

Mech 4321

Chapter 4321 Orderly Retreat

Many events happened throughout this massive battle.

The first major collision between the Hexers and the Fridaymen produced countless victories and tragedies on the battlefield.

A lot of large hardware got pummeled until they no could no longer operate.

The invading side lost a notable amount of combat carriers and other starships. The damage would have been bigger if the Sundered Phalanx didn't shift their focus to destroying their opposition's combat mechs, but parties like the Larkinson Clan truly regretted the fact that they couldn't field as many mechs as before.

The loss of mechs was considerably greater. The amount of mechs that got wrecked or torn to pieces were too many to count. An unimaginable amount of value disappeared in an instant.

Even the more powerful mechs that few people could ever imagine that they could break such as the Shield of Samar had met their end on the battlefield!

Fortunately, many broken mechs hadn't fallen in such an abysmal state. There were still plenty of salvageable machines floating around in space that just needed a moderate fix in order to get working again.

Groups such as the Larkinson Clan had already marked them out for retrieval. Since the invading forces had traveled deep in enemy territory, it was important for them to restore their effective combat power as quickly as possible.

Compared to how many mechs had fallen, the amount of pilots that perished in battle was much smaller.

Many of them managed to eject their cockpits safely from their doom machines and succeeded in retreating from the battlefield.

It was quite notable how despite how many expert mechs got defeated, many of their pilots succeeded in preserving their lives!

Their cockpits were much faster and better protected than that of regular mechs, and friendly mechs in the vicinity often abandoned their previous orders in order to guard and evacuate the expert pilots from the battlefield.

Even so, deaths were unavoidable. Many mech pilots and even more support personnel perished when mechs, starships, defensive platforms, space stations and more got struck by destructive attacks.

"Our Kotic Ring will soon cease to exist! Only a skeleton is left of our original defensive network!"

The relentless artillery fire from the invading forces had breached the defenses of every major orbital space fortress. Many of them had been blasted into hollow husks that no longer provided any meaningful value aside from giving the Sundered Phalanx additional cover.

The thousands of defensive platforms were also being dismantled at a rapid rate. Though it took a lot of sustained firepower to take them out, their static orbits made it easy for ranged mechs to take them out at a steady rate.

The biggest turning point of the Battle of Pima Prime was the hardfought victory of Patriarch Reginald Cross and the Mars.

The clear defeat of the Neo Amadeus and the savage killing of Saint Jeremiah Gauge caused many Gaugers to lose their hope of gaining victory.

As the best Gauger mech designers and strategists evaluated the state of the retreating Mars, they concluded that it had enough combat power left to intervene in the ongoing fighting, especially after it had returned to its mothership and received a quick fix.

A Sundered Phalanx military advisor clearly described their current situation.

"Once the Mars returns to the battlefield, the battle is over. No expert mech can withstand its firepower. Don't forget that it is a hybrid mech. It can demolish everything within its line of sight with overwhelming firepower. Perhaps it is not as effective at causing mass destruction to our mech forces as artillery mechs or striker mechs, but every surviving mech unit in the field will fall without a doubt!"

Due to the overwhelming threat of the Mars, the Fridayman commanders concluded that there was no point in fighting the current battle any longer.

System Governor Mabrius Gauge had already thought of how the local troops should proceed after this defeat.

"Commence a general retreat. Our mechs may be doomed on this orbital battlefield, but they can still play a role in delaying the enemy from launching planetary raids on our surface settlements. Pima Prime V is far too large for the Mars to fly around and slaughter every city district and town we have built. Such acts of slaughter are beneath the dignity of a Saint. Patriarch Reginald Cross will only earn mass condemnation and ruin the glory that he has earned from defeating an equal in single combat."

The Fridaymen clearly recognized that as long as their surviving mech divisions kept fighting on this open battlefield, the Mars could slaughter them all with impunity!

After all, the Sundered Phalanx was a professional military force that explicitly engaged in combat and war. There were hardly any civilians in the field who were truly innocent.

As such, many surviving mech units conducted a gradual but orderly retreat. They boarded whatever combat carriers or transports that were available. These vessels either joined the increasingly more numerous evacuation fleets

or descended onto the surface in order to prepare the military mechs for grueling urban battles.

There were many mechs that didn't necessarily need to board a carrier vessel in order to reach the surface.

The more modern and more resilient multi-environmental mechs with decent flight capabilities simply flew into the planet at different angles and endured the heat generated by air friction before they touched down at their respective destinations.

The most notable ones that the Gaugers sought to evacuate from the star system were their expert mechs and expert pilots.

Sometimes, the powerful machines couldn't be salvaged as the Hexers and Golden Skullers had already claimed them as spoils, but very few Fridayman expert pilots had fallen in battle.

Even Venerable Oskar Virathon whose mech had suffered multiple intensive counterattacks after destroying the Shield of Samar managed to beat a sorry retreat back to friendly territory!

"These Fridaymen are too good at running away!"

"I'm not surprised. Retreating in good order is an essential survival skill that many veterans of the Komodo War have developed. It's the only way to preserve their combat strength as best as possible over the course of a lengthy conflict. Most of the mech pilots that ended up losing their lives today are probably the rookies who haven't learned this lesson."

As the Fridayman mechs were retreating before the eyes of the invading troops, many Hexers and other people wanted to press their victory!

"The cowards are running away! Pursue! We can't allow them to retreat so easily!"

Chasing after the retreating Fridayman mech units was easier said than done.

The remnants of the Sundered Phalanx still maintained their fighting spirit despite the specter of defeat looming over their heads. A suicide group had split off from their main ranks and desperately tried to push towards the center of the Larkinson Navy.

Though this radical act succeeded in slowing down the advance of the Hexers and the Golden Skullers, the advancing Gauger mechs simply didn't have the numbers to sustain their push. Their progress quickly stalled as the Larkinsons and their allies quickly repositioned their mech units in order to prevent the Fridaymen from having the last laugh!

While the two sides were trying to minimize their losses as best as possible, the entire crew of the Hemmington Cross welcomed back their victorious patriarch and hero!

"Cross Clan! Cross Clan! Cross Clan!"

When the damaged but still functional Mars entered one of the hangar bays and roughly landed on the deck with a powerful thump, the ace hybrid mech finally dumped the proof of its victory onto the metal surface!

The loud clattering and shaking generated by the unceremonious tossing of the remains of a powerful ace mech did not bother the gathered Crosser servicemen in the slightest.

In fact, their appearance amplified the roars!

"Look at this wreck. How much do you think it will sell on the market?"

"Are you kidding me? Why would we ever want to sell this mech? Its alloys and tech are priceless!"

"Our clan could probably earn at least a million of MTA credits if we put it up for auction. Just look how complete it is. A lot of its systems are still intact and there are hardly any missing parts aside from two of its swords."

Speaking of swords, the Crossers did not forget to retrieve the plasma sword that the Neo Amadeus wielded at the end.

Though the weapon had been flung away at the final moment before Saint Jeremiah's defeat, the Crossers had made sure to beat off the Sundered Phalanx mech units that desperately sought to retrieve the last weapon wielded by their deceased ace pilot!

A Crosser mech entered the hangar bay shortly after the arrival of the Mars. The ordinary machine reverently held the inactive plasma sword with both of its hands.

The Mars seemed to bask in the earnest cries of the Crossers, but its ace pilot still remembered that its presence was needed on the battlefield.

Due to the damage sustained to its legs, it was not able to walk efficiently. It was forced to hover above the deck as it quickly moved deeper inside the fleet carrier.

The Mars still held its Whale-Cutting Saber that was currently impaling the cockpit of the Neo Amadeus while it moved to its next destination.

The Crosser mech that held the plasma sword also followed suit.

The two machines eventually reached a workshop that had already been set up to receive the Mars.

Master Benedict Cortez, who wore a thick and protective suit of combat armor, quickly directed the mechs and the personnel under his command to perform emergency repairs and maintenance on the pride of the Cross Clan.

Once the various mech designers, mech technicians and various engineers operated the various workshop machines and bots without any obvious mistakes, the Master Mech Designer smoothly flew down and arrived at the pieces of plunder that had been dumped to the side.

Meanwhile, Patriarch Reginald brought his suited body out of the cockpit of his Mars and descended to the deck in order to join up with the lead designer of his machine.

"Congratulations for your first win." Master Benedict spoke.

"It was a closer shave than I would have liked, but I owe much of my victory to your work." Reginald generously praised.

The ace pilot was in an excellent mood despite his obvious exhausted state!

The two soon turned their attention to the enemy cockpit and mech sword.

"I tried to bring back the skull you wanted." Reginald said. "I tried my best to stab my weapon in a way that shouldn't hit the skull of my opponent, but the saber that Ketis has developed for me is too big and heavy. I can't guarantee that Jeremiah's skull is still in one piece."

"It's okay." Master Benedict smiled. "We can glue it back together as long as it hasn't disintegrated into powder. I am more interested in the plasma sword to be honest."

The two walked away from the damaged cockpit and approached the plasma sword that hardly sustained any scratches.

Though Patriarch Reginald cared little about this energy-based weapon, Master Benedict was the opposite.

His mood darkened as a complicated expression appeared on his face. His metal-covered arm reach out and carefully touched the surface of the giant hilt.

Patriarch Reginald immediately noticed the drastic mood swing from his friend.

"What's wrong?"

"...This sword... is the handiwork of Master Toqueman Huron, did you know that?"

The ace pilot shrugged. "Maybe. It doesn't matter. A sword is a sword. No matter what fancy tech the Gaugers have put into the Neo Amadeus, their efforts ultimately couldn't beat your work."

Master Benedict grimly smiled. "You're correct. I am proud of the Mars, even though I do not deserve full credit for helping you win. It gladdens me that you managed to teach the developers of the Neo Amadeus a lesson."

As the two leading figures of the Cross Clan continued to talk, Master Benedict kept staring at the plasma sword that ostensibly contained the skull of a Fridayman expert pilot.

Even now, the ace pilot and the Master Mech Designer could clearly feel the presence of a living individual inside this perversion of a mech weapon!

Chapter 4322 A Dead Living Mech

As much as Ves wanted to stay on the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim and preside over the Larkinson Army's winning lap, his obligations as a patriarch and a mech designer compelled him to travel elsewhere.

"We're going on a trip, Lucky."

"Meow?"

Ves rose up from his seat and briskly left the bridge in the company of his cat and his honor guard.

Not many people were walking through the corridors at the moment. It did not take too much time for him to reach his personal workshop where a number of

Living Sentinel mechs carefully put down the remains of an important expert mech onto the deck.

Unlike the Crossers who treated the remains brought back by their patriarch as proof of their victory, the Larkinsons who witnessed the retrieval of the scattered salvage all adopted sad or sympathetic expressions.

Ves grew a bit moody as well as he entered the workshop compartment and beheld what was left of one of the strongest and most iconic living mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

He still remembered the initial time where he fabricated the first production copy of his new Aurora Titan design.

Though the Aurora Titan model did not turn out to be a great seller and eventually got phased out of the market, the Shield of Samar lived on and evolved long after the demise of the original design it spawned from. This was a privilege that few living mechs enjoyed!

The mech that Jannzi had bonded with went on to enjoy a life of its own, much like how the Quint diverged from the Bright Warrior line and gained its own separate identity.

The Shield of Samar underwent six major revisions over its lifetime.

It started out as a humble and quirky third-class standard mech and slowly evolved into an impressive second-class mid-tier masterwork expert space knight!

Not only that, but the Shield of Samar's continued association with Venerable Jannzi had forged a strong and unique bond between the two. Both of them had grown from their humble origins and reached greater heights step-by-step over the course of a decade.

Much had changed over the years, but no matter what happened to the Larkinson Clan, the Shield of Samar and Venerable Jannzi always improved a bit more.

Ves still remembered how much he and the rest of his Design Department invested a lot of time, money and resources into upgrading the Shield of Samar during its last major overhaul.

The Larkinson mech designers carefully and respectfully worked to improve its performance and increase its damage-resisting capabilities in order to ensure it was fully equipped to keep up with combat in the Red Ocean.

"We failed." Ves sighed as he looked at how all of those improvements went to naught.

