

Mech 1911

Chapter 1911 Tethered

The battle on land turned more chaotic after the intervention of two additional groups of combatants.

While the Living Prophet and Commander Dise did not bring enough mechs to overcome the numbers disparity, the timing and direction of their attacks profoundly disturbed the attacking force!

The reserves covering the rear along with the vulnerable ranged mechs supporting the mechs at the front all came under heavy attack!

Though the combined force of CRC mechs and foreign mercenary mechs still possessed more than enough mechs to address the newcomers, the influence to their morale was significant!

No army liked to be surrounded from different directions. A mech force especially didn't want to be attacked from the rear which normally served as their fallback point or escape route!

The Kronon defectors and Swordmaidens also exerted a lot of pressure in different ways that significantly impacted the confidence of the mercenary mech pilots.

"OUR FAITH SHALL SHATTER YOUR WILL! TREMBLE BEFORE MY MAJESTY!"

First, the glow exuded by the prototype Transcendent Messenger exceeded the glows of any mech! Its glow was so strong and palpitating that the defectors from the Kronon Dynasty wholeheartedly believed that the Living Prophet was truly the Great Prophet!

Not only did the prototype exude a presence that would make any Ylvainan prostrate before the mech, its righteous fury and its piercing judgement caused every foreign mercenary mech pilot to quake.

Many of the secularists among the attackers suddenly started to shudder in fear. Did gods exist? Was Prophet Ylvaine truly passing judgement on them? Even though these fears sounded absurd, many mercenaries couldn't help suspect that their actions had very real repercussions on their souls!

As a consequence of this invisible suppression, the mercenary mechs lagged even further when they were pressing the attack. If not for the rich rewards and strict warnings given by the Coalition Reserve Corps, the mercenaries might have started to retreat by now!

"Swordmaidens!" Commander Dise shouted over the command channel. "Chop these flimsy mechs apart and show them that the frontier still lives!"

"Chop!"

"Chop!"

"Chop!"

The swordsman mechs piloted by the Swordmaidens all stormed forward with blades held with both hands.

Unlike other ordinary mech pilots, the Swordmaidens exhibited a passion and skill for swordsmanship that could not be equaled by an academy-trained mech pilot!

The Swordmaidens lived and breathed with their personal swords, carrying them everywhere and training with them until their sweat soaked their hard bodies.

Their brutal physical conditioning and harsh drilling in the unique style of swordsmanship developed by the late Commander Lydia all yielded fantastic results when translated to mech piloting!

The Swordmaiden Style had been geared towards giving human warriors a chance at slaying a ferocious exobeast while armed with nothing but a sword!

Each Swordmaiden not only underwent a harsh regime of training that was equivalent to the training programmes for elites, but also passed a brutal graduation ritual that forced them to hunt and kill a deadly exobeast on an untamed planet!

Though this strict training regime had always limited the growth of the Swordmaidens as an outfit, it ensured that every single mech pilot of theirs was extremely strong, skilled and determined in battle!

With an expert candidate in the form of Commander Dise leading the charge, the Swordmaiden mechs sliced and diced their way through the hasty formation of mercenaries!

Though the mercenary mechs still held the weight of numbers, most of them were directing their attention to the front! It took time for the commanders of the respective mercenary corps to order their subordinates to turn their mechs around and face the new threat!

"Hahaha!" The commander laughed. "This is just like slaughtering Gizla Lizards! These mercs expected to lean on their Fridayman masters to do the heavy lifting! They're as spineless as the bottom feeders of the frontier when they have to face us alone!"

Much of that had to do with the oppressive glows impacting the confidence of the mech pilots. The LMC mechs fielded by the Avatars and Sentinels along with the Living Prophet's Transcendent Messenger all showed how powerful Ves' design philosophy could be in the right hands!

With the Swordmaiden mechs cutting a swathe through the rear lines of the mercenaries, the impact to their morale was particularly huge!

With all of the blows the mercenaries suffered at the rear, their offensive truly started to stall!

The Avatars and Sentinels defending the underground facility received a much-needed reprieve! The pressure exerted on them by the attackers reduced by a significant margin, allowing them to catch their breath and reorganize their formations to better cope with the challenges they faced!

The ferocity of the Swordmaidens knew no bounds. Hardly any mercenary mech lasted more than a dozen seconds against the Swordmaiden mechs. Through a combination of unrelenting aggression, exquisite teamwork and undaunted momentum, the former frontier pirates became such an acute threat that even Colonel Jeivz began to frown in his command center!

"Where do these rabble keep coming from?!" The senior officer banged his fist against the armrest of his command chair! "Why have we not accounted for their strength?!"

"Sir, since we have been able to smuggle in our mech companies onto Kesseling VIII, other groups should have been able to do so as well. Most of our intelligence support was mostly directed towards blinding our target's intelligence assets. We neither had the time nor the resources to scout Kesseling VIII extensively."

The CRC admittedly rushed this surprise attack ahead of time when they learned that Ves Larkinson would be undergoing surgery soon and depart from the planet shortly afterwards.

Along with the lack of resources directed towards the conversion of the Ylvaine Protectorate to the Coalition's side, Colonel Jeivz made the decision to shore up his shortcomings by hiring mercenaries.

Right now, those mercenaries should be supporting the main offensive while preventing any interlopers from disturbing their mission.

The mercenaries weren't allowed to falter! If they all abandoned their mission, then his CRC mechs would become exposed!

Not only would the Glory Battalion be able to direct their full attention towards his assets without any disturbance, but the lesser mechs would be able to intervene in the battle as well!

Even if the remaining defenders only fielded third-class mechs, their quantity was still very considerable! As long as they ganged up on a couple of second-class mechs at a time, it was not impossible for them to whittle away the strength of the main attacking force!

Any distraction that ensued would tip the balance in the favor of the Glory Battalion, thereby reducing the odds of victory by a significant margin!

"These sword-wielding maniacs need to be neutralized!" Colonel Jeivz decided. "Allocate some defensive mechs to stand in their path. Once their momentum stalls, their threat level won't pose any problems anymore."

"What about the so-called Living Prophet, sir?"

"This charlatan needs to be squashed directly. Dispatch an elite squad to crush his mech! In fact, shoot down his cockpit if he tries to eject! This farcical terrorist leader will continue to hinder our takeover of this state if he is allowed to retreat!"

The CRC Colonel's orders soon came into effect. As the mercenaries became increasingly less certain about their chances of victory, a number of Fridayman mechs suddenly split off from the main formations and rapidly advanced towards the hostile mechs attacking from the rear!

With their powerful flight systems, the two squads closed the distance with prodigious speed!

The mercenaries became a little more relieved now that their rear lines

"Damn! Those Fridaymen are really angry now!" Commander Dise cursed. "Get ready, Swordmaidens! The true challenge starts here! Treat them like we're hunting exobeasts!"

A squad composed predominantly of knight mechs landed on the ground with thunderous thuds!

Every part of their design was wrapped in thick, protective shells. Their all-encompassing armor system not only covered every part of their frames with armor, but their integrated shielding devices also projected various energy fields over their shields but more importantly their weak points!

No matter how well their opponents attempted to outmaneuver them, with their twin defenses, the Fridayman knight mechs could never be felled in a single blow!

Yet their formidable defenses did not deter the Swordmaidens at all! Commander Dise's mech raised its huge sword in the air.

"Look at these conceited Fridaymen. They only sent twelve of their mechs to us! Do they think we hit like little girls? Show these tin cans what our swords can really do!"

The Swordmaiden mechs did not pull back their aggression at all! They charged at the prepared Fridayman mechs as if the tech and training disparity didn't exist!

The second-class knight mechs were faster, stronger and more versatile than the mechs piloted by the Swordmaidens. Even before the Swordmaidens managed to close the distance, the knight mechs flew in the air to escape the reach of their adversaries while at the same time firing missiles from various ports of their frames!

In an instant, almost a dozen swordsman mechs succumbed to the powerful missiles! They fell so fast that their mech pilots didn't have the time to eject before their cockpits was lost in the sea of explosions!

Despite these losses, the rest of the Swordmaidens didn't falter. Even when the knight mechs flew far beyond the reach of their swords, their mechs never let go of their swords or brought out their backup pistols, if they even had any!

Instead, once they closed within several hundred meters of the flying knight mechs, Commander Dise and her subordinates all activated the special function built within their mechs.

"Did you think we're defenseless against flying mechs? Think again!"

Hooks attached to thick cables suddenly launched from the Swordmaiden mechs.

As the hooks all attempted to entangle the knight mechs, the alarmed mech pilots either tried to evade or cut the thick cables.

Though the knight mechs managed to evade or intercept at least half of the tethered hooks, the other half managed to grab or spool around the limbs of the mechs!

Though the CRC mechs were very much capable of shaking off these bonds, the Swordmaidens didn't give them the time!

The swordsman mechs attempted to drag the knight mechs down!

Though the flight systems built into the knight mechs were powerful enough to lift their weight under standard gravity, it was a stretch to think they could lift another mech!

Though the swordsman mechs all strained to drag the flying mechs to the ground, by dividing the load among multiple machines, their tethering systems barely managed to keep working!

Once the knight mechs were dragged within reach, multiple Swordmaidens laid in wait with their sharp and sturdy swords!

None of the trapped Fridayman mechs could avoid the swift and powerful thrusts. Most of them avoided the thickest part of the armor and relentlessly hit against the shields covering their vulnerable weak points.

Though the shields withstood the barrage with apparent ease, the Fridayman mech pilots noted with alarm that their shielding systems were slowly being overloaded!

With the Glory Battalion pinning the remaining CRC mechs down, it wasn't easy for the Fridaymen to dispatch additional reinforcements to rescue the stricken knight mechs!

Though a number of mercenary mechs and CRC mechs moved to reinforce the stricken mechs, the remaining Swordmaiden mechs were well prepared to fend off the sporadic rescue attempts!

"Abort our counterattack against the Living Prophet and divert our elite squad to rescue our defensive mechs!"

"We can't, sir! The Kronon traitors are overwhelming our elites!"

"What?! How?!"

"Additional reinforcements have arrived! Three Kronon mech companies stationed throughout Krent have gone AWOL and moved to support the Living Prophet!"

"These blasted Ylvainans! Their faith is blinding their good sense!"

The Kronon defectors only numbered around fifty mechs at the start, but rapidly grew in numbers as additional Kronon mech pilots arrived to support the Living Prophet!

"Our blessings have returned!"

"Praise Ylvaine!"

"The Living Prophet is our salvation! Only he can return us to the true faith!"

The reason why these Kronons decided to defy their superiors and support the defecting side was simple.

The LMC mechs in their possession slowly regained their glows when they moved towards the Living Prophet.

If they did the opposite, then their glows would definitely disappear again.

To the Ylvainans, such an outcome was intolerable! The mech pilots who had become accustomed to the reassuring glows of the Holy Soldiers and Deliverers believed that this was a test from the Great Prophet.

The only way to regain the grace of the Great Prophet was to fight by his side even if they made enemies with the rest of their state!

"The three leading dynasties have forsaken the prophet! Only the True Ylvaine Dynasty serves the prophet's will!"

Though the elite squad of CRC mechs felled plenty of Kronon mechs within the blink of an eye, they couldn't stop the rest from mobbing them from each direction! The fanatical Kronon mech pilots ignored every danger and risk of death in order to madly tear the second-class mechs apart!

Chapter 1912 Rippling Futures

Though the Swordmaidens managed to exhaust the defenses of the knight mechs and wreck each of them, they paid a very heavy price for their victory.

Less than twenty Swordmaiden mechs remained operational. Commander Dise lost over two-thirds of the mechs she had brought to reinforce the defenders!

Though she didn't mourn the loss of mechs, she winced at the thought of losing some of her sisters. The knight mechs and the other Fridayman mechs punched far above what their mechs were capable of withstanding!

Against such superior machines, too many Swordmaidens died unjustly. The attacks directed against their mechs punched through their cockpits with such penetration power that their female mech pilots never had the opportunity to pull the emergency ejection lever!

While the Swordmaidens were saddened by their losses, the Kronons suffered an even greater tragedy!

With almost two-hundreds mobbing the elite CRC squad, the numbers disparity had grown too great for the elite mechs to fend them all off, especially when the distances were so short!

Their ranged mechs barely had the time to fell a few dozen mechs before all of the melee Kronon mechs started to surround and separate the CRC mechs from each other by physically exerting their considerable weight!

Once separated, each elite mech had to fend off against at least eight lesser mechs at the same time!

While it was very much possible for a second-class mech to defeat ten third-class mechs at the same time, it was very difficult to do so without the space and breathing to maneuver and bring their weapons to bear!

The Kronon Dynasty trained their mech pilots well. As a professional mech military, the Kronons taught their mech pilots various tactics on how to tackle superior mechs.

