

Mech 2641

Chapter 2641: Confidence of a Larkinson

The meeting descended into a shouting match.

It was a disgraceful sight.

Ves watched on as the projections of different commanders and military leaders exaggerated each other's positions and resorted to ad hominem attacks to drive their point home.

"We are not cannon fodder! We are not cattle bred for the slaughter! Our meat is not tastier than yours!"

"We will not agree to this disadvantageous arrangement that solely serves to preserve the lives of as many Hexers as possible!"

"Why do you deny the truth? Our mechs are better than yours? We have been second-raters for centuries and our mech pilots are far more able to fight against our Fridayman counterparts than yours. I don't care how many pirate warships you've demolished, but if we were in your place, we would have defeated those pathetic Nyxian pirates without suffering any losses!"

"YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT, WITCH!"

The dispute boiled down to determining the role of the 'weakest' force of the expeditionary fleet.

Aside from the prime mechs, Valkyrie Redeemers and the Transcendent Punishers, the remainder of the Larkinson Clan's war machines lacked the strength to compete with the other participants of the battle on an equal level.

It would have been fine if the attackers consisted of pirates, mercenaries or some other private organization. The Princess Jeckas, Vima Suns and Tamris Stellars were serviceable second-class mechs that not only possessed crushing power against third-class machines, but could also give mechs that cost twice as much a run for their money.

Unfortunately, reality wasn't fair. There was no rule that stated that every opponent the Larkinson Clan bumped into had to be on the same level.

The Fridaymen who must have plotted this ambush weren't stupid! If they could only afford to dispatch 5 deep strike fleet carriers, then they would definitely stuff them with the most powerful elite mech units they could afford to assign. They must have certainly made the best use of the limited capacities of the capital ships.

The Praetor Clan and the Planat Clan should be less committed. Both of them were in decline after the events that led to the fall of the Cross Clan. Yet they should still have brought enough strength to give them confidence in beating their former allies.

"Meow."

"Yeah, I know."

Both Lucky and Ves seemed to have been relegated to bystanders as Colonel Ariadne Wodin tried and failed to maintain her authority. She underestimated the independent and proud nature of the Larkinsons!

Letting her take the lead had been a mistake in hindsight. Ves had put too much stock in Colonel Ariadne's official qualifications and overlooked her Hexer tendencies.

The Hexers put a lot of stock in their hierarchy. The matriarchs at the top had to be obeyed and respected at all costs while the Hexers at the bottom had no choice but to obey.

It was different for the Larkinsons. Everyone was a valued individual. None of the senior leaders could unilaterally force an ordinary clansman to sacrifice their lives or anything. Such an order had to be conveyed in the form of a request.

These differences caused Colonel Ariadne to slam her head into a wall. As competent as she might be among Hexers, her exposure to foreign cultures was probably very slim. If she actually took the trouble to understand the Larkinsons, she wouldn't have presented her intentions in such a commanding manner.

Ves loudly clapped his hands. At the same time, he transmitted a command through his implant that muted everyone's voices.

"Peace!"

The Larkinsons and Glory Seekers all drew back and slowly regained their composure.

Both sides had shouted at each other with real emotion. Even though they were all adults who knew how to behave, the stakes were too high. There were many lives on the line.

The Larkinson Clan did not wish to lose all of its mech pilots. Even if their mechs were weaker than the rest, they could still contribute to the battle in other ways.

The Glory Seekers tried their best to seek the most optimal path to victory. Their overarching priority was to avoid an outcome that might trigger the defeat of the Hexadric Hegemony. Everything else was dispensable in their eyes!

Ves did not see any way of reconciling the two. One way or another, something had to give. He just needed to adopt an approach that did not rub either of them the wrong way. It was vital for him to maintain the trust and support of both if he wished to see this battle through.

"Time is short." He reiterated. "We cannot afford to squander precious minutes on childish squabbles. Let us consider the overall situation first. The two approaches presented by Colonel Ariadne are merely starting premises. The actual battle does not take into account the differences in mechs, the role of starships and bunker mechs, the effect of glows and the impact of prime mechs. The scenarios also assume that the enemy expert mechs will all detach from the main enemy body and operate separately."

Colonel Ariadne raised her hand. Ves allowed her to speak.

"Expert mechs usually tend to avoid fighting too close to their regular comrades. Fights between multiple expert mechs produce considerable amounts of collateral damage."

"Do the Fridaymen care about collateral damage this time?"

That was a good question. This was less of a concern in space due to the greater distances involved. In addition, depending on their overall goals, they might decide that suffering through some friendly fire was an acceptable price to increase their chances of victory.

"Colonel, it is not my intention to cast doubt on your plans." Ves reassured the Hexers. "Whether the enemy expert pilots will act separately or not, they still need to be constrained as much as possible. Our Larkinson Clan possesses no practical experience in fighting against expert pilots. I am sure that your Glory Seekers and our allied Crossers are much better versed in anti-expert mech tactics."

While it was theoretically possible for a lot of standard mechs to overwhelm an expert mech, the former had to adopt specific tactics in order to do so. This took training, discipline and a special kind of courage that allowed mech pilots to remain committed even as their friends and comrades dropped like flies!

If Ves looked at his own forces, then only the Penitent Sisters, Battle Criers and maybe the Swordmaidens met this standard.

This didn't mean he looked down on the courage and favor of the Avatars of Myth or Living Sentinels. He merely thought they weren't ready yet. Their martial traditions were too short and their mech pilots still had a long way to go until they reached the standard of true veteran mech pilots.

"Let's face it." He continued as he swept his gaze over his own Larkinsons. "The result of throwing our mechs and mech pilots against the enemy expert mechs is too unpredictable. Rather than assuming a responsibility that we have never prepared for, it

is better to direct our attention on more familiar territory. Focusing our efforts on stalling the elite mech units of the Fridaymen and Vicious Mountainers will not be easy, but we Larkinsons are much better suited to take on this burden."

In effect, Ves threw in his support for Colonel Ariadne's second battle plan. In the event the Glory Seekers and Crossers managed to isolate the enemy expert mechs, the Larkinsons along with some limited support must do their best to pin down 6000 enemy elites!

"On the surface, we are not a match against the enemy mech units. However, we have a lot of tricks up our sleeve. We have glows while they do not. We have prime mechs that can unleash greater power than any other standard mech. We possess even more advantages that we can utilize to level the playing field! I sincerely believe that we do not have to settle for stalling the enemy mechs. Since Fridaymen, Praetors and Planats shouldn't be aware of our trump cards, I sincerely believe that we can defeat them! Do you agree?"

He unmuted everyone, allowing them to speak freely again.

Yet despite regaining the opportunity to speak, everyone kept silent. They did not entirely agree with him, but they did not want to oppose him either. His authority among the Larkinsons was still high. The hope he presented may sound far-fetched, but Ves had a track record of performing miracles in battle!

Even if it was irrational to pin their hopes on Ves, the Larkinsons had become accustomed to looking up to him to see them through a difficult battle.

The Glory Seekers looked bewildered as Ves managed to tame his own people. Why did he succeed where Colonel Ariadne failed?

Ves did not bother to explain. He briefly turned to their side.

"Colonel, please coordinate with Major Verle and whoever is in charge of leading the Crossers into battle. Let us take your second approach as the blueprint of our strategy and flesh it out into a more structured approach."

"Are you sure, Patriarch Ves?" She carefully asked.

"Our Larkinsons are up to the challenge. We are not as pathetic as we were back in the Nyxian Gap. We have evolved."

The rest of the meeting no longer held any suspense. Ves had decided on behalf of his clan in a way that expressed his confidence in his men. His mech commanders could hardly belittle their troops in this situation.

Though Ves adopted a confident demeanor, inwardly he was sweating bullets.

While he believed he had made the right choice, he knew that the disparity in quality of both mechs and mech pilots could not be bridged so easily.

His clansmen would definitely bleed this time! How much losses the Larkinsons suffered depended on how well he was able to stack the deck in their favor.

He did not participate in the subsequent discussions. He was still a layman, after all. He merely requested the Glory Seekers to put their 500 Valkyrie mechs at his disposal. He could make significantly better use of them than anyone else. He already had special plans for the Valkyrie Interceptors and Hurricanes piloted by the Hexers.

"The glows of the Valkyrie mechs are ineffective against expert pilots. Their wills are strong to let someone like the Superior Mother shake their resolve." Ves reasoned to Colonel Ariadna. "The mechs are designed to debilitate ordinary mech pilots. While the effectiveness of the Valkyrie mechs is reduced against elites, this is already a good result."

The old woman quickly acquiesced. "Very well. I will temporarily transfer command over them to you. Please take good care of their mech pilots. No matter what you think of Hexers, the women who pilot our Valkyrie mechs are earnest Wodins who are devoted to the Superior Mother and loyal to their mission."

That was all he needed from the Glory Seekers. He just needed to gain the support of a thousand or so mechs from Cross Clan in order to gain enough confidence in his own approach.

He did not contact Patriarch Reginald Cross directly. Instead, he made a quick call to Professor Benedict Cortez.

"Mr. Larkinson. What is it you want?" The former Skull Architect asked in an impatient tone.

Ves did not dare to say too much on this channel. "We have a plan to handle the enemy troops. We can't do this alone, though. We need the cooperation of the Cross Clan. Pretty soon, my staff will contact your side on a secure channel. Please do your best to encourage Patriarch Reginald to assign as many of his mechs to us as possible. We cannot assume our responsibilities alone."

"...I'll see." The Senior Mech Designer replied. "I will judge your plan for myself. If there is any merit to it, I won't mind giving you some help."

"Thanks."

"Do your best to strengthen your forces. Don't hold anything back. I don't want to see you fall because you are unwilling to expose your secrets."

"You don't need to tell me that." Ves frowned. "Watch carefully. I am certain my forces will astound you in the coming battle!"

Chapter 2642: Blessing Ceremony

The plan was set.

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers quickly came to a consensus. The greatest priority was to contain and eliminate the enemy expert mechs.

It didn't matter if the Fridaymen, Praetors and Planats adopted a different strategy.

With 5 expert mechs and around 4100 standard mechs, the Glory Seekers and Crossers would definitely succeed in forcing all 11 enemy expert mechs away from the main body!

Ves actually didn't expect the Glory Seekers and Crossers to resolve the enemy expert mechs quickly.

Expert mechs were truly monsters on the battlefield, and their battle effectiveness couldn't be judged according to normal standards. Their vastly superior performance granted them a lot of agency in any battle.

Whenever expert mechs enjoyed an absolute advantage, then they would leverage their destructive firepower to the fullest in order to defeat as many enemies as possible!

When a swarm of standard mechs besieged the expert mechs, the latter could switch to adopting hit-and-run tactics. As long as the expert mechs tried their best not to get hit, they could easily whittle down their pursuers over time.

The general saying that 1 expert mech was capable of defeating 100 standard mechs was an oversimplification. The common saying only truly applied if both sides fought each other head-on! In practice, expert pilots rarely exposed their expert mechs to needless danger.

Therefore, even if the Glory Seekers and the Crossers vastly outnumbered and outgunned all 11 enemy expert mechs, there was still a possibility that the latter might come out on top!

"Such cases have happened in the past." Major Verle spoke to Ves after the meeting. "Ordinarily, we shouldn't worry too much, but there is one variable that puts everything in a different light."

"Unit L." Ves mentioned.

"Exactly, sir. The Charlemagne and the Scarra can either be utilized to eliminate opposing expert mechs quickly or be used to massacre hundreds of standard mechs in a short amount of time. The task of confronting the enemy expert mechs is not a light one. The only chance our allies can come out on top is to direct as much incoming firepower at their standard mechs as possible."

In the end, the Glory Seekers and Crossers could not avoid the fate of becoming cannon fodder either.

While Ves idly cradled Lucky's black-clad form, he put his mind away from this side of the upcoming battle. It was not his responsibility to worry about the enemy expert mechs. He and his Larkinsons assumed primary responsibility of blocking the way of 6000 enemy mechs.

The good news was that the 4300 mechs of the Larkinsons gained the support of 700 mechs of the Glory Seekers and 1000 mechs of the Cross Clan.

That amounted to 6000 mechs in total, which ensured they maintained numerical parity, at least at the start.

What was interesting was that some of the Glory Seeker and Crosser mechs consisted of heavy artillery mechs. The two allies basically loaned all of their bunker mechs to the Larkinsons. They also promised to coordinate the movements of their combat vessels to facilitate a defensive strategy.