Though the main reason why the Shield of Samar failed to return in one piece was because it fought against a surprisingly lethal opponent with bug-like offensive power, this was not an excuse for how Ves had failed the living mech and its expert pilot.

Ves took a closer look at what was left of the Shield of Samar.

In order to fully convey its condition, it was easier to describe the parts that were at least moderately intact than to list the huge amount of components and subcomponents that the Skorpion Kommando managed to dissolve with its final spiteful attack!

"Damn, this is worse than I thought."

He already had low expectations of what was left of the Shield of Samar, but seeing the remnants for himself gave him a much more accurate impression on how much one of the most valuable mechs of his clan had fallen.

None of the Larkinson expert mechs had suffered so much ruination!

At worst, their armor got battered and a couple of limbs or major systems got smashed or cut off. Though repairing all of that battle damage and returning the expert mechs to their previous peaks would be a long and complicated endeavor, there was at least hope to restore them to their former glory!

The Shield of Samar on the other hand left him with much less confidence.

As Ves approached the gathered wreckage, he made sure his Unending Regalia was fully sealed. He had no idea whether any of the salvaged parts had turned radioactive or were on the verge of blowing up. The preliminary scans showed that they did not pose any significant risk to people, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Venerable Jannzi apparently didn't get the memo. As soon as she exited the cockpit that the Living Sentinels had safely escorted off the battlefield, she had insisted on moving to the side of her battle partner!

Though the distraught and grieving expert pilot was still wearing her custom protective piloting suit, she did not hesitate to move closer and collapse beside the inert head of her expert mech.

"Sammie!"

When Ves stopped by her side, Lucky cautiously floated closer and tried to console the woman.

"Meow..."

Though Jannzi accepted Lucky's company and embraced the gem cat in her arms, her tears never stopped falling as she pressed her helmet against the giant surface of the Shield of Samar's head.

It was as if Jannzi was desperately trying to resonate and connect with the living mech that had accompanied her for almost her entire career as a mech pilot!

It took almost a minute for the young mother to finally acknowledge the presence of the patriarch.

"Ves... you're a mech designer, right? You made my Sammie. You can fix this. You can bring my mech back alive. Since you can create life out of nothing, it should be a piece of cake for you to restore the life of a broken mech!"

"It... doesn't work like that, Jannzi." Ves slowly and carefully replied. "Life and death applies to mechs as well as humans. When the bodies of people such as you and I are broken, we die. Whatever is left of us will pass to the beyond. The same goes for mechs. The Shield of Samar may have been a powerful third-order living mech, but unless it has reached a higher state of growth, it is not so easy for such entities to cling to life."

Living beings did not necessarily disappear once their corporeal bodies died. Of the individuals that Ves had met who had somehow managed to defy the natural cycle of life, both his mother and Qilanxo had managed to overcome the shackles of their mortal coils and live on in a different day through their own abilities.

However, these cases were rare and demanded a lot of growth and proficiency in spiritual manipulation. Ves frankly had no idea how this could be done.

While it was possible for Ves to preserve the lives of other spiritual entities such as Zeigra and the Phase King, he had to intervene quickly and get ready to preserve their spiritualities from the moment they got loose. The bodies of the two entities that went on to become his design spirits were also relatively intact when he had taken action.

As for what had happened to Shield of Samar, much of its spiritual foundation crumbled and collapsed after the vast majority of its frame had fallen apart.

This loss came so quickly that not even sending Blinky to what was left of his masterwork mech could preserve this collapse!

This devastating loss at least confirmed his hypothesis that third order living mechs had not gotten rid of the shackles of mortality.

At the very least, the condition of their physical forms were still tied to the condition of their spiritual states!

Perhaps it would have been possible to give the Shield of Samar's spiritual foundation a lifeline if Ves had turned it into a design spirit like the Quint.

Ves regretted that he did not do so. Perhaps he should pay more attention to providing support to all of his expert mechs in the future.

"The Shield of Samar may have died, but not everything is gone. There is still a remnant inside this head." He spoke as he placed his armored hand on the surface of the expert mech's detached head. "It's only as small as a spark at the moment, but... maybe I can do something with it. Let me think for a moment."

Venerable Jannzi looked a lot more expectant towards Ves at this time, though she did not dare to harbor too much hope.

Her bond with the Shield of Samar was deep and profound. She understood her living mech's condition almost just as well as Ves!

When Ves studied the spiritual remnant of the Shield of Samar in greater detail, he discovered that more of the living mech remained intact due to the intervention of a certain design spirit.

"Thank you, Qilanxo."

The design spirit silently conveyed a meaning to Ves.

It turned out that Qilanxo had used her connection to the Shield of Samar to rescue the spiritual foundation of the living mech.

Unfortunately, 'Sammie' was still too young and had not developed to the point where it could still cling to its own self after the demise of its material form.

The best Qilanxo could do was gather whatever spiritual remnants that were left and hold them in place by expending her own power.

"Can you hold this spiritual remnant, Qilanxo?"

The design spirit replied with an affirmative response. It helped a lot that the Shield of Samar was largely made out of Unending alloy. Much of the exterior of the intact head was made of this material.

Now, it reluctantly functioned as a container for what little was left intact of the Shield of Samar.

When Ves was thinking about what he could do for Jannzi, he recalled an instance in the past where he had to work with less.

A long time ago, Ves came across a nutrient pack wrapper that Prophet Ylvaine had once discarded.

Even though the historical figure hardly spent any time or thought on this wrapper, he still imparted it with a fraction of his spiritual energy.

Ves had taken advantage of this interaction and consciously tried to turn this forgettable fragment of Ylvaine alive.

Once it came to life, it was able to grow rapidly by absorbing a lot of spiritual feedback from other sources.

In the end, that tiny spiritual remnant went on to grow into a fully fledged design spirit that looked as if the Great Prophet had truly come back from the dead!

Since Ves was able to 'revive' Prophet Ylvaine in a sense, how feasible would it be for him to do the same for one of his most important living mechs?

A lot of thoughts began to brew in his mind. He came up with a lot of possibilities as he brainstormed hundreds of different plans and approaches.

He finally turned to Jannzi.

"I can't make any promises, but I will do my best to restore your living mech. There is not much left of her personality and consciousness, but I may have a way to reconstruct them. Whether my efforts will be able to bring back your old and familiar Shield of Samar is uncertain."

"That... is better than Sammie disappearing forever..."

Ves owed it to Venerable Jannzi to restore her battle partner as best as possible. He bore undeniable responsibility for allowing the Battle of Pima Prime to come to pass. The Shield of Samar would have never confronted the Skorpion Kommando in battle if the Golden Skull Alliance hadn't been eager to pick a fight.

Once he made his choice on how to proceed, he moved quickly to preserve the state of his living mech.

He arranged for the physical remains to be stored as securely as possible.

He also moved the Aspect of Healing inside the storage compartment in order to provide additional assistance to the spiritual remnant of the Shield of Samar.

In order to confirm that the Shield of Samar did not die off completely, Ves even called in Helena to ask her judgment on whether the living mech was dead.

"Death... is rather complicated." His so-called eldest sister replied. "This living mech of yours has definitely died, but death has not managed to claim everything."

"Can you help us with preserving or reviving my living mech?"

Helena frowned. "Turning the dead back alive is not exactly my expertise. I thought that was your thing, Ves. I guess I can still do something. I can remove the lingering signs of death from these remains so that they won't deteriorate the situation any further. That is all I can really do with my current powers."

"That is already enough, sister. Leave the rest to me." Ves smiled.

Chapter 4323 Orbital Supremacy

While Ves busied himself with coming up with a plan to restore the Shield of Samar, the rest of the Larkinson Clan was mostly preoccupied with stopping the Sundered Phalanx from threatening the main fleet.

Even though the most dangerous enemy threats such as the Skorpion Kommando, the Tensars and the Star of Liberation had left the battlefield, that didn't mean that the Larkinson expert mechs were in good shape either.

The Riot and the First Sword had been taken out of action and could no longer be deployed in battle.

Other notable expert mechs such as the Dark Zephyr, the Amaranto, the Minerva, the Blade Chaser Mark II and the C-Man could still put up a decent fight, but the machines and especially their pilots had exhausted themselves in their efforts to defeat or stall the enemy champions.

Fortunately, their combat power wasn't particularly needed to stop desperately advancing Sundered Phalanx mech units.

The ferocity of these brave and loyal Fridayman mech pilots was commendable, but that did not change the fundamental fact that they were outnumbered several times over!

Not only that, but their offensive wave quickly became surrounded on all sides, making it so that they had no way to retreat!

The only reason why the surrounding formations did not press the suicide mechs too hard was because the Hex Army and the Golden Skull Alliance did not want to exacerbate their losses.

In that sense, the sacrificial mechs succeeded in their aim of buying time to allow for the rest of the Sundered Phalanx to retreat in good order!

The current trend continued to persist until a single launch into space again.

From the moment the Mars made its way back onto the battlefield, almost every participant froze as they registered the return of the apex warrior that had proclaimed himself the king of the Battle of Pima Prime!

"It's... it's the ace mech! The enemy ace mech has reappeared!"

"Pima Prime's doom is at hand!"

"FOR THE CROSS!"

The retreating mechs became a lot more disordered as apprehension gripped the hearts of the Fridayman mech pilots and other personnel.

In contrast, the Hexers and the Golden Skullers became a lot more invigorated! Their mechs pressed their opponents harder as their morale practically doubled in an instant!

The Mars hadn't even done anything yet aside from exiting the Hemmington Cross, but already the sight of this partially-restored machine was single-handedly changing the trajectory of the battle.

To be honest, Patriarch Reginald did not really want to go out again. After winning the most thrilling and exciting mech duel in his life, he really didn't find it interesting to bully a bunch of weaklings.

None of the remaining mech units of the Sundered Phalanx could ever compare to the strength and majesty of Saint Jeremiah Gauge and his Neo Amadeus!

Even the enemy expert mechs such as the dangerous and relatively intact Star of Liberation and the Tensars had pulled back long before the Mars could ever take them out in an instant.

"Boring." Reginald wearily remarked as he simply couldn't bring himself to summon any energy or enthusiasm to this clean-up operation.

The only reason why he forced himself to bring out his Mars once again was because he recognized that his presence was an essential guarantee to his side.

Not only that, but the remaining firepower of the Mars was extremely useful in breaking apart any remaining threats and obstacles!

"Well, I guess I should get on with it. The longer this farce goes on, the more mechs my clan is losing."

In order to raise the effective firepower of the Crosser ace mech as best as possible, Master Benedict had taken advantage of the fact that the Mars could mount different modular weapon systems on its shoulders.

The Neo Amadeus might have managed to wreck the expensive pair of shoulder-mounted transphasic gauss cannons during the unforgettable duel, but the Cross Clan had produced multiple alternatives.

The gauss cannons packed the greatest punch against tough and powerful targets such as an enemy ace mech. Though they could also be useful in sieges, they weren't the most optimal choice now that all high-level threats had retreated from the battlefield.

Master Benedict therefore decided to remove whatever remained of the broken gauss cannons and put transphasic laser cannons in their place.

The addition of the pristine shoulder-mounted transphasic laser cannons partially compensated for the reduction of the ARCEUS System.

The additional energy weapons also gave the Mars a greater ability to stay in the fight as they did not use up any ammunition.

After completely replenishing its energy reserves, the Mars had plenty of juice to bombard enemy targets! Reginald did not even feel the need to fire the weapons at his disposal at full power.

Even at half power the various energy weapons of the Mars were more than enough to destroy a dozen mechs with ease if they all happened to line up in the right way!

As such, the Mars turned into a singularly destructive machine as soon as it took its place and opened fire on different targets!

Reginald did not even bother to manually aim the weapons of his ace mech. He simply opened up a connection to the command center of the Hemmington Cross and let the tactical officers of his clan program the priority targets on his behalf.

Despite the ace pilot's obvious lack of effort and enthusiasm, even a half-hearted version of the Mars was more than what the Sundered Phalanx could handle!

Rays of laser beams lanced across the formations of Fridayman mechs that had attempted to occupy the attention of the invading forces.

