

## Mech 4341

### Chapter 4341 Words That Begin With R

The Dullahan Project was probably the biggest and most exciting experimental project that Ves had come up with in years.

Ves grew more and more excited about it the more he thought about it. The Dullahan Project was not just an ad-hoc attempt to make Venerable Jannzi happy by giving her an expert mech that possessed a relation to her old Shield of Samar.

He saw it more as an opportunity to work on living mechs in a deeper and more profound way than before.

Rather than designing and making a new living mech like he had done in the past, he intended to work around an existing living mech, or at least a remnant of it, and try to see whether he could breathe new life in one of his perished works!

Just as he expected, the vision he presented completely exceeded Venerable Jannzi's expectation and cognition. She looked floored as she tried to imagine what sort of mech she might end up with if Ves completed the Dullahan Project according to his current intentions.

Jannzi found it difficult to understand this strange new project. The mix between new and old was jarring to her. Only a mech designer as crazy and radical as Ves would come up with a design concept that combined a relatively new and fresh expert space knight design with the surviving head of her familiar Shield of Samar.

It was not without reason that she accused Ves of designing a Frankenstein mech. The draft design he had drawn in front of her eyes pretty much fit the definition of such a machine!

Ves did not blame her for reacting in this manner. It was highly unusual to design a mech that essentially recycled old parts. Any decent mech designer knew that a mech that incorporated design solutions meant for another product rarely fit together that well.

Ves didn't worry too much about this problem, though. He was confident in his ability to make it work despite the additional challenges brought by this combination. He and Gloriana were both well-equipped to solve the many new tangible and intangible issues over the course of the project.

The main client was not as certain, however.

"Why?"

"The answer is complicated." Ves steadily replied. "The Dullahan Project is a result of trying to reconcile your demands with what is technologically feasible with our current capabilities. I have already explained why it is not possible for you to regain your old Shield of Samar. It's gone for the most part. Rather than remaining stuck in the past, I think it is best that we move on from this loss and try to work out a way to go forward."

"Are you trying to force a break from the past?" Jannzi looked suspicious.

Ves gave her a generous smile. "I'm not saying that. The fact that I have preserved the head of your old mech in the new design is a clear indication that I still respect your demands. I just don't think it is healthy or desirable to reproduce the last iteration of the Shield of Samar as closely as possible. From a philosophical standpoint, doing so does not constitute moving forward at all. I see it more as a regression. You need to accept what has happened to you and your old partner and find a way to be the expert pilot that the Shield of Samar can be proud of. Ask yourself this. Would your old living mech prefer it if you keep moping about all day, or would it rather have you pick yourself up again and regain your drive to fight?"

The female expert pilot's eyes teared up as she thought about what she said. Her emotions grew heavy but the cloud of depression that emanated from her body had lifted to an extent.

His efforts were working. If he just wanted to develop another expert mech for Venerable Jannzi, he didn't have to come up with such a complicated concept or explain so much of his perspective to the expert pilot.

The reason why he was being so patient and wordy to her was because he wanted to light a fire in her tired engine and end her mourning phase as quickly as possible.

What was lost was lost. Ves didn't think it was productive for Jannzi to remain so attached to an expert mech that had fallen in battle. Designing a mech that deliberately looked and functioned differently was an attempt to induce a mental shift that allowed her to come to terms with her loss.

"This sounds more like an elaborate psychological treatment to me." Jannzi answered with a lot of skepticism remaining in her voice. "I don't like being manipulated and I especially don't like being manipulated by you. I haven't forgotten your Devil Tongue moniker even though few people have called you that in recent years. I know how you work, Ves."

Ves raised his palm in objection. "Don't be too hasty to dismiss my idea. It is genuinely good for you. I'm not trying to lure you into a trap or anything."

"Why do I have the feeling that this is exactly what you are trying to do?" Jannzi guardedly asked.

He sighed in exasperation. He never liked to argue with Jannzi. She was just so stubborn and unwilling to agree to his opinions.

"Let me put the Dullahan Project into context for you, then. The key word to the Dullahan Project is rebirth."

"Rebirth?"

"Yes, rebirth." Ves confirmed with a nod. "What I am explicitly not attempting to do is to bring back your old Shield of Samar alive in its original form. It's impossible for the reasons that I have already explained before. Doing that constitutes revival, which is different from what I have in mind."

Rebirth and revival. The two words possessed similar meanings, but to Ves they represented two completely different directions.

To revive a broken mech was to restore it to its former glory. This would have been suitable for the Shield of Samar if it had broken down in battle in a more conventional manner.

Rebirth on the other hand was to take whatever scraps was left of a broken mech and use some of it as the basis for a new machine that was fundamentally different in many ways.

Though Jannzi correctly doubted whether the latter had anything to do with the original Shield of Samar, it was a bold forward-looking vision that thematically offered her a way forward.

Though Ves wrapped up his concept in a different coat, it appeared his attempts to gain Jannzi trust and understanding had failed. She still looked confused as ever.

"I really don't know how you come up with all of these weird concepts and ideas." The expert pilot remarked.

"Okay, let me dumb down my words so that you can understand my meaning. Let's suppose the Shield of Samar is... was... your husband."

The woman snorted. "You do know I'm married, right? I'm not as young as I used to be. As much as I like Sammie, I don't consider my living mech to be my lover. I'm not that crazy, you know."

"Just work with me, Jannzi. Anyway, you and the Shield and Samar were doing well together until your spouse died in battle."

"Is there a point to this story?"

"Be patient and let me finish. Look, the reason why I set this story up this way is to emphasize that much of your original living mech is simply lost. Both its material and intangible qualities are either lost or have become damaged beyond recognition. What I am trying to tell you is that rather than taking your husband's dead body and attempting to bring it back to life through some sort of unholy ritual, it is better to take what little your partner has left behind and use it as a seed to plant new life."

Comprehension finally dawned on Jannzi's face.

"That sounds more like reproduction rather than rebirth."

"Oh, no. That is where this analogy breaks down." Ves quickly replied. "This new mech that I have not sketched is not meant to be a child from you and your expert mech. Mechs aren't physically human and they can't reproduce. What I am attempting to do instead is to take the remaining essence of the Shield of Samar and use it to plant a seed that will bloom into a new mech."

Planting a seed in order to grow a new mech. That was probably the most accurate description that Ves could provide to Jannzi.

"I think I understand now." Jannzi said. "Whatever I get at the end can still be called the Shield of Samar, but it won't be the same anymore depending on how you tackle your new project."

"What you need to understand is that I can't completely control the outcome of this project. What makes life wonderful is that it can grow and develop in many different directions. The downside to that is that we can't necessarily choose how your reborn mech will look like. I only have partial control over the variables that determine the outcome of the Dullahan Project."

"Why did you choose this codename for this project? What is a dullahan?"

Ves chuckled. "A dullahan is an ancient myth about an undead knight that rides around and haunts people for whatever reason. What is special about this dullahan is that he is originally a knight on a horse whose head somehow got chopped off his body. Somehow, the knight didn't die from that, but has gained another life as an undead creature that rides around while carrying his separated head in his arms."

"That... is a disturbing image. I do not want you to turn my Shield of Samar into an undead monstrosity that does more harm than good."

"Oh, don't misunderstand me. That is exactly the opposite of what I am attempting to do. I wouldn't have put the head of your old expert mech onto the torso of your new one if I was trying to faithfully reproduce this myth. The codename is simply a loose reference to this story. There is no further thought behind this association."

Jannzi relaxed a bit. "I have no problem with this as long as this is the case. Can you tell me more about how much of my old Shield of Samar will stay the same once you are done with your work?"

"As I've said, I can't control the process, so there is no way I can give you a definite answer to your inquiry." Ves steadily replied. "The only thing I can say about this is that I am aiming to achieve a rebirth. Everything that is too old and weak about your old living mech has already been shed or will inevitably fall off during the transformation process. You view it as a purification cycle. The result of this is that we will be left with the strongest and purest essence of the Shield of Samar. This will serve as the seed that allows your living mech to start anew on a much stronger footing than before."

"That... sounds like reincarnation."

Ves chuckled again. "We can use a lot of different high-minded words that start with the letter R. What is important is that your Shield of Samar will be able to live again in a new form and a new incarnation. Perhaps you can call it nirvana. Just like how a phoenix can rise from its ashes, your Shield of Samar has never really died. It just came back to you again in a youthful and updated form."

As Ves kept explaining these ideas to Jannzi, he became more invested in this nirvana concept.

He had a feeling that if he succeeded in giving the Shield of Samar a new life in this manner, he might be able to unlock a powerful new possibility that could give a lot more living mechs a way to move forward after they fell, became obsolete or were no longer wanted for whatever reason!

#### **Chapter 4342 Path To Rebirth**

Ves continued to discuss and explore his vision with Venerable Jannzi.

It was crucial that he obtained her buy-in from the start of the Dullahan Project. Its importance to himself, his clan and Jannzi could not be overstated.

He recognized that after a long time since he last achieved any major progress in his design philosophy, he was finally progressing his core work in a proactive manner.

The fact that he did not have a good idea of the outcome of the Dullahan Project was a great sign that he was embarking on a new and innovative feature.

When he looked back at how he began his mech design career, he split up his progression into multiple different stages.

The first stage was when he began to dabble with the X-Factor after the System guided him towards this direction.

The second stage was when his mother introduced him to the possibilities of converting spiritual entities into design spirits.

The third stage was the gradual discovery and realization that living mechs went through qualitative transformations at specific thresholds, leading him to develop his so-called Larkinson's Orders of Life Theory.

All of these advancements were mainly rooted in spirituality, life and growth.

Some of it required active intervention and effort from Ves, but a lot of growth-oriented changes happened naturally over time.

Lately, Ves felt that his design philosophy became overly slanted towards growth.

While he was happy to see mechs grow stronger and evolve into third order living mechs after sufficient growth and accumulation, Ves didn't feel much accomplishment from this phenomenon because he didn't really get involved in the process.

Sure, he may have set up his living mechs to grow into strong and amazing life forms, but aside from getting involved in the beginning, he surrendered all of the initiative to time and nature.

It was too passive. Lack of control translated into lack of determination.

Ves thought back on how he struggled with an old philosophical struggle related to his approach towards progressing his design philosophy.

He viewed his range of options as a spectrum between two extremes.

The path of determinism was an aspiration to become more actively involved and exercise greater control over growth of his living mechs. It was an explicit attempt to reduce variance and minimize uncontrolled and undesirable outcomes.



Nurturing and influencing living mechs as they grew through different means allowed him to exercise a high amount of control on how they matured. It was similar to raising a kid.

The path of life sought to do the opposite. Rather than trying to control an inherently chaotic concept such as life, Ves embraced its incredible variance in the hopes of obtaining incredible results.

He did so by creating the seeds of life at the start before releasing them into the wild where they could grow and develop under different circumstances.

Ves understood the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches. He did not want to commit to a single path at the cost of giving up all of the benefits of the other path. He believed that his design philosophy would become a lot simpler but also a lot less promising if he aimed for simplicity.

Generally, he tried his best to balance his progression between these two extremes. Perhaps he would never be able to explore the extreme limits of either path, but the combination between the two could yield incredible results as well.

The problem that Ves faced as of late was that his work over the last years veered increasingly more towards the path of life.

Ves felt as if he had increasingly turned into an architect that was solely responsible for designing a city.

Once it was built and once people started using the various buildings and facilities of his design, Ves no longer needed to do anything. Everything seemed to go on the right track and no one needed his help any further.

