

## The Mech 5501

Chapter 5501 Swordmaster in Charge

Given the congestion in Bortele, the Bluejay Fleet could not avoid getting fairly close to other fleets, especially as it moved closer to the third planet from the local star.

Nonetheless, traffic control reserved a fairly wide band of space for the important fleet.

Once the collection of warships of the Red Association entered into high orbit over Bortele III, Ves and an expanded group of staffers teleported directly down to the surface.

This time, they arrived directly inside Razor Fort, the local headquarters of the Bortele III Branch of the Larkinson Clan.

Due to recent events, the Bortele III Branch had grown faster than all of the other ones.

It not only facilitated the logistics of the expeditionary fleet, but also managed the lucrative business interests of the clan.

The LMC, the Creation Association and the Larkinson Biotech Institute had all established a relatively strong presence on this booming planet.

While Ves just started to settle down in their temporary accommodations within the bowels of Razor Fort, Alexa Streon and Gavin Neumann already started to check up on the situation.

As the highest leader of the Larkinson Clan, there was no need for Ves to meet with the local branch leaders and supervise the various arrangements in person.

Ves could delegate most of the work and allocate the remainder of his time on more useful endeavors.

Now that his vacation came to an end, he could no longer spend much of his time on Bortele III on sightseeing tours.

Ves needed to fulfill his obligations to the Eden Institute and teach his classes by remote.

His children meanwhile already boarded another RA warship that brought them back to New Constantinople VIII.

It was better for them to return straight to the Terran port system so that they could attend their classes at the Joan Devos Elementary School in person.

Ves and Jovy also believed it was more prudent to keep the children away from their father for the following weeks.

The probability of an assassination attempt was too great at this time. Who knew how much collateral damage would result from such an incident.

It became a lot easier for the mechers to keep Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine safe when they were well out of the way.

Though Ves missed his children, he could still communicate with them on a daily basis by calling them over the galactic net.

The lack of distractions allowed Ves to focus much more on his work and duties.

While he made sure that he and his incarnations worked on his mech designs on a regular basis, he also started to spend more time on conducting research.

Ves managed to harvest so many insights as of late that he needed to convert his gains into actionable results.

The foundation of the Hyper Generation rested on the rapid development of hyper technology and E-technology.

At this stage, many competitors were scrambling to upgrade their lastgen mechs into proper hyper mechs.

Ves could not ignore this trend either. The LMC had already started to lay the groundwork on this expansive effort.

The problem was that the Design Department got hollowed out during an inconvenient time. Ves and Gloriana transferred to the Premier Branch while a lot of other lead designers chose to undergo years-long EdNet training.

The only lead designer left to hold the fort over there was Ketis.

She had taken on many more responsibilities because of that. It was not a surprise that she had not yet recruited enough Journeyman Mech Designers to restore the Design Department's ability to handle many second-class mech design projects at once.

Ves decided to call her in person to address this issue and more.

"I am impressed with what I saw back on Ocanon VI." Ves calmly spoke as he faced the projection of his former student. "The Swordmaidens over there have found a new way to synergize with their swordsman mechs that fits the new age. I can't help but notice that their cooperation could become a lot more effective if their mechs were more alive. Your Monster Slayers are only equivalent to first order living mechs. Think about how much more E energy they can harness if the mechs are second order living mechs instead."

Ketis crossed her arms. Her posture radiated a lot more strength and confidence than before. She had come into her own now that Ves had left her to fend for herself over at the expeditionary fleet.

She had designed numerous mechs and started up several interesting new research projects.

A lot of Swordmaidens and Heavensworders looked up to her for leadership and guidance.

Ketis and Venerable Dise also worked hard to explore how they could combine their traditional swordsmanship with E energy radiation.

It turned out that these two separate concepts synergized quite well with each other!

Swordmasters operating in a low energy environment were like fish on land.

Swordmasters operating in a medium energy environment were more like fish swimming in a shallow pool of water.

Though the pool was not large enough to comfortably accommodate most species of fish, they at least had access to enough water to unlock much of their buried potential!

"The oldest sword schools have carefully preserved ancient records that speak of this." Ketis solemnly explained to Ves. "While much of those records are written in foreign languages that we

can barely understand, they speak of swordmasters that can launch wind blades, unleash fire storms, cut through the fabric of space and more. Many Heavensworders treat these outlandish claims as myths or wildly exaggerated boasts, but it is clear to us that there is a lot more truth to them than we thought. Our swordsmen and swordswomen have begun to explore the potential of sword styles that are special enough to call upon these forces."

"Does that mean that swordmasters such as yourself can become strong enough to fight against mechs head-on?" Ves speculatively asked.

"Not yet." Ketis immediately replied. "The comparison doesn't make sense. A swordmaster may become strong enough to defeat a mech or even a squad of mechs in the most extreme conditions, but there are too many shortcomings. Swordmasters cannot effectively threaten ranged mechs that keep their distance. It is also much harder for additional swordmasters to rise from the ranks."

"Shouldn't it be easier for all of those swordsmen to break through now that the environment has become more favorable?"

"That is true, but only to an extent. Many more sword initiates have emerged in the last year, especially once we started to hand out companion spirit fruits. The amount of Heavensworders who have become the equivalent of expert candidates has surprised all of us. It will take more effort for them to become the next generation of swordmasters, but once they do, we will gain a powerful troop of powerful infantry soldiers that can serve as excellent bodyguards, boarding troops and so on. They are not as powerful mech pilots, but they are far more flexible and suited for many missions."

Ves' eyes lit up. Sword initiates were the equivalent of expert candidates. Anyone who managed to get started in extraordinary swordsmanship had a high chance of becoming swordmasters, especially in the current climate.

Of course, these sword initiates also needed to receive expert guidance. They needed to master and perfect their swordsmanship to a superhuman degree. It was much harder for them to accomplish this by themselves.

This was why guidance from Ketis was so crucial for them all. Her swordsmanship had reached such an impressive height that she could easily bring up other swordsmen regardless of their individual sword styles!

As Ketis continued to explain her plan to raise an army of powerful swordmasters in the Heavensworder tradition, Ves already started to think about the implications of this development.

An army of swordmasters represented the rise of an entirely new force. Though many of these powerful sword fanatics had a strong aversion to using ranged weapons, they were practically invincible at close range!

Their intuition, their flexibility, their reliability and their dedication all turned them into supersoldiers that were much less ostentatious than expert pilots!

"I can certainly see how they can be useful to our clan, but don't fixate too much on them, okay? Swordmasters are not weak, but they cannot escape the fact that they are too small and weak to challenge mechs and warships, both of which are available in large numbers. Only the superior scale and firepower of mechs and warships can keep up with the endless number of phasefighters and alien warships of our enemies."

The projection of Ketis responded with a reassuring smile. "I have not forgotten about that either. I am a mech designer as well as a swordmaster. I do not want to neglect either of them. I have not slowed down any of my work related to mechs. The progress that I have made into strengthening swordmasters can also be translated back to my mech designs. This is how the Monster Slayers over at Ocanon VI are able to strengthen their swords and cut through much harder objects than they should. According to the five elements theory, swords, mechs and sharpness are all derivatives of the metal element."

Ves nodded multiple times when Ketis explained her work, but he did a double-take when he heard her last sentence!

"Are you making deliberate use of the five elements theory to design and improve your mechs?"

"In part." Ketis responded. "For now, I am trying to explore more powerful ways to strengthen my mechs with the metal element. It is the easiest way for me to upgrade the performance of my swordsman mechs and bring them into the Hyper Generation. Once I have made enough progress in this area, I will try and dabble into other elements. The one exception is the Storm Sword since I started it before the start of the Age of Dawn."

Her approach sounded quite fitting for her. Ketis had such a strong affinity to metal and its various subcategories that she could quickly make her mech designs stronger by delving deeper into this element.

"It sounds like you are on the right track. You do not even need to explore those other elements, do you know that? I am afraid that you will split your focus and waste too much time on trying to comprehend the other elements that you are not so good at. It would be a shame for you to underutilize your amazing affinity for metal."

Ketis appreciated her former teacher's well-intentioned warning, but she had her own plan.

"I know what I am doing, Ves. I do not want my work to stay so one-dimensional. There are many ways to design good swords and swordsman mechs, and I am confident that I can bring a few of them to life."

"Perhaps you should spend a bit of time on raising a few apprentices of your own. You can delegate much of this work to other mech designers while you focus on developing your core strengths."

"There are no other mech designers like me. I am unique." Ketis exasperatingly said. "Don't think that I have not tried to do something about this. The Swordmaidens have recruited multiple batches of young mech design students and tried to put them through their training program. The results... were not that good."

"Let me guess. The students who are smart enough to keep up their studies perform poorly in physical training. The students who are doing well in their swordsmanship classes are not intellectually gifted enough to study mech design."

"How did you know? That is a good summary of what we have seen so far. I would have thought that these second-raters could endure more hardship, but all of the mech design students that I have trained so far are not suited for combat. Their willpower is weak, their pain tolerance is disappointing and their progress in improving their swordsmanship is too low."

"Perhaps you are recruiting from the wrong pool of people. You need to recruit people who have endured a lot more hardship in their lives, like you for example. Perhaps it may be a better idea to recruit from third-raters instead. As long as their talents are good enough, you can fix their poor qualifications by investing in them. Does that sound like a better idea?"

"Hmm, you may have a point, but... I don't think we can wait that long. Second-raters need much less retraining and supplemental learning in order to become useful to our clan. I think I will continue to stick to my current plan, but I will apply different criteria to weed out the worst candidates."

Chapter 5502 Commercial Storm

Ves and Ketis talked about many topics.

Though Ketis encountered difficulties in an attempt to raise successors of her own unique mech design discipline, she had much less trouble with recruiting other mech designers.

"Our clan has become so popular that it has become easier to recruit second-class mech designers." She reported to Ves. "Novices, Apprentices, Journeymen and even Seniors are willing to sign up with us. I have already taken the liberty to approve the entry of hundreds of Apprentices and dozens of Journeymen, but I have yet to transfer them to the Design Department. I think it is better for them to spend more time in the trenches before they are ready to handle the greater responsibilities of working on our second-class mech design projects."

Ves fell into thought. Her approach was not wrong. This was the best way to assimilate and indoctrinate a lot of external mech designers who possessed varying degrees of attachments to their old lives and previous employers.

The mech designers expected to work in the Design Department also had to understand many different Larkinson mechs on a deeper level. It would be absurd for them to work on mech designs that they did not even understand.

However, this process took time. Ves was not sure whether the Larkinson Clan could afford to keep all of these new recruits in 'boot camp' for such a long time.

"Have you taken a look at the market developments over the past few months? Hyper mechs are becoming more and more essential, Ketis. We need to shift more manpower to the Design Department so we can speed up the comprehensive revisions to all of our existing mech lines."

"We have already begun work on these projects, but it is hard to find any Journeyman who has mastered hyper technology well enough to upgrade our existing products. This is a really difficult field, you know. All of us have to learn so many new scientific principles that have little in common with what we have learned before. It is just as perplexing as phasewater technology, but in a different way. We could have gotten started with hyper technology a lot sooner if we are able to work with Seniors and Masters. They are able to learn the new principles much faster."

"I see..."

Ves had improved his depth and understanding of phasewater theory and hyper technology so quickly that he developed a mistaken assumption that it was not a big deal for other mech designers.

