

## Mech 3241

*Chapter 3241: General Iker Kebrinore*

The artillery duel wasn't going well for the Golden Skull Alliance. No matter whether it was the Larkinson Clan, the Glory Seekers or the Cross Clan, neither of them possessed a strong enough artillery unit that could compete against the Ferril Provincial Army's Steel Rain mech regiment.

This was the difference between a band of space vagabonds and a professional mech military backed by an entire second-rate state!

The amount of support enjoyed by the latter was so disproportionately big that there was no true contest. It wasn't simply a matter of funding. The Larkinson Clan had plenty of money to spare and could invest in even higher-quality mechs if necessary.

The Steel Rain simply enjoyed too many other advantages. It was part of a large mech army that was not only professionally organized but contained a huge number of mech pilots and other skilled personnel.

As a large and comprehensive military organization, the Ferril Provincial Army had the power to invest a considerable amount of funding, manpower, expertise and other forms of support to raise numerous elite mech regiments.

Though it was too costly and extravagant to try to turn every mech regiment into an elite unit, it was no problem to concentrate double the amount of resources in 1 out of 20 or even 1 out of 10 units.

The Steel Rain was the beneficiary of this treatment. Though Ves had always considered all of his mech legions aside from the Living Sentinels as elites, it was only now that he discovered that there was still a significant gap between what his clan considered elite and the Vulcan Empire had painstakingly built!

It was for this reason that General Verle finally couldn't bear it anymore. Since the Vulcanites already put the Gauss Baron in action, the Golden Skull Alliance had to reciprocate in kind. If not, the morale of its mech pilots would inevitably decline as the oppression exerted by an overpowering expert artillery mech increasingly pressed onto their hearts!

To someone who paid a lot of attention to the moods of both friendly and enemy soldiers, General Verle made his decision based on trying to keep the former's morale as high as possible and doing the opposite to the latter.

Though the Amaranto was not as good at suppressing opponents as the Gauss Baron due to its lower firing rate, its lethality was undeniable!

Though Venerable Stark's expert mech only wielded a single main weapon as opposed to the eight formidable cannons at Leiva's disposal, the singular firepower of the crystalline rifle was more than sufficient to punch through the hardest bunkers on the surface of the Lemogo Dostat!

"What is that expert mech?!"

The dwarven analysts and observers only just discovered the presence of this dark red expert mech. Just like the other Larkinson expert mechs, it had hidden behind the Graveyard until General Verle finally called it out. Even then, the slim expert rifleman mech barely showed anything to the distant enemy as it lay prone on the hull of the Graveyard with most of its profile hidden by a barricade.

Yet once Venerable Stark started firing her weapon, the Amaranto's resonance shield along with the light show generated by its weapon turned it into the brightest star in the expeditionary fleet. Tens of thousands of active and passive scans dialed onto its coordinates and provided the dwarves with an increasingly clear image of what they were dealing with at this moment.

"It's a tall folk expert rifleman mech!"

"The exterior material composition of the enemy expert mech is average, but the rifle it is wielding is unlike anything that we have ever recorded in our database."

"Where are our mech designers?! There's something weird about this tall folk expert mech."

"BY VULCAN! It's a masterwork expert mech!"

"WHAT?!"

The citizens of the Vulcan Empire all worshipped the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship. Though they might have differences of opinion with regards to his identity as a human or dwarf, no Vulcanite disrespected the domains that represented patron god.

Since the founding of the dwarven state, its industrious citizens focused more effort on Vulcan's authorities than anything else. With the active encouragement of the Vulcan Faith, the victors not only worked hard to build up a new dwarven identity, but also invested a lot in building up their mech industry and other industries.

What was notable about the latter was that the dwarves paid special attention to craftsmanship. In just a couple of decades, a lot of dwarven craftsmen and engineers had emerged that had sought to please or dedicate themselves to their god by trying to excel in good craftsmanship.

The status of any dwarven craftsman, whether he or she was a sculptor, gunsmith, shipwright or architect, was just as prestigious as a mech designer!

As the dwarves caught up to the regional standard in an admirably short amount of time, they did not stop and continued to invest in artisanal craftsmanship. Although the Vulcanites originally weren't noted for their high-end artisanship, the extreme amount of attention devoted to this sector caused them to rapidly raise a number of skilled and talented master artisans.

Now, one of them who happened to work for the Molten Hammers immediately recognized the remarkable nature of the Amaranto. Though the long-ranged scans were somewhat fuzzy due to a combination of distance, blockage and interference, the old but mechanically-gifted dwarf could not mistake the clues he managed to detect with his eyes.

More than that, as someone who personally created masterworks with his own stubby hands, the induction in his mind caused him to know that this enemy expert mech was absolutely a treasure!

"The enemy expert rifleman mech is a complete masterwork! From its chassis to its rifle, this work is blessed by Vulcan!"

"What?!"

"That's impossible!"

"This is blasphemy!"

The dwarven leaders who heard this answer from their respected master artisan couldn't immediately accept this conclusion. They turned to other dwarven engineers and technical consultants. They even transmitted the data feeds to dwarven Master Mech Designers who resided far away in order to receive confirmation.

As soon as these respected dwarven Masters took a good look, their eyes all widened.

It was not impossible for these Masters to make a masterwork mech based on a regular mech design. This was especially so after they had all begun to focus their efforts on improving their craftsmanship above all else. Yet even they could mostly only dream about fabricating a masterwork expert mech!

As much as these respected Masters all wanted to deny the truth, they had no choice but to confirm the earlier conclusion.

"We are 98 percent certain that this expert mech is a masterwork."

Many dwarven leaders had become shaken. If the humanoid expert mech utilized by their opponents was a masterwork, were they inadvertently fighting against the favored of Vulcan?

"Don't think too much!" A deep and loud voice boomed on the bridge of the Great Ram!

General Iker Kebrinore was an old and imposing dwarf. His resplendent uniform was bedecked with medals, many of which he had earned when he was a much younger mech pilot who fought to free his fellow dwarves from the tall folk.

The most notable part of his appearance wasn't his imposing uniform or dozens of medals, but his rich and braided beard. General Kebrinore's beard was so long and bushy that at least a third of it pooled onto the deck!

If not for the fact that his smart uniform was equipped with special modules, the general constantly risked tripping on his own facial hair whenever he moved forward!

Much like many dwarves of his generation, he wasn't particularly known for his cleverness and ingenuity, which prevented him from climbing up to a higher office. However, he was incredibly steady, respected and loyal.

The general was particularly noted for his excellent battle intuition. Even though he never managed to become an expert pilot, his ability to read the flow of battle served him well and allowed him to survive the brutal battles that led to the founding of the Vulcan Empire.

He was also noted for his undying hatred against humans! This was why General Kebrinore was put in charge of the Ferril Punitive Fleet. His support for this risky and consequential action was high even if he was stubborn about embracing the Dwarven God Cult. In fact, his leadership ensured that the dwarves who still clung to the traditional Vulcan Faith did not feel alienated.

"Do not be deceived by a single masterwork expert mech." General Kebrinore steadily spoke to his men. "Vulcan is a fair god. Craftsmanship has never been exclusive to dwarves. Human craftsmen and mech designers make millions of different masterwork creations every day in the galaxy. We would have encountered them sooner or later."

The confusion among his men decreased. Although this was not a completely ideal answer, it was still sufficient to calm the conflicting emotions among his men.

General Kebrinore began to make another revelation.

"Our Masters along with our intelligence sources have just informed me that the enemy masterwork is almost certainly designed by a Master from the Mech Trade Association! This is the strongest proof yet that our great oppressor is behind this incursion. Defeat this tool and you will be credited with cutting off an arm of a great evil!"

Though the dwarven general was not convinced that the Big Two were secretly led by a cabal of evil human gods, that did not stop him from leveraging this radical theory to incite his men!

Indeed, as soon as the dwarven mech pilots ceased to treat the Amaranto as a holy creation but instead equated it to an infernal abomination, their fear and apprehension to the thought of fighting it had dropped.

The Ferril mech pilots instead became eager to be the ones that successfully slayed the devilish mech!

A large number of Land Crackers and Ship Crackers trained their sights in the direction of the Graveyard. More than a hundred heavy projectiles slammed into the capital ship, causing her surface armor to crack and shatter across a wider area!

The Steel Rain did not let up. They continued to batter the poor Graveyard with a continuous rain of kinetic rounds that exerted an unimaginable amount of stress on the capital ship.

Venerable Stark even had to pull back her Amaranto as her coordinates attracted most of the incoming firepower!

Though the Graveyard's exterior rapidly accumulated more and more damage, the salvage ship moonlighting as a defensive vessel was not that easy to take down!

The scrap and other available metals merged into her hull was so much that the Graveyard could endure much greater punishment. She even rolled her hull so that she was able to smear the incoming damage across her extensive, kilometers-long hull!

"The dwarves have finally shifted their fire!"

Though the Graveyard had fallen into a worrisome crisis, this diversion temporarily offered the rest of the Larkinson fleet a much-needed reprieve.

The Land Crackers and the Ship Crackers were so powerful that the screen of escort ships had depleted way too quickly. Several dozen sub-capital ships had already been crippled or destroyed in the opening stage of the battle.

Though it was not pleasant to turn the Graveyard into a punching bag for artillery mechs, she was at least built for the purpose. She boasted so many thick layers of scrap armor that the dwarven artillery mechs still hadn't come close to breaching her hull!

In order to make sure the Steel Rain kept up their attacks on the Graveyard, the Amaranto constantly poked out from behind the defensive ship and fired precise

positron beams that always managed to penetrate a heavily-fortified bunker and destroy the Land Cracker mechs inside.

Venerable Stark did not attack any other mech. The Land Crackers were by far the greatest threats against the starships of the expeditionary fleet. The sooner she whittled them all down, the less the Larkinson Clan had to worry about losing all of their loved ones.

Just as her Amaranto was about to snap a beam towards another Land Cracker, its resonance shield shook and wobbled as an empowered gauss round slammed its upper edge!

"Your opponent is me!" Venerable Leiva broadcasted as all eight of the Gauss Baron's guns fired straight into the direction of the Amaranto!

Moments later, a huge chunk of hull plating blasted into pieces as the powerful attacks hit their mark!

#### *Chapter 3242: Peekaboo*

The Amaranto and the Gauss Baron were both powerful expert mechs in their own right. It was not easy to determine which one was superior.

Any direct comparison became a lot more complicated because comparing the two was similar to comparing apples and oranges.

The Amaranto only possessed a single gun while the Gauss Baron boasted eight powerful cannons. The former was able to maneuver somewhat comfortably in space while the Gauss Baron was locked in a large and incredibly resilient bunker.

The Amaranto's lack of bulk meant that it did not possess enough armor to endure too many powerful attacks. The Gauss Baron was so thick and heavy that it could easily withstand a sustained bombardment even if its resonance shield had been exhausted!

The differences in firepower and defensive capabilities immediately determined which of the two expert mechs gained the upper hand.

"I won't let you harm my brothers!" Venerable Leiva Hinder shouted as the female dwarf focused all of her concentration on anticipating her opponents moves.

From the moment the Amaranto popped out from behind the Graveyard, her cannons had already barked out a full salvo at least a second ago! The dwarven expert pilot's ability to read and anticipate her opponent's movements was excellent.

The profligate way in which the Gauss Baron unloaded its firepower onto the Amaranto made Venerable Stark's life extremely uncomfortable for a moment.

Although she was able to snap off a shot at her targets at least half of the time, there were too many instances where she had to abort her attack.

If she didn't pull her Amaranto back in time, the fragile expert mech would either suffer a direct hit or get affected by the catastrophic damage dealt to the Graveyard's exterior.

Either way, Venerable Stark knew that she couldn't afford to get hit!

Further back in the fleet, Venerable Jannzi saw all of this taking place with obvious frustration on her face. If her Shield of Samar had been upgraded to an expert mech, then she would not have hesitated to serve as the Amaranto's shield.

"If only my mech was strong enough..."

She was not a reckless expert pilot and knew her machine's capabilities well enough to know that it would be outmatched in this fight. The Shield of Samar may incorporate a lot of Unending alloy in its tower shield and frontal structure, but the lack of reinforcement granted by true resonance was a fatal weakness!

The powerful gauss projectiles unleashed by the Gauss Baron might not be able to penetrate Shield of Samar's defenses, but every powerful impact would transfer a lot of kinetic energy that Unending alloy was unable to dampen completely. The more fragile and breakable internal parts of her space knight would definitely shake until they fell apart.