This made a fair amount of sense. It was too dangerous to expose their starships against the enemy expert mechs. As long as just one extraordinary mech got close, they only needed less than a minute to take down a sub-capital starship!

It was much better to square off the defenses of the combat carriers against the standard mechs of the enemy. As long as they were being rotated, none of them should suffer any crippling damage, at least for a time.

Ves left the remainder of the battle planning to the professionals. Instead, he continued to tinker around a bit in his personal workshop. At the same time, he formulated the methods he could employ to give his forces an edge.

He first dismissed all of the illegal options. While it was possible for him and his production crews to fabricate some nukes or other controversial weapons, he did not wish to fall out with the Big Two.

He had to strengthen his forces in other ways. Fortunately, he still had plenty of options.

"Right now, the Valkyrie Redeemers, Transcendent Punishers and prime mechs are already enhanced to at least 25 Ves, which is a good starting point but not the limit."

By default, every LMC mech in the Larkinson Clan was spiritually enhanced right after they were fabricated. This was something that he personally arranged. Some mechs featured 50 Ves or more, but not enough.

"The Superior Mother has plenty of energy to spare." He muttered. "I should abuse that fact and fill up the mechs as much as their mech pilots can withstand."

Once he made up his mind, he instructed the Penitent Sisters to deploy their mechs in space in order to prepare for something special.

If possible, Ves wanted to bring all 200 or so Valkyrie Redeemers in the hands of the Penitent Sisters to the Spirit of Bentheim, but there wasn't space to accommodate so many machines at once.

"I can treat the Valkyrie Interceptors and Hurricanes of the Glory Seekers while I'm at it." He muttered.

He hadn't enhanced their mechs because he did not wish to give them any advantages over the Larkinson Clan. Due to the current crisis, he couldn't be so petty anymore. He had to grasp every opportunity to strengthen his odds as possible.

There was another reason why he wanted to bring all of the Valkyrie mechs in the expeditionary fleet together. Ves transmitted an order to Venerable Joshua to bring out his Valkyrie Prime too in order to complete the assembly.

After a bit of thought, Ves figured he might as well go all-out. He ordered a crew to bring out the statue of the Superior Mother from the Hexer shrine aboard the Spirit of Bentheim and drag it into space.

Once he boarded a shuttle that brought out of his flagship and stopped a couple of kilometers away, Ves checked the seals of Unending Regalia and looked at Lucky.

The cat's Misfortune Harness Mark III incorporated many upgrades from the previous version. It also possessed a smoother and more streamlined profile.

"You look quite good, but I feel like you're missing something."

"Meow?" Lucky tilted his head.

"Ah, I get it now! You need a cape!"

"Meow!"

"Oh come on, they're nice! They'll not only increase your stature, but also make you cuter!"

"Meow meow meow!"

"Okay, okay!"

Ves temporarily shelved his plan to affix a cape on the Misfortune Harness and stepped outside the shuttle.

He emerged out into open space. After a brief moment of disorientation, he quickly regained his bearings. His Unending Regalia was fully vacuum-sealed and possessed plenty of oxygen to keep him breathing.

He mounted a standard flight backpack module to the slot on the back of his custom-built suit. While he wasn't very proficient at controlling his flight, he managed to achieve a stable course towards the hundreds of Valkyrie mechs that answered his summons.

Every single Valkyrie mech formed a giant wall with plenty room in between. They respectfully maintained their position in front of the statue of the Superior Mother that a couple of shuttles had brought.

The Penitent Sisters and Glory Seekers were both Hexer in origin. They both worshipped the Superior Mother. Now that they assembled in front of the origin of the Supreme, every mech pilot fell silent.

The statue was just too special. After inexplicably being struck by lightning, it gained a special charm that Ves couldn't quite figure out. It happened to have an especially strong attraction to those who held the Superior Mother in their hearts.

While Ves floated forward until he stopped in front of the statue he made, Lucky used his own flight abilities to float around in a circle.

"Glory Seekers. Penitent Sisters. Venerable Joshua. Let me be frank. Each of you bears a heavy responsibility in the upcoming battle. While planning is still ongoing, your mechs shall constitute our main strike force against the elite mech units of our enemies. Do you know why? Because you are our sharpest spears on the battlefield!"

Every Hexer and ex-Hexer who listened to Ves over the communication channel felt proud at this. The Valkyrie Redeemer and its variants achieved considerable success in the Komodo War, so the mech pilots had faith their role would not be small in the coming battle!

"As part of our most powerful offensive unit against the soldiers of the Friday Coalition and the Vicious Mountainers, it is your responsibility to strike lethal blows against them. Every other mech and starship at our disposal will act as the anvil to your hammer. This is a glorious task, but also a heavy one. The enemy is well aware of the disruption that Valkyrie mechs can induce. They will be on guard against your attack runs and prioritize their counterattacks on your machines."

"We are not afraid!" Venerable Joshua responded. His Valkyrie Prime proudly raised its spear. "We will attack until there is no enemy left standing!"

"For the Superior Mother!"

The other Valkyrie mechs raised their spears as well!

Ves was surprised at how many of them followed suit. While Venerable Joshua managed to earn the respect of all of the Penitent Sister mech pilots, the Glory Seekers should have been more reticent.

However, it seemed they received orders beforehand. It could also be that the mech pilots assigned to the Valkyrie Interceptors and Hurricanes had already received extensive influencing from their machines.

In any case, their obedience made things easier for Ves.

"Your confidence inspires me, but confidence alone is not enough to vanquish our foes." Ves gestured to the statue. "In order to give you the advantages you need to defend our fleet, I will beseech the Superior Mother to grant you and your mechs an additional blessing!"

The Hexer mech pilots reacted ecstatically at his announcement! Even if they had no idea what form this blessing would take, they all believed that the Superior Mother's 'son' had the ability to channel her power!

Ves did not delay any further. He still needed to prepare a lot of other special measures.

He concentrated his mind and began to connect to the Superior Mother. He began to issue some instructions to the ancestral spirit.

It was much easier for her to extend her presence around the statue that birthed her. With so many Valkyrie mechs gathered together, there was no way for her to miss them all. The Hexer mech pilots all held their breath as they felt the statue come to life.

With the help of Ves, the Superior Mother started to channel her spiritual power to every Valkyrie mech barring the Valkyrie Prime.

The mech pilots felt as if their machines were changing before their eyes as some part of them became greater than before. This must be the blessing that Ves had promised!

This was the first time that Ves employed spiritual foundation enhancement on so many mechs at a time. He unilaterally commanded the Superior Mother to saturate every Valkyrie mech up to 75 Ves.

While he could have taken a more fine-grained approach, he didn't have the time to do so. 75 Ves was the most that ordinary mech pilots could bear as long as the mech wasn't hostile to them. If a couple of mech pilots happened to become disabled due to incompatibility, then that was a risk that Ves was willing to accept.

Fortunately, none of the mech pilots showed any alarming signs. While he became aware that many Glory Seekers began to feel some discomfort, this was merely because the transition from 0 Ves to 75 Ves was too abrupt.

This was why he performed this blessing ceremony first. He had to give the Glory Seekers enough time to adjust to their enhanced mechs.

Ves wasn't sure whether any of the mech pilots gathered here would break through during the battle. Enhancing their mechs increased the odds of this happening, but he did not hold out his hopes.

The Superior Mother channeled an enormous amount of spiritual energy at a time. Ves was quite impressed at her generosity.

"Are you happy with your blessing?" Ves smiled. "Well, don't leave yet, because there's more!"

Chapter 2643: Ves the Giver of Blessings

LMC mechs played a vital role in the defense of the Larkinson Clan.

Compared to other second-class mechs, Ves could do more with them than others.

If he had enough time to rework the Larkinson Clan's entire mech roster, then he would have been able to rely on more than Valkyries and Transcendent Punishers!

Unfortunately, the timing wasn't right and the enemy had come sooner than he anticipated. He had no choice but to pile up as many 'blessings' as he could conceivably think of in order to maximize the potential of the LMC mechs at his disposal!

After the initial mass blessing, the Glory Seeker and Penitent Sister mech pilots were curious at what Ves would do next.

They already felt stronger than before! The Glory Seekers especially became caught up in the illusions brought by the abrupt strengthening of their mechs!

However, Ves knew that the actual difference was not all that much. The mechs hadn't actually grown stronger on a technical level. The blessing only made their mechs a lot more alive, which would hopefully improve the performance of the mech pilots and give them a greater chance of breaking through.

While the latter was already a benefit that other mech pilots would kill for, the odds of this happening was too low. There were only a bunch of mech pilots with spiritual potential, so the chance of any breakthroughs was slim due to the low quantity of eligible individuals.

What Ves was really banking on was something else. He spread his arms and pushed them aside as if he was making a swimming motion.

"Alright, for the next blessings, I need the two of you to move aside."

Once the Glory Seeker machines flew away from the Penitent Sister mechs, Ves first turned to the latter group.

The Valkyrie Prime happened to be a part of this group as well.

"Hold still while the Superior Mother blesses your mechs once more." Ves commanded. "Please keep in mind that we are trying something new and unprecedented here. If you experience any discomfort, shut down your mechs. Do not take any risks. Not everyone is capable of bearing the burden of greater power."

He knew this was a useless warning. There was no way the Penitent Sisters would miss out on another 'blessing'!

He originally didn't plan to perform this experiment so soon. He still wanted to gather more data and perform more analyses before taking this step.

"Crises have a way of accelerating my experimental schedule." Ves sighed to himself.

The reason why he was reluctant to perform his next experiment was because it represented a pretty major shift in how he viewed and made use of mechs.

Up until now, the core principle of his design philosophy was largely invisible and unnoticeable. Hardly anyone really paid much mind to it. Even Ves unconsciously adopted the mentality of a normal mech designer sometimes.

That was going to be a lot harder to do once he made this move. Ves instinctively felt as if he could never turn back once he stepped on this path.

He gritted his teeth. "I don't have any choice! I can't hold back any longer when the enemy is almost at my doorstep!"

After firming up his resolve, he concentrated his mind yet again and began to perform a different procedure. He called upon the Superior Mother and beseeched her to open up her battle network.

Her crown shone. The ancestral spirit's battle network began to form 200 new connections at once!

Once the open-ended connections had formed, Ves carefully guided them forward and caused them to reach into the Valkyrie Prime and the Valkyrie Redeemers piloted by the Penitent Sisters.

One by one, Ves meticulously attached the newly-forged bonds to the spiritual foundations of every respective mech.

He only established a single connection at the start. The Valkyrie Redeemer in question seemed to undergo some fluctuations that made its mech pilot uncomfortable, but the activity soon subsided.

"It worked.. I think."

He felt half-relieved.

While the Superior Mother was already connected to the mech by virtue of her position as the design spirit of the Valkyrie Redeemer design, this was not as impressive as it sounded.

What Ves was attempting to do was to form a stronger bond between the two. The Superior Mother's crown was a spiritual network that was especially designed to provide assistance in battle. It was his spin on Master Huron's neural network and originally sought to bind Larkinson mech pilots together.

When he created his battle networks, he worked on the premise that they were solely meant to unify humans in battle.

Yet... why limit his selection to mech pilots? Why not pull in their mechs as well?

This sounded absurd at first. Ves very much doubted that Master Huron extended his neural networks to mechs as well! The Fridayman Master probably treated the mechs that support neural networks as vehicles for his inventions.

Ves adopted a different perspective. He believed that mechs were alive. If that was the case, it should be possible to add them to the same battle network their pilots were connected to! Even though the mechs were completely different entities from their mech pilots, Ves theorized that the man-machine connection should have smoothed over these differences.

When a mech pilot interfaced with a mech, the person essentially became the mech and vice versa!

Another way of describing this situation was that his battle networks were currently being underutilized. He only connected half of the entities who were supposed to fight.

It was like fielding a bunch of calvarymen without horses! How could these mounted warriors ever put their training and battle prowess to good use when they were deprived of their steeds?

Ves faintly suspected that adding the mechs to the same battle network would result in a comprehensive increase in power of battle formations!

It was too bad that this was not the time to see the results. It was very costly to activate a battle network. Ves could not afford to tire out his mech pilots when they needed to perform at their best a couple of hours later.

Since the first bond took shape without any head explosions or other unfortunate accidents, Ves quickly bonded the rest of the mechs. When he connected the final spiritual bond to the Valkyrie Prime, Ves took stock of the machines.

