

## Mech 2631

### *Chapter 2631: Approved Relationship*

Ves was quite hopeful about Ketis. She was sober enough to recognize her limitations. Without a reputation in the mech market, it was very unlikely for an Apprentice to design a bestseller.

Frankly, she didn't need to sell so many mechs. As a member of the Larkinson Clan and a mech designer working for the LMC, much of her needs were already being taken care of. There was no need for her to assume the burden of running a mech company like Ves. Therefore, earning as much profit as possible was not a priority.

She just needed to validate her worth as a mech designer by earning the satisfaction of her customers. As long as she persuaded at least a couple of thousands of mech buyers to fork over their hard-earned money for her products, she would have all the proof she needed that her work had value!

This was quite a difficult test to any mech designer, let alone someone who worked under his shadow. The competition was stiff and Apprentices simply didn't offer enough benefits to break out of a particular niche.

"What kind of commercial mech are you thinking of designing?" Ves curiously inquired.

"I haven't settled on the concept yet. For now, I've decided to design a premium spaceborn mech."

"Why premium and why spaceborn?"

"My mech has to be at least a premium mech because my main goal has always been to design the best swordsman mechs for my sisters. I'll never settle for something cheap and affordable. If I want to fulfill my goal, I need as much practice in designing expensive, high-performing mechs as possible. There is not much point for me to branch out into designing budget mechs."

Ves frowned when he heard that. "I don't agree with you. Tackling diverse mech design projects is a good way to broaden your perspective and gain a better understanding of your current direction. If you keep designing the same pattern of mechs over and over again, you'll become blind to the shortcomings of your narrow specialty."

"I can still branch out in other ways, Ves. There is an endless variety of swordsman mechs that I can design."

"I know that, but varying the budgets of your mech designs is also a good way to increase your proficiency. Don't neglect what I am saying. Even Gloriana has told me how much she improved after she started to design third-class mechs with me. If you

want to design clean and efficient second-class mechs later on, you should get more practice in designing third-class mechs under the most demanding circumstances."

"I will think about it..." Ketis hesitantly promised.

As they quietly worked together on preparing the Bright Sword Prime design, Ves suddenly brought up something completely different.

"According to Calabast, you've been spending some time with Venerable Joshua lately. You used to hang out with him every day before the start of our grand expedition. Ever since then, you apply to visit his ship or hang around with him when he has moved over to the Spirit of Bentheim."

Ketis instantly reddened. "Uhhh.. we're friends.."

"You don't need to hide it from me." Ves indulgently smiled. "You're growing older, and so is Joshua. Both of you are adults. While I am your superior, I'm not your father. What you want to do is your business, not mine. I just want to tell you that I have no problem if you manage to work something out with him. The fact that both of you are involved with mechs is very convenient."

She was quite embarrassed! She had no idea that Ves would bring up her personal life at this time!

While she didn't exactly keep her ambitions secret, she still felt uncomfortable when her boss and teacher took interest in her love life.

"Do you love him?" Ves asked in a serious tone.

"I do." She immediately answered.

Even though her relationship with Joshua hadn't progressed too far, she was already willing to commit to him. If she wasn't afraid of spooking him off, she would have moved even faster!

"What do you like about him, exactly?"

Her lips curled into an impish smile. "Where do I begin? He's a sweet pilot. He doesn't have much experience, but he tries his best to take care of me. Unlike nearly every other Larkinson, he doesn't judge me for my appearance, my passion and my identity as a Swordmaiden. Too many Larkinsons think that Swordmaidens are brutes, thugs or simple-minded."

"To be fair, you Swordmaidens are just as unique and distinctive as the Penitent Sisters. Both of you abide by some very strange customs."

"I know that. Only a small number of people who know us personally are aware that we are individuals as well. It might be difficult to distinguish us when we are acting together, but we Swordmaidens come from many different backgrounds. The harsh and uniform training we go through is meant to smooth over our differences and make us as cohesive as possible."

"Hmm. I'm aware of that." Ves nodded. "Is there anything else that attracts you to him? What about your professions? Does he benefit from your expertise in mech design and do you receive some mech piloting insights in return?"

She nodded. "He's not that good in the technical side of mechs, so I can't explain anything too deeply to him. Regardless, I've taught him plenty of lessons about mechs. He should possess a greater understanding of how mechs are put together and how much he can push them. As for me, I'm already corresponding with Commander Dise, but that doesn't mean that Joshua's input is useless. He's a different expert pilot and takes a completely different approach. I think I have learned more about your specialty from him than ever before!"

Overall, Ves was content that Ketis and Joshua hooked up. He appreciated both of them and benefited a lot from them. If their relationship became permanent, then Ves was confident he could keep them in his grip for generations to come.

Perhaps he might even be able to make use of their offspring! There was no way that the kids of an expert pilot and a Journeyman would be average. No matter what, Venerable Joshua and Ketis would probably do everything in their power to raise their kids into powerful mech pilots or mech designers!

Of course, there was a good chance that one of their kids would decide to pursue a different career, but all Ves had to do was to encourage the pair to produce more kids. He did not believe that none of the kids would refuse to follow in the footsteps of their heroic parents!

Now that he thought about it, he should not limit his family planning to Joshua and Ketis. There were plenty of other talented and valuable clansmen in his employ. Every human came with an expiration date. While some people were able to extend that date, it was not realistic to provide multiple rounds of life-prolonging treatment to every single clansman.

If Ves wanted to be assured of receiving loyal and competent service, he might need to make additional long-term plans.

In any case, this was not the time to think about this. Ves had some prime mechs to prepare.

With the help of Ketis, the Bright Sword Prime morphed into a mech that was much more pleasing to the eye of a Swordmaiden. When Venerable Dise checked out the mockups of the prime mechs, she was moderately pleased with what she saw.

"The mech is not as strong as I want, but I suppose it will do." The former Swordmaiden Commander remarked. "I'm not a fan of the Bright Warrior model, and this mech reminds me far too much of it. I hope my future expert mech won't be as boring as this so-called prime mech."

"Don't worry." Ves tried to reassure the expert pilot. "This is only a stopgap mech, just like the other prime mechs. The Bright Sword Prime is not the best mech we can design for you, but it is the best we can offer in a short amount of time. If you have spoken to Venerable Joshua, you should be aware of the benefits of piloting a prime mech."

None of the expert pilots objected to piloting a prime mech. In the absence of expert mechs, they didn't have much choice in the first place. Even Venerable Jannzi agreed to hand over the Shield of Samar to Gloriana in order to overhaul her structure.

One of the most notable changes Gloriana wished to implement was to do away with the Shield of Samar's outdated and underpowered polarizing module.

"She agreed with your suggestion?" Ves astonishingly asked.

Gloriana grinned as she ruffled Clixie's belly. "Yup. She's not as rigid as you think, Ves. It has long been clear to her that the original polarizing module simply can't keep up with the times. I've decided to take out the polarizing module and install a proper second-class shield generator in its place instead. The good news is that the Shield of Samar offers enough space to accommodate a compact version of a heavy mech-grade shield generator. It's a more expensive but also more effective version of the shield generator added to the Valkyrie Brunhild and Valkyrie Prime."

Ves took a look at the specs of the shield generator. It indeed offered substantial defensive power against second-class attacks. Even though the prime version of the Shield of Samar already incorporated substantial amounts of Unending alloy, the ability to generate a shield would definitely be helpful in fending off attacks directed to its vulnerable rear!

"Make sure the shield generator orients its energy shield towards the rear." He suggested. "Normally, shields are strongest at their front, but that's exactly what the Shield of Samar doesn't need."

"I know. I've already taken that into account. Still, you can make an argument that it's better to strengthen its strong points than diminishing its weaknesses. I thought the entire idea behind this mech is to pursue the greatest possible extreme."

That was indeed what Ves originally pursued.

"You're not wrong, but the Shield of Samar is too vulnerable against mobile enemies that can reach the super-medium mech's rear. Even if Venerable Jannzi is good enough to cope with such a threatening situation, it's still a huge distraction."

They decided to go through with his suggestion.

Humanity invented multiple types of shield generators. The better ones offered equal omnidirectional protection. In fact, the good ones were capable of directing more protection in the direction of incoming attacks.

The model that Gloriana chose was incapable of doing this. Second-class shield generators were much more limited. By default, they could only offer greater protection in a single fixed direction.

In most cases, this was directed towards the front because that was what mech pilots were used to. A skilled mech pilot never exposed the rear of a mech to the enemy if it was possible. This was also why pincer attacks were so devastating in mech combat.

"The Shield of Samar will finally become a true defensive bulwark again after this round of upgrades." Ves noted with some satisfaction.

"It's still too slow, though. Although I have attempted to upgrade its flight system, here is only so much I can do in order to keep its existing internal architecture. This mech has gone through several rounds of revisions. It's kind of confusing how it mixes third-class elements with second-class elements."

"I'm aware of that. Once I have designed the second-class version Aurora Titan, I will be ready to streamline the Shield of Samar. For now, just focus on the low-hanging fruit."

It didn't matter if the Shield of Samar was a mess of a mech design. Its performance was very real!

When Ves finished checking up on Jannzi's mech, he turned his attention to the final remaining prime mech.

The Piranha Prime was the only light machine of the current set of prime mechs.

#### *Chapter 2632: New Generation of Larkinson Mechs*

As the Golden Skull Alliance neared the border between Komodo and Vicious Mountain, the Larkinson Clan started to field some brand-new mechs.

Some of them were relatively mundane, though remarkable in their own way. The LMC had begun to test some of their spaceborn mechs whenever the allied fleet emerged out of FTL and rested at least six hours in realspace.

Out of the six ongoing mech design projects of the Design Department, half of them were exclusive to the Larkinson Clan.

The three upcoming Larkinson mech designs were all multi-environmental machines with flexible deployment characteristics. They fared best in space, which was ideal for a spaceborn fleet, but they could also operate in the air under standard gravity conditions.

The prototypes derived from the three designs each looked remarkable. The Glory Seekers and the Crossers observing from the side immediately recognized that two of them were derived from the LMC's existing mech designs.

The Bright Warrior IB and the Ferocious Piranha IB straightforwardly copied the mech concepts of their third-class counterparts. If the old and the newer versions flew side by side, then laymen would probably find more similarities than differences.

Of course, looks could be deceiving.

Despite their close resemblance, the Ferocious Piranha Version B was at least a hundred times more expensive than the Version C of the light skirmisher!

The comparison was a bit difficult to make for the two different Bright Warrior models. The new Bright Warrior Version B utilized regular second-class armor plating, which was actually worse than the Breyer alloy utilized in the original!

Regardless, the Larkinson Clan would definitely be able to exhibit greater strength once the Bright Warrior IB and the Ferocious Piranha IB entered service. This was especially because Ves and Gloriana decided to double their design budgets at some point!

By raising their respective budgets to 400 million hex credits, their quality became on par with the Valkyrie Redeemer, which had long conquered the hearts of many Hexer military mech pilots.

A single Bright Warrior IB was around 8 times more expensive than the commercial second-class mechs the Larkinson Clan were fielding at the moment!

Naturally, that didn't mean the new Bright Warriors and Ferocious Piranhas performed 8 times better than the Princess Jeckas and the Vima Suns. The actual performance improvement was 'only' 2 to 4 times better depending on the calculation method.

Despite making the new clan-exclusive mechs as expensive as a mainline military mech model, the Larkinson Clan could easily afford the expenditure.

With the explosive success of the new Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version C model, the LMC's earnings finally surpassed 1 trillion hex credits!

This was an astounding sum, and one the Larkinsons had long anticipated! Although the rapidly-growing Larkinson Clan immediately spent much of it on its growing expenses and a warchest reserved for the acquisition of capital ships, it shouldn't be a problem to splurge on a couple of thousand expensive mechs.

Ves knew that the Larkinson Clan would be relying heavily on the Bright Warrior IB and the Ferocious Piranha IB for the coming decade or so. It was better to invest more in the mech design upfront so that they wouldn't become obsolete by the time the clan reached the Red Ocean.

With the increase in budget, the two second-class mech designs incorporated better armor, higher capacity energy cells, higher-performing core components, hardened sensor and communication systems, more powerful flight systems and so on. They even incorporated much tougher cockpits so that the mech pilots had a higher chance of preserving their lives!

"Fielding thousands of these mechs will cost as much as a capital ship." Ves muttered as he observed the prototypes going through their paces in an observation room aboard the Spirit of Bentheim. "These mechs are great, no doubt about it, but our accounts will definitely cry when they see how much money they drain."