This problem was especially concerning if the Shield of Samar had to resist continuous resonance-empowered attacks. Previous testing had showed that attacks that expert pilots had enhanced with their own will possessed damaging properties that weren't simple to explain. Any projectile that was empowered in this manner had a much greater chance of dealing internal damage even if they failed to penetrate strong armor.

This was one of the reasons why expert mechs were sometimes able to leapfrog classes and defeat superior mechs that boasted much more resilient armor systems!

Venerable Jannzi sighed. "I shouldn't think about ideas beyond my reach. I can still do plenty for my clan!"

She briefly directed her attention to the ranks of Living Sentinel mechs that had yet to enter battle. The Bright Warrior mechs all exuded the same glow that caused every Larkinson mech pilot to feel the need to defend their clansmen against the murderous dwarves.

Though Jannzi felt rather sad that the Larkinson Clan was once more embroiled into a needless, avoidable battle that was bound to harvest the lives of lots of clansmen, this was not the time for her to entertain thoughts about recriminating Ves.

"Look alive, Sentinels!" Her Shield of Samar raised its sword. "In about ten minutes, the approaching dwarven fleet will come close enough for the rest of us to do our part. No matter what happens, do not falter! Hold the line as much as possible and do not let a single capital ship fall!"

The Sentinels all became encouraged by her presence and words! Even if she wasn't piloting a genuine expert mech, her identity as a powerful expert pilot still did wonders in strengthening the spines of her fellow mech pilots.

The Quint floated right next to the Shield of Samar. Legion Commander Casella Ingvar appreciated Jannzi's help.

"Thank you for that, Venerable. My men will soon be hard hit by the enemy troops. It will become a lot harder to keep their confidence levels high once the true battle commences."

"No problem, commander. Your Living Sentinels have always suffered the brunt of the casualties in these major battles. I won't let your men suffer like that again."

She considered the disproportionate losses suffered by the Sentinels as one of her many failings. Although she wasn't able to do much in a battle of this scale, she was determined to do everything in her power to prevent these brave and decent soldiers from bearing the brunt of the damage once again.

While the other mech legions were preparing for the next phase of the battle, the fight between the Amaranto and the Gauss Baron continued to intensify.

The Graveyard, which was supposed to be able to withstand a lot of damage, was starting to look increasingly more ragged as the Gauss Baron continued to fire its cannons without any regard of its consumption. Whether it was ammunition, energy or heat, none of these limitations concerned Venerable Leiva a lot.

Only her willpower and mental state were serious constraints to her. She had stopped empowering her attacks with resonance in order to be more economical, but even without this the attacks unleashed by her expert mech's cannons were still considerably more powerful than anything launched by a Land Cracker!

"If I can't hit your mech directly, then I'll just tear apart your ships!"

The dwarven expert pilot kept suppressing the Amaranto but at the same time diverted more firepower on the damaged sections of the Graveyard. Even if the defensive capital ship constantly turned in order to prevent the Gauss Baron and other artillery mechs from concentrating their damage, her overall hull had already incurred considerable damage.

As long as this continued for a time, a hull breach would eventually take place!



Still, the Larkinsons weren't entirely displeased with the situation. Through Venerable Stark's unremitting efforts, her mech had consistently managed to snap out a shot in time that unerringly burned through reinforced bunkers and destroyed the Land Crackers inside.

The Eye of Ylvaine had also become more proficient at their attempts to suppress or destroy the remaining Land Crackers. The bunkers that covered these threatening dwarven heavy artillery mechs were well-engineered and could withstand a lot of punishment, but they were not without their weak points.

After Gloriana analyzed their structure to an extensive degree, she highlighted over a dozen different weak points. If some of them were hit by energy weapons and other points were struck by powerful kinetic forces, the Larkinsons were able to permanently shut the gun slots that always slid shut whenever the bunker in question endured focused damage.

Although forcibly closing the bunkers was not the same as destroying the artillery mechs inside, this measure at least reduced the weight of fire from the Steel Rain mech regiment if only on a temporary basis.

The dwarves had to dispatch repair bots and work crews in order to fix the damage, and that all took time. The only other way for the Land Crackers to regain their ability to fire at their targets was to blast the blockage from the inside!

Suffice to say, this extreme measure was not only risky and destructive, but also negated much of the defensive advantage enjoyed by the heavy artillery mechs!

Each time an impatient dwarven mech pilot turned its cannons on the bunkers and blasted it open by force, a torrent of projectiles and positron beams fired by the Eye of Ylvaine quickly overwhelmed the defenses of the Cracker mechs!

Through these measures, the artillery duel slowly evened up, but not by much. Despite their exploitable bunkers, the Steel Rain artillery mechs still managed to destroy a growing amount of opposing threatening mechs and deepened the scars of the Graveyard.

"Cover the Graveyard! She has done her job for now. Don't let her hull get breached in too many places. We cannot afford to turn her into a liability." General Verle instructed.

The Larkinson Clan's disposable sub-capital ships shifted their positions and began to cover for the Graveyard. Though the Gauss Baron's salvos dealt an unimaginable damage to these smaller and weaker ships, it became a lot harder for Venerable Leiva to suppress the Amaranto.

"I don't have the time and energy to waste on you." Venerable Stark huffed and continued to peek out to eliminate the remaining Land Cracker mechs.

Though the Steel Rain fielded at least 200 of their most powerful and heaviest artillery mechs, their numbers quickly diminished over the course of the artillery duel.

Eventually, General Kebrinore saw that their situation wasn't good and ordered the remaining Land Crackers to retract into their respective ships if possible.

As a result, no more ultra-heavy gauss rounds slammed into the starships of the expeditionary anymore. The remaining projectiles fired by the Ship Crackers and the Mech Crackers were still concerning, but much less threatening towards capital ships.

The Larkinsons were disappointed by the withdrawal of the remaining Land Crackers. They could show up again at any time and deal a heavy blow to any damaged starship.

"Switch over to targeting the Ship Crackers! We can't let them fire at our fleet with impunity!"

As the distance between the two fleets continued to narrow, the time almost came for the other mechs to be put into play.

The overall results of the initial artillery duel were mixed for both sides. The Steel Rain had inflicted a lot of material damage to the starships of the expeditionary fleets. Their destructive firepower was not all that precise but the sheer power and volume of their bombardment had turned many ships into scarred or broken wrecks!

However, the Eye of Ylvaine along with Venerable Stark made the most out of their precision advantage. Their absolute firepower might not match up against the Steel Rain but their accuracy had actually overtaken that of the dwarves!

Part of that was due to their mechs possessing energy weapons. Positron beams were a lot easier to aim because they struck their targets at insanely high speeds. The Transcendent Punishers relied increasingly more on their positron cannons to do the bulk of their work.

Even Venerable Leiva slowly began to recognize the threat.

"There's something suspicious about these artillery mechs!"

Her instincts as an expert pilot were sharp. Though she initially dismissed the artillery mechs of the Larkinson Clan as mediocre machines, the more she saw them in action, the more she sensed that there was more to them than met the eye.

She reluctantly began to redirect more of her fire towards the bunkers that held these odd mechs. Two of the cannons at her disposal kept tracking the Amaranto's position as best as possible in order to ensure that the expert rifleman mech had to remain on its toes. The other six guns of the Gauss Baron began to bombard the different bunkers

across the hull of the Spirit of Bentheim with great enthusiasm, overwhelming the factory ship's energy shields with only a bit of extra effort!

Suddenly, a volley of ultra-heavy rounds impacted the energy shield covering the Gauss Baron's reinforced bunkers!

Though the shield had not yet broken, Leiva looked surprised that it was already closed to breaking. A second volley of hard and heavy projectiles destroyed the shield and slammed into the first layer of the bunker cover!

Though it would take a lot more damage to penetrate the high-quality metals that shielded the Gauss Baron from incoming damage, the dwarven expert pilot already began to pay more attention when she saw that the surface of her bunker had been chipped!

"These aren't regular attacks!"

She tracked where the shells had been fired upon and detected a couple of mech companies of cannoner mechs that had just begun to open fire behind the combat carriers they were using as cover!

The actions of the cannoner mechs seemed to have triggered the next phase in the battle.

"Rifleman mechs, open fire!"

"Melee mechs, storm out!"

"It's showtime!"

Tens of thousands of mechs finally began to take part in the massive battle! A huge amount of beams and projectiles began to flood the space between the two fleets as they just started to get more serious!

#### *Chapter 3243: The Great Advance*

It was as if the appetizers had just made way for the main course of the meal. The entry of every other mech that had previously remained in reserve was a shocking sight that instantly increased the intensity of the battlefield by an order of magnitude!

Thousands of positron beams struck the sturdy and formidable knight mechs of the Molten Hammers. The mech pilots of these dwarven units all possessed the courage to charge in front of everyone else for very good reasons.

The short height of these defensive mechs might not provide as much cover to the mechs following from behind, but they also made it a lot harder to strike them from a distance.

Their thicker physical shields and stockier forms also meant it would take longer to take them down despite getting hit a lot of times. Their high mass and solid constructions allowed each of them to maintain a stable and purposeful flight trajectory despite getting hit by dozens of gauss rounds or positron beams. Even if their shields were close to falling apart, the mechs did not stop until their frames became more and more ragged.

At that point, the damaged space knights smoothly fell out of formation and turned around to retreat back to their motherships.

This not only preserved the functionality of their machines, but also allowed them to act as emergency reserves!

If there was ever a need for their services in the later stages of a battle, they could always deploy again with backup shields in their hands to block incoming damage at critical moments.

"What a well-executed approach!" Ves sighed with admiration.

While there were many defensive units that employed similar rotations, the dwarves were much more proficient at it. Their defensive mechs were tougher and did not break as easily when put under fire. The dwarven mech pilots had also practiced this maneuver a lot and were able to judge when their mechs were close to suffering internal damage.

As long as the damage to their machines was contained to the exterior, the damaged armor sections could always be repaired or patched up with haste as long as they returned to their motherships. However, once their critical internal parts started taking damage, it became a lot more troublesome and time-consuming to bring them back up to full functionality.

In essence, the hardy mechs of the dwarves granted them a lot more staying power than normal. Many people such as Ves and General Verle were already able to figure out that they could not afford to get locked in a battle of attrition against these resilient opponents!

"The Hivar Roarers mechs have also begun to move!"

Whereas the Molten Hammer and Slug Ranger mechs were all accelerating straight ahead, the mechs of the bestial mech regiment weren't as straightforward.

Only a few of their heavier and less mobile bestial mechs all joined the main formations that were moving straight ahead. Most of their mechs split up into two different prongs

and began to arc around so that they would be able to converge upon the expeditionary fleet from different angles.

That caused Ves to take the Hivar Roarers more seriously. As he studied their mech models, he saw that they consisted of a variety of ranged and melee machines that took up all kinds of different animal shapes.

One of the more distinct Roarer mechs was the odd-looking turtle mechs. They looked almost exactly how they sounded. They resembled giant turtles though with at least some of their limbs replaced by guns. Cannons and other weapon modules were also mounted to their sides sometimes.

"Don't waste your firepower on these turtle mechs. They're too difficult to hit, and even if you strike them, they hardly look any worse!"

This was the most interesting characteristic about the turtle mechs. Since they were flying forward with their distinct turtle shells facing upwards, their silhouette was quite flat and minimal. This made it very difficult for the ranged mechs of the expeditionary fleet to hit these odd-looking bestial mechs.

Of course, the fact that shots could easily bypass these turtle mechs also meant that they were not good at blocking incoming fire. The mechs that were flying close to them had to endure the incoming fire without much cover!

Ves soon figured out the concept behind these hardy bestial mechs.

"Don't underestimate the threat posed by the Hivar Roarer turtle mechs." Ves called. "They are self-contained weapon platforms that can unleash a constant barrage of fire at our forces. Think of them as doom crawlers in space! As long as they are able to take up positions on our flanks, they can enfilade our ranks!"

That quickly woke up the Larkinsons. Although the firepower of the turtle mechs didn't actually match that of a doom crawler, they still came close enough to the Cracker line of the Slug Rangers. The cannons mounted on the turtle mechs could inflict even more damage to the expeditionary fleet's forces because they would incur damage from their sides or even their rear!

As long as any mech or formation of mechs had to defend against incoming fire from multiple sides, the poor machines wouldn't be able to hold their ground anymore. They either had to retreat or face a swift defeat.