Though there was a considerable risk that the shots fired by the Mars might end up damaging a friendly unit by mistake, Patriarch Reginald was far too capable to make such a mistake.

Each strike from his ace mech accurately picked off the strongest and toughest mechs of the Sundered Phalanx.

Often times, the Mars angled its attacks to ensure that the resonance-empowered laser beams struck multiple enemy machines at a time!

It only took two minutes for the advancing enemy mech units to disintegrate. The Mars had essentially broke its back and taken out so many key targets that the remaining Fridayman mechs were unable to organize any effective of resistance anymore!

Patriarch Reginald turned his attention to the more distant enemies.

Each of them turned into targets in his eyes. The vast quantities of intact enemy mechs could no longer threaten his Mars in the slightest.

In fact, the Sundered Phalanx still wouldn't have stood a chance if it had gathered all of its surviving expert mechs!

"It's too bad they haven't even made the attempt. They are too timid."

Patriarch Reginald spoke in a disappointed tone.

At least the Golden Skull Alliance still mustered up the courage to attack the Olympus Mons piloted by Saint Yila Mayorka in the past.

The Cross Patriarch's disappointment did not affect his determination to do what was necessary to increase the advantages of the Cross Clan.

The Mars shifted its shoulder-mounted laser cannons as well as the intact integrated weapon modules of the ARCEUS System to numerous different targets within its line of sight.

Many shots landed on the somewhat intact orbital space stations. The Hexers and the Golden Skullers may have already managed to break their titan shields and destroyed all of their exposed turrets, but they could still pose a threat in other ways.

The easiest way to ensure that they were truly rendered harmless was to attack them to the point where the Mars was able to break open their interiors and destroy whatever was inside!

"Don't leave anything intact!"

Aside from that, the Mars also utilized its firepower to strike at any Sundered Phalanx mechs that hadn't been able to retreat in time.

The efficiency of these attacks were fairly low, though. The enemy mech pilots weren't stupid enough to gather together so that they could be taken out all at once with a single overpowering attack.

Each Fridayman mech received instructions to scatter and move to their evacuation points by relying on their own efforts.

Seeing how few fleeing mechs that Patriarch Reginald and his ace mech were able to take down from a distance, the Cross Clan soon decided to shift their targeting priority.

"Concentrate on crippling their starships! Many of them have already left or swung around the other side of the planet, but there are still hundreds of combat carriers and other support vessels within sight. If we can take out their thrusters or knock out their power without damaging them too heavily, we can capture the hulls and use them to replace the starships we have lost in this battle!"

The Hex Army was more interested in wiping out the remaining enemy mechs. The loss of many of their combat carriers did not affect the Hexers too much as their colonial state possessed plenty of shipbuilding capability.

The Golden Skull Alliance was different in that it was a lot harder for the Larkinsons and their allies to place large orders at third-party shipbuilding companies.

Perhaps their dramatic victory today might cause the leaders of these companies to reevaluate their relationship with the Golden Skull Alliance, but even then it might take years for the expeditionary fleet to return to its former size.

Patriarch Reginald became a bit more attentive when his Mars was tasked with immobilizing the fleeing enemy starships.

Though many vessels sought to escape doom by hiding on the opposite side of Pima Prime V, the mechs of the Larkinson Clan, the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan were already on their way to capture the ships one way or another.

As the Mars struck the sub-light propulsion systems of the different starships with measured attacks, the crew of the affected vessels turned stubborn.

"Don't let our ship fall into their hands!"

The loyal Fridaymen crew members overwhelmingly decided to self-destruct their vessels before abandoning ship.

Thousands of escape pods launched into space just before the power reactors and any other volatile elements blew up from within!

There was little the Hexers and Golden Skullers could do to prevent the Fridaymen from destroying their own ships once it became clear that they could no longer escape the port system.

Even threats of shooting down the escape pods did not have any effect. The hatred that the Fridaymen had accumulated towards the Hexers had grown so much that neither side wanted to grant any advantages towards their archenemies!

Though many mech pilots had grown tired, they still performed their duties for many hours as they definitely drove away any remaining elements of the Sundered Phalanx while taking over control of the orbit of the planet including whatever was left of the Kosic Ring.

The fall of the orbital defensive network marked the definite end of the battle in orbit.

Task Force Fury and the Golden Skull Alliance obtained full control of the space above Pima Prime V, which meant that they could soon land their mech troops on the ground and commence their planetary assault!

There was no way for the Gaugers on the ground to fend off the incoming invasion entirely, but they could still do much to slow down enemy progress.

"Tens of thousands of mechs of the Sundered Phalanx have managed to reach the surface." General Verle spoke with concern. "I'm afraid that they have already linked up with their counterparts stationed on the planet. Pima Prime still has many fortified bases on the planet. It will be very difficult to root them up unless we bring overwhelming firepower."

Calabast chuckled. "You overestimate the opposition that we will encounter. The Fridaymen won't be able to fight back as well as you think. While our agents weren't able to play a significant role in the battle in orbit, we are much more able to affect the defenses on the surface since many of them are located in densely populated settlements. Just watch and see."

Chapter 4324 Opening Doors

The Battle of Pima Prime ended in a decisive victory for the invading forces!

Every citizen of the Hex Federation celebrated the success of the Hex Army and the crushing of one of their most hated foes on the battlefield.

The battle did not involve any tricks or traps. Though the attacking forces most definitely leaned on the element of surprise, the Gaugers enjoyed a considerable defensive advantage.

In fact, the invaders also enjoyed a massive intelligence advantage that allowed them to plan out their assault and make the right preparations, but none of these results would have been possible without possessing enough strength!

The battle that ended today was also significant for other reasons.

For example, this was the first time that the Hexers fought alongside external allies.

During the Komodo War that the two sides fought in the past, the Fridaymen were usually the ones that relied on outside help to bolster their capabilities.

Their ploy to convert the expert pilots of 'vassal' states into their retainers had been a massive success and supplied the mech armies of the Friday Coalition with additional high-end combat power.

It was profoundly ironic that the Hexers essentially copied the same approach from the archenemies by relying on the aid of the Golden Skull Alliance to counter the Sundered Phalanx's powerful elites and champions!

The fact that the Golden Skull Alliance had actually been willing to commit their newly-advanced ace pilot in a dramatic duel to the death was shocking news to many powers in the Red Ocean!

The reputation of the Golden Skull Alliance soared overnight!

Previously, the quirky alliance made up of three weird organizations gained a bit of attention, but not too much.

The living mechs of the Larkinson Clan and the emergence of a new ace pilot from the ranks of the Cross Clan were both noteworthy attention-grabbers, but there were plenty of other groups that performed no less worse.

The Battle of Pima Prime changed people's cognition of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Though their numbers were limited, the Golden Skullers showed that their mechs and mech pilots matched or in some cases exceeded the standard of a credible veteran military mech army!

No one thought that the Sundered Phalanx was weak. Their record in a recent war was as clear as day, and even the fact that many of the mech divisions

transferred to the Red Ocean had not yet updated their mech rosters to modern standards was not that big of a deal.

However, in this battle, the Sundered Phalanx had been reduced to a foil. Aside from the rare and fantastic breakthrough of Saint Rebecca Andus, the proud soldiers and heroes of the Gauge Dynasty largely lost at the hands of the troops of this strange alliance!

It wasn't just the strength of the Golden Skull Alliance that made a profound impression on the grassroots and the leaders of other organizations.

It was the willingness of Patriarch Ves Larkinson and its other leaders to take part in a risky offensive operation that also frightened and impressed other people!

Even though there were plenty of pioneering organizations and colonial states that had vastly more troops at their disposal, they always treated them sparingly whenever possible.

The Red Ocean was full of dangers and the difficulties of replenishing lost mechs, mech pilots and starships were far greater than in the old galaxy.

For the Golden Skull Alliance to boldly commit its entire core fleet and mech forces to a battle that did not involve its core interest was rather shocking news.

The consequences of losing in this battle were too great!

For example, Patriarch Reginald Cross could have been killed by Saint Jeremiah Gauge, thereby robbing the Cross Clan and the Golden Skull Alliance of their top-end combat asset.

Though it was probable that the Golden Skull Alliance probably wouldn't run off to intervene in another conflict between colonial states, what if this happened anyway?

Anyone who looked up the history of the Golden Skull Alliance would immediately conclude that it was made up of large numbers of battle maniacs!

From the Larkinson Clan's frequent acts of provoking powerful enemies to the warmongering roots of the Cross Clan, it was hard to believe that the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance were willing to sit in place and commit to peaceful development.

"We don't have to befriend these maniacs, but we absolutely cannot afford to become their enemies. At least two of their leaders are dangerously unstable and can decide to pick a fight with people for any reason."

"These crazies aren't even content with raiding one of the core star systems of a colonial state. They have also announced an ambitious expedition to the deeper parts of the new frontier."

"There is no way this Golden Skull Alliance will survive in the long run! Sooner or later they will enter into a conflict against an enemy that is too great for them to handle. Over the course of human history, it is far too rare for daredevils like these Larkinsons to overcome their continuous challenges. It has always been the steadier groups like ours that are able to outlast the other ones."

"The leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance aren't as simple as you think. You are not a mech designer, so you haven't been able to see what my colleagues and I have seen. The properties and the effective combat power of the mechs fielded by this alliance are far more impressive and impactful than we thought. The designers of their impressive masterwork ace mech are young but visionary. I have no doubt that the MTA has already taken a special interest in their work."

The excellent performance of the mech forces of the Golden Skull Alliance generated an explosive amount of buzz among the public.

The galactic net became filled with discussions, commentary and post-battle analyses as a huge number of people tried to figure out the details, either out of curiosity, admiration or fear.

Though the strength exhibited by the Golden Skull Alliance most certainly spooked a lot of rivals and possible enemies, the upsides massively outweighed the downsides!

The reputation, prestige and glory of the winners had all skyrocketed!

One of the more immediate benefits of winning the Battle of Pima Prime was that the businesses associated with the Golden Skull Alliance all received a massive surge in interest!

As Ves busied himself with surveying the damage done to his precious expert mechs, his personal assistant did not wait to present him with the good news.

"As far as marketing goes, this battle is worth more than a galaxy-wide advertising campaign." Gavin Neumann said while wearing a hazard suit due to safety regulations. "The LMC has received 300 percent more inquiries in the past four hours than the past week, and this is just the beginning. The company management has already decided to ramp up production and contract more third-party manufacturers in anticipation for the spike in sales."

Ves nodded as he studied the damaged state of the First Sword. Most of his attention was still directed towards the upcoming repair jobs.

Restoring damaged expert mechs back to their peak conditions was anything but simple. It took a lot more precision and expertise to fix these powerful machines, and the difficulty only skyrocketed when trying to repair masterworks among expert mechs.

Ordinary mech technicians and low-ranking mech designers weren't qualified to repair the expert mechs. Ves and his fellow Journeymen had to take action in person to restore the strongest and most important mechs of their clan.

Ves already lamented the amount of time he had to set aside to fix these important machines, but he had little choice in the matter.

"I'm not that interested in the sales of general commercial mech models anymore, Benny." He spoke. "Whether we earn 50,000 or 200,000 MTA credits a month won't affect our outlook in the short term. I'm more interested in whether our strategic products are able to increase their market penetration. Have our War Squires and our Pacifiers gained additional interest from relevant clients?"

"We haven't seen much sign of that yet, but our analysts expect that to change soon enough. The Battle of Pima Prime offers an abundance of hard proof that your work is not useless. Our living mechs have definitely proved their worth on the battlefield against formidable adversaries. It is much more difficult for skeptics to deny the added value that living mechs can bring. As long as people accept this truth, many more large and institutional clients will become interested in our War Squire and Pacifier mech lines. It will just take a while for them to commit to placing orders since their decision-making is much slower and more deliberate."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. The profit generated from the sales of those mechs were not as important as how much they were able to spread the Larkinson Clan's influence.

There were many ways for him to earn money, but it was a lot harder for him to make friends or build up goodwill among other human powers.

From what it sounded like, the Larkinsons didn't have to worry about this problem as much anymore. Ves was confident that as long as more and more powerful clients adopted his most useful living mechs, they would never think about switching back to the alternatives sold by his competitors!

