

## Mech 2361

### *Chapter 2361: Battle Networks*

Long after Calabast had left his stateroom, Ves continued to think back on her words.

She seemed very confident that Ves would change his propensity for risk once he grew older.

"Where does she get that idea?" Ves scratched his head.

He didn't really feel like changing himself. Though he found his current circumstances to be very challenging, he didn't regret the choices he made.

No one won all the time. Every risky decision entailed the possibility of losing. Ves had already accepted this possibility when he initially made his bet. Even though the current circumstances exceeded his estimates, he only had himself to blame, and that was fine.

Perhaps the main issue of contention to him was that he felt a little conflicted about his principles.

As a Larkinson, he should seek opportunities, but at the same time care for his fellow Larkinsons.

There was an inherent contradiction between these two values. It wasn't that much of a problem for the Larkinson Family because the mech pilots assumed most of the risks. The norms mostly remained behind and lived normal lives. No matter how many Larkinsons died on the battlefield, the family's foundation was never under threat.

This no longer applied to the clan. Without the protection of a state, the civilian Larkinsons solely relied on the protection of the mech pilots of the clan. If the latter suffered enormous losses, then the others became vulnerable to predation.

"Maybe I should dial it back in the future."

Though he thought about it, he felt it was pointless to make any choices when the future was so far away. There was no way to predict what would happen years later so Ves felt it was pointless to agonize about it. Certainly, he was aware that he might need to make better choices, but he hadn't come this far by being timid.

"Well, enough moping around. I need to get to work."

He spent time on various priorities such as trying to figure out how to form specialized combat-oriented spiritual networks for some of his mech forces.

Though he only possessed a shallow understanding of Master Huron's neural networks, Ves vaguely understood the basic premise.

A neural network enabled different like-minded mech pilots to pool their thoughts and share them with each other.

This was already a very delicate process under normal circumstances. Any variable or disturbance could easily cause unexpected fluctuations that might cause severe brain damage to anyone connected to a destabilized network!

The genius of Master Huron was that he managed to form a stable neural network that was safe and robust enough to function properly on the battlefield.

This was a true miracle!

Every mech designer knew that messing with neural interfaces was exceedingly dangerous. Master Huron not only performed a couple of tweaks on the neural interfaces of his mechs, but outright expanded their functionality, thereby redefining what neural interfaces were supposed to do. Only a fearless and confident mech designer would be able to realize a design philosophy centered around this insane idea!

Therefore, even if Master Huron belonged to the opposing side, Ves had nothing but respect for this old but inventive mech designer.

Knowing how exceptional it was to develop such an innovative way to increase the battle effectiveness of mech units, Ves became a bit unsure about his own way forward.

"I'm not a Master. I don't know much about neural interfaces, let alone connecting people's minds together."

That didn't stop him from forming the Larkinson Network. When Ves swept his glance to the Larkinson Mandate, the Golden Cat happily administered her bonds with every clansman.

Nyaaaaaa!

Ves couldn't help but smile at the adorable ancestral spirit. "Keep up the good work, Goldie. We need to keep morale as high as possible. Don't be afraid to tell me if anyone is beginning to think impure thoughts."

Nyaaaa.

Though the Larkinson Network he masterminded turned out to be both safe and useful, its applicability in combat was very limited.

For a long time, Ves accepted this, as he never saw any need to fix something that wasn't broken. The Larkinson Clan was already doing fine with its existing advantages.

That no longer applied to the present situation. Ves had to grasp any possible way to strengthen his forces, and forming a better spiritual network was one of his key ideas.

The question that first came to mind was whether he should alter the existing Larkinson Network or form a new network or subnetwork.

Ves chose the latter option. He wanted to confine his new developments to a smaller and more homogenous group of participants.

The existing Larkinson Network was already doing a good job by itself. Ves didn't want to take the risk of breaking it. While he liked to live dangerously every now and then, this was a preventable risk.

While Ves was not a neural interface specialist, he knew a fair bit about spirituality and how they interacted with people. All of the experiments he performed on the captive pirates had borne considerable more fruit than the direct results to his tests. His overall insight and intuition of spirituality had grown substantially.

He possessed just enough confidence to make it work.

Though spiritual networks were not identical to neural networks, Ves nevertheless took a lot of inspiration from Master Huron's applications.

When Ves browsed the galactic net and looked up on the latest instances where Master Huron's products made a splash, he noticed a clear division of networks.

The ordinary users of neural networks all consisted of normal but well-trained mech pilots. Each unit consisted of crack troops in order to meet the prerequisites. It wasn't a secret that every member of the neural network had to be aligned with each other in order to function properly. The greater the heterogeneity, the greater the instability.

If Ves wanted to implement a new spiritual network with this style, then he had to abide by the same logic. Of all of the mech forces at his disposal, only the Swordmaidens, the Battle Criers and the Penitent Sisters met this strict standard.

"Each of them are well-trained veterans with lots of shared battles and experiences under their belt. Their martial cultures strongly emphasize a common identity that sets them apart from other people. In short, they are made for neural and spiritual networks."

The other mech forces regrettably did not meet the necessary standard.

The Avatars of Myth was very strong, but it lacked too much experience.

The Living Sentinels possessed a weaker culture and featured a lot of heterogeneity within their mech roster.

The Flagrant Vandals boasted a lot of veterancy but their martial culture emphasized a lot of autonomy, so every Vandal was different.

"I don't think any mech pilot under these three mech forces will like it when they meld their minds directly to their fellow mech pilots."

Perhaps Ves was making the wrong assumption. The strict standard that Master Huron adhered to only applied to his neural networks.

Spiritual networks were different. Some of the principles were the same, but the implementation was very different. Spiritual engineering did not operate by the same rules as the ones underpinning neural interface technology.

That said, Ves believed it was better to start with the Swordmaidens, Battle Criers and Penitent Sisters. If the results exceeded his expectations and if he still had some time, he might look to augment the remainder in some other fashion.

For now, he focused his attention on his current choice.

He had something special planned for the Battle Criers. They had long been neglected by him even though they had been performing well. All this time, they maintained absolute loyalty to him rather than just the Larkinsons as a whole. Ves wanted to reward them by implementing something that would allow them to stand out from the other Larkinsons.

Because of the elevated risks involved with empowering the Battle Criers in this fashion, Ves wanted to experiment with them later.

His first target was the Penitent Sisters. While their strength made them very important for the upcoming battle, Ves cared the least out of them. Even if they were Larkinsons, he was still inclined to use them up because of their Hexer heritage.

Ves wanted to turn them into his first guinea pigs. He wouldn't shed a tear if any of these crazy Hexer died as a result of his experiments. They were just as good as his pirate test subjects in that regard!

"I can't afford to lose too many of them, though."

He intended to start with a modest amount of Penitent Sisters and slowly add more members to the network from there.

The goal of implementing this new kind of spiritual network was not to replicate the functionality of the existing Larkinson Network. Neither did he want to copy Master Huron's accomplishments.

All he wanted to do was to boost the battle performance of the mech pilots connected to the new network. How this strengthening took shape didn't matter to Ves.

Normally, Ves wasn't confident in his ability to create a network that exceeded the Larkinson Network in this aspect. He didn't really know how the latter exactly functioned. There were way too many gaps in his understanding of spiritual engineering for him to be able to explain every single component.

"That's fine. It's not as if I have to understand something down to the tiniest details."

To Ves, Spirituality was a product of thought and emotions. As long as he willed something to work in a specific fashion, the spiritual energy he manipulated would make it happen somehow.

Of course, this was only practical with simpler applications. Creating vastly more complex spiritual applications such as the Grand Dynamo required way more detail and precision than daydreams could accomplish.

"I should keep it simple, then."

The battle-oriented spiritual network that Ves wanted to create for the Penitent Sisters was based on a fairly simple idea.

He wanted to center this battle network around the Superior Mother!

His mother's position wouldn't be the same as that of the Golden Cat. In the Larkinson Network, Goldie played the role as network administrator more or less. This was a fairly restrained role as Ves aimed for stability and did not dare to ask for more at the time. He also wanted to avoid interfering too much in the lives of his clansmen.

A battle network should be able to do more. Ves believed the key to empowering it was to tie in the design spirit in a more direct fashion. Instead of playing the role as a passive system administrator, Ves wanted to turn the Superior Mother into a source of power to those connected to the network!

This was different from empowering mechs. Ves wasn't really sure what would result from channeling some of the essence of his mother into the Penitent Sisters in this fashion, but he hoped that something good might ensue.

"As long as this experiment succeeds, I can proceed with the next one."

He had something else in mind for the Swordmaidens. Not only were their Swordmaidens some of the most cohesive troops he had ever seen, they were also helmed by an expert candidate that was close to becoming a fully-fledged expert pilot.

Ves took inspiration from the rumored 'asymmetrical neural network' that supposedly allowed Ghanso to run around with fifty quasi-expert mechs.

"What if.. Commander Dise gains her own entourage of empowered mech pilots?"

The result would definitely be different from that of Master Huron's latest innovations, but Ves was eager to see what this expert pilot-focused battle network might produce!

In short, Ves aimed to create two different battle networks centered around two different powerful subjects.

Whether the subject was a design spirit or an expert pilot, both of them were powerful in spirit! As long as he tied them together with mech pilots that were very closely aligned with the central subjects, Ves believed that the risks were manageable.

"Now how am I going to put a battle network together, exactly?"

#### *Chapter 2362: Industrious Hexers*

Time went by as the Larkinsons busied themselves with their preparations. Machinists and technicians broke down a lot of valuable scrap and began to clad them onto their ships or mechs, sometimes without any regard for balance or mass distribution.

This was a viable means of upgrading the durability of a mech in the short term. The enemies the Larkinsons expected to face would definitely bring a lot of firepower to the table. Adding extra layers of armor would give many mechs some additional chances of survival.

As for the negative impact on their mobility, Ves and the other leaders did not think much of it. Ves personally designed a special attachment scheme that was semi-modular. The way the Larkinsons slapped the additional armor plating onto the mechs was done in a way to make them detachable when they were rendered unusable.

Simply put, the mechs gained some scales that covered much of their surface. As long as the Larkinsons coated the scrap armor with the color schemes of the respective mech troops, then they didn't look that out of place!

While the mechs only carried a relatively thin layer of additional armor, the starships gained substantially more.

Ves decisively commanded the fleet to use up all of the relatively lower-value bulk metals that filled many of the cargo bays. While it was difficult to shape these materials

into large armor plates in a fleet while on the move, the Larkinsons somehow made it work with the help of the available mobile fabrication capabilities.

As long as no one minded the occasional flaws, cracks and sloppy finishings, the output was still adequate.

The Penitent Sisters took much of the newly-produced ship plating and used them to reinforce the bow armor of their combat carriers.

Since Ves ruthlessly decided to convert all of these strong vessels into single-use ramming vessels, he wanted them to excel in their new role.

The main purpose for adding more frontal power was to give the combat carriers a greater chance at withstanding the primary and secondary gun battery fire of the Gravada Knarlax.

With all of the bulk armor being put onto the ships, the effectiveness of secondary battery fire was heavily reduced. As for the main guns, Ves did not harbor that much hope. When a cannon reached a certain scale, armor became like paper. They would be lucky if the additional armor gave the combat carriers the chance to survive an additional hit.

"Hopefully, the firing rate of those main cannons aren't too fast."

Bigger guns generally reloaded slower. The bigger the caliber, the much more troublesome it became to load in another shell smoothly. Due to the relative cramped space of a warship, ship designers had to squeeze in a lot of functionality while keeping everything stable and robust.

These were very strenuous demands as warships were always expected to continue functioning even if they came under heavy fire.

Ves did not believe the pirate warships were built well enough to meet the insanely high standards of the CFA. Continuous investment or not, there was only so much a bunch of criminals could do in a barren and lightly-populated region like the Nyxian Gap.

