

Chapter 1411 Wallowing in Mediocrity

"You should be ashamed of yourself." Ves theatrically shook his head in disappointment. "Do you know why? Because you are a bunch of pampered kids!"

The stares of resentment from the mech pilots attending the meeting grew more severe. Their acrimony towards Ves continually increased as he continued to disparage them in various ways.

Even Lady Miralix looked astonished! If Ves continued to pile up insults onto her mech pilots, they might decide to depart right this instant! That was the last thing she wanted to see!

Yet as soon as she thought about opening her mouth to reprimand the mech designer, she simply failed to sum up the courage to do so! Her heart quivered each time she was about to speak!

Ves ignored the noblewoman's distress and transmitted his full ire towards the mech pilots. Each and everyone of them began to feel ashamed when they met his eyes, though they didn't know why!

"Do you think you are real mech pilots? Just because you've graduated from a mech academy doesn't mean you amount to something! Even the shabby pirates in the frontier are superior to you! Do you know why? It's because they have the courage to fight even under the most awful circumstances imaginable!"

His rebukes continually battered at their self-esteem. While Ves had to admit that he was taking some liberties with the truth, he really wanted to teach these brats a lesson!

"Let me ask you again." He spoke. "Do you have the guts to consider yourselves to live up to your profession?"

Silence.

"Where is your courage? Where is your willingness to push yourselves? I don't see any of that here today! Let me tell you what I've witnessed from true mech pilots. They're willing to fight when ordered to even when they're outnumbered by two-to-one! I've seen real soldiers throw themselves into battles when the odds of victory are against them! These men and women in uniform are true mech pilots!"

"You have no right to look down on us!" Someone finally summed up the courage to respond. "War is war! Mech pilots are expected to do their duty! This is different! Hunting a Crown Cat is nothing more than a selfish pursuit! We aren't harming anyone by beating a retreat!"

Ves grinned like a shark. "Are you sure about that? In my judgement, the odds are fifty-fifty. Zeigra has as much of a chance of winning as us. Are these odds too low for you spoiled brats?"

"It's not worth it for us to gamble our lives for a bit of fame!"

BANG!

"There is more than fame and prestige on the line here!" Ves burst out while slamming both of his knuckles against the surface of the conference table!

"You goddamn mech pilots all dream of building up a wonderful career for yourself, but promotions won't come by if you lack the persistence to fight for opportunities! This hunt has always been a golden chance for you all, but at the first sign of difficulty, you've all turned into snivelling cowards!"

"I object to that! You have no right to call us cowards!"

"I'm not painting you as cowards! Your own conduct has painted you as cowards!" Ves pointed at the mech pilot who spoke back at him. "Don't you see what you people are turning your backs against? This is a rare opportunity to test yourself and push your resolve to the limits! The entire

reason why House Laterna imposes this challenge to every mech pilot who bears their name is because a trial like this separates the warriors from the braggarts!"

A part of Ves felt kind of bad to paint their prudent decision in a bad light. Personally, he thought that they made a rational choice by objectively weighing the benefits and risks.

What Ves was doing right now amounted to upending their calculations by bombarding them with additional considerations regardless of whether they were relevant or not! Even if the mech pilots didn't agree with his words, a sliver of doubt would still chip away at their determination!

"From what I've heard, Nyxian pirates are some of the most dangerous scum you can fight against in the Komodo Star Sector. Do you think you're ready to confront them in battle when they've stacked the deck against you? There are many situations where they don't play fair! When you inevitably face a situation where the odds of victory can be as low as twenty percent, are you willing to fight your way out or put yourselves at the mercy of the most ruthless and despicable pirates in the region?"

"We'll never be placed in such a situation!"

"Oh really?" Ves snorted. "Has every battle the Sentinel Kingdom engaged in been fought on favorable terms? Can you state with confidence that none of the Peacekeeper outfits have ever been led into a trap?"

Another moment of silence.

"Do you see now why I think you're shaming yourselves? You would never last on the battlefield with your pampered attitudes! The worst thing about it is that every colleague who you'll work with in the future will all be able to see how little you can tolerate discomfort! Any adverse situation you encounter,

you'd rather cease and pull back rather than grit your teeth and push through!\

The arguments that Ves made use of partially drew on the indoctrination that every mech pilot went through in their academy days.

As a Larkinson and someone who frequently interacted with mech pilots all his life, Ves knew exactly what kind of ideals the mech academies wanted to instill in their mech cadets!

Courage, honor, duty, fealty, brotherhood, sacrifice and more were just some of the common values that every mech pilot internalized from their mech instructors.

Mech pilots were expected to fight. In order to make them willing to put their lives at risk and perform the dreadful act of killing other people, their minds needed to be stuffed with specific beliefs.

These ideals also served to anchor the morality of the mech pilots in a way that benefited society. Mech pilots trained to kill without any other considerations were much more likely to join a criminal or pirate gang!

While Ves wasn't familiar with the precise curriculum that Sentinel potentates had to go through, he could make an educated guess.

The Kingdom's strong animosity towards pirates almost certainly led to a very intense focus on shaping the norms and values of every mech cadet!

This meant that when Ves disparaged the mech pilots in such a direct and confrontational fashion, he directly targeted their hearts!

The mech pilots found it harder and harder to respond against Ves. For some reason, they began to feel they truly didn't deserve to be regarded as real mech pilots!

"It's true that the prospect of battling Zeigra once again is not a sure bet." Ves spoke while constantly sweeping his eyes over his audience. The brief instances of eye contact made it even harder for them to stand up against him! "Yet Zeigra is not a god! He can be defeated! To turn back on this critical moment is a huge mistake!"

"Why is it a mistake?"

"Do I need to explain it to you pampered brats?! Where is your competitive drive! How can you expect to achieve anything great in your lives when you aren't willing to step out of your comfort zone? The next and likely final confrontation against Zeigra will be a battle to the death in the truest sense. Either Zeigra dies, or all of us dies!"

"That's exactly why we should retreat!" One of the members of the support staff uttered. "We've never signed up for a suicide mission!"

Ves glared at the person who spoke out, who immediately quivered backwards. "All hunts against Crown Cats are suicide missions! You all know damn well what you've signed up for! The casualty statistics that the Kemila Hunting Hall has published is easily accessible to you! When Lady Miralix paid you your fat paychecks, it's because it already includes hazard pay! I don't believe that any of you signed up for this hunting team without being aware of the risks!"

That shot down most of the support personnel, though their resentment towards him had probably grown.

He didn't care. Only the mech pilots mattered. As long as he got through to some of them, the hunting team would still be able to proceed with the hunt!

"Look, the matter is simple." He spoke, turning his gaze back to the mech pilots. "If you are content to wallow in your mediocrity, then go ahead and depart from this hunting team. If instead you think you are capable of

achieving more, then stick with Lady Miralix and trust in her abilities. I know that killing Zeigra will be hard, but it is exactly in battles like these that test your courage, your conviction and your piloting abilities to the limit where expert candidates are born!\

This was a known fact. Even if advancing to expert candidate was as unlikely as winning the lottery, a lot of those lottery winners tended to emerge in the midst of arduous battles!

With his understanding of expert pilots, Ves believed that the combination of intense emotions, extreme pressure and forcing pilots to exhibit the utmost of their abilities presented an ideal conditions for any mech pilots to make their breakthroughs!

Of course, Ves didn't expect any of these dummies to break through the extraordinary threshold during this hunt. He had already scouted out their spiritual potential and found nothing of significance.

Just like Lady Miralix, her subordinates were destined to remain as mortals. Ves didn't tell them that, though. Just pointing out that something like that could happen among them already lifted some of their hopes!

Ves had done more than enough to savage their egos. This was the moment where he had to present a light at the end of the tunnel.

He knew that abusing people was not an optimal method to motivate people! Ves needed to give them something to look forward to if they played along!

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"Mech pilots come in many flavors. Most mech pilots I've met are adequate soldiers and warriors. I count all of you in this category. Yet is this really what you will amount to in your lives? Who will remember you when you retire after a lifetime of boring service? What deeds will you accomplish when the most impressive accomplishment in your records is an abortive hunt against a

Crown Cat? Is this the legacy that you intend to leave behind in order to make your mark on history?"

No! Though none of the mech pilots spoke out, their eyes betrayed their unwillingness.

Every mech pilot imagined themselves as heroes in their minds! Piloting mechs was such a great and lauded vocation that it was easy for many mech pilots to believe they were destined for greatness!

This was especially so for recent graduates who still hadn't endured the grind and slog of actual duty!

Ves deliberately appealed to their desire for greatness because he didn't see any other angle he could use to motivate the mech pilots.

In the end, neither Ves nor Lady Miralix could coerce the mech pilots into fighting Zeigra. They needed to decide for themselves whether they were willing to risk their lives to earn a substantial amount of reputation and prestige!

"Make your choice." He said with a tone of expectation. "Are you brave enough to go through the crucible of heroes, or will you rather run from it with your tails stuck between your legs? Choose carefully. An opportunity like this might very well happen once!"

He nodded towards every mech pilot before slowly drawing back.

Silence reigned in the meeting room as every mech pilot contemplated their options.

Each of them viewed their earlier decisions in a new light.

In the end, only half of the mech pilots agreed to stay onboard. The other half threw in the towel.

Chapter 1412 Treacherous Treatment

"Thank you, Mr. Larkinson."

After the fateful meeting where half of the mech pilots decided to stay onboard the Felixia Catstrikers, everyone except Ves and Lady Miralix's projection had left the room.

The two stayed back in order to hold a private conversation.

"I bailed you out to further my own interests, not yours." He flatly replied. By now, he had shed his stern persona which he used to great effect during the meeting. "Don't forget that this attempted mutiny reflects badly on your leadership ability."

"I.. you're right."

Perhaps in front of everyone else, she might maintain her belligerent act. However, she couldn't do so against the savior of her hunting ambitions.

Ves took a deep breath. After whipping the mech pilots with his Devil Tongue, he was feeling awfully tired of it all.

"Let's move on. We've managed to stem the bleeding to only half of the mech pilots and a portion of the support personnel. What do you intend to do with them, my lady?"

She let out a rueful smile. "It's difficult. I can't hold them here. They also have enough crew on their side that they can hijack some mechs and at least one legged transport and return to Kemila on their own volition. However, I can't let them do that. I need each and every mech we have to fight the final round against Zeigra."

This left the Felixia Catstrikers in a very difficult position. The traitors wanted to leave the dangerous hunting zone as soon as possible, but there was no way they could return safely unless they enjoyed the escort of at least two functioning mechs!

If Lady Miralix granted them a single legged transport with no escort at all, then the chance they would suffer an ambush from an errant huge cat was very significant!

In fact, the risk of dying in a random ambush was probably larger than the risk of remaining with the hunting team when they confronted Zeigra!

Neither Miralix nor the traitors could afford to compromise on their demands for the mechs of the hunting team!

Nonetheless, to Ves, the equation was simple.

"Just knock the treacherous mech pilots out and stuff them in one of the holding cells of the legged transports. Make sure to post guards at their cells to prevent any sympathisers from freeing them! Problem solved!"

"That.. that will not endear anyone to me." She retorted. Her earlier bravado was nowhere to be seen. "Not only will we be trampling on the demands of those who want to leave, we'll also be instilling more doubts to those who have tentatively decided to stay by my side."

"Hahaha!" Ves grinned. "They're traitors! Each and every one of them has chosen to quit halfway in the middle of a perilous hunting zone! Even if we aren't chasing after a Crown Cat, their cowardly collusion has threatened the safety of you and everyone else who are determined to fulfill your mission!"

"This isn't a battlefield. While the mech pilots who voted to quit are unquestionably cowards, it's still a step too far to paint them as traitors. This is an extremely serious accusation that will only heighten our divisions even further!"

"Who cares? If you give in to their demands, you'll only be endangering your loyalists, which happen to be the people whose support you need the most! Instead of compromising with the traitors, just lock them up and keep them out of sight until after the hunt concludes! This way, you'll only piss off the people

who have already decided to betray you! As for everyone else, the fight against Zeigra will quickly distract them from other matters!"

Though it took a bit more persuasion, she eventually started to come around. Ves purposefully appealed to her obsession to succeed in the hunt.

Her chances to kill a Crown Cat depended highly on how many mechs she could bring. All of the mech pilots that remained loyal just happened to match the specialties of the humanoid mechs that remained functional.