However, he overlooked how his phase lord cultivation and his existing accumulation in cultivation science massively boosted his progress in those special subjects!

Not everyone enjoyed his rare combination of endowments. Ordinary second-class mech designers would have to force themselves to accept entirely new paradigms that sounded so counterintuitive that it seemed they were studying pseudoscience instead!

"I do not recommend that we pull the latest batches of recruits out of their current assignments too soon. They still need more time to learn the fundamentals of hyper technology before they are ready to apply it onto the mech designs that are asking for updates."

"I see."

This was a troublesome issue. Their current manpower was too inadequate.

"Have you tried to recruit mech designers who are smart enough to master hyper technology faster?"

"Our recruiters are doing their best to appeal to them, but they usually belong to other organizations. It is similar to the fact that those who have shown a greater ability in mastering transphasic technology can always find work at the best mech companies."

"Hmmm..."

There were no easy ways to solve this problem then. Ves would either have to poach these kinds of mech designers in the prosperous mech industry of Bortele III, or he had to resort to other means.

"Okay, I understand what is going on." Ves thoughtfully said as he formulated a new plan. "We can't rely on other mech designers in the short term. We can only address this issue ourselves. Once I have completed the product reveal, I will return to New Constantinople VIII and reunite with my wife, who should have gained a game-changing cranial implant at that time. Gloriana and I will focus much of our time on updating our existing product lines to currentgen standards in the next year or so. Our combined productivity has become so high that it is not impossible for us to complete all of that work in a much shorter time frame."

Ketis looked impressed. "If you are confident you can update all of our mechs in a year, then that is fantastic news. Will you prioritize our commercial mechs or focus on upgrading our Larkinson-exclusive mechs first?"

That was a difficult question.

"I will prioritize our commercial works over our Larkinson-exclusive ones. Our clan also makes extensive use of the former, so the Larkinson Army will still be able to benefit from our newer works. As for the Larkinson-exclusive mech models, I want to take my time to upgrade them. It will take more work to improve their performance gap over the competition. They need to be as good if not better than the Transcendent Punisher Mark III that I am close to finishing."

That was a good enough rationale. Ves wanted to update the mech lines that were most widely used such as the Ferocious Piranha and the Pacifier models. This would increase the momentum of the LMC much harder in a time where his mech company needed it the most!

Ves also did not forget about Ketis' mech models.

"I have noticed that your Monster Slayer line is quite popular among certain market segments. Are you planning on upgrading it as well?"

"I do, but it is not time yet." The female mech designer responded. "I need to complete a handful of research projects first before I gain the confidence to reshape my Monster Slayer into the mech that matches my dreams. I do not want to turn it into a simple hyper mech and call it a day. That would be an insult to its concept and a stain on my reputation as a mech designer."

"If you wait too long, your Monster Slayer will fall off hard. You have to understand that hyper mechs will become the prevailing standard in as little as 3 or 4 years. The performance boosts are too obvious, and the supply of low to mid-grade hypers will increase so much that their scarcity will be a thing of the past. You need to move ahead of this trend if you want to maintain the popularity of this mech line of yours."

Ketis let out a sigh. "I am working as fast as I can, Ves. I won't disappoint my Monster Slayer model and the loyal customers who appreciate my work. The next major revision will be different. I will reveal the true potential of swordsman mechs to everyone at that time."

That sounded promising and ambitious. Ves felt proud of her, but he was still concerned about what would happen in the short term.

"Does that mean that you will refrain from publishing any commercial mech designs in the next year?"

His former student shook her head. "No. I know the LMC can use a hand. Once I have finalized the Storm Sword, I will transfer much of the design solutions that I have developed for this elite mech model to its predecessor. The Stormblade Samurai will no longer be as important as before, so it shouldn't be too much of an issue to publish the Mark II version on the market. It will share much of the same tech as the Storm Sword, but in a cheaper and more simplified package. I can complete this update fairly quickly. It won't take more than half a year if I work on it by myself."

That sounded a lot more helpful.

The significance of this was great. Although the Stormblade Samurai model was not that conspicuous within the Larkinson Army, that was because it was filled with lots of excellent mech models.

The mech by itself was already fairly powerful due to the fact that stormblade technology could chew through transphasic energy shields faster than normal.

Now that the introduction of space suppressors had turned melee mechs into much more effective counters against alien warships, an updated and commercialized version of the Stormblade Samurai had the potential to become a new bestseller for the LMC!

Ves could think of many reasons why it should succeed.

The original Stormblade Samurai was relatively affordable and cost-efficient, and that should not change once Ketis updated the model.

The mech imposed a low logistical burden as it did not require the use of phasewater or high-grade hypers.

The Stormblade Samurai was faster and easier for mech pilots to master. It put less emphasis on difficult swordsmanship as it mostly relied on the ability to electrify its swords to do much of the damage.

That said, it would still hold a huge attraction for many mech pilots as Ketis would undoubtedly imbue it with a special sword style that anyone could learn.

Most importantly, the Stormblade Samurai was a spaceborn mech. It was designed to participate in actual space battles, and could readily be deployed on the peripheral warzones of the Red War!

The more basic and rudimentary Monster Slayer had been a big hit among hunters and mech athletes. Ketis' first commercial work proved that she was able to succeed in the mech market. She was only held back by the fact that her debut work was unable to participate directly in the Red War due to its lack of wings.

This was why the Stormblade Samurai Mark II held greater significance to Ves. If Ketis proceeded with her current plan, then this special swordsman mech would be her first major contribution to the war effort!

Ves and Ketis continued to talk about more promising commercial prospects. The introduction of hyper technology promised to revitalize a lot of old mech designs, but only if they succeeded in boosting their value propositions.

Every mech designer was playing the same game, so the Larkinsons had to do better if they wanted to grow their market share.

"Don't worry about falling behind." Ves smirked. "A number of our competitors may be able to gain a head-start by borrowing from ancient legacies, but I doubt that many of them can match my understanding of E-technology. I haven't been wasting my time in the last few weeks. My most recent vacation has taught me a lot of useful lessons. I cannot wait to convert all of that into brand-new design applications."

They continued to talk about their product strategies and business strategies for several more minutes before they switched to other important topics.

"How is my grandfather doing over there? Did he have a chance to prove his mettle in combat?"

The swordmaster's expression changed. "Your grandfather is an impressive soldier. Ever since he returned, he has beaten every other expert pilot in the expeditionary fleet. No matter whether they are Larkinsons or Crossers, he has never lost a mech duel. The Blood Star Mark II is a true wonder. I can feel how much more alive and connected he is to his battle partner. They have not yet fought against a real alien force, but it should not take too long for them to have their chance. I can't say much more over this communication channel."

"I understand. You guys are in charge over there. There is no need to keep me in the loop. I just expect good results."

It sounded as if the expeditionary fleet was planning a risky and daring operation. This was why it had not done anything special in the last few months. The scouts and reconnaissance forces needed more time to scope out the enemy forces and put all of the pieces together.

"By the way, Venerable Tusa and all of the other expert pilots over here are clamoring for you to update their mechs. When will you be ready to satisfy their needs? They don't wait to wait years for you to find the time to upgrade them into fully fledged hyper mechs."

"That is a tricky matter..."

## Chapter 5503 SKL Mech Industries

Now that Ves had arrived in the Bortele System, the preparations for the upcoming product reveal picked up steam.

The Living Mech Corporation and the Larkinson Clan had already fabricated numerous batches of Fey Fiannas by now. The feedback from test pilots and the Larkinsons who chose to embrace them all had glowing words for the impressive new drone mech.

Ves spent much of the first day after his arrival in the star system to query the mech pilots who managed to spend enough time with the Fey Fiannas to share their thoughts about their new machines.

"I always struggled to maintain control over multiple spurs in the past. That burden is a thing of the past now that I have piloted this mech. These fey are so much more impressive. They are smarter and actively try to anticipate my needs. It is much easier to trust them to act by themselves. The mech itself also helps me manage the fey better. I think I can handle one or two more fey before I reach my limit!"

"This mech can save a lot of lives. The camouflage capabilities of these mechs aren't too strong, but unless we are fighting against the more technologically superior races like the puelmers, the false emissions of the fey should fool most aliens into thinking that we have brought several times more mechs than in reality. The only issue I have with your machine is that we will need to add several more cargo ships to our fleet in order to replace all of the fey that will easily get shot down over the course of several battles. The durability of their cheapest edition is not that great."

"The power of the Elite Edition of your new drone mech is good. Its transphasic defenses can handle a large amount of punishment short of suffering a direct hit from a warship. I like the modularity of the armor system, but the plates are too thin for this to matter much. The camouflage systems are relatively decent, but if our enemies start to employ specialized scanners that counter the underlying tech, the decoys will become exposed."

"I like many of the strengths of my new Fey Fianna, but it doesn't hit as hard as I have hoped. Maybe it is because I only have access to the pauper version of this mech, but the fey that is mounted with the hyper gauss cannon simply doesn't hit as hard as the gauss guns wielded by other mechs. This is despite the fact that there aren't any great differences in caliber! The ammunition reserves of this ranged weapon fey are also tiny. It is mandatory for us to bring support mechs along that carry additional stocks of gauss rounds."

"The energy weapon fey is much better than the kinetic weapon fey. I do not see a reason why anyone would want to make use of the latter. I have only heard about these alien luminar crystal guns, but now that I have access to them, they are so much better than I expected. Those fiery beams are more powerful and efficient than I have ever seen from a weapon this small! What is even better is that I can choose between three different beam types, of which one of them happens to be remarkably good at draining energy shields. Forget about the other fey. I just want to pair my drone mech with four energy weapon fey and keep blasting warships from a safe distance."

"I don't know why you have bothered to add these melee weapon feys. Sticking swords and spears onto these small spurs doesn't necessarily make them useful. The mass of the fey is too small. They can hardly build up enough momentum to penetrate through armor or quickly drain energy shields. Their maneuverability and durability also leaves a lot to be desired. I can only say that they are

better than nothing. A skilled drone operator should be able to make adequate use out of them, but this is an uphill battle from the start."

The opinions given by all of these test users were varied and exposed many strengths and shortcomings of the Fey Fianna.

Ves particularly paid attention to all of the critique. He knew that his Fey Fianna was still far from perfection. He already thought about many of the problems during the months he spent on designing this mech, but there was only so much he could do to solve all of these issues.

The focus of much of the criticism centered around the fey. They had many strengths. From their ability to camouflage themselves to the enhancements brought by hyper technology to the design spirits directly boosting the performance of hyper technology, the fey earned a lot of praise.

However, the lack of specialists working on the mech design caused many of its technical aspects to fall behind.

The Larkinson Clan still lacked a dedicated kinetic weapon specialist, so the gauss cannon technology utilized in the corresponding fey could only be described as average.

It did not matter if the integration of hyper technology and E-technology was better than average. If the technological foundation of the gauss cannon was only mediocre, it was unable to match the performance of the market leaders!

Fortunately, this was not a fatal problem.

"The gauss cannons may be simple, but that means that they are also cheaper and less difficult to maintain." Ves smiled.

He had gone through great lengths to keep the Standard Edition of the Fey Fianna as economical as possible.

Though the mech still ended up fairly costly in the end, it was still an affordable machine considering all of the advantages it possessed.

What was important was that it was not too costly to purchase spare fey. Their cost had to be contained as much as possible in order to make it less painful for forces to sacrifice a lot of fey in order to accomplish an important objective.