Was this the sort of mech designer that he aspired to become?

Not really.

It was too passive. A mech designer's job should never be done. There was always work to do. There were always ways to update and improve his existing designs.

If all he needed to do to realize the best living mechs was to set them up once, then what was the point of staying in his profession?

He might as well retire after that point!

Therefore, Ves was eager to find a way to shift his design philosophy back towards the path of determinism and exercise greater control over his own products.

While there was nothing wrong with allowing living mechs to grow by themselves without any further intervention, his responsibility as a mech designer demanded that he should find more ways to actively influence the growth process to achieve more optimal outcomes.

This at least enabled him to affect the growth pattern of specific mechs that he favored more than most.

Larkinson mechs and more specifically the high-ranking ones played a vital role to his clan and his own career.

It was more than worth it for him to spend more time on improving their growth conditions and preventing them from being weighed down by their undesirable baggage.

As far as the Shield of Samar was concerned, Ves slowly became convinced that its recent setback was not that big of a detriment anymore.

After all, the Shield of Samar went through six major revisions, several of which drastically changed the mech to the point that it was almost unrecognizable from its previous iterations.

Ves did not forget that the Shield of Samar was never meant to become a powerful masterwork expert mech.

It initially started out as a weak, commercial third-class standard mech!

Though Ves was incredibly proud at how he was able to elevate such a humble mech into one of the most powerful machines of the Larkinson Clan, he recognized that its spiritual evolution did not keep up with its physical transformations.

Ves had plenty of ways to upgrade the Shield of Samar's technology and physical components, but his ability to improve the spiritual design of the same mech was not as great.

That might change in the near future.

The Dullahan Project was a chance for Ves to cleanse the Shield of Samar of its impurities and acquire a deeper and more promising foundation.

His hope was that the Shield of Samar would not only be able to make up for what it had lost, but also progress further as if it had transformed into a rocket!

This might even be a way for Ves to push the evolution of a living mech to the next level!

What did this mean? It gave him the hope that the Shield of Samar may be the first to evolve into a fourth order living mech, a classification that only existed in his theories up to this point!

Though Ves only explained a part of his ambitious vision to Venerable Jannzi, the expert pilot clearly sensed his energy and enthusiasm.

He had become fired up by the promise of pushing living mechs to a higher limit. The prospect of allowing the Shield of Samar to be reborn anew and at a higher starting point was so interesting that his passion became more and more enflamed!

"I'll be honest with you, Ves." Venerable Jannzi said. "I have my doubts about your ideas. They don't make as much sense to me. I'm not a professional, though. You know more about living mechs like the Shield of Samar than anyone else. I might not agree with you on many issues, but I at least trust you to do what is right for any mech, including my own. You have proven yourself to be nothing but trustworthy and reliable in matters relating to mechs. I can't say the same with regards to everything else..."

Ves dismissed her backhanded compliment. "I can promise you that I will do my utmost to present your Shield of Samar with a brighter future. Death is not necessarily the end for a living mech. I sincerely believe that even if they have fallen apart, there is still a way to give them a chance to be reborn. The Dullahan Project is not just an opportunity to give your old mech a new life, but many other mechs that have suffered similar fates!"

Now that he gained Jannzi's approval, Ves immediately wanted to flesh out his new experimental project.

He quickly left the hall where the remains of the Shield of Samar was stored and headed back to the design lab in order to begin his preparations.

He encountered an unexpected surprise when he reached the main lab.

His wife looked annoyed while his kids had all burst into tears!

"Waaaaaaahh!"

"Waaaaah!"

"Wahhhhh!"

Ves' heart tugged when he heard the distress from all three of his children. He immediately walked up to his wife and pinned her with an accusing stare.

"What did you do, Gloriana?!"

"It's not me! It's your cat!"

"What?!"

Ves turned around and stared at Lucky. He recalled that his cat had returned to the fleet rather late after he scurried around on the surface of Pima Prime V.

Though the gem cat looked a bit bloated upon his return, Ves didn't really think about it any further.

It appeared that Lucky had truly bitten off more than he could chew this time.

"MEOOWWW.... Meeeeeoowww..."

Lucky mewled in pain as he listlessly laid on the deck.

His little tummy looked conspicuously rounded at this time, and from the way that Lucky was squirming about, it was clear that this was the source of his distress!

"Papa!" Little Andraste ran up to Ves and embraced his leg. "What's wrong with Lucky?! Can't you do anything about him? He's so sad!"

Ves chuckled and sneered. "There is nothing to be concerned about, sweetie. Lucky has brought this on himself. This is what happens when you eat more than you should. If you don't want to end up like our cat, then you need to make sure that you don't exceed your portions. The mistake that Lucky has made is that he let his desire for eating overtake his good sense. His punishment for disregarding his health and overtaking his limitations is becoming afflicted with a tummy ache."

His light and confident tone implied that nothing was wrong. He successfully caused his kids to stop crying now that they thought that Lucky wouldn't be going away forever.

"Won't it stop, papa?"

"That depends." He replied. "I don't know how mechanical cats Lucky solve their indigestion problems. Just let him suffer for a few days. If he hasn't used the litter box by then, I'll feed him with a special medicine that is guaranteed to empty his overstuffed stomach."

"MEEEEEOOWW.... MEOOOOWWWW...!"

"Don't complain, Lucky!" Ves snapped back. "How many tons of metals and ores did you eat last time?"

"Meooww..."

"What do you mean you don't know?! Can you give me an estimate at least?! How about a metric ton?"

"Meooww..."

"ten metric tons?"

"Meow..."

"Fifty metric tons?"

"Meow...."

"A hundred metric tons?"

"Meow....."

"A thousand metric tons?"

"..."

"You gotta be kidding me." Ves disbelievingly said. "How can a tiny cat like you stuff so much junk in your belly? Wait. Forget what I said. A cat like you clearly doesn't abide by common sense. It's a shame that your ability to stuff yourself with metals hasn't been able to catch up to your ability to digest it all. Should I bring over a laxative?"

"Meeow...!"

Ves already began to smirk. "Maybe I should wait a few days or weeks. The longer you're digesting your meal, the more you will convert the nutrients into 'waste products'. It's been years since you last used the toilet. Perhaps it is finally time for me to earn a return on my investment. Maybe I should feed you with additional high-grade exotics that our clan has managed to plunder from Pima Prime."

"Meow meow meow...!"

"Oh, there is also a lot of high-quality wreckage that we have picked up from the battlefield. We've got fragments that originated expert mechs like the Shockshell and the Skorpion Kommando. Don't they sound yummy, Lucky?"

"MEEEEEEEEOOOOW...!"

## THE MECH TOUCH

### Chapter 4343 Wild Conjectures

Ves derived pleasure from Lucky's pain.

The more Lucky suffered from his stomach ache, the greater the probability of producing fantastic gems.

In order to ensure that the gem cat sufficiently digested the massive amount of metals that he had undoubtedly devoured during his trip to the surface, Ves did not want to end Lucky's suffering too soon!

"Hehehe. Just leave him be. He'll get over it eventually. It is normal for cats like him to suffer from stomach aches. It's just like having a toothache. He'll probably get over his problem in a few days."

"What if he is still hurt after that?"

"Then I'll feed him with a special laxative that will force him to go to the toilet early. Don't worry. Your father has everything under control."

Once Ves dealt with this farce by convincing his children to ignore Lucky's awful condition, he was finally able to take his wife aside so that he could introduce his latest experimental project to her skeptical ears.

"Your idea is truly revolutionary." She said. "Assuming it works, that is. How certain are you that this rebirth concept of yours will yield a positive result? From what I can understand, the Shield of Samar used to be a powerful and developed proto-god, but lost much of that after the battle. It is awfully premature for you to think that you can bring it back better than ever after it has lost so much accumulation. Shouldn't it be the case that your living mech will have to start growing from scratch again?"

Ves shook his head. "No. I'm pretty sure that there will be clear gains compared to the first time that the Shield of Samar came into existence. This is because even if its spiritual foundation has suffered massive losses, the remnant bears the essence of a third order living mech. As long as I convert it into a seed that can grow anew without being burdened by the flaws and obsolete elements that no longer play a useful role, I think it will be able to experience a period of accelerated growth!"

It was not unusual for new living mechs to grow at a massive pace once they were put to use. This usually happened when the strength of the pilot was a lot stronger.

Ves had seen it happen to expert mechs such as the Minerva and the Promethea that both started off their existences by getting paired with expert pilots.

The Shield of Samar on the other hand was a much older and more mature living mech. While it had grown alongside Jannzi for many years, it had already reached maturity by the time the Larkinsons upgraded it into a masterwork expert mech.



If Ves was able to take the existing Shield of Samar but revert it to the point where it retained its nature as a third order living mech but brought it back to its infancy, then not even he could predict how much the 'second generation living mech' would be able to surpass its previous incarnation!

As Ves explained his theories and his expectations to his wife, Gloriana began to understand his logic.

She even became optimistic about his chances all of a sudden!

"I understand now!" Her eyes lit up. "What you're talking about has to work!"

"Wait... you believe me?" Ves furrowed his eyebrows.

Though he was happy that he did not have to spend as much time on convincing his wife than he initially expected, it was rather suspicious that she agreed with his theories so quickly.

"Why shouldn't I believe you?" His wife smiled and tilted her head. "I should have thought about it first. What you are attempting to realize with your experiment falls in line with the six phases of hexism. Normally, people like you automatically move on to the next phase when we die, but this might not necessarily be the case for living mechs and proto-gods. Since they are artificial life forms, it is logical that they need help from their maker in order to help them move onto the next phase."

"..."

"Your idea is so brilliant, Ves! The Shield of Samar will definitely transcend into a powerful new deity sooner or later! First comes life. Then comes death. Godhood comes third. This means that your living mechs only have to be reborn twice in order to become a powerhouse that can stand on an equal height to god pilots! You may have accidentally uncovered the secret to producing god mechs by coming up with the Dullahan Project! You have even

chosen the right codename of this project. The ancient undead myth corresponds perfectly to the second phase of existence!"

"Wait, Gloriana. Don't get ahead of yourself. There is no proof that what you say is true. It is absurd to think that I can make a god mech just by allowing a living mech to undergo two cycles of rebirth. There is no solid guarantee that a mech like the Shield of Samar will be able to become an existence comparable to a god mech. Besides, it requires Venerable Jannzi to merge with her own machine by definition."

"That's exactly right!" Gloriana's eyes lit up further! "Don't you see, Ves?! What you have described also happens to match the fourth phase of the Mech Body Merger Process! Think about it! When ace pilots that have reached their limit are ready to take the final plunge, they have to shed all of the remaining parts of their mortal selves and rely on their extremely strong willpower to transcend into a god pilot!"

Ves widened his eyes. That was true! Though the sources that he had read in the past were rather vague about the Mech Body Merger Process, what little he knew about it seemed to share a lot of resemblance to his hypothesized rebirth process.

At the very least, the underlying reasons happened to be the same!

Since it was possible to allow an older and more worn living mech to undergo nirvana and achieve greater heights as a result, why shouldn't this process apply to mech pilots as well?

Perhaps the details were different, but the principles should still apply to both cases!

Ves vigorously shook his head. "Stop. Let's not talk about this any further. I haven't proved anything so far, and it is anything but certain that my Dullahan

Project can create a new method that can improve the chances of ace pilots undergoing their third and final evolution."

"You're wrong."

"What are you talking about, Gloriana?"

His wife looked at Ves as if he was being stupid again. "How many phases of existence are there in hexism?"