Expensive mechs not only cost more upfront, but also came with higher maintenance cost. The burden of maintaining thousands of second-class Bright Warriors and Ferocious Piranhas would bankrupt any normal organization!

This was why Ves and the LMC played such a crucial role in the Larkinson Clan. Greater strength did not come for free. Without earning more, Ves would have never dared to double the budgets of his mech design projects.

So far, the test sessions already proved the potency of the two upcoming mech designs.

The four different configurations of the Bright Warrior Version B were not eye-catching. Ves deliberately conceived of them as the new backbone fighting machines of the Larkinson Clan.

This meant that the rifleman mech, swordsman mech, lancer mech and space knight configurations fought like their normal equivalents. They did not possess any pronounced strengths and weaknesses and were quite boring aside from their Larkinson glows.

Though Ves normally thought ill of balanced mech designs, the Bright Warrior product line was not designed to be strongest. Instead, it had to be as universal and adaptable as possible in order to ensure that many different mech pilots would be able to harness at least one of its four configurations.

"Normally, I try to do the opposite in my mech designs." Gloriana noted as she stood by his side while she manipulated her workstation. "Working on the Bright Warrior has been an interesting exercise for me. I worked hard to figure out new ways to increase the compatibility of this mech platform. I dare say that at least 90 percent of our mech pilots will find what they like in our new Bright Warrior."

"That's a bold claim." Ves raised his eyebrow. "With the increase in performance, this mech has become more difficult to pilot. Don't forget that most of our mech pilots originally started off as third-raters. It will take more time before they are on par with genuine second-class mech pilots. Until then, they won't be able to draw out all of the potential of these mechs."

They essentially designed the Bright Warrior B and the Ferocious Piranha B with future proofing in mind. They aimed to achieve specifications with their mech designs that their pilots could currently handle. While that was bad and wasteful in the short term, it would definitely pay off in spades in the medium and long term.

This was especially important when Ves considered the higher strength levels of the new frontier. In a place where the best pioneers across the Milky Way concentrated in a smaller dwarf galaxy, a premium mech in the galactic rim would probably be considered a budget mech in the Red Ocean!

Therefore, even if both Ves and Gloriana were considerably impressed by the performance of the Bright Warrior B and the Ferocious Piranha B right now, they knew that their future rivals and competitors would likely look down on them a bit in a couple of years!

"Well, it's not important. Even if the Bright Warrior and the Ferocious Piranha are relegated to the background in the future, they will still remain useful." He muttered.

Ves especially appreciated the Ferocious Piranha B. Its Doom Guard-like glow already caused the prototype to be a terror in mock battles.

He directed his gaze towards a projection of one in action right now. The Ferocious Piranha did nothing except approach a squad of Living Sentinel mechs.

As soon as the Ferocious Piranha entered into close range, all of the surrounding Princess Jeckas, Vima Suns and Tamris Stellars pretty much went out of control!

Aside from a few exceptions, their mech pilots became so disoriented by the alternating glows of Zeigra and Lufa that they could no longer maintain enough concentration to pilot their mechs!

Ves sighed at the sight. "What a shameful showing."



"To be fair, we picked out the newest and freshest recruits to perform this test." Gloriana added. "In our earlier tests, the more experienced veteran mech pilots fared better. They maintain enough control to launch counter attacks against the Ferocious Piranha. Also, suppressive glows are less effective against other mechs with glows."

Even without the Sanctuary, mech pilots were still better off with piloting an LMC mech when they encountered a harmful glow.

The Larkinson Clan didn't have to worry about the threat of hostile glows, though. Every LMC mech came with a safeguard that rendered them ineffective against the Larkinsons by default. Ves just disabled the safety measure for the prototypes in order to test their performance under realistic conditions.

From what he could see so far, the Ferocious Piranha B would definitely be able to exert much greater strength against every kind of opponent. Even the Penitent Sisters and Swordmaidens felt disturbed when they confronted the mech, preventing them from exerting all of their skill.

The Ferocious Piranha B was already labeled the mech that the Larkinson mech pilots least wanted to fight against!

After verifying the effectiveness of the second-class Bright Warriors and Ferocious Piranhas, Ves directed his attention to the third Larkinson mech under development.

The mech codenamed Giant Killer was even more impressive than the other two. With a budget of 800 million credits, the Giant Killer was definitely a sight to behold!

As a cannoneer mech that wielded a rather large and formidable-looking gauss cannon, the mech initially appeared to be a lighter and more mobile adaptation of the Transcendent Punisher.

However, the Giant Killer was actually very different from the heavy artillery mech that had become more ubiquitous throughout the fleet.

While the Transcendent Punisher's total firepower surpassed that of the Giant Killer, the latter's formidable Samheim gauss cannon loaded with the proprietary Sarun rounds actually boasted higher single-shot damage!

Combined with satisfactory mobility, the cannoneer mech was able to maneuver to optimal firing positions in order to launch devastating armor-piercing attacks at the flanks of their targets.

Each time the Giant Killer fired its Samheim cannon, the mech visibly flew backwards due to the inability to fully compensate for the recoil.

As much as Ves admired the Giant Killer whenever it smashed a space rock or a bunch of scrap metal the Larkinsons launched into space to serve as practice targets, the prototypes did exhibit two major shortcomings.

"The accuracy exhibited by the Giant Killer isn't all that high." Gloriana seriously noted as she tapped a specific graph. "Look at these numbers. Starting from medium range, accuracy rapidly drops as the distance lengthens. At long range, the Giant Killer is no longer able to hit medium mechs on a reliable basis. Your Penitent Sister mech will only be effective in sieging roles."

"It can at least be used to siege heavy mechs, starships, space stations and other fortifications."

"That's true, but you better bring some kind of shuttle or auxiliary mech with the Giant Killers, because their ammo and energy reserves aren't all that high!"

That was the other shortcoming of the Giant Killer. In order to maintain a certain degree of compactness and mobility, the Giant Killer couldn't carry too much goodies. Its massive Samheim gauss cannon was already a hefty weapon, so it was a given that their Sarun rounds were large and heavy. The weapon also demanded a lot of energy to fire each round, so the mech also had to accommodate enough energy cells.

All told, the base loadout of the Giant Killer only allowed for 25 full-powered shots in total before the mech expended its ammunition!

This was actually relatively decent for cannoner mechs, but Ves wasn't satisfied with this result. The Transcendent Punisher could fire much more rounds without requiring replenishment!

This was why Ves and Gloriana designed a modified rear ammo carrier that allowed the Giant Killer to carry additional rounds and energy cells. Although the extended loadout made the mch more sluggish, it enabled the cannoner mech to fire 45 full-powered shots before running dry!

"That's better, I suppose."

While it was more convenient to attach a small supply train to a Giant Killer unit, that was not always ideal. It took time and effort for the Giant Killers to replenish their spent reserves in mid-battle, and a clever enemy always targeted the supply mechs or vehicles first if they had brain cells!

"It's okay." Ves reassured himself. "The Giant Killer is not a mech that is designed for attrition warfare. It's all about taking the most threatening enemy elements into battle as fast as possible. As long as the tough ones are taken off the board, our other mechs can clean up the remaining enemies."

### *Chapter 2633: Bright Primes*

Aside from testing the initial prototypes of the clan-exclusive mechs, the Larkinson Clan also began to field its new and unusual prime mechs.

Every time the prime mechs deployed into space, the clan made sure to hide its performance by erecting enormous sensor-blocking screens around their practice zones.

It took hundreds of mechs to erect these cumbersome energy screens. They drained a lot of energy and forced many mech pilots to spend at least an hour of doing nothing while maintaining a constant position.

A lot of Larkinsons actually asked whether it was worth it to go through all of that effort to perform tests on individual custom mechs.

However, once the clansmen heard that the so-called prime mechs were meant to be piloted by the expert pilots of the clan, most of the complaints disappeared.

The expert pilots enjoyed a high status among the Larkinsons. Now that they had received better mechs, it was a given that they were entitled to practice with their new machines!

Along with the Valkyrie Prime, the expeditionary fleet quickly expanded its lineup of prime mechs with the Bright Sword Prime, the Bright Spear Prime, the Bright Beam Prime, the Piranha Prime and the newly-overhauled Shield of Samar!

Each of the mechs barring the Bright Beam Prime boasted considerable amounts of Unending alloy. While this incredibly tough material did not attract much attention at the start, seeing them withstand the full blows of Transcendent Punishers and Giant Killers with ease astonished the Larkinsons who were permitted to witness the capabilities of the new prime mechs!

"Not even expert mechs can withstand as much damage as your new prime mechs!" Major Verle noted with surprise.

"That's not exactly true." Ves shook his head. "While Unending alloy is practically indestructible in second-class battles, the prime mechs aren't necessarily impervious. For example, their shock-absorbing properties are relatively mundane, which means that the prime mechs cannot negate heavy impacts."

He called up the footage of an earlier test. It featured the Bright Sword Prime being bombarded by a handful of Transcendent Punishers.

The gauss rounds impacting the mechs continually pushed it back. The positron beams scorching across the chest plating of the mech slowly heated up the entire machine.

The staccato of energy pulses continually degraded the sensors and other vulnerable surface modules of Venerable Dise's new machine.

"As you can see, Unending alloy is not a panacea." Ves explained. "Our prime mechs can still be beaten by overloading them with heat, mobbing it with lots of mechs, physically pushing them away from the battlefield or disabling all of their surface components. Enemies can even launch a single, overpowering physical attack that can kill the mech pilot through lethal concussion!"

All of these limitations dampened the hype surrounding the prime mechs. Their indestructible armor hardly ensured they could guarantee victory in every battle, especially when the enemy fielded lots of mechs with powerful attacks.

Major Verle was clever enough to realize the implications.

"It's not possible for expert mechs to defeat hundreds or thousands of mechs by themselves. The best way to maximize the value of exceptional mechs is to field them alongside other elements. Expert mechs are best able to show their value when there are friendly units keeping the enemy occupied. We'll have to adopt a similar approach for our new prime mechs."

"That's what I think as well. Two of our expert pilots, namely Venerable Joshua and Venerable Dise, can be integrated into battle formations."

The earlier tests had already proven that this was the case. The Penitent Sister and Swordmaiden battle formations performed so well with the Valkyrie Prime and the Bright Sword Prime that Ves did not even dare to repeat the tests any longer.

The battle formations were too cumbersome!

Anytime they expended a huge amount of energy, the mech pilots that took part in the tests were basically done for the day. The intensity of repeated, daily attempts was so high that the mech pilots risked suffering chronic problems if this went on. Out of concern of their safety, it was best not to employ them too often.

Perhaps the story might be different if the mech pilots trained their mental resilience and could bear a greater burden, but that was not going to happen anytime soon.

The Larkinson Clan had long recognized the importance of training the mental resilience of its mech pilots. Every mech pilot regularly had to exercise their minds by subjecting them to the glow of the Doom Guard.

Ves already knew from his time on Aeon Corona VII that such training programs provided a lot of benefits. Being able to bear the burden of a battle formation was just one of them. A more vital benefit was that mentally-strong mech pilots always persisted in battle. They never lost heart or gave up when they faced a powerful opponent!

As Ves briefly reviewed the performance of the Valkyrie Prime and the Bright Sword Prime, he regretted the fact that his other expert pilots weren't able to exhibit this kind of strength.

The Larkinson Clan only had three battle networks to begin with. Absolute strength did not determine whether a mech pilot was eligible to take part in a battle formation.

This meant that the Bright Spear Prime, the Bright Beam Prime, the Piranha Prime and the Shield of Samar had to rely on their individual strengths in order to impact the battlefield.

Fortunately, none of the remaining prime mechs were weak. The Bright Spear Prime was a relatively normal spearman mech. If not for its Unending alloy armor system and its ability to induce prime resonance, it was easy to overlook its presence among other second-class mechs!

The Piranha Prime was a bit more notable. Venerable Tusa did not like its glow. When Ves initially introduced him to his prime mech, the expert pilot immediately grimaced.

"I don't need to rely on any gimmicks to overpower my enemies. This glow is just a distraction."

Ves placed his palm on his cousin's shoulder. "Don't be that way. Expert pilot or not, you're still vulnerable without an expert mech. This prime mech is meant to tide you over. Compared to a regular Ferocious Piranha, this prime version boasts much better armor and allows you to negate even more attacks by inducing prime resonance. We've also upgraded a number of its other components so that it flies even faster and hits even harder than the standard equivalent."

Venerable Tusa looked a little more pleased when he heard that. "It's.. fine, I suppose. I'll take it, not that I have much choice in the first place."

"Don't underestimate its glow. Just because it's not effective against expert pilots such as you doesn't mean it is pointless against other enemies. The Ferocious Piranha's glow will ensure that you will always have a defense against getting mobbed."