Gavin continued to report on the other immediate consequences of winning the battle in orbit.

Other subsidiaries associated with the Larkinsons such as the Open Consortium, the Larkinson Biotech Institute and the Creation Association also enjoyed a lot more attention than before, but the increase in business prospects weren't as exaggerated as none of these organizations were directly tied to mechs.

Nonetheless, Ves confirmed that his clan had definitely taken a large step into becoming a force to be reckoned with. The reputation of the Larkinson Clan was on the verge of hitting a new peak in the Magair and Krakatoa Middle Zones!

"Please tell me whether we have gained any immediate and concrete gains from this victory." Ves asked his assistant.

"Well, I believe you will be glad to hear this news, boss. Minister Shederin Purnesse has already informed me that our clan has already begun to make more headway in our ongoing negotiations with possible business partners. Think of resource suppliers, shipbuilding companies, high-end development companies and more. The companies that we are in talks with are already taking us a lot more seriously than before. This will give us greater leverage in negotiations. I can already tell you that it will be easier than ever to replace the combat carriers that we have lost today."

That was the best news that Ves had heard from Gavin. Though the other gains were also important to Ves, right now it was crucially important for the Larkinson Clan to restore its strength as quickly as possible.

"Our total combat strength is heavily dependent on how many mechs we are able to carry in our fleet. The sooner we make up for our losses, the better."

"You should wait for the good news, then." Gavin smiled. "We are already in talks with several major shipbuilding companies, each of which can produce many more hulls than Murphy & Sons. It probably isn't realistic for us to be able to order capital ships from them, but it should be a lot easier for us to secure promises to deliver a large batch of combat carriers to us within a standard year. Aside from this, we have even received orders to swap the captured Fridayman starships for other hulls."

"Oh? What is that about, Benny?"

"It's a fairly common business arrangement in the Red Ocean, boss. The basic idea is that whenever a group like ours wins a battle, we often end up capturing a bunch of starships from our opponent. It is not wise for us to add these prizes to our fleet because the vessels are most certainly riddled with backdoors. There are companies who specialize in refurbishing such vessels, and they will be glad to take our captured ships off our hands."

Ves became a lot more interested in this new business. The Red Ocean was not lacking in clever entrepreneurs!

"Can you give me a more concrete picture of these starship swaps?"

"Let me give you a general example. For every 4 Fridayman starships that we pass into their hands, we can expect to get 3 refurbished starships produced by other parties in return, each of which have been refurbished. If you insist on obtaining newly produced starships, then you will only gain 2 of them in return. Though the exchange rate is not as great, the waiting time is usually short, so this is definitely a quick and convenient way for groups to restore their numbers after winning a battle."

Ves became incredibly attracted by these potential offers. Though it sounded as if the ship wholesalers gained a massive advantage from this trade deal, it

was actually a win-win arrangement where both sides got what they needed from each other.

There was no way for the Larkinson Clan to convert the captured Fridayman combat carriers into usable assets within a short amount of time, so why not trade them for trustworthy new vessels right away?

"Please tell Minister Shederin to prioritize these talks." Ves instructed. "I'm not sure how many Fridayman starships we'll be able to capture and drag back to Davute, but it will definitely be a sizable number. We also have a lot of derelict starships of our own that can't be fixed within a few years. We might as well swap them out as well."

"Understood. Our people will get right on it, boss. Just take into account that we will actually have to bring all of the hulls out of the Friday Colonies first before we can proceed with the swaps. Everything that we cannot bring out of enemy territory will eventually fall into the hands of our foes."

Ves grimaced. "You don't need to remind me. The Gauge Dynasty will definitely attempt to recover from their losses by processing the huge amounts of salvage floating in this star system."

The time table was too tight and there was no way for the Hexers and the Golden Skullers to take away everything of value.

Even now, their troops were desperately speeding up their raids on the surface of Pima Prime V!

Chapter 4325 Gains And Losses

As the Larkinsons continued to preoccupy themselves with launching planetary raids and handling the aftermath of the battle in orbit, Ves eventually attended an important meeting.

Enough hours had passed for the Larkinson Army to rescue its trapped mech pilots and tally most of the gains and losses.

"Let's start with the unpleasant news first." Ves spoke shortly after he entered the virtual meeting room. "How many ships have we lost?"

The Larkinsons attending the virtual meeting turned all their heads towards Chief Minister Abigail Evern.

As the most senior naval expert in the clan, Abigail possessed the greatest understanding of the states of all of the starships that participated in the battle.

"At least 12 of our combat carriers have sustained serious damage to the point where they have lost power, FTL travel capability or both." The woman reported. "The good news is that our engineers are confident that they can restore 4 of the aforementioned starships to a state where they can keep up with the fleet by themselves, but that still leaves us with 8 burdens."

The possible permanent loss of 8 combat carriers was a serious blow to the Larkinson Navy.

"How far gone are the 8 most seriously damaged starships?" General Verle inquired.

"That differs from case to case, sir, but they can all be restored in time." Chief Ship Designer Vivian Tsai replied. "We can even restore them in-house if you want. Our Diligent Ovenbird doesn't even have to transform back into stationary mode in order to conduct the necessary repairs. The biggest downside is that we can only fix them one by one, which will take at least a year and a half. The efficiency is too low. It is best to leave this job to dedicated repair yards, but it is notoriously difficult to contract their services."

Ves smiled. "We may be able to swap our damaged or derelict hulls for intact ones."

Both Abigail and Vivian were familiar with the type of service that their patriarch references.

"If we can conclude a deal with those companies, then that is indeed possible." Abigail Evern looked thoughtful. "These kinds of swaps involve trading starships for time, which is unprofitable in the long term but incredibly useful for parties that need to increase their combat power as quickly as possible such as us. If we want to proceed with our original plan of embarking on the Trailblazer Expedition after we have concluded our participation in Operation Saturday Market, then it is not a bad idea to engage in this business."

Though there were Larkinsons who felt that the ship wholesalers were definitely getting the better end of the deal, there were no better alternatives available to them. This was just a part of the reality of the persistent lack of supply of starships in the Red Ocean.

The Larkinsons continued on to talk about the state of their other starships.

"Our other sub-capital ships have received various degrees of damage." Chief Minister Abigail continued. "Some have merely received scratches while others have lost entire compartments into space. Many of them are designed to take a beating, so there is no particular need for concern. We can repair the majority of the damage ourselves. There are only a small number of cases where it is recommended to put them in a drydock to perform more extensive repairs."

"How are our capital ships doing?" Ves asked. "I've noticed that several of them have taken an awful beating."

Abigail nodded. "That is indeed the case, but that is exactly how they were meant to be used. All of our armored vessels such as the Gorgoneion, the Graveyard, the Wild Torch have all received heavy damage to their exterior. However, all of this is within a controllable range. The crews have responded well to the pressure exerted by the Sundered Phalanx and made sure that none of our enemies were able to damage their critical systems."

The hulls of these capital ships were so large and thick that they could endure an unimaginable amount of incoming damage as long as enemies weren't able to concentrate their attacks on specific sections.

The Larkinson Clan actually owed a lot to Task Force Fury for providing a lot of cover during battle. The Hexers attracted the brunt of enemy firepower.

When Ves learned more about the condition of all of his capital ships, he became reassured that none of them had turned into liabilities that could slow down his fleet.

After holding a brief discussion on the damage sustained by the ships of their allies, the meeting soon turned to the losses sustained by the Larkinson Army.

General Verle took over the word at this point. "I won't go into too much detail, but in general our casualties are well within acceptable range. We entered the battle with around 10,000 fully operational mechs. Around 5000 of them have returned in good condition. 3000 more have received light to moderate damage that our clan can easily repair with the capabilities we have on hand. The remaining 2000 or so mechs are scrapped to the point where it makes more sense to fabricate new replacements rather than to bother with rebuilding the mechs from their broken scraps."

Ves paused for a moment as he took in the numbers. "The loss rate is on the low end of our expectations."

"That's not a surprise, sir." General Verle proudly grinned. "Our mech legions have all gained the upper hand when fighting against their Sundered Phalanx counterparts. As long as one side in a battle is able to gain a considerable advantage, their loss rate is drastically reduced. What is particularly commendable is that not a single of our mech legions fell behind at any point during the battle. We have made good use of all of our advantages. With excellent training, powerful mechs, high morale, good preparation and

considerable assistance from allies, it would be a surprise if we lost more than a mech regiment's worth of machines. Our clan excels at building mechs. We can easily make up for the losses in a matter of months so long as we have enough carrier capacity."

Several people including Ves and Commander Casella Ingvar frowned.

"Our mechs are all alive." Casella noted. "At least, they are supposed to be. If we were anyone else, then maybe we can dismiss the loss of 2000 mechs without any further thought. This is not the case. Those mechs are all alive as you and I. We can't treat the fall of mechs like the Shield of Samar as a numbers game. We need to do more to honor their sacrifice in battle."

General Verle looked doubtful. "What are you suggesting?"

"Give them a funeral. Emphasize their contributions during our memorial service. All I ask is that we treat them as soldiers rather than our equipment."

"I agree." Ves concurred with the expert pilot. "We never paid too much attention to this before, but after I have seen what is left of the Shield of Samar, I believe it is an injustice to skim over the loss of all of those living mechs. Many of them are several years old and they have already experienced a lot of growth alongside their mech pilots. It is regrettable that their potential has been cut short due to their early demise."

If possible, Ves really wanted to take all of those wrecked mechs and find a way to restore them to their former glory.

As the father of living mechs and the designer of their models, he couldn't stand the idea of discarding the broken remains when there was still a possibility of 'reviving' them. Not every wreck was as gone as the Shield of Samar!

However, there was only so much work the clan could do. Its manpower and production capacity was limited.

Though Ves had already accepted this unfortunate reality in the past, that did not mean he was happy with the status quo. He increasingly felt a need to do more to remedy this awful situation.

Perhaps he could figure out a new solution while he attempted to restore the Shield of Samar from almost nothing.

Ves lifted up his head. "I already understand the situation concerning our mechs. What are the casualties among our mech pilots?"

"We don't have any final figures as there are those that have sustained severe injuries and might not make it to the end." General Verle said in a more subdued tone. "In general, around 450 are confirmed killed in action while 200 more are moderately to severely injured. Our losses have been light considering the scale of the battle that we fought in. All of the variables that I have mentioned before have heavily contributed to minimizing the deaths of our mech pilots."

No one looked particularly surprised at the mention of these figures. The Larkinson Army had gained the upper hand early on, so not a lot of mech pilots became exposed to danger.

Those that lost their mechs were usually able to eject in time and safely return to the fleet without incident.

Most of the mech pilots who died were usually those who failed to eject from their doomed mechs in time. The Sundered Phalanx still had plenty of mechs that were capable of dealing so much damage that they could punch through the chest armor and cockpit in one go like the Space Piercers.

Though Ves regretted these deaths, objectively the Larkinson Clan suffered negligible damage.

The clan had deliberately hired a reserve of 3000 surplus mech pilots. They were almost just as good as the Larkinson Army's active mech pilots. Their

only shortcoming was that the mech legions didn't have enough mechs to make them useful in battle.

Now that hundreds of Larkinson mech pilots had been taken out of action, the Larkinson Army could easily call upon these reserves to quickly make up for the shortfall.

This was why no one paid too much attention to the deaths of so many mech pilots. As long as the Larkinson Army was able to get back up strength in a timely manner, the clan would fully return to its peak.

Ves soon turned to the most interesting part of the meeting.

"How many expert candidates and expert pilots have we gained and lost?"

Everyone turned to Commandant Cristoph Larkinson who led the Hall of Heroes.

Though the man usually maintained a low profile, he played a vital role in managing the powerhouses of the Larkinson Army.

"Three new expert pilots have joined our ranks." The man steadily replied.

"None of them were particularly prominent when they were expert candidates, but they have quietly built up enough accumulation that it only took a single push for them to experience apotheosis. Each of them managed to break through fairly quickly once they entered battle, which shows that it was only a matter of time before they made a name for themselves."

