

Mech 2341

Chapter 2341: Prideful Pirates

The news shook the periphery of the Nyxian Gap!

For several months, the Larkinson Clan's fleet rampaged through Wreckage Paradise and Maynard Fields as if the pirates were just moles to be whacked. Several pirate bases and many individual pirate groups all succumbed against the might of this domineering new power from civilized space.

All of the pirates became both angry and afraid of the Larkinson Clan!

The local scum hated the clan for treating them as easy targets. Aside from the Battle of Ulimo Citadel, every other battle ended up with the Larkinsons wiping out their opposition with ease.

This kind of bullying went too far even for pirates!

"The amount of resentment that we have accrued is not something to be taken lightly." Calabast calmed down a bit after she announced the initial news. She chose to sit down on the side of Ves' bed this time. "The Nyxian pirates are normally selfish and prone to infighting. Even when the Peacekeeper outfits come in to threaten them, they usually celebrate any misfortune visited upon their fellow pirates."

"That is my understanding." Ves nodded. "Has that changed?"

Calabast let out a rueful smile. "The Nyxian pirates never unite under normal circumstances. There are few common interests among them and no one wants to risk their lives and freedom to do someone else's dirty work. There are no greater authorities or states that can unite the pirates either. Even the Allidus Alliance and the other core powers don't quite have the clout to unite every pirate group in the Nyxian Gap."

"Pirates mainly fight for themselves. Some are loyal to their organization or their leader, but that's probably brainwashing at work."

"While that's true, don't underestimate the mindset of these degenerates. They have their own pride. Despite fending off Peacekeepers outfits, adventuring fleets like ours and even the warfleets of the Big Two, the Nyxian pirates have always managed to survive everything that civilized space has thrown at them. This has inflated their confidence and caused them to develop a reputation for impunity."

"What has changed, then?"

"We cracked this reputation." She told him. "It has been going on for a while, but the pirates were barely able to hold themselves in because we've only been bullying the

weak mostly. That has changed after toppling Ulimo Citadel. Unlike the other pirate bases we have overrun, Ulimo is one of the central and most iconic bases of Maynard Fields."

"What happened next?"

"The pirates believe their reputation has taken a hit. If they allow us to leave unchallenged, they fear that other fleets like ours will replicate our rampage. In fact, word in certain circles has already spread of other powerful mech forces assembling at the border of the Sentinel Kingdom and other nearby states. Now that the Big Two have quietly announced that they are willing to pay double the merits to destroy the arsenal of superweapons in the possession of pirates, a fair amount of big players want to join in on the action!"

"Most of them will probably have a bad time if they think they can replicate our success."

The danger of facing nuclear missiles, warship-grade cannons and other dangerous superweapons in battle was not trivial. Task Force Predator only managed to come out on top against the stronger pirate groups by taking advantage of Lucky and the Penitent Sisters.

"You're not wrong, Ves. The power players who are aiming to harvest a lot of merits are already aware of the risks. That's why they won't take a single step into the Nyxian Gap. Do you think every leader is like you? The real style of a leader is to dispatch others to do your dirty work while you stay safe and comfortable in the comfort of your heavily-guarded mansion."

"Those kinds of people are better at scheming than doing something that will actually allow them to rise above their station." Ves scoffed. "Our clan doesn't have the heritage or connections of these old powers, but we have already accomplished more in a year than the Tovar Family has accomplished in a century!"

Perhaps that was an exaggeration, but Ves really did look down on the old fogeys that were typically in charge. At least Ves put his money where his mouth was and shared in the fortune and misfortune of his own soldiers.

Calabast did not agree. "I really don't know what goes on in your head sometimes. You're a mech designer. A Journeyman. You are most valuable in the rear where you can work on your designs in peace."

"That's not the Larkinson way! I know I'm a bit odd about this, but I believe that mech designers like my Braves and I are best suited to experience the vagaries of mech combat in person. Only when we put your life on the line will we be pushed into designing our best possible mechs!"

The spymaster looked at Ves as if he was crazy.

"You already know my thoughts on this matter, so let's not talk about that right now." She moved on. "Tensions in and around the Nyxian Gap had already risen before we began our excursion. Skirmishes between pirates and state-backed forces have become more and more frequent. There is a war going on, Ves. It's unannounced and not well-known, but the struggle is very real at the highest level of both societies."

"What does that have to do with our situation?"

"We are seen as a group of hired thugs from civilized space. To be more precise, people seem to believe that your good relations with Master Willix hint that you have become 'her' person. Why else would the Larkinson Clan take so many risks and attack so many heavily-defended pirate bases? Everyone suspects that you have turned into an unofficial agent of the MTA!"

Ves blinked at that statement. This couldn't be further from the truth.

Sure, he was on speaking terms with a prestigious MTA Master Mech Designer.

Sure, he made some special deals with Master Willix that enabled him to exchange special benefits with the MTA.

Sure, he gleefully attacked powerful pirate bases that had been accumulating more and more taboo weapons such as Xiphard Base and Ulimo Citadel, earning an immense amount of merits in just a quarter of a year.

That did not mean that he had turned into a poster boy for the MTA!

He had broken so many rules and violated so many taboos that he would have put the Skull Architect to shame!

Even now, he constantly lied and withheld information from Master Willix. Partially, he wanted to protect his trade secrets, but mostly he just wanted to avoid exposing his numerous misdeeds!

Ves did not want to get too close to the MTA. That sounded as stupid as a career criminal moving into a house next to a police station. The two simply didn't get along!

"What are the consequences of being seen as agents of the MTA?" He asked with concern.

"Well, it's useful when we return to civilized space. Even if the MTA can't be bothered to confirm this rumor, it is very helpful to be associated with one of the Big Two in this way. Enemies will become even more reluctant to do anything against us. This will be especially helpful once we start to leave the Komodo Star Sector. We'll be strangers

and foreigners in other star sectors. If there are rumors swirling around us that we are favored by the MTA, hardly anyone with malicious intent will want to take the chance."

"It's fake, though." Ves stated. "From what I understand the MTA, their sights are set so high that they don't care about individual people and organizations."

"That's true, but there are still benefits to keeping up the illusion. Perception can be as effective as truth under the right circumstances. It would help if you keep being seen as performing actions on behalf of the MTA."

"I already plan to do that to an extent. Any mech designer can earn a couple of thousand merits. It's a different story if we're talking about earning millions of merits!"

What could he do when the Big Two controlled every beyonder gate through the Gate Consortium? Just like how no one could avoid using the galactic net, Ves was forced to play by the rules of the Big Two in order to obtain passage to the Red Ocean.

If not for this ambition, Ves would have never gone out of his way to bootlick the MTA in order to earn a huge amount of merits!

Calabast went back to the current crisis at hand. "While gaining this reputation is beneficial to us in civilized space, it's the opposite in the Nyxian Gap. The pirates here don't fear the Big Two. As long as it comes to their own turf, they are confident that they can defeat entire battleships!"

Normally, those who made this claim would be seen as absolutely mad. Yet the pirates of the Nyxian Gap were one of the few people in the galaxy who could make this boast without being ridiculed!

Now, it appeared that the pirates have all turned their ire on the Larkinson Clan.

Since they didn't even fear the Big Two, why should they shake in their boots whenever the Larkinsons came up? Letting the clan go scott-free after cracking open a pirate stronghold as important as Ulimo Citadel was a great shame!

"The result is that a few pirate alliances that are normally neutral or slightly hostile have all agreed that we need to be wiped out. The Allidus Alliance is the biggest driver of this initiative, but I have found some mention that there are other powers that are pushing for our downfall."

"Let me guess. The Hallowed Abyss Temple is one of them, right?"

"Yes." Calabast sighed. "It seems that our actions at Ulimo Citadel have riled them all up. The White Watchers and Grey Watchers that preside over the shrines that are spread across the Nyxian Gap have all begun to move. They're hiring dark mercenaries and making deals with local pirate groups to hinder or advance. They don't need to

defeat us. They just need to slow us down. The less progress we make, the greater the chance the Allidus Alliance's punitive fleet will intercept our task force."

This was terrible news. Perhaps the Allidus Alliance wouldn't have been able to mobilize every pirate outfit by themselves, but it was a different matter if others joined the fray. Now that it had become a matter of pride, the pirates really didn't want to see the Larkinsons swagger back into civilized space!

Calabast briefly spent some time on explaining the various ways the pirates in their way could slow them down. From planting mines deep into random asteroids to poking at them from multiple directions at long range, many of these measures were very difficult to deal with, especially in a complex space environment where there were lots of asteroids for pirates to obscure their presence!

"We can't sit still and do nothing. We need to convene and develop some plans and countermeasures." Ves concluded. "I'll call a meeting to discuss everyone's proposals. Defending ourselves against guerilla attacks is important, but we also have to make plans to overcome the Allidus Alliance's punitive fleet. Do you know whether the pirate fleet..."

"It's as you have feared. The pirates have brought out several homemade warships. Among them is a heavy cruiser that may or may not be the Gravada Knarlax."

Ves almost had a heart attack when he heard this name. This was the infamous warship that allowed the Allidus Alliance to rise into power!

The pirate warship was so powerful that her bounty reached as high as 4,500,000 merits! In fact, her current bounty should be double now that the MTA awarded twice as much merits!

Even though Ves drooled at the prospect of earning 9 million MTA merits at once, he wasn't stupid. A ship that carried so much bounty would never be taken down so easily.

What was worse was that the Allidus Alliance dispatched additional warships as escorts!

Chapter 2342: Pirate Warships

The news soon spread to the rest of Task Force Predator.

Neither Ves nor Calabast thought it was best to hide the news. Morale dropped immediately after everyone found out that the entire Nyxian Gap was out to get them. Not even Major Verle or Venerable Jannzi could do much to restore everyone's confidence.

"It's better this way, sir." Major Verle told Ves. "While we need to be careful not to exaggerate the threat of the pirates, we need to give each of our people some time to process the threat. Eventually, they'll conclude that the only way to overcome this challenge is to do their absolute best. I expect a lot of good results in a week."

Though the possible enthusiasm sounded great, many battles weren't solely won by that. When Ves thought of the possibility of facing the notorious Gravada Knarlax and her massive cruiser-grade cannons in battle, his heart almost stopped!

A warship, even a third-rate, bootleg pirate version of the genuine article, could easily demolish his entire task force under the right circumstances!

"While the exact specifications of the Gravada Knarlax is not publicly known, she has revealed various properties the few times she engaged in battle." Major Verle explained while he activated a projection that depicted a wireframe model of the ship.

Compared to actual design schematics, the wireframe model of the Knarlax only exposed her exterior layout. Only the Allidus Alliance knew what lay beneath, and every pirate who served on the heavy cruiser never leaked any details.

"What is known about the Knarlax is that she is 800 meters long. She's a sub-capital ship, but don't underestimate her for this reason. She was built several decades ago when the Allidus Alliance wasn't as formidable as now. This means that much of her internal structure should be relatively weak. They're thick and heavy in order to prevent the ship from rattling herself to pieces. As a consequence, she should be very slow and quite vulnerable if any attacks make it through her exterior."

"I guess that punching through her hull plating is easier said than done." Ves remarked.

Verle poked his finger at the projection, highlighting the thick belt of armor wrapped around the ship. "It's a lot easier for relatively low-skilled shipbuilders to upgrade the armor plating and exterior modules. What we know is that over the years, the Allidus Alliance has continued to invest in upgrading the armor plating of its flagship. This allows them to exert more power, thereby increasing the Alliance's power. With greater power, the Lord Hivex is able to channel more resources into strengthening the heavy cruiser once again."

It was a virtuous cycle. In the Nyxian Gap, the ones with the biggest fist had the most say. The Allidus Alliance knew that growing wealthier without increasing their ability to defend their gains was counterproductive. Ves would have upgraded the Knarlax too in order to boost her deterrence factor.

"What about the other warships?"