From now on, the Valkyrie Prime and the 200 Valkyrie Redeemers were truly blessed! In fact, in theory, the mechs should be able to form a battle formation even if their mech pilots weren't connected to the network.

Ves didn't dare to try it out, though. There were way too many uncertainties.

"Alright, you're dismissed." He conveyed to Venerable Joshua and the Penitent Sisters. "Please return to standby and make sure your mechs are in peak condition at the start of the battle."

Once the mechs flew away, Ves flew over to the Glory Seeker side.

The Glory Seekers acquired more Valkyrie mechs than the Penitent Sisters due to their greater numbers. They fielded around 500 of Valkyrie Interceptors and Hurricanes, which was quite a big commitment.

Naturally, it was unrealistic to expect the Glory Seekers to abandon their other mech models. They still needed knight mechs, rifleman mechs, light skirmishers and other mech types to perform different roles.

"Hexers." He addressed the Glory Seeker mech pilots. "What I am about to do is extend two different 'blessings' to you. To be more precise, the Superior Mother and I will be blessing both you and your Valkyrie mechs. Please be aware that up until now, we have never extended this much generosity outside of the Larkinson Clan. We grant you this power in the hopes that you will use it to defend me and my clan. As long as you succeed, you and your mechs may keep these blessings. If you fail... well, there is no need for us to take them back."

While he couldn't see the faces of the Glory Seeker mech pilots, Ves believed they all looked solemn.

He didn't quibble over the fact that he sounded like a cult leader right now. He needed to ensure maximum cooperation from the Hexers. If he had to package his spiritual techniques as 'blessings' in order to get his point across, then so be it! He would even call himself a god if that was what it took to beat his hateful cousin Ghanso!

His approach was wildly successful, of course. The Glory Seekers had already invested their faith into the Superior Mother, the mech pilots of the Valkyries most of all. The sudden enhancement of their mechs only reinforced their beliefs even more!

Under their cooperation, Ves calmly coordinated with the Superior Mother to forge a thousand bonds at once.

For a moment, he worried whether the Superior Mother's crown could endure the strain of sustaining so many new connections.

It turned out his worries were unfounded. He might be justified in his concerns if the Superior Mother was weaker, but that was not the case. With so many Hexers presenting their spiritual tribute to her, the ancestral spirit had grown incredibly powerful. As a spiritual construct, her crown grew as well, allowing it to sustain many more active connections at once.

The process was tedious and exhausting more than anything else. Ves had to be fairly precise in directing the ends of the spiritual bonds to the right destination.

Once all 500 mechs Valkyrie mechs and mech pilots gained a connection to the Superior Mother's battle network, Ves floated back a bit. The Glory Seeker mechs hardly looked different than before, but he knew that every Glory Seeker possessed a more intimate connection to the Superior Mother.

"The power that you have gained will enable you to borrow the Superior Mother's strength in battle." Ves kept his explanation vague. "Be aware that there is a price to calling upon her power. I will not tell you how to activate this new ability beyond telling you that you must all clear your mind of distracting thoughts as much as possible and pray to the Superior Mother while battling the enemy. If you and your fellow mech pilots are devout enough, then you may be fortunate enough to unleash her wrath on our enemies!"

"We will not let the Superior Mother down!"

He dismissed the Glory Seekers and flew back to his shuttle. Once he and the precious statue of the Superior Mother returned to the Spirit of Bentheim, he exited his vehicle.

Instead of leaving the hangar bay, he moved to the side where all of his current prime mechs had been gathered.

The Valkyrie Prime just lined up next to the Bright Sword Prime, Bright Spear Prime, Bright Sword Prime, Piranha Prime and the Shield of Samar.

The expert pilots waited right in front of their respective machines. Each of them wondered why Ves had gathered them here. Shouldn't they be preparing for the upcoming battle in their own way?

As Ves approached the prime mechs, he silently lamented his lack of expert mechs.

Properly speaking, his expert pilots deserved to pilot true expert mechs. It was only due to lack of time and resources they ended up with prime mechs instead.

He did not dare to field the prime mechs against the expert mechs of the enemy. The strength disparity was too great! The shiny Larkinson mechs would just be obvious targets that Venerable Ghanso would probably be able to snipe with ease.

Instead of putting his expert pilots and his prime mechs in a disadvantageous situation, Ves thought it was better to deploy them against the regular elites of the enemy strike force.

"What did you call us here for, sir?" Venerable Orfan impatiently asked.

"I'm doing you all a favor by making your mechs more powerful. This won't take much time, but I need to perform a secret procedure in person. Just stay here while I visit the cockpits of your mechs one by one."

Ves did not waste any further time on satisfying their curiosity. He proceeded to activate the antigrav function of his Unending Regalia and floated inside the cockpit of the Valkyrie Prime.

Lucky had followed suit. His black-clad head curiously looked around the cockpit and the decorative reliefs that had been carved on the walls and ceiling.

Each relief inside an LMC mech told a fantastical story that was meant to put the mech pilots into a more compatible mood with their mechs.

"Well, let's get this over with." He muttered.

He first closed the cockpit before activating the jammer built into his Unending Regalia.

After making sure that the Valkyrie Prime was completely offline, he opened a secret storage compartment inside his personal armor.

His armored fingers carefully fished out a very familiar-looking pouch.

"Meow?"

"You guessed it right. I wanted to save them up, but..."

It was foolish to keep Lucky's gems in reserve because he wanted to save them for a future opportunity. If Ves didn't use them now, he might not have a future anymore!

"Now which gem should I use first?"

Chapter 2644: Recognizing Value

Lucky's gems always tempted Ves. They strengthened mechs through inexplicable and seemingly magical means.

The System's vague descriptions and names for them only furthered their sense of mystique. Ves could hardly fathom the principles behind these tiny but incredibly influential objects. He couldn't even begin to figure out how a gem cat, a sentient mechanical creation, could possibly convert a lot of minerals into these extraordinary objects.

Ves was determined to crack their secrets some day. He knew that now was not the time, though. He already tried to utilize many different scanners on them, but none of them had ever produced any useful clues. The 'tech' behind these gems was too advanced. A simple Journeyman like him wouldn't even be able to get his foot in the door.

"I'll probably have to wait until I reach Master before I can begin my studies." He muttered.

Even then, it was doubtful if he could make any significant progress at that level of strength. His specialty did not lie in gems. While he felt that they might be related to spirituality in some way, the gems worked too well in isolating that aspect from his perception.

Before Ves pulled out his gems from his pocket, he suddenly paused and turned to Lucky.

The black-clad gem cat idly floated inside the cockpit. Lucky sniffed the controls and curiously eyed the alloyed surfaces.

"Lucky."

The cat turned around his head. "Meow?"

"We're in a difficult situation right now. Don't you think it's time you contributed to our defense?"

"Meow?"

"Don't act stupid! You know what I'm talking about!"

"Meow meow meow!"

No matter how much Ves cajoled or threatened Lucky, the darned gem cat simply wouldn't spit out a gem. What was taking him so long?!

"If you're suffering from constipation or something, then Dr. Ves here has a solution for you..."

As soon as Ves brought out a spare chunk of B-stone from another hidden pocket, Lucky's black-plated tail went ramrod straight!

"MEOW!"

Unfortunately, the bluff didn't work. Even the threat of suffering an awful belly ache did not prompt Lucky to go to the bathroom. Ves disappointingly put his B-stone chunk that he had prepared for this occasion away.

While he felt tempted to ram a piece of B-stone down Lucky's throat, that would only render his powerful commando cat useless in the coming battle. The timing wasn't good.

He had no choice but to turn his attention to his existing collection of gems. He grimaced as he thought of the options available to him. None of the gems he retained were as good as the ones he used before.

[Maiden's Affection]

The desire of an ancient maiden is locked within this gem. Increases the attraction of a mech by 40 percent to females.

[Bastet's Whisper]

The echoing whisper of a feline patron can be found within this gem. Enhances the acceleration of a tiger mech by 30 percent.

[Whipping Boy]

The fear of a boy towards women is encapsulated within this cursed gem. Increases the dread of a mech by 50 percent to males.

These three gems were supposed to be Lucky's ordinary products. Aside from the Bastet's Whisper which he couldn't utilize right now, the other two gems brought abnormal benefits.

For a long time, he considered them to be trash. They did not increase a mech's technical performance but instead changed the way that people regarded them.

Ves merely relegated them to masterwork mech tokens in his mind because of his low opinion of them. They held no other value pushing a high-quality mech over the threshold of masterwork mech.

This time was different. The current crisis forced Ves to reevaluate all of his assets. He realized what a fool he had been to look down on the Maiden's Affection and the Whipping Boy.

After designing the Doom Guard, the Valkyrie Redeemer and Ferocious Piranha, he discovered how effective suppressive glows could impact the battlefield. As long as the enemy mech pilots were susceptible to the negative influence of a glow, then it was truly worth it to invest in a mech that specialized in this aspect!

The existence of the three aforementioned mechs caused Ves to view gems that influenced human emotions in a different light.

An important question came to mind. "Do the effects of the gems overlap with the glows of my mechs?"

He wasn't too sure about that, but the implications were huge. If the Valkyrie Prime, which also possessed the iconic Marked For Death ability, frightened an enemy mech pilot to an extent, amplifying this effect by 50 percent could very well render the target completely frozen in fear!

If the gem and glow did not directly interact with each other, then it was still fine. The double effects would still produce a better result than normal due to their complementary effects.

Whatever the case, the Whipping Boy had suddenly turned into a hot commodity in his eyes. He actually resented Lucky for not producing more useful gems like these!

"I only have one to go around." He muttered. "Should I really use it up on the Valkyrie Prime?"

As much as Ves relished the sight of the Valkyrie Prime taking out the enemy champions one-by-one by reducing their mental balance, there was another prime mech that also possessed a suppressive effect.

If the Piranha Prime assigned to Venerable Tusa possessed the original glow of the Doom Guard, then he would have installed the Whipping Boy into its frame within a heartbeat.

However, ever since Nyxie died, the Doom Guard and Ferocious Piranha designs lost their primordial fear effect they were originally centered around. Now, the mechs produced an alternating disorientating glow that was based on different principles.

"What a shame." He shook his head. "If the Piranha Prime still possessed its old glow, the Whipping Boy would have turned it into a terror that could disrupt the enemy battle formation."

As a result, the Whipping Boy gem appeared to be the most suitable for the Valkyrie Prime. Ves briefly thought what Venerable Joshua would think about piloting a mech that was blessed by a gem with such a denigrating name.

"It doesn't matter! I'm not going to tell him anything!"

Just as he unfolded the small tools embedded into his Unending Regalia in order to install the Whipping Boy, he briefly paused. His pouch held much more than three gems. It was just that their origins and descriptions were too vague.

[Minor Chaos Remnant]

An infinitesimally small remnant of chaos is captured within this gem. Increases the penetration of any sharp melee weapon wielded by a mech by 40 percent.

[Unstable Chaos Essence]

A terrible essence of chaos is locked within this gem. The essence is stolen from a great and ancient horror that would dearly wish to regain it. Carry this gem at your own risk.

[Antithesis Essence]

???

The Minor Chaos Remnant at least sounded useful, but the other two gems left Ves completely speechless!

He could only guess at their effects, but the good news was that he wasn't completely left in the dark. He once utilized a pair of Unstable Chaos Essence gems in his wedding rings. He also transformed a bunch of Highly Unstable Chaos Essence gems into spiritual bombs which produced potent blasts during the Battle against the Abyss.

These so-called chaos gems were filled with volatile but powerful energy. Ves believed they could be harnessed, but so far he lacked the courage to embed them in any of his mechs.

"They should be safe enough." He guessed. "Every gem that Lucky produced so far is geared towards empowering mechs. These chaos gems should not be any different. It's just that I can't predict what effects they will bring. What if they bring harm to the mech pilot as well as the opponent? What if they have a corrupting effect?"

Lucky produced a substantial amount of chaos gems while travelling through the Nyxian Gap. The dark and twisted environment somehow affected the gem cat's output, which meant that the gems definitely contained a lot of ominous energy!

Together with other clues, this interaction also proved that Lucky's products were heavily influenced by the environment he was in, but Ves wasn't paying attention to that at the moment.