Lady Miralix hardened her eyes after she accepted his arguments. "I'll take care of it. All of the cowards have made their wishes known. My security team will move out and secure them somewhere safe where they won't be able to disrupt our operations."

She did as promised. After an hour of tension and premature exchange of farewells, the security guards and others who earned her trust ambushed the unsuspecting traitors and put them under arrest!

"Hey, what's happening?!"

"Miralix has gone crazy! She's going to kill us all!"

"We're friends! Why are you taking us down!?"

"This is outrageous! We'll be lodging a complaint as soon as we get free!"

No matter what kind of threats or excuses they muttered, the traitors and cowards succumbed to the stun guns without much issue. The mech pilots may be capable of annihilating entire city districts with their mechs, but outside the cockpit they were unable to muster up any resistance against armored guards!

Ves observed the mass arrests from the observation chamber at the top of one of the legged transports. As the person who encouraged Lady Miralix into

taking the traitors in her custody, he bore some responsibility if anything went wrong.

After all, the mech pilots and support personnel who decided to quit did so because they didn't wish to risk their lives any further.

By taking them hostage, the traitors were forced to accompany the hunting team. The only difference was that each of them no longer played any role in the upcoming confrontation. They were not longer in control of their own destinies! They could only pray that Lady Miralix and her loyalist mech pilots were capable enough to kill or scare off Zeigra!

If the remaining Felixia Catstrikers succeeded, then all they faced was to return to Kemila in disgrace. Their decision to quit the hunting team in the field in this vital stage while their other comrades continued the good fight reflected awfully on their records.

In fact, if Zeigra succeeded in overpowering Lady Miralix and her loyalists before killing the rest of the hunting team, then the decision of the traitors would instead be seen as a prescient choice!

"In short, the traitors suffer the least amount of damage to their reputation if the rest of the hunting team dies!"

Ves found an issue with this warped situation. It didn't seem fair for the cowards to root for the failure of the former comrades they decisively turned their back towards.

"Hehehe." He chuckled. "Since you guys are so eager to see us die, then you might as well ride along with us to the end!"

On the flipside, if the final round ended in Zeigra's death, then the traitors would be seen as dishonorable! No one cared whether Lady Miralix hurt their feelings and put them in deadly peril by denying them permission to retreat.

In fact, she wouldn't even be blamed for imprisoning the traitors. As someone who succeeded in hunting a Crown Cat, her reputation and prestige would almost certainly shield her from the minor irregularities that happened under her leadership!

"This is the privilege that victors enjoy!"

Ves realized that as long as someone earned more fame, they were allowed to get away with quite a lot of misdeeds.

He experienced this himself back in the Bright Republic and Ylvaine Protectorate!

"Meow."

Lucky casually jumped on his shoulder and watched what was happening with a curious gaze.

"Heh. Pets are just as selfish as humans. You've disobeyed me plenty of times, remember?"

"Meow!"

The two of them watched as the excitement quickly died down. Fortunately, enough loyalists remained to take charge of the remaining mechs and transports. The hunting team quickly ended their extended break and resumed their march.

Zeigra was certainly licking his wounds right now! The longer the Felixia Catstrikers delayed the final round, the more the powerful Crown Cat regained his strength!

In order to prepare for the final round of combat against the cat, Lady Miralix convened her mech pilots and some of the remaining hunting consultants for a final planning session.

Ves also attended the meeting, of course, though he was more interested in stroking Lucky's back than offering any further advice. He had already attracted way too much attention. He did not wish to exert any further pressure on the nervous mech pilots.

Miralix began the meeting by projecting the most likely scenario. "The plan we formulated before we set out on this hunting trip already took our possible losses into account. However, we suffered a bit more damage than we expected. I don't think it's viable for us to maintain an encirclement with only one ranged mech, one knight mech and three other melee mechs. If Zeigra really wants to run, he can easily slip through one of the gaping holes in our encirclement."

"If we allow Zeigra to run again, it's a question whether any of our mechs still has some fight left in their frames." A mech pilot expressed his concerns.

"While I'm all for trying to take down Zeigra one more time, a second time is..."

"I agree."

Lady Miralix surprised everyone by agreeing with the sentiment the mech pilot expressed!

"We all want to kill Zeigra." She continued. "As long as we have a realistic chance of success, I'm all for it. That won't be possible if my Kinslayer is damaged to the point where it no longer poses a threat to the Crown Cat. The fourth round will be our last chance to achieve success. There won't be a fifth round."

Sitting in the back, Ves quietly nodded in approval. He was relieved that whatever spiritual contamination acted on her, she still retained a measure of her rationality. Continuing the hunt even when all of the humanoid mechs had

fallen apart and her Kinslayer was halfway from following in their footsteps was sheer folly!

Even if her entire crew didn't rebel, Ves would certainly take matters into his own hands if necessary!

Lady Miralix began to instruct her subordinates in the changes to the plan. Since Zeigra hadn't been as weakened as they expected, the noblewoman decisively gave up her previous intention to corner Zeigra in a one-on-one duel.

"We need to take the offensive right from the start." She declared with a determined expression. "The moment we track Zeigra to his hideout, we'll spend a brief moment to top off our energy levels before commencing our assault!"

Some of the mech pilots looked concerned. Maintaining an encirclement was a lot less risky than participating in an offensive!

"Some of our mechs won't be able to last against Zeigra."

"I know. Even if Zeigra quickly takes out one of your mechs by using his corrosion ability, that means he hasn't used it on my own machine. If there's anything we've learned during the previous rounds, it's that sending in our mechs by piecemeal will only play in the Crown Cat's hands! We have to overwhelm him with enemies in order to spread out his limited corrosion ability over multiple machines!"

Unless Zeigra held back during the previous rounds, which was a very realistic possibility, the Crown Cat couldn't use his special power over metals in rapid succession.

Zeigra always exhibited a delay before he activated this ability again!

In fact, the pauses that occurred between his use of his powers lasted longer and longer in each round.

This meant that whatever resource or energy Zeigra expended to activate his powers, the Crown Cat couldn't easily replenish what he lost!

This observation gave Lady Miralix a lot of confidence! Even if the Crown Cat was still a tough opponent without his powers, Zeigra almost exhausted his trump card!

Whatever limits he faced, everyone estimated that he was close to reaching this point!

Lady Miralix unabashedly grinned. "A Crown Cat that relies solely on his body is a cat that we can defeat! As long as we work together and display impeccable teamwork, we can end the short-lived reign of Zeigra! For the hunt!"

"For the hunt!"

"For the hunt!"

"For the hunt!"

Chapter 1413 The Fourth Round

The measures taken by Lady Miralix suppressed the internal turmoil in her hunting team. That did not mean that she solved the underlying issues entirely.

It was all well and good for Ves to berate the mech pilots for lacking the courage to challenge their limits when Zeigra was still far away.

Now that the Felixia Catstrikers followed the Mech Cruncher's tracks to his latest hideouts, everyone's nerves began to simmer again.

Both the mech pilots and the support staff started to have second thoughts about this confrontation. With the possibility of dying by getting chomped by

an immense genetically-modified cat getting closer and closer, morale throughout the entire group started to waver.

As for Miralix herself, her urgency and eagerness in slaying Zeigra drove her to exhort her team to push forward.

She wasn't going to let anyone wallow in their doubts for long! Delaying the battle would only provide more opportunities for incidents to throw another wrench in her plans!

"Zeigra is close." She spoke from her mech. She transmitted her voice to all of her remaining mechs as well as the legged transports parked in the distance. "He's just up ahead, licking his wounds. Though he's still able to exert a formidable amount of strength, all of our analysts and experts agree that he is wounded and exhausted."

Ves had declined to sit in the command center this time. Because of the importance of the battle, he decided to see if he could lend a hand this time.

For this reason, he took Lucky and moved to the empty observation chamber placed at the top of the legged transport. Though the vehicle wasn't close enough to observe the Crown Cat in person, he already summoned a raft of projections that displayed multiple feeds as well as telemetry from every mech about to go into battle.

In truth, Ves paid no attention to the figures and graphs depicting the state of the mechs. He merely summoned them as a smokescreen to hide his real intentions.

Considering the uncertain odds of the final round, he decided to contribute to the battle more directly this time.

How?

By seeing if he could leverage his Spirituality to hinder Zeigra!

After extensively observing Zeigra in battle, Ves tentatively concluded that the Crown Cat ought to be a spiritually strong entity. While Ves hadn't been able to confirm this conclusion directly because he hadn't been able to get close to the cat, there were too many indirect signs that this was the case.

His intuition leaned in favor of this conclusion as well, so Ves decided to go through with his radical and potentially dangerous plan!

"If this little move of mine succeeds, then maybe I'll no longer be relegated to cheer from the sides!"

It only dawned upon him recently that his spiritual toolbox had become filled with many tools, of which some could be turned into weapons if the situation had grown desperate!

Ves felt as if he was about to join a fight between armored knights. Against a confrontation between armored warriors, there was little he could do if he came armed with a pitchfork while wearing peasant garments!

Yet even a pitchfork could be deadly in the right circumstances!

"Well, it's not like I'll have to face Zeigra all on my own. I'm merely lending a hand, that's all."

The Kinslayer and the five surviving humanoid mechs would be playing the leading role in defeating Zeigra. Ves only intended to tilt the odds in their favor so that their chances of victory increased.

For the upcoming battle plan, the Kinslayer played the leading role. The tiger mech that had recently been enhanced by instilling Vescas as its design spirit remained in tip-top shape by refraining from participating in the previous three rounds.

That wasn't possible anymore. Lady Miralix needed to enter the fray in person, but under circumstances that Ves thought was less than ideal.

The biggest variable that could ruin their chances of winning was Zeigra's metal corrosion power. The Crown Cat's ability to drastically weaken specific subcomponents deep within a mech had been the main reason why the Catstrikers lost so many mechs in the previous rounds.

If Zeigra was smart enough to employ his ability on the Kinslayer right at the start, then the entire outcome of the battle may have been decided right then and there!

In order to lessen the chances of this happening, Lady Miralix planned to throw her subordinates straight at Zeigra, keeping him occupied for several minutes.

Meanwhile, she planned to maneuver her Kinslayer to Zeigra's rear and planned to remain out of sight of the Crown Cat as much as possible!

Ves had a lot of doubts about this tactic.

First, Zeigra did not require line of sight to affect a subcomponent with his corrosive ability. There was a chance that the huge cat might still be able to employ his ability to a mech attacking from behind!

Second, Lady Miralix's subordinates would face the brunt of Zeigra's ire! With the resolve of the mech pilots already starting to waver, ordering them to stand their ground in front of one of the deadliest huge cats on Felixia was asking a lot!

Third, Zeigra may still be strong enough to fend them all off even if he didn't employ his corrosion ability! Though all of the biotech researchers stated that the previous rounds of battle successfully injured and tired the huge cat, Ves believed the creature would only fight harder when pushed into a corner!

"We can't underestimate any Crown Cat!"

"Meow!"

Lucky swished his tail in vigilance. Even he knew that this moment would be pivotal to all of them. If the hunting team failed to defeat Zeigra in this final round, then everyone left behind on the legged transports would instantly turn into sitting ducks against the Crown Cat's ire!

"If worse comes to worst, we'll have to sneak our way back on foot." He whispered.

"Meow.."

"Yeah, with huge cats and other predators infesting this forest, it'll be a very difficult journey back to Kemila."

The most important point was that no one could call for rescue in the hunting zone. House Laterna deliberately turned much of the Asco Continent into a communications void. Multiple measures ensured that not even Lucky's sophisticated communication methods could transmit a help signal to Kemila or any vessels in orbit!

The sanctity of the hunt had to be preserved!

In this way, Felixia's Asco Continent retained its solid reputation as a challenging hunting continent!

"There's no exception. Not even a scion of House Laterna can cheat the hunting process!"

With their backs to the walls, Ves saw no choice but to initiate another experiment.

"Let's see if it works!"

Time passed as the mechs of the Catstrikers slowly trudged to a hilly and mountainous part of the forest. Cliffs, rocks and other complex terrain features forced the mechs to watch their steps carefully.

Ostensibly, the terrain heavily favored Zeigra, whose agility and quadruped form allowed the Crown Cat to move over terrain that would give many humanoid mechs headaches!

However, the Kinslayer agilely climbed and hopped over jagged rocks and cliffs without too much effort!

