

Mech 2681

Chapter 2681: Helpless

When the Trost reached the Spirit of Bentheim, Venerable Kelvin Praetor felt a bit of consternation.

It wasn't easy to bore into a capital ship. The analysts aboard the Soaring Eagle already transmitted a lot of information about the enemy factory ship to his mech.

According to various sources, the Spirit of Bentheim wasn't a typical industrial vessel. She was expressly configured for frontier survival missions and came equipped with both energy shields and a robust layer of armor.

However, a non-combat vessel was never able to match a combat vessel such as a fleet carrier when it came to defense.

The Spirit of Bentheim just posed a greater challenge to the Trost than normal, especially when it was rotating as madly as possible like someone threw a spinning coin in space.

What was even more annoying was that the Amphis would soon reach the Spirit of Bentheim as well. While Venerable Kelvin Praetor was confident that he could keep out of its reach, the necessity of moving around would hinder his attempts to bore into the core compartments of his target ship.

"The Amphis possesses decent straight-line acceleration capabilities but it is less good at correcting its course." Another analyst instructed him. "As long as you keep circling around the Spirit of Bentheim, it's impossible for the Amphis to close in on your mech. However, be careful not to meet the Amphis on the other side."

"Don't worry. I won't make such a beginner's mistake."

Venerable Kelvin concentrated deeply onto the rotating vessel. He had set his sights on the stern of the factory ship.

The other sections were too difficult to bore through quickly. The sides were covered with meters of thick hull plating. Even if the materials were not all that tough compared to mech armor, their sheer thickness was an obstacle in itself.

The bow was even more unbearable to him. He was surprised when the analysts told him that the sculpted prow consisted entirely of mech-grade armor.

This was an extremely extravagant expenditure! The Larkinson Clan would have been much better off if it employed this tough alloy into its mechs instead. At least several

hundred more mechs would have remained intact if they were clad with this excellent material!

Kelvin shrugged. "Idiots."

The stupid Larkinsons did not even apply this material onto the surface of the Spirit of Bentheim in a manner that made sense. Instead, the Larkinsons decided to pile it all onto the prow, giving the ship an extremely hard head but leaving the rest alone!

"They should have used it to reinforce the backside instead." He shook his head. "Well, at least that makes my task easier!"

As his expert mech continued to circle around the Spirit of Bentheim, he waited for the right moment to strike.

The Spirit of Bentheim's rotation might look hard to deal with, but the processors of his expert mech already figured out his target's trajectories. There was no way a vessel as huge as this could alter the direction and speed of her rotations.

In addition, the ship had to take a lot of care not to spin too quickly. If her angular momentum exceeded what her inertial dampeners could compensate for, any crew inside that wasn't strapped down would quickly be pressed onto a solid surface!

In the worst case scenario, their bodies might go splat as if they fell off a tall building!

"The primary engineering bay of a capital ship is always closely connected to the main sublight propulsion system." A Praetor engineer informed Kelvin. "We have looked closely at the stern of the Spirit of Bentheim and believe this thruster section is your best opportunity to breach into the primary engineering bay. Once you have destroyed what's inside, the ship will already be half-crippled. You'll have to get in deeper to seriously threaten the ship and all of her occupants."

"What about their leader?" The expert pilot asked. "Is Ves Larkinson even onboard this ship?"

"Even if he isn't, you are still doing enough to save our fleet. Only the Crossers are still chasing after our fleet. The Larkinson and Glory Seeker mechs have all begun to turn back to their own ships."

While none of the members of the Golden Skull Alliance wanted to let their enemies go, the Larkinsons and Glory Seekers absolutely couldn't care about chasing after the enemy capital ships at this time.

Both Ves and Gloriana were under great danger!

Even though it shouldn't be possible for the Trost to find them in a ship that was over 2 kilometers long, who knew how much destruction the expert mech could unleash once it got inside!

Just as the Trost was about to pounce onto the stern that was just rotating into view, a mech had barely managed to get into range and began to fire all of the weapons it could bring to bear.

Missiles exploded without inflicting any meaningful damage.

Nails ricocheted off the armor.

A laser beam reflected off the surface.

The mech closest to the Trost was so weak and ineffectual that nobody paid attention to it! The mech in question was so irrelevant that not even its own mech pilot thought he could make a difference.

"I told you already, Raella! My attacks aren't even tickling the mech. The Transcendent Punishers are much more powerful than my old little mech."

"That's not an excuse, Vincent!" Raella shouted at him over their private communication channel. "I don't expect you to defeat the Trost, but you need to do everything possible to stall it so that the others can catch up. Get close, get in its way, attack its flight system. Just do something!"

"I can't!" Vincent fearfully replied. "I'm not cut out for this! My mech isn't good enough either. We don't belong in a battle like this. That bastard Ves didn't even give me a proper second-class mech like yours. What am I supposed to do? The Trost can fight off thousands of mechs like mine!"

Raella privately agreed with Vincent's assessment, but the situation was far too desperate at the moment. The Larkinsons had to do everything in their power to preserve their flagship and the tens of thousands of innocent Larkinsons taking shelter inside the vessel.

Even though she wasn't a typical Larkinson, she still prioritized the safety of all of those vulnerable clansmen over the life of a single mech pilot.

"Are you a coward, Vincent?!"

"What? No! I'm not! I can't go against an expert mech. I just can't!"

"You disappoint me, Vincent. Where was the brash young man who fought valiantly against the Sand War? Where is the war hero who fought to defend Bentheim for

months? Has all of your courage disappeared once you became a Larkinson? You're a disgrace!"

The insults crushed his heart and hurt his confidence.

Even as the Trost successfully charged the stern of the Spirit of Bentheim and unleashed a torrent of attacks that damaged one of her main thrusters, the Adonis Colossus remained unmoving!

"GET MOVING, VINCENT! Are you a man or are you a coward?!"

"I'm a man!"

"I'm not seeing any of that here. For all your pretensions, you're doing a very poor job at proving your worth. All of our other mech pilots have fought and risked their lives against the enemy. You're pretty much the only one who hasn't done anything to defend us. You're no Larkinson, Vincent! You may have taken our name, but when it mattered the most, you chose to dig your head into the ground instead of fighting like a man. You're a disgrace!"

"I'm attacking! I'm doing something, don't you see?!"

