

The Mech 5481

Chapter 5481 The Arrow Gods

The Giant Stone Eater displayed a remarkable ability to weaponize the ground!

This attack method exceeded the scope of biological attack methods. No ordinary exobeast could manipulate the soil to the point of causing them to spawn abnormally strong and sharp spikes.

"What a strong application of earth-attributed E energy." Ves admiringly said. "It is amazing to think that this mutated beast is able to utilize energy in such a directed fashion solely by relying on its new instincts."

Based on his comprehension of the Beginner Five Elements Spells Manual, it would take a qi cultivator years of hard work and practice to manifest his power in a similar fashion!

It was unheard of for qi cultivators to be able to execute these kinds of spells without studying them first. Even those with an excellent affinity in the earth element still needed to figure out stuff on their own before they could apply their powers with such skill.

Apparently, Arrow Gods did not expect that the Giant Stone Eater could summon a forest of spikes.

The most annoying part about them was that they lingered upon appearance. The powerful mutated beast even continued to channel earth-attributed E energy in them, causing them to retain their abnormally strong resilience.

The earth element was often associated with defense and toughness, so the Huntmaster mechs were unable to break them with ease.

The forest of spikes effectively limited their maneuvering space!

Since it took way too much time and effort to get rid of all of these ground spikes, the Huntmaster mechs circled around and tried to poke at their target's weak points from another angle.

The spearman mechs barely had any time to interfere with the Giant Stone Eater up close when the mutated beast summoned even more earth energy!

Though the mech pilots of the Huntmasters had a low sensitivity towards any shifts in E energy, their living mechs were different!

From the moment their living mechs detected the massive shift and warned their mech pilots of the impending danger, the latter did not hesitate to back off from the Giant Stone Eater!

Another forest of spikes shot out of the ground, this time larger and wider than before!

Crack!

Though two of the Huntmasters managed to get out unscathed, the one that was closest to the mutated beast failed to avoid the spike that tore up its left leg!

The crippled mech stumbled as the stone spike surprisingly tore through so many components that the limb had become inoperable!

"Damn! That Huntmaster is falling!"

The Giant Stone Eater had suffered attack after attack since this confrontation began. Now that one of the annoyingly mobile mech had lost its speed, the mutated beast quickly took advantage of this opening!

A pair of rocky slabs shifted apart, revealing a scaled nozzle that resembled a short rifle muzzle.

Soon, that nozzle began to spit out an erratic but rapid torrent of crude stone projectiles!

Reinforced by earth energy, these relatively small chunks of rocks struck with greater force and impact than they should, causing them to strike at the vulnerable Huntmaster with the force of ballistic projectiles!

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

The fallen Huntmaster's armor began to get chipped at a steady rate. Its inability to evade attacks exposed a serious flaw in its ability to cope with attacks.

Though the armor system designed by Sara Voiken held up remarkably well against these rapid physical attacks, there was only so much she could do for an offensive mech.

"That is also new." President Yarich remarked. "The Giant Stone Eater must have evolved this imitation rifle after it had exhausted the ammunition of the previous hunting team that thought it could win a battle of attrition with this monster."

That strategy made sense if the hunters attacked an ordinary opponent, but a mutated beast that could continually absorb earth-attributed E energy did not play by the rules.

The other mechs of the Arrow Gods tried to relieve pressure on their injured comrade by focusing their attacks on the scaled nozzle.

It hardly worked. The organic weapon was so embedded in the body of the Giant Stone Eater that it could only be attacked from a limited angle!

Anytime the ranged mechs positioned themselves at the correct angles, the Giant Stone Eater simply lobbed a pair of explosive rocks at them, which forced them to abandon their attacks and move away!

BOOOM! BOOOM!

The Giant Stone Eater actually showed another adaptation by throwing smaller rocks. Their explosive power was weaker, but the mutated beast was able to form them quickly enough to pressure the archer mechs and rifleman mechs much better this time!

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

The crippled Huntmaster had rolled onto the ground and changed its orientation in order to narrow its surface area to the monster.

This actually reduced the hit rate by a significant margin as the organic rifle was incredibly inaccurate.

It might be bearable for the Giant Stone Eater to fire a stream of rock projectiles at closer range, but it had yet to figure out how to make it accurate at longer ranges!

As the Arrow Gods struggled to save one of their own, a trio of auxiliary mechs finally stepped forward.

Ves did not recognize their design, but he could see that they were utilized as pack mules and additional labor.

Each of them happened to be equipped with chained hook launchers, though Ves imagined that the mechs could swap out their hooks with sharp harpoons.

The machines quickly fired three identical hooks that magnetically attached themselves to the fallen Huntmaster at the right sections.

The three support mechs subsequently ran backwards, making sure to reel in the chains attached to the magnetic hooks.

"They are rescuing their fallen mech." Marvaine noted with great interest.

President Yarich nodded in approval. "It is customary for hunting teams to include auxiliary mechs. Piloting them is not a glamorous job, but they are often piloted by young and inexperienced recruits who are in the process of learning this trade. Wreck retrieval is an essential job to them. They not only prevent expensive machines from getting trampled by maddened beasts, but can also restrain the movements of a prey."

The Huntmaster's condition deteriorated as the hooks roughly dragged it across the ground.

The angle of the crater made this job a little more difficult. The Giant Stone Eater continued to spray its stone projectiles without abandon.

Yet what concerned the Arrow Gods the most was when the crippled mech had distanced itself just far enough to come in the range of the mutated beast's fearsome stone catapults!

As if sensing the impending threat, the various mechs ceased their ineffectual attacks and ran towards the chains.

The mechs all utilized their chains to speed up the retrieval of their fallen comrade.

"They're not going to make it in time." Andraste frowned.

The Giant Stone Eater launched two decently sized explosive rocks at the damaged Huntmaster!

Yet before they fell down to the ground, the Huntmaster suddenly regained a lot of life and utilized its arms and only working leg to push itself off the ground and sprint away in an awkward crawling motion!

BOOOM! BOOOM!

Normally, this would never work, but because the spearman mech was actively pulled by three strong hooks, it managed to escape the blast radius just enough to only get sprayed by a shower of pebbles!

"They're gone!"

The damaged mech successfully leapt over the edge of the crater and continued to sprint-crawl away as if its life depended on its performance.

Even though the mechs of the Arrow Gods had left the Giant Stone Eater's line of sight, the latter still had another way of sensing its retreating adversaries.

BOOOM! BOOOM!

BOOOM! BOOOM!

The Giant Stone Eater continued to lob explosive rocks at the departing hunting team for quite a while. Its powerful throwing arms possessed a remarkable range and demonstrated an impressive degree of accuracy.

If not for the fact that the rocks were so painfully slow once they flew into the air, it would have been a lot more challenging for the hunting mechs to evade these artillery strikes!

"A failed hunt." Oscar Tarich delivered the verdict. "This is not a surprising result. The Arrow Gods fought well and came in with a good game plan. It is commendable that they managed to minimize the damage as soon as they recognized that they cannot defeat their prey without suffering serious losses. It is just that the Giant Stone Eater has adapted faster than the norm. Despite its appearance, this mutated beast is learning quickly. We will have to revise our estimate on how much time is needed for it to evolve into a Calamity Beast."

"This beast is so strong." Andraste spoke with a lot of awe in her voice. "Do you think the Swordmaidens can kill this monster, papa?"

Ves wanted to voice his support for his troops, but he found it difficult to do so this time.

"That is difficult to say, honey. Part of the reason why the Arrow Gods failed to take down the Giant Stone Eater is because their mech and weapon configurations are not the most ideal against this kind of thick and heavy monster. The Swordmaidens will incur a similar handicap if they challenge this beast with just their Monster Slayer mechs. This massive beast cannot be defeated by relying on clever maneuvering and fancy sword techniques. It needs to get pounded by concentrated salvos of artillery fire from a comfortable distance."

The forest of spikes posed a massive threat to any landbound melee mechs. Ves could not think of any way for the Swordmaidens to remain close to this versatile stone beast.

"We generally disapprove of artillery mechs in hunts." The branch president of the Hunting Association said. "They inflict too much damage to the terrain, and produce too much noise. Their usage vastly increases the chance of attracting other powerful beasts. This is a serious danger as most artillery mechs are slow to move and poorer at traversing complex terrain such as the mountains of the Sorara #390 Hunting Ground."

"I see."

"Oh, I have an idea!" Marvaine cutely spoke up! "If we cannot bombard it from a distance, then why not use flamethrowers? Our mechs do not have to get so close in order to use them. They can spray so much fire on the rock monster until it cooks like the fish we roasted last time!"

"That is so clever, little brother! I wonder what a rock monster steak tastes like."

"Ahem." Ves cleared his throat. "Your idea is good, Marvaine, but it is a little more complicated than that. If you look up the public database of the Red Association, you will find out that fire energy has a synergistic relationship with earth energy. Defense happens to be the Giant Stone Eater's specialty, so it should be able to endure the damaging influx of fire well enough to transform into additional earth energy. What will end up happening is that this beast will become even stronger and find a way to kill all of those flamethrower mechs. Perhaps it may even evolve into a lava beast."

"Ow..." Marvinne looked disappointed that he got it wrong. "Then how can you defeat this beast?"

"According to that same database, wood energy has a contradictory relationship with earth energy. I would try to field a mech that has a strong relationship to this element. Such a mech can effectively inhibit the Giant Stone Eater's capacity to reinforce itself with earth energy. Once you can weaken its fundamental strength, its attacks will become less exaggerated and its defenses won't be as inexhaustible as before."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Such a mech doesn't exist, papa."

"I know. I will design it one day."

Ves took one last look at the triumphant Giant Stone Eater before the shuttle moved to another hunting ground.

He had become quite impressed by this earth beast. Its defensive properties were insane and its offensive potential was not weak.

The mutated beast was not so easy to obtain, though.

He struggled to decide whether he should instruct the Ocanon VI Branch of the Larkinson Clan to retrieve the Giant Stone Eater.

Chapter 5482 Azure Tornado Dragon

A mostly untamed planet such as Ocanon VI possessed a huge amount of biodiversity.

Billions of years of nearly untouched evolution had shaped the organisms on the planet in profound ways.

Though the human colonists who recently claimed this jewel discovered faded signs of prior alien visitations and occupations, the planet's critical lack of phasewater drastically lowered its worth among the native alien races.

Their neglect made sense in a time where the Red Ocean used to orbit around the Milky Way, but the Age of Dawn had completely upended the status quo.

Phasewater still remained valuable, but it was not as critical of a resource as before.

Humans and aliens could not have imagined that an ordinary life-bearing planet such as Ocanon VI could one day hold just as much value as a planet with a renewable phasewater deposit!

The rich and natural ecosystems of these virgins had turned into strategic resources overnight.

Their huge value lay in their ability to effectively convert raw E energy radiation into bizarre and powerful mutated beasts!

The greater the quantity of exoplants and exobeasts, the higher the incidences of extreme mutations.

The greater the biodiversity of the ecosystem, the more varied and unusual the expressions of mutations.

Ocanon VI happened to score high in both criteria!

Though it was easy for Ves and his children to understand these rules in theory, the facts became a lot more impactful when they had a chance to see the results for themselves.

The shuttle continued to fly across the wildest and most dangerous Chasseur Continent. It became increasingly clearer to them why the death rates had skyrocketed all of a sudden.

The entire continent had been turned into an intentional calamity beast breeding ground!

This turned it into the most exciting challenge ground. Virtually no one but the most daring adventurers dared to hunt their prey on foot on this exceedingly dangerous landmass.

In contrast to the more regulated Melrose and Chamon Continents where the Hunting Association actively culled mutated beasts the moment they crossed the limits of their hunting grounds, the Chasseur Continent received so little interference that all kinds of strange life forms evolved from its expansive hunting grounds!

For example, when the shuttle flew over the Mother River #405 Hunting Ground, Ves and his children spotted an amazing creature swimming in one of the many tributaries of an expansive river delta.

"Look! Look! Look! It's a dragon, papa!"

"Wait, really? Oh, wow, it truly is a dragon."

"That is not a dragon, silly. It has no forearms, so it should technically be classified as a wyvern."