The six mechs slowly advanced to a small cave that barely fit Zeigra's prodigious body. As soon as the mechs came within sight of the cave, Zeigra's alert eyes already glared at the machines as if the cat had awaited their arrival for a while.

"Drive him out of his hole! Open fire!"

The battle commenced when their only remaining rifleman mech started to unload onto the cat! A steady salvo of shells blanketed the cave and the cat with loud impacts and explosions!

ROOAAAAR!

Zeigra angrily bellowed at the hunters who doggedly pursued him over several days. The Crown Cat lifted his mighty bulk and quickly started to accelerate towards the mechs!

The battle had begun!

Though the approaching Crown Cat caused all of the mech pilots to quiver, they had already been psychologically prepared to face such a situation.

As the rifleman mech continued to pelt at Zeigra, the Kinslayer quietly circled to the side. In the meantime, the remaining four melee mechs adopted a spread formation.

The only knight mech the Catstrikers still possessed stood bravely in the front with his battered and claw-scarred shield held out in front.

"He's veering to the side!"

Zeigra knew better than to waste his time with the knight mech, whose sword and shield hardly posed a threat to his resilient hide and flesh.

However, whenever Zeigra tried to maneuver around the melee mechs to attack the lone rifleman mech, the Catstrikers shifted their orientation so that the knight mech would always be in the way!

The constant maneuvering wore at the nerves of the mech pilots and frustrated the Crown Cat.

Having evidently lost his patience, Zeigra roared yet again before dashing forward.

If the knight mech was determined to stand in his way, then he would just have to take it down first!

"He's coming!"

The mech pilot of the knight mech endured an enormous amount of pressure as the violent cat closed the distance. Nonetheless, the mech continued to stand in place, only moving to position and angle its shield to properly redirect the impact as much as possible!

CLANG!

The knight mech audibly groaned as it endured an immense amount of force! Despite the mech pilot's attempt to mitigate the damage as much as possible, several alerts sounded out as its internal integrity took a substantial beating!

However, the knight mech's heroic attempt to withstand Zeigra's charge succeeded in blunting his charge and slowing him down!

As the Crown Cat tried to recover from his charge, the other three melee mechs immediately went on the attack!

The two spearman mechs kept their distance and thrust their spears at Zeigra from opposite directions. The axeman mech which had lost its arm in the first

round held back, but would make sure to block the cat from going after the rifleman mech that continued to steadily wear down the integrity of his resilient but cracking hide!

"Damnit! We can't hold him for long!"

"We don't have enough mechs!"

"Hold your ground! I'm coming!"

As Zeigra was about to swat aside the annoying spears that tried to bar his way forward, the cat abruptly roared in pain and irritation as the Kinslayer finally made its move!

Lady Miralix had held her mech back until she was certain that Zeigra hadn't been watching for attacks from the rear. As soon as she saw her window of opportunity, she urged her Kinslayer forward and pounced straight at Zeigra's hindquarters!

The collision drove the Kinslayer's claws deep into Zeigra's flesh! Not even his resilient hide proved sufficient enough to withstand the tiger mech's claws!

The angry cat immediately ignored the surrounding humanoid mechs and quickly whirled around in order to swat at the offending mech that dared to make him bleed!

However, Lady Miralix cleverly retreated and tried to circle around Zeigra to remain out of sight. At no point during the battle could the Kinslayer afford to be subjected to the Crown Cat's strange ability!

The knight mech and spearman mechs all stepped forward and intensified their attacks, doing their best to attract Zeigra's attention away from the Kinslayer!

As the tiger mech and the humanoid mechs prodded the frustrated huge cat from multiple directions, Ves made his move!

\ "The time is now!\"

While his eyes kept staring at the various displays, he no longer paid any attention to the information projected in front of him. Instead, he concentrated his mind and leveraged his Spirituality into another excursion to the imaginary realm.

At this crucial moment, Ves no longer decided to remain on the sidelines. As soon as his spiritual projection entered the imaginary realm, he swept his senses throughout the surrounding void.

Though the corrosive spiritual winds did their best to obscure his senses, he still managed to detect a strong and active presence in the vicinity.

\ "Found you!\"

Proximity in the imaginary realm often correlated to proximity in the imaginary realm. Just as Ves suspected, Zeigra's spirituality had broken through the extraordinary threshold, which made his presence very easy to find!

Chapter 1414 Spiritual Posturing

Within the span of a minute, the mech pilots of the Catstrikers were being pushed to the brink!

Zeigra's aggressive attacks and maneuvering made it very difficult for Lady Miralix's Kinslayer to approach from behind and savage the Crown Cat's vulnerable rear with its claws.

The huge cat was on guard after suffering from the initial surprise attack!

\ "This darned cat is too smart! He's ignoring us!\"

The humanoid mechs of the Catstrikers did their best to hinder Zeigra from turning his ire towards the Kinslayer. The tiger mech was their only hope of tearing the crown from the powerful cat!

Despite the possibility that the cat might sabotage their mechs at any moment, the mech pilots stuck to their parts of the plan and boldly kept the raging, bleeding and berserking cat occupied!

Nonetheless, an accident still took place as soon as their only remaining knight mech braced for another attack.

Instead of fending off another claw strike, Zeigra dove straight forward and bit the side of the knight mech's shield! With a powerful heave with his neck, the Crown Cat wrenched the shield away from its former owner's grasp!

"Pull back!"

Too late! As soon as Zeigra succeeded in robbing the shield from the knight mech's possession, he quickly pounced forward and pounced the mech to the ground!

"NO!" Lady Miralix shouted! "ATTACK! PUSH HIM OFF OUR COMRADE!"

Zeigra ignored the spear jabs, axe chops and claw attacks savaging his flanks and hind in favor of demolishing the mech it pressed down on the ground. A savage roar escaped from his throat as his claws cut its way through the thick but already-damaged chest plating of the offending mech!

The mech pilot of the trapped mech desperately wanted to eject, but he couldn't! Since the mech had fallen flat on his back, there was no way for the cockpit to eject and bring its occupant to safety!

Awful screams soon flooded the comms as Zeigra vented his frustrations at his trapped and succeeded in piercing his claws through the cockpit! The Crown Cat uttered a triumphant roar before chomping straight through the damaged chest portion of the mech!

Shortly afterwards, Zeigra lifted up his head while chewing a bite of mech sprinkled with the crushed and mangled body of a mech pilot!

Both fear and rage suffused the other mech pilots. The fate suffered by their comrade intimidated the other mech pilots, amplifying their doubts which caused them to unconsciously relent on their assault.

While Lady Miralix was under an incredible amount of strain as she tried to inflict serious damage to Zeigra, she still recognized the danger the fatality presented!

"Fight! Zeigra is right in front of us! This is no time to mourn our fallen comrade! Avenge his death by killing the perpetrator! Only then will we be able to honor his sacrifice!"

In this tense and perilous moment, Lady Miralix pushed herself and her mech to a degree that smashed her previous records!

She had planned for this fight for years! Every mech pilot who emerged from House Laterna knew they were destined to test their mettle against a Crown Cat! Her will and determination never wavered even once even when she knew that Zeigra wanted nothing more than to kill her and her hunting team and ruin all of her efforts!

Her bond with her Kinslayer deepened. If Ves still paid attention to the telemetry transmitted back to the legged transports, then he would have picked up that her connection to her mech deepened until it had reached the upper limit that her neural interface would allow!

Going any further wasn't possible as the Kinslayer's neural interface model attempted to shield her brains and psyche from the negative side effects of such a dangerous connection.

Even so, her mech moved and fought more fluidly than ever before! Zeigra continually attempted to catch the Kinslayer out, but Lady Miralix succeeded time and time again in slipping through the Crown Cat's grasp.

The Kinslayer moved in unison to her thoughts! The mech's responsiveness towards her commands had become so remarkable that she felt as if she truly embodied the machine!

This wondrous and immersive state saved the Kinslayer time and time again as Lady Miralix possessed an uncanny sense when Zeigra attempted to whirl around and launch a sudden strike!

As long as she could keep this up, she could slowly wear Zeigra down!

"Hang on, men! Keep up the fight! Don't let up the pressure!"

While the Kinslayer and the humanoid mechs barely managed to keep Zeigra contained, the removal of their only knight mech meant that the cat became a lot more unbridled!

The spearman mechs were doing their best to pierce and bleed Zeigra's flanks, but the cat's increasingly aggressive counterattacks were taking a toll onto their already degraded mech frames!

As the Felixia Catstrikers barely kept up with the raging Crown Cat in the material realm, a separate battle took place in the imaginary realm.

Different from what Ves expected when his spiritual projection neared the coordinates of Zeigra's spirituality, he encountered two spiritual entities instead of one!

One cloud of spiritual energy dwarfed over the other. A combination of instinct, cunning and brutality suffused this roiling concentration. Ves tentatively identified it as Zeigra's spirituality!

Surprisingly, hovering close to this larger concentration was a smaller and antagonistic collection of spiritual energy.

Ves immediately recognized its flavor! In fact, as its creator, Ves was more than familiar with its identity!

"Vescas! Why are you here!"

Now that he thought about it, why wouldn't Vescas be here? His first true spiritual product was a spirituality strong entity. This meant that its presence amounted to more than a miniscule hole in the imaginary realm!

Nonetheless, when Ves evaluated the spiritual presences of Zeigra and Vescas in the imaginary realm, he quickly realized that their strengths diverged significantly.

Whereas Zeigra's spirituality resembled a storm, Vescas' spirituality only measured up to a tornado.

Still, despite the disparity in strength, neither of them attacked each other directly. Ves could only speculate at the reason. Perhaps both of them were incapable of observing and interacting in the imaginary realm like Ves was doing.

The result of their proximity was an indirect standoff where both sides influenced each other with the pressure of their auras!

Zeigra held a significant advantage in this area. Not only did he possess a lot more spiritual energy, but its quality was a lot more sophisticated and mature!

As for Vescas, the newborn spiritual product only enjoyed a week or so of development. This was way too short for it to match the spirituality of a maturing Crown Cat who already underwent frequent tempering in battle!

Still, despite Zeigra's superiority in this department, his spirituality failed to break Vescas' spiritual presence.

Even when it was suppressed on all sides, the spiritual product admirably held its ground! Its concentrated mix of stubbornness, faith in mechs and unrelenting fury shielded the presence from the brunt of its proximity to the stronger spiritual presence!

"Is this what happens every time two spiritually strong presences are locked in battle?" Ves mentally guessed.

Perhaps a battle between expert pilots took place in two realms at the same time! At the same time they locked themselves into battle, they were also pressuring each other with their spiritual presences in the imaginary realm!

Right now, Ves recognized that while Vescas held its ground, it was still being suppressed by the stronger spiritual presence. Zeigra was simply too strong and could easily bring its pressure to bear on a flawed and recently-born spiritual product!

"What are the consequences if Vescas succumbs?"

Nothing good, he suspected. Though he didn't think that Zeigra's spiritual presence was capable of outright snuffing Vescas' spiritual presence, the damage the former could inflict on the latter would certainly affect the Kinslayer's battle performance!

If Lady Miralix or the Kinslayer ever suffered a spiritual backlash from such an incident, then the pain and distraction might be enough for the Crown Cat to catch the tiger mech out!

It would be game over for Ves, Lady Miralix and the rest of the Catstrikers if that happened!

"I have to step in and tilt the odds in our favor!" Ves resolutely concluded.

Yet... what could he do? While Zeigra's spiritual presence seemed strong, in truth its magnitude probably matched his own.

The problem was that Ves was merely projecting a portion of his Spirituality in the imaginary realm.

Much of his spiritual strength was locked in his design seed, which he imagined as a solid crystalline mass of spiritual energy.

This provided him with a lot of benefits such as strengthening his beliefs and amplifying the help it offered to his design work. Yet the downside to such an arrangement was that the effectively spiritual energy he could utilize for other applications was cut into a fraction of its former glory!

"Still, my Spirituality has grown in recent months. I have a bit more spiritual energy than before, and that's not just due to replenishing what I've lost."

His maximum capacity had slowly grown and still grew even now. Ves had no idea how much further it would grow, but as long as his design seed didn't claim a larger share of the pie, he'd be able to exert an increasing amount of strength in other applications.

"Well, that's still in the future. The issue is that I need to do something now!"

Ves suspected that the spiritual posturing that took place between the two spiritual presences might be one of the reasons why Zeigra hadn't employed his strange corrosion ability yet. As strong as his spiritual presence seemed, Ves sensed some signs that hinted at exhaustion.

