

The Mech 5461

Chapter 5461 Multi-Spirit Living Mechs

The Bluejay Fleet cut through space like a sharp knife. The vessels of the Red Association had become much more visible and active throughout human-occupied space, so they did not attract too much attention.

Nonetheless, many parties had developed a strong interest in tracking the movements of Professor Ves Larkinson.

It was not difficult to find out that he was scheduled to hold a product reveal in the Bortele System in less than a month.

The 9 ships of the Bluejay Fleet followed the right trajectory for the most part. Their powerful superdrives made the journey much shorter than what was possible just a decade or so before.

This gave Ves less time to practice his flute playing skills, not that he was able to devote much time on this activity to begin with, just because he set out on a vacation did not mean he could drop his other obligations so easily.

Though he had made sure to clear his schedule for an entire week upon the moment he arrived at Ocanon VI, he had to make up for that by putting in extra work.

Fortunately, his productivity had increased by another degree after his second lightning baptism. It did not bring any notable qualitative improvements to his cognitive capabilities, but the quantitative improvements were quite notable!

Ves utilized this boost to quickly revise and expand the spiritual designs of the Supremo Project and the Transcendent Punisher Mark III Project.

It was not easy for him to convert them from mono-spirit living mechs into multi-spirit living mechs.

He not only had to figure out a lot of new solutions in order to cram multiple living entities in a single cohesive mech frame, but he also had to build up the theoretical framework that systemized this novel approach.

According to his latest theoretical model, living mechs could be divided into two different categories.

Almost all of his previous works could be categorized as mono-spirit living mechs. Leaving out the variable of design spirits, living mechs always embodied just a single living spirit.

It was only after Ves designed the Fey Fianna that he broke this pattern. Though he had confined the additional spiritual entities into the fey, they were still subordinate and connected to the main body.

From this result, Ves derived two variations that he could pursue in order to develop additional variations of his central living mech concept.

The first variation was the one he was trying to realize with his two heavy artillery mech design projects.

Asymmetrical multi-spirit living mechs encompassed any of his products that contained a hierarchy of multiple spirits.

The Fey Fianna was actually the first mech model of this kind. Ves currently sought to determine whether he could also apply this approach to mechs without any external equipment or spurs.

The word 'asymmetrical' denoted the existence of an unequal relationship between the different spirits. A hierarchy had to exist where there was at least one master spirit and multiple slave spirits.

"Hm, maybe that is the wrong terminology to use. It's better to use the terms dominant spirit and subordinate spirits instead."

In any case, no matter how much the different spirits got along, when it came down to it, only one of them had the greatest say.

A battlefield was no place to engage in any quarrels. Efficiency and quick decision-making mattered more than debating over the most effective solutions.

Ves believed it was always better to leave one spirit in charge of any of the other ones he put inside his works.

"Of course, the mech pilot has the ultimate say over everything. His will supersede everything."

He intended to pay close attention to the actual performance of the Fey Fianna, the Supremo Project and the Transcendent Punisher Mark III in reality.

So long as the asymmetrical multi-spirit arrangement applied by Ves worked out well in three different cases, he planned to make it the standard of all of his living mech designs going forward!

So long as it did not introduce any serious shortcomings, Ves saw little reason why he should stick to mono-spirit living mechs.

This could be considered a generational evolution of living mechs.

"Thinking about asymmetrical living mechs also caused Ves to wonder what would happen if he designed a living mech that was not asymmetrical."

It was an interesting thought experiment. What if he stuffed multiple equal spirits into a single mech frame and did not establish an explicit hierarchy?

Would the two spirits work out their own responsibilities and split their duties in a harmonious fashion?

Or would the two spirits try to fight and devour each other in an attempt to 'monopolize' the mech they inhabited?

Ves truly did not know what would happen, and that made him excited. He just needed to come up with the right mech concept in order to develop such an interesting mech.

That was not all. Since Ves was able to design a living mech that contained multiple interconnected spirits inside its mech frame, what if he went into the other direction and spread them out over multiple mech bodies instead?

This could be regarded as an extrapolation of the Fey Fianna.

Instead of designing a single living mech that was accompanied by several living spurs, Ves wondered what would happen if he replaced the latter with complete living mechs instead.

"If this works out the way I think it will, I can effectively create a superorganism among mechs!"

This would be another radical new application of living mechs!

Instead of designing living mechs that all took on the role of independent machines that could be combined and separated without any issue, he wanted to form permanent spiritual bonds between them all that discouraged any separation.

"It would be like designing a Fey Fianna while replacing its living fey with dependent mechs."

The dominant mech would serve as the hive queen or pack leader of a larger number of subordinate mechs.

The former was able to exist on its own, but was designed to perform much better if it actively led a squad or a company of permanently bonded low-ranked units.

The latter would operate at reduced effectiveness when left on their own, but would be able to provide a lot more value on the battlefield if led by a suitable leader unit!

Ves imagined several possible scenarios where an arrangement like this could be better than grouping mechs in a traditional manner.

For example, the dominant mech could be piloted by an experienced and battle-hardened mech officer. The pilot of this machine did not even have to possess good combat skills. So long as his judgment and leadership abilities were good enough, even injured leaders could contribute to the battle with the help of a supportive machine!

As for the subordinate mechs, there was no reason to make them too powerful or expensive.

The best possible use for them was to put younger, inexperienced and lesser qualified mech pilots into their cockpits.

They could be reservists who never experienced a life-and-death battle in their lives.

They could be less talented mech pilots whose genetic aptitudes scored below C.

They could even be old and retired veterans whose skills had degraded and found it difficult to maintain situational awareness on a chaotic battlefield.

Whatever the case, so long as these lesser-qualified mech pilots interfaced with their machines, they not only developed a connection with living mechs, but also formed an indirect bond with their superior officer!

This would make it so that all of the mech pilots in this unit fought in a much more coordinated fashion.

"I would love to tackle this project."

Ves recognized that there should definitely be a demand for this kind of concept. While he did not think it would catch on in the first-class mech market, he believed it should be of considerable value in both the second-class and third-class mech markets!

"This is an especially good way to effectively mobilize a lot of low-skilled third-class mech pilots!"

From what Ves recalled of the time he lived in the Bright Republic, there were an awful lot of potentates that lacked the talent or the money to attend a mech academy.

They either learned how to pilot mechs on a part-time basis or simply attended a crappy mech academy before settling down as security guards or whatever.

Throwing all of these poorly qualified mech pilots into the meat grinder that was the ongoing war between red humanity and the native alien races without any preparation would just be sending them to their deaths!

In an ideal scenario, the people in charge would send all of these lesser pilots through intensive retraining courses in order to bring them up to standard.

However, this was not a realistic solution. Red humanity couldn't afford to wait so many years to put so many mech pilots into action.

The manpower, mechs and other resources needed to train or retrain so many mech pilots was considerable as well. Those resources could be better spent on supporting existing mech armies.

Before he knew it, Ves had already begun to sketch out a few hypothetical mechs that conformed to his latest idea.

He needed to be especially careful with embarking on this complicated project because he essentially had to design two interdependent mechs at the same time!

Any mistake in one mech directly affected the performance of another mech.

Ves felt more challenged than ever by the added requirements and the much greater variables that could go wrong.

"It is all worth it as long as I can make it work. I do not think that there is any mech that can more closely bind different mech pilots and living mechs together with each other!"

According to his vision, this might be an alternative and more accessible way to enhance the coordination between mech officers and their subordinates.

Command-oriented mech pilots such as Casella Ingvar possessed the ability to Commandeer any subordinates that were willing to obey her instructions.

Certain mechs designed with enhanced coordination in mind such as the works of Master Toqueman Huron were able to produce similar results, but only after satisfying a lot of heavy demands.

Ves owed a lot to Master Huron.

The Fridayman Master Mech Designer had inspired Ves to create many of his most valuable and innovative design solutions.

He would have never been able to come up with the kinship network, battle network, design network and so on without drawing inspiration from Master Huron's iconic neural networks!

While Ves did not study neural interfaces too deeply, he actually considered himself to be the Master Huron's best apprentice!

It was funny. Master Huron not only belonged to a hostile state, but never met his talented and overachieving 'student' in reality!

Ves had even killed one of his formal disciples, so his actual relationship with the Fridayman Master was complex to say the least.

Nonetheless, there was so much synergy between networks and living mechs that Ves couldn't stop himself from replicating or surpassing Master Huron's works.

As far as he recalled, Master Huron had designed different variations of these asymmetrical neurally networked mechs in the past.

One of them happened to be piloted by Venerable Ghanso Larkinson!

The Charlemagne and its 44 accompanying quasi-expert mechs had been formidable in combat. Ves drew a lot of inspiration from them when he designed the Minerva.

Now, Ves wanted to see if he could replicate the same scheme at the standard mech level.

While there were no powerful expert pilots that could enhance their control and supervision over a bunch of subordinate mech pilots, Ves believed he could partially make up for this shortcoming by shifting their responsibilities to the living mechs.

In effect, the dominant living mech would serve as a non-human adjunct officer that performed much of the more labor-intensive duties, thereby allowing the mech officer to focus on the truly important issues!

"How can I strengthen their cooperation further?"

Better teamwork alone was not enough to win a battle. Ves needed to find a way to better leverage the increased coordination of an interconnected mech unit.

"What about hyper technology?"

Chapter 5462 Swarm Mechs Concept

Ves already developed several solutions that enabled multiple mechs to exert far greater power as a whole than if they were by themselves.

The problem was that they were both exclusive to the Larkinson Clan.

There was no need for Ves to extol the power of his battle networks. They had turned around many battles. They fully deserved to be recognized as the trump cards of both the Larkinson Clan and the Glory Seekers.

This was why Ves found it unacceptable to spread them outside of his control. People could do as much damage as a weapon of mass destruction if they managed to reproduce a battle network.

After all, unleashing a death wave in the middle of a crowded city would most definitely cause the deaths of millions of people!

Few if any of the defenses that protected these innocent civilians from orbital bombardment could pose a hindrance to such a weird attack method!

Though Ves could no longer rule out the possibility that particularly clever mech designers and cultivation scientists might be able to imitate his battle networks, at least he would not be culpable for the crimes of others.

Battle networks were unsuitable for the swarm mechs that he had in mind. They required excellent trust and coordination between the participating mech pilots.

This was why Ves had only granted them to mech legions that embodied these traits the most. It was way too much to expect poorly trained third-raters to match the standards of a Swordmaiden of a Penitent Sister.

The second solution that Ves briefly thought about was the Energy Weaver Mech Ecosystem. This was a more generalized method to increase the combat power of larger quantities of living mechs.

However, Ves had not even tested this new E-technology application in reality. The Larkinson Edition of the Fey Fianna had only just begun to be produced by the Spirit of Bentheim.

It would take months after the new drone mechs had been produced for their new mech pilots to master their operation and explore their more advanced capabilities.

"Even if the Energy Weaver Mech Ecosystem has proven its value, I don't intend to surrender this trump card so easily."

A trump card could only be regarded as one if it was a rare and powerful advantage. The Larkinson Clan needed to retain as many of them as possible in order to keep their enemies on their toes.

The Energy Weaver Mech Ecosystem was also far too deep and complicated for the target audience of his hypothetical swarm mechs. It took a lot of time, effort and appreciation of living mechs to gain control over the pseudo-domain generated by a large group of living mechs.

Ves was proud of the mech ecosystem that he devised recently because it was incredibly comprehensive. It could reproduce almost anything related to E energy manipulation.

There was no need to add all of these complicating possibilities to a bunch of low-end mechs.

It had been a long time since Ves had any close contact with low-quality third-class mech pilots.

He still remembered the scum struggling to do what they could while piloting the most awful junk mechs early on in his career. Though he hated the experience of trying to keep the ramshackle machines of Walter's Whalers together, it had been an unforgettable learning experience that still resonated to him to this day.

