

Chapter 1401 Spiritual Produc

Ves took his newly-created spiritual product and left the 'workshop'.

He quickly found out that if he did not wish to abandon his detached spiritual projection, then he had to depart from Lady Miralix's mind first.

Leaving took little effort. The main difficulty in entering her mind from a distance was tracking down her very minute presence in the imaginary realm. Exiting merely required him to phase through the barriers of her mind.

Because of the differences between their states, they actually didn't really bump into each other. The new spiritual product he created also exited fairly easily, proving that it fell into the category of a spiritually powerful entity, though only barely.

However, as he crossed out of Lady Miralix's mind and instantly dragged his spiritual projection and its cargo back to his own mind, he thought back to his Mastery experiences.

Was the System doing something similar? Had it already mastered the ability to spiritually project someone's consciousness and insert them into other people's minds?

"Am I reinventing the wheel?"

It irked him a bit that some of his experiments and explorations resulted in innovations that others had already come up with. Not being the first person to invent some of his spiritual new techniques struck a significant blow to his vanity.

"Damn it. Couldn't it have taught me some of these tricks earlier?"

He only let this wrinkle spoil this mood for so long. As a teacher himself, he knew the value of solving problems without assistance. Although it sounded

paradoxical, it really was the best way for someone to learn a new ability or technique.

So even if the System appeared to possess a more refined set of applications of Spirituality, Ves did not even consider begging it to teach him some tricks. He was doing well enough on his own by learning at his own pace.

As Ves fully returned his entire consciousness in his own mind, he regarded the spiritual product in his mind with the fondness of an artisan creating a seminal piece of work.

There was a reason why he called the spiritual fragment that combined his own spiritual energy with the Dragon Cat's spiritual remnant a product.

It was, in essence, a manufactured creation!

Even if the production process took place in a purely spiritual setting, it did not detract from the fact that it had come into existence through deliberate intent.

"Am I a god now?" He asked himself.

Well, he didn't really feel like one, so he probably had some ways to go. In any case, the point was that Ves made significant strides in his design philosophy.

He had gone from using spiritual fragments directly as his design spirits after minimal processing to using them as the raw materials of a more sophisticated spiritual product!

This was like if he used to eat eggs by boiling them and eating directly by using them as ingredients for a traditional cake. The latter was much more sophisticated than the former, thereby opening up many possibilities with what he could do in his work!

Sure, the product he created looked kind of rough and unpolished when Ves inspected it further. The spiritual fragment only merged together the two different kinds of spiritual energies in a rudimentary fashion.

This was a product created out of trial and error rather than deliberate theory. Ves still had no idea why it worked at all and how he got the two energies to establish a basic, symbiotic bond with each other.

"It's good enough that it worked!"

For a mere modification project, Ves didn't quibble too much about the shortcomings of his spiritual product. In fact, applying his new creation to the Kinslayer would be a very good opportunity to put this innovation to the test!

"You're going to need a name. You deserve that at the very least." He whispered.

He had breathed life into the remains of a spiritually dead entity. The new creation might have incorporated some of his spiritual strength, but it was completely detached and independent from himself.

All their common ground did was make the newborn spiritual entity more open and trusting towards him. It had not yet developed a sophisticated consciousness that stood up on its own.

"It's like a baby, pretty much, but without the incessant crying and need for milk and comfort."

He spontaneously decided to call it Vescas.

The name didn't matter. What Ves cared more was what its creation represented for his future development.

No longer was he bound to the whims of his spiritual fragments if he ever obtained them for his future projects!

As long as they proved recalcitrant, uncooperative or incompatible, Ves could choose to overpower their defenses and break them apart!

"It's just like dismantling a useless mech in order to recycle its parts and materials!"

If he did this to living spiritual fragments, he was essentially killing them by doing this. Their spiritual imprints tying them to their source would still linger, but no longer did they play a significant role.

As long as Ves introduced his excess spiritual energy and melded it into the broken spiritual remains, his living spiritual imprint would overpower and subsume the dead spiritual imprint of the original source!

This was exactly what happened in the case of Vescas!

As Ves continued to probe his new organic product from every angle, he noted that its spiritual imprint had changed as well.

It contained elements from both the deceased Dragon Cat and himself along with a lot of random elements.

The latter proved to be the component that distinguished the new entity's imprint from both its parent sources.

Vescas firmly existed as an independent spiritual entity, and only possessed loose familial ties with Ves and the Dragon Cat!

"This must be the reason why I can't control it like a limb. It really is akin to a child!"

The path of life revolved around the wonder and mysteries of life. Surprises and unexpected behavior was part of what made life so vibrant every day.

If Ves turned back to the path of determinism, then he might prioritize a way to enslave the spiritual product and keep it under his heel.

"I can't do that." He shook his head.

Right now, he did not wish to besmirch the path of life and tread over its core values. Now that he created a new form of spiritual life, he wanted to put Vescas to good use where it could develop into something more.

"It might be my baby, but it's also a product! Products are meant to be used, not pampered!"

He wasn't running a charity, after all!

As Ves quietly studied Vescas further by probing it with his own Spirituality, he found out that the spiritual product contained a messy fusion of both his understanding of mech design and the Dragon Cat's rich experience in combat!

This was a very ideal fusion considering that both of them complimented well with a tiger mech once they combined their strengths!

"It's all about symbiosis!"

His own Spirituality was highly familiar with mechs and mech designs, but it possessed no battle expertise.

The Dragon Cat's remnant spirituality knew nothing about how mechs worked, but it possessed an abundant amount of battle intent and experience.

Combining the two together resulted in an ideal fusion where the strengths of both covered the weaknesses of each other!

The spiritual product's familiarity and intimacy with mechs was the highest of any spiritual fragment he came in touch with in the past!

Entities such as Qilanxo's spiritual fragment and Prophet Ylvaine's spiritual fragment all possessed their own strong points.

However, all of the supplemental images he blended into them only supplemented some familiarity and expertise in mechs into them. It did not change their fundamental makeup in a very significant way.

It was more like the previous spiritual fragments began to wear mech-themed coats. Underneath their clothes, they still reflected their source, which possessed little to no familiarity at all with mechs.

This was why his latest innovation was so important. Rather than drape his spirituality over the fragments in a shallow manner, he shoved it inside their spiritual makeup! This forced them to integrate a much larger proportion of his intimacy of mechs!

For this reason, Ves regarded Vescas as the next step in his utilization of spiritual fragments. Despite its lack of strength compared to Ylvaine's spiritual fragment or Qilanxo's spiritual fragment, its depth and familiarity to mechs far surpassed the older spiritual entities!

"It's kind of a way of accomplishing more with less."

Ves had been driven to this point out of necessity. The Dragon Cat's spiritual remnant had already died by the time he got to it. What he essentially did was repurposing the spiritual carcass into something new and functional.

If he could already do this with some dead spiritual remains, what if he applied the same method to something stronger?

His eyes shone as he started to imagine the possibilities if he managed to harvest a living spiritual fragment from a notorious Crown Cat such as Zeigra!

In fact, his greed urged him to take more. Instead of harvesting a mere fragment from the huge cat's spirituality, Ves aimed to capture it whole!

Of course, he didn't think it was as simple as yanking Zeigra's spirituality out of his mind as soon as he caught sight of the Crown Cat.

He figured that he'd only have an opportunity to do so at the moment of its death. As the fate of the Dragon Cat's spiritual remnant already showed, when a powerful creature died, their spirituality became unmoored.

This would be the time when Ves would make his move!

"In order to get to that point, I have to make sure Lady Miralix and her hunters are piloting the strongest mechs possible!"

His motivation towards his current assignment shot up into the sky! He deeply committed himself to improving the mechs of the Catstrikers, especially Miralix's Kinslayer!

As soon as he came off his inner contemplation, he dragged Lucky and Nitaa over to the mech workshops where he immediately went to work.

Aside from drawing up modification plans on the fly for the humanoid mechs, Ves poured his entire heart into tweaking and refining the Kinslayer.

Ves was like a bundle of energy as he completely immersed himself into his work. While the other mechs of the Catslayers only received modest alterations, the modifications he made to the Kinslayer became much more pronounced!

With Vescas housed in his mind, he actively solicited it during the modification process. Even if it was too immature to make its own decisions, just familiarizing the spiritual product to the mech was an important step.

"Look closely! This is going to be your new home soon!"

Overall, the changes he made to the Kinslayer made it conform a little more to the Dragon Cat. In fact, Ves spent more time and effort on applying cosmetic changes than altering its performance.

Appearances mattered! As Ves added various decorative elements to the mech, the tiger mech became more and more majestic. Along with the latent

X-Factor it developed because of how much Ves invested in the modification plans, the mech slowly began to take an entirely different air!

To the mech technicians working at the workshop, their leader's personal mech began to acquire the stature it deserved!

While Lady Miralix understood little of what Ves was actually doing, she applauded his efforts nonetheless.

"Fantastic work, Mr. Larkinson!" She clapped her hands in satisfaction. "I knew it was worth it to involve you in my hunt! I can already imagine how well my new and improved Kinslayer will perform against Zeigra! The footage that we'll record will surely look epic!"

Though he shared some of her enthusiasm, Ves did not let his feelings detract from the dangers they faced.

"Please don't think you'll be invincible when you pilot the new Kinslayer. We're facing a Crown Cat, after all. Or other preparations can't fall behind."

Lady Miralix quickly regained her composure. "Ah, yes, you're right. We can't take any Crown Cat for granted. It's been a while since we last observed Zeigra in battle, so he may have grown stronger than we projected in the meantime. Hopefully, your efforts have closed the gap."

"We can only hope." Ves said cautiously.

Chapter 1402 The Crown Hun

After a week of tinkering and modification work, the Felixia Catslayers finally commenced with their ambitious hunt.

Practically half of Kemila's residents emerged from their homes, bars and other workplaces in order to witness the procession of the Felixia Catstrikers.

Like any dutiful scion and mech pilot of House Laterna, Lady Miralix ingratiated herself in Kemila's hunting community.

She spent a fair amount of time in the middling hunting city going on various hunts, doing business with the local shops and service providers, and learning from more experienced hunters.

For this reason, lots of locals paid attention to everything she did. So when she and her hunting team finally set off for their long-anticipated hunt, the citizens of Kemila largely cheered them on that morning!

Nonetheless, the moment the crowds at the streets caught sight of the altered Kinslayer marching proudly at the head of the procession, their cheers stilled in their throats for a moment.

"This mech!"

"How come it looks so different than before!"

"Not even the huge cats I've faced in battle are as ferocious as Lady Miralix's Kinslayer!"

A burst of discussion and admiration exploded from the crowd of people closest to the compound. Almost everyone in the city caught a glimpse of the Kinslayer or its predecessors before.

Yet the difference between now and then was that the current incarnation of the Kinslayer gave a vastly stronger impression than before!

Whereas before the hunters regarded the Kinslayer as a fine battle machine and a quality mech, now they started to believe it had become capable of something more.

The Kinslayer evoked a powerful sense of pride and confidence! Even Ves looked a bit stumped when he witnessed the mech basked in the energy of the parade.

Vescas, the Kinslayer's new design spirit, took after its parents! Its pride came from the Dragon Cat while its confidence came from himself! The two of them

combined led to an aura that turned the Kinslayer into a mech that made everyone believe it could triumph against a Crown Cat!

"Meow."

"Oh, you silly Lucky." He admonished the pet that perched on his shoulder. "I can't turn you into something like that. You'll have to develop your own air."

"Meow!"

"I don't think you'll appreciate the process I have to do in order to make you resemble the Kinslayer."

Ves, Lucky and Nitaa accompanied the hunting team in one of their four fast legged transports.

Each hunting team consisted of twelve mechs and up to four extra support vehicles. The latter carried spare parts, some basic fabrication and repair equipment, additional supplies and more.

The legged transports resembled the ones the Vandals and Swordmaidens utilized on Aeon Corona VII.

Of course, the models used by the Catstrikers were optimized for close-to-standard gravity, so they moved a lot faster. At their full speed, they could keep up with any sprinting medium mech.

Right now, Ves looked out of the transparent viewscreen at the top of one of the legged transports. His commanding view over the crowd and the mechs in the procession gave him a very clear picture of how the changes he made to the Kinslayer sparked a drastic change to how people reacted to its appearance!