It should always be better to sacrifice a lot of fey rather than mechs piloted by actual humans!

As Ves continued to read all of the feedback and watch a lot of footage of where his Fey Fianna was being trialed, he gained a better understanding of his product.

Alexa Streon arrived at the branch headquarters of the Larkinson Clan and entered the design lab where Ves had made his home.

"You've returned. What is your impression of Bortele III?"

"It is a busy planet." The young woman responded. "I enjoy the atmosphere, though I miss some of the amenities that are common on Terran planets. I have done what you have asked and scoped out the competition of the Fey Fianna. Drone mechs are not popular in this part of space, so I do not think that you need to fear too much from them. If they were truly good, then they would have been sold in greater numbers. You shouldn't underestimate them, though. They perform well as long as the conditions are favorable enough."

"Oh?" Ves turned away from the projected footage and gazed directly at his new disciple. "Let's hear it, then. Which drone mechs have caught your attention?"

Alexa activated a projection that showed several variations of a drone mech that took quantity to another level.

"This is the Sparrow Storm Mark XII, which is the latest version in a long line of drone mechs sold by SKL Mech Industries."

"I am familiar with it." Ves spoke. "I came across it during my research on drone mechs. It is a sickle mech, so it is bound to attract a lot of customers."

"That is correct. SKL Mech Industries has earned this popularity. A surprisingly high number of the mech company's products can be found within the top 10 rankings of their respective subcategories."

SKL Mech Industries was not an average mech company. It was a giant and had dominated much of the mech markets across human space for several centuries.

It had a lot of excellent Master Mech Designers working for it, of which the best of them owned varying proportions of shares in the highly lucrative company.

SKL's products were present in practically every region and every segment. The company did not know how to hold back and pursued an aggressive product strategy that compelled it to design mechs for practically every possible occasion!

As such, its brand awareness was almost 100 percent because it was almost impossible not to find one of the mechs that carried its famous brand name in ; mech market.

SKL was so obsessed with maximizing its market presence that it maintained a strong presence in first-class, second-class as well as third-class mech markets!

The most ridiculous part about SKL was that it not only split its attention across a huge amount of different markets, but also managed to do extremely well for the most part!

SKL earned massive profits by maintaining many dominant mech lines that had captured at least 10 percent if not 25 percent of their respective markets!

These well-established mech lines became so common that the mech community regarded them as mainstream mech models.

This meant that the SKL mech models in question had become the standards of which all other competitors had to compare against!

SKL mechs were usually called sickle mechs due to how often people had to mention them. That was reflective of how many of them were in use at all times.

"SKL Mech Industries is a Terran mech company in origin, so I know more about it than most." Alexa spoke. "On the surface, the Sulie Ancient Clan only owns 29 percent of SKL's stock, while 19 highly reputable Terran Master Mech Designers own the remainder. The latter are independents who have produced enough successes to become a partner of this trans-galactic enterprise. Those that are unable or unwilling to design mechs for the company anymore must transfer their shares to another Master Mech Designer that is willing to take over responsibility."

"This is a clever scheme." Ves admiringly said. "The famous mech company does not belong to any individual mech designer. It is able to bring together multiple top mech designers. SKL can offer them an excellent way for their work to reach as many customers as possible, all without needing to do all of the long and tedious groundwork. These excellent mech designers can also collaborate with each other whenever they want, making it easier for them to design superior works that can beat the prevailing competition."

This was a monstrous mech company that was never known to be soft-hearted. Though it never employed any dirty tactics, it did not need to resort to those measures in the first place. It employed so many good mech designers that it could compete against the best in the mech market fair and square!

A lot of other mech designers hated SKL more than anything else for that reason. No matter how hard the smaller players tried to design inventive products that possessed their own appeal, it was far too difficult for their works to overcome the dominant position of the market leader!

The only mercy was that sickle mechs were usually sold at high price premiums.

This made it so that many competitors could still keep their business alive by charging less for their own products.

However, SKL did not care, as its huge brand loyalty always ensured that it would sell enough copies even if their customers had to pay more!

The quality, reliability and extensive support for their products were always guaranteed.

The profits earned by SKL were insane because of that. The high prices combined with the huge economies of scale due to the high production volumes of its dominant products meant that the enormous mech company also happened to be one of the most profitable of its kind!

It was not without reason that Alexa mentioned this giant to Ves. The Sparrow Storm Mark XII was a mech line that many of his potential customers would think of when they learned about the Fey Fianna.

#### Chapter 5504 Vertical Integration

Most mech designers never became good enough to challenge the market leadership of SKL Mech Industries.

It was sheer folly for them to even think about competing directly against this monster of a mech company!

Smaller players simply did not have the skills to compete against the large amount of excellent mech designers employed by SKL.

Even if there were individual mech designers who excelled so much that their products could actually achieve parity with the corresponding sickle mechs, their own mech businesses were simply too small and inadequate to match the industrial prowess of a giant mech enterprise.

"SKL's business model centers around two crucial advantages." Alexa explained the greater details of this market leader to Ves. "Due to its dominance in the industry and the market, it has always attracted a large number of excellent mech designers. The company maintains a policy of recruiting external mech designers from practically any state or background as long as they are good enough

to design mechs according to its standards. SKL is never short on applicants, as many mech designers who worked for the company all received excellent treatment for their services."

Although working for SKL did not hold a great attraction to Ves who already owned his own successful mech company, the same did not apply to those who did not have a business empire on their hands.

There were many mech designers who worked for governments, other mech companies and research institutions for the majority of their careers.

Once their obligations to their old employers came to an end, these newly freed Seniors and Masters usually wanted to dip their toes into the commercial mech market, but did not want to build their own mech companies and everything related to them from scratch.

So long as they were good enough, there was a chance that they could get accepted by SKL, which granted them access to one of the best and most expansive business networks and industrial chains in human space!

SKL could take care of every problem, from marketing to sourcing rare materials. Mech designers only had to do their core job well and leave all of the other tedious work to other highly competent professionals.

"The other major advantage that SKL is counting upon to maintain its dominance in every mech market and mech industry is its high vertical integration. SKL sits at the heart of an industrial network that encompasses many different subsidiaries. They encompass mining companies, material processing companies, logistical companies, research institutions, development companies and even after-market service centers. In short, SKL utilizes its own in-house goods and services as much as possible, allowing it to control the entire supply chain from start to finish."

Ves looked impressed. "From what I have learned about business, most attempts at vertical integration fail. When companies spread their focus over too many different business activities, they tend to lose focus and allow a lot of inefficiencies to fester. The lack of external competition makes it so that a lot of links in the chain lose their competitiveness over time."

"That is true, sir, but SKL has managed to avoid that outcome. It relies on a combination of strict management as well as internal competition to keep its subsidiaries sharp. The company regularly does business with third-party companies in order to make direct comparisons."

The ability for SKL to build a large and vertically integrated supply chain on such an enormous scale reflected its strength as a company!

The Larkinson Clan and the Living Mech Corporation were incapable of doing the same.

The Larkinsons lacked the capital, the connections, the expertise and the motivation to do everything themselves.

The clan had no inherent advantage in essential links such as harvesting raw materials and shipping large amounts of goods across human space.

Trying to enter these industries was a bad idea. It did not matter if the Larkinsons took existing companies or set up new subsidiaries from scratch.

Without enough people in charge who excelled in these sectors, it would be difficult to make these subsidiaries as good and efficient as those run by established competitors!

Ves tilted his head in thought. "SKL's vertical integration is unmatched. The closest thing we have that can compete against this powerful force are the Open Consortiums, but that is not a fair comparison at all. Our supply chain is still made up of a lot of external companies that each demand their own share of the profits."

The Open Consortium had grown a lot since he initially founded it to make sure that the LMC's manufacturing complexes could always keep its production lines fed.

Just like many other daughter organizations of the Larkinson Clan, the Open Consortium established many different branches on many planets that hosted a large number of industries.

It usually cooperated closely with the local branches of the LMC on the same planets. Due to the reliability of contracts added to the Open Book.

The various Open Consortiums established on other planets did not need to acquire their own Open Books.

The only relic of its kind in existence was still in the hands of Chairwoman Calsie Doornbos.

In order to enable the activities of the other Open Consortiums, the holder of the Open Book was able to remove pages from it that still carried its power.

These pages could be shipped to other star systems where the local people in charge could use them to form agreements guaranteed by the Solemn Guardian.

"The Open Consortiums of our clan has recently experienced a large surge in popularity." Alexa Streon mentioned. "Your explosive rise in status has caused many companies to take our Open Consortiums seriously. We are able to bring a larger variety of companies into the fold, allowing our clan to expand our industrial network. While it is still difficult for us to cooperate with high-end businesses, it has become much easier for us to do business and negotiate favorable terms with less established enterprises. This has allowed us to contain the costs of our business activities."

Ves nodded in understanding. The Open Consortium promoted long-term business agreements. The LMC and the other divisions of the Larkinson Clan could take advantage of the stability afforded by these partnerships to earn steady profits even when the local industries experienced greater disruption.

However, the growing web of long-term business relationships could not match the tighter coordination of true vertical integration.

All of those subsidiaries had no need to earn substantial profits. They could provide their goods and services up the chain at lower prices. This made it cheaper for SKL Mech Industries to mass produce its mechs, thereby allowing this massive company to reap huge profits in the end!

"I will let you in on a secret, sir. On the surface, the Sulie Ancient Clan only owns 29 percent of the shares of SKL Mech Industries. That makes it seem as if it only has partial control over the mech company. What most people do not realize is that the first-class subsidiary companies that are part of the supply chain are all at least 50 percent owned by this very same ancient clan. Aside from that, the Sulies have also established excellent relationships with many of the other stockholders of the company."

That meant that the Sulie Ancient Clan pretty much determined the direction of SKL Mech Industries.

"That must make the Sulie Ancient Clan one of the richest of the Terran Alliance."

Alexa nodded. "That is true. It occupies a dominant position in numerous other industries. All of this added together has turned it into an economic powerhouse, both inside and outside Terran space. The only territories where SKL is unable to take root are within those controlled by the Rubarthan Pact. Other than that, sickle mechs can be found virtually anywhere else. Even the states that are highly protectionist do not have the guts to deny entry to a megacorporation owned by one of the most successful Terran ancient clans."

"So anyone competing against SKL is actually competing against an arm of the Sulie Ancient Clan, is that what you are trying to say?"

"That is one of the messages that I wanted to convey. You do not need to fear the Sulies. As one of the absolute market leaders of the mech industry, they have to contend against a huge amount of competitors, which also includes other megacorporations. You cannot even impact their bottom line."

"Then why should I pay attention to SKL at all?" Ves asked.

"SKL is so large, profitable and influential that it is able to design a large number of mechs across many different classes and product categories. The company does not like to lose, sir. Whenever one of its mainstream mech models drops in popularity, its marketing executives will become alarmed. The company will conduct a lot of research on the upstarts that had managed to dethrone its bestseller, before allocating a more competent and capable design team to develop an improved product that can regain market leadership."

That indeed sounded like a serious threat. SKL could afford to do this because it employed a huge number of excellent mech designers!

Ves was not surprised that the company aggressively defended its market dominance. This was the only way for it to sell so many mechs and support the operation of so many different subsidiary companies.

This was the downside to vertical integration. If the end business was not doing as good, all of the companies that were also a part of the supply chain threatened to become incredibly unprofitable!