"Buddy, a light mech never gets surrounded. As long as the mech pilot is good enough, it's impossible to end up in the situation that you've described!"

Well, at least Venerable Tusa did not lack confidence.

With the Piranha Prime in good hands, Ves directed his attention to the Bright Beam Prime and the Shield of Samar.

The two prime mechs were the odd ones out. Due to a shortage of Unending alloy, Ves and Gloriana simply couldn't afford to lavish them with Unending alloy.

That was a bit difficult to stomach for Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Stark. When Ves invited both of them to meet their new machines, they immediately expressed their doubts.

"Are you punishing me or something?" Venerable Jannzi confronted Ves. "The others get to fight with mechs that are fully protected by this new superalloy of yours. Joshua's Valkyrie Prime even boasts a strengthened internal frame! Why is my Shield of Samar only reinforced at the front?"

"We didn't have enough Unending alloy left, that's why! If you want to grab more, then we should enter the Nyxian Gap. That's where I got it from in the first place."

"Tch." Jannzi scowled. "So this new material is essentially tainted with the blood of our clansmen. No wonder you were so eager to fight all of those powerful pirate groups!"

"Hey! Don't misjudge me! I never knew that something like Unending alloy existed until recently. I just stumbled upon it after we defeated our opponents. Look, if you don't like this material, I can always strip it from the Shield of Samar and reprocess it so that I can put it onto the Bright Beam Prime."

The mention of the rifleman mech prompted Venerable Davia Stark to voice her own objections.

"When I pledge to serve you for a century, I clearly demanded to be treated as equals to your Larkinson mech pilots. Why is my mech the only one that is devoid of better protection?"

Ves awkwardly coughed. "As I have stated earlier, we don't have enough Unending alloy to go around. We have to employ this material as rationally as possible. Logically speaking, our melee offensive mechs need the protection the most considering they will be in the thick of battle. Your rifleman mech won't be doing all of that. It's more practical for your mech to hide behind cover. That is why we have focused on upgrading the offensive capabilities of the Bright Beam Prime. It's damage output is the only factor that matters."

"That does not conform to my fighting style." Venerable Stark frowned. "I prefer to be more active in battle."

"You can still do that, but just take into account that your mech is clad with Breyer alloy. While it is a good material, it doesn't make you invincible. I still recommend you to keep the Bright Beam Prime behind solid cover. If you don't mind sticking close to our starships, you can place your mech in a bunker or just stick it behind a starship. If you want to gain better firing angles, then I suggest you cooperate with Venerable Jannzi. In fact, Gloriana and I pretty much designed the Bright Beam Prime and the latest revision of the Shield of Samar on the assumption that they will be fighting as a cohesive unit."

Both female expert pilots eyed each other. Neither of them were familiar with each other. They were just passing acquaintances as far as they were concerned. This was not enough for them to judge whether they would work well together.

Still, as expert pilots, they had their own confidence. Their professionalism did not allow them to make any judgements before they even attempted to cooperate.

"Just try it out." Ves waved his hand.

They did so. The Bright Beam Prime huddled closely behind the Shield of Samar as the oversized space knight flew into space.

After performing a few routine maneuvers, the two prime mechs began to exhibit their strengths.

The Shield of Samar immediately tested its powerful new shield generator. A spherical energy shield formed around the mech. While the bubble wasn't large enough to encompass other mechs, its defensive capabilities were quite formidable!

What was even better was that the energy shield did not interfere with the prime resonance shield. Just like the Valkyrie Prime, the Shield of Samar was able to rely on multiple layers of protection to fend off attacks!

However, Ves didn't really pay attention to Jannzi's mech. The upgrades to the Shield of Samar were relatively simple and boring. Aside from increasing its defensive capabilities, it didn't gain any exceptional traits.

The Bright Beam Prime was different.

When Ves prepared this mech, he realized early on that its original design spirit wasn't suitable. Every other prime mech was piloted by a Larkinson. The Bright Beam Prime was the only exception!

Since this prime mech was originally derived from the rifleman mech configuration of the Bright Warrior Version B, the Golden Cat should have been its design spirit.

Obviously, that needed to be changed!

Ves had never switched out a design spirit of a mech that was practically designed to conform to it. He did not have a good idea of whether it was viable to pull out the Golden Cat and put another design spirit in its place. Would the Bright Beam Prime still be able to function normally?

*Chapter 2634: Bright Beam Prime*

What would happen if Ves swapped out the design spirit of one of his mech models?

The answer wasn't obvious to him. Would the altered mech remain as effective as before? Would it suffer from an identity crisis? Ves wasn't sure.

He tried to imagine the outcome of a couple of scenarios.

For instance, what if he pulled out the Solemn Guardian from the Desolate Soldier and put the Superior Mother in its place?

Very clearly, millions of LMC customers would immediately be confronted by a mech that had become a radically different product!

The Desolate Soldier practically lost its only selling point, its powerful and widely-applicable duty-oriented glow.

In its stead was a different glow that was anything but encouraging! Unless the customers were Hexers, which was extremely unlikely considering that the Desolate Soldier was just a third-class mech, a lot of mech pilots wouldn't be able to do their jobs anymore because their own mechs hated them suddenly!

"If I was crazy enough to make this swap, then the LMC will instantly lose its reputation!" Ves shuddered in fear!

It was a very frightening thought that Ves could ruin his entire business empire by performing a single reckless move.

In fact, the LMC barely averted disaster in a similar scenario recently.

When Nyxie perished during the Battle of the Abyss, the Doom Guard suddenly lost the support of one of its two design spirits.

Ves had acted quickly by putting Lufa in Nyxie's place. While that irrevocably changed the Doom Guard's glow, his quick measure succeeded in preserving most of the value of the product.

This was the only real instance where Ves had actually swapped a design spirit.

While this case was a bit complicated due to the fact that the Doom Guard had multiple design spirits, it still provided Ves with a lot of insights.

An unanticipated swap may not necessarily lead to a severe decline in performance. However, even if Lufa managed to rescue the Doom Guard, he did not fit in perfectly with the new mech.

Lufa possessed very different attributes and characteristics from Nyxie. This meant that certain design choices were no longer optimal. Even the name of the mech was no longer accurate!



When Ves was ready to design a successor of the Doom Guard, he intended to apply some extensive corrections and adjustments in order to conform it to this profound change.

That was something that he should consider for later.

For now, Ves had to determine what would happen if Ves hastily swapped out the Golden Cat for another design spirit for the Bright Beam Prime.

This change was needed because Venerable Davia Stark adamantly insisted on maintaining her distance from the Larkinson Clan. While she was willing to fight alongside the Larkinsons against worthy enemies, she did not agree to abandon her heritage and change her loyalties.

This meant that it wasn't appropriate to pair her up with the Golden Cat.

Which design spirit should he choose?

He didn't have many options. He doubted that Venerable Stark would play nice with Lufa, Bravo or the Superior Mother.

Pairing her up with Zeigra also sounded like a poor idea? The deceased Crown Cat's rage and fury would only egg Venerable Stark on, causing her to become even more unstable than before!

"Why am I even considering these options? The answer is actually rather obvious."

Out of all of his design spirits, only two complimented ranged mechs.

Prophet Ylvaine provided an obvious benefit to a ranged mech. The design spirit was able to lend limited predictive abilities to a devout Ylvainan mech pilot. The Deliverer and the Transcendent Punisher had already proven the effectiveness of this mystical enhancement!

Of course, the limitations were also clear. Ylvainan mechs weren't as ubiquitous as before. Ever since the Ylvaine Protectorate defected to the Friday Coalition, it got rid of all of its Holy Soldiers and Deliverers.

This effectively starved Ylvaine of a huge amount of spiritual feedback. Even if a lot of Ylvainan citizens still prayed to it, the revived spiritual entity was not as capable of absorbing all of this worship as the Superior Mother.

In fact, for a prophet, Ylvaine was actually quite incompetent in this regard!

"They're two different entities." Ves muttered. "The Superior Mother inherited Cynthia's energy devouring talents. She's also made with a spiritual network in mind. Ylvaine on the other hand focuses all of his capabilities into prophecy."

If Ves hadn't designed the Transcendent Punisher, Ylvaine would have probably been pushed to the brink of starvation. A handful of outdated Holy Soldiers and Deliverers were far from enough to feed a grown and matured spiritual entity!

In any case, Ves did not need to consider Ylvaine any further. The religious design spirit was very partial towards Ylvainans. Despite the friendly face of the Ylvainan Faith, it was actually quite closed towards nonbelievers.

There was no chance that Venerable Stark would be able to pilot the Bright Beam Prime if Ylvaine took over the mech!

"Then that leaves me with the Illustrious One."

Ves still did not understand the full depth of the luminar design spirit. Part of it was because he knew too little about luminars, whether it was their race, their history or their tech.

Another part of it was because the Illustrious One absorbed the strength of the Blinding One.

Though Ves managed to learn more about the Illustrious One by studying the performance of the Crystal Lord Mark II and working on the Blinding Mech Project, he still did not feel he had plumbed the depths of this strange design spirit.

"Well, whatever. It is an excellent complement to laser rifleman mechs."

What Ves liked about the Illustrious One was that he was a neutral design spirit. Despite his alien nature, he possessed a relatively unbiased attitude against humans.

Ves studied the customer base of the Crystal Lord Mark I and Mark II carefully. It's mech pilots reflected a wide variety of different people. There were male mech pilots, female mech pilots, religious mech pilots, secularists mech pilots and so on who managed to utilize the landbound rifleman mechs well.

This meant that the Illustrious One should neither favor nor disfavor Venerable Stark. In fact, the luminar design spirit cared more about the luminar crystals integrated in the Bright Beam Prime than its mech pilot!

In order to make the Illustrious One feel more at home in a machine that was originally designed with the Golden Cat in mind, Ves had implemented some extensive changes.

Aside from implementing some easy upgrades, he tried to add as many luminar crystals alongside P-stones as possible. Both materials played a key role in the Bright Beam Prime. The former complemented the design spirit and the latter complemented the mech pilot.

When Venerable Stark initially piloted the Bright Beam Prime, the mech did not exhibit any remarkable strengths.

In fact, one of the uncertainties to Ves was whether the 40 P-stones he integrated in the mech and its upgraded rifle would do anything.

Due to the relative fragility of P-stones, Ves had to put them into protective shells, which isolated the prime material from the mech to an extent.

Even so, Ves managed to place them close enough to luminar crystals to be confident that an interaction might take place between the two materials.

This was especially because Ves forced the Illustrious One to fill up the P-stones with spiritual energy!

Unfortunately, the 40 P-stones weren't very large. Even if the material was capable of storing much more spiritual energy than Unending alloy, in the end Ves was only able to fill them up to a fraction of the level of the Valkyrie Prime and the other prime mechs.

If Ves had to make an estimate, the Bright Beam Prime only amounted to around 460 Ves when filled at maximum capacity. That was all the 40 P-stones could bear in the form of raw spiritual energy.

This time, Ves knew for sure that this was not the limit. His P-stones previously bore spiritual fragments and design spirits that should have been very powerful.

The difference was that spiritual entities and spiritual fragments consisted of concentrated spiritual energy. In contrast, free spiritual energy floated in the form of gas particles, which was far from efficient.

Even though that sounded rather bad, one of the advantages of keeping spiritual energy in this looser form was that it could easily be put into use. The Bright Beam Prime hardly exhibited any delay when Venerable Stark attempted to resonate with her mech!

Unlike the Larkinson expert pilots, Venerable Stark possessed much greater resonance strength. Her difficult journey and the hurdles she had to overcome had caused her to develop a strong and aggressive will!

Joshua's resonance strength measured at less than 3 laveres. Davia's resonance strength almost hit 20 laveres!

This did not mean that Venerable Davia was six times stronger than Venerable Joshua. The lavere scale did not work that way.

However, there was no doubt that Venerable Davia was capable of exhibiting much greater resonance than the demigods who had recently broken through!

"Oh my! Look at that! The Bright Beam Prime is practically glowing like an actual expert mech!" Gloriana alarmingly observed from her work station.

The entire observation room became enthralled when Venerable Davia resonated with the Bright Beam Prime. Despite lacking Unending alloy, the resonance shield surrounding the mech was just as bright if not brighter than the resonance shields of the other prime mechs!

This indirectly proved that stronger expert pilots were capable of drawing out a lot more strength out of prime mechs!

