

Mech 3231

Chapter 3231: Calling Dibs

Unlike the unlucky expert pilots who still hadn't received their long-anticipated expert mechs, Tusa, Stark, Orfan and Dise each received powerful new expert mechs.

They were all immensely grateful that they were able to participate in the upcoming battle with mechs befitting their capabilities, but that also meant they had to shoulder a heavier responsibility.

After all, the Larkinson Clan didn't have any mech pilot who was stronger on an individual basis than the foursome.

Out of the four 'lucky' Larkinson expert pilots, Venerable Stark shouldered the greatest burden of them all. The Amaranto was unquestionably the strongest expert mech of the four existing ones in the clan. It also had the benefit of being a ranged mech, allowing it to project its power at extremely long distances.

Now, the expert pilots had to figure out how to best use the power that they had recently gained to the best effect.

"If Patriarch Reginald Cross didn't call dibs on Venerable Orthox, I would have wanted to try my spear against the Gatecrasher." Venerable Orfan grumbled.

"Are you crazy?" Tusa directed an odd glance at the woman. "Venerable Orthox is a high-tier expert pilot! He's in an entirely different league from us! His expert mech is also superior to ours!"

Venerable Orfan snorted. "I can still take him! Look, I admit I might not be able to beat this old dwarf, but I can sure as hell keep dancing with him. That's what my Riot is designed for. It has multiple defensive systems and it is also clad with an inner layer of Unending alloy. Maybe I'll have to worry about my survival if I'm locked in battle against an expert offensive mech, but the Gatecrasher is a space knight."

"An offensive space knight." Venerable Dise reminded her colleague.

"My point still stands! I'm not a mech designer, but I can see that most of the design resources put into this fancy machine is spent on making it as tough and resilient as possible. Sure, its defenses might reach the level of a high-tier expert mech, but what about its attack power? There are bound to be limitations there."

Tusa shook his head. "A high-tier expert mech does not have as many weaknesses as you think. You're dreaming if you think an expert called the Gatecrasher isn't able to hit back hard."

"Look, you may be right, but I'm confident I can handle Orthox. If I'm losing, then I'll do my best to prolong my defeat as long as possible so that you and everyone else can take advantage of my stalling action." Venerable Orfan stubbornly claimed. "It makes a lot of strategic sense for me to do this. I'll readily admit that I'm not as strong or valuable as Reginald Cross. Doesn't it sound great that we can free him up and sic his Bolvar Rage against weaker enemy expert mechs?"

The logic was surprisingly good, but Tusa recognized that the viability of this suggested rested on Venerable Orfan's ability to stop the unstoppable expert mech. The Gatecrasher was a famed expert mech in the Ferril Province and admired by a lot of Vulcanites for good reasons.

There was also another flaw that was sure to doom Venerable Orfan's intentions.

"You don't need to convince us, Orfan. If you want to tussle against the Gatecrasher, you first have to convince the Cross Patriarch that you're calling dibs on his dibs. Are you confident enough that you will get your way?"

Venerable Orfan glared at Tusa. His argument instantly popped her bubble. As much as she hated to acknowledge it, there was no way she would be able to get her way. Patriarch Reginald Cross was not only the most powerful expert pilot of the Golden Skull Alliance, but he was also a clan leader in his own right. He held much more say than anyone else.

"Patriarch Reginald is determined to challenge himself." Venerable Dise said, providing more support to Tusa's argument. "At his level, it is hard for him to make any further progress towards ace pilot. If we can free him up so that he can bully weaker dwarven expert pilots, we can quickly whittle down the enemy's advantage in numbers. However, fighting against weaker expert pilots and expert mechs won't push him past his limits. If he prioritizes his own advancement over every other priority, then he must seek out the strongest champion of the opposing force."

That pretty much ended this line of argument. As expert pilots, they were already aware of the allure of advancing to ace pilot. So many expert pilots had tried and failed to take the next step in their evolution. That didn't stop them from resorting to the most desperate measures in order to grasp their chance. As strong-willed individuals, they never gave up fighting!

"If I'm not going to fight against the Gatecrasher, then which dwarven mech can I fight against instead?"

Part of the reason why Venerable Orfan was so eager to fight against Venerable Orthox was because his expert mech was easy to confront.

As for the other two notable dwarven expert mechs...

"You can forget about dueling against Venerable Leiva's Gauss Baron." Tusa stated. "You'll just get beaten to a pulp long before you are able to get close. As for Venerable Merek's Paravad, I don't think it will be in a mood to tango with you. This avian expert mech is a lot faster and maneuverable than your weighted-down Riot. As soon as Venerable Merek finds out that you're a tough customer, he'll just sidestep your expert mech and find an easier target."

"Just get ready to fight against other expert mechs." Dise told her. "There are bound to be more attractive targets among the dwarven mech force. Even if they're not as famed and celebrated as the three dwarven heroes, you will still be able to get the fight you crave."

Venerable Orfan grunted in frustration. "There's not enough glory in defeating a nobody!"

"This isn't the time to worry about glory. We need to ensure our survival before we can think about building up our fame. Look, just focus on beating the weaker dwarven expert mechs at first. As long as you can mop them up first, you can always reinforce Patriarch Reginald and work together to take down Venerable Orthox. It won't be a fair fight at that point, but you'll still be able to claim victory against a celebrated hero."

This was the best that Orfan could hope for in her position.

That still didn't solve the problem of who should target the other two dwarven heroes.

Dise and Tusa both looked at Venerable Stark. The non-Larkinson expert pilot was the strongest of them all. As a consequence, her preferences and opinions mattered more.

Stark had been contemplating her target selection for a while now. It was not easy for her to choose between the Gauss Baron and the Paravad.

"The Gauss Baron is the greatest threat to our fleet." Tusa said. "In fact, all of their artillery mechs are huge threats, but the Gauss Baron alone can breach the defenses of our ships and destroy our capital ships even if we manage to win the battle."

"Will Venerable Leiva really focus her fire on our starships over our mechs?" Orfan skeptically asked. "I mean, our ships don't have any direct combat value. It's a much better idea to take down our mechs first before sweeping our defenseless vessels."

Tusa sighed. "You never know. Maybe she'll focus on our expert mechs or our bunker mechs. Regardless, whoever she targets will definitely be doomed, so we can't allow her to bombard us with impunity. We need to target her and pressure her right from the start."

This was why they all looked at Venerable Stark. Her Amaranto was the only expert mech that could match the range and possibly even exceed the range of the Gauss Baron.

Both the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan used to field rifleman expert mechs as well, but the Star Dancer and the Leskin had both been wrecked during the Battle of Reckoning.

Surprisingly, Venerable Stark did not announce her choice. Instead, she turned to Tusa. "Can you take out the Gauss Baron?"

The light skirmisher specialised was taken aback. "Uhm, I'm not sure. I have to get close to it before I can do anything to this expert mech, but there are bound to be a lot of obstacles in the way. It could be other expert mechs, thousands of regular mechs or an extremely well-defended bunker. I also have to evade all of Venerable Leiva's attempts to intercept my expert mech."

"Isn't this what the Dark Zephyr is good at?" Orfan said. "Your expert mech is faster and more difficult to hit than anything else on our side."

"Don't you think I know that? I just think that there is no way I can avoid getting hit by the Gauss Baron. It has so many guns that it can saturate an entire area of space with projectiles."

"So what? The rate of hits won't be high. Also, your mech is clad with Unending alloy, so it should easily be able to withstand a lot of hits."

"Maybe the exterior will remain intact, but the internals will definitely get shaken to pieces if my expert mech absorbs too many impacts! There's a real chance I might not make it all the way through!"

Venerable Stark did not stare away. She repeated her question.

"Can you eliminate the Gauss Baron?"

"I..." Venerable Tusa paused before he let out a sigh. "I will do my best. I won't promise I can neutralize Venerable Leiva, but if my posture is threatening enough, she will have no choice but to target me in order to keep my Dark Zephyr at bay. That should at least relieve the rest of our forces from getting targeted by this destructive force."

The guest pilot slowly nodded in satisfaction. "If you can do that, then I will eliminate the Paravad."

"Are you sure?"

Venerable Stark did not change her mind. "My Amaranto is able to fire extremely powerful shots, but I don't think I can penetrate the defenses of the Gauss Baron, at least from a distance. If it is sitting inside a bunker, then the starship it is on can simply roll over and prevent me from delivering the coup de grace. The Paravad is a much more convenient target for me. As an avian marauder mech, it will most certainly circle around the battlefield and seek to attack us at a favorable angle. This means that it will most certainly be in the open."

"You'll have to hit the Paravad in order to take it out." Tusa pointed out.

"I can land hits on your Dark Zephyr." Venerable Stark stated a fact. "I don't see why I can't do the same to a heavier and slower mech. My chances of striking it are a lot higher, though it likely has its own evasive abilities. If that is the case, then it will take considerably more time for me to eliminate this bird mech."

"I can handle the Paravad instead." Venerable Dise offered. "My First Sword should just be fast enough to keep up with this avian expert mech."

Stark shook her head. "No. That won't work. The Paravad is not as good in dueling as a dedicated swordsman mech. Venerable Merek will try to circumvent you and he will succeed because his expert mech is designed to be mobile while yours is not. It has to be me. If I ever think my chances of taking it out are too low, I will tell General Verle, but for now I believe I have the greatest chance of taking out this flanking threat quickly. It's not as well-protected as the other dwarven expert mechs, so I only need to land a handful of hits in order to eliminate this enemy hero."

This was a considerable gamble. The Amaranto's full-powered shots were highly potent, but all of that could easily be wasted if it missed or encountered too many obstacles. Venerable Stark and her expert mechs weren't able to fire too many full-powered shots at a time, so if she missed the mark too many times, then she wouldn't have the firepower to defeat the Paravad anymore!

Once Stark confirmed her decision, only Venerable Dise was left.

The Swordmaiden expert pilot eventually decided to fulfill a similar role to that of Venerable Orfan and set her sights on other dwarven expert mechs. The only difference was that she would be fighting alongside other Swordmaiden mech pilots.

After all, their battle network was one of the trump cards of the Larkinson Clan. In the right moment, their collective attack could instantly turn the tide!

Chapter 3232: Sacrifices

Time passed by. As the Larkinson Clan slowly planned and prepared, many Larkinsons were being put to use. Although there was a clear separation between soldiers and civilians in the clan, at the end of the day this line was not that clear.

After all, a losing battle would not just spell the end of all of the mech pilots fighting in the front, but also the civilians in the rear!

This was one of the downsides of basing the clan around a fleet. It was not easy to keep a healthy distance between active servicemen and defenseless civilians. The ships that functioned as combat vessels also served as home for the families of the spacers stationed there. Even if the families were being segregated into dedicated civilian ships, those vessels also needed protection or else it was too easy for malicious parties to raid them or blast them apart.

Since the lives and freedom of the civilians were also at stake, they tried their best to contribute to the defense of the Larkinson fleet in any way they could.

The children, the elderly and anyone else who wasn't able to provide any assistance had to be moved out of the way.

The question was where to put them. Should they be placed onto fragile civilian ships, resilient combat carriers or aboard one of the capital ships?

After General Verle, Chief Minister Magdalena Larkinson, Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon and Commodore Abigail Evern held a strategic session, they made a number of difficult decisions.

Considering the strength of the enemy fleet, it was highly unlikely for the Larkinson Clan to retain all of its ships. It was unreasonable to protect hundreds of sub-capital ships and numerous vulnerable non-combat capital ships.

The Larkinson Clan therefore had to set its priorities and decide which ships they should truly try to preserve and which vessels they could do without.

"The purpose of owning a large number of sub-capital ships is to strengthen ourselves so that we can reach the beyonder gate safely." Verle reminded everyone. "However, we never intended to keep them all as it is too prohibitive to buy gate passage for them all. Since we intend to discard them at some point in the future, it shouldn't be too big of a deal to lose them earlier than planned."

"Are you saying that we should use our fleet of sub-capital ships as disposable consumables?" Commodore Evern raised her eyebrow.