Neither of these options were acceptable! There was no room for the mechs to retreat or else they would bump right into the ships of the expeditionary fleet. If these crucial vessels began to get bombarded from multiple sides, then it was unlikely that they would be able to last much longer either.

"As long as the dwarves attack us from the front, we can concentrate all of our defenses forward so we can fend off their attacks for a long time. If we have to worry about getting stabbed from the side, we'll have to split our defensive resources and weaken our ability to defend from either direction. This is not ideal!"

This was not an ideal situation. In fact, it was one of the nightmare scenarios that the Golden Skull Alliance had anticipated. The Ferrils could easily afford to split off a third of their mechs to perform a pincer maneuver because they had the numbers to spare!

The best solution to attack these dangerous turtle mechs was to fight them up close. As ranged mechs, they were unable to defend themselves properly against melee mechs.

However, the large escort of other bestial mechs meant it wouldn't be easy to get at the turtle mechs. A large number of tiger mechs, avian mechs and other oddly-shaped mechs followed behind the turtle mechs.

Whether they were melee or ranged-oriented, these eclectic bestial mechs could easily entangle any detachment that attempted to intercept the pincers.

The defenders could not let the pincers succeed in their flanking attacks, but the problem was that the Golden Skull Alliance didn't have enough mechs to spare!

The military leaders of the alliance had eventually decided to shift some of their units to the flanks. The Larkinson Clan transferred a mix of Swordmaiden, Vandal and Heavensworder mechs to both sides. These units largely consisted of lighter and more maneuverable offensive mechs.

Though they were not ideal at defending, anything heavier and slower was liable to get ignored by the Hivar Roarers. It was too easy for most of their bestial mechs to outspeed and outmaneuver defensive units!

As for the Penitent Sisters, they had a different role to play this time. Venerable Joshua's Valkyrie Prime was already in the middle of a formation of Valkyrie Redeemers as it advanced forward right behind the Avatars of Myth.

Anyone in the Golden Skull Alliance knew that they would play a crucial role in the coming clash. Ves already tried to estimate how much damage the Penitent Sister battle network could inflict on the dwarven mech force.

"It's not as much as I want." He glumly concluded.

Though plenty of dwarven mechs were stacking close together, there were simply too many of them to bunch up in a small area! The different mech companies and mech regiments generously spaced themselves away from each other in order to avoid bumping into each other or interfering with any of their spontaneous maneuvers.

Since there was so much real estate in space, why not make use of it all? This was the general thought behind the dwarven formations. Dispersing their mechs and formations also made it harder to whittle them all down from range. This was one of the ideal ways to approaching an enemy while enduring constant fire.

"They'll have to close ranks eventually once their melee mechs collide against ours." Ves muttered.

If the mechs and mech companies continued to space themselves away from other friendlies, then it became too easy to flank and surround them. This was why Ves was willing to be patient and keep the Penitent Sister battle network in reserve. This was not the time for them to show off the Superior Mother's might.

"I'm not sure whether it is wise to employ their battle networks too early."

This was a difficult dilemma. As long as the Penitent Sisters used their big move, their mech pilots including Joshua would no longer be in their prime state. While they would probably be able to continue to fight, the half-depleted mech pilots would not be as effective as before.

However, when he thought about taking out a huge chunk of dwarven combat assets early, he felt it was worth the tradeoff.

Such a massive attack would not only take out threats that could disable hundreds if not thousands of friendly mechs over the course of a battle, but also inflict an immense morale blow to the enemy dwarves!

"Maybe the attack can persist long enough to reap the lives aboard a couple of dwarven fleets."

Ves began to shift his attention to the rifleman mechs of both sides.

Though the melee mechs of both sides still had a lot of distance to traverse before they came close to swinging their weapons, the various ranged mechs had already begun to fire at each other.

The Bright Warriors mechs armed with rifles did not perform particularly well compared to their Slug Ranger counterparts. The latter were more solid, specialized and piloted by better-trained dwarves.

The only advantage the Bright Warriors enjoyed was their greater mobility. They were able to evade significantly more incoming shots and the resilience of their armor was also quite respectable.

As a result, the fight between the two slowly evened up as the mech pilots of the Bright Warriors became used to their opponents.

There were other ranged mechs that did not fly forward aside from the flightless heavy artillery mechs.

Of particular note to Ves was the Eternal Redemptions piloted by the ranged mech specialists of the Penitent Sisters.

Ves briefly smiled. "They finally get to show their worth for the first time."

Their performance did not disappoint him. Despite not being armed with his powerful luminar crystal rifles, their massive Samheim Gauss Cannons fired ultra-heavy rounds that inflicted the most damage against defensive mechs and bunkers alike!

The Eternal Redemption was one of the few mech models of the Larkinson Clan that truly deserved to fit the moniker of elite. They cost twice as much as a Bright Warrior to build and it showed. They were not only resilient enough to withstand a lot of return fire, but also tore apart many dwarf mechs that never took the firepower of their human foes seriously!

"It's too bad I only have a couple of hundred of them." Ves briefly lamented.

It was difficult to produce these Eternal Redemptions on a large scale. They were not only big and hefty, but also demanded a lot of premium materials to form all of their strongest parts.

Still, the performance of the Eternal Redemptions along with their ability to maneuver in space were crucial in making life harder for the Ferril mechs. The cannoner mechs had begun to occupy more favorable positions away from the main fleet where they could fire at their targets from an angle exerted a bit more pressure onto the advancing dwarf mechs.

Yet as much as they were able to cripple or force many dwarf mechs into retreat, there were easily thousands more enemy machines that remained undeterred!

"The initial collision will not be pretty!" Ves winced in concern.

*Chapter 3244: Watcher in the Dark*

The battle that took place in the outer system of the Fordilla Zentra System had finally taken a more serious turn!

After letting the artillery mechs dominate the opening act, the main show had finally begun!

Tens of thousands of mechs armed with rifles released lances and kinetic slugs at each other like there was no tomorrow. The space in between had become so flooded with



with lethal ordnance that not even a heavily-armored fleet carrier would be able to survive for long in this location!

As the melee mechs of both sides began to charge forward or maneuver towards the flanks, many thousands of mech pilots grew increasingly eager, grim, determined or focused.

This was what they had been training for. A mech pilot existed to fight, not to train all day and look pretty on parades. True mech pilots always yearned to prove themselves in battle.

However, many of them were also human enough to realize how likely it was for them to fall in battle. The battlefield was always cruel and enemies never held any consideration towards their opposition.

It was undeniable that mech pilots always suffered the brunt of every engagement. They were celebrated and worshipped by many people throughout the galaxy, but only they knew how terrifying it was to fight against other war machines that could easily crush an entire town flat if left unopposed!

There were only three ships in the star system that hadn't involved themselves in the unfolding clash. They had all kept a healthy distance from the battle and made sure to remain at an angle that made it unlikely for any ranged mech to fire in their direction.

The chance of getting hit by a stray projectile was minimal, though that did not reassure Director Olivier Persham aboard the Dented Coin.

"Accelerate faster!" He yelled on the bridge. "Overload the thrusters if necessary! If we get hit by a single artillery projectile, we're doomed!"

He was not exaggerating. In this enormous confrontation between two powerful second-class forces, his lightly-armored third-class trade vessel was as fragile as his beard.

Though both sides of the conflict were aware of the Dented Coin, neither of them spared any attention to this inconsequential vessel.

The dwarven patrol vessel was a different matter. As soon as it became clear that the Ferril Provincial Army was truly trying to annihilate the human fleet, the frigate was trying to distance herself from the battlefield as much as possible. She carried only a handful of compact mechs and could not play a meaningful role in this battle. Staying around would only see her destroyed in vain!

Luckily enough, the Larkinson mechs only fired a couple of laser beams at the ship before giving up. The frigate was fast and agile and she was able to frustrate the aim of distant attackers. Even if a laser beam hit, the vessel was sturdy enough to withstand incidental attacks.

"Hah!" The dwarven patrol captain exulted. "You humans are too inferior! Our dwarven engineering is the best in its class!"

In this way, the cheeky dwarf managed to escape from the battlefield with his life intact.

What the people in the star system didn't know was that the bystanders weren't limited to just two vessels. Aside from the Dented Coin and dwarven patrol ship, there was a third starship floating a decent distance away from the battlefield.

Though this stealthed and completely hidden vessel could get hit by a stray projectile at any time, none of her crew showed any concern. The defenses and stealth systems of this little courier vessel was top-notch compared to the more basic and primitive tech employed by the two sides.

One of the compartments of this corvette had been converted into an observation room.

"Do you feel it, Jovy?" A projection of a dignified figure asked.

"It's so... chaotic." The young Journeyman Mech Designer replied as he gazed at the large projections that displayed the unfolding battle from several different angles. "There are so many different chances for mechs and their pilots to survive or fall in battle. Anything can happen that can affect the future of a mech, whether it is getting hit by a random gauss round, being targeted by a focused charge, or suffering a catastrophic malfunction induced by prior damage."

Every mech designer viewed reality in a different way. Their design philosophies colored their perception and shaped the way they interpreted sensory data.

For example, Ves saw everything in terms of how much life they possessed and how this characteristic affected someone or something. Gloriana judged what she saw by how flawed or flawless they were. Even rational mech designers that tried to be as rational and objective as possible couldn't escape the fact that even their ways of interpreting reality was inherently biased.

To someone who had steadily gained more prominence within the Mech Trade Association as the Reality Trickster, Jovy Armalon principally saw everything he perceived in terms of probability.

He could estimate how likely it was for a mech to suffer a malfunction over the course of a year. He was also able to judge the probability that a mech was able to defeat another mech.

However, this was not the extent of his talents. The design philosophy that he had managed to develop with great effort from when he was young potentially allowed him to affect the probabilities that most people never even dreamed of manipulating!

Of course, that did not make him a god. Far from it. He was just a mech designer and his talents were mostly limited to affecting mechs in minor and subtle degrees. Though these little effects already granted him a hefty advantage, Jovy knew that this was just the start.

The real power of his unorthodox design philosophy would only bloom when he became a Master.

If he reached that level of strength, this battle probably would have become a lot more clearer to him. As for now, he became so overwhelmed by the multitude of probabilities flashing through his perception that he simply couldn't see the forest from the trees.

Sometimes, too much data was not a good thing. Despite his luxurious suite of implants and genetic modification, the input was too high!

"You are pushing yourself too hard." Master Willix's projection said. "Large scale battles are inherently unpredictable."

"These are lower-class mechs! I should be able to figure them all out somehow!" Jovy complained. "Besides, I don't think the outcome of this engagement is in doubt. I respect Ves and his team of Journeymen a lot, but there is a point where gimmicks aren't enough anymore. The dwarves outnumber their opponents by thousands of mechs, none of which are worse in performance."

"How certain are you of this conclusion?" Master Willix looked amused.

"80 percent, and this is a conservative estimate. You... don't agree?"

"Oh, I think this is an accurate enough measure." She replied. "However, don't underestimate this 20 percent. I think a large part of this battle hinges on how well the Larkinsons utilize the few advantages they possess. If they leverage their surprises well enough, then they may be able to overcome the Vulcanite mechs."

Jovy looked suspicious at the Master. "Do you know something that I don't? You've worked on the Larkinson Clan's expert mechs. Have you learned what Ves has in store that might tilt the balance?"

Master Willix didn't deign to answer this question. The two may be part of the same organization but Jovy was not her student. They merely came together at this time because they shared a common interest in Ves and the Larkinson Clan.

The Journeyman knew Willix's character and shrugged before turning his attention back to the projections. He silently transmitted an instruction. A second later, a container filled with snacks materialized on his lap. He grabbed a random piece and threw it in his mouth while continuing to observe the battle as if he was enjoying a good show.

"How much progress have you made on your latest assignment?" Willix asked.

Jovy's joviality abruptly dropped. "Not good. It's difficult to research a major contribution at my stage. I've learned a lot in the last few years and I have managed to develop several promising methods. I have to thank Ves for inspiring my work, but that's not enough to achieve a high score."

"Innovation is never easy." Master Willix said. "It is difficult to find a fruitful direction of research when you have not yet seen enough of what is possible. At the Journeyman stage, you must continue to travel and broaden your horizons. There is no shame in getting inspired by other people's work. As long as you contribute new material to an existing subject, you will further our field."

"That's why I requested to witness this battle in person. I hope I can gain more inspiration from seeing Ves' work in action. He is by far the most interesting indigenous mech designer that I have ever met. No one else in his generation is as ingenious and extreme as him. With his talents and capabilities, he should have been a part of our Association."