Compared to the seemingly-transformed tiger mech, the humanoid ranged and melee mechs that trailed after it like obedient soldiers barely looked any different.

While Ves did manage to help the mech technicians perform various tweaks and optimizations under the hood, he simply didn't have the time or resources to impart them with a spiritual component.

"Hopefully, it won't come to bite me back in the butt."

Ves, Lady Miralix and everyone else accompanying the hunting team depended on the performance of the humanoid mechs to wear Zeigra down.

If the humanoid mechs failed to contain the powerful Crown Cat in the first couple of rounds, then the Kinslayer might be forced to step forward prematurely!

This was an outcome that everyone on their hunting team wanted to prevent, including Ves. He thought he could make more improvements to the other mechs, but the Kinslayer demanded so much of his attention that he barely squeezed enough time to soup up the other mechs.

"Well, it's not like they were in shambles before I got my hands on them. I've seen worse."

To someone like Lady Miralix, succeeding in this hunt determined the success she enjoyed in the future. With so much at stake, it did not surprise him at all that she paid far more attention to the state and quality of her mechs than regular mech commanders.

Ves approved of her attitude. Her willingness to make a lot of concessions in order to acquire his assistance proved how much she invested in her mechs.

"If more mech pilots and mech commanders were like her, the LMC would be making vastly more sales."

In truth, even if more and more people in the mech community started to learn about the remarkable nature of his products, they still hesitated to open their wallets. The high prices that his company charged still posed an enormous deterrent to popularizing his style of mechs.

It reminded Ves that he had to design a series of cheaper mechs at some point in order to service the lower end of the mech market.

"Mr. Larkinson?" Nitaa asked. She'd been standing quietly at his side in the observation compartment. "Please forgive me for my presumptuousness, but can I ask a question?"

"Sure. You don't need to ask for permission. I consider you as something more than just a bodyguard."

"What are we even doing here? What is so important about participating in this dangerous hunt that you have to participate in person?"

Ves stopped admiring the work he did to the Kinslayer and turned around to face his Kinner bodyguard. He had to crane his neck upwards due to her height, which irked him a bit.

"Nitaa, you've spent some months in my company, which is enough time for you to become familiar with me. Do you think I'm the sort of person who does something without a reason?"

She shook her head. "I know that you are not one for wasting time, sir."

"This is the same. My words and actions might not make much sense from time to time, but there's always a reason behind my decisions."

"But are your decisions sound?" She questioned. "Although I don't wish to disparage you, I think the concerns expressed by your executive assistant are valid. Your judgement is... outside the norm."

Ves crossed his arms. "I'll give you that. I know what Gavin and you are worried about, but you just have to put your faith in me that I am doing the best for both myself and anyone who depends on me. There are factors in play that I don't dare to reveal to you or anyone else."

"I understand that, sir, but is it worth taking so many risks?" She frowned. "Right now, we are on our way to hunt one of the deadliest hostile creatures on Felixia. Each Crown Cat is a tough and unreasonable monster. Who knows how many mechs have succumbed to the rage of these huge cats, and legged transports aren't exempt from danger!"

"I share your concerns, Nitaa, but I'm still convinced this is the best course of action for me. I have already made a lot of gains on Felixia, but the grand prize has yet to fall into my hands. I won't leave Felixia until I'm satisfied!"

He turned back towards the viewscreen in order to watch the hunting team move out of the city premises and head into the deepest hunting zone within Kemila's range.

In truth, Ves already made a lot of gains. Without coming across a damaged and dying spiritual remnant from an exobeast that had recently been slain, Ves would have never come up with his series of new spiritual techniques.

It was in rare encounters like these that frequently prodded him into coming up with novel solutions to unexpected problems. Spiritual invasion, spiritual alignment and spiritual restoration were the latest tools he added into his spiritual toolbox.

His options and his versatility in the spiritual department grew by the day. He had made a lot of strides in the path of life since the start of his one-year tour, so much so that Ves thought it might be time to hit the brakes soon.

Though the path of life continued to tempt him with greater possibilities, he couldn't neglect the path of determinism. Adding too many uncontrollable factors in his mech designs would eventually lead to disaster!

To him, life possessed unlimited potential. The danger here was that not every outcome favored him. If his own design spirits turned against him one day, Ves would have to rely on precautions to limit the damage.

Unfortunately, the path of life did not place a strong emphasis on control. Once a new spiritual product came into existence, Ves lost direct control over them. How they developed was anyone's guess.

Only the path of determinism provided a solid framework to rein in his spiritual products! Even if the problem didn't appear to be acute right now, he saw the need for solutions to be ready at hand in the future.

"Will there ever be a time where you can let your guard down and stop chasing after power?" Nitaa asked, interrupting the silence.

Ves ruefully smiled as he stared at the giant tropical forest looming closer and closer.

"I don't think that time will ever come. There's always a threat in the background that is ready to pull out the knives as soon as I reveal my back to them. If I wanted to be at the whim of fate and circumstance, I can just abandon everything I have and turn back to the life of a normal space peasant. Even then, I'll never be safe, as normal citizens are still subject to events that affect entire states."

His answer made Nitaa uneasy, though she already expected such an answer.

"When someone grows into power, they have the option to resist. Those that lack sufficient power have no choice at all."

"Exactly. I've suffered from lacking power plenty of times in the past. No more. As soon as I gained some control over my life, I resolved to never put myself in such a helpless condition again. The decisions I've made and the risks I've taken are a necessary price to pay in order to remedy my deficiency."

"You could slow down, sir." Nitaa frowned. "I won't argue with you about the merits of pursuing growth, but the speed and urgency in which you are doing it has turned you into a greater threat to yourself than any external enemy!"

Ves turned around again and faced Nitaa with a flat face. "Haha. That's funny. Nice joke. Just to be clear, I'm always doing what is best for myself! Sure, I have to go through a lot of pain sometimes, but there is always light at the end of the tunnel."

The two stopped talking once the hunting team finally moved into the tropical forest. The massive genetically-modified trees towered far above the height of mechs, providing both hunter and prey with plenty of solid obstacles that made every attempt to sprint a nightmare in this environment!

Their comms also chirped, notifying that they had both lost connection to the planetary network.

"The hunting zones are under a complete blockade." Ves said seriously. "There's no way we can call for help."

Everything fell into the neatly-planned arrangements of House Laterna. The hunting zones became areas where hunters had to rely on their efforts to catch their prey.

If they failed, no one would come and save them. No matter how many signals they transmitted, no one would come to their aid.

Even a privileged member of a noble house was not exempt! In the eyes of House Laterna and almost every other noble institution, the sanctity of the hunt mattered more than the life of a single family member!

"We're on our own from now on!" Ves declared. "The true hunt has begun!"

Chapter 1403 Prey by Design

Tracking an immense cat-like creature in a hunting zone required a bit of effort. The experienced hunting consultants riding on the legged transports constantly scanned their surroundings.

Enormous creatures ordinarily left a lot of traces of their passage behind. Ves understood little of what they saw, but one day after they set out, the Felixia Catstrikers found a trail!

"The tracks are over two weeks old. Not bad." One of the fellows stated at the observation compartment of one of the transports.

Ves, Lucky and Nitaa happened to be present as well. The rest of the cramped transport's interior looked absolutely drab. The vehicle's entire design revolved around function. Hardly any thought had been spent on comfort, which Ves personally thought was a bad design choice!

The hunters and other personnel aboard the transports didn't share his complaints. To them, a hunt was serious business. This was no time to sink into a comfortable couch and enjoy a nice glass of wine!

Certainly, a longer hunt on an untamed planet might merit some priority on comfort, but the Felixia Catstrikers estimated that their current hunt would not last longer than a week.

During this period, every mech pilot and every staffer had to be as alert and focused on the job as possible!

Even Ves still carried some responsibilities. He had to keep track of the conditions of the mechs of the hunting team throughout the course of the hunt.

He also had to pitch in with performing acute repairs in the field after they concluded a round of fighting with the Crown Cat.

He knew he'd become very busy soon, which was why he prized this quiet period at the beginning. If only he had a comfy couch instead of a drab alloy bench to rest upon! His seat didn't even come with a backrest!

As the hours passed by, Ves idly distracted himself by studying the surrounding terrain.

The hunting zone that kept Zeigra contained within its area was situated in the very depths of a very huge tropical rainforest environment. Different from regular forests, House Laterna seeded the lands with supersized tropical trees.

It took an extremely long time for these trees to grow to their current height and size, but once they did they absolutely towered over every mech!

Ves studied the basic parameters of the trees beforehand and found out that even mechs and huge cats had difficulty cutting them down!

While they weren't invincible or even highly resilient, their sheer size and mass made trying to cut them down a waste of time. A mech or a huge cat would have to expend way too much energy to go through all of that wood, and that only took care of one among billions of trees!

Aside from the massive trees and huge shrubs and bushes, plenty of wildlife also livened up the vibrant rainforest. Various creatures the size of dogs comprised the smallest animals in the forest.

Larger animals the size of bears or hippos preyed upon these bottom-tier animals, but even these mighty genetically-strengthened predators fell prey to the various cats roaming the hunting zone!

Yes, cats!

Zeigra was far from the only huge cat to occupy the hunting zone. House Laterna wanted to provide hunters with a realistic and challenging hunting experience, and facing multiple predators fell within the range of possibilities that could overcome a hunting team.

For this reason, Lady Miralix and the other hunters slowed their pace and progressed carefully into the rainforest. Even as they tracked Zeigra's old tracks, they kept their eyes peeled out for the tracks of smaller but still threatening huge cats.

Still, even the most vigilant hunters fell prey to surprises.

Just as Ves was shifting his seating posture, alarms suddenly rang throughout the compartment!

"Alert! Massive heat signature detected to the west!"

The observation chamber immediately locked down by sliding down the armored shutters over the transparent windows!

"What's going on?!" Ves asked with concern.

"A huge cat is lying in ambush along our path!"

Ves activated a projector and inputted his temporary credentials. Due to his sweeping responsibilities, he gained extensive access to the systems of the hunting team.

Right now, he used his access to call up the live footage of the fight about to take place outside.

As soon as someone sounded the alarm, the mechs and vehicles of the hunting team all moved into position. The legged transports all huddled together, forming the center of a loose formation of ranged mechs that all pointed their weapons outward.

Circling around them, the melee mechs brandished their weapons as they adopted postures that would help them deflect or withstand any pounce from a huge cat!

In this circumstance, the mechs couldn't afford to evade or dodge an attack! Neither the ranged mechs or the legged transports were built to withstand the raw fury of even a regular huge cat for more than a couple of seconds!

"It's coming!"

The bushes to the west parted as a huge cat pounced at the nearest machine, which happened to be a knight mech immediately placed upon the spot!

The cat did not utter any roar at all, perhaps thinking that its attack hadn't been noticed at all!

In truth, the hunting team already locked on the creature's noise, heat signature and other indicators a while ago!

Even if the huge cats were genetically modified to make them harder to detect, that only worked in distances ranging to kilometers. This close, their huge bulk made it untenable for them to remain undetected!

As the huge cat which looked like a green-and-orange panther pounced, the knight mech which stood in the way began to bend its stance and angle its kite shield.

CLANG!

The colorful panther's claws raked across the surface of the shield and deflected to the side! The rest of the huge cat's body partially slammed against the shield as well, but due to the clever angling, started to bounce aside as if it was a stone skipping across water!

"Yes! The cat fell for it! He's dead meat now!"

The hunting consultant's words proved accurate. The panther who looked like an abomination of a kid's doodling had been thrown so off-guard by the failed pounce that it failed to react in time to the threats approaching its flanks!

Two spearman mechs flanking the knight mech charged forward and rammed their weapons through the thick hide of the huge cat!

"AOOOOOWW!"

The huge roar emanating from the injured creature was so forceful that Ves had the illusion that it rattled his bones!

He picked up Lucky and hugged his cat close to his chest.

"Look, Lucky! That's what happens to big, dumb cats! I better hope you don't grow up as large and stupid like this genetic failure!"

"Meow!"