If a point ever came where they were ordered to attack second-class mechs, every Kronon followed the same multi-step plan!

"First, hug their arms. Even if the artificial musculature of these mechs are stronger than you can ever imagine, enveloping them with the mass of an entire medium mech will definitely hamper their functioning!"

With one or two Kronon mechs physically grabbing hold and pinning down the arms of the CRC mechs, the Fridaymen knew that they had made a huge mistake in closing in on the Kronon mechs!

Unlike the other lesser rabble, the Kronons were fully-fledged military mech pilots! Even if their strength still wasn't very impressive by the standards of the Friday Coalition, the discipline and teamwork exhibited by over a hundred high-spirited mech pilots was not something to be taken lightly!

Their arrogance and underestimation of those they considered to be inferior would force them to pay dearly!

"Second, remove their weapons. If the second-class mechs employ interchangeable weapons, then it is not as hard as you think to overpower their fingers and pry their rifles or swords from their hands! If they carry any integrated weapon modules, then just do your best to wreck or bash them apart with continuous attacks! These integrated weapon modules are just as vulnerable as any other weak point!"

Even as Kronon mech after Kronon mech got blasted away by the secondary armament built into the frames of the elite CRC mechs, the Ylvainan defectors did not abandon their plan!

Several mechs maneuvered around the machines keeping the arms of the enemy mechs trapped. After the Kronon mechs came within reach, they bashed, pulled or pried the ranged and melee weapons held by the mechs from their rightful owners!

The loss of their primary weaponry alarmed the Fridaymen mech pilots quite a lot, but once the crazy Kronons rabidly bashed the areas of their mechs which held their secondary armaments, they turned to full-blown panic!

"We're trapped!"

"Colonel Jeivz, we request immediate assistance!"

"Reinforcements are on their way! Don't give up!"

Once the mechs lost their weapons, they no longer posed a serious threat against the surviving Kronon mechs.

The Living Prophet issued some quick orders. Half of the Kronon mechs separated from the elite squad in order to hinder the advance of the reinforcing mercenary mechs and CRC mechs.

Though the Kronon defectors suffered enormously, the elite CRC squad no longer exited!

After losing their weapons, the trapped mechs soon lost their footing as the Kronon mechs purposefully tripped them onto the ground.

Once they lay prone and vulnerable, the Kronon mechs didn't hesitate to bash their more vulnerable parts with weapon attacks or trampling attacks!

Stepping onto the second-class mechs with the weight of another mech was not only satisfying, but also effective at crushing weaker parts while deforming the armor covering the stronger parts!

Due to all of these sudden developments, Colonel Jeivz looked at the tactical overview in shock.

The mercenary mechs no longer exhibited any drive. His CRC mechs no longer enjoyed a numerical superiority against the Glory Battalion. In fact, the Hexers were beginning to gain the upper hand as more and more momentum swung in their favor!

"The battle is no longer under our control, sir. Resistance is heavier than expected. We should cut our losses." His aide advised.

"We can still win." Colonel Jeivz gritted his teeth. His curly moustache twitched as he rapidly considered various tactics to address the threats from the rear.

The Swordmaidens and Kronon defectors may have downed a fair number of second-class mechs, but their strength had diminished! They wouldn't be able to resist another wave!

Even if the colonel wasn't able to direct any of his surviving CRC mechs against the flankers, he could still instruct the mercenaries to mob the remaining hostile elements harrying the rear!

"Sir, look! More Kronon mechs are making their way on the battlefield!"

In the extended map that encompassed half of Krent, hundreds of mech signatures started moving straight towards the site of the battle!

Though the scattered patrols and elements would still take some time to reach the battle, it didn't take a lot of thinking to conclude that these reinforcements were definitely on the side of the defectors!

The Ylvainan leaders had made it more than clear that the Ylvainans could never be ordered into attacking the Bright Martyr.

This meant that hundreds of mechs would soon begin to trickle in and continue to replenish the ranks of the flanking forces. All the while, the dwindling mercenaries would continue to lose their mechs and become less able to shield his CRC mechs from getting harassed from multiple directions.

Once that happened, the losses could easily surpass his bottom line! Once his forces suffered such a total defeat, the colonel's standing within the CRC would definitely be ruined!

Though Colonel Jeivz didn't necessary care about his personal reputation, he knew that his disgrace would also extend to the Vanguard Group!

"I can't allow the other partners to use this potential fiasco as an excuse to suppress the Vanguard Group!" He whispered.

Between a total defeat and a partial defeat, neither outcome appealed to him. Yet victory seemed to shift further and further away as his forces had already lost their numerical advantage!

In the end, he issued a very painful order.

"Retreat. Fall back as orderly as possible. I believe our adversaries won't press their pursuit. What of Venerable Valentine?"

"The Screaming Blade has slowly gained the upper hand against the Star Dancer. However, Venerable Brutus has proven to be very tricky. He has abandoned all attempts to hit back against his opponent in order to focus fully on evasion. For the last five minutes, he has managed to stall Venerable Valentine by dodging all of her attacks!"

"Shameless!"

Though Colonel Jeivz looked down on the bootlicking expert pilot, he had to admit that the woman worshipper made the right tactical choice.

Light mechs always possessed an advantage against ranged mechs. While this rule of thumb was less applicable when it came to expert mechs, the Screaming Blade still possessed an edge against the Star Dancer.

Yet due to Brutus' earnest attempts at evasion, the blood that Venerable Valentine craved was nowhere to be seen!

"Coward! You male Hexers are so craven! I knew the Hexers robbed your pride as a man, but this is a new low. You're an insult to expert pilots!"

The Star Dancer shimmered with a fluctuating rainbow glow as it illogically moved out of the way of yet another saber swing!

Throughout the engagement, the heated and empowered red blade of the Screaming Blade failed to inflict more than some surface scratches against the armor of the Star Dancer.

The mech was simply too slippery for her to land a solid hit!

The Screaming Blade did its best to take out the Star Dancer. A purple haze emanated from its frame as Raen Valentine activated her mech's own mobility resonance ability.

The problem was that unlike the Star Dancer, the Screaming Blade didn't possess a way to augment its agility. Instead, its mobility resonance ability mainly empowered its straight-line acceleration, allowing it to rapidly close the distance on a distant target!

Though this had served Venerable Valentine well against most opponents, the Star Dancer she currently faced was just swift and agile enough to react and evade against all of her swooping attacks!

This caused the two expert mechs to fall into a stalemate. Both expert pilots bet on their endurance and hoped to last longer than their opponent, because maintaining these empowered states was very taxing on their resonance strength and energy reserves.

The general retreat ordered by Colonel Jeivz put a stop to this dance.

Once Venerable Valentine received her latest instructions, she grunted in frustration! "What a waste! How come these third-raters and dirty bootlickers trounced our forces? We had the upper hand!"

Yet no matter how much she complained, she couldn't reverse the orders that instructed the surviving mercenary mechs and CRC mechs to disengage and retreat to the fallback point!

"This isn't over yet, Brutus!" The female expert pilot hissed through the open channel. Her mech raised its saber menacingly at its foe. "My Screaming Blade may have failed to taste your blood, but your tactics won't work next time! Once my crew adjust the configuration of my mech, you won't be able to escape my attacks again!"

The Star Dancer hovered in the air while it slowly lost its shimmering rainbow glow. It bowed at the Screaming Blade.

"If you wish to dance with me again, then I shall always be ready to accompany you for another waltz."

"Grow a pair!"

Venerable Valentine no longer lingered any longer. With her friendlies starting to disappear back into the city, she needed to leave as well before the Glory Battalion boxed her Screaming Blade in with its surviving mechs!

The departure of the CRC expert mech caused every remaining defender to sigh in relief.

Now that they had withstood and repelled the Fridayman surprise attack, they finally started to take stock of the losses.

"Damn! Just look at how many wrecks are strewn on the ground! This place has turned into a junkyard!"

Overall, the original defenders lost over half of their mechs! The reinforcements fared worse, especially the Kronon reinforcements who mainly employed risky swarming tactics against the enemy second-class mechs.

While their bold tactics succeeded in felling a fair amount of CRC mechs, the Kronon defectors still suffered enormously!

Commander Magdalena, who presided over the Avatars and Sentinels, hailed the Transcendent Messenger piloted by the Living Prophet.

"Mr. Prophet.. thank you for your assistance."

"Call me James, if that is what makes you comfortable." A young but charismatic voice replied. "I know you have many questions. This is not the time to ask them. I suggest you proceed with taking charge of your surviving and order your support personnel to scavenge and triage the surviving wounded. Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon should

have already dispatched a handful of transport ships and light carriers to our location to pick up the salvage and take in the wrecks."

"YOU!" The old Larkinson commander sputtered. "How can you read my mind?! How come the fleet coordinator accepted your orders!? Is she one of yours?!"

"I am Ylvaine reborn. The past, present and future are all within my grasp!"

"As if!" Magdalena scoffed. "I'd be more inclined to believe you if you weren't so obviously unprepared to aid us against this surprise attack. Just admit it. You were just as blindsided by the CRC as us!"

"I knew this attack was coming. I tried to prevent it as best as possible. I attempted to persuade the three leading dynasties to reconsider their betrayal. Their leaders disappointed me by going through with their blasphemous intentions."

"If you were truly capable of seeing the future, then you would have anticipated their obstinacy."

"It's not that simple! The future is always in flux! Each response I make directly affects the future trends in an unpredictable and chaotic fashion!"

Commander Magdalena no longer had the patience to listen to the nonsense of a clone. She cut off the channel and began to issue the necessary orders to clean up this battlefield and reorganize their remaining forces.

Just because the Fridaymen pulled back didn't mean they could launch a second attack!

Chapter 1913 Picking up the Pieces

Almost a thousand different mechs had fallen on the surface of Kesseling VIII. The amount of value destroyed during this engagement was enough to make anyone bleed!

Ves and the Larkinson Clan invested heavily in expanding the Avatars and Sentinels in recent times. Now, all of their efforts were almost entirely undone as the landbound contingent of the two mech forces lost a lot of mechs after they were taken out with contemptuous ease by the Coalition Reserve Corps or the flood of mercenaries.

The Battle Criers suffered substantially as well. Though not as numerous or attention-grabbing as the other forces, their unflinching Kinner loyalty compelled them to brave every possible danger directed at them. They would rather die than allow their owner to fall victim to his enemy!

The Kronon defectors lost a huge amount of mechs as they had been the most valiant in confronting the attackers. Their fanatical devotion towards Prophet Ylvaine all

compelled them to throw themselves into battle against vastly-superior mechs without enjoying the protection of the Glory Battalion!

Though the glows of their LMC mechs had returned, the Kronon mech pilots all turned numb as they had no idea what they should do now. Many of them had families that tied them down to the Protectorate. Would they have to abandon everything they worked for in order to avoid punishment from the Friday Coalition or their own superiors?

Fortunately, the Living Prophet was ready to lead the flock of lost sheep. His Transcendent Messenger along with the Zeal approached the scattered formation of military mechs and began to envelop them in a warm glow that was unmistakably pure and sacred.

"If you truly believe, then you should not have any doubt." James softly said as his mech seemed to fade a bit as its glow seemed to have run out of steam. "The Protectorate as you knew it is gone. The Curins, Poxcos and Kronons have turned their back on the true faith. The beliefs they upheld are corrupted by their self-serving distortions. It is not without reason that I retracted by my blessings from the rest of the Protectorate!"

While James worked to convert the confused and listless Kronons to his side, the other combatants started to pick up the pieces.

Various ships belonging to the Larkinson Clan emerged from various locations, including the Avatar base.

Though a fair number of functional aerial mechs had been assigned to escort them to the battlefield, the CRC did not attempt to take them down, which was a huge relief.

Once the ships landed on the cleared locations of the battlefield, various mechs, bots and people started to go to work.

The highest priority was to rescue the trapped mech pilots who survived the fall of their mechs but were unable to eject to safety.

The next priority was to ensure that the mechs belonging to the hostels were properly neutralized.

Many of the surviving friendly mechs cautiously swept through each downed mech and made sure they wouldn't be waking up anytime soon.

The third priority was to recover any salvage that could allow the damaged forces to regain some of their strength!

Though the crew on scavenger duty prioritized the recovery of LMC mechs, they also showed no hesitation in stealing the remains of second-class CRC mechs!

Even if it was not that easy to restore them to functionality, if the mech technicians could accomplish this task at all, at the very least their materials could be recycled to yield all kinds of valuables.

Though the mechs they lost could be replaced with time, effort and money, the lives who perished in this battle could never be regained!

Some of the Larkinsons already started crying or mourning for the loss of their family, friends or comrades!

