opinions about the purpose and motivations of this aggressive action, but she knew that this was not the time to complain. Her main priority at this time was to limit the damage and save as many lives as possible!

It also did not escape her attention that this was a good time for her to showcase her capabilities.

As of late, her prestige as an expert pilot had dropped. Few clansmen had truly seen her contribute meaningfully to a battle and therefore had a mistaken impression that she wasn't as indispensable as the likes of Venerable Stark or Venerable Joshua.

"Samar!" She called to her mech! "Let these ignorant watchers see how strong our shield has become!"

GLADLY.

As she resonated with her expert mech, she also called out her other battle partner!

"Qilanxo, lend me a hand! Our shield needs to endure as long as possible!"

An inaudible roar rang in her ears, signaling to Jannzi that the big lizard agreed!

After accumulating her power, focus and will to her shield, Jannzi and the Shield of Samar exploded into action!

"PRIMAL AEGIS!"



The expert mech projected a massive resonance barrier that covered a radius of several hundred meters, thereby protecting much of the battered bow of the Spirit of Bentheim!

Not only that, but a vague energy manifestation of an enormous lizard appeared on top of the resonance barrier!

The illusionary lizard roared, causing the barrier to receive additional power from another source!

As numerous laser beams raked the resonance barrier, it managed to hold true!

Both the aliens and the humans themselves were astounded by how resilient this resonance barrier turned out to be. Not only did it cover a huge area, it also resisted a lot of energy attacks without showing any sign of reaching its limit for the moment!

This was the perverse nature of an expert pilot at work. Their willpower was literally capable of distorting reality. When it was amplified with the help of an expert mech, the effects could be applied on a grander scale!

Though Venerable Jannzi quickly suffered from additional strain with every heavy laser attack that had been stopped, she steeled her will and became determined to endure torture as much as possible!

"The longer I hold out, the more lives I can save!"

By temporarily blocking much of the alien attacks, the expeditionary forces gained a major advantage!

Two more alien warships were taken out of action!

This time, the Amaranto did not inflict the crucial blows alone.

Instead, the Star Dancer Mark II and the Everchanger both managed to acquit themselves well this time!

The two expert mechs might be proficient in ranged combat, but they never excelled that much in long-ranged precision.

It was only when the battle progressed up to this stage that they were truly able to demonstrate their respective strengths!

*Chapter 3684 Fleeing Hope*

Comparisons between expert mechs were never simple.

Though the Amaranto, the Everchanger and the Star Dancer Mark II were all able to function as expert rifleman mechs, their strengths and specialties leaned in considerably different directions.

The Amaranto was the most useful of the three in relatively static long-ranged firefights. Even though it was an awful duelist and dogfighter, these weaknesses were not relevant so long as the enemy did not deploy any close-ranged threats.

Venerable Stark and her expert mech had already contributed significantly so far. The Amaranto's and focused firepower had accelerated the takedowns of numerous pakklaton warships by inflicting damage at just the right places.

The Star Dancer Mark II was not as precise at long ranges, but once the distance between the two fleets grew less exaggerated, Venerable Brutus was finally able to showcase his abilities as well.

Even if the attacks of the agile expert mech were not precise enough to target specific modules, they still inflicted heavy damage to the hull integrity of the enemy vessels.

The same applied to the Everchanger. The biggest difference between the expert hero mech and the expert rifleman mech was that Venerable Joshua's machine was a bit less powerful.

After all, the Everchanger also had to allocate enough capacity to make it competent in melee combat. It was already good enough if it was able to exhibit 80 percent of the power of a proper ranged mech.

In any case, now that the Star Dancer Mark II and the Everchanger were both able to contribute earnestly in this battle, the condition of the enemy warships deteriorated at a faster rate than ever!

When Warship Eta received the combined attacks of all three ranged expert mechs, the vessel was quickly speared through by a combination of cleverly-aimed resonance-empowered attacks!

The combination of precision and power crippled numerous important ship systems, causing Warship Eta to lose power to over half of her functions!

Aside from the power of three expert mechs, the other ranged mechs of the expeditionary fleet already began to showcase their power.

The Transcendent Punishers were finally able to exhibit their full strength. They had always been firing their positron cannons up until this point.

Now, they began to fire their gauss cannons as well, thereby slinging hundreds of projectiles towards the damaged pakklaton warships!

Though the hit rate of gauss cannons was not fantastic, each time they struck a ship, they inflicted significant damage!

Part of this was due to all of the energy attacks the enemy warships had endured. Their frontal hull plating had grown hotter and weaker. Though it still took a lot of energy to melt or vaporize them entirely, a single hard knock could easily shatter the weakened plating!

Warship Beta quickly became overwhelmed by this torrent of gauss cannons as well as other energy weapons fire.

After knocking out 4 out of 9 warships and partially crippling the combat capabilities of the remaining vessels, the pakklaton refugee fleet had lost over 60 percent of its firepower!

The pressure on the expeditionary fleet grew much less. Even though the surviving warships still retained enough operational laser weapons to inflict severe material damage to their targets, the intervention of the Shield of Samar played an extremely crucial role in preventing greater losses.

Even now, the Shield of Samar bravely flew in front of the Spirit of Bentheim while projecting an amazing resonance barrier that glowed with a bright blue corona!

The energy manifestation of Qilanxo had grown weaker after a few minutes, but the former sacred god still made her presence felt by reinforcing the resonance barrier with additional defensive power.

It was amazing how many attacks the Shield of Samar had managed to withstand so far! Even though Venerable Jannzi's force of will quickly depleted in strength due to all of the strain, she and her battle partner had already demonstrated way more defensive capabilities than other expert mechs and expert pilots!

Out of everyone in the expeditionary fleet, no one knew how remarkable this display was than another defensive expert pilot.

Venerable Linda Cross was highly confident in her own strength, but right now her confidence in her own expert mech was shaken.

"How is this possible? Is this the power of a masterwork expert mech? That can't be right. There has to be more to the Shield of Samar!"

There truly was no comparison between Venerable Linda's Amphis and the Venerable Jannzi's amazing Shield of Samar.

Though the Amphis was a proper expert medium space knight with balanced attributes and serviceable dueling capabilities, it was pretty much a standard mid-tier expert mech designed in the standard Garlaner style without too many special traits.

Even at its former height, the Cross Clan hadn't invested as much funding, effort and resources into its design, and it showed.

The Larkinson Clan, though a lot smaller and weaker in the past, still invested a lot more attention and resources into the development of the latest revision of the Shield of Samar.

Chief among them was the assistance provided by Master Moira Willix! Even if she held back a lot, her touch in the Shield of Samar was undeniable given her solid performance and excellent integration of resonating exotics!

Though Linda Cross knew that her Amphis was a much more capable dueler that could take part in offensive operations, right now she felt her machine had become completely outdated.

Even if she was able to contribute in future battles, at most her poor Amphis would be relegated to the background while the Larkinson Clan's proudest machines would play the starring roles!

"How is this fair?" She whined.

She had little faith that Professor Benedict and his gaggle of mediocre Journeymen could develop a new expert mech that was just as impressive.

Personally, she also knew that it would be difficult for the Cross Clan to invest as much resources in a new machine for herself.

Patriarch Reginald Cross had already reserved a generous amount of funding and resources for the development of his next high-tier expert mech.

"Maybe I can request my own new expert mech after Reginald has received his machine."

The battle continued at a more frenetic pace. After withstanding a lot of attacks, Venerable Jannzi and the Shield of Samar finally reached their limits and were forced to withdraw their imposing resonance barrier.

They had done their jobs for the most part. Though Venerable Jannzi was still able to fight in other ways, it was impossible for her to exert her ragged mind and will to perform another powerful move.

"It's up to the rest of you now." Venerable Jannzi said as she tried to recover from her heavy mental exertion.

It was at this time that the pakklavons finally displayed a different reaction.

After sending all of its shuttle-like vehicles back and forth between the different ships, the pakklavons apparently completed all of the transfers that they had planned.

The 5 relatively-intact vessels all engaged their sub-light propulsion systems, causing them to turn and move in the direction of a distant star system.

At the same time, they also engaged their warp drives, not hesitating to inject additional phasewater into them in order to supercharge their warp departure!

As the energy levels and other signs of activity from those key ships began to spike, General Verle issued a key order to Venerable Stark.

"We can't let the pakklavons flee with all of their phasewater and other valuables. Take the shot."

"I have been waiting for this." Venerable Stark grinned.

Though her fiery vengeance had cooled over the course of the lengthy firefight, she still retained enough energy to unleash a few more powerful attacks!

The Amaranto glowed a bit brighter as the expert pilot began to prepare for another powerful attack.

The changes did escape the notice of the pakklavons, however. The alien vessels all tightened their formation so that the Amaranto did not possess any straight shot towards any of the alien evacuation ships!