"It's a dragon! Tell her I'm right, Lucky."

"Meow?"

The supposed 'dragon' only vaguely resembled one. It looked like a reptilian pterodactyl that lacked feathers and gained a lot more bulk.

This should have made it so that the creature became too heavy to support its own flight, but with the help of the Oceancaller, Ves managed to sense that the creature had a strong affinity to both the water and air element.

The mutated beast had evolved in a direction that enabled it to rise up the food chains in both an aerial and aquatic environment!

Ves could not even begin to understand the logic behind this unusual evolutionary direction, but it obviously worked out for the creature because it had grown large enough to block a third of this river tributary!

"The Azure Tornado Dragon is already a borderline calamity beast in our books." President Oscar Tarich continued to play the role of a dutiful tour guide in the shuttle. "Though it is relatively unintelligent compared to its peers, it is also strong in body and ability. Its maneuverability in the air is low, but it can utilize its power of air to boost its straight-line velocity, making it difficult to retreat once you have engaged it in battle. Its most dramatic display of power was when it generated an artificial tornado that completely tore apart the formation of a hunting team. This incident caused the death of 10 hunters. Ejecting did not save them at all as the creature possessed enough mobility to intercept them before they escaped its reach."

That caused Ves to frown. "Did your Hunting Association have the power to save those poor hunters?"

"We did." The older man plainly admitted. "Before you ask, we chose not to intervene. Our Association's general policy is that we only intervene when people are being attacked by exobeasts that they are not supposed to encounter in a hunting ground. The rules are always made clear beforehand. If powerful exobeasts wander into areas that they should not be in, or if exobeasts have mutated far beyond what is acceptable in a given hunting ground, then we consider them to be force majeure incidents. The victims bear no fault for encountering dangers that are beyond their capacity to handle."

It was necessary for the Hunting Association to intervene in these cases because people generally entered its hunting grounds with limited numbers and loadouts.

Hunting was an expensive hobby, and a lot of people who engaged in it could afford to bring much better and more powerful mechs and equipment.

However, the Hunting Association usually denied them the ability to bring out the best in order to protect the fragile ecosystems and preserve the challenge of the hunt.

It would be incredibly unfair if the Hunting Association's own rules led these hapless hunters to their deaths!

The rapidly growing organization would not be able to keep its approval rate high if it did not maintain its own fairness!

Yet it was because of those very same rules that the rescue teams of the Hunting Association did not lift a finger when hunters died after they bit off more than they could chew.

Oscar Tarich shook his head in disapproval. "What happened here a week ago is not a force majeure event. We have granted as much information as we could to the hunting team. We even advised its leader not to challenge the Azure Tornado Dragon. He ignored our warning and proceeded to challenge the beast anyway. Do you know why? He and his hunters believed too much in his new mechs. The hunters thought that their new aerial mechs were powerful enough to resist the tornado and strong winds generated by their prey."

Modern second-class aerial mechs possessed enough thrust power to push through most storms. Mere strong winds could not completely inhibit their passage.

However, the winds generated by powerful mutated beasts were different. They were consciously enhanced by the manipulation of E energies, causing these ordinary phenomena to acquire extraordinary power.

This was a power that could defy the laws of physics to the point of allowing a huge multiton 'dragon' to take flight despite the fact that its wings were unable to generate enough lift force by themselves!

"Can the Swordmaidens slay this dragon?" Andraste curiously asked her father.

"It depends on what sort of mechs they are allowed to bring." Ves spoke. "It is too difficult to confront an opponent like this with a landbound mech such as a Monster Slayer. It is best to field a mech that can swing and fly. If that is not possible, then a hunting team must consist of a combination between amphibian mechs and aerial mechs. Even then, there are too many other

challenges. Ranged mechs likely won't have the power to overcome the strong active and passive defenses of this mutated beast. Melee mechs might be able to get through, but they cannot withstand the tyrannical physical attacks of this massive dragon."

An even greater issue than that was that it would be impossible to coordinate the actions of all of the hunting mechs.

Hunting teams were able to defeat much more powerful exobeasts by relying on tight teamwork and coordination.

The Azure Tornado Dragon had the ability to mess all of that up by summoning highly disruptive weather events.

Once a large tornado fell into their midst, the scattered mech pilots had no choice but to fend for themselves!

Ves quietly gripped his Oceancaller as he stared down at the relaxing apex predator.

His connection with his new flute allowed him to sense its yearning.

The Oceancaller became attracted to the Azure Tornado Dragon's domain.

Ves had a hunch that he might be able to speed up his artifact flute's growth by feeding it with the mutated beast's soul!

He inwardly shuddered.

Was this why the Mistress of the Ocean unleashed so many world-ending floods when she was alive?

All of the residents of those planets had been reduced to sacrifices in order to further the transformation of a high-level artifact!

Ves briefly thought back of his most recent discussion with Helena and felt conflicted again.

He had already decided to upgrade his living mechs with the ability to absorb their defeated foes.

While he only had the best intentions in mind, he could not rule out the possibility that this growth method might be abused one day.

However, this was an issue that would only become relevant in the distant future. Ves was far from developing this new solution, let alone implementing it in his mech designs.

He still had time to flesh out his ideas.

"Do you intend to instruct your clan to take action against the Azure Tornado Dragon?" The branch president inquired.

Ves thought for a few seconds before offering his answer.

"I would like to send them out if they are allowed to field stronger mechs than usual. According to your own words, this beast has already touched the threshold of a calamity beast. It may have already become one. I think that should warrant a loosening of your hunting restrictions. If my Swordmaidens can confront this beast with their Second Swords as opposed to their Monster Slayers, then they can regain their parity with this beast."

Unlike the commercial Monster Slayers, the Larkinson-exclusive Second Swords were not only capable of flight, but also performed well enough to participate in the Larkinson Clan's serious battles.

"I am afraid that I cannot oblige you, Professor Larkinson. If it has come to that point, then the Azure Tornado Dragon has grown too powerful to be treated as a hunting target. A verified calamity beast needs to be exterminated, and we can already do that ourselves. This is our original responsibility."

What Oscar Tarich did not mention was that if his men felled the Azure Tornado Dragon themselves, the Hunting Association could claim all of the remains of this powerful beast without needing to share them with others!

"When will this happen?"

"We shall dispatch a termination team as the Azure Energy Dragon has openly manifested the power of a calamity beast according to our definition. If this beast is content to laze around, then we will wait 8 to 9 days before eliminating it regardless of whether it has completed its major evolution. We cannot take the risk of allowing a calamity beast to accumulate its power in secret."

"I see."

Ves tried his best to suppress the urge to send out his clansmen on a hunt that was beyond their capacity to complete.

He had already spent enough time with President Tarich to know that the Hunting Association fanatically stuck to its own rules, or rather code.

Every rule had its basis in the rituals and ideology of the Hunter's Code. This turned the members of this organization into dogmatic fools who would rather obey the rules than to save people's lives!

While Ves could respect their faith and conviction, that did not mean he had to like them all. In an age where red humanity needed all of the soldiers it could muster to persist in the war against the native aliens, he found it exceptionally wasteful to let all of these trained and combat-ready mech pilots perish in these sordid hunting grounds.

Perhaps this was another form of ritual sacrifice. Survival of the fittest applied to the hunters as well.

Only the strongest and most adaptable among them deserved to enjoy the rewards of their efforts.

Those who failed to measure up as hunters inevitably became food for the exobeasts

Chapter 5483 Hunting Considerations

After a long and highly informative tour across the Chasseur Continent, the day had finally come to an end.

The shuttle flew back to the Melrose Continent and landed right in the middle of Tixe City.

As the children stepped out of the shuttle and looked forward to eating dinner, their father continued to think about what he wanted and what would be nice for him to obtain.

"Are you impressed by our wide variety of mutated beasts?" President Tarich asked.

"I am." Ves honestly replied. "The combat power of the indigenous beasts of this planet has grown to a terrifying degree within the span of just a single year. We are all lucky that these powerful monsters are highly individualistic and unable to communicate with each other. They can probably conquer entire star systems if they put down their hostility towards each other and join forces."

President Tarich smiled in response. "Exobeasts lack the capacity to bridge across their differences with each other. They are all savage creatures who only identify with their own species, and even that has become diminished as they change in so many different ways. If this is not the case, then calamity beasts will probably rise to become the third dominant civilization group in the Red Ocean."

"It is good that this will never happen."

The line between savagery and civilization was clear-cut. Any organisms that were unable to create enough order to form a structured society could never pose a serious threat against more organized races.

The power of an individual was ultimately too limited to compete against the technological accumulations of an old civilization.

"Have you formed any thoughts about commissioning any hunts for the powerful beasts that you have witnessed during your tour?"

"I have formed a lot of thoughts, but I have not yet made up my mind." Ves replied. "I need more time to think over my plans. Your planet offers a lot of tantalizing possibilities, but they are not that easy to obtain. I do not want to send any of my subordinates to their deaths for a dispensable goal."

"You do not have to rely on your own people to complete the hunts, professor. You can hire other hunting teams to take action on your behalf. They will be glad to provide their services to you as long as you can satisfy their demands. Promising large sums of money can move the hearts of many hunters, though they will also insist that they be given a chance to eat a portion of the meat of their prey."

"I see. I understand. Thank you for your advice."

Ves was ambivalent about commissioning third-party hunting teams to complete hunts on his behalf.

Bypassing his own eager Swordmaidens could be construed as a lack of confidence in their fighting abilities.

Considering how prideful they could be, this could turn into a serious incident!

Ves continued to think about his options while he and his children ate dinner and continued to visit a few locales in the late evening.

Once he put his cute kids to bed, he knew that he had to make up his mind.

He could not pass off this decision to the morning because the hunters needed to reserve enough time to conduct preparations for their upcoming missions.

After a bit of thought, he decided to summon the most senior leader in Tixe City.

It took around fifteen minutes for Captain Gheri of the Swordmaidens to arrive at the hotel by shuttle.

She entered the luxurious hotel suite with an ordinary training suit, having left her customary greatsword outside.

Despite the late hour, the veteran mech officer looked ready to take action at any time. She gave Ves a salute.

"You called, sir?"

"I did. Sit down, please. I have a few ideas in mind. I would like you to give your input on them. Your understanding of Ocanon VI and its many dangers are better than mine."

He activated a projection and proceeded to show the powerful mutated beasts that had made an impression on him. Captain Gheri was already familiar with them. She always kept an eye on any news about powerful mutated beasts.

"Any questions, captain?"

"Our troops are always eager to go onto a hunt, but these beasts that you have singled out are difficult to beat even for us." Captain Gheri seriously spoke. "As a Swordmaiden, I would never chicken out of a fight, but as an officer and a leader, I need to be responsible for my women. What do you want us to fight for? What conditions will you set for our hunts? Do we need to keep the bodies as intact as possible, or are we allowed to chop them up however we like?"

Ves did not immediately respond. He instead stared back at the projections of the three beasts that he had set his eye upon.

Ocanon VI hosted a lot of interesting and exotic mutated beasts that he had never encountered anywhere else, but only these three spoke to him on a deeper level.

"These mutated beasts are useful to me." He told her. "It is a little too complicated to explain why. I do not care too much about the conditions of their bodies so long as they aren't pulverized or blown into unrecognizable pieces. What is important is that I need to be in fairly close proximity to them when they die. This is an essential demand."

That caused Captain Gheri to become alarmed. "The only ways to satisfy your condition are to make a deal with the Hunting Association or ride along in one of the cockpits of our mechs. However, if you cannot do the former, then I do not recommend you to participate in our hunts. There is no need for you to prove your courage. You have done that many times over the years. Our clan would not forgive us if we risk your life in a needless confrontation."

"It's okay. I am not as fragile as before, captain. I have already talked with the Hunting Association. Their people will not allow me to come close enough for me to do what I must. It appears that riding along with you is my only viable option."

The two argued about this topic for a few minutes, but Ves did not budge from his position.