Ves began to shift his attention to the overall design characteristics of the sickle mech that his Fey Fianna had to contend against.

The concept and vision of the two mech lines were completely different from each other.

Whereas the Fey Fianna largely focused on quality over quantity, the Sparrow Storm did the opposite!

The mech frame was relatively basic but extremely solid and cheap. It served as an excellent 'mothership' for its many spurs. The so-called Sparrows were relatively small and slender spurs that stood out for their disposable nature.

"The Sparrows are the highlight of this drone mech system." Alexa continued to explain.

"Depending on the variant, a Sparrow Storm can carry 16 to 64 Sparrows at a time. Mech pilots can

only pilot the variants that carry the most extreme quantities of Sparrows if they have specialized cranial implants that vastly increase their multitasking ability."

These were the most dedicated and specialized drone mech pilots. Once they took this step, they would never be able to reach their full potential if they switched to another mech type!

"Our product isn't designed to appeal to these hardcore drone mech specialists." Ves spoke with regret in his tone.

"Yes. This is an advantage because we do not have to compete directly against the Sparrow Storm. It is also a disadvantage as we need to appeal to segments that have little experience with piloting drone mechs. We will have to break new ground."

"I am sure that the value proposition of our Fey Fianna will be attractive enough to win them over."

Alexa briefly smiled. "I think so as well, sir. The Sparrow Storm is a great product. It is especially popular because SKL not only designed over a hundred different varieties of Sparrows, but also supported the rise of a growing subcommunity of third-party developers who have designed their own Sparrows. The high degree of personalization and variation has made it so that the Sparrow System is not a mech, but a platform for deploying custom spurs that fit perfectly with the needs of their owners."

This was a strength that the Fey Fianna could not match. Not only was this product far too new, but it did not come with a large selection of different fey models.

Ves thought about this for a moment. He actually found the existing fey that he had paired with the mech design to be inadequate. Perhaps it might be useful for him to design additional fey, especially ones that incorporated his latest insights into E-technology and the elements!

## Chapter 5505 Sparrow Storm

The Sparrow Storm deserved to be treated as the market leader in the second-class mech market.

The functionality provided by its endless variety of Sparrows was amazing.

Even Alexa could not withhold her admiration for the SKL's enduring business success with this product line.

"The Sparrow Storms are relatively expensive to buy upfront. Here in Bortele, a customer has to pay 2.2 MTA credits to obtain a starter Sparrow Storm that comes with a set of 16 Sparrows. That is not as much as the 3 MTA credits that we intend to charge for a Standard Edition of the Fey Project, but the production costs are not on the same level. The mech frame of the Sparrow Storm is made out of inferior materials, but their excellent design and optimization allows the machine to utilize their properties to the extreme."

Ves nodded in understanding. "It is not the mech frame, but the Sparrows that are the real earners for the company, isn't that right?"

"Yes. SKL sells a large variety of Sparrows. They possess many different functions and fall into several different price categories. Since SKL has sold so many Sparrow Storms, each of which regularly run through their stock of Sparrows, the company is able to achieve high economies of scale by producing large quantities of replacement Sparrows. The company also keeps their prices low for multiple reasons. Cheaper Sparrows incentivize existing customers to continue to use their

existing sickle mechs. The company also cannot really charge more because it has to compete against third-party developers that sell their own Sparrow models."

SKL cleverly licensed out its Sparrow models under generous conditions. This attracted a lot of development companies that came up with their own unique spin on the small spurs.

Although SKL could only earn a small cut from the sales of these third-party Sparrows, their availability strengthened the appeal of the entire mech platform!

There was no way for the Larkinson Clan to design thousands of different fey. It was also difficult to encourage third-party developers to design their own fey when they were so complex and difficult to fully replicate.

Though the business strategy adopted by SKL was not the most lucrative, it was one that retained existing customers the best!

Most of the Sparrows models were dirt-cheap, and if customers wanted to obtain more powerful ones, then those varieties were available for purchase as well!

Ever since the first editions of the Sparrow Storm line captured a large portion of the second-class drone market, no competitor had ever managed to depose it from its throne.

It was the well-deserved king of drone mechs in the second-class mech market!

"What is the current market share of the Sparrow Storm?" Ves curiously asked as he began to look up footage of this popular drone mech model in action.

"Its market share is around 31 percent according to last month's statistics."

Ves briefly looked up from the projected display. "Hm? Early in the development of the Fey Fianna, I checked this figure myself. I distinctly recall that the Sparrow Storm had a 37 percent market share back then. What changed?"

The young woman smiled. "Two major developments have caused the Sparrow Storm to drop in popularity. The transition to the Hyper Generation has caused the Sparrow Storm Mark XI and all of the tens of thousands of different Sparrow models to become obsolete. Although SLK has moved quickly to design and release the Sparrow Storm Mark XII along with dozens of upgraded Sparrow models that incorporate hyper technology, their performance against alien warships is not stellar. In fact, that was already the case before the Age of Dawn, but that did not matter too much because the Sparrow Storm is primarily designed to fight against other mech forces."

A large amount of battle footage depicted the Sparrow Storm in battles between different mech forces.

This was where they excelled. Multiple Sparrow Storms banding together could easily deploy hundreds of not thousands of Sparrows at a time!

Individually, the Sparrows were relatively weak due to their awfully small sizes. Their attack power was poor and their defenses were pathetic.

What made them so troublesome was that they were relatively fast and difficult to hit!

As long as a drone mech spread out its Sparrows and commanded them to buzz around in random patterns, it became difficult for most ranged mechs to shoot all of them down!

Rifleman mechs and many other ranged mechs practically despaired when they were being harassed by enormous swarms of Sparrows.

The weak laser beams shot by these pitiful-looking spurs could only scratch their armor, but when hundreds of them rained on their mech frames at a time, those laser beams produced horrifying results!

In contrast, the more powerful weapons wielded by these rifleman mechs often had trouble with shooting down individual Sparrows.

Even if the rifleman mechs hit their targets, they still had to chew through hundreds more!

While it was possible to cause these Sparrows to lose control by targeting the drone mechs directly, it would not be easy to take the latter down.

A good mech force would take measures to protect their drone mechs or make it as difficult as possible to attack them directly.

The only effective counter to the Sparrow Storms was to destroy their Sparrows en masse with area weapons.

Flamethrowers, explosive missiles and in certain cases ECM attacks could all take a lot of Sparrows out of the fight.

However, there were still many ways to prevent this from happening, either by placing the Sparrows well out of range or employing active countermeasures.

"The Sparrow Storm truly sounds like the perfect drone mech if quantity is all you care about." Ves remarked with a hint of appreciation. "We are actually lucky that it doesn't appear to be remarkably effective when used against alien warships. This must be the main reason why it has lost its market share."

"That is so for now. Many of the Sparrow models that the existing customer base have used for decades are simply not effective when employed against alien warships. One of the characteristics of energy shields is that stronger attacks drain them at faster rates. The weaker the attacks, the less energy shields become disturbed by them. This effect is still manageable when Sparrows only have to break the defenses of mechs, but warships are far too different. Their transphasic energy shields are so strong that they can practically bounce any attack from these tiny Sparrows."

Energy shields worked like umbrellas. They could easily block a lot of rain drops, but they broke as long as they were struck by a few bullets!

That should have made the Sparrow Storm less useful in the Hyper Generation, but their developer did not give up that easily.

Alexa displayed one of their solutions to Ves by projecting footage of one of the latest Sparrow Storms in action.

"SKL has already tried to compensate for this problem by resorting to the advantages bestowed by hyper technology."

Ves became impressed by the swarm of thousands of Sparrows being put to use against an alien raiding fleet.

Each of these sparrows were mounted with fire hyper laser beams. When each of them started to group together, they formed a pseudo-domain of sorts that contained a lot more fire-attributed E energy than elsewhere!

The large increase in fire energy allowed the Sparrows that were partially built with fire hyper materials to perform considerably better than if they operated in smaller groups!

The boost in firepower was not small. The spurs gained enough lethality to inflict more significant damage against the transphasic energy shields of alien warships!

"Our Fey Fianna can do this as well." Ves tentatively spoke. "Just not as good. Each of our drone mechs start out with only four fey, and it is difficult to increase that number. While each of my fey are much stronger than any of these Sparrows, it is impossible to match their quantity."

"When we hold our product reveal, we need to make a case that our fey can be strong as well without needing to match the quantities of the Sparrows." Alexa advised. "Many people will make this comparison once they learn about the Fey Fianna. We must control the narrative by doing this ourselves. We need to show that our ranged fey can inflict greater damage in much lower numbers."

That was rather tricky. Ves needed to think carefully on how he could make this happen. He had a few ideas, but he might have to build more powerful fey in order to fully show the superiority of his own products.

"That alone shouldn't be enough for SKL to restore the market dominance of its Sparrow Storm line, right?"

"Both SKL and numerous third-party development companies have already announced their intention to design more advanced hyper Sparrows that can borrow the power of E energy radiation to a greater extent." Alexa responded. "What is notable is that these hyper Sparrows are designed to be backwards compatible. Lastgen Sparrow Storms can seamlessly carry and operate currentgen hyper Sparrows after they install a simple software update. This alone is enough to secure the loyalty of its existing customers."

SKL was so good to its customers!

A greedier and more shortsighted mech company would have deliberately made it so that its hyper Sparrows were only compatible with the latest Mark XII version of the Sparrow Storm.

However, that sort of behavior would only damage the loyalty of a lot of disgruntled customers, making it much more likely for them to do business with competing mech companies.

Many of SKL's business decisions repeatedly proved that the company was more than willing to sacrifice short-term windfalls for long-term profitability.

Such companies happened to be the most difficult to compete against. They simply made no mistakes and held their markets in a tight grip!

"We should just stick to our current strategy." Ves concluded. "It actually makes more sense for us to market our products to customers that have never fielded drone mechs before. Everyone else is already satisfied with their Sparrow Storms."

Alexa concurred with this assessment. "Those are my thoughts as well, sir. We need to play to our strengths. All of the user feedback that we have gathered state that our Fey Fianna model is much

easier and more comfortable to pilot than other drone mechs. There is no demand for mech pilots to install specialized multitasking cranial implants in order to use our product to its full potential. Any general mech pilot can become proficient in the Fey Fianna after several weeks of training. We have the potential to expand the user base of drone mechs by ourselves!"

Both Ves and Alexa smiled at each other.

This was a clever way to deal with powerful competitors. There was no way that Ves could defeat SKL in its home game, so he simply started his own one that best matched his own advantages!

The only degree of uncertainty was whether Ves could persuade enough customers to switch to the drone mechs. A lot of mech pilots were already fairly comfortable in their own roles. It would take quite a bit of persuasion for them to accept a brand-new concept like the Fey Fianna.

Ves and his new disciple continued to talk about their strongest competition.

Alexa issued a few more warnings.

"If our Fey Fianna model takes off as you think it will, our mech company will need to keep an eye on SKL. Whether directly or indirectly, the latter's market share will drop at a rapid rate. When that happens, our rival company can respond in two different ways. If SKL urgently wishes to restore its market share, it can significantly drop the price of its Sparrow Storm Mark XII model. Do not underestimate this. The profit margins of this model are high, but that means that SKL has plenty of room to wage a price war."

That was indeed a serious threat, but Ves had enough faith in his Fey Fianna that his upcoming customers would stick to it despite it becoming relatively more expensive!