Ves quickly skimmed through the list of names. He didn't really know any of them well enough to care too much about them. Unless any one of them were particularly special, he was more than willing to hand over their cases to Gloriana.

"What about our expert candidates?"

"Two of them have unfortunately perished in battle." Commandant Christoph regretfully said. "They attracted too much attention in battle but didn't have the strength or ability to deal with it. The good news is that we gained 9 new expert candidates, many of whom are on the younger side. Just as before, these expert candidates already stood out before they broke through. They have all invested a lot of effort into improving themselves by conducting rigorous training with the MSTS and also accrued sufficient real battle experience by fulfilling numerous mercenary missions."

The addition of 9 expert candidates was great news for the Larkinson Army. Ves already expected to gain that much from a single battle.

Just as Commandant Cristoph had mentioned, the Mental Simulation Training Simulation had drastically improved the accumulation of a lot of Larkinson mech pilots over the years!

Even if the Everchanger did not switch to the transcendence glow, the most talented among the rank and file soldiers would have broken through eventually.

Chapter 4326 Significant Growth

Ves' mentality towards the expert candidates and expert pilots had changed over the years.

The Larkinson Clan was no longer awfully deficient in high-end combat power.

Sure, the Larkinson Army was still far away from obtaining an ace pilot let alone a high-tier expert pilot, but it wasn't easy to fill up these gaps in the short and medium term.

Though most of the Larkinson expert pilots were still young and fairly early in their careers, the clan was able to provide them with the equivalent combat power of a mid-tier expert pilot by providing with much more powerful expert mechs than normal.

Ves simply overcame the weakness of one by cranking up the strength of the other in order to shore up his high-end combat power.

The overall results they attained in this battle largely vindicated his strategy. Pretty much every Larkinson expert pilot overperformed compared to their peers in the Sundered Phalanx.

It was not as if the expert pilots of the Gauge Dynasty were piloting crappy mechs. Ves had a lot of respect for their mid-tier and high-tier expert mechs. He gained a lot of inspiration from watching mechs like the Tensars, the Shockshell and the Skorpion Kommando in action.

Yet even though Ves was more than willing to admit that they had all been well-designed, they ultimately possessed limitations due to their limited design budgets.

The Fridayman mech pilots would have been able to put up a much more difficult fight if their mechs were as extravagant as those of the Larkinson Clan.

In short, the Battle of Pima Prime definitely proved that it was possible to defeat high-tier expert pilots and high-tier expert mechs by investing a huge amount of funding and resources in the development of his own expert mechs.

Even the incident where the Shield of Samar fell after fighting the Skorpion Kommando was not necessarily a repudiation of his chosen approach.

The Skorpion Kommando managed to break out with much more strength than usual because the Fridayman had partially adopted the same idea with regards to this specific expert mech!

If not for the sudden crisis that had overtaken the Pima Prime System, the Gaugers would have never agreed to invest at least a kilogram's worth of phasewater on consumable ammunition!

The Skorpion Kommando literally sprayed away a fortune's worth of phasewater each time it struck with its Skorpion Tail!

The overall lesson that Ves derived from this battle was that spending lots of money most definitely made life easier for the Larkinson Clan.

As Ves thought about whether he should pimp his expert mechs even further, the discussion of the ongoing virtual meeting turned to the expert candidates and expert pilots of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan.

Just as with the Larkinsons, their allies also welcomed a bunch of new heroes.

Naturally, Ves wasn't familiar with any of the names, though he guessed that he would probably get familiar with all of the new expert pilots in due time.

"The Glory Seekers have only gained 2 new expert pilots, which is within the range of our expectations. Their mech capacity is the smallest out of our alliance, so it is rather improbable for them to gain more demigods in a single battle."

Ves furrowed his brows. He distinctly remembered that many Glory Seeker mech pilots had access to the MSTS for a long period of time.

The only problem was that the Glory Seekers didn't possess a lot of expert candidates to begin with, so the pool of pilots that were eligible to jump to the rank of expert pilots was too small.

"The Cross Clan is in a much better position as they have gained 4 expert pilots over the course of the battle." General Verle continued. "It is rather notable that their breakthroughs mostly happened in the later stages of the battle. From the moment Patriarch Reginald and the Mars began to demonstrate their might, the Crosser mech pilots fought as if their favorite sports team was crushing the opposition. The breakthroughs happened quickly during this period."

That fell in line with Ves' theoretical framework.

"It is easier for mech pilots to break through when they are highly stimulated by external factors. Though our clansmen most definitely gained a lot of courage from seeing the Mars holding its own against the Neo Amadeus, it is a pity that the ace pilot ultimately belongs to the Cross Clan."

The Cross Clan undoubtedly entered an accelerated revival period after its forces played a decisive role in winning the Battle of Pima Prime.

The addition of four new expert pilots at once would most definitely fill up the schedule of Master Benedict Cortez.

Ves had a feeling that he could forget about receiving an invitation to contribute to the design of the Cross Clan's latest batch of expert mechs.

The Crossers had already maintained a policy of limiting their dependence on living mechs.

The fact that Patriarch Reginald brutally murdered the personality of his living mechs showed that the Cross Clan most likely dropped any further interest in exploring the possibilities of making use of synergistic living mechs at any level!

"Gloriana is about to receive big business." Ves softly muttered.

By hollowing out the Mars and turning it into his incarnation, Patriarch Reginald inadvertently converted to vision espoused by Gloriana!

Master Benedict would most definitely invite Gloriana to apply her own design solutions to the new expert mechs of the Cross Clan. Her specialty and her latest innovations were all extremely suitable for high-level mechs.

As long as the Crosser mech pilots wanted to obtain expert mechs designed in a similar style to the Mars, then Gloriana's contributions were essential to make their dreams come true!

"At least the Glory Seekers should still be fans of my work."

The Glory Seekers along with other Hexers valued his approach to mech design a lot more due to his ability to tie the Hexer design spirits such as Helena and the Superior Mother to their exclusive mech models.

In addition to that, they also did not object to their own mechs coming alive and developing personalities of their own. Many of them even started to believe in the nonsense that their living mechs were actually proto-gods in the making.

"If we leave aside the plunder we will be able to obtain from the surface and the assets we will be able to salvage from the orbital battlefield, the biggest gains we have obtained from this battle is the growth we have attained and the experience that we have accrued from fighting against the Sundered Phalanx." General Verle spoke.

"We managed to test what worked out well and what didn't work so well." Ves affirmed. "We have introduced a lot of new design concepts and applications that we were never sure would work in a major battle. Sure, we have already collected a lot of data on the performance of recent mech models such as the Lucid Rage and the Bright Warrior Mark II, but their main purpose was to help us win the battles that truly matter. While I still have to study the data and battle logs in detail, my preliminary conclusion is that all of our latest works have performed at least adequately in the last battle."

Commander Casella also saw lots of gains. "All of our mech pilots down to our rookies have fought thousands of simulated battles within the MSTs, but there is still a small but insurmountable gap with reality. None of our rookies are rookies anymore. Our veterans have also made massive gains. Once we recover and internalize all of the lessons we have learned, our battle readiness will reach a substantially higher level in the future. Our troops will be a lot better prepared to face the challenges of the Red Ocean by that time."

The Larkinsons explicitly sought to make these gains when they committed to Operation Saturday Market.

In line with the Societal Revival Theory, Ves and much of the leadership thought that the only way to prevent their fellow Larkinsons from becoming complacent and falling into decay was to subject them to high-pressure situations.

Ves hated this treatment back when he was a small and insignificant Apprentice Mech Designer, but nowadays he held the opposite opinion.

He found it rather ironic that he turned out this way when he previously loathed the leaders of the Bright Republic for ascribing to this radical social theory.

It was as if someone who used to be abused as a child went on to abuse his own kids once he had become a parent.

Anyway, Ves saw nothing wrong with his approach as long as he controlled the risks. He just had to make sure to never pick a fight with an overwhelming opponent.

"What is your evaluation of our new expert pilots, sir?" General Verle asked.

"Huh?" Ves snapped his attention back to the current discussion. "It has been a long time since I personally paid attention to our expert candidates. I don't particularly know the ones that have broken through today that well. Can any of you give us more insight on the three lucky bastards that have managed to take a step forward?"

"I can help you with that." Calabast surprisingly spoke up. "One of them happens to be a Black Cat. Do you remember the circumstances where we picked up Zimro Belson?"

Ves had to dig through the memory of his cranial implant to recall this particular event.

"I remember. Zimro was one of the former 'pirates' that we picked up during the Nyxian Gap Campaign. He has an intelligence background but was forced to flee from civilized space after running afoul of his own state."

Calabast smirked. "That is correct, Ves. Zimro has been serving in the mech wing of my Black Cats ever since. He has taken to piloting numerous stealth mechs over the years including one that Gloriana custom-developed according to his needs. He has played an important role in this battle by sneaking up on vulnerable and isolated ranged mech units before taking them out in an instant."

Ves became a lot more interested all of a sudden. "I see. So Zimro managed to break through as a stealth specialist?"

"That is correct. He has already expressed a desire to pilot an expert mech that possesses even stronger stealth capabilities. He wants to fulfill the role of an assassin and a saboteur that is much better at silently approaching enemy positions than Venerable Tusa."

"We shall see what we can do, but I can promise you that I will definitely take charge of this design project." Ves promised his strategic partner.

He quickly developed an interest in designing his first true expert stealth mech!

It was a type of mech that he had never designed before.

Although his experiences with stealth technology was rather limited, he just happened to have upgraded his Stealth and Cloaking Skill to Senior-level after he coincidentally won the associated enlightenment fruit from the lottery!

Though Ves initially did not expect to make serious use of his improved competences in stealth technology, the emergence of Venerable Zimro Belson presented a lot of new opportunities!

Ves already became stoked when he thought about all of the fancy stealth tech he might add to this new expert mech.

The variety of stealth solutions was great and the introduction of phasewater technology happened to mitigate one of the biggest shortcomings of stealth mechs.

Traditionally, stealth mechs were extremely fragile in open combat as their armor simply couldn't withstand a lot of attacks.

However, by employing new phasewater-infused materials, stealth mechs had the option to actively reinforce their exteriors at the cost of deactivating their stealth measures.

Though this meant that stealth mechs wouldn't be able to toughen themselves up when they were sneaking around, they at least wouldn't fall apart after a single hit once they got exposed!

Naturally, expert stealth mechs were subject to less limitations because of the greater possibilities of high technology.

As long as Ves was willing to spend enough money, he could design an expert mech that was equally effective when operating in the dark as well as in the light!

Chapter 4327 Raiding The Surface

As the winning side of the Battle of Pima Prime cleaned up the battlefield in orbit, the operations on the ground began to pick up steam.

The main objectives of Operation Saturday Market had always been to plunder or raze the heart of the port system!

As such, hundreds of intact combat carriers steadily descended from orbit and pierced through the upper layers of the atmosphere so that they could bring their combat-ready mechs to the surface.

The local defenders of the Gauge Dynasty did not make it easy for all of these vessels to reach their destination unscathed.

A large number of turrets and ranged mechs opened fire without hesitation and attempted to strike at the distant targets as best as possible!

The rather intense anti-air barrages forced the descending combat carriers to keep their distance from the enemy strongholds and touch down further away than they wished.

None of this hindered the massive amount of incoming raiding forces for long, but every second counted.

The garrison stationed on the surface along with the remnants of the Sundered Phalanx that lost the battle in orbit did not set out to repel the invading enemy troops.

The defenders no longer had the numbers to defeat the Hexers and the Golden Skullers in open combat.

Instead, the Gaugers had clearly shifted to a strategy that amounted to delaying the progress of their opposition as much as possible!

By forcing the raiding Hexers and Golden Skullers to waste lots of time on cracking powerful titan shields and dislodging entrenched mechs, the Gauge Dynasty hoped to limit the damage that the invaders could inflict on the planet.

"The first wave of reinforcements are already on their way! It's impossible for the Hexers to hold on to our planet when they have traveled so deep into our territory. They will have to leave eventually, so let's make sure that our old

enemies won't be able to create too much of a mess to our planet. Time is on our side!"