"The Allidus Alliance don't want to put all of their eggs in one basket, sir. While it is very difficult to build another heavy cruiser like the Gravada Knarlax, the pirates have instead

opted to build numerous smaller ships. From what we have heard, at least half-a-dozen armored destroyers and frigates are accompanying the Knarlax. Any one of them are already capable of destroying entire mech companies."

"I'm aware."

The scale of their weapons and armor simply couldn't be compared to the loadout of mechs. Size mattered. Even if the tech base of those pirate warships were low, their sheer size was enough for them to prove deadly against second-class mechs!

Major Verle spent some time outlining the different weapons on the Knarlax.

"The secondary armament of the Knarlax consists of over hundred smaller gun batteries. In this case, the word small is relative. Since the pirates aren't constrained by any taboos, they have been able to fit much more secondary guns onto the heavy cruiser's hull. Each of her gun batteries are centrally fed from the ship."

The cumbersome requirements of the MTA imposed a lot of inefficiencies in normal starship design. For example, his own upcoming factory ship came with numerous empty bunkers to accommodate powerful heavy artillery mechs as a form of defense.

No matter how strong or impressive heavy mechs may be, forcing them to play the role as gun batteries on ships was incredibly inefficient!

Heavy mechs massed so much and took up so much space that they brought much less firepower than if the space was taken up by dedicated gun turrets.

It was for this reason that the Gravada Knarlax, despite being less than half as long as the Larkinson Clan's upcoming factory ship, already possessed substantially greater firepower by virtue of her secondary armaments alone!

"While the secondary guns are already enough to chew an entire mech regiment to pieces, it's the primary guns we need to watch out for. The Gravada Knarlax has nine main cannons in total."

Major Verle tapped the turrets. "The main cannons are grouped up in three turrets, which are placed in a triangular scheme around her hull. Two of them are placed close to the bow while the remaining one is located at the stern. While this turret layout means that the Knarlax is only capable of bringing all of her guns to bear against a single target positioned forward or to rear. Any enemies approaching from the side will only have to risk getting hit by two out of three of the triple-barreled turrets."

That was not much of a consolation. Just one of the cannons on those turrets already possessed enough power to hammer the Scarlet Rose into pieces!

"Do the main guns consist of laser or ballistic cannons?"

"The latter, sir. The Gravada Knarlax is designed to be a brawler. While she is rumored to possess numerous missile batteries to attack longer-ranged targets, her guns make her very suitable to advance forward with unstoppable might. The closer she gets to her target, the easier it is for her guns to hit their targets. With decades worth of upgrades to her hull plating, not even a nuclear missile can punch through her armor belt."

Obviously, the heavy cruiser was easily avoidable under the right circumstances. Her acceleration was abysmal so it was not that difficult for mobile fleets to bypass the sluggish pirate warship.

To Ves, the Gravada Knarlax was the warship equivalent of a doom crawler. Both were slow, but stuffed with armor and weapons. They were mostly used as the centerpiece of a dedicated assault. Their indomitable advance couldn't be stopped. Any enemies who were cornered by them were surely doomed!

Before, Ves never really worried about the Gravada Knarlax coming after Task Force Predator because the mobility of the two weren't even on the same level.

It was different now that the Allidus Alliance somehow managed to shift the Knarlax and the rest of the pirate fleet to Wreckage Paradise all at once!

Ves had heard about the secret space lanes that were spread across the Nyxian Gap. These lanes effectively served as shortcuts that allowed anyone to instantly emerge at a completely different part of the Gap.

They were supposedly rare and rarely used. How could Ves ever anticipate that the Allidus Alliance would go crazy and send so many warships through one in order to take revenge against the Larkinson Clan?

This was absolute madness!

"What about the escorts? Those destroyers and frigates?" Ves asked.

"Their main armaments are likely armed with laser cannons, sir. They aren't as massive or tough as the Knarlax, but they make up for it in speed and agility. The Allidus Alliance designed them to complement the Knarlax."

"These warships are ideal ship killers." Ves concluded. "The Knarlax can be deadly to mechs up close, but strictly speaking the warships don't need to go through all of that trouble. As long as their guns destroy all of our carriers and other ships, our mechs won't be able to last forever."

How were the mechs supposed to get back to civilized space without FTL drives? How were mechs supposed to last in space by themselves when they no longer had any opportunity to resupply? Hardly any of the mechs in the task force were designed to operate longer than a day!

"Don't forget about conventional carriers and mechs, sir. You can expect the punitive fleet to be accompanied by at least a couple of thousand mechs."

"Of course. These pirates don't want to give us any opportunity to overpower their warships if our mechs ever manage to get close."

The cost of doing so was too ruinous for Ves to even think about it. The secondary armaments of the Knarlax and her escorts were already enough to repel any frontal assault!

The strength of the pirates was depressingly overwhelming. Neither Ves nor Major Verle could think of any way to defeat them in any sort of open battle.

It wasn't as if the warships were invincible. No matter how tough they were built, enough concentrated firepower or getting any melee mechs up close ought to be sufficient in taking them down.

The problem was that none of those warships were alone or content to let themselves get beat up without retaliating. While Ves was a child of the Age of Mechs, he learned enough about the Age of Conquest that the might of any fleet that consisted of genuine warships simply couldn't be overcome by lighter forces.

The difference in scale was too oppressive!

Unless the Larkinson Clan could whip out some warships of its own, there was no chance of victory. Ves doubted that even sneaking Lucky inside the Knarlax would accomplish anything.

The Allidus Alliance would surely be on guard against infiltration after the fall of Ulimo Citadel. In addition, Ves knew that his clan had pissed off the formidable Hallowed Abyss Temple, so performing any spiritual tricks against the pirates probably wouldn't work either!

The entire situation pushed him close to despair!

If not for the fact that it would take at least a month for his task force to clash against the punitive fleet, he would have considered bailing out.

There was one obvious way to save at least some of his people. If Ves commanded every ship to separate from each other and flee from the Nyxian Gap by themselves, then at least some ships would be able to make it back.

Sadly, individual carriers and mech companies were highly vulnerable to even the weakest pirate gangs. Hardly any pirate could resist such juicy prey, especially when the major pirate factions offered a lot of incentives to take down the Larkinsons!

"How will we solve this predicament?" Ves hopelessly asked. "Do you have any ideas?"

"I'm still working on them, sir. I will share some of them during the upcoming emergency meeting. We need to be creative in order to survive this crisis. Don't hold back. Grasp at any opportunity we can get. I'll be happy as long as we can get out alive."

"That's easier said than done." Ves sighed. "Wait, since the punitive fleet has emerged in Wreckage Paradise, doesn't that mean that we can ask the Wodin Warriors to destroy the pirate fleet?"

Verle shook his head. "The Allidus Alliance isn't that stupid. They emerged deep in Wreckage Paradise. It will take too long for the Wodin Warriors to venture inside the Nyxian Gap and chase after the pirate fleet. We don't know what countermeasures the pirates have prepared against third-party interference. I doubt the Wodins want to risk so much of their main combat forces on such a risky venture."

The conditions they would demand would also be prohibitive, and it might not even work. The pirates had a long track record of defeating stronger opponents. The Nyxian Gap wasn't regarded as a bottomless abyss for nothing!

"I hope to hear some very good ideas then, because we need them. I won't let the Allidus Alliance crush my forces!"

Chapter 2343: No Good Solutions

A cloud hung over the task force as it flew past the endless asteroids. Already, the outlying patrols detected the presence of pirate scouts.

Though these weak and paltry mechs posed no threat to the Larkinsons, they were consistently stalking and keeping tabs on the task force.

The patrolling Larkinson mechs did their best to shoot at them in order to deter their actions, but so far that has accomplished little more than pushing the pirate scouts back.

More pirate outfits were on their way. With the major pirate powers of the core regions directing the smaller pirate groups, everyone knew what to do. With the Allidus Alliance's punitive fleet serving as the main means of taking down the task force, the other pirate outfits didn't have to take too many risks.

This doubtlessly increased their enthusiasm. Who didn't want to earn some easy rewards? The Allidus Alliance paid very generously this time!

"Meow..."

"C'mon, Lucky! Heal faster!" Ves begged his cat. "I need you to get back into tip-top shape as soon as possible. While I don't have much confidence in your ability to sabotage the Gravada Knarlax, at least we have a chance to make it out alive if you can reprise your role as a commando cat. I'm already prepared to build a new and improved Misfortune Harness for you. The pirates won't be able to harm you so easily next time!"

His tired and lethargic cat continued to lie on the surface of the bed without any movement.

"Meoowww..."

There was nothing Ves could do. Repairing a gem cat as complex as Lucky was out of the question.

"Will it help if I feed you with something? We've looted quite a variety of high and medium-grade exotics from Ulimo Citadel. Would you like to pay a visit to the vault?"

Lucky faintly shook his head. "Meooow..."

Ves looked glum. Of all the times to suffer a stomach ache, this was the worst!

With his cat unable to eat any exotics, there wasn't any way to speed up the regeneration process. Ves estimated that it might take at least a month for Lucky to repair his exterior wounds, but that did not address his digestion problems.

Ves truly didn't know how long it would take for the gem cat to handle all of the Unending alloy he had eaten. While Ves didn't know much about how Lucky digested minerals, something as resilient and difficult to work with as Unending alloy couldn't be broken down in a single day!

What was even more concerning was that Lucky had eaten the Unending alloy as it was actively pumping out darkness. His cat may have inadvertently eaten the negative spiritual energy contained in the metal, thereby potentially causing all sorts of issues!

"Well, I hope you don't turn into a dark god or something, Lucky." He petted his tired cat's back. "I'll do my best to find other solutions."

Ves turned away and moved back to his desk. With the losses the Larkinsons and Penitent Sisters suffered in the Battle of Ulimo Citadel, his fleet was not in a good shape to fight.

Even if the mech technicians finished repairing as many damaged mechs as possible, they still lacked the numbers to fight the Gravada Knarlax alone by herself, let alone the rest of the pirate fleet!

When the disparity in strength had become so big, conventional solutions no longer worked. The Larkinsons could never win a fair fight against the pirates.

The only viable means of overcoming this difficulty was if the Larkinsons played dirty. Just like the pirates who inhabited the Nyxian Gap, Task Force Predator had no choice but to take after the locals!

This happened to be the first suggestion that Major Verle proposed.

"Sir, is the special dispensation you received from the MTA still valid?"

Ves rapidly recalled the exact wording of the deal he made with the MTA. "Yes. It is valid until we leave the Nyxian Gap or until my wedding is about to take place."

There was no way that Ves would stay longer in the Nyxian Gap than the date of his wedding, so he didn't argue for any further extensions. Even now when the entire Nyxian Gap was ganging up on the Larkinson Clan, Ves still believed it was possible to make it back in time and avoid Gloriana's wrath!

Everyone looked around. None of the mech commanders looked comfortable with this suggestion, but they declined to speak against it. Against warships and superweapons, it made sense to hit back as hard as possible.

"While the suggestion sounds reasonable, we don't have any superweapons in stock." Commander Melkor reminded everyone. "Unless one of us here has secretly squirreled some of them away, we shouldn't be in the possession of any weapons of mass destruction."

He was right. The Larkinson Clan explicitly cataloged and destroyed any prohibited weapon. This was needed in order to give the MTA confirmation that the dangerous weapons were truly gone.

Now, it seemed that the Larkinsons had been acting too hasty. Ves really could have used some of those potent armaments in order to give his task force more teeth against the Allidus Alliance!

Ves activated a small projection at his side of the conference table and began to look through the abundant resource stockpile his fleet had accumulated.

"We can build new superweapons." He announced to everyone. "We have collected plenty of fissionable materials and energetic exotics to produce powerful explosives. Whether they are strong enough to crack through the hull plating of the Gravada Knarlax is questionable, but they should at least pose a greater threat against her escort ships."

"Can we build something else with the resources we have at hand?" Commander Magdalena asked.