Captain Gheri made an exasperated sound. "If you truly insist, then we will try our best to keep you safe while completing our mission, in that order. No matter what you say, we will never try to pursue victory at the cost of letting you come to harm. Hunting in the Chasseur Continent is an exceedingly dangerous activity. There have been times where even my own hunting team has been forced to abort our hunts due to accidents. Every good hunter on this planet has learned the value of beating an early retreat. It is better to run away and live to fight another day than to stubbornly chase after a win that is not as important as preserving our lives."

Ves looked surprised at her. Where was the fearless challenger that courageously ventured into the hunting grounds alone and challenged powerful beasts by herself?

Even if she had mostly completed these feats before the Age of Dawn, he expected her to be a lot more eager to challenge herself!

Then again, those were the times where Captain Gheri only risked her own life. It was an entirely different story for her to become responsible for the life of the patriarch of her entire clan!

Ves gestured at the projected monsters. "Let's get back on topic. Which of the three would you prefer to hunt given the conditions that I have set?"

"That one." The Swordmaiden veteran pointed at the Giant Stone Eater. "It will be difficult for our swords to cut through all of that rock armor, but at least we will be fighting on solid ground."

"The Giant Stone Eater is difficult to fight against up close. Have you not heard what happened when the Arrow Gods attempted to hunt it down? The stone spikes that shot out of the ground successfully tore through the leg armor of one of my Huntmasters. I am still familiar with the armor system of that mech design, and it should not have failed so easily under normal circumstances. What is worse is that those stone spikes persist, making it impossible to approach the mech from the ground."

Captain Gheri did not take these descriptions too seriously. "Our mechs are fast and nimble enough to evade the spikes when they show up, especially if the Giant Stone Eater telegraphs its move. Aside from that, we can also chop apart these spikes with our swords in order to make our way to the beast."

The Swordmaiden had set her sights on this monster. She treated it as a worthy prey for her to hunt.

Ves was not so sure about this as their Monster Slayers were not adequately equipped to fight against such a tough and troublesome earth element beast.

However, the other two mutated beasts were worse.

"What would you have us do instead?" Captain Gheri brought up this point. "This Evil Lake Tree doesn't look as strong as the other two beasts, but it is hiding inside its own lake! Is the Monster Slayer even capable of fighting underwater?"

Ves had already consulted Ketis' old design a few hours ago. He had asked the same question himself.

"Technically, the Monster Slayer is sealed so well that it is rated for both vacuum and underwater environments. That said, they are not designed to operate in those environments. The Monster Slayer will lose most of its advantages underwater. The water will inhibit all of its movements, turning a mech with good mobility into a sluggish machine that the tree will easily be able to catch with its flexible roots and branches. The only way to properly challenge the tree is to pilot amphibian mechs instead."

"The LMC doesn't have any amphibian mechs in its catalog." The store manager said. "We would have to entrust our lives to third-party mechs."

There was no way that Larkinson mech pilots ever wanted to go back to piloting lifeless mechs!

The quality of life and companionship of a real living mech had turned into an essential part of their piloting careers.

Even if their Monster Slayers had only reached the standard of a first order living mech, that was still better than nothing!

Ves had already managed to accrue a dedicated customer base early on when his living mechs were not much better in this regard.

"What of the Azure Tornado Dragon?"

"Are you kidding me, sir? I suppose we can stand a better chance if we are allowed to field proper flight-capable mechs such as the Bright Warrior or hopefully the Second Sword, but that will not help us much if this beast dives into the water. The main reason why so many hunting teams failed to kill this dragon after all of this time is because it is a scoundrel. If the hunters are weak in the air, this beast will fight them in the air. If the hunters are weak underwater, then this dragon will stay underneath the surface. The beast might not necessarily be able to defeat every hunting team, but it will always be able to get away alive."

That was quite impressive of the Azure Tornado Dragon. It sounded as if this savage winged beast possessed a higher degree of intelligence than usual.

"You don't particularly like to hunt down water-based beasts, do you, captain?"

"Water gets in the way of our mechs and swords. My advice is that you should leave this to the professionals in this area. I can name several reputable and well-established hunting teams on the top of my head that are more than willing to accept a commission on these two troublesome mutated beasts. I cannot guarantee that they will succeed, but they are your best shot at getting whatever you are trying to obtain from these creatures."

"Hmmm..."

Chapter 5484 Change of Plans

After an extensive discussion, Captain Gheri quickly departed the hotel and returned to the Larkinson Clan's in Tixe City to prepare for the upcoming deployment.

Since Ves had sprung this mission onto the local Larkinsons on short notice, everyone had to forgo sleep and work all night to prepare for a dangerous hunt.

Before she left, Captain Gheri recommended a few other hunting teams that might be interested in hunting down the other exobeasts.

Ves contacted them, and while they were all surprised to be contacted by a high and mighty tier 3 galactic citizen, they would never joke around with their lives.

"I am sorry, Patriarch Larkinson. The Ochre Seals would normally be open to accepting your commission, but we usually sign contracts that allow us to study and prepare for our target at least a week in advance. No matter how high your need may be, it is industry standard on our planet that we are given 7 days to set ourselves up for a proper hunt in the Chasseur Continent. It is only in rare cases that we have shortened our preparation time to 5 days, but we will never do that in a hunt against a mutated beast that has is getting closer to becoming a calamity beast."

"Money is not a problem." Ves stated. "If you are willing to move out fast enough, I am even willing to spare a bit of phasewater."

The deputy commander of the Ochre Seals remained unmoved. "As I have stated before, your conditions are too unreasonable. The Chasseur Continent has grown more and more dangerous in the past half year. We have been lucky enough that we managed to avoid any deaths, but we have suffered numerous close shaves where we had to abandon our broken mechs. We have learned the hard way that it is not wise for us to tempt fate. Any experienced and well-established hunting team will say the same. You may have better luck if you approach the fresher teams that have arrived only recently, but against a monster as weird as the Evil Lake Tree, you will just be sending them to their deaths."

That was a harsh but fair assessment. Ves had already learned of the enormous gap in performance between the old timers and the newbies.

The quality of the mechs or the skill of the mech pilots mattered a lot, but in the complicated environments of the hunting grounds, experience was the greatest indicator of success!

It was not a coincidence that the hunting teams recommended by Captain Gheri had been rooted on this planet for a long time.

Yet it was exactly because these old hunting teams knew better that they refused to work for Ves!

Ves quickly ended the call once he realized that he could not get anything from the Ochre Seals.

He contacted a few other recommended hunting teams, but their reactions were all similar.

These hunters were successful enough that there was no need for them to chase after windfalls and quick gains. Their favorable reputation and hunting records meant that they could have their pick of commissions. They were not that short of money either after hunting down so many powerful beasts.

He was getting nowhere with this. The only other alternative was to contact the newer hunting teams that didn't know any better, but he did not want to push them into fighting a mutated beast that they were not ready to tackle.

Even if Ves did not care about these random hunters at all, he did not want to sacrifice their lives just to gain a benefit that was not a critical priority.

"I guess I'll go with Plan B, then." He sighed.

Ves suspended his plan on contracting a third-party hunting team and called Captain Gheri yet again.

"What is it, sir?"

"I need to borrow your workshop. Is the inventory stocked with enough spare parts and materials?"

"Uh, yes, sir. The wear and tear of our Monster Slayers is not too great, but it is always better to keep enough supplies on hand."

"Good. I will need to do a bit of work. Oh, and make sure to keep your mechs on hand. I won't be able to do any extensive work on them, but I am sure I can tune them to run even better than before."

There was no way to say no to that. Ves rose from his seat and grabbed his coat.

"Clixie."

"Miaow?"

"Keep an eye on the children. If I don't return quickly enough, try and keep them in line. That goes for you too, Lucky."

"Meow."

"Miaow."

Time was of the essence. Though Ves originally intended to treat his stay here as a vacation, he could not resist the benefits of harvesting the powerful spiritualities of those notable beasts.

It would be a lot more difficult for him to harvest anything comparable.

Though planets such as Ocanon VI always spawned powerful new mutated beasts over time, Ves could not guarantee that they would have the same abilities and talents as the ones he had seen earlier today!

Ves deeply appreciated the value of powerful entities with their own signature abilities. Some of his best and powerful creations had been derived from the spiritual remains of those exceptional existences.

For example, Blinky would not have been able to devour so much spiritual energy and fuel the evolution of an entire internal universe without relying on the power derived from the Unending One!

Entities as powerful and useful as the Unending One were exceedingly rare and difficult to encounter in the Milky Way.

The same applied to the Red Ocean during the Age of Mechs.

It was only when the Age of Dawn rolled in that Ves gained a lot of new options!

As long as Ves was patient enough, he could gather hundreds of high-quality spiritual ingredients.

The issue now was not that he was unable to obtain all of these riches, but that he did not have the time to spend so much time on harvesting them in the best possible conditions.

Only Ves could 'salvage' these valuable spiritualities of these amazing beasts when they died.

Though he felt tempted to reside permanently in Tixe City, this was too unreasonable.

He would not only find it harder to fulfill his teaching duties, he also lost access to the highly developed first-class mech industry on New Constantinople VIII.

Worse than that was that his wife would absolutely explode! She would hate it if she had to move from a major Terran port system to a poorer and more primitive second-class hunting preserve!

"I still need to remind myself what is important. I have to become a first-class mech designer and a good one at that. My foundation in this aspect is too weak at the moment. I need to fix this shortcoming if I want to go much further."

Ves could gain a much better foundation in first-class mech design if he regularly interacted and exchanged with the large and vibrant community of first-class mech designers on that planet.

As for harvesting spiritual ingredients, Ves did not have a high demand for them at the moment. He could already do much with a handful of them. There was no acute need for him to create other design spirits or whatever.

In any case, Ves threw aside the remainder of his vacation plan and headed straight to the base occupied by the local branch of the Larkinson Clan.

The facility did not amount to much. The strong restrictions on the local architecture made it seem as if it was just a compound. The only saving grace was that it featured an expansive underground mech hanger and other essential facilities.

Captain Gheri already rounded up a hunting team. The mechs and mech pilots had hastily been selected. Preparations proceeded at a rapid pace as the hunters had to sortie in very little time.

If not for the fact that Ves was their ultimate leader, these Swordmaidens would have never agreed to hunt the Giant Stone Eater in so little time!

"What is your status? Are there any pressing issues?"

"Our readiness always remains high, sir. We can start our hunt right away if that is what you need."

Ves nodded with satisfaction while looking up at the selection of mechs. "Are these the machines that you have decided to bring?"

"Yes. Our branch does not have a copy of every Larkinson mech model on hand, but we have made sure to maintain a modest reserve."

"Mhmm. Well, most of the mechs that I have designed are optimized for space combat. Not many of them are as simple as our Monster Slayers and Crystal Lords."

Ves grew mildly surprised that Captain Gheri had agreed to his suggestion to bring along a few ranged mechs.

Naturally, they were piloted by Larkinsons other than the Swordmaidens.

"6 Monster Slayers and 3 Crystal Lords. That shall be the units that we will be depending upon in our fight against the Giant Stone Eater. All of our Monster Slayers are armed with their regular greatswords. They're not transphasic nor hyper, but my pilots and I know exactly how to use them in battle. The Crystal Lords are armed with ordinary second generation luminar crystal rifles. They will mainly be firing at the monster with kinetic beams. Only physical force is required to crack through all of that stone armor. The damage inflicted by laser beams and positron beams get dispersed too easily."

"What about the remaining three mechs?"

"The lone Huntmaster is only there to attract the Giant Stone Father's attention with its glow. The two Hymenopteras will serve as our pure support mechs. They are copies of the upgraded variant that is upgraded for rougher field work."

Ves felt a bit uneasy about her choices.

"Three Crystal Lords can only provide light support, you know. Their kinetic beams can deliver accurate punches from a distance, but their impact damage is lower than straightforward gauss rounds."

"We know, but we would have to switch to unfamiliar third party mechs, which we refuse to do. We respect your Crystal Lords and we are all highly familiar with what it is capable of. That improves our coordination."

"Do you think it is a good idea to confront your prey with 6 melee mechs at the same time? The Giant Stone Eater may be big, but it will be hard for all 6 of your swordsman mechs to concentrate their attacks on a single section. It will be too easy for your machines to get in the way."