"I don't have enough gems to go around." He muttered. "I have 6 prime mechs and only 3 usable gems with defined effects. While I'm afraid how the chaos gems will affect the mentality of my expert pilots, I shouldn't underestimate their mental fortitude."

Expert pilots were famed for their abnormally strong wills. Ves was actually quite hopeful that the corrupting influence of the chaos gems might bring about a stimulating effect instead. It was similar to how inducing prime resonance and true resonance allowed expert pilots to exercise their resonance strength.

Of course, that was just wishful thinking.

Ves made the decision to utilize the chaos gems despite the risks. Whatever happened to his expert pilots in the future, right now he needed to add an immediate boost of power to as many mechs as possible!

"Let's get this over with first."

He installed the Whipping Boy gem into the Valkyrie Prime. The mech did not appear to be much different aside from gaining a small but invisible boost in quality.

As Ves eventually emerged from the cockpit, he turned around to take another look at the mech.

The machine did not look more intimidating to him. Joshua needed to activate its Marked For Death ability in order for the Whipping Boy to exert its true value.

Ves looked forward to witnessing that moment.

He proceeded to install the other gems.

The choice of gem for the Bright Sword Prime was very obvious. The Minor Chaos Remnant possessed an incredibly valuable effect of increasing penetration.

While Ves briefly contemplated using it on the Bright Spear Prime instead, he eventually opted to augment Venerable Dise's mech.

The Swordmaiden fighting style depended heavily on cutting through mechs. Ketis also specialized in sharpness and tried to turn that into a key advantage when she assisted him in developing the Bright Sword Prime.

With Venerable Dise's indomitable battle performance and aggressive fighting style, she could easily bring distress to her opponents!

Of course, defense wasn't her strong suit. If the enemy prepared to meet her attacks and employed containment tactics, then the Bright Sword Prime could easily become entangled before being attacked on all sides. It was up to Major Verle and the other commanders to prevent that from happening.

"Well, even if she gets surrounded, with an indestructible Unending alloy greatsword that is 40 percent sharper than before, she can probably cut her way out of an encirclement!"

After augmenting Venerable Dise's prime mech, Ves contemplated whether he should use up the Maiden's Affection. Compared to the Whipping Boy, the Maiden's Affection appeared to be mostly useful in boosting the morale of friendly Hexers.

"The Valkyrie Prime and the Bright Sword Prime were already the best opportunities to utilize this gem."

In his opinion, the third-best mech to use this gem upon was the Shield of Samar, but it already possessed a gem long before he turned it into a prime mech.

The other three prime mechs did not look like a good fit for the Maiden's Affection.

"Hmmm, maybe I should save it up for the Glory Seekers."

He decided to put away the Maiden's Affection and begin using his other chaos gems instead.

He entered the cockpit of the Piranha Prime and decided to embed it with one of his Unstable Chaos Essence gems.

"Since this mech possesses a suppressive glow, then adding a bit of chaos to the mix will definitely produce a surprising result!"

He could hardly imagine changes to the Piranha Prime's glow. If it worked out the way he hoped, Venerable Tusa would probably gain an even greater advantage at close-ranged combat!

The mere thought of this happening delighted Ves!

"Hahahaha! More chaos! More death! More destruction! Don't let any of those blasted Fridaymen get away with their sanity intact!"

Chapter 2645: Expiration Date

After augmenting the Valkyrie Prime, the Bright Sword Prime and the Piranha Prime with some remarkable gems, only two more prime mechs awaited their prizes.

As Ves entered the cockpit of the Bright Beam Prime, he brought out another Unstable Chaos Essence gem.

Yet before he installed it into the mech, he paused and directed his gaze back to his pouch.

The contents of his pouch had dwindled. Aside from the Maiden's Affection and a small amount of Unstable Chaos Essence gems, it also contained Lucky's latest products.

Ves slowly put back the gem he had originally brought out and pulled out a different gem instead.

It immediately stood out for its round shape with sharp spikes sticking out from the surface. Ves happened to possess two of these unusual gems.

"Meow!" Lucky hissed as he flew back at the sight of a spiky gem!

Ves chuckled. "Your guts must have gotten quite a workout to produce these abnormal gems!"

"Meeeeeeow!"

He recalled that Lucky originally 'produced' a couple of Antithesis Essence gems after he attempted to cure his pet's indigestion problem.

The Nyxian Gap, Unending alloy and B-stone all combined to generate a pair of spiky gems with an ambiguous description.

[Antithesis Essence]

???

If not even the System was capable of deciphering their effects, then they must definitely be on a higher tier than his other gems!

The problem was that all of this potency was shrouded behind a veil. What if they brought harm to the mech pilot? What if their effects were conditional to specific circumstances?

At the very least, the Unstable Chaos Essence gems appeared to be a little more straightforward.

The few clues he had hinted to Ves that the Antithesis gems might have a surprising effect against spiritual entities and maybe expert mechs.

"The Nyxian Gap. Unending Alloy. B-stone. Antithesis. All of these put together will definitely not result in something weak!"

His first thought was that he should employ these gems into mechs that could be used to repel expert mechs.

"The Fridaymen, Praetors and Planats brought 11 expert mechs. Even if the Glory Seekers and Crossers do their best, they can't guarantee they'll be able to contain every enemy expert mech."

If just one of them managed to break through the blockade, the Larkinson mech forces would definitely experience much greater pressure!

Therefore, the Larkinson Clan needed to prepare a response against expert mechs.

While expert mechs could not be beaten so easily, it was still possible to hinder them by bombarding them from a distance.

"This Bright Beam Prime is already very suited for this purpose. I'm not sure whether its firepower is truly capable of inflicting damage to an expert mech, but it doesn't hurt to strengthen this capability."

The only downside was that the Bright Beam Prime was only capable of firing a total of three prime resonance-empowered shots in a single go. Ves essentially had to gamble whether an Antithesis gem brought enough power to make it worthwhile to expend such a precious but mysterious resource.

"Ahh, let's just do it!" He shouted in the cockpit! "I have a good feeling about this, and that is enough!"

When faced with inexplicable and uncertain circumstances, Ves usually defaulted to his intuition. Even though it did not send any positive or negative signals at the moment, it did not suppress his bold streak.

As soon as he installed one of his two Antithesis gems into the Bright Beam Prime, the mech seemed to experience a profound change. Ves carefully observed the mech with his regular and spiritual vision, but he failed to glean any clues.

"I'll just have to wait until the battle starts to see the results of my decisions." He muttered.

For the final mech, Ves briefly contemplated using his second Antithesis gem before shaking his head.

The Bright Spear Prime stood no chance against an expert mech at close range. He could make much better use of the Antithesis gem by embedding it into another ranged mech.

"I guess I'll use one of my remaining Unstable Chaos Essence gems, then. I hope Venerable Orfan is able to cope with this addition."

Every prime mech possessed a gem now. In order to prevent Venerable Jannzi from feeling left out, Ves entered the Shield of Samar's cockpit and pretended to do something. Once he emerged from the final mech, Ves told the expert pilots that he was done with the prime mechs.

"I can't tell you how your mechs have changed. While they have definitely become more potent in battle, I cannot determine the exact outcomes. What's worse, my actions may have introduced some side effects to your machines. Just bear with them. The power bestowed to your mechs is very much worth it. Our overarching priority is to defeat the enemies that intend to crush our clan and kill all of our comrades."

"We can bear any pain so long as we gain greater power." Venerable Dise stated in an indomitable tone. "We appreciate all of the help that you have given to us. The Fridaymen will taste our wrath on the battlefield!"

Ves smiled. "Well said!"

Now that he handled the prime mechs, Ves quickly moved to another section of the Spirit of Bentheim. In order to waste as little time as possible, he utilized the flight system of his Unending Regalia and rapidly flew through the hallways.

He eventually reached the mech stables where a number of Transcender Punishers were being readied for the upcoming engagement.

Ves happened to meet two familiar Ylvainans next to the Prophet's Fist.

"Bright Martyr. I knew you would come to visit." James Ylvaine greeted him with an exhausted tone.

"You look.. older."

The Living Prophet didn't seem so lively today. His pure white robe drooped over his listless body as if it was a funeral shroud. Wrinkles marred his previously youthful face and a portion of his slick brown hair had turned white.

This was a drastic change! Ves had met with James not too long ago. He looked around 10 to 20 years younger back then. How could the cult leader look so much closer to the traditional depiction of the Great Prophet as an old and wiser man?

"Power always comes at a price." James sardonically smiled at Ves. "Isn't that what you always said? Even transcendents cannot escape the law of conservation of energy."

Ves did not pay attention to how James managed to decipher some of his inner thoughts. He sensed a heavy weight had settled in the air. His spiritual advisor looked much worse off than before!

"Is it because of my request?" He asked.

"I told you, Ves. The fates of the strong are harder to read than the fates of the weak."

In other words, James Ylvaine sacrificed a lot in order to provide Ves with the intelligence he demanded!

"Is your condition permanent?"

The prophet nodded and patted his chest. "My sight is strong, but my body is weak. This vessel is too flawed. I am not the first to suffer from premature aging. So do not feel guilty for seeing me in this form. The body is just a channel for me to interact with our flock. If it expires, it expires. I have faced death many times before. It gets old after the first few times."

This was incredibly troubling talk! Ves gained so much information that he could hardly determine how much of it consisted of shameless boasting!

Ves was always aware that James, for all of his humanness, was actually a clone. Perhaps his interaction with Ylvaine's resurrected spirit may have given him more life, but that did not mean he suddenly turned into a normal human. At the very least, his physiological shortcomings still remained.

Due to overdrafting his power, James had brought his time of death a lot closer!

Ves didn't know what to think about that. It was partially his fault that James lost a significant amount of years of his life.

Even so, his forces truly needed to know in advance how many expert mechs they were about to face. The Golden Skull Alliance was able to prepare much more thorough countermeasures now that they knew what to expect.

For this reason, Ves did not regret his choice. It was absolutely worth it to sacrifice a single person's lifespan to obtain crucial information that significantly increased their odds of winning.

Besides, he knew that James was wise and clear-minded enough to know the implications of what he had done. If the Living Prophet valued his life more, then he would have refused to make the prediction.

"How long do you have left?" Ves softly asked.

"I cannot say. It might sound strange to you, but looking into my own fate is the most costliest prediction I can make. Before I can even get an answer, my body will definitely expire."

"I see."

Ves didn't understand anything. He hated prophecies. Not only were they rooted in superstition, they also implied that the future was fixed or that fate actually existed.

He did not believe in this nonsense. He was an adherent of free choice and the future was inherently chaotic. At each moment of time, there was an infinite amount of possible futures. While some futures had a much higher chance of coming true than others, the rules of probability taught him that the most likely outcomes were never guaranteed to happen.

James sighed and turned to gaze up at the Prophet's Fist. "It is okay, Bright Martyr. You do not need to entangle yourself with my future. Whether my body can persist or not, our flock does not need me anymore. They have you to turn to after I am gone."

"Prophet!" Taon Melin couldn't remain silent any longer. "What are you saying?! We still need your guidance!"

"You misunderstand, Taon." James gently shook his head. "I will never be gone. Life and death is just a cycle to me. Besides, it is high time that the faithful must learn to stand up for themselves. The galaxy will not remain tranquil forever."

"Prophet..."

"No more, Taon. You need to think about solving our current predicament before you should consider anything else. Bright Martyr, please proceed with your plan."

Ves nodded. He originally planned to ask James whether he could determine the effects of the Antithesis gem, but he decided to drop it. He did not want to waste the remaining charges of his human-shaped prediction engine.

He turned to the Ylvainan mech pilot. "Taon, your mech along with every other Transcendent Punisher will play a vital role in the coming battle. The firepower at your disposal is massive. Aside from our prime mechs and our Valkyrie Redeemers, our other second-class mechs simply don't have the firepower to efficiently chew through the armor of the enemy mechs we expect to face. Our general battle approach is to provide our heavy artillery mechs with as many opportunities to fire upon enemy elements as possible."

"We understand, Bright Martyr. We will do our best to shoot down each and every enemy mech even if they are expert mechs!"

"Good man." Ves lightly patted Taon's shoulder. "I'll be going ahead with adding something extra to the Prophet's Fist."

He issued the same warning to Taon as he did his expert pilots. The Ylvainan mech pilot had to be on guard against any possible negative side effects.

It did not take long for Ves to install the Antithesis Essence gem in the first production copy of the Transcendent Punisher. He was faintly afraid that the ominous Nyxian gem might have corrupted the previously pure Ylvainan mech.