Indeed, his mech had begun to fire its missiles and other ranged weapons at the Trost whenever possible. Unfortunately, the Adonis Colossus was designed to fight against sandman vessels and third-class mechs. The jump to its current opponent was too big!

"YOU'RE NOT DOING ANYTHING!" Raella furiously shouted. "GET CLOSE AND USE YOUR MECH AS A DISTRACTION! DON'T LET THE TROST GET ANY DEEPER! IF YOU DON'T START MOVING NOW, I'LL NOT ONLY BREAK UP WITH YOU, BUT ALSO ASK VES TO KICK YOU OUT OF THE CLAN! WE DON'T NEED COWARDS LIKE YOU IN OUR RANKS!"

Vincent froze. He really didn't want to get booted out of the Larkinson Clan. There was no way he wanted to return to his old life as a space peasant after enjoying a lot of benefits.

What was even less acceptable was the damage to his pride and confidence. After going through so many bumps in his life, he finally settled on centering his identity around his manhood.

If he lost even that, what reason was there for him to exist?

It was unbearable for him to live in hell after he became accustomed to living in heaven!

He imagined what he would be like if Raella truly did what she said. How would he be able to lift his head up when he was branded a coward and a failure of a man?

"I would rather die!"

He really couldn't live in disgrace. Not now. Not when he enjoyed the good life.

In comparison to such an awful outcome, death didn't sound so bad. Even if he perished in battle, he would perish like a Larkinson and a man. His girlfriend and the other Larkinsons would honor his sacrifice and credit him with saving the lives of thousands of Larkinsons.

Once his mentality changed, Vincent seemingly became a whole new man. His body no longer shook. His eyes didn't waver anymore. His thoughts no longer became enthralled by fear.

While he was still afraid, he chose to disregard the many possible ways that this could go wrong.

"I need to step up as a man." He spoke to himself as he piloted his mech forward. "I need to prove myself as a warrior and a Larkinson!"

His determined words seemed to echo with his mech. The Adonis Colossus became much more comfortable for Vincent. His thoughts aligned with the machine and the machine aligned with Vincent.

Even if his mech was only a fraction as strong as the Trost, the Adonis Colossus was the closest to the only remaining threat to the clan. Even a second of stalling could save numerous lives aboard the ship!

Right now, the Spirit of Bentheim had already sustained considerable damage to her propulsion systems.

The Trost did not land on the vessel. Instead, it remained mobile and just fired its formidable ranged weapons at the stern. The advanced targeting systems of the expert mech combined with the considerable skill of its pilot resulted in accurate, devastating salvos that inflicted massive damage to one the thrusters.

The Shield of Samar and the Bright Beam Prime were helpless to intervene.

The Amphis was about to arrive as well, but the space knight simply didn't have a chance of catching up either, and everyone knew it. The only way for Venerable Linda Cross to attack the Trost was by firing her mech's shoulder-mounted laser hardpoints, but this wasn't really an effective solution.

The shoulder lasers were mostly designed to pick off kiting standard mechs and intercept incoming missiles. They lacked too much of a punch against better-armored targets!

It was at this time that the Adonis Colossus reluctantly came closer.

To be honest, the hybrid mech piloted by Vincent wasn't all that fast either. The only reason why the Adonis Colossus managed to get close to its target at all was because the Trost completely disregarded its threat.

Venerable Kelvin Praetor had to keep circling around the Spirit of Bentheim in order to avoid bumping into the Amphis.

Vincent simply followed a track suggested by a tactical officer and found that his mech was flying almost straight towards the Trost!

The enemy expert mech finally noticed the Adonis Colossus in front of it. Its active sensors swept across the third-class mech. One of its secondary weapons, a laser hardpoint buried in its chest, casually targeted the weaker mech.

A powerful beam that was strong enough to pierce through any third-class mech instantly struck the Adonis Colossus!

Chapter 2682: Lasted Too Short

Moments before the Trost decided to get rid of the annoying fly in front of its path, Ves looked befuddled as he saw the Adonis Colossus moving closer to an expert mech that was so much stronger that a comparison wasn't even meaningful.

"What is Vincent doing?" Ves frowned. "Major Verle, did you issue any orders to this idiot?"

Major Verle's projection looked just as confused. "No. The Adonis Colossus may be one of your most.. visually distinctive works, but it's effective as an unarmed shuttle against the Trost. I see no need to needlessly throw away another mech and mech pilot."

Both of them agreed with each other that the Adonis Colossus absolutely wasn't qualified to take part in a battle of this level. Unlike some of the other third-class mechs the Larkinsons fielded in desperation, at least the Desolate Soldier and the original Bright Warrior were able to contribute with their glows.

As for the Adonis Colossus? Other than instilling a bit of useless bravado, its glow was completely pointless. None of the Larkinsons ever saw a need to deploy the Adonis Colossus at the front.

Technically, the third-class hybrid mech was supposed to be on reserve.

The truth was that none of the mech commanders wanted to deal with the headache of trying to integrate a useless machine in their formations. Carelessly throwing in outsiders into the mix could lead to severe disruption.

It was better to keep this useless mech out of the way!

Ves narrowed his eyes at the Adonis Colossus. The mech was so pathetic that not even the enemy expert pilot was on guard against it. This amazingly allowed Vicent's mech to come quite close!

Unfortunately, the party was about to end. The Trost simply activated its most convenient weapon system at hand and fired a lethal laser at the annoying mech.

Yet just before the thin but very powerful laser beam struck the Adonis Colossus, Vincent had just put up a defense against the attack!

It may have been years since Vincent confronted the sandmen in battle, but he never forgot what it was like getting attacked by sandman lasers.

"Lasponge! Do your thing!"

The Lasponge module had become active!

In just a few eyeblinks, the Adonis Colossus released a liquid substance that quickly hardened into a giant crystal shield.

Yet the shield only had time to harden up before it was immediately struck with the most powerful laser that had ever targeted the Adonis Colossus!

Vincent had not held anything back. His mech dispensed its entire tank to form the thickest and most solid shield he could erect at this critical time.

Even though it was a long time since he fought in a true battle, he still kept his reflexes and instincts sharp by piloting his mech in competitive duels. This allowed them to react fast enough before it was too late.

"It worked!"

The crystal shield was just capable enough to block the laser attack. The story would have been different if the Trost fired another weapon or took the Adonis Colossus more seriously by empowering his attack with resonance.

Instead, the attack that should have pierced through the cockpit had instead fallen short of its goal.