In any case, Ves still remembered that mech pilots of this caliber possessed much different priorities and concerns than their superior counterparts.

Mechs should be as simple and solid as possible. They had to be cheap, cost-effective and easy to repair. Needless complexity always resulted in more breakdowns and inefficiencies.

Third-class mech pilots could only handle so much. Their training and their hardware simply couldn't handle anything too complex at one time.

Perhaps the more elite military mech pilots could handle greater challenges, but they were not the target audience that Ves had in mind.

"Maybe I should design a simplified version of the Energy Weaver Mech Ecosystem." Ves considered.

That solved multiple problems at the same time.

Ves did not need to work from scratch to develop a design solution that was incredibly difficult and time-consuming for him to perfect. He could just copy his existing mech ecosystem and strip it down until he was only left with the bare essentials.

He could also automate certain processes and embed them into the simplified mech ecosystem in order to make it easier for mech pilots to employ them in battle.

Ves had deliberately designed the Energy Weaver Mech Ecosystem to be an open-ended sandbox where any mech pilot could leverage E Energy in their own little ways.

The idea behind this was that there would always be geniuses among them who could devise a lot of inventive and fantastic methods. As long as they passed on their solutions, the Larkinson Army would soon amass a collection of best practices that enabled everyone to make versatile use of the Energy Weaver Mech Ecosystem!

Ves had no need to retain this versatile and open-ended nature for the mech ecosystem for the masses.

He could straightforwardly adapt a handful of those best practices and implement them into his swarm mechs as fixed abilities.

Sure, his swarm mechs would deprive their mech pilots the option to develop their own E energy abilities, but it was not really necessary for people at their level.

After he collected his thoughts and created a few draft designs, he had locked in his vision for a pair of co-dependent mechs.

This was the first project of its kind where Ves intended to design two completely separate mechs that nonetheless shared an inseparable relationship with each other.

"The Swarm Project will allow me to prove whether it is possible to design multi-spirit mechs across multiple mechs."

This was a rather advanced and convoluted way to design living mechs, but as long as it worked out, Ves would successfully make more progress into realizing Master Huron's ultimate ambition!

"He will surely have to acknowledge that I am his best 'student' after I complete this project." Ves grinned.

It was too bad that Master Huron was one of the many mech designers who missed out on all of the excitement.

Ves devised many new ways to network mechs and mech pilots with each other, but felt rather hollow when he could not show them off to the original source of his inspiration.

"Maybe Veronica can show off my work to him one day." He thought.

In any case, once he gathered his notes and his draft designs into a mech proposal, he presented his case to Alexa.

She set aside her private research on living mechs and seriously analyzed the latest brainchild of her mentor.

"Well? What do you think, Alexa?"

"I am not the best mech designer to provide feedback for this proposal." The young woman responded. "I respect the craft of third-class mech design, but I have no personal experience in working on mechs of such limited strength. I am afraid that I am too far removed from the realities

of the third-class mech industry that my judgment may mislead you into making decisions that are not optimal."

Ves smiled at her in reassurance. "Don't be afraid to say what you think. It takes a lot more than that to lead me in the wrong direction. I am asking for your feedback exactly because you do not think like all of the other mech designers who have experience in designing third-class mechs."

"Why are you thinking about embarking on a design project centered around a pair of third-class mechs, sir? Is it not better for you to focus your efforts on designing second-class mechs at the very least?"

"Oh, I do intend to design a second-class variant of these swarm mechs, but not right away. I want to prove this concept and deliver my first implementation of my idea to the target audience that needs my work the most. I normally don't really bother with third-class mechs anymore, but this idea is interesting enough for me to return to my roots."

"You are relying on many assumptions to make your swarm mechs work." Alexa cautioned. "The Energy Weaver Mech Ecosystem needs to be a success. Enough mech pilots need to explore its usage and develop effective methods to utilize its potential. You will have to adapt your mech ecosystem into a much more simplified version that is more accessible. You must convince enough customers to make substantial investments on your new products, which by their very nature can only be sold in large batches."

"I am aware that my assumptions might not always match what happens in reality, but these are risks that I am willing to take." Ves calmly responded. "Besides, I can always adapt if there are any changes. I think it is definitely possible to develop my swarm mechs one way or another. I just have to put more effort into my work if there are any setbacks."

That sounded a bit reckless to Alexa, but considering that they were talking about third-class mechs, there was a lot more tolerance for errors.

First-class mech designers learned how to plan out their mech design projects as extensively as possible. Their time was precious, their workload was massive and the price of making a mistake with a first-class mech was much more expensive than if they made a similar mistake with a third-class mech!

Perhaps this was how her mentor developed such a sloppy and non-rigorous approach to mech design.

"If you are able to make this work, then... it may be possible for these unassuming third-class mechs to produce an outsized effect in battle." Alexa speculated. "I have witnessed a number of applications of E-technology that are class-independent. What I mean by that is that a third-class mech can become just as threatening as a first-class mech when employing a common solution. For example, if hundreds of your third-class mechs can produce battle network attacks comparable to the ones produced by the Valkyrie Redeemers, then your new work may grant the weakest mech pilots of red humanity the ability to disable the largest and most powerful alien battleships."

Ves had thought of that as well. "That is a bit of a stretch, Alexa. The Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seekers mainly borrow the power of Helena when they channel their iconic death energy wave attacks. The pilots of my swarm mechs will have to rely on themselves and their living mechs to launch any collective attacks."

"If that is the case, there is a chance that your swarm mechs will become powerful enough to dominate the third-class mech market at the lower end. The sales volume of these products will certainly be high, but I cannot imagine that the LMC will be able to earn any appreciable profits."

"This is not about profits. I don't care if I earn 1 MTA credit or 1 million MTA credits out of these products. I just want to prove a new mech concept and add more variety into my work. This is the best third-class mech concept that I have come up with in years. As long as this mech design project ends up successful, I can design a lot of other interesting codependent mechs that are much more extensively networked with each other than what I have previously accomplished."

There was still a lot of potential for networking in mech design. Ves had already applied this concept in many different ways, but he still felt that there was a lot more room to exploit it in different ways.

"How long do you expect to work on this mech design project?"

"Not long at all." Ves confidently replied. "Third-class mechs have very little complexity and should take much less time to design. It doesn't even matter if I have to design a dominant mech and a subordinate mech at the same time. They can share a lot of commonalities to make it easier to maintain both machines."

Chapter 5463 Arrival at Ocanon VI

If Ves embarked on this potential new mech design project, he confidently expected to finish it within half a year.

This was important. Time was valuable, and that was especially the case in the early days of the Hyper Generation.

The competition wasn't sitting around doing nothing. Rival mech designers had already begun to introduce new mechs that possessed a lot of new capabilities that did not exist before.

Ves shouldn't be the only mech designer who focused on networks to enhance the combat power of his products.

"I plan to start this project after I have completed the product reveal and return to New Constantinople VIII." He told his assistant. "I think it may be useful for you to contribute to this mech design project as well. You should widen your horizons and see what it is like to work with tech and materials that are much cheaper than you have ever come into contact with before."

Alexa's expression did not convey much enthusiasm for this suggestion. "I am open to new experiences, but my lack of familiarity with third-class mech designs may slow you down."

"That's okay. Just think of it as a learning experience. I don't expect you to master the art of designing third-class mechs, but you should at least obtain enough first-hand experience of working with them to know what you are dealing with if you come across them in the future."

They talked a bit more about the tentative new mech design project, but they did not go into too much detail.

Ves was still exploring his options for the time being. He did not have to go through with this idea.

Right now, his vacation took priority. After several days of rapid travel, the Bluejay Fleet reached the Ocanon System without incident.

Contrary to Ves' expectations, the star system hosted greater traffic than expected.

He already heard that Ocanon VI had stood out as one of the more popular hunting destinations of the Krakatoa Middle Zone, but he expected a lot less people to be interested in this leisure activity after the Great Severing occurred.

Red humanity found itself outnumbered and cut off from any reinforcements. The conquest of the Red Ocean had turned into a war of survival. How could there possibly be a lot of people who discarded the incentives of the New Elites Program and merrily planned to go on a hunting trip on an exotic planet?

The popularity of Ocanon VI showed that the war against the native aliens had not yet produced enough urgency.

Humans were simply not accustomed to total war anymore. Ves predicted that it would take a long time to mobilize all of these people and put red humanity on a proper war footing.

"It's not my problem." He shrugged.

This was a problem for the established powers. Ves was just a mech designer, and right now all he wanted to do was to set aside his worries and enjoy his much-deserved vacation.

As Ves and his children prepared to get teleported to the surface with their luggage, a few people came to see him off.

"Good luck, sir." Alexa said. "By the time you return from your successful hunts, I hope I can present you with the final direction of my design philosophy."

Jovy gave a reassuring nod at Ves. "I will not be accompanying you, but our troops will be close at hand to prevent any undesirable incidents from occurring. Aside from that, we will also be monitoring you on a constant basis up in orbit. Our mechs shall always be ready to teleport to the surface in case of emergencies."

"I shall make sure to handle any contacts that ordinarily demand your attention, boss." Gavin bowed. "Thank you for entrusting me with the power to make small decisions on your behalf. I have worked for you long enough to figure out how you want stuff done."

"Meow meow!"

"Miaow-"

Lucky and Clixie would bore themselves to death if they remained stuck on a heavy cruiser that heavily restricted their movements.

The two cats practically insisted on coming along!

Ves checked whether everything was in order. Once he was satisfied with the arrangements, he conveyed a hand signal to Jovy.

"See you in a week."

The teleportation process happened in an instant.

It only took a short time for Ves, the children and their cats to adapt to an alien ecosystem.

They had entered a closed chamber that was designed for the few occasions when people reached the surface through teleportation as opposed to riding shuttles.

Surrounding him was a squad of heavily armed and armored infantry from the Bluejay Fleet. The few greeting personnel that awaited the arrival of VIPs clearly grew intimidated by their presence, but they possessed enough training to go through all of the routine entry procedures.

Once one of the local officials stamped a virtual document, the man gave a welcoming smile to Ves.

"Welcome to Ocanon VI. We are immensely honored by your arrival. Please forgive us for being unable to accommodate every need. Our colony is not built with comfort in mind. We hope that you will be able to appreciate our distinct cultural customs while you stay in Tixe City. President Oscar Tarich of the local branch of the Hunting Association shall receive you in person. Please check whether your breathing masks are fully operational and properly affixed. We have a stock of spare masks available if your current ones are not working properly."

"Thank you for your officer, but that should not be necessary."

The mechers had issued the breathing masks to the Larkinsons. Though Ves manually checked the status of every breathing mask just to be certain, he did not encounter any problems, just as he expected.

Once everything was in order, Ves led his children to the exit of the arrival chamber.

As soon as the double doors slid open, the children gasped as they came across an impressive and exotic sight.

"Welcome to Ocanon VI." Ves introduced to his children with a smile.

"It's so green..." Marvinine whispered.

"Is that a city? Everything is covered by plants!"

"Have the locals regressed in technology?"

"Tixe City is deliberately built in this fashion." Ves answered as he breathed the air through a transparent breathing mask. "The pioneers who colonized this planet wanted to retain its wild and alien biosphere as much as possible. They only reluctantly built this city to accommodate their operations on the surface, and even then they decided to stick to a low-tech approach in order to preserve the wild atmosphere as much as possible."

Ocanon VI could no longer be regarded as a completely untamed planet, but it still retained a lot of aspects of an alien life-bearing globe.

Due to the fact that Ocanon VI orbited a fairly ordinary yellow star, the flora of this planet all engaged in photosynthesis in the most common manner.