However, just like with his other decisions, he didn't have the luxury of worrying about any potential sequelae. As long as the gems brought additional power, any price was acceptable!

As Ves was about to leave, he briefly considered doing something extra for the Ylvainans.

Should he establish a battle network for them? Ves briefly checked up on Ylvaine the design spirit.

He silently shook his head.

The design spirit of the Transcendent Punisher was too weak. There were too few Ylvainans providing him with spiritual feedback.

What happened to Ylvaine might also happen to the Superior Mother if the Hexers lost their foundation. Ves became more resolved to beat the enemy strike enemy force today.

He could not allow the Friday Coalition to succeed!

Chapter 2646: Not A Pauper Anymore

The visit to the Ylvainans put Ves in a heavy mood. Thoughts of mortality, losing and other heavy subjects filled his mind.

Lucky floated over to the shoulder of the Unending Regalia and perched upon it. "Meow."

"You don't need to worry about me." Ves responded. "I'm not letting myself get distracted for long."

Plenty of time had already passed. He did not have to wait much longer before the battle commenced.

In fact, both sides were already capable of firing on each other's starships.

The capital ships of both sides were massive targets and it was not impossible to land hits on the larger sub-capital ships.

Even if it was difficult to maintain accuracy at stupendous ranges, sustained attacks from laser weapons could definitely inflict a lot of damage over time!

In fact, there was a very real possibility that Venerable Ghanso and his Scarra would start to siege the expeditionary fleet. Every single starship was on full alert during this time. They did not fly a straight course but weaved from side to side in random patterns. Yet no matter how much the starships tried to turn themselves into difficult targets, it did not change the fundamental truth that they were far too sluggish to dodge attacks that arrived almost instantly!

It was quite telling that the Fridaymen did not do anything during this time.

As a mech designer, Ves understood the reason why the incoming strike force withheld their fire. At longer ranges, the effectiveness of sieging an enemy fleet was questionable.

Too much energy would be wasted on missed attacks. Even if they hit, energy weapons were not famed for their penetration capabilities.

The combined fleet had already put its vulnerable support ships and civilian ships behind the bulk of better-armored vessels. The Spirit of Bentheim, the Indigo Tremor, the Antonio Cross and the Hemmington Cross were all incredibly beefy, and the sub-capital combat carriers were also tough in their own right!

What would happen if a few hundred energy beams struck any of those heavily-armored vessels?

It was virtually impossible for them to converge on a single point on a single ship! What would likely happen was that many beams would go wide. Those that managed to strike a ship would just sear different lines across the hull.

It was too difficult to keep any beam on a single point, especially when the starship that got struck was rotating along her axis!

Simply spinning around the hull was one of the best ways to mitigate incoming firepower. Such a response basically made it impossible for distant enemies to pile up their attacks on a single weak point and succeed in punching through several meters of thick hull plating!

While the starships in question would definitely suffer damage, the most important point was that it didn't result in any effective advantages to the attacking side.

What happened instead was that the sieging mechs would heat up considerably while expending lots of energy and other supplies. The conditions of the mechs would also degrade slightly while in use, preventing them from fighting in the main battle at their peak condition.

This was also why the Larkinson Clan did not order its Transcendent Punishers to open fire against the incoming enemy strike force. The rugged heavy artillery mechs were designed to cope with the stresses of extended engagements, but that did not mean they could maintain their peak condition over several hours!

Even if the difference amounted to just 2 to 5 percent, this might still be enough to tilt the outcome of a battle!

Besides, if the Larkinsons or the incoming enemies succeeded in taking down a starship, so what?

It was the mechs that decided the battle, not the vessels responsible for supporting them and bringing them to the right location!

The effort only paid off if the attacks managed to down a capital ship, but the chances of that happening was far too low. None of the capital ships in the Golden Skull Alliance were fragile and thinly armored.

Ves was actually grateful that he hadn't acquired a refinery ship or ark ship yet. He also patted himself on the back for his insistence on beefing up the defensive capabilities of his factory ship.

In fact, even if the Larkinsons already acquired a non-combat capital ship, they would just put other ships in the way.

"This quiet will not last forever, though." He grumbled.

Once the two fleets came close enough, he had no doubt that the space in between would become filled with deadly beams!

Ves eventually returned to his personal workshop. After clearing his mind of distracting thoughts, he checked his list for any measures he could still implement to gain an edge in the upcoming battle.

"I don't have many choices left." Ves glumly concluded.

While he had empowered a lot of mechs and mech pilots, he couldn't help but feel his preparations weren't enough. While his actions definitely improved his odds of winning, the battle could still go either way!

"I haven't exhausted all of my resources yet. I need to do more to give myself more certainty. It seems I can't avoid it any longer."

He looked around his personal workshop and entered an isolated compartment. He specifically ordered it built in order to provide him with a better venue than his bathroom to do his shady business.

"Lucky, please check if there are any bugs or anything."

"Meow."

"Nitaa, guard the entrance. Don't let anyone in no matter what."

His tall and silent bodyguard moved into place.

Once Lucky swept the small compartment, Ves relaxed and activated a mental command.

A shimmering comm materialized into existence. The comm briefly floated in the air before morphing into an opening in one of the vambraces of his Unending Regalia.

Once the comm integrated with his personal armor, Ves activated the Mech Designer System for the first time in many months.

The System instantly booted up. A flood of announcements scrolled past the projected interface. Ves ignored most of the information and only paid attention to how many Design Points he earned since he completed the design of the Blessed Squire.

[Design Evaluation: Transcendent Punisher TP-A-01-B]

...

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for completing an adequate original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

[Valkyrie Redeemer Valkyrie Redeemer VR-A-01-B]

...

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for completing an adequate original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

[Design Evaluation: Chiron CH-A-01-C]

...

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for completing an adequate original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

[Your project involvement is lower than 50 percent. Your rewards for completing this design are halved.]

[Design Evaluation: Sanctuary SA-A-01-C]

...

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for completing an adequate original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

[Your project involvement is lower than 50 percent. Your rewards for completing this design are halved.]

[Design Evaluation: Crystal Lord Mark II CL-A-02-C]

...

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for completing an adequate original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

[Your project involvement is lower than 50 percent. Your rewards for completing this design are halved.]

[Design Evaluation: Ferocious Piranha FP-A-01-C]

...

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for completing an adequate original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

[Your project involvement is lower than 50 percent. Your rewards for completing this design are halved.]

[Design Evaluation: Valkyrie Avenger VR-AA-01-B]

...

[You have received 10,000 Design Points for completing an adequate variant of an existing design.]

[Design Evaluation: Valkyrie Brunhild VR-AB-01-B]

...

[You have received 10,000 Design Points for completing an adequate variant of an existing design.]

[Design Evaluation: Valkyrie Interceptor VR-AI-01-B]

...

[You have received 10,000 Design Points for completing an adequate variant of an existing design.]

[Design Evaluation: Valkyrie Huntress VR-AH-01-B]

...

[You have received 10,000 Design Points for completing an adequate variant of an existing design.]

[Design Evaluation: Valkyrie Hurricane VR-AC-01-B]

...

[You have received 10,000 Design Points for completing an adequate variant of an existing design.]

As expected, The System awarded a hefty amount of DP for his major design projects. He received half as much Design Points for his minor design projects, but he did not have anything to complain about.

Ever since he learned how the System adjusted its rewarded based on involvement, Ves made sure he contributed at least more than 20 percent to any project. This ensured that the System wouldn't shrink his cut any further.

Compared to the DP he earned from designing his original mechs, the rewards for designing a bunch of variants really didn't amount to much!

"It makes sense, though. I spent much less time designing these variants."

He quickly checked whether he received any awards for developing his prime mechs, but the System wasn't so gullible. Despite discovering a new form of resonance, his stingy partner never paid attention to his innovations.

Only mech designs earned its appreciation, and they had to pass several thresholds before the System took notice of them. The Valkyrie Prime and the other prime mechs were too low effort to earn him any DP.

"Well, let's see how much progress I've made."

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Journeyman Mech Designer

Specializations: Spiritual Man-Machine Symbiosis

Design Points: 457,342

Attributes

Strength: 1.6

Dexterity: 1.6

Endurance: 2.0

Intelligence: 2.4

Creativity: 2.1

Concentration: 2.2

Spirituality: 2.1

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Journeyman - [3D Printer Proficiency V] - [Assembler Proficiency V] - [Masterwork Mech Assembly III]

[Battle Mechatronics]: Journeyman - [Knight Mech Mastery I] - [Rifleman Mech Mastery I] - [Space Knight Mastery I] - [Hero Mech Mastery I] - [Light Skirmisher Mastery I] - [Custom Mech Design III]

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Journeyman - [Mech Hacking III] - [Programming IV]

[Electrical Engineering]: Senior - [Structural Pathway Configuration V] - [Energy Storage V] - [Conductors IV] - [Ultracompact Energy Storage I] - [Power Reactors II] - [Dense Energy Transmissions I]

[Materials Science]: Journeyman - [Crystallography IV] - [Crystal Laser Propagation IV] - [Lithic Materials I] - [Heat-Resistant Materials I] - [Luminar Crystals III]

[Mathematics]: Journeyman - [Simulations V]

[Mechanics]: Senior - [Jury Rigging IV] - [Speed Tuning IV] - [Mechanical Fault Detection II] - [Fine Motion Control I] - [Heavy Mech Design III]

[Metallurgy]: Senior - [Alloy Compression IV] - [Fixed Armor Specialization IV] - [Flexible Armor Specialization I] - [Smart Metal IV] - [ASMAS III] - [Internal Structure Specialization II]

[Metaphysics]: Apprentice - [X-Factor V] - [Spiritual Senses II] - [Spiritual Exploration I] - [Spiritual Manipulation III] - [Spiritual Engineering III]

[Interfacing]: Novice - [Neural Interface Optimization I]

[Physics]: Senior - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization IV] - [Gamma Laser Weapons II] [Lightweight Armor Optimization II] - [Mediumweight Armor Optimization IV] - [Melee Weapon Optimization IV] - [Polarizing Shielding II] - [Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation IV] - [Optics IV] - [Ballistic Weapon Optimization IV]

[Propulsion]: Journeyman - [Flight Systems IV]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice - [Field Repairs III]

[Signals and Communications]: Journeyman - [Anti-Stealth Detection III] - [Active ECM Systems II] - [Passive ECM Systems II]

[Stealth and Cloaking]: Journeyman

Abilities

[Superpublish]: Available. Can be activated once a year.

[Inventorize]: Unavailable.

Evaluation: A competent Journeyman Mech Designer who has made progress in the mysteries of life, mechs and synergy.

Ves briefly smiled as he noted a lot of small improvements.

His Spirituality had grown to 2.1, which was slightly out of his expectation. He thought he might bump into a bottleneck or something, but if there was any, he easily surpassed this barrier.

Various Sub-Skills scored higher than before, reflecting his ongoing studies. He often referenced various textbooks while he was working on a design project. Gloriana always insisted that he should come up with better solutions whenever he bumped into challenging design problems.

He even gained a couple of new additions to his Skill List without redeeming them from the System.

"I can admire my mech design capabilities later." He reminded himself.

The only piece of data that was truly relevant to his circumstances was how much resources he could spend.

Ever since he completed the first round of mech designs, he earned several hundred Design Points at once!

This clearly reflected the benefits to expanding his Design Department. With more and more helpers at his side, he was able to output a lot more mech designs than before, thereby skyrocketing his DP earnings!

"I have over 450,000 DP at my disposal!"

He was no longer a pauper anymore!

Chapter 2647: Who Is The Test Subject?

His decision to expand his Design Department paid off. Now that Ves transitioned over to working on several mech design projects at a time, his productivity had skyrocketed. By letting his assistants perform the work that required the least brainpower, he freed up a lot of time which he could spend on solving the most critical design problems.

Certainly, there were downsides to this approach. His sense of ownership in his products had dropped. His lack of control resulted in suboptimal outcomes that he would have never produced on his own. He wore out his mind a lot faster due to the need to juggle many different mech designs at once.

Yet the benefits were worth it. Not only was he able to deliver many more mech designs to the people that needed them, he also gained the approval of the System in the form of Design Points.

Ves was well aware that the System's new incentive mechanisms encouraged him to design more mechs. It was set up in a way that silently told him that it was better to design a lot of mech designs in haste than to design a single extremely high quality mech design at a time.