"Damn! It's getting far too hot!"

The crystal shield absorbed so much heat from the single attack that it instantly blew up, flinging extremely hot shards in every direction!

Fortunately, the Adonis Colossus only suffered minimal surface damage. The mech was actually quite sturdy for a third-class mech.

While the mech remained intact, it was a different matter when it came to its mech pilot.

Vincent's courage and bravado had practically popped when the Trost fired at his mech.

He knew quite well that the attack was aimed straight at the cockpit of his mech!

If he hadn't activated his Lasponge module in time, he might not even be alive anymore!

It was all well and good to dream about putting up a valiant fight, but now that he had almost brushed past his own death, the reality of situation was so much worse than he could ever imagine.

Who could stay calm when they realized they were close to dying?

Who wouldn't cherish their life more after such a frightening moment?

His instincts warred against his thoughts. His body shook and began to release a copious amount of sweat. His vision blurred and his control over the Adonis Colossus wavered. He audibly gulped.

The only reason why he hadn't turned around his mech and flew away was because Raella's words were still ringing in his ears.

She would never forgive him if he turned away like a coward! The Larkinson Clan would never acknowledge him as their own even though it was completely unfair to expect him to make a move against a powerful expert mech!

He simply couldn't make a decision on what he should do. Fortunately, the Trost did not seem to take much notice of his mech's continued existence.

As far as Venerable Kelvin Praetor was concerned, he needed to keep drilling into the stern of the Spirit of Bentheim. His expert mech was already moving away in order to reach the next coordinates that allowed it to fire into the heavily-damaged thruster system.

The Amphis suddenly flew past the immobile Adonis Colossus!

"Either do something or get out of the way!" Venerable Linda Cross contemptuously barked on the local channel.

That caused Vincent to lose even more confidence. Yet another woman thought he was a good-for-nothing. Would it even make a difference if he piloted one of the new-fangled second-class mechs designed by Ves?

Perhaps he would be just as useless as now!

"Damnit, what am I thinking?! Why have I become such a coward?!"

He still remembered the glory days of the past. Back when he was a member of the Bentheim Liberation Movement, he mingled with the worst while fighting against the entire Bright Republic.

He fought and survived through many battles against both humans and sandmen. He had lived through family plots, a war between states and an alien invasion.

"I'm just as much of a warrior as any other Larkinson mech pilot!" Vincent indignantly roared!

His heart longed for him to prove himself!

"I am a real man! I don't hide behind women!"

His mind echoed with his mech once again!

"Who cares about fighting an expert mech? I will make its pilot pay!"

The Adonis Colossus flew forward once again. It circled around the Spirit of Bentheim for a moment and was finally able to approach the Trost once again.

The enemy expert mech was still firing its ranged weapons at the Spirit of Bentheim. Further behind, the Amphis attempted to launch its chainsword at the Trost, only to fall short as the distance between the two machines was never getting shorter.

Due to the track that the Adonis Colossus had taken, Vincent was again in a position to intercept the Trost. His mech was already firing another volley of missiles, nails and laser beams.

The Trost didn't bother to defend against the harmless attacks. While it tried to alter its course to go around the obstacle in front, it did not really try that hard, allowing Vincent to make sure his mech was on a collision course.

If the Adonis Colossus wouldn't get out of the way, then it would quickly collide against the expert mech, causing it to shatter or bounce aside!

There was no way that Vincent would be able to survive such a violent collision!

However, the mech pilot strangely did not move his mech away. Instead, he dared himself to stay right in front of the Trost, forcing the expert mech to make a more proactive move that would force it to waste some of its resources.

At this time, the Trost decided to cut the Adonis Colossus in half. It raised its halberd and was prepared to chop its target down.

As the intimidating blade of the polearm began to hack down, Vincent's heart was pumping faster than ever before.

"MOVE ASIDE, VINCENT!" Raella screamed over the channel.

Her words didn't register in his ears. Instead, as the halberd was about to cut into his mech, his mind had become unprecedentedly close to his mech.

He felt as if the mech that Ves had designed and made for him was truly an extension of himself during this life-threatening moment.

The Adonis Colossus was not the strongest mech by far, but it was the manliest one, and that was enough.

The mech seemed to sense its own impending destruction. It too was unwilling to perish without putting up a decent fight!

Two brave and foolish souls seemed to meld into one. An invisible barrier broke and a will that carried forth the desires of Vincent, the Adonis Colossus and Bravo flooded out of Vincent's mind!

"I AM A MAN!"

The Adonis Colossus, which had already been spiritually enhanced by Ves a some time ago, had actually nurtured itself and Vincent for many months.

Together, they quietly developed as Vincent fought every space duel with his trusty custom mech.

Even though the fights weren't as real, the mech pilot had unquestionably developed a deeper bond with his machine.

Now, all of this accumulation set the conditions for an improbable breakthrough.

When Ves realized what was happening, his mouth practically gaped.

As far as he could recall, Vincent didn't possess any spiritual potential. The likelihood of him going through this event should have been minimal!

Yet during this critical life-and-death moment, the Adonis Colossus became surrounded in a radiant golden corona!

The resonance shield that formed around the mech actually managed to block the halberd strike of the Trost!

Not only that, but the unanticipated failure to cut apart the Adonis Colossus immediately resulted in a very different collision than Venerable Kelvin had anticipated!

The Trost collided against the newly-formed resonance shield!

Already weakened by the failed halberd strike, the resonance shield instantly popped. The forced resonance generated by Vincent may be powerful, but it was still too weak to stop an entire mech in its tracks!

A violet but soundless crash occurred as both mechs bounced away from each other!

Vincent's heroic moment already came to an end!

He lasted less than a second!

The entire front surface of the Adonis Colossus had been crushed! Not a single portion of its front looked intact as the collision had flattened and ruined the muscle definition of its chest!

The damage would have been worse if the resonance shield hadn't absorbed much of the incoming force, but the Adonis Colossus still turned into a wreck!

"VINCENT!"

"Ahh.. Raella.. I'm still there." Vincent weakly said. "Ahh! My cockpit is crushed! Call for help! I think my legs are gone!"

"Help is on the way! Don't worry about your legs. We can just grow them back!"

"Wait.. is my little brother still there?! It can't be, right? I NEED HELP!"

While the ruined Adonis Colossus was flung away, the Trost had also become affected.