"Impossible. We have lived, trained and fought alongside each other for many years. While the Swordmaiden mech legion has turned our local branch into a training base for new recruits, I am not bringing any of the rookies to this hunt this time. Each of the mech pilots that I have selected are veterans of multiple expedition battles."

Captain Gheri had the situation well in hand. Ves might not entirely agree with her strategy, but he did not object to her choices anymore, especially now that it was clear that she had put a lot of thought into her hunting team's mech roster.

Ves did not see any reason to question the professional further. Since time was so short, he did not waste anymore time and immediately started to make use of the workshop.

There was no time for Ves to do anything fancy. He had to complete numerous jobs in the most efficient ways possible.

Though it was regrettable for him to interrupt his vacation to this extent, Ves did not feel stressed at all. The growing grin on his face as he worked to tune the Monster Slayers showed that he could not feel more delighted at this situation!

Ves had missed this sort of excitement. It had been too long since he last enjoyed a proper adventure.

Having chosen to confront the Giant Stone Eater, Ves made sure that these mechs could move as nimbly and effectively as possible. Mobility was vital to the success of the upcoming hunting trip!

Chapter 5485 Heavy Packs

"Why are we not allowed to go with you?! It's not fair!" Andraste whined while holding Lucky in her arms.

"Meow."

Ves let out a breath and knelt down in front of his second daughter. He patted his redheaded girl on the head, though she did not look particularly pleased at this gesture.

"Hey, your time to fight has not yet come. It is one thing to watch a hunt taking place while sitting in a shuttle high above the air. It is another thing to take an active part in a hunt. I had to negotiate with the mechers for a long time before they agreed that I can ride along our hunting team by sitting inside the cockpit of an auxiliary mech. Do you want to spend hours squeezed inside a cramped and boring coffin?"

"That does not sound boring at all, papa. It sounds fun!"

Ves patted Andraste on her head yet again. "Let's wait until you are a few decades older. Children are not supposed to take part in stuff like this. Be a good girl and keep your brother and sister company, okay? I promise I will let you go on hunts like these when you are older and able to take care of yourself?"

He argued with his stubborn girl a bit longer before he sent her away. Her disgruntled expression showed that she did not like this outcome at all, but what else could he do? There was no way he wanted her to risk getting hurt after that debacle in Davute.

"Our mechs are ready to go." Captain Gheri of the Swordmaidens reported to Ves. "Thank you for taking the time to tune our mechs. They look better than ever. I can feel their eagerness to test out their strength."

"I am pleased to hear that you approve of my work. I was afraid that I would change so much that you would lose your familiarity and tacit cooperation with your machines. I have refrained from making any drastic upgrades for that reason."

Ves knew enough about mech pilots that they would always have to spend weeks if not months on retraining whenever their mechs went through substantial changes.

An upgrade may improve the technical parameters of a mech, but if those changes were disruptive enough to mess up the mech pilot's performance, the net performance gain might go into negative territory!

He knew that this was an especially great factor in situations where highly skilled mech pilots were paired with mechs that featured high skill ceilings.

In cases like these, the absolute performance of a mech was not as important anymore. What Ves should actually be paying attention to was how extensively the mech pilot was able to utilize the existing properties of a mech to the best effect.

This was why tuning up the machine was the best way he could help her out. The Monster Slayers and the Crystal Lords he worked on still performed in the same way. Ves even made sure to preserve the unique modifications that increased their fit to their assigned mech pilots.

What he did was to increase the fault tolerance of the mechs, allowing them to become more reliable under great pressure. It was only in the most stressful situations that relatively minor adjustments could mean the difference between victory and defeat!

Of course, Ves also did more than that in the workshop. This hunting trip was of great importance to him. It was unlikely that he would visit this planet again, so he intended to make the most out of his only stay on this memorable hunting planet.

"Our transport is due to arrive in ten minutes. We shall be ready to load our mechs and supplies before we depart to the Chasseur Continent. Once we drop off! at the entry point of the Sorara #390 Hunting Ground, we will need to remain on high alert at every hour of the day. I cannot emphasize to you enough that there is danger in every corner. There are powerful beasts that have learned how to hide themselves in order to better ambush our mechs."

Ves looked surprised at that. "The sensor systems of our mechs aren't the best, but I am pretty sure the Huntmaster has a pretty good array that excels at picking up life signs."

"That may be so, but we have encountered mutated beasts that our sensors have failed to pick up until they were right on top of our mechs. We have learned not to rely too much on tech to do the work that we should be doing in the first place. We constantly have to pay attention to the environment while utilizing our own judgment. We will not be able to accommodate your requests by that time. You may be our leader, but once we step into the field, I will be in charge. Is that clear?"

Ves gave the Swordmaiden captain a reassuring smile.

"I am not a hunter. I do not presume to know better than you, so I fully agree with the decision to put you in charge of your hunting team. That said, do not disregard my feedback. I will refrain from challenging your authority in the field, but I am highly knowledgeable in both technical and more esoteric matters. I possess unique insights in the application of E energy, which allows me to gain a better understanding of what our prey is doing during a fight."

Captain Gheri nodded at that. "I have heard that you know your way around a battle, so I shall trust you to not say anything that interferes with our combat approach."

Now that they had reached an understanding, they waited until the transport vessel arrived from above.

The vehicle had been adapted for combat. It was not as big and comprehensive as a combat carrier, but it was capable of bringing a modest amount of mechs and supplies into contested territory.

Ves took one last look at his children and the cats.

Similar to yesterday, they would be watching the hunt from above. Ves had made a special deal with President Tarich in order to let his children watch from a distance.

He knew that his kids would become incredibly upset with him if he just left them with their nannies while he simply went off on an exciting hunt.

Of course, a real hunting trip largely consisted of trekking across dangerous territory while only spending a fraction of that time on killing beasts.

He made sure that his kids would have plenty of ways to entertain themselves while they remained stuck inside for so many hours.

Time passed by as the transport and the shuttle made their way to the Chasseur Continent.

Along the way, both visible and invisible mechs escorted the vehicles and watched out for the approach of any threatening exobirds.

While it was rare, it was not unheard of for vehicles in transit to get assailed by flight-capable mutated beasts!

During the trip, Ves spent a bit of time on familiarizing himself with all of the mech pilots handpicked by Captain Gheri.

Though none of them stood out to him, each of them were veterans of plenty of battles and hunts.

The 6 Monster Slayers were all piloted by Captain Gheri and her veteran Swordmaidens. Though not all of them were part of the old guard that went all the way back to their original pirate days, the ones that joined up later had already spent years of training and fighting in the Swordmaiden tradition.

The three Crystal Lords were piloted by the best marksmen among the mech pilots assigned to the Ocanon VI Branch. Each of them happened to be former members of the Living Sentinels.

The sole Huntmaster was piloted by a Flagrant Vandal, which was a good fit.

Captain Gheri even replaced the rookies who were previously assigned to the Hymenopteras with a pair of reliable Heavensworders. They could fill in for any of the previous mech pilots if any accidents occurred.

This was the complete composition of the hunting team. Aside from carrying their handful of equipment, the mechs also carried heavy packs filled with spare energy cells and other supplies.

Although the hunters did not intend to stay in the Chasseur Continent for a long time, it was still prudent to carry extra gear, including field repair tools that could be used to conduct simple fixes in the field.

That weighed down the mechs considerably. Ves could hear the joints and plates of the mechs groaning from all of the extra tons of weights mounted onto the back of the machines.

The Hymenopteras had to bear the greatest burden, but they were designed for this job. The base model had been designed to haul around heavy containers in factories and logistical centers. The variant utilized by the hunting team was much better equipped to carry all of that weight on its back.

The biggest downsides were the drop in speed and maneuverability of the mechs.

This was why the Huntmaster and a couple of Monster Slayers only carried lighter packs on their backs.

They served as scouts as well as the vanguard. They only needed to stall the approach of a powerful beast long enough to give the other mechs time to dismount their heavier packs.

Ves never took part in such an expedition. Most of the mech battles he became involved in largely consisted of straightforward battles where his mechs sortied from their carriers.

This was a new experience, and Ves savored it while constantly learning more about the conditions of an actual hunt.

The Huntmaster that possessed the most sensitive array soon transmitted a warning.

"Detected a single large heat signature underground. Unlikely to be strong."

"Walk around. We do not have the time to clean up any rabble."

The mechs marched past without incident.

Perhaps the underground creature could have sprung out of the ground and chased after the mechs, but that would have exposed it to all of its enemies.

The mechs still remained vigilant in case this actually happened, but their worries were unfounded this time.

"Stay sharp. Not all exobeasts are smart enough to lay low when catching sight of a superior number of indigestible mechs."

As the machines continued to go uphill on the arid hills of the Sorara #390 Hunting Ground, they indeed encountered a few 'stupid' exobeasts.

They were usually large and clumsy beasts that had mostly relied on their bodies rather than their underdeveloped brains to win their fights.

There was no need for the hunting team to go all out against these crude beasts. The two Monster Slayers in the vanguard took it upon themselves to solve these obstacles.

The two swordsman mechs always moved forward in a pincer and straightforwardly slashed their powerful greatswords on the same beast at the same time.

None of the beasts attacked in this manner had been able to defend against sword strikes from two opposing directions!

Not even the panicked but powerful tail attacks could strike a Monster Slayer when its veteran mech pilot skillfully evaded them before they came close enough to deal crushing damage.

Cleaning up the exobeasts once they exposed themselves was easy.

The harder part was to maintain high focus against any nearby threats when the latter had yet to reveal themselves.

The mech pilots could not afford to rest or lower their concentration for fear of getting ambushed by an exobeast that was stronger than the norm.

Still, as several hours slowly went by, such exceptions never occurred.

The frequency of exobeast encounters rapidly dropped from the moment they approached the crater that served as the lair of the Giant Stone Eater.

Somehow, this massive beast was able to claim its own territory. This was good for the hunters because the probability was low that any other beast would show up and band together against the hunters.

Captain Gheri began to issue her orders. "Lower our packs. Let us leave them in that depression before we climb up the hill. Bring only the essentials and nothing more. We will need to preserve as much mobility as possible in order to evade the Giant Stone Eater's artillery strikes."

The tension within the hunting team rose as they had come close to challenging one of the powerful mutated beasts of this hunting ground.

Survival could not be guaranteed. Now that they had decided to conduct a valid hunt, the Hunting Association had made it clear that the hunters needed to start and end their own business.

This was a sacred ritual in which the mech pilots intended to prove their worth as hunters with their highest leader as a witness!

Chapter 5486 The Hunt Begins

Though Captain Gheri and her best mech pilots all completed a lot of challenging hunts, they had no experience with fighting this particular opponent.

"It is highly unlikely that our approach has gone unnoticed." Ves told the hunters. "The Giant Stone Eater not only has a powerful command over earth-attributed E energy, but has also utilized its

power to claim this entire crater as its territory. While I cannot tell you what that entails, I am So percent sure the beast knows we have arrived."

"I see." Captain Gheri responded over the communication channel. "It is of little consequence. I never counted on taking the Giant Stone Eater by surprise. The mutated beast's shell is too damn hard for us to penetrate in any opening strike. We will have to wear down its defenses step by step."

As the captain proceeded to instruct her troops to conduct their last checks, Ves extended his senses in order to gather more information about their prey.

With the help of Blinky, he was vaguely able to sense the powerful monster's mood.

"The Giant Stone Eater is rousing himself from slumber." Ves speculated. "I can't tell for certain, but it does not feel like he is planning to lob explosive rocks at us right away. Be on the lookout for new abilities. Do not underestimate this beast. Ever since the Arrow Gods failed in their hunt, this mutated beast most certainly developed countermeasures to increase its ability against similar threats."

"It is a good thing that we did not intend to poke it with spears and arrows. We shall let our greatswords do the work!"

The hunters did not want to give the Giant Stone Eater any additional time to prepare.

They advanced up the hill with a few additional pieces of equipment in hand.

What stood out the most was the mining picks by all of the Monster Slayers!

Even though the Swordmaiden mech pilots fully intended to make use of their greatswords from beginning to end, they were still prudent enough to carry backup weapons.

Sometimes, their love and dedication towards swords had to make way for practicality.