To put it simpler, the System valued the process and the experience of designing mechs more than the end product.

Ves directed a knowing look at the vambrace of the Unending Regalia that had integrated the System comm.

"You value me more than my mech designs, is that right? What is your purpose?"

Naturally, the System did not deign to answer him. He was already used to its attitude. Even if Ves insulted it, the System was way too stuck-up to pay any mind to his feelings.

As Ves experienced more of the galaxy, his perspective was not as limited as before. Beyond discovering the System's entanglement with his mother and the Five Scrolls Compact, he was becoming more aware of the interests that drove people forward.

Now that he looked back on the behavior of the System, Ves had become much more certain about his suspicions. He had become so dazzled by its incredibly advanced capabilities that he failed to think critically about its complete state.

It may actually be the Metal Scroll or a remnant of the long-lost Sacred Scroll, but it was definitely far from its prime. The Mech Designer System was very much flawed and rough to Ves. It was as if the Scroll had just cobbled it up together in order to present a different image. The fact that its mechanisms changed over time meant that the System was experimenting!

Just like how Ves experimented on his mech pilots, the System likely treated him the same way!

As a seasoned researcher, he knew quite well how dangerous it was to be someone's test subject. Sometimes, he felt as if he was beta testing a product for the Metal Scroll. A moment of carelessness could easily result in a head explosion!

Sweat poured out of his brow. His Unending Regalia automatically absorbed the moisture, but that did not lessen his fears about realizing that he was caught in another entity's experiment!

He slowly calmed down. He recognized he couldn't do anything about his suspected status. Experimenters always did their utmost to control every possible variable. They never let test subjects go out of control.

Besides, he didn't think the System intended to dispose of him after expending so many resources on facilitating his growth. That was an enormous waste and unnecessary to boot. Its ambiguous relationship with his mother gave him some guarantees as well. She would have done something if she believed the System was harmful.

Ves pushed these distracting thoughts to the back of his mind. While it was useful gain more awareness, he had to solve his immediate problems first before addressing other concerns.

"With over 450,000 DP under my belt, I've gained a lot more spending power."

He could have spent it on so many new Skills and Sub-Skills. Ever since he integrated his Archimedes Rubal implant, he expanded his brain capacity. While he still needed to pay attention to the compatibility of the knowledge he absorbed, as long as his design philosophy was okay with it, he could easily imagine boosting the quality of his mech designs even further by spending all of that DP!

"In fact, according to my original plan, I should be conserving these points until I accumulate 1 million DP."

He still yearned to unlock the mystery behind expert mech design. If the System kept its old reward structure, then he would have been able to afford it many times over by now. He wasn't too hung up over the changes because it was only a matter of time before he reached his target.

"I probably won't be able to earn 550,000 DP after completing the current round of mech designs, but I'll definitely get it done after completing the next round!"

Unfortunately, the enemy fleet forced his hand. Rather than sitting on his pile of accumulated Design Points like a hoarding dragon, he felt pressured to convert them into anything that would help him tide over this crisis.

His resentment against his cousin Ghanso and the Fridaymen rose even higher!

"Goddamn you bastards. You've effectively delayed my plans for a year. I'll never forgive you for setting back my masterplan!"

He navigated the interface of the System. As much as he wanted to delve into the Skill Tree, he resisted his urges and ventured into the Store.

He browsed through the catalog and tried to look for any useful categories.

He used to think that the Store charged exorbitant prices for its goods. Everytime he purchased something from it, he felt as if the Store was ripping him off. He wasted so much of his hard-earn DP on items which he could have used to improve his design capabilities instead.

He knew better now. The System was actually filled with a broad selection of advanced and incredibly expensive first-rate products that he couldn't obtain through normal means. A large proportion of the products it sold were exclusive to certain human factions and never saw the light of day.

It was natural for the Store to set its prices so high for these reasons. The Store essentially served to close the gap between him and eminent sons such as Jovie Armalon who enjoyed the best opportunities a mech designer could get from their organizations.

In fact, Ves even felt that the Store was subsidizing him by undercharging many of its products. There was no way that its Attribute Candies were actually worth a few hundred to a few thousand DP. The fact that he could obtain Candies tailored to other people basically implied that the System wanted him to develop a network of helpers, just like other high-ranking mech designers.

"Well, Store, do you have anything that can help me beat up a few thousand second-class mechs?"

He impatiently browsed through the projected storefront. He observed many products that offered a lot of personal conveniences to him when he was at work or when he was under threat.

He scrolled past mech designer equipment such as scanners, miniature fabrication modules, precision tools, anti-tampering gadgets, auto-designers and other equipment that would not look out of place in Master Willix's personal workshop.

Of course, none of these amazing tools were cheap. Anything worthwhile enough for him to acquire cost millions of DP. Ves had to forgo upgrading a lot of Skills in order to afford any of them. In the early stages of his mech design career, this was a stupid choice.

"I don't need the System to obtain these products." He muttered. "As long as I keep climbing up, I can obtain equipment that is just as good from the MTA or some other powerful organization."

Aside from professional gear, the System also offered a range of self-protection options. They ranged from medicine, infantry weapons, combat armor modules, stealth gadgets, communication equipment and optional upgrades to some of the aforementioned goods.

Ves spent several minutes exploring this broad category of weapons, armor and auxiliary products.

His eyes lit up as he spotted many incredibly useful modules that he could add to his Unending Regalia. Even if he wasn't a professional-trained soldier, he could turn himself into a deadly commando by stuffing his armor with all of these fancy additions!

"Yet..." His voice fell. "Why is there nothing here that will help me fight against mechs?!"

The scale of the products on offer was purely limited in scale and scope! Even the most expensive laser pistols that reminded him of the Amastendira were only incidentally able to threaten mechs.

The Store offered no wondrous weapons that he could directly mount onto one of his mechs!

Most crucially, it also declined to put any mechs or any other large war machines for sale!

As for ships, the Store only sold a relatively modest variety of ship components.

Its catalog of raw materials was also rather lackluster. The MTA offered a much greater selection.

The underlying message became clear to him. The System didn't want him to rely on its Store to resolve mech-based threats. A true mech designer was supposed to design, produce and field his own mechs!

If he couldn't even do that, he didn't deserve to keep the System.

"Then.. what am I supposed to do?" He frowned. "Should I splurge it all on lottery tickets instead?"

He felt tempted to do so. As long as he bought enough lottery tickets, he was bound to obtain something good.

However, the lack of control along with all of the randomness scared him off. Even if he gained something fantastic, his prize probably wouldn't be relevant to his current situation!

"Besides, they're way too expensive."

The System charged 20,000 DP for a silver lottery ticket and 100,000 DP for a golden lottery ticket. That was way too much considering that there was a significant chance that they didn't award any prize!

In the end, Ves disappointedly stuck to the Store and browsed the section on auxiliary modules.

Mechs and weapons were out of his consideration. He only hoped to redeem some augments that were primarily designed to improve his personal safety but could also be employed in mechs.

"If you think about it, equipment that is meant to be carried by a person can also be used as a miniaturized mech module!"

It didn't matter if he intended to use a machine beyond what it was designed for. A tool was a tool. As long as it worked, who cared whether he was breaking its warranty?

Which of his mechs should he upgrade? And what should he choose to upgrade?

"Unlike gems, these modules aren't installed permanently. I don't have to feel sorry about using them up. As long as they remain intact, I can always move them over to a better mech in the future."

After narrowing down his specifications, he still had a fair number of options to choose from. He struggled to select a suitable module that was useful enough while still fitting within his budget.

[Odineye - Long-ranged Omni-Sensor - Level 3]

Price: 400,000 DP

This compact sensor module is specialized in detecting and uncovering the data of any object, person or mech up to an extended range. It is compatible with targeting systems, analytical machines and many other devices that accept sensor input.

The level 3 Odineye is most effective within a range of 500 meters in unobstructed spaces, but gradually loses most of its effectiveness at 5 kilometers.

While he could have chosen a lot of other helpful gadgets, Ves eventually settled his mind on the Odineye.

"It's not the known threats I should necessarily worry about. It's the unknown threats that I truly need to be worried about!"

The Odineye's range might be short in the context of space battles, but its capabilities were undeniable. Not only was it able to detect all manner of stealth mechs and stealth vehicles, it was also capable of looking deep into the structure of mechs.

This effectively meant that Ves could employ the Odineye to expose all of the weak points of any mech! As long as the machine was incapable of blocking the Odineye's sight, then much of its vulnerabilities became visible.

This was invaluable information to a mech designer like Ves!

Chapter 2648: A New Eye

As its name suggested, the Odineye shared a lot of relations with the Vulcaneye.

Ves was very satisfied with the advanced handheld scanner that he had purchased from the System's Store a long time ago. Even though his larger workshop scanners performed much better, the Vulcaneye was unmatched in portability.

If he was willing to spend more DP to level it up, the Vulcaneye would definitely be able to scan and glean more useful data from the materials he possessed. He might be able to decipher better ways to utilize unusual materials such as Unending alloy, P-stone and B-stone with the help of an upgraded scanner.

"There are much better ways to spend my DP, though." He sighed.

Upgrading his Skills and Sub-Skills remained his primary focus. The Skill Tree not only allowed him to access knowledge beyond his reach, but also provided him with enormous time savings. Many mech designers would be willing to kill expert pilots or add taboo weapons to their mechs if that was what it took to gain more time!

"Time is the scarcest resource to every mech designer. It is constantly being spent, but it can hardly be supplemented. Even Star Designers wish they can buy more time for themselves."

The ability to exchange an imaginary currency for time was definitely the most useful and cost-effective benefit offered by the System. In a perfect reality, Ves wouldn't need to spend any DP in the Store.

Sadly, it was not to be. The cosmos was filled with danger. While danger brought many opportunities, such as thriving demand for mechs, it also inconvenienced the lives of many ambitious mech designers.

The Store essentially served as a vendor of last resort. He could obtain various useful goodies that he could use to get past an obstacle.

Of course, the premise was whether he earned enough Design Points to use the Store for its intended purpose. Ves continually needed to design a lot of mechs in order to be able to afford anything the System offered.

"What a slave driver." He muttered.

It was not as if he was doing anything different. The Larkinson Merit Exchange he set up within his clan was doing the exact same thing to his clansmen.

The most insidious aspect about these reward systems was that they didn't force anymore to play by the rules. They just aroused people's greed, causing them to voluntarily submit to exploitation on their accord!

The main reason why these unfair and unequal exchanges remained viable was because the alternatives were worse. Most people didn't have access to anything better, Ves included.

Ves shook his head. He was being way too paranoid and suspicious of the System lately. While he felt it was a good idea to remain skeptical, he lacked the power to actually do anything about his concerns.

He turned his attention back to the Odineye. For a sensor that was capable of providing very detailed observation data within a range of 5 kilometers, it was surprisingly small. The entire module was about the size of his palm if he left his fingers out of consideration.

He could easily free up some room on his Unending Regalia to integrate this 400,000 DP sensor system.

"Perhaps I'll do so after this battle. No stealthy bugger will be able to sneak up to me as long as it is working at full power!"

As Ves explored his curious new module, he quickly gained access to its control interface. He skimmed over the specifications of the expensive device.

He discovered various useful insights about the Odineye.

It turned out that its stated maximum range of 5 kilometers only applied to its main sensor capabilities. It was able to detect objects further ahead, but the resolution and amount of useful data was very limited. That meant that the Odineye might easily be able to detect an active mech, but it wouldn't be able to spit out a lot of useful details.

The second useful property of the Odineye was that it was very resistant against damage. While the sensor module wasn't as ridiculously tough as the Darkbreak module, it was still capable of withstanding a couple of direct second-class attacks!

"It's still breakable though." He frowned.

He would probably cry if a sensor module that was worth 400,000 DP broke in the upcoming battle!

The third property that Ves took notice of was that the Odineye was quite capable of detecting stealthed people and objects. Its performance against first-class stealth technology was actually rather bad, but it was probably capable of thwarting nearly every form of conventional second-class stealth system!

The reason why he added the word 'conventional' to that description was that there were bound to be a lot of alien and unorthodox stealth tech that might be able to sneak past the Odineye!

This was not a big deal to Ves. "No piece of tech is devoid of loopholes. It's already good enough that the Odineye is capable of doing so much at this level."