"It's the same as when I've expended my own spiritual energy on something." He muttered.

Zeigra's spiritual presence wouldn't be able to suppress Vescas' spiritual presence if it weakened any further. If the latter gained some breathing room, it might be able to exert its own strength in a way that tipped the battle in the material realm in Lady Miralix's favor!

Perhaps Vescas' spiritual presence might even be able to turn the tables and suppress Zeigra's spiritual presence, causing the Crown Cat to fight a lot less confidently in his struggle against the Catstrikers!

After taking in the situation, Ves decided to move into action. He extended his own spiritual projection forward and began to tentatively attack Zeigra's spiritual presence.

The closer he neared his target, the more he tried to sneak his way undetected. Zeigra's spiritual presence was fully occupied with wearing down Vescas' spiritual presence, which enabled Ves to sneak his spiritual projection up close.

The spiritual projection subsequently attempted to take a bite out of Zeigra's formidable concentration of spiritual energy.

"OUCH!"

Ves failed! The spirituality he attempted to siphon from the distracted spiritual presence hurt his spiritual projection!

Apparently, it was a lot harder to mess with the spiritual presence of an entity that was awake and locked into combat!

Not only did Ves failed to manage to steal a small spiritual fragment from Zeigra, but his spiritual presence also became alert to the presence of another interloper!

Some of the pressure that Zeigra exerted over Vescas suddenly washed over him as well! Though the pressure wasn't enough to affect his core consciousness or his design seed, it was a different case for his spiritual projection!

The weaker concentration of spiritual energy from his mind started to lose some of its integrity! Ves quickly supplemented the losses from the attack by supplying additional spiritual energy to his spiritual projection!

"Damn it, it's like adding more fuel to the flame!"

Ves found himself in the unenviable position of being forced to continue to drain his spiritual energy in order to maintain the strength of his spiritual projection.

Each second that passed meant that more and more of his spiritual energy burned due to Zeigra's attacks!

Ves had to make the most of his limited time before he expended too much spiritual energy!

Chapter 1415 Tipping the Balance

Trying to take a bite out of Zeigra's spirituality was like trying to bite a ball made out of compressed alloy. All Ves could accomplish from this act was breaking his teeth!

After two more tries, Ves knew better than to make another attempt to secure a small prize for himself. Zeigra's active and belligerent spiritual presence maintained a state of high vigilance. It left no openings at all for Ves to abscond with a borrowed spiritual fragment!

Since Ves saw no hope of damaging Zeigra's spirituality by taking a bite out of it, he quickly tried to come up with alternative means.

His main objective did not encompass crushing Zeigra's spirituality. Neither did Ves hope to siphon away a spiritual fragment.

Those were just opportunistic goals that he would fulfill if he possessed the strength and ability to do so.

As his broken spiritual teeth attested to, the strength of his spiritual projection was far too inadequate to make a dent in Zeigra's spiritual defenses!

In the back of his mind, he always maintained the faint hope that he possessed the power to decide the outcome of a battle between two spiritually strong entities!

"As if!" Ves shook his head.

His design seed monopolized the majority of his spiritual energy. What he had left hardly constituted anything that could pose a serious threat to expert pilots, especially if they were awake and on guard.

Instead, Ves realized that expert pilots appeared to be exceptionally suitable for launching attacks in the imaginary realm.

Their spirituality took the form of a force of will.

In truth, a force of will was a fancy description for a collection of spiritual energy that underwent a qualitative transformation.

The critical aspect that defined the force of will was that it gained a lot of strength by fusing them with the strong willpower of an expert pilot.

"It's essentially a process of weaponizing spiritual energy in its misty form!"

What Ves was doing right now, expert pilots could do at least ten or even a hundred times better! Perhaps the reason why Ves hadn't seen any signs of expert pilots doing so was because they weren't aware of the imaginary realm.

"I'll have to look into this sometime." Ves mentally muttered. "How much do expert pilots know? And how aware is the MTA of this intangible realm that connects everyone's spirituality?"

He suspected that out of the major trans-galactic organization, only the Five Scrolls Compact knew more.

In any case, since Ves didn't possess the strength to attack Zeigra directly, he instead opted to annoy it and disrupt whatever it was doing.

Even though Ves continued to burn through his spirituality while he remained near, Zeigra's spiritual presence only diverted a small part of its attention to the annoying fly that buzzed all over the place.

In addition, while the quantities of spiritual energy between them differed a lot, their quality was roughly on par!

Actually, Ves discovered that the quality of his spirituality was a bit richer than that of the Crown Cat!

All of this meant that the expenditure of spiritual energy on his part was within a tolerable range. As long as he kept his presence here brief, he'd be able to top off his losses with the excess spirituality that he accumulated in his P-stone.

"Let's go!"

He truly felt like a fly trying to annoy a human. His spiritual projection hardly posed a threat to Zeigra's spiritual presence. However, the Crown Cat definitely bore some discomfort, as evidenced by how much pressure he lifted from Vescas!

The spiritual product breathed a little easier now that the oppressive Crown Cat no longer exerted his complete attention onto the design spirit of the Kinslayer!

The results were felt in the battle taking place in the material realm as Zeigra's responses and aggressive attacks yielded less results.

Lady Miralix and her subordinates swiftly noticed the difference. They mistook Zeigra's weakness as a sign that the huge cat was starting to succumb to attrition!

"He's getting tired! He hasn't had a good rest in days! Keep bleeding him! We have to sap his strength as much as possible!"

Only a couple of minutes had passed, but none of the mechs in the battle looked great. Zeigra successfully caught one of the spearman mechs and

battered it into a wreck. Its mech pilot, eager to avoid the fate of his dead comrade, managed to eject in time.

Still, the loss of yet another melee mech meant that the Catstrikers no longer managed to contain the Crown Cat. Zeigra eagerly took advantage of his increased freedom of movement by battering every other mech in the way to run down the sole rifleman mech!

The Kinslayer desperately followed Zeigra on his heels, but the injured Crown Cat moved so abruptly that his initial advantage was hard to overcome!

"My ammunition is almost spent! I'm ejecting! Sorry, commander!" The mech pilot of the remaining rifleman mech transmitted before decisively activating the ejection command!

As the cockpit of the rifleman mech threaded between the tree trunks and flew off into the distance, the vengeful Crown Cat leapt onto the prone and lifeless mech and angrily tore out its limbs while biting big chunks out of its thin frame!

Metal crunched between the Crown Cat's teeth before he swallowed his prize. The huge cat's eyes already started to shift back and forth, as if contemplating his escape route.

"Zeigra is looking to escape!" One of the sharp-eyed hunting consultants in the command center transmitted to the mechs in the field. "He's approaching his limits! Keep exerting pressure! Whatever you are doing is working!"

"Close in but surround our target from the sides!" Lady Miralix screamed and pushed forth her Kinslayer into a direct confrontation against the Crown Cat!

"Make sure to cover as many escape routes as possible! We have to contain him here or all of our sacrifices will be in vain!"

She had no other choice but to launch a direct challenge against the injured huge cat! Only two mechs remained standing, and both of them were already at the end of their ropes!

The spearman mech and axeman mech maneuvered to the sides but refrained from getting close. With all of the damage they incurred, their mech pilots doubted that they could inflict any serious damage onto Zeigra while most of his hide was still intact!

Even though Zeigra's mineral and exotic-infused hide largely looked intact, all of the damage it withstood during the battle had taken a toll on its integrity. Zeigra's hindquarters and flanks leaked out blood from several nasty cuts as the Kinslayer's claws and a few errant spear and axe strikes managed to pierce through the hide or expand its existing wounds.

These wounds now presented the only hope of defeating Zeigra! This seemingly unstoppable Crown Cat no longer seemed invincible now that his hide presented several tantalizing openings which exposed the creature's softer flesh!

A rush of excitement and battle mania swirled her mind. The fight she had been waiting for had finally arrived! The prospect of fighting a one-on-one duel between her Kinslayer and Zeigra did not frighten her at all. Instead, she embraced the moment, betting the entirety of her life and her future on this battle!

She never entertained any thoughts of retreating at all!

"Either you die, or I die! If I can't return with your head as my trophy, I might as well be buried within your stomach! For the hunt!"

"For the hunt!"

"For the hunt!"

The Kinslayer circled around Zeigra, as if trying to get an angle at the Crown Cat's wounded parts.

Despite her battle euphoria, Lady Miralix knew very well that attacking Zeigra from the front was a bad idea!

Just like most cat-like species, Zeigra was at his most dangerous when oriented towards his front! The Crown Cat could easily bring most of his offensive power such as his forelimbs and his devastating maw to bear upon any opponent opting to face it in a head-on collision!

As much as Lady Miralix put her trust in her Kinslayer, this fight was still very much uneven!

As a result, she decided to maneuver her Kinslayer in a circle around Zeigra, hoping to obtain an opportunity to savage the huge cat's open and bleeding wounds!

Zeigra released a frustrated roar at the tiger mech. All of the circling by the mech forced the tiring cat to awkwardly spin around in place in order to maintain his facing towards the mech shaped like his own species.

Meanwhile, his discomfort during the battle deepened as a part of him that he might not be aware of endured its own suffering!

Back in the imaginary realm, Ves had spent quite some time trying to buzz around Zeigra's spiritual presence. While he faintly believed he was making a difference considering the pressure on Vescas lessened, Ves believed he wasn't doing enough to tip the battle in his favor!

A part of his consciousness briefly directed his attention towards the footage and the telemetry projected in front of his physical body. He rapidly took in the state and the battle and realized the pivotal confrontation between Zeigra and the Kinslayer had commenced!

Ves realized that to win, he not only had to prevent Zeigra from employing his strange ability onto the Kinslayer.

He also had to make sure that Vescas still held up against the pressure exerted by the Crown Cat!

When Ves studied the condition of his spiritual product, he found out that Vescas' spiritual presence in the imaginary realm started showing cracks.

Vescas was a flawed and rudimentary creation to begin with. Ves created him out of a combination of his spiritual energy and the Dragon Cat's remnant energy. Now that it was starting to take on damage, its structure that glued the two types of spiritual energies together began to unravel!

"Damn it! My creation is too fragile!"

If Vescas had more time to grow up, then it might have been able to patch up its flawed and makeshift structure and refine it into a more coherent whole.

However, Ves only created it recently. Throwing it in battle after merely a week of maturing and exposure to Lady Miralix's mind was way too soon!

"The difference in development is too large!"

Ves decided to cease his paltry efforts and began to direct his spiritual projection to Vescas' spiritual presence.

After a moment's thought, Ves decided to approach the damaged spiritual entity and feed it some of his spiritual energy.

The infusion, though small, made a substantial contribution! It was as if Ves had added some fuel to Vescas' nearly-empty tanks!

Ves carefully fed more of his spiritual energy to his spiritual product, knowing that the latter could absorb it without too much effort.

"You're my creation, after all! Even if you've become an independent existence, you still carry a part of me in your spiritual DNA!"

Ves slightly winced at the losses he suffered. His spiritual energy expenditure had reached the point where he would have exhausted his remaining reserve of excess spiritual energy.

Now he was suffering from a real deficit! The longer this went on, the more time he needed to replenish his losses!

"I have to make this quick! I don't want to spend another couple of months without the drive to design a mech! I'll go crazy at that rate!"

If a mech designer no longer enjoyed the process of designing a mech, then what was the point of continuing with his profession?

Fortunately, Vescas did not require too much milk from its mother in order to become sated. The spiritual product was still a weaker spiritual entity than Ves, so its capacity to absorb additional energy was limited.

Ves had merely supplied Vescas with enough spiritual energy to restore its defenses against the pressure exerted by Zeigra's spiritual presence.

"That's enough to keep you intact for a couple of minutes!"

Considering the raging battle taking place in the material realm, Ves estimated that the battle would soon be coming to a close! As long as Vescas managed to stand its ground, then Zeigra would not be able to employ his spiritual superiority with impunity!

"There's still one more thing I can do, I think!"

His spiritual projection regarded Vescas in a different light. The brief contact he made with his spiritual product opened up his eyes to another possible way he could tip the balance in his favor!

Chapter 1416 Parallel Battles

The Felixia Catstrikers were almost wiped out. One by one, Zeigra destroyed or disabled half of their mechs in the first three rounds.

Now, the fourth round annihilated every remaining humanoid mech in the fight. Both the spearman mech and the one-armed axeman mech that feebly tried to contain the brutal huge cat had finally succumbed from all of the damage they accumulated.