Even if the Amaranto's next attack was able to punch through the hull of an alien vessel, there would be another in the way to exhaust the remainder of the destructive energies!

It was too bad that the pakklavons didn't possess enough intelligence about the Amaranto and the Larkinson Clan. These ragged aliens could hardly be expected to access humanity's galactic net and read up on all of the public deeds and capabilities of their current opponents.

As a result, when the Amaranto finally released its charged attack, the aliens bracing to block this next attack became utterly shocked when it went wide!

"No! The human war machine didn't miss! Its energy beam bent!"

Though it only happened for an instant, the powerful beam leveraged one of the Amaranto's special resonance abilities and actually managed to bend around the tough formation of alien starships!

Without encountering the hindrance that it should have met, the special energy beam struck the side of one of the evacuation ships that was almost ready to activate her warp drive!

Many avian individuals cried out in panic as they saw the beam strike the side of the evacuation ship!

Surprisingly enough, the Amaranto's special attack did not inflict that much material damage.

Though it had cleverly entered one of the open gaps produced by the gnawing voribugs, the released energies did not blast entire compartments apart or anything.

Instead, Venerable Stark's strike was more insidious.

She had switched the attack phase of her luminar crystal rifle from a laser beam crystal to a disruptor beam crystal.

This massively reduced the direct damage her weapon was able to inflict, but allowed the Amaranto to achieve a different effect.

After the disruptor beam struck the exposed interior of the civilian vessel that was attempting to make an escape, her relatively weak and less sturdy internal systems could not withstand the resonance-enhanced power of the disruption generated by this single strike!

Though it would be far too exaggerated for a single mech to knock out all of the power of a large starship, the crucially-timed disruptor beam attack nonetheless managed to create enough chaos to prevent the vessel from completing its warping procedure!

The civilian ship hitched as its warp drive experienced enough shocks to make its operation unstable. Automatic safeties kicked in and forcibly aborted the alien ship's attempt to enter into warp!

The unlucky vessel had stalled while the other four evacuation ships successfully managed to slip away!

The four pakklaton vessels in question appeared to elongate in an unusual fashion even as they rapidly moved away from the battlefield at a pace that was unattainable if they relied on their ordinary means of propulsion!

This was the best result the Golden Skull Alliance was able to achieve in this situation.

As for the pakklatons, this was one of the outcomes they had feared!

A lot of their children and other valuables had been loaded onto the vessel. An awful fate awaited those aboard the stranded evacuation ship if the humans got close!

Fortunately, the disruption caused by the Amaranto only lasted for a relatively short amount of time. The evacuation ship was still mostly intact and her engineers already reported that her warp drive could be brought back operational again once the damage generated from the disruption was repaired.

All of that took time, however! The pakklatons had to do their best to stall the humans long enough to give the remaining evacuation ship enough time to restart her warp drive.

The humans knew what they had to do as well. If they wanted to capture the bounty that was certainly stored aboard this valuable vessel, they needed to advance quickly enough to disable the ship permanently and prevent her crew from destroying any phasewater samples and other treasures stored inside her cargo hold!

"Speed up our advance! Their warships are largely spent and crippled. Focus on disabling the remaining ones and smash aside any hulls in the way! That remaining evacuation ship must be ours!"

#### *Chapter 3685 Incredible Resilience*

The pakklaton refugee fleet managed to evacuate most of the ships that carried their most valuable offspring, resources and heritage!

Though the civilian ships that successfully managed to enter warp travel were still in the Orange Tulip System, they had already traversed a distance that was far beyond the reach of the human attackers!

Soon enough, the fleeing vessels would continue to build up their speed and leave this star system without anyone able to stop their flight!

However, the sudden intervention of the Amaranto's disruptor beam partially spoiled the plan hatched by the aliens.

The last-second intervention from the Amaranto temporarily stranded one of their key ships!

Up to this point, the human mech forces only exhibited the capability to fire direct weapons that traversed in a straight line. Whether it was laser beams or gauss projectiles, both types of weapons only soared straight forward under the absence of any significant gravity wells or other powerful influences in the vicinity.

Even if the humans fired any missiles, the warships could intercept them out easily enough with their secondary guns which they had yet to employ.

Yet how could the avian soldiers ever imagine that one of the powerful human expert mechs could fire an energy beam that could actually circle around their wall of ships?

Even though the formation of ships had also attempted to block attacks coming in at slight angles, the coverage wasn't complete enough!

If the pakklats were able to anticipate such a weird attack, they could have put up a more comprehensive barrier!

Though the destructiveness of a disruptor beam could not be compared to that of a laser beam or positron beam, their effects against energy shields and electrical systems were vastly more impressive.

Now, the alien crew members on the final remaining evacuation ship tried their best to get the stalled warp drive to work again.

Hundreds of crew members ran around to repair all of the blown and fried components. Many other helpers who had escaped from their previous ships spontaneously joined the damage control parties as well.

Even so, repairing all of the damage under battlefield conditions was extremely difficult!

In addition, the vessel was also infected by voribugs, who saw a greater opportunity to pounce now that numerous different security systems had failed!

No one knew how much time it took to repair all of the damage, but the pakklats stationed aboard the other ships were determined to do whatever it took to protect the final ship!

"The last flight must soar!"

"Protect our remaining younglings!"

The alien fleet altered their approach.

Six civilian vessels that had incurred the most damage tried their best to cover the remaining evacuation ship.

Meanwhile, the four surviving warships along with the remaining ten civilian vessels began to accelerate forward. Their damaged and faltering sub-light propulsion systems made that a harder task than normal, and a few vessels barely managed to push forward.



These were the vessels that were already unable to flee even if they tried their best. The voribugs also managed to eat and disable most of their systems, especially after much of their crew had already evacuated from the doomed vessels.

The skeleton crews that remained behind in order to give the rest a chance to flee were not numerous enough to suppress the voribugs that kept eating and multiplying aboard the pakklaton vessels!

When the members of the Golden Skull Alliance observed the latest moves of the alien fleet, they momentarily grew puzzled.

"What are the pakklatons doing?"

"They're trying to give their final treasure ship a chance to escape!"

"Why don't they stay put, then? Wouldn't it make more sense to stay put and shield their remaining evacuation ship?"

When General Verle observed the latest developments, he slowly began to frown.

"The pakklatons... are trying to inflict as much damage to us as possible." He concluded. "Focus your fire on the remaining warships. If my guess is correct, their secondary guns will open fire soon!"

The smaller laser cannon batteries that covered the exterior of the pakklaton warships were no joke! Their lethality against starships might not be stellar, but their effectiveness against mechs was much greater, especially at closer ranges!

Indeed, his worst fears came true. At a certain point, the warships opened fire with whatever secondary batteries they could bring to bear!

Not all of them were operational due to all of the damage they incurred, but each of them were able to fire dozens of laser beams in rapid succession!

Since the secondary laser batteries were not limited by the constraints of a mech, they were able to fire faster without worrying too much about overheating or draining too much energy reserves!

The mechs that were exposed began to encounter a hail of laser beams!

Even though a single small laser beam was unable to inflict fatal damage on most mechs, the volume of fire was too great. No machine was able to remain operational after getting struck by twenty or forty laser beams in rapid succession!

All of the mechs had little choice but to take cover behind the starships of the Larkinson Clan, but that presented the fleet with a different problem.

Much of the vanguard of the expeditionary fleet had already incurred a lot of damage to their forward hull plating!

Even if the secondary laser batteries were not weak enough to punch through compartments all at once, their volume of fire was surprisingly high!

In fact, the warships could have fired even more lasers if their conditions hadn't deteriorated so much.

"Focus fire on the remaining functional weapon batteries of the enemy warships." General Verle instructed his troops before he opened up a private communication feed. "Commander Taon Melin, I am counting your troops this time. Your artillery mechs must demolish their secondary weapon batteries as quickly as possible."

"They shall not escape their fate, sir." The Eye of Ylvaine Commander acknowledged.

The expert candidate was much more confident now. The range between the two fleets had decreased to a point where his Transcendent Punishers were much more accurate than before!

Though it was still a bit challenging for his mech pilots to snipe the exposed enemy weapon batteries under the current circumstances, they were never alone.

"The Great Prophet is by our side."

From the moment the Ylvainan mech pilots drew upon Ylvaine's might once again, the cannons of their bunker mechs became a lot more effective!

Now that the margin for error was a lot more generous, the small faults and other variables that previously interfered with their accuracy no longer spoiled their shots as much.

The Transcendent Punishers soon began to bombard the secondary laser battles that were actively firing towards the expeditionary fleet!

Though the avians had reinforced these weapon emplacements to an extent, they were still unable to withstand the attacks of dozens of artillery mechs!

In addition, the other mechs had been focusing their fire on the much larger and more exposed primary laser cannon emplacements.

While they were a lot tougher and better protected, when so many attacks struck the targets and the sections around them, the remaining warships slowly lost their fangs!