He didn't believe the Friday Coalition, the Preator Clan and the Planat Clan possessed anything advanced enough to fool the Odineye. This was probably a much greater concern once he reached the Red Ocean.

"Even then, I can just upgrade the Odineye to higher level to mitigate this vulnerability."

As much as the Odineye astounded Ves, not everything was great.

The biggest shortcoming was that the Odineye did not supply its own power!

The Vulcaneye scanner was a self-contained product. It was meant to be used on its own.

The Odineye was designed to be slotted into a suit of combat armor and draw power from a central source.

Normally, this wasn't a big deal. His Unending Regalia supplied plenty of power to its various modules and other systems.

This time was different!

"What a power hog!"

At its current state, the internal power supply of his Unending Regalia wasn't even capable of supporting the Odineye when it was at full strength!

Fortunately, the power consumption was only excessive relative to the human scale. The load was much more reasonable when utilized by one of his better mechs. Certainly, any machine that attempted to make use of the Odineye would have to take the increased power draw into account, but that was not a big deal in most battles.

"Besides, it doesn't have to be dialed up to maximum all the time."

If he just wanted to utilize the Odineye on his own, then he could just set a regular interval where it was active for only a couple of milliseconds or so. That was enough time for the sensor module to sweep the surroundings and detect any possible hidden threats.

In the remainder of the time, Ves could put it on a lower standby setting where its range and effectiveness was vastly reduced in order to minimize its power consumption.

"I have a lot of options here. This is a very versatile module."

He got what he paid for. He did not regret splurging 400,000 DP on this useful tool!

After gaining a good understanding of the basic capabilities of his new purchase, he began to delve a bit deeper into its configuration. He needed to know to what extent he could integrate it into other systems and devices.

Just as he expected, the Odineye was a very high-end product that was primarily designed to mate with other first-class gear. That said, it was designed to be widely compatible with both standard and proprietary connection standards, so Ves didn't have to worry about this problem.

"I can proceed with my plan." He grinned.

He immediately left his personal workshop and raced back to the hangar bay with Lucky following right behind.

During the journey, he briefly considered which mech he should integrate the Odineye.

The Prophet's Fist wasn't a suitable choice. As a bunker mech, it was fixed in place and was only able to make detailed observations up to 5 kilometers from the Spirit of Bentheim.

"This is completely redundant considering that heavy artillery mechs mostly rely on sensor data supplied by other mechs and ships."

What about the Bright Beam Prime? Venerable Stark's rifleman mech was one of his killer weapons. Once it came under the effect of prime resonance, the mech was able to fire incredibly powerful energy beams, but only a few times!

With three attacks before the mech ran out of juice, every shot counted. While Venerable Stark possessed superhuman marksmanship, she was limited by her mech. Adding the Odineye to her machine would grant her much greater accuracy.

Yet Ves still hesitated!

"It's not worth it to commit this precious resource on a mech that can fire just three shots at full power."

Besides, the battle plan called for deploying the Bright Beam Prime at the rear, where the Odineye was too far away from the front to resolve anything useful.

He rapidly went through his remaining options.

The Piranha Prime would definitely be a good choice. It would enhance its role as a scout and be able to transmit detailed observation and targeting data to other friendly forces. The ability to detect weak points would also be of great help in increasing its killing efficiency.

The Bright Sword Prime already possessed enhanced cutting power after Ves augmented it with a gem. Combining it with the Odineye would allow Venerable Dis to pierce through even the toughest mechs!

While both of these choices sounded good, emotionally he had already made a choice.

He stopped in front of the Valkyrie Prime.

Like any human with feelings, Ves was susceptible to favoritism. Out of all of the mech pilots in his fleet, he liked Venerable Joshua the most.

"Well, that's enough of a reason, I guess." He shrugged.

The other two prime mechs already possessed sufficient advantages. In his heart, Ves believed that the Valkyrie Prime was the most powerful prime mech. Temporarily lending it the Odineye was also a good choice.

He already had the perfect place in mind to affix the Odineye. He called over a few bots and tools and floated up to the forehead of the mech.

Just like every LMC mech, the Valkyrie Prime proudly boasted a third eye surrounded by a hexagon.

In the next twenty minutes, Ves installed the Odineye in the 'pupil' of the third eye. He covered it with a transparent protective material to give it a bit of a buffer against incidental damage. He also integrated the Odineye in the operating system of the mech.

He also provided brief instructions to Venerable Joshua.

The expert pilot looked puzzled. "If this new sensor system is able to detect stealthed opponents, shouldn't you be putting it onto a mech that is assigned to the rear? I'll likely be fighting in one of the hotspots of the battlefield. Stealth mechs have no place there because it's far too easy for them to get hit by random shots and debris."

"I'm aware of that, but I mainly want you to use the Odineye to help us expose the weak points of every enemy mech in range. The military mechs we're about to confront are just too tough. It's too difficult to take them down the conventional way. We need to cheat as much as possible, and informing our mech pilots where they should concentrate their attacks will definitely even the playing field!"

Joshua quickly understood the importance of his additional role. He not only had to lead the Penitent Sisters in battle, but also act as a forward scout that relayed critical sensor readings back to the fleet!

"So my mech must stay up as long as possible in order to supply all of this data, right?"

"Correct." Ves nodded. "The Odineye is an extremely rare and expensive component. Try your best to prevent the enemy from targeting it. Even if you can't prevent your mech from getting trashed, at least make sure we'll be able to salvage this sensor module intact!"

He did not want to flush 400,000 DP down the drain!

Chapter 2649: Duty Calls

Once Ves finished handling the new Odineye, he essentially completed all of his personal preparations.

He could do more, of course, but there simply wasn't enough time to accomplish anything meaningful.

Rather than tiring himself out, Ves decided to relax and spend the final hour before the start of the battle on checking up on key personnel.

"How do you feel about the upcoming battle?" He asked his favorite expert pilot.

"We're not prepared for this fight." Joshua replied. "I can see, hear and feel it from the personnel around us. Our clansmen are worried. They aren't as confident as before. For a long time, the Friday Coalition has been a giant in everyone's minds. We're not so far removed from our third-rater roots. A few years ago, none of us ever imagined we would be able to match up against the Fridaymen. They're just too powerful."

"Ah."

Ves overlooked this detail. His vision was set so high these days that he essentially put himself at the same height as the Fridaymen. That didn't mean the rest of his clansmen had followed suit. It appeared he needed to do his best to pep them up just before the battle commenced.

"Thank you for telling me that, Joshua. While it is true that we are not the equals to the enemy Fridaymen and Vicious Mountainers, the fight isn't hopeless for us. We have glows, battle formations and plenty of other tricks up our sleeve."

These were unconventional advantages that granted the Larkinsons a chance of overturning the upcoming engagement. However, if his mech pilots failed to leverage them well enough, the superior base capabilities of the enemy could easily run them all down!

Every mech pilot knew the score. Aside from the prime mechs, the Transcendent Punishers and Valkyrie Redeemers, the Larkinson Clan was far behind when it came to powerful mechs. A victory would definitely be bittersweet once the casualty figures become known!

As Ves chatted with Venerable Joshua, elsewhere a different pair of people was preparing for the upcoming fight.

"I don't want to go out! I've already retired from the battlefield! I'm a mech athlete, not a soldier!"

Raella jabbed her elbow against her boyfriend's suited form. "You've already been at it for hours. We're not letting you off the hook again! I'm even stepping onto the battlefield!"

Desperate times called for desperate measures. The Larkinson Clan truly couldn't afford to let any of its mech pilots sit back and relax. Major Verle had called upon the reserves to step forward and pilot any spare machine the Larkinson Clan had left.

In truth, there weren't many mechs that were still lacking mech pilots. The spare mechs mostly consisted of obsolete third-class mechs such as the Adonis Colossus or the

various prototypes of the ongoing mech design projects at the Design Design Department.

As a pair of young mech pilots at their prime, both Raella Larkinson and Vincent Ricklin were at the top of the list of reserves. It was unconscionable for them to sit out the battle that threatened the continuation of the entire clan!

"Nyeow!" A white Persian cat angrily swiped her claws on Vincent's leg. "Nyeow!"

"Hey, be careful, Minxie!"

If not for the tough material of his piloting suit, he would have bled at this moment!

Raella snorted and crossed her arms across her own piloting suit. "That's what happens to cowards. If you don't want to turn every Larkinson against you, then you better take part in the battle."

"I can't do anything!" Vincent complained. "My mech is too weak! It might be good enough to fight in the Sand War, but any second-class mech can easily chop my hybrid mech in half. I don't see why my shabby old Adonis Colossus can possibly make a difference. I'm not as lucky as you. I bet you don't have to worry about a single attack drilling straight through the cockpit of your new mech!"

As a skilled skirmisher specialist, the Larkinson Clan offered Raella the opportunity to pilot one of the prototypes of the Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version B.

To be honest, Raella wasn't sure if she was up to the task of piloting the powerful premium light skirmisher. She still honed her piloting skills, but she was mostly engaged in her desk job these days. She didn't even have enough time to learn all of the aspects required to pilot a second-class mech.

Despite these shortcomings, Raella was still one of the most suitable mech pilots left to pilot the spare prototype. She did not even think of shirking this responsibility. Just because she didn't like to fight and kill on the battlefield did not mean she was ignorant.

"You just need to sit back and provide covering fire for us." Raella softened her tone. "I've heard that the mech technicians will supply your mech with a powerful rifle. Just do the best you can from the rear. If any enemies get past our lines, just do your best to distract them from their goals. I don't think you'll have any trouble with that. Your mech is quite eye-catching."

Vincent groaned. "I regret piloting the Adonis Colossus. Can I request a swap?"

"Stop joking and get moving!"

"Nyeow!"

Elsewhere, Captain Vraken paid a surprise visit to the Black Cats. When Calabast saw the grand captain enter her territory, she immediately grew upset.

"What are you doing here, aunt?" She hissed in a low tone.

"Can we talk in private?"

"Tch. Fine."

Both women entered one of the isolated compartments that were specifically built to prevent any leaks.

Calabast strode inside while wearing a thick, black infiltrator suit with many modules and gadgets attached to the surface.

When Captain Daria-Maria curiously scanned all of the gear, she raised her eyebrow. Compared to her high-quality but relatively standard officer-grade hazard suit, the spymaster of the Larkinson Clan looked ready to sow chaos in a Fridayman base!

"Where did you get all of this gear?"

"Wouldn't you like to know." Calabast smirked. "There is an entire galaxy beyond the Hexadric Hegemony, you know. As long as you have money and connection, you can obtain damn near anything."

"Mhmm."

The compartment briefly fell silent as Calabast eyed her distant aunt with a hostile expression.

"Why must you be like this? No matter your current allegiances, we are still family. It doesn't matter what our dynasty says. You grew up as one of us. You are still a Vraken to me. Can't I show some concern for you as your good aunt?"

"FAMILY DOESN'T EXIST IN THE VRAKEN DYNASTY!" The spymaster burst out. "Don't think I'm unaware of what you are plotting! You're trying to exploit this crisis to establish a friendly connection with me. I have no interest in letting you get your way."

Daria-Maria sighed. "I won't deny that I have this goal in mind, but my motives aren't as nefarious as you think. The further we distance ourselves from our home star sector, the harder it is to connect with like-minded people. There are only so many Hexers in the expeditionary fleet and there are scant few Vrakens at our level."

"The fact that you feel you are missing companionship does not interest me in the slightest. I don't feel alone at all here. There are tens of thousands of Larkinsons that I

can befriend. I've already become acquainted with hundreds of them. They may not be as.. clever as a Vraken, but they aren't hiding any daggers behind their backs."

"I'm disappointed in you, Calabast. Consorting with all of these random Larkinsons will only lower you to their level. You should know better!"

"Hahaha!" Calabast abruptly laughed. "The fact that you look down on my clansmen says everything about you and the dynasty that I have divorced myself from. Mark my words, captain. You'll be eating your words in a decade or so. These Larkinsons you are dismissing will become much greater than any Hexer once we achieve success in the Red Ocean!"

The older woman at least had the decency to smile. "I'll be happy to be proven wrong, but don't get your hopes up yet. We'll first have to survive this battle, and that is still very much in doubt."

Both of them lost some of their cheer. They were much more aware of the threat posed by the Fridaymen. The elite mech units that the deep strike fleet carriers must be bringing into range was capable of fighting the best soldiers of the Hex Army to a standstill.