Every mech possessed a limit! To the two midrange mechs, they had already performed admirably for lasting so long against a huge cat engineered to destroy and consume mechs!

At this stage of the battle, Lady Miralix's Kinslayer was the only mech that stood in the way between victory and defeat. The lives of all of the mech pilots who ejected as well as the support personnel watching the battle with baited breath aboard the legged transports depended on the performance of the tiger mech!

Despite carrying such a huge burden on her shoulders, Lady Miralix no longer thought about her responsibilities. She no longer put any mind to her future ambitions, nor did she think about how frightening it was to confront a Crown Cat by herself.

She had fully given in to the rush of battle!

Both Lady Miralix and the Kinslayer fought with only one goal in mind: to defeat Zeigra! Their animosity towards the powerful huge cat compelled them to vanquish the arrogant huge cat and prove their worth as the true king of the forest!

"No stinking cat will triumph against a true daughter of House Laterna!"

While his exhaustion and his profusely-bleeding wounds sapped Zeigra's strength, the Crown Cat still mustered up whatever strength he could draw upon his battered body. The endurance of the huge cat had continuously confounded everyone from the hunting team!

"Rank twenty, my butt! He's at least rank fifteen, if not higher!"

"I don't understand how he's able to keep fighting when many other cats would have slowed down by now! Is Zeigra extracting his energy from the chunks of mechs he's eaten or something?!"

The huge cat certainly deserved to be regarded as a Crown Cat. Yet Lady Miralix exhibited no fear at all for challenging this formidable beast in single combat.

Zeigra may be powerful, but her Kinslayer still managed to keep up!

Even though her mech bore numerous claw marks and other scars of combat, as long as she avoided damage to the Kinslayer's limbs and other essential parts, she still had a chance of vanquishing her opponent!

Zeigra possessed an absolute advantage in size, strength and damage absorbing capacity. Despite his increasingly distressed state, the cat appeared as if he could still keep up the fighting for another fifteen minutes!

Lady Miralix knew her Kinslayer couldn't last that long! Having expended a huge amount of energy from the start of the battle, the endurance of her tiger mech would only see her through the battle for just five minutes at this rate!

That was too short!

Even if she stretched out her energy reserves, the damage that Zeigra inflicted on her mech continued to take its toll as well.

A battle of attrition pitted both sides to a brutal competition to see who outlasted the other! The Kinslayer significantly underperformed in this aspect compared to Zeigra, but Lady Miralix did not give up the fight!

She still maintained her confidence!

"If I can't beat you with strength, I'll beat you with my skill!"

The battle between the two cat-like entities became increasingly more violent as Lady Miralix no longer heeded any concerns about conserving the energy reserves or the integrity of her mech.

Instead, she urged her machine to circle around and launch risky attacks. Even if she failed half of the time, the strikes she landed succeeded in exacerbating the wounds that Zeigra already incurred.

Lady Miralix recognized that the key to victory lay in accelerating the bleeding! As long as Zeigra lost enough blood, he would inevitably slow down as the lack of blood circulation would severely hamper the functioning of his huge but very demanding body!

The Kinslayer's smaller size provided it with an advantage in spontaneity and explosiveness. Zeigra could be quite fast as well, but aside from pouncing forward, he had trouble keeping up with the Kinslayer as the tiger mech dodged and tried to circle around!

As the battle in the material realm heated up, the battle that simultaneously took place in the imaginary realm took yet another turn.

The spiritual presences that Zeigra and Vescas maintained in the imaginary realm echoed the circumstances in reality. The former still maintained an absolute advantage in strength over the latter.

If Ves had not injected his recently-created spiritual product with a dose of his own spiritual energy, then Vescas would have already succumbed by now!

"What would have happened if I didn't intervene?" Ves momentarily wondered.

Perhaps Vescas might not break apart, but it would have certainly drawn back its strength, thereby depriving Lady Miralix of the support she received from her mech!

There was a significant difference between piloting a mech that felt alive and one that felt as lifeless as a rock!

With so much at stake, how could Ves make a difference between the posturing that took place between the two uneven spiritual entities?

His previous efforts in annoying Zeigra's spiritual presence might have made a difference, but Ves doubted that he achieved anything too impactful.

The beast's spirituality was almost as strong as ever! Aside from its energy expenditure, Zeigra's spiritual presence still felt as aggressive and brutal as ever!

"Whatever exhaustion and physical wounds Zeigra is suffering from, the damage isn't reflected to his spirituality!"

That made sense to Ves, but it was still a disappointment to him. He couldn't find an easy angle to make any serious dent in Zeigra's spiritual strength.

The only way that Ves could pose a serious threat to the huge cat's spirituality was if he could muster up his complete strength, but that was easier said than done!

"It's not like I can move my design seed from the deepest part of my mind and fling it forward like a cannonball." He muttered. "Can I?"

That was a silly idea. Ves had tried multiple times to move his design seed, but it appeared to be rooted in the core of his mind.

Trying to tear his design seed from its place in order to use it as a weapon was as silly as a mech tearing open its cockpit, grabbing hold of its mech pilot in order to use the body as a club!

Ves could not bring his full Spirituality to bear against his opponent, and this limitation annoyed him to no end!

How could he leverage his limited strength in the best possible way to tip the balance of the ongoing battle in his favor?

His eyes drew away from Zeigra's spiritual presence and started to lock into the spiritual presence of his spiritual product.

"I can't do anything about Zeigra since his spirituality is active and at its most alert state, but it's a different story when it comes to Vescas!"

Ves enjoyed a lot of leverage over his spiritual product. As for his creation, Vescas still responded and opened up to him, especially after he fed the newborn spiritual entity with additional spiritual energy when it needed it the most!

"It's like a puppy who latches on to anyone who shows affection!"

Vescas grew onto Lady Miralix when she continually interfaced with the Kinslayer. Now, it had become reacquainted with one of its birth parents when Ves helped it in its time of need.

The openness of his spiritual product towards him gave Ves an idea that might work.

"What if I resonate with my spiritual product?"

The theory was simple. Instead of adding his strength directly to a fragile spiritual product which couldn't handle anymore energy, why not find a way to resonate and amplify its existing strength?

One of the main preoccupations of a mech designer was synergy. Trying to piece different parts together so that their combination resulted in a much higher level of performance made a huge difference.

"Just like how physical parts can achieve synergy, two compatible spiritual entities can achieve synergy as well!"

However, Ves quickly bumped into the problem of how he could possibly resonate with his spiritual product.

"I'm not an expert pilot." He mentally muttered to himself. "Yet.. I can imitate some of their abilities!"

His eyes metaphorically shined as the idea came into his head. He studied and witnessed the usage of an expert pilot's force of will enough times to know how they worked in principle!

Even if his understanding of the underlying mechanics was a bit fuzzy, Ves might as well try and see if he could achieve anything remarkable!

"Is it possible that I can make Miralix and Vescas achieve unity between man and machine?"

Ves mentally shook his head. There was no way he could fully replicate the steps required to achieve the legendary state of complete resonance. What Venerable Eloise Pelican and her Valiant Warden mech once achieved had only come about with the aid of a very powerful spiritual fragment!

With the lackluster strength of his spiritual projection in the imaginary realm, the best Ves could hope for was to provide a temporary boost to the Kinslayer's X-Factor by resonating with Vescas.

He decided to enact his plan. He first changed the shape of his spiritual projection. Instead of compressing it into a solid tentacle-like concentration of spiritual energy, he deliberately dispersed it into its more natural cloud-like form.

Of course, the burn rate of his spiritual energy increased as the corrosive winds of the imaginary realm as well as the pressure exerted by Zeigra's spiritual presence pounced on the weaknesses of this form!

To combat this, Ves attempted to muster up his thoughts and emotions and inject it into his spiritual projection in a special way. He was not very deliberate about what kind of elements he chose to incorporate into his pseudo-force of will.

The weak but coherent force of will that Ves invented possessed a very weird quality. He recognized all of the aspects of himself in it, such as his depth of knowledge and affection towards mechs as well as his beliefs and assumptions concerning his design philosophy. His force of will even possessed a dauntless quality, as if it dared to take on the galaxy!

Ves had no time to reflect on himself. Instead, he moved his pseudo-force of will to the spiritual presence of his spiritual product.

"Open yourself up to me." He mentally whispered to Vescas. "I want to help you. You need my help!"

His naive spiritual product tasted the flavor of the approaching force of will and instantly took a liking for it! It hadn't yet grown sophisticated enough to be on guard, so it wholeheartedly embraced the force of will that felt so familiar with its own spiritual DNA!

"Yes! Resonate with me! Empower yourself by synchronizing with my empowered will!"

What happened next was hard to describe to Ves. His cognition blurred as something very remarkable and abstruse took place. His force of will seamlessly entered into his spiritual product and began to vibrate, for lack of a better word.

Due to the willpower infused in his force of will, it managed to retain its separate identity. Vescas could not do anything to absorb it without using force, but it would never do such a thing against an entity it loved!

Whatever Ves was doing started to produce results.

Vescas' spiritual presence in the imaginary realm started to firm up. While quantity or quality of spiritual energy hadn't increased, the rudimentary resonance taking place inside its core makeup amplified its existing strength!

The spiritual product no longer wavered against the suppression exerted by Zeigra's spiritual presence. Instead, Vescas started to exert its own form of pressuring!

Although its pressure paled in comparison to that of the Crown Cat, it nonetheless produced some effects!

The changes taking place in the imaginary realm quickly reflected back to the battle taking place in the material realm!

Whereas Lady Miralix felt as if she controlled her mech more fluidly, to the point of where her mech already begun to move before she inputted her thoughts through the connection, Zeigra experienced the opposite!

The Crown Cat's appeared less confident and his ferocity exhibited some instability!

As his wounds and his exhaustion continued to pile up, this subtle change in mentality compounded Zeigra's difficulties! The huge cat began to show increasing signs of hesitation!

Chapter 1417 The Two Cats

Within the imaginary realm, the spiritual projection that Ves shaped into a psuedo-force of will continued to interact with Vescas in a very abstruse way.

"There's a lot about resonance that I still don't know yet! I have the feeling that I've only touched upon the tip of the iceberg!"

To be honest, the resonance he achieved with Vescas could hardly be called perfect. Not only did his projected strength fail to measure up, he also suspected that he was fumbling the process.

In addition, the mixed and polluted qualities and attributes embedded into his pseudo-force of will prevented him from exerting it into a strong, coherent direction.

"Expert pilots like Venerable Foster are all single-minded in their beliefs!" Ves mentally recalled. "This makes it easier for them to exert the full force of their will in a specific application!"

Venerable Foster's aggressive and domineering attitude complimented her extremely well whenever she sought to destroy her opponents.

Venerable Pelican's motherly instincts and protectiveness allowed her to achieve superhuman feats whenever she fought to protect her friends and family.

The strength shown by both of them led Ves to surmise that simplicity did not detract from their strength. In fact, the purer their force of will, the easier it was for them to exert their powers!

"Unfortunately, I'm anything but simple." Ves mentally sighed.

Just a single look at his messed-up pseudo-force of will revealed the difference.

The force of will of genuine expert pilots resembled glasses of water flavored with a specific, defined taste.

In contrast, his own bastardized version of a force of will resembled raw sewage!

The lack of purity in his mentality, as reflected by the unfiltered thoughts and emotions he imparted to his pseudo-force of will, meant that he would never be able to match an expert pilot on their home ground!

"I've made my choice long ago! The development of my spirituality has always been geared towards improving my ability to design mechs!"

The only reason why his turbid and polluted pseudo-force of will resonated with Vescas at all was because his spiritual product inherited his mental garbage!

The perfect match between the two made sure that at least some form of resonance took place!

The effects became increasingly more evident in the desperate battle that took place in the material realm.

The duel that Lady Miralix and her Kinslayer had started against Zeigra was beginning to reach its terminal phase. Both the mech and the huge cat were nearing their physical limits!

One of the forelimbs of the Kinslayer suffered an awful claw strike that resulted in a thirty percent reduction of its ability to exert force. The blow considerably hampered the mech's mobility and offensive power!

However, Lady Miralix managed to make Zeigra pay for his overreach by pushing her mech beyond its limits and launch a brutal counterattack that tore through the hide, flesh and tendons of one of his already-injured hind limbs!