"Hopefully, at least some of the combat carriers will reach their target this way."

As an extra touch, the Penitent Sisters also shaped the prows of their combat carriers in the form of a cone or triangular shape. While this change might not have that much of effect at collisions of this scale, it was still worth a try in order to see if the combat carriers were capable of breaching the armor of the heavy cruiser.

Of course, with the addition of all of that mass, much of the flight characteristics of the combat carrier had turned a bit messy. The crew of the ship had to make constant adjustments to offset the small but noticeable shift in balance.



All of this presented a new problem. If the ships accrued too much mass, it would take far too long for them to build up a respectable amount of speed. Perhaps the Gravada Knarlax might be capable of dodging the incoming suicide ships just enough to turn a devastating blow into a glancing blow!

This was why all of the engineers of the Penitent Sisters came together and outlined an extensive set of modifications to the sub-light propulsion systems.

Commodore Abigail Even personally explained the proposal to Ves one day.

"Since we don't expect to retain any of our combat carriers after the decisive battle, we wish to convert a large portion of the interior to make room for temporary boosters and other supporting elements. Our goal is to use up as much fuel and energy as possible in as little time as possible to sustain the powerful boosters and supercharge the other propulsion systems."

"How will you use all of that excess energy?"

"There is little point to retaining all of the fuel and energy if there is no expectation that the ships will survive past a month. We might as well use it all up even if it is astronomically wasteful."

The efficiency of these measures were horrible. Ves glanced at the estimates drafted by the Hexer engineers and all told it was wholly unacceptable under normal circumstances.

For example, in order to gain a modest ten percent boost in acceleration, the ship had to use up at least five-thousand times more fuel and energy!

And this was just the start. Each successive increase in acceleration demanded an exponentially greater amount of juice.

However, in these specific circumstances, it was worth it! The only reason why Ves looked a bit hesitant was because he knew it wasn't easy to contain the violent reactions needed to give the large and heavy combat carriers a powerful shove forward.

Still, former cultists or not, the Hexers knew how to train their engineers. The extensive designs the Penitent Sisters put forward all outlined robust changes at the stern of the vessels in question.

"Where will you get all of the high-quality materials needed to build all of these new parts?" Ves asked.

"We will be cannibalizing much of the interior of our combat carriers." Commodore Abigail readily answered. "Much of the interior of our combat carriers are geared towards supporting longer deployments. Think of large compartments devoted to storing



ammunition, spare parts, recycling systems, and all of the machinery required to service and maintain our mechs. If we cannibalize all of these redundant elements, we'll be able to fashion quite a bit of crude but workable solutions."

Ves was quite surprised at the flexibility exhibited by the Penitent Sisters. They may be stiff about their beliefs, but everything else about them spoke of an abundant amount of competence.

Nevermind their mech pilots, Ves wanted to absorb their ship crews! With all of these excellent second-class spacers at his disposal, he could instantly man his upcoming factory ship with them, thereby ensuring that his future flagship would run a lot more smoother at the start than he initially projected.

With huge and lumbering capital ships, malfunctions and screw ups always hindered their functioning at the beginning.

Under normal circumstances, every large and complex ship had to undergo numerous trials in order to work out all of the teething problems. No matter how precise the shipbuilders put the ship together, they always left behind at least some mistakes and miscalculations.

Even a small but critical error might be enough to cause a part of the ship to explode!

In these crucial situations, having trained and experienced spacers at hand could vastly reduce the chances of small problems snowballing into life-threatening disasters!

As for the complication that most of these competent spacers consisted of radical Hexers, Ves paid little mind to this issue.

He finished studying all of the reports and diagrams. While he did not understand the deeper nuances of naval engineering, he was still able to glean enough details by relying on his existing foundation in mechanics, propulsion systems and other relevant fields.

"All of this looks good to me. You have my approval to implement these extensive modifications. Will your crews be able to complete the transformations in time?"

Commodore Even nodded. "We are confident we will so long as we don't adhere to a strict standard. Supreme Mother willing, we will work as fast as possible to allow our cherished ships to go down in a blaze of glory!"

That was another important aspect of their plan. Alongside modifying their ships, the Penitent Sisters also helped with producing potent explosives to give their planned attack run some extra bite.

Alongside programming the power reactors to overload on command, adding all of the bombs, some of which qualified as weapons of mass destruction, would surely give the Gravada Knarlax some added difficulties!

The only downside of fabricating all of these homemade bombs was that they weren't able to turn enough of them into directional explosives. When most of the bombs detonated, much of the blast would radiate in the opposite direction of the target, thereby wasting a lot of their destructive potential.

It couldn't be helped. To contain and direct so many forces required materials and manufacturing capabilities that were out of reach to the task force.

If only they had his factory ship. With the extensive industrial manufacturing capabilities of such a huge and ridiculously expensive vessel, they wouldn't need to sink so low in order to hastily increase their battle capabilities.

"Alright, I've seen enough. Keep up the good work."

With the crucial ship modifications running on schedule, Ves no longer paid attention to this aspect. He devoted his full attention to enhancing the battle power of his mechs.

Aside from working out the theory and application of his battle network concept, he also began work on transforming regular Bright Warriors into powerful custom mechs for every expert candidate.

He decided to start with the simplest modification project. He invited Ketis to reengineer a Bright Warrior in its swordsman mech configuration so that it suited a Swordmaiden mech pilot.

"I've often thought about adapting the Nova Warriors in order to make them more compatible with our fight style." She said as she looked up at the machine that Ves had moved to the Scarlet Rose's mech workshop. "A full transformation will probably take a month to accomplish."

"That's too long." Ves shook his head. "These custom mechs are only stopgap solutions. We don't have to aim for something permanent. Once Commander Dise advanced to expert pilot, we can slowly work towards designing a dedicated expert mech for her. Until then, we just have to prepare a mech that is better than what she currently pilots."

"That's going to be a challenge." Ketis said. "What she is piloting right now fits her fighting style well. It's Mayra's work after all. While I know that the absolute performance of the Bright Warrior is far superior to what is now a last-gen third-class mech, we can't really replicate the piloting experience that Commander Dise prefers."

This was a very serious issue to Ves. "I'll try to make it as comfortable as possible for her. This is something of a specialty of mine so I am sure I can find some way to ease the transition. Until then, we only have a week at maximum to modify this mech. Let's make the most out of it. We can't waste any time."

The two began to load the design of the mech and began to manipulate the diagrams and wireframe models to transform the Bright Warrior.

To his surprise, Ves found out that Ketis had caught up quite a bit to his level. While she was far from holding as much knowledge as him, when it came to her narrow specialty, she was already a match for many regular Journeymen!

Their discussions produced a lot of results for that reason. It only took half a day to settle on all of the changes they intended to realize.

"At the end of this week, this mech should be strong enough to chop up a ship!"

#### *Chapter 2363: Sword and Spear*

Working on the custom mech for Commander Dise granted Ves a greater insight in how the Swordmaidens fought.

This was invaluable for many reasons. Not only did he gain a better idea on how to design a swordsman mech that suited these former pirates, he also developed a better idea on how to shape their experimental battle network.

Ketis helped enormously in this project. Ves initially thought that his skills were far too good compared to hers, but it turned out that she had already progressed enormously in the areas she cared about.

This was the biggest advantage of hyperspecialization. As long as Ketis chose to neglect her studies in other fields such as ranged weapons and so on, she could make rapid progress in her chosen specialty.

Even though she had yet to finalize a single mech design, her actual design ability was already beyond every assistant mech designer in the LMC!

Her fluency and depth of understanding towards swordsman mechs not only matched his own level. In some crucial areas, she had already overtaken him! She knew so much about swordsman mechs that Ves gradually allowed her to take the lead on this project.

"I still need to work on the other custom mechs after this, but it's different for you." Ves said. "I think you're good enough to continue tweaking the mech without me. You have already proven that you know what you are doing. With how much this mech matters to Swordmaidens, I am confident that you will do right by this mech."

His announcement came as a surprise to Ketis. She halted her current work and looked at Ves with shock.

"Will you really hand over responsibility for this mech to me? Can I change whatever I want?"

"You can as long as it's within reason. Don't think you are completely free to do what you want. I'll be checking up periodically in order to make sure you aren't going astray."

"Thank you, Ves!"

This was great news to Ketis! Of course, it was not because she looked forward to getting rid of Ves. The main reason for her jubilation was because she wanted to implement deeper modifications that would turn the custom swordsman mech into an even better vessel for Commander Dise!

With several more weeks to go, there was much an enterprising mech designer like her could do. She already began to dig up some of the more ambitious ideas that Ves had previously judged impractical.

With these additional changes, Commander Dise would probably perform even more brilliantly than normal.

"Just make sure you keep the mech as robust and resilient as possible." He warned her. "Don't blindly try to squeeze more performance out of the frame. The stability and toughness of the mech has to remain high in order to accommodate any potential breakthrough phenomena. When Commander Dise breaks through, she becomes able to exert true resonance on a non-expert mech. Her mech's performance will vastly increase as a result, but it doesn't necessarily mean that the frame can take all of the abuse. Don't let the mech fall apart under these circumstances."

Ketis nodded with a serious expression. "I will watch out for that. I will never allow my work to let her down."

Work on the custom mech proceeded a bit swifter than before while Ves was still involved. Ketis had become incredibly motivated and passionate about her new responsibility. In absence of publishing any mech designs, completing this custom mech was pretty much her first experience at delivering a real mech to a client!

With Ves reassured that this custom mech was in good hands, he withdrew from the project after he determined he no longer needed to provide anymore guidance. He had already implemented various changes related to the power reactor, flight system and other components that Ketis still needed to grasp.

The one last step he needed to take before he left was to enhance the spiritual foundation of the mech. Ves thought about adding some spiritual constructs as well to

add some triggered abilities to the mech, but he eventually decided against it for several reasons.

He couldn't really predict what would happen if the spiritual constructs received a substantial boost due to the strengthening of the entire spiritual foundation of the mech. He still needed to investigate this issue before he deemed it safe to add spiritual constructs.

Ketis moved Commander Dise's machine to the Jaded Sword. She suggested that she would be able to do much more work if she was working alongside a crew of Swordmaiden mech technicians and Ves agreed. Even though the Swordmaiden flagship didn't possess any high-quality production equipment, she still desired to work on the custom mech at its natural home.

Ves moved on to working on the next custom mech on the list. Commander Orfan specialized in piloting spearman mechs. Though she was more comfortable with piloting landbound mechs, fighting in space was not a huge issue to an expert candidate.

Spearman mechs were not very common in spaceborn combat. Due to the huge distances involved, traditional melee mechs were always less practical than ranged mechs.

If any outfits deployed any spear-wielding mechs, they were liable to be lancer mechs instead.

Unlike typical spearman mechs, lancer mechs were designed with potent forward acceleration in mind. This meant that as long as they charged forward without any elaborate course corrections, they could quickly build up a lot of speed, thereby crossing the vast distances that separated friendlies and enemies in a shorter amount of time!

This was crucial in space combat as cover was almost nonexistent in most space battles. The sooner a melee mech reached the enemy, the sooner it ended its stint as a moving practice target!

"That said, I don't need to pay that much attention to this priority." Ves muttered.

Unlike many other regions, the Nyxian Gap was filled with an unnaturally huge amount of asteroids. While it was possible to thread the spaces between the asteroids without going too much off-course, a mech could also take cover behind the floating rocks instead. This severely increased the survivability of melee mechs while heavily impacting the effectiveness of ranged mechs.

"I wonder if the Gravada Knarlax is able to blow apart these asteroids by firing a single cannon. In fact, how is a ship this large even able to navigate smoothly through the asteroid fields?"

Whatever the case, Commander Orfan preferred to pilot a spear-wielding mech that possessed enough agility, reaction time and range of motion to duel mechs up close.