Even though its excellent armor caused the mech to remain undamaged, its forward progress had abruptly stalled.

After impacting the resonance shield and the surface of the opposing mech, the Trost had actually bounced back uncontrollably.

Even though Venerable Kelvin Praetor quickly tried to move his mech forward again, the small delay was enough for the Amphis to get closer!

If that wasn't bad enough, the Trost actually flew back at an angle, causing it to angle into a posture that made it seem as if it was reclining on an invisible couch.

This change in angle just happened to be captured by Venerable Davia Stark. Her eyes glinted as her Bright Beam Prime spat out a full-powered energy beam that struck one of the most sensitive exterior components of the enemy expert mech's flight system!

The blindingly powerful beam hit its mark!

Even though the attack failed to deal any further damage, a portion of the flight system fizzled out as the damaged section no longer provided any propulsion power!

The Trost had become slower!

The reduction in acceleration effectively meant that it was barely able to keep ahead of the Amphis!

As long as the space knight was able to reduce the distance a bit more, it would definitely be able to catch the Trost!

"I need one last nudge!" Venerable Linda Cross excitedly exclaimed. "The Trost is almost in my range!"

Venerable Davia quickly contemplated her options. The Trost may have slowed down, but it was still a threat. It had also oriented itself so that she would never be able to shoot its flight system again.

With the Spirit of Bentheim's stern in awful shape, she couldn't afford to wait patiently anymore.

The Trost only needed to make one more attack pass to breach the primary engineering bay and inflict untold destruction to the capital ship!

She took a deep breath and waited until the Trost circled around and came back in the Bright Beam Prime's sights.

"Get ready, Linda!"

Davia pulled the trigger, causing the Bright Beam Prime unleash a final full-powered shot! The resonance-empowered beam struck the Trost head-on, inflicting little actual damage but causing substantially more psychological damage!

When Venerable Kelvin Praetor noticed that the Bright Beam Prime was about to fire, his willpower quivered a bit. Even though expert pilots felt no fear, he still remembered how he suffered the earlier attack.

Perhaps the ranged mech wasn't able to harm his Trost. Perhaps the enemy mech had been holding back until now. Kelvin was stuck in a very difficult dilemma and had no time to think the situation through.

In the end, he flinched, and so did the Trost.

The expert hybrid mech crossed its arms, causing the attack to strike against its already-ruined wrist-mounted flamethrowers.

The damage was actually a bit serious. One of the hands of the Trost had become unresponsive.

"Is that all?"

The damage actually wasn't a big deal. The Trost was still able to wield its energy rifle with a single hand.

Just as Kelvin contemplated the purpose of this ineffective shot, a powerful volley of attacks actually came from a completely unexpected angle.

His instincts warned him of a threat from below, but due to the earlier incident, he wasn't able to orient the Trost fast enough!

A pair of searing white positron beams struck the mech's flight system from below, dealing actual, material damage to it! The strikes were so precise that the Trost completely spun out of control as its thrust had become uneven.

Just half a second later, a pair of glowing gauss rounds struck the already-damaged flight system just as it exposed its rear towards the Spirit of Bentheim.

The Trost's entire flight system shattered into pieces as the enhanced kinetic impacts completely crippled its flight abilities!

"You're finished!" Linda exulted as her Amphis finally caught up with the final traitor expert pilot!

A chainsword wrapped around Trost's torso. The Amphis yanked on the chain, causing it and its target to converge.

What followed next didn't need to be said. Suffice to say, the Trost had been completely neutralized!

Everyone quickly noticed who was responsible for sealing the Trost's fate. A glowing white corona leaked out of one of the bunkers on the surface of the Spirit of Bentheim.

Ves almost shot out of his observer's seat.

"Whose mech is in that bunker?!"

"It's.. Taon Melin, sir. The Prophet's Fist is stationed inside that specific bunker!"

Realization had finally set in for the Larkinsons. The final threat to the Spirit of Bentheim was taken care of. In the final moments, two new expert candidates had broken through and prevented the Trost from breaching the primary engineering bay.

"We're.. saved? We're saved!"

Victory never tasted sweeter.

Chapter 2683: Turnaround

A huge wave of relief swept across the bridge.

The Golden Skull Alliance prevailed!

After sacrificing thousands of mechs and losing a lot of mech pilots, the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers managed to achieve a military victory against their opponents!

The behavior of the enemy strike force conclusively set the hard-won victory in stone. The deep strike fleet carriers of the Friday Coalition and the larger fleet composed of carriers from the Praetor Clan and Planat Clan were all beating a desperate retreat!

Their sudden turnaround reflected the fact that they no longer possessed the confidence to defeat the expeditionary fleet.

Instead, it was their turn to fear death and capture!

Now that they no longer had enough mechs to complete their objectives, they recognized that their defeat was already set in stone.

Their subsequent actions were no longer geared towards achieving victory. The chance of salvaging a win after losing so many combat assets was too slim.

Instead, the enemies who initially attacked the expeditionary fleet were solely trying to preserve as many assets as possible.

Any mech or starship that fell in the hands of an enemy would only compound their losses!

Thousands of trained mech pilots and starship personnel were still aboard the fleet carriers and combat carriers. All of these well-trained servicemen took decades to

nurture. Their loss would definitely hurt the national strength of their respective organizations!

The aggrieved members of the Golden Skull Alliance definitely didn't let their opponents off! The ambushers had to pay a price for launching an unprovoked attack.

"Mr. Melin! Don't let the Fridaymen off! Use whatever strength you have left to cripple the mobility of their fleet carriers!"

"Yes, sir!"

The bunker on the Spirit of Bentheim that housed the Prophet's Fist was still glowing!

Unlike Vincent Ricklin whose breakthrough ended prematurely, Taon Melin still had plenty of juice left in the tank!

Ves and Major Verle did not want to waste the temporary power of the Larkinson Clan's newest expert candidate.

At this moment. The Prophet's Fist was surrounded by a sacred white glow that was unquestionably Ylvainan in character. The forced resonance that affected the entire mech temporarily elevated it to the performance standards of an expert mech.

Soon enough, Taon Melin showed what an artillery mech was truly capable of at the expert level.

The Prophet's Fist fired radiant white positron beams that struck the thrusters of the Eager Condemnation.

An instant later, the glowing mech fired its gauss cannons.

Two white comets slammed into the wounds opened up by the earlier attacks. The resonance-empowered projectiles slammed into the rear of the Eager Condemnation with great violence!