Willix shook her head. "He would never thrive in our ranks. His unique life trajectory has pressured him into developing his potential to a completely different direction than what any of our colleagues could ever conceive of. That makes him perplexing and valuable to us at the same time. Some mech designers are untamable. Don't think the mech industry can keep thriving if we attempt to own every talented mech designer in human space. Our Association is too orderly and bound by rules for most passionate mech designers to express their full capabilities."

Jovy Armalon raised his eyebrow. "That doesn't sound like you, Master Willix. You're willing to let mech designers play dangerous games?"

"We are in a greater game, Jovy." She said. "You know the threats we face. In the beginning of the Age of Mechs, we had to reconstruct order from a broken galaxy. That was over four centuries ago. By now, we have not only repaired human society, but also taken a couple of steps ahead. The conquest of the Red Ocean is but the first step to accelerate the potential of our civilization. Humanity has grown up, and must learn to wield greater power for the times to come."

This was a heavy subject within the Association. There were many opinions on what the MTA and humanity as a whole must do to confront the dangers that loomed in the dark.

"Will Ves play an important role in our future plans?" Jovy wondered.

"It is possible, but then again, we have you and many other promising seeds. Any of you can become our pillar of support in the centuries to come. While I am earnestly wishing for his success, we have many options to choose from. That is the benefit of fostering a large and thriving mech industry."

Jovy caught the implicit meaning in Willix's words. She wouldn't intervene if Ves lost his life in this battle. There were far too many promising mech designers in the galaxy. Though Ves was certainly one of the most accomplished in his batch, the truly good mech designers had to be steady enough to survive the long passage of time. Anyone who gambled with his life had to accept the consequences of a loss.

"It would be a shame if Ves falls in this low-level battle. I'm still interested in collaborating with him. I truly want to see how powerful a living version of my work can become."

Master Willix crossed her arm. "You should worry about your own career. So long as you have not made a major contribution, you will not be eligible to transfer to the Red Ocean. I cannot count how many of your rivals across the Milky Way are trying to do the same."

"I won't fail." Jovy stated. "The reason why I'm stuck is not because I'm incapable, but because I can't figure out the right approach. My results will most definitely satisfy the panel once I am done. I am not going to miss out on witnessing the rise of the Red Ocean up close."

"That is good."

"Will I be able to see you in the Red Ocean as well, Master?"

Willix shook her head. "I'm afraid not. I have traveled to the galactic rim for a reason, and the Red Ocean does not hold much attraction for a mech designer of my interests. I will not depart until I have completed my main research project, and that will not happen in at least five to seven decades."

"I see." Jovy said, not commenting any further about Willix's biggest preoccupation. "Ves will probably miss you, assuming he's able to get out of this battle alive."

"There will be other associates of mine who will handle his case in the Red Ocean." Willix said without much emotion. "In the future, it may even be possible for you to liaise with Ves. You must build up your authority first before you are allowed to do so. Wait until you have advanced to Senior."

"I understand." Jovy replied as his glowing eyes shone... "I won't slow down."

#### *Chapter 3245: A Conversation Between Masters*

After Master Willix completed her discussion with Jovy Armalon, her projection disappeared from the stealthed corvette.

She did not need to be physically or virtually present aboard this observation vessel in order to observe the ongoing battle. Her powerful implant was able to feed footage

directly into her mind, though much like other people she preferred to observe with her eyes. Events became more real and tangible in this way.

Her real body sat in the middle of an expansive office within the depths of Halcyon Citadel. The office also functioned as her secondary workshop and laboratory. Several hyper-sophisticated machines were currently performing complex tasks.

These tasks ranged from analyzing unknown materials to studying the reactions between different materials and exotics. Willix also enjoyed a considerably large quota of processing power from Halcyon Citadel that she constantly made use of to perform an astounding number of calculations related to gravitic and dimensional curving.

Her major research project demanded so many calculations that all of the processors in the Hexadric Hegemony put together amounted to less than 1 percent of her processing quota!

Master Willix knew that several enormous data centers were constantly active deep inside Halcyon Citadel. She even toured one of them and became impressed at how the local branch managed to turn this space station into a powerful computing center. Rows and rows of integrated sandman admiral cores had been linked up so that they could perform effective calculations with a high degree of algorithmic learning and adaptivity.

The CFA wasn't the only organization who recognized the uses of altered sandman admiral cores.

She glanced at the progress report. Only 1 year and three months to go until Halcyon Citadel's processors finished the mathematical modelling tasks that she had requested.

This was a long time for normal people, but not that much for an MTA Master who was easily able to live for at least half a millennium.

In fact, she still had seven decades to go to complete her major transformational research project. She arrived in the Komodo Star Sector a long time ago and gave herself a hundred years to complete her ambitious contribution to the mech industry.

If she succeeded, she would not only be able to elevate her status within the Association to the upper reaches of what a Master could achieve, but also open up a chance for her to get closer to becoming a Star Designer!

No Master was content with remaining at their current level. Every mech designer who worked hard enough to realize their design philosophies was ambitious and loved their craft to an obsessive degree. Not even rational mech designers were exempt from this as each of them recognized they needed to retain at least some passion in order to preserve their love and motivation for their field.

As Willix studied a complicated diagram that one of her experiments recently yielded, she occasionally glanced at the projections displaying the unfolding battle in the Fordilla Zentra System.

Her eyes hardly rested on the dwarven mechs. Though she was mildly impressed at how quickly the Vulcan Empire managed to build up its mech industry from scratch, the dwarven mech designers were too ambivalent towards the MTA.

Compared to the plain dwarven mechs, the vivid and unusual Larkinson mechs were much more interesting to her. Though their designs were simple and primitive in her eyes, they contained a unique and unreplicable charm that only a mech designer Ves could impart to his work.

Even so, Willix still did not direct much her attention to the various ordinary mechs of the Larkinson Clan. She allocated most of her attention to the most special mechs, all of which happened to be prime mechs or expert mechs.

She wasn't able to see through the prime mechs. On several occasions, they displayed far greater power than what their parts were capable of exerting. Ves may have explained some of his theories to her but she could not yet understand the principles of this strange new form of resonance that he managed to invent.

What was interesting was that the expert mechs she collaborated on seemed to have inherited the traits of prime mechs. She anticipated that this so-called 'prime resonance' might react or combine with true resonance in unpredictable ways.

Though she tried to model and calculate the possible outcomes, she couldn't take any of the results seriously due to lack of understanding and insufficient reliable data.

Therefore, the best way for Willix to gain the answers she wanted was to observe the new expert mechs in action. So far, she hadn't witnessed anything remarkable, but none of them aside from the Amaranto had taken action at this point.

The remaining three expert mechs were not in a hurry to make their moves. Master Willix knew she had to be patient.

The relationship between her and the expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan was odd. Though Master Willix had unquestionably contributed to their designs, she had tried to keep her intervention as minimal as possible so that she would not make her own mark.

That put her in an odd position. She felt very little ownership and responsibility towards the Dark Zephyr, the Amaranto, the Riot and the First Sword. This was despite the crucial work she performed in integrating the resonating materials to the base designs.

Her expression became even more mixed when she beheld the Amaranto. The fact that it turned into a masterwork was shocking to the MTA, but what truly held her interest

was how an unknown but extremely capable mech designer improved her work on its design.

She still wasn't finished with digesting all of the gains. What Ves' mysterious patron had done not only showed her more refined methods of integrating resonating materials into expert mechs, but also gave her many minor pointers on tiny flaws and imperfections that she had never even realized she possessed!

As long as she was able to understand and figure out the logic behind these micro-adjustments, she would be able to elevate the quality and performance of her designs by a couple of percentage points.

At her level, even a 1 percent improvement in performance could take years of research to accomplish!

She partially regretted not contributing a little more of her ingenuity to the Amaranto design. If she implemented her best solutions and applied just a small part of her native design philosophy, she might have been able to reap enough rewards to progress her major research project by at least a decade!

Of course, Master Willix wasn't the sort of person to get hung up over missed opportunities. She had lived long enough to know that there were many more opportunities that were ripe for the taking. Whether she was able to grasp them depended on her vision and the choices she made.

Even without this particular opportunity, she still had many more plans in the works that might result in a breakthrough in her enormous research project.

A small chime sounded in the hollow office. Willix noticed that the time of her next appointment had arrived. She mentally approved the incoming communication request while waving her hand to shut down any sensitive screens that were too sensitive to expose to outsiders.

A highly-realistic physical projection of another woman appeared in the space.

The newcomer did not offer a meaningless greeting to Master Willix because it was pointless to say them in the first place. They were already familiar enough with each other to make ordinary pleasantries redundant.

As research-oriented mech designers, they valued efficiency over theatrics.

The newcomer stepped closer and sat down on a chair close to Master Willix's desk. The woman was dressed in a fashionable business suit and wore a tight-fitting lab coat over her body. She brushed aside her blond hair and swept her gaze at the projections of a distant battle.



"The Larkinson Clan." She spoke.

"My work." Willix responded.

"How much?"

"Minimal."

"Why?"

"You will see."

"Answers."

"Unexplainable."

"Ves."

"Confirmed."

"Stupid."

"Maybe."

"Reason?"

"Unknown goal."

"I see."

The two women stayed silent for a time. Whether they were communicating through other, non-verbal means was unknown, but their expressions remained neutral and without emotion.

Still, when the Amaranto began to show off more of its capabilities, the spectators became increasingly more interested.

"Masterwork?"

"Not only."

"A pity he changed his allegiance."

"Cooperation."

"Unlikely."

"38.75 percent."

"Irrational."

"Irrational."

"Touché."

They no longer spoke about this topic. They continued to observe the performance of the Amaranto and other notable Larkinson mechs. They paid more and more attention to the data readouts that measured hundreds of different unusual phenomena that most people didn't even know existed.

This was also the main reason why the MTA dispatched a stealth corvette all the way to the remote Fordilla Zentra System. If Master Willix wasn't interested in gathering more data, then she could have settled for a more convenient way of observing the battle.

"Progress on your project?"

"Steady."

"Need assistance?"

"Not yet necessary. You have other obligations."

"Free time."

"Doubt."

"Komodo War's outcome is almost set."

"Doubt."

"Cannot overcome shortage of expert mechs."

"Doubt."

That caused the visitor to frown a bit, which was highly unusual to see for a rational mech designer.

"Argument."

Master Willix waved her hand at the live footage of the battle. "New solutions."

"Serious doubt."

"Confidence."

"We will see."

Another period of silence passed by. Master Willix turned to her guest. "Reason for visit?"

"Request."

"Explain."

"Phasewater."

"Unfulfillable."

"Why?"

"Lack of supply."

"Reason."

"Reserved."

"For what?"

"Confidential."

"Friends."

"Confidential."

"Aliens?"

"Confidential."

"Cultists?"

"Confidential."

"Threat zero."

"Confidential."

Master Olson's projection directed a deep look at Master Willix. The host calmly looked back.

Both of them may possess different backgrounds, but they shared a lot in common. They were not only Masters who had already made numerous accomplishments in their respective fields, but they also approached mech design from a rational perspective.

It was a lot harder for mech designers to realize their design philosophies if they weren't allowing their passion free reign!

This handicap was so great that most mech designers outside the MTA simply failed to get started. Master Carmin Olson was a rare exception as she had managed to realize her design philosophy without the support of the MTA by relying on her hard work and talent.

That made her worthy of Master Willix's friendship. Even if one of them was a native mech designer of a second-rate state and the other an MTA Master of much higher status, to them their expertise and insights mattered more than these superfluous barriers.

It didn't matter that Master Olson was much further behind in terms of accumulation and breadth of knowledge. Her expertise on motion, mechanics and engines along with her different perspective occasionally served as useful supplements to Master Willix's projects.

Of course, the main reason why Master Willix cultivated a relationship with Master Olson was because the latter might be able to play a crucial role in her ambitious research project at a later stage.

"Battle."

"Not going well."

"Partiality."

"Yes."

"Ves?"

"Interesting."

"Dwarves?"

"Mistake."

"Clarify."

"Should not exist."

"Agree, but too late."

"Regret."

"Rectification possible."

"Rights."

"Dwarves have rights?"

Master Willix frowned at her peer. "Do not question."

"Not what I have heard."

"Factions."

"Ah. Support."

"Negligible. Dwarf population insignificant."

"Sad."

"Glad."