General Alisky Victrix and the other leaders of the invading forces understood this truth as well. They had already given up on assaulting smaller and less important settlements and city districts. It simply wasn't worth the time and effort to destroy a bunch of bungalows, shopping malls or office buildings when there were much more profitable and strategic targets for them to strike.

It was at this junction that the different forces of the invading fleet split up and attacked Pima Prime V according to their own ideas.

It was not necessary anymore for the different allied forces to combine their efforts anymore. Operating together in sieging and raiding operations across dense urban environments would inevitably lead to greater confusion, friction and delays.

The Hexers had their own methodology of conducting raids and adding in other forces like the Larkinson Army would add a lot of coordination problems.

"The defenders are but a shadow of their former selves. Now that we have broken their backs and drove their expert mechs away, the threat of facing an overwhelming counterattack should be minimal!"

The movements of the surviving Fridayman mech forces were not secret to the attackers. It would be incredibly obvious if tens of thousands of mechs converged on one location in order to fight another standing battle."

"The Gaugers won't dare to concentrate their mech units anymore. No matter how many they can rally under these circumstances, we can definitely muster up more! Combined with the fact that we still have the Mars as well as plenty of expert mechs at our disposal, the Sundered Phalanx would only invite greater humiliation on the battlefield."

Reputation mattered!

The Gauge Dynasty had already become the laughingstock of the Magair Middle Zone!

Back in the Friday Coalition, its prestige and air of invincibility had also taken a lot of hits.

The smart and clear-minded leaders of the Gauge Dynasty were confident that they could rebuild their tattered reputation, but that required them to stop the bleeding.

This was why even if the Sundered Phalanx was still able to field the numbers required to contest the invaders once again, the Gaugers didn't dare to roll the dice again!

As such, the Sundered Phalanx no longer concentrated all of their available forces on a single battlefield, but dispersed whatever it had left across multiple different settlements and city districts.

While the more important strategic locations were much better defended than the less important ones, that did not change the reality that none of these sites were particularly difficult to siege.

The different invading forces had already divided their responsibilities and picked their own targets to focus upon.

The Hex Federation's ultimate goal was to destroy Pima Prime's capability to act as a strong and well-developed commercial and industrial hub.

The Hexers therefore targeted a lot of heavy industries, logistical centers but also more administrative or symbolic structures such as government offices and the Palace of New Beginnings.

Though General Alisky Victrix marked out a lot of different targets for destruction, Task Force Fury managed to deploy at least 80,000 mechs on the surface!

Even if many of them weren't optimized for atmospheric environments and siege operations, the abundance of mechs could overwhelm any well-defended fortification!

While it was nice if the detachments of Task Force Fury could plunder large quantities of lucrative goods, resources and data along the way, this was not as important as destroying as much infrastructure as possible.

"Don't spare your ammunition. Just shoot everything that looks expensive! I want to see this entire city flattened by the end of the day."

"Hahahaha! Those Fridayman mechs have all transformed into turtles. They are doing nothing aside from huddling inside their bunkers and underground tunnels. Where is their courage?!"

Flames and explosions engulfed many different cities and city districts in a short amount of time.

The Hexers didn't even wait to land all of their combat carriers before the earliest arrivals had already begun to march towards their nearest targets.

All the while, the mechs of the Hex Army hardly exhibited any restraint.

The mechs generally stayed low on the ground as opposed to flying in the air in order to avoid getting picked off by anti-air fire.

Melee mechs went in first and casually struck their weapons at the structures in the way.

Artillery mechs unleashed their cannons and missiles at distant targets with little concern whether their attacks ended up in the right places.

Other ranged mechs deliberately fired their laser or gauss rifles straight through the urban landscape in front of them as their pilots just wanted to wreck as much Fridayman possessions as possible!

The officers of the Hex Army did not rein in their soldiers. In fact, it was the opposite! These senior Hexer leaders were even more eager to demolish as much of Pima Prime V as they could manage during their short visit to this star system.

Of course, the Hexers didn't forget to do what they set out to accomplish in the first place.

A lot of expensive and important strongholds and complexes got broken in as thousands of mechs systematically overwhelmed the obstacles in their way.

Though mechs such as the Valkyrie Redeemer Mark II's were not that great at siege battles, their rifles possessed enough firepower to wear down titan shields as long as enough of them attacked at the same time!

Civilian casualties remained surprisingly low as these operations took place. The Fridaymen still possessed a strong memory of the cruelty of the Hexers and knew better than to ignore the orders to evacuate and head to safety.

Every settlement built by the Gaugers was designed to offer an abundance of underground shelters. Millions of colonists had already entered them before they all closed up in an effort to keep them out of harm's way as long as possible.

However, the Hexers weren't willing to let them all go. While the Hexers originally sought to sniff out these large shelters and collapse them so that none of the Fridaymen would be able to stay alive and contribute to the development of the Friday Colonies, the invaders recently changed their minds on how to best exploit these civilians.

Spies and saboteurs that had previously blended in with the locals silently took control of the operation centers of these facilities and unlocked the heavily reinforced entrances that should have kept the shelters closed.

The Hexer mechs that arrived soon afterward easily took control over the shelters and forced the bewildered Fridayman colonists to follow their own arrangements!

This wasn't the extent of what the Hexer spies accomplished now that time was of the essence.

Thousands of DIVA agents and other Hexer operatives emerged out of nowhere and struck critical objectives such as titan shield generators, ammunition depots, senior officers and more.

Many groups of defenders fell into disarray as their titan shields disappeared in an instant or when explosions began to engulf their own strongholds!

"These Hexers are everywhere!"

"How did they find out about our secret entrance?"

"Our intelligence agencies are too incompetent!"

As all of this was taking place, the Golden Skull Alliance preoccupied itself with chasing after its own objectives.

To the partners of the alliance, the planetary assault offered them a rare chance to plunder as much as they could out of what was left on Pima Prime V!

Most of them put their focus on attacking the wealthiest and most advanced districts of Ardham, the capital city of the main planet of the port system.

Ardham was roughly comparable to Kotor City of Davute VII. Both had developed into urban metropolises that were divided into many planned city districts.

The Golden Skull Alliance were mainly interested in attacking two sorts of districts.

The most obvious ones were the industrial districts. This was where all of the manufacturing complexes and most of the warehouses were located.

Thousands of Larkinson, Glory Seeker and Crosser mechs all split up in three different directions and sieged the areas that featured the largest and most extensive factories.

No matter whether these industrial facilities were tasked with producing mechs, starship components or colonial infrastructure, they were bound to store a lot of valuable materials and other goodies!

However, when a combined force of Swordmaidens and Penitent Sisters easily overran the defenses of a manufacturing complex belonging to a large mech company, they found precious little worth taking inside the production halls.

"Damn."

The Gaugers took away all of the superfabs while blowing up all of the other production equipment that weren't worth as much.

When the Larkinson mechs intruded into the warehouses, they saw that a lot of material stockpiles still remained intact, but that the most valuable exotics were nowhere to be soon.

It was a dream for the Larkinsons to think that they could plunder any phasewater from the surface of Pima Prime V!

Fortunately, not every manufacturing complex they targeted had been emptied of most of their valuables.

There were still numerous other factories where the locals failed to destroy or take away as much as they wished.

In one facility, a team of Black Cats patiently waited for the arrival of the Avatars of Myth.

"Are those superfabs? How could they still be intact?!"

"Mistakes tend to happen when everyone is running around like headless chickens." An intelligence operative replied with a smirk. "The locals didn't have enough manpower and transportation capacity to empty out each and every factory. This one happens to be a bit lower on the priority list, so it was not that difficult for us to delay the efforts of the Fridaymen and prevent them from destroying these machines."

Though the Larkinson Clan had no intentions of making use of these Fridayman superfabs, they could easily be sold for tens of thousands of MTA credits in any market!

Though these situations were fairly rare, the efforts of the Black Cats easily tripled the profits that the Larkinsons expected to gain from these raids!

Aside from plundering a lot of valuable production machines, the Larkinson raiding units also managed to pick up all kinds of new and strange exotics.

While their value was unclear, Ves eagerly wanted to take them away in the hopes of finding a new material that worked well with his specialty.

Chapter 4328 TXQ Phase Tech

Hours went by as the Hexers and the Golden Skullers continued to assault the feeble defenses that stopped them from plundering the wealth of Pima Prime V.

Many mech pilots that had recently fought a battle in orbit only enjoyed a brief rest before they had to get back into their cockpits and fight other battles.

Many settlements of Pima Prime V turned into ruins as the invading forces focused on ruining years worth of investment in just a single day.

Plenty of people were enjoying this moment. Practically every Hexer mech pilots vented their frustrations towards the Fridaymen during this time and eagerly spread as much destruction as possible!

In contrast to the violent and destructive Hexers, the troops of the Golden Skull Alliance didn't exhibit as much uncontrolled behavior.

Aside from the Glory Seekers who acted a bit more heavy-handed than normal, the Larkinsons and the Crossers did not harbor any overwhelming animosity towards the Fridaymen.

They were much more focused on earning a profit rather than kicking enemies while they were down.

The planetary assault presented an excellent opportunity for the Larkinsons and Crossers to obtain rare and precious valuables on the cheap.

The Larkinson Clan had already made an abundant amount of preparations for their raids.

The Black Cats played a key role in securing all of the plunder. Hundreds of intelligence operatives along with many more informers had gone to work weeks before the invaders arrived in the star system.

These well-trained and well-equipped agents scoped out important facilities in advance and infiltrated them in order to pave the way for future raids.

The agents had put a lot of effort into identifying and securing as much valuable and strategic goods as possible.

The Black Cats of today were incomparably stronger and more numerous than years before!

Calabast had personally made sure to persuade the Larkinson Clan to invest a lot of money and resources into building up its own intelligence network and spy organization.

Once it became clear that the Golden Skull Alliance would take part in Operation Saturday Market, Calabast knew that the time had come to prove to

Ves and every Larkinson that her Black Cats were not as impotent as in the past!

"So why are we here?" Lanie Larkinson asked as her Lucid Rage entered one of the academic districts of Ardam. "There aren't any factories over here. There are only schools in this neighborhood."

Though her Lucid Rage got banged up quite a bit during the battle in orbit, the mech technicians only had to patch it up a little bit to ensure it wouldn't malfunction in the short term.

"The academic district holds more than schools." A Larkinson mech officer spoke as he led a unit of Avatar mechs into the quiet and peaceful district. "There are labs, workshops and libraries in this place. The patriarch himself has designated several numerous sites as priority targets. Raiding these facilities is even more important than plundering the factories in his opinion."

"Why?"

"Because those labs and workshops might contain a lot of valuable research. According to the reports, the Black Cats have already infiltrated them in advance and prevented the staff from destroying everything they couldn't immediately take away."

Lanie looked skeptical. "The Fridaymen have put a lot of effort into taking away the most valuable materials like phasewater. I doubt we'll ever be able to find a single drop in this district."

"You're probably right. Our agents might be good, but they're not that good. The Gaugers would have taken all of the phasewater and other high-value materials by force if any delays took place. This was why our Black Cats waited until the evacuation troops brought out the most critical materials."

"What did they do, then?"

"They prevented the staff from destroying the valuable hardware and clearing out all of the data. The Black Cats probably haven't been able to save everything of value that is left, but as long as they managed to preserve just 10 or 20 percent of this stuff, then that is enough to make our patriarch happy."

Lanie smiled. Though she didn't understand the value of obtaining all of this science crap, she could get behind the goal of making Ves happy. She owed far too much to the Larkinson Patriarch already. It was finally time for her to pay back her benefactor.

The group of mechs eventually reached a fancy-looking modern building that belonged to a high-end research and development institution.

"What is special about this place?" Lanie asked as the Larkinson mechs bumped into a few scattered defenses.

"This is the main R&D facility of TXQ Phase Tech. It's one of the top research companies on the planet. The elite researchers and developers who used to work here have already been dragged on one of the first ships to evacuate from this star system, but at least some of their work should still be left. Our job is to break into this place and retrieve the goods. We're about to engage the defenses, but whatever you do, don't go overboard."

"Understood."

TXQ Phase Tech possessed a substantial presence in the research and development sector of the Friday Colonies.