Such a mech would not be able to perform devastating charges like true lancer mechs because their structures and internals pursued different aims.

Ves took another Bright Warrior configured as a swordsman mech and began to work from there. In order to assist in his work, he called up a bunch of Braves to assist him in his work.

Though none of them were as good as Ketis, people like Moltar Ringer, Dukan French and Felicia Slenn were able to provide different perspectives to the project.

Still, Ves missed the competence and ability demonstrated by Ketis. The rest of the Braves still hadn't caught up to her level yet, and they probably wouldn't be unless they gained second-class augmentation or if he decided to feed them Attribute Candies.

He also made sure to obtain frequent input from Gloriana, though it was difficult for her to stay on top of what was going on by remote.

"Why haven't we worked on fabricating the spear for this custom mech?" Dukan French asked.

"Developing the weapons for this mech and other custom mechs is a separate project. They're going to be fairly special, but that means that a lot more work is required to make them. For now, just work from the numbers that I've given to you all. Keep in mind that while the spear will likely be fairly thin, it is heftier than it looks."

Someone else asked a question.

"It's a shame to design this mech without any elevating shock-absorbing capabilities. Can't we modify this mech so that it is capable of performing both charging attacks and be good at fighting up close?"

Ves threw a contemptuous look at the assistant who asked that question. He didn't even think it was worth it to open his mouth. His silent reaction was enough to hammer home what he thought about this proposal.

In truth, he wanted to accomplish this as well, but the circumstances didn't allow it. In his judgement, it was possible to design a lancer mech that was also good or at least decent in frontal combat if he built a mech according to second-class standards.

That wasn't quite possible under the circumstances. The Bright Warrior was a bridge mech, and the modifications he intended to implement weren't capable of exceeding some of the limitations of its original design.

He had to design a new mech from the ground up in order to accommodate both modes of combat.

Work on the mech proceeded briskly. Partially, this was due to the relative simplicity of the modifications. A swordsman mech was already capable of wielding spears with good proficiency. Ves just wanted to make it even better by performing targeted upgrades and enhancements that optimized its performance when wielding spears.

Midway into the project, Ves invited the Commander Orfan to Scarlet Rose in order to observe her upcoming mech.

When she arrived, she looked impressed at the Bright Warrior. "Wow. Is this really for me? I feel much less reluctant about setting my old mech now!"

Though the mech was partially disassembled and did not reflect the finished product, Orfan just looked at all of the work being done and instantly gave her seal of approval.

"You're fine with what the mech looks like so far?" Ves blinked.

"Why not?" She grinned. "You're a great mech designer. Why shouldn't I trust your work? I'm sure this new baby will run smoothly once I get my hands on it. Is there something else you need or can I get back to training?"

"Ah, I need you to provide more details on your preferred fighting style and habits. We want to make absolutely sure that the mech excels at performing your favorite moves."

"Oh, okay. I can do that. It's not that complicated."

She was used to adapting to the mechs she was assigned to. Piloting a mech that was customized especially for her was a relatively new experience to her. For this reason, she did not make too many demands.

"Make sure the mech is balanced and mobile." She said. "The way I fight with this mech is to keep enemy melee mechs out of reach by threatening to spear them if they ever step into my zone. The arms need to be strong enough to make quick but also powerful stabs. I like to alternate between them in order to catch my opponents off-guard. Aside from that, try and add some secondary weapons if possible. I'm not a purist like Commander Dise who solely wants to rely on her sword to win a battle."

As long as Ves made some modest compromises, he could squeeze in several secondary weapon systems.

"Your mech is already slated to get a shield so I can add something as long as it doesn't take up too much capacity. What would you like? A shortsword? A carbine?"



She rubbed her sturdy chin. "Hmm.. give me a knife as well as a pistol. Is that possible?"

"We can add that. It's just.. they won't add too much strength to your mech. At most, you will have some extra options at your disposal."

"It's enough, Ves. I don't want to depend too heavily on my spear and shield no matter how much you claim how good they will be. If my mech ever loses them, I will still have some options available that I can rely on. Understand?"

"We will try our best to accommodate your demands."

#### *Chapter 2364: Ves the Planter*

Working back-to-back on the custom mechs of both Dise and Orfan presented an interesting contrast to Ves.

Both expert candidates were melee mech specialists, but they possessed different philosophies in their approach towards combat.

Commander Dise dedicated herself completely to swordsmanship. Her will was obsessed with it and she believed that almost every threat could be dealt with as long as she held a blade.

Of course, most people would say that mech pilots such as her fared really badly against opponents that were too distant and used overwhelming ranged firepower to destroy their targets from a distance.

In these cases, mechs with no ability to attack hostiles from a distance usually had to run for cover.

That didn't necessarily mean that mech pilots like the Swordmaidens were useless. When they were still a large outfit, they fielded at least some ranged mechs and other mechs to balance out their mech roster.

Mechs never fought alone unless they engaged in duels. In most battles, swordsman mechs fought alongside other mech types. In this context, the extreme specialization of the Swordmaidens turned into a powerful advantage rather than a vulnerability that was begging to be exploited.

To Ves and the clan, this extreme dedication made the Swordmaidens very valuable. There were other mech forces which were capable of fulfilling the roles that the Swordmaidens rejected.

The Vandals were different. As a remnant of a disbanded mech regiment, they were accustomed to fielding a rounded mech roster with plenty of variety. While its mech

pilots usually specialized in different mech types, their military-standard training was good enough to allow them to pilot other mech types if needed.

This meant that Commander Orfan and her ilk were much more open to utilizing whatever weapon was suitable and on hand rather than sticking to a single weapon system as if their life depended on it. These kinds of mech pilots were much more common in second-rate states as mechs at that point were easily able to accommodate additional primary weapon systems.

The two expert candidates and hopefully future expert pilots would continue to develop along these divergent paths. Ves could see the pros and cons of both approaches so he didn't do anything to encourage the expert candidates to change anything.

"Diversity is a benefit to our clan. If every mech pilot fights the same way, it will be too easy to exploit our weaknesses."

This diversity was present in the two custom mechs he made. Commander Dise's custom mech only excelled in one specific fighting style and weapon. This specialization went so deep that its performance would only be a fraction of its peak if it wielded any other weapon such as an axe or a rifle.

Ves chose a different direction for Commander Orfan's machine. He drafted plans to broaden the fighting capabilities of the mech. While he had to sacrifice some performance in the form of lower mechanical strength and slightly worsened reaction speed, the mech became very adaptable.

It wasn't confined to fighting with its current weapon loadout. If Commander Orfan ever felt she needed to resort to other weapons, she could do so without worrying that her mech would lock up or fail to keep up with her demands.

"Well, this mech is pretty much done." Ves clapped his hands.

He and his Braves looked proud at what they managed to cobble up in a week. The custom mech for Commander Orfan wouldn't be as brilliant as the one for the Swordmaiden Commander, but its versatility made up for it for the most part.

Of course, the mech wasn't equipped with its full range of weapons yet. So far, Ves had only fabricated the pistol and knife. The spear and shield had to wait until he was ready to break down the statue of the Unending One.

Before he began work on Joshua's Quint, Ves allocated some time on advancing one of his other initiatives.

After two weeks of intermittent theorizing and planning, Ves was finally ready to form his first battle network.

He took a shuttle to the Surly Cockatrice in order to meet with the Penitent Sisters. Commander Chancy and Head Designer Stameross already greeted him the moment he stepped foot onto the hangar deck.

"Welcome to our ship, sir."

She sounded a lot more respectful than before. It seemed that she was already advancing further in her new mindset as a future member of the Larkinson Clan. The Penitent Sisters no longer appeared to object as much to this possibility.

"Let's proceed quickly. My time is short. Bring me to the participants."

They crossed the hangar deck and reached a formation of forty mech pilots. Each exiled Hexer stood straight in their rigid postures.

Ves studied them carefully with both his ordinary vision and his spiritual vision. He could feel the unity, devotion and deep trust these Penitent Sisters held towards each other and their shared faith.

"How are these soldiers?"

"They are some of our best." Commander Chancy proudly smiled. "The competition to become the first participants of your glorious new gift was intense, but in the end I have decided to grant this honor to our 3rd Spaceborn Mech Company."

Ves looked oddly at the eager-looking Penitent Sisters.

When he usually wanted to experiment with test subjects, he had to drag them over to his testing area while they were kicking and screaming. All of the pirate captives he had tormented just a few weeks ago had all attempted to shout obscenities at him while forcefully trying to fight against their restraints.

Having been long used to the sight of resistant test subjects, the sudden change took him aback. The enthusiasm that rolled off their bodies confirmed that they truly thought it was an honor to become his test subjects!

Ves resisted the urge to rub his eyes. Maybe he was seeing a mirage.

"Well.." He said. "I like what I see. I'm sure they will do great."

"To be honest, the Third Mech Company sustained some losses during the previous battle, but we have reconsolidated and reorganized our ranks to fill up the gaps. However, you don't have to worry about the cohesion of these Sisters. They completely trust each other with their backs."

"That's good. Let's proceed with the experiment, then. Bring me to the testing chambers that you have prepared."

They moved to an isolated section of the Surly Cockatrice. The Penitent Sisters had already brought over a lot of lab equipment and other equipment. While Ves did not expect these machines to be useful in enabling his experiments, they were still useful in monitoring the conditions of his test subjects.

If any of these test subjects experienced considerable strain, he would at least be able to get some advance warning.

Ves decided to start small and chose to form his network out of a single squad of mech pilots.

Ten Penitent Sister mech pilots stepped into the prepared testing chamber. A lot of sensors and scanners kept a very close eye on the physiological conditions of the first batch of test subjects.

"Bring in the idol." Ves commanded.

A bot entered the chamber. A small idol depicted the Superior Mother with great detail. Ves had personally crafted it with care and attention in order to turn it into a small but potent vessel for his mother's glow.

The effect was immediate. The ten test subjects reacted towards the idol with reverence and knelt like knights meeting their monarchs.

Ves blinked again. The behavior of these test subjects inspired him to alter his approach towards this experiment.

When Ves learned about neural networks, he knew that its effectiveness was largely dependent on how closely the participants aligned with each other.

The same should apply to battle networks as well. Anything that could help the mech pilots in question think the same way was valuable.

He turned to Commander Chancy, who was standing besides him in the control room.

"Tell the sisters to.. uhmmm.. pray to the idol."

"Yes, sir."

The ten test subjects began to worship the idol as if the Superior Mother herself had descended onto it! Almost every other thought left their minds as they completely concentrated on showing their devotion to the Supreme.

The intensity of their worship reminded him a lot of the times when Gloriana entered her own prayer sessions.

These Hexers had begun to pray since they were young. They had become so accustomed to opening themselves up to something greater that their minds literally entered a different state that was unique to their current activities.

Ves studied the neural readings provided by the sensors.

He made a very important discovery.

"These readings are all similar!"

The minds of every worshipper had become even more closely aligned with each other!

Prayer could be private, but it was also common to see people performing their prayers in giant churches and temples.

When they grouped up for prayer, they were already conditioned by their priestesses or whatever to listen and align to a central thought or speaker!

Ves realized that these conditions exceeded his most ideal expectations. Perhaps he could hijack this conditioning in order to maximize his experiment's chances of success!

The method wasn't important to Ves. Only the result mattered. Who cared if he took advantage of a faith he didn't believe in? These Penitent Sisters exhibited the most unity when they were engaged in their beliefs!

He decided to help guide them along as he prepared the spiritual building blocks of his first battle network. He began to speak through a communication channel.

"Open yourself up to the Superior Mother. Feel her splendor in the idol that is sitting before you. The mother is all-knowing and all-powerful. Her wrath is terrible but her kindness is endless. As the nurturer of sons and daughters, you are her child. Surrender yourself to her glow and accept her as your caretaker."