"I'm not sure. We have collected a lot of materials, but I'm not familiar with much of them and none of them immediately stand out. We'll have to look into them further in order to figure out our options, but don't expect too much."

Soon enough, they moved on to entertaining other suggestions. Calabast proposed something very original.

"It may be possible to approach a pirate faction and collude with them to frustrate this attack."

"That shouldn't be possible." Major Verle frowned. "Stopping us has become a matter of pride to the local pirates. The interests involved are greater than any single pirate faction. Any group of pirates who dare go against the will of the majority will not be able to live long!"

"While I agree with you that the collective interests of the Nyxian pirates are best served by cooperating with the Allidus Alliance, do you really think that their animosity towards each other has stopped? No, their infighting has merely paused. As long as we find the right angle, we may be able to persuade a pirate faction to hinder the efforts of the other pirates. The Allidus Alliance may have grown powerful over the decades, but Lord Hivex has also made his fair share of enemies. The key is to approach some of these enemies and find ways to hinder their rival."

Though Ves found this idea to be a bit promising, he knew better than to get his hopes up. Even if some other pirate alliances wanted the Allidus Alliance to lose its warships, the Nyxian pirate community would never tolerate any instances of colluding with civilized folk in order to harm their fellow pirates!

Though such dirty deals doubtlessly took place, they were all secret and never exposed to the public. Pirates were pirates and civilized folk were civilized folk. That was how the galaxy should be run!

Calabast wouldn't give up on the idea, though. "We don't have to waste any resources or expend much money to explore our options. I will continue to try and see if we can approach powerful factions such as the Krella Alliance for aid."

"It's unlikely to work." Ves shook his head. "First, there are more powers backing this revenge action. The Hallowed Abyss Temple is very influential and wants us dead really bad. Second, even if you can persuade the other pirate alliances to help us somehow, there is no way they can help us in the inevitable battle. They are too far away from Wreckage Paradise."

"They can use the space lanes."

"There aren't that many of them and the Allidus Alliance may be blocking them. Whatever the case, I doubt Lord Hivex is blind to this possibility."

While it didn't hurt for Calabast to try and find some locals to collude with, Ves wasn't getting his hopes up. No matter what kind of rewards they offered to any potential, nothing was more valuable than retaining their lives.

They discussed some other options. Commander Orfan raised the most ridiculous suggestion of the entire session.

"Hey! Don't get so glum. We haven't lost yet." She admonished everyone. "Didn't Venerable Jannzi beat up that giant whale with tentacles at the end of the last battle? As far as I'm concerned, as long as me, Dise, Tusa and little Joshua all break through at once, there's no way the Gravada Knarlax will survive against our collective might."

Everyone, including Commander Dise, did not exhibit any confidence in her suggestion at all! Major Verle slammed his palm against the surface of the conference table.

"Don't joke around, Commander Orfan! This isn't an action drama where the heroes all magically break through at once at the nick of time! During the previous battle, only one out of five of our expert candidates underwent apotheosis."

"The odds are better for us this time!" Orphan defended herself. "While none of us has managed to get over the threshold, we've come a lot closer than before. Each of us just needs a tiny push to make it past our bottlenecks!"

"What then?" Verle asked.

"Uh, isn't that obvious? We take advantage of the boost of power we gain from breaking through and channel it all against the Gravada Knarlax. Even if we can't tear the big warships apart, we can at least cripple her so that she won't be able to threaten us further!"

A heavy silence fell over the conference room.

Commander Magdalena sighed. "There are more warships than just the Gravada Knarlax. Taking out the flagship is a powerful gesture, but it doesn't address the remaining threats. Besides, the only reason why Venerable Jannzi exhibited such might was because she achieved the legendary state of Unity of Man and Machine. The odds of breaking through are already so low. The odds that one of your breakthroughs can also attain this state is even lower!"

Ves nodded in agreement. "What happened with Jannzi can't easily be replicated. She possessed a special bond with her mech. The same can't be said for the rest of you. I think only Joshua has a small chance to follow in Jannzi's footsteps, but..."

"It's not enough." Major Verle spoke.

"Without any instance of perfect resonance, the chances of any one of you expert candidates being able to threaten the Gravada Knarlax and the other pirate warships is minimal. A normal breakthrough simply doesn't produce enough power."

"Can't you do something, Ves?" Orfan pleaded. "You're the miracle man! You made the machine that caused Jannzi to turn from a regular Larkinson mech pilot into a brand-new expert pilot! Can't you perform your magic again and give us all a power up when we most need it? I won't disappoint your expectations!"

Everyone thought her suggestion was ridiculous. The odds were too low.

The discussion moved on after everyone decided to ignore Commander Orfan's ill-thought proposal.

Only Ves kept thinking about her suggestion. Maybe to the other Larkinsons, her suggestion sounded too stupid to take seriously.

Yet Ves fell silent for a time. His thoughts still lingered on the suggestion. Perhaps other people might not be able to do anything with it, but Ves was different.

Was it really impossible to induce the remaining expert candidates of his clan to break through at once?

Was it truly unthinkable to enable one or more of those breakthroughs to be accompanied by perfect resonance?

What if.. Ves could make that happen?

"That would be a true miracle." He muttered under his breath.

Chapter 2344: Bold Ideas

The various commanders filed out of the room. None of them held any smiles. Though they swapped numerous ideas during the meeting, none of them sounded good enough to save them from their current predicament.

Any external help, even from the MTA, would come way too late. The Nyxian Gap's remarkable properties also made it insanely difficult to get anywhere quickly unless someone had access to the so-called secret spacelanes.

These shortcuts were very obscure. The Peacekeeper Association which knew the most about the Nyxian Gap had absolutely no clue where any of them were and how to access them! Not even the Big Two's warfleets with their sophisticated detection technologies managed to sniff out these unusual spatial channels.

Whatever the case, the Larkinson Fleet was in too deep and the Allidus Alliance's punitive fleet was already heading to the border between Wreckage Paradise and Maynard Fields.

Perhaps the one useful suggestion offered by the various officers was one given by Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon.

"There is no reason why we should accelerate towards the enemy. Confronting the enemy warships one day sooner is worse than one day later. At the very least, delaying for time will give us more opportunities to turn the situation around. Maybe the pirate factions break off from each other. Maybe a spatial anomaly has swallowed the Gravada Knarlax. Though the odds of these events taking place are low, who knows what will actually happen."

Her suggestion was a good one.

"We should stop moving to the border of the Nyxian Gap. Instead, we should be travelling deeper!" Orfan suggestion.

"No." Ves shook his head. "This is still enemy turf. The deeper we go, the greater the chance we'll encounter interference from the established pirate groups. Don't forget that the stronger pirates are all located closer to the center of the Gap. The Allidus Alliance's punitive fleet won't be the only enemy we need to be worried about."

"We can slow our pace, but we should not stop." Ophelia said. "Parking at the same coordinates will make it much easier for the pirates to surround us. Instead, we should make steady progress while varying our course. We have to prevent the enemy pirates from predicting our route. Otherwise, we'll encounter a lot of traps hidden in the asteroids."

There were a lot of complex considerations behind these decisions. Since Ves did not specialize in navigation or fleet maneuvers, he left it up to the experts to decide their route.

Aside from this, no other meaningful topic had been raised during the meeting.

When everyone except Major Verle left, he turned to Ves.

"We will do our best to bring the odds in our favor, but it is likely not enough. Even if the rumors are exaggerated, there is little doubt the opposition possesses overwhelming power."

"Do you have any suggestions?" Ves asked with a hint of hope.

"Activate your signal jammer first."

"Okay."

Ves instantly pressed the button. He was so practiced with doing so that he didn't even need to look down at his toolbelt.

The major spoke after the familiar field enveloped them both.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures, sir. I.. am aware of some of your proclivities. The way you run through the bodies of the captives makes that clear."

Ves instantly put up his guard. "What about it? They're pirates! They have forfeited their human rights!"

The senior mech officer coughed. "I pass no judgement on what is taking place on this ship. All I know is that I have witnessed a fair amount of strangeness ever since my fellow Vandals and I have joined your side. Although some of the implications are disturbing, I have little doubt of the effectiveness of your applications."

"You... approve?"

"I am a Vandal, Ves. Don't you remember?" Major Verle grinned. "I also used to be a part of the Firestarters Division of Flashlight. Even though I have long renounced my Brighter ties, I still possess the background. I have taken part in operations that I'm not proud of. Yet I did so without complaint because everything I did was necessary to keep the Bright Republic going. Every light casts a shadow."

Ah, that was right. Major Verle and the rest of the Flagrant Vandals weren't a part of the squeaky clean portion of the Bright Republic. Whereas most of the Larkinsons served honorably, the Vandals mucked about in the dirt. Their morals were considerably looser, which was very useful.

Ves thought for a moment. "I have some controversial ideas. The experiments that I perform are meant to test these ideas and see whether they can be implemented safely."

"Are they useful ideas?"

"Oh, certainly! If they work the way I think they do, then the effective battle performance of any of our mechs will jump! Still..." Ves looked a bit glum. "Even if I go all out, I don't think the results will be sufficient to change the outcome of the decisive battle. Don't tell anyone about this, but I think I have a way of helping our expert candidates break through. The problem is that warships don't care about expert pilots. A few direct cannon impacts can make short work of a mech regardless of whether there's a resonance field or not. Pure power can overwhelm any trick."

Many humans in the galaxy still believed that warships were the apex of human civilization's might. Ves happened to agree with them. Even if high-ranking mech pilots were capable of making reality their plaything, there were only so many of them, and their capacity was finite.

Warships may be expensive to build and difficult to crew, but once they got up and running, their combat capabilities vastly exceeded that of an expert pilot depending on their ship class and quality.

"Do you have any interesting ideas you want to implement?"

"Uhhmm.."

"Don't hold back, sir." Major Verle spoke in a soothing and encouraging tone. "We'll be dead if we don't do enough to get ourselves out of this predicament. Would you rather keep your honor and die or would you rather keep your life and live in disgrace?"

"The latter, of course. This is a no-brainer!"

"Then go loose. No matter how dangerous or ridiculous your proposals sound, just voice them to me. I won't judge you no matter how extreme you sound."

Ves believed him. No matter what, Verle was part of the Larkinson Clan. With the Golden Cat watching over every Larkinson, any intent to betray him would never stay hidden. This was something that he expressly added to the design of the ancestral spirit!

A few minutes passed as Ves calmly ran through his ideas, both recent and old. There were several controversial measures buried in the back of his mind that he never dared to entertain because of the immense risks involved.

Now that Task Force Predator was slowly being driven to a corner, Ves no longer cared that much. The desperation of the moment was already getting to him in a very bad way.

Ever since he entered the Nyxian Gap, Ves felt a lot more unconstrained in his actions. The lawlessness and degeneracy of the region made him feel both liberated and under constant threat.

For a long time, this was tolerable to Ves. With the strength of his task force and the protection of the Penitent Sisters, there were hardly any pirates who could withstand their might.

That feeling of superiority didn't last. Ves felt as if he had gone back to the days where he was serving alongside the Flagrant Vandals while travelling deep into unfriendly territories.

Ves let out a deep breath. He suddenly felt liberated after receiving Major Verle's encouragement. Keeping all of his controversial ideas to himself was stifling. He really needed a confidante who understood his difficulties. Sometimes, a helping hand and a second opinion could go a long way in helping him shape his solutions.

"The method that I have just alluded to might help our expert candidates out, but it isn't primarily targeted towards them. It's actually a way to empower our weaker mech pilots. By 'charging' up their mechs with an exotic form of energy, their mechs will become more 'alive'. It's difficult to describe the exact effects because I haven't really applied it to anything except for the Desolate Soldier mech I've tinkered with recently. Some of the mech pilots that I've stuck into its cockpit have died. That should give you an understanding how dangerous it can be to play around with this idea."