If not for the fact that the arrival of so many hostile troops threatened the entire planet, the Fridaymen would have put a lot more effort into securing or destroying this research facility!

As it was, there were so many fires that the local forces needed to put out that they simply couldn't spare the mechs or manpower to take care of a bunch of labs.

The staffers and security personnel who worked in a research institution like this should have been the ones to clear it out, but the Black Cats produced enough interference to hinder these efforts!

"According to the maps and intelligence that we have received, this research institution is guarded by twenty medium-powered turrets along with other defenses. Our saboteurs claim to have neutralized them, but be careful when you approach. We will destroy them just in case they are able to go back online."

Lanie found it strange as she and her fellow Larkinsons approached this valuable research facility.

She expected to encounter a lot more opposition from the Fridaymen, but aside from sweeping a couple of hundred security bots, the Larkinsons failed to meet any significant opposition.

"Huh. The turrets are all offline."

"That makes it easier for us to take them down. Be careful when you do. Don't damage the main buildings and don't trigger anything dangerous."

The ranged mechs didn't attack the disabled turrets for fear of producing collateral damage.

It was up to melee mechs such as the Sword Warriors and Lucid Rages to destroy these potential threats.

Once the Larkinson mechs completed this chore, they moved further into the grounds of the research institute and continually kept their sensors peeled for any other threats.

In order to detect hidden defenses or spaces that hadn't been mentioned in any of the intelligence gathered by the Larkinson Clan, the Avatars borrowed a Light Hunter mech from the Flagrant Vandals.

The light scout mech was too weak to pose a threat against other mechs, but it possessed an abundance of sensors and scanners.

The Samasel Orb Directional Scanning Module came in extremely handy in situations like these. The powerful active scanning system was able to sense anything built underground as well as expose the interior of the main research buildings.

Numerous hidden defenses, tunnels and other curiosities became visible to the Larkinson mech unit.

Though the Light Hunter did indeed uncover several more hidden nooks and crannies, none of them presented any acute threats to the introducing Larkinson mechs.

In the end, the Larkinsons easily managed to gain control over the research facility. There were still staffers and security personnel left who had been attempting to wipe out all of the data banks so that there would be nothing left for the invaders to steal, but they only partially managed to accomplish their goals.

"You're finally here." An agent hiding in stealth spoke as he revealed himself before the Larkinson mechs. "We need your help in breaking open a pair of data centers. Both of them are highly fortified. We can't breach them with our current means."

"Won't that risk destroying the data stored inside?"

"We managed to disable those precautions, though we can't guarantee that we have neutralized every measure. This is why both of us need to work together. This will be a delicate operation. I need a mech that is powerful

enough to breach the fortified walls but also possesses enough precision and control to avoid further damage."

"That's me." Lanie spoke as her Lucid Rage took a single step forward.

The intelligence operative directed a skeptical look towards the tonfas of her mech. "Those clubs of yours aren't exactly what we have in mind."

"That's not a problem. Can anyone here lend me a sword?"

Though the Lucid Rage was designed to fight with a pair of tonfas, nothing stopped it from wielding a bladed weapon.

Once it was armed with a sharp mech sword, the Lucid Rage proceeded to break into a structure and carefully utilize its weapon to pierce through a reinforced vault-like structure.

Lanie had to be exceedingly careful when digging through the reinforced wall. She could not push too hard for fear of triggering a contingency measure or inadvertently damaging some of the data banks inside.

Fortunately, she and the Black Cats meticulously kept the situation under control. It did not take long for the Lucid Rage to slowly pry open a wide enough hole!

The infiltration team had already utilized their various gizmos and computing systems to control whatever was inside. Their hacking suites and other measures neutralized a lot of precautionary measures and prevented the precious research data from going up in smoke!

It was only after a couple of operatives stepped inside and came back out while carrying several storage devices that they announced the good news.

"We succeeded. I have personally confirmed that this data center contains encrypted research and development files related to the development of high-end transphasic weapons and transphasic armor systems. It's highly likely that

at least some of this research had recently been applied to the Sundered Phalanx's expert mechs that we recently fought against."

"Are you sure about that?!"

"We still have to decrypt the files once we have returned to our fleet, but we think it is probable that we have stolen the secrets behind the development of those powerful Fridayman expert mechs!"

This wasn't the only intact data center of this site. There was also another data center that stored files related to different applications of phasewater technology.

TXQ Phase Tech might be a relatively new company in the Friday Colonies, but it was founded by numerous powerful influences of the Gauge Dynasty.

The Sundered Phalanx, numerous Master Mech Designers as well as a group of industrialists had invested in this company. Their goal was to fund the research and development of a lot of powerful and useful transphasic products!

TXQ Phase Tech probably wasn't as small as Melmen Advanced Systems but wasn't quite up to the level of Morton Tech.

Even so, it was still an indispensable institution to the Gauge Dynasty. It wasn't just the local mech industry that benefited from the R&D conducted by TXQ Phase Tech.

A lot of important mech designers and other people back in the Komodo Star Sector depended on the work of TXQ Phase Tech to decipher the properties of phasewater on their behalf.

It was incredibly difficult to bring back large quantities of phasewater back to the Friday Coalition in the old galaxy, so many interested individuals and

groups back home had little choice but to set up research institutions in the Red Ocean to study phasewater in earnest.

Now, all of the money and effort that people such as Master Huron poured into TXQ Phase Tech had gone on to benefit the thieving Larkinsons.

Even if the clan couldn't digest all of this advanced research and development data by itself, there was always the option of passing it to friendly development companies such as Melmen Advanced Systems in exchange for favors!

Chapter 4329 Plundering The Fridaymen

Now that Operation Saturday Market had progressed past its most dangerous and risky phase, Ves and many Larkinsons in the fleet no longer remained on high alert.

That did not mean that they let loose every precaution and treated this trip to Pima Prime like a holiday, but at least no one needed to act as if the Fridaymen could start a fight at any second.

The intelligence operatives dispatched by the Hexers and the Larkinsons gained an excellent grasp of enemy movements and activity. The defeat of the Sundered Phalanx in orbit combined with the chaos and disruption that took place on the surface opened up a lot of vulnerabilities that agents took advantage of in the last few days.

The local Fridaymen didn't even know that a part of their command centers had already been bugged!

This was why Ves possessed a high degree of confidence that nothing on the surface could threaten his main fleet at this stage.

The only serious danger that he needed to take into account was the possibility that a large mech army was quickly heading towards Pima Prime V under warp travel.

However, the Hex Army already took that possibility into account. They had seeded every corner of the star system with probes and listening devices whose sole job was to track warp travel activity.

Every warp drive and minidrive worked by bending the surrounding space to form so-called warp bubbles that allowed mechs and starships to reach their destinations faster.

The disturbances and fluctuations generated by these powerful drives were as obvious as observing the ripples of a lake.

Even if the fast-acting reinforcements dispatched by the Fridaymen managed to avoid the detection of all of these warp detectors, the Hex Army already deployed a web of warp inhibitors in every direction.

This prevented the newcomers from dropping their ships and mechs right on top of the invading fleet!

With all of these precautions and more in place, Ves decided to relax and enjoy the good news that his troops regularly transmitted from the surface.

He moved back to the main design lab and began to study the abundance of data generated by the battle in orbit.

There was so much interesting footage and data that Ves felt as if he had entered a paradise!

He casually waved his hand and activated a projection that showed a globe representing Pima Prime V.

The augmented map not only showed the fantastic terraformed landscape of a colony that the Gauge Dynasty once regarded as one of its crown jewels, but also tracked the activities taking place in different settlements.

The city of Ardam turned into a particularly busy hotspot as at least a half of the mechs that landed on the surface had infested the place!

"It's beautiful." Gloriana remarked as she held a dozing Marvaine in her arms. She had taken her eyes away from the battle footage of the Mars to observe the globe as well. "Look at all the cities that are burning. The Hex Army is as decisive as ever."

The Hexers specifically brought out striker mechs armed with flamethrowers and artillery mechs capable of firing flammable shells to burn as much construction as possible.

Though engulfing the cities in flames took quite a lot of effort that the Hexers could have spent on breaking open more fortified areas, the Hexers eagerly wanted to make Pima Prime V as unlivable as possible.

The main reason for the Hexers to spread so many fires wasn't even centered around setting back development or trying to destroy as much value as possible.

The Hexers wanted to spread fear and apprehension in the hearts of the Fridaymen. By wiping out their homes and workplaces, the Hexers sent their archenemies a clear and open message.

It was conceivable that it would become a lot less popular for the Fridaymen in the old galaxy to immigrate to the new frontier!

After all, the Fridaymen recently gained control over an entire star sector. The Friday Coalition reigned over Komodo Star Sector and did not have to worry about getting attacked by hostile neighbors.

The Friday Colonies were in a different situation. Not only were the colonies a lot less developed than any population center back in the old galaxy, but the colonists also had to take into account that the Hexers might drop by and ruin the party at any time!

Ves shook his head in disapproval. "Don't talk like that in front of our kids. Our conflict against the Friday Coalition is old news. The two of us might still

harbor hard feelings against the Fridaymen, but I don't want children to get caught up in a spiral of revenge."

He directed a loving gaze at his suited daughters who were sitting on a mat while playing with their cats.

"Miaow~" Clixie purred as Aurelia scratched the cat behind the ears.

"Meow." Lucky jumped up in the air and caught the ball that Andraste had flicked above her head.

Both girls noticed their father's attention and beamed in his direction.

"Papa!"

Ves' heart melted a bit. He didn't want his girls to take over the obsessions of the Hexers. The Red Ocean was bigger than the Fridaymen. It was much more productive for the Larkinson Clan to interact with other groups that were much more relevant in the future rather than remain stuck in the past.

As Ves tracked the incoming news about the developments on the surface, he briefly raised his eyebrows when he heard that his troops successfully made a few gains in the academic districts of Ardam.

The Larkinson Clan was the only visiting group that bothered to raid the academic district at all. The rest simply weren't interested in plundering boring data and obscure lab equipment that the Fridaymen hadn't managed to destroy.

Ves was different. He wanted to enrich his understanding of advanced technologies and wanted to obtain glimpses of what others were working on. Who knows whether the works of other researchers and developers might end up improving the performance of the next batch of Larkinson mechs.

His wife found his priorities rather amusing. "You truly want to get a peek at other people's work, don't you? You have a rather interesting habit of stealing other people's work and ideas."

"I'm not a thief, Gloriana. I take inspiration from the work of other mech designers. There is a difference." Ves emphatically defended himself. "My design solutions might share a resemblance of what I have seen before, but I have always applied my own interpretation to them. Every mech designer stands on the shoulders of giants. None of us would ever be able to design mechs as great as ours if we didn't have a huge body of existing mechs and knowledge to bring us up. I'm just taking a few more liberties than usual."

His wife clearly didn't buy it. "If you say so, Ves. Personally, I think you should set your expectations straight. The research data that you can obtain from those research institutions and development companies won't be usable to us unless we employ a team of highly competent phasewater specialists. Unless you can gain a controlling interest in a company such as Melmen Advanced Systems, there shouldn't be any way we can make good use of specialized phasewater research files."

He sighed. "You might have a point, but it is still worth a try. Phasewater technology is the future of human warfare. The battle that we have just fought clearly taught us that. Personally, I'm hoping to see data on how they efficiently increased the penetration capabilities of the Space Piercer mech model. We already developed a handful of spearman mechs and lancer mechs that would definitely benefit from this application."

"We can develop this application ourselves, you know. You don't have to insist on stealing someone else's homework to lace the tips of our spears and lances with phasewater."

Ves shook his head in disagreement. "I don't think it is as simple as letting a drop of phasewater fall onto the tips of the weapons. It takes special

production processes to maximize their toughness and penetration power. There are also many possible alloys that you can use to make the speartips. The Fridaymen should have invested a lot of research into finding out the most optimal alloys out of all of the possible metals that they can obtain in the Red Ocean. Besides, there should be other interesting pieces of tech available as well. I'm particularly looking forward to stealing the Viper's corrosive fluid formulas."

"Didn't you just state that you don't engage in theft?"

"Ahem, I meant that it might be useful for us to diversify our offensive options by developing our own powerful acid solution that is laced with phasewater." Ves coughed.