The neural readings slightly improved. The readings of different Penitent Sisters began to sync up even more, which showed that his measures were working!

He continued to speak random nonsense to sustain their current states.

"A true Hexer is never filled with hate. A Hexer is filled with love. Out of every possible Hexer, mothers bear the most love of all. Don't restrain yourself. Accept the Superior Mother's embrace, because she holds enough love for everyone. With love, everything can be forgiven. Even the damned such as you are worthy to earn her redemption as

long as you accept her love. Embrace the power of love and become her first anointed heralds!"

Ves began to concentrate and began to make contact with the Superior Mother.

It was still dormant, which was good. Ves would never pull something off on his mother if she was still awake.

Normally, a powerful spiritual entity would have blocked and repelled any foreign entity that drew close.

Not Ves.

He was both her father and her child. These dual familiar relations caused the Superior Mother unconscious instincts to adopt a very warm posture towards his arrival.

Ves smiled. This was exactly what he wanted to see. He needed his mother to be clueless in order to proceed with the next step of his plan.

After making sure that the Superior Mother hadn't secretly woken up or anything, he finally made his move.

He began to touch his mother! He began to manipulate the exterior of her spiritual body without any regard for propriety. All he wanted to do now was to manipulate some of her spiritual essence and shape it into a form that was capable of supporting his first battle network!

Ves had no idea if she would wake up or turn hostile due to his spiritual molestations, so he began to work faster and rougher.

The Superior Mother's sleeping essence began to shake and convulse as if her unconscious spirit detected something amiss.

"Damnit! Keep sleeping! I'm not done yet! Let me plant you with my battle network before you kick me out!"

#### *Chapter 2365: Regal Mother*

Something extraordinary took place. Commander Chancy, Juliet and several other Penitent Sisters who were standing by or monitoring the readings each felt as if the Superior Mother had descended from the beyond!

The small idol of the Superior Mother actively radiated the ancestral spirit's glow. Ripples of activity emanated from it. The ten chosen Penitent Sister mech pilots each prostrated themselves before the totem.

To them, this experience had transcended anything they had ever experienced in their lives! Not even the most solemn hexism ceremonies where they witnessed boys being impaled alive topped the majesty and profoundness of this deceptively bare and simple occasion!

The power of glows transcended any religious trappings. Churches, hymns, artwork and scripture were mere window dressing compared to direct exposure that the gullible Hexers mistook as a deific figure!

The control room adjacent to the testing chamber was no different. Not only did the glow emanating from the idol bleed over to the surrounding compartments, Ves began to appear as if he had become a channel for the Superior Mother as well!

This made the Penitent Sister Commander and her subordinates believe that something unprecedentedly holy was taking place. Some operators even forgot about their duties and began to kneel on the deck in order to demonstrate their sincere devotion to the boy who carried the blessing of the Superior Mother.

Not a single Penitent Sister present in the control room harbored any further doubts towards Ves! He was truly the son of the Superior Mother. As a boy who received the nurturing of the best mother in the multiverse, there was no way they could treat Ves like any other regular boy.

In their perspective, he transcended the idiotic boyiness typical to his gender and had reached a greater status! Despite his youth, he was as wise and mature as a woman!

"He is truly blessed." Someone muttered with awe.

"I want to bask in the Superior Mother's presence every day."

"It's possible as long as we follow her holy son. We can't look down on the Larkinson Clan anymore."

Many of the Hexers here had already experienced a gradual shift in ideology. It wasn't much of a stretch for them to extend some of the same high regard they held towards the Supreme to Ves. After all, he was unquestionably her son, and that was enough for them to set aside most of their usual biases against boys!

In this profound moment, Ves wasn't thinking about his effect on the exiled Hexers at all. Instead, he was frantically trying to plant the framework of his battle network inside the Superior Mother as fast as possible.

"Stop shaking so much! Can't you just go back to sleep like a good mommy?"

From the moment he found out that the Superior Mother's spiritual makeup did not reject his touch, he eagerly dove in with his spiritual projections.



What he tried to do was in essence similar to what he did to the spiritual foundations of his mech designs. He attempted to create a new spiritual construct from the Superior Mother's own existence.

Not only that, but he also wanted the spiritual construct to be alive and capable of growth. For this reason, he donated a copious amount of his own spiritual energy. By steadily inserting his essence into his mother, the two slowly conceived a new form of life.

"This is it! This is what I want!"

Ves became more enchanted by the creation process. As someone whose domain largely centered around life, the act of creation always satisfied him to no end.

He lived for this experience.

Creating anything, whether it was a mech, mech design, spiritual product or whatever else, was an act filled with meaning. It was a process where disorder slowly made way for a certain kind of order.

His excitement was compounded by the fact that he was creating a new life by using his mother as a carrier. Normally, an entity as strong as the Superior Mother possessed her own pride.

Although Ves could easily approach Qilanxo and ask her to gift him a spiritual fragment every now and then, he had no illusion that she would refuse to allow him to manipulate her spiritual essence.

The spirit was the foundation of a sentient being's life! This was especially the case for entities that somehow managed to transcend their mortal coil!

Perhaps Ves might have better luck with his own spiritual products, but not everyone was as open to him as the likes of the Golden Cat.

Someone as proud, domineering and imperious as the Superior Mother would have never allowed him to get close enough to touch her without a good reason.

It was a good thing she was dormant at the moment. The ancestral spirit had never woken up after her birth. Ves chalked it up to his mother's attempt to turn the Superior Mother into her 'incarnation'.

While Ves rapidly built up the spiritual construct, his intuition warned him of an approaching threat.

For some reason, he began to feel a sense of growing doom. What he was doing clearly irritated the unconscious Superior Mother. Her spirituality continued to ripple and convulse as if it slowly became apparent that Ves was up to no good!

"Damn, I need to hurry up before something happens!"

He threw all caution to the wind and thrust his spiritual projections deeper. He rapidly completed the framework of his prototypical battle network with little regard for the flaws and imperfections that showed up. He didn't really mind them. While they made the battle network less efficient, they also added character and uniqueness to the living spiritual construct.

As long as it was allowed to grow, the living spiritual product could either outgrow or transform these flaws!

Just fifteen minutes passed when Ves hastily ended his task. In the end, Ves managed to create an embedded living spiritual construct that took on the form of a crown!

Yes, a crown!

This crown instantly gave an even more dignified image to the Superior Mother. Due to the special nature of the spiritual construct, the new head ornament did not look quite solid. Instead, it gave off an ethereal and mist-like vibe.

As the living construct was not active at the moment, the crown looked very dim and almost unnoticeable. If not for his keen spiritual senses, he would have thought the crown had disappeared!

Ves barely had time to admire the creation he conceived before the Superior Mother finally couldn't take the violation any longer.

The unconscious spirit released a strong pulse that instantly crushed his spiritual projections and broke his concentration!

"Agh!"

The pulse was so strong that Ves immediately collapsed to the deck as if his mother had pressed him down. At the same time, both his body and the small idol leaked out the aftershocks of the violent pulse, causing every Hexer in the vicinity to experience the Superior Mother's might directly to the point of taking a few steps back!

"Amazing! The Superior Mother has blessed us! We are truly fortunate to have received her attention!"

"I will dedicate my life to worshipping her from now on! No matriarch has ever conveyed as much power as her. I have been worshipping the wrong Hexers all this time!"

As the Hexers all became enthralled by the magical moment they had just experienced, Ves was not feeling so good.

Mother or not, the punishment she inflicted on him dealt quite a bit of damage to him. With the accumulated worship of billions of Hexers, the ancestral spirit had rapidly grown stronger.

Just an unconscious pulse was enough to give him a gnawing headache!

The shattering of all of his spiritual projections along with the shock to his mind made it difficult for him to perform any further spiritual exertion.

The pain was no less than getting kicked in the nuts!

Couldn't his mother be a bit more gentle? She was his child, after all! He birthed her and breathed life into her! Why was it strange for him to touch her and knead her spiritual essence in order to fashion a new addition?

Still, punishment aside, he succeeded in his endeavor. The crown had taken shape and the Superior Mother did not appear to reject the new addition.

As the ancestral spirit slowly entered into a deeper sleep, Ves finally shrugged off most of his aches and lifted himself up to his feet.

He looked around but saw that he didn't need to be worried. Commander Chancy and the rest were so absorbed by their own experiences that they hardly took notice of his moment of weakness.

"Well, the first phase is over. Let's move on to the next one."

That surprised some of the Penitent Sisters.

"It isn't over yet?"

"This is just the setup! In fact, I thought I would have been able to complete the next phase, but my mother's patience isn't endless."

He miscalculated. Before he was ready to take the next step, his mother slapped him away!

This also made his next step a bit difficult. Right now, the ten test subjects who were supposed to be the first Penitent Sisters to connect to the battle network were still unchanged.

After managing the situation at the control room, Ves decided to complete the next step right away.

He entered the testing chamber and approached the mech lieutenant that led her unit.

"Sir." The Hexer bent her head as she remained on her knees.

Though the idol of the Superior mother no longer pulsed so vividly, it still radiated a firm but gentle glow.

Ves didn't bother calling her up her feet. Instead, he placed his palm on her head. His fingers sank lightly into her red hair that she had tied into a short ponytail.

"Please stay calm and keep thinking about the Superior Mother. You have witnessed her love, right? Now think about embracing it. As long as your mind is clear and your heart is pure, I will allow you to bond with her to a greater degree than before. Are you willing to become her adopted daughter?"

The Penitent Sister's lieutenant's eyes lit up! "Yes! I do! I shall give everything to receive this supreme honor!"

"Then close your eyes and prepare yourself. I don't know what will happen next, but you will likely feel some sort of disturbance. Don't resist. Open yourself up to the Superior Mother. No matter how much pain you feel, it will be alright in the end as long as you are sincere. Are you ready?"

The Hexer clasped her hands together and looked more earnest than she had ever been in her life!

"I am ready."

Ves began to feel her mind through his touch and sensed that she was a typical mech pilot without spiritual potential. Only a tiny, intangible mote of spirituality was present in her mind. Though weak, it was still potent enough to sustain a human experience.

How was he supposed to connect this little spark to his new battle network?

Ordinarily, Ves would have asked his mother to extend a connection to his test subject, but she was not very responsive at the moment.

Maybe he didn't need to bother with these solutions. His spiritual energy was already highly compatible with her own spiritual energy. This meant that it shouldn't matter much whose energy he used.

Ves began to create a new spiritual projection in the form of a very thin and long string. He 'tied' one end to his test subject. Though the woman frowned a bit and showed some signs of wanting to shrug it off, in the end her strong belief caused her to stay still.

Even so, the connection didn't seem to hold very much. Before his spiritual string disconnected from his test subject, Ves quickly cast the other end to the Superior Mother's crown.

The crown seemed to sense the approaching string. Due to its nature as a battle network, it automatically sensed that a very compatible mind was connected to the end.

The living spiritual construct began to follow the programming that Ves had instilled into it. The crown magically attracted the string and tied it to its structure, thereby establishing its first connection to a human!

A shudder ran through the Penitent Sister lieutenant's body.

"I can feel something!"

"What do you feel?"

The woman opened her eyes in astonishment. "I feel.. connected to her! She is so powerful!"

Ves released his hand from her head and grinned. The connection was stable!

#### *Chapter 2366: Thick Connections*

After establishing the first connection, he used the same crude method to connect the remainder of the squad members to the Superior Mother's new crown. Though it felt strange to use his own spiritual energy to make these bonds, he didn't have any other choice.

The moment he made these connections, the test subjects barely changed. Aside from gaining a bit more awareness towards the Superior Mother, they still remained normal.

This was by design.

To Ves, a battle network served a different purpose than the Larkinson Network.