"I believe you, sir. You are not the sort of person who tortures people out of enjoyment. Have you made any progress?"

Ves shook his head. "Not quite. Experimenting with pirates only gets me so far. If I want to take the next step, I need to apply the method I'm developing to our own mechs and mech pilots. So far, I have secretly applied my method to just one of our clansmen, but it remains to be seen whether it works. I didn't dare to go too far, so I'm afraid the effect might not be strong enough and that it will take too long to see the results."

"Will it help if you apply your experiments to more mech pilots?"

"Definitely. The concept should be sound, but I don't know how certain variables can affect the outcome. Performing actual experiments is the key to determining whether my method is safe and effective. It's just.. if I have miscalculated, our fellow Larkinsons may actually die."

"Perform the experiment on the Vandals."

"What?"

"My Vandals soldiers." Verle said. "We are trained to take risks that no one else is willing to take. We have gone through hell and back several times. This is no different. If you aren't willing to perform this experiment on any other Larkinsons, then just use us. You can trust us to do our duty."

Ves felt touched by his offer, though he doubted whether the major actually spoke for the entirety of the Vandals.

"That sounds.. great, but the Vandals aren't suitable. Right now, they are mostly piloting their old Mech Corps machines. I can't apply the method that I'm developing to mechs that I haven't worked on. I can only empower mechs that are alive."

"Oh." The major frowned. "I did not know that. In that case, I suggest you turn to the Living Sentinels. While they are badly battered, there are still more than two-hundred mech pilots at your disposal. The Sentinels have performed the worst during this excursion and their battle strength is too low to play a meaningful role in the decisive battle. It's better to make a bet and find some way to strengthen the Sentinels no matter the cost."

"That's a reasonable argument." Ves nodded. "It would be even better if I apply my trick to the Avatars as well. The Bright Warrior mechs that are issued to a couple of mech companies are very suitable for empowerment. It also happens to die into my second possible idea."

"And that is?"

"There may be another way to enhance the battle strength of our mech pilots. It's.. inspired by the invisible network that ties our minds together. I'm sure you have noticed how some kind of invisible influence is affecting your perception and predisposition towards fellow clansmen. Right now, this network doesn't do much other than watch out for treacherous thoughts."

"I've noticed. It can do more?"

Ves reluctantly nodded. "The network I made was inspired by the neural network developed Master Huron. There are several parallels between them both, but they are being utilized for different purposes. My proposal is to replicate another feature of the neural network. I want.. to be able to connect the minds of every Larkinson mech pilot with each other in order to enable greater cooperation. There might even be other effects due to the nature of the network I want to create. If I combine this idea with the previous one we've discussed, the combination might even produce unexpectedly powerful results. What do you think?"

"You sure are bold." Major Verle responded mildly. "I understand why you have been reluctant to share them with someone."

Chapter 2345: Third Idea

The ideas that Ves shared with Major Verle sounded deceptively simple, but could easily produce a cascade of unintended consequences.

The truth was that Ves didn't know what would happen if he did anything related to the two ideas. His unwillingness to cross a line by experimenting on his fellow Larkinsons had long constrained some of his wilder impulses.

While Ves was pretty confident that both of his ideas could make a difference in the upcoming battle, he could not guarantee the safety of his test subjects.

Both of them were crazy!

As all of the exploded heads that Ves had witnessed could attest, messing with spirituality was anything but safe.

Human minds could only handle so much spiritual input. Messing with people in this fashion was a very good way to kill or harm them. How could Ves do that to his own clansmen?

It was too bad that his excursion had become a lot more dangerous. The looming crisis cast a very large shadow on the fleet, and Ves immediately understood that his Larkinsons were not up to par against one of the most powerful pirate forces in the Nyxian Gap.

He couldn't hold back anymore!

The more he spoke to Major Verle, the more he became certain of what he had to do. Dangerous or not, time was short and enemies were closing in. Resorting to other measures such as fabricating some weapons of mass destruction was not good enough.

Warships were built to take a beating. This was especially so for the Gravada Knarlax which boasted thick and heavy hull plating that had been constantly upgraded over the years.

Even if the pirate heavy cruiser didn't show up, the remainder of the Allidus Alliance's punitive fleet was more than what the Larkinson Clan could handle.

Several smaller warships supported by a swarm of pirate mechs were already capable of running over Task Force Predator!

"If only we had warships of our own." Ves sighed.

"The galaxy would be a very different place if that were so." Major Verle responded.

"Combat would revolve around ships for the most part. The common people will have to live their lives in fear due to the constant threat of mass destruction. Even if the various warfleets agree to restrain their firepower around planets, it's inevitable for collateral damage to increase. Just the broken pieces of warships falling from orbit are enough to wipe out entire cities!"

There were good reasons why the Big Two took away the right to field warships from the majority of humans. They simply couldn't be trusted with the immense potential of destruction that they enabled.

Of course, the pirates didn't care. Death? Destruction? They thrived in chaos! They played by different rules. If Ves failed to adapt to them, his entire fleet would surely get overrun by the tide of warships that were moving closer with each passing day!

After receiving some surprisingly helpful support from Major Verle, they ended their little meeting. Ves still needed to explore and flesh out his ideas while Verle had many other duties to attend to. With so much at stake, neither of them could afford to take any breaks.

As Ves left the conference room and returned to his stateroom, he thought over what he said and what he didn't say.

What Major Verle didn't know was that Ves had come up with a third proposal. He didn't mention it to his confidante because it sounded incredibly dangerous. He also lacked a way to make his idea happen.

The premise was simple. Ves wanted to borrow the huge and swirling forces that were constantly at work in the imaginary realm!

Ves had witnessed the power and might of the huge spiritual vortex spinning around in the higher dimensions. If the vortex wasn't constrained in a different realm, the Nyxian Gap would have looked completely differently! No one would be able to live in a spinning disk where asteroids constantly slammed against each other.

Sure, causing the imaginary realm to overlap with the material realm was dangerous. The Nova Krakow's sudden disappearance was proof that this dangerous event could easily engulf his fleet as well.

However, doing something was better than doing nothing at all. Ever since the Battle of Ulimo Citadel took place, Ves discovered that there were people in the Nyxian Gap who were capable of summoning artificial anomalies.

If some cultists could do it, why shouldn't Ves be able to do the same?

As long as Ves could turn the environment hostile against his enemies, then it didn't matter how many cannons the Gravada Knarlax possessed or how many nuclear explosions her hull was able to withstand.

Against the huge forces that affected an entire region of space, not a single human creation could withstand such might!

"Although it sounds great to subject my enemies to a natural disaster, how can I open up a breach and cause the two realms to overlap? How can I create an anomaly that won't subsequently devour my entire fleet?"

Ves had never done anything like this in his life!

"I'm a mech designer, not a deranged priest!"

However, he was also a dabbler in spiritual engineering. He had visited the shrine where Grey Watcher Xarnus presided over the ritual that called down the dark sphere and sustained it. Though the sight he had seen was disturbing, Ves still observed some useful clues.

"If I break it down into chunks, then maybe I can tackle the problems one by one."

He composed a new document in his Archimedes Rubal implant. He began to record his theories and guesses about how to invoke an artificial disaster.

"I already know it's possible to merge the two realms. I have lived through two separate incidents where this took place. The naturally-occurring temporal anomaly came about because turbulence in the imaginary realm caused it to spill over to the material realm to an extent."

This meant that if Ves could replicate some of the conditions, he might be able to spark a similar disaster!

"As long as this disaster is just a fraction as strong as the temporal anomaly, I can really turn the tables around!"

However, Ves immediately recognized that evoking such a calamity was a double-edged sword. How could he possibly protect himself and his fellow Larkinsons against his own actions?

This was a very problematic issue and one that Ves couldn't answer right now. His understanding of spirituality and how it related to the imaginary realm was too deficient.

"That hasn't stopped me before." He muttered with a ruthless expression. "Even if my own people are affected as well, at least it's better than the alternative!"

Disrupting the battlefield and suffering the consequences at least gave Task Force Predator an opportunity to survive. If the battlefield remained completely normal, then his mechs and ships would never be able to avoid getting battered by the formidable primary and secondary weapons of the pirate warships!

"Even so, it's important to limit the damage inflicted on my own forces."

How would he be able to do so?

Back at the shrine, the Grey Watcher conducted a ritual with a ritual circle and everything. Ves was rather skeptical the latter meant anything. Perhaps it was merely a way to communicate with the ancient entity known as the Unending One.

Ves was very reluctant to draw someone's blood in order to paint a weird circle and meaningless alien symbols on the floor. He disdained the superstition and preferred to skip all of the useless steps.

"The ritual was either a way to control the anomaly or a set of instructions that told the Unending One how to channel his powers. Either way, I doubt I can replicate this step. Oh well. I'll just go without and protect my forces some other way."

He couldn't help but recall the fact that the dark sphere wasn't as dangerous inside Ulimo Citadel. While the Larkinson mechs trapped outside had to fight against ghostly mechs, the people inside the pirate stronghold only had to fend off weaker ghosts on foot.

That something like this took place hinted to Ves that the Watchers of the Hallowed Abyss Temple may be capable of mitigating or even eliminating any anomaly that affected them. This might even be the reason why many large pirate bases almost never became engulfed by any anomalies. The Grey Watchers secretly guarded their locations against anomalies!

Considering that the Larkinson Clan had dealt a severe blow to the Hallowed Abyss Temple, Ves was sure that several of its Watchers to the Gravada Knarlax and possibly other ships.

"Those guys will definitely try to stop my efforts!"

How was he supposed to beat people who might possibly be decades ahead in developing their spiritual prowess?

"Power! I need power!"

If a small spiritual storm failed to engulf the pirate fleet, then Ves had to call up an even bigger storm!

He did not believe the cultists that would surely be travelling on the Gravada Knarlax could fight against the massive vortex.

"How can I channel all of that power? Where will I be able to get all of the energy required to sustain such a disaster?"

These were questions that Ves wasn't able to answer right now. He had some ideas, but he was very far away from developing a complete method.

He would have to perform a lot more experiments in the coming days. The earlier two ideas he shared with Major Verle sounded nice, but the power of humans was limited.

Ves would much rather borrow from the power of anomalous hazards to equal the odds!

"I'm not really sure how to protect my entire fleet from such a calamity, but maybe Venerable Jannzi might come useful."

None of the rumors about the pirates stated that they had their own expert pilot. Ves thought it was unlikely that they had someone like that in reserve. The conditions for a mech pilot to advance to expert pilot were strict, and most pirates lacked the qualities needed to advance.

That said, even if the Allidus Alliance produced a freak, it should only be one at most, and the expert mech probably won't be on par with those built in civilized space.

If Ves could induce multiple clansmen to break through at once, then the Larkinsons would definitely gain an advantage in this aspect!

Ves did not believe that evoking an artificial anomaly would wipe out the pirates. It was just a means to avoid imminent defeat as far as he was concerned.

What he truly counted on was the might of his current and future expert pilots. Their strong will were very suited to resist strange phenomena. Their strong domains were centered around their willpower. Ves already learned that expert pilots were easily capable of resisting harmful effects that entered their domain. How else did Jannzi manage to shield so many friendly mechs at the time?

Protecting his own fleet against spiritual shenanigans was an important priority to Ves. Even if Ves didn't do anything, the enemy might do so. Now that he was aware of the existence of the Hallowed Abyss Temple and the unusual powers of their cultists, Ves had to develop some defense mechanisms.

"Maybe I can make use of all of the B-stone I've accumulated."

The Unending alloy that Ves obtained might be too difficult for him to work with, but the same didn't apply to B-stone. The material wasn't very strong, which meant that Ves could manipulate it in any way he liked.

Perhaps he could use it for something that would help facilitate his goals. He recalled that B-stone seemed to work well with Lufa, and perhaps the ancient imprisoned entities that were locked inside the vortex.

"Hmmm..."