Soon enough, the pakklavons had lost much of their ability to retaliate from a distance!

The humans didn't feel at ease, though. The enemy vessels that still retained enough mobility tried their best to close in on the expeditionary fleet!

"What are they doing? Are they attempting to ram us? They'll never succeed!"

The Larkinson Clan and its allies possessed enough firepower to disable most of the incoming vessels.

The various human starships also began to split up at this point. Now that the warships had lost their teeth, they could no longer threaten the more vulnerable starships of the expeditionary fleet.

The various mech forces also began to spread out in order to pincer the remaining alien ships.

All of the mechs became a lot less constrained now that they didn't have to worry about exposing themselves to warship-grade weapons!

Ship after ship incurred a lot of damage. Their systems failed and more and more of them were taken out of the fight.

Though the warships were tougher, the civilian ships were much easier to disable. They had never been built to military standards. It did not take as much effort for a multitude of mech attacks to cripple their vital systems.

The humans weren't reassured, though. The situation became more and more concerning as the pakklavons kept trying to approach no matter the cost.

"Sir! Numerous swarms of voribugs are approaching our position! They have all emerged from the alien starships that we have destroyed!"

"What?!"

The voribugs no longer seemed content to chew on the pakklaton ships.

When the expeditionary fleet employed their sensors and scanners to investigate the situation, the operators found out that the problem had grown quite serious!

The more mature and older voribugs chose to leave the pakklaton ships on their own accord.

It appeared that they sensed more attractive prey!

Although people like Ves did not think the voribugs could destroy his ships, they were still incredibly difficult to get rid of once they took root on any ship!

He did not dare to rely solely on all of the anti-voribug measures that he bought back in Vulit.

The voribugs weren't considered one of the thirteen major races of the Red Ocean for nothing! Their resilience, adaptation and reproductive capabilities were high!

"Spread out and intercept the voribugs! Do not let them get close! If you are infected, maintain your distance from others and wait until we can sterilize your mechs."

The mech forces adjusted their target priorities and began to intercept the bugs in space as best as possible.

This was not as easy as it sounded. These organic creatures were weak but extremely numerous. Precise laser beams could only eliminate a handful of them at most as much of the expeditionary forces lacked explosive warheads or other area weapons that could eliminate a lot of weaker enemies at once.

In addition, the voribugs trying to hop from the pakklaton ships to the human ships had all gorged themselves on plenty of food!

Each of them had grown and evolved to an elder stage!

Their sizes not only became greater, but they also gained a lot of new capabilities! The most important ones was the ability to traverse through space, but their defenses had also grown significantly more formidable.

The voribugs were particularly resistant against energy weapons, which was bad news because the expeditionary fleet relied heavily on them. The luminar crystal rifles that the Larkinsons employed in abundance did not possess a strong advantage against their latest opponents.

Their energy beams did not deal as much damage as they should against these inexplicable insects!

Though the elder bugs could be overwhelmed as long as they got hit by enough laser beams, they were still relatively small and agile. They were almost as hard to strike as light mechs in this regard!

As Ves observed the approaching swarms, he noted that the number of elder voribugs was not overwhelming

However, they were still numerous enough to form different swarms that chased after different human ships. He feared that his mechs weren't up to the task of shooting them all down!

As for melee mechs, they could strike the elder voribugs easily enough, but what about the smaller bugs they carried in their shells?

If any of the juvenile and mature voribugs succeeded in slipping onto the mechs, then the machines in question would definitely be compromised!

"If only we had a striker mech or an explosive artillery mech."

Striker mechs armed with shotguns would be particularly helpful in this situation, though the range of their weapons wasn't particularly impressive.

It appeared he needed to think about the mechs of the next design round even further. The Larkinson Army still possessed way too many holes.

Just as Ves thought his clan needed to bring out the pesticides, the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seekers began to perform a familiar move again. Their mechs gathered together and advanced towards the enemy so that they could get as close as possible.

Ves' eyes lit up! "Of course!"

Under the lead of the Everchanger and the Star Dancer Mark II, the battle formations evoked the Superior Mother and began to unleash death towards the incoming swarm!

#### *Chapter 3686 Tenacious Bugs*

The voribugs sounded simple at first. The tough little exospecies was a race of vermin that weren't intelligent but could be as challenging to fight as any other major race in the Red Ocean!

The reason for that was their high adaptability. They were pests that liked to eat organic and inorganic matter. They were also able to tolerate different environments and reproduced quickly.

When all of these traits and more combined in a single species, the result was a pest that could gnaw entire starships if given time to proliferate!

Though they could multiply to vast numbers if they found enough sustenance, they had not taken over the Red Ocean due to numerous limitations.

First, they were unable to traverse the stars. Their ability to move in space notwithstanding, no amount of mutation or morphing could allow them to replicate the insanely complicated functions of a warp drive!

The local aliens therefore considered the voribugs to be parasitic in that the insects had to resort to hitchhiking on other ships to move around.

Second, the voribugs were not invincible. The other alien races had long developed solutions against them and many native exobeasts were also capable of crushing their shells.

Even if they did not encounter any significant resistance, the voribugs possessed such endless appetites that they eventually ran out of food to eat. At that point, they could only feed on each other, which often produced a lot of chaotic outcomes.

Third, the voribugs were not intelligent. As far as everyone knew, the voribugs had not evolved to the point where their intelligence grew on par with that of the sentient alien races.

The oldest voribugs encountered by different civilizations may have grown smart enough to lead other voribugs, but they were still incapable of moving beyond the instincts of their race.

That said, if the aliens weren't careful enough, the voribugs could still cause the collapse of many starships, space stations and planets!

There had been instances in the past where entire alien species went extinct because they failed to repel the voribugs that had managed to land on their planets!

The native alien civilizations of the Red Ocean had to come to an accord to wipe them all out, which didn't happen all that often!

Now, this voracious threat was advancing straight towards the expeditionary fleet in large and deadly swarms.

Yet before they could reach any of the ships and mechs of the Larkinson Clan, two energy silhouettes briefly came into existence.

The bugs all shuddered as two identical battle formations unleashed their waves of death!

One of them managed to blast through a single swarm that consisted of thousands of elder voribugs!

As soon as the death wave passed through their bodies, the elder voribugs along with all of the smaller bugs sheltering inside their bodies turned comatose.

Though their bodies were still functional, their minds had been snuffed out by the Superior Mother's merciless energies.

The voribugs would have been able to resist the effect if their minds were stronger, but they were ultimately insects. All of their tenacity and resilience was based around their bodies!

While the death wave unleashed by the Glory Seekers only destroyed a single swarm, the one released by the Penitent Sisters was much more effective!

With Venerable Joshua controlling the battle formation, the death wave partially fell under his control. With great effort, he was able to take advantage of the fact that he bestowed life to the extraordinary attack to steer it around and wipe out a few other nearby swarms!

Once the Penitent Sisters were no longer able to support the battle formation, over a third of the insect swarms fell apart!

"There's still more!"

The remaining voribugs still posed a substantial threat. They had dispersed too much to get caught by a single area attack.

They needed to be eliminated the old-fashioned way.

"Ranged mechs, shoot them down! Melee mechs, get ready to put away your rifles! We need to cut the voribugs down if they get close!"

The expeditionary forces didn't expect that their melee mechs would play a role this time!

However, it was better to block the advancing voribugs with a mech rather than a starship. Any mech that confronted one of the insects in battle could easily be cleansed once the battle was over.

More and more bugs fell as they got struck by weapons fire.

The desperate pakklaton ships also faltered as they lost their various systems to targeted fire.

Ves and the others remained on guard for any further surprises.

The Larkinsons and their allies no longer perceived the pakklaton ships as a threat. Their warships were all neutralized by now and their civilian ships were too fragile in front of massed firepower.

What truly concerned Ves and the others was the voribugs. There weren't enough mechs to intercept the approaching bugs at range!

Though this was bad news for most people, the melee mech pilots reacted differently towards this threat.

Many of them were grinning at the moment!

The mechs either holstered or tossed aside their spare energy rifles and drew their swords and other melee weapons.

All of this shooting business was not their cup of tea. Even if they possessed adequate marksmanship training, their mechs weren't suitable for this mode of combat.

"What they really wanted was to chop the bugs in pieces!

"Our time has come!"

"Chop these bugs apart!"

"Don't let any of the voribugs proceed any further!"

Soon, the first wave of voribugs crashed against the hastily-prepared formation of melee mechs!

Swordmaidens, Glory Seekers and Crossers dueled and danced against the tide of voribugs that mainly sought to reach the many ships of the expeditionary fleet!

The battle quickly grew intense. Though the melee mechs were able to chop or stab the voribugs easily enough, the problem was that there were still thousands more that were able to pass without being impeded!

The Valkyrie mechs of the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seekers tried their best to catch up to these voribugs, but their pilots were no longer in their best condition. The battle formations they employed had already drained most of their mental energies!