"Why would you possibly resort to such an unconventional weapon solution?" Gloriana frowned. "We have never worked with it before and it isn't our style to dabble with them. It's too dangerous and we don't have the expertise to minimize accidents. Do you know that a lot of mech designers end up creating accidents by playing around with dangerous substances?"

"It's not as bad as you think. Most of those accidents occurred because of negligence, not because the tech is inherently volatile."

His wife grew tired of him. "There are good reasons why such a dangerous payload is almost entirely absent in mech combat. It only takes a strong wind for a mech to take itself out. If I were you, I would stick to those luminar crystal weapons that you are so good at. Didn't the MTA turn you into a contributor of restricted technology because of your expertise in this alien tech?"

"I'm aware of that, honey, but I already have an idea on how to handle that. I think these corrosive fluids pair best with organic mechs. In fact, it might even be possible to design a biomech that contains an organ that can automatically produce a specific formula as long as it is fed with the right materials!"

Ves didn't know why, but he felt the strange urge to design a scorpion-based mech.

Perhaps it was because one of his proudest and strongest works got destroyed by the Skorpion Kommando.

Even though the circumstances behind the Shield of Samar were unconventional to say the least, a defeat was a defeat.

Perhaps a normal person would have developed an animosity towards the Skorpion Kommando for killing off such a powerful and valuable living mech, but Ves was different.

As a mech designer, he respected and admired any mech that was strong enough to beat his own work.

Ves even wanted to call the Viper and hold a constructive exchange with her in order to understand the design of the Skorpion Kommando.

It was unfortunate that he probably wasn't on speaking terms with the Masters of the Gauge Dynasty. Many of them probably hated his guts for defeating so many of their works!

"How is the Mars doing, by the way?" Ves asked.

"Shouldn't you be asking this question to the Crossers?"

"Master Benedict probably wants to deepen your involvement in its development. I haven't received any news about the Mars lately. Did he invite you to tweak the Mars further?"

"In fact, he did." Gloriana unabashedly grinned. "The Mars revealed so much about itself during its duel against the Neo Amadeus. It also evolved so much over the course of the fight that we need to survey all of the changes and understand how elements such as the Endex System and the god body system will continue to affect its performance. I already have a few follow-up

ideas in mind to optimize its configuration as a second skin mech as opposed to a traditional living mech."

"That's... nice."

Ves was not jealous. Seriously. He was just happy that his wife continued to receive further opportunities to participate in the ongoing development of the only ace mech in the Golden Skull Alliance.

It might even be for the best that Ves didn't waste his time on a mech that no longer had much to do with him anymore. He gained so many new ideas from the recent battle that he could easily pack his schedule with lots of interesting design projects.

Chapter 4330 Lucky's Trip

A gloved hand patted the armored leg of Ves' Unending Regalia.

"Papa?"

Ves looked down and smiled at his second daughter. She was just too cute! Her suited figure along with her big head reminded him of an exquisite doll.

"What's the matter, dear?"

"Lucky is sad, papa. He wants to go down."

As if that wasn't enough of a message, the gem cat himself floated next to Andraste and made a begging motion with his paws.

"Meeeow. Meeeow. Meeeow."

"Really now." Ves felt the urge to palm his face. "Do you know how unsafe it is to travel to a planet that is owned by a hostile state, you forgetful cat? Have you forgotten how long we were trapped on the surface of Prosperous Hill IV? Look, I'm in the same boat as you. I also want to snoop around in a big city like Ardham and see whether I can dig out a few treasures, but the risks aren't proportionate to the rewards. Do you really think the Gauge Dynasty is stupid

enough to leave behind high-grade exotics and other exceptionally valuable materials?"

Though the Gaugers had been forced to leave behind a lot useful materials and goods behind due to lack of time and transportation capacity, they weren't stupid. The strategic reserves had been one of the first vaults to get emptied during the evacuation effort that preceded the battle in orbit!

The reports that the Larkinsons on the ground transmitted to the fleet indicated that a lot of warehouses and other storage places mostly contained low-to-medium value bulk materials.

Though all of these goods that were ordinarily used to make incredibly useful products such as mechs, starships and structures could be worth millions of MTA credits, the only way to actually profit from them was to bring it all back to a place where they could fence their stolen goods.

The Hex Federation was the nearest state where the Larkinsons could expect to get a good deal out of selling all of this loot.

The problem was hauling it out of the Friday Colonies! Just as the Fridayman lacked the cargo vessels to take away all of their valuable materials, the invading forces possessed even less capacity!

It really wasn't worthwhile to bring out all the bulk materials that Pima Prime had in storage. Whenever the Larkinsons encountered a warehouse filled with bulk materials, they simply passed the location over and went on to search for more worthwhile goods to plunder.

Considering the quality of Lucky's diet nowadays, Ves truly didn't think that his cat would be able to find anything good enough for him to eat. Why bother taking a risk when he could just lie down and eat his regular bowl of exotics?

"Meeeow!"

Lucky did not show any sign of backing down, however! The cat kept squirming and begging to go down for a visit!

"Pleeeeeease, papa?"

Perhaps Lucky alone wasn't strong enough to persuade Ves to change his mind, but the addition of his youngest daughter caused him to hesitate.

Andraste turned and grasped Lucky in her arms. Their relationship had grown quite close over the years.

It took a few more minutes for Ves to let out a sigh.

"Fine. I suppose Lucky is capable enough to take care of himself on the surface." He said while directing a warning gaze towards the gem cat. "You can board a shuttle or transport that is heading down to Ardam. You can roam around wherever you like and eat whatever exotics strikes your fancy, but I expect you to do your duty while you are in the field. If you happen to find a secret stash of exotics or other items of value, please notify our clan so that we can pick it all up. I will reward you with additional high-grade exotics in your daily meals if you happen to stumble upon an experimental device or the like. Do you understand?"

"Meow!"

"Don't forget that our schedule is tight. Though the intelligence suggests that the Fridaymen have been slower to send out rescue troops to this star system, that doesn't mean we'll be extending our stay. I expect you to return within 12 hours. If you're late, then our fleet will depart with or without you on our ship. Have I made myself clear?"

"Meeeow!"

"Papa! Don't be mean to Lucky!"

Ves sneered. "Andraste, if you want our cat to come back in time, then you better persuade him to keep track of time. Who knows how long he will stay if he doesn't get the message."

A half-ruined planet that belonged to a hostile state probably looked like paradise to Lucky!

There were so many materials that Lucky sneakily ingested without attracting too much attention because the Fridaymen were too preoccupied with other crises to track these kinds of losses.

It would take months if not years for the Gauge Dynasty to rebuild the planet and get everything back in order.

Even then Lucky had plenty of ways to keep stealing valuable exotics under everyone's noses.

The Fridaymen were all enemies so the cat had no reason to feel guilty about stealing their possessions.

The chances of getting caught were also small as long as the locals never found out about his presence.

Lucky hadn't been lazing around all of these years!

Years of eating a luxurious diet of high-quality exotics had slowly but steadily increased his capabilities. His speed, toughness, energy reserves as well as phasing capabilities had all improved by varying degrees.

His only significant shortcoming was that he wasn't able to cloak his body, but Ves already prepared a solution for this problem.

"I almost forgot, Lucky. Before you enter your shuttle, be sure to equip your Misfortune Harness."

"Meow!"

"I know it makes you feel confined, but it's for your own good!"

Andraste and Clixie decided to accompany Lucky during his trip to the hangar bay.

Along the way, Lucky visited an armory where he changed into the body-covering suit of armor that Ves had occasionally worked on in the past 5 years.

Lucky looked completely different once donned his high-tech cat armor!

The Mark V edition of the Misfortune Harness was a bit slimmer and much more refined than the previous versions.

It not only incorporated a more expensive active stealth system, but also integrated miniature modules that could perform a lot of auxiliary functions such as scanning, data storage, decryption and hacking.

In other words, Lucky transformed into a larger but still fairly sleek spy cat once he donned his black outfit!

Little Andraste had never seen him in this special outfit before. Her eyes quickly grew into stars as she admired the way that Lucky resembled a black cat!

"You're so cool, Lucky! I want to go down with you as well."

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

There was no way the two cats would agree to that! It was one thing for a powerful cat to travel to a danger zone, but a toddler had no business strolling around in a burning city!

At least Andraste was able to accompany the cats down to the hangar bay where a shuttle was being prepped to descend from orbit in order to pick up another batch of valuable cargo.

Andraste hugged the black-clad cat as if she was saying farewell to her favorite toy.

"Have fun down there. Be sure to pick up a gift for me before you go back!"

"Meow~"

Clixie also came closer in order to lick Lucky's cheek and wish him good luck.

"Miaow~"

Lucky finally entered the shuttle which steadily exited the hangar bay and initiated its descent to the surface.

The shuttles employed by the Larkinson Clan nowadays were upscale models that possessed greater speed, larger cargo holds and greater protection against attacks.

Even if it was a bit risky for shuttles to be flying in the vicinity of cities such as Ardam, the escorting made sure that none of them would get shot down over the course of their flight.

A large quantity of mechs and shuttles had initially attempted to shoot down the combat carriers and other vehicles that entered the airspace, but the Hexers and the Golden Skullers quickly took care of these threats.

The local Fridaymen were much more honest by this time. They had either lost their capabilities to resist or were far too busy with fighting against the troops on the ground to bother with shooting down targets from the skies.

In order to keep track of Lucky's movements and help coordinate his actions with other friendly units, the Larkinson Clan tasked a Black Cat operative to accompany the cat.

The woman activated a projection that displayed a real-time map of Ardam.

The map accurately depicted the capital city's dire state, including the numerous districts that had become engulfed in flames or bombed to oblivion.

"Where would you like to explore first?" The woman asked. "I don't recommend you explore the industrial districts. Many of them have already been ransacked or explored already. The academic districts might be of interest to you. There are many labs and workshops that might contain hidden surprises that our initial scans failed to detect the first time."

Under normal circumstances, the chance of encountering high-end goods and materials was definitely the greatest in these areas, but that had changed once Pima Prime got attacked.

Lucky shook his head and pointed his paw at one of the more central districts.

"Oh? You want to visit the richest district instead? This is where the most successful administrators, businessmen and military officers reside. It is unlikely for the residents to forget about taking away sensitive and valuable goods, but perhaps they may have been too hasty to pack up their important possessions. It's a good choice for you to explore these sites if the Hexers have already gone through this place."

"Meow meow."

Lucky insisted on exploring the mansion-filled district despite the fact that several Hexer mech units had barged into the area and attacked almost every fancy estate out of spite!

The shuttle eventually touched down in the outskirts of Ardam. The pilot did not dare to land anywhere closer, but the Black Cat operative took out a hoverbike and hopped onto the seat.

"Let's go, Lucky."

"Meow!" The cat jumped up and settled onto a special seat that was designed to fit his exact dimension.

The slender but powerful vehicle quietly floated up in the air and sped up towards the center of the city.

Along the way, the vehicle changed shape and activated a cloaking system that turned it invisible.

No one disturbed the stealth bike as it silently made its way to its destination. There was so much fighting going on that the locals had much better things to do than looking out for stealthed vehicles.

The abundance of emissions in the air also made it a lot more difficult to detect anomalies passing through the skies.

The stealthed bike soon reached the center of the wealthiest and most luxurious districts of Ardam.

The Black Cat continued to keep her vehicle under stealth and emerged while activating the stealth system of her infiltrator suit to keep herself as undetectable as possible.

The gem cat landed on the ground and began to sniff around for anything interesting.

"Did you find anything, Lucky?" The operative asked over a short-ranged communication channel. "I specifically chose to touch down on this location because the surrounding estates are all owned by the direct descendants of the Gauge Dynasty. If there are any places where you can find hidden vaults, these homes are the most likely candidates."

Perhaps she was right, because Lucky soon caught an interesting scent!

"Meow!"

The cat didn't bother to explain any further and activated his phasing ability before diving into the ground!

The Larkinson intelligence agent sighed but did not express any frustration. She had already been informed of Lucky's habits and antics.

"I hope you can find useful intelligence for us. There has to be more we can obtain from this planet."