Several ideas flowed in his mind. Ordinarily, he would have pushed them away for being too crazy, but this time he was fully unrestrained in his thinking.

"No matter what, getting out alive is my greatest priority!"

Chapter 2346: Agents of Order

"This design... what have you been doing with them?" Ves wondered.

"I asked Sharpie to help me." Ketis answered. "He's been really helpful, though I feel a bit drained whenever he does something to my design. Whatever it is, I think it's useful! Whenever I think about it, I feel as if I'm more in tune with it. It's a swordsman mech designed by a swordwoman. It doesn't get any more genuine than this! Don't you agree, Ves?"

Ves didn't necessarily subscribe to that theory, but he nodded because he didn't want to pop her bubble. "Your personal experiences are invaluable to your work. It's just that I still don't entirely think this mech concept can actually work. Using two broad-bladed swords as shields is still an awful idea no matter how you look at it. A proper shield is much thicker and covers a significantly larger surface area. Certain models of shields even come with sharp edges if you still want to add some cutting power."

"I already told you that I am not interested in designing something as boring as a knight mech. Even if this idea isn't practical, I still want to design it to completion, just to see how well it can defend against ranged attacks.

"Well, if you're sure. I like your commitment at least. Fail or succeed, at least you'll get something out of it. Just don't try to push faulty products down the throats of your target audience."

"I know, Ves. I think this mech could be very interesting to the Swordmaidens. Defending in this manner is something that every Swordmaiden mech pilot has trained in. My sisters don't like to pilot traditional knight mechs because they heavily constrain their ability to attack. Offering an alternative that suits their fighting style can go a long way into improving their tactical flexibility."

Ves continued to study her updated design. Compared to the original, it was a bit more developed. It also gained a lot of technical refinements based on his feedback.

Her strength as a mech designer had become a lot more impressive to him. Due to all of the candies he stuffed in her, the amount of knowledge she possessed was already sufficient.

The challenge she faced was utilizing what she learned. Ves suffered from the same problem sometimes and that was an unavoidable consequence of absorbing too much theory and know-how from the System at once.

He didn't expect much improvement in this aspect. He was wrong.

Not just this defensive swordsman mech design, but all of her other personal mech designs exhibited the same degree of maturity as well. It was as if she had transformed

from an awkward, inexperienced Apprentice into a more seasoned mech designer who knew her craft well!

He saw the hint of an Apprentice that was ready to advance to Journeyman at any time.

What she did to the mech design might become her main direction.

He pointed at the sword wielded by the duel-wielding swordsman mech projected in front. "Although I'm not sure what Sharpie has done, my best guess is that it has imparted some of his strength to the mech design. Any mech derived from this design will probably be able to channel some of that into its swords."

"And therefore make it sharper, right?"

Ves reluctantly nodded. "That's my guess, but I'm not certain whether it will work. Though Sharpie is a part of you, it is not a good habit of using powers you don't understand. You need to know what you are doing in order to make true progress."

"I'll take that into account." Ketis grimaced. "I don't know whether I'll even be able to do so, though. From what I heard, we're facing some very powerful enemies soon. Without anyone to help us, will we be able to escape?"

"It's hard to say. We're not going down without a fight, though. We've plundered a lot of resources from Ulimo Citadel and we're already starting to make good use of them. In addition to that, I have some other surprises in store that may be able to level the playing field. Warships may be the ultimate weapon in the galaxy, but the ones built and operated by pirates are probably ramshackle and deficient in many ways. There is no way the shipbuilding infrastructure in this unstable region can sustain the production of better-quality ships."

It took a lot of people and some very expensive machinery to build a starship, and that only applied to the simplest ones such as transports and cargo haulers.

The bigger and more sophisticated a ship, the greater demand on expertise and infrastructure. Since the Nyxian Gap was not known to be an intellectual or industrial powerhouse, the Allidus Alliance must have wasted far more resources on building the Gravada Knarlax than the pirates should have.

It didn't really make sense to Ves at first. Then he began to recall the bottleneck on mech pilots.

Though there were always outcasts and criminals fleeing into the Nyxian Gap every day, the supply of mech pilots still remained limited.

In comparison, the amount of norms that entered this region was a lot higher. Even if non-mech pilots weren't treated as well, those with useful skills could still find a place in the pirate community.

Being able to crew a warship with norms was the biggest advantage to fielding them. Though truly skilled and knowledgeable people such as naval engineers and command officers were still in short supply, they didn't catch as much attention as mech pilots. It was therefore easier for any pirate faction to prioritize employing them. The Allidus Alliance only had to spend a couple of years to gather and train a full crew.

Ves continued to evaluate Ketis' recent design work. She even showed him an updated draft design of her so-called Monster Slayer mech.

Different from the rest, the Monster Slayer was a second-class mech design. Even though her draft was anything but complete, Ves spotted many more points that might have worked in lesser mech designs but would surely become a problem if Ketis wanted to design a higher-specced mech.

"You haven't designed any mechs yet, Ketis. While I understand your haste, it's better for you to take your time and focus on studying what makes a second-class mech different from a third-class one. What I'm seeing right now is that your depth of knowledge in this area is too shallow."

The woman looked glum. "It's still an early version. I'll keep working on it. I don't want to downgrade my design. My goal is to deliver something useful to the Swordmaidens, and I don't want to wait several years to do so. If we survive the coming crisis, then becoming a second-class mech designer is my second-highest priority after trying to advance to Journeyman!"

"How close are you to breaking through?"

Ketis shrugged. "Beats me. Did you know beforehand whether you would advance?"

"I did so right after I completed the design of the Aurora Titan and presented it to the market. You haven't designed or published a single complete mech design of your own making yet, so you don't know what you're missing out. Once you start serving customers, any customers, you will experience a degree of satisfaction that is unique to creators."

He stretched his hand and placed it on top of her own hand. "It is easier to destroy than to create. Just look back at the Age of Conquest. It takes centuries to turn a barren planet into a thriving population center. It takes a single battleship to bombard it all to oblivion."

"Aren't the products we make supposed to be used to destroy?"

"You're not wrong, but that's not the complete picture. Humanity is a race that thrives on order. Ever since our civilization has started, we have constantly expanded our territory and exploited more resources in order to make greater creations. Weapons, farming implements, houses, vehicles and more can't be made without people like us who develop the knowledge to create all of these essential products."

Ketis raised her hand to adjust her poofy beret. "What does that have to do with what I said?"

"Weapons are tools. Mechs are tools. Their immediate use may be related to violence, but they are actually the means which people use to impose order. Warfare is nothing but a struggle to gain supremacy. The galaxy may look a little bad with all of the petty wars taking place between states, but conflicts like these can't be prevented. Our place in this society is to supply the war machines that our customers need to further their own interests."

"And that leads to order?"

"Yes." Ves sincerely nodded. "As long as our mechs are the strongest, our customers will reign supreme in their respective domains."

"What if our customers consist of both sides of a conflict?"

"Then they have both made a good choice. Regardless of who wins or loses, the battle will solely play out by the rules that we have set. This is a different form of order."

Ketis narrowed her eyes at her. "I don't know. It all sounds like crap to me. Mechs are big, powerful machines that can kill thousands of people in a minute. Every battle fought by mechs has led to a lot of destruction. Just look at the pirate bases that we have overrun."

"They're pirates." Ves dismissively snorted. "Setting them back is a great way to increase the order in civilized space."

Ketis crossed her arms. She looked increasingly skeptical at him. "It all sounds like excuses to me. Why can't you just admit you just want to channel your urge to destroy something with your mechs? Isn't that why we have entered the Nyxian Gap?"

"That's different! We didn't enter the Nyxian Gap to satisfy this nonexistent craving! We set out to earn a lot of MTA merits in the fastest way possible!"

"Uh huh. Whatever you say."

Really. What was Ketis talking about? Did she think of Ves as a savage or something? That couldn't be further from the truth!

He coughed. "We've strayed from the original topic. Let's head back to my original point. Right now, you have become better at designing mechs, but that doesn't necessarily mean you are a good mech designer."

His student looked confused. "Isn't that the same?"

Ves shook his head. "Designing mechs is just one aspect of being a mech designer. There are steps preceding this act and steps following this act. Before you design a mech, you need to understand your target audience. What do they need? What do they prefer to use? What are they lacking?"

"I already did that with the Swordmaidens. None of my mech designs are irrelevant to them, even my dual-wielding design."

"You possess a unique advantage in that area, I'll give you that." He conceded. "It's what happens afterwards that you need to work on. Right now, you have little experience in this. While you have participated in several successful design projects, those works belong to Gloriana and I. As an assistant, your contribution is marginal, so you don't feel the same sense of pride and accomplishment that we do. Every creator craves validation. It is the reward that your inner mech designer sorely needs to lift you to greater heights."

She didn't understand him. How could she? Her uneven development had left her very stunted in this area. The reason why Ves placed so much importance in this aspect was because he predicted that she would definitely be able to step up once the addressing this shortcoming.

Ves truly hoped to see her turn into Journeyman soon. Still, it was hard for him to feel optimistic about her chances when his fleet was under an enormous crisis. What could Ketis possibly do if she ever manages to advance to Journeyman?

Unlike expert pilots, mech designers did not exhibit any flashy powers when they formed their design seeds. All of the excitement happened in their minds.

He sighed. "Just work at your own pace. You don't need to hurry. You're still young."

Chapter 2347: Pessimistic Sentiment

"Half of the Wodin Warriors sent to the Cinach System are being dispatched to the Nyxian Gap." Gloriana's physical projection told him. Her shape pressed against his own and her perfume intoxicated his nose. "We care about you, so we have sent the most we are able to afford. It's just that they won't be able to get to you fast enough."

"I'm aware. Regardless, your dynasty's gesture is helpful nonetheless. If some major change takes place that alters our strategic situation, our fleet might be able to evade

the Allidus Alliance. Don't forget that while those warships are powerful, they're also slow."

"I know, but my sister Kellendra told me that your options are limited. She's not very optimistic about being able to catch up. She also can't go too deep into the Nyxian Gap. It would be a tragedy to lose her along with thousands of loyal, rigorously-trained Hexer mech pilots."

"Don't worry. Your dynasty's commitment is enough. I don't want to drag them all down with me if the worst comes to pass. If anything, maybe some of us might be able to evade the pirates by splitting up. As long as I'm on one of the few ships that manages to rendez-vous with your Wodin Warriors, I'll probably be in the clear."

"That's what we're hoping for as well." She looked up at him with an adoring expression. "Regardless of the fate of your forces in the Nyxian Gap, you are by far the most important person in your fleet. It doesn't matter if Venerable Jannzi, your relatives, your experienced mech pilots or anyone else will die. It doesn't matter if you lose all of your ships and possessions. Your life is the only thing that matters to me. Don't let yourself be dragged down by your counterproductive sentiments."

Ves frowned at that. "Our clan is all about family, Gloriana. I won't leave my people behind while there is still a chance."

"DON'T THROW AWAY YOUR LIFE, VES! I STILL NEED YOU!" She slapped her palm against his chest. "Look, if all hope is lost, and it appears to be that way, then just do everything you can to make it out. We can always start anew as long as you return, especially with the level of success we currently enjoy. You're a mech designer. Playing clan leader is all well and good, but if it becomes a hindrance to your career, then don't continue with it any longer. You can always rely on the Wodin Dynasty to manage your business and protect you from danger."

There was no way Ves was going to accept this solution! He would rather let the pirates kill him and the entire task force than to become a Hexer puppet!

"I appreciate the offer, but I don't think the outcome is set in stone. Let's just see how the situation develops."

Gloriana wasn't the only person who encouraged him to bail out of the task force. Doing so would definitely leave most of the members of the task force at the mercy of the pirates, but that didn't seem to bother a couple of other people.

In a later meeting with Calabast, she expressed a similar sentiment.

"I know that you and some of the people in the fleet are cooking up some drastic measures to resist the enemy punitive fleet."