"To be fair, this applies to expert mechs as well, so this shouldn't be a surprising result." Ves remarked as he checked the pilot telemetry. "The extraordinary power an expert mech is able to display not only based on the resonating materials it incorporates, but also the strength of the expert pilot. If one of them is weak, they basically act as a limitation that constrains the performance of the combination."

In other words, the other five prime mechs actually possessed a lot more potential than they had shown. It was just that their expert pilots were simply too bad to draw out more than a fraction of their potential!

This was what made the Bright Beam Prime so special. Its expert pilot was so different that Ves managed to gain several important insights by comparing Davia's performance to that of his other expert pilots!

"The contrast is very clear! Venerable Davia is the only expert pilot at our disposal who is much more developed in terms of resonance strength. The Bright Beam Prime should have actually been one of our weakest prime mechs because it doesn't incorporate as much prime material. Yet due to the human factor, it's actually the opposite!"

The Bright Beam Prime soon prepared to fire.

The mech had already fired its custom laser rifle under normal circumstances.

Now, it was attempting to fire while Venerable Stark tried her best to focus the prime resonance on empowering the weapon.

The laser rifle glowed brighter. While the weapon did not expose any of its P-stones and luminar crystals, Ves could practically imagine them interacting together in a mysterious fashion.

"Fire!"

The prime mech unleashed a glowing bright beam that instantly hit a floating piece of scrap and burned straight through over ten meters of different metals compacted together!

Once the beam pierced through the other end, it continued to zap forward at the speed of light until it disappeared in deep space!

The observation room fell silent. Ves and Gloriana froze as they studied the meters that detected how much power the attack held.

"This.. I think the Bright Beam Prime can threaten an expert mech." Gloriana guessed. "It's definitely better than the Giant Killer in this role!"

Ves did not remain fascinated by the power of the prime resonance-empowered attack for long.

"Please fire again, Venerable Stark."

Under his instructions, the Bright Beam Prime unleashed several more full-powered attacks.

The mech was unable to maintain its resonance state any longer after firing its rifle for a third time.

The P-stones had run out of spiritual energy!

*Chapter 2635: Lifers*

Ves contently stretches his arms and opened his eyes.

He lay on a soft, luxurious bed. A quilt as soft as a cloud and patterned with purple hexagons rested comfortably on top of his body.

He turned his head to his side. The pale bronze tiger-striped form of his cat yawned and gazed at him with a relaxed expression.

"Did you have a good rest?"

"Meow~"

"Oh yeah, it's sunday. It's your day off."

His cat turned his body and softly smacked his face with a solid tail.

"Hey!"

"Mhmmm..." A female voice hummed from the other side.

Ves turned his body around to gaze upon his wife.

Gloriana clutched her own cat against her face as she rubbed her cheek against Clixie's fur. She looked a bit plainer without makeup applied to her face, but her modified genes and targeted cosmetic surgery still caused her to look pretty in a different way.

She wore pink pajamas decorated with multi-layered six-leafed lotuses. Though Ves did not believe in perfection, at this moment, he felt as if his life couldn't be any better.

"Hmmm.. what are you thinking about, Ves?"

"Oh, I just feel like kissing you right now."

"Then what are you waiting for?" She smiled invitingly at him. "I happen to feel the same way."

"Miaow?"

She set Clixie aside and began to cuddle and kiss with him. Every morning, before work and other matters complicated their lives, they made sure to spend a moment where they had nothing but each other in their eyes.

No mech design project, management issues, clan administration problems or anything else interfered with their love for each other.

While they argued about something at least several times a week, that did not take away their pure and simply love for each other.

It was not easy to keep their love alive. Both of them were opinionated mech designers who resisted compromise on any issue they held dear. The problem was that their interests intersected quite often, which caused them to conflict quite easily.

However, their disagreements did not exceed their desire to maintain their relationship. Beyond emotions such as love, they both held some very pragmatic reasons why they wanted to stay together.

Their marriage was not just a union of love, but also the realization of an alliance, both on a personal level and an organizational level.

Ves used Gloriana while she used him. He was never under an illusion that their relationship was based on irrational and illogical emotions alone.

Perhaps normal people might scoff at that, but Ves felt more secure in his relationship due to these factors. In a society where trust was a scarce resource, he did not have much faith in contracts and verbal promises.

Contracts could be ripped while promises could be forgotten.

Only active interests mattered. As long as there were good reasons to cooperate with him, Ves knew he could rely on his partners to work together in good faith.

This described his relationships with many people and groups. The Larkinson Clan, the Ylvainains, the Penitent Sisters, the Cross Clan, the Wodin Dynasty and even wife had an interest in maintaining a good relationship with him. As long as he could offer them something, they would continue to play nice.

Their greed and yearning was not a sin in his eyes. It did not matter if they were using him. He was doing the same thing and never held any illusions about it. The only difference was that he wouldn't be so crass to betray his allies if doing so was in his best interests.

He might lie, cheat, break taboos and murder people, but he would never betray someone else's trust. That was a line he never wanted to cross.

As the married couple finished their little makeout session, they readied themselves for the day. Both emerged from their beds and went to their separate bathrooms.

Ves freshened himself up and dressed himself in his patriarch uniform. His trusty grooming bot effortlessly shaved the stubble on his face and applied some additional treatments until his skin became as smooth as a baby's bottom.

As Ves admired himself in the mirror, he trailed his finger across his cheek. "Maybe I should switch up my look. Should I grow out a beard?"

He was beginning to ask this question to himself more often. Now that he had become a married man, he felt as if he had entered into a new phase of life. His face had slowly matured as well, though his altered and optimized genes slowed down the process quite well.

"I'm not young anymore."

When Ves emerged out of the bathroom and went down to the dining room of the grand stateroom, the chefs had already prepared their usual breakfast.

As Ves and Gloriana dined on noodles, toast, steamed fish and freshly-grown fruits, they chatted about their projects and other matters.

Naturally, their cats filled their stomachs as well. While Clixie dug into a bowl filled with high-density meat and other fortified ingredients, Lucky eagerly dug into a mixture of Breyer alloy and exotic scraps taken from the production halls.

One of the advantages of living aboard a factory ship was that Lucky never lacked for food!

Ves even suspected that Lucky secretly snuck into the cargo holds to take a little bite here and there. As long as his gluttonous cat was clever enough, he could gnaw off only a couple of grams from a solid block of material or ingest just a handful of pellets from a container filled with metal balls.

It didn't matter. The Larkinson Clan was so wealthy that these modest losses didn't affect production. Lucky might be naughty, after he ate all of the CFA equipment that Ves retrieved from Aeon Corona VII, he behaved with a lot more restraint.

Ves idly stroked Lucky's ribbed and metallic back.

"Meow."

"How many months has it been since your butt got to work?"

"Meow!"

Lucky did not like that line of questioning! He moved his bowl further away until his body was out of reach.

"Hey, I don't know how much you've eaten, but you definitely haven't been putting on any extra weight. Where is all of that food going, exactly?"

Either Lucky was preparing to 'produce' the most powerful gem up to date, or he was converting all of that food into something else! The gem cat's touchy behavior whenever Ves brought this topic up was a telling sign that Lucky was hiding something.

Well, whatever. Ves was in a generous mood right now, so he was willing to indulge Lucky for a time.

"Don't get too lazy." He warned his cat. "If I don't see something in three months, I won't be so patient with you anymore."

"Meow meow!"

Once they finished breakfast, the couple went their separate ways. Gloriana left for the design lab in order to check up on the results of the latest round of prototype tests. Ves went to his main office in order to receive Gavin's daily briefing and do some routine paperwork.



"We have completed some additional preparations for our journey to the Life Research Association." Gavin reported to Ves. "While the LRA is an open state that welcomes tourists and business visitors, the Golden Skull Alliance is equivalent to a mech division in strength. No state will feel at ease with a fleet as strong as ours roaming within their borders. It's okay As long as our starships remain parked at the edge of the outer systems whenever we transition out of FTL travel, we won't pose a threat."

Ves nodded in understanding. "It's when our powerful fleet approaches a settled planet that the local authorities start to worry. It's the same for us, Benny. We don't like it either if some random ship or fleet strays close to our vessels."

"Well, we have been trying to obtain permission to bring our fleet closer to the destinations you wish to visit, but... we have been encountering some resistance."

"Why?" Ves frowned. "The locations I selected are all commercial planets that do a lot of business with foreigners. There shouldn't be a problem even if our strength is rather high."

"That's only part of the problem as far as we can surmise. There are two additional factors at play that have made the lifers lukewarm towards us. Are you aware of the contentious relationship between Vicious and Majestic Teal?"

"I am aware. Are you saying..."

"You guessed it right. While Majestic Tealers won't fight Vicious Mountainers at the drop of a hat, it is indisputable that they consider each other as rivals. We're not just travel buddies with the Cross Clan. We have also allied with them. That means that the lifers and the other natives of Majestic Teal already consider us to be in their rival star sector's camp."

"Don't they know that the Cross Clan are a bunch of beaten dogs? The Crossers don't have any foundation left in Vicious Mountain!"

"Tell that to the lifers." Gavin sardonically said. "If that's not enough, there's also a second reason why the state is not welcoming us in. They have a beef with you. The local mech designers don't like your products."

"We aren't selling any second-class mechs as far as I know. I haven't encroached on their market share. Why are they upset with me, Benny?" Ves looked confused.

"It's not about business. Their problem with you is.. philosophical in nature. Think about it. The Life Research Association is obsessed with biotechnology. Their researchers have made high attainments in the field of exobiology, genetics, biomachines and other life sciences. Even their mech industry is dominated by biomechs. Now how do you think they will react when they hear about you and your 'living mechs'?"

It did not take long for Ves to understand the problem.

"Oh. The lifers must have a different idea on what a living mech means, right?"

Gavin nodded. "That's correct, boss. The local mech community over there is heavily biased towards biomechs. Up to 80 percent of the mechs in use in that state are biological instead of mechanical. The groups and organizations that utilize ordinary mechs are usually foreign-owned companies or outfits. The locals are very proud of their grown mechs."

Biomechs were truly grown rather than assembled. The intricate biotech needed to produce a mech by cultivating them from flesh and bone was incredible. What amazed Ves even more was that the proponents of biomechs had managed to develop their tech to the point where biomechs were competitive against classic mechs!

As Ves briefly looked up the mech industry of the LRA, he observed an extra detail. The lifers adopted both humanoid and bestial biomechs in equal measure.

This was not that difficult to figure out to Ves. The bestial mechs seemed to be based on giant exobeasts. It had become something of a competition for bestial biomech designers to find the strongest exobeasts before using their biological tissue to cultivate or graft a new biomachine.

To be honest, most people would probably consider biomechs to be actual living mechs. When they were placed side by side with LMC mechs, it was very hard for people to consider living!

Ves wasn't really interested in competing with the lifers over this issue. What he did care about was gaining entry into the state.

"Have you solved the problem?"

"We have, though we aren't sure whether it will work out." Gavin replied. "In order to gain entry and avoid as much friction with our hosts as possible, we have tried to seek out a local partner to vouch for us and guide us around. When we reached out to some associates, we came in touch with a local biomech designer who is willing to open some doors for us. If we accept his cooperation, we will definitely enjoy a smoother journey throughout the state."

That sounded intriguing to Ves, but he didn't think it was that simple.

"It would be nice if we can rely on a local guide, but what does this fellow want from us? There's no way a local will work with someone as controversial as us without an agenda."

Gavin hesitated for a moment. "You're right, boss. The biomech designer.. wants to challenge you to a design duel. He wants to know which kind of living mech is stronger."

"Oh."

*Chapter 2636: Dr. Frederico Navarro*

According to his public profile, Frederico Navarro was a forty-odd years old Journeyman Mech Designer.

To be more precise, he was both a biotech expert and a biomech designer. This reflected the fact that every biomech designer had to know the ins and outs of exobiology, genetics, molecular biology, biomechanics and many other related fields.

How else could they design and 'grow' their biomechs if they didn't know how a living organism worked?

Biomechs may perform identical to classical mechs on the battlefield, but their organic nature meant that the logistics around them were completely different.

Mech companies didn't fabricate biomechs. They grew them. Biomechs literally started as tiny, juvenile masses of tissue. As long as they were kept in special cultivation pools, it usually took a couple of weeks or months for them to grow in size and mass.

This was a very long production time. The weakest biomechs took at least a week to reach maturity while the more powerful models might take years to gestate!

While this sounded incredibly backwards, this growth-based production method had its own advantages.

The most important one was that once a producer set up the infrastructure, they just needed to feed materials, energy and nutrients in the cultivation pools in order to grow a lot of mechs at once.

Hardly any mech technicians or other workers were required to perform any manual processes. Just a few overseers and biotech experts were enough to oversee the production of thousands of biomechs!