The latter was a means to unify different clansmen and warn them of any traitors in their midst. It did not play a direct role in battle, though Ves might be able to change that when he upgraded the network in the future.

Still, due to its central importance, Ves was very reluctant to mess with something so profound. He was more inclined to create different networks that served specific roles.

For now, it appeared that the battle network that he had fashioned had finally come into being! Though he only connected ten Penitent Sister mech pilots to the network, there should still be room for more. If the crown ever reached its maximum capacity, then Ves

merely had to wait for the living spiritual construct to grow in order to accommodate more connections.

Unlike the Larkinson Network or the unnamed network that allowed the Superior Mother to connect to every Hexer, a battle network was much smaller in scope.

Battle networks had to be robust, so Ves wanted to make sure it reinforced its connections to its mech pilots as much as possible. It had to withstand external disturbances and had to withstand any attempts to cut them off. After all, suddenly losing connection to the network while in the middle of an active battle could prove fatal to the mech pilots involved!

A battle network also had to empower the participants involved to a substantially greater extent.

The Larkinson Network only established a relatively modest connection to the members of the clan. The bandwidth of these thin connections wasn't all that impressive.

A battle network on the other hand was capable of maintaining significantly greater bonds. Even now, the Superior Mother's crown was already nourishing the bonds that Ves had made.

What made a battle network stand out even more was the fact that it was only active when it needed to be. Outside of battle, it would remain dormant and accumulate energy. Only when the members of the networks all deployed together in battle and formed into a cohesive unit would the crown begin to truly activate the connections!

Not only would the Penitent Sister mech pilots in question be able to form an active bond with the Superior Mother, her crown also enabled them to connect to each other!

This was Ves' attempt to form a spiritual equivalent of Master Huron's neural network. With the Superior Mother acting as both the system administrator and the source of power, Ves had high expectations for the battle network in its active state!

There were still a lot of uncertainties, though. Due to his insufficient theoretical foundation in spirituality, he had to leave many areas ambiguous and open to adaptation. How exactly the battle network was supposed to augment the mech pilots in battle, Ves truly didn't know. He kind of left that problem to the Superior Mother. As an inherent spiritual entity, she was capable of exerting these kinds of effects with much greater proficiency.

If Ves attempted to come up with something on his own, his solution would likely be flawed and filled with loopholes. He decided not to take the rest and simply left it up to the Superior Mother to fill in the blanks however she wanted.

Whether her method of empowerment was strong or weak didn't matter too much for Ves. He just wanted this experiment to produce some solid results and confirm his theories.

As long as this battle network produced plenty of results, Ves would be in a much better position to design more refined battle networks for some of his other mech forces!

It didn't take too long for the crown to complete the reinforcements of all of the bonds. Ves had only involved ten test subjects so far, so it didn't require that much work.

Ves clapped his hands. "Alright, let us see whether you have truly become her adopted daughters. Please suit up and board your mechs. Once you sortie into space, please stand by. You need to mentally prepare yourselves to reach out to the Superior Mother, just like before. The test can't proceed if you are too distracted. It's important that each of you have her in your mind, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

Some Penitent Sisters guided the mech pilots away. Meanwhile, Ves followed Commander Chancy to the expansive bridge of the Surly Cockatrice.

The two remained silent for most of the walk. They passed through various corridors where a number of Penitent Sisters looked a bit surprised at his presence.

Though some of them looked hostile, the intensity of those piercing stares were much less than he would have received a few months ago. It seemed that every single Hexer on this ship had already become affected by the Superior Mother's alternate ideology.

Just as planned.

"What can we expect to see now that you have.. done whatever it is you did?" Commander Chancy reluctantly asked.

"That is up to the Superior Mother and the devotion of your mech pilots. The conditions of what I have been trying to accomplish are fairly harsh. There is a chance that we won't see any meaningful differences. Still, as long as your mech pilots are at least somewhat willing to surrender themselves to the Supreme, then we should at least see something different."

"I will make sure my mech pilots have received this message. Not that I doubt them at all. After experiencing that unforgettable moment, I don't think any of the mech pilots in question possess any remaining doubts!"

That was true. Though Ves disdained the religious-themed theatrics he resorted to, he had to admit it was extraordinarily effective against these Hexer fanatics. The more bombastic the ritual, the more extensively the Penitent Sisters bought into his illusion!



The fact that all of the show and dance was based on falsehoods did not bother Ves at all. He saw it as an effective way of achieving his goal.

Having studied and taken inspiration from Master Huron's work, he knew that it was of the utmost importance to align the mech pilots involved as closely as possible.

The Fridaymen who piloted Master Huron's work mainly drew from their strong camaraderie and distinct esprit de corps to maintain this condition.

Ves partially chose to start his experiment with the Penitent Sisters because they too possessed these two essential traits.

What Ves did differently from Master Huron was that he added another element that was capable of centering the mech pilots even further.

By connecting the minds and spirits to the Superior Mother's crown, they all gained a very simple condition.

As long as they centered their thoughts around the Superior Mother, they didn't have to resort to other more ambiguous thoughts in order to align themselves. By opening themselves up to the Superior Mother, they became much more receptive to the battle network's input.

Would the results exceed Master Huron's work? Ves wasn't sure. It was extremely arrogant for him to believe that a Journeyman like him could essentially outcompete a Master Mech Designer in this area.

Besides, what little Ves knew about Master Huron's was only what the public knew. The Fridayman Master doubtlessly worked on many other projects, some of which were still classified and others that had never seen the light of day.

For all Ves knew, the neural networks that were known to the public were simply the most superficial application of Huron's work.

He shook his head. He had no reason to compare himself to a Master Mech Designer at his stage. There was no shame in acknowledging that his efforts would definitely pale in comparison to Huron's better work. There was also no reason for him to feel any undeserved pride for thinking that he exceeded a Master at his own game.

All Ves wanted was to invent a new method to strengthen his combat forces for the upcoming battle. With very severe time, resource, manpower and industrial capacity constraints, he didn't have a lot of ways to lessen the disparity between his mechs and the warships fielded by the pirates.

This was why he engaged in something as risky as trying to form a battle network. Even though everything proceeded well so far, Ves knew that his attempt could have easily ended up in disaster if any of the steps went awry.

Fortunately, the connections he forged between the test subjects and the Superior Mother remained healthy and stable.

While the crown was in its inactive state, the connections were essentially closed. Other than feeling a hint of the Superior Mother's majesty, the connected mech pilots didn't feel anything different. At most, this small influence would have a subtle indoctrination effect.

Ves designed these bonds in this way for multiple reasons. First, he wanted to conserve energy. The thick bonds actually consumed quite a bit of energy in order to remain active. While the Superior Mother received a huge amount of spiritual feedback these days, Ves did not condone needless waste.

What if he expanded the battle network? What if he not only applied it to the Penitent Sisters, but also to a select number of soldiers of the Hex Army?

Ves already planned to apply the battle network in conjunction with a future Hexer mech design. He wanted to see how powerful a mech could be if it was designed with the battle network in mind from the ground up. The strengthened cohesion between mech, mech pilot and design spirit would definitely produce surprising results!

Unfortunately, that wouldn't be the case today. The Penitent Sisters only had access to lastgen second-class commercial mechs. Each of them were designed by Hexers, so there was no opportunity for Ves to take ownership of them unless he invested a lot of time in modifying each and every machine.

It was better this way. By leaving a living mech out of consideration, the upcoming test was much simpler. Only two real variables mattered this time. Ves closely monitored the mech pilots in order to see how aligned they were to each other.

Judging from their worshipful expressions as they entered their cockpits and waited their turn to deploy into space, Ves shouldn't have to worry too much.

The ritual that they had lived through was still very fresh in their minds. This was also why Ves wanted to hurry up and start the test right away.

The second variable that Ves paid attention to was the reaction of the Superior Mother. Since she was in an unconscious state, it was a bit of a mystery how her unconscious self would do with the battle network once it became active.

The worst outcome was that the Superior Mother remained unmoved. With channeling any spiritual energy through the network, there was no substance to it. The mech pilots wouldn't gain much power this way!

"I hope we'll see something."

Soon, the test went underway. After the squad of Penitent Sisters mechs flew further away, their mech pilots began to follow their instructions.

"Superior Mother, please grant me your power!"

"Aid us in battle, please!"

The mech pilots actively beseeched the Superior Mother. This was the way to activate the battle network.

The crown grew active a minute after receiving the signals. It glowed a little as it began to radiate some power. Even without the Superior Mother's conscious direction, she had automatically begun to divert some of her energy into the living spiritual construct.

The crown soon began to process and channel that energy through the connections!

Ves leaned forward to look at the projections of the mechs with attention.

"Is it working?"

#### *Chapter 2367: Close Alignment*

A lot of Penitent Sisters and Larkinsons were watching the squad of mechs. Many of them had heard that Ves was up to something again. They wondered what was special about these mechs that weren't assigned on any patrols.

Would they witness something similar to the last round of experiments? Back then, many of the Bright Warrior mechs that went through their paces performed better than usual.

Since then, the Bright Warriors that Ves enhanced from 25 percent to 100 percent saturation all continued to produce slightly greater results with each subsequent practice session.

The mechs themselves hadn't grown stronger, but the piloting ability of their mech pilots was definitely trending upwards!

Even though the improvement from day to day was rather light, the fact that the results were constantly growing higher was very notable. Ordinary training never yielded these kinds of smooth and continuous curves!

A lot of other mech pilots had begun to ask whether they too would be able to benefit from this magic. Which mech pilot didn't want to improve so fast on a daily basis?

Sadly, their superiors couldn't provide any answers. Ves already denied any requests to expand this program because he was only able to pull off this trick on LMC mechs.

The most he did was to expand the scope of this experiment to his other mech models such as the Aurora Titans and the Deliverer mechs. Ves skipped the Doom Guards because he didn't think it was a good idea to strengthen something so fearsome and because their numbers were too small to make a difference in the coming battle.

The results weren't as drastic as with the Bright Warriors. The Aurora Titan was a very sluggish defensive mech that didn't have a lot of agency. The skill involved in piloting them mainly revolved around spreading out the damage across its entire frame, avoiding damage to any critical components and managing the polarizer module wisely.

The Deliverer mechs didn't possess that many options either. They were very slow and fragile compared to normal ranged mechs. The only skill required to pilot them proficiently was to aim their weapons well and to open themselves up for any guidance that Ylvaine might provide.

Nevertheless, the growth characteristic alone caused many mech pilots to increase their appreciation of their own mechs. They felt as if their assigned machines became more and more intimate with them. The lucky mech pilots became more willing to entrust their lives to their improved mechs.

"Is something happening? It has been some time since our mechs deployed into space." Commander Chancy couldn't help but ask.

The Penitent Sister Commander had slowly overcome her awe at the ritual she witnessed. Her responsibilities as a leader asserted themselves, causing her to remain more sober than the rest of the Hexers who witnessed what had previously taken place.

"Don't be impatient." Ves answered as he continued to monitor the various projections. "This is the first time your women are doing something like this. It is too early to tell whether the Superior Mother can truly support them in battle as I originally envisioned."

Time continued to pass as the mech pilots earnestly prayed to the Superior Mother. While their earnest efforts successfully triggered the battle network, it wasn't doing anything!

Ves wanted to scratch his head. Right now, the crown attracted a fair amount of spiritual energy from his mother. The battle network even transformed it into a more usable form of power.

Yet after finishing all of these pre-programmed steps, the battle network appeared to have run out of instructions. In truth, this was the part where the ancestral spirit was supposed to take over and do something specific with the charged battle network.

"..."

It was as if Ves programmed a battle bot to enter a battlefield, only for the stupid machine to freeze in place because Ves hadn't loaded a combat AI into it. Without a guiding hand, there was no purpose to the active battle network!