The abundance of green leaves grown from the walls of the fairly low structures of Tixe City made it seem as if they had arrived at an elven city.

Though the architecture was too blocky and inelegant to match the typical elven aesthetic, there was a strong sense of harmony between nature and civilization.

Ves could feel it in the air. His spiritual senses told him that the wood element was particularly abundant in the local environment.

"I thought that alien planets would look a lot more different." Aurelia remarked.

"Me too!" Marvaine spoke before turning to his father. "Why are all of these alien leaves green, papa?"

"That is because green leaves are the most optimal ones to absorb solar energy on a continuous basis." Ves calmly replied. "Plants are green because a lot of light from the local star peaks at the blue and red sides of the spectrum. Absorbing these energies will produce the greatest yield of energy. The leaves refuse to absorb green light because variations in light intensity and motion makes it more difficult to establish a stable rate of energy conversion. Just like machines that run on electricity, plants don't like it when they constantly absorb light at different intensities all of the time. It's a long story, but a lot of leaves on many life-bearing planets have evolved to become green because these plant species have 'learned' that reflecting green light helps with maintaining a stable rate of energy absorption and conversion. Since these are universal concepts, a lot of different alien plants have engaged in convergent evolution and settled on the same solution. That is why their leaves are all green."

Aurelia and Marvaine found it difficult to follow their father's explanation. They had yet to take any biology or exobiology classes.

"Hihihihi! Look, papa! I can jump much higher!"

Meanwhile, Andraste just discovered the effects of the reduced gravity of the planet by jumping up and down while relishing in her improved jumping ability!

"Ocanon VI has a gravity of 0.53 g." Ves said. "That means that each of you weigh a little less on this planet. The lower gravity has made it easier for the local fauna and flora to grow a bit taller than normal."

Ves continued to explain the basic science of Ocanon VI to his children as they eventually moved down a path.

Ves looked down at his feet. He and his children had changed into sturdy and fashionable outfits that would not look out of place in a hunting magazine.

The mechers had been the ones to provide the smart clothing. They came with many compact hidden features that were particularly useful in survival settings.

Right now, Ves was glad that he and his children were wearing country boots. The road they traversed was surprisingly rudimentary. Pebbles and wet dirt already started to cling to the soles.

It had evidently rained relatively recently.

An older man in a brown coat met the Larkinsons halfway down the path.

"Welcome to Ocanon VI, Professor Larkinson. I am Oscar Tarich. I have been appointed as the president of the local branch of the Hunting Association. I shall facilitate your needs in person should you welcome my company."

"I do not mind if you follow me along." Ves replied in a deliberately casual tone in order to put the other man at ease. "I did not expect to be accompanied by a representative of the Hunting Association. Shouldn't it be more appropriate for the owners of this colony to send their own people?"

"There are special reasons for that, professor. Would you like to be addressed as professor or patriarch?"

"Either way is fine. I don't care."

"I shall use the current term if that is the case. To continue, Canon VI is not entirely managed by the pioneering organizations who originally claimed this planet. Our Hunting Association has become thoroughly involved after they have invited us to turn all of the rich biomes into profitable hunting grounds. We have taken charge of all of the areas where hunting activities are permitted to occur."

"What do you do here?" Ves asked even though he roughly knew the answer.

"We control the entry of hunters to prevent overhunting. We monitor and control the exobeasts to prevent their populations from fluctuating too wildly. We verify and record valid hunting kills. We provide training courses to hunters who are interested in expanding their skill sets. In fact, we have recently started a new training course that has proven to be extremely popular as of late. Hundreds of thousands of hunters have already enrolled so far, and that is from our branch alone."

"Hm? What is it that you teach in this training course that has proven so popular?"

President Tarich smiled and projected a virtual book.

"Why, the headquarters of our Hunting Association has most recently published the Hunter's Code. It is not easy to explain what it is, but I can tell you the benefits of studying and practicing its techniques. It teaches you how to absorb E energy to make your body stronger and your senses sharper. It helps you acquire a strong sense of blood. It even contains a ritual that can dramatically improve your ability to absorb nutrients of the flesh of the prey that you have killed in person, thereby transforming you into a superhuman at a vastly accelerated rate."

"What?!"

Chapter 5464 Tixe City

As Ves and the president of the local branch of the Hunter's Association led their small procession into the exotic forest city, they quickly became immersed by the unique charm of the local environment.

Tixe City was not a tall colony settlement. Hardly any structure was taller than one or two stories. The few exceptions consisted of mech workshops and other facilities that had to raise their ceiling by necessity.

Many structures also happened to be covered by alien ivy-like plants. Combined with all of the dust and mud that lingered from the abundance of dirt roads, it made Tixe City look a lot older and weathered than normal.

All of this spoke of careful and deliberate planning. Though Ves was supposed to be on vacation, he couldn't help but switch on his analytical mind and think about the effects of the environment on its inhabitants and people.

In contrast to the clean metal aesthetic that dominated most advanced settlements, Tixe City deliberately induced an atmosphere that harkened back to humanity's less civilized past.

The colonists had even gone out of their way to add elements of savagery into the streets.

From constructing crude animalistic wooden totems to mounting the large and intimidating skulls of exobeasts above the entrances to many buildings, the savage architectural elements caused every visitor to immerse themselves in a fantasy where they had turned into one of the prehistoric hunter-gatherers of their distant ancestry.

Even now, Ves couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to hold a spear and relentlessly hound one of the massive mammoth-sized exobeasts of Ocanon VI as it clumsily tried to fight for its life.

"Here in Ocanon VI, almost everyone is a hunter." President Oscar Tarich proudly explained. "Aside from the wounded, infirm and the very young, every human on this planet has hunted at least a dozen different prey. There are three major continents, and the safest and most regulated hunting grounds are located right here in the Melrose Continent. There are many small hunting grounds around Tixe City that are expressly filled with small and mostly harmless prey. I highly recommend you bring your children to them so that they can get blooded."

"Oh, I certainly intend to do so. Are you looking forward to your upcoming hunts, kids?"

"I have been waiting to kill for years!" Andraste ecstatically squealed.

"Meow." Lucky rolled his eyes as he was being held by the boisterous girl.

Aurelia and Marvaine looked curious but not particularly enthused.

"Those animals are so small and cute. Why do we have to kill them, papa? Can't we turn them into our pets?" Aurelia asked.

"Not everyone can afford to support so many pets, especially if they are alien and incompatible with standard human environments." Ves replied through his transparent breathing mask. "Pets are a luxury, Aurelia. It is not worth it to turn ordinary exobeasts into animal companions. I won't force you to kill these critters if you don't want to, but it is not wise for you to remain soft in a galaxy where the phase whales and the other powerful aliens constantly want to turn us into prey."

"Well said, professor! Do not be concerned, young lady. It is not unheard of for hunters to enter our hunting grounds with non-lethal weaponry. The practice does not entirely conform to the Hunter's Code, however. Ever since our Association has made it available to the public, the proportion of non-lethal hunts has dropped enormously as of late. Hunters simply do not earn enough rewards if they are being merciful and let their prey go after a successful hunt."

"I see."

Ves grew more and more curious about the Hunter's Code. He wanted to obtain more information about it from his high-ranked tour guide, but President Tarich wanted to lead them into the branch headquarters first before he introduced this mysterious new cultivation method.

In the meantime, the branch president continued to introduce the city to the VIP guests.

As Ves stared at a wooden totem that stacked four expertly carved exobeast heads on top of each other, Tarich smiled and explained the custom surrounding these special artworks.

"Successful hunters can apply to rent spaces where they can place their totems. Each of them records the proudest hunts validated by our Hunting Association. They are one of the means used by

famous hunters and hunting groups to increase their fame. It may seem trivial to you, but the hunters of Ocanon VI compete fiercely against each other to attain the highest rankings."

"Hunters are ranked?"

"Naturally. Hunting does not have to be a competitive sport, but inserting competitive elements makes everything more exciting. There is no better way to drive hunters to excel and challenge more challenging prey than to make direct comparisons between their performance and that of others. That said, only true professionals and hardcore hobbyists fight for higher rankings. The less driven hunters understand their own limits and stick to hunting the prey they can handle. Hunting can be life-threatening, especially if you seek to complete recognized hunts that are validated by our Hunting Association."

The Hunting Association had an enormous presence on this planet. Ves realized that it had pretty much taken it over from the original colonists. No one seemed to talk about the pioneering organizations who originally settled on this planet. Their personnel and any obvious symbols related to them were entirely absent from this city.

"Is the Hunting Association a direct successor to the Galactic Hunting Club of the Milky Way?"

"That is correct." President Tarich responded with a nod. "Under the leadership of the Huntsman, we have quickly completed a reorganization that seeks to increase the legitimacy and popularity of our vocation. Hunting is a serious activity, and has inspired many great men to complete great deeds. The god pilot who has taken charge of our reformed Association is the greatest example of that. He is the idol of many hunters. Many of us on Ocanon VI seek to learn from his deeds and attain ultimate strength by imitating his accomplishments. The Hunter's Code is the vehicle that gives us hope of becoming a god of the hunt as His Divinity."

The Hunting Association had great ambitions, but it was doubtful whether it could realize them all. Any other organization would be accused of hubris if they made these claims, but this time was different.

Just the fact that the Huntsman led this new Association meant that others were forced to take it seriously!

Nobody dared to disparage or oppose the Hunting Association too heavily because of this. Even if a lot of people thought that hunting was a wasteful and extravagant hobby for the rich and powerful, there was no incentive for them to piss off one of the eight strongest protectors of red humanity!

This was why President Oscar Tarich sounded so proud and self-assured as he extolled the virtues of hunting.

It was also why the formidable looking hunters walking on the streets possessed a collective air of confidence.

Their god and patron approved of their 'sacred' activity!

"What do these giant exobeast skulls signify?" Ves asked as he stared at the entrances of many structures.

"They show off the strength and hunting accomplishments of the owners or occupants of the buildings. This is a privilege only granted to those who have completed valid hunts. They not only

serve to deter anyone from causing trouble inside their premises, but also attract more customers if the hunting trophies are placed above the entrances of shops."

This dynamic became quite clear as Ves and his family passed through a few streets that contained shops.

Tixe City was the central hub of Ocanon VI, and therefore hosted a lot of shops to accommodate every possible hunting need.

Yet no matter what kind of store that people opened up, they always made sure to mount the largest and most ostentatious-looking exobeast skulls that could fit on their storefronts!

"They look so big and scary." Marvaine complained.

Clixie brushed against his body to reassure the young boy. "Miaow miaow."

"I can't wait to hunt exobeasts whose skulls are just as big as the largest of those hunting trophies!" Andraste enthusiastically said. "Can we go out and hunt those huge beasts, papa?"

"Absolutely not, pumpkin! These beasts are too strong to be defeated on foot. They can only be hunted by mechs. At most, we can accompany a mech troop as it enters a hunting zone and utilize their strong machines to beat a large exobeast into submission. By the way, president, does every entrepreneur have to show off a hunting trophy in order to do business on this planet?"

"They do." Oscar Tarich straightforwardly replied. "This is a planet where the strong respects the strong. None of us prefer to do business with those who have no understanding of our craft and have suffered none of the ordeals that we regularly have to endure. They can take their business elsewhere. There are still plenty of businessmen who respect our craft and traditions that can take their place."

"Is it mandatory for the owners of larger stores and buildings to mount hunting trophies taken from beasts the size of mechs?"

"It is not a legal requirement, but in the years since Tixe City operated as a city of hunters, it has evolved in this direction. The reality is that hunters frequent the places that resonate with them most. While they do not expect a small store that sells ice cream to mount trophies the size of shuttles, our clientele expect more from those who dare to invest in larger businesses such as hotels and mech arenas. Their owners or one of members of their upper management must always be a mech pilot that has completed one of the difficult hunts that Ocanon VI has to offer."