Fragments of thruster components exploded from the damaged capital ship. Immediately, her acceleration dropped by 7 percent. While that didn't sound very impressive at first, this was just the first salvo!

Fleet carriers were combat vessels, so their propulsion systems shouldn't be so easily affected by damage. Yet the power of the Prophet's Fist was easily able to overcome the initial layers of defense.

The other Transcendent Punishers joined in on the action as well.

Though the range was quite considerable, there was no way for the huge and lumbering capital ships to evade! At this distance, it was no problem for regular artillery mechs to land their shots on a reliable basis.

"Hahaha! Look at them running! Serves them right for trying to kill our patriarch!"

"Don't let any of them get away!"

Despite being besieged from behind, none of the remaining enemy combatants had any intentions to fight to the death.

First, there was no benefit to it. Victory was unattainable, so it made no sense to continue the fight.

Second, they still had an escape route. Space was very open and the battle took place beyond the edge of the zone that prohibited FTL transitions.

This meant that as long as any of the fleeing ships distanced themselves far enough from the enemy, they could instantly slip into the higher dimensions and

"Don't let those starships run!" Colonel Ariadne Wodin of the Glory Seekers commanded! "The outcome of this battle has been decided, but we still need to bleed the Fridaymen more. Don't let any of their deep strike fleet carriers escape!"

This time, it was the expeditionary fleet's turn to inhibit their opponents from escaping this star system!

The enemy strike force had stopped to prevent their targets from running by launching gravitic interference missiles.

Instead, it was the Golden Skull Alliance's turn to detonate gravitic payloads that disturbed the local region of space!

The Larkinson Clan didn't stock up on gravitic interference missiles, but fortunately its allies already had that covered.

Both the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan had already loaded their missileer mechs with the appropriate missiles. Now, they fired them in the vicinity of their respective targets.

The soldiers of the Wodin Dynasty did not want to let any of the deep strike fleet carriers go. The Glory Seeker missiles all detonated close to the Eager Condemnation, the Amagi, the Forward Momentum and the Orca Tyrant.

The Hexers did not even let the Auralis off! Even though all of her crew had been wiped out some time ago, the Fridaymen were already employing multiple methods to take the paralyzed fleet carrier out of the hands of their opponents.

As for the Cross Clan, their surviving mechs were already racing after the ships of the Praetor Clan and Planat Clan!

However, the chase was a bit more restrained here. Unlike the Fridaymen, the traitor clans still retained a considerable amount of strength.

Even when the surviving Crosser mechs from both the left and right side converged back together, they only roughly matched the amount of opposing mechs.

They needed to borrow the help of the surviving Glory Seeker mechs in order to enjoy a decisive numerical advantage, but the problem was that the Hexers weren't very interested in battling a desperate opponent!

Patriarch Reginald Cross — who had managed to return to the Hemmington Cross — made an urgent plea to Colonel Ariadne Wodin.

"We can't let them run!" His projection angrily shouted. "We have suffered far too much at the hands of the Praetors and Planats. We must not let their ships crawl back to their nests. If we can't take all of their carriers, then we must at least destroy them. I will not stop chasing them until I have cornered Damira Planat!"

The expert pilot of the Erin Tear had managed to eject and return to her mothership as well. Just the thought of letting that woman flee from this battle alive made Reginald Cross very indignant!

"Patriarch, I understand your desire to take revenge, but there are still around 1000 enemy mechs left." The colonel replied. "While we outnumber them by more than two times, a battle against a cornered enemy will definitely produce further losses. It is difficult to tolerate further sacrifices when we have already accomplished our primary goal. We survived."

"It's not enough! Don't think I haven't seen your mechs chasing after those deep strike fleet carriers as if they are your birthday presents."

"The Fridaymen have essentially lost their ability to protect their ships. Aside from some bunker mechs and scattered ranged mechs, their ability to threaten us is nil. We do not have to make any sacrifices to overtake their carriers. It's a different story when it comes to your old enemies."

"Then help us! As long as you can facilitate the capture or destruction of the Soaring Eagle, the Vindicator 35 and the Palmis Crislin, I won't demand reparations for most of

the damage we have incurred. We have lost a lot of good Crosser mech pilots from this battle. We have also lost Venerable Banner Cross."

Both of them briefly fell silent at this mention.

The Golden Skull Alliance hadn't actually lost a lot of expert pilots. The ones who lost their mechs successfully ejected from their broken machines and safely returned to their motherships.

However, Venerable Banner Cross never had the chance to do so when the Jeanne D'Arc stabbed its sword straight through the Leskin's cockpit.

This was an incredibly painful loss to the Cross Clan. The most troublesome aspect was that Venerable Banner Cross sacrificed his life to block the Fridayman expert mechs.

Colonel Ariadne Wodin knew that she could not act rashly at this time. The Cross Clan certainly needed to be compensated for the losses they suffered while fighting opponents who were only enemies by association.

She quickly pulled in Ves into the conversation. His projection appeared quickly.

After briefly filling him in on the situation, Ves briefly frowned until the commanding officer of the Glory Seeker asked some very relevant questions.

"How many artillery mechs do you have left? What are their conditions? How many hours do they have left before they are spent?"

Her questions reminded Ves of the greatest performers of the Larkinson Clan in this battle.

While his prime mechs and his battle formations arguably stole the show, as far as he was concerned, the battle would have never ended up as good if not for his Transcendent Punishers!

Ves quickly used his implants to access the most current status update.

"We have around 160 Transcendent Punishers. Most of them are tired but can still fire their weapons continuously at low intensity. As the designers of this heavy artillery mech, I can assure you that they will be able hold on for several hours. They are not made of glass. Several dozen of Transcendent Punishers have suffered varying degrees of damage, so their combat effectiveness is not as good. There are also a handful of artillery mechs that were previously taken out of action. Our mech technicians are working as hard as possible to restore their combat ability."

160 artillery mechs!

Perhaps that did not sound like much when the battle started off with 16,000 mechs, but now that the number of enemy threats dipped below 1000 combat effective mechs, this was a priceless advance, especially when it came to ranged combat!

If that wasn't enough, the Glory Seekers and Crossers also retained a considerable amount of bunker mechs! Even though their heavy artillery mechs weren't as flashy as the Larkinson Clan's Transcendent Punishers, they were still a force to be reckoned with at this stage of the engagement!