"We are." Ves nodded. "Do you have something in mind as well?"

"I'm still working on it. It will take some time for me to get back to you on that. Still, we can't assume that all of our harebrained schemes will work out. We need to plan for failure as well."

"What are you talking about?"

"If worse comes to worst, we need to get out, preferably without getting chased by too many pirates." Calabast stated. "I have already developed some contingency plans on how to do so before or during a losing battle. Utilizing our stealth shuttle is key. While there is a possibility that the Gravada Knarlax possesses anti-stealth capabilities that are potent enough to power through our shuttle's means of stealth, such measures aren't effective past a certain range."

"You're suggesting that we abandon the Scarlet Rose and scurry away with the help of our stealth shuttle?"

She nodded. "You and I are some of the most high-value targets in our fleet. Capturing or killing us is very important to our opponents. We can't run away on the Scarlet Rose because our ship is too high-profile. Even if she is fast enough to outrun any pirate target, don't forget that we'll still be surrounded by many other pirate groups. There is little chance our smaller vessel can resist every hostile pirate outfit that attempts to bar our way."

He agreed with her on that. The Scarlet Rose was one of the best ships in the Larkinson Clan to this date, but she only held enough hangar room capacity for four mechs, maybe five if he tossed away the statue of the Unending One from the mech workshop.

How could an escort of five mechs possibly fend off all of the pirates who would come running as if they were sharks smelling blood?

"The plan therefore is to remain fluid. Depending on how the rout unfolds, we'll have to make a judgement call and decide on following the ship that has the best chance of getting away from the main pirate force. Ideally, we should be following a combat carrier of the Penitent Sisters. Their ships are faster and far more resistant to damage. If the carrier is able to retain a full mech company, then our chances of escaping enemy pursuit and fending off opportunistic pirate outfits are the highest. I've already contacted some of their officers in order to prepare for an eventual emergency withdrawal."

Though Ves was not seriously willing to consider bailing out, he had to admit that Calabast's arrangements sounded workable. Making it off with forty second-class mechs sounded like a decent prospect.

Still, he knew that Calabast hadn't cooked up this plan solely because she was worried for his life.

"This is your escape plan, isn't it?" Ves guessed. "If I refuse to go along with you, will this be how you get away?"

She smiled at him. She didn't hide her intentions. "You can't win every fight, Ves. Victory and defeat are part of life. The true test is not how often you can achieve a win, but how well you are able to pick yourself up after suffering a loss. Don't be stupid and die with the rest. Focus on preserving your life."

"I don't think I'll be able to live with myself if I take your option."

"Disgrace, guilt and shame are immaterial." Calabast lectured to him while crossing her arms. "So what if you disgrace yourself? So what if you are branded as a coward? You're a mech designer! No one expects you to put up a good fight, or any fight for that matter! What little guilt and shame you acquire will easily fade after a couple of decades of running a normal life. When you look back on this incident, you'll probably whack yourself on the head for entering the Nyxian Gap in the first place."

That last part sounded true, but most of what she said did not sit well in him. Certainly, disgrace, guilt and shame were not a big deal to some people. They were social or psychological concepts that largely existed in everyone's minds.

From a logical perspective, as long as Ves decided to ignore these emotions, he could go on about his life without too many repercussions.

Yet Ves instinctively resisted such thoughts.

"The battle isn't lost yet. It hasn't even begun. As Larkinsons, we should be giving it all. No enemy is infallible nor invincible. There are always ways to beat them. I believe that our task force still possesses the means to defeat the pirate fleet. We just need to utilize our assets to the greatest degree."

The spymaster began to look annoyed at his stubborn mindset. She tapped him on the forehead.

"Preserving your life in a hopeless situation isn't a sin, Ves. The remainder of the Larkinson Clan is better served with you returning alive and well rather than dying for a hopeless cause."

Ves shoved away her finger. "Enough! I understand your argument, and ordinarily you may be right, but our case isn't hopeless just yet! Let's all work on our own solutions and see where that will take us a month from now. If we truly haven't been able to come up with anything that helps, then I'll consider your suggestion more seriously."

She ended the meeting and left shortly after he made his stance clear.

Though he understood her logic, he didn't like her overall mindset. What was it with all of these people telling him the battle was already lost? Sure, Task Force Predator was horribly outgunned and outmatched by the pirate warfleet, but the enemy wasn't the only one who possessed trump cards!

"Since these Nyxian pirates like to go crazy, I'll do the same!" Ves spoke with an intense expression!

One of the measures he had chosen was to begin with empowering some of his mechs. He couldn't wait for his little experiment with Vincent's Adonis Colossus to yield some measurable results.

Even if he lacked way too much data to conclude this measure was safe, Ves had no choice but to set aside all of his safety concerns and trust in his unproven and unconfirmed theories.

For this reason, he moved to the Redfeather's hangar bay and addressed every mech pilot who piloted a Bright Warrior on the Avatar flagship.

"Avatars, Bright Companions, I am glad to see you today."

The Avatars as well as Joshua and his personal squad stood straight in their dashing bright uniforms.

Despite the pessimistic sentiment that had spread throughout the fleet, the Avatars remained fully confident in their ability to make it through. Their ability to keep up their morale was a testament to their elite training.

"While we are facing some formidable enemies, we aren't pushovers. Our clan is strong. We have faced many crises. We will make it through this time as well, but it won't be easy. I have developed a potential.. upgrade.. That might supercharge your ability to pilot your mech."

The Avatars all looked interested. That was good.

Ves hesitated a bit. "I can't exactly describe what I will do to your Bright Warrior mechs, but know that piloting them will become a lot more serious from now on. When you next pilot your mech, you will doubtlessly realize that it is more responsive to you. This is not an illusion. If my changes are successful, your mech will become more 'alive', in a way."

He looked sternly in every mech pilot's eyes. "However, the reason why I've withheld this measure from everyone is because it's very experimental. Death is a very real possibility. However, if you follow my instructions and sincerely respect the mech, nothing will go wrong. All I ask from you is to abide by your code of honor and to maintain your confidence. Are there any volunteers for this experimental procedure?"

It didn't take long before Joshua stepped forward. "I wish to volunteer, sir!"

"I want to volunteer as well, sir!"

"Please improve our mechs, sir!"

Not a single Avatar mech pilot refused this call. As far as they were concerned, it was their duty to do so. Their trust in Ves was very high. Anything that could improve their mechs and make them feel less useless was very welcome in their eyes.

The Avatars of Myth did not wish to be relegated to cannon fodder in the next battle!

Warmth spread through his veins as Ves received the response he wished. "Very well, then. Let's begin. I will be tinkering with each of your mechs for the remainder of the day. Due to experimental reasons, the changes will vary in intensity, but don't take any of the mechs lightly!"

Ves was about to experiment on his own clansmen, and some of his best mech pilots at that! If this experiment proceeded horribly, then the Avatars of Myth would surely suffer a massive blow!

Chapter 2348: Cat and Lizard

Ves quite enjoyed spending time with the Avatars on the Redfeather.

Unlike mopers like Calabast, the Avatars possessed a great sense of confidence and battle spirit. While the Avatars certainly suffered several blows throughout the excursion into the Nyxian Gap, they remained ready for battle even after losing almost 180 comrades in arms.

It was too bad that the mechs they piloted tended to be mixed. Not many of them actually piloted a mech produced by the LMC.

This couldn't be helped, as Ves hadn't designed a full range of suitable mechs for any mech force. If not for the fact that the Bright Warrior actually covered four different mech types, the Avatar's mech roster would have looked even drearier!

The lack of LMC mechs fielded by the Avatars meant that Ves wouldn't be able to boost all of their mechs.

In some way, that could be seen as a detriment, but it could also be regarded as a benefit.

For now, Ves was only able to upgrade the Bright Warriors, Aurora Titans, Doom Guards and Deliverers that were being actively used by his mech forces. Each of these spaceborn models covered a decent spread of mech types. If not for the fact that

fabricating the Bright Warrior was very troublesome, the Avatars should have been able to field an LMC mech to more.

As it was, Ves wanted to start off with upgrading the Bright Warrior mechs utilized by both the First and Second Spaceborn Mech Companies.

The unflinching loyalty and battle spirit shown by the Avatars turned them into the ideal mech pilots to test whether empowering mechs would work as he hoped.

Ves originally designed the Bright Warrior as a mech to train and uplift the Larkinson Clan. Every mech pilot assigned to the machines would be able to experience what it was like to gain some second-class mech capabilities.

In addition, the Bright Warrior design was also supposed to represent the Larkinson Clan at its best at the time. Even though bridge mechs sat in an awkward place between third-class mechs and second-class mechs, the Bright Warrior was still far more powerful than any mech the Larkinson Clan fielded at the time.

Though the power of the Bright Warrior had been eclipsed by the presence of the Penitent Sisters, Ves still considered his design to be a great success.

He was definitely going to design a second-class revision that incorporated all of his latest innovations when he survived this crisis. Perhaps he might start work on them immediately after completing his current round of active projects!

After the brave Avatar mech pilots all agreed to take part in a dangerous experimental procedure they knew nothing about, they all boarded shuttles that brought them to one of the combat carriers of the Penitent Sisters.

In order to obtain more data and be sure that every mech pilot was capable of enduring substantial stress, Ves wanted them all to undergo extensive health checks.

When he had brought this demand to Ranya, she suggested conducting the health inspections aboard the Surly Cockatrice. The Penitent Sister flagship may be a bit aged, but she possessed a large infirmary that was suitable to perform fast but very detailed inspections in a short amount of time.

With the pilots departing from the ship and the mech technicians ordered to move out, Ves was left alone other than some bodyguards.

After deactivating the monitoring system and deploying some jammers, he finally felt secure enough to perform his routine.

In fact, he didn't need to do anything. It was the Golden Cat doing all of the work.

"C'mon, Goldie." He held out the Larkinson Mandate. "Pump some of your juice into these shiny Bright Warriors. Each of these mechs can be more than what they are right now if you contribute to their growth."

Goldie's glowing, intangible head poked out from the book. She looked at the Bright Warriors with a familiar but also curious expression. Her tail flicked back and forth, moving through both the book and his hand.

Nyaaaa?

"I know you don't have as much energy as the other spirits, but this will be a worthwhile sacrifice. I won't ask you to pump everything you have into the mechs. Just a portion is enough for most of them. Can you do it, or do you need help?"

Nyaa...

Compared to his other design spirits, the Golden Cat truly didn't have enough energy to spare. Being connected to just tens of thousands of Larkinsons was different from being connected to millions of mech pilots!

The ancestral spirit suddenly perked up for some reason.

Nya! Nyaa nyaaa!

"Huh? Qilanxo is willing to help you? Can she do that?"

Nya nya nya!

Ves recalled that when he created the Golden Cat, he made use of Qilanxo's spiritual fragment as one of her ingredients. Ves wasn't sure whether that was enough for Goldie to make use of Qilanxo's donated spiritual energy, but evidently their relations were good enough to make such a course of action viable.

The presence of Qilanxo soon approached both of them. Ves sensed great concern from the design spirit. As an entity that had been watching over Ves, the Larkinson Clan and her three chosen, the predicament facing Task Force Predator was of great concern to the sacred god.

A wave of willingness exuded from her spirit. Qilanxo conveyed a willingness to supply Goldie with energy in order to make this measure possible.

"Thank you, Qilanxo. This will make everything easier."

Ves trusted the former exobeast because it was in her best interest to help out the Larkinson Clan.

Venerable Jannzi had just broken through to expert pilot and would likely be able to supply her with the higher-quality spiritual feedback she sorely needed to evolve.

Commander Orfan and Commander Dise were close to breaking through as well. Keeping Ves alive was also in her best interest because he was the only one who was able to connect her to more mech pilots and thereby possibly keep sustaining her existence.

It was due to these mutual intertwined interests that Ves appreciated her. As Qilanxo and Goldie began to do something together, he noticed that the latter began to grow visibly more energetic.