"Six..."

"That means that a living mech like the Shield of Samar can be reborn five more times. No, that's not entirely correct. It can be reborn six times in total! That is because after it reaches the sixth phase, it can undergo one more cycle of death and rebirth to become a Supreme at the same height as the Superior Mother!"

Ves looked befuddled. "That doesn't make sense. Shouldn't there be seven phases of hexism if that is the case?"

"SHUT UP, YOU IDIOT!"

As her dutiful husband, Ves obediently closed his mouth.

Gloriana's expression turned happy again. "Anyway, you are definitely on the right track, Ves. I am sure that once you figure out the secret to inducing rebirth into your products, they will truly take off at that point! The Shield of Samar's second incarnation will probably turn into an undead mech. Its third incarnation will turn into a god mech. Its fourth incarnation will become a devil mech. Its fifth incarnation will probably be its weakest and most invisible version. Its sixth incarnation shall be its second-most powerful version."

"...What about the seventh incarnation?"

"I TOLD YOU TO STOP TALKING NONSENSE, VES!"

Ves didn't find anything credible about Gloriana's deluded theories. The fact that they were based on religious and pseudo-scientific claptrap rather than sound empirical evidence was a giant red flag that he really shouldn't entertain her ideas in the first place.

At least her theory that his rebirth process might be related to the mysterious Mech Body Merger Process was a lot more viable since it was based on concrete phenomena.

Once Gloriana finished her wild conjectures, the discussion between the two finally became more productive.

Ves presented his wife with the sloppy draft design that he had drawn in front of Jannzi.

Though his wife predictably became annoyed at seeing his careless artwork, she soon became intrigued as she took in all of the design choices he had made during the sketching process.

"Recycling the surviving head of the Shield of Samar is a creative idea." Gloriana genuinely praised. "I can understand what you are attempting to achieve with this now that I have heard your explanation. I'm surprised that Jannzi agreed to the drastic changes you have made to the rest of the frame. It's as if you are forcing the Shield of Samar to go on a diet. Did you lose faith in your original concept and vision?"

Ves shook his head. "No. I still believe that pursuing an approach that is based on extreme defense can yield great results in battle. However, the configuration and performance of a mech has to match the situation. The battles that we tend to fight against different enemies tend to be big, decisive, intense and incidental. Take our last fight for example. The Living Sentinels generally did not do as much back then because their low mobility and overly

defense-oriented mech doctrines has left them with few options to take the initiative."

His wife was anything but stupid, so she quickly understood his argument.

"I see. You're correct to a degree. If we take our last battles as a model, then you can indeed come to the conclusion that it is better if the Shield of Samar is able to move faster and keep up with other expert mechs in battle."

"You don't sound convinced, honey."

"Human mechs aren't the only opponents we face anymore, Ves." She told him. "Historical trends do not necessarily have to match future trends. If we proceed with the Trailblazer Expedition, we will enter a drastically new environment where we will encounter brand-new enemies. What is to say that a more balanced heavy space knight is better than a more defense-oriented heavy space knight?"

Ves already thought about this angle.

"I agree that there may be cases where we would rather have a heavier and more defensible expert mech by our side. However, if you consider every possible battle scenario, you will find out that we can gain more value out of having a more mobile and adaptable expert mech. The ability to move and reposition quickly is useful in many more circumstances. As long as we ensure that it is tough enough despite slimming it down, everything will be fine. Just look at the Skorpion Kommando. It was able to shrug off a huge amount of damage despite being lighter than the Shield of Samar."

"That's because it was paired with a high-tier expert pilot."

"Venerable Jannzi will eventually grow into a high-tier expert pilot as well." Ves retorted. "It may take decades, but once she has reached this stage, I would rather see her being put to use in many more ways than to have her

stick around our fleet while doing nothing else but project a barrier that blocks incoming attacks."

His wife took a deep look at Ves. "It sounds to me that the Skorpion Kommando has made such a strong impression on you that you cannot resist the urge to imitate its configuration. Will the Shield of Samar truly remain our mech or will it become a pale copy of the work of the Viper instead?"

"You don't need to be so dramatic, Gloriana. I still have plenty of ideas that should ensure that the Shield of Samar retains enough of its original identity and traits to keep Venerable Jannzi happy. Let me explain my proposal further..."

### **Chapter 4344 Security Seals**

As much as Ves wanted to devote all of his time to fleshing out the Dullahan Project, he still had a lot of other responsibilities on his plate.

The good news was that it appeared that the combined fleet was on track to leave the territories of the Friday Colonies without any further incidents.

The Fridaymen still hadn't organized any large-scale pursuit fleets even though a large enemy force was still moving through the interior of their colonial state.

At this point, it was already too late for the Fridayman mech fleets to catch up to the combined fleet.

With every advisor telling Ves that the chances of getting ambushed or intercepted had dropped to a massive degree, he let down his guard and handled the follow-up matters of Operation Saturday Market as best as possible.

From attending meetings to inspecting the rich amount and diversity of loot, Ves became more and more impressed at all of the profit the Larkinson Clan had earned from the successful raid.

"Did we capture any prisoners during the battle or during the planetary assault?" Ves asked during a meeting with his spymaster.

Calabast shook her head. "No. Our troops and agents may have picked up wounded or trapped Fridaymen during their sweeps, but we did not keep hold of them. It makes little sense for us to hold onto low-level grunts as they don't provide any value to us. We have already transferred custody of them to the Hex Army. The Hexers are in a much greater position to squeeze more value from their old enemies."

"I see. What about higher-ranking prisoners?"

"There is no chance of obtaining them when they aren't in our reach to begin with." His strategic partner said. "Not every rich and successful leader is a daredevil and thrillseeker like you, Ves. They generally prize their safety a lot more and try to avoid straying within reach of their enemies."

"Hmm. That's a shame. Oh well. Did you manage to find anything interesting out of the large amounts of data that we have retrieved from Pima Prime?"

"Our Black Cats have only begun to decrypt them a short time ago. You are asking too much if you think we are able to unlock the stolen databases so soon. It may take months and years to unlock them all even if we are able to put our immense amount of processing power to work on this issue. It may be more economical for us to sell the encrypted data storage devices to different parties that can work around this problem."

Ves did not look pleased with this answer. "That means that we will likely lose the chance to obtain the data ourselves. I don't want to make it cheaper for others to get rewarded for the risks that we have taken."

"Then how do you want us to proceed?"

"Keep decrypting the data with as much processing power that you can muster. I will try and see if we can boost that further during our return to Davute, but if not then I am fine with settling for a longer wait."

The Larkinson Clan hadn't made much strides in understanding phasewater technology. It was not necessarily useful for the Larkinson mech designer to gain access to rich data on how the Fridaymen applied this tech in different mech and ship-related applications.

"Do you have any better news for me?" He asked.

"Well, it is still early to tell, but our actions and the actions of our allies have made a profound impression in the regional community. Our agents and informers have gathered many clues that suggest that different parties are becoming more willing to cooperate with us, especially when it comes to business."

"Is there any special reason or motivation why they are willing to do business with us, or is it simply because they have taken us a lot more seriously after the operation?"

"It's because of fear."

"Fear?"

"These companies are intimidated by our clan and alliance." Calabast said.

"Much as you expect, our impulsive decision to take part in this operation has given others the impression that we are trigger-happy battle maniacs who won't hesitate to fight anyone that has offended our sensibilities. Though this is clearly an exaggeration, the people who are in charge prefer to leave nothing to chance. The most risk-averse course of action that different groups and companies can take is not to ignore our existence, but to maintain a slightly friendly posture towards us while conducting small but constant business transactions."



Ves raised his eyebrow. "It doesn't sound like these third parties are being sincere."

"Of course not." Calabast chuckled. "Fear can't produce any sincerity. Only friendship can do that. Even so, the existence of mutual interests does not necessarily have to depend on sincerity in order to become valid. It is more than worth it to trade with us on a regular basis if it will make us think twice about attacking them one day. After all, we do have a reputation for being friendly and honest towards our friends and allies."

"Does that mean we can order starships easier than before?"

Calabast looked uncertain. "That remains to be seen. The Cross Clan will definitely find it easier to expand its fleet because Patriarch Reginald is the greatest source of intimidation in the Golden Skull Alliance. As for our clan, we simply aren't threatening enough. Much of our strength is based on our expanding commercial activities, and they are simply not as difficult to deal with as overwhelming violence."

She was right. Though the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan possessed many similarities, they also differed in many important ways.

Ves always regarded the Larkinson Clan as a vessel to facilitate his mech design career. Designing mechs, producing mechs and selling mechs was a large part of its DNA.

The Cross Clan on the other hand operated more like an orphaned mech army that started up various businesses in order to support its military activities.

When it came to earning power, the Larkinson Clan definitely possessed the edge.

When it came to scaring people senseless, the Cross Clan was much more frightening!

"I do not think there is anything wrong with our positioning." Calabast spoke as if she already knew what he was thinking. "There is real value in building up a positive, upright, honest and approachable image for ourselves. Many of the major business deals that sustain our clan and our numerous subsidiaries wouldn't have formed if we did not attract so many willing and eager business partners. What is better is that few of them have turned away so far. Over time, we will be able to develop a large and intricate web of business interests that will turn us into an untouchable institution in the Red Ocean."

Ves dismissively shrugged. "That is long-term stuff. I'm more interested in what we can gain in the short term. Let's address a more interesting matter. Where did you store the collection of heirloom equipment?"

"We have moved most of them to our inspection labs. Allow me to lead the way."

The pair moved deeper into the Blinding Banshee and eventually reached a guarded compartment where a lot of different pieces of equipment were placed on different tables.

Though Ves had already examined them from remote, the experience was a lot different now that he was able to witness them in person.

His senses went into overdrive at the moment as he came across more than thousand different pieces of heirloom weapons and equipment.

Some pieces were so many centuries old that they were probably made during the Age of Conquest.

Other pieces incorporated transphasic technology and represented some of the most cutting-edge advances in phasewater technology that the Friday Coalition had mastered in recent years.

Roughly half of the equipment consisted of weapons. Most of the guns in turn came in the form of more compact armaments.

"These rich guys really like their pistols." Ves remarked.

Calabast smiled. "You've used them as well at times. Pistols are much easier to carry on a day-to-day basis than rifles, shotguns and cannons."

"You can make the larger arms lighter and more foldable through the use of advanced technology."

"That is true, but do you think it is likely that the VIPs among the Fridaymen are able to wield these weapons proficiently? Besides, using pistols will make them look a lot more elegant, especially if the gunsmiths have put a lot of effort into decorating them. The heirloom weapons are also meant to serve as status symbols, so their appearances are rated higher than their actual functionality."

"Form over function. How inefficient." Ves contemptuously snorted.

He did not mind making his products prettier, but the premise of that was that their performance remained sound.

After he was done with taking in the collection as a whole, he became eager to study the best pieces in greater detail.

"Where is the personal teleporter?"

"We have stored it in a more secure compartment."

They moved to a small and secure side office that held nothing but a table and a small vault that contained the precious gadget in question.

When Calabast unlocked and opened the vault herself, Ves held his breath as he laid his eyes on the single-use emergency personal teleporter.

"It definitely looks like the personal teleporters that I have occasionally seen on other people, mostly high-ranking mechers." Ves smiled. "Have you confirmed its authenticity?"

Calabast nodded. "We did. That was one of the first tasks we performed after we brought back this haul. While we have no hope of understanding how this piece of high technology works, it is surprisingly easy for us to verify that it is safe and ready for usage."