The general grinned. "That is exactly what I am suggesting. Instead of selling them off for money, we can instead use them as improvised walls that can shield our more crucial starships from getting crippled or destroyed by the inevitable bombardment from the Slug Rangers. If we can use our expendable hulls as defensive strongholds for our own mechs, then we can buy time and slow down the rate of losses of our mechs. At the end of the day, victory rests on our mechs, not our ships, so let us put the latter to

better use rather than indiscriminately trying to preserve them all and risk losing something irreplaceable."

"It is also easier to protect our civilians if we don't spread them around so much." Minister Magdalena added.

The crown jewels of the Larkinson Clan had to be preserved at all cost. The leaders soon decided to allocate the civilians equally aboard each of the capital ships. In fact, they went a step further and ordered all non-essential servicemen aboard all of the sub-capital ships to transfer to the capital ships as soon as it became clear that battle was inevitable.

Although the capital ships weren't ready to host so many extra passengers in comfort, aside from the Blinding Banshee they were all large enough to fit a lot more bodies as long as the transferred people could cope with temporary accommodations for a week.

According to the new plan, only the bare minimum of skeleton crews of brave spacers would be left in charge of the emptied sub-capital ships. Their sense of duty, honor and belonging to the clan all made them willing to perform the noble task of controlling the combat carriers and logistical ships while they would soon be pounded into pieces by enemy artillery.

If they were lucky, they might be able to evacuate their crumbling vessels via escape pods in time. If not, they would most certainly go down with their ships.

The Larkinson Clan employed a similar tactic during the Battle against the Abyss. General Verle still remembered how they transformed the second-class combat carriers of the Penitent Sisters into giant improvised torpedoes. It was one of the only ways they could think of to destroy the pirate warship known as the Gravada Knarlax.

Of course, this time such a ramming strategy was not as viable. They weren't facing single powerful warships but a large fleet of carriers as well as tens of thousands of mechs. Simple ramming tactics would never fundamentally threaten such a large force.

This time, the Larkinson Clan was firmly on the defensive, so it was best to employ the disposable sub-capital ships as barriers to shield the capital ships from damage.

The better-armored capital ships such as the Graveyard and the Spirit of Bentheim could easily take care of themselves for a time. The crew of the former even planned to mount additional pieces of hardy metal onto her already-bloated hull.

The fleet possessed an abundant amount of raw materials that couldn't be converted into mechs or other useful supplies in the short term. Rather than letting them go to waste, the Larkinsons already came up with the idea of affixing them to the hulls of the more vulnerable sub-capital ships so that they could at least function as sturdier walls!

As all of these plans were being readied, elsewhere on the fleet Ves was holding an important discussion with the other Journeymen.

"Everyone is in it together, so let's make sure we put our assistants to good use." Ves began.

"What do you have in mind, Ves?" His wife asked.

"We can keep the Erudites here and function as analysts. Let them stare at all of the mechs deployed by the dwarves and point out any weak points and vulnerabilities that our mech pilots can exploit. As for the Braves, I suggest sending them down to the mech hangars of every carrier vessel. They're far superior compared to mech technicians when it comes to readying individual mechs for battle and efficiently repairing damaged machines."

"If you do that, there are bound to be casualties among the latter group of mech designers." Juliet observed.

"That's their bad luck." Ves crossed his arms. "I once fought in the 'trenches' myself and I gained a large amount of experience and insights that have shaped and benefited my design philosophy. Anyone who carries the title of Brave has already been told what I expect from them. I did not hire them for their intellect. I hired them for their resilience."

Although he was engaging in the same scheme as the Brighter politicians who believed in the Societal Vitality Theory, he firmly believed that the Larkinson Clan's mech designers needed to live through the hardships endured by the soldiers they served in order to design more effective products in the future!

Mech design was not just about designing the highest performing mechs. It was also about designing the most suitable mechs, and that was not possible if the designers became too arrogant and locked themselves up in their ivory towers all the time.

It was a tendency that Ves was very familiar with whenever he collaborated with Gloriana.

Ketis enthusiastically agreed with his decision. "The best people who can serve soldiers are soldiers themselves. These Braves of ours have grown too soft in the past year. They've done a great job in studying more knowledge and gaining more skills, but they still don't have a good idea of how their work affects their users. Seeing the consequences of their own decisions up close will make them a lot more serious about their future designs."

The matter was soon set. Even if a batch of Braves perished in battle, it wasn't a big deal. Ves could easily hire another batch of assistants. His reputation, prestige and accomplishments in the mech industry was already impressive enough to attract a large number of Apprentice Mech Designers from any state.

As for the Journeymen themselves, they decided to stay in the design lab and work with the Erudites to analyze the enemy mechs. No machine was without vulnerabilities. The more they were able to figure out, the easier it was for their mech pilots to take down their foes.

"I think most of our attention should be focused on the enemy expert mechs." Ves spoke. "Defeating them is crucial to winning the battle. At the very least, we need to pressure them enough so that they can't run roughshod over our forces."

"That's going to be difficult. Expert mechs are much more advanced than regular mechs."

"Even a tiny advantage is enough to make a difference. We have several offensive options that can become a lot more effective if they know where to hit to achieve maximum effect."

Since it would take a few hours before the hostile dwarven fleet arrived, the Journeymen intended to spend their time on other useful activities.

For example, Juliet and Ketis went back to their respective mech legions in order to finetune their mechs and advise them on how to approach the battle.

Gloriana decided to tweak and tune the expert mechs so that they could enter battle in their best possible state.

As for Ves? As much as he wanted to join his wife, he did not follow her right away.

"What are you up to this time?" She asked in a suspicious tone.

"I'm thinking about how we can even the odds a little further." He said. "While I'm glad that our clansmen are doing everything in their power to prepare us for battle, I don't think it's enough."

Gloriana looked concerned. "You've been able to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat several times before. What makes this different?"

"The number disparity is too great." He told her. "Even with our various trump cards, I don't think it's enough. Not only are we short on thousands of regular mechs, but we will also have to contain more expert mechs than we can match. I think our forces can reluctantly deal with one of these problems, but it is too much to handle both of them at the same time. We just don't have enough combat assets to spare."

"So you're thinking about a way to increase that?"

Ves nodded. "Either that or improve the strength of our existing assets so that they have a better chance of overcoming the disparity in numbers."

"If that's the case, why haven't you made use of these options before?"

"They're... somewhat costly or controversial. I've been reluctant to resort to them for various reasons. The only reason why I'm thinking about these options is because our situation is too dire for me to stick to this conservative stance. The dwarves are driving me to desperation!"

He felt very distressed about this situation. He really didn't want to resort to his more costly or dangerous bag of tricks but the damned Ferrils weren't leaving him with much choice!

It would be the height of foolishness to conserve his strength in this life-and-death battle!

At this time, he couldn't care about the price he had to pay or the risks he had to incur. As long as he was able to improve the odds of victory, it was worth it for him to take action!

As for the negative consequences that he and his clan were bound to suffer afterwards? That was no big deal. As long as he and his clan managed to survive, it was worth the sacrifice!

The two shared an intimate kiss before they separated... While Gloriana went down to the hangar bay, Ves moved to his personal workshop.

Chapter 3233: Painful Options

"Well, here we are again." Ves sighed as he sat in front of his main workstation in his personal workshop. "It seems that every time I'm being confronted by a powerful enemy, I have to pull out another rabbit out of my hat."

"Meow."

Lucky floated around Ves before settling on the table. The cat was already familiar with this routine and wondered what he would be able to witness this time.

The scariest aspect about an imaginative mech designer like Ves was that he developed a lot of ideas.

A handful of them were good.

A lot of them were awful.

A fair number of them promised significant benefits but not without complications!

Ves shelved a lot of ideas that fell into the last category. Although he liked to take a risk every now and then, he did not generally feel the need to resort to them when he was already doing fine by maintaining a stable trajectory.

Unfortunately, the good times were over. After a year of stable growth, the Larkinson Clan finally bumped into an enemy that was too powerful to overcome by letting Venerable Tusa out of his cage.

"It's not just the numbers that daunt me." He whispered.

If the 30,000 mechs dispatched by the Vulcanites fought like a mob, then Ves would still have ample confidence in his forces. However, the Ferril Provincial Army was a professional mech military that did not feature any obvious shortcomings such as lack of funding, corrupt and complacent leaders or low morale.

The incoming enemies were all trained and driven soldiers who knew how to fight like a proper army. Even if their martial traditions were not old and even if they lacked recent battle experience, they were still capable of employing proper strategies and tactics that attempted to achieve greater synergy out of the three mech divisions.

The strength of a coordinated mech army was two to ten times stronger than a swarm of unorganized mechs piloted by undisciplined scum!

Fortunately, the Larkinson Army was also close to military-grade. The mech legions were only deficient in a couple of aspects such as accumulation and martial tradition, but they had already proven that they could hold their own against the likes of the Fridaymen.

"This isn't enough, though."

Ves did not like the current odds as he saw it. Even if the Larkinson Clan and its allies were able to achieve victory, it would most definitely be paid with the blood of a lot of people and the loss of many crucial starships!

A pyrrhic victory at this stage was barely better than an outright loss. If his clan lost most of its capital ships and a huge amount of mech pilots and other critical personnel, then he and his clan would no longer be in a position to enter the Red Ocean.

"I won't accept this outcome."

This was why he started to pull out old ideas from the back of his mind and contemplate whether it was feasible to implement them. Almost no option was too taboo for him anymore!

"Should I build a giant warship-grade luminar cannon and mount it on the prow of my factory ship?"

Ves ruled out this idea straight away. Even if he won the battle, he would land himself in hot water with the Big Two. Whatever happened to him and his clan in this case would be no worse than losing the battle.

If he wasn't able to get ahead in some way, it was not worth it to employ the idea in question.

"Besides, a cannon of that size and caliber takes too long to build."

There were many impractical ideas like that. After contemplating several more suggestions, he came up with a simple one that was a lot more practical but was associated with a considerable opportunity cost.

Ves reached into his uniform pocket and retrieved a pouch. He opened it up and withdrew a handful of gems.

[Bastet's Favor]

The blessing of a feline patron is stored in this gem. Enhances the cutting power of a mech by 20 percent.

[Bastet's Regard]

The blessing of a feline patron is stored in this gem. Improves the agility of a mech by 20 percent.

[Bastet's Affection]

The blessing of a feline patron is stored in this gem. Increases the firepower of a ranged mech by 20 percent.

The three gems were the latest batch that Lucky had managed to produce. Unlike many of his other gems, these ones provided straightforward boosts without any complications. The only weirdness was that they appeared to have ties with the same patron, but that was not important at the moment.

Ves currently contemplated whether he should use them on his existing expert mechs.

"If I do so, I won't gain any substantial benefits with regards to my progression."

Their greatest value to him was the possibility to upgrade a mech that was already high in quality into a masterwork mech. This was an immensely profitable procedure that had already provided considerable boosts to his ability to design mechs.

In essence, the more he utilized his gems in this fashion, the faster he was able to realize his design philosophy! It also brought him closer to fulfilling his ultimate ambition to become a Star Designer.

Ever since he learned about Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship and its relevance to his profession, he realized that making masterwork mechs was even more critical to his future accomplishments.

The headstart he managed to accrue with the help of Lucky's gems already put him at a significant advantage.

It gave Ves a whole new appreciation of his first pet. At the same time, he also suspected that there was an even greater meaning to having him by his side. Whether his mother, the System or some other unfathomable existence arranged Lucky to assist his mech design journey, it was clear that the remarkable gems were crucial to increasing his affinity for mechs and thereby allow him to catch up to the best and most talented mech designers.

To use them up at this junction and give up the opportunity to make three future masterwork mechs was a painful thought.

Yet when he thought about the opposition that his expert mechs had to confront, he also felt a lot of pressure.

What if the First Sword succumbed against the Gatecrasher because its sword wasn't sharp enough to cut through the latter's defenses?

What if the Amaranto was torn to pieces by the Paravad because its firepower was not strong enough to destroy the avian expert mech on its approach?

What if the Dark Zephyr fell under the massed bombardment of the Gauss Baron and other Slug Ranger mechs due to its inability to evade enough attacks?

Even if the gems only boosted a single property by 20 percent, as long as they were applied to the strongest and most crucial attributes of his expert mechs, they would definitely perform a lot better!