"Just look at the awful coloring of its coat! The biotech researchers who cooked up its genes have no artistic sense at all! Anyone who takes a look at it will immediately develop the impression that it's a clown! Considering its idiotic decision to ambush a hunting team, I'm not surprised it's lacking in the intelligence department!"

Once the cat suffered two deep puncture wounds, the hunting team adopted a conservative and vigilant posture.

Only the knight mech and the two spearman mechs sparred with the bleeding panther. The other mechs including the Kinslayer vigilantly faced every other direction in case any other hidden cats lay in wait to pounce!

Just because some huge cats were stupid didn't mean every specimen charged at their deaths!

Most cats, especially the more mature and older ones, developed sentient or near-sentient intelligence. This made them especially dangerous as their planning and cooperation exceeded the norm of regular exobeasts.

Perhaps the most fearsome disaster that could befall a hunting team was being ambushed by a pride of multiple huge cats!

When each of these massive creatures consciously and proactively hunted together, then the battle power they could exert increased exponentially!

Fortunately, it appeared that the colorful panther brought no friends and backup. The knight mech easily fended off the weakening panther's instinctive attacks while the spearman mechs continued to poke more holes into its flanks and rear.

After eight minutes of steady dancing, the panther finally developed second thoughts. Though it attempted to escape multiple times, the hunting mechs did not allow it to escape with its life intact.

The green-and-orange panther might develop a grudge against the Felixia Catstrikers or other hunting teams! To prevent the resentful cat from taking revenge in the future, the Catstrikers had to nip the attacker in the bud!

"It can't run!"

Stabbed by spears from both flanks, the huge cat had bled out so much from its puncture wounds that it could no longer summon up the strength to stop the knight mech from stabbing through one of its eyes with a sword!

"It's dead!"

Despite this small accomplishment, none of the hunters expressed any excitement.

In fact, the hunting team outright ignored the carcass of the panther and quickly started to get back on the move!

"Why are we leaving the carcass behind?" Ves frowned.

"The huge cat is only an adolescent of its species." The hunting consultant shook his head. "Lady Miralix won't earn any prestige for hunting such a weak prey. Zeigra is our only target. We are to avoid any lesser huge cat as hunting them down provides no benefit to our hunting team!"

The cat that pounced on them just a moment ago turned out to be young, inexperienced and weak!

The fury and combat prowess of a Crown Cat definitely surpassed that of this trivial panther!

What they encountered was just a taste of what was about to come!

"Is it unusual to face a lot of ambushes by other huge cats?"

"It's as normal as any other hunting environment." The hunter smiled. "Many times, hunting teams that set out to hunt down a specific cat will return with the carcass of another cat on their transports. Every cat in every hunting zone is our enemy. Some are clever and know better than to confront a team of mechs, but other cats like the panther just then are compelled to attack anything big that moves!"

"Even if they face a bunch of mechs that they can't eat?" Ves scratched his head.

The hunter's smile turned into a grin. "There's us humans inside those mechs, you know? The transports like the ones we are on right now carries a lot more humans. Some cats are really hungry for human flesh. Others deliberately target us because they're smart enough to realize that they're nothing but prey that exists solely for our amusement!"

Now that he thought about it, the fate of most huge cats on the Asco Continent was kind of tragic. A lot of huge cats emerged from test tubes instead of born from actual mother cats.

Knowing no love, they grew rapidly as their genes compelled them to eat and eat until they grew to an immense size. This hastened and industrial-like upbringing did the mental states of the cats no favor.

"The smarter the cats, the more they comprehend the nihilism of their existence! Their entire lives came into being for the sole purpose of giving us humans some feisty prey to hunt!"

The way the hunter gleefully talked down on the huge cats made it clear to Ves that some hunters were in it to satisfy their need to take down something bigger and stronger than them. Humans were so small compared to the size of the huge cats that it gave the former a power rush whenever they took down something so enormous!

"Don't you think that some of these cats deserve better?" Ves cautiously asked.

The hunting consultant threw an ugly look at him. "Prey is prey. No matter how deadly they are and how smart they grow, the cats are always destined to turn into our fur coats and hunting trophies mounted on our walls. In the parlance of mech designers like you, they are prey by design!"

House Laterna designed the vast majority of the huge cats on the Asco Continent to serve as hunting fodder!

In no instance did the biotech researchers and the hunters ever think that the huge cats deserved any chance of escaping this fate!

For some reason, Ves felt inordinately sad for the huge cats.

"Meow!"

Of course, Lucky didn't see it that way. To him, the huge cats were merely mutations that deviated enormously from the ideal cat!

Chapter 1404 Beyond Purpose

The hunting team rested only for a short period after taking down the huge panther. As mechs started to remain on guard, Ves and a handful of mech technicians exited their legged transports and performed perfunctory maintenance and repairs on the mechs engaged in battle.

Only the knight mech that faced the brunt of the panther's charges required some minor fixes. The mech had been designed to absorb a lot of shock, and it had properly braced and angled itself to redirect a large portion of the forces slamming into its shield.

"Alright, it's done!" Ves shouted as he recalled the mech technicians who replaced a few minor broken subcomponents.

The work they performed amounted to nothing but an emergency patch. Only after they rested for the night would the maintenance crew be able to perform more thorough maintenance.

Right now, the carcass bleeding and stinking all over the place made this location a very poor resting spot! Who knew how many hungry cats would converge on the site!

The hunting team departed within an hour. Lady Miralix declined to take any trophies from the corpse of the brightly-colored panther. The noblewoman and her hunters considered the huge cat to be too young, juvenile, stupid and unworthy to celebrate its death!

Back inside the legged transport, Ves harbored mixed feelings about the attitudes expressed by the hunting consultants and other people on the team.

Their callous treatment of huge cats like the panther made it clear that they saw every huge cat in the hunting zones as prey and only prey.

The only value the huge cats offered to the hunters was how much bragging rights they provided to the hunters. It was as if every huge cat wandered around with a floating label on top of their heads which signified how much reputation and prestige they provided!

The panther they just defeated evidently provided so little value that the hunters outright dismissed the kill.

"What do the geneticists and exobiologists who designed this ugly panther think about their creation?"

They likely care little to nothing about their own creations. They cooked up so many different species of huge cats and dumped them onto the Asco Continent in order to collect experimental data.

The more successful species that grew into Crown Cats received the bulk of their attention. The lesser ones who fared less well against the hunters were probably regarded as genetic trash that needed to be cleaned up to make room for deadlier and more successful prey.

Normally, Ves cared little for the methods and machinations of biotech researchers. The crazy specialists constantly played around with genes sampled from newly-discovered exobeasts or synthesized entirely from their labs. The type of work they did differed significantly from the work of a typical mech designer.

One played god, while the other designed machines.

"Yet the difference isn't so clear now in my case." He whispered to himself.

He cast his eyes down his firm and dexterous hands. For now, he designed mechs with his hands.

In the future, he might be able to shape more than mechs with his limbs. Perhaps he might directly create a new lifeform with a few gestures of his hands one day!

Having read the research data and files that Lucky had once lifted from a hidden research outpost, Ves knew that the attitudes held by the hunters were also shared among the specialists

who created the cats.

"There are very few people who actually respect the huge cats."

Only the hardcore, professional hunters who lived by the hunter's creed respected every creature they felled. Sadly, Lady Miralix declined to hire any of them on her hunting team.

To her, rigid traditions had no place in her current mission. All she cared about was hunting down a notable Crown Cat to provide a powerful boost to her career.

"In a way, the huge cats are fulfilling their purpose. Why should I pity their existences?"

No matter how much he tried to dismiss the issue, his doubts continued to come back to haunt him. This was because his recent experimentation drew obvious parallels with the work of House Laterna's biotech researchers.

Both of them created new forms of life. While their methods and their products diverged, the implications of their work were remarkably similar.

"What is the responsibility of a creator to their work?"

Ves struggled with this question ever since he became a mech designer.

Sometimes he washed his hands of them as soon as they fell into the hands of his customers. This applied the most to his mass-market products.

Sometimes he cared a lot about how they were being utilized. This only applied to some of his custom mechs and gold label mechs.

The somewhat inconsistent approach made it clear that Ves had never really come up with a good answer to this difficult question.

On top of that now came the consideration of how he should approach the creation of spiritual products.

Even though he called them products, they were just as alive as the diverse species of cats created and spread throughout Felixia.

It was easy to abuse a lifeless object. If Ves held a nutrient pack for example, he had no qualms about throwing it on the ground and trampling it with his foot.

If he instead wanted to do the same with a cuddly house cat, he wouldn't be able to bring himself to exhibit such cruelty!

"Well, it's different if it's a nasty bug, but whatever!"

The point was that living and potentially sentient lifeforms possessed intrinsic rights! They deserved better treatment!

Ves constantly thought back on his first spiritual product and how he should regard it during every stage of its existence.

"A product is created to fulfill a specific purpose. Yet does life have a purpose?"

"Meow."

He scratched Lucky's ears. "Heh. Even pets like you have a purpose, you know."

Even if Lucky had been designed to eat minerals and convert them to gems, Ves thought of his cat as something more than a production machine.

Lucky was his friend and companion. His liveliness and his capacity to exhibit emotions such as love, hate, irritation and amusement made him part of the family.

If Lucky could become a beloved companion, then what about the spiritual fragments he procured and the spiritual products he intended to produce in the future?

"Does life have to fulfill a specific purpose? What if its job is done? What happens next."

The struggles he faced with regard to continuity, free will and control all became more acute the more he delved into the path of life.

How much responsibility should he show to his living spiritual creations?

How many rights should he bestow to his spiritual products, and how far should he go in considering their wellbeing?

"If they are merely products, this would be so much easier to deal with. But they're not! They're alive!"

Not only were his spiritual products alive, but they were also sentient. So far, Ves had never encountered a spiritual entity that wasn't sentient or emerged from a sentient being.

This complicated the matter further because it cut off the convenient option of treating his spiritual products as mundane as livestock, which solely lived to produce meat for consumption.

After a bit of thinking, Ves decided to hold off on declaring a bill of rights for spiritual existences.

Instead, he tentatively developed a number of principles that eased his conscience and made him feel better about his future works.

First, as spiritual products were meant to serve as vital components of his mechs, he extended the same regard he held for mechs.

Without a design spirit, his mechs were unable to come to life. For this reason, the spiritual fragments and products that fulfilled this role deserved to be considered living beings rather than something lesser.

"Rather than consider them objects that just happen to be alive, it's better to treat them as living beings that are hired to perform a specific purpose."

Ves already treated spiritual entities such as Qilanxo's spiritual fragment and Prophet Ylvaine's spiritual fragments in this way. In essence, he was merely formalizing what he already believed in and extended the same treatment to the lesser design spirits of his older mechs.

Each of them, no matter how strong or weak they became, deserve the basic respect of a living, sentient being.

Secondly, the existences of his spiritual creations encompassed more than fulfilling their purpose.

Each spiritual entity was alive. Each of them possessed their own hopes, dreams, ambitions and priorities. While Ves really wanted them to serve as the design spirits of his mechs and mech designs in perpetuity, there may come a time when they wanted to move on and do something else in their spiritual lives.

Of course, Ves couldn't allow them to quit their jobs willy-nilly, especially if the mech models they enhanced were still current and widely-used!

"I have to make a compromise here. Total freedom and total control are both untenable."

He did not wish to enslave his spiritual products and force them to labor on his behalf when they really wanted to do something else.

However, as a mech designer, he deeply relied on design spirits to elevate the quality of his mechs in a way that no other competitor could match!

For this reason, extending total freedom to his spiritual products and allowing them to express their free will would certainly lead to many disasters!

Instead of choosing between one direction or the other, Ves decided to straddle the middle line. As long as his design spirits fulfilled their duty for a certain period of existence, Ves would allow them to 'resign' from their work and find a different purpose in life.

"I can always create another product to fulfill the void left behind." He muttered.

Offering hope to his spiritual products and promising that they would be able to take the reins of their own lives after fulfilling their obligatory duties would hopefully keep them motivated.

"They'll stay honest and dutiful as long as they are incentivized to do so!"

Perhaps some spiritual products liked to work as design spirits and would voluntarily choose to extend their 'employment contracts'. Others might decide they wanted to explore the galaxy or the imaginary realm.