This was a crucial attack, because the partially-crippled limb ensured that Zeigra was no longer able to run away or launch powerful pouncing attacks!

The only way this savage duel between the artificial and organic cat would end was for one or the other to die!

Though some of the parts of the Kinslayer started to whine or buzz in a worrying fashion, Lady Miralix still invested her complete attention into the fight. She couldn't afford to let herself be distracted by her increasing concerns!

"I still have a chance!"

She pushed her Kinslayer past her limits, demanding more out of its frame despite the damage preventing it from moving as smoothly as before.

Amazingly, the mech and its partially-crippled limb held up under the immense strain that Miralix forced upon its stressed and failing parts!

Though various parts of the mechs were already beginning to deteriorate to the point of breaking down, for now the most critical parts still held on during this crucial end stage of the battle!

While Lady Miralix and her Kinslayer still threw themselves fully at their opponent, Zeigra had slightly begun to wilt.

A tiny flaw in his mentality compounded the exhaustion and injuries afflicting his body. The constant pursuit and the lack of rest that plagued Zeigra during the past few days were finally showing their results!

No matter how much rest and recuperation the Crown Cat managed to eke out during the hunt, he never managed to recover to his peak condition!

Zeigra's savage and unrestrained fighting style didn't help much either. Though his high aggression yielded great results in the earlier rounds, the huge cat had expended huge amounts of its energy to take out all of the humanoid mechs of the hunting team.

Now, with just one mech left to defeat, Zeigra was truly starting to scrape the bottom of the barrel! The huge cat no longer dared to launch unrestrained attacks, and instead circled slowly to keep pace with the Kinslayer.

He let out an intimidating roar at the mech that closely resembled his own form. Zeigra took a lot of issue with the machine that learned from him and imitated some of his attacks!

As the two opponents postured against each other, the differences in bearing became increasingly more evident.

Whereas Zeigra's confidence exhibited some flaws, the Kinslayer piloted by Lady Miralix seemed even more eager than ever to vanquish its opponent!

In fact, the Kinslayer subtly experienced some changes on a level almost no one perceived. Its braveness and its aggression became more pronounced. It was as if the mech wouldn't stop attacking until its very last parts fell apart!

"You've done an excellent job, but I still need your strength!" Lady Miralix whispered to her mech. "You were made for this battle! We have to keep fighting until we fulfill our purpose!"

She had the illusion that the Kinslayer concurred with her sentiments. Through her connection with her mech, the focus and emotions she invested into the battle seemed to have elevated in a higher state.

Her bond with her mech had reached a state where she partially felt as if she had become the mech! Through some means that she wasn't even aware of, her control over the machine had surpassed the technical limitations imposed on her by her neural interface!

The mech and cat suddenly launched against each other! The two cats barely missed each other as they both managed to land their blows!

The two cats quickly separated from the exchange of blows.

The Kinslayer acquired a new stretch of claw marks that marred the increasingly-distressed armor onto its flanks.

As for Zeigra, the huge cat roared in pain as thick, scarlet blood bled over his giant snarling face. What was worse was that pain continually erupted from his head due to the claws that the Kinslayer had embedded into its skull before detaching them from its paw!

Though Zeigra's huge and immensely-resilient resilient skull prevented the claws from digging into his brains, the pain was almost unbearable to the cat!

The blood that bled over his eyes and around his nose also interfered with his senses!

Another pain roar escaped the Crown Cat's throat! The agony plagued Zeigra to such an extent that the beast raised one of his limbs in order to dislodge the detached claws pressed against his skull!

"Chance!" Lady Miralix's eyes lit up.

She spotted an opening!

Her mech had already started to pounce forward just as Zeigra swatted the claws from his wounded forehead. The final batch of replacement claws had already slotted into the forepaws of her mech, its gleaming sharpness ready to tear into the flesh of the huge cat!

The nearly undetectable form of a translucent cat-like form briefly overlapped with the form of the Kinslayer as the tiger mech successfully pounced on the Crown Cat!

Sadly, not a single sensor managed to capture the brief apparition!

The most the sensors managed to capture were some anomalies readings that vaguely resembled fake resonance. However, the instance happened too rapidly to confirm that fake resonance had taken place despite the lack of resonating exotics built into the Kinslayer!

Lady Miralix herself jostled onto her piloting seat as the abrupt collision pushed the inertial dampeners of her cockpit to their breaking points!

Nonetheless, no matter how much abuse her physical body went through, her mouth curled into a razor-sharp grin as she enthusiastically urged her Kinslayer to bite Zeigra's neck and activate the warming heat projector built into the throat of the mech!

\\"This is it! Unleash your might, Kinslayer! LET YOUR RAGE BURN THE LIFE OUT OF THIS CROWN CAT!\\\"

The tiger mech endured an immense amount of battering as Zeigra frantically tried to dislodge the Kinslayer from his neck!

However, the Kinslayer's proximity made it difficult for the Crown Cat to leverage its strength at the awkward angle that the mech had latched on to his vulnerable flesh!

In addition, the attrition brought the Crown Cat close to his limits and sapped his strength and energy to the point where his strength no longer overwhelmed the tiger mech!

Even so, the Kinslayer's condition didn't look much better either! Parts continued to malfunction at an alarming rate! Just making sure that it maintained its grip and bite onto the violently-shaking Crown Cat was already taking a huge toll!

\\"We're doing it! He's dying! Keep burning until there's not a single shred of life left in his body!\\\"

The Crown Cat released mangled roars as the heat and flames emanating from the throat of the tiger mech washed into his unprotected neck and constantly burned at his vital flesh!

While the flesh of the huge cats had been genetically-modified to resist a variety of damage including laser fire, the immense amount of thermal energy that the Kinslayer withheld until this final, pivotal moment was too much for any engineer flesh to handle!

Increasingly large portions of Zeigra's hide and flesh started to char and blacken! Uncountable amounts of tissue were dying rapidly due to being overwhelmed by the heat and flames!

Zeigra's desperate counterattack against the Kinslayer intensified for a moment, making it seem as if the mech wouldn't be able to hold on, but slowly the huge cat started to fade.

The strength and frequency of his battering grew weaker! As more and more of his neck and other portions of his body succumbed to the heat, the functioning of his body started fail at an accelerating pace!

"BURN! BURN! BURN!"

Even though the Kinslayer lost some strength as well, the mech heroically persisted in its attack and continued to release its entire remaining reserves of fuel and energy to unleash as much damage to Zeigra as possible!

Still, there was a limit to how much the Kinslayer could hold on. At some point, the mech had exhausted all of its reserves.

The tiger mech's throat ceased to emit its deadly payload as the heat projector itself had run out of juice! The component along with the entire mouth cavity of the mech had pretty much begun to melt!

The rest of the mech no longer possessed the strength to remain active. Its frame emitted forceful groans as its failing components could no longer hold it together! They'd been pushed well past their limits, to the point where the mech forcibly shut down lest its continued breakdowns resulted in debilitating damage!

Both the tiger mech and the huge cat slumped down.

Silence stretched across the battlefield.

The spectators of the battle aboard the legged transports stared at the footage with amazed astonishment.

"Who.. won?"

An exobiologist checked the sensor readings. \"Zeigra's lifesigns are fading...\"

\"He's dying!\"

\"Does that mean we've won?\"

\"Lady Miralix is still alive!\"

Everyone realized what that meant. Cheers spontaneously erupted from every member of the hunting team! They succeeded! Through the skin of their teeth, they defeated a formidable Crown Cat!

\"We've won!\"

The waves of success not only spread out in the material realm. Upon the moment that Zeigra succumbed, a radical change took place in the imaginary realm that occupied Ves' attention!

Chapter 1418 The Great Catch

Two cats entered the battle. Both of them collapsed in the end.

Yet the difference between the two was that one cat's life had already begun to fade, while the other cat was as vigorous as ever!

The Kinslayer magnificently fought against Zeigra, the Mech Cruncher and one of the fastest-growing huge cats released onto the Asco Continent!

Many sensors spread around the battle site beforehand captured every second of the final confrontation between the Felixia Catstrikers and Zeigra!

Such recordings held a huge amount of value as they proved Lady Miralix's courage and valor against a powerful foe! They also proved that Lady Miralix played the leading role in this difficult and risky hunt!

Inside the cockpit of the dormant and half-broken Kinslayer, Lady Miralix quietly wound down from the excitement that carried her all the way to the end of the battle.

Despite her lack of awareness of what took place outside her mech, she already knew she fulfilled her greatest wish. If Zeigra was still alive, then the cat would have continued to savage her Kinslayer!

Since nothing of the sort had happened, Lady Miralix knew that she had finally proved herself to be worthy to fight in House Laterna's name!

"I did it.. we did it.. Zeigra is dead...!"

From today onwards, she became a true potency of House Laterna! She could lift her head high and leave Felixia in order to take part in the wider Sentinel Kingdom as one of its most prominent noble mech pilots!

"The victory I've achieved today will continue the prosperity of my house!"

As Lady Miralix quietly immersed herself in her exultation of completing her challenge, Ves did not have time yet to celebrate.

He still needed to secure his own gains from the destructive battle between the two cats!

At the moment of Zeigra's death, his spiritual presence in the imaginary realm abruptly started to falter!

Ves recognized that the moment he had been waiting for and working towards all this time had finally arrived!

"This is my chance!"

He immediately stopped resonating with Vescas. As much as he wanted to experiment with it further, the act continually drained his spiritual energy, something which he intensely abhorred!

Ves mentally patted Vescas' back as he withdrew his spiritual projection from its spiritual presence.

"Good job. You really helped us all succeed. Now give me some of my energy back."

He forcibly siphoned some of the spiritual energy that originally belonged to him back into himself. Though he encountered some resistance, Vescas still held him in high regard, so it didn't resist as much as it could have despite the pain it experienced.

Besides, even if the spiritual product did put up a fight, its strength was still lacking against its creator!

"Don't be so bummed out, Vescas. If Lady Miralix continues to pilot the Kinslayer, then you'll eventually make up for the loss!"

The spiritual energy he drew back into himself did much to replenish his earlier expenditure.

Energized by the recovery of some of his spent energy, Ves began to move his spiritual projection towards Zeigra's spiritual presence.

Whereas before it projected strength, brutality and cunning, now it started to unravel! The death of Zeigra meant his spirituality lost the foundation that sustained its life!

"It's dying!"

Just as he expected, a spiritual entity that lost its physical body could no longer sustain itself!

Even if pieces of it might be able to persist in the form of broken fragments, most of what gave the spiritual entity its identity would be lost because there was simply too much that couldn't be retained!

This was what happened to the Dragon Cat days after Ves managed to access its frozen corpse. A lot of time had passed upon which the Dragon Cat's spirituality had gradually broken apart and most of its pieces either blew

away into other parts of the imaginary realm or deteriorated completely due to the spiritual corrosion they endured.

Still, Ves also kept an open mind and considered the possibility that Zeigra's spirituality might persist even without a physical body. He had seen stranger stuff, of which the most eye-catching was the paradoxical existence of his dead mother.

Was the spiritual ghost that claimed to be his mother truly what she claimed to be? If so, how in the hell did she manage to keep her spirituality intact and somewhat lucid throughout all of those years since her corporeal death?

"Am I able to do the same?" He mentally asked.

Ves considered this question many times. He believed that not even expert pilots and Journeyman Mech Designers were able to retain their spiritual existences after their bodies were laid to rest. A lot of places would have been haunted by spiritual ghosts by now if that was the case!

From the signs he gathered so far and the guesses he made, he tentatively concluded that life after death required a special technique. His mother probably utilized a sophisticated method that halted the degradation of her spiritual existence.

Still, even if she managed to preserve a sliver of her life, Ves doubted that her condition remained well throughout the years. Only until Ves arrived at the Glowing Planet did she manage to regain the strength to mess with his life and wander off after stealing the corpse of the crystal builder leader from his possession.

He was still rather cross about that theft!

Ves mentally shook his head. Not everyone could replicate his mother's feat. She was the exception rather than the rule.

Zeigra was case in point. As the genetically-engineered beast met her end at the hands of Lady Miralix and her Kinslayer, his spiritual presence increasingly started to lose cohesion!

Bits and pieces of Zeigra's spirituality even detached from the presence the cat maintained in the imaginary realm! The corrosive spiritual winds feasted upon the debris and whisked them away from this site!

If the damage that Zeigra's spirituality suffered in the imaginary realm was already this bad, then the damage it suffered in the material realm was probably just as bad!