This battle was much more brutal than a typical engagement against the Vesians! Not only was the attack too sudden, but the CRC mechs were also extraordinarily lethal against third-class mechs.

A small but considerable portion of fallen consisted of Larkinsons. Notable people who left a part of their blood and spirit in the Larkinson Mandate had become the very first Larkinsons who died to preserve the future of their clan!

Skilled mech pilots like Rhode Larkinson could have enjoyed a bright future as a skilled second-class mech pilot if not for getting speared by a spear attack that punched straight through the thick chest armor of his striker mech like it was cheese!

Though resentment and recriminations welled in the bitter survivors, they were professional enough to keep their complaints to themselves.

As long as they remained under threat, they needed to focus on their immediate survival! Casting blame at this point would only invalidate the sacrifices of the fallen! They did not die only for the survivors to squabble amongst themselves and make themselves vulnerable for another attack!

Commander Magdalena frowned and pressed her forehead with her fingers after she issued the latest raft of orders.

??We won, but we can't fight this kind battle again! We lost too many mechs and mech pilots!"

The strength of the defenders had fallen to a new low. Even the Glory Battalion was smarting as the CRC mech pilots directed most of their attacks towards those they considered their equal in battle!

Fortunately, the Glory Warriors boasted a much higher survival rate. Even if their mechs succumbed in battle, they offered enough defenses for the Glory Warriors to eject in time and reach safety.

This meant that as long as the Glory Battalion received enough time to repair their fallen mechs, it could quickly exhibit eighty to ninety percent of its original strength!

As the hasty evacuation proceeded with haste, the underground facility finally exhibited a change.

A number of armored plating shifted apart as some underground rooms began to shuffle in order to make way for a floating and detached chamber.

This was the operation room built according to Ves' design! Inside this precious chamber, Ranya and the Ylvainan surgeons were still focusing on facilitating the connection and integration of the Archimedes Rubal implant with the patient's brain!

Though the furious battle that happened on the surface didn't do the operation any good, the underground facility was so well designed that even the largest impacts only resulted in a minor tremble by the time the ripples reached the center.

Now that it was clear that the Larkinsons needed to evacuate the planet, Gloriana activated one of the contingency functions that allowed the operation chamber to separate and float in the air.

Soon, Gloriana's Stellar Chaser arrived to take the operation chamber in her cargo hold before ascending into orbit while being escorted by the remaining operational Glory mechs.

Since it was clear that the Coalition Reserve Corps was targeting Ves, bringing him away would directly decrease the danger directed at the remaining assets and people on the surface!

The Larkinson Clan still required a few more hours to complete their evacuation. Though the victims of the attack wanted to flee the Kesseling System as fast as possible, they couldn't afford to leave too many assets behind.

If the Friday Coalition were determined to pursue them, then they needed to be prepared for battle as best as possible!

Due to the Ylvaine Protectorate's unfortunate position in the Komodo Star Sector, it would take at least several months to flee to a Hexer-aligned region of space!

With Ves still out of the picture, the leaders of his respective organizations tried to keep everything together as best as possible.

Even though the CRC and their mercenaries were beaten black and blue, Kesseling VIII simply wasn't safe anymore.

Not only were the Larkinsons afraid of the arrival of enemy reinforcements, they were also concerned by the growing anarchy in the Kesseling System!

As ground zero of the battle that led to the disappearance of the glows throughout the Ylvaine Protectorate, the local Ylvainans had all become hysterical!

The destructive battle that led to the defeat of the CRC had ruined half the city of Krent!

Countless shops, office buildings and residential apartments had fallen from the collateral damage that both sides inflicted without any restraint!

Though the casualties among the civilians no longer rose as much when they reached the nearest underground shelters, over a hundred-thousand Ylvainans still lost their lives in the span of half an hour!

The death, chaos, destruction and outrage all caused the services and existing order on the industrial planet to break down!

In order to avoid getting swept by the protesting and rioting Ylvainans, the Larkinsons tried to hurry up their evacuation as expediently as possible!

Within Gloriana's stateroom aboard the Stellar Chaser, two Hexers were having a very important conversation.

SLAP!

"You failed! Again! How many times has it been, Calabast?"

"I deserved that." The former intelligence operative said flatly. "I won't allow you to lay a hand on me again. You are welcome to try if you want to lose your hand."

Gloriana scowled and pressed her fists against her hips. "Don't act all superior against me. We all trusted you to foresee these kinds of attacks in advance! How could you have missed so many suspicious movements?!"

"I have told Ves time and time again that intelligence gathering is not precise. In addition, this time I faced an entire team of Fridayman intelligence agents who were proficient in counterintelligence. They successfully negated much of the work I put in the Protectorate."

"Excuses! You Vrakens are always so easy to weasel your way out of blame whenever you fail! I don't even know why Ves continues to see you as an equal partner! If it was up to me, I would have already booted you from your partnership!"

Calabast sneered at the younger woman. "I may have dropped the ball this time, but you can't imagine how many times I saved Ves' hide. It's the nature of my profession that most of my successes go unsung while some of my failures become painfully clear. If you don't appreciate what I bring to the table, then I don't care! Once Ves wakes up, he'll back me up. He's a sensible boy."

"He won't be waking anytime soon due to your intelligence failure!" Gloriana shouted. "According to Ranya, the complications that arose disturbed the integration process between the bioimplant and my boyfriend's brain tissue. While she has managed to fix most of the damage, Ves will certainly need to be out for at least a month before it is safe enough for him to wake!"

"A month without Ves. I feel tempted to celebrate."

"Don't joke around! With all of the losses the Larkinson Clan and our other mech pilots have suffered, some of the survivors are already furious at our leadership! If Ves didn't provoke the Friday Coalition or led their people to a state that was in their crosshairs, so many mech pilots would have never died!"

"This is a good test of leadership for the people that Ves put in charge in his absence. Will they rise to the challenge? As long as they pass this challenge, Ves will definitely be able to entrust them with greater responsibility."

"Don't treat this like a mere test, you heartless spy! Everything that Ves has built is at risk!"

"I know." Calabast calmly replied. "Am I concerned? Yes. Am I afraid? No. Don't underestimate how much influence Ves has built up. Even if he's incapacitated, people like Melkor Larkinson and Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson are too invested in Ves to let this incident tear down everything they have been working towards. I believe as long as the Larkinson Clan can get past this crisis, it will emerge stronger and more cohesive than ever before! It is only in the direst of situations that people's true nature becomes clear."

Nothing Calabast said so far reassured Gloriana. Though she wasn't a Larkinson, she was bound by the clan by the Larkinson Mandate resting on her deck!

Ves had invested so much in the Larkinson Clan that she felt compelled to protect his interests.

She would never be able to forgive herself if Ves woke up only to find out that his clan voted to disband itself!

Chapter 1914 Stepping Up

An exodus ensued after the Battle of Kesseling VIII.

After a hard-fought victory, the forces aligned with Ves and the Larkinson Clan cleaned up the battleground and picked up as much valuable scrap the cargo holds of their vessels could hold.

No one believed the crisis was over. The Coalition Reserve Corps may be one of the lesser paramilitary branches of the Friday Coalition, but when it gathered all of its might, the CRC could easily overrun dozens of lesser states in an instant!

The only reason why the Larkinsons managed to foil the CRC's surprise attack was that it possessed a very broad mandate. It had to split up its forces across multiple territories in order to fulfill a multitude of different responsibilities.

However, just because the CRC spread its forces out didn't mean it had to stay that way. As long as the need was great enough, the CRC could easily order their nearby assets to converge on each other like the sandman converged in the former Coman Federation.

Just like the sandman planet that was rumored to attack the Bentheim System, the CRC could very well form an armada that could easily defeat the forces of the Larkinson Clan ten times over!

Every leader under Ves knew the precariousness of their situation. If the Friday Coalition truly decided to expand the Komodo War to the lesser states, then they were basically stranded deep behind enemy lines!

The distance towards the nearest state that was under the Hexadric Hegemony's umbrella of protection was at least two months away, and that only assumed their fleet would travel on the most direct and predictable route!

"Ves would know what to do in this situation." Gloriana sighed as she leaned her head against her palm. "He's been in these kinds of flight situations several times."

She missed Ves. She missed his decisiveness during a crisis.

Though Ranya recently informed her that Ves made it through the extended implantation surgery without any permanent impairments, it would still take at least a month for him to heal the remaining damage.

"Damn traitorous doctor." She scowled. "You got off far too easily!"

She always thought that Ves went a little overboard with his preparations and precautions, but now she realized that he was very right to invest so much in prevention and disaster preparation.

"It's not paranoia if they are really out to get you!"

She felt as if she understood this phrase for the very first time after this long and exhausting day.

Previously, she thought that her boyfriend irrationally feared the prospect of installing a cranial implant in his head. Back at the Hegemony, her peers installed such implants all the time with hardly any stories about botched surgeries or problems related to sabotage.

Yet her friends and acquaintances weren't like Ves. They weren't third-raters who managed to provoke the CRC. They weren't as talented as Ves, nor did they possess an inkling of his potential.

None of the mech designers he knew possessed the power to influence the course of a war or swing the destiny of entire states like Ves!

Even when he was in a coma, her boyfriend still managed to make an absolute mess out of the Ylvaine Protectorate!

With the scattered communications blackout, the Battle of Kesseling VIII couldn't be hidden from the population for long. Many Ylvainans soon found out the truth, and their rage and ire at the government was immense!

In fact, many members among the middle and lower ranks of the Curin, Poxco and Kronon Dynasty joined the opposition as well!

The loss of the Great Prophet's grace was very evident! No one had to look any further than all of the Holy Soldiers and Deliverer mechs that lost their blessed glows.

How could any devout Ylvainan support the blasphemous actions of their leadership? A huge uprising swept throughout the Ylvaine Protectorate, causing the entire state apparatus to become completely paralyzed!

While Gloriana didn't really excel in crisis leadership, she knew that she needed to take advantage of the current circumstances while they were still favorable!

With the absence of Ves, his remaining people lacked a single voice. He never appointed a second-in-command. No one possessed enough clout to step up and be accepted as the temporary leader in charge of the Larkinson Clan!

To address the issue of leadership, Gloriana convened an emergency meeting in the conference room of the Stellar Chaser. Various shuttles arrived at her personal ship. Various passengers continued to enter the opulently-decorated conference room.

The new entrants all frowned when they took in the Hexer influences in the interior design.

The conference table was shaped like a hexagon. Six unobtrusive but very symbolic images were projected from six sides.

Along with what the passengers saw when they walked through the corridors, it became clearer and clearer that Gloriana was completely different from the rest of them! Their apprehension and alienation towards Hexers only increased!

Unfortunately, Gloriana failed to pick up their discomfort. If Ves was still awake, he would have convened a meeting on the Barracuda or the partially-refitted Scarlet Rose rather than the Stellar Chaser!

"Miaow."

Clixie flicked her head against her owner's palm.

Gloriana smiled and petted Clixie's head. "I'll do my best."

The cat went back to the center of the table in order to brush her body against a very large and ornate book!

The Larkinson Mandate placed on the center of the table could not be missed. Its inspiring glow, which was identical to that of the famed Glory Warrior mechs that had earned them a decisive victory in space, was core to the identity of the Larkinson Clan!

No one was allowed to take outright possession of the book. Ves surprisingly designated Nitaa as the primary caretaker of the book.

Right now, Nitaa refused to leave the recovery room where Ves was resting after his surgery.

Therefore, the book temporarily fell into the care of Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson, but only for this meeting.

The glow of the book reminded Gloriana what she needed to do. The people depending on Ves needed direction. During this pivotal moment, she needed to step up!

"Ladies and gentlemen, let's begin." Her clear and cultured voice interrupted the low conversation between the attendees.

Though she fell short in some aspects, Gloriana was very much at home in other aspects.

She adopted a serious and imposing demeanor as she sat at the conference table. Everyone who had been invited for the meeting settled down and turned their attention to the woman they needed to keep happy in order to save their lives.

No matter what they thought about Hexers or the Hegemony, they all knew they had to play nice with them! No one else in the star sector could protect them against the aggression from the Friday Coalition!

Therefore, a certain degree of tension descended on the conference room. Not everyone was happy with their current circumstances. They never wanted to become enemies of the Friday Coalition!

Fortunately, this was just a smaller meeting. Gloriana only invited those who were likely to be on Ves' side.

"We managed to achieve a very great victory, but we have all suffered greatly in return." She spoke in a measured way. "We can mourn later when we are out of the reach of the Fridaymen. What is more important is that we need to discuss how to go forward. Let us begin with our troop disposition. How many mechs and mech pilots have we lost?"

Everyone looked at each other before Commander Magdalena Larkinson decided to bite the bullet.