Maintaining the biomechs once they were finished was easy as well. The living machines were always capable of regenerating minor battle damage by themselves. If they suffered major damage such as losing an arm, they could still regrow a new one as long as they were fed with lots of materials and tended to by a single biomech technician!

The same method could also be employed to upgrade or modify the biomechs.

Rather than treat them as machines, biomech designers and biomech technicians instead treated them as giant living organisms. Just like how humans could improve their capabilities by augmenting themselves with implants and gene treatments, biomechs could also be augmented in the same fashion!

While biomechs possessed several advantages, they also came with some distinct downsides.

The first major demerit was the higher barrier to entry to design them. Every biomech designer had to be proficient in both biotechnology and traditional engineering. They could not skimp in either direction, or else their biomechs would never be able to compete against classical mechs.

The second significant downside was that biomechs demanded a completely different infrastructure. The traditional mech industry had no clue how to produce, repair, maintain and recycle biomechs.

As biological machines, a large proportion of their makeup had to be made with different materials. Biomech producers competed against both traditional mech companies and other biotech companies when it came to sourcing the necessary materials.

All in all, biomechs were generally very difficult to popularize in a region where classical mechs already reigned supreme. The lack of infrastructure hampered their utility as it demanded producers and consumers to make special accommodations. All of that cost extra money, effort and resources.

When Ves briefly looked at the states bordering the Life Research Association, he quickly found out that none of the neighbors adopted biomechs on a widespread scale.

Aside from a couple of exceptions, the rest of Majestic Teal firmly stuck to using normal metallic mechs!

While this forced the LRA's mech industry to stand alone, the biomech enthusiasts didn't appear to be having difficulties. Biotechnology was far more developed in the state than anywhere else in the local region, so local biomech designers such as Frederico Navarro could easily make a living by depending entirely on the domestic market.

"Why is Dr. Navarro so interested in challenging me to a design duel?" Ves asked.

His assistant shrugged. "We aren't sure, but we think that he is driven by a combination of pride in the LRA's biomechs and a perception that we are challenging the definition of 'living mechs'. I'm not sure how his specialty plays into his motives. According to the MTA, Dr. Navarro excels at designing mechs that can transform mid-battle or in a short amount of time."

His exact specialty was rapid biomechanical transformation. While it was a bit exaggerated to state that Dr. Navarro's products could transform in the middle of an engagement, some of his products were actually capable of doing so depending on the scale of changes.

Regardless whether his biomechs took seconds or hours to change into a different form, Dr. Navarro was not the most successful Journeyman in his home state. His products may be versatile, but they were also significantly more expensive than the industry standard. His biomechs also possessed shorter lifespans. If they lived longer than they were designed to last, then they would rapidly degrade until they died a 'natural' death. Just like prolonging the lives of humans, it was very troublesome to extend the lifespan of a biomech.

However, what did all of this have to do with Ves? While he was intrigued by Dr. Navarro's work, he had no intention of delving further into the intricacies of biomechs. He possessed no foundation in this weird category of mechs. His own production facilities weren't capable of producing biomechs and classical mechs already offered plenty of diversity for him to explore.

"Is it possible that Dr. Navarro did not reach out to us on our own initiative?" Ves guessed. "What if someone else wants to test us through this fellow?"

"That is what Calabast suspects as well when we brought it up to her. She is still looking into this angle, but it is unlikely for us to determine whether that is the case." Gavin replied.

Just like regular mech designers, every biomech designer possessed a range of connections. Their teachers, business partners, friends and colleagues were part of the networks that people like Dr. Navarro relied upon to maintain their footing in a competitive mech industry.

No mech designer was able to stand alone. This was especially the case in a second-rate state.

Personally, Ves suspected that Dr. Navarro might be part of an organization or faction within the LRA. That wasn't necessarily a big deal as Ves would actually be surprised if the biomech designer was all on his lonesome.

Was Dr. Navarro or the mastermind standing behind him trying to pull Ves and the Larkinson Clan into some kind of plot?

Who knew. Ves just wanted to shop at the LRA. He had no interest in getting pulled into the quagmire of local politics.

"As long as you don't find anything alarming about Dr. Navarro, go ahead and tell him that I accept his challenge." He decided after a moment of thought. "Make sure to

remind him of our conditions. We will only be travelling to open, commercial star systems and we will not stay too long in any destination."

"Will do, boss."

Ves put the issue out of his mind and moved on to other matters.

Later in the day, Ves entered the bridge. He looked around and approached Captain Daria-Maria Vraken as she looked closely at a timer.

Once the timer counted down to 0, the ship shuddered for a moment. A brief nauseating sensation swept over Ves before his body quickly stabilized.

The fleet had returned to realspace!

The grand captain spent a few minutes issuing orders in order to make sure the Spirit of Bentheim was still in order.

Hundreds of mechs deployed into space. They immediately patrolled the surrounding space and remained on guard against any unusual signs.

The mech pilots were a bit more jumpy than usual this time. A nervous mood swept across the entire fleet as this seemingly-unordinary star system was actually different from the other stops.

Ves stood still for a moment as he took in the significance of this destination.

While Ves had traveled beyond the Komodo Star Sector a few years ago, this was the first time in his life that he had entered a different star sector!

"Welcome to Vicious Mountain, Patriarch Larkinson." Captain Vraken announced. "While we will only be here for a week, we have entered into a different region from before. Unlike our home star sector, Vicious Mountain is dominated by a single second-rate state. The Garlen Empire imposes its own rules in this star sector. There is no reason to be concerned, though. As long as we stay in the periphery, the Garlen Empire won't bother with us. We are just passing through."

As Ves studied the projection of the local plot, the star system did not look any different from a star system in Komodo.

Doubt crossed his face. "I thought the crossover would be more noticeable. We did pass through a gravitic barrier, right?"

"Do you think that our Hexer FTL drives are inadequate? They are easily capable of bridging this gap. If you actually felt any turbulence along the way, then that is a sign that the FTL drive is malfunctioning."

Every star sector aside from frontier ones was surrounded by barriers that inhibited FTL travel. Whether these were natural formations or created by aliens in the past, humanity had mastered the ability to strengthen these higher-dimensional walls.

According to the Big Two, separating star sectors by erecting these barriers was a form of defense against invaders. Any alien empire that declared war against humanity would be forced to chew through one star sector after another. It was impossible to bypass them and reach the core of human civilization right away!

The fact that these same measures also made it harder for humanity to travel across the galaxy did not seem to bother the MTA and CFA. Ves personally thought that the powers that be actually wanted to keep space peasants in their place.

Those who were capable of crossing into other star sectors should either be galactic citizens or those connected to them. Ves and the Larkinson Clan easily met the qualifications to travel across the galaxy.

In fact, the Larkinson Family also managed to cross over in this star sector. He knew that Uncle Ark and the rest of the old family had somehow managed to enter the Garlen Empire in search of protection and employment.

Though Ves felt a little worried about his relatives, Ark was not a reckless leader. If the Larkinson Family thought it was safe to enter a second-rate state, then they should not be exposed to danger.

It was just a bit difficult for Ves to shake his worries. He did not have a lot of positive experiences interacting with powerful organizations and factions. The Garlen Empire might be a powerful monolithic state on paper, but it was actually divided into many squabbling tribes and clans. The Cross Clan was just one of thousands of organizations that struggled for power.

As Ves slowly got over the wonder of entering into a different star sector, he occupied himself with ship-related matters.

Running the Spirit of Bentheim was a heavy responsibility. So many people and parts were moving around at the same time that he admired Captain Vraken for her ability to stay on top of everything.

As they talked about the lackluster training progress of the Larkinsons who were supposed to replace the Hexer trainers, an alarm suddenly sounded.

"What is the matter?!" Captain Vraken questioned the sensor officer.

"We're reading a massive incoming FTL translation signal! An unknown fleet is arriving within the vicinity of our position!"

Ves briefly paused. An unsettling feeling swept over him. Was it a coincidence, or...?

Another alarm sounded.

Major Verle had immediately raised the alert level to yellow, which meant that the Larkinsons had to be prepared to meet any dangerous situation!

Thousands of mechs preemptively deployed into space In the span of a couple of minutes. The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan automatically followed suit.

As Ves tried to figure out whether he should be worried or not, the unknown fleet had finally transitioned into the star system!

"Alert! We have identified eight capital ships and an unknown number of sub-capital ships, but no less than fifty!"

The arriving fleet arrived a fair distance away from the expeditionary fleet. It would take at least a couple of hours for the two fleets to enter into engagement range.

"According to our calculations, the unknown fleet can reach us in less than 4 hours, which is less than the maximum time it takes for all of our starships to cycle their FTL drives." Captain Vraken informed Ves. "In my judgement, this is not a coincidence."

As the sensors finally resolved more details from the arriving ships, the sensor officer cried out in fright!

"WE HAVE IDENTIFIED FIVE OF THE EIGHT CAPITAL SHIPS! THEY ARE ALL FRIDAYMAN FLEET CARRIERS!"

Shock immediately swept across the bridge.

*Chapter 2637: Reviving the Larkinson Family*

The Friday Coalition had come to attack the Larkinson Clan. There was no doubt about that.

The sudden Fridayman fleet did not hide its identity. The fleet carriers proudly announced their identity through their IFFs!

Just to be sure, the sensor officers attempted to match the emissions, silhouettes and other observed details to the Hexer database of known Fridayman capital ships.

All of the data matched! There was a very high chance that the IFFs announced the truth.



"These fleet carriers are special." Grand Captain Vraken told Ves. "The Eager Condemnation, the Auralis, the Amagi, the Forward Momentum and the Orca Tyrant are all built to perform raids in enemy territory. They are incredibly valuable deep strike carriers!"

"What?! All five of them!?" Ves reacted with alarm!

"It's true. With their extended-range FTL drives, if they didn't manage to intercept us here, they would have caught up to us eventually. In fact, there is a significant chance that this strike force has already attempted to intercept us while we were still travelling through the Komodo Star Sector."

A weight pressed upon his heart. Ves did not need any clarification to realize that the Friday Coalition's deep strike fleet carriers did not venture all of the way out here to have a picnic with the Larkinson Clan.

The Fridayman were out for blood!

"Wait.. only five out of eight of the capital ships are identified as Fridaymen ships, correct?" Ves frowned. "What about the other three? Where do the sub-capital ships accompanying these huge vessels hail from?"

"I think the Cross Clan can explain that better than us." Captain Vraken replied.

Sure enough, the Hemmington Cross hailed the Spirit of Bentheim. The grand captain instantly accepted the request.

The projection of Patriarch Reginald Cross appeared into view. The man looked as if he was only a few steps away from bursting out in anger!

"Larkinsons!" The Vicious Mountainer shouted. "Our blood enemies have come to finish the job! The foul Planat Clan and the craven Praetor Clan will do everything in their power to complete their betrayal on us. Will you stand with me and fight against the foes that are arrayed against us? Let me warn you that this will not be an easy fight!"

This was not a simple courtesy call. On the surface, Patriarch Reginald was merely stating the obvious. The three fleet carriers and the fifty-odd combat carriers had all been dispatched by the old enemies of the Cross Clan.

With the enemies capable of catching up to the Golden Skull Alliance, there shouldn't be any question whether battle was inevitable.

However, this was not the only option. If Ves absolutely wanted to avoid battle, he could command his clan to evacuate from the starships that needed longer than 3 or 4 hours to cycle their FTL drives.

That effectively meant abandoning every sub-capital ship aside from the lightest vessels!

While the Larkinson Clan would have to abandon a lot of valuable ships and mechs, by transferring all of the personnel to the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves could easily take the factory ship away on account of her multiple FTL drives.

Even if it took a whopping 18 hours for the Spirit of Bentheim to cycle an FTL drive, she had two additional ones that were more than capable of bringing the factory ship away right this instant!

Still, was this what Ves wanted to do?

No.

As Ves studied the data on the enemy fleet, he roughly estimated that it shouldn't have brought too many mechs. In fact, he was pretty sure that the Golden Skull Alliance was able to muster at least several thousand more mechs!

Of course, there was always a chance that enemy reinforcements might drop in the vicinity at any moment. Vicious Mountain was the home star sector of both the Praetor Clan and the Planat Clan. The implication here was that the two archenemies of the Cross Clan may have invested way more ships and mechs than had currently appeared!

Ves inwardly shook his head. He could not let his imagination go wild during a crisis moment. He needed to address the immediate problems right away!

He straightened his back and faced the Cross Patriarch with the dignity of a clan leader!