Not even Swordmaidens could deny the fact that mining picks were the best tool for the job when it came to breaking through rocks.

The offensive mechs all stepped forward while the two auxiliary mechs followed at a more respectable distance.

Just like the support mechs of the Arrow Gods, the two Hymenopteras had been equipped with chain hooks that could quickly pull away a downed mech.

The only issue was that the lack of a third support mech made the retrieval process a lot slower.

The hunting team could not afford to make as many mistakes.

Inside the cramped cockpit of one of the Hymenopteras, Ves had already summoned an expansive control panel.

Though the conditions were anything but ideal, Ves was able to monitor the conditions of the mechs just fine.

The tension in the air rose as a sense of mutual hostility started to settle over the crater environment.

Both sides had become aware of each other. A confrontation was inevitable, and neither side wanted to back down.

After the mechs approached the raised edge of the crater, the Monster Slayers stopped.

The first objective of any difficult hunt was to test the capabilities of a mutated beast and attempt to draw out any new abilities if possible.

The intelligence that Ves had gathered yesterday had already become obsolete due to the rapid mutation speed of powerful beasts in the wild.

"Go!"

The lone Huntmaster jumped over the edge and started to sprint down and rapidly closed the distance to the Giant Stone Eater.

Compared to the last fight, the mutated beast had clearly grown in size again, making it clear that it had definitely grown stronger than before!

"Watch out. Its mass and volume has increased by at least 10 percent, but its movements haven't slowed down to the same extent."

The Huntmaster courageously sprinted forward but did not appear to be in a hurry to get into attack range. It shifted its path and circled around the massive beast as if he was looking for an opening.

The Giant Stone Eater did not look easy to mess with. It had kept its body low to the ground, using its giant exterior to shield its legs.

At a certain point, the Huntmaster tried to provoke the beast by throwing a grenade at the creature.

The toss accurately caused the grenade to land on top of the monster, right at the junction of its catapult arms.

Splash!

Instead of producing an explosion, the grenade released a lot of acid that instantly started to burn at the monster's rocky top layer as well as its thick and resilient catapult arms!

Though the acid was unable to inflict much damage to the parts reinforced with an abundant amount of earth energy, the pain enraged the mutated beast!

Ves could clearly sense that the Giant Stone Eater had lost its cool. The fires of fury stimulated its savage instincts and prompted him to go on the attack!

Powerful earth energies started to converge on the powerful beast as its catapult arms prepared to throw explosive rocks.

At the same time, the Giant Stone Eater also began to expand its control over the ground around its massive bulk.

"Watch out! The beast is likely to summon a forest of spikes!"

The warning gave the Huntmaster mech pilot enough time to jump back from the moment dozens of sharp black spikes extended from the ground!

"They're taller and thicker than last time!"

It appeared that the Giant Stone Eater discovered how useful it was to summon all of these spikes. They formed a powerful restraint against melee mechs.

While the Huntmaster continued to circle around the beast while occasionally throwing acid grenades, the Crystal Lords started to get into action as well.

Their tuned second generation luminar crystal rifles might not be anything impressive compared to the latest fourth generation equivalents, but they had proven their power and reliability in many hunts.

The Crystal Lords did not remain stationary as they fired their luminar crystal rifles. Remaining still usually turned mechs into easy targets in a hunt.

Fortunately, every ranged mech specialist was proficient in firing on the move. The former Living Sentinels were especially skilled at this. They piloted their Crystal Lords with great familiarity and always managed to maintain a high hit rate against the slow and heavy Giant Stone Eater.

The ranged mechs launched kinetic beam after kinetic beam at the catapult arms. This was the most vulnerable exterior limb of the Giant Stone Eater that was exposed to ranged attacks.

The strange kinetic beams looked like laser beams but not as hot and bright. Despite looking like they merely consisted of pure energy, the beams strangely transferred a lot of physical force, creating wounds that looked as if the Giant Stone Eater was getting hammered from a distance!

"It's about to throw!"

The two catapult arms were so large and dense that they were largely able to shrug off the persistent ranged attacks.

The Crystal Lords made sure to concentrate all of their attacks on a single catapult arm whenever possible.

Though their focus indeed caused the limb to look increasingly less pristine, the arm did not grow any weaker!

BOOOM! BOOOM!

The Crystal Lords had already suspended their attacks and scattered from each other!

The landbound rifleman mech model excelled at fighting against other ranged mechs equipped with energy weapons. Its defenses, meager as they may be on the relatively slim machine, could cope a lot better against laser beams and to a lesser extent positron beams.

Unfortunately, the Crystal Lords possessed no inherent defensive advantage against purely physical damage, so their mech pilots did not want to tempt fate and get struck by the exploding rocks!

Despite the fact that the Crystal Lords did not appear to be making quick progress with their attacks, they continued to fire their rifles at the catapult arms with great persistence.

Perhaps the Giant Stone Eater may be able resist the attacks for the time being, but there had to be a breaking point.

At the very least, the Crystal Lords successfully distracted the powerful beast and forced it to split its attention.

As the probing attacks continued, the Giant Stone Eater did not fall behind at all. Instead, its momentum steadily grew stronger as its sturdy defenses and powerful attacks restrained any mech in the fight!

When the Huntmaster attempted to throw another acid grenade, the mutated beast began to expose not one, but sixteen different organic muzzles!

They posed at the lower end of the Giant Stone Eater's massive torso. Though they were not as protected as before, they were still covered by enough scales to make it harder to penetrate them and damage the creature's internals.

The organic muzzles were spread around every side of the mutated beast, making it so that the Giant Stone Eater had no blind spots in this regard.

The monster put its recently grown 'rock shard rifles' to good use by bombarding the circling Huntmaster with a torrent of rock shards!

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

Though the accuracy of the 'rock shard rifles' left much to be desired, their high firing rates ensured that the Huntmaster could not avoid getting hit!

Fortunately, the armor of the Huntmaster was designed with strong physical piercing attacks in mind, so the machine did not suffer any crippling damage.

Its armor held up quite well for the time being, but as long as the rapid-fire attacks struck the Huntmaster often enough, the machine would definitely reach a limit!

Right now, the Larkinson hunting team managed to explore a lot of new and familiar properties of the Giant Stone Eater.

The new discoveries were useful, but Ves did not entirely feel comfortable with the situation.

"Do you have any important observations to make, patriarch? If not, we will execute a full assault."

"I do not have any hard proof, but I have a hunch that the Giant Stone Eater is still holding back. The beast is probably capable of doing more, but it is surprisingly willing to rely on its defenses and staying power to win a fight."

"I see."

Though the hunting team failed to draw out all of the beast's solutions, the time for waiting was over.

"Advance, Swordmaidens! For Ketis and the clan!"

"For Ketis and the clan!" The other Swordmaidens roared!

When the Monster Slayers jumped over the edge of the crater and sprinted towards the Giant Stone Eater, the unified will and beliefs of the mech pilots and their mechs granted them a lot of momentum!

Blinky was able to sense how the Swordmaidens were able to form a subconscious battle network with each other.

Even though it was not that strong or noticeable, the six Monster Slayers succeeded in driving away the oppressive aura of the Giant Stone Eater, making it harder for the mutated beast to extend its power to the approaching machines.

"The monster is accumulating a lot of earth energy. It is about to summon a more powerful forest of spikes!"

The sensitive Monster Slayers participated in many hunts. The living mechs confronted so many different powerful beasts that they had all become sensitive towards the extraordinary abilities of their prey.

Ves' warning proved to be redundant as Captain Gheri and her Swordmaidens completely trusted in the warning issued by their own living mechs.

Soon enough, hundreds of sharp and black spikes poked out of the ground!

An entire third of the surface area of the crater had become filled with spikes strong enough to tear through alloy!

Seeing all of these spikes made it hard for Ves to believe that the melee mechs of the hunting team could get any close, yet the Monster Slayers fearlessly dashed forward again now that the Giant Stone Eater had exerted its power.

"The monster is recovering from its earlier move."

"Good. That is exactly what I wanted to hear. Sisters, chop these spikes!"

The Monster Slayers held their greatswords in a firm grip and began to swing them forward in a long and powerful horizontal sweep!

Strangely enough, the large blades glowed with extraordinary power.

As the Swordmaidens and their living mechs joined forces to execute an extraordinary sword technique, the power of metal and sharpness empowered their blows, causing the blades to slice through the stone spikes with surprising ease!

Chapter 5487 The Evolved Swordmaidens

Ves became shocked at the strong posture of the Swordmaiden mech pilots.

Their performance exceeded his expectations.

They did not fight like normal swordsman mech pilots!

This immediately became evident when they successfully imitated a small part of Ketis' extraordinary swordsmanship.

While the Monster Slayers under their control were not able to perform dazzling sword techniques similar to the ones of the First Sword, their sword attacks were not normal in the slightest!

Ves grew confused as he saw that Captain Gheri and her fellow Swordmaidens had apparently developed a unique sword style that blended the strengths of many different factors together.

Although their unorthodox but highly effective combat solutions looked awfully messy and underdeveloped in his eyes, the power they wielded exceeded mortal limits!

Before this hunt commenced, Ves did not entirely know why Captain Gheri possessed so much confidence in her ability to counter the difficult abilities of the Giant Stone Eater.

Now he knew!

"They're fighting as if they are sword initiates at the scale of a mech!"

That was the most coherent description he could muster based on what he was witnessing in front of his eyes.

The Giant Stone Eater had begun to utilize its inaccurate rapid-fire rock shard rifles to suppress the aggressive swordsman mechs.

This was quite a good solution as the high firing rates made it a lot more difficult for the Monster Slayers to evade all of the attacks.

Even so, their fluid and proficient evasive maneuvers made it a lot more difficult for the Giant Stone Eater to track the mobile melee mechs as they circled around the forest of spikes!

Every few seconds, the Monster Slayers and their mech pilots combined their will and spirit to generate extraordinary power!

The mech and mech pilot seamlessly worked together to channel this power into their greatswords, charging them up so that they effortlessly sliced through all of the earth-empowered spikes that poked out of the ground!

Ves or rather Blinky looked closer at how the empowered swords interacted with the stone spikes upon contact.

The Monster Slayers swung their blades so quickly that it was hard for the companion spirit to capture what was happening at this distance.

However, the energetic swordsman mechs repeated their actions often enough to give Ves a few vital clues!

Ves had confirmed through his observations that none of the Swordmaidens had experienced any breakthroughs. They were pure mortals, though their willpower were all strong compared to other standard mech pilots.

Even though their talent was relatively poor, they made up for it with excellent swordsmanship and willpower honed through plenty of struggles.

Yet that was not enough for them to fight beyond their mortal limits.

The Larkinson Clan's production of companion spirit fruits had yet to reach a sufficient scale.

Though Ves was aware that the T Institute had already begun to hand them out to Larkinsons, the clansmen serving in the expeditionary fleet obviously had priority over these much-coveted fruits.

That meant that the Larkinsons assigned to the growing number of side branches of the Larkinson Clan still had to wait a few years if not longer before they received their turn.

That obviously did not stop Captain Gheri and her Swordmaidens from mastering a different approach to enhancing their combat effectiveness.

Somehow, they managed to combine their willpower with the spirituality of their first order living mechs to form a version of resonance!

Ves recalled the old phenomenon of false resonance, but this was a much stronger version of that because it possessed real substance!

Rather than relying on the mech pilot to develop a strong force of will, it was theoretically possible to form a similar phenomenon using the components from two different sources.

This could only be done if the mech and mech pilot trusted and knew each other at a deep level!

"How amazing! I never thought that this could actually happen in practice!"

This was a different approach to mech piloting or rather artifact cultivation.

Traditionally, artifact cultivators were always able to display greater combat power despite not being strong themselves.

They did so by borrowing the power of their artifacts, but that was just the start.

The truly powerful artifact cultivators did not merely rely on the power of their artifacts, but also combined it with their own inherent strength to produce amazing synergies that far surpassed the sum of all parts!

Ves was witnessing a case like this in front of him. The 6 Swordmaiden mech pilots worked so well with their own living mechs that they effectively fought like quasi-expert pilots!