"Oh? How did you determine that, exactly?"

"You might not know this, but commercial personal teleporters are subject to many regulations. The MTA imposes a large amount of rules in order to reduce people's mistrust and suspicion towards these kinds of high-end life-saving products. The short explanation is that they are strictly programmed and strictly designed to be almost impossible to tamper without anyone knowing about it. That is because they contain many virtual and physical seals that instantly give out warnings if anything about them has been compromised. This policy has existed for centuries."

Ves looked impressed. "That's actually a good measure. The MTA is useful for something, at least."

He carefully studied the teleporter and analyzed the seals that he had access to. They indeed looked authentic and reliable.

When he examined the personal teleporter with his spiritual senses, he did not pick up anything interesting. It appeared that its previous owner rarely made use of it. Perhaps it was a backup that the person had left in his vault.

What was odd was that Ves didn't pick up anything obvious from the designers or makers of the personal teleporter.

Ves briefly grew confused until he realized that it had likely been produced with a materializer. It was anything but a handmade piece of equipment.

Though Ves found that to be regretful, that did not stop him from appreciating this device himself.

He wanted to make use of it right away!

"Is it safe for me to use?" Ves asked.

"I would advise you not to wear it on your person at this time." Calabast replied in a serious tone. "This is still a strange and foreign device of unknown providence. Even if everything looks fine and dandy, there is still a chance that it is an elaborate trap device that is meant to hurt its user. I have already tasked one of my teams to contact its manufacturer to verify whether the product is truly one of theirs. You can wear it once we have concluded a few more checks."

"Alright. I can wait a few extra weeks. It's not as if we are in danger at the moment. The chances that I will have to depend on them are much greater once we have traveled deeper into the frontier."

#### **Chapter 4345 Arminio Collection**

If this was a decade ago, Ves would have become ecstatic if he obtained such a large and elaborate collection of heirloom equipment.

Almost everything possessed a lot of value.

The modern transphasic weapons were much more powerful than their normal counterparts due to their ability to penetrate armor and energy shields. Only transphasic combat armor and transphasic shield generators possessed the means to resist this effect. As long as they were powerful and artistic enough, both types of equipment could be sold for thousands of MTA credits. The best pieces could even be sold for over ten-thousand MTA credits if the Larkinson Clan could find the right buyers!

The older antiques that possessed outdated tech might not be as usable anymore, but the rich and powerful colonists who ruled over Pima Prime V tended to collect them by the dozens or even the hundreds.

"These older fellows really like to decorate their walls with rows and rows of historical guns." Ves mildly remarked as he swept his gaze across a table that contained over a hundred phased-out Terran handguns. "Personally, I'm not a fan of this stuff. I can recognize that they were all good products over time, but these guys spent way too much money just so that they can brag about their collections."

Calabast chuckled. "Everyone needs hobbies, Ves. The high disposable incomes of a small subset of the population of the Gauge Dynasty encourages more extravagant spending. Collecting all of these relics is not just a sign of wealth, but also a sign that you possess the appreciation to value these refined objects and the connections to obtain these rare goods. Other people will think more highly of those that meet all of the qualifications to amass these kinds of collections. This is a similar dynamic to collecting hunting trophies. Mere numbers in a bank account cannot fully convey a person's success."

"I see."

As someone who most people considered nouveau riche, Ves still hadn't come around this elitist mindset. People tended to spend a lot of money on the most ridiculous luxuries.

Ves admittedly indulged himself in this manner as well, though it was mostly his wife who spent the most on luxury consumer goods such as handbags, dresses, shoes and even baby clothing.

At the very least, Ves tried to keep his profligate streak as productive as possible by channeling his urge to splurge into his mech design projects.

For example, he already drafted a plan to allocate a considerable chunk of the profits of the recent raids to fund the Dullahan Project.

The latest two revisions of the Shield of Samar cost the Larkinson Clan a lot of money to say the least, and that was when much of its armor and structure already consisted of Unending alloy that hadn't been priced into the design budget.

The Shield of Samar fell in battle due to participating in the raid of Pima Prime V to begin with. It was only right for Ves to make it right by using a large chunk of the proceeds of the planetary raids to fund its possible transformation and rebirth.

Ves considered it an attempt to ease his guilt and compensate Venerable Jannzi for the suffering she was enduring.

Calabast picked up a random antique and activated it before aiming it carefully up the ceiling. The Terran-made gun might be out of date, but its high-quality tech and material composition still granted it a huge amount of power in a comfortably small package.

"Can we keep a couple of hundred of these guns?" She asked. "Many of them can be life savers for the Black Cats in the field. Their styles and origins can help a lot with allowing our spies to blend into more well-off communities."

Ves glanced around the entire hall. The Larkinsons had plundered thousands of pieces of equipment from the villas and mansions of the wealthiest district of Ardam.

Though he found it a bit odd that their owners had left so much wealth behind, when he saw how much cargo space it would take to carry them all away, he figured that the hasty evacuation process left people with little time and space to take away their material goods.

Nothing was more important than safeguarding one's own life!

"You can keep 10 percent of this stuff." Ves finally replied. "You can keep the best and most practical gear, but I am not letting go of the revenue that we

can earn from selling the rest to the right buyers. If the Fridaymen appreciate them to the point of adding them to their personal collections, then there ought to be plenty of discerning customers in Davute who are willing to pay serious money for this haul."

The spymaster frowned at the answer. "That is less than I was asking for, but I suppose it is better than nothing."

The woman carefully put down the weapon in her hand and continued to survey the other pieces of equipment.

Ves and Calabast proceeded to inspect the items that deserved the greatest amount of attention. Each of them were special in different ways.

For example, Calabast brought Ves over to a separate table where a full set of high-quality gear had been placed on the surface.

Ves had already noticed the peculiarity of this set as soon as he entered the hall, but now that he got closer, he was fully able to appreciate this exceptional display of craftsmanship.

His inner Vulcan already became excited at the sight of all of the works.

"This is..."

"This is the Arminio Collection, one of the most renowned collections of personal gear that has ever been produced in the Friday Coalition." Calabast proudly introduced in a way that made it sound as if the Larkinsons had been entrusted with the coordinated pieces of equipment.

Ves had observed plenty of masterwork mechs throughout his life. The Masterwork Galleries were his favorite types of museums in the Red Ocean.

He and his clan even made a bunch of masterwork mechs themselves. Whenever Ves was in the mood to contemplate his craftsmanship or just wanted to enjoy the sight of a fantastic example of craftsmanship, he could



visit the hangar bays where one of the several Larkinson masterwork mechs were stored.

Yet despite his unusually extensive experiences with masterwork mechs, Ves became increasingly more impressed at the sight of the so-called Arminio Collection.

On the surface, it consisted of a full set of top-grade second-class equipment that was made roughly a decade before the start of the Komodo War.

"They're all masterworks!"

"That's right, Ves. It took one-and-a-half years for Master Smith Kelaco Urvier to design the collection and source every rare material before he handcrafted each and every piece of equipment. He proceeded to earn several prestigious industry awards for completing this string of masterworks."

As a mech designer who possessed a bunch of masterwork certificates, Ves fully understood how difficult it was to make so many consecutive masterwork products, especially when they were discrete from each other.

Though it looked as if the difficulty of turning imposing mechs into masterworks was much more difficult due to their vastly greater scale, the truth was actually a lot more nuanced.

Mech designers simply accomplished difficult feats a lot easier due to their extraordinary characteristics.

Gunsmiths and armorsmiths did not necessarily enjoy the same benefits, so they had to be able to make masterworks by relying on nothing but impressive skills, extensive experience and personal brilliance.

People like Master Smith Kelaco Urvier deserved almost just as much respect as Master Mech Designers for their accomplishments and their excellent ability to develop new products!

When Ves used his comm to look up the maker in question, he discovered that Master Urvier was a 300 year old geezer who came from a long line of celebrated gunsmiths and armorsmiths.

The Urviers emerged way back during the height of the Age of Conquest when humanity had reached its zenith!

When Ves tried to find out more about the man's design philosophy, he found articles that described that Master Kelaco Urvier did not pursue any extreme concepts.

Instead, the old man prized the integration of technology in people's daily lives. He made his products with the intention of making them as practical and useful as possible.

This was why many of his works were remarkably small and light. The intention was to make their owners carry them around and have them handy when they were needed the most.

It was a pity that the last owner of the Arminio Collection completely disregarded the maker's wishes. The valuable pieces of gear had remained locked inside a dark and isolated vault throughout the crisis that had befallen Pima Prime V.

Now that he familiarized himself with the smith that created the collection, he began to inspect the individual pieces in further detail.

The elegant suit of light combat armor was the largest, most expensive and most prominent piece of equipment. It was surprisingly small, thin and light and could be folded into a large suitcase for convenience and camouflage.

Despite its lack of bulk, it still managed to cram in a full set of advanced components and systems due to a heavy reliance on miniaturization.

Unfortunately, the high priority on making the suit of combat armor as portable as possible meant that it did not come with inherent defensive boost or any other extra functionality.

In line with the armor's compact design, it was paired with two different compact weapons, a small laser pistol and a heated combat knife. The weapons were each made to exacting standards and continued to adhere to the uniform design concept of making them as powerful as possible while still adhering to strict size and mass constraints.

To complete the ensemble, the maker of this collection created additional modules that could be slotted to the combat armor at the cost of making it bulkier.

There was an ECM module that could drastically make it easier for the wearer of the collection to hide himself from detection.

There was an automatic repair module that could fix and maintain the elaborate collection in the field without requiring the help of any engineers or technicians.

There was also a back-mounted shield generator that provided the combat armor with a massive increase in defensive power at the cost of adding a lot of bulk.

Overall, this was a fairly complete and rounded loadout that was completely designed to work with each other.

At its greatest, the Arminio Collection was exactly what Ves would have wanted to wear when he went out on dangerous excursions in past events!

Ves felt tempted to reserve it for his own use even now. There were several reasons why he decided not to claim the Arminio Collection for himself.

First, it was made by someone else. Ves had become accustomed to designing and making gear for himself. Since he possessed sufficient skill and expertise to meet his own needs, why should he bother with products made by others?

Even if Master Urvier was undoubtedly more skilled in developing personal equipment, Ves could never fully understand the pieces of the Arminio Collection.

Second, the configuration was not entirely fitting to Ves. If he ever ended up in another crisis situation, he would rather entrust his life to bulkier and more robust pieces of equipment. He wanted to have access to serious hardware that didn't look like they could snap in half as soon as they endured greater pressure than they were rated to withstand.

However, there was also a third and more important reason why the Arminio Collection did not satisfy his needs.

"This is an excellent ensemble of masterworks, but... the gear is already dated." Ves sighed. "The pieces are not just relics from the previous generation, but they're also incapable of keeping up with the latest transphasic products."

"You can always upgrade them by adding phasewater to them." Calabast suggested.

Ves shook his head in rejection. "That is extremely complicated and would take a huge amount of time. Not only that, it would be disrespectful for me to tamper with a set of masterworks that Master Urvier designed with a specific vision and intentions in mind. He may be a Fridayman, but that does not stop me from respecting him as a fellow artisan."

"What do you want to do with this collection if you don't intend to use it for yourself?"

"I'll add it to my trophy case." Ves smiled. "It's a nice way to commemorate the success of Operation Saturday Market. Perhaps it might provide me with inspiration as I stare at it whenever I am sitting in my office."