Not even Venerable Brutus and Venerable Joshua were able to function as sharp and energetic as before.

This was the price they paid to channel the Superior Mother's might!

Fortunately, there was an even faster group of mechs that were able to catch up to the bugs that slipped past the initial lines.

Ves watched closely as the Ferocious Piranhas of the Battle Criers quickly closed in on the insects.

"Huh?"

From the moment the light skirmishers got close, the relentless elder voribugs suddenly jerked and went out of control. Their flight trajectories became completely disordered. It was as if the insects became drunk all of a sudden!

"Wait... is that how they respond to glows?"



Ves had already surmised that while the voribugs possessed impressive biological attributes, their mental and spiritual development was nothing to be impressed about.

Now, the Ferocious Piranha happened to be one of the few mechs that could exploit this weakness!

The others caught onto this fact as well. General Verle immediately issued another order.

"Commander Firelight, disperse your Ferocious Piranhas. Their glows must cover as much space as possible!"

"Understood, sir."

The Flagrant Vandals quickly adjusted. They no longer flew in whole squads and companies as was standard. Instead, they all split up into individual units and formed a wide net that extended their disorientation glows across a much wider area!

A large amount of voribugs that managed to bypass the Avatars, Swordmaidens and other mech legions instantly got caught in the net cast by the Ferocious Piranhas.

Although the affected voribugs still drifted forward due to inertia, they were quickly focused down by either ranged attacks or melee attacks.

With all of these measures, the Larkinson Clan did not have to resort to any further tricks. The elder voribugs that sought to inhabit the expeditionary fleet eventually died before they reached their destination.

The only concern was that the expeditionary fleet was still at risk of getting infected.

The elder voribugs all carried a multitude of smaller bugs, some of which may have slipped out and drifted off into space.

Since the younger voribugs were all small and weak, they were quite hard to detect in space.

Therefore, every ship and mech needed to be checked in order to guarantee that the voribugs didn't become the latest passengers of the expeditionary fleet!

Still, with the elder voribugs taken care of, the threat of this major race had passed. Even if a few younger insects managed to slip onto the exterior of the Spirit of Bentheim, it was easy enough to detect them early enough with all of the tools the fleet acquired.

As long as the Larkinsons squashed these bugs early, they would have no time to multiply and expand to breathtaking numbers!

"Now that this threat is taken care of, there is only one task left."

The Larkinsons did not ignore the remaining evacuation ship. Even if most of their mechs became preoccupied with squashing bugs, a handful of units managed to circle around until they came close to the evacuation ship!

At this point, the distraction created by the pakklavons succeeded in buying a lot of time for the temporarily-stranded ship.

Not only did the pakklaton crew members managed to repair her critical systems in time, her warp drive also became active again!

Just as this highly complicated ship system was about to bring the final batch of pakklaton survivors out of the battlefield, a single expert mech rapidly approached and entered one of the open gaps of the damaged vessel!

The Dark Zephyr squeezed through until there was no more space. Though it could employ its weapon to carve out a path towards the alien vessel's engineering bay, it wasn't necessary to go any deeper.

Venerable Tusa's connection with his expert mech allowed him to see an annotated overlay that displayed a portion of the critical parts and systems that kept the evacuation ship running.

The Black Cats had compiled all of the data gathered from the MTA database and their own scans in order to produce a detailed blueprint of the enemy vessel.

If Tusa did not possess this data, then he wouldn't be able to figure out what he needed to wreck in order to prevent the final evacuation ship from warping away!

He smirked. "The Larkinsons send their regards."

The Dark Zephyr did not wield any daggers at this time.

Instead, it held a pair of bombs.

The expert mech tossed them out in different directions. Each of them landed close to a couple of critical systems and exploded shortly after!

The evacuation ship shuddered for a moment.

Then, a quarter of the ship lost power!

The disruption was so severe that the alien vessel's warp drive shut down yet again! The power-hungry component was quite delicate while it was starting up and could not properly warp while there were so many disturbances taking place!

The surviving pakklatons despaired when they observed what had happened.

When the Dark Zephyr drew out its daggers and began to dismantle even more critical systems from the inside, the evacuation ship had lost any chance of getting away!

The humans had won!

As the pakklatons were overtaken by despair, the Golden Skull Alliance moved quickly.

Mechs surged forward in order to disable the remaining civilian ships surrounding the key objective.

More importantly, scores of armored shuttles flew forward in order to land bots and infantry troops onto the alien ship!

Although mechs such as the Dark Zephyr could tear the evacuation ship apart from the inside, Ves and the others did not wish to inflict too much damage to the interior.

They were afraid that the alien vessel's warp drive and any phasewater stored inside would get lost in the ensuing destruction spree!

This was why it was important to secure the ship with the help of smaller troops.

#### *Chapter 3687 Slaughter*

The Battle of Orange Tulip had been decided!

All of the pakklaton ships had either blown up or became crippled to the point where they could not even move.

Their surviving crews could do little else but fight back against the voribug invasion to delay their possible demise.

Ves actually grew a bit interested in the relatively intact vessels. Even if they were built by aliens, they still contained plenty of tech and materials of interest to the Larkinson Clan.

Even if the voribug infestation ate up too much junk, the Larkinsons could still recover enough valuable materials by killing the insects and salvaging the most valuable exotics from their carcasses.

These weren't the real prizes, though.

Compared to sifting through the wrecks of these relatively low-tech alien starships, he would much rather see his men take control of the sole remaining evacuation ship!

Ves relaxed as the data screens provided him with enough confirmation that the vessel was stranded.

"She almost got away, but luckily Tusa managed to reach her in time."

Though the expert pilot once told Ves that he resented being used as a bomb delivery system, there was no better use for the Dark Zephyr at the moment.

The expert light skirmisher was by far the fastest mech in the Larkinson Army. It also happened to possess the least attack power out of all of the other expert mech. How else could the Larkinson Clan make use of the Dark Zephyr in a battle against warships?

In fact, even if the clan directed the Dark Zephyr to eliminate all of the voribugs that emerged later, its killing efficiency was simply too low.

The voribugs weren't individually strong and it was overkill to make use of a mech designed to outduel other expert mechs to squash their shells!

"Tusa has a point, though."

Ves didn't take him seriously before, but perhaps that was misjudgment.

Numerous mech units turned out to be irrelevant or only marginally useful this time.

The Swordmaidens, who had often played a prominent role in many battles, were rendered irrelevant in the first half of the battle!

The same went for all of the other melee mechs. They had been forced to wield energy rifles in order to keep their hands busy.

Though Ves was happy that the melee mechs still brought their primary weapons when the voribug swarms descended upon the expeditionary fleet, not every alien force carried hitchikers.

"If we fight against a nunser fleet next time, then our melee mechs will get blasted to pieces before they can get close."

The power disparity was too large. Second-class mechs were too fragile in the face of warship-grade weapons.

Ves understood that he needed to rethink the Larkinson Army's approach against alien battle fleets.

While he was sure that General Verle and his staff had already made plans for them, there was no denying that his mech legions lacked the mechs to fight effectively against warships.

Even the pakklaton refugee fleet could have destroyed a few human vessels if they were in better shape!

"Well, I can consider all of that later. First, we need to make sure we secure our main prize."

The Golden Skull Alliance all realized the importance of the final evacuation ship.

While it was good that the key alien vessel was no longer able to warp away, there was still a chance that the pakklavons could initiate a final act of spite and blow up the vessel!

"They don't even have to blow up the entire ship. They can already ruin my day if they destroy all of their phasewater reserves!"

Although phasewater was an extremely valuable substance, it was not indestructible. As long as the aliens set out to ruin it, they could employ various different means to render it useless!

Therefore, the main priority of the expeditionary forces was to make sure that the pakklavons aboard the vessel did not have a chance of completing any of these actions.

The first shuttles that approached the evacuation ship landed inside holes that were situated close to the engineering bay and other sensitive areas.

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan all dispatched light assault troops that were fairly light and mobile.

Speed was of the essence this time as every second counted.

The light assault troops dispatched by the Glory Seekers and the Crossers possessed fairly standard loadouts. They all wore suits of light to medium combat armor that were equipped with special compact boosters that enabled them to speed up their advance.

Their mobility systems also came in handy whenever the troops needed to fly up to a higher floor. The pakklavons were avian in nature so they rarely relied on stairs or elevators to ascend the decks.

What was a little more unusual about the initial boarding troops was that the ones hailing from the Larkinson Clan were armed with additional weapons.

Aside from carrying infantry-grade luminar crystal rifles, they also came armed with swords!

The Swordmaiden and Heavensworder contingents had both volunteered for this duty. They did not fear death and relished the chance to make themselves useful for the clan!

It was fortunate that a pakklaton body was considerably larger than a human body. The hallways and compartments of the alien ship were spacious enough for the Swordmaidens to swing their large blades without too many issues.