These customs had far-reaching effects on the local economy. Every major business was either owned or backed by a formidable mech pilot.

It was a radical form of change that altered the local society in a direction that conformed to the vision behind the Deep Strike Plan!

Was this the Huntsman's way of helping red humanity to complete the transition into one that was ruled over by warlords and other strong figures?

"Are there no exceptions to this rule, president?" Aurelia took the initiative to ask.

What a clever girl. Her politically astute mind probably figured out the same undercurrents.

"Even our hospitals must prove they are governed by strong hunters." The old hunter answered back with a smile. "It might not make sense to you, and that is okay. We are passionate about hunting, but

we do not insist on pushing our customs and traditions onto everyone. The new frontier is large enough to accommodate other cultures and subcultures. Just let us have our own corners."

"I am not sure if the native aliens will let your people engage in your hunting activities for long. What if the war goes badly for us? What if the Krakatoa Middle is on the verge of getting invaded?" Ves questioned.

President Tarich became a lot more vicious as he contemplated the prospect of an alien invasion.

"Let them come! Though we considered ourselves to be hunters first, that does not prevent us from becoming soldiers as well! If the aliens truly think they can challenge us, then every hunter on Ocanon VI shall rise up and use the strength honed in hunts to treat them as our latest prey. We will not run from our hunting paradises without making these invaders bleed!"

The hunters and especially the mech pilots among them might not have much experience on the battlefield, but all of the challenging hunts had mostly hardened them. They would turn into ferocious fighters if they ever had to fight a serious battle.

However, it did not seem as if the hunters were in a hurry to fight the aliens and earn lots of war merits.

The ongoing war was a distant affair to them as long as it did not hinder their hunting activities.

Chapter 5465 Changing Ecosystem

What struck Ves and his children was not just the ostentatious ivy-covered buildings that proudly displayed a large variety of large exobeast skulls.

It was also the colonists and visitors that traversed the dirt roads that compromised the streets of this settlement.

It was easy enough to distinguish the long-time residents of Ocanon VI from its foreign tourists.

The latter were dressed in a similar fashion to the Larkinsons. They all wore fairly modern smart clothing, and even if they adopted the style of more traditional adventurers, their outfits still looked way too pristine to earn the recognition of genuine hunters.

Of course, that did not mean that these casual tourists and hunters received open looks of disapproval.

Hunting was an expensive activity. The bigger the prey, the less affordable it became!

Ocanon Vi's economy heavily relied on tourism to maintain a positive balance of payments. The local hunters simply wouldn't be able to indulge in their passion so frequently if not for all of the money flowing from the outside.

The Ocanon System did not have any other industries worth mentioning. The only other businesses that could generate a large amount of money were the various research institutions that thoroughly studied the alien flora and fauna in the hopes of researching new medicines and valuable organic materials.

Nonetheless, tourists were almost completely ignored even if they were slightly more famous and accompanied by an entourage.

This was because the locals only respected hunters, particularly those who completed valid hunts on Ocanon VI.

Unless people went into one of the local hunting grounds and returned with a hunting trophy as well as a certificate, they would not be able to climb the planet's quirky social ladder.

It was a rather refreshing change from society. The local environment promoted a distorted meritocracy where only the strongest and most competent hunters had all of the say on this planet.

Ves took another glance at President Oscar Tarich. The man was over a century old and certainly started to show his age, but he wouldn't have been able to occupy such a high position if he was just an ordinary bureaucrat.

"You must have completed quite a few hunts yourself, right?" Ves directly asked.

"I do." The older man smiled as he reminisced about his past hunts. "I have 316 registered hunting kills to my name. That is not as much as other hunters of my generation, but I have made sure that each of my prey were strong enough to pose a threat to me. Every hunt should be a battle between predator and prey. If the latter does not have a chance to reverse the roles and punish me for making a mistake, there is not enough thrill to make the hunt meaningful enough. The Hunting Association that I am a part of holds the same stance, so I am proud to represent its interests on this hunting planet."

The man could talk all day about his past hunts, but there was not much point in sharing these stories.

Tourists came here not to admire the hunting deeds of other people, but to head into the hunting grounds and collect their own trophies!

That caused Ves to think about another subject.

"Can I ask how many visitors come here to go on valid hunts as opposed to ones that are not registered by the Hunting Association?"

"That is not a simple question to answer, professor. Before the Great Severing changed our society forever, most of our guests came to enjoy an experience. They had little interest in becoming a serious member of the Galactic Hunting Club and were content to go on guided hunts where they are always accompanied by professional guides and hunters."

"What changed?"

The older man pointed at the sky. There was a small golden glow in that direction that was barely distinguishable in the bright skies, but Ves knew exactly what it meant.

"Messier 87's exotic radiation has begun to mutate the environment." Ves observed.

"Correct. While this is happening on every planet of the Red Ocean, the ones with much richer and more diverse ecosystems tend to undergo more extreme changes. This is because there are always species of exoplants and exobeasts that happen to be much more sensitive to mutations induced by E energy radiation. In the past few months, our hunting grounds have undergone serious upheaval. Entire population groups have gone extinct. Heavily mutated plants and animals have suddenly jumped to the top of the food chain. If headquarters hadn't anticipated all of these extreme changes

in advance and transferred additional support to manage the hunting grounds that are in upheaval, I would not have been able to clear my schedule to accompany you on your trip."

President Tarich deliberately spoke about these issues to Ves. His message served as both a warning and perhaps a solicitation for further business.

Ves did not come to Ocanon VI without knowing anything. He had conducted at least a bit of research, though he did not delve too deeply in order to preserve the novelty of visiting this destination.

"How frequently do accidents occur on this planet?"

"They are becoming more frequent and severe every week." The branch president honestly replied. "There are too many exobeasts for us to track. We have increased our reliance on technological monitoring solutions, but we do not want to flood every hunting ground with conspicuous-looking bots. There are certain exobeasts that have developed rare mutations that enable them to circumvent long-ranged scans. They are the chief culprits responsible for causing hunt teams to be ambushed by predators that are too strong for their hunting grounds."

The Hunting Association carefully monitored and controlled all of the prey in all of the hunting grounds.

Each of them were ranked according to difficulty and maximum threat level to ensure that every hunter did not bite more than they could chew.

Hunting had become a lot more dangerous ever since the prey had a much higher chance of turning the tables against their hunters!

"Have hunters died?"

"Most definitely. Fatalities cannot be completely avoided. Before the Great Severing occurred, the Chasseur Continent had already claimed at least a hundred lives every year. This is to be expected as our Hunting Association has done the best to preserve its natural environment. This continent hosts our most dangerous hunting grounds as huge beasts share the same spaces as much weaker and smaller prey. However, once the alien wildlife started to mutate after getting exposed to E energy radiation, both the greatest of exobeasts and the smallest of vermin have become much stronger than before. The continent has already claimed over 500 brave hunters this year!"

That was a lot! The Chasseur Continent was where the truly dedicated hunters challenged themselves. They were all seasoned and professional hunters who always made thorough preparations before they embarked on their hunting trips.

These people had learned to be extremely cautious and account for many different scenarios. The probability that they would suffer a fatal accident should be low, but even then the Chasseur Continent still managed to claim their lives.

It was just that the rate of deaths had reached an 'acceptable' level in the past.

Those hardcore hunters did not get deterred by these deaths. They became excited by it! Any hunting ground that swallowed human lives and spit out their bones became a lot more prestigious in their community.

The bragging rights for completing a hunt in these dangerous grounds were much greater!

However, a five-fold increase in the annual death rate was anything but normal. Hunters may be looking for a thrill, but they were not suicidal!

President Tarich did not look concerned, though.

"While it is true that many hunters have ceased their trips to the most dangerous hunting grounds, their popularity has not dropped at all. As soon as the news broke out, more and more strong hunters have made the decision to come here and challenge themselves against the formidable prey we have to offer. This trend has recently accelerated even further after the release of the Hunter's Code. It is actually our easier hunting grounds that are suffering a drop in popularity. There is a greater variance in threat level of the prey in those areas. Around So hunters have died during hunting trips in the Shamon Continent. This landmass hosts more regulated hunting grounds that are meant to provide targeted hunting experiences. Well-prepared hunters shouldn't die here, but that has changed as of late."

"What about the Melrose Continent where we are on? Have the easiest hunting grounds on this planet produced any fatal accidents as well?" Ves asked.

According to his plan, he intended to take his kids on a hunting trip in one of these beginner grounds.

He did not really care about earning hunting certificates from the Hunting Association, so he had no objections to entering the grounds with a lot of additional protection.

It would still be prudent to learn what sort of dangers have appeared.

"Around 15 fatalities have occurred in the hunting grounds of this planet." President Tarich honestly answered. "They have occurred almost exclusively on valid hunting trips. The deceased hunters have also made numerous mistakes due to a combination of inexperience and an inability to follow our advice. They disrespected our hunting tradition and suffered the consequences of their bad decisions."

"That is harsh." Aurelia said.

"Hunting is not a bloodless sport, little lady. Our race may have developed past the point where we need to hunt in order to feed our hungry bellies, but that is no reason to treat it with so little care and respect. There is no need for you to be concerned. No children have died so far. Our Hunting Association has allocated a disproportionate amount of resources to ensure that our most kid-friendly hunting grounds are free of any threat. I highly recommend you to experience a real hunt at least once while these areas are still under control."

The president basically wanted to encourage Ves to go on an authentic hunting trip as opposed to a fake one where he could count on an excess of protective measures to protect him from his own mistakes.

Of course, there was no way that Ves would agree to such a decision.

"I may have gone on a thrilling hunt in the past, but I was a lot younger and more impulsive back then." Ves replied in a measured tone. "I did not have any children either back then. I am a father now. I am mostly interested in bonding with the family that I have brought along. I have no other intentions at this time."

The president did not look disappointed. He already expected this response.

"I understand. I am a happy grandfather myself. If you ever change your mind, we would be happy to accommodate you, professor."

They talked a bit more and explored a few more sights.

However, Ves suddenly stopped in his tracks when he caught sight of one of the largest and most highly frequented stores in Tixe City.

He recognized its company logo in an instant.

"The planetary branch store of your Living Mech Corporation is doing excellent business since it has been established in our city. While the diversity of mechs on offer is not as large as its competitors, your store has proven to be one of the most popular ones of its kind. The amount of sales concluded here has actually increased in the last few months. This is quite a surprise to us all as none of the staples sold from here have yet to be updated with hyper technology."

"Development is still ongoing." Ves faintly said as he stared at the large and prominent skull of a reptilian exobeast. "What is that?"

"That... is one of the most impressive trophies displayed in our city. The skull belongs to a Barrugan Acid Spitter. It is one of the top 10 apex predators of the Chasseur Continent. Any of our large structures would be proud to put such a skull on top of their entrance!"

Chapter 5466 The Ocanon VI Branch of the Larkinson Clan

"I do not think you understand the significance of hunting down a Barrugan Acid Spitter. It usually takes a full squad of well-equipped mechs piloted by experienced hunters to take it down. Almost every hunt involving this acid-spitting beast usually causes at least three or four of the hunting mechs to break down from a combination of acid and physical damage. Fatalities are not unheard of either as these beasts are smart enough to know that our mechs are piloted by humans."

"I see..."

This species was strong enough to overcome the defenses of a second-class mech and render it inoperable with remarkable speed.

Combined with intelligence that was on the higher end as far as exobeasts went, it shouldn't be surprising that the hunting community recognized it as one of the most dangerous huge beasts that roamed the most dangerous continent!