"The Living Sentinels have been savaged. Over two-hundred of our mech pilots have either perished or have become permanently unfit to pilot a mech. We've lost at least double the amount of mechs. The good news is that while our landbound mech companies have suffered a disproportionate amount of losses, our spaceborn assets are in a much better shape. My Sentinels are still reasonably combat-effective in any spaceborn engagements."

Commander Melkor stood up next.

"The Avatars of Myth have suffered a similar proportion of losses. We lost around 150 mech pilots, though most of them were recent recruits. Like the Sentinels, our landbound combat capabilities are severely crippled. Not only have we lost a lot of mech pilots, but we don't even have enough intact mechs to put up a decent fight on a terrestrial environment."

"Your spaceborn combat capabilities are still strong, correct?" Gloriana interjected.

Melkor nodded. A grim smile appeared below his visor. "The Bright Warrior that you and Ves designed has proven to be remarkably effective against a mixed force of mercenaries and second-class mechs. Admittedly, we faced much less CRC mechs in space than on land, but we are all immensely grateful that your mech has given us a chance to defeat second-class mechs without resorting to reckless dogpiling tactics."

As the Sentinel Commander and the Avatar Commander projected a brief overview of casualties and the state of their current forces, everyone lightened up a bit.

The casualties suffered by the Avatars and Sentinels in space was fairly light. The CRC heavily underestimated their spaceborn contingents, not expecting that the so-called bridge mechs could defeat their superior mechs!

"What about you, Commander Dise?" Gloriana turned to the dark-skinned woman who attracted more than her fair share of attention.

Surprisingly, it was Calabast who was sitting next to the Swordmaiden Commander who opened her mouth.

"My Swordmaidens have lost over forty mech pilots and even more mechs. Our spaceborn assets, though relatively small, are still fully intact, as I saw no reason to deploy them during the previous battle. We can still make a contribution in any space battle."

No one begrudged the Swordmaidens for holding back their mechs in space. The impact they made on the land battle was very great, and the losses they suffered when they boldly confronted the squad of CRC defensive mechs was horrendous!

"Our Glory Battalion is effectively down a mech company." Venerable Brutus stoically said. "While our mech companies may be slanted towards land or space, they can fight in both environments. We haven't lost as many mech pilots as the other forces. This means that as long as we can restore our mechs, our excess mech pilots can contribute their strength once again."

A short pause ensued as everyone tried to estimate how well they could withstand any follow-up attacks.

"At the risk of sounding callous, we are rather fortunate." Ovrin Larkinson mentioned.

As Benjamin Larkinson's brother and the Speaker of the Larkinson Assembly, the old and respectable Ovrin was one of the most important civilian leaders of the clan!

As a veteran mech pilot who had gone through his fair share of war in his youth, Ovrin was no stranger to crises. His words, while blunt, served to focus everyone's attention to their current needs.

"I agree." Director Clinton Larkinson said. "Our landbound losses, while grievous, can be disregarded for the moment. Right now, we must flee across a large stretch of space before we can shake off the inevitable retaliation from the CRC. There is no reason to land on any planets during our flight. For this reason, we should focus all of our efforts on repairing our spaceborn assets and transferring as many landbound mech pilots to spaceborn units as we can. Stick them into our spare Desolate Soldiers if needed."

Almost just as old as Ovrin, Clinton had also been bestowed with authority within the clan. He was currently one of the few respectable Larkinsons who had received the assent of the Assembly to assume a position within the all-important Larkinson Court!

Though it wasn't entirely proper for Director Clinton to attend this kind of meeting, he cared too much for the Larkinsons to miss out on this pivotal meeting!

"Your suggestion is in line with my thoughts." Commander Magdalena nodded in support.

The director and judge made a very sensible argument. Hardly anyone objected to its merits, so the attendants all agreed to prioritize their ability to fight in space.

This quick consensus may have been a small victory, but it put everyone in the right mood. A faint optimism spread throughout the conference room.

Their situation wasn't as untenable as they feared. As long as they enhanced their strength in space, they might be able to make it to safety!

Chapter 1915 Belonging

After gaining an overview on their current state and the amount of manpower, assets and resources at their disposal, the attendees quickly began to form an action plan.

They decided to focus their efforts on enhancing or restoring as much spaceborn combat capacity as possible.

They assigned expanded responsibilities to various leaders. A lot needed to be done, and many people needed to step up in order to manage the vastly-increased workload.

They also addressed the elephant in the room.

It was no secret now that a vast majority of the Ylvainans that joined their various organizations were actually members of the True Ylvaine Dynasty!

Known as a cult and terrorist group within the Protectorate, most of the Larkinsons never thought that the Living Prophet and his band of fanatics would side with them against the entire Protectorate!

No one really possessed a good grasp on Prophet James Ylvaine, or just James as his current incarnation preferred to be called.

The handsome, brown-haired young man shared a disturbing amount of similarities of the older, bearded and inviolable depictions of the original prophet!

The fact that he was a clone unsettled many people. It was well-known in the galaxy that clones weren't really 'equal' to normal sentient life!

Many of them exhibited severe mental defects and impairments. Even if their bodies were completely identical to another human being down to the tiniest cell, there was still a huge difference in how alive they were and how human they could act!

Compared to the stereotypical view of clones of flawed Frankenstein monsters or idiots who possessed the intelligence of a six year old, James appeared no different from any charismatic cult leader!

The presence he exuded and the natural charm he exhibited with his pleasant smile made it clear that he was not deficient when it came to socializing with other people!

With everyone's attention turning to James, the Living Prophet spread his arms.

"Please don't regard me with such suspicion. We are all brothers and sisters now. My True Believers and I have decisively thrown my lot with the Larkinson Clan. We are committed to support Mr. Larkinson and his clan no matter where he wants to take us. I believe that following him will lead my worshippers to a much brighter future than remaining in a state that has egregiously forsaken its faith and principles in favor of expedience."

Though he sounded well-meaning, no one could believe that James didn't have ulterior motives in mind when he and his True Believers secretly joined the LMC and growing fleets and mech units of the Avatars and Sentinels.

The fact that Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon decided to sit demurely next to James signified that he wielded an uncomfortable amount in their group!

"We never asked for you to join us." Gloriana said. "Please enlighten us, James. Why are you here?"

"The reasons for our joining are myriad. Let me reassure you that we do not intend to hijack the Larkinson Clan or attempt to impose our beliefs on you. We just want to be part of great undertaking started by Mr. Larkinson. As my Bright Martyr, I am very clear on how great he is and how much he is able to accomplish in the future. Consider our participation as an investment. We are willing to provide your group with badly-needed manpower in the form of ship crew, mech pilots and other specialists that you so desperately need."

"Every investment expects a return." Director Clinton frowned. "What is it that you are aiming for? If you just want to find a new home for your True Believers, then you can easily do so on your own! I don't understand why you are willing to share power."

Though James tried to reassure the other Larkinsons, they still harbored a lot of suspicions on his motives. The True Believers could single-handedly cripple the functioning of most their ships if the Living Prophet gave the command!

This effectively gave the radical Ylvainans a huge amount of leverage at this point of time. No Larkinson wanted to be beholden to another power ever again!

James was aware of their concerns. His smile hadn't faded at all. He faced the room of skeptical Larkinsons and wary Wodins with the assurance that he would be able to allay their suspicions!

Ophelia Kronon moved without warning. She leaned over the conference table and snatched the Larkinson Mandate!

"Miaow?!"

Though Clixie looked alarmed, she refrained from taking action as Gloriana gestured her to remain still.

Ophelia carefully held the ornate tome and reverently offered it to James.

James raised one hand in the air and placed his other hand on the cover until his palm rested over the solid medallion that depicted the head of the Golden Cat.

The atmosphere in the conference room changed!

"We are friends of the Larkinson Clan. Please believe me when I say that we are committed to support your endeavors. My True Believers will always serve their functions honestly as long as they are treated fairly. Let the Larkinson Mandate judge me whether I am sincere!"

To everyone's surprise, the Larkinson Mandate seemed to emanate a little more warmth!

Instinctively, everyone connected to the Larkinson Mandate felt that the book actually approved of James!

At the very least, he appeared to be truly sincere!

Gloriana didn't feel relieved, though. Just because James and the True Believers were harmless now didn't mean they remained that way.

"Is this.. okay?" Melkor puzzlingly frowned. "We're just supposed to follow the cue of a book?"

"That's the Larkinson Mandate you're talking about! It's not a regular book!"

A contentious argument ensued on whether they should take the Larkinson Mandate seriously.

Even if it possessed a dynamic glow, it was still a simple object? How could it possibly have a say in this meeting?

"Ahem!" Gloriana slapped the table with her palm. "Before you discuss any further, let me show you what Ves has to say about his joining?"

"Is Ves alive?!"

She shook her head. "No. He is still in a coma, and will remain so until his new implant has fully integrated with his brain. What I meant is that Ves has prepared a very extensive database of contingency plans. He has already accounted for many possible situations, such as what we have to do in the event of an attack or what needs to be done if the Protectorate turns hostile to our group. I saw no need to bring them up since our previous decisions largely fall in line with his intentions."

"Ves prepared a contingency plan for the True Believers?"

"He did." Gloriana smiled ruefully. "Even though he treated it as an extremely low-probability event, he actually prepared a statement in the event that James and his faithful had become attached to our group."

Ves prepared over a thousand plans and decision trees! His paranoia caused him to frantically document all of his desired responses towards all kinds of wild events!

From being hunted by the Mech Trade Association to the death of 95 percent of the Larkinson Clan, Ves prepared a contingency plan for each occurrence!

A projection of Ves soon appeared above the table.

[Hello everyone. If you are watching this recording, then something may have happened which caused us to require the support of the New Ylvaine Dynasty. Let me tell you that while I do not have the greatest impression of the new Living Prophet and his band of.. faithful, I am inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt. If you are hesitant on whether to accept the assistance of the True Believers, please employ the Larkinson Mandate as a test to see whether he is sincere. If you can't trust the Living Prophet, then at least trust in the judgement of our clan heirloom. That is all.]

Everyone blinked after the projection faded away. Many Larkinsons turned to James with an odd expression. Even before Ves' recording instructed them to use the Larkinson Mandate, the Living Prophet had already taken the test!

"How did he know?"

"Did he truly see the future?"

"That's nonsense! Maybe it's all a coincidence!"

"Can we even trust that book?"

"Ves has spoken!" Gloriana raised her voice, causing everyone else to fall silent. "The Larkinson Mandate has shown no hostility to James. This means he bears no ill will towards the Larkinson Clan."

"Excuse me, Miss Wodin, but what gives you the right to make decisions on behalf of our clan?" Magdalena asked.

The question distracted everyone from James.

This was a very important point. Since the meeting started, Gloriana had taken charge all this time.

This wouldn't be a problem if she was not a Wodin!

Gloriana didn't look flustered. She expected this question to pop up. "That is a good question."

She waved her hand towards the Larkinson Mandate. "Pass me the book."

The Larkinson Mandate floated from the hands of Ophelia Kronon and floated over the conference table until she grasped it as if she held her lover.

With a gentle smile, she opened the book and reached the page where Ves had signed his name and left his blood on the page. She flipped the page until she reached the one where she did the same!

She turned the book until her page faced the Larkinsons.

"Look. I took part in the founding of the Larkinson Clan. I may not have tied the knot yet with Ves, but he already considers me part of his family! Will you deny my membership of the clan just because my surname is different?"

"You are still a Wodin."

"I can be part of multiple families." She retorted. "This is very common in upper society. Now, do I need to show you a recording in which Ves affirms my right to take part in this discussion?"

Raymond shook his head. "That isn't necessary. I have seen you with Ves many times and I know how close you are to his heart. Despite the consequences of your joining, you have also been pivotal in keeping us alive. Without Venerable Brutus and the rest of your Glory Battalion resisting the CRC's strongest assets, we wouldn't be sitting here. The fact that a number of Hexer mech pilots died for us is enough to earn my trust!"

A lot of mixed expressions appeared on the faces of the other Larkinsons.

Though it was true that the Glory Battalion had paid a significant price to defend their group, the critics within the clan weren't very happy about the Hexers.

Notwithstanding their poisonous man-hating culture, Ves' relationship with Gloriana was the entire reason why the Larkinsons suddenly became an enemy of the Friday Coalition!

If not for the ongoing crisis, the discontent Larkinsons who were pissed about provoking such an immensely powerful enemy would have voiced their recriminations by now! Opposition against Gloriana and the Hexers had truly ballooned within a significant portion of the Larkinson Clan!

Once this episode had passed, the meeting resumed by addressing their flight from Protectorate space.

"I can assist in this." Calabast spoke up. "While the Fridaymen have hindered my intelligence network, I still have a lot of eyes and ears inside the Protectorate and many of the states we have to pass through in order to reach a friendly region of space. My subordinates and I have already charted a rudimentary route that steers clear of any known CRC or Coalition forces."