#### **Chapter 4346 Yorul-Tavik Clan**

It was an enormous shame that the Arminio Collection was too outdated to be of use today. If the current generation hadn't leapt forward so much due to the introduction of phasewater technology, its excellent performance would have allowed it to remain relevant a lot longer.

Even someone as impressive as Master Smith Urvier couldn't predict that most of his previous works would quickly lose a lot of relevance.

This was the nature of technology. Many years could go by while products only improved on an incremental basis, but then everything might change on a single day as a revolutionary new invention completely changed existing paradigms.

Ves took this case as a lesson that he should never be complacent about the works that he had already made.

If he didn't want to get overtaken by technological progression, then he needed to be an innovator who pushed the forefront of technology himself!

This was the only reliable way for him to stay ahead of the trends. It was also easier for him to keep updating his existing products so that they wouldn't fall into disuse because their performance became increasingly more insufficient.

After Ves and Calabast decided on the fate of the Arminio Collection, the pair proceeded to survey other interesting pieces of equipment.

Ves directed special attention towards other masterwork products. No matter whether they were centuries old or made in the last two years, each of them elevated a specific concept or idea.

Every craftsman that was skilled enough to make a masterwork was worth learning about. Ves entertained himself by imagining how he would approach the same jobs and how his own potential masterwork equipment would differ from that of others.

Once he had his fill of masterworks, he proceeded to inspect a lot of other valuable gear that were all modern and powerful enough to be of use to Ves.

Though he decided against adding any of them to his loadout due to his preference of relying on his own works, he did not object to gifting them to his other clansmen.

"This shock scepter functions like a rechargeable EMP and shock grenade." Calabast explained as she picked up a strange metal rod. "As long as you charge it with energy beforehand, it can release multiple shock blasts that are not only capable of disabling a lot of electric devices, but can also shock and paralyze the bodies of people within range. It's an excellent tool that is designed for self-defense purposes. The device's simple and user-friendly nature allows civilians such as your wife to make easy use of it without requiring any special training."

Ves looked impressed. "This is an excellent piece of technology. My wife won't accept it, though. The aesthetics are all wrong, and the scepter is a bit too big for her to hide. What is worse is that Gloriana is the sort of woman who believes that fighting should be left to others. I think someone like Ketis would embrace it a lot more."

The varied pieces of equipment certainly opened his eyes. There were all kinds of technological devices that excelled at solving one problem or another.

Ves even felt tempted to incorporate larger versions of these products in his next batch of mech designs.

His only regret was that he didn't find anything compelling enough to claim for himself.

So far, the only piece of equipment that he decided to make use of was the emergency single-use personal teleporter that he inspected at the start.

The Arminio Collection was also interesting, but not in a practical manner. Ves actually gained the faint hope that looking at it for longer periods of time might inspire him to design and create a set of gear that completely fit his own needs.

Two hours later, Ves had completed his extensive tour of the collections. Though the Larkinsons had plundered other miscellaneous artifacts and heirlooms from the underground vaults, none of them interested him in the slightest.

The Larkinson Clan was in full swing at this time. It was growing larger, stronger, wealthier and more powerful by the year. Ves was constantly making history and succeeded in coming up with new and groundbreaking products on a regular basis.

He had no reason to covet other people's prized possessions for those reasons. Only those that did not do anything impressive in their lives had the greatest need to revisit past glories.

Now that the tour came to an end, Ves and Calabast briefly discussed a couple of important topics.

"Our clan and our alliance has won a major victory in Pima Prime, but it will take time to recover from the damage that we have incurred in the last battle." Calabast spoke. "For example, how long will it take to put Venerable Jannzi back in action again?"

"I don't know." Ves replied. "I intend to try a lot of new stuff in the process of designing Jannzi's new expert mech, and that will probably take at least a

year. If my progress is slower than expected, then it may take additional months to give Jannzi an opportunity to contribute in battle again."

Calabast did not look pleased. "We will be deep into the Trailblazer Expedition by that time."

"What are you trying to say? Do you want me to delay the expedition? That's impossible. We still need this. Operation Saturday Market served as a good wakeup call to our clan, but if we want to forge everyone into hardened elites, then we need to continue to seek more challenges."

"I understand your motivations, but I suggest that you should adjust our route and early destinations so that we don't get as close to the action as we initially planned. Let us try to ease into the deep frontier rather than racing head-long into alien remnants. Just because we enjoy the cover of an ace mech like the Mars doesn't mean that we can ignore powerful alien threats entirely."

Ves thought back on how many ships and mechs his clan had lost and reluctantly agreed that the Larkinson Army was not in a good shape anymore.

"We'll discuss this during our next meeting with the other alliance partners."

He spoke. "Let's just say that I am open to the idea. We need to find the right balance between risk and reward."

Calabast smiled in an intriguing manner. "I have a suggestion that might interest you. It is a fairly recent development that has already attracted a number of pioneers, but the chances that the issue will be resolved is fairly minimal. Even so, it is worth attempting due to the people involved."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's a missing person case. Someone important went missing in the vicinity of the border between the Krakatoa Middle Zone and the Zelmar Upper Zone."

Ves looked surprised. "Wait, you're talking about an upper zone?"



"Yes, I'm indeed referring to a zone that is rich enough to attract first-raters. This case involves a member of the Yorul-Tavik Clan. A man who descended from it decided to become a pioneer and organized his fleet in order to go on an adventure and explore the Red Ocean."

Ves already snorted when he heard this. "Let me guess. This rich and naive fellow thought that he could head straight into the deep frontier without studying the lay of the land or harboring any serious respect against native threats."

"You hit the nail right on the head. Though the information that we have been able to gather on short notice is rather limited, most sources suggest that the pioneering fleet led by Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik passed through the greater beyonder gate and stopped by one of the central star nodes for only a week. After that, he led his ships straight towards adventure, as he saw it. The Yorul-Tavik Clan lost contact with him and all of the personnel under his command shortly after approaching the conflict areas."

"So no one knows what happened to Lord Pearian and his entire fleet of well-equipped ships and mechs?"

"There is proof that his fleet encountered a powerful enemy alien force. A chase occurred across many light-years that caused the fleeing ships to eventually reach the border between Krakatoa and Zelmar before losing all remaining contact."

"You should know what this means, Calabast. The chances that this pioneering fleet and everyone on it has survived are slim. People die in the new frontier all the time. Even first-raters have been demolished after running into powerful alien fleets. Just because the Big Two are able to match them doesn't mean that pioneers can do the same. What makes this particular bunch from the Yorul-Tavik Clan special?"

The spymaster smirked. "There are two reasons why we should take this opportunity seriously. First, let us assume that Lord Pearian and his entire crew have perished. Does that mean there is no more use in finding what was left? No! The Yorul-Tavik Clan is large and wealthy enough to raise a full fleet of first-class mechs and ships. We can make incredible gains even if we are only able to salvage a few scraps from the original pioneering fleet."

Now that sounded a lot more interesting! Ves immediately became excited, but logic quickly prevailed again.

"Wait. If this incident has already occurred and if people like us have obtained this news, then I bet that thousands of pioneers have already swarmed the border area. What makes you think there are any high-value remains left for us to salvage?"

"There are too many star systems in this region." Calabast replied. "As long as we arrive fast enough, there should still be a chance for us to come across at least one wreck. Even if we don't find anything, is it truly a loss for us to search around in this area? There are still plenty of other alien or natural curiosities that we can encounter in this border region."

Though Ves wasn't completely convinced, he was willing to accept this argument for the moment.

"What else?"

"This is a great opportunity for us to make contact with the Yorul-Tavik Clan. We only need to find a single clue to obtain the favor of this first-class clan."

"Why would we want to befriend them? Isn't it our policy to stay away or at least maintain a neutral posture towards powerful first-raters? It is not wise for us to get too involved in their affairs with our current level of strength and development."

"That is true, but this is a unique opportunity. The Yorul-Tavik Clan is not aggressive by nature. Its family interests are largely tied to commercial and industrial ventures. This is related to the state that they are based in. You see, the Omter Republic where the Yorul-Taviks hail from is a relatively small first-rate state that sits between the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire."

"Oh." Realization was already beginning to dawn on him. "Let me guess. The Omter Republic is a buffer state."

"Right again. You've become a lot sharper than before. The Omter Republic is nothing compared to its two super neighbors, but it is never meant to be able to stand up for itself. Its main role is to serve as a trade conduit between the Terrans and the Rubarthans. It is one of the states that can conveniently allow the two archrivals to trade their own specialty products with each other, but with an extra step in between. The Yorul-Tavik Clan is one such step."

Ves understood now why Calabast was so keen on taking on this near-hopeless task.

"You want to try and see if we can develop a relationship with the Yorul-Tavik Clan in the hopes of gaining access to Terran and Rubarthan trade channels, is that right?"

"That is one of the objectives we should strive for, yes. The Yorul-Tavik Clan urgently demands news of what has happened to Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik. We will win the jackpot if we can rescue him alive, but the clan has made other promises for those who are able to bring back proof of the subject's whereabouts or demise."

If that was the case, it was more than worthwhile to give this mission a try!

#### **Chapter 4347 Feedback Session**

Ves did not have much luck with missing person cases.

At least in person, Ves had abjectly failed in retrieving any notable person that went missing.

He had made numerous attempts to look for Alloc Brandstad, Mayra, Solok Reyva and other people, but he had failed each time.

A number of those failures hit him harder than others. His lack of success in these endeavors taught him how difficult it was to find someone.

Space was too big!

Millions if not billions of star systems were spread out across regions of space. Each of those star systems were like miniature universes in themselves as they featured a large range of planets, moons, asteroid belts and possibly anomalous spaces.

The odds of finding a missing fleet let alone a single missing individual was so slim that the Yorul-Tavik Clan shouldn't get its hopes up. Even if thousands of greedy pioneers had swarmed the border area that sat between the Krakatoa Middle Zone and the Zelmar Upper Zone, the majority of them would probably return empty-handed.

The Golden Skull Alliance likely wouldn't have any better luck either, but that was fine. The journey was more important than the destination. There were plenty of other interesting planets and curiosities that the expeditionary fleet could explore while looking out for the missing lord.

In truth, Ves wanted to try a bit harder to succeed in this mission. His past failures in finding the aforementioned missing individuals stained his conscience and unsettled him more than he wished.

He could go a long way in resolving this source of pain if he could actually succeed in rescuing a person that he set out to find.

Of course, the premise of all of this was that Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik still remained alive.

"Do you think that guy is still kicking after all this time?" Ves asked Calabast just before the end of his visit to the Blinding Banshee.

Calabast confidently smirked. "Don't underestimate the survival ability of rich and powerful scions. The man might not be good at preserving his fleet, but his core team of bodyguards as well as his access to the best first-class equipment provided by his clan should allow him to survive between the cracks for a long time. We should worry more about the possibility that other pioneers will find Lord Paerian first."

The mission along with all of the rich rewards promised by the Yoruk-Tavik Clan would come to an end as soon as a lucky pioneer brought the missing lordling back to civilized space.

Even so, there should still be plenty of other reasons to stay in the border region a little longer. The prospect of stumbling upon derelict first-class ships and mechs was attractive enough to hold his interest.

"By the way, is there any word about the enemy force that has driven Lord Pearian's pioneering fleet to such a dire state?" Ves asked.

"According to sources, Lord Pearian's fleet encountered a nunser warfleet in the deep frontier. The aliens developed such an animosity towards the human pioneering fleet that they did not hesitate to persist in chasing their targets towards human territory. Though an MTA fleet eventually managed to intercept and destroy the nunser vessels, the mechers arrived too late."