"It could even mean the difference between victory or death!"

As Ves stared at the gems he took out, he struggled with this decision. Lucky on the other hand stared at his own waste products and yawned.

"Meow."

"I suppose you're right..."

Gems were precious, but he still retained a channel where he could obtain more. They weren't like Unending alloy which Ves was pretty sure he would never be able to get his hands on outside the Nyxian Gap.

Though he would definitely miss some precious opportunities months or years from now, at least he still had a future to begin with. From a logical standpoint, it did not make sense to hang on to them when he risked losing everything.

He made his decision. He felt like he was trading the opportunity to earn 100 million MTA merits in the long term in order to obtain just 10 MTA merits in the short term. The loss was too much, but Ves had no other choice because obtaining 10 MTA merits right away might end up saving his life in the coming few days!

After making this difficult decision, he began to contemplate other possibilities. He soon thought about one of his most dramatic trump cards, his battle networks.

"Can I expand my battle networks?"

He quickly went over his options. The Avatars of Myth, the Living Sentinels and the Flagrant Vandals were too messy and diverse to form a battle formation. That had not changed from before.

However, different from last time, the Larkinson Clan welcomed one more mech legion into the fold.

"The Eye of Ylvaine all share the same beliefs."

As much as he loathed it, he had to admit that religion was a great way to homogenize a large group of people from different backgrounds. Their strong beliefs in the same god or tenets caused them to form a connection with each other that was strong enough to allow them to form a working battle network!

"I'll add this to the list."

He didn't expect much from this solution, though. Ylvaine wasn't doing so well as a design spirit these days.

Being cut off from a lot of spiritual feedback now that the Ylvaine Protectorate stopped making use of Holy Soldiers and Deliverers caused Ylvaine to go on a starvation diet. Though the situation had improved a bit from before due to the slow expansion of the Ylvainan Faith in the Larkinson Clan, the design spirit didn't have a lot of energy to spare.

"Still, anything is better than nothing. The Eye of Ylvaine only needs to make their precious opportunity count."

The only complication was that the Ylvainan mechs largely consisted of artillery mechs that were locked in bunkers. They weren't able to move around, so how could they place themselves in specific formations that allowed them to channel the power of their design spirit?

Ves scratched his head. "Maybe they'll be able to work something out. There's not much of a cost to granting the Eye of Ylvaine a battle network so I won't lose anything if it fails."

As he was thinking about this potential issue, he suddenly gained an inspiring thought.

"What if I combine the use of battle networks with powerful totems?"

He thought about the Four Aspects of Lufa and the statue of the Superior Mother. Each of them were remarkable and spiritually powerful in their own right. If he used them as a catalyst or booster to a spiritual process like his battle networks, then he might be able to achieve an even stronger effect!

This was a crazy yet brilliant idea!

Even though he had no idea whether it would work or whether it was safe to mess with spirituality in this way, at this moment Ves did not consider all of the ways that this could lead to catastrophic results.

As long as there was a chance to achieve a powerful result, it was worth the gamble!

Now that he came up with this idea, he soon matched his battle networks with suitable anchors.

"The Swordmaidens have the First Sword and the Decapitator. The Penitent Sisters have the statue of the Superior Mother. The Battle Criers have the Four Aspects of Lufa. As for the Eye of Ylvaine..."

They didn't really have a suitable totem now that he thought about it. The closest object that could fulfill this job was the Zeal, one of the six Transcendent Messenger mechs that Ves had designed a long time ago. Even though the third-class hero mech was long relegated to a museum piece, it was still a revered mech among the Ylvainans.

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Should I repurpose the Zeal or create a more suitable totem?"

He was leaning towards the latter. As much as he saw the appeal of reinventing the Zeal, it was not built for the job that he envisioned. It was too fragile and probably had to be piloted in order to achieve its maximum effect.

In contrast to choosing this messy solution, he much preferred to start with a clean slate and create a purpose-built totem.

"I've become quite good at making totems, and I think Ylvaine will be able to channel his powers much better if I develop a specialized vehicle that is designed to work with his battle network."

It was similar to designing an expert mech for a mech pilot. The difference was that his client was a design spirit and the vessel came in the form of a totem.

The only problem that caused Ves to pause was the implications of doing this. If he went through with creating a totem dedicated to the Great Prophet, the Eye of Ylvaine and the Ylvainan Faith would definitely be energized!

Ves could already foresee that the Ylvainans would be able to convert more Larkinsons in the future. This was an unfavorable development that increased the proportion of believers and reduced the number of secularists in the clan!

His expression became pained again. "Damn it. Our clan really needs Ylvaine's power... I can't pass this opportunity up just because I don't like what happens afterwards."

Chapter 3234: Wild Ideas

The ideas he came up with all sounded promising. Ves could already imagine the balance of odds shifting in his favor.

comment

Whether it was integrating his expert mechs with Lucky's gems, granting a battle network to the Eye of Ylvaine and making a new totem in Ylvaine's honor, each of them promised to convert unused potential into greater strength.

comment

At least that was what he hoped would happen.

"It's not enough, don't you think so, Lucky?"

"Meow." Lucky nodded.

"I feel as if I can still do something to tip the scales further."

Although it was tempting to feel satisfied at this point, he couldn't afford to underestimate the Vulcanites. They might be lacking in many aspects but the intelligence he read on the Ferril Provincial Army made it clear that his upcoming enemies were definitely hiding their own cards!

comment

It was dangerous to assume that the capabilities described in the intelligence reports conformed to reality. What if the dwarven mech force retained another high-tier expert pilot? What if the Ferrils reinforced their attack fleet with a couple of extra mech regiments that they had lying on hand?

Any of these surprises could completely upend his calculus and doom his clan just because he became complacent too soon!

His thoughts rotated faster as he renewed his effort to improve the outcoming of the upcoming battle.

He had so many potentially good ideas in mind. From producing more luminar crystal weapons for his ranged mechs to convincing the Empire of the Lost to send a rescue force to bail him out, each of them would definitely improve his circumstances.

Unfortunately, all of these solutions required too much time!

"If only Calabast discovered the conspiracy targeted against us sooner." He sighed.

He was grateful that the Black Cats managed to uncover the Ferril Province's plot ahead of time. Calabast had probably saved a lot of lives by acting on her suspicions towards the Ferril patrol captain.

It could have been better, though. The Larkinson Clan would have never been so close to meeting its end if Calabast managed to inform him of the threat a week earlier!

"Maybe I'm asking too much from the Black Cats."

If his clan was stronger and fielded more mechs, Ves wouldn't have ended up in this desperate position in the first place. He could have just relied on superior quantity and quality to steamroll his opposition.

"I really need to get my hands on a fleet carrier or two after this is over." He grumbled.

He briefly thought about trying to hijack the dwarven carriers. The idea sounded great at first, but then Ves remembered that the Vulcanites employed an extremely effective 'anti-theft' measure that quickly ended this particular ambition.

"Those damn dwarves build their ships with ceilings that are far too low!"

Almost every compartment and passageway that didn't have to fit anything big was deliberately designed to make it harder for humans to navigate them. The Vulcanites were so eager with this that they baked this measure into all of their starships in a way

that made it impossible for tall folk to capture them and crew them in an effective manner!

The only way to convert a dwarven carrier into a more normal vessel was to rip out all of the interior and rebuild the insides from the ground up! For capital ships, that could take years!

This devious dwarven measure also ruled out the possibility of boarding or infiltrating the enemy vessels. The Larkinson Clan's boarding parties and infiltration teams simply couldn't go anywhere without scraping and bumping their helmets against the ceiling!

Just as he was about to give up on this train of thought, his eyes suddenly strayed towards Lucky.

The lazy gem cat was already starting to get bored. His eyes dimmed as he yawned another time.

However, when Lucky sensed that Ves was looking at him with a speculative look, the cat quickly became alert.

Nothing good ever happened when Ves adopted this gaze!

"Meow...?"

"You're shorter than a dwarf, right? In fact, lower ceilings don't bother you at all since you can just phase through solid matter."

"Meow..."

"It's time to make another contribution, Lucky."

"Meow!"

"Don't complain! Would you rather lose your ride and all of your privileges that you currently enjoy in our clan? If not, then get ready to suit up in your Misfortune Harness, because you're going on another infiltration mission!"

That riled Lucky up! The cat jumped into the air as if his feet had just been scalded with hot water!

"Meow meow meow!"

"I'm not taking no for an answer! You'll either do this or you can float in the emptiness of space forever!"

"Meeeeeeooooow!"

After dealing with this little matter, Ves gained a bit more confidence, but only by a small amount. Though allowing Lucky to get loose on the enemy's flagship would undoubtedly cause the dwarven mech force to fall into disarray, it would not directly affect the dwarven mechs that have already deployed in space.

Ves needed to find at least one more way to harm or debilitate them in some way.

Soon enough, a particularly radical idea came to mind.

"Could I use their beliefs against them?" He wondered.

He fell silent for a moment. This was not a light matter.

The dwarves were his children in a sense. Though nobody except him knew the truth, he was still the origin of their beliefs and the founder of their faith.

During his last Mastery experience, he invented a fake persona and adopted the guise of Vulcan, the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship to rally the stupid dwarven rebels and make sure they fought hard enough against their human oppressors.

"If it worked once, it can work again."

No one should be better at impersonating Vulcan than himself. He was confident enough in his persuasion abilities to sow doubt in the fanatic dwarven mech pilots!

It would be great if he could not only convince the hostile Ferrils that he was Vulcan or a representative of their god, but also persuade them to give up on their attempt to destroy the human visitors.

Ves wasn't confident he would be able to accomplish the latter. "The Ferrils have embraced the Dwarven God Cult, so they probably won't recognize me as their god."

Fanatics were so committed to their beliefs that they were remarkably good at rejecting any evidence that contradicted their assumptions.

Still, from what Ves learned of the Ferril Province's population as well as the composition of the Molten Hammers, Slug Rangers and Hivar Roarers, not every Vulcanite was a Dwarven God cultist.

The original Vulcan Faith had been entrenched in the empire for decades and should still have a lot of adherents. Perhaps their influence had waned and there might not be a lot of them in the mech divisions hand-picked to launch this attack, but as long as he was able to sway the minds of just 1 percent of the enemy troops, it could easily disrupt the enemy mech force's cohesion!

"The lower their coordination, the easier it is to break the dwarven units apart and defeat them in detail!"

Ves thought about ways he could make his performance more convincing. The best solution was to turn Vulcan from a falsehood into a real design spirit, but he soon rejected this option.

"I don't have the ingredients to create a version of Vulcan that's convincing enough."

It also conflicted with an ambitious plan that he had cooked up as of late.

"I don't need a design spirit. I can just make another totem and instill it with the right impression."

He believed that these steps should be able to make a difference in battle. After all, the dwarves had worshipped Vulcan so long that the prospect of finally meeting their own god should definitely cause disruptions!

This plan fell in line with the Larkinson Clan's psychological warfare doctrine. No matter how dirty it was to play with other people's beliefs, Ves was willing to set aside his disgust for religion in order to take advantage of other people's superstitions!

"As long as it delivers the results I want, I have no problem with pretending to be a god!"

After coming up with this latest ploy, Ves finally felt confident enough that he had done what he could to even the odds. Perhaps he might come up with more viable solutions, but for now he had a good starting point that effectively made use of his advantages.

He immediately began to put his plan in motion. He first created a pair of totems in his workshop with the materials he had on hand.

He spent the most time on creating a large-scale totem that was dedicated to Ylvaine. Ves couldn't afford to stop and think about what he should create so he just went with the first thought that came into mind.

"It will take too long for me to make anything complex, so I should stick to a simple shape. What about a rod?"

Originally, he wanted to make a giant cannon or gun in order to serve as a catalyst for a battle network, but Ves wouldn't be able to design and build anything up to standard in just a couple of hours of time.

A rod was much simpler and easier to make, though he still invested a lot of time to make the giant object as simple and flawless as possible. It had to look good enough to make the Ylvainans believe that it was connected to the Great Prophet.

While he made the rod, he instilled it with as much life as he could. He focused his efforts on two aspects.

First, it had to exude the same glow as Ylvaine in the purest possible form.