She projected the chart above the conference table. No one except Ophelia Kronon could glean more than a few surface details from the projection. Everyone else pretty much regarded the route as a random line connecting to various starry dots.

"This route is moderately circuitous, but not too much to delay us overly much." The fleet coordinator remarked. "The issue is that this chart suggests that the best way to avoid CRC pursuit is to pass through the ravaged and recently-abandoned star systems of the states that fell during the Sand War!"

"What?!"

Chapter 1916 Orders are Orders

In the end, the Larkinsons who attended the conference meeting agreed to the proposal to put Calabast in charge of planning their escape route.

First, she was truly the most qualified individual to plan their escape. Though flawed, having at least one information network was better than possessing no network at all!

Only the Wodins could offer something comparable, but the Larkinsons were very hesitant towards the idea of letting them take charge of their clan!

The Larkinson Clan was never supposed to become a vassal of the Wodin Dynasty! Hardly any Larkinsons would agree to such a ridiculous prospect!

Second, as a former intelligence operative, Calabast also possessed a lot of expertise in these matters. Even if she didn't excel in space navigation, she had plenty of specialists in her employ that could provide her with the necessary scientific expertise to form a clever route.

The Larkinsons lacked a strong naval tradition. They were almost completely devoted to piloting mechs.

Out of all of the attendees, only Fleet Coordinator Ophelia could make an informed pushback.

"While I am not entirely comfortable with the suggested route, I believe it is safer than passing through active space. The Bright Republic, Vesian Kingdom and etcetera are all aligned with the Friday Coalition."

Though Ophelia's backing didn't count for much since she was a True Believer, it was a different matter when Ves himself threw his support behind his strategic partner!

Gloriana looked pained as she reluctantly tapped a button on the projected interface of her comm.

Ves appeared over the conference table yet again.

[Hello everyone. If you see this, then a situation might have arisen where you may be wondering whether you must put your faith in the Hexer known as Calabast. Let me tell you that while she is slimy, arrogant, deceitful, absent, inscrutable and unreliable, she is still worthy of our trust because our success is linked to her own success. Both of our goals are aligned, and Calabast truly brings a lot to the table. Don't reject her voice just because she isn't a Larkinson. She can be a very staunch ally of ours. Don't underestimate her capabilities.]

Calabast offered everyone a shaky smile. Her relationship with Ves was obviously more than just a mere business partnership given how many insults he hurled at her. Some people even switched their gazes between Calabast and Gloriana as if there was a hidden subtext!

"You heard it from the clan patriarch himself. He knows I am the only one who can successfully lead us to safety. I did so before when Ves escaped the clutches of the CRC and I can do so again!" The former spy smiled and leaned back against her chair.

"Let me remind you that the Fridaymen don't look kindly on us Hexers." Gloriana noted. "Calabast and I are not welcome in this region of space. We want to escape the reach of the Friday Coalition just as much as you. Therefore, even if you have cause to doubt Calabast's motives, please don't doubt her willingness to avoid our mutual enemy."

This caused the Larkinsons to lay down some of their objections. While none of them really wanted to trust this strange woman completely, it was undeniable that they were on the same boat.

After addressing a few more topics, the conference meeting finally came to an end.

With the help of Ves' contingency plans, everyone had a clear idea on how to go forward. Right now, they needed to do everything possible to escape pursuit! Once they reached a region of space where they were no longer under threat of annihilation, they were free to address other priorities, but until then they better focus on saving their hides!

Once the attendees bid farewell and returned to their shuttles, Calabast lingered while Raymond reverently took hold of the Larkinson Mandate.

"Let's stop by Ves." Gloriana suggested as she picked up Clixie.

"Miaow."

"Hihihi!" Gloriana giggled, completely losing her stiff and stately demeanor. "I did well, right?"

"Miaow."

"Oh, I'm sure Ves would be proud of my performance!"

"The reason why the meeting proceeded so amiably is because you invited all of Ves' closest supporters along with some pliable guests like James." Raymond gently remarked. "If you had to face the entire Larkinson Clan, I can guarantee you that it won't be nearly as easy to come to a consensus."

The mounting discontent among the survivors was still welling up. Plenty of Larkinsons exhibited some form of buyer's remorse. They wished they would have rather remained with the old family rather than get drawn in by one of Ves' troubles!

They soon arrived at the entrance of a heavily-guarded compartment. After passing a few security checks, Gloriana, Raymond and Calabast entered the chamber.

Dr. Ranya was standing next to a very advanced recovery machine. She inspected the readings projected by the pod-like machine.

Gloriana carefully stepped close until she loomed above the transparent cover that showed Ves' body immersed in some kind of nourishing fluid.

His head looked intact, but Gloriana knew that it would take a long time before Ves was ready to emerge from his coma.

"Miaow."

"I want him to recover as soon as possible. It's not the same without him. If he was still awake, he would have been able to squash any possible revolt before it becomes a threat."

Clixie squirmed out of her arms and jumped over to a table where a mechanical cat was watching over the pod.

"Miaow."

"Meow."

Meanwhile, Raymond gently returned the Larkinson Mandate to Nitaa, who carefully slotted the book into a holder built into her suit of combat armor.

That Ves decided to entrust Nitaa with the Larkinson Mandate while he was incapacitated was a very perplexing decision! Gloriana wasn't sure why he didn't entrust it to Raymond as usual, but even she couldn't fully fathom his genius or madness.

"I have to leave in order to take charge of the LMC and the Executive Council." Raymond respectfully spoke to Gloriana. "Hopefully, Ves can recover sooner than a month, because all of his contingency plans aren't enough to keep us going."

"I know." Gloriana whispered as she placed her palm on the surface of the transparent cover.

Once Raymond left, Gloriana turned to her cousin.

"Is there anything new?"

"No. My estimates are still the same." Ranya closed the projected interface. "Ves came off very lightly from the incident at the operation room. The traitor could have done more damage if his control to the operating machines hadn't been cut off. I guess we owe Calabast a lot of thanks."

"Yes. Thanks."

"I need to study and analyze the latest developments in order to optimize Ves' recovery."

"Thank you for what you've done."

Once Ranya departed from the compartment, Gloriana was left with Calabast, some cats, the Larkinson Mandate and a few guards she disregarded entirely.

"So." She spoke to Calabast. "Tell me about our situation. Are we on the right track?"

"You're doing fine so far." The older woman said as she leaned against one of the bulky medical machines. "The losses we suffered are great, but our core strength is still intact. So long as Ves remains alive, we can always recover. We just have to make sure that his clan still exists when he finally wakes up from his coma."

Gloriana frowned as she twirled one of her locks of hair. "The Larkinson Clan..."

"The clan is too young. Even though it branched off from the Larkinson Family, for all intents and purposes it is still a fragile entity. Many of the Larkinsons who decided to join the clan did so in order to pursue greatness or prosperity."

"Do they expect to achieve greatness without making sacrifices?! Do they think they can grow rich while sitting back and relaxing all day?! Ves chose the Larkinson Clan's motto for a very good reason! His clansmen won't amount to anything if Ves isn't there to push them forward!"

"I don't think your words are without merit, Gloriana, but tell that to the Larkinsons who expected a mech designer like Ves to shovel easy money into their bank accounts. Expectations and reality often seem to find a way to diverge, and this battle has brutally popped their fantasies. Over forty trueblood Larkinson mech pilots died, do you know that? In a clan composed of less than a thousand members, that is a painful loss, especially when you realize that the amount of Larkinson mech pilots is only a fraction of that number."

The clan suddenly lost a substantial amount of landbound mech pilots after the Battle of Kesseling VIII. This meant that their representation in Avatars and Sentinels had dropped, especially in their landbound mech contingents!

The Larkinson Clan was not like the Mech Corps. Unlike the military which could always supplement its lost manpower by replenishing it with transfers and fresh recruits, the Larkinson Clan required decades to birth and raise new mech pilots!

Therefore, these losses were especially painful to the clan!

Usually, the original Larkinson Family managed to keep their numbers stable because the Bright-Vesia Wars always erupted roughly once every generation.

Even if a number of Larkinsons had fallen, the survivors would still be able to return and pass on their genes and teachings to the next generation!

While this model had served the Larkinsons well, frequent battles threatened the foundation of the clan.

If the clan lost too many mech pilots, it risked losing its military tradition!

Just when Gloriana didn't think the situation could grow any worse, Calabast suddenly stiffened as she received some sort of message.

"What is it, Calabast?"

The spy looked grave. "Now that the Coalition Reserve Corps moved to decouple the Protectorate from the Hegemony, the Friday Coalition has shown that they are very willing to drag the lesser states in our war. Don't forget that there are more Larkinsons than the ones who have joined the clan."

Gloriana widened the eyes. "That means the Fridaymen must have exerted their influence on the Larkinsons living in the Bright Republic as well! Damnit! I hope Ves' grandfather and other relatives can make it out. If the Fridaymen truly dare to lay a hand on the Larkinsons in his old home state..."

"It hasn't come to that." Calabast smiled. "My agents have always been ready to assist the Larkinson Family into evacuating the Bright Republic. Besides, they aren't being hunted right now. The CRC has dispatched most of their available assets to assist in their operations in the Protectorate. Officially, the Fridaymen relayed instructions to the Bright Republic to take the Larkinsons into custody."

"Again?! How dare they?!"

"Don't be alarmed! This time is different. It seems the Bright Republic's government has learned its lesson this time."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let's just say that the Brighters are.. less than eager to stab the backs of one of the most honorable military families of their state. The centuries of loyal service and selfless duty by the countless descendants of the Larkinson Family is not something that their government can ignore! Unlike the Protectorate, power is more divided and based on laws and public opinion. Just because a couple of higher ups and a few founding families like the Cavendishes support the measure doesn't mean the rest of the state is eager to betray their ideals and principles!"

"Does that mean they are safe?!" Gloriana looked hopeful.

"It's.. complicated. Some Larkinsons have it easier than others to escape the clutches of their own government. My agents are doing the best they can to facilitate their flight, but we can't help every Larkinson!"

Across the Bright Republic, many areas became turbulent!

This was because the Larkinson Family had abruptly been designated as enemies of the state!

Though the government tried its best to keep these controversial movements secret, they quickly leaked onto the galactic net within a matter of minutes!

The amount of public indignation directed towards the Bright Republic's government may not be as great as their Ylvainan counterparts in the Protectorate, but it could not be ignored!

Practically the entire Mech Corps threw its full support behind the Larkinsons! After the disgraceful attempt to capture Ves and sell him out to the Friday Coalition, the military was highly opposed to this latest measure!

Though the government was still able to dispatch Spotlight and some other groups to arrest the Larkinsons, Flashlight and many other groups were openly obstructing their progress!

In one space station at Bentheim, Raella and Ketis hastily boarded her Blood Claw carrier under the urging of one of Calabast's agents.

"Hurry up! Spotlight is right on our heels!"

At the headquarters of the Ministry of Defense on Rittersberg, a pair of Spotlight agents immediately restrained Benjamin Larkinson and escorted him out of his office.

A senior agent nodded respectfully at Benjamin. "Orders are orders. I hope you understand, sir."

"I'm old." The elder Larkinson sighed. I don't care what happens to me. I just want the rest of my family to be safe."

On a combat carrier stationed at the edge of the Bentheim System, Ghanso Larkinson shook his head at the security officers that arrived at his stateroom.

"I appreciate your offer, but I can't in good conscience allow you to violate your orders."

The young expert pilot held out his arms. "Put the cuffs on me and escort me to the brig. I am confident the government will absolve us loyal Larkinsons."

At an immense fleet floating in an empty star system in deep space, Ark Larkinson pressed a button on his uniform that caused all of his badges and rank insignia to fade away. He saluted the ranks of soldiers who gathered at the hangar bay to send him off.

Over a thousand soldiers returned his salute!

After bidding farewell to the 1st Havensworth Division, Ark solemnly boarded his Bright Star and departed from the fleet carrier.

As he flew his expert mech towards a smaller civilian vessel that would bring him and a number of other Larkinsons in his division away, his arm gripped one of the controls in a crushing grip.

His face displayed so much pain and agony that his Bright Star started to shake and resonate in a discordant manner!

Chapter 1917 Heartless Choice

The calamity that befell the Larkinson Family was both sudden and controversial. Compliance was anything but adequate, and many Larkinsons managed to slip the net.

That said, the Bright Republic still took plenty of Larkinsons into custody, including virtually every Larkinson who resided in Rittersberg. The capital planet was simply too well-guarded and well-regulated to give any Larkinson a chance to escape!

Word of the capture of hundreds of Larkinsons, many of them spouses and children, alarmed and enraged the rest of the family.