"Part of the reason why your store sees so much traffic is because its store manager has bravely entered the Chasseur Continent by herself with only a single mech." President Tarich continued to elaborate. "She personally tracked down this exobeast and beheaded it in single combat, which is a feat that has rarely been replicated since. This is not only proof of your store manager's hunting prowess, but it is also a strong endorsement of the mech model that she has chosen to complete her hunt."

"Wow!" Andraste perked up when she heard this tale. "I know! The hunter should be a Swordmaiden, right?!"

"That is correct, little lady. The Swordmaidens and those other swordsmen of your clan maintain a constant presence on this planet. They are known as one of the strongest and fiercest hunters on Ocanon VI. Not even the most unruly members of our community dare to provoke the fanatic sword

wielders of your clan. They are known as the kings and queens of melee hunters on our planet. If not for the fact that they disdain to use ranged weapons, they would have provoked a lot more challenges."

Ves had no idea that the Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders managed to establish such a strong reputation on this planet.

They had to be side branch members of the clan, because the main branch members were almost exclusively stationed within the expeditionary fleet.

While it was not that important for the Larkinson Clan to establish a strong presence on a single planet in the Red Ocean, Ves still felt it a sense of accomplishment that his clansmen had successfully spread their influence over a wider area.

"I want to go inside!" Marvaine eagerly asked.

"Me too!" Andraste echoed.

"You don't need to beg any further. I am curious to see how this business of ours is faring as well."

The group crossed the street and approached the storefront.

It was only after they came closer that they experienced a much greater appreciation of the large exobeast skull that had been expertly mounted above the entrance of the LMC store!

Ves could vividly feel the strong vitality and threat that the Barrugan Acid Spitter once possessed.

Even though it had been hunted down in the final years of the Age of Mechs, its aura was no less intimidating and oppressive as an actual mutated beast.

Exotic radiation strengthened everything in different measures. Even the bones of dead creatures inexplicably grew stronger!

As soon as the group entered the store, the employees had already cleared a space in the busy showroom.

"HAIL PATRIARCH VES OF THE LARKINSON CLAN!"

Around two-dozen Swordmaidens and Heavensworders stood neatly in their ranks and showed their respect towards the arrival of their patriarch!

Ves looked quite impressed, and so did the customers who were looking to inquire about the mechs sold by the store.

He waved at the soldiers. "At ease. Do not let my presence interrupt your duties or anything. This is not a formal visit, so just go on as normal."

It was impossible for the customers and personnel to go back to normal, but they no longer behaved as if nothing mattered anymore.

Ves ignored all of the staring eyes and studied the interior of the store. Many smaller hunting trophies had been proudly mounted on the wall. Each of them gave a more savage air to the warm interior. It resembled a tall and relatively high-tech hunting lodge. All of the swords mounted on another wall added an even more martial vibe to the space, especially when their former wielders had not even bothered to wipe away the dried blood from their blades!

The sight of all of these hunting trophies and authentic hunting weapons stirred the blood of any prospective hunter.

Many people would undoubtedly gain even more enthusiasm to pick up a weapon and dive into a hunting ground!

It did not miss his notice that the LMC store also happened to sell a large range of infantry gear. Several Swordmaidens were actually responsible for selling different varieties of swords full-time!

Ves would not be surprised if this store happened to be one of the greatest sources of tax revenue of Tixe City. No wonder that President Tarich was so willing to accompany him and his family for an entire week.

The famed store manager of this particular venue strode forward with strong and precise steps. She introduced herself to her patriarch with a strong but measured voice.

"I am Captain Gheri, formerly of the Swordmaiden Mech Legion, now a member of the Ocanon VI Branch of the Larkinson Clan. It is an honor to receive you at our store. As you can see, our sales are doing good, although we only really sell three different mech models on this planet."

"Pleased to meet you, captain."

Captain Gheri did not possess the sensitivity and refinement of a proper businesswoman, but there was no need for her to turn herself into one. The hunting community respected strength and hunting accomplishments over everything else. The veteran Swordmaiden mech officer had both in spades, so she was the most suitable figurehead to watch over this store!

The Swordmaiden officer led the group straight to the three most prominent display mechs that represented the main machines that got sold in this venue.

"The Huntmaster is several years old, but it has been a hit within the hunting community since its release." The woman introduced. "Its performance is balanced. It has a good set of legs that are good for dodging and maneuvering uneven terrain. Its armor system is not the thickest, but it makes every armor plate count. Its endurance is one its strongest points. No one else but other hunters recognize the importance of staying power in long hunts. Its ability to stab its spear is good enough to penetrate the tough hides and scales of most large exobeasts. It is frankly overkill to equip them with transphasic spears. Doing so will make a hunt invalid."

President Tarich nodded in agreement. "Ocanon VI is a planet that has very few deposits of phasewater. Ordinary mechs are already sufficient to challenge all of the large exobeasts of our hunting grounds. The Hunting Association's current policy is to withhold recognition of any hunt that involves the use of transphasic mechs. This is good because it keeps everything affordable."

That was understandable. Transphasic mechs were almost exclusively reserved for strong military mech armies or highly prized private forces.

It would be a waste to squander so much phasewater to empower the hunting community!

Ves looked up at the silent copy of the Huntmaster. It was coated in camouflage green, enabling it to blend better into the heavily forested regions of the Chasseur Continent. The mech was alive but also dormant due to months of being put on display. The mech retained a solid connection to Zeigra, though the store had dialed down its glow so that it was only disturbing at very close range.

He recalled that Dulo and Sara Voiken had been responsible for designing most aspects of the Huntmaster design. Ves had only made the mech alive and bestowed it with a design spirit.

Though his involvement had been light, his contribution added the crucial elements that made the Huntmaster far more popular than any other spearman mech that catered to the hunting community!

"Glow is one of the strongest selling points of our mechs." Captain Gheri smiled. "Many of the top hunting teams have made sure to include at least one Huntmaster in their limited mech rosters. This is not just because the Huntmaster is a capable and reliable fighting machine. The main reason why it is so desired on this planet as well as other hunting planets is because its glow is just too useful in provoking the beasts into a fight. Every hunting mech pilot has grown to appreciate Zeigra for being so damn good at luring exobeasts into standing their ground. Without the Huntmaster, the smarter and more cunning beasts tend to run more often than not. This makes the process of hunting far more exhausting and time-consuming."

The president of the local branch of the Hunting Association also had a word or two to say about this topic.

"The utility of glows in hunts has provoked many debates within our halls. Their use has either provoked dangerous reactions among many of the beasts that are subject to them, or alters the behavior of many exobeasts to such an extent that it trivializes the hunting process. We have ultimately decided to ban many of your products from participating in official hunts. The Ferocious Piranha and the Pacifier are particularly problematic to us. The Huntmaster is a border case, but given that it does not weaken the lethality posed by the dangerous prey, we have continued to permit its use. Too many of our hunters are bound to protest if we attempt to prohibit it from participating in valid hunts."

That was interesting. Hunting needed to remain a challenge, so the hunters were not allowed to make use of mechs and equipment that tilted the hunt too far in their favor.

Of course, this only applied for hunts that could increase the ranking of the participants.

"To be honest, I do not think that glows matter as much as before." The tall and muscular store manager gave her opinion. "Ever since exotic radiation is mutating so many exobeasts, we have noticed in our most recent hunts that these creatures are getting stronger on both a physical and mental level. The species that we have become accustomed to hunting in the past few years have become noticeably harder to fool. They are becoming smarter and more able to resist the emotions generated by exposure to our glows."

That sounded like a concerning development. "Do you think that will lead to a decline in sales of our popular Huntmaster model?"

"I am not too worried, sir. Zeigra can still provoke those beasts into standing their ground. We are dealing with completely wild beasts that are still controlled by their instincts. Even if the Huntmasters cannot induce them into fights, their mech pilots have come to appreciate the glow. They fight with greater confidence and are considerably more willing to challenge themselves. Sometimes, that is all it takes to turn a good hunter into a great hunter."

"Or a dead one." Ves astutely said.

Captain Gheri curled her lips. "Quite. At least we completed the sales beforehand. We do not sell our products on credit. The time and expenses needed to claw the remaining balance from the estates or the relatives of those dead losers are not worth the gains."

"Understandable."

"Anyway, let me show you our second-most popular mech model. The Monster Slayer is my personal favorite for obvious reasons. Ketis has done a perfect job. Many people mistakenly believe that she designed this mech model to excel in both the mech arena, but those who truly know her understand that she has sought to design the best hunting mech for Swordmaidens such as myself. Although the Monster Slayer can be an acquired taste among other hunters, its popularity has risen every day."

"Thanks in no part due to the stellar performance of you and the rest of your Swordmaidens." President Tarich added. "Your repeated successes have convinced more mech pilots within our community to bring swordsman mechs into their hunting trips. It has also contributed to the rise of casualties among those very same hunters."

Captain Gheri showed no remorse at all. "They should have stuck to their rifles and spears if they were so incompetent. Every good hunter must have a sober assessment of their qualifications. It is no fault of ours if they are too weak and stupid to challenge prey that they couldn't handle. I will not allow any of these foolish hunters to blame their Monster Slayers for their own incompetence. If anything, it is the responsibility of your Hunting Association to teach them how to hunt properly."

The branch president let out a sigh. "We have tried. Trust me. Humility is a rare trait among many hunters, particularly the newcomers who have arrived only recently."

Chapter 5467 Culpability

The exchange between President Oscar Tarich and Captain Gheri of the Swordmaidens made it clear that piloting the Monster Slayer came with elevated risks.

Hunting was not a risk-free activity to begin with. Those who treated it as a casual hobby often suffered when they entered the hunting trips without proper guidance and supervision.

However, the controversy surrounding the Monster Slayer model was that it had led to plenty of deaths among the more experienced and professional hunters!

This was a serious issue. Mech pilots normally shouldn't die in such frequent numbers. If the 'death rate' of a specific mech model became noticeably higher than the other products sold in the local market, then that definitely threatened to harm the reputation of the Monster Slayer model as well as its original designer!

There was no way that Ves could remain unmoved after learning about this issue.

The Monster Slayer was the first true commercial swordsman mech designed by Ketis.

She had deliberately set out to design it from beginning to end by herself. She wanted to prove to Ves and everyone else that she had become good enough to design a viable and popular mech model by relying on her own merits, and she succeeded in her venture.

Due to Ves' lack of involvement, the Monster Slayer was not a traditional living mech per se, and lacked many of the distinctive advantages of his own products.

Still, as Ves looked up at the proud display copy of the greatsword-wielding mech, he could sense a seed of life buried within its well-designed frame.

If he had to describe it, Ketis had learned just enough about living mechs to ensure that her products would at least end up as first order living mechs.

It was unlikely for her works to improve in a qualitative fashion by themselves. Ves saw no way they could evolve into second order or third order living mechs.

The problem was similar to the one that had plagued the Ouroboros all of the time. The scope of life applied to the design was simply too limited to know how to reach greater heights.

Ketis also did not attach a design spirit to the Monster Slayer.

This was the limit that Ketis was able to accomplish without developing an actual specialization in living mechs.

This was fine.

Instead of copying her former mentor, she added her own charm to the machine.

The main reason why she made her mech alive was so that she could load it with her swordsmanship.

The main role of the living mech was to instruct its mech pilot on how to learn and execute the sword styles she imbued in her designs!

The Monster Slayers effectively turned into a swordsmanship instructor for their pilots. Many of these people had quickly learned the basics of the relatively simple but solid Foundational Greatsword Style that Ketis had especially composed for beginner swordsmen.

This alone made it worthwhile for melee mech specialists to pilot the Monster Slayer!

There was no other mech like it. While there were mech designers that equipped their products with advanced AIs that could instruct their pilots in a similar manner, it lacked the intimacy and the personal touch of the Monster Slayer model.

More importantly, Ketis was able to imbue her swordsman mech designs with a touch of Sharpie's extraordinary willpower.