No matter what, they still had to take part in this battle regardless.

"Why did you come?" Calabast repeated her earlier question.

"I wish to prepare some contingency plans with you. No matter what, we cannot allow the Friday Coalition to accomplish their primary objective."

As a Vraken, Calabast knew what Daria-Maria was talking about. She did not disagree in principle.

"Let's talk."

In a different location, Taon Melin was about to board his Prophet's Fist. He was well aware of the pivotal role that he and his fellow Ylvainan mech pilots were about to play.

As the main source of firepower of the Larkinson Clan, the Transcendent Punishers were vital in crushing the enemy mechs.

Each miss, each delay and each misstep could easily result in the deaths of more Larkinsons!

Fortunately, the Living Prophet was with them. James Ylvaine had brought them all a lot of peace.

"Taon." The aged form of the Living Prophet approached the former chosen of Zeal. "If this battle is about to tip over.. we may need to make some sacrifices."

The Ylvainan mech pilot looked troubled. "I don't understand, sir."

James smiled. "You don't need to play stupid. You have spent enough time with me to know what I am alluding to. As the Bright Martyr often likes to say, there is a price for everything. I still have a bit of wealth left in my bones. My only regret is that I can't spend more."

"Your Holiness, is there..."

"Believe in yourself, Taon." The Living Prophet patted the mech pilot's suited shoulder. "While I welcome your devotion, this has always been your flaw. True faith transcends any individual. Even I am not indispensable to your beliefs. When you exact your punishment on the enemy, do it for yourself. You are your own god, Taon. The sooner you recognize this, the sooner you understand the essence of my tenets."

After a brief and unusually intimate talk, the Living Prophet bid farewell to the Ylvainan mech pilots and left the mech stables.

No one knew where he was going.

Taon clenched his fist before turning around to board the Prophet's Fist.

"I will never allow the enemy to push us to the brink!"

Aboard an entirely different capital ship, two expert pilots were waiting for the mech technicians to make their final checks.

The Charlemagne and the Jeanne D'Arc stood ready to launch an assault.

Venerable Ghanso Larkinson and Venerable Relia Foster both looked ready to fulfill their respective goals.

"Don't hold back." The female expert pilot warns. "If I see you sandbagging during this battle, I will cut down your mech myself!"

"Don't bother with your threats, Vesian." Ghanso growled back. "I don't recognize any 'Larkinson' in the enemy fleet as my kin. You should be afraid of the opposite. I might slay so many false Larkinsons that there aren't any left for you to kill!"

"Hmph. If I wasn't assigned to guard you and your follower mechs, I could give you a run for your money. My Jeanne D'Arc is wasted as a bodyguard."

An alert finally sounded throughout the hangar bay. Both expert pilots ceased their little game and flew into the cockpits of their respective mechs.

Soon enough, the two expert mechs smoothly slipped through the hangar bay hatch. The mechs joined many other Fridaymen mechs and entered into a formation.

The Scarra had joined up as well. The quasi-expert mechs gently moved to their assigned positions, their deadly rifles already warming up for the battle to come!

Chapter 2650: Hard Head

The time had come. Almost four hours had gone by. At this time, the two opposing fleets had drawn very close to each other.

The smaller Umbra Task Force doggedly chased after the considerably larger fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance with the help of its faster and purpose-built carriers. Even though the Fridaymen, Praetor and Planat engineers pushed their respective vessels beyond their recommended parameters, none of them showed any restraint.

The condition of the engines, thrusters and many other propulsion systems degraded rapidly as the attackers sought to catch up to their targets as fast as possible!

The Larkinsons and their allies did not choose to shirk this battle. They still held hope for victory despite knowing that their overall strength fell short compared to the enemy.

In their eyes, it was not yet time to cut off the rest of the fleet and take their capital ships away. While it sounded tempting to flee and preserve as many lives as possible, the expeditionary fleet would have to leave behind much of its assets, thereby putting it into an even weaker position if the enemy strike force ever caught up again!

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers knew quite well that this was the best shot they had of overturning the enemy. They had to fight right away if they did not wish to resign themselves to months of desperate flight!

Ves and Lucky briefly reunited with Gloriana and Clixie on the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim.

Everyone wore protective suits or armor without exception. Safety was paramount and even the extensive protective measures on the bridge could not guarantee anyone's life if a direct attack pierced all the way through the factory ship.

While Ves looked valiant in his Unending Regalia, his wife wore fashionable protective armor that was covered with hundreds of purple hexagons.

"Meow." Lucky poked at Clixie's suited form.

"Miaow."

Even pets were not exempted! Clixie along with every other critter in the fleet wore some kind of suit that was able to supply them with air and protected them from various hazards.

While the cats were exploring each other's suits, Ves opened his faceplate and leaned in to kiss Gloriana's uncovered lips.

"We'll make it through this battle." He softly whispered.

"I believe you." She said although her eyes betrayed her fear.

Ves gently held her by her armored hips. "Be brave, honey. You're not just a mech designer now. You're my wife, a lead designer and a symbol to our clansmen. It's normal to be afraid, but in times like these, you need to step up and lead by example."

"I'll try my best, but I'm not used to being so close to danger. This is only the second time in my life that I am looking down the barrel of someone's gun!"

Her nerves were shaking. She wasn't coping too well with the current situation. Hardly any of her Hexer determination was on display this time.

At the eve of battle, Gloriana had been reduced to a civilian, someone who had never been forged in the fires of battle!

Ves did not look down on her because of that. She enjoyed a different upbringing than him and followed a very different career trajectory. In fact, she was much more reflective of how a mech designer was expected to behave.

Still, his earlier words also rang true. If Gloriana wanted to become a leading figure in the clan, she needed to walk the walk. How could she earn any respect from the Larkinsons if she continued to act as a negative example?

His eyes hardened a little. "You can't show any doubt in a combat situation. Information must be conveyed and orders must be implemented as quickly and precisely as possible. Any chaos or interference can lead to deadly results. Fear is infectious. If you cannot present a brave front, the surrounding Larkinsons might become affected, thereby causing them to respond slower than normal. What if your actions lead to the death of your brother?"

That final part caused Gloriana to widen her eyes. She might not care too much about the life of a random Larkinson, but she would never forgive herself if she dragged the heels of her closest relative!

"I understand." She spoke, this time with much more conviction than before. "I will do my best to lead our assistant mech designers in analyzing the weak points of the enemy mechs."

"We will all be counting on you." Ves smiled.

This was the most suitable role for Gloriana. As someone who was extremely sensitive to flaws in mech designs, she was much more efficient at discovering the shortcomings of any mech.

"Do note that our effectiveness is heavily dependent on the quantity, quality and depth of data we receive." She reminded him. "We can't make any detailed studies on the structural flaws of a mech if all we get is snapshots and garbled noise."

"That won't be a concern. You'll get your data, one way or another. Don't forget to coordinate with Professor Cortez. He's a very experienced Senior who probably knows a thing or two about Fridayman mechs."

One of the more obscure advantages of the expeditionary fleet was the large number of mech designers riding along.

The low low-ranking mech designers in the Design Department and assigned to maintenance crews were all capable of performing a lot of labor-intensive analyses.

The high-ranking mech designers in the form of Ves, Gloriana, Juliet and the former Skull Architect could utilize their profound insights to detect tiny flaws and weak points that others might miss.

As long as all of these mech designers could be put to use, the defenders would be able to gain another edge in the coming battle!

Ves bet that the enemy fleet did not enjoy the same advantage. It was incredibly stupid to assign so many precious mech designers to a strike force tasked with performing a high-risk mission.

Of course, it was not as if the enemy necessarily needed this edge. The base performance of all of their mechs was already high enough to achieve victory by relying on brute force.

Once Gloriana took her place behind one of the bridge consoles, Ves took the Larkinson Mandate from Nitaa and approached a central position on the bridge.

He quietly waited until the time had come to rouse his men.

Every Larkinson fell silent and paid attention to their leader. Those on the bridge turned their chairs around to face him, while the Larkinsons stationed elsewhere all tuned in to the broadcast spread throughout the ships and mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

At this time, Colonel Ariadne Wodin and Lord Reginald Cross must be holding speeches in front of their troops.

"My fellow Larkinsons." Ves began as he faced the front, knowing that his visage would be transmitted to tens of thousands of Larkinsons at a time. "We stand in front of a deadly precipice. The enmity between our clan and the Friday Coalition has come to head. Our old enemies are not content to let us go. They mustered up their precious deep strike fleet carriers and filled them up with some of their elites to achieve a single purpose. Destroy the Larkinson Clan."

This was a rather questionable claim. Ves knew very well that the primary reason the Fridaymen went through all of this trouble was to target him specifically. However, he wasn't about to point that out. He didn't want to give his clan any ideas.

His face grew grim. "We face a hard battle. The enemy mechs are powerful and their mech pilots are highly-trained. The firepower they are about to bring to bear will shake our vessels and shatter our mechs. You can bet that the Fridaymen and their Garlaner allies will do their utmost to shake our reserve and overwhelm us with their aggressive momentum."

He suddenly raised the Larkinson Mandate above his head! The eye-catching medallion of the Golden Cat glinted in the light!

"They have chosen the wrong target! Inferior our mechs may be, our hearts and courage are far greater than what our scheming ambushers can ever comprehend!"

Under the watchful eyes of the Golden Cat, the Larkinsons found their courage and pushed away their doubts!

"We have fought several formidable enemies in the past." Ves reminded everyone as he lowered the ancestral heirloom. He tapped its front cover with one of his armored fingers. "The Friday Coalition attempted to bring us down before. Successive pirate groups attempted to stand in our way. None have succeeded! Neither second-class mechs nor a fully-functional heavy cruiser managed to bring us down. Even gods have failed to shake our foundation!"

Only the veterans of the Nyxian Gap Campaign understood the last point. Everyone else just treated it as hyperbole.

Exaggeration or not, the boastful claim drew out the pride that had been carved in the bones of every Larkinson. Their clan had already been forged in the fires of battle. They just needed a little reminder for them to recall their own capital for success!

"With our glows, expert pilots and other secret weapons, we can teach the Fridaymen and the rest of human space a new way of waging battle! As innovators, we have developed brand-new methods and products that no other mech force has ever seen. Our mech pilots have the latest and greatest tools and weapons that we have been able to supply them with. With the advantages that only we possess, we can overwhelm our unsuspecting opponents through guile and strategy!"

Ves conveyed a message of hope and victory with his words. He did not deny the strength of the enemy, but he painted them as ignorant brutes. As long as the Larkinsons outwitted and outmaneuvered them, they had a very good chance of coming out on top in the coming engagement!

Ves smiled at his audience. "Life is precious to us. As Larkinsons, we do not like to harvest the lives of others. That does not mean we are herbivores. If anyone approaches us with ill intent, we will defend ourselves and our fellow clansmen because that is who we are. As long as we pass this test, our clan will have truly earned the right to roam the stars. Are you scared?"

"NO!"

"Are you willing to let the enemy ruin your dreams?"

"NO!"

"Are you willing to let your families get slain?"

"NO!"

"Are you willing to let the Fridaymen defeat us in battle!"

"NOOOO!"

"Then what are you waiting for? Take up your arms and prepare to welcome our approaching foes. Let us split their bodies until the space lanes run red with rivers of blood! FOR THE CLAN!"

"FOR THE CLAN!" His Larkinsons universally echoed!

"Meow!" "Miaow!" "Nyeow!" "Woof!" "Chirp!"

Even their pets chimed in! If not for their inability to reach the enemy, they would have been eager to tear into the enemies that sought to kill their human companions!

Upon a certain command, the expeditionary fleet no longer oriented their starships away from the pursuing enemies.

It was a bad idea to expose their vulnerable rear to enemy firepower. Every single ship turned around until their bows faced the direction of the incoming threat.

Due to Newton's first law of motion, the ships didn't suddenly travel in a different direction. They continued to coast along their original trajectory. In other words, the vessels were flying in reverse, at least until they accelerated in a different direction.

The bow of the Spirit of Bentheim was the most prominent of all of the ships in the combined fleet. The majestic golden cat head that adorned the front of the ship seemed to taunt the distant enemies.

Immediately, a score of glowing positron beams struck the prow! The Breyer alloy on the surface wasn't able to cope with the destructive firepower.

Yet once the volley subsided, the prow of the capital ship only exhibited some modest surface damage.

The injury only emboldened the Larkinsons!