"My brother. We are honored to fight by your side. Let us band together and baptize our alliance in the blood of our enemies! From this day onward, your enemies are my enemies!"

"Well said, Patriarch Ves!" The older man released a bloodthirsty grin. "I care nothing for the Komodo War, but if the Fridaymen are conspiring with the Praetors and Planats, our Cross Clan shall not let them go! We have run away from our enemies for too long. Now that my surviving clansmen have rested and replenished their strength, we shall no longer scurry away like frightened mice. If we do not make the two traitor clans bleed at least once before we depart, we are not Crossers!"

The transmission closed, leaving Ves to stew over the implications.

There was a chance the Cross Patriarch might have put up an act in front of Ves. If the Crossers made a deal with the enemy, they were in a prime position to screw the Larkinsons over.

Ves didn't think this was the case, though. For one, the Praetor Clan and the Planat Clan used to be part of the same tribe as the Cross Clan. When Saint Hemmington Cross led the Becker Tribe, the Praetors and Planats meekly followed the lead of the aggressive ace pilot.

However, once Hemmington Cross died and the Becker Tribe was pushed back by rivaling neighbors, the former subordinate clans viciously stabbed the Cross Clan in the back!

There was no way the Cross Clan would ever forgive the despicable clans! Even if Patriarch Reginald wanted to collude with the Praetors and Planats, his subordinates would not let this come to pass!

In fact, it was much more likely for the rank-and-file Crossers to have second thoughts. Patriarch Reginald was not just a clan leader, but also a high-tier expert pilot!

Expert pilots were incredibly principled. Unless they possessed a shady background, they were always upright and honest. From his brief talk with Patriarch Reginald, Ves did not sense a single sign that the Cross Patriarch was being dishonest!

Ves turned to Captain Vraken, who nodded.

"My impression is that Patriarch Reginald Cross is determined to fight the enemy fleet. Don't take me at my word, though. Your clan needs to perform an extensive analysis. In fact, we all need to make extensive preparations. Let us take care of the most time-sensitive priorities first."

"Very well. Please do whatever is necessary to stabilize this ship and prepare us for battle!"

When Major Verle shifted the fleet to yellow condition, the Larkinson fleet had already begun to orient away from the arriving enemy fleet and accelerate forward. The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan had both followed suit.

The Golden Skull Alliance was trying to distance itself from the incoming fleet.

Unfortunately, the enemy fleet arrived in a favorable position. They were already fairly close. Combined with their other advantages, the leading elements of the enemy fleet ought to be able to catch up to the Golden Skull Alliance in 4 or so hours.

If the expeditionary fleet did not attempt to fly away, then it would take a lot less time for hostilities to commence.

In fact, if the Larkinsons and Crossers were really spoiling for a fight, they would have turned their ships in the opposite direction and fly straight at the incoming enemies!

That was a stupid course of action. The intercepting party had clearly made more preparations for the battle. In contrast, the Golden Skull Alliance had only been moderately alert to the possibility of encountering enemies.

They were not running away. They were buying time to prepare whatever was necessary to increase their chances of winning the upcoming confrontation!

Every single Larkinson, Glory Seeker and Crosser became fully roused.

Mech technicians and mech designers were in the process of tuning up mechs.

Mech pilots were undergoing preliminary briefings where they learned about how the Fridaymen, Praetors and Planats fought and how to counter their fighting styles.

Sensor operators and intelligence analysts worked together to observe the enemy fleet as much as possible in order to gather vital clues about the enemy battle strength.

The senior officers were either in the process of calming down and organizing the men or planned out the impending battle.

Ves did not immediately interfere aside from ordering his subordinate mech designers to make themselves useful. There was little point in keeping them inside the design lab during this crisis. He wanted them to join the maintenance crews and do their best to figure out how to tune up or strengthen the mechs that the Larkinson Clan would soon be putting on the field!

Four hours was not a lot of time, but it presented the defenders with enough of a buffer to increase their battle readiness by at least 10 percent!

As Ves was about to start an emergency meeting with Major Verle and the other senior military officers of the clan, he received an unknown call.

He had a feeling who it was. He diverted to a private office and accepted the call.

Venerable Ghanso Larkinson projected into existence. A smug and confident expression appeared on the treacherous expert pilot's face.

"Ghanso." Ves growled.

"Hahaha! You didn't expect us to drop by, did you, Ves?"

"You have shown your true colors at least. You finally can't resist. It's not enough for you to sell out your fellow family members. The Fridaymen have finally succeeded in corrupting you. Only the most depraved people in the galaxy would ever turn their weapons against their own family! You're a kinslayer, Ghanso!"

"YOU'RE WRONG!" The expert pilot burst out! Satisfaction quickly made way for anger as Ves had precisely targeted his sore point! "Your clan is a farce! Not a single member is a Larkinson! You and the traitors who have turned your backs against the family. What gives you the right to claim our heritage? As for the tens of thousands of deluded foreigners who have joined your clan, they are only Larkinsons in name! Not a single drop of Larkinson blood flows in their veins. They have never been brought up in our ways. You are all pretenders!"

Ves looked shocked. It was one thing to reject the adopted members as actual Larkinsons. It was another thing to consider the trueblood members as fake Larkinsons as well!

Ghanso's mentality had become so warped that he did not identify himself with any Larkinson anymore.

Even though the expert pilot claimed to be the purest Larkinson alive, every other Larkinson considered him to be a whackjob!

Ves turned around and stretched out his hand. Nitaa passed over the Larkinson Mandate.

Once he held the book, he briefly concentrated his mind and tried to focus on Venerable Ghanso.

As expected. The Larkinson Network failed to connect with his treacherous cousin. Ghanso hated the clan so much that Goldie simply couldn't find anything common enough to form a bond!

The realization put Ves in a strange mood. He shook his head. "You poor fellow. You don't know how far you have fallen. It's not us who are wrong. It's you who has gone astray!"

"Your lies will not sway me from my noble cause!" Ghanso spat. "The True Larkinson Family will rise again, and the first step to doing so will begin today! Once I wipe out your clan, I will confront Uncle Ark and the remaining Larkinsons. If my misguided relatives recognize their faults, I will generously lead them back into the light. If they have fallen to darkness, then I will wipe them out just like I will erase you from existence! Even if I am the last Larkinson alive, I shall assume the role of the second Larkinson Ancestor. Our heritage and our bloodline shall not die out as long as I survive!"

Ghanso was utterly determined to revive the original Larkinson Family no matter the cost!

"You..." Ves was momentarily rendered speechless. "You're utterly mad!"

### *Chapter 2638: Fight or Flight*

An important meeting began in one of the smaller conference rooms aboard the Spirit of Bentheim.

Due to the lack of time, everyone invited to the meeting showed up via projection. None of the senior leaders of the Larkinson Clan could afford to waste precious minutes walking back and forth.

An incredibly heavy mood swept across the entire expeditionary fleet. No one smiled or joked around.

The projected figures that appeared into view looked much larger and more dangerous than before. Shortly after the alert level had been raised, every Larkinson changed out their service uniforms for more protective gear.

Most ship ratings and officers donned hazard suits and carried sidearms. Security officers and infantry soldiers set off to guard the most critical sections of their ships in full combat gear.

Even if the enemy fleet needed at least a couple of hours to close in on the Larkinsons, no one loosened their vigilance. The Friday Coalition fielded a professional military that was highly developed and highly trained in many aspects. The Fridaymen could easily be sneaking infiltrators and saboteurs at this very moment!

It was better to be safe than sorry. The slight inconvenience that came from wearing bulky suits was nothing compared to the protection they offered against explosions and surprise attacks.

Ves showed up in projection form as well. He had descended down to his personal workshop shortly after listening to Venerable Ghanso's unhinged tirade.

He appeared while wearing his improved and streamlined Unending Regalia. Ever since he gained access to the ELKINE production line, he had rebuilt the roughest parts of his personal armor and corrected all of the irregularities due to relying on Lucky's teeth to cut Unending alloy.

With a cape draped over his armor's shoulders, he had fully transitioned his look from a clan leader and mech designer to a war leader and survivor of many battles.

"Meow."

Lucky appeared as well, because why not. His appearance briefly attracted a lot of eyes due to his darker body. Ves had put the latest version of the Misfortune Harness onto his cat.

Just like he did with his personal gear, had fully redesigned and streamlined the Misfortune Harness so that its combination of B-stone, Unending alloy and stealth materials covered nearly every surface!

If Lucky kept his mouth closed and retracted his claws, the cat should not be able to release any energy emissions that gave his presence away!

Still, despite feeling proud of his craftsmanship, Ves was not deluded enough that this upcoming battle would be decided by personal combat.

If Ghanso's Charlemagne fired its rifle directly at Ves, the Unending Regalia may survive, but its wearer would be unable to withstand the immense transfer of heat and energy!

Jutland organ or not, there was no way the energy of an attack that was capable of piercing through mech armor could be resisted by a half-alien body!

The difference in scale was too big. Ves pointedly recalled how Dr. Jutland foolishly challenged a mech with his body.

The power of a single human was nothing in a battle between mechs.

Ves knew he would have to rely on the forces he established and nurtured over the years to make it past this crisis.

He looked around the conference room. Though the other projected Larkinson looked as grave as him, they did not lose their fighting spirit. Even if they knew that they had fallen into an ambush of sorts, their battle intent hadn't been doused.

Instead, the looming threat intensified their determination. Their eyes burned with indignation. The Larkinson Clan was already leaving the Komodo Star Sector. Why must the Fridaymen come and start a fight? No matter who won or lost today, a lot of Larkinsons were bound to lose their lives at the end of the day!

This was an unavoidable tragedy, and that made every Larkinson even angrier.

"I know that time is short, so let's make this quick." Ves announced as he swept his gaze to the other projections. "That said, we can't skip over any critical issues. Against a foe like the Friday Coalition, we must come up with a comprehensive plan that leverages our advantages as much as possible. We cannot underestimate our foes."

The Larkinsons and Hexers nodded their heads.

Aside from inviting Major Verle, his staff and the mech commanders of the Larkinson Clan, Ves also roped in the Glory Seekers and some other Hexers.

Mech Colonel Ariadne Wodin led the Glory Seekers. Grand Captain Ancilla Wodin commanded the Indigo Tremor. Both of them looked very formidable and exuded much more fighting spirit than the Larkinsons.

Their archenemies had come.

Aside from Ves, the Larkinsons didn't harbor a strong vendetta against the Friday Coalition. It was different for the Hexers. With the Friday Coalition gaining the upper hand against the Hexadric Hegemony as of late, the Glory Seekers did not wish to hand another victory over to their enemies.

Every Wodin knew full well what was at stake! Even though their nominal mission was to safeguard Gloriana's life, the Glory Seekers could not stand by and let Ves be killed or taken away. Their failure might irrevocably cause the Hegemony to lose the Komodo War!

Major Verle silently nodded to Colonel Ariadne Wodin. In this critical situation, he did not dare to bet that he was capable of directing this battle.

The two had briefly corresponded before the meeting.

Colonel Ariadne was more than twice as old as Major Verle and possessed at least four times as much knowledge of second-class mech warfare. She knew the Friday Coalition battle methods by heart and always kept up to date on how the Fridayman fought in the Komodo War.

The only shortcoming was that she did not understand the strength of the Larkinson Clan, but Major Verle and the other Larkinsons already covered that aspect.

"If no one objects to my appointment, I shall assume overall responsibility over the Glory Seekers and the Larkinson Clan for this active engagement."

It was important to establish a clear chain of command and put the best people possible in charge. Neither Ves nor any of his Larkinsons quibbled over letting Hexers interfere in their business this time.

They knew their limits. The Larkinson Clan was too new at this scale and class of warfare.

That said, it was not as if Colonel Ariadne could command the Larkinsons willy-nilly. She was doubtlessly aware that she needed the buy-in of the Larkinson Clan in order to keep her command. Therefore, she could not afford to act like any arrogant Hexer and ignore the input of others.

"Let me begin by making sure we are on the same page." The older woman who belonged to the same generation as Constance Wodin spoke. "Our highest priority for



this engagement is to keep Miss Gloriana Wodin and Patriarch Ves Larkinson alive and out of the hands of the enemy. Everything else is secondary. If necessary, we must be ready to discard all of our mechs and sub-capital ships. We can still avoid a total defeat by evacuating every Larkinson and Hexer to the Indigo Tremor and the Spirit of Bentheim before relying on their multiple FTL drives to flee from the enemy."