Ves frowned deeper and deeper as the Superior Mother really didn't appear to be doing anything with her glowing crown. Perhaps it would be a different story if the spiritual entity was fully conscious, but that was not the case at the moment.

Should he wake her up?

That might not be a good idea. He sensed that a lot of transformations still took place inside the Superior Mother. Interrupting it might cause a lot of damage to his mother.

If his mother wasn't conscious, then how could he induce her to act?

Ves quickly began to think up a solution. Her state of dormancy was different from regular sleep. Even if the Superior Mother wasn't conscious, she still maintained the large and growing network of Hexers who had begun to revere the Supreme.

He recalled the time when he initially planted his battle network into her. He managed to arouse an unconscious reaction out of her by irritating her to a large degree.

Did this mean that if Ves had to act like a naughty boy again if he wanted his mother to do something?

His face grimaced. This was not a sustainable solution.

Ves looked back to the projections of the mech pilots inside their cockpits. He had hoped the faith and devotion of the Penitent Sister mech pilots would have been enough for the Superior Mother to make a move. Evidently, general worship was not sufficient to make her do something with her new crown.

"Maybe there has to be a purpose." Ves guessed.

If his test subjects weren't in danger, there was no reason for the battle network to make a move. As its name suggested, its only purpose was to empower mech pilots in battle.

Ves began to open a channel to Commander Melkor.

"What is it, Ves?"

"I need you to send out a mech company of Bright Warriors and as many Doom Guards that your Avatars can scramble in a short amount of time."

"I can do that, but what do you want to do with them? Is it related to your current activity?"

He nodded. "I have done something to some of the Penitent Sisters. If it works out, I may have established another method of strengthening some of our forces. The only problem is that it is only supposed to be active during battle. I need your mechs to pressure the squad of the Penitent Sister mechs. Try to make their mech pilots feel distressed. The greater the threat, the greater this trial will yield a result!"

"Understood. Do you want to send out any of our expert candidates? Joshua is available."

"No." Ves shook his head. He didn't want to add too many variables to the equation. "Just regular mech pilots will do. Send them over quickly."

The Avatars of Myth soon dispatched a full squad of Bright Warriors as well as a motley collection of Doom Guards.

To be honest, the Larkinson Clan did not make extensive use of the striker mechs. They were not only troublesome to work with, but they possessed limited mobility. The Avatars especially disdained the striker mech because much of their doctrine was based around maneuver warfare.

The mechs that Ves requested flew over to the Penitent Sister mechs that Ves was keeping an eye on. Shortly afterwards, Commander Chancy and Commander Melkor agreed on how to conduct a spar.

The Bright Warriors in rifleman mech configuration soon began to fire their laser rifles at the Penitent Sister mechs.

The Doom Guards drew closer in order to pressure the Hexer mech pilots with their glows.

The melee Bright Warrior mechs circled around their targets and occasionally darted in to launch their attacks before drawing back.

The Penitent Sister mech pilots were instantly forced to take control of their mechs to fend off the sustained assaults. While their powerful mechs easily endured the weak attacks, they still felt enough of a threat to feel compelled to defend themselves!

Neither side inflicted any serious damage towards each other. This wasn't the first time the Penitent Sisters sparred against the weaker mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

Though neither side tried to kill each other, the pressure was very real to the mech pilots engaged in the spar.

Over sixty mechs circled and attacked the ten Penitent Sister mechs. There was no way the latter felt comfortable under these circumstances!

The glows of the Doom Guards were especially helpful in giving the Penitent Sisters a greater sense of threat. As these striker mechs grew closer, the Penitent Sister mech pilots began to feel an increasing amount of genuine distress!

"Superior Mother, please show your might!"

Ves stirred as he sensed a change. Though his test subjects were trying their best to fend off the frequent attacks, their growing urgency finally sparked a reaction from the battle network.

The Superior Mother's crown began to shine! A small amount of power began to flow through the connections. Instantly, the mech pilots connected to the battle network seemed to come alive in a way that Ves had never witnessed before!

"Something is happening!"

The life signs of all of the mech pilots rose as their minds became involved in a mysterious process. Ves tried to extend his spiritual senses, but he was too far away to glean much detail.

All he could see right now was that the Penitent Sister mechs hadn't stopped at all. Instead, they fought back more ferociously than a minute ago. The intensity of their counterattacks not only grew greater, but they also began to reposition themselves!

"This is not one of our standard formations." Commander Chancy frowned.

The way the ten mechs repositioned themselves reminded Ves of a cross surrounded by a hexagon. The definition of this image wasn't very high with just ten mechs, but he could easily imagine it would look a lot more impressive with more machines.

Just as Ves questioned the purpose of this odd formation, something profound took place.

The battle network went hyperactive and channeled a lot more spiritual energy all of a sudden!

If all of that energy was being dumped into his test subjects, their heads would have exploded by now!



The only reason why that didn't happen was that the battle network was channeling that energy elsewhere. Ves vaguely sensed something grand and powerful coming into being.

"Something is happening! Are.. are those mechs glowing?"

"Is it resonance?"

"No, ma'am! The resonance meters aren't moving!"

"Then why does it look so similar? Is this false resonance? That's impossible! Those mechs don't incorporate any resonating materials!"

While the Penitent Sisters all became confused by the vaguely familiar phenomena, Ves widened his eyes.

With his spiritual senses, he understood what was happening.

Normally, expert pilots exerted their power by resonating with their mechs.

What was happening right now was similar, but different! The same kind of resonance took place but with different actors involved.

Instead of resonating with their mechs, his test subjects were instead resonating with themselves and the Superior Mother!

The glows around the mechs began to expand and diffuse over a greater area. The Larkinson mechs attacking the Penitent Sisters couldn't help but slow their attacks.

"What is going on?"

"Are they all simultaneously turning into expert candidates?"

That wasn't the case, but it was difficult to fault their misconceptions. The glow surrounding the mechs became so bright it began to encompass the entire formation and beyond!

Soon, Ves felt as if all of the power from the Superior Mother began to manifest in something substantial. After a few seconds, the enormous ring of light turned into a vague silhouette of the Superior Mother herself!

"The Superior Mother is with us!"

Before Ves or anyone else could step in, the Penitent Sister mechs simultaneously moved. Their odd formation darted forward and smashed all of the Bright Warrior mechs aside with undaunted force!

Despite their Breyer alloy armor plating, the affected Bright Warriors sustained severe damage, much to Ves' consternation!

What was surprising about this sudden attack run wasn't just the added power exerted by the mechs. The giant silhouette of the Superior Mother actually attempted to strike as well!

Fortunately for the Avatar mechs, the glowing apparition failed to inflict any material damage.

"Women are superior!" The test subjects simultaneously exulted.

Just as their formation turned around to launch another attack run, the battle network suddenly reached some sort of limit. The glowing apparition rapidly diminished and the Penitent Sister mechs all lost their glows!

A lot of observing people looked dismayed. While the effect seemed powerful, the duration was too short!

It didn't matter much to Ves. He had already seen enough proof that his battle network actually worked! Even if it didn't look very practical, he could always refine this new innovation later.

"This experiment is a success!"

*Chapter 2368: Impractical*

After the spectacle ended, the investigation had begun.

Something completely new and unprecedented took place. After aligning themselves to the Superior Mother, the test subjects managed to get in sync with the Superior Mother and each other. What happened next confounded Ves and those who observed the proceedings.

After adopting a certain pattern, a strange insubstantial apparition of the Superior Mother superimposed itself over the formation. This silhouette acted as if it was alive and moved according to the actions of the mechs that made up the formation.

"Or is it the other way around?" Ves frowned and wondered.

He wondered who was in control in the brief interval of time when the odd phenomenon ran its course. Had some part of the Superior Mother directed the mechs to attack according to her will? Or had the collective of Penitent Sister mech pilots pooled their minds together into some kind of gestalt will that provided unified direction?

He had so many questions that he didn't know where to begin!

After studying the data recorded in the logs and finding nothing of use, he knew that the phenomenon that took place was largely spiritual in nature. The mechs did not play a major role other than serving as tools.

Ves wondered whether the battle network would perform more impressively if he connected living mechs to it. That was something to consider for later. First, he needed to get to the bottom of the first successful trial.

"It's quite strange." He frowned. "The Superior Mother expended a substantial amount of energy, but where did it go?"

He did notice that the offensive might and the momentum of the mechs had increased. That was a real gain and something that could really make a difference during critical moments.

The problem was that Ves didn't think it was worth it! From an efficiency standpoint, the yield was so abominably bad that Gloriana would literally tear her hair out if she knew how much energy the battle network actually wasted!

"Is it truly wasted, though?"

He couldn't really tell so far. He only witnessed the battle network becoming active once and at a very healthy distance. For the subsequent trials, he needed to observe from a closer vantage point in order to glean more details on where most of the energy disappeared.

One potential destination was the insubstantial energy silhouette that had spontaneously emerged after all of the affected mechs released some sort of radiance. While their glows resembled the visual resonance phenomena unleashed by expert mechs, they were different in nature.

At the very least, the energy silhouettes for a lack of better description were not infused by any will.

This wasn't a big surprise. The Penitent Sister mech pilots taking part in the experiment were all spiritually weak like most normal people. That was good, because Ves mostly sought a way to empower the majority of his mech pilots who weren't as gifted in spirituality.

The entire point of centering the battle network around the Superior Mother was to draw the energy needed to boost mech pilots from a potent source.

While he managed to accomplish this goal, he has not sufficiently accounted for what happened next. It was not as if he had much choice as he was truly clueless on how to transform the energy into something useful. He left that up to the Superior Mother and her new crown, but evidently they weren't as competent as he hoped.

"It's like going through all that trouble developing an exquisite expert mech only to let a dummy like Vincent pilot it. All of that work and effort is wasted!"

All of this resulted in a short burst of power that was only marginally useful in the larger scheme of things. No matter how impressive the formation and the energy silhouette looked, it was mostly smoke and mirrors.

Once the exhausted test subjects returned their mechs to the Surly Cockatrice, Ves instructed the Penitent Sisters to set the women aside and perform extensive checkups on their conditions.

They were largely fine. Their exhaustion was largely mental in nature. There was nothing wrong with their bodies aside from getting overexcited.

When Ves met with the test subjects in a debriefing room, he briefly interviewed them on an individual basis.

He placed the idol of the Superior Mother on the table, causing his interviewees to become a lot more earnest and respectable.

There was no way these fanatics would attempt to lie or withhold any information in the presence of such an obvious icon!

"What did you feel during this period of time?" Ves asked as he projected a recording of the time just before the mechs moved into an odd formation.

"I'm not sure." The Penitent Sister mech pilot honestly answered. "I wasn't quite aware of myself. My memories of that time are a little fuzzy. I don't know why I instructed my mech to move into a formation that I have never learned. I guess.. the Superior Mother may have told me to do this, but not with words. It just.. comes to me.

She became enchanted as she shifted her gaze to idol. Pure awe and worship filled her eyes.

Ves stretched out his hand and snapped his fingers. "Hey! Don't get lost on me yet! You can do whatever you want when you are released, but until then please answer my questions."

He asked a raft of other questions. He asked what she thought about the formation, where the strange radiant glow came from, how her mech was able to exert power beyond its technical specs and why the phenomenon suddenly cut off after a single pass.

"I think I remember.." She said as she watched the footage of the formation suddenly breaking apart and the energy silhouette disappearing shortly afterwards. "I think the strain got to me and my Sisters. We came closer than ever to the Superior Mother, but

she's simply too strong. I.. always imagined that a Supreme was strong, but feeling it up close like this is something else! I truly cannot describe how little I felt in front of her majesty."

Ves heard the same answers from the other test pilots. Each of them had come close to the Superior Mother somehow but couldn't withstand the strain of staying in her presence.

After the round of interviews ended, Ves went over what he heard and tried to extract as many clues, insights and patterns as possible.