Second, it had to work well with the battle network he planned to make.

Since he had yet to create the latter, it was a lot more convenient for Ves to preconfigure the rod for its future purpose. He employed his accumulated spiritual engineering to create a spiritual construct that should provide specific functionality.

Ves even made the spiritual construct alive and fed it with a precious portion of universal life energy to power up the entire artifact.

He winced as he used up this portion. He didn't want to squander his precious high-grade serum in this manner, but this seemed like a bad time to be stingy, so he used up 10 percent of the energy contained in a full vial to accelerate the spiritual development of his totem.

This made a huge difference! The totem's glow and spiritual foundation started off weak but quickly became a lot stronger and more solid after receiving a potent injection!

"This will have to do." Ves reluctantly nodded. "I'll just call you the Rod of Ylvaine."

He was too much in a rush to think up a better name. Besides, he didn't think the Ylvainans would care. If they were stupid enough to worship a discarded nutrient pack wrapper of the Great Prophet, then they should have no problem worshipping a giant metal rod!

Ves quickly moved on to complete his other tasks. From creating a totem that was based on what he remembered of his persona of Vulcan to gathering the Eye of Ylvaine together in order to create a brand-new battle network, he worked quickly to get everything done in time.

Even as the Ylvainans were singing praises to the Bright Martyr for granting them his 'blessing', Ves quickly turned away and headed over to the hangar bay in order to insert Lucky's gems into his expert mechs.

"Well, the choices are obvious."

The Bastet gems seemed tailor-made for specific expert mechs. The First Sword received Bastet's Favor, the Dark Zephyr integrated Bastet's Regard and the Amaranto absorbed Bastet's Affection.

He tried to be as subtle as possible and inserted the gems to the expert mechs inside their cockpits. Hopefully, Gloriana wouldn't find out that he had just used up three potential opportunities to make masterwork mechs too soon.

"She'll definitely find out when the expert mechs finally show off their performance." Ves predicted.

Gloriana knew her work so well that she should immediately be able to detect the discrepancies!

The only Larkinson expert mech that didn't receive a gem was the Riot. Ves felt kind of sad for this expert mech. It was not just a machine but also a living mech. He contemplated whether he should take out another gem and give it a little power-up as well.

He pulled out one more gem from his pouch.

[Unstable Chaos Essence]

A terrible essence of chaos is locked within this gem. The essence is stolen from a great and ancient horror that would dearly wish to regain it. Carry this gem at your own risk.

"Should I...?"

Well, he had already taken a number of reckless chances in order to improve his odds. What was the harm in making another gamble?

Chapter 3235: Three Flagships

What everyone in the Golden Skull Alliance feared came to pass.

The gravitic sensors already detected a massive spike in readings in the Fordilla Zentra System.

The odds that a random trading convoy or some massive migration fleet would choose to enter this random, lifeless star system was minimal.

Yet a fleet larger than almost anything the Larkinsons had witnessed just happened to be entering this neighborhood at roughly the same time the dwarven patrol vessel was supposed to receive additional reinforcements!

According to the rude and arrogant Ferril inspection captain, he merely called over an assisting force in order to speed up the inspection work of the hundreds of ships of the Golden Skull Alliance.

If the dwarf was speaking the truth, then the wave of reinforcements should have just consisted of a handful of frigates carrying a small army of inspectors.

The behemoth fleet that transitioned into the star system was much more than that. That became evident as numerous impressive-looking fleet carriers appeared into view.

"Fifteen fleet carriers." Someone whispered on the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim.

A shudder ran through many people's spines.

The quantity of capital ships already pressed a heavy weight on the shoulders of the human visitors. A normal host would never spontaneously dispatch a huge fleet led by fifteen whopping fleet carriers just to conduct a routine inspection!

What was even more impressive was the uniform clouds of combat carriers. Each of them roughly consisted of the same ship classes, signifying a high degree of standardization and professionalism. To see these combat carriers lining up in precise formations before slowly slowing moving forward in unison sent another shudder through everyone's spines.

"There's not a single non-combat vessel in the fleet."

These dwarves came for one single purpose, and Ves did not believe they just wanted to stretch their legs.

The three mech divisions of the Ferril Provincial Army came prepared for combat. They left behind every vulnerable vessel so that they would have less weaknesses to worry about.

Three fleet carriers stood out from the rest. Whereas the majority of fleet carriers looked like standard models that resembled barrels in space, the flagships of the mech divisions were all unique vessels that each possessed their own characteristics.

The Great Ram shared a couple of parallels with the Spirit of Bentheim. The flagship of the Molten Hammers was a broad cigar-shaped vessel that featured much thicker armor than any capital ship in the star system.

Of particular note was her bow. The shipwrights had shaped it into a giant ram head, complete with curled horns that gave the vessel a much more savage presence!

"This ship can't actually ram other ships, right? It would be a suicide attack if the Great Ram recklessly charges onto another hull!"

Ramming was never a reliable tactic unless the tech disparity was insanely high. Ves and many other technically-proficient personnel could already tell that if the Great Ram

attempted to charge a ship like the Spirit of Bentheim, she would most definitely collapse in on herself!

This was because the ramming vessel had to endure the same force as her victim. Newton's Third law of motion was no joke! No matter how much the dwarves reinforced the structure of this fleet carrier, the Great Ram didn't look sturdy enough to withstand the unimaginable forces unleashed during a collision against a solid-enough object!

Impracticalities aside, her giant ram head still looked incredibly intimidating. The Great Ram essentially encapsulated the fighting approach of the Molten Hammers.

"She's extremely heavily-armored. She boasts multiple layers of dense hull plating on every side except her stern. While her maneuverability is also extremely low, she actually boasts an oversized propulsion system, allowing her to accelerate fast enough to not slow down the rest of the fleet too much."

There were other characteristics about the Great Ram that looked unusual. For example, she boasted a thick underside that could withstand a lot of punishment. She also boasted just 60 bunkers, which was less than average than a ship of her size could accommodate.

Obviously, the Great Ram was primarily focused on defense rather than offense. It was the Ferril Provincial Army's version of the Graveyard, except the dwarven fleet carrier was much more oriented towards combat and didn't look nearly as shabby.

However, compared to this slow and plodding fleet carrier, the flagship of the Slug Rangers posed a much greater concern to the Golden Skull Alliance.

Whereas the Great Ram lacked too many bunkers to pose an immediate threat, the Lemogo Distat immediately caused a lot of alarms to ring inside the heads of the military commanders.

Her design deviated the most from a standard fleet carrier. She was narrower than the Great Ram and did not boast an exaggerated amount of armor. Her hull still looked sturdy enough to withstand a lot of bombardment and her maneuverability was probably a bit more decent.

What really stood out from Lemogo was her bunkers.

She had a lot of them. It only took a short moment for the Larkinson Clan's long-ranged sensors to count all of the reinforced bunkers.

"The Lemogo Distat carries a total of 200 bunkers. She's practically made to serve as a firing platform for artillery mechs!"

This was the closest thing to a warship that ordinary states were allowed to field. Though the Vulcanites hated the rules imposed by the Big Two, which they considered to be a cabal of tall folk, even the dwarves weren't stupid enough to cross the clearest red line set by humanity.

The Lemogo Distat actually boasted the smallest mech capacity out of all of the fleet carriers. So much of her volume was dedicated towards hosting bunkers and supporting the artillery mechs within that she did not need to fulfill any other function.

What stood out from the bunkers was that they weren't as recessed as typical bunker implementation. Instead, they stuck out from the surface of the hull like huge pimples.

These high bunkers increased the angles in which the artillery mechs inside could direct their fire. Otherwise, it would have been a lot harder for a mech positioned on the starboard side to fire at a target that was positioned forward, behind, above or below the Lemogo Distat.

Sure, the oddly-shaped bunkers made the fleet carrier look like a disease-ridden vessel, but they ensured that at least two-thirds of the Cracker mechs ensconced inside would be able to unleash their formidable firepower at any time!

The Roost was plainer than the rest. The main fleet carrier of the Hivar Roarers resembled an oval nest as she was designed to carry and support 800 mechs. Her hull plating wasn't as thick as the other two flagships but her mobility was noticeably better. Her 77 bunkers weren't anything to write home about.

The ships of the three mech divisions each stuck fairly close to each other while at the same time maintaining their own spaces. The direction of their headings was clear, though.

They were all navigating straight towards the expeditionary fleet!

While this took place, the ongoing talk between the expeditionary fleet and the dwarven patrol captain took on a different turn.

The dwarven patrol captain had kept Minister Shederin Purnesse locked in a circular argument for several hours. It was only now that he finally said something different.

"Ah, our main inspection teams have just arrived." The dwarf captain schooled his face and tried to reassure the tall folk. "Please stand by and wait for their approach. They shall be conducting their examinations soon."

"Your newly-arrived friends have come with many more combat vessels than what is necessary to conduct a routine inspection." Shederin plainly pointed out.

"Ah, according to our new laws, we must take extra precautions to protect our border. One of our rules is that we must field more ships and mechs than the parties that wish to enter our space. Please do not be concerned. This modest detachment from our great mech army will only take action should you break our rules or if the inspections have uncovered prohibited contraband.

"We are an expeditionary fleet that comes in peace." Shederin firmly stated. "We have already changed our minds about crossing deeper into the Vulcan Empire. As soon as we are ready, we will promptly depart from this star system and head straight back outside this star sector. It is unnecessary for your forces to conduct an inspection."

The dwarven captain frowned. "We cannot allow you to go. Your behavior is suspicious. Whether you wish to proceed with your journey or not, you are already in our empire's space. This means you are already subject to our rules. It is our obligation to make certain that no one violates our laws. Cease your new plans immediately and surrender to our examinations. I will not warn you twice."

"We are not subject to your empire's laws!" Shederin took on a strong tone! "We have told you over and over again that our MTA pass provides us with immunity to your local laws and customs. If any of your empire's vessels ever come within combat range of our expeditionary fleet, we have no choice but to assume you intend to attack us in clear violation of the rules of the MTA. We have the right to defend ourselves and we shall do so in the most violent way possible!"

Even though the charade was up, the dwarven captain continued to act cluelessly and did his best to stall and deceive the tall folk.

Ves shut down the channel. It was a waste of time to listen to the dwarven captain's lies any further.

Instead, he turned to General Verle's projection. "Your thoughts?"

"The dwarven punitive fleet is highly consistent in terms of numbers and other traits. It appears that the Ferril Provincial Army liked to organize its units in an orderly manner. The chances are high that we will have to fight against 15 dwarven expert mechs."

"Damn." Ves softly cursed.

This was indeed a bad scenario and one that the Larkinsons did not want to see. The Ferril Provincial Army may lack actual battle experience, but that also made it easy for its units to remain at full strength.

War was a massive drain on funding, manpower and resources. This has caused states that engaged in frequent war like the old Bright Republic to have trouble with allocating a sufficient amount of assets and other necessities to its mech regiments.

Not so for the Vulcan Empire. The Molten Hammerse, Slug Rangers and Hivar Roarers were not affected by attrition at all and arrived in their strongest posture!

"A lot of their starships are on the slow side." Ves pointed out. "Is it possible for us to just keep accelerating away and wait until all of our FTL drives have finished cycling?"

"I'm not certain that will work, sir." Verle replied as he analyzed the estimated specs of the dwarven vessels. "Their fleet carriers are indeed slow, but their combat carriers feature a respectable amount of acceleration despite the thickness of their hulls. They can still catch up with our expeditionary fleet if they are willing to overload their propulsion systems. This will allow them to bring their mechs close enough to entangle us in battle, thereby slowing us down and anchoring us to this star system long enough for their heavy fleet carriers to catch up. So in short, we can't run away unless we choose to jump away early and leave behind half of our fleet that hasn't finished cycling their FTL drives in time."

Even though accelerating away from the dwarven combat vessels wouldn't allow the expeditionary fleet to avoid battle entirely, it could still buy a few more hours for the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers.

Yet was there any point to delaying the confrontation?

"The dwarven fleet is too intimidating." General Verle judged. "The longer it looms behind our back, the more it will impact our morale. Attempting to move away is already an admission of inferiority on our part. We have already made a lot of preparations and we don't need much more time to prep our fleet for battle. I believe it is unwise to delay the inevitable. Let us meet the dwarven aggression with our heads lifted high rather than hunched down."