"How are we supposed to run?!" Commander Cinnabar of the Battle Criers questioned. "According to your own sources, we're facing at least five deep strike carriers! Once they have gotten onto our tail, we'll never be able to shake them off! The Fridaymen just need to calculate our destination from our transition orientation and emissions before heading there first to set up an interdiction field. No matter if our capital ships have two FTL drives or three FTL drives, none of them will have any chance of activating as long as there is too much gravitic turbulence at our emergence site!"

Everyone's hearts sank as they realized that fleeing prematurely did not necessarily guarantee their safety.

One of the advantages of extended-range FTL drives was that they reached the same destination faster as a regular FTL drive.

Any of the 5 deep strike carriers was capable of overtaking the Spirit of Bentheim and the Indigo Tremor even if they departed an hour later!

"This is not an absolute certainty." Grand Captain Daria-Maria Vracken noted. "The enemy must make detailed and extensive observations of the FTL transitions at close range. As long as we place our other ships in the way and generate as much interference as possible, it is likely that the enemy fleet will not be able to figure out our route. However, if we choose to give up this confrontation and run, we must do so quickly."

Major Verle looked grim. "We'll have to give up on the grand expedition if that is the case. The involvement of the Praetor Clan and the Planat Clan suggests that we might encounter hostile Vicious Mountainers if we insist on our original route. The safest option is to turn back and return to Hexer-aligned space. While the Fridaymen may have been sneaky enough to slip 5 deep strike carriers all of the way out here, I doubt they sent any other forces."

Ves shook his head. As long as there was a chance they could win this battle, he did not want to turn back. He had spent so much time, money, resources and effort to organize his grand expedition. How could his expeditionary fleet shirk back at the first sign of difficulties?

The Larkinsons had run away too often. Even if these were cases where discretion was the better part of valor, Ves did not want to make running away the default strategy of his clan!

Besides, if Ves ran back to the Komodo Star Sector, he would become even more dependent on the Hexers than before! If he returned to the Hegemony's doorstep like a beaten dog, he predicted that his clan would become more Hexer than Larkinson over time!

All of these reasons and more caused Ves to reject the option of running away before the battle even started.

"We will not consider fleeing until we have no other choice." Ves announced, silencing the ongoing discussion. "The Fridaymen have come with fewer ships, which means their strength is likely within the range that we can handle. When the enemy planned this operation, I doubt their planners possessed a full grasp of our strength. We can still take them by surprise with the methods and solutions we have developed in the last year."

Every Larkinson accepted his decision. The Glory Seekers agreed as well.

Colonel Ariadne nodded. "If that is the case, then we will not avoid a confrontation at all costs. However, in the event the enemy gains the upper hand, our most vital ships must be prepared to evacuate at any time. I suggest we prepare the Indigo Tremor and the Spirit of Bentheim for emergency transitions. In order to minimize our losses, we should also order all civilians and non-essential personnel aboard our smaller vessels to transfer to our capital ships."

Everyone quickly agreed. This was a logical course of action. Every sub-capital ship in the expeditionary fleet only possessed a single FTL drive, which severely hampered their ability to escape enemy pursuit. It shouldn't be too much of a problem to accommodate tens of thousands of extra passengers aboard the Indigo Tremor and Spirit of Bentheim.

Of course, there was no guarantee that their escape plan would succeed. The Fridaymen went through all of this trouble to target Ves. They would never let him get away like this so easily!

After quickly discussing all of the ways they could flee and minimize their losses in the event of a loss, the discussion finally turned to how they planned to prevent that from happening.

Colonel Ariadne projected a list that outlined the suspected assets of the enemy fleet. "Our observers and analysts have been working hard to estimate the combat strength of the strike force. We have combined the data we have gathered with our understanding of how the Fridaymen fight and organize themselves. We have also tried to get into the heads of the enemy commander in order to figure out how they plan to gain the upper hand in this battle. After doing all of this, we believe their strategy is simple. They plan to beat us with quality instead of quantity."

When Ves took a glance at the estimated assets and battle strength of the enemy, he grew a bit less confident.

The Golden Skull Alliance was probably able to field thousands more mechs, but the quality of the enemy forces was uniformly high!

*Chapter 2639: Quantity and Quality*

"Before we begin to study the enemy combat strength, it is useful to take stock of our own fighting capabilities first." Colonel Ariadne Wodin of the Glory Seekers stated.

She called up another projection that outlined the numbers of the Larkinson Clan, Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan.

While the Crossers weren't invited to this meeting, they still sent a basic summary of their strength. Whether it was accurate or not, it at least gave the others a good idea of what their allies were capable of in battle.

"The Larkinson Clan possesses 94 second-class Hexer-built combat carriers." Major Verle began. "While our combat carriers are not up to military standards, they come fairly close to them. While the tech is at least fifty years out of date, their defensive capabilities are mostly sound. Each combat carrier boasts at least 3 to 6 bunkers. We also have the Spirit of Bentheim."

Captain Vraken took over from here. "The Spirit of Bentheim is a ruggedized factory ship with enhanced defenses. She can play a key role in the upcoming battle. With her 80 bunkers, her powerful shield generators, her resilient hull plating and her armored prow, she can partially function as our defensive bulwark."

They had little choice but to make use of the Spirit of Bentheim in the upcoming battle. Ideally, the Larkinsons did not want to expose their precious factory ship to enemy attacks, but without any other capital ships at their disposal, they did not have the luxury to set such a powerful ship aside.

Major Verle moved on to summarizing their mechs. "After accounting for the recent additions to our mech roster, we are capable of deploying up to 4300 mechs at once. However, before you get excited, please note that around 3550 consist of second-class budget mechs. The only second-class mechs that are able to achieve parity against the Fridaymen mechs are 350 Transcendent Punishers and 200 Valkyrie Redeemers."

Ves felt a huge amount of regret right now. Due to his cheapskate tendencies, he refused to invest in higher quality second-class mechs during the reconstruction of his mech forces.

His logic back then was that an attack against his expeditionary fleet was too unlikely due to its size and numbers. Ves wanted to avoid wasting too much money by investing

into cheaper mechs that didn't require a high upfront cost and wouldn't lose too much value when selling them off in the second-hand market.

In any case, once he completed the Bright Warrior IB and Ferocious Piranha IB designs, his clan would easily be able to solve this temporary weakness.

Unfortunately, The blasted Fridaymen refused to play along!

"Damn Ghanso and damn these persistent bastards!"

Ves mentally beat himself up for not splurging on more powerful mechs while he still could! While he wouldn't have been able to equip his mech pilots with second-class LMC mechs, he could have issued them mechs with comparable performance!

He knew quite well how much the disparity in quality put the Larkinson mech forces at a disadvantage.

In the past, it was usually Ves and his men who bullied their weaker and less organized opponents. The pirates of the Nyxian Gap largely fielded weaker and shabbier mechs that easily fell apart after getting attacked by a mech that cost at least thrice as much to produce.

The Nyxian pirates who piloted inferior machines had to expend a lot more effort in order to scratch a mech that belonged to the Larkinsons!

The only reason why the Nyxian scum came close to defeating Task Force Predator at times was because they were quite aware of their own shortcomings. The pirate lords knew that their infrastructure couldn't support higher-quality mechs and mech pilots, so they sought to increase their strength in other ways.

Arming themselves with weapons of mass destruction, building powerful warships and consorting with the dark gods were just some of the ways the pirates leveled the playing field!

Now that Ves ended up in the same position as the Nyxian pirates back then, he knew his forces had to adopt the same approach.

The only way to increase their combat strength was to cheat!

As Ves desperately listed out the possible ways he could give his side an edge, Colonel Ariadne briefly outlined the combat readiness of the Glory Seekers.

"We possess more mechs than a typical Hexer mech regiment." The old woman explained. "At the onset, we were already able to field around 2000 mechs. The recent addition of the Indigo Tremor has added 600 more mechs to our lineup. Right now, we are capable of fielding 500 Valkyrie mechs and 2100 mechs that are not any worse on

average. Our other mech models are either military mech models or premium civilian models that are close to the former in performance."

That sounded quite strong! The Glory Seekers would definitely be able to fight a Fridayman military unit to a standstill if that was the case.

However, Ves remembered a very caveat about the mechs of the Glory Seekers.

"Colonel Ariadne, how many of the mechs of the Glory Seekers are optimized for space combat and how many of them are more suited for combat on land?"

The moods of many Larkinsons had lifted when Colonel Ariadne outlined the mechs of the Glory Seekers, but now that trend had reversed!

"Only half our mechs are truly spaceborn." She replied without hiding anything. "We are able to field 250 Valkyrie Interceptors and 1100 other spaceborn mechs. That doesn't mean our other mechs are incapable of contributing to the battle. Patriarch Ves, you know better than I that while our 250 Valkyrie Hurricanes are optimized to fight under atmospheric conditions, they can still put up a good fight in space."

That was true. The aerial variant of the Valkyrie Redeemer possessed more powerful flight systems in order to fight against gravity and resistance. The problem was that while the Valkyrie Hurricanes were still sealed against vacuum, they lacked some of the accommodations for space warfare.

Most noticeably, the Valkyrie Hurricanes were designed to disperse their heat in the air. Space largely consisted of vacuum so the only way the mechs could get rid of heat was through relying on thermal radiation.

Every other mech designed to fight under atmospheric conditions possessed the same shortcomings. This was why Colonel Ariadne suggested that they should deploy their landbound and aerial mechs close to the fleet.

Ves still wanted to palm his face, though. He disagreed with the Glory Seeker mech doctrine from the start. The Larkinsons would be spending most of their time in space. It was of great importance to make sure they could adequately defend themselves in space before considering anything else!

The Wodins did not think about that. Instead, they blindly copied some of the Hex Army's mech doctrines. One of them advocated that it was better and more efficient to field mechs that were dedicated to combat in a single environment.

While that worked on the scale of a mech army, it did not work as well in this case!

"Our aerial and landbound mechs will still be able to display most of their capabilities as long as the enemy comes to us." Colonel Ariadne confidently claimed. "Our aerial

mechs possess good maneuverability, but their endurance is not as good. Our landbound mechs come with inbuilt boosters that grants them limited mobility in space. If that is not sufficient, we can issue floaters to our most immobile assets in order to make them useful."

Overall, the Glory Seekers were still strong despite these issues.

"What of the Cross Clan?"

Calabast spoke up. "According to the information they have supplied along with the intelligence we have gathered on them, the Crossers are stronger than the Glory Seekers. Due to their flight, the Cross Clan has gotten rid of almost all of their useless landbound assets. Our allies may have lost many other assets during the flight from the Becker Tribe, but they have replenished most of their battle losses during the time they resided in the Cinach System. The Crossers can field around 3200 mechs, all of which consist of military mech models or equivalents."

Just like the Glory Seekers, the Crossers were highly-trained soldiers. In fact, the Crosser mech pilots were comparable to elites. They made it through the decline and fall of the Cross Clan in the Garlen Empire and survived the long and arduous flight from the Vicious Mountain Star Sector.

Commander Casella Ingvar of the Living Sentinels gestured to the list that listed out the possible enemy assets.

"While our Larkinson forces are rather mixed in quality, the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan should be able to match the mechs deployed by our enemies."

That was technically true.

"The five Fridayman deep strike fleet carriers are able to carry up to 2300 mechs in total." Calabast nodded. "The carriers of the Praetor Clan are able to carry around 2000 mechs while the ships of the Planat Clan should have brought up to 1800 mechs. Mind you, these numbers are either estimates or derived from external intelligence sources. You should take them with a grain of salt."

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Those figures shouldn't be too far from the truth. I have already taken a good look at their starships. I highly doubt that they can stuff 50 percent more mechs aboard their ships."

"The bad news is that both the Fridaymen and the Garlaners appear to have dispatched their elite mech units." Calabast cautioned. "We have tried our best to analyze our long-range sensor data. Based on the mechs that are patrolling around the enemy fleet, we are facing the crack troops of both states. This means that each of their mechs are at minimum comparable to the Valkyrie Redeemer in quality."

She may have overestimated the strength of the enemy, but neither Ves nor anyone else believed that was the case!

Without some form of advantage, the enemy strike force wouldn't have been so eager to launch an attack. Considering the nature of their operation, the Fridaymen alone should have definitely sent some of their best troops!

Colonel Ariadne brought up her greatest concern. "There is one more variable that we have yet to address. Expert mechs can completely change the course of a battle."

The Larkinsons all looked depressed. This just happened to be one of the areas that they were lacking in! While they possessed an abundance of expert pilots, they did not have a single expert mech in their possession!

"How many expert mechs are the Glory Seekers able to field?" Ves cautiously asked.

"...One. Just one." She replied in a subdued tone. "Venerable Brutus Wodin stands ready to resist the Fridaymen with the Star Dancer."

"..."