Master Olson knew what faction that Master Willix was a part of, so she already knew it was unlikely for her standpoint to deviate.

"Nyxian Gap."

"Not now." Willix shook her head.

"Crown terrorists."

"Annoyance."

"Maybe more."

"Annoyance."

"Nyxian Gap."

"Progress will continue."

"Doubt."

"Underestimation."

"Insufficient information."

"Tell."

"Confidential."

Despite saying that, Master Willix could not predict what would happen to the Nyxian Gap as the Crown Uprising continued to unfold. The traffic to this anomalous region had tripled in the last half year and it was only projected to rise even higher in the next year.

The reason for this was unclear. Sometimes, she entertained suspicions that Ves Larkinson had something to do with the loss of the supposed crown, but she had confirmed many times that this wasn't the case. He and the Larkinson Clan had already moved far away from the Nyxian Gap by the time the galaxy-wide upheaval erupted.

Still, as she continued to see his work in action, she couldn't help but wonder if her assumptions were correct... Her mind said one thing but her instincts said another thing.

*Chapter 3246: Poor Dwarves*

"I don't want to die!"

It was fortunate that Vincent Ricklin closed his transmission capabilities, because the other Larkinsons would definitely become scandalized if they heard his words!

The Bright Warrior he piloted flew as part of a ranged mech company of the Avatars of Myth. Even though it was piloted by an expert candidate whose skill and capabilities had risen beyond the human norm, Vincent's contribution to the massive battle was not remarkable enough to stand out from the massive crowd.

In a major battle that involved over 50,000 mechs, it was impossible for a single expert candidate to attract much attention.

In fact, as soon as the Ferril AIs recognized that Vincent Ricklin's mech performed better and hit more dwarven mechs than other Bright Warriors, they designated it as a priority target that needed to be taken out quickly.

The switch happened abruptly. The mech company that Vincent previously moved with only received moderate return fire up until now. The distance between the ranged mechs of both sides was still far enough that it was difficult for both sides to reach a high hit rate.

Vincent expected that this pattern would continue to remain the same until the distance narrowed to the point where they could focus their fire on specific mechs.

It was therefore a complete surprise to him and his fellow Avatars that three Slug Ranger mech companies simultaneously directed their fire in his direction!

The incoming fire wasn't particularly precise, but Vincent could already tell that he had become their common target!

"Damnit!"

He stopped concentrating on his aim in order to perform the most desperate evasive maneuvers of his life!

Though he missed his Adonis Colossus, he knew that the large and sluggish hybrid mech wouldn't have fared well in this situation. Vincent became more charmed with his Bright Warrior as he successfully used its capabilities to avoid a lethal blow.

The Bright Warrior Mark I Version B was a balanced mech design. Even though different configurations had their own strengths and weaknesses, the change in parameters were not as extreme as in more singular mech designs.

This meant that while the Bright Warrior moved a little slower than comparable rifleman mechs, its ability to withstand damage was noticeably better!

This probably saved Vincent for the moment as his Bright Warrior got hit by a dozen different rounds despite his best efforts to dodge. In fact, trying to evade the incoming attacks was largely useless as the sheer amount of projectiles fired in his direction were so imprecise that many of them ended up hitting the mech company he was attached to. Several Bright Warriors had already shattered or fell out of formation after taking one too many hits.

Though Vincent's own mech began to look increasingly more shabby, another Avatar mech company had finally come to their aid. The Bright Warriors clad with thicker plating and carrying imposing tower shields finally flew in front of the beleaguered ranged mechs.

Though the shields wouldn't last forever, they offered the surviving rifleman mechs a crucial reprieve.

Once the battered mech pilots regained their composure, they directed their mechs to fire back at the dwarven mechs that caused them a lot of misery.

Though the dwarven ranged mechs were much less maneuverable than even the Bright Warriors, they had a lot of armor to spare. The Slug Rangers did not ascribe to the convention that mid-ranged rifleman mechs needed to be swift and maneuverable.

Instead, just like many of their other dwarven mechs, their rifleman mechs were built like tanks!

This put the rifleman mechs of the Larkinson Clan at a heavy disadvantage because they were almost entirely armed with energy weapons.

Laser weapons and positron weapons were powerful in their own ways, but were not the best at punching through thick armor. The energy they unleashed tended to spread across wider surface areas which caused a lot of general damage but none of them specific enough to breach thick enough armor.

As a result, all of the mechs armed with energy weapons had to fire at their targets consistently in order to achieve real results. Just damaging their targets was not enough. They had to persist until they finally burned or melted through the thick frontal armor of the Slug Ranger mechs!

When Vincent saw how much effort it took for him to take out a dwarven rifleman mech despite his superior precision, he cursed.

"Why the hell don't I have any of those newfangled crystal weapons?!"

Every ranged mech specialist in the Larkinson Clan had become impressed with the new luminar crystal rifle paired with the Amaranto. The news that the clan would be issuing a batch of standard luminar crystal rifles to specific units was greeted with great fanfare.

However, much to his surprise, Vincent was left out of this allocation despite his strength as an expert candidate!

"It's unfair!"

Different from Vincent and the many mech pilots who were stuck with firing ordinary weapons, the Eternal Redemptions continued to shine throughout this battle.

The cannoner mechs piloted by the best ranged specialists of the Penitent Sisters were capable of unleashing heavy blows at the cost of a slow firing rate.

This was ordinarily a major problem if they had to fight against fast and agile targets, but in this situation they had a multitude of ideal targets! Their Samheim ultra-heavy gauss cannons fired proprietary ammunition that inflicted greater kinetic damage than usual as long as they hit their targets.

The slow but sturdy Slug Ranger rifleman mechs were the ideal prey for the Eternal Redemptions! Every unit of dwarven mechs that got targeted by the Penitent Sisters quickly experienced a similar kind of hell that Vincent had just experienced.

"Requesting cover!"

"We need backup!"



"Those cannoner mechs need to be taken down or else we will all go back to Vulcan's side!"

Though there were only several hundred Eternal Redemptions, each of them had quickly turned into as much of a priority target as the Transcendent Punishers!

Fortunately, the cannoner mechs hadn't moved forward with the main wave. Instead, they hung close to the fleet and used the hulls of ships such as the Graveyard and the Spirit of Bentheim as cover. Most of the incoming fire originating from the Slug Riders ineffectively bounced off the sturdy hulls of the starships of the Larkinson Clan.

"Continue firing, sisters! The Superior Mother watches over us all! Let us slay these wicked dwarves!"

"For the Larkinson Clan!"

"For the Superior Mother!"

Kinetic rounds flew back and forth, causing huge amounts of valuable alloys and other materials to break and shatter. A trailing debris field had already formed that could earn any salvaging fleet a fortune if they were allowed to pick the most valuable scraps for just a couple hours.

Yet neither side cared about the recyclable treasures that were floating further and further away from the active engagement. Not even the rescue parties dared to launch their shuttles out of the ships they were docked at. As soon as any of their vehicles showed up in space, a mech was liable to shoot them! Getting hit just a single time was enough for them to crumple!

Not too far away, Venerable Jannzi grew annoyed as she stayed with the Living Sentinels that were also sticking close to the fleet. Her Shield of Samar functioned as a beacon of hope and a formidable shield for the Quint which was calmly firing its rifle at the Slug Rangers.

The reason why the expert pilot was displeased was because the dwarves hadn't spared much attention to the Living Sentinels!

"It makes sense for the dwarves to ignore us." Commander Casella Ingvar noted.

"We're not moving forward like the Avatars and the rest. This will change as long as the dwarves are able to breach past our forward lines and reach our rear. Don't slack off too soon."

The dwarven mechs had the advantage of numbers and were too tough. This made it difficult to block their advance. As long as they pushed hard enough, they were bound to break through!

At that time, Commander Casella knew that her Sentinels would have to bleed hard once again. They functioned as both the reserves and the final line of defense. Once the enemy mechs managed to break past her units, only the bunker mechs stationed on the starships themselves would be able to fend off the approaching attackers!

Determined not to let this happen, Casella kept her attention on the evolving battle while at the same time making sure that each of her shots landed on the same enemy mech.

The Quint wasn't armed with any of the new luminar crystal rifles for special reasons, but that did not make it weak! Casella already sensed the differences in the first few times she piloted the masterwork mech for practice purposes.

Though the living mech hadn't actually spoken to her after her first interfacing attempt, she could constantly feel that the Quint was by her side. The rifle she wielded fired positron beams that were considerably powerful in their own right. The improvement was just enough for her to avoid the frustration experienced by other mech pilots such as Vincent.

However, the overall lack of progress in whittling down the enemy mechs caused her to feel increasingly more concerned. Her leadership responsibilities forced her to constantly maintain situational awareness, so she was able to extrapolate the current results.

Her estimations were not optimistic.

"Fire faster! Don't think about energy consumption right now. If necessary, you can go back to your carriers in order to replenish your energy cells and transfer any excess heat when your mech is only halfway spent. It will still take some time for the dwarven mechs to push through our first wave."

The Sentinel mechs armed with ranged weapons fired their weapons faster as a result. The dwarves soon started to acknowledge the increased threat of the Living Sentinels, but still focused most of their firepower on the Larkinson mechs that were in the process of advancing forward.

One of the units that was already being put under fire was the Valkyrie Redeemers piloted by the Penitent Sisters. The Valkyrie Prime flying in the middle of the formation received a lot of focused fire due to how much better it looked compared to the rest.

Venerable Joshua remained cool under fire. He knew that it was not yet time for him to serve as the center of an active battle formation.

"We need to get closer first. We also need to wait until the dwarven mechs have closed ranks. Temper your speed and don't fly too close to the Avatars. Let them collide against the Molten Hammers first."

The Valkyrie mechs weren't good in frontal engagements. Though they were excellent at performing charges, it was harder to leverage their advantages in space.

For now, they held their circular shields up front in order to block the hefty rounds slamming in their direction. They also raised their pulse submachine guns forwards and fired weak but rapid energy particles in the direction of the enemy formations.

Hardly any of the pulses struck the enemy mechs, and if they did they hardly damaged the exterior. The Valkyrie Redeemers had to get much closer in order to deal effective damage!

Strangely enough, the lack of effective firepower at this range caused the Slug Rangers and the other dwarven mechs to dismiss the Penitent Sister mechs as a threat. Less and less dwarven mechs fired at the Valkyrie Redeemers. They obviously recognized that the Hexer mech model was a marauder mech and wouldn't become a priority until they got close.

Joshua mirthlessly smirked when he realized this. "These dwarves..."

He genuinely felt pity for his opponents. He did not look down on them like many other humans. To him, they were truly human and worthy of respect. Although the Vulcan Empire wasn't exactly pleasant, the dwarves had good cause to adopt a hostile posture against the tall folk.

In a different situation, Joshua would have wanted to befriend the Vulcanites and attempt to melt their hatred against normal humans. It was unfortunate that he would never have the chance.

"Poor dwarves."

#### *Chapter 3247: Her Sword*

The first melee mechs to clash against each other weren't the mechs charging at each other in the center. Space knights and other sturdy mechs took up the vanguard. Their heavy shields and their resilient frames allowed them to resist a lot of damage, making them ideal to lead the charge.

However, the need to stay behind their limited protective envelope meant that a lot of faster mechs had to limit their speed and acceleration. A unit of mechs only moved as fast as its slowest machine, and space knights that piled up lots of armor weren't known for their mobility!

Fortunately, it was not that big of a problem for them to accelerate straight forward. Many space knights incorporated specialized flight systems that were hardy and not that easy to damage. While they did not have the power to induce a lot of directional forces

on the mech, they compensated for that by putting most of their efforts into moving forward.

Perhaps the buildup of speed wasn't anything impressive at the start, but as long as the mech continued thrusting forward, it could build up greater and greater momentum that could turn it into an undaunted charger that could not be stopped unless the opposition was willing to pay a price!

Still, even with both sides charging at each other, neither side wanted to go full out. There was a risk involved with accelerating too hard and building up momentum too quickly. If both the expeditionary forces and the dwarven forces collided against each other with their full might, the chances that the mechs of both sides would suffer catastrophic damage was high!

This was not what the combatants wanted to see, so they conscientiously took their time and made sure they controlled their speeds.

In any case, the priority of the expeditionary forces at the center was to hold the line and prevent the enemy from opening a breach. While it was fine for scattered units to bypass the front and attempt to reach the interior, they would definitely be surrounded and defeated in an instant as long as they weren't accompanied by a lot of allies.