In order to confirm his hunch, he pulled up the readings from the resonance meter of the Hymenoptera.

Usually, this meter should have played no role in this fight, but at this moment the specialized sensor picked up resonance manifestations that reached as high as 0.01 laverses!

"What?!"

This was on par with an expert candidate!

While none of the Swordmaidens came close to performing like an actual expert pilot, the fact that they were able to fight as if they were 1 level higher was already a miracle in his opinion!

As the Monster Slayers continued to work closely with their mech pilots, they effortlessly broke one powerful rock spike after another.

The forest was being cut down at a rapid rate!

This caused the Giant Stone Eater to take the threat up close a lot more seriously. The immediate response to this was that the mutated beast no longer lobbed any explosive rocks at the Crystal Lords.

Instead, the arms began to grow and lengthen to the point where they could directly toss their dangerous rocks at the swordsman mechs that were working their way inward!

This was another new adaptation that it had yet to display before.

Compared to the clearly ineffective artillery strikes of before, the earth monster's ability to threaten mechs with explosive attacks had become much stronger!

The disturbingly human-like arms directly tossed the rocks straight at the nearest two swordsman mechs.

The much straighter trajectory along with the strong force of this throw meant that the Monster Slayers had much less time to jump out of the way!

BOOOOM! BOOOOM!

The blast radius of these rocks were larger!

The powerful concussive blasts along with the release of lots of rock shrapnel affected the two machines to the point where their armor plating got dented!

Fortunately, the mech pilots reacted quickly enough to make enough distance to prevent any serious damage.

The Monster Slayer model designed by Ketis possessed a typical high mobility low defense configuration.

They could not afford to take any serious hits, especially ones that damaged their speed and maneuverability!

The Giant Stone Eater was evidently pleased with the effect of this new attack method, because its catapult arms quickly gathered another set of rocks.

"Evade!"

"Watch those catapult arms carefully!"

"Retreat as soon as those arms swing in your direction!"

BOOOM! BOOOOM!

The Swordmaiden mech pilots were much better prepared this time. They knew what was coming and already commanded their machines to evade before those explosive rocks came close.

Even so, the short range combined by the high velocities of the thrown projectiles made it so that none of the affected mechs could completely escape the damage.

They always suffered minor damage that dented their armor and shook their internals.

In the meantime, the rock shard rifles continued to pelt the Monster Slayers at random.

Even though the Monster Slayers were able to endure the pressure for the time being, Ves understood their design well enough that they could not tolerate repeated hits, even if none of them were particularly strong!

"Speed up, sisters! We are on a time limit here. We cannot afford to fight a battle of attrition. We need to mow down these spikes as fast as possible!"

Just as the six circling Monster Slayers managed to dwindle down the forest of spikes until there were only a couple of dozen left, the Giant Stone Eater had begun to accumulate a huge amount of earth energy!

The alert and vigilant Swordmaiden mech pilots had already commanded their mechs to suspend their current actions and beat a hasty retreat before Ves could issue his warning!

"Be careful! It is about to summon a second forest of spikes!"

The mutated beast did more than that. It summoned the powerful ground spikes while at the same time throwing both of its explosive rocks at a single Monster Slayer!

This was an incredibly dangerous combination that caused the targeted mech pilot a lot of distress.

"JUMP!"

Just as hundreds of rock spikes shot out of the ground, the six Monster Slayers leapt into the air and just managed to vault over the furthest needles.

The one exception was the Monster Slayer that was being threatened by the explosive rocks.

Perhaps she was driven by the acute danger posed by these two attacks, but the Swordmaiden mech pilot channeled so much of her willpower into her jump that her efforts combined with that of her living mech caused the latter to jump 50 percent higher and further than the rest!

It turned out that the mech and mech pilot had combined forces to empower the legs, enabling the vulnerable machine to escape the worst of this combination attack!

"What is your status?!"

"I am fine! My mech's lower systems have been overloaded, but they are otherwise in working condition. I can still fight!"

The Giant Stone Eater might have almost inflicted heavy damage onto one of the mechs, but the combatants remained undeterred.

The Monster Slayers turned around with a vengeance. The Swordmaidens became even more furious at the earth monster, and channeled all of their additional aggression into their machines.

The resonance meter started to spike more and more, showing that the changing mood had a real effect on the combat power of these Monster Slayers!

The spikes got chopped apart at a faster rate than before. The powerful and indomitable Monster Slayers continued to swing their abnormally sharp blades, using a derivative attribute of metal to cut through earth like cutting through wheat.

It helped a lot that the first order living mechs were also able to leverage a small part of the metal-attribute E energies in the environment!

Without this additional support, this extraordinary power manifestation would have been a lot weaker.

"Hmmm..."

The strength, the stability and the technique demonstrated by the veteran Swordmaiden mech pilots made it clear that this was a deliberate and highly practiced combat solution to them. This was not a power that they stumbled upon at random.

Ves began to develop a suspicion about this novel way of fighting with a mech. The blend between extraordinary swordsmanship, strong willpower, the spirituality

"Pilot." He asked the Heavensworder who was piloting the Hymenoptera. "Did Ketis teach the Swordmaidens how to fight this way?"

The male mech pilot smiled. "She did. She added a lot of new stuff to the Swordmaiden Sword Style. This is one of the projects that Swordmaster Ketis, Venerable Dise and others have been working on a way for ordinary mech pilots such as ourselves to defeat phase whales and other superpowered enemies. I heard they even worked together with the T Institute. Together, they managed to form a new approach that is currently in the testing phase. To be honest, only a small number of Swordmaidens have managed to reach this point. Captain Gheri and her sisters were among the first to master this approach by practicing their skills against many beasts on this planet."

Ves had a feeling that this was the case.

"So this is one of Ketis' latest brainchild, huh?"

It was brilliant. It was clever. It brought power to the masses.

Theoretically, no mech pilot had to undergo apotheosis in order to produce a form of resonance in battle.

They could rely on relatively common means to produce uncommon results!

Ves suddenly understood Ketis' bold ambition.

It was just like how Ves wanted to empower a lot of weak humans by giving them a chance to pilot mechs through the Carmine System.

If he was reading Ketis correctly, his former student wanted to give every swordsman mech pilot a chance of wielding the power of an expert pilot by supplying them with the right sword techniques and mechs!

Chapter 5488 Conservation of Momentum

Of the 12 mechs brought by the Larkinson hunting team, it became clear which ones carried the show.

That was not to say the other mechs underperformed.

The lone Huntmaster served as an adequate scout and possessed the greatest sensitivity towards the actions of the Giant Stone Eater. If not for the presence of Ves, the spearman mech that excelled at hunting would have surely made a greater impact in the fight.

The three Crystal Lords failed to inflict any serious damage at first glance, but their steady and consistent kinetic beam attacks constantly forced the Giant Stone Eater to split its attention.

This was especially the case now that the large earth monster had directed all of its attention to eliminating the more serious swordsman mechs up close!

Unburdened by the need to suspend their attacks and frantically evade incoming exploding rocks, the mech pilots of the gleaming reflective rifleman mechs devoted a lot more focus towards aiming and firing their rifles.

In circumstances like these, the Crystal Lords leveraged one of their greatest strengths, which was their ability to achieve pinpoint accuracy while launching many repeated attacks!

This was not too unusual among rifleman mechs armed with energy rifles, but the crucial difference here was that these older mechs were able to inflict pure kinetic damage due to the odd properties of their luminar crystal rifles!

Any other physical weapons such as low-tech ballistic guns inevitably produced varying degrees of recoil.

Even high-tech gauss rifles produced recoil due to conservation of momentum, though the impulse was usually smaller with longer barrels.

No matter what, few powerful kinetic weapons could remain completely still when fired.

This was what made luminar crystal rifles loaded with kinetic beam attack phase crystals so special.

Conservation of momentum still applied in this case, but in a bizarre case of alien tech wizardry, kinetic beams did not actually possess any significant mass when they launched out of the muzzles of the luminar crystal rifles!

It was as if the rifles fired kinetic rounds that effectively massed less than a single hair!

By taking advantage of the fact that they retained the accuracy of energy weapons while inflicting damage as if they were kinetic weapons, the luminar crystal rifles inflicted devastating surgical damage on a narrow section of rock armor and resilient flesh that connected a catapult arm to the top of the Giant Stone Eater's torso.

If not for the fact that the defensive and regenerating properties of the highly mutated beast were so insane, the catapult arm would have been amputated by this time!

Even so, the Giant Stone Eater was not able to attack as freely as before. By neglecting the consistent precision fire from the three Crystal Lords, the beast had to redirect a greater part of its power to strengthen the defenses of its catapult arm while also regenerating all of the damaged flesh that impaired its functioning.

This led to many consequences.

The most critical one was that the Giant Stone Eater was unable to muster enough energy to summon the forest of spikes too many times.

Though the large beast rooted in the middle of the crater had access to an abundant supply of earth energy, its consumption was equally as large!

It had to reinforce its entire body to keep it covered with thick stone armor.

It had to fire many rock shark rifles at the same time in order to exert pressure onto the Monster Slayers.

It had to launch its explosive rocks at the very same Monster Slayers to slow down their advance.

It also had to channel a lot of earth energy to all of the existing spikes in order to keep them strong enough to pose a threat against mechs.

Aside from that, it had to power a lot of other processes in order to maintain a strong front against all of these mechs!

"The Giant Stone Eater was beginning to run an energy deficit for the first time."

Even though the mechs and mech pilots of the hunting team were also draining their reserves at a rapid rate, they at least made more progress than the Arrow Gods of last time!

In short, the suppression from the Crystal Lords not only prevented it from replenishing the existing spikes, but also caused the damaged catapult arm to become less accurate and responsive.

It was even starting to fall behind its healthier counterpart, which meant that the Monster Slayers found it a lot easier to evade the lone explosive rocks!

All of these conditions shifted the circumstances in the favor of the Monster Slayers.

These key swordsman mechs mowed through the expansive forest of spikes with greatswords that glowed with the sharp and metallic shine of brilliant reinforced blades.

Each swing cut through the spikes and caused them to collapse.

The hundreds of spikes that the Giant Stone Eater summoned before all got whittled down in a matter of minutes!

Still, the mechs had not been able to remain unscathed during this time.

The damage inflicted by the 16 rock shard rifles placed at the lower end of the stone beast's torso had inflicted significant damage over time.

Unlike the mutated beast, the Monster Slayers did not possess the capacity to regenerate their dented and beaten frames over time!

The good news was that much of the damage was confined to their exterior armor.

The relatively thin layers of armor plating did their jobs and absorbed any unavoidable damage before they could damage the more crucial internal components of the mechs.

The Swordmaiden pilots also deliberately shifted the facing of their mechs in an attempt to spread the damage over a much larger surface area.

Combined with their constant efforts at evasion, they managed to preserve their combat ability by the time they swept apart the last spikes that barred their way forward.

"The beast is within our reach!"

"Be careful! We do not know what the Giant Stone Eater is capable of at close range."

"Don't go all out! Poke it first and see how it will counterattack."

The Giant Stone Eater clearly became more agitated due to the approach of six threatening machines.

"Thrust!"

"Slice!"

"Cut!"

The Swordmaidens did not dare to underestimate the threat posed by the beast that outmassed their mechs by a large margin.

They simply steeled their willpower and channeled much of it into the greatswords of their mechs.

The Monster Slayers eagerly responded to the guiding will of their mech pilots and did their own part to produce a weak form of resonance that enhanced the power of their blades.

Through this deep and intricate form of teamwork, the swordsman mechs simultaneously managed to penetrate the thick stone exterior of their prey with greater ease than normal!

Though the effect was not as smooth as they wished, Captain Gheri and her fellow Swordmaidens rejoiced when they saw that their weapons were effective at cutting through the beast's stone armor.

The only issue was that the Giant Stone Eater was already beginning to repair the damaged rock by filling up the gaps, the Monster Slayers just commenced another run where they managed to inflict multiple wounds.

Each time the relatively fast and agile mechs struck, they always reserved a part of their power in case they needed to evade a powerful counterattack.

However, the larger and clumsy beast failed to respond adequately to the close assaults.