Whatever they decided, Ves wanted them to make their own choices. Only by being empowered to choose their own future would they be willing to work for him in earnest!

This summed up his third principle, which was that spiritual entities were obligated to do their jobs and not slack off or quit prematurely for the duration of their employment contracts.

Ves snorted. Would spiritual entities even abide by contracts?

Maybe he should find a way to form a binding spiritual contract. With all of the potential that spirituality offered, something as simple as a contract that bound two parties to a specific set of terms ought to be possible.

In any case, the three principles he formulated this day would henceforth act as his guiding approach!

It was as if a huge weight lifted off his shoulders. In the end, he took a radically different approach to his creations than the biotech researchers of House Laterna.

He managed to come up with a simple set of principles that safeguarded his right to exert control while at the same time granted some fundamental rights to his spiritual products.

"This ought to be sufficient!"

The principles aligned closely to the path of balance that he currently followed.

The path of determinism would seek to impose absolute control over his spiritual products, to the point of robbing them of the vitality that life had to offer.

"What's the point of life if they can't express themselves?"

They'd end up as sad as the huge cats in Asco, who were only formulated into existence to provide hunters with trophies and research data to House Laterna's research institutions.

In contrast, the path of life would obligate him to surrender full control and let his spiritual creations choose their own purpose.

While this kind of unbound forms of life held the highest potential to produce something remarkable, the lack of order and predictability made them far too hard to work with in the long run.

All of his mechs ought to be reliable! Ves would not be able to stay in business if the quality of his mechs fluctuated wildly from model to model!

The three principles of life he formulated avoided these undesirable outcomes. Though not everyone got what they wanted, no one received unfair treatment!

Chapter 1405 Newborn Implications

His mood significantly improved after he formulated his principles of life. Not only did they match with the principles of his design philosophy, but they also merged with it! By becoming a newly-merged aspect of his expanding ideology, Ves had taken one step closer to advancing to Senior!

"Becoming a Senior isn't all about designing mechs." He reiterated the lessons he learned from talking to various high-ranking mech designers. "It's about achieving the impossible, taking one step at a time."

His recent insights prompted him to look at the Kinslayer in a new light.

As the hunting team steadily followed Zeigra's tracks, Ves constantly kept an eye on the Kinslayer. He continually kept up a projection of its telemetry in his view, and specifically monitored the fluctuations of Lady Miralix's neural connection to her mech.

Even if he didn't understand the majority of what was being measured and what it meant if some lines went up or down, he still gained a general sense of what took place.

One of the regrets he held about the Kinslayer was that he hadn't managed to replace her neural interface. Just like every other mech in civilized space, the tiger mech utilized a standard neural interface model published by the MTA.

From the telemetry he received so far, Ves observed that the neural interface model leaned somewhere in the middle. It was neither too dangerous or too

limited. The neural interface was simply a bog-standard piece of equipment that provided no advantages or disadvantages.

"Boring." Ves flatly declared.

Even so, Ves saw some signs that Lady Miralix had begun to deepen her relationship with the Kinslayer.

This was especially so once he extended his spiritual senses towards the tiger mech when Lady Miralix actively piloted it. Even if she wasn't aware that a spiritual existence occupied the mech, her fondness for her mech increased after every piloting session.

"The Kinslayer is maturing. Don't you think so, Lucky?"

"Meow!"

The cat held in his grasp turned his gaze away from the tiger mech in view. A giant mech in the form of a cat was still inferior to his own existence!

Nonetheless, Ves sensed that Vescas was rapidly starting to mature. Its frequent bonding sessions with Lady Miralix helped enormously.

Vescas already exhibited some affection towards Miralix as her mind had been the birthing chamber of its existence. The spiritual product subsequently grew smarter and more sophisticated due to its ability to access Miralix's mind and the knowledge stored within.

Observing this interaction from the side revealed something important to Ves. The newborn spiritual product's development drew heavily from its environment!

This meant that Lady Miralix unwittingly indoctrinated the rapidly-maturing Vescas with her own values, principles, beliefs and biases!

Though Vescas retained a lot of instincts, beliefs and knowledge from both the Dragon Cat and Ves, these were merely inherited from its 'parents'. Now that

Lady Miralix became its only other caretaker, the spiritual product began to take on her beliefs and view its inherited values from the perspective of a noble hunter!

Ves didn't know what to make of this phenomenon. On one hand, if mech pilots raised newly-born spiritual products, their compatibility continually improved and might possibly reach a monstrous height over time!

On the other hand, the spiritual products also diverged from the values and principles instilled into them by him. How much would Vescas even hold on to aspects of Ves and the Dragon Cat?

"It feels like I'm giving my newborn baby for adoption to someone else. The baby might share my DNA, but her upbringing reflected that of an entirely different person!"

Despite the mixed feelings this brought to Ves, he did not oppose this novel development. In fact, the promise of high compatibility reminded him of his third Mastery experience.

Back then, he witnessed Venerable Eloise Pelican maintain a very tight relationship with her space knight. The bond between them was so tight that Venerable Pelican and her mech managed to achieve the legendary state of complete resonance!

Though this remarkable condition only came about after Qilanxo's spiritual fragment gave them a firm push, complete resonance could have never taken place if Venerable Pelican did not trust her mech to such a high degree!

"There's value in this phenomenon!"

Ves saw great value in this kind of development in custom mechs!

With mechs designed to accommodate a specific mech pilot, compatibility mattered more than anything. Having a design spirit that gently familiarized

and grew alongside the mech pilot was extremely beneficial to the performance of the custom mech!

Ves expected much greater synergies to arise out of mechs like the Kinslayer if they continued to be used!

Previously, Ves deduced that Lady Miralix only saw her Kinslayer as a one-use mech made solely for the purpose of taking down a Crown Cat.

Now... the deepening affection she shared with the Kinslayer made Ves suspect that she was starting to change her mind.

He couldn't help but smile when he observed this change. His work propagated his principles! He had already converted another mech pilot into adopting his insistence that mechs ought to be valued as living companions rather than disposable commodities!

He sighed. "If only every mech can start off with an impressionable mind."

Sadly, Ves did not see any way this could be viable for his mass-market mechs. Both the military and private outfits saw mechs as their possessions instead of the possessions of mech pilots.

This was an important distinction. Despite the fact that mech forces mostly assigned mech pilots to specific mechs, they might be shuffled around one day.

If a specific mech developed to the point of adoring only a single mech pilot, what if a mech officer chose to put a different person in the cockpit?

"The results won't be pretty." Ves grimaced as he imagined several unpleasant scenarios.

Mech pilots died, retired and transferred all the time. Even the Avatars of Myth routinely rotated their assignments as some mech pilots earned the right to enjoy some leave so they could spend some time with their families!

Since it would be an awful waste to leave their mechs unattended, Melkor or another officer would just assign another mech pilot to use the unoccupied mech.

For this reason, Ves decided to avoid replicating this phenomenon when he designed a commercial mech.

"Besides, what will happen if it is being raised by thousands of parents at the same time?"

If Ves released a new mech model with a newborn spiritual product as its design spirit, then thousands of customers would collectively shape its perspective as it matured!

He could hardly imagine the horror that all of this chaos might result!

For this reason, Ves resolved to put mature spiritual entities in charge of his commercial mech models.

"Their flexibility and adaptability will be much less, but it's essential to retain their universality."

A mech that turned useless upon the death or departure of its main mech pilot was an awful product to most outfits. Unlike custom mechs, ordinary mechs had to offer consistent and reliable performance as long as any skilled mech pilot entered their cockpits.

As Ves continued to muse about the various implications of his recent innovations, the hunting trip continued to creep closer to Zeigra.

The powerful Crown Cat never made a habit of hiding its presence. It rarely hid its tracks as it was already the most powerful creature in the hunting zone.

Zeigra feared nothing! Any cat or mech that wanted to challenge the king of the forest was welcome to try!

"We're getting close." Lady Miralix announced with a serious expression.

The noblewoman and her closest confidantes gathered in a cramped conference room in one of the legged transports. Ves observed the map projected above the center table. It depicted the surrounding terrain and outlined the tracks they observed.

The line representing the tracks led forward until they neared a small lake.

A hunting consultant started to brief everyone on what they discovered.

"The lake up ahead is one of the most desirable water sources for the beasts in the hunting zone. It's laced with a high concentration of desirable minerals to the huge cats. Even a Crown Cat like Zeigra likes to linger around the lake. Right now, we are reasonably certain we can find our target in the vicinity, though pinning down his exact location can't be done without approaching the site."

Everyone present knew that the critical first round of battle loomed close!

"Forgive me for asking, but is Zeigra nocturnal?" Ves asked.

"We don't know."

Huh?

"To be more precise, we haven't been able to discern a pattern from the information we've obtained about Zeigra." Lady Miralix explained. "The organic products produced by the labs show a high amount of variance. Right now, we can't make any assumptions about Zeigra's sleeping patterns."

This meant that they had no idea whether Zeigra was at his most alert state when it was day, night, dusk or dawn!

"When will we launch our attack, then?"

The noble switched the projection to depict a simulation of an attack launched in broad daylight!

"Since it is not viable for us to scout and observe Zeigra without revealing our presence, we will commence our attack in a timing that best suits our hunting team. My hunters and I are still accustomed to a normal sleeping pattern. This means we are most alert and primed for combat in the late morning, which is the best time for us to confront the Crown Cat!"

Lady Miralix and a number of hunters proceeded to explain the plans they made for the first round of attack.

The projection demonstrated various scenarios that might happen. The Felixia Catstrikers had to be prepared for every eventuality.

What if Zeigra wasn't alone and enjoyed the company of another huge cat?

What if the Crown Cat sniffed out their presence long ago and quietly slinked away?

What if Zeigra turned out to be stronger than anticipated and pressed the Catstrikers back?

What if Zeigra avoided the mechs and instead launched an ambush towards the vulnerable legged transports?

Emphasizing good preparation, Lady Miralix demanded a ready answer to all of these questions and more.

The leadership and competence she exhibited soothed everyone's nerves. She possessed a good foundation to take charge in her future roles in the Sentinel Kingdom's military.

"As you all know, the first round is critical. Even if we don't encounter any surprises, Zeigra may still be able to overpower our mechs through sheer brute force."

No one wanted to see this happen, especially not during the first round of combat when Zeigra fought at his peak!

\nIf worse comes to worst, my Kinslayer and I will step in to push Zeigra into retreat!\n"

\nNo!\n"

\nThat's too reckless!\n"

\nYour mech won't be able to hold when it matters the most!\n"

\nSILENCE!\n"

The woman strongly pressed everyone into shutting their mouths. She glared at everyone who expressed their doubts.

\nI know what you are afraid of, but that was when we still had our old mechs! It's different now! Remember that we have a new guest among us! We are in the company of a mech designer who is famed for creating miracles and has an abundant amount of experience in repairing mechs in the field!\n"

Everyone turned their attention to Ves, making him feel very uncomfortable all of a sudden.

\nMr. Larkinson here will make sure that any deterioration my mech might suffer will doubtlessly be remedied for future confrontations! Isn't that right?\n"

Ves offered a nervous smile. \nI appreciate your compliments, but the spare parts, supplies and equipment you've brought can only do so much. I can probably patch or jury-rig some minor damage, but if Zeigra rips off an entire limb from the Kinslayer, repairing such heavy damage is beyond my capabilities!\n"

\nI'll make sure my Kinslayer won't be pushed to that point.\n" She grinned back. \nYou can rest at ease, Mr. Larkinson. Everything is under control.\n"

If there was one thing the Laternas excelled at, it was in maintaining control!

Chapter 1406 First Round

The lake the mechs of the hunting team approach could only be called small to huge cats and giant mechs.

For regular humans, the lake encompassed an area the size of a small mech arena!

Hardly any animals and critters approached the glistening mineral-rich water to quench their thirst. Even if many of them knew that they'd be able to boost their growth if they continued to drink the valuable lake water, the apex predator that claimed the lake as his own had left his scent all over the place!

This was Zeigra's territory, and any creature that dared to sample the lake water did so at their own peril!

As the local star continued to rise above the sky of Felixia, the waters began to glisten, sparkle and reflect a considerable amount of light. The humid air and mist added a mystical quality to the entire scene.