Compared to the center, the two flanks converged at each other with much greater speed! Since these mechs were more maneuverable and able to change their direction more easily, they had less to fear from self-destructive collisions or losing control.

Among the most prominent flanking units was the large number of sword-wielding mechs among the Larkinson forces.

There were two distinct groups among them that differed from each other in substantial ways.

The first were several mech companies that consisted of both veteran Swordmaidens and recent recruits. They all piloted Bright Warriors in swordsman mech configuration, though unlike the Avatars and other mech legions they swapped their thinner and more flexible blades for giant greatswords that were noted for their heft and reach. They were great at crushing thin to moderately-armored mechs but they were also slower and required harsh training to wield proficiently.

The Swordmaidens establish the harshest and most extreme training programs in the Larkinson Clan. Though they had already recruited large batches of hundreds of aspiring female mech pilots each, these younger talents were far from ready to step onto the battlefield as Swordmaidens.

There were also other batches of older and more experienced swordsman mech pilots who transferred to the Swordmaidens and began to adapt to their ways. Though these

mech pilots integrated well with this mech legion, there was still some distance to those who underwent training since they were teens.

However, Commander Sendra didn't care about this difference. Now that she and her sisters were on their way to intercept thousands of mechs of the Hivar Roarers, she felt that bringing only 40 mechs was not enough to make a difference. The extra mech companies that consisted of recent recruits would definitely come in very handy in this battle where the amount of mechs involved in the battle exceeded anything that she had ever taken part in before!

"We're playing in the big leagues now!"

As the flanking forces rapidly closed in on each other, every mech pilot began to grow more nervous and eager. No matter whether it was the humans or the dwarves, none of them had ever taken part in such a massive, soul-stirring action!

It was both frightening and awe-inspiring. Just looking at the thousands of enemy mechs they had to fight caused them to feel as if their importance had shrunk. Even if they were confident in their skills, it was unlikely for them to overcome too many enemy machines.

In a battle of this scale, the influence of individual skill and heroism was severely diminished. What mattered more to the units was their cohesion, coordination and overall mech performance!

On the surface, both sides were roughly even in this regard. The flanking forces of the Larkinson Clan and Glory Seekers reached military standards or close to it in many regards. The dwarves were slightly superior in this regard due to being a part of a regular military organization.

The morale of the Hivar Roarer mech pilots was also high. As the youngest and most recent mech division that took part in this attack, a disproportionate amount of servicemen were fanatical members of the Dwarven God Cult!

Even now, they were enthusiastically saying their prayers!

"Oh Vulcan, ye supreme dwarven authority, bless your sons and daughters so that we may smite the human infidels!"

"Great Vulcan, oh beautiful and majestic Vulcan, bless our divine mechs so that we may collapse the feeble mechs piloted by these tall folk! Let the galaxy know that dwarven mechs and craftsmanship is supreme!"

"Witness me as I smite these tortured slaves! Dwarvenkind shall always reign supreme!"

"FIRE AND BLOOD!" The dwarven mech pilots roared!

In opposition to the dwarves, the mech pilots of the Swordmaidens and the Heavensword association quickly quieted down once their greatest authority patched into their communication channel.

Back in the main design lab of the Spirit of Bentheim, Ketis had stood up from her chair and unsheathed Bloodsinger from its scabbard. She recalled Sharpie back to her mind, causing her will and presence to grow stronger and more exceptional.

A portion of the assistant mech designers working to analyze the enemy dwarven mech models even became distracted by Ketis' glow. They had never experienced the force of will of her as a Swordmaiden before!

"Get back to work!" Gloriana snapped from the other side of the design lab. "We're in the middle of a battle that will decide whether we will live or die. Don't think about anything else aside from performing your assigned job."

Ketis took no notice of what was going on in the design lab. She had shifted all of her attention over to the Swordmaiden and the Heavensworder mech pilots who fought for both the clan and herself!

She felt responsible for the Sword School disciples who chose to leave behind their stable environment in the Heavensword Association and follow her back to the Larkinson Clan. They admired her swordsmanship, idolized her identity as a Swordmaster and thought that she had boundless prospects.

At times, she thought that the Heavensworders were woefully naive. They dedicated themselves to her because they thought she could lead them to greatness.

Were they right?

Ketis was not so sure. Though the existence of Sharpie as well as her dual identity as a Journeyman and a Swordmaiden granted her a unique advantage in mastering and developing other sword styles, she never considered herself as their savior or their supreme teacher.

Yet that was exactly what the Heavensworders thought of her. They unquestionably put her up a pedestal and expected that she could help them fulfill their dreams.

She did not think she was that amazing, but she couldn't betray their trust in her. For the sake of those who put their lives on the line because of their dedication.

This was why she did not hesitate to embrace her full Swordmaster persona at this time. Sharpie formed her greatest pillar of support at this time as her willpower grew so strong

that it distorted the air around her! Anyone who stepped close to her would increasingly feel as if they were stepping into a forest of needles!

"Swordsmen and swordswomen." She began to speak, her powerful voice echoing in the cockpits of the various swordsman mechs from the Heavensword Association. "The sword is a weapon, not a tool. Each of us have devoted our entire lives to master the way of the sword. Now, the time has come to put that practice into play and utilize your skills for its greatest purpose!"

Ketis pointed her greatsword forward, which caused her will and mind to focus onto a distant enemy!

"As a Swordmaiden and a Swordmaster, I wish for nothing more than to be at your side and charge towards the enemy mech. Sadly, I can't. Piloting mechs is not my calling. As a mech designer, I can only design the machines that can fight in my stead."

She seemed to look at the Heavensworder mechs that its owners had brought with them when they decided to emigrate from their former state. None of them were Larkinson mechs and none of them were alive, but Ketis had already studied them beforehand and sensed the unique charms that their designers had imparted to their works!

"Your mechs may not be designed by me, but the spirit of swordsmanship is still there! No matter where you came from, no matter which sword school you joined and no matter the style you practice, you are all one now! Today, you are more than Larkinson. Today, you are more than a mech pilot. Today, you are more than a swordsman."

Ketis brought her greatsword back and pointed its massive blade upright. The Unending alloy weapon already began to glow as she resonated with it. A pure and upright aura emanated from her body.

"Because today, you shall act as my sword, and slice the enemies who have the temerity to wish us dead!"

The morale and fanaticism of the Heavensworders who listened to her speech had peaked at this moment! The moods of many of them rose to heights that they had never reached! Even those who witnessed Ketis breaking through in the First Sword Arena had never felt so energized in their lives!

"FOR KETIS!"

"FOR THE LARKINSON CLAN!"

"FOR THE SWORD!"

It was at this time that they finally clashed against the bestial mechs of the Hivar Roarers!

The flanks instantly turned into chaotic flashpoints!

Some of the mechs collided head-on against each other due to various reasons! These collisions did not result in a good end for either side. Some swordsman mechs lost limbs or got crushed entirely while the bestial mechs also suffered various forms of heavy damage.

Fortunately, not every mech pilot was crazy and reckless enough to charge head-on against their counterparts.

Instead, individual squads and companies began to split up from each other in order to weave and dance around their enemy counterparts.

A battle in space often devolved into a maneuvering game due to lack of constraints. However, a pattern immediately emerged.

The Hivar Roarers tried their best to push through the opposition as a whole in order to reach the ships of the Golden Skull Alliance. As long as they got close enough, they could instantly change the terms of the battle and force the humans into a disadvantageous position!

The Swordmaidens, Heavensworders, Vandals, Glory Seekers and other flanking forces tried their best to thwart the dwarven mechs from getting any closer. The defending mechs stuck to their bestial counterparts in order to compel the latter to stop going forward and defend themselves from destruction.

Though the lines of the expeditionary forces pushed back a bit due to lacking numbers, soon they stabilized as the Heavensworders began to show their worth!

"WE ARE THE SWORD OF KETIS!"

"WE FIGHT WITH HER WILL!"

"WE SHALL NEVER YIELD IN FRONT OF THE ENEMY!"

The swordsman mechs were ready to start a slaughter!

*Chapter 3248: Flanking Maneuvers*

Compared to the center, the flanks did not come under as much fire. The rifleman mechs on both sides were mostly targeting each other. Though they were more than willing to level their guns at the mechs that threatened to attack them from the sides, they couldn't afford to let the enemy ranged mechs destroy them first!



In this way, the massive battlefield involving over 50,000 mechs slowly delineated into several different sections, each of which were largely self-contained.

Though senior officers such as General Verle looked at the battlefield in a much more detailed and comprehensive manner, laymen like Ves lacked the training and expertise to see that much.

He had enough experience to be able to tell what was going on. As someone who was always sensitive towards life, he could intuitively sense that the dance of life and death had just erupted at the sides!

He leaned forward and switched the feeds of the projections to gain a better view of the action in those areas.

Ferocious Piranhas swept past the formations of the Hivar Roarers. Each time they swept close, the bestial mechs piloted by the dwarves shuddered a bit. These Vulcanites had never come into contact with glows in their life. In fact, they never heard of them except when their superiors held hasty briefings on the known capabilities of the mechs employed by the Larkinson Clan.

The dwarven mech pilots should have been more prepared for a measure that they knew what was coming. After all, a lot of industry insiders had written about the capabilities of the Ferocious Piranhas back in the Yeina Star Cluster. The third-class version of this mech model was currently the highest selling product of the Living Mech Corporation!

Yet reading about its effects was different from experiencing it themselves. The analysts and lower officers who described the effects of the Ferocious Piranhas don't even know what they were talking about. How could the mech pilots possibly anticipate and guard against a phenomenon that they couldn't even describe with their own words?

It was this initial surprise that gave the dwarven mech pilots an awful surprise. The odd shifts between feeling angry and feeling emotionless at such a rapid frequency made them all dizzy to the point where they were no longer able to maintain their concentration!

These brief interruptions were extremely deadly to the affected mech pilots as the Ferocious Piranhas piloted by the Flagrant Vandals flew just ahead of other friendly mech units!

"They're open!"

"Kill them all!"

"Drive our swords through their throats!"

The other Larkinson mech pilots had long known about the properties of the Ferocious Piranhas. They even trained alongside the Flagrant Vandals in order to maximize the utility of the light skirmisher's extremely useful glow.

Swords cut through metal without encountering any opposition. Blades thrust through weak points with much greater ease than before. Hundreds of Vulcanite mechs instantly fell into a disadvantage as they incurred a lot of damage at once!

If not for the fact that the bestial mechs were larger and a bit more massive than other mechs, many more would have fallen at the first blow!

Even so, the injuries they sustained in the first clash were so significant that their performance could no longer keep up with the heat of the battle. Their lack of power quickly stalled the momentum of the Hivar Roarers, which the Larkinsons and Glory Seekers did not miss.

"They've stalled. Keep pushing them back!" A Glory Seeker captain roared.

"The Superior Mother is with us today!"

The disarray among the dwarves granted the defenders an opportunity to launch a counter-attack. The Glory Seekers mechs that had previously hung back and fired their submachine guns at the enemy units all holstered their guns and brought out their spears.

They soon circled above and below the disrupted enemy formations before initiating a deathly charge!

"The Superior Mother demands your death!"

The dwarven mech pilots of the Hivar Roarers weren't rookies. Though they lacked real battle experience for the most part, their training was impeccable and their discipline was high. They soon learned to cope with the disruption caused by the Ferocious Piranhas. Even if they weren't able to maintain their full concentration, they wouldn't lose control like last time.

In fact, the main reason why they were able to regain control was their intense belief in Vulcan and their undying hatred against the tall folk!

"The tall folk gods seek to muddle us up!"

"Do not let the evil gods and their slaves confuse our purpose!"

"Dwarves shall never falter against the tall folk!"

The Dwarven God Cult and its ideology held a lot of sway in the Hivar Roarers. The dwarven mech pilots in the vanguard, ashamed at their poor performance, whipped themselves up to such a frenzy that their intense fury and other emotions forcibly kept themselves cool in the face of suppressive glows!

Yet just as the dwarves became accustomed to the harassment conducted by the Flagrant Vandals, the Valkyrie Interceptors of the Glory Seekers had closed in on the enemy bestial mechs!

Different from the Penitent Sisters, the Glory Seekers preferred to pilot more specialized models. The Valkyrie Interceptor was completely optimized for spaceborn engagements. By sacrificing a lot of effective performance on land and aerial environments, they were able to perform a fraction better in space.

The Glory Seekers previously retained the Valkyrie Hurricane as well. This was the aerial variant of the Valkyrie Redeemer and performed a lot better under atmospheric conditions.