"Hahaha! This way, sisters! One of the backup power generators is beyond this corridor!" A Swordmaiden officer called as she held her greatsword close! "Get ready for battle. Our scans have detected the presence of two-dozen aliens. Chop them all up before they can overload the power generator or something!"

Although a closed hatch barred their way forward, how could the enthusiastic soldiers be stopped?

The ship they were on was originally built for civilian purposes. The pakklavons had not bothered to reinforce her interior in any significant fashion.

One of the Heavensworders pulled out a small launcher and fired a warhead that quickly breached a wide hole in the hatch.

When the sword wielders plunged through, they soon spotted the tall avian aliens that were wearing odd metal suits that covered their entire bodies.

Although the pakklavons weren't strong compared to the other races in the Red Ocean, they were still predators at heart!

The large bird-like aliens uttered loud caws as they attacked the human infantry soldiers!

Both sides fired energy beams at each other. At the same time, they also closed in so that they could use their claws and swords to tear each other asunder.

Pakklavons fell from the air while humans collapsed as a short but brutal fight ensued!

Claws that were strengthened by energy fields tore through the relatively thin armor of the Larkinson troops.

Swords hacked through the armored wings of the pakklavons.

The two sides also employed other weapons such as explosives in order to gain the upper hand.

However, compared to a race that had risen up through conquest and once waged war against every other race in their home galaxy, the pakklavons were still too underdeveloped in this aspect!

What was worse was that the pakklavons were too overtaken by grief and rage to fight in a more methodical fashion. They almost grew feral as they relied on ferocity rather than sound tactics in order to defeat the human murderers!

"These birds have gone mad!"

"Isn't that great? Wild chicken always tastes better."

"Wait a minute. You're not thinking about roasting them, are you? They're intelligent!"

"So what? A bird is a bird. Besides, these pakklavons are so stupid now that they're no different from exobeasts."

"Stop talking about dinner and focus on finishing off these birds!"

The Swordmaidens and Heavensworders both gained the upper hand in this short but brutal struggle. After gaining the measure of their opponents, they deftly cooperated with each other to eliminate the overwhelmed pakklavons.

In the end, the defenders succumbed. Their frozen expressions were locked in hatred as they swore curses upon the killers of their race.

The surviving Larkinson troops didn't care, though. They checked on their dead and wounded while also securing the alien power reactor.

They had no idea how it worked, of course. Even the sole Swordmaiden with engineering training had no clue how to operate this alien contraption.

Fortunately, her job didn't entail taking control of the device. She merely had to find a way to take it offline while at the same time unplugging it from the ship's power network.

She referenced a few schematics before she pointed at a spot on the deck. "Pry off that deck plate and plant a directional bomb facing downwards under there."

One small explosion later, the nearby compartments all lost power. Emergency lighting soon came online, but they all ran on internal batteries. Most of the more power-hungry systems were unable to function anymore, thereby further taking away control from the pakklavons.

More incidents like this took place throughout the ship.

The human infantry soldiers smashed through every barrier and overran any defenders.

If this was a military ship, then the human invaders would have shown a lot more respect. A proper vessel that was designed to resist boarding could employ all kinds of different ways to prevent intruders from going deeper.

From crushing the compartment and anyone inside into pancakes to mustering up heavily-armored troops, in many cases the costs associated with boarding actions were too high to bother with them. It was better to rely on mechs to smash all of the dangerous elements from a distance!

The pakklavons hadn't been able to prepare any significant defensive measures, and that suited the humans fine.

Back on the Spirit of Bentheim, the teams of mech designers quietly observed the direct helmet feeds of the Larkinson soldiers as they brutally spilled alien blood.

Many of them grew queasy at the sight of all of the blood. Even among the Journeymen, people like Jannassa Pellier and Tifi Coslone looked as if they wanted to empty their stomachs.

"How barbaric. Do they really have to insist on using swords?"

"I can't imagine how these Swordmaidens can kill so many aliens without slowing down."

While the mech designers observed the action, Aurelia happily floated in the air as she somehow learned how to direct her flight by moving her arms in different ways.

"Hihihihi!"

"Meow meow~"

"Do the Larkinsons do this often?" Sara Voiken asked with a distasteful expression.

Gloriana huffed. "Not really. We usually stick to killing our enemies with our mechs. You better get used to this, though. This won't be the last time our soldiers will kill our opponents up close. Sometimes, it takes a slaughter to get our point across."

Her daughter, who had been floating in the vicinity, grew more enthused all of a sudden.

Her face scrunched up as her lips began to release a new sound.

"S...S....Swauta..."

Gloriana instantly turned her attention towards her baby daughter. "What did you say?!"

"Ss..."



The mother stretched out her arm, causing Aurelia's pink suit to automatically come back.

Once the baby fell into her arms, Gloriana activated the command that retracted the pink suit's transparent faceplate.

"You said 'mama', right? Say it again!"

Aurelia squirmed her body as she looked up at her mother's face with youthful curiosity.

"Say mama!"

"..maaaaa?"

"You said it!" Gloriana burst with happiness! "You said mama! Hahaha! You're so brilliant! I won! Take that, Ves!"

Aurelia grew happy when she saw that her mother was happy!

"Mama!"

"Yes, mama! You are a genius, Aurelia!"

Gloriana hugged her baby and showered her cute little face with kisses.

What about phasewater?

What about alien tech?

What about valuable resources?

Nothing could make her happier than hearing her daughter say 'mama' as her first word!

Gloriana grinned so much that she quickly called up her husband.

"What is it, Gloriana? I'm kind of busy now. The battle isn't even over yet, you know. We still have a ship to pacify!"

"Guess what, Ves?"

"What?"

"Aurelia said 'mama' first!"

"Huh?!"

### *Chapter 3688 Bug Extermination*

The main battle had been won!

The pakklaton refugee fleet posed no significant threat to the expeditionary fleet anymore. All of the warships had been trashed and the remaining vessels did not contain any notable weapons to begin with. As long as the ships of the Golden Skull Alliance kept their distance, the chances were low that the aliens could damage a human mech or ship.

The voribugs weren't in a better shape either. While the insects still ate away the guts of the pakklaton ships, pretty much all of their elder voribugs had died when they attempted to jump onto the much larger human fleet.

The juvenile and adult voribugs may be incredibly difficult to get rid of entirely once they took root inside a starship, but they were too small and weak to traverse through space and navigate towards another vessel.

Right now, the main priorities of the Golden Skull Alliance were twofold.

First, they had to make sure to neutralize any active opposition inside the alien ships. Neither the pakklatons nor the voribugs must be allowed to ruin anything of value inside the hulls!

Second, the humans had to secure any high-priority treasures that the evacuation ship and the other disabled ships were carrying at the moment. This included phasewater and other high-grade exotics.

It was for this reason that the Golden Skull Alliance deployed a lot of assault shuttles carrying lots of different infantry units.

Although the Golden Skull Alliance mostly depended on its mechs to fight its battles, infantry soldiers were also indispensable.

Whether they were utilized as guards or employed as marines that specialized in performing boarding action, the Larkinson Clan had not neglected the necessity of raising and training thousands troops.

Of course, most of the time they melted into the background. They were the faceless troops that manned the checkpoints, inspected incoming and outgoing shuttles and escorted VIPs such as Ves and the other leaders.

It was quite rare for them to play an active role in a battle!

Although mechs could easily penetrate through the hulls of the crippled starships and annihilate any alien holdouts stirring up trouble inside, the damage the mechs would inflict in the process was way too high!

Any samples of phasewater or delicate pieces of valuable alien technology could easily get crushed by the sheer amount of collateral damage that mechs unavoidably inflicted!

This was why the infantry forces came out in full force. They all suited and boarded the shuttles in batches in order to head to different crippled alien vessels.

Most of them proceeded towards the evacuation ship, but the expeditionary forces made sure to dispatch enough units to secure the most critical compartments of other vessels.

The takeover did not go smoothly in many cases.

"CAWW!"

Over twenty different birds in armor flew above the heads of the Glory Seeker soldiers that had just entered and launched attacks by dropping bombs and firing their wing-mounted laser cannons.

Such an assault would have taken a light assault squad by surprise, but the squad that had entered was much more resistant against damage!

The Glory Seeker troops were taken aback at the ferocity of the attack, but they happened to carry a shield generator that blocked much of the initial strikes.

Even if the attacks went through, the heavy combat armor worn by the female soldiers were not for decoration. Their heavily armor plating could take quite a beating before they succumbed.

Several of them raised their positron rifles and tried their best to aim at the armored wings of the pakklaton troops.

These strikes dealt substantial damage as the pakklatons rarely employed heavy armor as far as the humans were aware of. As a race evolved from alien birds, the pakklatons favored flight and mobility in all of their combat approaches.