"I see."

The MTA was strong, but the new frontier was way too big to adequately cover every region. The mechers didn't even bother to stay around to find the missing lordling as the task was beneath their station.

The nunsers were certainly powerful. In fact, they were among the most dominant of the major alien races of the Red Ocean.

However, the nunsers also possessed a highly communal and collectivist culture and rarely engaged in subterfuge or sneaky actions. It was unlikely for them to dispatch a powerful ship of theirs that was lingering in the border region, especially when they had already destroyed the fleet of the humans that attracted their hatred.

Ves was more concerned about the friction that might ensue if he bumped into any human forces, but it was rare for any of them to have any ace mechs in their lineup.

As long as Patriarch Reginald and the Mars remained available, ordinary pioneers could no longer pose a threat to the Golden Skull Alliance!

When Ves returned to the Spirit of Bentheim, he transmitted a brief message to various leaders in order to notify them of this potential opportunity.

They agreed to discuss this matter during a future meeting after the expeditionary fleet returned to Davute.

Right now, many people were still preoccupied with handling the affairs of the previous battle and operation.

For example, Ves had to preside over a meeting between all of the Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan.

Everyone had picked up a lot of gains over the course of the Battle of Pima Prime. Ves and all of the other mech designers discovered serious shortcomings about the performance of their existing mechs, gained a lot of inspiration from seeing the enemy mechs in action and developed a lot of new ideas for future mech design projects.

Since every mech designer was different, Ves and the others found it desirable to share and exchange their insights with each other.

When Ves entered the conference room, everyone else had already taken their seats.

He took his seat beside his wife and glanced at the faces.

Old and familiar figures such as Ketis and Juliet looked relaxed while the newer faces such as Miles Tovar, Merrill O'Brian and Cormaunt Hempkamp looked a bit out of place.

The latter three had yet to make any contributions to the Larkinson Army. The previous battle didn't feature any mechs that they had designed because they had advanced too recently to make significant contributions to any design project.

Even so, they could still learn a lot by listening and taking part in this discussion.

"Alright." Ves broke the silence. "All of you know why we are here. The main goal of this meeting is to evaluate the performance of our products and figure out what has worked and what hasn't worked. If there is a case of the latter, then I hope that we can go into further detail to figure out the reasons behind a shortcoming and how we can remedy that in the future. Before we address any specific mech model or design in particular, do any of you have any general impressions about our mech roster and force makeup that you wish to share?"

A few hands shot up. Ves gestured towards one of the new faces.

"Cormaunt, you can go first. You have joined our ranks the latest, so you should have retained your outsider's perspective. What do our forces look like in your eyes?"

It was not a coincidence that Ves first gave the word to the mech designer with the lowest seniority among the gathering. He wanted to integrate the newer lead designers into the clan and Design Department as quickly as possible. Engaging them in constructive activities was a great way to speed up their assimilation.

Mr. Hempkamp briefly blinked as if he did not expect to be the center of attention so soon. He soon regained his composure, fortunately.

"From my time in our clan, I have already learned that the main emphasis of our clan lies in space combat. I have already adjusted my expectations on the performance of our mechs when we brought them down to the surface. Once they started to fight against the local defenders, I found that their performance was worse than I anticipated. In my judgment, the mech pilots are well-trained if not entirely comfortable with landbound operations, but their mechs simply possess too many hindrances in a planetary environment."

No one exhibited any surprise when they heard this evaluation.

Ves sighed. "Our mechs are far from reaching the technological standards of first-class multipurpose mechs. We have to make hard choices in a circumstance where we never have enough carrier vessels to bring along enough mechs. We have all made the decision to focus on designing spaceborn mechs that can also function decently on land and in the air when needed. Sure, the mechs don't look graceful at all when operating in the latter two environments, but at least they still retain enough battle power, and that is what matters the most."

"Understood. This is a difficult dilemma. I agree with your choice."

"Do you have any other general ideas that you wish to share, Cormaunt?"

"Yes. As you all know, I specialize in developing neural interfaces. I have carefully studied how our mech pilots are able to operate different mechs



through the standard neural interface that you have selected in the past, and I can already state with confidence that the performance of every Larkinson mech can be elevated by at least 5 percent if I equip them with more tailored and optimized neural interface models."

Gloriana became engaged in this topic. "We shouldn't wait until we start new design projects that are centered around overhauling our existing mech models to replace their older neural interfaces with newer ones. Our mech pilots deserve better. The sooner their mechs are updated with better neural interfaces, the less casualties we will suffer in the next battles. Cormaunt, can you update all of our existing mech designs in batches?"

The man had already thought about this matter, so he quickly nodded.

"I can. There is almost no technical challenge involved with replacing one neural interface model with another one in a given mech design. The only matter that takes time is designing the optimized neural interfaces that best compliments every unique mech design. In order to save time, I think it is best if I limit my work to the base models of every large mech line. There are too many variants for me to take care of in person. It would be better if I have a team of Apprentices working for me that can take over this burden."

Ves looked interested. "That is actually a good idea. I will leave you in charge of that. From now on, I want every product that comes out of our Design Department to feature a neural interface model that truly fits the design. We need to hold ourselves to higher standards. We have always emphasized quality over speed or volume, and I do not want to cut corners when we can clearly do better. Mr. Hempkamp, please see if you can hire a team of Apprentices in Davute that can assist you in your work."

The other Journeyman looked seriously. "There are not many Apprentices that possess the required certifications to work on neural interface technology, but

we should be able to incentivize them into working for us as long as we promise enough benefits."

"Then do that. We aren't short on money and I am more than willing to invest in essential talent."

The clan should have done this earlier, but it was not too late to plug this gap.

"Do you have anything else to say?"

"No. Not for now." Cormaunt replied.

"We appreciate your input." Ves smiled. "Don't hesitate to say anything if you feel your opinion can benefit everyone. Our clan isn't strict on sharing feedback, whether it is positive or negative. We are all mech designers here, and designing stronger and better mechs is what matters the most. If people like myself aren't able to take a hit, then we have no business aiming for the top of our profession."

While it was fairly easy to maintain a close and intimate atmosphere among the Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan at the moment, Ves knew that it wouldn't last forever.

As more Journeymen joined the clan and as the first Seniors began to emerge from the ranks, the changes would likely lead to a shift in culture and norms that would make the discussions a lot more formal and stilted.

Whether this was a good or bad development remained to be seen, but Ves wanted to cherish these moments as much as possible while this period lasted.

### **Chapter 4348 Superior Value Mechs**

The discussion entered into full swing. Numerous mech designers shared their insights and brought up many good points.

Just as Ves hoped, the mood in the conference room quickly turned casual as people spoke freely with each other.

That was not to say that everything became rowdy and that people started yelling or talking over each other.

Each of them were Journeymen. They had already taken the first step of transcending their mortal limitations. Though their changes in personality weren't as drastic as with expert pilots, they were anything but dummies!

Even the newest batch of Journeymen began to get comfortable during the evaluation meeting. While Miles Tovar, Merrill O'Brian and Cormaunt Hempkamp never forgot that they were the smallest and least accomplished among the group of Journeymen, they did not feel ostracized in any way.

Everyone here recognized that they had all become close colleagues and collaborators to each other. It was inevitable for everyone to work together for months or years at a time. None of the Journeymen possessed useless design philosophies.

After all, who knew whether a project leader needed to borrow the expertise of a more obscure Journeyman? It was in their interest to warm up to each other and plant the seeds of cooperation early.

The Journeymen did not spend time fooling around. Their time was precious and each of them had a lot of work to do due to the aftermath of Operation Saturday Market. The expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan weren't getting fixed by themselves!

The Battle of Pima Prime was the first time that the mechs that the Design Department designed exclusively for the Larkinson Clan fought against a serious opponent in reality.

Though the Sundered Phalanx probably wasn't the strongest mech military in the Magair Middle Zone, it was definitely up to standard when it came to

professionalism, training, funding, technological advancement and so on. The fact that the Larkinson Army fought directly against the Gaugers made it easy to contrast their performance against each other.

"In general, our mech legions all managed to gain the upper hand against the Sundered Phalanx's mech divisions." Janassa Pellier provided her input. "In my opinion, our melee mechs have performed particularly well. Even our most basic mech models have shown that they can hold their own against most enemy mechs, while our more advanced ones all achieved higher kill ratios."

Tifi Coslone agreed with her close friend and collaborator. "The Lucid Rage model that I worked on has attained a lot of results in the last battle. The Avatars of Myth made excellent use of its ability to capture and wrench away the handheld weapons of the opposing mechs. The Lucid Rage fully unveiled the high upper limit of its potential when it was piloted by champions such as Lanie Larkinson. She managed to disarm so many enemy mechs that she could arm several mech companies with the weapons she relieved from her opponents."

Ves grinned. He had worked extensively on the Lucid Rage as well.

"The Lucid Rage has proven to be an excellent machine in exerting enough pressure and influence onto skilled mech pilots. Each of them have displayed excellent fighting skills that they have recently attained after training with this unique melee mech. Its glow dynamic along with pairing it with weapons that are much more complex than a simple sword or spear is just what our melee mech pilots need to break the stagnation of their improvement."

His wife partially agreed with him. "The Lucid Rage functions well as a training mech. Its focus on training the mentality of its mech pilots and helping them polish their weapon skills has most assuredly made a difference to its pilots. However, that doesn't change its fundamental shortcomings. As an offensive melee mech, it is particularly difficult to get started, which means it can only

be fielded in relatively small numbers. Another shortcoming is that the Lucid Rage still has trouble with taking down heavily-armored opponents. Even Lanie no longer bothered with trying to defeat the Modal Firmaments of the Pima Defender Mech Division due to the fact that the plasma torches have to spend too much time and energy to burn through so much armor plating."

"The Lucid Rage was never designed to dismantle hostile defensive mechs." Tifi spoke up again. "The Redaxe which I have also designed in collaboration with Ves and Sara are the designated shield and armor breaking units of the Avatars of Myth. The two mech models complement each other and are able to make up for each other's shortcomings. While I agree that we cannot rely on the Lucid Rage model to defeat every opponent, it can play a great role in any mech body when operating alongside other mech models."

Ketis nodded in support. "The Swordmaidens have developed an interest in the Lucid Rage as well after witnessing how much the pilots of this new model have advanced their combat acumen."

That surprised Ves. "Does that mean the Swordmaidens will begin to field mechs that aren't equipped with bladed weapons?"

"Nope." Ketis immediately responded. "It's important for the Swordmaidens to wield their swords as much as possible in battle. Each life-and-death struggle is another opportunity for them to exceed their existing levels of swordsmanship. There is no way a Swordmaiden is willing to give up on that chance just so that they can deepen their mastery in tonfas. These exotic weapons are good training tools, but they are not the sort of weapons that my fellow Swordmaidens want to specialize in. They just want to employ the Lucid Rage as the grown up version of a training mech."

"I see." Ves thought for a moment. "The Lucid Rage is currently the exclusive model of the Avatars of Myth, and I don't see any reason to change that if the Swordmaidens aren't willing to commit to it. We are also short on mech

capacity so we cannot accommodate additional mechs that are solely present for training purposes. Try and see if your Swordmaidens can get what they need from piloting virtual versions of the Lucid Rage within the MSTs. If that doesn't work, then maybe the Avatars can offer to lend their Lucid Rages to the Swordmaidens."

The Lucid Rage model had amply proved its value on the battlefield, but Ves wanted to find out whether it could play an even greater role as a training mech.