Of course, the same went for the enemy. Their artillery mechs were still covering for the retreat of their fleet.

Even so, both Ariadne and Reginald looked ecstatic! As long as the Larkinson Clan pitched in their artillery mechs, their side could easily crush the remaining enemy bunker mechs!

"If this is the case, the remaining enemy mechs will not be a problem." She confidently stated. "We still have a significant amount of artillery mechs at our disposal. We don't need to assault the enemy remnants directly. We can just maintain a safe distance while bombarding the propulsion systems of the enemy carriers. Since the vessels are currently trying to run away from us, their main thrusters are in our sights. Even at three times the distance, our artillery mechs can still cripple their legs. Once we have accomplished that, we can suppress or demolish their surviving mechs with continuous bombardment."

The three suited and armored figures quickly hashed out a plan.

While the Larkinsons and Glory Seekers still prioritized immobilizing the fleet carriers of the Friday Coalition, they promised to lend their strength to cripple as many starships of the traitor clans as possible.

Patriarch Reginald was not content with forcing the three fleet carriers of the two clans to stay. He wanted to immobilize the 50-odd combat carriers that the Praetor Clan and Planat Clan had brought as well.

As long as at least one of the combat carriers was able to escape the star system, then there was a good chance that Venerable Damira Planat and Venerable Albert Praetor would escape from the vengeful patriarch's grasp!

The Cross Clan did not want to let either of them crawl back to their respective clans! Weakening his old enemies by depriving them of their valuable expert pilots would hurt more than robbing them of their carrier vessels.

This was especially the case for Venerable Damira Planat! As a high-tier expert pilot, she was effectively an ace pilot candidate, someone who was able to revive her clan as long as she managed to advance.

There was no way that Reginald was willing to let this happen!

"Do not let any enemy escape!"

Chapter 2684: Loyal to the End

The battle had devolved into a giant frenzy at this stage. Even though there were thousands of wrecks floating in space, the search and rescue operation was only a sideshow compared to the current undertaking of the expeditionary forces.

This time, the hunters had become the hunted!

Initially, the Fridaymen and the traitor clans entered the battle in high spirits. They confidently banked on their elite mech units and their superior amount of expert mechs to crush their opponents.

Against any other enemies, their plan may have worked. Even if they suffered a lot of casualties to earn their victory, it was all worth it as long as they were able to achieve their primary goals.

Yet once they fell victim to the unconventional methods that the Larkinson Clan had never unveiled in public, the attackers suffered too many setbacks!

A pallid shadow cast over the crews of the fleeing starships.

Aboard the Eager Condemnation, Aisling Curver ignored the frantic activity around the command center.

The Coalition Reserve Corps was hardly the best military branch of the Friday Coalition, but its professionalism was beyond doubt. The personnel taking part in Operation Head Crusher were hand-picked for both their competence and loyalty.

Their loss would no doubt hurt the CRC considerably, but they could also be counted upon not to leave anything valuable behind to the enemy.

Even now, the bridge officers were in the process of wiping out valuable data, installing booby traps and facilitating the upcoming end of the Eager Condemnation.

General Pierce did not even want to leave a single scrap of useful material to the enemy. Blowing up the ship was the best possible way to spite their enemies and prevent them from gaining more loot.

While it was still possible for the winners to pick up the fragments from the expanding debris field, this was a very time-consuming ordeal that would likely take months to complete!

As more time went by, the debris of the destroyed ship would keep spreading further apart, making it even more difficult to pick up the pieces.

"The Larkinsons and Hexers will never waste the time to pick up our scraps."

"Even if someone comes to salvage the remains of our grand ship, I would rather let the local scavengers pick our bones!"

Their deaths loomed close, but the remaining CRC servicemen were determined to withhold as many benefits from the winners as possible.

It had practically become an obsession to the doomed crew members!

"Hahaha! Our engineers have just trashed our deep strike FTL drives! We're not going to let any Larkinson or Hexer use our own tech to travel through the stars!"

Aisling widened her eyes when she heard this news. This was an incredibly serious measure. Destroying the FTL drives of a starship was nothing less than cutting off their own legs!

Even though it was clear that everyone was already resigned to meet their doom, she was still surprised at how quickly and decisively the crew of the Eager Condemnation had moved.

No hesitation!

No procrastination!

No excuses!

As soon as it became 99 percent certain that they wouldn't be able to bring back their fleet carrier to the Friday Coalition, the people in charge immediately destroyed their own means of getting away.

"Ah!"

A low rumble rang throughout the ship. This was definitely a sign that another propulsion system had been taken out by the enemy artillery mechs.

There was no way to prevent the enemy from firing their guns at their main thrusters.

The only way for the Eager Condemnation to run from their pursuers was to turn their backs to them. If any ship attempted to shield their vulnerable propulsion systems by pointing their noses at the enemy, then they wouldn't be able to fly away anymore!

The only way to mitigate the damage somewhat was to fly away at an angle. This made it a bit more difficult to immobilize the starships completely.

Right now, this was exactly what Task Force Umbra was doing.

Each fleet carrier had split up. Aside from the silent Auralis, the other four Fridayman fleet carriers had opted to fan out in different directions. This forced their pursuers to make the difficult decision to spread out their pursuit forces. This was risky and dangerous considering that each Fridayman vessel still retained some bunker mechs and other damaged mechs.

Unfortunately, the Larkinsons and Glory Seekers were not deterred. Even though their mechs weren't in good shape and their mech pilots were very exhausted, they were determined to take revenge and maximize their gains!

Splitting up only delayed the inevitable. Even Aisling could see that. She considered her own fate.

She had a responsibility as well.

Master Huron briefly transmitted a message to her just before the crew of the Eager Condemnation trashed the quantum communication nodes.

"...I deeply regret your loss, but I will make sure your family and dependants are well taken care of. As the main technical supervisor of Unit L, you must wrap up this project as properly as possible. Please see to it that all of the spare parts, data banks, manuals and any other equipment related to the asymmetrical neural network project are properly disposed of. We cannot allow even an inkling of my research to fall in the hands of the enemy. The Gauge Dynasty and I expect you to do your duty. The Friday Coalition will prevail. Farewell, Aisling."

Due to the sensitive moment, Master Huron was only able to transmit a brief message. The rest of the bandwidth of the quantum communication nodes was already taken up by the need to transmit as much data as possible about the battle. Every sensor reading, every battle log and every other scrap of data had to be preserved to allow the Friday Coalition to figure out how they lost this battle.