While the pakklaton race once raised heavily-armored units, these elite soldiers had long been crushed under the heel of the Big Two's boots. The alien troopers that accompanied the pakklaton refugee fleet were merely grunts that were lucky enough to enter an evacuation ship in time.

Even if they honed and polished their combat skills against the voribugs for several weeks, human troops were much more versatile than mindless insects!

"Bring these birds down onto the deck!"

A couple of heavily-armored soldiers brought their fluid projectors to bear and began to fire concentrated streams of slime that rapidly dried and solidified upon contact!

Often used for riot control, the slime was designed to trap, immobilize and incapacitate anyone and anything engulfed in the substance.

The slime formula used by the Glory Seekers was much more effective than the ones used by states such as the Bright Republic.

The slime not only stuck more effectively onto surfaces, but also reached an impressive degree of hardness within a minute!

Even if the slime did not have time to dry out, their inherent viscosity and thick consistency already glued up the movements and surface modules of the pakklaton soldiers in the air.

Soon enough, they fell helplessly onto the deck as they were unable to maintain flight with all of the hardening glue-like substances engulfing their armored forms!

At this point, killing them was as easy as slaughtering chickens.

Perhaps a more elite or well-funded unit would have been able to prevent or mitigate these actions, but the human attackers were considerably better in this regard!

"Heh. Stupid birds." A female soldier contemptuously stomped the beak of a dying pakklaton soldier. "The chickens just don't learn. Instead of hiding behind cover and relying on the defensive advantages of fighting on home ground, they would much rather fly out in the open inside a cramped starship. It's as if they never got rid of their primal way of fighting."

"Shut up, Costella. I am glad these pakklavons employ the same tactic over and over again. Now let's secure the bridge or whatever they call it. Why must they build so high?"

The bridge of the alien vessels was built like a forest or a giant nest. Though the heavily-armored troops were able to levitate, their bulk made it difficult to move quickly.

Fortunately, none of them had to know how all of the alien devices worked. Their tech specialist just pulled out a special data container and pressed it onto an alien console.

Soon enough, the various control panels switched off, signifying that much of the ship was locked down.

Elsewhere, another squad of heavy assault troops dispatched by the Cross Clan advanced towards a dangerous voribug nest where a lot of new insects were being hatched.

An elder voribug had stayed behind in order to protect the nest. When the insect learned that human invaders were on the way, the creature let out an invisible noise that caused many voribugs in the vicinity to stop their previous actions and converge upon the nest!

"Hsssssss!"

"Shaaaaa!"

The flood of voribugs that descended upon the approaching Crosser troopers was great!

If a dozen of the small hand-sized insects were able to jump onto the armor of the human troops, they could use their metal-tearing limbs and maws to drill inside and mutilate the vulnerable bodies within.

However, the Crossers did not allow the bugs to get close in the first place!

The troops all raised their heavy shotguns and poured out small but extremely numerous pellets in different directions.

Whenever a swarm of bugs became too much, one of the small shoulder-mounted launchers automatically fired impact grenades that produced strong shockwaves that pushed the voribugs aside!

If any of the insects managed to get past all of those defenses, then the shield generator carried by the troops forcibly stopped them from getting any further.

Hundreds of deathly insects fell in quick succession. While the elder voribugs were quite threatening to individual soldiers, these ordinary bugs were trivial to kill as long as the defenders were prepared.

The only troublesome factor was that repelling all of the bugs consumed a lot of energy and ammunition. If the soldiers weren't accompanied by carrier bots that contained additional supplies, they wouldn't have been so wasteful in how they fought.

The only troublesome part about the voribugs was that they could come in each direction. The ones tunneling below the decks were particularly difficult to deal with because the soldiers preferred to keep the surface they were standing on intact.

"These bugs are endless!"

"No wonder the pakklavons never managed to eradicate them for so long."

Slowly but surely, the Crosser assault troops managed to reach the entrance to the compartment that held one of the hives of the voribugs.

They briefly stopped as they beheld the space. Every surface was covered in gunk, causing the entire space to look dark and foreboding. Even the light fixtures had been partially covered by the excretions and other biological waste matter of the insects.

A single elder voribug stood in front of a large nest of tiny eggs. It was many times larger than an adult and its exoskeleton was laced by the alloys that it had originally eaten from the ship.

The creature gazed at the human intruders with opaque black eyes. None of the Crossers could determine how much intelligence they conveyed, but none of them enjoyed being stared at by an exoinsect!

"HHSSSSSSSSSS..."

The sound issued by the elder voribug echoed through the chamber and discomfited the humans. The cry served as both a warning and a declaration of strength to the creature!

If that wasn't enough, strange half-metal wings unfolded from behind the voribug. They flapped at a rapid pace, causing the heavy creature to rise up in the air despite its considerable mass.

Given the size and the material composition of the elder voribug, it would take quite a lot of effort for soldiers on foot to kill this powerful insect!

This was a voribug that could pose a threat to mechs!

The Crossers didn't come in blind, though. Even though the Golden Skull Alliance only learned relatively recently that the pakklavon ships were infested by voribugs, it did not take a lot of time for them to pull out the gear and plans they prepared in the event they encountered a voribug infestation.

"Take out the cannon. Slowly. Let's not startle this bug, shall we?"

One of the heavy weapon specialists slowly withdrew the cannon parts mounted on one of the floating carrier bots and slowly locked them into an operational weapon.

The voribug seemed content to buzz around while making intimidating noises. The creature's greatest priority was to safeguard the eggs of its species, so it did not dare to act rashly.

However, as the heavy weapons specialist slowly brought the large and formidable-looking cannon, the elder voribug finally recognized that it would not be able to protect eggs if the intruders got their way!

"HHHHHHSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!"

This insectile hiss sounded different from the last one! The sensors of the Crosser soldiers went wild as they detected a lot of incoming enemies!

"The bugs are coming!"

"Hold out until we can fire our cannon!"

Swarms of voribugs emerged out of lots of tiny holes and descended upon the Crosser infantry squad!

While they were being halted by the same means they employed before, the difference was that they were also facing an elder voribug this time!

Just as the troopers thought they could complete their mission without any complications, a large and heavy insect slammed against the energy shield!

The barrier exploded in light as the shield generator could not withstand the force of the impact!

Without the protection of this shield, the smaller insects were quickly able to swarm towards the vulnerable troopers.

"Flamethrowers!"

Although the flames unleashed by the soldiers managed to fry many insects, the voribugs were quite resistant against heat damage, so plenty of them managed to get through!

One insect drilled through the faceplate of a soldier. The man screamed as his entire face was being eaten by a voribug!

However, even as all of this was taking place, the heavy weapon specialist successfully fired his cannon!

A powerful gauss shell surged forth and slammed against the elder voribug that managed to get in the way in time!

Though its large body cracked and almost shattered from the blow, the creature managed to remain alive with the help of its incredibly tenacious biology.

It was a pity that the creature was not able to negate physics. The surprisingly powerful gauss cannon attack propelled the body of the elder voribug backwards until it slammed through thousands of tiny, milk-like eggs!

As the voribug came to its senses, it observed the eggs that had been crushed under its heavy shell.

For a moment, the voribug swarms paused and fell silent.

Then, they all hissed louder than ever!

"HSSSSSSSSSS!"

"HSSSSSSSSSSSS!"

"HSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!"

The surviving Crosser troopers all shook in their armors.

"We should have brought more men!"

*Chapter 3689 The Melee Mech Problem*

The pacification of the alien starships did not fully go according to plan.

The pakklaton infantry soldiers did not put up a lot of resistance. The losses they suffered before this battle along with the depletion of their supplies left them in a pretty bad shape.

When their broken and tormented mentalities came into play, the pakklaton soldiers completely degenerated into suicidal animals that only sought to kill at least one filthy human before they died!

In contrast to the pakklaton resistance, the voribugs were much more difficult to defeat than everyone thought.

With the manpower, training and equipment of the Golden Skull Alliance, the various boarding teams were experiencing considerable difficulties in securing the vessels.

Even if they killed millions of bugs and wiped a couple of nests, there were still a lot more voribugs scurrying around that had drilled into areas that were incredibly difficult to access by humans!

The only way to reach these isolated areas quickly was to employ a mech to dig into these sections, but that would be ruinous to the alien ship in question.



There was no good solution at the moment aside from steadily grinding down the voribug numbers to a more manageable level.

Casualties had fallen among the soldiers sent to secure the alien ships. The constant engagements against the swarms of voribugs and especially the elder voribugs that remained behind took their toll against the enthusiastic but inadequately equipped troopers.

Morale among the men remained high, though. The soldiers of the Golden Skull Alliance were not meek, and everyone was aware of the realities of combat.

This was what they had trained for! If they could not show their value in this instance, how could their organizations possibly increase their investment in them? Demonstrating their willingness to fight was the best way to show that the expeditionary forces consisted of more than mechs!

The constant fighting gradually achieved results.

"Look! The voribugs aren't attacking us anymore! We're making progress!"