Of all of the mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan, the Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders were definitely the most avid melee combat specialists. If training with the Lucid Rage mechs allowed many of them to improve their effective combat power over time, then that indicated that the tonfa-wielding model should be used as more than a specialized mech for the most elite melee mech pilots.

"I am tempted to design a bladed variant of the Lucid Rage." Ketis remarked. "It's a surprisingly good concept, but the limitations of its damage types are also clear."

"I would advise against that." Gloriana replied. "This might not work out that well considering that the tonfas are designed to be gripped in multiple ways. That will be a lot harder to do if some of the grips have turned sharp."

"You're right."

Once they were done with putting the spotlight on the Lucid Rage model, the evaluation meeting soon turned to another prominent new mech model.

The focus shifted to the Maiden of Adversity, the armored skirt-wearing hero mech that the Penitent Sisters, the Glory Seekers and most notably the Hex Army adopted on a larger scale!

Gloriana beamed with pride and satisfaction as soon as the central projection began to show different footage of the fantastic looking mech model in action.

"I don't think there is any doubt that the Maiden of Adversity is the best performing model among the ones that we have introduced in the past few years. Despite the fact there are high requirements to piloting it, it is considerably more versatile and practical than the Lucid Rage that we have just discussed. Not only is it armed with an energy rifle that can allow it to fight effectively at range, it is not bad at all at closer ranges. Its Battle Skirt System makes it so that it can fight as if it is constantly fighting alongside a knight mech."

It was hard for the other mech designers to refute this argument. The fact that the Hex Army had already produced thousands of copies of this robust but also feminine mech model was already a mark of success in itself.

The excellent performance of the Maiden of Adversity in the hands of three distinctly different mech forces during the Battle of Pima Prime fully vindicated the trust put into this product!

"The more elite and skilled Hexers finally have a high-end alternative to the living mechs that they can pilot in battle." Gloriana continued in a gushing tone. "Previously, they had nothing better to pilot than the Valkyrie Redeemer and its many variants, but now that they have a mech that is much better equipped to fight standing battles, their ability to compete against the Fridaymen and other enemies have significantly improved."

Ves felt pleased when he heard this news. Though his involvement in this particular design project wasn't much, he still derived satisfaction from hearing that one of the iconic new products of his clan achieved critical success.

"Gloriana, Juliet, the two of you know the Hexers the best. Do you think the Hex Army will adopt the new Maiden mech line in greater numbers than the Valkyrie mech line?"

"I can already guarantee you that the popularity of the Maiden of Adversity will likely surpass that of the Valkyrie Redeemer because of these reasons." His wife confidently stated. "It doesn't matter if it takes a more diverse skill set to draw out its full potential. The Hexers will invest as much time and effort as needed to qualify for piloting this new mech. It is just too useful for this mech to be able to deploy its own sniper shield when exchanging fire against ranged opponents or to be able to duel against an enemy melee mech with at least 50 percent extra armor."

Her argument encapsulated the key reason that allowed the Maiden of Adversity to stand out from the competition. Hero mechs traditionally fell short in terms of defensive power, but by utilizing a smart modular armor system that could dynamically shift into the most appropriate configurations in the middle of a battle, the Maiden of Adversity gained a lot of defensive buffer while limiting the increase to its bulk and mass!

Though this was not necessarily a brand-new concept that had never been designed before, what made the Maiden of Adversity different was its glow as well as its feminine aesthetics.

Female mech pilots just loved to pilot it! Every Hexer mech pilot that got lucky enough to be assigned to a copy became so motivated that they easily exceeded their personal records.

Of course, no one cared about whether the Maiden of Adversity had the same effect on male mech pilots.



Still, as much as the Maiden of Adversity had made a powerful statement during the Battle of Pima Prime, there were multiple reasons why it was difficult to expand the new model's usage.

"It's too bad that the production cost of this machine is too high." Gloriana sighed in regret. "Depending on the variant, it can cost up to twice as much to produce a Maiden of Adversity as opposed to a comparable hero mech. The Hex Federation will have to bleed a lot of money to field their latest favorite living mech model on a larger scale."

"The Maiden of Adversity is a better fit for our clan for that reason." Ves responded. "We are limited by the amount of mechs that we can carry and deploy into battle. It is better for us to invest in fewer but stronger mechs so that we can maximize the mech capacity of all of our carrier vessels. I think we should design more mechs along this approach. Cost is not as important as combat effectiveness."

Ves already came up with a few interesting ideas. The Sundered Phalanx's rich variety of mech concepts and specialties had already given him a lot of inspiration that he was eager to explore in a future design round.

#### **Chapter 4349 Limited Space Problem**

The Lucid Rage and the Maiden of Adversity were the two most notable new additions to the Larkinson Army's mech roster, but they were hardly the only newly introduced models.

The evaluation meeting also touched upon other models that hadn't been deployed in large numbers.

Many of them were similar to the Lucid Rage in that the Larkinsons only produced smaller batches for trial purposes. If they succeeded in performing well in real battle conditions, then the clan might decide to expand their usage.

"The handful of beast mechs that we have designed over the past few years have performed adequately in battle, but if I am being honest, they did not impress me that much. None of the avian mechs or tiger mechs have produced significantly greater results than their humanoid equivalents." Ves shared his opinion to the others. "I see no reason to found a new mech division that is centered around beast mechs for the time being."

The Power Pair looked disappointed as they had been the ones that spent the most time on designing beast mechs for the clan, but neither Janassa nor Tifi expressed too much objection to this evaluation.

Compared to a fantastic new model like the Maiden of Adversity, the strange combination between the Sharpwing and the Mauler models looked a lot less brilliant in comparison.

They were merely average, and that was not enough to impress the Larkinsons.

Merrill O'Brian, one of the newbies among the Journeymen, accurately identified one of the factors that could explain the lackluster results.

"Beast mechs are not fully capable of utilizing all of their advantages in space battles. Their non-humanoid form factors grant them great advantages under aerial and landbound conditions, but in an empty void like deep space, the variables that make them special possess much less weight."

Ves and many others nodded in agreement. This was a common observation. What use was there for a tiger mech when its four powerful limbs weren't able to gain any leverage over difficult and complex terrain? Why did it matter if an avian mech possessed wings when there was no way to generate lift in space due to the absence of air?

Though these animal-derived elements did not completely lose their utility when put into space, they simply brought significantly more deadweight than humanoid mechs.

"Maybe the Trailblazer Expedition will give our beast mechs better opportunities to showcase their unique strengths and advantages." Ves noted with a bit of hope. "There is a lot to gain on certain planets, and depending on how wild it is, avian mechs and tiger mechs can navigate difficult terrain a lot better and more efficiently than our other mech models."

The Larkinson Clan would eventually grow large enough to accommodate beast mech units. Ves was more than willing to add them to his clan so long as the additions made sense. For now, there were too many reasons for the Larkinsons to wait until they embraced this massive addition.

As the discussion continued, the Larkinson Journeymen eventually covered every new mech model that debuted in the first major battle since their release.

The topics soon shifted towards the older and more familiar mech lines. Many of them were Mark II versions of the original mechs that had been designed a long time ago. Despite the age of their concepts, they still remained relevant on the battlefield with the help of extensive technological upgrades.

Gloriana brought up footage of the many different varieties of the standard mech model of the Larkinson Clan.

"The Bright Warrior Mark II's haven't necessarily shown great power, but they have managed to become a lot more relevant due to their increased modularization. The ability to equip all kinds of optional equipment and modules has empowered the mech pilots. The people who have come to embrace the Mark II are much better able to utilize their strengths."

The logic of this was clear and indisputable. The Bright Warrior Mark II truly presented a lot of good options to mech pilots who had become tired of sticking to rigid configurations.

"The Bright Warrior Mark II also takes up more space than normal mechs." Sara Voiken mentioned. "Depending on how far you go with this, much of the additional weapons and modules will take the place of supplies, raw materials and other essential cargo. It's not an efficient solution to our current situation. Yes, you have just mentioned earlier that we should maximize the value that we can obtain from a given amount of space on a ship. If we adopt the Bright Warrior Mark II more extensively, then I am afraid that we may be filling up an unnecessary amount of capacity on redundant equipment loadouts."

She brought up an important point that Ves hadn't fully considered.

"You're right, Sara. If I am being honest, the Bright Warrior Mark II is another mech platform that is more suitable to be used in a planetary environment because there are no meaningful constraints in place. Still, our clan should be able to minimize the amount of useless gear that this new model brings due to the fact that our main fleet possesses strong recycling and production capabilities."

The expeditionary fleet was fully capable of recycling old and unused equipment while at the same time producing new gear that might fit a future situation better. This helped a lot with preventing space from being wasted.

As other mech designers provided their own input on the Bright Warrior Mark II, Ves became fairly satisfied with the versatile mech model.

Perhaps it did not perform as eye-catchingly well as the Maiden of Adversity, but there were hardly any cases where the Bright Warrior Mark II performed badly.

This was its greatest strength. As long as the Larkinsons made sufficient preparations, they could always count upon their Bright Warrior Mark II's to serve as a reliable base in any mech lineup.

There were no compelling reasons to update the model anytime soon. The current version already served its purpose well enough and it did not exhibit any obvious or critical weaknesses that the Design Department urgently needed to address.

If that was the case, then Ves preferred to wait until the clan gained access to better tech, materials and design solutions before revising it another time.

The Larkinson Journeymen proceeded to cover other Mark II and Mark III versions of familiar Larkinson mech designs.

Despite the passage of time, the advancement of technology and the changing conditions of mech combat, the oldies among the Larkinson mech models were still going strong.

The formulas that made mechs such as the Transcendent Punisher Mark II, the Valkyrie Redeemer Mark II and the Ferocious Piranha Mark III so strong had not become invalid in the Red Ocean.

They at least remained relevant when employed against human mech forces.

"I am not so sure these mainstay mechs will be as useful when we fight against alien threats." Ves shared his concerns. "It heavily depends on the force composition and the overall strength of our opponents. If we bump into a minor race like the pakklavons, then we should easily be able to overrun their weak warships by relying on brute force. I'm concerned about the strongest native alien races. We are still short on powerful ranged mech units that can put a lot of pressure on enemy warships."

Ketis recognized the inherent dilemma that had plagued the Larkinson Clan. "It is difficult to decide how we should set the proportion of melee mechs to

ranged mechs. Most alien threats can be dealt with by relying solely on ranged mechs, but if we meet a human mech force, this will make us a lot more vulnerable."

Ves nodded in agreement. "That's right. Our potential enemies are both human and alien forces. The entire frontier is filled with conflict and it is easy to trigger a battle for the most superficial reasons. That said, I hope that we can make more progress in helping melee mechs become more practical in battles that involve large alien warships."

Ketis had thought more about this problem than any other Larkinson mech designer. Due to her ideology and commitment to her design philosophy, it was impossible for her to abandon swordsman mechs. Her career strongly depended on whether melee mechs remained relevant.

"So far, there are only two ways for us to improve the relevance of melee mechs." She said. "I don't think there is much wrong with their offensive power, but it is their defenses and mobility that are hindering them from becoming more relevant. Our melee mechs hadn't noticed this problem that much in the previous battle, but they were already struggling to deal with the ranged bombardment from the Blackened Reapers and the Witch Shatterers. The problem can easily become ten times worse if we fight against a fleet that consists entirely of warships."

Dulo Voiken hummed. "Defense and mobility, huh? The only way for us to improve both of these areas is if we begin to apply phasewater technology to our standard mech models. Mech models such as the Space Piercer employed by the Sundered Phalanx have already given us a way forward. Our mechs don't have to use up too much phasewater to make them a lot more useful on the battlefield."