If not for the dangerous cats and other predators that roamed the forest, Ves would have mistaken the sight as an idyllic relaxation site!

Unfortunately, Ves doubted the pristine site would remain so picturesque. The Felixia Catstrikers had begun to move according to the plan they formulated the previous night.

Half of the mechs of the hunting team cautiously approached the clearing around the lake.

The mechs had already been adapted for hunting purposes. Each mech made as little noise as possible as they moved. They avoided every tree and took detours around bushes. Their mech pilots, all young but very well prepared, skillfully navigated the rough terrain without impacting the terrain too much.

Some huge cats were very skilled at reading the tremors propagating through the ground! Many ambushes failed when the huge cats had put up an act but turned around and claw the attacking mechs at the last moment!

"We don't expect we can take Zeigra by surprise." One of the hunting consultants explained to the inspector who worked on behalf of both the royal house and the Galactic Hunting Club. "We are merely aiming to place our mechs close enough to limit the amount of plans the Crown Cat can form in response to our approach."

The inspector, who happened to be a noble, nodded in understanding. "I see you have only sent out a single knight mech in the first wave. That is a bold choice."

"Lady Miralix has faith in her mech pilots and the mechs she procured for them. Mr. Larkinson here has also endeavored to sharpen them up for the coming confrontation."

That caused the inspector to glance briefly at Ves before turning back to the projection.

For his part, Ves felt rather put out that Lady Miralix and the other members of the hunting team put way too much stock in his abilities. Did they think he was a miracle worker or something?

He was just a mech designer! There were limits to how much he could do, especially on short notice and under severe cost and resource constraints!

Lucky, who sat on his shoulder, rubbed nervously against his head.

"Meow."

"I know. I have a bad feeling about this too. When was the last time a hunting team made a stab at Zeigra? We know how strong he was back then, but how much has he grown since this time?"

The Catstrikers already took Zeigra's growth into account. They anticipated that he had grown up to twenty percent more powerful since his last confirmed battle against a hunting team.

Ves hoped that whoever made those estimates knew what they were doing!

"We've caught sight of a large signature at the other end of the lake! We have a confirmed sighting of Zeigra!"

The projection shifted towards depicting a huge cat lounging on a low, grassy knoll by the side of the lake. The massive beast squinted his eyes and basked in the sunshine pouring down on the lake and the clearing.

"That's a very enormous and dangerous-looking cat." He muttered.

"Meow."

"Do you think you can still take him on?"

"Meow.."

"Hehe. Seeing is believing!"

Compared to how the newest Crown Cat appeared in previous footage, the cat obviously underwent some development.

Zeigra's rust-bronze colored fur coat looked significantly richer and magnificent. Faint spots of deeper red added a remarkable texture to the Crown Cat's luxurious fur.

The cat's massive and heavy tail lazily swished about as if the huge cat had nothing to worry about this fine morning.

However, the Catstrikers weren't fooled by this peaceful facade.

"We've detected several elevated life signs from the huge cat. He has definitely detected our first vanguard! Shall we attack, commander?"

"Not yet." Lady Miralix spoke over the channel. "Let's wait until our flanking mechs are in position."

The attack planned by Miralix and her mech pilots sounded simple. Instead of throwing all eleven humanoid mechs of the Catstrikers at Zeigra all at once, they would begin with only half of that number.

The six mechs they sent forth first consisted of three ranged mechs, two spearman mechs and a single knight mech.

There was no way such a paltry force could defeat a beast that weighed more than a heavy mech and charged as fast as a lancer mech!

But that was not the point!

The vanguard's main purpose was to probe Zeigra's capabilities and determine how much the Crown Cat had grown.

Minutes passed as everyone grew more tense. Even the royal inspector looked uneasy. If the Zeigra turned out to be stronger than expected, the formidable king cat might take out his ire on the hunting team by smashing aside their mechs and tearing apart the legged transports!

Ves and everyone else aboard the transport vehicles would be in big trouble if that happened!

As Ves thought that the Catstrikers would be content in maintaining the status quo for hours if need be, Lady Miralix finally issued a decisive order!

"Launch the attack! Follow the plan!"

All of the mechs stopped their hiding measures and rose up from behind the concealing bushes. The three melee mechs all stood ready to react to anything that might get thrown in their way as the three ranged mechs aimed their ballistic rifles at their prey.

Most hunting teams in Asco favored ballistic rifles as their ranged weapon of choice.

Laser weapons could output a lot of damage, but they fared best in sustained battles, which rarely happened during hunts.

While they brought a considerable amount of firepower to the table, especially against cats that didn't specialize against fending off energy attacks, the damage accumulated too gradually most of the time.

In contrast, ballistic and kinetic weapons achieved much more immediate results due to the impact damage they dealt. Powerful shells and projectiles not only hit like a good blow from a melee mech, they also rattled the huge cats and incited worry.

No matter how formidable they appeared, no creature liked to be peppered with painful rounds!

"Fire!"

The ranged mechs unleashed their first salvos. Having read up on the specifications of the ballistic rifles, Ves knew that they fired specialized shells designed specifically to deal damage against exobeasts with resilient exteriors!

As soon as the rounds impacted against the seemingly-oblivious Crown Cat, the enormous creature roared in pain and irritation as three loud explosions impacted his flank!

"Minimal damage! Oh, he's angry!"

"Keep firing! We knew Zeigra's hide is harder than it looks, but the damage will add up!"

According to the analysis performed on Zeigra's past battles, one of the more remarkable aspects about the cat was how much damage he resisted.

The cat's hide incorporated a lot of exotics and materials ordinarily seen in mech armor!

While every huge cat developed by House Laterna's biotech researchers incorporated this ability, Zeigra was vastly more efficient in ingesting and transforming materials into hardening his hide!

In their previous encounter, the Catstrikers easily defeated an ambushing huge cat by impaling it with simple spear thrusts.

Against Zeigra, it was much more likely for the spearpoint to break before the Crown Cat's hide got punctured!

"Fire at will! Weaken his hide as much as possible!"

One of the reasons why the Catstrikers wanted to confront Zeigra over at least four rounds was because they needed time to chip away at his defenses!

A single round of combat didn't offer enough time to create a serious vulnerability in his defenses!

Leaving aside whether it was possible to keep the ranged mechs safe against a raging Crown Cat, their rifles would probably run out of ammunition before they dealt enough damage!

For this reason, the Catstrikers heavily preferred tiring Zeigra out over multiple rounds. Otherwise, the ranged mechs wouldn't be able to replenish their ammunition!

"He's coming! Damn it! He's diving into the water!"

"What?!"

While the lake wasn't very big, it was still deep enough to encompass an entire Crown Cat!

The ranged mechs continued to fire at the underwater cat. Their firing systems automatically compensated for the angles they needed to adopt to hit the fast-moving cat, but even then their rounds encountered a lot of difficulties!

Ves knew that the ballistic rifles hadn't been designed to fire into the water!

Sooner than he expected, the powerful Crown Cat emerged on the side of the bank where the vanguard made their stand!

"Damnit! Our flanking mechs are out of position! We thought Zeigra would have chosen to sprint around the lake! It will take a little more time for our flankers to get into position!"

The six mechs of the vanguard faced a very tough test right now. They had to contain and withstand the powerful Crown Cat!

Fortunately, his relatively young age meant he lacked the rich battle experience of the older Crown Cats. Zeigra directly pounced against the knight mech with his claws ready to grip and tear at the defensive mech!

Just like last time, the knight mech did not attempt to fend off the attack head-on. Zeigra's pouncing momentum was way too dreadful for any mech to withstand directly!

Instead, the mech quickly took a few steps back and angled to the side. The knight mech held its curved shield with both arms, having never unsheathed its sword.

There was no way the knight mech would ever be able to hurt Zeigra even if it swung its sword a hundred times!

SKRT!

An awful sound screeched as Zeigra's claws raked across the surface of the shield!

If the previous huge cat barely left any marks on the shield, Zeigra was entirely different!

His sharp claws and powerful momentum inflicted a very deep pair of grooves behind! Zeigra managed to penetrate multiple layers of armor with his first attack!

Everyone looked frightened at the might of the Crown Cat! If Zeigra continued to cut and pound at the damaged sections of the shield, it would surely succumb in minutes!

Fortunately, while the shield took a serious beating, the knight mech itself managed to smoothly ride out the impact pressed upon its frame by moving backwards and bending its legs to shunt the force to the ground!

"Get up!" Lady Miralix commanded. "Zeigra has already recovered! He's attempting to attack our rifleman mechs!"

Despite its remarkable stance and techniques, the knight mech endured such a heavy impact that it required several more seconds to recover! This was way too much time as the energetic Crown Cat already started to close the distance to the ranged mechs!

The rifleman mechs had already started beating a retreat, turning around their upper torsos to fire at Zeigra's massive bulk while doing so. Nonetheless, their running speed paled in comparison to an apex predator that had reached the top twenty of the ranking!

The spearman mechs had no choice but to move into action. They rushed forward and tried to threaten Zeigra in order to force him to confront the more immediate threat!

"Zeigra is attempting to bypass our spearman mechs!"

The cat was smart enough to realize that the ranged mechs posed a bigger threat! The longer they fired at his hide, the more his defenses deteriorated!

Just as the spearman mechs launched their thrusts, the cat released a powerful roar! Immediately afterwards, one of the spearman mechs inexplicably tripped!

\\"NO!\"

Chapter 1407 Ferocious Ca

One of the two spearman mechs in charge of holding up Zeigra as the beast went after the rifleman mechs tripped.

It shouldn't have happened!

Ves and everyone else gasped as they witnessed one of the mechs falter in such a critical moment. How could a mech that had only faced one brief moment of combat jumble its footing in such an idiotic manner?!

Was it the mech pilot? Almost certainly not! From their academy days, mech pilots spent thousands of hours practising the right footing for their mechs.

With the consequences of falling due to improper footing so grave, the mech instructors thoroughly force their mech cadets to learn how to walk, run, sprint and sidestep on even the most rugged and uneven simulated terrain!

Though the mech pilot of the spearman mech was fairly young, this proper footing should have still been a critical graduation criteria for even the most basic mech pilots!

Suspicious rapidly turned towards the mech.

As the mech designer who supervised the condition of the mechs, Ves began to receive some unwelcome glares from the others in the command center.

If a mech carried a critical flaw that might have led to a mech losing its footing, then he should have caught it well before the battle commenced!

Aware of the blame he might receive, Ves immediately manipulated the projected interface to call up the logs and telemetry from the tripped spearman mech.

Having studied Zeigra extensively, he had already what kind of tricks the Crown Cat might pull off! This wasn't the first time a mech faltered before the powerful organic product, but it never happened so quickly and abruptly!

While Ves tried to seek out the reason for the spearman mech's sudden fall, the battle rapidly progressed.

With just one spearman mech left on its feet, its mech pilot continued pushing the machine forward despite the fall of a partner.

However, Zeigra exhibited no concern towards the lone spear targeting its eyes! Belying its prodigious mass, the beast easily sidestepped the thrust and continued charging onwards to the vulnerable rifleman mechs!

Fortunately, the mech pilots of the rifleman mechs had already started moving even before Zeigra closed in. They split up in different directions and spent more time on sprinting away than firing potshots at the creature.

Zeigra roared in fury and kept charging forward, determined to chase after at least one of the hunter mechs!

"Run! Maximize your speed by any means possible!" Lady Miralix urged!

"Backup is on the way but it will take time!"

Zeigra's mobility posed lots of problems to the vanguard as the huge cat had cleverly threaded a hole in their formation! One spearman mech wasted precious seconds trying to raise itself up its feet while the other desperately sprinted after the speeding beast!

The knight mech chased after the cat as well with its raked shield, but its bulky armor did its speed and acceleration no favors! There was no way the knight

mech could ever catch up to an organic product optimized for chasing after prey!

Zeigra wanted to kill the rifleman mech in the center of his vision so much that he began to sprint like a cheetah!

His hind limbs pushed off the soil almost simultaneously, pushing forth his immense bulk with powerful force.

His forelimbs landed and pressed against the soil soon after, stabilizing his feline bulk just enough for his hind limbs to push forth again!