Aside from the rock shard rifles which appeared to find it much more difficult to stay on target against mechs that made fast lateral movements at closer ranges, the only other offensive tool was the explosive rocks thrown by the catapult arms.

Seeing that the mechs had come so close, the catapult arm made an extreme move and threw the explosive rocks down at exceedingly steep angles!

BOOOOM! boooooom!

Though the targeted Monster Slayers weren't entirely able to escape the blasts at such close range, the explosions happened to inflict a lot of damage to the mutated beast's rock armor!

The results were clear to everyone. The affected stone armor had partially shattered. A web of cracks ran through the surface. The extent and magnitude of the cracked stone made it a lot harder to restore them to their former conditions.

"Hah! The stupid beast has done more damage to itself than our greatswords. If we can fool this monster into doing this a dozen more times, we'll be able to crack its armor in no time!"

"Don't celebrate too soon." Captain Gheri frowned as she beheld the Giant Stone Eater with greater vigilance than before. "Its intelligence isn't as low as it looks. It has gotten close to evolving to a calamity beast. We need to maintain our vigilance. Do not hesitate to absorb your attacks the moment you see anything wrong."

Although the Swordmaidens valued the importance of maintaining control, it became more and more challenging for them to rein in their aggression.

They had so much power at their disposal now that they had developed an extensive degree of cooperation with their mechs!

In the heat of battle, their urge to prove the strength and commit to more serious attacks continued to grow stronger.

However, the harsh and brutal training of the Swordmaidens always emphasized the need to maintain control.

Aggression was good, but only when they leashed it and kept it under their control.

From the moment they released their control and gave in to their more primal and savage urges, they would lose the majesty and deliberate swordsmanship of the Swordmaidens!

This was how the 6 aggressive Swordmaiden pilots ultimately managed to shackle their bloodlust.

The Swordmaiden Sword Style's more extraordinary moves all required a high degree of control in order to pull them off. Any smidgen of inattention could cause a complicated move to lose its support, thereby making it difficult to produce extraordinary results through ordinary means.

Ves was able to witness this in the cockpit of one of the Hymenopterans.

The more he studied Ketis' work over the past year, the more he figured out the general working principles behind this novel new combat approach.

"It is remarkable how these mech pilots are able to fight like quasi-expert pilots, but... mech pilots outside of the Swordmaidens will face an uphill battle in trying to replicate this feat." He concluded.

The Heavensworder pilot in the cockpit nodded. "We have all tried to study and practice the new methods devised by Swordmaster Ketis. Theoretically, other swordsmen should be able to do the same, but somehow it is only the Swordmaidens who have succeeded so far. We hope that we may be able to master it in time after we continue to polish our skills and willpower in challenging hunt, but we may have to grind away for years before we can reach the level of Captain Gheri and her sworn sisters."

It was not easy for these ordinary mech pilots to overcome their lack of talent. It did not help that they had aged past the prime of their lives. This was a common characteristic among the mech pilots who chose to transfer to the side branches.

Though the continuous exposure to E energy radiation should gradually increase their chances of breaking through, an increase in probability did not translate into a certain outcome.

In a galaxy where the enemies of red humanity constantly grew stronger and more threatening, it was incredibly useful for standard mech pilots to become as effective as quasi-expert mech pilots in battle!

Ves fully recognized the value of Ketis' work and hoped that she would be able to flesh it out so that it became more accessible to mech pilots outside of her own posse.

Just as he thought about how he could help Ketis improve her latest work, his eyes suddenly widened as Blinky detected a surge of earth energy!

"Watch out! The beast is about to make a big move!"

The sensitive living mechs had already issued their warnings to their mech pilots a split-second before.

Captain Gheri's prudence paid off as the cautious Monster Slayers neatly turned around and sprinted away from the threatening beast as fast as possible!

Even so, the Giant Stone Eater channeled a lot of power onto its left side. This section happened to feature a lot of stone armor that had been cracked by its own explosive rocks.

From the moment the earth beast channeled a lot of power into this damaged section, the cracked stone armor exploded from its body and showered the nearby area with lots of heavy stone chunks!

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

Though most of the Monster Slayers were nowhere close inside the area of effect, one of the machines got struck by multiple powerful blows at once!

Not only did the shards manage to penetrate the vulnerable rear armor, but one of its legs also got struck, causing it to deform out of shape!

"Mech down!"

Chapter 5489 Peak State

Mutated beasts usually had no concept of honor.

Honor was a civilized construct. It restrained the conduct of many beings and helped to maintain order in society.

Exobeasts arguably had rudimentary societies of their own. They all abided by a set of rules that ensured they did not hunt their own species to extinction.

That said, they could still be as cunning, cruel and dishonorable towards other species!

Traps, surprise attacks and more all served to increase their chances of survival and prevent themselves from sliding down the food chain.

The mutated beasts that had transcended their original species and evolved into unique existences no longer had to rely on these dirty methods to maintain their place at the top of their food chains.

However, old habits died hard. A powerful beast like the Giant Stone Eater spent most of its life as a weaker exobeast that constantly struggled to survive in the arid region that compromised the Sorora #390 Hunting Ground.

It had relied upon the advantage of surprise to prey on many hostile exobeasts that had the power to defeat it in a direct confrontation!

At this time, the fight took a drastic turn when the Giant Stone Eater's cunning move had disabled one of the Monster Slayers!

Even though this mech model was supposed to be fast and nimble enough to evade most clumsy attacks launched by powerful beasts, Ketis had designed it in a time where the Age of Mechs was still in its heyday.

Back then, exobeasts used to be a lot weaker. Even the rare mutated beasts that evolved from their more common brethren only grew moderately stronger before they hit a ceiling.

These creatures rarely possessed large and powerful attacks that could sweep entire areas. The consumption was simply too great for them at the time.

All of that changed since the Age of Dawn commenced. Gaining access to Messier 87's exotic radiation liberated many mutated beasts. They were able to unscrupulously develop more powerful means of attack without being bothered by their past constraints!

The Monster Slayer that had entered this new age without a comprehensive upgrade to its model was not entirely equipped to handle these changes.

Its relatively weak armor that had been softened up beforehand finally succumbed when struck by multiple heavy chunks of stone!

As soon as the mech of one of the Swordmaidens lost its footing and fell to the ground, the entire hunting team scrambled into action!

"Grenades!"

The Huntmaster had depleted its stash of grenades during the initial probing phase, but it had replenished its stock after the Monster Slayers had entered the fight.

Now, the spearman mech quickly moved to distract and occupy the Giant Stone Eater by tossing its grenades as fast as it could pull them off its bandolier!

The Flagrant Vandal pilot did not toss them at the Giant Stone Eater at random. He had made sure to toss them all into the exposed section of its body that had become exposed once the rock armor at this section exploded into pieces.

The powerful acid formula that was meant to dissolve hardy stone was almost just as effective when applied to the flesh of the mutated beast.

The creature had already inflicted a lot of pain on itself by pulling off this self-destructive move.

Now, the upper layers of its bruised and battered flesh started to dissolve as acid grenade after acid grenade constantly struck this section.

It was not enough!

"This is only a flesh wound for this giant beast!"

The Giant Stone Eater was able to bear the pain and damage by relying on its heavy body and the defensive enhancement of earth energy.

Its more vulnerable organs and body parts were not so easy to damage. No matter how much the mechs beat up the monster, the Giant Stone Eater still retained a lot of combat power so long as none of the attacks penetrated past its exterior layers.

"Go all out, sisters!" Captain Gheri commanded as her Monster Slayer sprinted towards the earth monstrosity. "The Giant Stone Eater has probably exhausted itself. We need to hit it while it is still recovering from its last move."

Her analysis happened to be correct. The Giant Stone Eater exposed a clear gap in its defenses, but otherwise looked as strong as usual.

Only Ves and the living mechs could sense that the mutated beast had fallen into a recovery state.

Its ability to command earth energy remained almost the same as before, but it had to channel much of it to fortify its defenses and regenerate its fleshy wounds.

This caused the beast to lack the energy to fuel all of its attacks!

The catapult arms became more sluggish and formed their explosive payloads at a slower rate.

The rock shard rifles became feebler and fired at a considerably slower rate.

The Swordmaidens smelled blood. They did not hesitate and approached the Giant Stone Eater with fury threatening to overtake their rationality!

Although the female mech pilots were not as clear-headed as before, each of these trained and experienced veterans had mastered the art of skirting the edge to push themselves into their peak combat state!

It was only then that they were able to pull off their strongest moves!

For example, the Monster Slayer piloted by Captain Gheri started to channel more metal energy into the blade of its greatsword.

The energies were not spread evenly. Under the conscious will and direction of Captain Gheri and her mech, the energies started to compress and accumulate at the tip until it glowed with an incredible degree of sharpness!

Propelled by the twin desires to hurt the Giant Stone Eater while also drawing its attention away from the downed swordsman mech, the legs of Captain Gheri's machine pushed off the ground with greater force, enabling it to reach the side of the monster first!

"Sword of Lydia!"

Propelled by the belief and respect towards the founder of the Swordmaidens, Captain Gheri's willpower urged her mech to thrust its sharp greatsword forward!

Just as the mech did so, the concentrated metal energies burst out of the tip like a cannon and briefly produced a manifestation of a much longer sword before thrusting into the body of the Giant Stone Eater!

An earthquake erupted in the crater from the moment this extraordinary sword attack punched deep into the flesh of the Giant Stone Eater!

The large energy blade primarily managed to cut through the intangible earth energy that reinforced the flesh, thereby softening up the latter just enough to allow the physical sword to cut through layer after layer of alien biomass with much greater ease.

In the end, this power move enabled the Monster Slayer to thrust its greatsword deep enough to damage a couple of internal organs!

Yet it was because of this critical blow that the Giant Stone Eater briefly lost control over its own power and channeled all of its might into the ground, thereby producing a highly disruptive earthquake that disrupted the footing of every mech in the crater!

Two Monster Slayers lost their rhythm as they had been forced to make hasty corrective moves in order to prevent them from falling onto the ground.

The other two Monster Slayers managed to adjust their footing despite the unexpected quakes. Their training enabled them to step forward with light and deft steps that enabled them to adapt to the powerful quakes.

"Beheader!"

One of the Monster Slayers slashed its greatsword at one of the exposed legs and managed to inflict a deep cut that most certainly disabled the limb!"

"Double Chop!"

The other Monster Slayer leapt off the ground and committed a risky attack that enabled it to chop at a catapult arm twice in quick succession!

Due to the temporary weakening of the Giant Stone Eater, the arms were less protected than before, enabling this strike to successfully cut off the entire limb!

Alien blood spilled from multiple wounds as the mutated beast moved for the first time. Seven of its thick, intact legs produced smaller quakes as the monster struggled to regain its composure.

This was the first time that this powerful creature suffered so much pain since it had grown to this scale!

"Press the advantage!"

The Monster Slayers continued to stab, chop and slice at the Giant Stone Eater.

The mech pilots did not have time to accumulate their power and execute any powerful moves, but their ordinary strikes cut through stone armor and vulnerable flesh well enough.

The Giant Stone Eater began to bleed more and more while rapidly losing its remaining stone armor.

With the Monster Slayers descending upon it from multiple directions, it took the creature far too long to decide how to respond against the relentless sword attacks.

The powerful mutated beast began to feel desperate enough to abandon its tough and steady posture. Instead of trying to reform its defenses, the Giant Stone Eater became so overtaken by its instincts that it decided to give into its ferocity!

"Watch out! The beast is drawing in a lot of earth energy again! I think it is about to blow up its remaining stone armor!"

The cut and fractured stone armor sections that still covered most of its body began to glow just an instant before they exploded and launched outwards with lots of kinetic force!

However, the remaining Monster Slayers in the field responded a lot better to this move now that they had witnessed it once before.

The Monster Slayers closer to the vulnerable side simply backed off, knowing that there wasn't any stone armor pieces launching in their direction.

The others simply dropped onto the ground with their backs facing downwards despite how such a move would rattle their internals and tried to stay as flat as possible.

The vast majority of the empowered stone chunks that launched away from the Giant Stone Eater simply passed through empty air before colliding against the sides of the crater.