Several faces turned ugly. It was easy to come up with this solution, but the phasewater required to upgrade every single mech in the Larkinson Army was too prohibitive!

His sister sighed. "Personally, I am hoping that phasewater becomes a lot more common in the future. Once the supply is large enough, it shouldn't be that much of a problem anymore to equip all of our standard mechs with transphasic parts. Our mech legions will comprehensively be able to double or triple their effective performance."

This was not as unrealistic as it sounded. The Larkinson Clan already secured at least one reliable supply of phasewater, and it was not out of the question to open up additional channels in the future.

"Our earning power is one of the greatest strengths of our clan." Ves pointed out. "Cost should be no issue. It is more important to power up our mechs than to be too stingy with our money and phasewater. As far as I'm concerned, it is not enough for us to keep up with the changing times. We need to get ahead of the curve and transform all of our mechs before others adopt this pattern. In a circumstance like ours, we cannot afford to lose a single battle as long as our fleet is at risk. Our ships are our homes. Given our precarious situation, there should be no limit to how much we are willing to spend to strengthen the defense of our fleet."

"We need to earn more money, then." Gloriana concluded. "A lot more money. The current income of the LMC isn't enough to fulfill this ambition. Our mech company needs to earn at least ten times more profit before we can seriously think about converting thousands of mechs into transphasic machines."

"We will have to make sure that we don't neglect commercial mechs once we commence the next design round. I am sure that this battle has given us all plenty of new ideas that might sell well."

Overall, a lot of the changes and suggestions essentially entailed spending more money in order to compensate for the various weaknesses exhibited by the Larkinson Army.

The inability to accommodate more mechs simply imposed too many restrictions on the Larkinson Clan. Every single mech and every single proposal had to work the limited space issue in one manner or another.

Ves was growing rather tired of it. He wished that his clan no longer became as constrained by the lack of space as now. If this problem didn't exist, then it would have been easy for the Larkinson Clan to expand its numbers so that it was able to field thirty-thousand, forty-thousand or even fifty-thousand elite mechs at the same time!

#### **Chapter 4350 Misestimation**

Once the Larkinson Journeymen had gone over all of the standard mechs of the Larkinson Army, they proceeded to shift their discussion to the most powerful and exciting mechs in their possession.

It was difficult for both the older and newer Journeymen to remain impassive at this time. The Larkinson expert mechs not only represented the best of what they had offer, but also displayed much of their strengths and weaknesses during the Battle of Pima Prime.

The Sundered Phalanx's own collection of expert mechs presented enough of a challenge to force many heroes of the Larkinson Clan to fight at their best.

Each of their battles provided the Design Department with a wealth of empirical data that the Larkinson mech designers barely had time to study in detail.

Even so, a brief look at the footage and most important pieces of data granted them plenty of insights.



"Let's address the matter of phasewater technology first." Ves began. "The Gauge Dynasty equipped each of its expert mechs with transphasic parts and systems. Though none of those machines barring the Skorpion Kommando received an excessive amount of phasewater, what we have seen so far should be the minimum standard going forward. The Sundered Phalanx and other well-funded mech organizations will probably continue to equip their expert mechs with stronger and more phase water-saturated technology over time."

"What is your point, Ves?" Gloriana asked.

"The development of our expert mechs can't fall behind. We need to think about what kind of phasewater technology we should incorporate in their designs in the future. This especially applies to our older expert mechs which are still counting on Unending alloy armor systems to protect them from damage."

"Wait. Are you changing your stance on trying to extend the use of Unending alloy as long as possible? What about your past arguments? Didn't you tell us that prime mechs can be more powerful than transphasic mechs?"

He let out a tired breath. "I don't believe my argument is wrong, Gloriana, but what happened to the Shield of Samar has been a wakeup call for me. Living mechs and prime mechs should be absolutely powerful enough to contend against modern transphasic mechs, but the problem is that it takes years if not decades of growth to reach that point. Our enemies won't give our expert mechs to grow to that extent. I have neglected the time factor in my calculations. It takes more than two decades for a human baby to grow into a qualified mech pilot. Mechs aren't the same as us, but they should take at least just as long to develop a lot of inherent power."

The Shield of Samar possessed plenty of advantages in this area when it was still intact.

It was among the oldest living mechs in active service, which meant that it had accumulated many years of growth.

Being paired with strong individuals such as Venerable Jannzi and Qilanxo had further boosted its spiritual growth by providing the living mech with rich spiritual feedback.

Along with the advantages granted by its Ardent Wish gem that increased its spiritual feedback by a whopping 40 percent, the Shield of Samar was definitely the machine that best encapsulated Ves' design philosophy!

Yet despite all of these spiritual boosts, the Shield of Samar ultimately proved itself to be a bit too young and immature to defend against the horrible lethality of the Skorpion Kommando!

"Sara." Ves turned to one of the Voiken siblings. "You've studied what has happened to the Shield of Samar, right? Please explain to us whether Venerable Jannzi's expert mech could have survived the final attack of the Skorpion Kommando if it was outfitted with a high-quality transphasic armor system."

Sara Voiken pressed her lips. "I can't give you a solid answer. It depends heavily on the quality and specs of the transphasic armor system. In general, I still think it would have been unlikely for the expert space knight to resist the flood of phasewater-enriched corrosive substances from the Skorpion Kommando. The concentration of phasewater was simply too high. At least a quarter of the Shield of Samar probably would have dissolved, but I am mildly hopeful that this will be the extent of the damage. The expert mech has a lot of mass, and transphasic armor plating is excellent at neutralizing phasewater attacks."

That was what Ves thought as well.

"Transphasic weapons will only become more prevalent in the future. Perhaps rare cases like the Skorpion Kommando's extremely powerful venom formulas might not happen too often, but the chances that our expert mechs will encounter a similar threat will only grow in the future. Since I don't want us to fall behind the trends, we should proactively begin to consider how to replace the armor systems of our old expert mechs with more modern transphasic armor systems in advance."

That was a surprise even to Gloriana.

"Are you sure about this, Ves?"

"I am sure. I love Unending alloy, but we lack the expertise to reverse engineer its production method or make it transphasic. We also lack the ability to develop a substitute material that possesses similar properties. Given this reality, I have judged that it is best to phase out Unending alloy over time."

No one offered strong objections to this change. Nobody aside from Ves cared too much about Unending alloy anyway.

"What is the timeframe of this upgrade round?" Sara Voiken curiously inquired. "We are currently in the process of servicing and repairing the expert mechs that have survived the battle. We can overhaul their armor systems once we return to Davute and gain access to the services of the local development companies."

"Let's not be too hasty. Our expert mechs are still doing more than fine even if they are still stuck with Unending alloy. We should look into replacing the armor systems while also incorporating other powerful technologies to our older expert mechs in five to ten years."

"So they will still remain vulnerable to the same sort of attacks that have felled the Shield of Samar during the Trailblazer Expedition."

Ves helplessly shrugged. "Let's just hope we don't encounter an opponent that has access to exceptionally powerful transphasic weapons."

He was eager to move on from this topic, so he quickly activated a projection that displayed the Dark Zephyr.

"Of all of the expert mechs that we have deployed in battle, the Dark Zephyr probably stands out as the best performer. It has not only managed to defeat two mid-tier expert mechs by itself, but also retained considerable battle effectiveness at the end of its first bout, allowing it to assist with defeating numerous other enemy expert mechs over the course of the battle."

The Dark Zephyr might be the lightest and smallest of the Larkinson expert mechs, but it consistently delivered solid results.

Gloriana was not as impressed, however. "The main reason why the Dark Zephyr managed to overcome the Quadknife and the Filemon with relative ease was because you equipped it with a batch of transphasic grenades. Although Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson is not weak, personal strength does not play that much of a role when his expert mech is equipped with explosives that are powerful enough to threaten other expert mechs."

"A transphasic grenade can't deal as much damage if an expert mech still maintains a fully intact resonance shield." Sara said. "Venerable Tusa at least deserves credit for whittling down the defenses of the Quadknife beforehand."

Ves spent a few seconds watching the footage displayed by the central projector.

The transphasic grenade that the Dark Zephyr blew up in the Quadknife's face was definitely a turning point in this bout.

"I think that this engagement shows that we should think about using phasewater-enriched explosives to a greater extent. Their power is incredible and they can be lifesavers. Perhaps the Shield of Samar might not have

ended up in such a sorry state if it was equipped with a transphasic grenade or missile." He said.

Sara Voiken shook her head. "I am not so certain about that, sir. Transphasic grenades can still be resisted as long as the expert pilot or the defenses of an expert mech are strong enough. A mech as strong and armored as the Skorpion Kommando would have been able to fend off most of the damage even if it has lost its resonance shield. It is not so easy to enable a light mech to easily take down a space knight."

As much as Ves became attracted by the idea of equipping every expert mech with a transphasic grenade, he wasn't certain whether the clan could afford the consumption of phasewater.

There were many possible uses for phasewater, and Ves vastly preferred to expend it on more permanent enhancements rather than squandering it on consumable products.

Once an expert mech tossed a transphasic grenade, all of the phasewater put into it was pretty much lost forever.

"I think it is better to save up our phasewater to upgrade all of our standard mechs in the future than to spend it on these luxury weapons. We need to show more restraint. We can't act like those other groups that have ran through their phasewater reserves too quickly because they can't exercise enough self-control." Ves eventually judged.

Though the Larkinson Clan still saved up a considerable amount of phasewater from the amount gained during the Purgatory Campaign, Ves had resisted many temptations to use up the remaining reserves over the past five years.

Many times, he resisted this urge, though there were also incidents where he gave in and invested in powerful applications.

The Larkinson Journeymen continued to discuss this topic a bit more before they moved on to talking about other expert mechs.

"The Riot and the First Sword did not look good in the last battle, but it was not their fault." Ves spoke in a serious tone. "They simply weren't equipped to fight against Rebecca Andus and her Shellshock. We underestimated the power of a high-tier expert pilot and accompanying high-tier expert mech. We should have tried to allocate an additional expert mech against the Shellshock and the Skorpion Kommando."

"We didn't have the expert mechs to spare." His wife reminded him. "We did not have much choice but to assign only two of our expert mechs to the Shellshock."

Ves shook his head. "We could have done more. For example, we could have tried to give the Amaranto more space to support the Riot and the First Sword. I think we should have ordered Venerable Tusa to stop his efforts on the right flank and move his Dark Zephyr to the center as quickly as possible."

He was determined not to make this mistake again.

"I think a part of the reason why we misestimated the power of the Shellshock and the Skorpion Kommando is because they have benefited more from phasewater technology than other mechs." Gloriana explained her own theory. "The amplification provided by this tech becomes higher as the mechs get higher in tier and rank. This is partly due to their owners allocating more funding in their development as their strategic importance rises, but it is also partly due to the ability of stronger mech pilots to achieve more results with transphasic products."

Ves thought about her words and found that they made a lot of sense.

"You're right. Previously, we based too much of our expectations on the high-tier expert mechs that we have witnessed in the past. The Bolvos Rage and

the Erin Tear come to mind. Both of them were powerful in their own right, but they were lastgen products that do not represent the mechs of today."

The Riot and the First Sword could partially be described as expert mechs that were stuck in the past as well. Their lack of transphasic parts meant that they were missing out on the latest developments in the mech industry.

"Maybe we need to rethink the two melee expert mechs." Ves wondered.