However, the Battle of Reckoning had taught the Glory Seekers a painful lesson about bringing the wrong mechs to a battle. Ever since then, Marshal Ariadne Wodin and other senior officers decided that it was unlikely for them to need mechs that were optimized to fight in planetary environments. They all converted their existing Hurricanes to Interceptors and only procured the latter from that point onwards.

Now, these variant marauder mechs were about to activate one of their signature features!

The Glory Seekers did not opt to activate it when they were further away. Perhaps aware that these stubborn dwarves were not that easy to intimidate, the Hexer officers all commanded their subordinates to hold back until their Valkyrie mechs all came closer.

It wasn't until the charging mechs armed with spears and shields almost reached the hastily-prepared formations of the Hivar Roarer mechs that they performed their well-practiced routine!

"DEATH!"

The Valkyrie Interceptors all activated their Marked For Death triggered ability. Even though this feature did not have the support of prime resonance or true resonance, the inherent life of the mechs themselves was enough to power this ability to an effective degree!

In an instant, the bestial mechs targeted by individual Valkyrie Interceptors stagnated yet again.

This time, thousands of affected dwarven mech pilots felt as if they were staring right into death, which came in the form of a woman that seemed to be able to snuff out their souls with her stare alone.

A portion of strong-willed officers and mech pilots managed to shake themselves out of this paralysis.

"Don't be confused by this evil human god! Vulcan shall protect our souls!"

Unfortunately, they woke up too late. By the time their mechs were just about to evade or brace for impacts, waves of spears pierced through their armor and sank into their internals!

Many more dwarven mechs were rendered inoperable at this time!

"Starburst!" The Glory Seeker officers ordered.

The Valkyrie Interceptors that had pulled off their charges and became vulnerable to counter-attack quickly launched their grenades in unison.

When these grenades detonated, they released a hugely disorienting blast of light, particles and other forms of interference. Though short-ranged, these Starburst grenades successfully disrupted the rhythm of the vengeful Hivar Roarers mechs that were still advancing from behind.

The Valkyrie Interceptors did not linger in order to fight the bestial mechs up close but instead retreated in a smooth and organized fashion.

These were the maneuvers that the Hex Army had refined and perfected over the course of the Komodo War. The Glory Seekers still shared a close relationship with the Wodin Dynasty and by extension the Hexadric Hegemony, so their mech pilots benefited from many of the state's latest advancements.

In fact, this was just the most basic routine. The Fridaymen mech pilots had developed so many different countermeasures against this classic charge that the Hexers had to become more inventive in order to make good use of the Valkyrie product line.

One of these aspects was the follow-up. While the Valkyrie mechs were able to work well by themselves, they were even more effective if they worked alongside other units!

At this point, the vanguard of the dwarven flanking units had suffered multiple continuous surprises and setbacks in rapid succession. The tall folk that were fighting against them weren't playing by the rules!

"It's those swordsman mechs again!"

The impact caused by the Valkyrie Interceptors provided the Heavensworders with an excellent opening!

Buoyed by the continuous successes, the confident Heavensworders dove into the ranks of the Hivar Roarers and began to batter them with unrelenting aggression.

Though the Hivar Roarers all possessed sufficient training in how to cope against normal melee mechs, the swordsman mechs and the mech pilots of the Heavensword Association were far from average!

The swordsman mech models employed by the Heavensword Association were all designed to channel and complement specific sword styles.

One model was swift and agile and wielded shorter blades that allowed it to fight like a pseudo-light skirmisher.

Another model was thick and sturdy and wielded two hefty blades which allowed it to be able to entangle enemy melee mechs with great ease.

There were many more models among the Heavensworders, so much so that there was little cohesion and coherence in their formations. The only real organization they displayed was when they fought alongside similar mechs that belonged to the same sword school.

Even so, their individual prowess was incredibly formidable. They outfought many different kinds of opposing mechs with practiced moves and excellent battle sense. Though the sword styles displayed by the typical Heavensworder mechs weren't empowered by any extraordinary element, just the exquisite techniques alone put them far ahead from the Hivar Roarer mech pilots who never fought against such insanely skilled opponents!

"Wait for backup! They're just catching up. These tall folk must never break our lines!"

Though the combination of Glory Seekers, Heavensworders and Flagrant Vandals dealt a serious blow to the enemy flanking forces, the fact of the matter was that the Hivar Roarer still outnumbered them. There were many more mechs that had yet to join the fray but were rapidly coming closer.

The dwarves brought a lot more mechs!

Commander Sendra of the Swordmaidens felt a bit chilled at the sight of thousands more bestial mechs preparing to confront the Larkinsons and Glory Seekers.

Though she was proud of the performance of her side, they had only managed to repel the enemy vanguard because they exposed many of their strengths.

Now that the dwarves had seen how effective they were and how they worked, they would inevitably come better prepared this time!

Soon, dozens of Heavensworder mechs were blasted by enemy fire. Though they were amazing attackers, their defensive properties were not stellar. Aside from a number of exceptions, most of the swordsman mechs were not able to cope with being targeted by large caliber or intensive firepower.

"It's those damn turtle mechs! They finally caught up and are opening fire!"

This was one of the signature models of the Hivar Roarers. Their spaceborn version of a Doom Crawler had to take its time to reach a location, but once they did, they could suppress enemy units by performing continuous bombardment!

The way they did this was rather ingenious. Despite the slow and heavy firing rate of the cannons poking out from the four holes of their turtle shells, the turtle mechs simply spun around so that one cannon was able to fire at a target before spinning 90 degrees to allow another cannon to fire right after!

This continuous firing pattern allowed the turtle mechs to put their targets under continuous fire, which was very hard to cope with... The Heavensworder mechs were no longer able to fight as unscrupulous as before. Their momentum visibly faltered!

#### *Chapter 3249: Crumbleshells*

The struggle at the flanks took a turn from the worst as soon as the odd turtle mechs showed up. Though the Larkinsons had always been on guard against these hardy machines, it was only now that the expeditionary forces truly experienced what this ranged mech was able to accomplish!

"Those cannons hit too hard!"

"Our ranged support can't take them down!"

"Calm down! We need to charge up to them and destroy them up close."

"We can't! The other Hivar Roarer mechs are screening for their turtle mechs!"

It was only now that the main strategy of the Hivar Roarers came to life. The tiger mechs, avian mechs and other bestial machines merely served as bodyguards for the turtle mechs at the moment.

Their only role was to prevent enemy melee mechs from getting close enough to crack open the turtle shells!

When Ves saw how much impact the turtle mechs were making, he immediately became alarmed.

"What the hell are those mechs?"

He quickly called up the intelligence and the various analysis reports compiled by other mech designers.

Apparently, the turtle mechs were called the Crumbleshells. They were the signature mechs of the elite Mokabe Bombadiers mech regiment.

Even though the Bombardiers wasn't classified as an elite mech regiment, it shared several similarities with the Steel Rain.

The most notable aspect of the Crumbleshells was their odd shape and the advantages they bestowed. They were designed around their shells which offered plenty of internal volume while at the same time not displaying a large profile towards an enemy.

These turtleshells were as thick and resilient as the armor of a medium space knight. They could withstand a lot of attacks head-on, but they were highly noted for their even thicker side armor.

By concentrating a lot of armor at the sides which would usually face towards the enemy, they were much harder to damage and disable than humanoid space knights.

"This armor design is quite ingenious actually."

Aside from the vulnerable gun ports, the turtle mechs did not possess any other exterior weak points! The top, bottom and sides of the Crumbleshell design were all thick and well-protected, but not to the point that it affected its mobility too much.

Defense wasn't the turtle mech's only strong point. Unlike space knights, the Crumbleshells were able to output a moderately high amount of damage at medium range. The gauss cannons that took the place of the limbs of a normal turtle were all of medium caliber.

This did not sound impressive at first, but the Crumbleshell's main armament were designed according to much different specifications from the cannons of the Steel Rain's iconic Cracker series.

The special cannons were characterized by relatively low accuracy, low firing rate, respectable impact damage and most notably access to a lot of ammunition!

The Crumbleshell was not a heavy mech, but due to the reasonable size of its cannons, it was able to carry a large amount of ammunition and energy cells. In addition, its large bulk and plentiful armor allowed it to absorb a lot of heat.

Although the Crumbleshells weren't accurate enough to perform long-ranged bombardment, their threat level rose drastically as long as they came closer to their targets. By employing their distinctive spinning maneuver, they were able to fire their four cannons in rotation at the same target, thereby putting any enemy in their sights under a huge amount of pressure.

If the mech being targeted couldn't find any cover or if no one forced the Crumbleshell to interrupt its action, the poor machine was bound to get crushed!

This was what was happening at the moment. The Crumbleshells did not work together to concentrate their firepower on a single target. While this allowed them to destroy individual mechs at a faster rate, they instead picked their own targets and therefore maximized the amount of human mechs that came under heavy pressure.

Instantly, the tide had turned. Though the Valkyrie Interceptors urgently used their pulse submachine guns to hit back at the Crumbleshells, the rapid streams of pulsed particles simply bounced off the exterior of the turtle mechs without accomplishing anything except chipping the outermost layer!

It was more than obvious that the Crumbleshells functioned similar to a lighter version of Doom Crawlers in space. They were practically invincible at medium range.

The only way to slaughter them in an efficient manner was to attack them at point-blank range!

Anyone could see that while the Crumbleshells completely sacrificed every form of melee combat capability. They did not even have articulating limbs which meant they weren't able to employ claws or wield handheld weapons that could help them fend off attackers.

In fact, the firing angles of their four gauss cannons were also very awkward. As long as a mech managed to land on the top or bottom of their shells, there was nothing the Crumbleshells could do to fend off their slayers!

Yet no matter whether it was the Ferocious Piranhas, the Bright Warriors or the other swordsman mechs, none of them succeeded in breaking through the ranks of the other Hivar Roarer mechs.

Though the dwarves were more than happy to go on the attack, they excelled at defense! As long as they had to defend a fixed position or an important unit, they were able to employ numerous tactics that were highly effective at preventing breaches.

The hardiness of their mechs also played a good role at this time. The general dwarven design philosophy always put a lot of emphasis on defense. Even the Hivar Roarers which was supposed to be the lightest and most mobile mech division of the Ferril punitive fleet did not go too lightly when they formed their mech roster.



Now, all of the bestial mech regiments of the Hivar Roarers had stopped trying to advance at all cost. Instead, they formed a stubborn defensive envelope that matched its pace with the slow advance of the Crumbleshells.

It was as if the Hivar Roarer mechs had combined into a moving fort! No matter which angle the Larkinsons and Glory Seekers tried to attack them from, the fort was able to orient its mechs and guns quickly so that an offensive push would quickly get repelled!

Though the mechs of the expeditionary forces managed to down plenty of bestial mechs in these failed pushes, the fact of the matter was that they were losing mechs at a faster rate than the Hivar Roarers!

What was even worse was that since the Crumbleshells took action, only a handful of them had been repelled!

Occasional support fire from the distant Transcendent Punishers and other ranged mechs managed to overwhelm the defenses of a small amount of turtle mechs, but the cost was too great.

The low profile of the Crumbleshells along with their ability to move meant that it took a disproportionate amount of effort to take them down. A Transcendent Punisher could have destroyed at least two Steel Rain heavy artillery mechs with the same effort it took to take down a Crumbleshell, and that also took into account the difficulty of breaking through bunkers!

"Gloriana, those Crumbleshells are tearing up our wings!" Ves contacted his wife from the bridge. "Have you found any of their critical vulnerabilities yet!?"

"No! What makes you think I'll be able to come up with something? Those Crumbleshells are impeccably designed. I didn't expect the dwarves to be so good at designing defensive systems. The only way to take them down with ease is to fire into their gun ports while they have exposed their cannons."

Ves shook his head. "That's too difficult."

Any Crumbleshell that came under heavy fire could instantly adopt a defensive posture. They were able to retract their short-barreled cannons and close the gap with armor curtains. Though this solution prevented the Crumbleshells from attacking, it was highly worth it to increase their durability and buy time for other turtle mechs to maintain their own attacks.

Ves shifted his eyes to the left and right wings. The situation for both of them wasn't so good now that the Mokabe Bombardiers had shown their might.

Still, there was one mech legion on the flanks that had yet to take action. The Swordmaiden mechs had been hanging back. They functioned as reserves that should only take action if the Larkinsons needed a breakthrough.