The sinuous undulation of his back during his dash possessed a mesmerizing quality. The Crown Cat's pleasing aesthetics only added to the intimidation factor of the creature. Practically every mech pilot engaged in battle against the beast already started to quiver!

The rifleman mech that became Zeigra's target ran as fast as possible, so much so that it decisively tossed away its ballistic rifle in order to sprint faster with the aid of its arms!

Yet no matter what kind of running technique its mech pilot employed, its speed still fell short of Zeigra's dash!

"Fire at its limbs! Disturb Zeigra's footing as best as you can!"

The two rifleman mechs that ran on opposite sides to the dashing cat stopped their flight and turned around to aim at Zeigra's limbs!

Their rifles barked out, but the round impacted only empty ground.

They missed!

It took an agonizingly long time before the rifles fired again! One of the powerful rounds exploded a distance away from the cat as Zeigra cleverly juked at the last moment! Another round fell close enough to encompass one

of the limbs, but the damage was too weak to deter the cat from his determined attack.

Lady Miralix and everyone else saw with increasing horror as Zeigra resolutely dodged or withstood every round thrown in his way. It took vastly more damage before his hide and his flesh degraded! The brief window of opportunity at the moment was far too short to push Zeigra to that point!

"Stall Zeigra as best you can before you eject!"

The pilot of the rifleman mech kept withdrawing, hoping to stretch out the chase as much as possible.

However, just as it seemed it would take Zeigra half-a-dozen seconds more to close the distance, the rifleman mech jerked and stumbled upon its feet!

"EJECT!"

Just before the rifleman mech tumbled completely onto its face, the mech pilot had already issued the emergency eject command!

The cockpit blasted out the back of the rifleman mech and flew out of Zeigra's grasp just as the furious Crown Cat pounced on what remained!

A triumphant roar bellowed from his throat as Zeigra savaged the rifleman mech with savage glee. The Crown Cat showed no mercy to the pilot-less mech as he tore through its vulnerable rear armor and made an absolute mess of its internal parts!

Ves looked sick as Zeigra inflicted an incredible amount of destruction to numerous critical components. He suspected that Zeigra knew exactly what he was doing as the cat deliberately savaged as many parts as possible even though he constantly suffered repeated impacts from the rifles aimed at his sides!

In addition, not only did the Crown Cat destroy the mech with his claws, he also took several meaty bites out of it! An entire arm got ripped apart as Zeigra clamped the rifleman mech's shoulder and ripped straight through its armor plating!

"He's eating the mech! He's feeding himself!"

In fact, Zeigra became so preoccupied with thrashing and digesting mouthfuls of the mech that the flanking force finally arrived within range!

One more rifleman mech added to the firepower of two of its surviving comrades. With three ballistic rifles coordinating their firepower, Zeigra began to accumulate increasingly serious damage.

His prone state made it exceptionally easy for the ranged mechs to layer their fire on the same spots they already struck, thereby compounding the damage further and further as time went by!

A pair of axeman mechs led by another knight mech approached from the Crown Cat's left! They closed in even as Zeigra greedily kept ingesting choice bits of metals and alloys from the badly-mutilated mech frame underneath its limbs!

"Careful! He might be putting on an act!"

The warning issued by Lady Miralix proved prescient as the Crown Cat abruptly turned and spat out the contents of his mouth at the approaching knight mech!

The defensive mech raised its shield and blocked the saliva-covered debris without any effort! The mech slowed down as it came close, though, unwilling to charge a cat that was bigger, stronger and bulkier!

Nonetheless, the defensive mech's proximity succeeded in drawing Zeigra's attention, enough for the flanking axeman mechs to charge at his sides and slam their axes down in unison on the creature's wide flanks!

"Careful! He's launching an attack!"

Zeigra's huge eyes glinted in savage cunning as he rapidly whirled his body around, abandoning his mutilated prize in favor of batting aside an axe with his paw before chomping his powerful jaws straight onto one of the arms of the axeman mech!

With a powerful heave, the Crown Cat ripped the arm straight off the shoulder of the caught mech!

However, Zeigra's choice had left the other axeman mech in a prime position to attack the creature's rear! Its mech pilot exploited the opportunity by landing a savage chop with all of the strength and momentum of the charging mech behind the blow!

A painful roar escaped the rust-red-colored cat as the prime axe chop landed straight onto the small of his back! His seemingly-invincible hide suffered a modest but very welcome cut!

"We've bled the cat!"

Unfortunately, the damage and the trickle of blood that escaped from the cut failed to impact its spine, which might as well be as hard as ship-grade armor plating!

"His bones are too tough to break! We already knew that! Concentrate on the flesh! We have to damage his flesh and bleed him dry!"

Perhaps Zeigra himself did not expect to get hurt so much, because the cat lost his composure and started lashing out in a mindless flurry of attacks!

Though his savagery increased, the melee mechs that finally caught up managed to keep the berserking cat occupied without suffering any further damage.

A minute passed as two knight mechs, two axeman mechs and two spearman mechs each surrounded Zeigra in a circle.

Whenever the cat targeted a mech, the machine in question would do its best to pull back and avoid getting hit.

In the meantime, the other mechs took advantage of the opening by landing hasty attacks onto Zeigra's vulnerable flanks and hindquarters!

Most of the attacks concentrated on the limbs or the cut on his back whenever possible. Despite the flurry of attacks, the mechs were unable to exert much force or momentum in their blows. Zeigra's hide absorbed most of the blows without too much issue!

"The damage is accumulating! Keep going!"

The encirclement did not manage to press Zeigra enough, though.

One of the axeman mech swung its hefty axe with just a single arm, which significantly hampered its combat effectiveness.

Meanwhile, the spearman mech that recently tripped but climbed back on its feet exhibited far too much caution with its footing. The mech moved too slow to keep up with Zeigra's rapid maneuvering!

In addition to all of this, the ranged mechs no longer dared to open fire, as the risk of hitting the melee mechs became too great! The rifleman mechs instead took advantage of the lull by repositioning themselves while they changed their magazines.

Just as everyone thought they were succeeding in piling up an increasing amount of damage onto the Crown Cat, Zeigra roared yet again!

Though the mech pilots had long grown used to the intimidating roar of their prey, the knight mech with the raked shield inexplicably jerked to a halt!

"Its mech engine has stalled!" Ves shouted with alarm!

Zeigra instantly pounced at the knight mech, raking its shield again before batting aside the slowed and weakened mech as if it was a light mech!

"He's running!"

Apparently, Zeigra no longer wanted to tussle with the mechs and attempted to beat a retreat!

"He might be putting on an act again! Stay in formation and don't reveal any vulnerabilities!"

The Crown Cat continued to dash away from the lake clearing and entered the dense forest. The thick and immense trees blocked many of the shots from the rifleman mechs as Zeigra cleverly maneuvered his body behind the natural cover!

Just a minute later, the cat managed to sprint out of range!

"He's gone!"

"Stay alert! He might be circling around us for another offensive! Do not lower your guard!"

Nothing happened in the next couple of minutes. Zeigra was well and truly gone.

The first round had ended!

Yet.. no one looked happy. Ves continually studied the logs of the stricken mechs but kept one eye on the faces of the hunting consultants and other personnel monitoring the battle in the command center.

The Felixia Catstrikers managed to bleed Zeigra and land plenty of blows against his resilient bulk. Yet at what cost did they secure the first round?

Chapter 1408 Deserving Crown

The first round between the Felixia Catstrikers and Zeigra ended abruptly after the latter's departure.

Some of the Catstrikers privately felt relieved as the worst case scenario hadn't occurred.

When the humanoid mechs of the Catstrikers managed to surround the Crown Cat, they inflicted a considerable amount of damage, weakening the structural integrity of Zeigra's resilient fur by an uncertain degree.

This probably led the huge cat to conclude that it was in his best interest to depart.

As a precaution, most of the mechs still remained on guard in case Zeigra wanted to start with the second round right away, but for all intents and purposes the battle was over.

The legged transports moved into the clearing and poured out a host of mech technicians and equipment in order to perform emergency repairs on the mechs that suffered serious damage.

Lady Miralix opted to remain inside her Kinslayer in order to guard the legged transports. That did not prevent her from projecting her body onto the battle site to observe and help supervise the aftermath.

A lot of questions welled in her mind. The first round may not have led to the total disaster that everyone feared, but the damage the cat dished out seriously impacted their battle effectiveness.

Perhaps the most tragic casualty of the first round was the rifleman mech that got caught out by Zeigra! Not only did the brutal cat tore out practically its

entire internal guts, but the cat also chomped significant chunks of alloy from the mech!

As Ves depressingly studied the wreck of the downed rifleman mech, Lady Miralix's projection floated up to his side.

"I don't need a mech designer to know that there's no way that this mech will get up again." She began. "What happened?"

"Do you mean the incidents where two of the mechs had tripped?"

"Yes. What happened?"

"Have you heard of the rumors surrounding Zeigra?"

"Do you mean to say the claims that Zeigra possesses the ability to corrode the parts of a mech is true?"

"With the evidence I've gathered, there's no more room for doubt." Ves declared. "Zeigra truly does possess the ability to induce targeted corrosion and weakening of specific parts."

He began to summon up a projection from his comm and pointed at specific log data points which indicated that moments before the spearman mech and rifleman mech tripped, small but critical subcomponents had already started to send out small alerts!

With the help of his explanation, Lady Miralix managed to understand what had happened. Her eyes widened in alarm!

"If this is true, then it only took seconds for a number of critical components in their legs to fail! That's too fast!"

"According to the rumors of the previous hunters who attempted to hunt down Zeigra, it took several minutes of contact before incidents like this occurred. Either they underestimated this possible effect, or Zeigra has become far more adept at wielding this special ability!"

The implications weighed heavily on their shoulders. Hunting down a ferocious Crown Cat became a lot harder if Zeigra continually sabotaged the functioning of the mechs of the Catstrikers!

"How does it work? Can we block Zeigra from utilizing this corrosion ability?"

Ves helplessly shrugged. "Beats me. I'm a mech designer, not an exobiologist. You'll have to ask the developers of Zeigra's species if you want to know more."

"I doubt they know anything." The lady sighed. "Half the products they cook up in their labs perform vastly out of their expectation. Every Crown Cat is pretty much a product of accident, coincidence and chance. Biosciences are always subject to the chaotic whims of nature. Besides, I'm not allowed to gather inside information and any contact to the outside universe is blocked in the hunting zone. We can only rely on ourselves for answers."

The Catstrikers did employ some unaffiliated biotech specialists, but none of them had any idea how Zeigra could possibly corrode the parts of a mech at a distance.

As soon as Ves disseminated his explanation, the suspicious glances directed at him lessened. The evidence he provided made it abundantly clear that the mech technicians and him hadn't been negligent in maintaining the mechs.

Still, the worried mech pilots still remained upset as Ves hadn't been able to come up with any solution to block this insidious attack! The mechs would continue to be vulnerable to Zeigra's hidden machinations! They would have to continue battling the Crown Cat all the while aware that their mechs might falter at critical moments!

Everyone's morale inevitably took a serious hit. This single extra complication had already led to the premature destruction of a rifleman mech. Another axeman mech would have to make do without a vital arm, while the spearman

mech that tripped required an extensive amount of tedious light repairs as its entire frame got rattled by its fall!

\\"What an awful mess!\"

The Catstrikers knew the first round would be the toughest, but after facing Zeigra's surprising strength and abilities, it became clear they still underestimated the challenge of confronting it in battle.

A lot of analysis and speculation went on in various meetings. Ves only attended a number of them as he became more preoccupied with directing the emergency field repairs on the mechs affected by the battle.

Because pressing Zeigra quickly was crucial to tiring out the beast, the repairs only lasted for around six hours. The mech pilots maintained a rotation of patrols in order to grant everyone crucial time to sleep and rest.

By the time Lady Miralix commanded her hunting team to follow Zeigra's tracks, the Catstrikers continued forth with one less mech.

There was no way for Ves to restore the badly-mangled rifleman mech! Since the wreck wasn't going to be moving and fighting on its own strength anymore, he instead recommended the mech technicians to salvage some intact parts that might prove useful in fixing up the other rifleman mechs in later battles.