"Then so be it." Ves concurred. "We shall never allow the dwarves to humiliate us! We are Larkinsons! We are unbowed!"

The Golden Skull Alliance chose not to reconsider its plans after seeing what the Ferril Province had sent. Though the dwarven punitive fleet looked a bit more formidable than anyone thought, it could still be overcome in the right circumstances!

Chapter 3236: Ineffectual Response

The expeditionary fleet began to move. While it moved away from the large dwarven combat fleet that had just arrived in the Fordilla Zentra System, the vessels did not engage their propulsion systems at full strength.

The ships of the Larkinson Clan, Glory Seekers and Cross Clan made it clear that they weren't running away per se. Instead, they wanted to build up a measure of motion and make sure their dwarven pursuers didn't barrel down on them with high speed.

According to the calculations, the expeditionary fleet's maneuvers would delay the interception by half an hour to an hour, which was enough to button down the ships and affix more improvised hull plating on their surfaces.

This time, the expeditionary fleet no longer bothered to play stupid. The actions of the Golden Skull Alliance made it clear that it has already figured that the Ferril Province came with hostile intentions.

Strangely enough, it did not do anything to the dwarven patrol vessel. Aside from launching an intimidating amount of mechs in order to make sure the vessel kept her distance, the Larkinsons left her and her incredibly annoying captain alone.

"As much as we would like to blow this ship into pieces, we should refrain from being the ones who engage in hostilities first." Minister Shederin warned Ves and the other leaders. "If there is any hope of deterring the Ferrils from going through with this ill-advised attack, then we must make sure that they will have to pay a grievous price for their actions. The MTA will certainly not take kindly to any actions that blatantly disregard its authority."

"Will the MTA actually come and stop this battle if the dwarves ignore our pass?" Ves asked.

The foreign minister briefly paused. "We have already contacted the MTA. Unfortunately, the reply that we have just received isn't encouraging."

"What did the mechers say?"

"Well, they have already informed the officials of the Vulcan Empire that they will revoke all special privileges granted to the state if the Vulcanites persist in launching an attack. This also includes the Association's guarantee of protection."

That was a heavy punishment that would certainly alarm a majority of the population of the Vulcan Empire! There were plenty of sober dwarves who did not want to lose their main form of protection against invasion by neighboring human states.

Unfortunately, the Dwarven God Cult and the fanatics that had gained a lot of sway in the Ferril Province did not think so! The more radical dwarven supremacists did not appreciate the MTA at all and wanted to force a break between the Vulcan Empire and the human-dominated organization!

Since the MTA's draconian threat of punishment fell exactly in line with the intentions of the dwarven radicals, Ves and the other Larkinsons immediately figured out that it became even less likely that the Ferrils would call off their attack!

"These stupid mechers!" Ves couldn't hold in his anger any longer. "Don't they know that they're giving the radical dwarves exactly what they want? The MTA should never reward rule-breaking behavior!"

Minister Shederin's expression turned awkward. "I have tried to argue the same to the local MTA branch, but the reply I've received is that the response of the Mech Trade Association falls in line with the rules that they have set. You have to understand that the Association is a rules-based organization. It only acts according to the laws and policies that it has already set. It rarely makes exceptions and it tries its best to avoid letting personal judgement and subjective opinions affect its rulings. The current punishment they threaten to levy to the Vulcan Empire is the best the MTA can do while maintaining its impartiality."

This might be true on the surface, but Ves knew the MTA wasn't above bending or breaking its own rules. There was no way that the MTA had its hands tied. If the mechers really wanted to stop the attack, they could have dispatched a squad of first-class multipurpose mechs to this star system and stop the dwarves from challenging their authority!

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. He had a hunch that the MTA was not that eager to stop the battle from taking place.

The Larkinsons developed a lot of new and impressive expert mechs, each of which exhibited powers that were beyond the norm. The Larkinson Clan also exhibited several other strange methods that were quite impactful in battle.

What if the MTA wanted to witness the Larkinson Clan fight a serious battle? What if the mechers wanted to observe all of the amazing methods that the Larkinsons came up with? What if there was a stealthed MTA ship lurking on the side that was already waiting to record detailed footage and high-quality sensor readings?

Though these suspicions sounded ridiculous at first, Ves couldn't help but think that the MTA had deliberately decided to form a lackadaisical response in order to ensure the battle would go through!

Of course, Ves wasn't stupid enough to voice these thoughts. Who knew if the MTA was actually listening in somehow? It was not a good idea to insult and berate one of the current hegemony of human space.

Ves slowly rubbed his smooth-shaven chin in concern. "I've learned a long time ago that we can never rely on greater authorities. They're not our nannies. If we want to stay alive and remain strong, we need to be able to stand up for ourselves. This is no different. It would have been nice if the MTA chose to adapt its response to the situation, but since it thinks that a collective punishment on the Vulcan Empire is enough to make the dwarves pay the price for this misdeed, then so be it. Our clan doesn't need to rely on any big brothers to defend its sovereignty."

Any further words were superfluous at this point. Though Minister Shederin and his staff were still trying to do whatever they could to convince different factions of the Vulcan Empire to stop their radical compatriots from going through with this insanely costly attack, it didn't matter.

The Molten Hammers, the Slug Rangers and the Hivar Roarers were all self-contained mech divisions that were already committed to their mission. The authorities based in other provinces might object to the Ferril Province's unilateral decision to force a break between the MTA and the Vulcan Empire, but they were too far to do anything about this action. It would take too much time to send a fleet that was powerful enough to prevent the situation from deteriorating!

Though the Vulcan Empire kept this news from the majority of the population, plenty of leading figures within the expansive dwarven state learned about what was happening.

Many traditional leaders such as Grand Regent Habidas Aaden and High Priestess Lyvell Greybeard vehemently opposed this move. Yet much to their surprise, a significant amount of leaders, including key figures within the central Uriburn Province itself, approved of the attack on the tall folk!

The entire dwarven state thus entered into a political crisis that intensified the contradiction between the followers of the original Vulcan Faith and the members of the Dwarven God Cult!

Since the separation between church and state was never a thing in the Vulcan Empire, a change in beliefs automatically translated into a change in policy.

Ves always hated this because of one particular reason.

It granted religious nuts real decision-making power!

Plenty of Larkinsons felt the same way, but that did nothing to change their current situation. They had no choice but to accelerate their preparations.

A lot of shuttles and transports moved back and forth. At the start, they transferred a lot of personnel and valuable goods from the combat carriers to the capital ships.

At the same time, a large number of spacers in hazard suits as well as other vehicles began to fortify the starships with whatever hardy materials they had on hand. The logistical vessels were the primary beneficiaries of this treatment. They were too easy to cripple in their base configurations so toughening up their hulls would not only allow them to stall the enemy longer, but also buy more time for the skeleton crews to evacuate the damaged hulls in time.

All of the mech legions of the Larkinson Army had already made special preparations. To Ves, the Battle Criers and the Eye of Ylvaine were especially worthy of his notice.

The Battle Criers was one of the mech legions that had lost much of its value as the Larkinson Clan bloomed and gained a very effective measure of ensuring everyone's loyalty.

As former mercenaries, the Kinners under the leadership of Commander Cinnabar didn't excel at any battle role. This had caused the Battle Criers to gradually fall to the bottom of the ranking of mech legions in the Larkinson Clan.

Even the Living Sentinels was considered to be a more attractive mech legion for mech pilots to build their careers!

If this trend continued, then there might come a day when the Battle Criers could no longer justify its existence.

That was a big shame to Ves, so he had already taken it upon himself to repurpose them somewhat so that they remained relevant to the Larkinson Clan.

Pairing them up with Lufa was key to granting them their new niche. Ves hoped to prevent a retread of the Battle of Reckoning where the struggle against enemy mechs led to a disproportionate amount of losses.

"I hope my trust in you is not in vain." He whispered.

It took a special sort of courage and dedication to resist expert mechs in an upright manner. In post-battle analyses, the Larkinsons identified a lot of instances where mech pilots let their awe and fear towards enemy expert mechs get the better of them. The reaction didn't have to be strong to affect their battle performance. Even a subtle, unconscious moment of hesitation or retreat was already enough to doom their lives!

Since the Battle Criers were more loyal than any other Larkinson, Ves believed them to be the right choice to become his anti-expert mech specialists. Although this was just an experimental measure in his eyes, he held high expectations toward their performance in the coming battle.

As for the Eye of Ylvaine, this was their first battle as a formal mech legion. Not only did they gain a strong legitimate identity within the Larkinson Army, they also received two powerful boosts in the form of a battle network and the Rod of Ylvaine.

Their morale and enthusiasm had shot through the roof once Ves presented them with these gifts.

"I hope they'll be able to maintain their confidence when they start to slug it out with the Slug Rangers." Ves muttered.

As the distance between the two fleets slowly narrowed, everyone suited up for combat. Ves donned his Unending Regalia once again and sat down in the observer's seat while lifting up a new addition to his equipment.

Different from his other gear, the hammer he held in his hands exuded a glow that should only be familiar with dwarves.

This was the totem that he had created in order to enhance his upcoming charade. He wasn't sure whether it would help or not, but he appreciated the craftsmanship of his new toy.

Even though the living totem was only a relatively simple hammer made out of Unending alloy, it had the potential to become something greater.

"It's also a pretty good tool for hammering metal or bashing skulls."

Due to the density of Unending alloy, the one-handed hammer possessed quite a lot of heft. The black object boasted a flat surface on one end and an axe-like blade on the other end.

He only really needed a single flat side in order to hammer stuff. The sharp end of the totem gave him the option to cut through solid matter.

The only embellishment that Ves decided to add to the hammer was to socket an enhanced luminar crystal onto the pommel of his hammer.

It did not quite fit with the aesthetic of a rough work tool but Ves liked it nonetheless. It twinkled nicely with the light and lit up depending on how much spiritual energy he channeled into his new creation.

The only point he was struggling with was how he should name this totem?

"Should I call it the Brilliance Hammer or the Hammer of Brilliance?"

Chapter 3237: Fire and Blood

Ves couldn't decide upon the name of his new hammer, so he decided to flip an imaginary coin.

"Hammer of Brilliance it is, then."

It didn't really matter how he labeled it. He didn't intend to make much use of it. Who actually used a hammer in this day and age? A modern multitool that was able to transform into many different forms could perform hundreds if not thousands of different functions.

From hammering nails, filing surfaces, drilling holes, removing dust and so on, multitools and other technological gadgets could perform the job in a much more precise and effective way!

"It's a symbol, not a tool."

Using a hammer to do work was as primitive as using a doorknob to open a door. It was laughably primitive!

He didn't plan to fool around with his toy a lot. If not for visiting the Vulcan Empire, he would have never come up with the idea in the first place.

This was also why he decided to make a hand-sized hammer instead of another object. The Vulcanites may have improved a lot from their humble roots as mining slaves, but most of them were still rough and uncultured compared to the likes of the Purnesses.

Anything that was too deep or subtle would fly right over the heads of the dwarves. If Ves wanted to make an impact on their psyches, then he had to look recognizable to them. The traditional depiction of Vulcan, whether he came in the form of a human or a dwarf, was always paired with a hammer.

Though Ves didn't recall using any hammers back when he possessed Rion Aaden during his last Mastery experience, they were so strongly associated with both Vulcan and dwarves that it made too much sense for the god to wield one in his hands!

"I need to look as relatable as possible to the dwarves if I want to have any hope of hoodwinking at least a portion of these idiots."

As time continued to pass, General Verle's projection appeared by his side again.

"We're as ready as we can be, sir."

"How are our mech legions?" Ves calmly asked.

"Our Avatars of Myth, the Living Sentinels, the Flagrant Vandals, the Swordmaidens, the Penitent Sisters and the Eye of Ylvaine are all in their best condition. Our Heavensworder auxiliaries are also ready to do battle."

"What of our expert pilots?"

"Venerable Tusa, Venerable Stark, Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise are fully prepared to meet the enemy expert mechs in battle. Venerable Joshua has decided to attach himself to the Penitent Sisters like before while Venerable Jannzi has chosen to hold the line with the Living Sentinels."