This enabled every pilot to come into contact with a will that was equivalent to that of an expert pilot!

The more they mastered the Foundational Greatsword Style, the greater their ability to execute the more remarkable techniques that already started to touch the threshold where sword techniques started to gain extraordinary traits!

Such an exhilarating mech model most definitely changed the mentality of its pilots. Had Ketis sufficiently considered the consequences of her own work? Did she implement enough safeguards to prevent her own customers from thinking they were champion swordsman mech pilots when their actual combat literacy was much further behind?

"Give me the statistics." Ves requested.

Both leaders transferred the relevant files to his comm.

He spent a few minutes analyzing the data himself. The data patterns and anecdotal testimonies matched their claims.

"I think I understand the underlying issue." Ves spoke again. "If you think about it, the Monster Slayer is a two-in-one mech. Ketis designed with two different roles in mind. Its first role is to function as a teaching mech. The target audience are mech pilots that are not accustomed to wielding greatswords or melee combat in general. These people tend to be less experienced and capable in general. The Monster Slayer's second role is to function as an advanced combat platform that can enable skilled and experienced mech pilots to challenge much more powerful opponents with comparably weaker machines."

There was an inherent contradiction between the two roles. The risk was that the mech pilots who originally piloted the Monster Slayer in order to learn how to fight effectively with a sword decided to put their new skills to use in actual battle.

That was not a problem on the surface, but it was different if the mech pilots overestimated their capabilities and deliberately sought to challenge themselves by tackling stronger enemies!

The LMC could not escape fault in these cases if the Monster Slayer actively pushed its own mech pilots to push their limits when they were not actually fit enough to undertake these dangerous fights!

President Tarich of the Hunting Association looked skeptical. "You may be correct, Professor Larkinson, but the pilots of Ocanon VI know better. The ones that attempted to challenge themselves and bring the Monster Slayers deep into the Chasseur Continent were not rookie mech pilots and hunters. They already completed enough hunts in both the Shamon and Chasseur Continents. In my opinion, the real issue is that strong hunters who have proven their skill and craft in many hunts have died in unusually high numbers since they piloted this dangerous machine of yours."

"Ketis told me once that the Monster Slayer is only supposed to be used in battle by really good mech pilots." Andraste said as she admired all of the mounted exobeast heads on the walls. "She also said that it is a mech that only allows the very best to become much stronger. It does not make much sense to stick to her Monster Slayer if the pilot isn't good enough to its full potential."

Ves nodded in agreement. He believed he understood the fundamental issue after he studied the data bit more.

"President Tarich, I do not believe you have missed your notice that the hunting teams of these overconfident hunters are always smaller. There are logs that show that the Monster Slayers among these teams have actually separated from the rest of their teammates and ventured into the depths of a dangerous hunting ground in duos or even by themselves. It is no surprise that they mostly failed to complete their hunts. If they piloted any other mech from any other company, their odds of defeating the powerful prey they had eyes upon would be just as poor."

"That is indeed the case." Oscar Tarich crossed his arms. "The difference here is that our hunters are able to keep their heads cool when they pilot the mechs produced by any other company. It is well-known that LMC mechs are able to exert different degrees of mental influence onto the pilots who interface with them. Although your living mechs have earned a high degree of acceptance among our community, there are skeptics who have begun to question whether we have all been underestimating the dark side of your products."

"There is no dark side to our living mechs." Ves frowned. "At the very least, the problem should be specific to the Monster Slayer model. Has the Huntmaster and the other products in our mech catalog generated any complaints?"

"Not yet, but that can change in the future."

"We will tackle that problem when it arises. For now, the conversation should be confined to the Monster Slayer model. That is what your branch is concerned about, right?"

Tarich shook his head in disappointment. "I do not wish to accuse you and your company of anything, but if the Monster Slayers sold by your company keep driving more and more of our hunters into reckless actions, then this will force the hand of our Hunting Association. Your product may end up joining your Ferocious Piranha and the Pacifier on the list of banned mech models."

Captain Gheri had done a good job at controlling her anger. Though she was not able to hide her increasing irritation, she at least knew better than to unleash an unhinged tirade.

That did not mean she wanted to remain silent!

"Do not listen to this guy. This is nonsense, sir." The Swordmaiden insisted. "What is really going on is that these arrogant hunters think they could beat our records. If I was able to hunt down a Barrugan Acid Spitter with a single Monster Slayer, those fools thought they could hunt other prey by themselves. I do not need to tell you the consequences of their actions. What is troublesome is what happens next. All of those people who have lost their friends and family need someone or something to blame. Instead of admitting that the dead hunters made a stupid decision that got themselves killed, they would rather shift the blame to Ketis' work and claim that our company has been negligent."

That caused Ves to frown. This was a very human response to the death of a loved one.

It was difficult to prove that the Monster Slayer had directly led to the deaths of those promising hunters.

However, it was also difficult to prove that the Monster Slayer had no involvement at all with the high death rates.

The hard numbers did not lie. The mech pilots of Ocanon VI had a much lower chance of dying if they entered the hunting grounds with any other mech!

Ves scratched his head. "I really do not want to deal with this matter. I am supposed to be on vacation right now. As far as I am concerned, the Monster Slayer should not be blamed for the failures of these mech pilots. I know that Ketis had tried to put a lot of effort into simplifying the Monster Slayer, but it is really only a mech model that the Swordmaidens can utilize to its full potential. I am not surprised that our elite Swordmaiden mech pilots can complete group hunts by themselves. They have gone through punishment training and mastered the greatsword to a much higher degree than those who have picked it up in just a couple of months. Other mech pilots simply cannot match this level of dedication in a relatively short amount of time."

The Monster Slayer provided a shortcut to mech pilots, but there were many more factors that made the Swordmaidens so absurdly strong in melee combat.

It was not without reason that his Larkinson Clan invested a lot of resources into this mech legion!

The indomitable spirit of these disciplined warriors along with their excellent combat acumen that was honed through numerous life-threatening challenges caused them to become fearless destroyers in battle.

As long as they were on the offensive, the Swordmaidens could chop anything apart!

The other hunters on Ocanon VI simply could not compare against these qualities! They had never put much emphasis on preparing themselves for fighting in the middle of a serious battlefield. Their ability to adapt to unexpected setbacks and cope with heavy disadvantages were much poorer!

"The Monster Slayer is not a forgiving mech in battle." Captain Gheri reiterated. "It packs a powerful punch and it can dodge nearly any attack as long as the pilot knows when to do so. However, its armor and defenses are not as great. It cannot take a lot of hits. Only a single mistake can be enough to cripple the machine, thereby turning it into a doomed machine when locked in combat with any powerful exobeast."

While she had explained this truth to the customers who bought copies of the Monster Slayer, her cautious advice always seemed to fall on deaf ears.

Chapter 5468 Effective Proposals

The fundamental problem was that the Monster Slayer was not exactly a beginner-friendly mech when utilized in actual combat.

Ketis was a highly skilled swordmaster, and spent most of her time interacting with Swordmaidens and Heavensworders, both of whom possessed remarkable skill in swordsmanship.

That made it a little more difficult for her to understand the plight and circumstances of mech pilots that comprised her actual clientele for this mech model.

Did she overestimate the competence and discipline of her customers?

Had she neglected to implement enough safeguards to prevent the mech pilots of her Monster Slayers from throwing themselves into near-certain death?

Or was it mainly the 'fault' of the Ocanon VI Branch of the Larkinson Clan for dominating the rankings by repeatedly defeating terrible monsters in solo hunts?

Ves really did not want to increase his stress by personally getting involved over this issue. This was not supposed to be a work visit.

He came up with a good idea on how to resolve this potentially thorny problem. He turned around and gestured for his oldest daughter to step forward.

"Aurelia?"

"What is it you require from me, papa?" The lovely girl asked in a slightly more formal tone than usual.

"Once you grow up, you may find yourself in charge of our clan. You will need to be able to resolve difficult problems that others haven't been able to solve. Given the current situation, how would you prevent this issue from turning into a serious blow to our clan?"

The young girl immediately looked thoughtful.

"More education is needed." Aurelia proposed in her elegant voice. "The root issue is lack of understanding. From what I can deduce based on what I have heard, the local hunters are overestimating the strength of the Monster Slayers and underestimating the skill of the Swordmaidens. Neither our mechs nor our personnel are at fault. There are no reasons to punish them for crimes they have not committed. The origin of the problem lies with the pilots, so the solution must target them as well."

Ves clapped. "That is sound logic, dear!"

It was not enough for President Tarich, however.

"With all due respect, we have already attempted to remedy the problem by issuing multiple warnings to the customers of your products. The death rates have not dropped as far as we can measure. There is something about your Monster Slayers that makes their pilots especially blind to their actual combat strength. They continue to overestimate their capabilities over and over again."

Aurelia took in this response and quickly formulated her response.

"If suggestive methods no longer work, then you must resort to more coercive methods to control the situation. Regardless of whether the Monster Slayer is a sound mech or not, it is a fact that it is being misused by too many of its customers. The most effective way to stop these mech pilots from undertaking challenges that are too much for them is to stop them from entering the hunting zones in the first place. President Tarich, your branch should institute a test that every mech pilot of the Monster Slayer must pass before he or she can proceed with their hunts."

That was a novel idea!

"That is an unprecedented move." The branch president stated. "If we follow your suggestion, then the Monster Slayer will be the first mech model that receives special treatment. This is not entirely fair to other mech designers and mech companies. The usual solution is to ban the mech model outright."

Aurelia shook her head. "It is not fair to the Living Mech Corporation to disallow one of its products from participating in valid hunts when neither of them are at fault. Your organization should not be inflexible. It is bad management to avoid the most obvious and effective solution due to bureaucratic limitations that do not exist."

She did not give the branch president an opportunity to issue another response. The assertive girl turned towards the store manager.

"Captain Gheri, you and your fellow Swordmaidens are not at fault for what has happened, but it cannot be denied that your actions have caused this problem to build up. You need to help our mech company in resolving this matter by showing that it is not the Monster Slayers, but your superior combat skills that are responsible for completing all of your highly challenging hunts."

The Swordmaiden veteran looked receptive towards Aurelia's idea. "You want us to leave our personal Monster Slayers behind and pilot other mechs instead?"

"You do not have to abandon your current mechs." Aurelia corrected. "You may keep them and continue to hunt with them. What I am suggesting is that you start to pilot our other mech models instead. I believe that you should be skilled enough to hunt your prey with the Huntmaster despite

the fact it is equipped with spears. You can also pilot swordsman mechs produced by our competitors."

"That sounds counterproductive, little girl. We will only boost the sales of the other mech stores in this city. Besides, I do not trust those swordsman mechs nearly as much as the Monster Slayer. The vast majority of their mech designers are completely inept in swordsmanship."

"This should not hinder your efforts, captain. You can choose to go on slightly easier hunts whenever you pilot third-party mechs. Your successful results should prove that you are still much more capable than all of the hunters. Your selection of prey should also send a message that you simply do not think you can fight just as well with a third-party mech than with a Monster Slayer."

It was a rather facetious message, but it still emphasized that the Swordmaidens had a lot more faith in the Monster Slayer model!

Everyone else looked impressed at Aurelia's suggestions. Perhaps Ves could have come up with these solutions as well, but he was not a preteen like his daughter!

"Miaow!"

"Meow meow!"

Clixie and Lucky had paused in their attempts to run around and explore the interesting decor by voicing their approval.

Ves clapped his hands. "Great! Let's go with what my daughter has just said. Do either of you have any objections to following her blueprint?"

A look of distaste appeared on Captain Gheri's face. "My Swordmaidens and I can diversify our mech usage if that will help. I do not like it, but as long as those stupid hunters start to recognize that we are good, then that is worth it, I think."