They had effectively done nothing useful!

The few stone chunks that managed to strike the mechs laying on the ground mostly struck the wide and flat blades of the greatswords.

Though they were not designed for this purpose, the greatswords were just wide and sturdy enough to function as makeshift shields in these kinds of situations!

Though the Monster Slayers in question still endured a lot of impacts and concussive shocks, their well-tuned mech frames managed to endure all of the forces just enough to preserve their combat power!

"My mech is still in fighting shape!"

"Mine as well!"

The only Monster Slayer that risked greater damage was the one that fell as its leg got crippled.

However, the remaining combat mechs occupied the attention of the Giant Stone Eater long enough for the two Hymenopterans to quietly launch their magnetic hooks and steadily drag the partially crippled swordsman mech out of the dangerous crater.

Since Ves was riding along inside the cockpit of one, he found it fascinating to witness this operation from this angle.

Despite working with only two mechs, the veteran Heavensworder mech pilots controlled their humble machines so well that they maximized the force exertions of their strengthened frames.

Industrial mechs were not known for being fast, but they always stood out for their ability to lift heavy loads.

The downed Monster Slayer managed to make it out well in time before the Giant Stone Eater could threaten it yet again!

One of the auxiliary mechs remained on standby while the other cracked upon a case filled with a set of simple parts and field repair equipment.

The mech pilot proficiently picked up a few plates and slapped it onto the damaged leg of the crippled Monster Slayer.

After a few procedures that lasted no longer than a minute, the broken leg section became surrounded by a thick metal brace!

The crude fix was not enough to fully restore mobility of the damaged machine, but the Monster Slayer at least regained its ability to stand upright and retreat on its own power!

Though the aggrieved Swordmaiden mech pilot would like nothing more than to jump back into the crater and support her fellow sisters, her damaged mech would do more harm than good in this situation.

Now that the Giant Stone Eater had purged all of its heavy stone armor, the fight had entered its final stage!

The beast had become completely exposed to the attacks of the remaining combat mechs!

However, shedding all of that heavy stone had also caused it to regain a lot of mobility!

The powerful beast had completely abandoned its prior posture and began to fight more proactively, trading blows for blows without any restraint!

Chapter 5490 In Memoriam

Now that the Giant Stone Eater had completely gotten rid of its heavy protective stone armor, the mutated beast exposed its naked body for the first time in a long time.

Surprisingly enough, the Giant Stone Eater did not appear to be as bulky and massive as it did before.

The stone armor added so much bulk that it gave off the suggestion that the real creature was built like a tank, but that was not quite the case.

The mechs of the Larkinson hunting team learned this lesson first-hand as they played a dangerous game with the enraged beast.

Watch out! It can sprint and leap short distances a lot better than our mechs!

It was like fighting against a giant, fat crocodile. The mutated beast was unable to beat any of the mechs in a race, but its relatively flexible body was able to produce short but powerful bursts that left very little time for its opponents to react!

No one had any doubts about the bite force of this vaguely reptilian creature that resembled a komodo dragon with too many legs.

Whenever the beast was not attempting to crunch through the metal alloys of the Larkinson mechs, it scooped up the rock and dirt below its feet to fuel its organic rock shark rifles that remained in working condition even to this point!

If the Monster Slayers and their mech pilots confronted the current beast in its current condition, then Captain Gheri and the rest of her team would have been able to evade the attacks and dismantle its attack methods with relative ease.

However, all of the rock shrapnel and rock shards battering against their mech frames for several long minutes inflicted so much accumulated damage that none of the machines were in good condition anymore!

When Ves observed the exterior of the mechs and studied their transmitted telemetry, he understood that their overall condition had dropped by at least 20 percent.

The battered Monster Slayers moved slower and attacked with less force and momentum.

Their mech pilots no longer possessed the confidence to perform advanced and risky maneuvers, causing them to pose less of a threat to the Giant Stone Eater.

However, the Swordmaidens all experienced a lot of pressure to finish off their prey quickly. The more they procrastinated, the more their battered mech frames accumulated even more damage!

"We need to eliminate those organic rifles first!"

"Don't forget about the surviving catapult arm. We can gain a lot more maneuvering space if we can stop the monster from launching explosive rocks."

Instances like these truly tested the skill and teamwork of a hunting team. With the melee mechs continuing to lose their armor integrity at a worrisome rate, the mech pilots all had to possess strong belief in themselves as well as their comrades to vanquish over their powerful prey.

The tension rose considerably as the damaged mechs did their best to coordinate their maneuvers and strike at the beast's head and limbs from multiple angles at the same time!

Though the Giant Stone Eater looked as if it had lost all of its protection now that it had shed its cumbersome stone armor, the reality was that its flesh and bones had become even tougher and sturdier than before!

Much of the earth energy that the Giant Stone Eater previously used to maintain and reinforce its thick exterior protection had now been redirected towards its actual body!

Its muscles grew stronger. Its flesh became thicker and harder to penetrate. Its bones became insanely tough. Even the creature's internal organs became less susceptible to damage!

This dampened the enthusiasm of the Living Sentinel pilots who commanded the Crystal Lords.

Though their attacks still managed to cut through the resilient flesh with greater ease than the previous stone armor, they were making much less progress than they wished.

Ves frowned as he analyzed the state of the current fight.

Both sides still retained a considerable degree of combat power. A few of the mechs were close to getting crippled while the Giant Stone Eater still had enough flesh to withstand a lot more attacks.

The Huntmaster and the Crystal Lords were doing their best to concentrate their damage and penetrate the limbs of the monster, but their attack power simply wasn't good enough against a beast that excelled at defense.

The only mechs that could deal significant damage against the mutated beast were the Monster Slayers!

Just as their names suggested, their performance stood out as they constantly threatened the monster with their powerful greatswords.

Though their attack frequency was not high, each heavy chop or thrust always managed to part a lot more flesh than any other attack!

"Keep the beast's attention off our Monster Slayers." Captain Gheri urged.

"I am trying, ma'am, but the beast no longer thinks my Huntmaster is worthwhile for it to attack."

"Then poke your spear at something important!"

The Huntmaster was unable to replicate the lethality of the Monster Slayer due to the inability to produce a form of false resonance.

The beast only paid attention to swordsman mechs that fought on the same level of a quasi-expert mech!

BOOOM!

A powerful explosive rock shattered close to another Monster Slayer, causing it to endure numerous damaging rock shrapnel that caused it to falter for an instant.

"My mech's movements are starting to glitch out. It can't take much longer!"

"Retreat, sister." Captain Gheri instantly commanded. "We can finish off this earth beast ourselves."

"Understood. I am on my way out. Good luck, sister."

The Swordmaidens would have fought a lot less freely if they had to worry about one of their own getting downed. It was better for the more seriously damaged mech to walk away in good order while it was still an option.

Nonetheless, the absence of an important offensive machine increased the pressure to the remaining mechs even more.

The only good news was that the Monster Slayers and the Crystal Lords successfully managed to trash most of the rock shard rifles by this time!

It took a decent amount of time and more than a few close shaves, but the creature was able to exert a lot of ranged pressure than before.

However, that also freed up enough earth energy for the Giant Stone Eater to channel its power in different ways.

"Watch out! It is channeling its energy through its legs. Be careful for ground attacks!"

The warning came just in time. The remaining Monster Slayers in the field backed off as a part of the soil collapsed and turned jagged.

This was bad!

The ground had already become filled with impact craters and a lot of stone debris. That made the footing of the mechs a lot more precarious as they needed to pay closer attention to their steps.

Now that the terrain had become a lot more uneven, it became a lot more difficult for the mechs to traverse these areas.

"The monster is in the process of gathering more earth energy to pull off this move again."

"We cannot let this beast limit our movement space even more. We need to cripple it now!"

"How, captain?! We've almost managed to slice off two of its legs as well as its catapult arm, but it still has five more legs as well as its forearms at its disposal. It has way too many limbs, and they are all strong enough to support much of its weight!"

Captain Gheri snarled as she studied her opponent. "Its back is exposed. Cover me. I am not going to hold back any longer. We either finish this now, or we pull back and declare this hunt a failure."

Retreating at this junction was the more prudent decision, but she was not willing to admit defeat at this point.

The Giant Stone Eater was the most powerful mutated beast she had challenged to date. She wanted to turn its head into a hunting trophy so bad. She also did not want to shame herself in front of her patriarch.

Her eyes grew hotter as she stared at the back of the lizard monster. After she made sure that her remaining teammates would provide support, her damaged Monster Slayer proceeded forward at a brisk but cautious pace.

Her Monster Slayer deliberately navigated through the patch of ground that had been turned into a jagged warscape.

The Giant Stone Eater did not consider Captain Gheri's mech to be a significant threat. Not only was it moving a lot slower than the other mechs, but it was also approaching at an angle that it had already taken care of, or so it thought.

The savage beast only had eyes for the faster-moving swordsman mechs. Only these machines posed the greatest threat as their momentous greatsword attacks repeatedly sliced through its limbs, causing them to get chopped off at a distressing rate.

Despite the fact that it had already lost numerous limbs, it moved almost just as fast and nimble as before, enabling it to turn and leap at one of the mechs with the speed of an ambush predator.

If not for the fact that the Monster Slayers and their mech pilots had become so damn good at reading their prey, they would have gotten caught in its jaws a lot sooner.

However, the constant stress exerted onto their damaged frames quickly caused their conditions to deteriorate even further.

The Swordmaiden mech pilots continually tried to skirt the limits of what they could do with their machines. They trusted their Monster Slayers well enough to endure the strain, but there were limits to what they could squeeze out of their increasingly more worn out machines.

Ves estimated that the Monster Slayers could only maintain their current intensity for a minute before their more fragile systems started to break down.

The Swordmaidens instinctively knew this as well. They pushed even harder just so that they could occupy the attention of the dangerous beast even further.

"Come on, you bastard! Chomp me if you can!"

The angry beast fixated on the Monster Slayer that was running in front of its snout and prepared to leap forward yet again.

However, just as the Giant Stone Eater was about to catch the tempting swordsman mech in its jaws, the machine piloted by Captain Gheri had leapt first!

Its greatsword glowed brighter than ever as it accumulated even more power into the tip of its blade!

As one of the few old school Swordmaiden veterans that had survived all the way up to the present day, Captain Gheri was one of the few people who lived and fought alongside Commander Lydia.

Unlike the many newer generation Swordmaidens, Captain Gheri did not look up to Commander Lydia as a mythical leader.

How could she treat her old commander like a god when she used to be her close friend and sister?

Yet that did not mean that the name of Commander Lydia held no power in her mind.

As her damaged but compelling Monster Slayer leapt higher in the air than before, Captain Gheri thought about all of the times when she and her fellow Swordmaidens hoped to attain a better future.

Now, many years had passed, and the present Swordmaidens had become incomparably stronger than before.

Though Captain Gheri felt a little sorry for herself for failing to live up to Commander Lydia's expectations, Ketis and Venerable Dise had done more than enough to lead their surviving sisters into power and prosperity.

Though the Swordmaidens of today had shed many of the vestiges of their past, their core remained as recognizable as ever.

It was the continued preservation of the old traditions of the Swordmaidens that bestowed power to the original commander's name!

Once Captain Gheri's Monster Slayer started to get pulled down by the relatively lighter gravity of Ocanon VI, she invoked the memory of Commander Lydia as her mech gripped its greatsword in a plunging stance!

"THIS SWORD IS FOR LYDIA!"

From the moment the Monster Slayer landed on the surprised beast's back, its weapon released an energy blade that was actually narrower than the blade of the actual greatsword!

That actually boosted the penetration power of this extraordinary stab, as all of its powerful energies had become much more focused than before.

Under the strong guidance of Captain Gheri's willpower, the empowered greatsword cut through the upper layers and bundles of strong back muscles with disturbing ease.

No amount of earth energy reinforcement could retain any effect in the face of all of this cutting power!

The greatsword continued to sink lower until it severed right through the monster's spine, though with much greater effort than before.

By the time the long and thick blade could cut no further, the spine of the Giant Stone Eater had just been severed in half!

"You did it, captain. The beast is collapsing. It has lost control over much of its body!"