Ves grimaced a bit. He still ached at the fact that the latter two expert pilots would remain severely underutilized. Their expert mechs were still months away from completion so there was no chance at all for them to duel against the enemy expert mechs on an equal basis.

"It will have to do." He sighed. "I see from the local plot that the Dented Coin is still in the star system. This place is not going to be safe for much longer."

"From what I've been told, the Pershams don't want to break relations with us. They also want to stay in the star system in order to witness the battle and make sure that the Dwarven God Cult doesn't distort the account of this battle. For example, the aggressors could lie about who struck the first blow and who was making aggressive maneuvers."

Ves frowned. "I don't want to broadcast this battle to the public."

"I think it's too late for that." General Verle replied. "It is not bad for us to show our capabilities. We have hidden our fangs so much that we aren't being taken seriously by many people. If we show that we can defeat or at least draw even against three military mech divisions, we will be able to gain a lot of respect. Maybe it makes more sense to hide our capabilities in the Milky Way, but we can't afford to show any weakness in the Red Ocean. If we show the pioneers beforehand that we have ways to punch above our weight, we'll probably be able to deter many rivals."

"We enjoy the MTA's protection for two years from the moment we enter the Red Ocean."

"And how has its permission to enter the Vulcan Empire worked out?" General Verle shot back. "Not everyone respects the MTA. Although it is foolish to do so, there are always people who don't conform to the rules. Besides, that only delays the threat by the same duration. We will go back to becoming vulnerable to predation after our protection period is over. The only difference is that enough time has passed for you to come up with stronger mech models and new trump cards. Don't be too attached to the solutions we currently possess. Since you think it is unlikely we will make use of them for the first two years of our expedition into the Red Ocean, it's better to make use of them now regardless of how much we expose."

This was quite a troubling decision to Ves, but if General Verle thought it was better to let the cat out of the bag, then he was inclined to trust the man.

"Very well then. The Dented Coin can stay and keep looking. The dwarves themselves will probably spread the footage to their fellow brethren in the Vulcan Empire anyway. Let them look. They will learn that Vulcan is not to be trifled with." Ves savagely grinned.

"Uhm, pardon, sir?" Verle momentarily looked confused.

"Oh, nothing. Please proceed with your duties."

As the dwarven fleet continued to close in on the Larkinson Fleet, the former didn't bother to transmit any demands to the latter.

The Ferril Provincial Army wasn't looking to win a painless battle. The only way to invigorate the Dwarven God cultists and prove to every Vulcanite that humans and dwarves were irreconcilable was to fight the cruelest battle as possible! Only fire and blood would be able to baptize the modern citizens of the Vulcan Empire just as it had transformed the original dwarven rebels on Desala X!

As the dwarven fleet with its formidable flagships continued its advance, the pressure it exerted on the Larkinson Clan steadily built up. Ves could feel the tension in the air.

Seeing that it would be detrimental if his clansmen commenced the battle while maintaining this nervous state, Ves decided to do something about it. There was no better way to invigorate his soldiers than to hold a speech!

He stood up, his Unending Regalia creaking as he did so. As he commanded the communication officer to prepare a fleet-wide broadcast, he noticed that he was still holding the Hammer of Brilliance.

"Ah, I better put this away."

He stashed the hammer behind his seat just in time for the broadcast to go live. Ves instantly schooled himself and faced his remote audience with a serious expression.

"My fellow Larkinsons and friends. Today we are confronted by yet another foe. This time, they come in the form of misguided dwarven soldiers. Although they are shorter than normal humans like us, they are not any weaker because of that. They not only come with greater numbers and military coordination, but also believe they are fighting on behalf of their supposed god."

His words did not sound as an encouragement to the Larkinsons. In fact, through the Larkinson network, he could already feel everyone's morale dropping yet again.

The truth had to be told, though. Ves did not want to deny the reality of this battle.

"Yet we have been in this position before. Our previous enemies have all met their end at our hands. We have beaten pirates, taken down warships, defeated the detachments from elite military mech regiments and even felled the dark gods! We have fought and defeated so many overwhelming threats that we are not weak in the slightest!"

This was a targeted reminder to all of the new recruits who had joined the Larkinson Clan in the last year. The odds might not look great but the clan had managed to survive against worse opponents!

"Today, we will all show these Ferrils and the rest of the Vulcan Empire what a mistake it was to attack our clan. We are giant slayers! We are god killers! We have become so good at butchering other humans that it should be no problem for us to slaughter the foolish dwarves who seek to do the same to us. No matter how many mechs our enemies deploy and no matter how hard their expert mechs can fight, they can never match our power!"

"Larkinson! Larkinson! Larkinson!"

It only took a small amount of words to dispel the heavy cloud hanging over the heads of his soldiers. Ves grinned as he began to feel more invigorated. He spread his arms!

"Trust in your fellow Larkinsons! Each and every clansman by your side will be with you to the end. No matter what is about to happen, never forget that your brothers and sisters are counting on you to do your part and fight!"

Every Larkinson had already developed a strong emotional commitment to the clan. Protecting their family was the strongest motivator for his soldiers.

They even became willing to fight to death in order to save the lives of other clansmen. It did not even matter whether they shared any blood relations. This was the power of kinship. Through the constant efforts of Ves and other supporters, identity had surpassed the importance of bloodline in the Larkinson Clan!

"Now get ready to show these dwarves the folly of attacking our clan. By the end of the day, we shall defeat them so hard that we will become the bane of their existence! Let us hunt these hostile dwarves down until not even a single one of them is able to make it out! Fight for victory and for family! For the Larkinson Clan!"

"FOR THE LARKINSON CLAN!"

"FOR YLVAINE!"

"FOR THE SUPERIOR MOTHER!"

"FOR THE GOLDEN CAT!"

"MEOW!"

It only took a short time later before the battle finally commenced!

The enemy fleet did not even bother to provoke the Larkinson Clan into attacking first. As soon as the Lemogo Distat and other dwarven vessels came close enough, their bunker mechs all opened fire!

A heavy volley of solid projections soared into space and slammed into the ships of the Golden Skull Alliance!

Tons of split and shattered metal debris flung from the ships that weren't agile and fast enough to evade the long-ranged bombardments. A lot of projectiles ended up hitting the capital ships that were in the line of fire.

Some ships came away with minor damage such as the Graveyard but other vessels incurred more serious damage to their hulls.

"Cover our capital ships!"

The formation of the expeditionary fleet abruptly changed. The sub-capital ships of the Larkinson Clan all weaved into walls that largely covered the capital ships.

Though these walls made of ships did not come close to offering total blockage, they still hindered the artillery mechs of the Slug Rangers seriously enough that over half of the projectiles in the next volley slammed into the weaker and smaller vessels instead!

Though the impacts to their hulls looked quite concerning, most of them couldn't be taken down so easily.

"What are we waiting for? Hit them back!"

Since they didn't have to worry about the crime of attacking first, the Larkinson Clan finally unleashed its own response!

A mixture of positron beams and gauss rounds exploded from the Transcendent Punishers and struck a couple of distant ships!

Unlike the Slug Rangers, the Eye of Ylvaine concentrated its firepower in order to inflict serious damage to the bunkers of the opposition.

Although this resulted in less suppression onto the enemy units, the Eye of Ylvaine nonetheless managed to overwhelm two bunkers housing Land Cracker mechs. The machines themselves also incurred enough damage to get taken out of the battle.

Although only two mechs had fallen so far, this was still an important accomplishment!

"Don't stop until we have wrecked all of their Land Cracker mechs!" Commander Taon instructed.

The artillery duel had just begin!

Chapter 3238: Alderia Smoke

The Fordilla Zentra System never saw battle in its entire history of its existence. It was just a bog-standard red dwarf star system. It only occasionally hosted lone vessels and small fleets that wanted to avoid the more frequented star systems for one reason or another.

Due to its relatively weak star, not a lot of light reached the outer system. Even if the borders of the outer system of a red dwarf was significantly smaller than that of a more powerful star, the current solar engine was not quite powerful enough to illuminate the vessels soaring in space like it was daytime.

Fortunately, there were other sources of illumination.

Bright energy beams, fiery explosions and the strong light sources affixed to the surfaces of both mechs and ships caused this desolate and empty piece of space to be lit up as if they were in a dance club on fire!

The two opposing fleets and mech forces each formed elaborate and coordinated formations that only wobbled in order to avoid making it too easy for them to get hit by distant attacks.

It was easy enough for most mechs in space to vary their flight in random patterns. Any distant artillery mech would have a hard time landing their shots even if they were armed with lightspeed or near-lightspeed energy weapons at these ranges.

This was why most of the mechs on both sides did not bother to attack the swarms of mechs that both sides had deployed.

Even though these machines had formed up into different ranks, the space between them was so wide that many shots were bound to pass right through. Space was big so mechs were accustomed to position themselves further apart from each other.

This was why the ranged mechs of both sides concentrated their firepower on the enemy vessels. Though damaging or downing any starship would not have much an immediate direct effect on the battle effectiveness on an enemy force, it would definitely affect the later stages and the aftermath of a serious clash!

If the battle turned into a prolonged siege, then combat carriers and fleet carriers all played a crucial role in sustaining a mech force. If one side or another decided to cut its losses and run, then the amount of functioning mechs remaining determined whether the losers could succeed in escaping the battlefield alive!

Though Ves apparently adopted a do or die attitude just like the rest of his Larkinsons, in truth he didn't intend to go down with his ship.

If the battle truly went sour, he had no qualms in running away!

It would definitely hurt him a lot if he lost his clan and destroyed his reputation as a brave and courageous mech pilot, but he was a mech designer by profession. Unlike soldiers who had a duty to protect the people they serve, Ves was only meant to provide support. Sacrificing his life to further for a noble cause was not a part of his job description!

He already prepared a multitude of contingency plans. It would be ideal if he could take the Spirit of Bentheim away, but if the dwarves tried their best to prevent the high-profile factory ship from getting away, Ves could always shuttle over to a smaller and less conspicuous vessel. There were so many sub-capital ships in the expeditionary fleet that the enemy wouldn't be able to tell which one carried any VIPs.

Calabast had helped out as well. By combining their expertise, they created numerous different escape routes for themselves that were very difficult to deal with if their opposition didn't know about the methods in advance.

Ves briefly smirked. Though Calabast and him were very different people, they were both of the same mind when it came to their most essential priorities.

The biggest problem was that some of these escape methods did not offer that much capacity. If the Larkinson Clan was truly about to be destroyed, he might not have enough time to bring along the people he cared about the most.

The thought of leaving behind people like Ketis, his wife and most importantly his unborn child was almost intolerable to him. He had to prevent this outcome at all costs!

The mutual bombardment had already proceeded for over a minute. The Transcendent Punishers of the Larkinson Clan and the equivalent artillery mechs of its alliance partners were all directing their firepower towards the distant carriers of the Slug Rangers.

Everyone in the Golden Skull Alliance knew that the ranged specialists of the Ferril Provincial Army had to be neutralized first!

The threat level of this destructive mech division was so great that no ship or mech would be able to survive getting focused upon.

"We've lost the Alderia Smoke!" A bridge operator called.

Ves switched his eyes to a dynamic projection that automatically showed the most relevant moments of the ongoing battle. It depicted a sub-capital fuel tanker that had been broken into half after a volley of ultra-heavy gauss rounds slammed into her hull.

The heavy firepower was too much for the lightly armored logistical vessel. Numerous projectiles fired by the incredibly formidable enemy Land Cracker mechs had bypassed the extra plating that had recently been affixed to Alderia Smoke's sides and happened to destroy her keel and a number of critical structural elements.

As a result, the fuel tanker snapped in half like a twig. The high-density fuel that was stored in her abundant tanks surprisingly didn't ignite and just froze into crystals as they drifted off into deep space.

Ves closed his eyes for a second. The fall of the Alderia Smoke was just the beginning. The Larkinsons had already anticipated that they would lose their ships one-by-one.

The problem was that the loss of this ship happened too soon! At this extreme range, the accuracy of the gauss weapons wielded by the Slug Rangers wasn't actually high. Yet they still managed to overcome numerous difficult circumstances and successfully removed one of the obstacles that shielded the Spirit of Bentheim.