\\"Zeigra may have fled, but he shouldn't have run too far! March carefully and stay in formation!\"

As the mechs and the legged transports cautiously entered the tropical forest and followed Zeigra's tracks, Ves returned to the observation room and began to study the logs of the battle once again.

Previously, Ves only managed to witness Zeigra in battle through publically-available archival footage. The fidelity of the recordings had been deliberately

lowered in order to avoid giving too much away about the hunting mechs. The footage had also been cut and edited to remove parts the hunters didn't want to reveal to its rivals and competitors.

Now, his inside access to the database of the Felixia Catstrikers meant he could call up all the data he wanted.

Ostensibly, he claimed that he was studying the footage in order to determine whether he could implement any adjustments to the mechs to make them less prone to corrosion attacks.

In truth, Ves wanted to determine whether Zeigra truly sabotaged the mechs with a spiritual ability.

With all the strange things that exobeasts could do, he couldn't quite rule out whether Zeigra possessed a significant degree of spirituality or not. Ves found it very difficult to determine the answer to this question through watching the footage.

"The distance hasn't helped at all."

In the name of safety, the legged transports had been placed well out of the way from the battle site with the Kinslayer standing guard.

While Ves agreed with the precaution, the sheer distance also hampered his ability to extend his spiritual senses in the surroundings and put Zeigra under direct observation.

Still, Ves tentatively guessed that even if Zeigra developed a measure of spirituality, it probably wasn't too strong. The huge cat was still young and lacked the experience and accumulation of the higher-ranking Crown Cats.

Instead of anticipating a resemblance to Qilanxo, Ves revised his expectations downwards. He began to lean towards the assumption that Zeigra's spirituality probably wasn't much stronger than the spirituality of the Dragon Cat.

\\"The fact that one is alive and the other had been dead for days before I got to her matters a lot, though.\\\"

Ves still hadn't given up on his ambition to harvest as much spirituality from Zeigra as possible, but he still had to be patient at the moment. At this time, he absolutely couldn't afford straying close to the site of the battle.

The Crown Cat's strength and abilities exceeded everyone's imagination! It was easy to imagine that the king of the forest would eventually rise to the top of the rankings with a few more years of maturing!

\\"Zeigra deserves to carry his crown!\\\"

As Ves continued to pour over the logs, he failed to detect anything pertinent. The parts that abruptly weakened in a matter of seconds just lost their integrity out of the blue. Even when the mechs were on the move, the parts still deteriorated as if Zeigra possessed an uncanny view.

He reported his meager findings to Lady Miralix during a short break.

\\"Zeigra has the ability to target specific components and subcomponents of a mech.\\\" Ves began to explain to her projection. \\"His corrosion ability, for lack of a better description, is capable of targeting precise internal components without requiring direct vision. No matter how much armor plating or other parts are in the way, he is always able to affect parts that are ordinarily shielded and protected deep within the mech.\\\"

Lady Miralix's projection looked grave. \\"Can Zeigra.. do more than sabotage the legs of our mechs?\\\"

\\"I think.. his control is not as outrageous as you think it is.\\\" Ves cautiously replied. \\"First, Zeigra may be clever, but he's far from matching the knowledge of a mech designer. I don't believe he is very clear about what all of the parts inside a mech actually does. My guess is that he's probably

targeting the mobility of our mechs because that is what his instincts as a predator tells him how to best hinder his prey.\

\\"What if he targets something else besides the legs and engines of our mechs?\"

\\"Then we better hope he doesn't mess with the power reactor or a couple of other critical components, my lady. If Zeigra knows as much about mechs as a typical mech technician, then he could employ his abilities to much greater effect!\"

Facing the Mech Cruncher was a nightmare to every mech!

Each one that entered battle against this formidable cat constantly had to be ready for sudden and drastic failures. The stress this put onto the mech pilots grew unimaginably burdensome.

Nonetheless, under Lady Miralix's leadership, none of the mech pilots lost their nerves. They still became determined to resume the hunt and take revenge against the cat. Their pride as hunters wouldn't let them give up so early during the hunt!

\\"Let's move! We're getting closer to Zeigra! Stay on your toes and be prepared for battle at any moment!\"

A few days passed by as a game of cat and mouse ensued. The Felixia Catstrikers unerringly tracked Zeigra in an attempt to prevent the cat from resting and recuperating.

The Crown Cat wasn't the only entity to be deprived of sufficient sleep. All of the mech pilots constantly stayed awake and alert throughout the hunt. Stimulants and other measures ensured they retained most of their alertness, though their battle effectiveness still eroded over time.

During the chase, the Catstrikers confronted Zeigra two more times. Each time, the Catstrikers suffered greater damage than the Crown Cat.

Zeigra's resilience and endurance turned him into a very difficult opponent to tire, and his corrosion ability continually tripped and sabotaged the mechs in his vicinity at the worst possible moments!

By the time Zeigra beat a rapid retreat at the end of the third round, the Catstrikers were only left with six functioning mechs!

The hunting team lost half of the mechs they brought into the hunting zone! Serious questions and doubts started to arise among the hunters and the support personnel as they began to lose faith in the hunt.

Unlike the hunting team which visibly lost half of its strength, Zeigra still fought as vigorously and energetic as ever! Despite his accumulating wounds and deteriorating hide, the Crown Cat still retained most of his battle effectiveness!

Chapter 1409 Test of Leadership

No one in the hunting team thought the hunt for Zeigra proceeded well. Over the course of three rounds of battle, their mechs managed to unload a lot of damage onto the Crown Cat.

However, his exotic and mineral-enhanced hide proved to be as tough as the armor plating of a heavy mech! The sheer resilience of the Crown Cat along with his formidable mobility meant that Zeigra absorbed or evaded most attacks directed against him without any apparent results!

Even if the exobiologists and other experts claimed that their efforts succeeded in wearing Zeigra, the mech pilots all suffered from the illusion that they faced Zeigra in his peak condition!

When one side visibly grew weaker while the other side still fought close to peak condition, the latter became increasingly unfathomable!

No amount of analysis and expert opinions could shake the impression that had rooted into the minds of Lady Miralix's closest companions. Her former classmates in the academy finally exhibited the weaknesses resulting from their lack of tempering and experience.

More and more, the mech pilots began to demand an end to the hunt!

Who cared whether they failed? They could always try next time! The price of retreat was no big deal to the mech pilots, but the same didn't apply to their commander.

Lady Miralix urgently wanted to conclude the hunt! The faster she hunted down a Crown Cat, the sooner she received permission to leave Felixia and pursue a career in the wider Sentinel Kingdom!

She was well aware that the late twenties and early thirties proved pivotal to the careers of many mech pilots. This was a time where the most ambitious and successful mech pilots grew the fastest and attracted the attention of a patron who might take a promising mech pilot under their wing!

While there was no harm in wasting a year or two, this was unacceptable to the most ambitious mech pilots! Every year mattered! It would be hard to make up for lost time as Lady Miralix might enter the service of Sentinel's military at the starting line while most of her fellow peers of the same generation had already been promoted to mech lieutenants or mech captains!

Due to these considerations, declaring an end to the hunt while they still possessed a number of functioning mechs was completely unacceptable to Lady Miralix!

"I would not call one rifleman mech, one knight mech, two spearman mechs, one axeman mech and one tiger mech a qualified hunting force against a Crown Cat." One of the mech pilots argued. "And lest you argue otherwise, all of our mechs barring your own are already falling apart!"

Due to the enduring complaints, Lady Miralix decided to call every mech pilot to a meeting.

Of course, considering the danger of leaving their hunting team exposed, they attended the meeting via projections. All six mechs that were still fit for battle deployed around the vulnerable legged transports.

Fortunately, Zeigra's preoccupation with demolishing and taking bites out of the mechs in front of his face prevented the cat from going after the vulnerable transports parked in the distance.

However, it was exactly due to Zeigra's focus on their mechs that forced Lady Miralix to confront her mech pilots over their demands to retreat!

"We can still fight." She stated, her face marked by the stress and exhaustion of keeping the hunting team together. "We entered this hunting zone to slay a Crown Cat, and we will not return without his carcass in our possession!"

"Madness!"

"Zeigra is too strong!"

"We're not good enough!"

"Lady Miralix!" One of the female mech pilots who lost their mechs shouted over the crowd. "Let's face it, our plan has failed. The battle of attrition that we waged against Zeigra has weakened us more than this darned cat! He's practically immortal! Every time we face him in battle, it's as if all the damage we've dealt to it before has been wasted! According to your own exobiologists, the damn cat has been eating huge chunks of our mechs to restore the integrity of his hide! A drawn-out chase is exactly the wrong approach to take against this monster!"

The woman's words resonated with the others in the meeting room. The exobiologists carefully studied the data captured by the sensors and found out after the third round that the cat's hide already incorporated a significant amount of exotics and metals it previously ate from their own mechs!

Ves sat in the back of the room and observed the meeting while Lucky yawned and napped on his lap.

If Genevieve was here, Lucky would at least be able to enjoy the company of a fellow cat. Sadly, Lady Miralix declined to bring her pet along the expedition, knowing that she would be forced to remain in the cockpit of her mech for days on end!

As the mech pilots continued to convince Lady Miralix to call for an end to the hunt, Ves began to entertain his own doubts.

He developed his own judgement based on how the first three rounds developed.

Both sides increasingly became more familiar with each other. Just as the Felixia Catstrikers gathered a wealth of data on Zeigra, so did the cat learn how to better defeat the opposing mechs.

In the first round, the Catstrikers lost just a single mech.

In the second round, the hunting team lost two mechs.

In the third round, they lost three mechs!

It didn't take much imagination to suspect that the hunting team might lose all of their remaining mechs!

A key factor that depressed everyone's expectations was the condition of the surviving mechs.

Every mech aside from the Kinslayer lost at least twenty percent of their battle strength! Some mechs fared worse, such as the axeman mech that lost its arm in the first round.

Despite the best efforts of Ves and the mech technicians, they only managed to make rudimentary patchwork repairs on the surviving mechs. No matter how many spare parts they salvaged from the wrecked machines, the lack of time and heavy equipment severely hampered the extent to which they could repair a broken mech.

With so little amenities, Ves already thought it was a miracle to ensure the hunting team could still rely on five functional humanoid mechs.

"Give it up, please." One of the mech pilots begged. "While we've all managed to eject from our cockpits in time, if we lose all of our mechs, how can we deter Zeigra from finishing us off?"

A human running on foot could never possibly outrun a vengeful huge cat! The legged transports wouldn't be able to get away either as they were optimized for capacity rather than speed.

Lady Miralix glared at her subordinates. Many of them used to be her buddies at the academy!

"My answer remains the same. A hunt is always marked by peril. That's what makes them worthwhile. Haven't we all agreed to persevere and put our utmost into succeeding in this hunt? Don't forget how much we'll benefit from having a successful Crown Cat hunt in our records! Our future colleagues will envy us! Promotions will shower down on our heads! Make no mistake. Killing Zeigra and returning in triumph is an opportunity that will only come once!"

"Commander, we don't have to hunt him this year! We can try again next time! With all of the things we've learned about Zeigra, we can adjust our mechs and training to counter his strong points while exploiting his weak

points! For example, we've learned that a battle of attrition isn't ideal against this cat!"

"NO!" Miralix angrily erupted. "WE WILL NOT END THIS HUNT AT THIS MOMENT! WE STILL HAVE A CHANCE!"

Her outburst quieted the meeting room.

The woman took a deep breath. "If we turn back now, everything we've learned will be moot. Zeigra is a fast-evolving cat and he has already started showing some progress after each and every round. Give him a few months or years, and he'll no longer be the bottom-ranked Crown Cat. Entering in the top ten is not impossible as long as he turns the tables on additional hunting teams!"

Once a Crown Cat entered the top ten, the Felixia Catstrikers no longer stood any chance of hunting such a formidable creature. Only the top hunting outfits with years of experience and an abundance of skill could challenge these true apex predators!

Some of the mech pilots sent knowing glances at each other. One of them eventually spoke up with a fatalistic tone.

"We've already sounded each other out in private. I'm sorry, Lady Miralix, but we can't support your ventures any further. There is no shame in conceding defeat against a formidable Crown Cat! In fact, the fact we tussled with the monster and returned with our lives is enough for us to earn a bit of fame!"