The Bright Republic went too far!

Many Larkinsons exhibited a lot of indignation towards the state for bowing to the unreasonable demands of the Friday Coalition. What of their loyalty? What of their unflinching duty? How could the Bright Republic be so dishonorable to ignore centuries of service and sacrifice?

The betrayed Larkinsons couldn't help but recall Ves' words of how foolish it was to serve a state instead of themselves.

Was he right?

"No! If not for Ves provoking the Friday Coalition, we would have never become at odds with the patrons of the Bright Republic! It's all his fault!"

Rather than blaming the Bright Republic or their own choices, they instead turned their ire towards the controversial Larkinson who split off from the old family and started his own clan!

"You're right! It's all his fault! It's fine if he is seeking death for himself!"

The mood among the escaped Larkinsons was very turbulent. These discontented members of the family soon made contact with the members of the clan, causing both groups to share each other grievances.

Both of them fed from each other's indignation! Calabast, who was keeping a very close eye on the Larkinsons, noticed this alarming trend and realized that the problem had

suddenly exploded to a very substantial threat to the continued existence of the Larkinson Clan and everything Ves had built!

"This is bad." She told Gloriana after she paid a personal visit to the Stellar Chaser. "Only a week has passed since we have left the Kesseling System, but already there is word among the clansmen that some of them want to bring Ves to account!"

"How ungrateful!" Gloriana displayed an ugly scowl. "These Larkinsons continue to disappoint me! Ves should be rolling in his recovery pod if he heard about their spoiled reactions. Per angusta ad augusta. What part of this motto don't they understand? This kind of setback is very common among family groups in their infancy! Plenty of clans and houses have suffered worse disasters, yet managed to survive through these hardships and used the lessons they learned during those arduous times to thrive!"

"You shouldn't blame those Larkinsons." Calabast crossed her arms. "The old family are truly victims. No matter how much it wants to pretend that Ves and the clan share no relations with them anymore, their blood and heritage still share a common relation. I would be pissed as well if I was a part of the old family."

Both of them fell into a momentary silence.

"The Larkinsons will soon demand a response." Gloriana guessed.

The former spy nodded. "Ves should be the one to face the angry Larkinsons. Since he isn't here, someone else needs to step up. No matter who speaks for Ves, the stakes are extremely high."

"Wait a minute. I think Ves prepared a contingency plan for this eventuality. Let me browse the database..."

After half a minute, Gloriana managed to find the right plan. She projected the recording that Ves attached to the plan.

[If you are watching this recording, then the old Larkinson Family may have become an enemy of the state. Whether the Friday Coalition or the Bright Republic has moved into action, it is clear that the old family stands no chance against the might of an entire state. If any of these states have unjustly and dishonorably captured the members of our old family, then I can foresee that many Larkinsons from my clan and the old family will request that we should do something to free them. Either we give in whatever demands the captors issue to us, or we organize some sort of breakout attempt.]

His projection seemed to stand proud as his eyes swept throughout a crowd that didn't exist with an imperious stare.

[Don't entertain any foolish fantasies. If the old family succumbed to the power of a state, how will it be any different if the clan tries to intervene? The reason why I led the

Larkinson Clan away from the Bright Republic is because my former home state has proved that it doesn't deserve our trust! Before I left, I warned the Larkinson Family how foolish they are for continuing to cling to their duty to a state that has already stabbed a Larkinson in the back! If my blind and foolish relatives in the Bright Republic insist on putting their lives in the hands of those who don't care about them, then I don't see any need to risk everything to undo their grievous errors!]

Both Calabast and Gloriana looked shocked! Was this really the Ves who cared so much about family? His response would definitely result in an immense backlash from his own clan if Gloriana dared to show this recording to the clan!

"Ves is mad!"

"He's being selfish." Calabast grunted with respect. "He's also making the most rational choice. Whatever ransom or blackmail demand the Friday Coalition plans to issue will inevitably hamper him in a very severe way. If the Fridaymen really plan to push Ves around, then the most rational course of action is to write off the hostages."

[Let me be clear.] Ves' projection continued. [As the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, I have a duty to protect our clansmen. While we share a bond with the Larkinson Family, I will not sacrifice the lives of the former to go on a futile quest to save the latter! This is not an action drama! Even if our clan was ten times stronger, we still wouldn't be able to succeed in rescuing our captured family members! Therefore, instead of demanding that we sacrifice ourselves in vain, we should instead demand the captured Larkinsons to sacrifice their own lives and wellbeing for our sakes! As far as I'm concerned, this is the price for their foolishness! They should have taken my warnings seriously if they wanted to avoid this foreseeable fate!]

His arguments, while twisted and outrageous, made sense. Yet even Gloriana knew that the principled and family-oriented Larkinsons would never be able to respect Ves again if his opinion on this matter became known!

With everything that happened, realising this response might very well turn over eighty percent of the Larkinson Assembly against their founding leader. This was disastrous as the Assembly could easily vote to strip Ves from his leadership position and hand it to another Larkinson!

[I am very much aware how harsh I sound, but don't think that I am callous or cruel. I love my clan. I love our Larkinson heritage. It is out of my love for our lineage that I choose to support the decision that best preserves the strength and future of our clan. I can promise you that while I might not be able to rescue our captured relatives, I will certainly do my utmost to avenge them! The Bright Republic or the Friday Coalition are making a big mistake if they think they have leverage over me! In order to preserve the lives and freedom of the captured, I believe it is better to resort to deterrence rather than appeasement!]

"I like his thinking direction." Calabast smiled in approval. "It's unfortunate that his relatives are Larkinsons, not Vrakens. If Ves was like this all the time, then he would fit right in with my former dynasty."

"He'd have to be a woman, though."

"True."

Ves' projection spoke again.

[If you disagree with my stance, that is fine. If you want to mount a rescue attempt, then that is fine as well. Just don't drag the rest of the clan down with you. Therefore, if you are entertaining any suicidal notions, then please leave the Larkinson Clan first. I don't care if you join the remnants of the old family or defect to the Friday Coalition. Just like the Larkinsons who stubbornly insisted on following tradition, you are responsible for your own actions!]

"He is not mincing any words!"

[Now, If you wish to leave the clan to mount a rescue attempt or because you're disgusted by my choices, then you can leave whenever you wish as far as I'm concerned. I don't need any clansmen who turn out to be fair-weather friends! I promise that each of you will receive 1 million hex credits as a farewell gift. If you or your direct relatives have contributed significantly in battle or suffered a major loss, then you will receive 10 million hex credits! This is what you deserve. Just remember that as long as you turn your back on the clan, the clan will also turn its back on you. The Larkinson Mandate will no longer recognize you if you abandon the clan in its time of need! Choose carefully and make the decision that you think is best!]

The projection finally disappeared, leaving Gloriana and Calabast numb. The Ves they heard today was completely different from the Ves who always showed at least affection towards his family.

"Delete it."

"What? I'll never do that!"

"I'm serious." Calabast turned to the younger woman. "Delete this recording and all of the files associated with this contingency plan."

"Didn't you just approve of his choice?"

"I approve of his mindset. That doesn't mean I think he is making the right choice in this situation. Ves may have prepared a contingency plan for thousands of scenarios, but even he can't foresee every single possibility!"

"What are you talking about?"

"There is a better option than the binary choice that Ves thought that he would face." Calabast grinned.

"You mean.."

"As long as I cash in my favors and promise some more, I might be able to persuade DIVA and some other Hexer elements in the Bright Republic to break the Larkinsons out. What is out of the reach of the clan is well within the reach of our state as long as it is willing to undertake action! We just have to move quickly while the hostages haven't been transferred into the care of the Fridaymen!"

Gloriana widened her eyes as a bit of hope started to light up her darkness. "That's right! The Hegemony might be able to do something! It's just.. will DIVA or our other government institutions even care?"

"On the surface, they won't." Calabast soberly explained. "Ves is just a boy. Even if he proved himself to be valuable, he's mostly a concern for your Wodin Dynasty. Therefore, we need to offer DIVA something that will make them invested!"

"That doesn't sound easy."

"I know. I'll think of something. For now, I want you to delete this recording and anything related to it. Just keeping it in the database is an immense risk. Going by its current state, the Larkinson Clan will certainly disintegrate if they hear what Ves has to say."

Though Gloriana felt a bit hesitant, she eventually agreed with Calabast that it was for the best. She resolutely erased the recording and the rest of the documents related to the contingency plan, making sure to scrub the storage chip thoroughly in order to foil any recovery attempts!

Once she was done, she turned to the spy. "You failed Ves several times already. I hope you won't fail again. He won't be happy when he hears what we've done to his contingency plan. The only way to placate him is to deliver a better result than what his choice would bring!"

"Relax. DIVA should definitely be capable of rescuing the Larkinsons. Their strength shouldn't be an issue as long as the Fridaymen aren't involved. It is motivating them into action that is our biggest concern. I will definitely need the support of your Wodin Dynasty to convince them to move."

"I'll try my best to convince my mother."

Chapter 1918 Rion Aaden

While Calabast and Gloriana plotted to find a way to rescue the captured Larkinsons, Ves remained blissfully ignorant.

As his body quietly rested in a recovery pod, his consciousness had traveled far away.

Dragged across both time and space, Ves had barely been cognizant of where the System was taking him before his consciousness finally smacked into someone else's mind!

This wasn't his first rodeo. Upon arrival, Ves immediately sought to hide presence!

His methods were a bit more skillful and refined since the last time he underwent a Mastery experience.

Through the strength of his detached mind and spirit, Ves immediately became a nonentity in the mind of his host.

Only after Ves made sure that his consciousness was sufficiently hidden and secure did he venture his senses outwards.

The mind he occupied looked very dull. Ves immediately felt a bit disappointed, but what could he expect from a first-tier Mastery Sub-Skill that cost only 40,000 DP?

He was not in a hurry to perform an intrusive inspection. He wanted to observe everything he needed to know in a passive way. Only after he gathered enough information would he contemplate other actions.

As Ves mysteriously connected to the senses of his host, he experienced a brand new life.

"We are not slaves."

A strong and rough hand let loose of the controls. Rion Aaden's suited form exited the mining vehicle and swept his resentful eyes at the vast cavern turned into a mining outpost.

Vast stretches of mining vehicles and mining equipment occupied the open ground before the entrance of the outpost.

Alloy walls and menacing turrets prevented anyone from stirring any trouble. Numerous tall and menacing armored guards patrolled the interior of the crudely-constructed base.

The planet of Desala X was interspersed by lots of underground outposts like these.

The giant, terrestrial planet was a frozen rock orbiting a listless red giant. Due to its harsh conditions, humanity decided not to turn Desala X into a livable planet.

Instead, House Kantis of the Paramount Kingdom opted to turn Desala X into a resource extraction site.

The Smiling Samuel Star Sector was an old and poor star sector in the galactic rim. Its glory days, however short they lasted, was long over. The star sector was so poor in resources that its decline hit every single state hard!

The Paramount Kingdom was no exception. Once a great and powerful third-rate state, it had now degenerated into a shell of its former self.

From the way its royals and nobles revelled and feasted, it was hard to see that! House Kantis was no exception. Its long existence stretched back all the way to the heyday of the Age of Conquest. Subsequently, its descendants inherited the pride of their predecessors at their peak!

Everyone who worked and toiled in the mines were very much aware that the cold, frozen, radioactive and lifeless planet they called their home was a cash cow to House Kantis.

It wasn't enough for the greedy nobles to extract every possible value from Desala X. They wanted to reduce their expenses as much as possible, thereby raising the profit margin from the relatively low-value bulk exotics they extracted!

Rion hobbled over to the security checkpoint where a number of tall guards contemptuously ignored the suited miners that passed through the scanning devices.

No one was allowed to smuggle any weapons or unauthorized objects into the outpost.

Anyone who violated this rule would immediately be shot down on the spot!

Rion shuddered in his suit as he remembered the blood that sprayed on his hazard suit when he witnessed the guards gunning down his friend!

His crime? Trying to smuggle a single pebble of Xantur iron into the outpost!

Xantur iron was one the most abundant and least valuable junk exotic on Desala X. A single pebble wasn't worth much at all, and it wasn't as if the miners could smuggle it out from an outpost that was almost completely controlled by House Kantis!

Yet the rules had to be obeyed. For this reason, Rion meekly subjected himself to the penetrating scan before shuffling through the gates while trying to attract as little attention as possible.

A bedraggled town came into view. The cheaply-made prefab structures showed lots of signs of wear and tear. An unending number of assembly, disassembly and moving caused the container-like structures to gain an unending number of scratches! In addition, it was rare to see any structure that was devoid of at least some form of corrosion.

In his entire years of existence, Rion lived in these kinds of settlements without experiencing anything better.