"The Steel Rain mech regiment is definitely worthy of its reputation!" Ves sighed.

Not all of the ranged mechs continued to fire their weapons after unleashing some initial volleys. Although the Bright Warriors armed with positron rifles were capable of hitting starships from a long distance with fairly respectable hit rates, it was extremely hard for them to hit the exact same sections multiple times.

With the way that starships were built, if incoming attacks did not strike the same surface, then they could easily absorb a huge amount of damage across their huge surfaces without losing any operational effectiveness!

The only way to take them out of the fight was to concentrate enough firepower on a single section and breach the interior. Only by taking out key systems such as the power reactors or just wrecking a sufficient amount of internal structure was it possible to cripple or destroy a starship.

Therefore, thousands of rifleman mechs, cannoner mechs and other mechs armed with ranged solutions withheld their fire for now. Each of them only possessed a limited amount of heat and energy capacity. While it was possible to replenish them by going back to their motherships, it took a lot of time and effort to replenish them. General Verle and his dwarven counterpart from the opposite fleet choose to keep the majority of their ranged mechs on standby.

Many of these mechs were much more effective at medium and close range. At those distances, the hit rates were a lot higher and it was a lot easier for the mechs and mech pilots to consistently target the same weak points.

For now, the amount of beams and projectiles flying across the void of space was relatively restrained, but that did not mean that the ongoing bombardment was a breeze!

The Steel Rain focused all of their firepower on a number of key targets. They devoted half of their attention on the Hemmington Cross and the other half on the Spirit of Bentheim.

"Good targets."

The Hemmington Cross was the biggest fleet carrier of the expeditionary fleet. She not only held a lot of mechs, but also served as the strongest enduring symbol of the Cross Clan.

If the Slug Rangers managed to blow her up, then the Crossers would definitely incur a huge drop in morale! Not only that, but the Cross fleet would also become disarrayed as it lost one of its central pieces.

In order to prevent this disaster from happening, the Crossers employed the same approach as the Larkinsons and put their resilient combat carriers in the line of fire so that their flagship would be spared from incurring too much damage.

The Hemmington Cross desperately needed the cover. Though her mech capacity was impressive, her hull plating was not that impressive! Although she could withstand a lot more damage than civilian vessels such as the Vivacious Wal, she was not designed to be in the thick of battle!

"That white elephant is dragging down the Cross Clan in every battle." Ves slightly frowned.

The Cross Clan had spent an unreasonable amount of effort to keep the capital ship named after their ace pilot alive, and this time would probably be no different. Compared to the worth of this priceless fleet carrier, the numerous combat carriers and other sub-capital vessels simply weren't comparable!

"Frontal starboard shields holding at 91 percent!"

Numerous slugs of different calibers managed to thread through the wall of sub-capital ships and slam into the Spirit of Bentheim. Fortunately, she not only boasted a respectable amount of armor, but also carried a number of ship-grade shield generators.

These shield generators were spread across the length of the hull and provided directional projection that covered different portions of the factory ship.

By now, the large and energy-hungry production halls had long ceased churning out mechs and parts. This freed up an immense amount of power that was all being redirected towards the shield generators.

As long as the intensity of the incoming fire wasn't too high, the shield generators could maintain their energy barriers for a very long time!

Captain Daria-Maria Vraken, dressed in an impressive uniform that also incorporated vacsuit functionality, directed the operations of the ship with a steady composure.

"Rotate the hull by 45 degrees. Let the partially depleted shields recover naturally. We need to maximize the longevity of our shield generators as much as possible. Make sure to hurry up with organizing evacuated crewmembers from other ships into additional work teams and damage control parties. The dwarves have set our ship as their highest priority target so we are bound to incur significant hull breaches."

The dwarves chose wisely, though Ves wished that they could have picked another target. The Larkinson fleet encompassed numerous different capital ships. Several of them were much less resilient and could be taken down with significantly greater ease.

Yet instead of picking on more fragile capital ships like the Dragon's Den or the Andrenidae, the Slug Ranger preferred to target the much tougher Spirit of Bentheim!

"Maybe I should have designed her to be more low-key." He muttered.

The Spirit of Bentheim's attractive appearance and strategic importance provided the Larkinson Clan with a lot of benefits outside of battle. However, when the ship became embroiled in battle, it was quite a pain for the Larkinsons to protect a vessel that was not quite relevant in combat!

As the artillery mechs from both sides continued to pound against each other, the damage continued to pile up. Several more vessels began to lose propulsion and slowly fell out of formation. Several bunkers had gotten breached and the mechs inside weren't in a better condition.

Both the attackers and the defenders already started to lose hundreds of lives. Ves could feel the Larkinson Network growing restless as it lost a few precious connections. Each of them represented the death of another Larkinson.

Nyaaaaa...

"Stay strong, Goldie." Ves softly whispered. "It will only get worse from this point. The only thing we can do is to remain firm and keep encouraging our men. Confidence is key. We cannot allow the dwarves to break us first."

The approaching dwarven fleet kept becoming more and more intimidating. All of that mass and all of that firepower exerted an increasing amount of pressure towards the Golden Skull Alliance!

Chapter 3239: Artillery Duel

An artillery duel could last several minutes at the shortest but could also stretch on for several days in the more extreme cases. It all depended on how willing either side wanted to close the distance and how long their hardware and supplies could endure the consumption.

The way that bunkers and compatible heavy artillery mechs were designed played a huge role in how long a side could persist. The Transcendent Punisher model was designed with Hexer technical specifications in mind and that made it a good fit for all of the Hexer-built vessels.

However, several minutes into this destructive exchange of fire, it became clear that the Slug Rangers were even better at this kind of ranged attrition warfare!

"The bunkers of the enemy vessels are at least 23 percent more damage resistant than ours."

"The heavy artillery mechs are mounted on movable platforms that can rapidly be pulled to the rear in the event a bunker has been breached."

"The heat dispersion and ammunition supply systems of the bunkers are 14 percent more efficient than ours."

Numerous analysts with a naval engineering background began to supply relevant information to the soldiers. It became clear that the Slug Rangers accumulated a lot more knowledge and experience in ranged combat and artillery duels.

For a moment, Ves had the illusion that he was not witnessing a battle between mechs, but warships.

Carrier vessels that incorporated bunkers into their design were hardly different from true warships at first glance. The only problem was that the scale of firepower was a bit too low. While it was possible for bunker mechs to destroy large starships, their relatively limited power meant that they either had to hit the right weak points or rely on applying continuous damage to break down their targets.

This was exactly what was taking place at the moment. The distance between the two fleets wasn't closing as fast as could be, which meant that this long-ranged exchange of fire could easily last an hour or more.

This was a rather nerve-wracking amount of time that could impact people's morale in a negative way.

The reason for that was that it was extremely frustrating to be fired upon but not be able to retaliate effectively. Melee mechs and other machines optimized for close to mid-ranged combat such as Valkyrie Redeemers were currently relegated to spectators at the moment.

In order to prevent them from suffering losses without any meaningful payoff, the mechs all took cover behind armored combat carriers or larger ships that could withstand a lot of hits such as the Graveyard.

They were the equivalent of armymen taking cover behind castle walls. Distant catapults and trebuchets tried to tear down the thick walls by launching constant heavy projectiles. Though the chances of getting directly hit was low, if anyone got hit even once, they would assuredly incur a lot of hurt!

It was during times like these that willpower, training, discipline and other mental factors became important.

When Ves surveyed his own men, he became satisfied with what he saw. Both his mech pilots and the ship crews were still holding firm. While not many of them were in high spirits anymore, they were far from crumbling. That might change as the battle intensified later on, but at least Ves didn't have to worry about the onset of doubt at this early stage.

"This is still the opening act. A battle as large as this won't be concluded so soon."

The scale of the battle and the numbers involved made it unlikely that both sides would be able to achieve a decisive victory so soon. This was especially when neither side was willing to rush each other.

Though the ships of the expeditionary fleet were still moving away from the dwarven fleet, they had already turned their orientations around so that their bow faced their pursuers. In other words, they were coasting backwards while using their positional thrusters to vary their course and prevent themselves from turning into easy targets.

If General Verle wanted to, he could order these ships to engage their main propulsion, causing them to close the distance to the chasing dwarves faster.

Yet he did not choose to do so. The reason for that was that he was reluctant to engage the Molten Hammers in battle.

Right now, the Molten Hammer mechs were just as useless as the melee mechs of the Larkinson Clan. They had all deployed in space but were all huddling behind their bulky but well-armored carriers.

Although the Molten Hammers hardly played any role in this stage of the unfolding battle, their threat level could easily exceed that of the Slug Rangers once their hardy dwarven mechs came close enough to slam in the expeditionary fleet's defensive lines!

What worried General Verle even more was that the Hivar Roarers would come into play as well. Their diverse bestial mechs could easily flank the main lines and attack the Larkinson Clan's mechs or starships from angles that were hard to defend against!

At the same time, the Slug Rangers and their Steel Rain elite mech regiment in particular would still be pounding the expeditionary fleet's assets without stopping!

"Damn, what a difficult choice."

Compared to the prospect of fighting against three dwarven mech divisions at once, General Verle wisely sought to contain the intensity of the battle and see whether they could take advantage at long range.

It didn't seem like things were going well, though. While the disparity was not alarmingly lopsided, the Steel Rain obviously weren't novices at this. The expeditionary fleet was incurring more damage than the well-armored ships of the dwarven fleet.

Ves sighed. The Eye of Ylvaine was too young and was just beginning to develop its own doctrines and unique practices. The Steel Rain was decades ahead and already possessed mature fighting and training systems.

"How many Transcendent Punishers have we lost so far?" He asked.

"Thirty-three, sir."

That did not sound like much, but the Larkinson Clan did not boast a lot of bunker and bunker mechs to begin with. In fact, it wasn't just quality that caused the Larkinsons to be put at a disadvantage, but also quantity. If not for the Glory Seekers and Cross Clan contributing their own artillery mechs, then this artillery duel would have easily become a one-sided slaughter!

Ves knew that the rate of losses would only accelerate as the distance narrowed. Most of the bunkers that succumbed had been targeted by massed firepower. When hundreds of heavy artillery mechs pounded onto the same ship, it shouldn't be surprising that the vessel and everyone on her would eventually break!

"Perhaps it is time to activate my first trump card."

The main reason why he granted the Eye of Ylvaine a battle network and a battle totem was to grant them a means to catch up to the enemy. Though Ves preferred to save this card at a later stage, he was afraid that his artillery mech legion would incur too many casualties too early, thereby directly reducing the impact of its battle network.

Suddenly, the Spirit of Bentheim shuddered a bit! His flagship apparently suffered a devastating impact!

"What happened!?"

"The Gauss Baron has opened fire!"

Just seconds earlier, eight potent high-quality projectiles empowered by resonance soared straight from the Lemogo Distat and squeezed through the wall of Larkinson ships until they slammed straight onto the bow of the Spirit of Bentheim!

"My cat head prow!"

Ves quickly switched the view of one of his projections. To his horror, the giant head that adorned the front of his factory ship had incurred a considerably ugly scar on the forehead!

The eight projections had not only cratered through many meters of solid Breyer alloy, but also transferred a devastating amount of kinetic energy that fractured and weakened the structure of the materials around the impact sites.

It was as if the powerful opening strike of the enemy's expert artillery mech had carved an ugly flower onto the most prominent symbol of the Golden Cat!

When the other Larkinsons found out what happened, they did not grow discouraged at the powerful show of force. Instead, they grew angry and indignant! Ves could feel a wave of fury building up in the Larkinson Network that infected every clansmen!

The mech pilots of the Eye of Ylvaine all grew offended at this grave insult and fought a little harder!

However, when the Gauss Baron fired a second volley, its eight guns fired weaker but still potent resonance-empowered strikes at the Spirit of Bentheim!

The Larkinsons were better prepared this time.

Three combat carriers intercepted three of the deadly projectiles, causing their armored hulls to incur so much damage that it looked as if they had been struck by a giant pick.

The remaining five projectiles all attempted to strike several different bunkers with only moderate deviations in accuracy.