"That sounds concerning, but it is not something we can stop. What else?"

"SKL may assign a design team to develop a superior imitation of our Fey Fianna. Its mech designers have a reputation for arrogance, but it is often well-deserved. Even if they cannot replicate all of the unique strengths of our product, they can design a mech with comparable features that just happen to be better than our own work. More importantly, SKL is most definitely able to produce its own mechs at lower costs, which gives them the option to undercut our prices. The company does not always resort to this measure, but once it does, it always manages to regain its market leadership."

Many competitors found it difficult to cope with this response!

## Chapter 5506 Sales Ambition

After getting apprised of the current developments related to the famous Sparrow Storm line, Ves felt intimidated by this obstacle.

Although the market for second-class drone mechs encompassed many other models, the Sparrow Storm line accumulated so many advantages that it was practically unassailable.

Though his Fey Fianna was never designed to compete directly against the Sparrow Storm, other people might not think this way. The public would definitely engage in direct comparisons and competitions to determine the worth of his product.

Alexa Streon knew this as well. Due to her background, she had become much more familiar with instances where upstart mech companies attempted to topple the dominance of highly popular mech lines from well-established megacorporations.

"The situation that you have fallen into is almost unprecedented." The clever Terran mech designer stated to her mentor. "A mech designed by a Senior should never have the qualifications to challenge a mainstream mech designed by at least 5 Masters that enjoy the support of a complete R&D infrastructure. Even if SKL only treats the Sparrow Storm as a low-priority mech line, its standards are still high enough to turn it into an unquestionable market leader."

"If that is the case, then we shouldn't even be talking about this." Ves spoke with a frown. "Do you really think my Fey Fianna has the qualifications to challenge Sparrow Storm?"

"I do." Alexa earnestly replied. She did not hesitate to convey how much she believed in his work. "I still recall the time where you became so engrossed in the spontaneous development of what you call the Elemental Lord. Somehow, this mech that you have made with your own hands had become so special that it single-handedly called down a strange and unusual E energy-infused lightning storm. Even if it ended up vaporizing your work, the fact that it had managed to provoke these responses in the first place is unquestionable proof that your work is good."

Ves' expression turned ugly as he recalled his recent failure. The pain had lessened due to the passage of time, but he still felt he had let down the greatest living mech that he had created up to this point.

It did not matter that it had been doomed to fail as soon as he attempted to bring it to life.

What mattered was that he bestowed the gift of life to a very special mech that he felt enormously attached to, only for it to crumble apart before it could fulfill its purpose.

What Ves had been doing after this was basically an attempt to atone for his sin.

He strangely possessed a much better understanding of the mind state of the Penitent Sisters.

He used to think this group of former Hexers were sick in their minds. There was no reason for them to be penitent anymore because they had long divested themselves from their original state and people. This group of female soldiers should have recognized that they had turned a new leaf as soon as they joined the Larkinson Clan.

Yet to the original members of the Penitent Sisters, their entire group still became burdened by the sins of the past. Such a stain on their honor could never be erased that easily, so they continued to live their lives as sinners looking to redeem themselves!

While that already sounded ridiculous enough, the Penitent Sisters even spread this burden to all of their new recruits!

This was insane!

Even though their belief in collective punishment was very much an undesirable form of superstition, the Larkinson Clan had never really addressed it because it was part of the core tenets of their culture.

It also helped that the Penitent Sisters derived so much motivation from the perception that they needed to atone for their 'sins' that they fought like hell!

At this moment, Ves realized that he had fallen under a similar compulsion.

He thought about his recent vacation.

What should have turned into a time of leisure instead became a partial work vacation.

Though he managed to restore his mood during the time he spent on Ocanon VI, he also engaged in a lot of discovery and learning.

His gains from that trip were massive. All of the insights he gathered during his hunting trips and his flute playing sessions were just waiting to be transformed into stronger mechs!

All of this happened with a clear direction in mind. Ves consciously focused on improving his understanding and his ability to apply the powers of water because he wanted to remake the Elemental Lord once again!

Right now, Ves questioned whether he was being affected by an external influence, or whether this was a desire that came from the bottom of his heart.

He firmly believed that the latter was the case, but he could not rule out the possibility that the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown may have given him a subtle nudge.

It would be typical for a symbol of authority that originated from the Five Scrolls Compact to encourage Ves to master the five elements!

However, Ves did not really mind this. The five classical elements formed such a big part of E-technology that it was unreasonable to ignore them over the course of becoming a better creation cultivator.

Alexa spoke again after she saw that Ves had fallen into his own thoughts.

"Think about it, sir. The brief existence and potential shown by the Elemental Lord should be proof that its root must be remarkable. The Fey Fianna has great potential, especially if we can learn how to develop its various traits to produce greater advantages in the field. If we can showcase its amazing potential during the upcoming product reveal, your work has a serious chance of overtaking a well-established mainstream mech model!"

She was not exaggerating when she said that! Though the Fey Fianna likely wouldn't be able to poach too many long-term customers who had become invested in the Sparrow Storm, the LMC's upcoming product was so easy to get started with that it could single-handedly break open a new market!

Though Ves personally believed that it was not possible to draw out the Fey Fianna's amazing potential in a short amount of time, it was still worthwhile to aim a bit higher.

Even if the Fey Fianna ended up short, there was no shame in becoming the second or third most popular mech model in a specific market category!

In any case, Ves was just a Senior Mech Designer, so it was normal for him to fail in this sort of competition.

"Alright. If this is the case, then we should play into this confrontation. We should alter and expand our game plan for the upcoming product. I think we should arrange a few exhibition matches. We must show that we are not afraid to deploy our Fey Fianna against the Sparrow Storm. It is better

for us to sei up these matches ourselves, though it will be harder to convince our audience that the matchups are fair."

Alexa looked troubled. "Exhibition matches are indeed a good way to demonstrate the superiority of a new product over older ones, but the premise is that the Fey Fianna is truly superior enough. Also, one of the issues of challenging the Sparrow Storm is that it has existed for so long that many of its mech pilots have years if not decades of experience with them. They have mastered its use to an excellent degree. In contrast, our Fey Fianna is so young that even our most experienced Larkinson mech pilots only spent a few weeks with their new machines."

The difference in skill was too great and could massively affect the outcome.

Even if the Larkinson Clan deliberately sought out less experienced drone mech pilots, these supposedly inexperienced rookies still benefited from many decades of accumulated knowledge!

A mech line as popular as the Sparrow Storm probably spawned a lot of manuals, textbooks, video guides and even specialized tutoring courses!

All of these learning resources could save many years of trial-and-error for any new mech pilot hoping to master this niche but very useful drone mech model.

Though the Larkinsons could find a bunch of less-qualified mech pilots to make up for this difference, that might cause the exhibition matches to turn into a giant farce.

That was not the effect that Ves wanted to see.

He already started to experience a headache due to this issue. These sorts of events had to be planned out extremely carefully in order to legitimize his claims.

Wait.

Why did he have to torture himself over these issues?

He was a leader nowadays. There was no need for him to address every issue in person.

Though a matter as important as this should not be delegated so easily, Ves was fortunate enough to have an excellent subordinate at his side.

"Alexa."

"Yes, professor?"

"I have a feeling that you probably know your way around these kinds of events a lot better. You should take charge of this. Work together with my assistant Gavin to make the necessary changes. If you need anything directly from me, just ask. Does that sound agreeable?"

The young woman looked surprised that he would shift so much responsibility to her. The importance of this product reveal could not be overstated.

The upcoming event is not just about introducing a new commercial mech.

It also served as the formal debut of a newly promoted tier 3 galactic citizen.

If Ves did not display the strength that came with his status, it became a lot harder for other people to take him seriously!

Ves raised his hand and patted Alexa on the shoulder. "I trust you. Not many people in the Larkinson Clan are good at this kind of stuff, but I think you wif do fine. Can you do this for me, or should I look elsewhere?"

"That will not be necessary, sir. I am fully capable of organizing this. What will you be doing during this time?"

"What else? I will be working on developing a few improved fey models." Ves grinned. "I have gained a lot of ideas as of late, and a few of them should be easy to implement. It won't take more than a week for me to whip up a batch of more powerful fey that can be sold as supplemental products."

"Are you sure that is the case? A week is not much. It should normally take longer than that to develop and test a new product."

"I am not going to tinker with the hardware too much. Much of my work is related to E-technology. Just trust me. I will be able to present you with a more solid overview of my work in a few days. I still need to make a few inquiries and conduct a few experiments. I believe that as long as my ideas work out, the Fey Fianna should be at least 50 percent more attractive to potential buyers!"

All of the time he spent on deepening his comprehension of the water element had not been in vain.

Even though it was a little too premature, Ves possessed enough confidence in his ability to design a revolutionary new set of water fey that could produce amazing results!

He just wasn't sure whether he could produce concrete results in time for the product reveal.

Ves and Alexa continued to talk a bit more. The Larkinsons had already spent weeks on preparing for this event, and now they needed to make a lot of changes due to changing whims.

This was quite disruptive to say the least, but Ves fully believed this was for the better.

"Tell me the truth, sir. How much of an impact will your water fey make according to your estimation?"

"If my wildest dreams come true, they should be powerful enough to turn the Fey Fianna into an essential component in any second-class mech force! As long as the price is not too excessive, it is bound to become more popular than the Pacifier!"

Chapter 5507 Mechs as Qi Cultivators

The days went by in a frenzy.

Alexa Streon, Gavin Neumann and many other leading figures of the Larkinson Clan all worked together to expand the scope of the much-anticipated product reveal.

From organizing more formal receptions to setting up more exciting exhibition matches, the Larkinsons in Bortele had to do a lot of extra work in order to do the Fey Fianna justice.

Few people complained about this. The bigger the show, the greater the prestige. The Larkinsons felt glad that the latest commercial mech of the Living Mech Corporation earned such luxurious treatment.

The greater the success, the more money poured into the coffers of the Larkinson Clan!

Even though the clan actually earned a lot more money from selling the plunder obtained during the Trailblazer Expedition, the income was way too risky and inconsistent.

Any well-established clan had to establish a strong commercial enterprise in order to maintain its prosperity across multiple generations.

The current Living Mech Corporation had supported the growth of the Larkinson Clan for a long time, but the former had become increasingly unable to keep up with the latter in the past few years.

It went without saying that this was a huge problem. Neither the Living Mech Corporation nor the other daughter organizations of the Larkinson Clan could pay for all of the rapidly growing expenses.

This was already bad enough when the Larkinson Clan established a lot of costly branches across many different planets in the middle zones.

The problem became a lot worse once the Premier Branch started to pick up steam!

In fact, just the cost of maintaining all of the expensive first-class instruments and facilities over at Diandi Base was a huge burden in itself!

If Ves or the rest of the Larkinson Clan were unable to bring in so much money, it was impossible for the Living Mech Corporation alone to cover for all of these expenses!

"All of that can change if the Fey Fianna can dethrone the Sparrow Storm."

Due to the Red Association's excellent data gathering and record-keeping habits, it was not that difficult to obtain records of the Sparrow Storm's sales figures.

Of course, much of the statistics were not that relevant to Ves. That was because the state of the mech market during the Age of Mechs was much bigger and more comprehensive at the time.

Losing access to the enormous market of the Milky Way as well as all of the mech designers who resided over there had completely upended the mech industry at the start of the Age of Dawn!