"It's rather simple." He whispered to himself. "The mech pilots are unable to harness so much power. It's similar to my previous experiment."

Back when he enhanced the spiritual foundations of his Bright Warriors, he discovered that weaker mech pilots were simply unable to bear the strain.

In his enthusiasm in increasing the bandwidth of the individual connections of the battle network, he overlooked the fact that the recipients might not be able to bear so much power!

Ves palmed his face. "I made a mistake."

Despite this oversight, he was very satisfied with how the first iteration of the battle network turned out. The initial test may have failed to showcase the practical application of his new invention, but he glimpsed a lot of potential behind it. As long as he worked out the flaws, the battle networks he intended to introduce would definitely make a difference in the upcoming battle!

There were several areas that Ves thought he should work on to refine the battle network concept.

First, he needed to uncover why the energy conversion was so inefficient. Where was all of it going?

Second, he had to figure out what was up with the energy silhouette. Was it being directed by the Superior Mother's consciousness?

Third, he had to increase the load-bearing capacity of the affected mech pilots when an active battle network brought them closer to the source of power.

Ves went to work immediately on these issues.

The last one was the easiest for him to address.

"If ten mech pilots can't bear the load, what if there are forty mech pilots? If normal mech pilots aren't strong enough, what if there are stronger mech pilots in the mix?"

The energy channeled by the battle network was substantial. The Superior Mother was also a rapidly-growing spiritual energy who was quickly nearing Qilanxo in strength.

Ves had high expectations for the ancestral spirit's future growth. This was because unlike other design spirits, the Superior Mother actively attracted the worship of hundreds, if not thousands of Hexer expert pilots!

Though the Superior Mother only absorbed a tiny amount of high-quality spiritual feedback, if every expert pilot in the service of the Hex Army took part, then the quantity was definitely considerable!

Normal people normally wouldn't be threatened if they came in close proximity to such a powerful spiritual entity, but it was different this time. The battle network forged a direct connection between a mech pilot and the Superior Mother. This bypassed much of the usual defenses that ordinarily protected the former.

"This is troublesome, but not insurmountable."

The first test only involved ten mech pilots. If he expanded the number of participants to a full mech company, he hypothesized that the strain on them would be diluted to an extent.

He began to organize a second test. This time, he expanded the battle network by connecting it to the remaining thirty mech pilots of the Third Spaceborn Mech Company of the Penitent Sisters.

Some of them happened to possess spiritual potential. Ves set these handful of mech pilots aside in order to control for this variable. He didn't want to involve them too early.

"Commence the second test!"

They repeated the first trial on a larger scale this time. Three mech companies of Avatars mustered forward to spar and induce a sense of crisis onto the Penitent Sisters.

After praying earnestly to the Superior Mother while they tried to keep their mechs together, more than thirty-five Penitent Sisters simultaneously began to adopt a formation.

"This formation is different from the one before!" Commander Chancy remarked. "It's more defensive in nature!"

The battle network had become active! With the Superior Mother's grown radiating power, her energy flowed through the connections. A familiar energy silhouette came into being but largely did nothing except look impressive.

Ves studied it for a small moment before focusing on the mechs. The formation they adopted this time vaguely resembled multilayered diamond-like hexahedrons. The mechs on the outside exhibited measurably greater defenses. Their energy consumption also lessened beyond what they should be! It was as if the formation had turned into a castle!

After a certain period of time, the mechs on the outer periphery rotated with the mechs inside the diamond. This caused the pressure on some of the mechs to decrease while letting more rested machines hold the line.

All the while, the energy silhouette of the Superior Mother seemingly adopted an inward, reactive posture. Even as the Bright Warrior mechs accidentally flew through her insubstantial body, the silhouette did not make any moves to attack as before.

Commande Chancy studied the positions and the rotations that were periodically taking place. "This is an attrition-oriented formation. Have you noticed that this time it is lasting longer?"

"I have."

Right now, Ves couldn't tell whether this was due to the added mech pilots or because the nature of the formation was different.

Regardless, he noticed that the formation still wasted a lot of energy. The difference it made was not negligible, but it was not enough to satisfy his expectations for the battle network.

After roughly thirteen minutes, the formation fizzled out. Some of the Penitent Sisters finally reached the end of their mental endurance and were unable to keep their thoughts aligned with the Superior Mother and their fellow comrades.

"Alright, the test has come to an end!"

The second test proceeded differently from the first. Ves felt a bit annoyed that the battle network induced the mech pilots to adopt a different formation this time. The effects were different, which meant he couldn't make direct comparisons!

"Goddamn it, do I need to run this experiment again and again? How many formations do you have, mother?"



### *Chapter 2369: Refining Formations*

Ves began to perform over forty successive tests. Each time, he deployed a varying amount of Penitent Sister mech pilots. After stimulating the Superior Mother's crown, they spontaneously adopted different formations depending on their circumstances.

It turned out that the Superior Mother was able to induce six different formations, each of which corresponded to the six phases of existence.

For example, the first test exhibited the last phase of existence. The formation based around the supremacy of women was capable of unleashing a strong burst of power. Unfortunately, without the requisite strength and number of mech pilots, the woman-oriented formation was very draining.

The second test showcased the fourth phase of existence. Apparently, the formation based around the damnation that every life form had to go through was oriented around beating attrition and outlasting the enemy.

The remaining four formations each excelled in different aspects. Where they actually came from was a mystery. Ves didn't think they came from Cynthia Larkinson. She may be many things, but he was pretty sure she didn't know anything about mechs, either from a pilot or designer's perspective.

Perhaps the ancestral spirit derived these formations from all the mech pilots she came in touch with during or after her creation. Ves still recalled the many mech pilots that took part in the ritual that birthed her. Subsequently, all of the bonds the Superior Mother formed with her worshippers may have also given her insights on formation and mech combat.

"I could be wrong, though."

There was something very odd about these formations that he couldn't quite figure out yet. Commander Chancy already confirmed to Ves that it was unlikely that any Hexer outfits or military mech regiments utilized any of these formations.

When the Penitent Sisters tried to recreate the formations without activating the battle network, nothing unusual happened. The formations were decent but did not bestow any abnormal advantages.

Without any spiritual shenanigans, the formations lacked meaning.

It took a lot of trials to gain these extensive results.

Just a single mech company wasn't enough to engage with the battle network over and over again. Seeing as none of the Penitent Sisters who maintained a thick connection

with the battle network suffered any maladies, Ves decided to throw all caution to the wind and connected every other Penitent Sister mech pilot to the same network!

With hundreds of test subjects to work with, Ves no longer had to wait until the participants of his tests had recovered from their mental and spiritual exhaustion. He could rotate a fresh batch of mech pilots on a continuous basis.

It only took two days for Ves to gather an ample amount of data.

Perhaps his most surprising finding was that the inclusion of just a single mech pilot with spiritual potential made a huge difference in the load-bearing capacity of the unit that was channeling a formation.

The duration of the formations doubled and in some cases tripled after the inclusion of mech pilots with spiritual potential. Whether this was because spiritual-active mech pilots redirected much of the burden to themselves or because of other factors, Ves wasn't sure. He was just glad that his latest innovation had become a lot more practical now that it was capable of lasting longer!

This wasn't all. Any spiritually-active mech pilot was not only capable of enduring more strain, but also gained greater awareness during the process!

This was an important discovery! Any mech pilot that managed to avoid getting subsumed by the Superior Mother's vast presence was able to actively nudge the formation to act in a certain manner more conducive to the battle at hand.

This effectively meant that the formation gained significantly more purpose and direction. Although the difference was rather subtle, it hinted that stronger mech pilots might be able to gain an even greater voice in the battle network!

Was this the principle behind Master Huron's asymmetrical neural networks?

It was too bad that the Penitent Sisters didn't boast a single expert candidate or expert pilot. He would have to form a new network centered around the Swordmaidens in order to explore this research direction.

In any case, through all of these successive tests, he and the Penitent Sisters slowly understood some of the rules behind the formations and how to make better use of them in battle.

When Ves met with Commander Chancy to review their conclusions, he handed her a modest list of mech pilots.

Chancy reviewed the names on the data pad. "Are these the mech pilots that are capable of extending the duration of the formations?"

Ves nodded. "They are all special and worthy of greater investment. Even if you don't do anything with them, it is still useful to spread them out among your mech companies."

"What happens if we concentrate them in a single unit?"

"Adding more will lengthen the duration of the special formations even further, but not by much. In fact, I think it's wasteful to add more than two special mech pilots in a single formation."

This was because while the additional spiritually-active mech pilots could channel much of the energy flowing through the battle network, they couldn't do much to help the remaining mech pilots withstand the Superior Mother's presence.

Maybe it would be different if Ves threw an expert candidate or expert pilot in the mix. Their strength gave them the capital to resist the powerful pressure of a strong spiritual entity, and their force of wills might interact with the battle network in a surprisingly different fashion.

Commander Chancy decided to accept Ves' recommendation. She intended to distribute the mech pilots on the list evenly across all of her mech companies. That way, their formations would all be able to last a decent amount of time.

"Do you have a name for this mysterious blessing?" She asked.

"Hmmm..."

Ves hesitated for a bit. He hadn't really thought about it yet. He was tempted to call the phenomenon a battle network, but he didn't want to reveal more than what was necessary.

If any outsiders heard this name, they would definitely conclude that Ves ripped off Master Huron's work.

While it wasn't shameful to take inspiration from other people's work, doing so without attribution or without respecting the source was deeply troublesome.

Ves did not wish to make use of the word network at all. He had always spoken vaguely about the Larkinson Network because he didn't want Master Willix and the MTA find out about all of his spiritual engineering projects.

He thought about using the word formation instead. That was more fitting. There was no way to hide the mechs adopting distinct formations, so he might as well base the name around them in order to attract outsiders away from what really mattered, which was the spiritual battle network.

"Let's call them battle formations." He decided after a couple of minutes. "These battle formations are distinct from regular formations due to the 'blessings' they can evoke."

The middle-aged Penitent Sister Commander furrowed her brows. "This is a rather underwhelming name for something so grand."

"That's the point, commander. I don't want people to know about them or be on guard against them. The battle formations are capable of conveying substantial advantages to our mech pilots, but they are not infallible. If our enemies are prepared against them, then the battle formations will only exhaust our mech pilots in vain."

Though Commander Chancy wanted to assert that the Superior Mother's formations were unbeatable, her better sense pushed through. Even she could think of ways to negate the advantages of the battle formations. For example, the most convenient method was simply to deny battle and wait until the battle formations reached the end of their durations!

"I understand. I will make sure my women will keep the details of the battle formations to themselves. Each of them have stated that it's a great privilege to become a vessel of the Superior Mother. They will not do anything that compromises the sanctity of this exalted ritual. It's just..."

"Is there anything you want, commander?"

"We have noticed that it takes your personal intervention to enable our Penitent Sisters to grow closer to the Superior Mother. While it makes sense that you are able to do so since you are her son, can you give us a means to convert more of our Sisters?"

Ves immediately shook his head. "No. Access can only be granted by me. Do you think anyone can approach the Superior Mother?"

"There are many non-mech pilots in our midst who would love to gain a closer relationship with the Superior Mother. For example, Head Designer Stameros deserves this honor for all of the work she has done in keeping our mechs running. Commodore Even will also be delighted if you grant her the same honor, and so do many more Penitent Sisters."

He couldn't do that. Battle networks were much smaller in scope by design because of their greater effects. Battle formations were only useful for mech pilots, so letting in someone else took up a valuable slot.

Only when the living spiritual constructs that supported the network grew more powerful would some additional slots open up, but that took time.

"I am open to exceptions, but not too much." Ves compromised a bit. "Let's leave this matter aside until after we have left the Nyxian Gap. Right now, we have very little

margin for error, so I don't want to complicate this matter further. Make sure to limit your suggestions to those who have earned this right."