On their way, three of them slammed against the shield protected by the same generator. The successive impacts were so powerful and destructive against the shield that it quickly broke!

This allowed two projectiles that arrived a bit later to move past the vanished protective barrier and hit two different bunkers without any further opposition!

It was as if the Spirit of Bentheim was struck by twin meteorites.

The two bunkers that were directly hit were taken out entirely with the Transcendent Punishers inside shattering apart from the residual forces unleashed by the successful attacks.

"What is the status of the overpowered shield generator?"

"Sir, it is still intact but damaged to the point that it is unable to project a new shield. Several of her energy-bearing parts have malfunctioned and need to be replaced in order to restore its functionality."

"How long will that take?"

"Three minutes at the fastest."

"Then hurry up! The Steel Rain are already concentrating their firepower on the unshielded section."

The Gauss Baron hadn't fired again, signifying that it could not fire shots at this power level too often.

Although the enemy artillery mechs were already trying to take advantage of the vulnerability, the Spirit of Bentheim slightly changed her orientation until the majority of enemy vessels were no longer able to fire at the damaged section.

After a dozen seconds, the Gauss Baron fired another high-powered volley. This time the Larkinson escort vessels had packed themselves even tighter and prevented the enemy expert mech from overpowering another shield generator.

Though Ves was glad that his factory ship remained unharmed this time, the huge craters and breached compartments on the unlucky sub-capital ships told him that the Gauss Baron did not waste its firepower.

"If this goes on, the Gauss Baron will definitely wreck a lot of ships!"

Nobody knew how much power it held and how many times it could fire volleys empowered by resonance. In fact, even if Venerable Leiva Hinder stopped leveraging resonance in her attacks, she would still be able to wear down the defenses of the Larkinson Clan with ease.

Ves switched to a private communication channel with General Verle. "Should we order the Eye of Ylvaine to show off their trick?"

"Hmmm..." General Verle fell into thought. "It is still too early for my liking, and I do not believe it will help with taking down this well-protected and highly-entrenched expert mech. We have a different plan in mind for that. Let the Gauss Baron waste its firepower on our starships. As long as it doesn't destroy too many of our bunker mechs, it is fine if it cripples a dozen sub-capital ships. We have plenty more to spare."

As the Gauss Baron continued to fire devastating volleys towards the ships covering for the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves understood the tradeoff that General Verle had accepted.

He was essentially sacrificing a steady amount of ships and artillery mechs just to keep a single enemy expert mech preoccupied!

What was happening at the moment was eerily similar to what happened during the Battle of Reckoning. Without a suitable expert mech, the only way to defeat or stall another expert mech was by sacrificing a lot of regular assets!

Chapter 3240: The Original Mankind

Hell was raining down on both the expeditionary fleet and dwarven attack fleet.

Though the two were slowly coming closer, at this time the artillery mechs of both sides were putting their all in this fight.

In their perception, their only opponents were their counterparts on the opposing side. The mech pilots of the artillery mechs in the expeditionary fleet gradually became familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the Steel Rain.

At the same time, the elite dwarven mech pilots of the Steel Rain also gained the measure of their opponents. Due to their specialization, they quickly found out that their opponents were inferior in every possible way.

The Steel Rain benefited from better mechs, stronger cannons, tougher armor, more thorough training and most importantly a heart for artillery combat!

"Amateurs." A Steel Rain dwarf contemptuously snickered.

The man in question was one of the Slug Rangers who had proven his skills and valor many times back when he served on a different mech regiment. His efforts to stand out from his colleagues paid off when his superiors approved of his transfer to the most prestigious brotherhood in the Slug Rangers.

Now, the prospect of unleashing holy punishment against the arrogant humans who had the temerity to treat the sovereign Vulcan Empire as their backyard had raised his combat state to a whole new peak!

"Hahahaha! Break for me, tall folk!" Furga Holbarn exulted. "I will not stop until my cannons have shattered each and every one of your mutated bodies!"

The hatred of the Vulcanites against normal humans had reached such an extreme that many of them had even begun to develop warped theories to justify their own supremacy.

According to one fringe theory that had gained popularity among the Dwarven God cultists as of late, heavy gravity variant humans weren't genetically modified people at all. They were the original and most perfect version of humans!

The reason why humanity gained the upper hand and managed to oppress and enslave the once-dominant race of dwarves was because their gods had betrayed the original race of mankind!

Dwarves were too powerful for the gods to control. Aside from the great and compassionate Vulcan that remained true to dwarvenkind, the other evil human gods had conspired against dwarves like Furga.

Ever greedy for power and control, the treacherous gods betrayed the proper order and create a new slave race made out of mutated dwarves!

By distorting the perfect dwarven form and turning them into spindly, tall shapes, the evil gods created a new race that was physically weaker, less intelligent and at least three times uglier. The humans that resulted from this unholy transformation became the best helpers, as they not only obeyed the traitor gods without a fault, but were also too weak and incompetent to ever rebel against their own creators!

Furga Holbarn momentarily felt pity for his distant human opponents. How could they not realize their own captivity? Wasn't it obvious that the gods were controlling their potential through the deceptive organizations known as the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance?

The Big Two were evil. They were ostensibly trying to protect humanity, but the reality was that they were exploiting the ignorant humans instead. From taking away the right to wield the strongest weapons and warships to preventing people from founding proper star nations, it couldn't be more clear to the dwarves that the evil human gods had done everything they could to keep their chattel in their cages!

"It is the duty of every dwarf to break this falsehood!"

The MTA and CFA were all fronts for the gods that had caused the fall of the dwarven race. If the descendants of the original race of mankind wanted to reverse this injustice, then they had to defeat the slave race and break apart the hypocritical Big Two in order to expose the evil gods that had been conspiring to limit the potential of both dwarves and humans.

What was worse was that many dwarves had been deceived as well!

Too many race traitors in the Vulcan Empire had chosen to take shelter under the MTA, preferring to rely on the very gods that had inflicted a great injustice on the dwarves to preserve their meager existences.

The first step to tear down the evil gods was to free the dwarves from the Big Two's oppression was to tear the mask of the MTA! The anointed soldiers of the Ferril Provincial Army had to show that this evil Association was not their protector but their jailor!

"Kill! Kill! Kill!"

The tall folk from the opposing fleet were assuredly the accomplices of the evil gods. The organization set up by the betrayers of Vulcan and dwarvenkind wouldn't have given these 'Larkinsons' and other rabble permission to travel freely in the Smiling Samuel Star Sector otherwise.

It was clear that these tall folk had nothing but bad intentions in mind when they sought to travel straight into the heart of the Vulcan Empire! Who knew whether these brainwashed slaves sought to gather crucial intelligence or plant some kind of secret superweapon in the dwarven empire.

The enemy had to be stopped before it could do any damage to one of the few states in the galaxy that still preserved the truth about dwarvenkind!

Furga's lips curled into a savage grin. "I couldn't have asked for a better mech!"

He was one of the few members of the Steel Rain who piloted the coveted Land Cracker heavy artillery mech.

As the biggest and most expensive variant of the Cracker line, the Land Cracker resembled a giant, overweight dwarf that had donned an extremely thick suit of armor.

Instead of possessing regular arms, it mounted two ultra-heavy gauss cannons in their stead, which technically made them frontline mechs. It didn't make much sense to grant these mechs articulating arms as they were highly specialized and could only perform a single job.

The advantage to this was that it was able to perform this job extremely well. Furga's artillery mech boasted thick, broad legs with even wider feet. This not only granted the mech excellent stability, but also provided a lot of surface area to transfer heat to the ship it was serving on. The Land Cracker had already placed its legs into two huge grooves to maximize this effect while at the same time providing excellent stability.

Its two huge arm cannons minutely moved in order to track a distant ship. A considerable shockwave exploded from the cannons and the rest of the mech as it had fired another salvo!

"Haha, take that!"

One of the ultra-heavy rounds slammed into the hull of a combat carrier. Though the latter's armor integrity took a severe hit, the ship quickly rolled around so that other dwarven artillery mechs couldn't compound the existing damage.

What Furga was actually happy about was that his other precisely-aimed shot had managed to hit the mark! The high-resolution sensor footage provided by the Lemogo Distat and other capable dwarven vessels showed that his mech's ultra-heavy round had impacted the side of a damaged bunker.

The protective cover on the human ship wasn't able to cope with the immense kinetic energy transferred by the ultra-heavy round and shattered straight away, causing the solid round to continue forwards and dump all of its residual power into the side of the enemy's artillery mech.

The only thing left of this six-legged artillery mech was millions of pieces of debris that were already floating out into space.

Just as Furga switched the aim of his powerful Land Cracker to another designated target, his bunker rumbled as the enemy finally focused their firepower on his bunker!

"Stupid humans!"

Not all bunkers were the same. The Land Crackers were the most prestigious and valuable artillery mechs in the Steel Rain mech regiment. It took a lot of training and effort for Furga to earn the right to pilot his current machine. His Land Cracker was therefore assigned to one of the most resilient bunkers on his current vessel.

Several armored panels slid across the openings, preventing Furga's Land Cracker from continuing to fire. Big, soundless impacts struck and dented the heavily-armored cover. Despite resisting dozen of attacks, the heavy cover continued to endure the damage without showing any breakage!

Furga grinned as he saw the results of this futile bombardment.

"More. More. More. Go on, humans! Keep attacking my little fort! It will all be in vain, hahaha!"

The dwarven artillery specialist was not concerned as all. He was more than willing to die for his righteous cause if it came down to it, but this was not possible. He knew that

as long as the bunker cover came close to breaking that the platform that his mech had mounted would automatically slide inwards and away from the exterior.

Though it usually took crucial seconds for the platform to be deep enough to bring a heavy artillery mech to safety, this was still enough to guarantee the survival of nearly all of them along with their precious dwarven mech pilots!

These guarantees allowed dwarves like Furga Holbarn to fight against the misguided lackeys of the evil gods without any reservations. Since the risk of dying was minimal, he would be able to ensure that he would be able to fight the deformed mutated humans another time!

His bloodthirst grew stronger as he and his brothers managed to cripple more ships and crack more bunkers. The marksmanship, firepower and numbers of their opposition was simply too inferior compared to the Steel Rain. There was no contest who would be able to come out on top of this artillery duel!

Just as the bombardment against his bunker had softened, Furga grinned and waited for the gun slots to slide open again. The two massive cannons of his Land Cracker were already done with loading new rounds and charging its capacitors. It was able to fire another salvo at any time, and Furga had even adjusted his aim with the help of the sensor data fed to his mech.

As soon as the Lemogo Distat confirmed that the enemy artillery mechs had shifted over to attacking other targets, the gun slots finally opened up again.

Yet just before Furga was about to pull the trigger, an intense feeling of crisis overtook his consciousness. Somewhere, a powerful will was targeting his mech. The dwarf mech pilot felt his own will shake for the first time in this battle as he had the illusion that he was being targeted by a slayer who was much more powerful than he could ever hope to become!

Though his mech did not sense any locks or other signs of being targeted, Furga trusted his instincts without any doubt and slammed his fist against the emergency evacuation button.

The gun slots were already closing up and additional protective sheets had rapidly slid above his Land Cracker, providing additional cover to absorb and weaken incoming attacks.

At the same time, the platform his artillery mech was slotted in was already retracting inwards. A large hatch at the end of the tunnel was already sliding open to allow the Land Cracker to take cover deeper inside the Lemogo Distat.

Yet before the platform even moved a single meter, a powerful resonance-empowered positron beam penetrated straight through the bunker cover and all of the intervening

layers and burned right through the center of the powerful Land Cracker, bypassing a strong but ultimately ineffective energy shield in the process!

Furga's mech was tough enough to withstand a moderate bombardment, yet the singularly powerful beam had not only defeated all of its defenses with ease, but also transferred so much destructive energies to the internals of the heavy artillery mech that almost half of its inside had either melted, vaporized or been annihilated!

On the other side of the battlefield, the Amaranto's brilliant luminar crystal rifle was still shining like a rainbow. Venerable Stark remained calm and smoothly adjusted the aim of her expert rifle's to another bunker that housed a Land Cracker mech.

She snorted... "Too easy."