He lifted his helmet towards the cavernous ceiling. No sun or star shone down on him. Living underground was all he knew for his entire life.

He couldn't imagine what it would be like to live under an open sky that was as blue as a verdant ocean.

Such sights only belonged to the nobles and the privileged, Rion had been taught.

In contrast, poor and dirty miners like him deserved to live in poor, restrictive settlements like this outpost!

His gloved fist clenched as he realized the indignity of it all! He was not a slave! He was a human!

It was futile. House Kantis cared little for the miners. They saw people like Rion as little more than free labor.

There was almost no way for those born on this planet to escape the fate of becoming a miner. What passed for school on Desala X were only meant to give future miners the necessary knowledge to operate the mining equipment.

Those who did well in school got to be in charge of better machines!

Their reward? A better hovel to live in! Nothing else!

There was no way for the miners to quit and depart from this planet. House Kantis fully controlled the only ships and shuttles that descended and ascended from the outposts.

The miners weren't able to solicit help or make their distress known in the hopes that someone might come and rescue them. None of the miners had access to the galactic net. They didn't even own the fabled comms that Rion had seen on wrists of the guards and overseers!

After reaching a container-shaped housing unit, Rion pressed his suited palm against the airlock, causing the front to slide open for a brief period of time.

He hurried inside as fast as possible, which took quite some effort!

After entering the chamber, Rion briefly waited as the airlock started to scrub his suited form of contaminants before pumping in some stale-smelling air.

At least it was breathable.

Once Rion emerged from the airlock, he barely paid any mind to the battered, makeshift junk metal furniture.

Instead, he freed himself from his hazard suit as fast as possible. He carefully hung the suit onto a rack before pausing in front of a slightly-polished surface that he used as a mirror.

An ugly, dark-skinned form greeted Rion. His skin was brown and rough. His yellow eyes looked sickly on his squashed face. His dark hair hadn't been washed in days due to the scarcity of water on Desala X!

If anyone normal encountered Rion, they would doubtlessly scream and mistake him as a demon!

As Ves tapped into Rion's senses and viewed his current host's appearance, he inwardly exclaimed at the shocking sight!

"Damnit, System! Are you on stimulants or something!? Of all the possible hosts you could have chosen, why pick a dwarf of all people?!"

It became clear that Rion wasn't just short for a human. His short and very stocky body was clearly out of the norm compared to the standard human physique.

Though Ves estimated that Rion was only 140 centimeters tall, his muscular form probably massed more than 200 kilograms!

For someone as poor and underprivileged as Rion, there was no way he had cultivated this body through training or surgery.

Instead, he had been born as a dwarf! As the child of two heavy gravity variant humans, Rion inherited the same artificial genes that House Kantis used to form an entire population of eternally-bonded serfs!

Slaves in all but name, Rion had been taught throughout his entire life that dwarves like him were never equal to the so-called 'tall folk' who controlled their lives!

Real humans were different from lowly dwarves. They enjoyed something called human rights. That was what other dwarves had told him. If not for joining a resistance movement, Rion would have lived the rest of his life with his fat and ugly head bent towards the ground!

"We are also humans!"

It was futile to speak those words. Though Rion had learned from the resistance that 'human space' also counted dwarves among the human race, House Kantis resolutely denied this statement!

Rion spent an hour resting in his small and cramped home. He opened a nutrient pack stored in his pantry and ate the tasteless nutrient with a numb expression.

To dwarves like Rion, real food was a fantasy. Only tall folk deserved to eat real food!

The only food that dwarves were entitled to eat were recycled and synthesized nutrients the biochemical factories created out of the sewage produced by the outposts!

As for water, Rion carefully opened a bottle of water with his rough and clumsy hands. His strong fingers gripped the unusually-resilient bottle and carefully sipped its contents.

The water was clean and filtered. Each trickle of water that descended down his throat quenched the considerable thirst that he accumulated during his previous shift!

On Desala X, water was life. With no source of water at all, it had to be recycled as efficiently as possible.

Due to evaporation, spillage and usage in many industrial processes, water constantly circulated out of the cycle set up by House Kantis. Transport ships frequently arrived at the outposts to deliver precious water. The vessels would then depart from the planet with cargo holds filled with junk-grade exotics.

Rion never saw a real ship in his life. These immensely huge and expensive vessels were the stuff of legends to the dwarves of Desala X.

A ship represented freedom!

A ship could bring them away from the bondage of House Kantis!

A ship could provide them with a brand new future!

Though most dwarves usually discarded these thoughts, Rion was different.

He may be a dwarf, but he was also a human!

"It's time." He muttered.

Rion headed to his bed and slid it aside, causing the scratchy metal legs to scrape sharply against the metal floor.

He knelt carefully, making sure not to lose stability. If Rion lost his balance and fell, he would definitely suffer a severe wound!

Desala X boasted gravity that was 4.6 times stronger than the so-called 'standard gravity' that the tall folk frequently mentioned.

Rion couldn't imagine what it was like to live on a planet where the gravity was several times weaker than what he was used to. Would he float through the roofless skies if he jumped? Would he be able to live if he fell down a kilometer-long ravine?

The dwarf may not be able to experience what it was like to live in this fabled environment in person, but there was another option available to him, courtesy of the Desala Resistance Movement!

Once Rion removed a floor panel, he pressed a button built into the side of a tunnel leading downwards.

Nothing seemed to have happened, but according to the technicians that excavated the chamber underneath his home, this was a necessary step to prevent House Kantis from finding out what was going inside!

Rion carefully descended the shallow steps until he reached a chamber that was only slightly taller than his already-short form.

With his hair brushing the smoothed rocky surface, he stepped forward while the interior of the cramped chamber lit up from the light strips installed around a damaged-looking machine.

Following the instructions of the technicians, Rion carefully stripped himself down to his underclothes before opening the crudely-repaired machine. He employed the lightest amount of force he could manage, as he was always afraid he would break some component!

Once Rion slipped in place, he manually closed the top cover, sealing him inside a dark coffin!

Locked within a lifeless cavity, the dwarf grinned savagely and spoke the phrase the technicians instructed him to say.

"Simulator pod, activate!"

Chapter 1919 4.6

If Ves had eyes, they would have widened until they reached the size of dinner plates.

"A dwarf! Of all the humans the System could have chosen in the history of human civilization during the Age of Mechs, it chose a heavy gravity variant human!"

He resisted the urge to bash his consciousness against the walls of Rion's mental walls!

Though the specific variant that House Kantis used to cultivate the dwarves Desolate X was not as extreme as the wildlings of Aeon Corona VII, Ves still couldn't get over the fact that his latest host was a dwarf!

"Goddammit System! Can't you give me someone normal? Rion doesn't even pilot a real mech!"

Though Ves hated the System's decision to put him in the mind of a dwarf, he resented his host's circumstances even more!

Rion Aaden was a dwarf!

On Desala X, that meant he was a miner!

As a slave in all-but-name, Rion never enjoyed proper schooling. He never attended a mech academy. He never received proper instruction from an experienced and seasoned mech instructor.

"He hasn't even piloted a single mech in his entire life!"

So what made him eligible to become the host of Ves' latest Mastery experience?

His simulator pod!

Ves disdained the poor excuse of a pod the resistance movement salvaged from somewhere and managed to make it functional again.

The simulator pod was at least useful in estimating the approximate time period of this Mastery experience.

So far, Ves hadn't been able to glean a lot of clues of his current setting. House Kantis strictly controlled the information supplied to the dwarves in order to make them as pliable as possible.

It was a lot easier to control a population of ignorant sheep than clever monkeys!

All Rion knew about his location was what the rebel dwarves had mentioned to him in passing.

Ves gleaned the basic circumstances of the Smiling Samuel Star Sector and the Paramount Kingdom.

Both of them were in decline. For a time, it barely had anything going for it except for the modest deposits of slightly-valuable exotics.

Then these valuable exotics ran out. The humans living in states like the Paramount Kingdom destructively extracted as much value as possible to fuel their decadence and wasteful spending.

Now, there was hardly anything to smile about in this poor and forgotten star sector in the galactic rim.

There was one very relevant detail about Smiling Samuel though. When the rebels once showed Rion a galactic map in order to emphasize how small they were compared to the scale of human civilization, Ves discovered that this star sector was not that far from his own!

Certainly, Ves would have to travel through several star clusters in order to reach Smiling Samuel, but it was very much possible to reach it within a year on a very fast ship!

He mentally shook his head. This was no time to think about the possibility of meeting his Mastery hosts in the flesh.

His goal was to learn the essence of piloting a light skirmisher from the perspective of a mech pilot. He really didn't need anything more out of this than a thorough understanding of how a skilled mech pilot made the most out of piloting a light skirmisher.

As soon as Rion booted up the simulator pod, the dwarf didn't have that much to choose from aside from the preinstalled scenarios loaded into its databanks.

The pod didn't possess a connection to the galactic net.

In the time since Rion first trained with the pod, he first learned the ropes by going through the virtual training sessions.

Every simulator pod came loaded with a basic but foolproof virtual training program by default. This allowed potentates who weren't able to attend a mech academy for some reason or another to self-study their way into becoming a mech pilot!

Of course, that didn't mean that physical mech academies had lost their value. Ves knew that a true academy was countless times more effective in teaching mech cadets than a low-quality virtual training program!

Any mech pilot who emerged from a cheap virtual training program always became a bottom-feeder pirate or gang member!

This was because their poor and irregular piloting foundation was too worthless in the eyes of more respectable employers!

"Urgh! What is this performance? Does Rion even know how to pilot a mech at all? He's making a complete mockery of light mechs!"

The training scenario Rion selected first was a simple arena duel. The dwarf entered the virtual cockpit of a generic landbound light skirmisher armed with two knives.

His opponent? A heavy mech of all choices!

Theoretically, light mechs were supposed to counter heavy mechs. If the latter was not a striker mech, then the light mech could easily run rings around the lumbering machine and stab through the weak points that didn't require as much force to damage!

Though heavy mechs were often regarded as invulnerable shells that should never boast any weaknesses, Ves knew very well that heavy mechs often exhibited a lot of holes in their defense.

Every mech exhibited such vulnerabilities, especially on their rear!

A skilled mech pilot and a swift and agile light skirmisher were therefore capable of neutralizing a mech that was at least four times heavier and more expensive!

Therefore, it was very much worthwhile to dispatch light mechs to close in and disable these huge and sluggish mechs.

Even if more light mechs fell than heavy mechs, it was still a worthwhile sacrifice!

It was no surprise that the main rationale for light mechs was how cheap they were. Lighter and smaller than other mechs, they cost less expensive materials to build.

Naturally, that also made them vulnerable to damage. Unlike larger and bulkier mechs, light mechs had to make do with the equivalent of a bedsheet as their armor.

Aside from resisting small-arms fire, they weren't very useful against resisting mech-grade ordnance at all! Just a few targeted hits from a normal ballistic rifle was enough to cripple their legs!

For this reason, light mechs depended entirely on the poor man's version of armor, namely evasion.

Dodging enemy attacks and evading various hazards was one of the most critical advantages of a light mech.

In fact, light mechs didn't possess any other advantages aside from their superior mobility!

It therefore became necessary for mech pilots to make the most out of the superior speed, acceleration, agility and range of motion of these fast and nimble war machines.

Ves expected Rion to perform decently. The Desala Resistance Movement provided Rion with a pod that only contained training scenarios that put him in the cockpit of a virtual light mech.

The rebels wanted Rion to become good at piloting a light skirmisher!

Yet when Ves saw the virtual light skirmisher drunkenly dragging itself towards the virtual heavy mech, his heart began to sink.

The light skirmisher wasn't accelerating as fast as it could! The mech model, which was a few generations out of date compared to the present, was capable of running so much faster. Ves didn't need to perform a detailed analysis on its mech model to realize that truth!

"Wait a second! This simulation takes place in a heavy gravity environment!"

It soon made sense why Rion's virtual mech performed such awful motions. The dwarf was trying to pilot a mech built for speed in an environment that was doing everything possible to slow everything down!

That said, from his experiences with the Vandals and Swordmaidens on Aeon Corona VII, he knew that there were much more efficient walking techniques to propel a light mech forward under these conditions!

As the brief practice duel against the heavy mech proceeded, Ves saw to his dismay that Rion wasn't only bad at walking.

The heavy mech he faced was a sturdy knight mech. It wielded a thick tower shield and a sword that looked hefty enough to tear Rion's mech in half!

Though the heavy knight exhibited the typical sluggishness inherent to its weight class, its AI mech pilot was clearly more adept than its opponent!

Combined with the reduced complexity of piloting a slower mech, the AI opponent skilfully kept pace with Rion's clumsy attempt at circling around the heavy mech!