"That's nothing! That's just a consolation prize that essentially celebrates our failure! I will not have such a stain marring my record!" The lady shouted.

"You're being too unreasonable! All of us understood how much you depend on this achievement, but hunting Crown Cats is hard for a very good reason! In your obsession with earning glory and fame, you've lost sight of how most hunts against these top monsters fail!"

"We were too overconfident!" Another mech pilot interjected. "We're all young and we've never fought a Crown Cat before. Zeigra is completely different from the other cats we've hunted for practice!"

It became clear to Ves that Lady Miralix's subordinates had already collectively decided to pull back. They merely wanted to get Lady Miralix to concede and give the order to retreat.

However, her obstinance and her strong belief that they still stood a chance against Zeigra threw a wrench into their plans!

The relations between Lady Miralix and her mech pilots continued to sour as they both held their ground.

Lady Miralix wanted to continue to chase after Zeigra!

Her subordinates no longer wanted to do anything with the hunt!

The two held completely opposite opinions. Despite Lady Miralix's high birth, every mech pilot was more than aware that she only wielded a limited amount of power right now.

As an untested mech pilot with a noble pedigree, Lady Miralix couldn't draw on the authority of House Laterna to force anyone on the planet to comply. This hunt was supposed to be a trial that put her leadership and combat capabilities to the test.

Right now, Lady Miralix was badly failing this critical leadership checkpoint.

Ves quietly shook his head at the increasingly acrimonious fight between the two sides. Lady Miralix practically stood alone as her staff and other non-combat personnel started to take the side of the mech pilots.

No one wanted to die in order to satisfy someone else's vanity! The fame and prestige that everyone stood to gain from slaying Zeigra was only attractive if they got to live at the end of the hunt!

As everyone's tempers flared, Lady Miralix increasingly found herself isolated. She found no support among even one of her mech pilots!

Her projection increasingly looked more upset! I was as if she was being driven mad by her own men!

"I won't repeat myself! The Felixia Catstrikers still have a chance! I will not order a retreat even if we only have one functioning mech left!"

"Then you can go hunt Zeigra on your own!" A mech pilot threw back! "Our mechs and our legged transports will return to Kemila without you! If you're so eager to charge at Zeigra and throw your life away, then by all means go ahead! Just don't drag us with you in your suicide attempt!"

The Felixia Catstrikers had enough! After three arduous rounds against Zeigra, they were ready to throw in the towel!

Sitting in the back, Ves quietly snorted.

Lady Miralix opted to form her hunting team entirely around young and inexperienced mech pilots.

Regardless of how well they performed in the mech academies, their resolve was no different from any other rookie mech pilot!

Chapter 1410 Negative Synergy

Ves observed the meeting from a detached perspective. Despite the stakes and the repercussions to his own plan, he chose to spectate rather than wade into the discussion.

Most of his attention fell on Lady Miralix. Before, she came across as an ambitious noble scion who maintained impeccable control. His interactions with her had always been pleasant, though that was mostly due to how much she needed his help.

Even then, she never lost her composure. Her dignity remained inviolable.

All of that went out of the window today. With public opinion going against her, she became increasingly more desperate. Her eyes glared accusingly at the academy buddies she assumed would have her back.

In this critical moment of the hunt, her comrades all wanted to disregard her wishes and return home!

The collusion and open insubordination among virtually every subordinate made it clear that while Lady Miralix held all the money and the authority, she was just a solitary human at the moment!

A leader would be able to command a team of a hundred people.

A single individual had no way of stopping a group of people from doing what they wanted!

Stripped of her power, Lady Miralix could truly do nothing to stop the mechs and legged transports from leaving. If the humans that crewed and piloted them really wanted to stop risking their lives on what they consider to be an increasingly doomed hunt, then no amount of orders would keep them in place!

"This is treason!" Her projection yelled at the other mech pilots, some of whom attended in projection form. "We agreed to risk our lives on this hunt in order to obtain an opportunity to earn fame! Think of what is at stake!"

"Our lives are at stake!" One of the mech pilots angrily retorted. "We all got onboard with your project because we believed in your claims that you could take down a Crown Cat! Now that we're actually putting your claims to the test, it turns out that your pedigree means nothing here! You vastly overstated the advantages you enjoyed as a member of House Laterna and hoodwinked us all into throwing our bodies against a monster that's at least half as dangerous as an expert pilot!"

A mech pilot who recently lost his mech slammed his fist against the conference table. "We all knew it was a challenge, and we all agreed beforehand that you'd order a retreat if the hunt becomes untenable. Now is that moment! With just five half-broken mechs and your lone pristine tiger mech, there's no way we can take down a freak of a huge cat like Zeigra!"

"Cowards!"

Not every mech pilot was present in projection form. Half of the mech pilots who lost their mechs in the previous rounds against Zeigra were physically present. Some of the most senior support staff attended the meeting as well, though all of them looked like they would rather be elsewhere.

Being forced to choose sides and piss off their employer at this sensitive time would certainly incur repercussions in the future!

Still, when it came down to it, the opinions of a mech technician or a hunting consultant didn't matter. Since the mechs did all of the fighting, only the will of the mech pilots mattered in the greater scheme of things.

Sadly, Lady Miralix adopted a belligerent and accusatory stance, which completely rubbed the mutinous mech pilots the wrong way. Far from bending their will in her favor, her demanding and spiteful attitude repelled them even further!

Again, Ves shook his head at the sight.

Someone like Major Verle of the Flagrant Vandals would never let the meeting devolve into such a counterproductive fashion.

Having watched the maestro work his manipulation upon the unsuspecting Vandals many times, Ves picked up some lessons on how to rein in unruly subordinates and keep them motivated to work towards a common goal.

Major Verle also taught him the importance of maintaining morale. This abstract but very real quality determined the willingness of subordinates to go above and beyond in performing their duty!

During the entire hunt, Lady Miralix completely neglected to keep up everyone's spirits! Her lack of attention into encouraging her mech pilots and peppering them had now come back to bite her in this crucial meeting!

Her stubbornness and tone deafness seemed uncharacteristic to his past impression of her. The more he observed her like a researcher observed a test subject, he recalled that she was indeed his current test subject!

"The Kinslayer!" He whispered.

He suddenly realized that between now and then, he induced a critical change in her circumstances by instilling her mech with a design spirit!

Vescas originated from his attempts to create a fusion between his own spiritual energy and the Dragon Cat's spiritual energy. The resulting spiritual product became a new entity that continually bonded with Lady Miralix during her extensive piloting sessions the last few days.

What attracted his attention right now was the traits that Vescas inherited from its 'birth parents'!

The aggressive Dragon Cat needed no elaboration. The alien exobeast personified fury when she was still alive, and she allegedly possessed the ability to induce others to embrace their rage!

As for Ves, while his spiritual energy revolved highly around mechs, it also carried some of his other traits, including his penchant for taking risks and his love for big gambles!

His eyes widened. Combining this flaw of his with the Dragon Cat's fury complemented and amplified their effects!

If his guess was right, then Vescas started off with an extreme inclination for recklessness upon his birth!

Instilling him as the Kinslayer's design spirit therefore had the unfortunate consequence of passing on this trait to Lady Miralix during the long days since the start of the hunt!

Ves smacked his face with his palm! He hadn't thought that something like this would happen! He hadn't considered the full repercussions of blending his traits with the traits of another spiritual entity.

Any spiritual product he created in the future would carry both his positive traits and his negative traits! If paired with a spiritual entity that was already inclined towards imprudence, then the resulting combination would synergize into an even greater degree of recklessness!

This was one of the few instances where synergy worked against his intentions!

In a man-machine connection, Just as Lady Miralix influenced the mech, the mech also influenced Lady Miralix!

Most of the time, Ves viewed this as a beneficial and positive relationship. What was the harm of letting mech pilots bond with their mechs?

Yet after his talk with Old Man Terrence, he recognized the dark side of this equation. What if one side of the bond possessed an undesirable trait?

It would get passed along to the other side regardless of whether it was a good idea!

This was true spiritual contamination!

Since the process took place over a man-machine connection, Lady Miralix's mind had been completely exposed to the influence of the other side!

As Ves continued to palm his face, he let out a deep breath.

Next time, he should pay more attention to the overlapping traits that he put in his spiritual products!

"Goddammit.. I'm such an idiot.. hehehe... stupid me... I want to hit my old self..."

"What's so funny, Mr. Larkinson!?" A mech pilot confronted him all of a sudden!

"Uh, what?" Ves quickly lowered his palm and looked at the mech pilot pointing him in an accusatory manner.

"Are you mocking us?! Do we look like clowns to you? We are fighting for our lives here! Lady Miralix is completely being unreasonable, and all you're doing is sitting in the back as if you are watching the show!"

A befuddled expression came over his face. "

At this moment, Lady Miralix's projection turned towards him as well!

"Mr. Larkinson, help me convince these numbskulls that they're missing the opportunities of their lifetimes! Don't forget our deal!"

Ves sighed. If the mutineers had their way, he could kiss goodbye to the heavy concessions Lady Miralix promised to him. There would be no opportunities for him to trade with organizations like the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association and the Circle of Mota.

He'd also miss out on other benefits!

Though he still possessed some misgivings about continuing the hunt, he eventually decided to side with Lady Miralix. He was familiar with the Kinslayer's capabilities, and judged the hunting team still stood a chance of defeating Zeigra as long as Lady Miralix put her entire heart and soul into the battle!

As Ves viewed the discontented expressions of everyone around the conference table, he knew it was time to dust off his old Devil Tongue.

He condescendingly sneered towards the mech pilots.

"I can hardly believe the bunch of you are mech pilots. Do you think a situation like this is untenable? The military mech pilots that I've served alongside with for several years during the Bright-Vesia Wars would be ashamed of your timidity!"

"Are you calling us cowards?!"

Ves shook his head. "Not necessarily. To be honest, your concerns are valid. The hunt has indeed taken a risky turn. Yet the resolve that you are showing today is incredibly disappointing!"

That riled up the mech pilots even more, but Ves didn't care. He began to place Lucky down in order to stand up from his seat. With deliberate steps, he approached the center of the meeting room.

Meanwhile, he concentrated his mind and roused his Spirituality. He automatically constructed an image of confidence, superiority and above all the leadership that Lady Miralix lacked!

He had become so adept in this process that it only took seconds to form a basic image, but it was sufficient for him to don it as a mask.

The invisible aura that emanated from his body caused some of the people present to pause and back off. The people standing in the way subconsciously parted to the side, allowing him free passage all the way to the side of the conference table!

The spontaneous parting added more weight to his presence. It was as if he demanded everyone's attention!

"Are you proud of yourselves?" He began, staring down in the eyes of each mech pilot in succession. "Is this what you imagined yourselves to be when you were attending your fancy mech academy? From what I've heard of Lady Miralix, each and every one of you scored high in your classes at your mech academy!"

"This is exactly why we should turn back! We can't waste our skills in this doomed venture!"

Ves crossed his arms. "Waste? Is that the extent of your resolve?"

"What's wrong with that?! So what if we chose to retreat? You're not the one who is risking your life by confronting Zeigra up close! It must be nice to be a mech designer, right? All you cowards do is sit back in the rear and use those big brains of yours to calculate whether it's better to coat our mechs in green or red!"

A brief moment of silence ensued after a mech pilot made this remark. The air grew tense as some people began to sense an unsettling feeling in the air.

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Did you just insult my profession?"

"I—"

"—I repeat, DID YOU JUST INSULT MY PROFESSION!?"

His outburst momentarily suppressed every mech pilot!

"You mech pilots are a disgrace!" He continued. "Do you think you're entitled to honor? Do you think that battles where you hold the advantage are the only ones worth fighting?"

"It makes sense to—"

"SHUT UP, YOU SAD EXCUSE OF A MECH PILOT!" Ves clenched his hand into a fist and banged it against his heart. "I know many mech pilots. I come from a family of mech pilots. I served alongside mech pilots. I sell my

products to mech pilots. Of all the ones I've interacted with, the bunch of you are some of the most disgraceful I've ever met!"

The accusation that Ves threw at the feet of the attending mech pilots did not endear him to them. Even so, Ves still expressed his opinion without hesitation!