If the Hex Army adopted the powerful methods of the Larkinson Clan one day, the Coalition had to be ready with a response!

None of the Fridaymen wanted to get caught with their pants down again. The introduction of the Blessed Squire and the Valkyrie Redeemer had already caused untold damage to their forces. Now that they gained a preview of some of the Larkinson Clan's next innovations, they had to make as much use out of this intelligence trove as possible.

To some of the Fridayman leaders back home, the intelligence gathered by Task Force Umbra made the loss of five deep strike fleet carriers a lot easier to accept!

Aisling's mood lowered even further as she rewatched her Master's message.

"You.. you're excited as well, aren't you? You can't wait to learn from the lessons of this battle."

She spent years learning under Master Toqueman Huron. She knew when he was eager to explore something new. The performance of Unit L and the Bloody Herons in this battle was very illuminating.

What was even more interesting was how some of the mechs of the Larkinson Clan vaguely exhibited a similar approach!

"This is impossible! There is no way that Ves has permission to form a neural network. The expertise required to design a networked neural interface is far too difficult for a Journeyman!"

She couldn't figure out how Ves managed to copy some of Huron's work! The mech designer in her was not reconciled with her ignorance. She wanted to know the truth! She wanted to take a look at Ves' research and applications!

Yet.. from what it looked like, she wouldn't have the chance. The Eager Condemnation was slowing down. The Larkinsons were steadily overtaking the increasingly less mobile fleet carrier.

The CRC would never let their opponents get what they wanted. With each minute that passed, the stoic crew members installed more explosives throughout the ship. They also purposefully crippled many systems by overloading them or forcing them to function outside of their boundaries.

"Don't blow up the ship just yet. Let's wait for them to land their boarding parties on our ship. We need to take as many of them with us as we can! It'll be our final surprise!"

"You idiot! There's no way our pursuers will fall for our trap. We've set up this scheme too many times during the Komodo War, and the Hexers have used the same trick as well."

The soldiers were right.

During the entire pursuit, the Glory Seekers constantly transmitted demands for them to surrender.

As long as the Fridaymen shut down their ship and evacuated from it, the Golden Skull Alliance promised to respect their surrender and keep them alive.

The expeditionary forces were much more interested in taking their ships than their lives!

Even if there was a lot of hatred between the two sides, as far as Ves and Colonel Ariadne were concerned, they would rather maximize their benefits than satisfy their grievances.

Aisling sighed. "They won't get their way."

The entire situation felt surreal to her. What was she doing here? Was Ves her enemy? Was she truly obligated to execute Master Huron's final orders?

She felt very mixed at this time. By all rights, she should do her best to safeguard the confidentiality of Master Huron's work. She shouldn't leave anything behind to the people who killed Venerable Ghanso Larkinsons and Venerable Relia Foster.

"Ghanso.. Relia..."

Although they weren't true Fridaymen, Aisling spent months working alongside them. Over the course of her assignment, she no longer minded their humble origins. Both expert pilots were individuals to be respected. She even regarded the two as comrades in arms.

If she wanted to respect her fallen friends, then she shouldn't even be hesitating at this moment!

"..Damnit! Why am I making this so difficult.."

She remained entangled in her conflicting emotions throughout the attempted flight.

At this time, the Transcendent Punishers had achieved a lot of progress in slowing down the fleeing fleet carriers.

Even though Taon's breakthrough moment finally came to an end, the Larkinsons didn't need to rely on his power to accomplish something as simple as cutting off the legs of their prey.

The pursuers still kept their distance, though.

Neither Ves, Major Verle, Colonel Ariadne and any other leader dared to send mechs or shuttles to the largely-immobilized fleet carriers.

"The Fridaymen are not responding to our surrender demands." Major Verle grimaced. "They're not even doing their best to lull us in a false sense of security. In my judgement, there is a 90 percent chance that the Eager Condemnation, the Amagi and the Orca Tyrant are already rigged to blow."

Ves rubbed his armored fingers against the side of his helmet. "What about the Forward Momentum?"

"The Forward Momentum is the lightest and most mobile fleet carrier of the enemy fleet. If any enemy capital ship has a chance of escaping our pursuit, it has to be this one. If you look at the local plot, you'll see that the Forward Momentum is far ahead from the battlefield. Her forward acceleration is the highest out of every other ship, including the Antonio Cross."

"Are they actually getting away?" Ves frowned.

Major Verle laughed. "Hahaha! No chance! While our artillery mechs are missing their shots quite often, they're still dismantling the Forward Momentum's sub-light propulsion systems over time. Since she is so poorly armored, it doesn't take a lot of hits to cripple her chances of getting away. It's just..."

"She'll just blow up in the end." Ves depressingly concluded.

This was a frustrating experience! Those deep strike fleet carriers were incredibly valuable! If the Larkinsons were able to get their hands on a couple of them, then they would gain a huge windfall!

No matter if the Larkinsons sold their spoils or converted the captured vessels for their own use, the enormous gains would definitely take the sting out of the enormous losses the clan had suffered!

However, from what it looked like, it was not to be. Ves could already see trillions of credits, huge troves of data and large reserves of valuable materials collapsing in front of him. This was an incredibly painful realization that almost the joy he gained from winning a crucial battle!

Fortunately, there was one more enemy fleet carrier.

"What about.. the Auralis?"

Major Verle grinned. "She's a special case. While the Fridaymen are doing their best to deprive her from us, we have dispatched numerous boarding parties to secure this prize."

The overall battle may have been decided, but an entirely different struggle was still taking place inside the hallways and compartments of the Auralis!

Chapter 2685: The Fate of the Auralis

The Forward Momentum had no chance of getting away.

It was not for lack of trying.

The Vanguarders crewing the vessel employed desperate measures to traverse as much distance as possible.

Bots and mechs were throwing away as many supplies and equipment as possible. It wasn't enough to dump their spare parts, their ammunition stores, their material reserves and even months worth of food and water into space.

The crew of the Forward Momentum also tore out as many non-essential equipment as possible!

Mechs roughly tore out heavy equipment such as 3D printers and structural components such as decks and bulkheads and physically threw them out the nearest large-sized hatches.

Of course, the Fridaymen didn't forget to trash any of the valuable equipment and goods they got rid of. They didn't want their pursuers to pick up a bargain.