Although a lot of mech companies had fallen overnight due to losing contact with the well-established lead designers from the old galaxy, not all of them perished in the Red Ocean.

SKL was so big and employed so many excellent mech designers that it still retained the services of many first-class, second-class and third-class mech designers!

Even though SKL was unable to support its immense product catalog after losing access to so many mech designers, the megacorporation was so powerful that it could easily hire hundreds of high-quality applicants to compensate for all of the absences.

This ultimately meant that SKL Mech Industries in the Red Ocean had not actually lost any strength. It quickly recovered from the abrupt transition to the new age and took advantage of the introduction of the Hyper Generation to reorganize all of its product lines.

The Sparrow Storm Mark XII was not only a lot different from the Mark XI iteration due to the inclusion of hyper technology, but also because many of its contributing mech designers had changed!

Still, SKL was highly accustomed to rotating the lead and contributing mech designers of its long-established mech lines. It had a mature system and approach in place to allow other mech designers to inherit its staple mech designs.

The Sparrow Storm Mark XII was therefore a qualitatively superior line of mechs that had been optimized to a fantastic degree.

The only flaw that Ves could speak of was that its hyper technology application was still too shallow and rudimentary. This was exactly the vulnerability that Ves intended to take advantage of when he was ready to push his Fey Fianna!

"This is the Age of Dawn." Ves reminded himself as he stared at the design of his new water fey. "Unlike the Age of Mechs, conventional technology no longer carries as much weight as before. E-technology can boost the performance of mechs just as much if not more!"

E-technology had many different meanings, but to Ves it represented an attempt to apply cultivation science to modern technology.

Ves recently embraced the model of treating his living mechs as artifacts.

This was a perspective that encouraged him to think of his products as remarkable objects that could be made strong through special production and evolution processes.

However, now that Ves needed to figure out better ways for his Fey Fianna to compete against a formidable mainstream mech line, he believed that this was no longer the most appropriate way to treat his machines.

"Artifacts are objects." He frowned. "Even if they are extremely precious and powerful, they cannot escape the fact that their scope is limited."

Ves had a different vision in mind for his living mechs.

From the early days of his career, he always dreamt of turning his products into true living beings.

He wanted to turn them into fully sentient beings with all of the rights and obligations that came with their status. He wanted his mechs to become fully recognized as ideal partners that attained permanent symbiosis with the human race.

"If living mechs can become like humans, why not treat them like cultivators?"

This was a highly impactful mental model. Treating his living mechs like cultivators meant that he would become more inclined to focus on their ability to practice cultivation methods, thereby enabling them to produce dramatic results once they mastered powerful techniques!

Although Ves had already started to do this by devising the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra for his living mechs, it only represented a single step in the right direction.

When Ves recalled the mantra that he had devised by combining several components from other ancient methods, he grew increasingly less satisfied with the lack of sophistication and power of his work.

"I was a lot less knowledgeable at the time."

Much had changed in the months that had passed since he made that mantra. Ves learned so much more about cultivation science as well as the interaction between E energy radiation and his living mechs.

He felt it was time for him to either update the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra or expand its techniques so that it was no longer confined to passive strengthening.

This was a huge undertaking. Ves needed to cooperate with multiple experts up to and including his mother in order to achieve the best results.

"There is not enough time." He shook his head.

The upcoming product reveal was scheduled to start pretty soon. There was no way for him to upgrade the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra in so little time.

Even if he managed to improve it, the Fey Fiannas would not have enough time to cultivate the improved method for more than a few days.

"I don't need to work on such a big project yet. I should focus on a smaller and more focused undertaking."

Ves gazed at the water fey that he had been working on. The water element corresponded best to non-offensive uses, so he had been trying to improve its utilization in the space suppressor fey and the energy shield fey.

While the Fey Fianna was divided into several editions, Ves mainly focused his attention on the non-transphasic version of the mech.

Even though it was the weakest out of the three existing editions, it was the one with the greatest marketability. The Standard Edition had to perform well in order to sustain the popularity of this mech line!

This was why he had been working hard to improve the existing implementation of hyper technology and E-technology into these two particular fey types.

Without using phasewater, Ves believed there were still ways for him to massively boost the performance of these two fey!

He smiled and raised the artifact flute that he had placed on his desk. "I can't do this without your help."

As soon as he held the flute, his affinity to water strengthened in an instant. It became a lot easier for him to develop intuitive solutions to problems related to water manipulation.

Although this function primarily served to boost the ability of a qi cultivator, Ves was able to take advantage of it to improve his design solutions!

"Now that I think about it, these living fey are equivalent to qi cultivators who specialize in the water element. The techniques derived from the Oceancaller can easily be transplanted in these fey!"

It was difficult to improve the space suppressor fey and the shield generator fey in a significant fashion. Any other mech designer would probably think that Ves had gone crazy for believing he could boost their performance by a large extent in just a handful of days!

However, as Ves continued to apply different concepts of water to the two fey types, he did not seem to get stuck.

He had already been thinking about applying these solutions before he left Ocanon Vi!

Ves already solved many of the possible problems in advance. This was why his progress was so remarkably smooth.

By the time he was nearing the end of this short design spree, he began to take a step back and evaluate what he had accomplished up to this point.

Both the space suppressor fey and the energy shield fey should have become much more powerful than before.

Though he had yet to fabricate them and test their performance in reality, he knew in his heart that they were no longer as unassuming as before. He was willing to bet his life on this prediction!

The only issue was that he felt that his upgraded fey was still missing a crucial component that could tie their enhancements together.

"What am I missing?" He frowned.

Since he designed these living fey as if they were qi cultivators, he started to think back on what he knew about the latter.

He had read through numerous qi cultivation methods and also received a few insightful lessons about them from his mother.

What characterized qi cultivators the most?

"Their artistic conception."

His back suddenly straightened as he realized why he felt his work was still incomplete.

Though he had implemented several concepts related to water to his upgraded fey, that did not mean that they made for good artistic conceptions.

Thinking about currents and whirlpools all of the time was like wearing gray t-shirts every day. There was little depth, complexity and potential in developing them any further.

The truly powerful qi cultivation methods often based their artistic conceptions around complex, multilayered subjects that enabled practitioners to develop their abilities in more sophisticated and powerful directions!

If a qi cultivator dreamt about becoming a Phoenix, he could eventually incarnate as one, similar to what the First Flame had done!

Although there were many difficulties involved with practicing such complicated methods, the rewards were much greater!

Ves' eyes shone as he gazed at his two water fey models.

He needed to put his imagination to good use.

"There are undoubtedly limits to what I can do, but I have to try this out. The potential is just too great!"

The defining characteristic of his mechs was that they were alive. No other mech designers aside from his wife and his students could make anything close

Ves had nothing to fear from SKL!

Though the powerful mech company had a bad habit of trying to imitate and surpass the selling points of rival products, there was no way that SKL could make their own mechs manipulate E energy as if they were qi cultivators.

That was because their products were not alive!

He suddenly frowned. "Well, that is not entirely true anymore..."

Chapter 5508 Balsem Indigo

Ves became so obsessed with designing a set of powerful water fey that he neglected to leave his design lab for several days.

This was abnormal as he had just arrived on an entirely new planet!

He originally planned to tour the most prominent sites of Bortele III. So many mech forces stopped by the port system that the place had become livelier than Davute.

At the very least, he wanted to stop by the local branches of the Larkinson Clan, the LMC, the Open Consortium and the Creation Association.

However, he threw most of these appointments out of the window when he became determined to add a lot of extra oomph to his living fey.

The challenge of defeating one of the dominant mech lines in the market compelled him to work as hard as possible!

Many people regretted the fact that they would not be able to meet with the famous patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, but there were also a lot of other people who felt relieved that he remained out of sight.

The less he moved around, the easier it became for the mechers to defend his life!

Ves received occasional reports about additional protectors dispatched by the Red Association.

Even the entire venue where he planned to conduct his product reveal came under special protection.

All of this did not bother Ves too much. He had firm goals in mind and felt driven to complete them now that he had recovered from his most recent failure.

The water fey was all done. Ves had just fabricated a few batches of them after spending a day in the mech workshop. Since they were not as big as mechs, it did not take a lot of time and effort to bring them into existence.

The only issue was that the mech pilots as well as the living mechs needed to spend precious time to get accustomed to their quirks.

The new fey came with additional complications which made it a bit more troublesome to utilize them at their full capacity.

Still, now that Ves had managed to complete this essential chore, he had enough time to focus on other priorities.

"Gavin?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Please purchase a dozen or so used mechs from the second-hand mech market. You can pick and choose whatever you like so long as they are not LMC mechs."

His assistant furrowed his brows. "That is an open-ended request. Bortele III has a thriving market for second-hand and even third-hand mechs. Can you narrow your criteria further so that I have a better idea what I should buy?"

"I want to study how constant exposure to E energy radiation has changed them. I don't need lots of samples, so a dozen is already enough. I don't care about their mech types, quality, features and price levels. What I do care about is how long they have been used. Try and purchase mechs that have been in constant use for over a decade or further. Make sure that they have also been piloted for at least several months during the Age of Dawn. The older the mech, the more I can gain from my observations. Is that clear, Gavin?"

His assistant vaguely figured out what Ves wanted to look for. The dutiful man nodded in understanding.

"Don't worry. Many mechs that tend to be older than one or two decades usually consist of guard machines that have rarely seen any actual use, but there are always exceptions. I will make sure to buy the oldest available machines that are still intact. Most people usually recycle them as they are pretty much worthless after suffering so much wear-and-tear, but maybe there are a few weirdos who can't let their precious machines get ripped apart in order to recover their materials."

"Just make it happen. The sooner you bring those mechs back, the sooner I can complete my research." Ves said. "Don't worry about putting them to use. I have no intention to field them or anything. We can send them to the recyclers once I have completed my examination."

"That will make my search easier."

Just as promised, it only took Gavin and his team a few hours to quickly scrounge up a small collection of used mechs from the second-hand mech market.

It turned out that a lot of established mech forces dumped their lastgen mechs in order to free up room for their shiny new hyper mechs.

While there were many forces that were willing to wait a few months to upgrade their existing mechs to an updated version, not every group was willing to take this route.

With the introduction of the Hyper Generation, the second-class mech market had become filled with models that belonged to the Phasewater Generation or even older!

The conditions of these mechs were actually pretty good for the most part. Even the shabbier machines got patched up in order to restore their fighting condition. This was because their owners all expected to make use of them for many more years.

The start of the Age of Dawn had changed everything, so all of these decent and serviceable mechs of the Phasewater Generation suddenly turned into unwanted foster children.

"You won't believe how many of them have been piling up inside the warehouses." Gavin said as the recently purchased mechs were being shipped into an underground hangar of branch headquarters of the Larkinson Clan. "Tens of thousands of them have been put on sale. An even greater quantity of mechs have been sent straight to the recycling companies, who are enjoying a massive boom in business by the way. It was easy for us to pick out the oldest and most used machines among the extensive collections of intact castoffs."

Ves couldn't help but feel uncomfortable about this. This sort of treatment fully reflected the prevailing attitude. Most people generally treated mechs as objects, commodities or disposable assets.

Once they had outlived their immediate usefulness, their owners had no qualms about selling them off or scrapping for parts and materials!

"Did you happen to see a lot of LMC mechs among those heaps?"