President Tarich also agreed to enact the proposal directed towards the Hunting Association.

"I will have to conduct numerous meetings in order to push through the changes necessary to restrict the usage of the Monster Slayer in valid hunts. It is good that our Association only recently completed a large and extensive reorganization. Our rules are still fluid enough that it should be easier to implement other changes."

"Did you hear that, Aurelia? Are you happy that your suggestion is leading these people to work towards effective solutions?"

The dark-haired girl nodded. "I do! This is fun. I like being in charge!"

Ves couldn't help but grin and pull his daughter into a hug. He soon began to shower her face in kisses.

"I am so proud of you, Aurelia! You're so cute when you act like a leader. I can't wait to see you grow up and take over my clan. I wish your mother could see you now. She would be just as happy!"

"Not here, papa! It embarrassing!"

"Hey, I want kisses as well!"

After Ves had his fill with showering his children with affection, he regained his composure and acted as if nothing special had happened.

"Ahem. Let's continue with this tour. Tell me about the third bestseller of this store."

Captain Gheri smiled in a funny way but did as she instructed. She led the group a short distance away until they arrived before a very different mech from the last two ones.

"The Crystal Lord Mark III is not a mech that should be popular within the hunting community. It is a landbound rifleman mech that is more expensive than most of the competition. It is also equipped with an energy weapon, which is generally regarded as less effective than a kinetic weapon when hunting huge beasts."

Large-scale exobeasts tended to possess a lot of damage-resistant meat. Normal energy attacks tended to burn a shallow amount of hide and flesh while dispersing a lot of heat energy to a much greater chunk of organic matter.

What all of this meant was that a lot of exobeasts had the ability to absorb a lot of energy beams without losing a lot of combat effectiveness.

So long as their organs and more important extremities remained untouched, these beasts could continue to rampage without any noticeable hindrance!

If hunters wanted to bring ranged mechs to a hunting trip, then they would often go for mechs armed with ballistic rifles, gauss rifles and similar armaments.

Although it was troublesome to carry around a lot of heavy and bulky ammunition, this effort paid off in spades as these chunky rounds were much better at penetrating through layers of thick and resilient flesh!

This was why Captain Gheri stated that the Crystal Lord Mark III model shouldn't be such a good seller in the local market.

Ves grew curious why one of his old machines had defied the odds.

The Mark III edition was equipped with second generation luminar crystal rifles, which was two generations behind his most current implementation of luminar crystal technology.

"The first reason why it is popular is because it is one of the few landbound living mechs that we sell that is optimized for ranged combat." The Swordmaiden explained. "Living mechs have become more and more popular here and elsewhere. I think many of our customers would still be willing to buy a worse version of the Crystal Lord Mark HI as long as it is still alive."

"That makes sense, but that should only lead to moderate sales. What else is responsible for boosting its sales?"

"There are many ranged mech pilots that have devoted most of their training to specializing in the use of energy weapons. They do not like to switch to kinetic weapons. Out of the rifleman mechs sold in the market, our Crystal Lord Mark III model offers greater firepower at a cheaper price. The more powerful luminar crystal weapons partially offset the lack in penetration power when hunting large exobeasts."

"I can see how that helps. That doesn't sound like everything, though. Are there any other factors that have made it so popular?"

"Heat." Gheri replied. "A lot of exobeasts can easily spot mechs that run hot, even through thick forests. There are many hunts where remaining undetected is of vital importance. No mechs that rely on energy weapons can keep their temperatures down, but the luminar crystal rifles of the Crystal Lord Mark III are so efficient that they heat up slower than any other energy weapon at their price range. This can mean the difference between a successful hunt and a fatal accident. The less an exobeast is able to detect the position of ranged mechs, the lower the chance the maddened creature will bull through everything in the way in an attempt to destroy the machines that fire those painfully hot beams."

"Even if that happens, the Crystal Lord Mark III should be able to outrun many threats. The mech is quite fast and maneuverable, which is what you want the most in a hunt." Ves grinned.

Of course, the Crystal Lord Mark III made up for that by reducing its armor protection.

Though Ves had added a gimmick that made it much more resistant against enemy energy attacks, most of the exobeasts of Ocanon VI were only able to attack through physical means.

Nonetheless, the threat to the Crystal Lord Mark III should be light as long as it maintained its distance.

Combined with a much lighter logistical burden due to avoiding the need to carry a lot of spare ammunition, the Crystal Lord Mark III sounded like a fine addition to any hunting team.

Chapter 5469 The Hunter's Code

After Captain Gheri had completed the tour through the LMC store, Ves and his family had seen enough.

The store only represented a part of the Larkinson Clan's interests on Ocanon VI, after all. The Larkinsons stationed on the planet also engaged in other important activities.

"You should pay a visit to the base where our local branch is housed." The Swordmaiden officer suggested to Ves. "Our fellow clansmen and I would love to demonstrate our strength to you. We have made good progress as of late. Our Monster Slayers have also become stronger."

"I will be sure to visit the branch in the evening." Ves promised as he shook the woman's strong and calloused hand.

President Oscar Tarich eventually led the recent arrivals away from the LMC store and straight to the center of Tixe City.

The traffic became lighter as they started to approach the district where all of the government institutions were located.

Ordinary hunters had little reason to visit these places under normal circumstances. The only place that attracted more traffic than usual was the head office of the Hunting Association!

It was not a tall structure, but it occupied a larger block. Several sprawling structures along with underground construction enabled the local branch of this notable organization to lead and coordinate a lot of different tasks.

Although it sounded contradictory, it took a huge amount of effort to preserve the natural state of Ocanon VI. Its hunting grounds were not able to replenish the losses from frequent hunts. Careful management was essential to keeping the prey populations at sustainable levels.

However, the rising onset of E energy radiation-induced mutations had caused the workers of the Hunting Association to become a lot more stressed.

Ves could feel the frenetic activity around him as he stepped through the main entrance of the central building.

Few workers looked relaxed and content as they moved between departments. Even with the arrival of additional support, the changes produced by the rapidly strengthening exobeasts were straining everyone's ability to keep the hunting grounds under control.

However, E energy radiation did not only bring disaster.

It also granted blessings to the many hunters who recently found out that there were additional benefits to hunting down these dangerous prey!

"As you can see, our Association is doing the utmost to preserve the safety of this planet without compromising its viability as a hunting preserve." President Tarich said as he led the Larkinsons through the hall and up the stairs to another floor. "Aside from taking direct action, we rely heavily on the hunters to put down mutating exobeasts long before they can grow out of control."

"Hunters like to tackle a challenge, but many of them shouldn't be willing to provoke dangerous beasts that have developed a lot of powerful surprises. How can you persuade them to eliminate the targets that are much more troublesome than others?" Ves curiously asked.

"Our Hunting Association is not short on wealth, professor. The most straightforward means to motivate the hunters into action is to attract them with cash rewards. We have instituted a virtual mission board where any hunter or hunting team can apply to complete one of our missions if they qualify. Your clansmen have been particularly enthusiastic about completing them, and we are grateful to your Larkinsons because of that. I think they have accepted the missions more because we are able to guide them directly to their prey, thereby saving them valuable time in tracking them down themselves."

"That sounds about right."

The Hunting Association indeed relied on a lot of money to solve problems before they became too powerful to suppress. Why do all of the dirty work when there was a city full of hunters that were more than willing to take action?

"Recently, that has changed." President Tarich continued to explain as they passed through several doors that led into the more secure sections of the main building. "As I have already explained, the central headquarters of our Hunting Association has published the Hunter's Code. Though it was initially met with skeptical reactions, the early adopters quickly began to outpace the more cautious hunters. Now, virtually every hunter on this planet as well as many other ones have enthusiastically embraced the new code."

They briefly stopped before a guarded checkpoint. Once the group passed through the thick and sturdy gate, they entered a library of sorts where a lot of texts had been printed into old-fashioned books.

There were several reasons why the Hunting Association had resorted to such a primitive method of information storage, though that was not important at the moment.

The branch president sped up his steps and picked up a thick black tome that exuded small but concentrated energy that immediately caused Ves and the others to see it in a different light!

"This book...!"

"The Hunter's Code is not a secret text." Tarich said. "Anyone can access it on the galactic net as long as they are registered hunters. It is impossible to prevent it from falling in the hands of others, but it is too difficult for non-hunters to make use of our code. What I have in my hands is the only physical copy of the Hunter's Code that the Huntsman has directly materialized using his own willpower."

"Wow!"

"So awesome!"

The children all looked eager to touch the big and heavy tome.

Ves did not show a strong reaction because he already guessed this answer. He had come into contact with the willpower of a powerful god pilot a few times before.

The book radiated the power of a distinctly different god pilot.

Whereas the Destroyer of Worlds possessed a will that evoked the threat of total annihilation, the influence of the Huntsman gave Ves the sense that everything in the cosmos could be divided between predator and prey!

To be honest, Ves recognized a few parallels between the Huntsman and Cynthia Larkinson.

They both shared a similar perspective about predation, though they utilized different angles to shape their domains.

Ves wondered whether there was any family relation between the two. Could the Huntsman be a distant relative?

Nah.

What a silly thought.

In any case, the black tome was absolutely remarkable. Even if its contents were exactly the same as the virtual editions of the Hunter's Code, this one was special because it possessed the remnant will of a god pilot!

Ves figured that any hunter that studied the Hunter's Code through this empowered tome would make much more progress than normal!

It was like the Monster Slayer in the form of a book.

The principles were similar, but the black tome probably offered a lot more effective guidance than a swordsman mech.

Once Oscar Tarich presented the sacred book to the Larkinsons, he reverently placed it on a flat table.

"You are permitted to peruse it as you wish for the remainder of the hour. I will have to ask you to leave once your time is up. Another hunter has reserved the following timeslot. You can continue to study the virtual edition of the Hunter's Code after you have left."

"I understand. I am grateful for the opportunity to study this book in person."

The branch president did not need to explain that this was an extremely coveted privilege. It was a dream for hunters to come into direct contact with a relic that was entirely made by the God Kingdom of their greatest idol!

Though Ves did not really appreciate the remarkable book as much as other people, he still handled it with great respect.

No matter what, the heavy tome contained an active trace of the Huntsman's willpower!

Though it was unlikely that the Huntsman actively paid attention to the hundreds of identical black tomes that he had sent to all of the branches of the Hunter's Association, who knew whether he paid attention just as Ves made a disrespectful remark?

"Can I see? Can I see?" Andraste asked as she walked up and pressed against his father's body.

"Me too!" Marvaine said as he reached out so that his father could lift him above the table.

Though Ves did not think it was suitable for them to come in touch with this cultivation method, they needed to get exposed to texts like these. He did not want them to get fooled by dubious cultivation mantras posted on the galactic net.

"I will let you read this as long as you promise not to practice it." He told his children. "If you want to grow stronger, I can offer you plenty of other ways to promote your evolution. Andraste, are you still practicing the method that I have taught?"

"Yes, papa." The red-headed girl rolled her eyes. "You don't have to ask. I know what is important. Becoming a potentate is still my biggest goal!"

"Good girl." Ves said as he patted Andraste's head. "Now let's see what this Hunter's Code is all about."

Even though reading a big book was not exactly a typical holiday activity, none of the Larkinsons issued any complaints.

The opening sentence was a direct quote of the Huntsman.

[Never forget that the hunter can always turn into the hunted and vice versa. Even the greatest of hunters can fall prey one day.]

"Well, that is intense." Ves muttered.

This sentence exposed the Huntsman's belief that there were always bigger fish in the ocean.

Nobody was truly weak, and nobody was truly strong.

"Let's continue."

Ves began to flip the pages at a speed that was too fast for his children to keep up with his reading pace.