"I can't let Zeigra's spirituality continue to fall apart!"

Though Ves briefly thought about capturing the bits and pieces that detached from Zeigra's spirituality, he pushed it aside in favor of an even greater possibility.

Instead of scavenging a few scraps and merging them into a feeble spiritual fragment, why not capture the whole thing?!

Although Ves still wasn't quite sure about how he would sustain the spiritual entity's life, he formed a few theories that he wanted to test!

He quickly extended his spiritual projection towards Zeigra's faltering spiritual presence. He did so to see how much of an awareness it still retained.

"OUCH!"

Okay, that was pretty lively still! Even as Zeigra's spirituality deteriorated, it still remained lucid and unresigned throughout the process! Ves sensed an entire wellspring of anger within the spiritual entity.

He was really angry at his defeat! He hated the Kinslayer and he hated his own weakness at failing to overcome the metal cat!

Ves did not hear Zeigra explain his feelings in words, but instead inferred it through the jumble of violent emotions swirling inside the spiritual entity.

Seeing that Zeigra might not be able to comprehend human speech, Ves tried to bring his spiritual projection closer in order to convey a simple message.

"I can save you. You don't have to die. Cooperate with me and I can bring you back to life."

RAGE.

Zeigra's spirituality mindlessly lashed out at Ves! Even as Zeigra's spirituality fell apart, it still recognized one of the antagonists that contributed to its death!

Knowing that Ves didn't have the time to persuade Zeigra's spirituality gently, he decided to take a firmer approach.

"We won. You lost. Your body may have died, but your spirit still lives on, for now. How long can you last, though? Surrender to me. As long as you allow me to bring you away, I promise I will craft a new container for you to come back to life, both in spirit and in body!"

Trying to articulate his intentions through a non-verbal exchange seemed difficult, but Ves adeptly conveyed his meaning to the intelligent spiritual entity.

While Zeigra was still a beast all considered, its spirituality wouldn't have grown so formidable if it was stupid!

Unfortunately, even if Zeigra was capable of higher-level thinking, it was still a huge cat! Its grief, hatred and animosity towards his killers vastly exceeded his other considerations!

Though Ves detected that Zeigra still possessed the will to live, his desire to deny his killers as many prizes as possible compelled him to remain stubborn to the end!

"Do you really want to die?! Do you really want to depart from this existence without leaving behind a legacy in the form of offspring?"

Ves appealed to the huge cat's baser instincts. He continued to coax the spiritual presence with offers of salvation and a chance to live a new life!

Still, Ves knew he faced a very tough customer. Zeigra's spirituality stubbornly maintained his unyielding stance, seemingly determined to deny Ves to the very end!

Time passed. The corrosive spiritual winds continually assaulted the weakened and fading spiritual presence. More and more spiritual debris separated from the greater whole and got carried away to parts unknown.

Most of the debris would eventually break down. One or two pieces might survive as hardy fragments, but even they might fall apart after enduring decades or centuries of continued battering.

The weak had no place in the imaginary realm!

Even though Ves occasionally wanted to capture the increasing amount of debris that separated from Zeigra's spirituality, he resisted the temptation.

Instead, he persisted in coaxing Zeigra's spirituality to give in to his demands.

"Does it feel good for you to die? I bet it doesn't! Save yourself the agony of death and open yourself up to me. Now that our battle has ended, I am no longer your opponent. I'm your savior! Accept my help and your life will no longer be forfeit!"

Though Zeigra kept up his resistance, it became increasingly harder to do so as its spirituality accelerated its degradation.

His spirit was really dying!

The closer he got to death, the more his resolve and his instincts wavered. The rage that Zeigra held towards his killers began to seem more and more distant as the threat of spiritual death became more acute!

Eventually, Zeigra's spirituality finally ceased its resistance. It had implicitly given in to Ves! Deep down in the core of his spiritual being, Zeigra still wanted to live!

"You've made the right choice!" Ves mentally smiled.

Though Ves privately ached at all of the spiritual energy that Zeigra lost, he knew it was a necessary step to gain the huge cat's acceptance.

The weak had no right to contend against the strong!

Now that Zeigra lost a substantial portion of its spiritual strength and continued bleeding even now, it fully recognized that it was in a weaker position.

Therefore, when Ves attempted to grab hold of Zeigra's spirituality, the beast did not resist.

"Oh." Ves mentally muttered in surprise.

He thought he would face a lot of resistance in his attempts to move Zeigra's spirituality. Even if it did not put up a resistance, its anchoring in the imaginary realm would certainly be hard to overcome!

However, the truth turned out to be different!

"His anchors have weakened!"

This made his next step a lot easier! While Ves fumbled around a bit, he eventually managed to drag Zeigra's spiritual presence back into his own mind!

"I want it all! I don't just want the portion of your spirituality in the imaginary realm, but also what's decaying in your dead body's mind!"

Fortunately, the spiritual presence was connected to the spirituality locked in the dead Crown Cat's mind. While Zeigra's death had caused the bonds to loosen, Ves still managed to tug it from its place and drag it all the way back to his mind!

As soon as Ves captured every last bits of Zeigra's spirituality within his range, he quickly returned to his mind.

Only to encounter a massive headache!

"AAAAHH!"

Chapter 1419 Ungrateful Ca

What if Ves met a stranded pirate ship out in space one day?

What if he opened a channel to the pirate ship and offered to rescue the men trapped within?

What if the pirates inside cussed and hurled insults at him, all the while their starship was falling apart?

What if the starship started to break up and throw every pirate into lifeless space?

At that point, many of those pirates quickly changed their mind and accepted the hand that was offered to them. They meekly boarded the vessel of their rescuer and profusely showed their gratitude as their comrades were fished out of their distressed ship.

Of course, once all of the pirates found safety by entering a new ship, they immediately turned on their rescuer and tried to hijack their ride!

This was exactly what Ves faced, because as soon as he slurped all the spirituality that Zeigra still retained and dumped it into his mind, the beast instantly rebelled!

"AHH! You ungrateful pussycat!" Ves yelled as he held his head in pain!

"Meow?!"

Lucky jumped from his shoulder and floated in the air, looking worried at his owner's state. The gem cat could do nothing to help Ves out in his spiritual struggles.

Ves could only rely on himself to fight his spiritual battles!

Right now, he faced a rebellion in the sanctum of his mind! The damaged but still vigorous spirituality of the slain Crown Cat refused to stay put and lashed out in every direction, inflicting an increasing amount of damage to his mentality!

Fortunately, his mind proved to be resilient, but he couldn't afford to keep this up forever.

Letting Zeigra's spirituality enter his mind was a bad idea. Keeping him contained in his mind where Zeigra was free to vandalize his mentality with impunity sounded even worse!

He quickly began to suppress the unruly spiritual entity. Because Ves was defending the interior of his mind, he was able to leverage a lot more spiritual strength to contain Zeigra for now, but how long would he be able to last?

"Pipe down, Zeigra!" He mentally yelled. "You're not going to come back to life if you keep resisting against me like this! Be patient and let me craft your body!"

Unfortunately, even if Zeigra's spirituality understood his intentions, the beast continued to resist the suppression.

After several minutes of wrangling, Ves realized that Zeigra was simply far too feral for Ves to tame! This prideful beast who fought his way to the top of Felixia food chain could not tolerate submitting to someone else, let alone the person responsible for killing his physical body!

A Crown Cat could not tolerate any affront to his dignity! Zeigra especially wasn't able to stomach submitting to a tiny, soft, bipedal snack who shouldn't have been able to pose a threat to him at all if not for their strange-tasting machines!

Ves partially regretted bringing Zeigra's spirituality in his mind, though he knew it was a necessary step to rescue it from the vagaries of the imaginary realm.

The good news was that its deterioration slowed down enormously.

The bad news was that it began to sustain itself from Ves' own body and mind! It lodged itself in his head like a parasite!

Not only that, but Zeigra was greedy for more! He wanted to supplant Ves as the dominant consciousness!

"Screw you, you dumb cat!"

Ves suppressed Zeigra's spirituality as best he could, but he knew the disembodied beast would never subside as long as an opportunity was still within reach.

Hosting Zeigra's complete spirituality in his mind was a lot different from hosting Qilanxo's spiritual fragment!

Just like the Sacred God herself, Qilanxo's spiritual fragment regarded Ves as a friend and tried to do its best to withhold its formidable and damaging spiritual energy within itself.

Zeigra on the other hand tried to do everything possible to hurt and weaken Ves! The cat felt no gratitude for the rescue but instead saw it as an opportunity to turn the tables and come out on top!

"A beast is a beast! No matter how smart they're engineered, they're still governed by their baser instincts!"

Ves grossly overestimated the degree of rationality exhibited by organic products. Zeigra may be sentient, but it never enjoyed a human upbringing! It was a mistake to assume that Zeigra might act like a civilized human being!

"Well, tough luck, you stupid cat, because I've already prepared a backup plan!"

Even if Zeigra's spirituality acted docility in his mind and cooperated with his arrangements, Ves still worried about the possibility of betrayal.

He drew his concentration from his mind and returned his attention to reality.

Ignoring all the projections blaring out for attention, he drew to the side and picked up a familiar box placed to his side. He opened it up, revealing the P-stone stored inside, which he picked up with both his hands.

"The party stops now."

First, he tugged out all of the excess spiritual energy he stored within his P-stone and returned it to his mind. This way, he replenished what he spent and strengthened his defenses against Zeigra's ongoing revolt.

Next, he leveraged his considerable mental defenses and forcibly pushed out Zeigra's spirituality.

If Zeigra's incorporeal spirituality got booted out of his head, then it would certainly drift its way back into the imaginary realm unless it could anchor its presence in the material realm!

There were only two places where Zeigra's spirituality could safely reside: his mind or the P-stone!

As Ves resisted Zeigra's presence in his mind with every fiber of his being, the Crown Cat's spirituality eventually got pushed into the P-stone, which exerted a strong suction that assisted in the beast's relocation!

"Hahaha!" Ves burst out.

The P-stone felt much different now that it hosted an unruly spiritual entity! Zeigra hated everything that happened to him recently. The Crown Cat detested his new home and lashed out at the spiritual confines of the P-stone!

However, unlike Ves' mind, the P-stone was more of a solid, lifeless structure! At the very least, Zeigra found himself unable to deal any significant damage to the P-stone!

More than that, the P-stone also prevented Zeigra's spirituality from leaving its new prison! The suction and attraction it exerted on spiritual energy was at its strongest at the very center!

Due to strange, abstruse rules, Zeigra's spirituality found itself unable to exert a sufficient amount of strength or leverage to resist the attraction and leave the P-stone!

To be honest, Ves hadn't expected the P-stone to be so capable of containing a spiritual entity. Whenever Ves pulled his excess spiritual energy from the P-stone, he only had to exert a moderate amount of strength to overcome the suction.

"But then again, I'm on the outside and not affected by whatever happens deep inside." He whispered.

Even if Zeigra was capable of exerting a sufficient amount of strength to leave the P-stone, what was the use in escaping?

Aside from Ves' mind, the deterioration of Zeigra's spirituality would quickly resume without finding another suitable body to house its formidable spiritual strength!

Both the P-stone and Ves' mind represented two lonely starships in the void of space. The moment Zeigra's spirituality attempted to escape either of them, it would quickly become exposed to the deadly vacuum, cold and radiation of interstellar space!

In this regard, leaving the P-stone was an act of suicide! After Zeigra chose to set aside its pride for a chance to live, it no longer had the courage to choose death!

Ves lovingly stroked the surface of the energetic P-stone as he placed it back into its container. \"Stay put for now. I still have a use for you.\"

Before he closed the box, Ves frowned a bit as he observed something disconcerting. Zeigra's spirituality continued to deteriorate even if it found a temporary home. It was far too big and strong to be able to maintain its integrity now that it had lost its physical foundation!

The P-stone made for a fine prison, but as a permanent home for spiritual entities, it still fell short!

\"My stone isn't alive.\"

The difference between his mind and the P-stone was that the latter was literally as dead as a rock. Just because it interacted with spiritual energy didn't mean the rock itself was alive!

What Ves basically did right now was to stuff Zeigra's spirituality in a cold, dark cell without any source of sustenance to keep it alive and healthy!

Zeigra needed a source of spiritual food and water to maintain its existence! If Ves didn't solve this problem, then the spiritual entity would still degrade over time!