"Surprisingly, no." Gavin smiled. "Our living mechs all have glows and other functions that are irreplaceable, at least for now. There is no substitute for the Pacifier line for example. Our existing products have all undergone a lot of growth. They not only became more useful, but also developed strong emotional bonds with their mech pilots. No one is willing to phase them out so easily. Many of them are still waiting for our clan to upgrade their models into hyper mechs."

"I know. I won't make them wait too long. It is good that these customers are willing to stick to their old machines and wait to upgrade them into more modern incarnations. They will fully be able to retain their growth progress if that is the case."

As far as Ves was concerned, this should happen a lot more. He still had a lot of work to do in order to turn this ideal into a universal standard.

Ves continued to ask about Gavin's observations when he went out to buy the used mechs.

Alexa Streon arrived a few minutes later.

"I heard that you were looking to examine a number of old mechs. Is this related to your design philosophy, professor?"

"It is." Ves admitted and started to stride forward. "Come with me. Let's take a look at them. That reminds me, you should be close to choosing your own design philosophy, right? Has your extra duties delayed you in taking this crucial step?"

"It is fine, sir. I do not mind it if I can take my time. I have continued to gather more insights from your work. The more I know about living mechs, the more certainty I will gain once I have set my course. It is better to embark on mech design with a clearer understanding of what lies ahead."

She was right. Ves was on his own when it came to developing living mechs. This was the downside of becoming the pioneer of an unexplored field.

They eventually stopped in front of a worn and weather-beaten landbound hybrid mech. It used to feature bright yellow coating, but it had suffered so much neglect that it had dulled to the point where it had partially worn away.

Gavin proceeded to introduce the machine.

"This is one of the oldest mechs that we managed to pick up from the used market. It is a 15 year old mech that is originally based on a model called the Balsem Indigo RIX-76P. It has swapped between four different owners according to its logs, and has been used by 9 different pilots over the course of its existence. It was already outdated during the Phasewater Generation, but it is still a cheap and useful mech when used to defend vulnerable colonies against exobeasts and enemy raids. It has seen infrequent action over the years, and has been repaired and modified too many times to count. The only reason why it has still remained in use for so long was because it has been continually upgraded by many different mech designers."

The Balsem Indigo was a mess.

It originally started out as a normal production copy, but gradually turned into a frankenstein mech.

Ves did not need to read a log in order to perceive the history of this old machine.

Its limbs got blown off multiple times. This was a machine that experienced more than its fair share of battles over the course of its life.

Its inferior parts got replaced by superior ones, which in turn got replaced again when newer parts became available.

Old tech occasionally made way for newer tech, but this did not apply to every mech system. Its weapon systems got replaced most often while much of its internals remained as old as the mech itself.

The Balsem Indigo also retained the echo and imprints of multiple mech pilots. Strangely enough, Ves could only clearly perceive 6 of them. This meant that the remaining three had spent so little time with it that they never managed to influence the machine.

All of these events and more formed a living tapestry that defined the life and history of a simple landbound hybrid mech!

It was beautiful.

"What do you think about this mech, Alexa?" Ves asked as he entered his teaching guise again. "Is it a simple rustbucket, or does it hold greater value than what is obvious on the surface?"

The woman did not answer immediately. She instead sent out Maia in order to study the spirituality of the Balsem Indigo.

"Myah."

"I... am not entirely certain whether it holds greater value, but... I think it is alive." Alexa eventually replied. "I do not mean that in the conventional sense. This mech isn't close to matching the liveliness of your living mechs or even that of the Monster Slayer. It is... much less developed. It is like a mouse to a human. How can this mech be alive in the first place? Has it spontaneously gained life after being bombarded by E Energy radiation?"

Ves nodded. "I think that is an important contributing factor to its current state. In the past, I would have told you that this mech has developed an X-Factor due to being shaped by the minds of mech pilots over a long stretch of time. Normally, that would have been the end of this story, as the concept of X-Factor is so vague and difficult to determine that most people simply don't think it exists in the first place."

"That has obviously changed. The Age of Dawn has rewritten the rules."

"That is apparently the case." Ves agreed. "My theory is that mechs with X-Factor can gradually evolve into proto-living mechs after being exposed to E energy radiation for a long stretch of time. While they haven't met the standard of first order living mechs, I am afraid that it may be possible for other mech designers to detect this properly and improve it through their own means."

Both Alexa and Gavin looked shocked as they realized the implications of this statement!

"Does that mean... your living mech monopoly is about to end?"

## Chapter 5509 Symbol of Second-Class Humanity

The day before the product reveal was scheduled to begin, the Borteale System became busier than ever.

Traffic in the strategic port system had always been high, but it received a small but noticeably uptick of inbound visits.

This was not remarkable in itself. Large coalition fleets occasionally returned from the hunt with a lot of valuable plunder in their cargo holds.

Occasionally, the fleets that originally set off from Borteale returned with less than a quarter of their warships and mechs intact. This did not happen as frequently because the forces who lost their battles often failed to escape the pursuit of enemy warships that were universally equipped with warp drives!

In any case, Borteale served as an excellent pitstop to many kinds of forces. It was a place to efficiently dump a lot of scrap, hire new personnel and repair a lot of damaged assets.

Many people who yearned to become New Elites could often find a way to mix into larger fleets by accepting the right opportunities in Borteale!

The humans in the Red Ocean generally weren't stupid. Those who transferred to the new frontier at an early stage of colonization tended to be more qualified, more ambitious and more desperate than the general population in the old galaxy.

At the very least, there was no shortage of pioneers with guts among red humanity!

While the dangers of fielding mechs against dangerous alien warships were considerable, everyone gradually realized that the New Elites Program would gradually reshape the hierarchy of red humanity.

The aristocrats and the magnates who currently held the reins of power might not be in charge anymore.

Anyone could overtake these old powers so long as they fought hard enough in the Red War!

Even though it was incredibly difficult to earn enough victories and preserve the fighting condition of a fighting force in the long run, that did not stop pioneers and other ambitious fortune seekers from betting everything in the fight!

In any case, once they encountered a catastrophe that wiped out all of their forces, these losers likely wouldn't live long enough to suffer from their mistakes!

What was different in Bortele was that it received a lot of inbound traffic that did not hang out in the Torald Middle Zone in the past.

They came from other regions such as the Magair and Krakatoa Middle Zone. An oddly high proportion of Hexer and Davutan groups had flocked to Bortele all of a sudden.

Not only that, but there was also a noticeable uptick in visitors that came from more distant zones!

It became clear pretty soon that these groups traveled to Bortele for a single common purpose.

They wanted to see Professor Ves Larkinson.

His name became incredibly famous over the last year. He was one of the models of a pioneer in the new frontier. Yet it was only after the start of the Age of Dawn that he had become one of the most famous second-raters in the Red Ocean!

Though much of the general public did not have clear knowledge of what took place during the infamous Survivalist conference, they all learned that Ves had played an outsized role during this political crisis.

The rumors that circulated among many communities even claimed that his influence exceeded the sway of a Star Designer!

The fact that those in the know never refuted these wild claims lent a lot of credence to this belief!

Regardless of the truth, the fact that a young and talented second-class Senior Mech Designer suddenly became a third-class galactic citizen in a single leap could not be denied!

Not only that, but this famous rising star also happened to possess mysterious connections with the first-rate colonial superstates.

There were strong claims that Ves had managed to gain the backing of the Destroyer of Worlds for whatever reason. Perhaps it was their shared love of cats or the commonality of their 'companion spirits' that brought them together.

The Rubarthans certainly did not know how to respond to these rumors, which implicitly served as an admission that the two seemingly unrelated individuals definitely managed to hook up with each other!

The new star's connection with the Terrans was much less ambiguous. Not only did he openly relocate to one of the strongholds of the Devos Ancient Clan, he also took on the granddaughter of General Axelar Streon as his personal disciple!

This was practically unheard of! How could a highborn first-class mech designer ever deign to accept a second-class mech designer as her teacher?

Though a lot of clever people determined that there was a connection between the legendary Ouroboros and living mechs, the fundamental reason had to be that Ves was way more valuable than a typical first-class Master Mech Designer!

In fact, his galactic citizenship already served as concrete proof of this assertion. Ves' sudden promotion caused him to overtake almost every other Master Mech Designer of red humanity.

This also included all of the centuries-old stalwarts who worked for the behemoths such as SKL Mech Industries!

Due to all of these clues, the people of the middle zones came to a consensus on this subject.

Ves was the hero of all second-raters!

In fact, even third-raters held him up as a hero who shared the same roots as them, but no one important enough really cared for their opinions.

A lot of people outright denied that Ves had originally started out as a poor citizen from the Bright Republic!

What mattered in public perception was that Ves entered the Red Ocean as a forgettable and indistinguishable second-class pioneer, but had now shot himself into the leadership class of red humanity as a whole!

Many second-raters dreamed of promoting to first-raters and rising up in their ranks to become a new generation leader, but the difficulty of accomplishing all of this was so high that hardly anyone had managed to succeed over the centuries.

Ves had managed to do it. Not only that, he did it in the fastest and most dramatic fashion possible!

Even if he enjoyed a lot of advantages and circumstances that ordinary second-raters could never dream of, at least he showed with his deeds that rising to the top from a second-class background could still be done!

In truth, one of the reasons why the Bortele System had become so busy over the last year was because Ves single-handedly inspired many second-raters to follow his example!

If he did not rise to power in such an impressive fashion, a lot of second-class humans would never have embraced the New Elites Program to this extent.

This was because second-raters inherently suffered from an inferiority complex. Their lack of belief in their ability to cross the gap between classes meant that they often lost before they even thought about making the attempt.

Yet now that Ves had already set an extremely successful example for every second-rater, he had become the idol among the people of the middle zones!

Perhaps only one among thousands of opportunists would succeed in becoming first-class humans, but that was already a good result compared to the old status quo!

In any case, as the most valiant and successful envoy of second-class society, Ves held such a special position among the people that they placed a lot of importance on his product reveal.

The fact that he intended to introduce a new second-class mech line showed that his recent rise to power did not cause him to forget about his old people!

More and more ships had poured into Bortele in the last weeks.

In fact, the amount of visitors could have doubled if the Larkinsons announced the product reveal more than a month in advance!

"So this is Bortele, huh? I can smell the scent of war in the air." A mercenary commander spoke as he exited his shuttle.

Many more shuttles descended from the air and landed on the designated pads.

The spaceports of Bortele had become busier than ever. Many queues had formed in order to inspect and process all of the new arrivals.

The security protocols became a lot stricter all of sudden. Everyone going in and out of the main city of Bortele III had to register their itinerary and go through multiple security checks.

A lot of forces that were previously allowed to field mechs in the city temporarily had to surrender that right.

The large venue where the product reveal was scheduled to be held gained a lot of fortifications as well.

So much had been done to prepare for one of the most prominent public events in Bortele since the start of the Age of Dawn!

The local economy was doing better than ever. Hotels became filled. Mech stores accepted more orders than ever. Fleets that were lacking in specialized personnel easily managed to make up for their shortfall.

Bortele earned so much profit from the upcoming product reveal that it didn't matter anymore if Ves made a complete fool out of himself!

Though Ves occupied his time with other matters, he did not miss the changes taking place outside the branch headquarters of the Larkinson Clan.

He looked out of a shielded window that granted him a view of a busy metropolis. All of the shuttles and the humans moving around made the entire urban landscape come to life.