Just like how Ves channeled his excess spiritual energy into Lufa during the previous battle, now Qilanxo was doing the same to Goldie.

The process was fairly delicate. Despite their mutual ties and close friendship, it was difficult for Goldie to properly absorb and internalize Qilanxo's higher-quality spiritual energy.

It was like dropping cold water in a hot pan! Goldie initially experienced a substantial amount of pain and discomfort.

Nyaaaa!

Ves couldn't do anything but watch as Goldie slowly tried to break down the donated energy into a form more suitable for her to work with. Fortunately, Qilanxo actively helped her gain control over what she gained.

With their continued cooperation, they finally managed to develop a rudimentary method where Qilanxo was able to drip feed Goldie with a small amount of her high-quality spiritual energy ever so often.

Though the rate of transfer was fairly low, it was stable. The biggest advantage to this process was that Qilanxo possessed an abundant amount of spiritual energy. She had plenty to spare for Goldie.

This little development inadvertently solved a significant future problem for Ves. Some spiritual entities weren't suited to become design spirits for mass market mechs.

The Golden Cat was the guardian of the Larkinson Clan. She worked best when she watched over the Larkinsons. Why would Ves ever assign her to a mech used by strangers? Doing so would only decrease her fit to the clan.

Nyaaa!

Once Goldie was stuffed with energy, she eagerly passed some of it on the mech in front of Ves.

He could see the rich flow of spiritual energy entering seamlessly into the mech. No compatibility issues emerged despite most of it belonging to a different spirit just some time ago.

The Bright Warrior mech, which was very familiar with the Golden Cat, openly embraced the injection of energy. Its spiritual foundation ballooned and soon reached saturation without any hindrance.

"Amazing." Ves uttered.

This was a rather fantastic development! As long as Qilanxo could keep passing some of her excess spiritual energy to Goldie, the Larkinson Clan's ancestral spirit could effectively do much more than what she was capable of doing alone.

His next experiment would go much smoother if this was the case!

"Okay, that's enough. This mech is completely filled up. Let's move on to the next one."

Several hours went by as Ves directed Goldie to enhance the Bright Warriors by varying degrees.

Only a couple reached 100 percent saturation. These mechs absorbed the maximum possible amount of spiritual energy their foundations could bear. That said, they were also the most dangerous mechs to pilot! If anything went wrong, the mech pilot in question would definitely die! The only uncertainty was whether the mech pilot would die by way of head explosion or merely heavy brain damage.

One special mech that made Ves pause was the Quint. The sole masterwork mech model was Joshua's partner in battle in the Nyxian Gap.

Of all of the mech pilots who utilized his products, Joshua was the only one who understood his design philosophy the deepest. That meant that the talented mech pilot should be able to adjust to the changes the best.

Considering Joshua's genuine love and respect for LMC mechs, Ves thought it was extremely unlikely for the Quint to turn against its current mech pilot.

"Pump it up to the brim, Goldie."

Nyaaaa?

Goldie looked hesitant. She was aware of the importance of the Quint through her connection with Joshua. She knew enough about this current experiment that playing around with so much spiritual energy could be very dangerous to people!

Still, Ves was undeterred. He had made his choice after weighing all of the risks and benefits.

"Please, do it. The Quint can be so much more if you give it a boost."

She did what he wanted. The Golden Cat took her time and tried to make the Quint's spiritual foundation to grow as smoothly as possible.

The masterwork mech seemed to gain much more life compared to the other mechs. Ves sensed the difference. Its masterwork qualities seem to become more vivid and the mech's personality began to be more pronounced.

What surprised Ves even more was that the Quint's spiritual foundation possessed a higher ceiling than other mechs!

It was stuffed with so much spiritual energy that Ves could scarcely predict what would happen if the mech fully harmonized with Joshua. Whatever the result, it was sure to be impressive.

"Well done, Goldie!"

Nyaaa!

After finishing up with the mechs at the Redfeather, he moved over to the Greenfeather to empower the mechs of the Second Spaceborn Mech Company of the Avatars of Myth.

He roughly applied the same even distribution he used on the previous carrier. The mechs were either fully saturated, 75 percent saturated, 50 percent saturated and 25 percent saturated.

With so many different degrees of enhancement, Ves wanted to keep a close eye on how these mech pilots behaved and whether they performed better in training.

Since only a quarter of the mechs fit into every category, Ves hoped to prevent every mech pilot of the Bright Warriors from dying at the same time due to some overlooked mistake or something!

Once Ves was finished with the round of experiments, he left the Greenfeather and returned to the Scarlet Rose.

Meanwhile, some of the Avatar mech pilots assigned to the empowered mechs had returned from their health inspections.

When they returned to their ships and approached their assigned machines, each of them felt the difference.

"The mech does seem more alive somehow."

"Are you sure? I don't feel anything. The mech seems a little different though."

Every mech pilot who returned to their machines expressed a lot of eagerness in taking them out on a spin!

Chapter 2349: Careful Tests

The Avatar mech pilots who had just returned from their health inspections weren't allowed to hop into their mechs immediately.

Due to all of the risks involved with this unprecedented experiment, Ves ordered the Avatars to stand by and wait their turns.

In the meantime, Ves gathered a bunch of his Braves and assigned them to watch over the telemetry of the mechs that he permitted to deploy.

Ves knew exactly how much saturation every individual Bright Warrior had reached.

Obviously, he was not going to begin with ordering the mechs that had reached full saturation to deploy.

If there was something fundamentally wrong with his theories, then he at least wanted his Avatar mech pilots to come away with a bad headache instead of chunks of their brains splattered all over the interior of their cockpits!

Joshua raised an immediate complaint, but Ves swiped his message away after taking a brief glance at it. There was no way that Ves would risk the mech pilot with the greatest value to him due to impatience!

"Alright, let's start." He told the Braves in the design lab.

Much more people were monitoring the mechs that were about to deploy. Various chief technicians and techs aboard the Redfeather and the Greenfeather were keeping a very close eye on the performance of the newly-empowered mechs.

No one knew what Ves had actually done with them. It didn't really take that much time and nothing about the mechs seemed different aside from performing some minor technical tweaks.

Yet somehow, the same mechs felt different when their mech pilots reunited with their machines.

Each of the Avatars had been taught to view their mechs as partners rather than tools. As Ves intended them to be the elites who utilized his mechs the best, how could they be ignorant of the life that existed in their machines?

As the Avatar mech pilots each recognized that their paired machines had become greater in some way, they hardly couldn't wait!

Ves viewed this enthusiasm as a good thing. Their love for their mechs and their eagerness to pilot them meant that the chances of rejection should be minimal. So long as all of the mech pilots in question did not hate their own mechs, they would likely be able to forge a greater and more intimate bond with them. He hoped that none of their enthusiasm faded as they waited their turns.

Since the Avatar mech pilots assigned to mechs with full saturation would be going last, it was very critical for them to remain positive and eager. Ves had already passed instructions to Commander Melkor to monitor this group closely and pull them out of the queue if there was anything wrong about their moods.

Ketis stepped to his side and peered at the projections that Ves had pulled up. The main one currently displayed a feed of the mech hangar of the Redfeather.

The first spiritually-enhanced mech was about to be deployed.

Though its foundation had only been boosted up to twenty-five percent saturation, that was still substantially greater than before.

A female mech pilot hopped inside the cockpit. As she sat down on the piloting chair and prepped for deployment, a sense of anticipation swept through the design lab.

Even if the assistants didn't know what Ves had done, they all looked forward to a show.

"Do you think what you have done will really strengthen us?" Ketis softly asked.

Ves tapped the side of his smooth-shaven chin. "I do, but don't expect immediate results. Right now, I just want to make sure that the changes I've made don't pose an imminent threat to the mech pilots. For this reason, I made sure to install a quick kill switch into every mech."

"You what?!"

"This is a dangerous experiment, Ketis. Do you think what I've done is something I was ready to roll out to our mech pilots straight away? Hell no! Originally, I planned to research this option further when we returned to civilized space. Now that the pirates

are trying to lead us into a dead end, I have no choice but to throw caution to the wind. That said, the least I can do is to prepare as many precautions as possible."

He would rather want his pilots alive but disoriented than dead by gruesome means.

When the female Avatar finally completed her routine check, she activated the mech.

The Bright Warrior slowly began to light up as various systems came online. The gleaming gold-coated mech seemed to glow richer and more vividly as the life that was dormant inside began to connect with its familiar mech pilot.

Ves stared very closely. He studied the Avatar mech pilot's appearance very closely for any signs of pain, panic or discomfort. At the same time, he also paid attention to her life signs. Once any of the parameters reached a dangerous level, Ves was ready to press the button that immediately shut the mech down regardless of what it was doing.

"It looks good so far." Ketis remarked. "The mech pilot seems happy. Just look at her smile. It's as if she has found her own Sharpie."

Her analogy, though weird, seemed apt.

While Ves was too far away from the Redfeather to extend his spiritual senses so far away, right now the expression of the mech pilot said it all. Pure bliss seemed to emanate from the mech pilot as she merged her mind with a reciprocating machine.

The Bright Warrior mech completed its bootup process without any issue. Ves even suspected that this was the smoothest starting procedure the mech had ever been through!

Ves and many other people watched the complicated telemetry projected in front of their eyes. Every important parameter appeared normal, but this was just the start.

It still remained to be seen whether the mech posed a threat to its own pilot. It might be possible for the machine to inflict harm on its mech pilot even if the machine did not mean to do so. That was why the mech had to go through further testing.

"Please proceed to launch into space and initiate the routine that we have specified."

The mech in question slowly walked across the mech hangar until it reached the exit. Once the machine smoothly engaged its flight system and emerged into space, the machine began to perform some basic movements.

The Bright Warrior that Ves had chosen to deploy first was in its swordsman mech configuration. This gave the mech the greatest range of motion. As the mech performed more and more complex maneuvers in space, Ves continued to observe the condition of

the mech pilot while keeping at least some of his attention on the performance of the mech.

Despite the mech pilot's brilliant smile, her machine did not appear to be any stronger. Its movements seemed more fluent perhaps, but the differences were very subtle.

To be honest, the Bright Warrior looked like any other of its kind. Some of the assistant mech designers tasked to pay attention to the performance of the mech grew disappointed.

What was all of this fuss about life-threatening danger and whatnot? Wasn't this just a regular mech deployment?

Others believed that the changes purely affected the glow or some other intangible elements that they were in the dark about.

The rest of the test proceeded without any noticeable differences. The mech pilot obediently followed the prescribed routine. The mech swung its swords against empty space for a time before an Aurora Titan appeared.

The two mechs began to hit each other with slow and controlled attacks. The power and frequency of the attacks slowly rose as the Bright Warrior showed no notable deviations. Once both mechs went at each other with serious attacks, Ves finally became sure that not even the rush of battle would lead to severe deviations.

"Alright. Pull her back. I've seen enough. Send out the next mech on the list."

This process went on for more than an hour as Bright Warrior after Bright Warrior exhibited no meaningful differences in their performance. Certainly, their mech pilots had become a lot more comfortable with interfacing with their mechs, but it was hard to see how this change would transform their battle strength.

Though Ves also began to feel bored now that he confirmed his guess, he still stuck to the original order. He wanted confirmation that every affected mech was still safe to pilot.

When every mech that had gained 25 percent saturation had their turn, the first mech with 50 percent saturation quietly deployed into space.

Compared to the previous mech pilots, the joy and happiness of the mech pilot was a bit more evident this time. Ves sensed some elevated life signs, but nothing had reached alarming levels.

"This fellow looks more excited than the previous ones." Ketis astutely remarks. "If I have to describe the difference, I would say that the ones who came before behaved as if they reunited with their childhood friends. This one looks like he's meeting his lover."