Though his kids were good learners, they were too young and lacked a comprehensive understanding of cultivation science.

Though the Hunter's Code was meant to be read by hunters who had no background in cultivation, Ves found it a lot easier to comprehend the mantra and the many associated techniques of this interesting new cultivation framework.

"What an impressive method."

Ves grew more and more appreciative of the Hunter's Code. Whoever composed this comprehensive cultivation method absolutely knew what they were doing.

While he was not able to judge whether the Hunter's Code was as good as the Metal God Method, he felt that it should not be any worse.

After fifteen minutes of going through the mantra and the extensive explanations on its various components, Ves gained a broad understanding of what he had just read.

According to his own understanding, the Hunter's Code was a combination between a qi cultivation method and a body cultivation method.

It sought to strengthen its practitioners in a holistic manner. There was a definite focus on combat, survival and hunting activities.

What makes the Hunter's Code different from many other hunting methods was the primary means of growth.

Qj cultivators mainly made progress by absorbing the power of heaven and thinking really hard on artistic conceptions.

Body cultivators mainly grew stronger by absorbing a lot of valuable resources and tempering their growing physiques.

The Hunter's Code mashed both of these approaches together into a mantra that attempted to shape the mentality of hunters while also encouraging them to strengthen their bodies by eating a lot of flesh!

The cultivation method imposed a lot of demands on its practitioners. Those who wanted to follow the Hunter's Code pretty much had to center their entire lifestyle around hunting. There was simply not enough room for any other obsessions.

However, there was one strong advantage that made the Hunter's Code extremely compelling for many people.

"Pretty much any healthy individual can practice this method."

This was remarkable work. If Ves interpreted it correctly, the Hunter's Code could easily be practiced by any human as long as they properly followed all of the instructions!

There was no demand for talent or affinities. There was no need to buy expensive augmentations or ingredients.

Even third-raters could overtake the progress of first-raters as long as they were earnest enough about following the Hunter's Code!

This was because the primary means of growth of its practitioners was to devour the strength of the prey of their own kills!

The Hunter's Code taught every hunter a large amount of rituals that enabled them to derive far more benefits from their defeated prey than normal!

The black tome even contained a ritual that directly sacrificed a kill to the Huntsman!

Chapter 5470 Modernized Sacrificial Rituals

Who didn't want to become stronger?

Ever since the Age of Dawn commenced, Ves and many other knowledgeable people concluded that red humanity would change forever.

Heavenly qi. The power of heaven. Spiritual energy. Psionic power. E energy.

No matter what label it carried, this powerful energy with psychoactive and psychoreactive properties had the potential to turn a lot of trash into treasure!

The magnitude of E energy radiation bombarding the Red Ocean was massive. The vast majority of this supposedly 'free' energy harmlessly passed through the empty void of space and continued their way onwards without benefiting anyone or anything in the process.

Only a small proportion of this huge amount of exotic radiation slammed into planets.

Rocks, plants and exobeasts all became bathed in E energy radiation. They all became affected by this ubiquitous force in many different ways.

The effect on the vast majority of subjects was little to none. Only a few minerals or organisms proved to be much more susceptible to mutations induced by E energy radiation, but that was already enough to radically alter the ecosystem of a life-bearing planet!

These mutated elements did not remain isolated from each other. They were all part of an ecosystem one way or another.

Exoplants extracted hyper materials that had suddenly emerged within the reach of their roots.

All manner of herbivores devoured these mutated plants, thereby absorbing a fraction of the extraordinary power contained within.

Carnivores subsequently hunted down and devoured the flesh of these plant-eating exobeasts, thereby devouring a portion of the hyper materials and energy-rich flesh of their prey.

This was a process known as bioaccumulation.

Even if the rate of contamination and mutation was not that extensive in the lower end of the food chain, the apex predator that sat atop it easily extracted the essence of the global changes to the entire ecosystem.

This was the main reason why Ocanon VI and many other untamed planets gradually started to experience more and more outbreaks from the top predators in their respective lands.

The strongest and most threatening predators experienced the fastest growth in strength!

This not only made them a lot more dangerous to fight against, but also increased their predation ability even further!

As the brutally cunning beasts began to associate eating with rapid growth, they lost all restraint and began to hunt down as many prey as possible, regardless of whether they had already filled their stomachs!

At most, these rapidly mutating exobeasts learned to be picky and only devour the most energy-dense flesh and organs.

The exceedingly fast growth of these powerful predators quickly broke the ecosystems they were a part of. The Hunting Association branches of every planet where widespread hunting took place experienced greater pressure to contain these outbreaks.

This trend could not be stopped!

So long as there was E energy radiation and life, the organisms who lived and thrived on a planet would always find a way to mutate and explode in strength.

Letting these powerful exobeasts grow in an unrestrained fashion threatened to pose a greater threat to the humans who may or may not live on that very same planet.

Though it hadn't happened as of yet, there was a small chance that an exobeast would grow so powerful that it might even be able to escape its own planet and soar into space!

Not even the Red Two could remain complacent at the possibility of this happening. When exobeasts turned into astral beasts, there was always a chance that a new terror among the stars would emerge.

If human-occupied space started to get plagued by marauding astral beasts, that would severely impact the supply lines that red humanity's industries relied upon.

The loss of trade and efficiencies would cripple red humanity's economy and warmaking potential, thereby dooming the chances of every human in the new frontier!

As such, the Hunting Association actually served an essential purpose in today's society.

Many people might not be aware of how vital it was to manage all of the hunting preserves and support the development of enough hunters to keep all of the mutating organisms in check.

The Hunter's Code played a key role in this new system.

Virtually every mutated beast was a natural body cultivator. They devoured the flesh and bones of weaker creatures that had absorbed significant quantities of E energy and hyper materials, thereby strengthening their own body tissue in turn.

Since exobeasts were able to grow stronger in such an extraordinary manner, then what about humans?

The extraordinary resources contained within the carcasses of their powerful prey held great value, and there was no reason for humans to let them rot.

There had to be a way to continue the process of bioaccumulation so that it effectively reached the human hunters that reigned at the top of every food chain!

This was the central premise of the Hunter's Code.

"It's not as easy as it sounds."

While the overall logic was sound, it was a lot harder to make it work in practice.

For one, humans were not known for their strong bodies. They were not only incredibly weak compared to a typical apex predator, they also happened to be fairly small!

It was impossible for humans to devour large quantities of flesh harvested from exobeasts that massed as much as two heavy mechs stacked together!

While not every mutated beast grew so large, they always tended to be far larger than any human could devour in a single meal.

This was problematic as exobeasts lost a portion of their potency at a rapid rate upon getting killed.

That was why the Hunter's Code put so much emphasis on devouring the flesh of the prey that the hunters had felled on the very same day!

The shorter the time delay, the more the energy-rich exobeast flesh retained much of the extraordinary qualities that made it strong.

Even then, hunters experienced many different problems in converting these precious organic resources into actual gains.

Their relatively small human bodies prevented them from eating a lot of rich flesh.

Their weak physiques meant that they lacked the ability to digest dangerous alien flesh that was filled with all kinds of poisonous metals and other toxic junk.

So how could hunters successfully devour the deadly flesh of their powerful prey?

The Hunter's Code did not prohibit hunters from processing the toxic flesh to render it safer for human consumption.

This was why a lot of hunting teams had started to bring along biological processing machines that were previously only found in food processing plants.

As long as these ambitious hunting teams successfully felled a mutated beast, they planted down their fancy machines and stuffed as much valuable flesh into it as possible!

After a lot of work, the processing machines successfully filtered and extracted a portion of meat that lost all of the elements that made it so deadly.

The yield was usually low, but at least it was better than nothing!

This was what the hunters sought to attain. While eating all of this processed meat usually did little for most humans, the story was different if they cultivated the Hunter's Code.

This expansive tome contained numerous mantras and techniques that were specifically designed to actively allow hunters to extract the most potent energies and nutrients from all of the rich flesh in their stomachs!

The hunters could subsequently channel all of these extracted resources into promoting the strength of their bodies and spiritualities.

Though the conversion rate was still fairly low, as long as their defeated prey was powerful enough, these hunters could rapidly strengthen their bodies through continuous hunting!

This was the body cultivation component of the Hunter's Code.

What was also important to note was that hunting teams usually received more flesh from this process than they could fit into their stomachs.

What should they do with the remainder of the processed and unprocessed flesh?

It was not that useful to ship it back to other people. Those who did not participate in the hunt would not be able to employ the methods of the Hunter's Code, thereby finding themselves unable to take advantage of the same powerful methods.

The Code offered an alternative way to convert the remainder of the excess flesh and bones into useful gains.

Ves widened his eyes as he caught sight of numerous rituals. He grew more and more astonished when he saw how boldly this cultivation method leaned on sacrificial offerings!

"Is this for real?"

The rituals in question encouraged the hunters to perform special actions in order to sacrifice the excess resources from their prey.

This mostly amounted to burning whatever remained from the carcasses in fancy processes that burdened on making religious offerings!

By sacrificing the remains of powerful prey to the Huntsman, the god pilot promised reward the successful hunters by granting them a trace of his own energy!

"This... this is wild!"

It was no wonder that so many hunters embraced the Hunter's Code!

This was probably the closest they could ever get to a god pilot.

The Hunter's Code did not obfuscate the benefits of receiving a trace of the Huntsman's energy.

Devouring a lot of messy energies from living creatures often led to contamination.

This problem became especially serious when it came to powerful mutated beasts that bore a huge amount of resentment towards their slayers!

The psychoactive and psychoreactive elements of their remnant flesh still contained traces of this burning resentment, and would do anything to take revenge!

Hunters that continued to devour flesh contaminated by resentment would ultimately become distorted by all of their kills.

The Huntsman's god-like will was able to cleanse all of the impurities formed by devouring contaminated flesh, thereby allowing hunters to retain their humanity and rationality.

This was not all.

As long as hunters earnestly cultivated the mantras of the Hunter's Code, they would eventually develop the artistic conceptions that were associated with their profession.

Getting into contact with the energy of the Huntsman would allow these earnest hunters to rapidly boost the development of their artistic conceptions, thereby advancing their qi cultivation by leaps and bounds!

Ves recognized that this was the qi cultivation component of the Hunter's Code.

"No. It is not as simple as that."

The strong involvement of the Huntsman effectively added a contract cultivation component to the Hunter's Code.

Every hunter who sacrificed their kills essentially completed a transaction to the Huntsman!

"What a clever scheme!"

Ves could spot the ambition of that powerful spear-throwing god pilot through these sacrificial rituals.

Whenever hunters made their sacrificial offerings, they not only transmitted a portion of the extraordinary resources to the Huntsman, but also offered up their faith in the process!

How could they not? From the perspective of these hunters, the Huntsman was their literal god.

The continuous exchanges from all of these sacrificial rituals benefited the Huntsman enormously.

By engaging in this form of deity cultivation, the god pilot obtained an army of hardcore devotees who constantly grew stronger by continuously hunting powerful prey.

The quantity of all of these hunters might not be great, but their quality as well as the frequency of their sacrificial offerings would absolutely be high!

This would undoubtedly further the subsequent advancement of the Huntsman.

It became clear that he had definite ambitions to become the God of the Hunt!

Ves did not know why a god pilot wanted to lean so heavily into deity cultivation all of a sudden.

He was still far from reaching this level. Perhaps his mother knew more, but she was not willing to divulge information that he was not yet qualified to know.

All that mattered was that the Huntsman was playing a big game with the Hunter's Code.

Ves grew inspired by the god pilot's ambitious and expansive layout.

"Is this a portend of the future?"

Ves did not entirely feel comfortable about the Hunter's Code. It contained several elements that possessed strong religious undertones.

This was an overt challenge to the Big Two's historical policy of avoiding and suppressing religion.