Should the Swordmaidens be put into play at this time? The situation did not look ideal. Usually, the Swordmaidens were extremely effective at attacking enemy units from the flanks or behind. Their lethal offensive capabilities allowed them to mow down a huge amount of mechs in quick succession as long as their enemies weren't prepared.

This was not possible right now. The bestial mechs of the Hivar Roarers guarded the Crumbleshells from every direction. There was no proper 'front' or 'rear'.

Attacking a prepared defensive formation from the front was not the best use of the Swordmaidens. General Verle knew that as well and did not order them to go forward at this time.

"We still need to find a solution." Ves hummed and rubbed his smooth-shaven chin.

There was one solution that he knew would definitely force a breakthrough. His gaze shifted over to the friendly forces on the right wing, which was a little stronger than the forces stationed at the left wing.

As long as Venerable Dise and her elite Swordmaidens activated their battle formation, they could instantly slice through a lot of dwarven mechs, especially the Crumbleshells which had closed up in a tighter formation due to the need to form an effective defensive envelope.

"They're not tight enough enough, though."

Ves was reluctant to resort to this option because the Hivar Roarers were still too dispersed for his liking. The thousands of mechs deployed by the enemy meant that they naturally spread out over a wider area.

He decided to discuss this matter with General Verle. He activated a private communication channel and shared his ideas.

"I've been told that Venerable Dise has not been idle during this time." General Verle said. "She has made rapid progress in developing her own sword style. She has developed numerous new extraordinary sword techniques, many of which can be performed in combination with the First Sword or the Swordmaiden battle network."

Ves' eyes lit up. "Has she developed any wide area attack techniques?"

"She has, but... she hasn't performed them under these conditions before. No one can estimate the power and range of her new technique. There is a substantial chance that the broad attack will leave many enemy mechs functional if in a damaged state."

The two fell silent for a time.

"Should we do it?" Ves tentatively asked.

"...Let us be patient. Their expert mechs have yet to emerge. I have been trying to keep this card in reserve for the enemy's expert mechs. If we put it into play against ordinary mechs, we will lose a powerful option that can immediately wipe an enemy expert mech off the board."

This was certainly a critical priority, but Ves also saw that the battle at the flanks couldn't continue in this way. His forces were learning how to deal more damage to the Hivar Roarer defensive formations but the latter were still in a winning posture.

He needed to play another card. The question was which one he should use to disrupt this awful situation.

He briefly raised his newly-made hammer. Was this the right time to perform his charade? He judged that he would be able to achieve a much better effect after he played his other trump cards.

After all, it was a lot easier to pretend to be a powerful god if his mechs had all displayed extremely powerful abilities that were far beyond the capabilities of ordinary machines!

"Sir, our center units are about to collide against the Molten Hammers!"

Ves quickly directed his attention to the middle of the battlefield. After both sides steadily approached the center, the mechs began to speed up a bit so that they could cross weapons with the enemy!

#### *Chapter 3250: Molten Furies*

The collision of mechs in the center of the battlefield was slower but much more impactful!

Sturdy mechs collided against each other with their shields up front! Other melee mechs either swooped past each other while trying to rake their opponents or stopped in the middle in order to start killing as many mechs as possible.

After a long time of waiting and advancing, the mainstay mechs of the two forces had finally clashed!

The Molten Hammers were especially eager. The oldest and most storied mech division in the Ferril punitive fleet had waited for a long time in order to show their prowess once again. Now that they were allowed to fight against human mechs for the first time in

decades, the mech pilots did not want to shame their predecessors who managed to defeat the previous rulers of this star sector!

"Slaughter the tall folk!"

"Our hammers will smash them to pieces!"

"My shield shall never break!"

The first units to oppose the Molten Hammers were the Avatars of Myth and the Cross Clan!

The latter tended to field sturdier and more solid mechs than the Glory Seekers. The Crossers also favored mechs with more resilience, endurance and staying power, which made them suitable to fight in standing battles.

Ves had already caught plenty of glimpses of the mechs fielded by the Cross Clan. Many of them were designed by Professor Benedict though the majority were still rather generic.

There was nothing wrong with their performance, though. They were solid and performed well in all of the basic parameters that mattered.

As for the Avatars of Myth, many of their mechs consisted of Bright Warriors.

The rifleman mech configurations were still further in the back and were already locked in an exchange of fire with the Slug Rangers.

The lancer mech configurations had not yet built up a charge. It was too risky for them to dive into the formidable dwarven mech formations.

The swordsman mech configurations were already hard at work trying to deal damage without exposing themselves too much to the deadly dwarven mechs.

The space knight configurations were the main focal point at the moment. They were the only mechs of the Larkinson Clan that could stand up to the heavy assault that the Molten Hammers excelled at! The pressure they had to endure was incredible and it only grew worse as the unique mech models fielded by the dwarves began to show their worth.

The most iconic dwarven mech model was the space knights fielded by its elite mech regiment. The overstrength Vulcan's Chosen fielded 3000 Molten Furies, which was the signature shield-bearing mechs of the Molten Hammers!

The low stature of the Molten Furies quickly gave the Avatars of Myth and the Cross Clan a lot of headaches. None of them had much experience with fighting mechs that were so short but so resilient at the same time.

The Vulcanite mech pilots were well aware of the pros and cons of piloting dwarven mechs. They made good use of their lack of height to make it more difficult to land effective attacks on them. At the same time, they also concentrated their attacks on the mid-sections of their opponents. This often resulted in awkward exchanges where the taller humanoid mechs had to employ neglected moves in order to defend against such low blows.

Of course, the Avatar and Crosser mechs tried to lower themselves in order to fight against the dwarven mechs on an equal basis, but this only prompted the Molten Hammer mechs to do the same.

The clash in the center was by no means a static crush between two massive forces. The huge distances in space along with a need to maintain distance from too many mechs lest they collide against each other meant that the actual battle line stretched out across many kilometers.

Mechs were quite big, after all! With the high degree of effectiveness of ranged mechs in space warfare, melee mechs tended to avoid clumping up too much in order to prevent themselves from becoming easy targets.

"Stand your ground! Our clan is depending on us. Do not let a single dwarven mech pass!" Commander Melkor exhorted his men as his mech constantly fired positron beams at suitable targets.

In front of him, the melee mechs of his Avatars were struggling to contain the dwarven mechs.

The Bright Warriors they piloted all exuded identical glows that provided the Avatar mech pilots with both comfort and strength. Yet that was not enough to resist the pushing power of the Molten Hammers.

Commander Melkor quickly grew grave as he witnessed the performance of the signature mechs of their opposition.

The Molten Furies that were the main dwarven mechs responsible for absorbing the blows of their opposition were hardy and difficult to deal with. In a one-on-one fight, it took too much effort for an offensive melee mech to break through their defenses.

So far, the only way the Avatars managed to overpower these hardy machines was to gang up on them and attack them from multiple angles. The Molten Furies and their thick shields were too difficult to overcome from the front!

"Argghh!"

"Careful!"

"Don't stay too close!"

As the Avatars and Crossers began to destroy the Molten Furies, they suddenly learned why they were called this way. Anytime a Molten Fury got wrecked or ejected its cockpit, the machine in question blew up with so much force that any mechs in front of it got blasted with such violence that they inevitably incurred damage.

This presented a major problem to the mechs up front. Aside from the space knights who were still able to bear the explosions, every other melee mech had to make way and make sure they did not face any of the Molten Furies head-on. This constrained their choices and quickly caused their performance to drop.

"Hah! They're too afraid of our molten surprise!"

""Push them back, laddies!"

Commander Melkor darkened. Despite the stable performance of the Avatars of Myth, these final surprises severely caused his mech pilots to become unbalanced.

"It's just like fighting against the Holvein Grenadiers during the Battle of Reckoning." He muttered.

Fortunately, their prior experience in fighting against explosives allowed the Avatar officers to form a suitable response. The space knights largely tried to keep the Molten Furies in place while the other melee mechs sought to harass or destroy the dwarven mechs from above and below.

"The Molten Furies can't shield as well from multiple angles at a time!" Gloriana concluded after she analyzed their design. "Don't attack their sides. They can easily pivot their shields to deflect attacks from their left or right. You need to attack them from a vertical angle. Attacking from below will definitely make them flustered!"

After just a few rounds of fighting, the Larkinsons confirmed Gloriana's analysis. It appeared that typical dwarven mechs were much less capable of defending themselves against attacks from the top or bottom of orientations.

Their shields were thick and they were able to defend well in horizontal directions. However, if an attack came from above, they had to angle their shields to cover their exposed top profile, which inevitably made it easier for enemy mechs to bypass the dwarven mech's defenses.

The Molten Furies were especially bad at defending against attacks from below. Their arms were short, so the only way to deal with this situation was to rotate their frames so they faced downwards.

Of course, the problem with that was that they exposed their upper sections to the enemy mechs that were previously to the front.

Humanoid mechs had difficulties defending from below as well, so this was not a unique weakness to dwarven-shaped machines. It was just that the Molten Furies were so sturdy that the expeditionary forces were desperate to grasp any possible advantage.

Since attacking their rears was too difficult in this large-scale engagement, then attacking from below was a good alternative!

Due to this, the battle became increasingly more three-dimensional as the mechs moved along the z-axis. The mechs were drifting further apart but not so much that they exposed too many loopholes to their opponents.

Commander Melkor tried his best to maintain situational awareness. He was constantly trying to keep his units together and occasionally issued orders to direct more mechs in areas where the dwarven mechs slowly gained an advantage.

Despite the various responses made by the expeditionary forces, the Molten Hammers were steadily pushing forward. Not only was it difficult to damage the dwarven mechs in set battles, the dwarven mech division also outnumbered its foes!

With several thousands more mechs than the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan could muster at the center, it became too difficult to rely on positioning and tactics to hold the line.

The defense effort was faltering!

This wasn't entirely the fault of the Molten Furies. These dwarven space knights were good at withstanding attacks but weren't nearly as good as dishing them out. They were all armed with one-handed axes that did not possess a lot of reach.

They had one advantage, though.

Axes were great at damaging shields!

The Molten Furies did not even bother to bypass the shields of the defensive Bright Warriors and other space knights. They just hacked at the shields right in front of them with such enthusiasm that their victims were definitely feeling a lot of pressure!

"Damnit, we can't hold!"

"Our swords can't overcome their defenses fast enough!"

"We need help or else we can't hold the line!"

Though the offensive mechs of the Larkinsons and Crossers tried their best to work around the strengths of the tricky dwarven space knights, the Molten Furies responded by tightening their formation so that they formed overlapping shield walls that looked like giant half spheres!

No matter whether the Larkinson or Crosser mechs tried to attack from the front, left, right, above or below, there were always thick and sturdy in their way. The amount of attacks that were actually able to land on the frames of the Molten Furies were distressingly few, and even if an attack went through the thick base armor of the dwarven space knights always limited the damage to just shallow marks.

"This is a real defensive mech regiment!" Commander Melkor gasped.

The Molten Furies belonged to the Vulcan's Chosen, which was the premier mech regiment of the 7th Mech Division of the Ferril Provincial Army. They were all extremely well trained and proud of their heritage and illustrious record.

Venerable Orthox De Massie, the expert pilot of the infamous Gatecrasher, had risen up from the Vulcan's Chosen!

"Hold fast, Avatars! No defense is impregnable! Help is on the way!"

Although the dwarven formation left an obvious weak point at the rear, none of his Avatar mechs took advantage of this opening.

This was because they had to fight through the offensive mechs of the Molten Hammers first!

Though the offensive melee mechs of the Molten Hammers didn't seem to be in a hurry to go on the attack, a number of them had already collided with the human mechs and showed off a frightening degree of threat despite their shorter stature.

None of the dwarven mechs were easy to deal with! The Molten Hammers were so good at frontal warfare that fighting a battle on their terms was no less than suicide!

"We need a way to break their cohesion." Commander Melkor concluded.

His heart ached whenever he saw another Avatar mech going down after getting overwhelmed by axes and other heavy weapons. The Molten Hammers were not only fighting in their element, but also had the advantage of numbers at their side!



Though the latter wasn't so obvious at the moment, when Melkor looked at the deep ranks of dwarven mechs just waiting to have their turn at hacking the human mechs, he couldn't help but feel that his Avatars were inadequate.

They performed well against smaller and less disciplined units, but now that they were fighting against a real heavy assault mech regiments, the difference between a private mech legion and a professional military mech division had become very obvious!