Though Ves wouldn't describe the differences in such a way, they roughly fit the circumstances. Obviously, the first Avatar mech pilot to deploy in a mech with 50 percent saturation had formed a stronger bond with his machine.

As the Bright Warrior in a rifleman mech configuration began to fire potshots at distant asteroids, Ves compared the mech pilot's current scores to his previous results.

The difference was small, but there was a definite difference. The mech pilot exhibited greater reaction speed and accuracy than before, and the improvement was just good enough to be statistically significant.

Unfortunately, hardly anyone else noticed the differences. The Bright Warrior still performed like a Bright Warrior. Even if its overall performance had grown by three percent, outwardly it was still the same mech!

"Alright. That's enough for this test. Send out the next on the list."

Ves did not underestimate this modest boost. He constantly reminded himself that this was just the start. The best was still to come.

As Bright Warriors continued to deploy from the Redfeather and the Greenfeather, Ves observed that the pattern was roughly consistent. Even if Ves had done nothing to improve the technical performance of the mechs with 50 percent saturation, their mech pilots were always able to make better use of their machines.

When it was time for the mechs with 75 percent saturation to show what they were capable of, an immediate deviation took place.

The heart rate of the mech pilot spiked along with other life signs!

Ves immediately hovered his finger right over the button. If the bootup process had truly gone awry, he wouldn't hesitate to shut off the mech!

"My mech!" The mech pilot eventually exulted. "I never imagined my mech could be so fantastic! I feel so great!"

Ves and many others let out a relieved breath. The reaction of the Avatar mech pilot almost frightened them. By now, many Braves noticed that the reactions of the mech pilots had grown successively more dramatic.

It stood to reason that the ones who were about to go last would definitely exhibit the most dramatic reaction!

As more and more mech pilots interfaced with their mechs, the same spectacle repeated over and over. Joy overflowed the lucky mech pilots as they fully embraced their newly-empowered mechs!

Finally, the final batch of mechs was about to go up. The Bright Warriors that had been stuffed with Goldie's spiritual energy until they reached saturation were the most special and dangerous of them all. Each of them possessed the capability to kill their mech pilots if anything went amiss.

Ves paid special attention to Imon Ingvar. He deliberately added 100 percent saturation to his assigned mech. As one of the few Avatars with spiritual potential, Imon's reaction would likely be more extreme than normal.

As for Joshua, he would go last. The Quint was far more special than the other Bright Warriors.

"Come. Show me your power." Ves whispered.

Chapter 2350: Fully Saturated Mechs

The spiritual foundation of a mech represented the machine's intrinsic life. The greater the foundation, the greater its strength in certain aspects.

Ves believed that strengthening the foundation in this way was a convenient way to quickly infuse a mech with more life.

Obviously, it was unrealistic to apply it to every copy of his mech designs, especially his mass produced models.

It took a decent amount of spiritual energy to empower a design to full saturation. The amount was far more than what a typical mech pilot could ever provide through spiritual feedback under normal conditions!

Although it sounded nice to empower an individual mech to the limit of what it could take at the beginning of its life cycle, the risks were very evident as well.

Imparting tools with life was not always a good idea.

How did a nutrient pack feel when it lay in some dusty crate for a couple of centuries?

What would a handgun think if its owner never bothered to perform maintenance on the weapon?

Not everyone treated their tools with care and reverence. Those who used them as disposable items and those who picked up bad habits never thought about changing their behavior.

Why should they?

Tools were lifeless objects.

It may be different if they were pets, but mechs were far from that. There was no particular reason to treat them any better.

To be sure, Ves did not want to usher forth a future where every single object, from nutrient packs to his shaving bot, gained sentience!

In the context of his current experiment, Ves believed that mechs were worthy to gain more life. They were much more expensive and much more impactful than something as trivial as nutrient packs. They were meant to last for years or possibly decades and their performance in battle directly affected the lives of millions or billions of people.

It was worth it to empower them. Ves loved anything that could increase the cooperation between his mechs and mech pilots!

However, his enthusiasm tempered a bit when he reminded himself that not every method was safe.

As the first mech with 100 percent saturation was about to go online, Ves began to grow a little worried.

He vividly recalled the instance where a pirate mech pilot's head exploded due to his inability to take in so much spiritual input. The mech back then was too strong. If the mech ever exerted any pressure, then the huge disparity in power gave no chance for any ordinary mech pilot to resist!

As Ves observed the projection of the mech pilot entering the cockpit, Ves quickly recalled the fellow's name. He had already inspected each and every Avatar mech pilot assigned to the Bright Warriors and noted down their spiritual strength.

The first one to come up possessed no spiritual potential. That paradoxically meant that this particular Avatar had a higher chance of surviving any accidents due to the difficulty of affecting his tiny but elusive spirit.

In contrast, someone with vivid spiritual potential such as Imon Ingvar had to endure greater risks. This was because his greater spiritual potential had to expose itself and thereby open itself up to external attacks.

All of this sounded rather strange and counterintuitive to Ves, but this was the way the rules were set. He had no choice but to work around these conditions.

"This mech is different from the others." Ketis stated as she continued to observe the same projections that he was watching. "Your posture has grown a lot tenser than usual when this machine has come up. You look as if a fight is about to start."

Ves did not hide the reason for his tension. "The last batch of Bright Warrior mechs are the most special ones of them all. If you imagine the previous ones as partially filled

bottles, these ones are filled to the brim. The pressure within these mechs are the greatest, and if any of it spills to the mech pilot, then I need to be ready to shut the mech down."

She gazed at him with concern. "How can that be? You always make sure that your mechs are as comfortable to your mech pilots as possible. Well, your Doom Guard is an exception, but these are Bright Warriors. They are some of the best mechs for our Larkinson mech pilots."

"Let me explain this in a way you can understand. Take your big CFA greatsword." Ves gestured towards the giant sword sheathed in a floating scabbard following Ketis from behind. "When a Swordmaiden wields this weapon, will she ever cut herself?"

"Absolutely not!" Ketis shouted back. She looked insulted that someone would even entertain this thought! "Learning how to control our blade is one of the first lessons we learn. We are never allowed to hold a real blade until we can prove with our practice weapons that we never let our blades get the better of us. The Swordmaiden must wield the sword, not the other way around."

"That's a good lesson and outlook. The same applies to this situation. I fear what is about to take place is much like handing someone such as Maikel your sword. It's far too powerful for him. Even holding it is risky."

Then.. if it's so dangerous, why go through with this test?"

"Because we have no choice." Ves ruefully smiled as the mech pilot was about to activate his mech. "The danger of wielding your sword is great, but so is the power you can exert. In an emergency, we need to put as many swords in people's hands as possible. All I want to see now is whether our Avatars are strong enough to harness their empowered mechs."

The moment that Ves had been waiting for had come. The mech pilot booted up the mech.

It was as if a hibernating monster woke up. The mech pilot quickly sensed something profound through the man-machine connection that was just starting to go active.

"What is this..?"

Ves and Ketis both looked at the projection of the interior of the cockpit and the mech pilot's life signs.

The latter already began to fluctuate wilder. Evidently, the mech pilot was experiencing increased activity and stress right away.

Roughly a minute passed as more of the mech became active. With each additional system that came online, the man-machine connection became more intense.

Suddenly, just as the mech was ready to move, the mech pilot suddenly convulsed in his seat!

"AAAAHHH! IT'S TOO MUCH! MY MECH.. IS.. TOO STRONG!"

The Avatar contorted against his seat in an ugly fashion, so much so that the sight shocked everyone who witnessed the sudden turn of events!

Not only that, but the Avatar mech pilot's life signs also began to enter dangerous territory! The moment some of the indicators such as heart rate and brain activity spiked into the red zones, Ves immediately pressed the shutdown button.

"Abort the current test! Medics, enter the cockpit and stabilize his condition!"

A prepared crew of medics and doctors led by Ranya Wodin immediately moved into action once they received the command.

Though the bootup process had gone wrong, the Avatar mech pilot only suffered for less than ten seconds. Though his brain had come under enormous stress, it shouldn't have incurred too much damage. Hopefully none of it was permanent.

Ketis and the assistant mech designers in the design lab all looked horrified at what happened.

How could this session go so awry so quickly?

Before, the Avatars mech pilots that had come before all experienced varying degrees of euphoria. They achieved significantly better scores when they piloted their newly-enhanced mechs.

It was only now that the bestanders realized that this change wasn't as positive as everyone thought.

While the medics took the injured Avatar mech pilot away, nobody knew what to do at the moment.

"Resume the test." Ves spoke with a heavy voice. "I need more data. A single doesn't necessarily point to anything. I need at least a few more observations."

"Is that a good idea?" Ketis frowned.

"I.. don't know. This could have been a fluke. If I want to rule it out, I need to run this test multiple times. Out of consideration of the danger to our mech pilots, I'll lower my demands, but I need at least three more tries."

Ves contacted the mech pilot who was supposed to go next.

"I need you to be brave. You may refuse to participate in this test. I won't blame you if you turn away. However, if you think you have what it takes to control your mech, then I won't say no if you wish to proceed. What is your answer?"

The man looked a bit discomfited, but he put on a brave face. "I am an Avatar! I will do what is necessary!"

"Good man! Then head inside the cockpit of your mech and mentally ready yourself."

Ves briefly smirked as he closed the private channel. There was hardly any chance his Avatars would refuse his demand. As long as he phrased his request as an expectation, any Avatar would feel compelled to meet it! As the golden boys of the Larkinson Clan, how could they ever disappoint the clan patriarch's expectations?

As the second test with a different mech at full saturation commenced, Ves became extra alert.

Initially, the bootup process looked similar to the last one. The second Avatar mech pilot experienced the same profundity from his newly-empowered machine.

Yet just a minute later, the man's life signs immediately spiked into the red zones straight away!

"I CAN'T HANDLE IT! IT'S TOO STRONG!"

Ves had already slapped the shutdown button the instant the life signs went crazy. Due to his faster reaction, the mech shut down five seconds faster than the previous one. The mech pilot even managed to stay conscious this time!

That said, there wasn't much to celebrate about with this test. Two successive mech pilots evidently experienced much more spiritual input than they could handle.

Ves hadn't seen any signs the Bright Warrior mechs had turned against their own mech pilots. The beginning stages of the formation of the man-machine connection went smoothly in both cases. The Bright Warrior mechs obviously liked their familiar mech pilots, yet something went wrong anyway.

The most likely explanation for this detrimental outcome was the analogy he had just shared with Ketis. Maybe the fully saturated mechs were too powerful for their own

good. Their mech pilots simply weren't capable enough to harness the most radically-altered mechs.

Hardly anyone thought the experiment should still proceed, but Ves wasn't satisfied yet. Currently, he only had two instances of mech pilots failing to endure the strain exerted by their fully saturated mechs. Both of the injured Avatar mech pilots just happened to possess no spiritual potential.

What if the mech pilot was stronger this time? What if he put someone Imon Ingvar up next?

Ves hesitated. Those with greater spiritual strength also became exposed to more damage whenever something went awry. Perhaps Imon's head would be the latest test subject to feel what it was like to have his head blown apart.

"That isn't supposed to happen." Ves bent his head and rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "If my theories are right, then a stronger mech pilot should have better chances of harnessing a powerful mech."

Despite the bad outcomes that had just occurred, they concurred with his theoretical framework. "My predictions should still be accurate!"

Ves commanded Imon Ingvar to go next. The mech champion was different from the last two Avatar mech pilots. The former noble possesses a more robust piloting foundation and his spiritual potential might be able to provide him with enough strength to keep up with his empowered mech.

"Mr. Ingvar, I expect more from you. Will you go next?"

"I will!" Imon said with fiery eyes. "I don't know what you have done to our mechs, but I think they're all stronger. I don't want my mech to be weak. Please let me proceed!"

"Then go, Mr. Ingvar. Your mech is ready to receive you. When you are ready to interface with your mech, keep our motto in mind. Per angusta ad augusta!"

"For the clan!"