The human forces discovered that as long as they reduced the population of the voribugs below a point, the insects became a lot less active.

They needed time to breed and replenish their numbers before they resumed their offensive!

Back on the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves did not pay any mind to the ongoing fights anymore.

Boarding actions and infantry-level battles were not his specialty and there were lots of other officers that could direct the cleanup operation.

He left the bridge and quickly headed down to the main design lab. He quickly spotted his wife along with a number of other Journeyman and approached the group.

Gloriana grinned at her daughter as she held the baby high in her grasp.

"Say it again, Aurelia. Say 'mama'!"

"..Mamaaa."

"Good girl!"

Gloriana leaned in and kissed Aurelia's cute face.

"What do you say to me when you see me again?"

"Mama!"

"What a clever girl!"

Gloriana smooched her daughter for the umpteenth time.

"When your father and I come up to you at the same time, who do you run up to first!"

"Mama!"

"You're so cute!"

As Ves observed this spectacle, he looked anything but happy. Aurelia barely learned how to say her first word and already Gloriana was indoctrinating her daughter with all of this 'mama' nonsense!

"Ahem."

"Hmm? Oh, the loser has arrived. Look, Aurelia. He's your father. What do you call your father?"

The baby girl grew confused as she wondered why Gloriana wasn't showering her with love this time.

"Guuu...swataaa?"

"Hihihihi! Just call mama, dear!"

"Mama!"

Ves grew so annoyed at this stupid display that he stepped forward and tried his best to wrench his daughter's pink-suited form out of Gloriana's grasp!

"Hey! What are you doing, Ves! You don't get to hold her right now! I won this contest!"

"Our daughter isn't a vehicle for you to compete! She is the product of our love!" Ves hissed at Gloriana before he tried to direct a gentle expression towards his baby. "Don't listen so much to your mother. I'm much saner than her! Call me papa."

"Boooo...."

"No, not boo. Papa. Paaaaapaaaa. Papa. Can you say it, honey?"

Aurelia didn't seem to understand what he was trying to convey. She looked around as a line of drool leaked from the corner of her mouth. Her face, which was moist with all of he kisses she received, began to look increasingly more droopy.

"No! Don't go to sleep yet! Say papa, please! Paapaaa!"

"...maaamaaaa..."

Aurelia dozed off and took another nap.

An awkward silence fell the area as the other mech designers pretended that they did not hear anything.

"Let me tuck her in." Gloriana triumphantly said as she took Aurelia back and carefully put her tiny body onto the floating crib. "There you go. Have a good rest, my sweetie pumpkin!"

She activated the setting that formed a shield and sound-isolating barrier around the crib before turning back to Ves. She couldn't help but smirk while placing her hands on her hips.

"You lose."

Ves frowned. "Can you stop that? I know you're smug and all, but Aurelia just happened to spend more time with you, that's all. I'll make sure to do better next time!"

"You're welcome to try." Gloriana confidently smirked.

In her opinion, it was impossible for Ves to gain the upper hand in the parenting contest! She was the best mother in the Larkinson Clan while Ves was just an overgrown kid. How could they possibly compare? The superior Hexer teaching principles she learned in her home state was the best way to raise a child!

Once they moved past this matter, Ves and the Journeymen turned their attention back to the main projections.

The live helmet feeds along with the overviews showing the progress the soldiers had made in capturing the alien ships all showed how far the expeditionary forces had come in securing their gains.

Ves briefly glanced at his new batch of lead designers. He didn't need to look at the earlier batch of Journeymen to know that they were unaffected by the violence. None of them were like Jannzi so he didn't have to worry about getting scolded.

Janessa Pellier and Tifi Coslone were both disciples of a Master Mech Designer. Ves had looked into their background and he figured that they were quite sheltered.

This wasn't unusual for mech designers as many of them were happy to work in a quiet design lab for years on end.

Even if they traveled around, they never went off the beaten path or braved any dangers.

The faces of the two female Journeymen looked a bit pale. Neither of the two were able to endure all of the bloodshed and violence of the boarding actions.

Tifi turned towards Ves. "Is this necessary, sir?"

"Why are you asking a question that you already know the answer to?" Ves turned her question around. "We did not come here to hold tea parties with the aliens. We came here to grow stronger. The aliens aboard those vessels need to be cleaned up one way or another. Dispatching our infantry troops is best way to do so without ruining everything else that remains on those vessels."

"Sir..."

"Did you object as much to the sight of mechs fighting alien warships?"

"No..."

"This is the same thing." Ves waved his arm at one of the helmet feeds that showed a squad of Battle Criers gunning down a group of hysterical pakklaton refugees. "Red Ocean belongs to humanity, and any alien that stands in our way must be removed. This is the imperative of all pioneers."

"Must we do this job ourselves?" Tifi questioned.

"Each of us must do our duty. If we want to do well in the Red Ocean, we can't sit back and shy away from dirty jobs. Anyway, there's no point discussing this any further. We have come this far, so we should look forward instead of backwards."

"I don't agree." Gloriana said as she grew serious again. "We should reflect on our performance in this battle. I do not think that I am the only one here who has seen the flaws in the performance of our mech forces."

Everyone's expressions grew ugly.

"Our melee mechs... are not effective against warships in their current forms." Dulo Voiken said.

This was a hard admission to make for someone who specialized in designing spearman mechs.

If battles against warships became more prevalent, then the demand for ranged mechs would rise while the demand for melee mechs would drop!

How could people like Dulo Voiken find any meaning in their existence if that was the case?

"You don't need to worry too much, Dulo." Ves tried to console the man. "There are lots of mech designers who are in the same straits as you. Will all of them lie down and let themselves become irrelevant? I don't think so. Someone will come up with adaptations that can infuse new lives into melee mechs. One of the ideas that we can apply is to find a way to increase our defenses against warship-grade weapons."

Sara Voiken became more enthused at this moment. "There's been movement in my field of specialty. There are many defensive specialists who are much more competent than myself that are quickly developing stopgap solutions in this regard. From creating an ultra-powerful shield generator to creating a giant 'armored sled' for mechs, there are still many ways for us to allow our melee mechs to close in on powerful warships. I even heard that the Polymath herself is contributing to these efforts!"

Everyone gasped or looked up at the mention of this title. The Polymath!

Ves directed an odd expression to Sara. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. The MTA isn't keeping it a secret. The mechers are all aware that solving this problem is extremely vital to preserve the strength of the mech industry. The Polymath might not be a defensive specialist, but she is an excellent innovator and knows theories that other defensive specialists have never come in touch with. She is not only one of the main mech designers who decide what innovations will be included in the next mech generation, she is also responsible for developing many of them! The rate of technological progression after the Polymath came into power is at least 20 percent higher than before!"

This was a scary number!

It spoke much about the Polymath's ability to contribute to humanity when just herself could accelerate the development of mechs to this degree.

The rest of the innovations were painstakingly invented by the rest of humanity! A hundred Star Designers, many more Masters and countless other researchers worked their utmost in order to push mechs to the next level, but their individual contributions were merely a fraction of that of the smartest mech designer!

Having met the legendary woman herself, if only in secret, Ves knew that the Polymath was highly concerned about the Survivalist cause and the MTA as a whole.

She would definitely find a way to make melee mechs more relevant in battles against warships. Ves could practically guarantee that the MTA would unveil a new surprise soon.

The latest mech generation had already rolled in a few years ago. It was too early to announce a new wave of innovations and updated technological standards, but this problem was so acute that he bet that the Polymath wouldn't wait!

"You hear that, Dulo and Ketis? The two of you don't have to..." Ves trailed off as he noticed that he overlooked the fact that there were only seven of them here. "Wait, where is Ketis?"

Juliet silently pointed at one of the projected helmet feeds.

The source of the feed held a blood-stained greatsword of excellent quality at the moment. A swarm of voribugs attempted to engulf the person, but all met their deaths when the sword wielder released an energy wave with just a single swing of her blade!

Ves looked aghast at the display. "What the hell is she doing on the evacuation ship!?"

### *Chapter 3690 Shaken Hand*

There were plenty of risks involved with boarding ships.

This was especially the case when everyone aboard them was hostile towards the visitors and wanted to do everything they could to prevent their vessels from falling into other people's hands!

In human combat, boarding actions were precarious when there was no guarantee that the losers would receive proper treatment.

If it became clear that the occupants would die anyway, then there was always a chance that an engineer would rig a power reactor to blow.

Even without this final measure, there were plenty of other ways to frustrate intruders. Many military ships contained to so many anti-boarding measures that it was practically suicide for any unwelcome guests to step inside.

This was because it was too common for corridors and compartments to turn into killboxes at the press of a button!

In order to capture a ship properly, the attackers had to be smart about their moves. Ironically, pirates were some of the most skilled people in taking over starships.