"Damnit. You greedy bastard." He mentally berated the cat.

After a bit of thought, Ves injected a trickle of his spiritual energy into the P-stone. It quickly arrived at Zeigra's side. The disembodied Crown Cat quickly pounced on it and started to assimilate it into its spiritual being.

It was hard. The incompatibility of their attributes meant that Zeigra found little to his liking. However, desperation forced the beast to chew on Ves' sewage-flavored spiritual energy anyway and assimilate it into its spiritual makeup regardless of the consequences.

"Don't complain." Ves mentally lectured the rebellious spiritual entity and smacked the surface of the P-stone. "It's the only sustenance that you'll enjoy for the next few weeks or months. The less trouble you stir up, the faster I'll complete your new home!"

Once Ves closed the box, he resolved to keep it close to him in case the Crown Cat managed to slip out of his prison somehow.

Still, Ves thought it was unlikely for Zeigra to succeed. His spirituality still suffered a considerable amount of deterioration upon his body's death. The paltry amount of spiritual energy that Ves threw at Zeigra was clearly not enough for the cat to repair the holes and other injuries to his spirituality.

After studying the box and making sure that its contents didn't act out or anything, Ves finally let down his guard and relaxed upon his bench.

"Success!"

Through his hidden intervention, Lady Miralix and her Felixia Catstrikers succeeded in completing their Crown Hunt!

Ves stood to gain a considerable amount of rewards resulting from this accomplishment! Aside from the concessions promised by Lady Miralix and the prestige he earned for tuning up the mechs employed in the hunt for Zeigra, he also achieved his main objective for traveling to Felixia!

In his opinion, the contents of his P-stone represented his biggest prize! The value of the complete spirituality of a powerful beast vastly exceeded that of an incomplete fragment!

This was the first time that Ves truly captured the total spiritual essence of another entity!

Ves managed to retain almost all of Zeigra's strengths, weaknesses, quirks, memories and other traits! Though the brief moment of deterioration caused Zeigra's spirituality to lose a few bits and pieces of itself, the losses were fairly minor all-considered.

The difference between a complete specimen and a mere fragment of a greater whole made a very huge difference to Ves. While spiritual fragments such as the one he refined of Prophet Ylvaine came across as very sophisticated, he always suspected that it hadn't restored what it lost, but rather amplified its existing traits to fill up the huge gaps in its spiritual makeup.

"Is this what happened to my mother as well?" He idly wondered, before quickly throwing the speculation to the back of his mind.

"Meow."

Lucky found it safe to approach again. The gem cat curiously floated down on top of the box and thumped his tail against the side of the container.

The box slightly shook, causing Lucky to jump back into the air in fright!

"Meow!"

"Hahaha! Careful with what's inside, Lucky!"

For all of his bravado, Lucky still regarded Zeigra with great fear. The latter's performance in the previous battle made it abundantly clear that the Crown Cat was an absolute killing machine!

"Well, let's wrap this up and start with the aftermath. We have a lot of work in store!" He spoke as he picked up the box and carried it with him out of the observation chamber.

Chapter 1420 Hasty Processing

The battle site soon became a hive of activity as soon as the hunting team definitively confirmed that Zeigra was dead.

Huge cats faked their own deaths before, and ambushed a lot of complacent hunters when they approached with their guards down.

Fortunately, the exobiologists on the hunting team confidently concluded that there was no way for Zeigra to ever come back alive again. The damage his body suffered was simply too severe!

The legged transports approached the messy and rocky battle site, their many sturdy legs easily allowing them to pass over the irregular terrain. Once they approached the corpse, they settled down and disgorged a large number of people and equipment.

Two main priorities occupied the support personnel.

First, they needed to rush a broken mech back into action. Zeigra had done a great job at disabling all of the mechs of the hunting team.

Even the Kinslayer could no longer be brought online due to all of the damage it suffered during the final confrontation!

This presented a huge concern to the hunting team as they were completely defenseless against the predation of the other huge cats that occupied the hunting zone!

"We don't have to worry too much about any other huge cats approaching this location for a time." A hunting consultant cheerfully informed Ves as they stepped out of the transport.

"How so?"

"The huge cats are highly territorial. They detest the presence of other cats on their turf. The only valid reason for the cats to get together is when they are in heat. Even then, many of the organic products are deliberately engineered to be sterile. House Laterna can't tolerate their products reproducing by themselves. Who will buy their products after buying a single breeding pair? Besides, the divergent genetics of each individual cat also makes it difficult for them to produce a viable offspring."

Ves nodded in understanding. "So for now, we're safe?"

"Yep. We don't have to worry too much about the cats finding out about Zeigra's juicy carcass. As a Crown Cat, his territory is by far the most expansive in this hunting zone. Even if the other cats smell the scent of his carcass, their fear for him will keep them away for at least a week by our reckoning."

This relieved Ves a little, because he shouldered the main responsibility of jury-rigging a mech back into service.

He had a lot of work to do. Zeigra had done a huge number on all of the mechs. From all the data he studied earlier, restoring the Kinslayer to a mobile state was doable, but Ves did not expect he could bring the heavily-battered tiger mech back into fighting condition!

His only alternative was to find some way to restore the fallen humanoid mechs. Unfortunately, Zeigra chomped judicious bites out of the torsos of all of their frames. The damage to any single mech was too severe for Ves and the mech technicians to restore them to functionality with conventional repairs.

Ves already had a plan in mind, though. As long as they cannibalized the intact parts from other broken mechs, Ves expected they could bring at least two of the mechs back onto their feet after a few days of work.

They wouldn't be pretty, nor would they be able to withstand a lot of damage, but as long as they could fend off an opportunistic huge cat, that was enough!

While Ves and the technical personnel crawled over the fallen mechs, the hunting specialist and biotech specialists quickly moved into action to preserve their physical prize.

If they wanted to return with their trophies in the best possible condition, they had to move quickly to preserve Zeigra's carcass!

Even now, the hot, tropical humid environment was probably not doing the body any favors. Its many cuts, bruises and notably charred and burned neck sections presented huge temptations to any bacteria and other bugs in the vicinity!

Fortunately, the hunting team already planned for this occasion. Some of the legged transports brought to the expedition dumped their cargo onto the ground before reconfiguring their cargo bays into mobile cooling chambers.

While the carcass was too large and heavy to fit into any single legged transport, some of the hunters in the team specialized in skinning and cutting up huge cats. They expertly directed the workers who employed specialized cutting machinery to process the carcass at the quickest speed.

"Start with the head, but be careful! Lady Miralix won't like it if we spoil her trophy!"

The head had to be preserved at all cost. As the grand prize of the Crown Hunt, the hunters prioritized its preservation with utmost haste and diligence.

As for the remainder of the carcass, they would skin it and cut it up afterwards. Since the ownership of the rest of the body went to Ves, the hunters were clearly not as motivated to do their best.

It was fine, though. What use did Ves have for a giant, headless carcass?

As Ves turned back to his work and drew up some rudimentary preparation work to keep the mech technicians busy, he approached the fallen Kinslayer.

The tiger mech had been slumped alongside Zeigra's body ever since its heat projector expended all of its firepower.

Medical personnel already opened up the mech's cockpit to rush Lady Miralix to the infirmary at one of the legged transports. She had fallen unconscious at the end as she expended her all in the fight.

Everyone present saluted and looked at her with appreciation as a floating stretcher brought her away in order to monitor her health.

As for Ves, he expressed little interest in the noblewoman's condition. Instead, he arrived at the Kinslayer's damaged side and placed his palm onto its armor plating.

He surreptitiously extended his spiritual senses and managed to find the familiar presence of its design spirit. Vescas looked dispirited after undergoing two battles at once in two different realms.

"Rest well. You deserve it. Hopefully, Lady Miralix appreciates you enough to restore you back to new."

Ves had no idea if Lady Miralix intended to do so. She might consider the Kinslayer to have fulfilled its purpose. Still, it would be a very heartless act for her to order the Kinslayer to be scrapped. As the mech that she took a liking

to and had brought her to victory against a Crown Cat, the Kinslayer might very well become her permanent companion!

"If Lady Miralix decides that her Kinslayer has lived long enough, you're free to strike out on your own. That's what you deserve."

In truth, Vescas wouldn't fare any better than Zeigra's spirituality when left unmoored and without a space to inhabit. Ves would certainly have to take Vescas out of the Kinslayer and place his spiritual product in another P-stone.

It was a good thing that Lady Miralix promised him a second P-stone upon their return to Kemila.

If that didn't work out, Ves could always host Vescas in his own mind. As his own creation, Ves was confident he could contain the spiritual product!

"Hopefully, it won't come to that."

In his opinion, the Kinslayer deserved to live. Even though he wasn't involved in its design, he had become very attached to it due to the contributions he put into the mech. Adding Vescas as its design spirit had made a huge difference in the outcome of the Crown Hunt.

He began to get to work by performing a more thorough inspection on the state of the Kinslayer. The judgement he made earlier matched with his inspection. With the supplies and equipment the hunting team had brought, Ves was confident that he'd be able to bring the Kinslayer back online.

"It can move, but it can't fight."

That was enough. Though Ves expected that he could only get three of its four limbs to work, that was sufficient for the mech to drag itself back to Kemila.

It would be a shame to leave the mech behind after all it had done. Under these hot and humid conditions, the exposed parts of the mech would

certainly deteriorate. Even if mechs were built to take a beating and resist corrosion as much as possible, Ves still believed the mech would not fare well when left alone here for a week!

In the meantime, any other huge cat might stumble upon this site and trash the machine!

A few days passed by as the work proceeded rapidly. The mech technicians under the expert and experienced direction of Ves managed to restore a spearman mech, an axeman mech and a rifleman mech to basic functionality

The judicious jury-rigging and patchwork repairs meant that none of the mechs could muster up more than thirty percent of their former strength. They were basically paper tigers in the sense that they looked vastly more impressive than their actual battle power.

The three shambling mechs would certainly struggle against an ordinary huge cat!

"We'll just have to trust that the presence of the three mechs is enough to deter the cats from attacks." A hunting consultant remarked. "We'll be taking a different route on our way back. Before, we didn't make any attempts to avoid the other cats. That's not a good idea anymore. We'll be doing a lot of scouting to avoid unnecessary trouble."

Everyone who signed up on the hunting team consisted of professionals. While Lady Miralix had made some errors with regards to the composition of her piloting roster, she insisted on hiring competent personnel.

All in all, watching Lady Miralix lead her hunting team with mixed success taught him a lot of lessons. Many of her decisions elicited admiration in him, but a few notable choices had almost caused the hunt to fail!

Amidst the celebration and joy of defeating a Crown Cat, almost no one spared any thought about the defectors who wanted to give up and return. Not

only did they quit the hunting team on their own accord, they also contributed nothing to the final round of battle.

Even if they played an important role in battling Zeigra in the previous three rounds, their contributions ultimately couldn't compensate for the fact that they stabbed their employer in the back in the most critical stage of the hunt!

While their actions technically weren't criminal as they didn't outright desert in the middle of an ongoing battle, such a disgraceful act deeply offended the sensibilities of the mech piloting community.

Mech pilots placed a huge amount of importance to the virtues of honor, courage, duty and so on! Families like the Larkinsons rose to fame in the Bright Republic because of their adherence to these values!

Mech pilots that faithfully embodied these virtues were held in high regard while those who spat on them were scorned by their fellow pilots. No ordinary outfit commander would want to hire scum who abandoned their employer and comrades before the job was done!

"It's worse in the Sentinel Kingdom."

After spending some time in the Sentinel Kingdom, Ves realized that its martial culture emphasized honor to a much greater degree.

The constant struggle against the Nyxian pirates had forced the state to present itself as a bastion of order and righteousness.

The nobles and royals largely derived their legitimacy from their ability to protect the commoners from dangerous pirates!

Ves also benefited from this preoccupation as well. While his contributions to the hunt might not be as important as that of Lady Miralix and her loyal mech pilots, he was still an esteemed Journeyman!

Not only that, he personally accompanied the Felixia Catstrikers as they hunted Zeigra, risking his own life and limb to help repair and maintain the mechs in the field!

This achievement mattered the most in the Sentinel Kingdom! Ves expected his future business to go a lot smoother now that he could brag about going on a famed hunt in the state!

"Hopefully, some of the local Journeymen will be a bit more willing to conduct an earnest exchange with me." He grinned. "Hardly any Journeyman has dared to take part in a Crown Hunt!"