"Will do, sir."

The relationship between Ves and most of the Penitent Sisters had warmed up ever since he hoodwinked them into thinking he was literally the Superior Mother's son. While this was factually true, Ves didn't want to emphasize it too much. He just wanted to convert these powerful mech pilots to his side so that they wouldn't abandon him when he needed them the most.

Before he left the Penitent Sisters and allowed them to explore battle formations at their own leisure, he implemented one more change.

One of the more perplexing aspects about battle formations was the emergence of impressive-looking but largely meaningless energy silhouettes.

He disliked them quite a bit. There was no substance to them all and their presence might give the Big Two as well as the Five Scrolls Compact some clues that Ves did not want to reveal.

He tried various methods to get rid of the energy projections, but none of it worked. They always showed up as long as the mech pilots engaged in battle formations.

"The two are inseparable!"

Since there was no way that Ves wanted to abandon battle formations, he decided to cover up the energy silhouettes.

It wasn't that hard to do so as long as Ves employed some technical ingenuity. He licensed some projection software from the galactic net and programmed an AI-driven software system.

The purpose of this new software was very simple. Whenever the Penitent Sister mechs engaged a battle formation, the projection modules built into the frames of the mechs automatically projected a lifelike visage of the Superior Mother over the energy silhouette.

With the help of sophisticated AIs, the projections perfectly matched the movements of the energy silhouettes!

Ves essentially covered up the spiritual phenomenon with a purely technological phenomenon!

Not only did the giant projection look a lot more impressive, but it was also useful for waging psychological warfare.

What would it be like if hundreds of different battle formations simultaneously projected giant figures at the same time? How would enemies react if all of those intimidating-looking projections charged into their lines?

"Hahaha! That will be a powerful show, especially if we combine it with glows!"

Other mech designers would probably regard it as a flamboyant quirk. After all, despite looking powerful, the projections ultimately didn't do much except affect the morale of both sides.

It was much like waving a flag, he thought.

"Hopefully, others will see it like that as well."

*Chapter 2370: Obnoxious Consultant*

"Meowww..."

Lucky painfully meowed as he squirmed on top of the desk. His indigestion was still as bad as a few weeks ago. Something about the Unending alloy he had eaten still caused him lots of problems to this day.

Fortunately, most of his wounds had healed. His metallic tiger-striped body no longer bore any exposed and open sections.

Ves estimated that Lucky would need one more week at most to heal all of his external damage. Maybe at that time, his gem cat could devote most of his energy on boosting his digestion.

"Time is running out, Lucky. You better finish your business quickly in the next few weeks. If you haven't accomplished anything by that time, I'll stuff you with you some B-stone to see if that will help unclog your pipes."

"Meow! Meow.. meow!"

Lucky reacted with alarm when he heard the threat. His weak body flailed a bit. It was as if he desperately wanted to phase his body and run as far away as possible from his devilish owner!

"Hehehe.." Ves grinned as he patted Lucky's limp back. "Work hard if you don't want to eat a B-stone sandwich for lunch."

"Meow!..."

Ves ignored his distressed cat and began to plan his new round of experiments.

He successfully realized the battle network concept, though the outcome did not match his initial expectations.

He initially aimed to replicate the high cohesion and coordination enabled by Master Huron's basic neural networks. What he got was something different.

When Ves activated his desk terminal and studied the public footage of the famed Master Mech Designer's products in battle, he did not see anything special about the formations they adopted.

Certainly, the mech pilots connected to the neural networks were able to employ all manner of complicated formations, but none of them added any extra oomph to their mechs.

The Fridaymen mechs didn't radiate any unusual energy projections either.

"The two aren't the same. They're completely different concepts."

Aside from sharing some superficial aspects, battle formations worked on an entirely different paradigm. He couldn't keep looking at neural networks for answers. He had to explore his new invention from scratch and avoid making unfounded assumptions.

"How troublesome!"

That said, the power of his battle formations were evident, if a bit unrefined. They had barely scratched the surface of this new battle method.

Naturally, Ves did not intend to spread something so good to too many many people. For now, he intended to keep it firmly within the clan as a unique, competitive advantage.

"I'm not sure it's entirely safe or practical though." He muttered. "Only by employing them in an actual battle will I know for sure whether it is a boon rather than a bane."

One of the more worrying side effects of employing battle formations was that the mech pilots usually experienced substantial mental exhaustion at the end. This made activating them very risky in large and difficult battles.

"It's best to employ them close to the end of a battle, but will there be any mech pilots left alive at the end?"

Energy, alignment and mental strain each imposed restrictions to battle formations. While Ves believed he might be able to lift or alleviate some of these constraints, he didn't have the time to explore this research at the moment.



He needed to move on and set up at least two more battle networks for the Swordmaidens and the Battle Criers.

As for the Avatars.. Ves reluctantly shook his head.

The experiments he performed on the Penitent Sisters already proved his guess that the mech pilots connected to the battle network needed to be as uniform as possible. Their thoughts all had to be highly aligned in order to meet the conditions to engage a battle formation.

"My Avatars are too heterogeneous. Not enough time has passed to form a strong and established martial tradition."

This was a massive pity. The excellent training, superior aptitude and powerful LMC mechs of the Avatars all suggested that uniting them in a battle formation might produce extremely powerful results!

"Well, the Swordmaidens and the Battle Criers aren't that bad."

He expected much from the Swordmaidens. They may not be watched over by a powerful ancestral spirit like the Superior Mother, but they had their own rising hero in the form of Commander Dise.

When Ves began to refine his design for the Swordmaiden battle network, he wondered whether centering it around Commander Dise adversely affected the crucial expert candidate.

If his experiments inadvertently prevented her from experiencing apotheosis in the coming battle, then Ves would have lost far more than he gained!

"I can't go too far!"

He revisited the notes he scribbled in his implant and began to revise them based on the results he had obtained from his earlier experiments. Now that he knew much more about battle networks and battle formations, he intended to introduce a more refined and adapted version for the Swordmaidens.

"It has to center around Commander Dise, but it also needs another unifying factor!"

Ves was worried whether using Commander Dise as the center of his second battle network would be sufficient in aligning the thoughts of every Swordmaiden mech pilot.

Even if she advanced to expert pilot, the Swordmaidens weren't really the type to completely surrender themselves to someone else. They possessed an incomparably strong degree of pride in themselves.

He thought about Ketis and how she obsessed about Sharpie and her sword all the time.

"Maybe that is what I need to add to the battle network. A sword!"

When Ves created his first battle network, he chose to shape it as a crown for superficial reasons. He just wanted to create something that reinforced the Superior Mother's control over the mech pilots.

For his second battle network, Ves thought about using the greatswords that the Swordmaidens were fond of as a model for the living spiritual construct.

It would be like creating a second Sharpie in a different Swordmaiden's mind!

"This is going to be costly."

Back when he created Ketis' living mind sword, he sacrificed a tiny portion of life-prolonging treatment serum to form it. If Ves intended to do the same for Commander Dise, then he would have to use up another drop.

"What a painful price!"

There was no way he could avoid it if he wanted to go through with his plan. Still, thinking about the potential power that Dise and her mech pilots might be able to exert, Ves pushed aside his stinginess.

Why should he put so much effort into conserving the drops of serum in his possession? If he held back too much, the chances that his task force would lose the upcoming battle would definitely be greater!

There was another reason why he needed to invest more power into his second battle network. Comparatively, the Superior Mother was far stronger than Commander Dise.

Even if the Swordmaiden leader advanced to expert pilot, her actual spiritual strength would still pale in comparison with the upper echelon of design spirits. This meant that any battle formation the Swordmaidens evoked would definitely yield disappointing results!

Ves spent hours on refining the design of his next battle network. Unlike the more general battle network targeted to the Penitent Sisters, his second one was much more narrow in scope.

It single-mindedly sought to enhance any combat action related to swords!

How that actually worked out, Ves wasn't sure. He couldn't really predict whether his second battle network would also express its power in the form of a battle formation.

"Hopefully, it doesn't, but who knows."

Though he had covered up much of the spiritual traces of the first battle network by superimposing the energy silhouette with a technological projection, it wasn't a foolproof solution.

If he had to do the same for the Swordmaidens and every other group connected to battle networks, then the beneficiaries had to implement the same projections to every single mech they piloted!

"How troublesome!"

As Ves began to encounter an increasing amount of uncertainties in his battle network design, he became more and more unsure of what he was trying to accomplish.

Trying to design a battle network that could be entirely sustained by a mech pilot was very risky. He became increasingly more afraid of taking missteps that would ruin Commander Dise's chances of future advancement.

"I could use some help or at least a second opinion."

Should he summon Ketis?

"No. She knows quite a lot about swords and mechs, but she won't be able to answer any of my questions."

What about the primary recipient, Commander Dise?

"I will definitely have to take her input into account, but she's my client, not my helper."

He needed assistance from someone who was versed with spirituality. Out of all of the clansmen in the fleet, only one person possessed the qualifications to speak to him in detail about this subject.

His mouth curled into a frown.

The list of spiritually-knowledgeable experts was pathetically short.

In fact, other than himself, there was only one other name!

Though he wanted to find reasons not to meet with the bastard, Ves had no alternative.

He reluctantly invited James to shuttle over the Scarlet Rose in order to discuss something confidential.

The Living Prophet calmly entered Ves' stateroom while garbed in a pure white robe draped over his standard Larkinson uniform.

"Bright Martyr, it is good to see you again. I believe you have doubts."

Ves couldn't be bothered to express his annoyance at James' foresight. "Sit down and help me understand what I'm dealing with right now. I have many questions and I hope you can answer at least some of them before I lose my patience."

He began to provide brief explanations on battle networks and battle formations. He also provided James with some of his theories and assumptions related to his current research.

For his part, the clone looked quite intrigued. "Hmmm.. this is interesting. I have to admit that I have never touched something like this before. This is truly as new to you as it is to me. Back in my time, most battles were fought between titanic warships."

"Yes, yes, yes, you old git, you lived through the Age of Conquest, now can you actually tell me something useful?"

James raised his hand and pointed at a projection of Commander Dise. "You are underestimating her power."

"What?" Ves looked confused.

"Great mech pilots are capable of evoking and harnessing far greater power than you think. Do you know why?"

"They express their power through their will."

"That is correct, but do you know why? What is so special about infusing their will with power? What makes them different from those with power who aren't mech pilots such as you and Qilanxo?"

Ves blinked. He always wondered about this question but he never really researched it in depth.

"I don't really know, to be honest. If I had to make a guess, it is that mech pilots are specialists. They are different because they augment their power with their will."

James tutted and shook his head. "Your views on expert pilots and more impressive mech pilots are woefully shallow. Mech pilots like Jannzi Larkinson, Joshua Larkinson and so on are defined by their will. Tell me, where does will come from? What is the source of will?"

It took a moment for Ves to form his answer. "Will comes from the mind. Will comes from thought."

"Where does the power you regularly manipulate come from?"

Ves widened his eyes. "It comes from the same source!"

Both spiritual energy and willpower shared a common origin!

Seeing that Ves grasped this point, James lifted both his arms. "Suppose I'm trying to hold a sword."

He stretched out one hand. "If I hold it with my dominant arm, I can probably swing it with decent force."

The Living Prophet stretched out his other hand. "If I hold it with my weaker arm, I will probably struggle to launch a decent attack."

He then stretched out both hands at the same time. "If I hold the sword with both hands, I can probably exert much more force than before."

Ves looked astonished, but only for a moment. He quickly grew skeptical. "This is different. The power that we wield is strong and versatile. Will is formless and unable to affect reality on its own. They may share the same origin, but they're completely different in terms of strength!"

"Are you sure about that?" James grinned. "Is willpower truly powerless?"