Eventually, the AI mech pilot decided enough was enough. The knight mech's considerable bulk drove forth, causing its shield to slam in the path of the light skirmisher's circular route!

"Ahhh! Damned tall folk! I won't let you get the better me! Taste my dwarven ferocity!"

The light skirmisher awkwardly regained its balance. Ves surmised that Rion learned how to regain the balance of mech quickly not because he systematically trained for it, but because he encountered this situation too many times to count!

Though Rion's mech managed to recover quickly, it didn't possess the right angle to attack the heavy knight's weak points!

Only a solid shield and thick frontal armor was within reach. His light mech's knives would probably break sooner than the frontal armor cover of the knight mech!

With the heavy knight on the offensive, the light skirmisher could do nothing to evade and distance itself from the heavy knight.

Normally, a light skirmisher could easily disengage from an unfavorable brawl and generate some distance.

However, the skill disparity between Rion and the AI mech pilot was too vast! The latter piloted fairly close to the standard of a fresh graduate from an average mech academy.

Meanwhile, Rion piloted worse than what Ves expected out of a self-taught mech pilot trying to learn how to pilot at 4.6 g!

"The gravity is the real problem!" Ves concluded. "If Rion went through a more standard training program first, he would have been able to form a proper foundation before branching out to heavy gravity operation!"

Mechs were originally designed to work between 0 g and 1 g. It took extra effort and a lot of adaptation on the part of both the mech pilot and the mech to make them suitable for planets such as Desala x.

Yet because the rebel technicians foolishly modified the virtual training program to start off with 4.6 g right away, Rion's instruction started off flawed from the very onset!

"Those idiots! Don't these rebels have a single person in their employ who worked or piloted with an actual mech for once? This is ridiculous! Any half-decent mech pilot would have been able to point out Rion's basic flaws!"

Seeing Rion trying to disengage was a sight that would make any Larkinson mad!

Seeing Rion switching gears and trying to fight the heavy knight head-on was a catastrophe on multiple levels!

With his clumsy knife swings ineffectually deflected by the heavy knight's solid shield, Rion failed to pull his light skirmisher back in time to evade the painfully-telegraphed counterattack!

The heavy knight's solid sword sung across the lower torso of the light skirmisher with undaunted momentum!

With just a single blow, the mech managed to chop at least half of the waist portion of the light skirmisher apart!

DEFEAT

"Ahhh!" Rion yelled in frustration inside his simulator pod. "Almost! I was almost there! Victory will surely be mine next time!"

Rion repeated the scenario five more times. Each of them resulted in swift defeat.

Ves became more and more frustrated at Rion's mule headed use of his practice time.

The stupid dwarf wasn't even aware of how bad he was! He had no idea how much better a real mech pilot performed in the same circumstances.

Proper mech pilots such as Joshua or the Larkinsons could easily pass this scenario within a couple of minutes! All they had to do was skillfully adapt to the heavy gravity while adopting modified walking techniques in order to outpace the rotation of the heavy knight.

Rion's futile practice session lasted for two hours. That was all the time he afforded himself before he needed to emerge from his secret chamber and sleep for just four hours.

House Kantis did not raise the dwarves to laze around. Their only purpose was to work as much as possible without causing them to expire too soon!

Chapter 1920 Incompetence

Several days went by as Rion Aaden followed a very boring routine.

Desala X was a mining planet. Nothing more. Hardly any amenities existed in any of the poor and bedraggled outposts that served as the hubs of all of the mining operations on the planet.

Though accurate information was hard to get, Ves managed to pin down a rough estimate of how far he traveled back into the past.

From the mining equipment, the gear worn by the tall folk, the simulator pod and other clues, he estimated that he travelled at least seventy years in the past.

This was a fairly short time disparity. Was the System growing lazy or something?

Just like Axelar, an opportunity existed for Ves to reunite with Rion when he returned to the present time. Assuming that Rion still resided in the Smiling Samuel Star Sector, it was very much possible for Ves to be able to meet his Mastery host within their lifetimes!

Of course, Ves had no intentions to meet with any of his former hosts, especially an inept mech pilot like Rion!

Over the course of several practice sessions, Ves witnessed failure and incompetence to a degree that he had never seen from any of his mech pilots!

"He's not a qualified mech pilot at all! He's too ignorant!"

To be fair, it wasn't Rion's fault that the rebel movement foolishly tried to train the potentate they discovered among the planet's dwarf population without knowing anything about mechs.

It was clear to Ves that the Desala Resistance Movement was not comparable to the more formidable rebel organizations he knew of. The Bentheim Liberation Movement and the Vesian Revolutionary Front were at least a thousand times stronger!

The main reason why Ves looked down on the DRM was because it consisted entirely of the indigenous population of dwarves.

Without the support of a single outsider or tall folk who actually knew a thing about how mechs actually worked and how they fought against other mechs, the DRM stood no chance against the guard forces keeping the dwarves in line!

If there was one detail that tilted the odds in the DRM's favor, it was that House Kantis invested very little in their operations on Desala X.

The decadent nobles could have easily run a proper mining planet that was fully compliant with all of the standards of human space if they were willing to treat the dwarves like regular salaried humans.

But no, House Kantis insisted on saving as much money as possible, and this included treating the main workforce like slaves!

The lack of willingness to invest in their operations on the mining planet extended to other aspects. Most of the mining gear was several decades old and extremely worn-

out. Their frequent malfunctions and breakdowns probably cost the House more than replacing with cheap but brand-new equipment!

The guards consisted entirely of thugs and former mercenaries that didn't even properly meet the standard of household troops. They were nothing more than prison guards in all but name.

Their equipment was fairly light and was oriented more towards detecting contraband and illicit goods than resisting a properly-armed and properly-trained raiding force.

"House Kantis is too cheap." Ves mentally shook his head. "Admittedly, there is no need to invest any further to keep the dwarves in line."

Against the captive dwarves who could employ nothing more than mining equipment to threaten the guards, this was enough!

Of course, all of the mining equipment and mining vehicles were under the complete control of the overseers. Even the dwarves knew how futile it was to rely on this gear as each of them incorporated many safeguards that forestalled any possible abuse!

As for mechs, he had seen a couple in the distance through Rion's eyes.

Ves surmised that House Kantis only stationed the mechs at the outposts as a form of deterrence rather than a precaution.

The chance that any of the dwarves could override all of the safeguards built into the formidable mining vehicles was low. Yet if that ever happened, the handful of mechs patrolling the outposts could easily wipe the civilian vehicles out with just a few attacks!

The handful of mechs he had seen so far at Outpost 35 didn't impress him at all. House Kantis tried to be as cheap as possible, which wasn't easy as mechs were considerably more expensive to operate on heavy gravity planets.

Most of the mechs consisted of frontline mechs. Due to the heavy disadvantages that ballistic weapons enjoyed in heavy gravity environments, the cheap and simple mechs were solely armed with laser weapons.

Ves begrudgingly approved of the frontline mech models that House Kantis chose. Weak and low performance they might be, they fared quite decently under heavy gravity and wouldn't be falling apart anytime soon.

A handful of other mech types made the rounds as well. Each dwarf cowered and scrambled out of the way of the domineering machines as they passed through the outpost.

The mechs deliberately ignored the dwarves in their path. Sometimes, their degenerate mech pilots even entertained themselves by landing their feet just a few breaths away from a miner!

There was no way for the dwarves to outrun a mech. The heavy gravity slowed everyone down, and dwarves didn't exactly boast the longest legs.

Fortunately, the mech pilots only restricted themselves to terrorizing the local population of miners. Killing them off cost money to their bosses, so the sadistic mech pilots had to abide by the regulations that ensured the workforce remained as productive as possible.

Though Ves hadn't been able to observe the patrolling mechs long enough to judge the overall skill level of their mech pilots, he guessed it didn't amount to much.

"Hardly any incident has happened on this planet that requires the intervention of mechs." He mentally surmised. "There is no glory or honor to be found here. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Only the dregs of the piloting profession can be found here. All of those guards could easily fit in with pirates and other scum."

Mech pilots who were willing to work as dwarf bullies desired easy pay and easy lives. Ves doubted whether any of the mech pilots even kept their rusted and untested skills up to standard by performing daily simulation drills and exercises.

"Desala X is a trash can of a planet." Ves concluded. "Nothing here is up to standard! The entire planet should be condemned as far as I'm concerned!"

House Kantis only cared about the bottom line. Their short-sightedness and lack of moral fiber trickled down in the way the overseers and guards ran the outposts.

Cutting corners was rampant. Nothing was up to date. The incompetence of the guards and mech pilots under the employ of House Kantis was only viable because the Desala Resistance Movement was just a band of disgruntled dwarves rather than a proper rebel organization!

So far, Rion hadn't met with his fellow rebels. Their work and sleep schedule was very tight. If there was one thing that was good about the 'breed' of dwarf on Desala X, it was that people like Rion were hardy workers who didn't require much 'maintenance' in order to remain functional.

This meant that Rion had to work several shifts a day with hardly any breaks in between. Only when some unforeseen accident happened or some very infrequently-planned breaks occurred did the minors enjoy some precious reprieve.

Accidents happened all too frequently, sadly. When a nearby mining tunnel collapsed when the breaks of a mining vehicle no longer worked, ten of Rion's fellow miners had lost their lives!

Of course, the tall folk hardly cared about the dwarves that perished. Instead, the high-and-mighty humans wanted to excavate the tunnel and recover as many vehicles and other hardware as possible!

The brief interruption due to the shuffling of assets and personnel gave Rion a rare break.

As he and his fellow miners returned to the outpost, Rion did not follow his usual path to his hovel.

Instead, he turned to a different district within the outpost. After entering some alleyways and some other areas that were completely obscured by the unmaintained monitoring system, he passed through a secret entrance that was apparently built below the workshops without the knowledge of the owners of the outpost!

The sheer incompetence of the guards were galling to Ves! Though he wasn't as obsessed about perfection as Gloriana, as a mech designer he hated it when something wasn't working properly.

"The guards aren't only incompetent, but also complacent!"

Decades without any major trouble from the dwarves had worn down the readiness of the guard forces. The miners obviously weren't capable of resisting their mechs, so why should they be so tightly-guarded?

Perhaps in the beginning, the quality and quantity of guards may have been adequate enough to forestall any attempts at insurrection.

Yet over the span of several decades of milking the mining planet, House Kantis continually sought to make their operations more 'efficient'.

Funding and manpower slowly dried up, causing the guard forces to be understaffed. Combined with the laziness and general apathy displayed by the so-called tall folk, the dwarves were somehow able to get away with digging an entire underground base underneath Outpost 35!

After descending a long tunnel guarded by a sparse number of dwarves wearing bits and pieces of metal scrap welded onto discarded hazard suits, Rion passed one final tunnel before he entered into an open cavern that looked a lot more impressive than Ves initially thought!

"They have mechs?" Ves' consciousness shook in astonishment. "Wait a minute.. those aren't mechs!"

The vehicles he initially mistook as mechs turned out to be nothing more than scrapped and salvaged mining vehicles strapped with makeshift armor and weapons!

The craftsmanship of these improved 'tanks', for lack of a better word, was abhorrent!

It became apparent to Ves that the engineering knowledge mastered by the rebel technicians amounted to little more than welding random metal scrap onto machines!

"How could they have even restored a simulator pod if their war machines look like they are liable to collapse at the first blow?"

The tanks armed with mining lasers and other potentially-lethal mining implements as their armament might be impressive to the dwarves, but Ves knew that they were wholly incapable of defeating even a single frontline mech of the guards!

These rebellious minors had no idea how powerful a mech could be, especially against war machines that enjoyed none of the advantages of a super weapon platform!

"Even if the heavy gravity handicaps the mobility and various other functions of a mech, they're still built for combat, which is a lot better than these repurposed mining vehicles!"

Just like how a converted carrier was not on the same level as a combat carrier, the makeshift tanks were completely weak against any form of attack. All of the scrap attached to the exterior of the mining vehicles didn't do anything to strengthen their internal structure!

Like a fragile egg, once their fragile exteriors were broken, the soft internals would definitely collapse!

Of course, an ignorant dwarf like Rion didn't know any better. He gazed up at the six scrappy 'tanks' with the same amount of reverence he directed towards the mechs operated by the guard force.

Rion clenched his fist and raised it to the surface!

"With these great battle wagons, we will fight our way to freedom!"

Ves mentally rolled his eyes. The chance of victory should the dwarves deploy the six sad excuses for fighting vehicles was virtually nil!

"That said, where are the mechs? Do the rebels even.. have any?"

The cavern might be large, but it only held enough room to hold the six giant battle wagons. If this was their only base, and the base consisted of just a single hollow cavern, then the rebels were more foolish than he thought!

"This is no rebel movement. This is a suicide pact!"