"You are responsible for much of it." Gavin noted as he stood at the side. "This is a visual indicator of how powerful and influential that you have become. It wasn't as obvious in the past, but now that you are making your first public debut since your most recent ascension, this is the influence that you wield. As long as you continue to maintain your relationship with second-raters, you can continue to reap the benefits of their adoration."

Ves grimaced as he folded his hands behind his back. "You make it sound as if I am an idol."

"That is because you are. You are more than a mech designer or an innovator. You have become a symbol of the people. The public will ascribe values to you that will make you larger than life. This is an advantage to you as it will let you get away with a lot of stuff that ordinary people cannot do. However, it is also a danger, because as soon as you do anything that breaks the illusion, these fans may turn against you for letting them down."

That was a huge burden that only grew heavier over time. Part of the reason why Ves always felt reluctant to follow a high-profile development strategy was because he did not want to deal with these complications.

Alas, it was too late now. There was no use crying over spilt milk. Ves had little choice but to accept his current reality.

"Does my celebrity afford me a greater advantage in selling my mechs?"

"Yes, but it is not as big as you want, boss. The LMC's brand recognition has become higher than ever. There are few second-raters that do not know of your products. What fame cannot do is to persuade rational and cautious buyers from replacing their old machines with LMC mechs. There

are way too many factors that customers have to take into account. People's lives and finances are at stake. The wrong decision can easily kill a lot of people and bring entire organizations to ruin. Ultimately, the best way to increase the market share of our products is to make them stronger than the competition."

Ves smirked at that. "I don't have any cause for concern if that is the case. Even if I can only release one Hyper Generation product for the time being, it should definitely be strong enough to overshadow many other second-class mechs! I dare say that it may spark a turning point in the second-class mech market."

Gavin did not want to celebrate too early.

"I hope your optimism is not misplaced. Anything can happen tomorrow. There is a chance that other competitors intend to exploit your fame by presenting challengers to the Fey Fianna. It is a cheap way for them to promote their latest products."

"Hahaha! Good! I hope they will come, but I do not think that is too likely. Once I introduce my new mech, I am afraid that most of these would-be challengers will lose their courage."

#### Chapter 5510 Two Unusual Visitors

If Ves happened to be a True God, he had a suspicion that he could leverage his current level of fame and adoration among the second-raters a lot better!

It was a pity that he was far from reaching the level of a True God. Despite undergoing two sublimations, he was nowhere close to becoming a Star Designer or anything comparable.

His various incarnations were also far away from reaching this powerful state. There was no way that Vulcan and Blinky could reach the finish line quickly given that they were practicing extremely advanced cultivation methods that promised huge payoffs at the end.

All of this meant that the literal and figurative worship of the masses had no use to him at all. Ves was not even able to sense the power of the faith that his most ardent and most loyal fans must be transmitting in his direction.

Ves knew that the story would become completely different once he or any of his incarnations broke through the ultimate threshold and reached a much higher state of life.

However, that was way too far away from him. His mother had already warned him plenty of times that he should not try to overreach and dabble with forces that he was not qualified to handle.

He quickly shoved the matter of his rising popularity out of his mind and focused on more immediate concerns.

In the final day before the product reveal, Ves spent much of his time meeting with different people.

A lot of important acquaintances and officials had arrived from afar. Each of them deserved a small moment of his time.

Though Ves found many of the talks to be tedious, Gavin advised him that this small gesture could mean a lot to the Larkinson Clan.

It would become a lot easier to obtain permissions and sign favorable deals if Ves showed that he cared.

Ves met with Hexers, Davutans, business executives and scientists.

The only people that he refused to meet were the envoys from religious organizations.

He could already predict what they wanted to ask from him. Ever since the Age of Dawn had brought the extraordinary to the forefront of people's minds, a lot of religious institutions experienced a resurgence in followers!

E energy radiation might as well be magic or the manifestation of divine power from the perspective of those who believed in gods or other supernatural forces.

Naturally, anyone who seriously studied Ves' background knew that he was able to bring people closer to their supposed gods through his living mechs.

The Ylvainans and the Hexers clearly benefited from his targeted works!

Though it was not strictly necessary to rely on this gimmick to sustain a faith, having lots of mechs around that exuded the glows of certain divinities would make it a lot easier to expand their flock!

Faiths were not exempt from competition. In this new era where belief in gods provided a lot more reassurance than before, many cults and churches began to compete with each other in order to capture the devotion of a limited pool of humans that were prone to worship.

Ves did not want to get involved in these messy fights. Wars between conflicting religions featured prominently throughout human history. Getting dragged into these mudfights was an easy way to tarnish his current popularity!

Right now, he already felt it was enough for him to meddle with the Ylvainans and the Hexers. He would just get entangled in a host of other historical grievances if he became involved with another religious group!

As much as Ves did not want to have anything to do with religion, Ves could not avoid a meeting with the people who were intricately involved with one particular faith.

That was the worship of Vulcan, who happened to be his own spiritual alter-ago!

Ves continued to stand in front of the high windows that granted him a view of Bortele's urban sprawl.

While it looked like he was placing himself in open view to any assassins who wanted to claim his bounty, he knew that the mechers had arranged a lot of protective measures to guard against a strike.

Anyone who was remotely intelligent could easily deduce that as well, so if there were any killers in the city, none of them were stupid enough to take a shot under the current circumstances!

"Oh well."

He turned around and faced his latest two visitors.

Though Ves had a hunch that he would be meeting these two figures sooner or later, he never expected that they would come together!

The woman garbed in sacred purple-and-gold robes possessed a complicated background. Ves could somehow perceive a strong spark of piety in her reptilian orange eyes, though he never had the feeling that she was as selfless as she appeared.

No matter what, Director Samandra Avikon knew her way around religions and had done an excellent job at expanding the reach and following of the Creation Association. Vulcan gained a lot of influence among second-class and third-class artisans throughout human-occupied space under her leadership!

What Ves did not expect was that she would come in the company of a much shorter, stockier and more muscular man.

He had never met this heavy gravity variant human in person, but Vulcan happened to possess a distinct impression of this bearded fellow.

The man was one of the high priests of the Eternal Vulcan Church, which happened to be the only state religion of the Eternal Vulcan Empire!

Though Vulcan already possessed a decent understanding of Joja Firebreath through the latter's prayers and other interactions, Ves did not really have a good impression of this dwarf.

Though the man obviously received a lot of social training, the man's respectful facade could not hide the greed and ambition inside his spirituality.

The way the two stepped forward and stopped in front of Ves suggested that the two were clearly familiar with each other, but did not know each other too well.

That should not be a surprise as Ves never intended for the Creation Association to get mixed up with the Eternal Vulcan Church.

Even though they ostensibly worshiped the same 'god', he did not want the Creation Association to get contaminated by the idiocy of the Vulcanites!

Alas, it appeared that the two had already reached out to each other. Any form of cooperation between the two distinctly different non-profit organizations would cause them to converge to an extent.

Ves did not bother to hide his displeasure. "Why are you here? If there is anything you need, you can communicate your requests through the regular channels. My assistant Gavin can decide whether your petition is worthwhile enough to bring to my attention."

Director Samandra Avikon and High Priest Joja Firebreath both swapped glances with each other.

The female leader spoke first.

"I urgently wish to bring a matter to your attention, but only in complete privacy. This is not a subject that should be overheard by anyone, particularly your current protectors."

Though Ves did not think that a person like Samandra had anything important to say, her demeanor indicated how much she cared about this issue.

"Okay. We can talk in private if that is what you want. We can retreat into a secure chamber so that we can speak in confidence." He told her before he turned to the dwarf. "What about you, Mr. Firebreath? You have come a long way. How is the Iron Emperor doing these days?"

The high priest smiled and bowed like a diplomat. "His Majesty is doing well. He has embraced this new era as it has brought all of our people closer to our god!"

The dwarf eagerly stared at the Hammer of Brilliance that hung on Ves' toolbelt.

The soft glow that exuded the purest presence of Vulcan signified that whoever possessed this relic would enjoy the blessing of this supposed god!

As Ves studied the dwarven high priest closely, he was pretty sure that Joja Firebreath remained ignorant about Vulcan's true identity.

An incredibly clever and cunning dwarf like Rion Aaden had to know the truth, but there was no benefit for him to share it with the rest of his dwarven subjects.

"So why have you come?" Ves impatiently asked.

The high priest reluctantly shifted his heated gaze away from the Hammer of Brilliance.

"I have come for multiple reasons. First, I would like to congratulate you on behalf of our eternal sovereign for your recent successes. Your defiance against forced unity has saved our culture and state. We have brought a gift in order to convey the appreciation of the Eternal Vulcan Empire, which I can introduce to you later."

The mention of a gift did not particularly move Ves that much.

He had received 'gifts' from numerous other visitors. They either amounted to forgettable souvenirs or outright bribes!

"Is this a gift from the Iron Emperor or your dwarven state as a whole?" Ves asked.

The high priest smiled and made a gesture of respect. "There is no difference between the two. The will of our eternal sovereign represents the will of our Eternal Vulcan Empire. He is the Chosen of Vulcan. He is the savior of the dwarven race. He is the light that will lead us out of the darkness."

Ves had a strong hunch that this gift was anything but simple. From what little Ves knew about his old buddy Rion, the Iron Emperor was not the sort of dwarf that engaged in pointless pageantry.

Perhaps this gift came with an obligation or another thorny entanglement. Ves wasn't sure, because his relationship with the head of the Eternal Vulcan Empire was not exactly harmonious.

"Okay. I am glad to accept this gesture. Is there anything else that either of you wish to bring up?" He asked.

The two shared another glance before the taller woman spoke up again.

"We would like to receive your opinion on how aggressively we should spread Vulcan's name within our society."

Ves immediately frowned. "What do you mean by that, Samantha?"

"Vulcan deserves to be loved and adored by far more people than the craftsmen and the dwarves that are most likely to come in touch with him. The mandate of our Creation Association is too limited at the moment."

High Priest Joja Firebreath added his own words.

"The Eternal Vulcan Church has a near-total adherence among the citizens of the Eternal Vulcan Empire, and though we would like to keep our god to ourselves, we believe it is better to convert as many humans as possible. The more humans have in common with dwarvenkind, the less likely it is for us to suffer persecution."

There was likely an ulterior motive behind these words. Ves knew quite well that Rion Aaden had always been plotting to break away from human civilization.

However, how could it be so easy for him to completely cut off ties to red humanity and form his own independent star nation?

There was no way the Red Two with all of its god pilots and dreadnoughts would allow the upstart dwarves to fracture their civilization in a time where every human needed to stick together!

Though Ves had no idea how the Iron Emperor intended to solve this seemingly impossible hurdle, the old dwarf should definitely have a plan in mind!

Perhaps hoodwinking more humans into worshiping Vulcan was an important component to the grand plan. Ves could think of several ways how this could help the dwarves escape the shackles of the tall folk.

"Why are you asking me? Shouldn't you pray to Vulcan instead?"

The dwarven high priest pointed directly at the Hammer of Brilliance.

"You are his envoy and his favored subject. Your opinion carries great weight among our adherents. We do not dare to make a decision as important as this without consulting you first."

"I see."

Ves was not sure what he should say in response. Vulcan could clearly benefit from having more worshipers, but he felt more than reluctant to spread his belief beyond the groups that he had already defined!