From planting their own people aboard the ships to employing psychological pressure to induce the occupants into keeping the ships intact, pirates were professionals when it came to capturing ships when they still held value.

The Larkinsons weren't pirates, and the alien ships were different from what they were accustomed to. Even if all of the data suggested that the pakklaton vessels wouldn't blow up anytime soon, there was always a chance that something might go wrong!

This was why the Larkinsons kept their ships at a healthy distance from the disabled alien ships.

This was also why the Larkinsons did not dare to dispatch any important personnel aboard the partially-secured vessels.

The soldiers who volunteered to board the pakklaton ships were all disposable footsoldiers from the perspective of the clan.

Recruiting, training and outfitting these troops was a lot cheaper than doing the equivalent with mech pilots.

The soldiers also took up relatively little space aboard a ship and did not need much investment to keep them happy.

All in all, Ves almost never paid attention to them and wouldn't shed a tear if any of them died. The steady trickle of soldiers dying among the Larkinson boarding parties did not bother him at all. They had chosen this vocation and knew that they could die for any reason at any place and any time.

While he could accept the deaths of trivial soldiers, the demise of Ketis was another matter!

"Ketis!" Ves roared as he opened a direct channel to his former student's combat armor. "What are you doing over there!"

"I'm doing my job." She said as she led a contingent of elite Swordmaiden troops to the heart of the evacuation ship. "I can't easily turn my back on a good fight."

"If you want a good fight, why don't you wait until we return to Davute?! There are plenty of arenas over there where swordswomen like you can fight to your heart's content!"

Ketis contemptuously snorted as her greatsword hacked through a bulkhead without encountering any resistance. "Those aren't real battles. If I want to remember this feeling and find the true meaning of swordsmanship, I need to challenge myself at the junction between life and death. I am already getting inspiration from the fighting so far! I can't obtain any of this progress if I stay on the Spirit of Bentheim."

Ves wanted to tear his hair out! Though he understood her desire to seek out battle, she was no longer an ordinary swordswoman!

"You can pick your battles more carefully, you know! Think of who you are and how much you matter to us all. You're one of the key Journeymen of our clan and you're also Venerable Joshua's wife. Your death will affect more than just yourself!"

"You don't need to remind me of that, Ves. It is exactly because so much is at stake that I need to find my strength in battle. These pakklavons and voribugs are weak compared to the greater threats we may face in the future. If I don't take this opportunity to improve myself, it will be too late in the future!"

She no longer listened to her words and completely focused her attention on the battle at hand.

Right now, she and her team of Swordmaidens made a lot of progress inside the evacuation ship.

They encountered a lot of voribugs so far, but none of them lasted long against the might of a swordmaster and the firepower of heavily-armed troopers.

With Ketis and Sharpie working together, not a single enemy succeeded in killing a human!

"Watch out." She said as she halted before a hatch that the pakklavons had recently reinforced. "There are lots of pakklavon life signs in the next compartment. If the aliens have prepared an ambush, then be prepared to fall back."

Her Bloodsinger hummed with the anticipation of tasting alien blood. It also spilled plenty of them but it would never say no to more!

With a single, powerful chop, the hatch blasted open from the middle!

The thick layers of metal that should never be cut so easily with just a sword had completely made way for Ketis' unyielding will!

She and her fellow Swordmaidens stepped inside without taking too many precautions. They had taken the measure of their alien opponents and did not fear their means.

Yet just as they swept their gazes, their swords and rifles faltered.

A gaggle of pakklavon guards glared angrily as they stood in front of over a hundred younglings.

The small and immature chicks were larger than human children, but that did not take away the fact that they were civilians who didn't even have the strength to harm a human soldier!

"Caww! Cawww!"



"Caaaaaaaaw!"

"Caaaw!"

The pakklaton children exhibited a mix of emotions. Many of them exhibited fright. They were so afraid of the human boogeymen that they flapped their featherless wings in panic!

Other children exhibited pure and utter hatred towards the foreign invaders that had wiped out their star nation and most of their fellow pakklatons.

Even though aliens usually thought and acted a lot differently from humans, Ketis had little doubt that the most resentful among the alien kids would definitely try to take revenge if they managed to survive this encounter!

However, that was only one of many possible outcomes. For now, they children. Alien children, but young and innocent nonetheless.

The pakklaton guards that had been guarding these children against intruding voribugs tensed up for a fight they knew they could not win.

They stood their ground anyway because they were all prepared to fight to the death in order to give the children of their race a chance to slip away!

Nobody started any attacks for the moment but the tension in the hall made it difficult to maintain this state.

Ketis could feel the desire to strike the aliens down from her fellow Swordmaidens.

She could also feel the alien but also very familiar determination from the pakklaton soldiers.

She slowly let out a deep breath.

"Lower your weapons. Slowly."

"Wait, what? Are you sure, Ketis?"

"The aliens don't pose a threat to us and killing them won't provide any significant gains."

The Swordmaidens did not take well to this message. The older veterans especially couldn't agree with her decision.

"With great respect, Ketis, but these aliens are our enemies. Back in the Faris Star Region, we either kept our blades sheathed or we stained them completely with blood.

You know what half-measures can produce. The longer they stay alive, the more we have to worry about what they can do to us. We cannot afford to keep so many uncertain elements alive."

Ketis shook her head even as she let go of her Bloodsinger. Her weapon floated in the air and was still close at hand, but the symbolism of this move was undeniable to the tense and jumpy pakklaton soldiers.

"Cawww..."

The avian juveniles all quieted down even as their protectors slowly lowered the muzzles of their rifles.

"Times have changed, sisters." She stated even as her force of will remained sharp. "We are no longer as weak and vulnerable as before. We have grown stronger, and that puts us in a different position."

"That doesn't take away from the fact that the aliens are our enemies." Someone insisted. "We are Swordmaidens. We never show mercy on the battlefield. The comrades of these aliens have tried their best to kill us. Other human troops have already died from the attacks of these crazy birds. Let us act according to our training and rid ourselves of this threat."

"You will do no such thing, sister! We are Swordmaidens, but we are also Larkinsons! We must uphold the honor in our hearts and pay closer attention to our actions. Forget about any orders that you might have. I want you to disarm and incapacitate all of the armed pakklatons in this chamber. Do it gently and do not make any aggressive moves. Do the same for the alien children, but try not to get overboard. They just need to stay in place before others take them away."

The Swordmaidens remained silent as they mulled over her incomprehensible order.

"Do it!" Ketis barked!

The Swordmaidens were conflicted. They wanted to obey Ketis, but her authority was a bit nebulous at the moment. It didn't help that she boarded an assault shuttle without warning.

Ves, who had been watching her actions from his factory ship, decided to intervene at this time.

"You can go ahead and take the aliens prisoner." He instructed. "Don't take any risks and don't let yourselves get fooled. You can capture any other pakklatons if they don't show any resistance. I'll pass this order to the rest of our boarding troops."

He initially wanted to get rid of these potential threats. After all, keeping them alive and watching over them took up manpower that could have been used to secure the ship faster.

However, he just recalled the worth of living prisoners rather than dead corpses. The former was much more valuable to him than the latter!

As Ves thought about what he might be able to do with his next batch of test subjects, the Swordmaidens no longer hesitated.

They followed their new instructions and tried to coax the aliens into allowing themselves to get bound.

"Cawww! Caww!"

Unfortunately, the alien soldiers were unwilling to let themselves be disarmed.

"What is the problem?"

"I think the pakklavons are worried that they'll get eaten by voribugs if we leave them defenseless."

"Oh. Then just promise to them that we will keep watch over them. We will repel any voribugs that attempt to eat their kids."

It took a while, but the pakklavons eventually lowered their guard. They reluctantly surrendered their weapons and allowed the humans to take custody over their group.

Even if a handful of pakklavon children attempted to resist, the human soldiers easily pinned them in place.

If necessary, Ketis employed her force of will to force the recalcitrant alien chicks to submit!

Once the prisoners were secured, Ketis left half of her squad behind to guard their charges against voribugs.

Before she moved on, she took one last look at the sad and subdued pakklavons.

It looked as if the humans had enslaved the avian individuals.

A part of her even thought that it would have been a mercy if she commanded her troops to cut them down on the spot.

Had she grown too soft? Was she letting her emotions get in the way of becoming a better swordswoman?

She gazed down at her armored hand. The limb actually shook a bit as she became engulfed in doubts.

Was it possible for a swordmaster to wield a sword of mercy, or were they only ever allowed to hold a blade that was stained with blood?

The old Ketis would have never hesitated to act as her fellow sisters suggested.

The current one was different. Though she had grown a lot stronger, she was also planning to be a mother.

Had her desire to bear a child made it less bearable for her to kill kids?

"There is no honor in slaying children."

Since when did she care about honor, though?

Her mood and will grew turbulent as she struggled to make sense of herself. She found that she did not know herself as well as she initially thought!

"Ugh. Now I know how Joshua felt."