To be fair, against regular opponents, that was already enough. Private sector outfits normally didn't retain any expert pilots at all. A typical military mech regiment usually retained just a single expert pilot. It was already considered luxurious for a mech regiment to be watched over by two or three expert pilots!

"As for our allies, the Cross Clan has informed us that they are able to deploy 4 expert mechs. This also includes the expert mech of Patriarch Reginald Cross."

In total, the Golden Skull Alliance was only able to muster up 5 genuine expert mechs. Somehow, none of the people gathered here today believed the enemy strike force brought less than that!

Ves leaned forward. "The important question here is how many expert pilots the enemy has brought. Do we have any clues?"

Calabast shook her head. "It is not possible to ascertain how many expert mechs the enemy is hiding. We can't rely on old Hexer intelligence data because this is clearly a task force put together out of different elements from different Coalition partners. We can't determine what you want to know through long-ranged observations either because our enemies aren't stupid enough to show their hand early."

This brought a lot of consternation to Ves and the others! They needed to know exactly how many expert mechs they faced in order to prepare the right measures to resist so many extraordinary opponents.

Letting an enemy expert mech move around unopposed was one of the worst outcomes that could happen!

Seeing that no one attending the meeting was able to propose a means to determine the amount of enemy expert mechs they faced, Ves knew he had to resort to a desperate solution.

"Please wait." He told the others before activating his comm.

"You called, Bright Martyr?"

"You should know why I called." Ves spoke to the Living Prophet. "Tell me how much."

James frowned. "I told you over and over again. I am not your personal search machine. Do you know the difficulty of determining what you wish to know? If it is so easy to read the fate of our enemies, I would have been invincible during my first lifetime."

"Just cut the crap and tell me how much!"

"You will not be able to ask any other questions if you insist upon this request."

"I am sure! Now cough up the answer!"

A few minutes later, Ves learned what they faced.

The Friday Coalition trotted out 8 expert pilots.

The Praetor Clan brought 2 expert pilots.

The Planat Clan reluctantly contributed 1 expert pilot.

That amounted to 11 expert pilots and expert mechs in total.

Of those expert mechs, 1 of them was bound to be the Charlemagne, which was always accompanied by a mech company of quasi-expert mechs!

The destruction they could inflict on the enemy when they fought together was far more than what they could accomplish on their own!

"We're screwed."

*Chapter 2640: Two Unpalatable Battle Plans*

In summary, Golden Skull Alliance was able to field around 10,000 mechs.

The enemy strike force should have brought around 6000 mechs.



That was a substantial disparity in numbers, but Ves did not take pleasure in enjoying a numbers advantage. He knew quite well that around 3500 mechs that belonged to his clan were basically cannon fodder!

The disparity in quality was too big. The Valkyrie Redeemer was valued at around 400 million hex credits, while a typical Princess Jecka sold for 59 million credits.

The old adage of 'you got what you paid for' applied here. The feeble second-class commercial mech models in the hands of the Larkinsons might be sufficient to fend off space pirates and ordinary riffraff, but they were quite inadequate against the crack troops of the Friday Coalition!

What was even worse was that the Golden Skull Alliance was badly behind in terms of expert mechs.

"Where did you get these numbers?" Calabast looked skeptical as Ves announced the numbers. "Don't tell me you..."

Ves loudly coughed. "AHEM. I cannot provide assurances that the enemy fleet has truly brought 11 expert mechs. However, I don't believe we can rely on other sources, so you can either believe what I said or make an unsubstantiated guess."

The choice was simple. Even though the source of this information was sketchy, the Larkinsons and the Glory Seekers instinctively felt this number should be close to the truth.

"It makes sense for the enemy to have brought so many expert pilots." Colonel Ariadne judged. "Ever since the Friday Coalition enlisted many foreign expert pilots, our enemies have been more liberal when it came to deploying them on dangerous missions. In fact, there is a good chance that most if not all of the expert pilots in the enemy strike force consist of foreigners. The Coalition can't risk its heroes. Its native expert pilots are not just combat assets, but also propaganda material."

While there weren't any Crossers in the meeting, Calabast had already studied up on the Praetor Clan and Planat Clans.

"It's impossible for the two Garlaner clans to bring too many expert pilots this time. Their Becker Tribe is practically a shadow of its former self. The Praetors and Planats have lost several expert pilots in previous conflicts, so they should prize their surviving ones more. Besides, they still need to keep most of their high-ranking mech pilots at home in order to avoid showing any further weakness than they have already done."

"Do you have more evidence to support your assumptions or are you just pulling facts out of thin air?" Commander Melkor of the Avatars of Myth expressed his skepticism.

He did not fully trust Ves' uncertain source nor put too much stock in Calabast's spurious guesses.

Calabast smirked at Melkor. "It just so happens that I have reasonable proof to back up my assessment. In the Garlen Empire, expert pilots are rulers and warlords. They do not hide in a carrier or military base for months on end. Garlaner expert pilots are greedy for power and eagerly exercise their authority. I have tasked my Black Cats to scour the news from the Becker Tribe. It turns out that least several expert pilots of the Praetor Clan and Planat Clan have not appeared in public for more than a month."

"The Garlaners could be playing a trick on us." Captain Vraken warned. "It is impossible for them to be ignorant of the fact that it is easy to track the whereabouts of their expert pilots through the news. If I was in their place, I would have employed some body doubles or just fabricate a number of false news articles outright."

The galactic net and the news couldn't be trusted. Not completely. As long as they fell into the hands of humans, they were always susceptible to human interests.

That said, these unreliable news sources still served useful indicators.

Ves crossed his arms. "It is very plausible for the Fridaymen to commit 7 to 8 expert mechs and the Preators and Planats to commit 3 to 4 expert mechs. That totals 11 expert mechs, which matches the number I gave earlier."

The Glory Seekers and Larkinsons became more convinced that they would truly be facing this many expert mechs.

It was difficult to maintain confidence when faced with such an awful disparity in numbers. Expert mechs may be different in quality and expert pilots always performed at different levels, there was no way the enemies brought any weaklings.

With just 5 expert mechs on the side of the Golden Skull Alliance, that meant that 6 enemy mech mechs could effectively terrorize the battlefield!

If the Fridaymen and hostile Vicious Mountainers abused their numbers advantage to gang up on Venerable Brutus and the Crosser expert pilots, then the chances of the latter surviving wasn't good!

Once the defending expert mechs fell in rapid succession due to being outnumbered, the enemy expert mechs would then be free to coordinate with the regular units to massacre the remaining opposition!

How could the Larkinsons and Glory Seekers possibly prevent this devastating outcome?

Colonel Ariadne Wodin did not lose her composure. She quickly came up with an overall gameplan.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Our opponents are powerful. If the enemy strike force managed to emerge right on top of us, then it is very likely they would have won. However, they have transitioned a bit further away, buying us precious time to prepare and plan ahead. We must utilize this opportunity to the utmost to thread the needle."

"If the number of estimated expert mechs is accurate, then we possess a powerful advantage." Calabast stated with a bit of confidence. "The enemy doesn't know that we know, so they should not be on guard against any special measures that specifically targets their expert mechs. Perhaps they think we are wracked with uncertainty right now because of our inability to determine how many exceptional machines they can bring to the field."

While that was true, the intelligence advantage did not offset the absolute disparity in strength. The expert mechs should not be easy pickings!

"To achieve victory, we can pursue two possible battle plans." Colonel Ariadne projected a drawing board where she quickly drew two different scenarios.

"First, we can allocate all of our expert mechs and as many standard mechs as we think can keep the enemy expert mechs busy. Their goal is not to defeat the Fridayman and Vicious Mountainer expert mechs. Their only purpose is to stall the enemy machines as long as possible. This leaves us with roughly an equal amount of mechs that we must employ to defeat the remainder of the enemy elite mech units as soon as possible."

In the example that she sketched, she basically squared off the standard mechs of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan against the standard mechs of the enemy strike force.

This should be an even battle at best, so there was no guarantee the Glory Seekers and Crossers could be relied upon to win this bloody clash.

A bit further away, the 5 expert mechs of the Golden Skull Alliance and all of the mobile mechs of the Larkinson Clan chased after the 11 enemy expert mechs!

It didn't take long for the Larkinsons to realize the ruinous outcome of this approach.

"Most of our war machines consist of budget mechs." Commander Casella Ingvar reminded everyone. "Their speed, armor, firepower and other parameters are grossly underpowered. Even if we throw thousands of them at a couple of enemy expert mechs, the latter enjoy absolute superiority. They merely have to rely on their superior mobility to prevent the weaker mechs from mobbing them while launching attacks at a distance with impunity!"

Ves added another reminder. "Don't forget about Venerable Ghanso Larkinson! One of those 11 expert mechs can't be judged according to normal standards! On the surface, the Charlemagne and the Scarra is just a single expert mech accompanied by a mech company of lesser mechs. In reality, Unit L can unleash massive firepower at long ranges with high precision. If we don't do something about those empowered quasi-expert mechs, they can easily wipe out all of the Larkinson mechs allocated to this mission by themselves!"

He was not exaggerating. There were several instances in the Komodo War where Unit L succeeded in wiping out thousands of enemy mechs when the Hexers failed to respond with expert mechs of their own!

"We don't have many options, Patriarch Ves." Colonel Ariadne carefully spoke. "While the mechs of your clan are grossly outmatched, the outcome will hardly be different if the Glory Seekers or the Crossers are tasked with keeping the enemy expert mechs instead. Their mechs are just slightly tougher cannon fodder when they face the unrestricted attacks of expert mechs. If we instead deploy your weaker commercial mechs against the elite mech units of the Fridaymen and Garlaners, then there is no hope for victory in either fronts."

The mech colonel's first strategy may seem callous, but it was the most rational way to allocate their troops.

The sound logic of this plan made Ves hate it even more. It basically justified the decision to use the vast majority of his Avatars, Sentinels, Battle Criers, Vandals, Penitent Sisters and Swordmaidens as cannon fodder against the expert mechs of the enemy!

No matter if the Larkinsons won or lost, they were bound to lose thousands of mechs and mech pilots at the end!

The Larkinson Clan could not afford to suffer another major loss after barely limping back from the Nyxian Gap! Ves could already imagine the Larkinson Assembly booting him out of office!

"What is the second battle plan?" He asked.

"It is essentially the reverse." The colonel replied and began to draw another diagram. "Instead of focusing most of our resources on the standard mechs of the enemy, we concentrate most of our resources on taking out the enemy expert mechs. The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan will concentrate several thousand of our strongest mechs and mech pilots to annihilate them as quickly as possible or at least end their ability to affect the battle."

"What about the enemy standard mechs?"

Colonel Ariadne looked grim. "We cannot hope for victory on that front. We must rely on the mechs of your Larkinson Clan as well as any remaining Glory Seeker and Crosser mechs that we can spare for this task. Just as before, your job is not to achieve victory, but to pin the enemy elite mech units down so that they cannot inflict too much destruction elsewhere."

Her second battle plan was just as unpalatable as the first one. In both scenarios, the Larkinson Clan's mech forces would assuredly suffer horrendous casualties!

It couldn't be helped. The commercial mechs they fielded performed too poorly and the Larkinson mech pilots were nowhere near as skilled as genuine second-class mech pilots.

The cold hard truth was that the Larkinson Clan simply wasn't ready to fight a battle at this level!

As frustration welled up inside his mind, the rest of the Larkinson officers expressed their indignation at Colonel Ariadne's bloody strategies!

"This is absurd!" Commander Sendra of the Swordmaidens expressed her outrage. "We know what it is like to face expert mechs with ordinary machines. We will fall like flies while failing to inflict any dent on their spotless machines!"

Commander Casella Ingvar concurred. "Our Living Sentinels are not as courageous and disciplined as the rest. We cannot depend upon them to sacrifice their lives for the greater good of the clan. They will break and run sooner or later as the primal fear of death overrides their cognition."

"Our Penitent Sisters stand ready to fight no matter the cost." Commander Valerie Chancy declared in a fatalistic tone. "The Superior Mother shall lead us to victory, one way or another."

"Victory is everything." Captain Daria Maria Vraken emphasized. "No matter how many mech pilots your Larkinson Clan loses, as long as you win, the lives of tens of thousands of clansmen will be safeguarded. With the resources at your disposal, it should be easy to replenish the losses you have suffered from this engagement. Do not let your unwillingness to spend the lives of your soldiers hinder you from adopting a battle plan that gives us the best chance of winning this engagement."

"This is not a numbers game, aunt!" Calabast hit back! "We are talking about real lives, here! You can't treat our mech pilots like most Hexers treat their boys!"