While it sounded a bit silly to speed up a ship as long and heavy as a fleet carrier in this fashion, the actions did make a difference, if only modestly.

It was too bad that too much of the Forward Momentum was still stuck to the hull. The hull plating and structural components such as the keel accounted for most of the mass of the fleet carrier. Removing them was either time-consuming or not doable if they actually wanted to keep the ship together when she transitioned into FTL travel.

In the end, the Forward Momentum lost her primary sub-light propulsion systems.

While she still possessed numerous secondary thrusters and so on, they were mainly responsible for performing delicate maneuvers and adjusting the ship's orientation. In other words, they were only responsible for turning and spinning the Forward Momentum around. It simply wasn't doable to rely on their meager power to outrun a mech or starship!

Even when the Forward Momentum's escape was blocked, Ves didn't pay much attention to the vessel.

"There is no way for the Vanguarders to run away far enough before my Transcendent Punishers robs them of their mobility."

He held no doubts. He knew his mechs the best, so he could already predict the outcome.

Even though his artillery mechs already fired their weapons more than a thousand times, even though their weapon barrels were already showing heavy signs of wear and

tear, even though the entire fleet's reserve of gauss ammunition and high-density mech-grade energy cells was running low, the Transcendent Punishers were still capable of finishing the job.

Of course, Ves did not look forward to the aftermath. The mechs had been in combat for so long that many of them were only just a few steps away from breaking down. Even the undamaged mechs required an extensive round of maintenance to fix all of the damage they accumulated over the course of firing their powerful weapons.

While it was not impossible to force them to take part in another battle, strictly speaking they should pretty much be out of service after this engagement.

Ves silently groaned and pressed his hand against his helmet. He felt the urge to palm his face or rub his smooth-shaven chin, but it was not wise to remove his Unending Regalia at this time.

While there was pretty much no chance that the Fridaymen managed to infiltrate the Spirit of Bentheim, it was best to be cautious to the very end. He had already paid for mistakes of underestimating the Fridaymen before.

In order to cheer him up, he turned his attention elsewhere. He focused his sights on the projection of the Auralis.

The Gauge Dynasty-built fleet carrier had fallen dormant ever since it got hit by the energy wave unleashed by the Penitent Sister battle formation.

A lot of people were initially scared and hesitant to approach the Auralis. The surviving Fridaymen all learned that the crew of the massive ship had died in an instant when the wave passed through the hull.

Over 20,000 humans died in an instant. None of them succeeded in resisting the unstoppable attack. Who knew whether some of that 'death energy' still lingered on the lifeless capital ship!

It was only belatedly that General Pierce compelled the forces under his command to dispatch marines to escort a takeover party to bring the Auralis back online.

"We can't leave this ship floating around in space! We can't let our opponents get our hands on her either. Gain control over her propulsion and her FTL drives and bring her away if possible. Blow her up if you can't or if our enemies have a chance of capturing her. The Auralis is the property of the Friday Coalition. There is too much sensitive intelligence and classified technology in her hull. She cannot fall into the hands of outsiders!"

This was easier said than done. When the Fridayman shuttles initially arrived next to the eerily-silent vessel, they had difficulty getting in. The Fridayman boarding parties were

stuck outside for a very long time as they waited for a mech to breach one of the entry hatches.

It got worse as they went inside.

Every compartment and hallway section was locked.

"Damnit, the Auralis isn't accepting our codes or communication requests! The stupid ship AIs don't want to let us in. They're treating us as rivals rather than allies!"

The AIs were never programmed to deal with this unprecedented situation. A ship as valuable and sensitive as a deep strike fleet carrier possessed extremely high security. The Auralis boasted the best physical defenses and virtual defenses the Gauge Dynasty could stuff in a capital ship.

Bang!

A frustrated virtual security specialist slammed his fist against the console. Trying to gain access into the Auralis' internal network was as hard as pulling out an exobeast's teeth!

The suited and armored figures of this specific boarding party all impatiently shuffled their feet. If the Auralis accepted their identities and let them in, then they would have been able to reach her primary engineering bay at this time!

Instead, the ship acted like a traumatized survivor who had become horribly paranoid to anyone else. She closed herself off from her former friends and allies and trusted no one except for other Gaugers.

This ordinarily shouldn't be a problem. No matter what catastrophe the Auralis suffered, she was so well-armored and well-protected that it should have been impossible for all of her crew to die at once.

In the imagination of her shipwrights, the only instance where all of the crew would die at once was if she flew into a sun, crashed onto the surface of a heavy gravity planet or got struck by a superweapon.

In any other instance, at least some of the 20,000 crew members of the highly-compartmentalized vessel should still be left alive to take over command.

Even if every crew member died except for the junior cook, the Auralis would instantly recognize the survivor as the highest-ranking service member on the ship who was still alive.

This simple cook would gain a huge amount of authority and become capable of commanding the fleet carrier's AIs and automated systems.

This was enough power to command the Auralis to flee from the battlefield or initiate self-destruct procedures!

Yet this did not happen! Every single crew member had died without exception, so according to the programming of the AIs, the Auralis was locked unless a senior officer of the Sundered Phalanx came to take over command.

"What kind of stupid demand is this!?" A marine captain roared. "I'm a citizen of the Gauge Dynasty!"

Unfortunately, the Auralis ignored the officer's pleas.

The marine captain served in the Coalition Reserve Corps, which was a separate military branch.

The man was also an infantry officer, making him unqualified to 'unlock' a ship as valuable as the Auralis!

"Wait, don't we have any surviving Sundered Phalanx mech pilots left, sir?" A combat engineer suddenly proposed. "The mech pilots of the Bloody Herons and the Holvein Grenadiers are part of the Auralis' original crew complement. As long as we bring one of them back, the Auralis should recognize them and hand over command authority."

As soon as they conveyed this suggestion back to their superiors, they were met with a long period of silence before they received an answer.

"Not a single mech of the Bloody Herons and the Holvein Grenadiers have managed to disengage from the battle. The enemy mech forces have essentially wiped them all out."

A heavy weight fell on the shoulders of the boarding party.

It didn't matter if other senior Fridayman officers came. As far as the Auralis was concerned, people from the Konsu Clan, Vanguard Group and other Coalition partners couldn't be trusted.

Who knew if they were looking to steal the Auralis for themselves!

These strict instructions reflected the general wariness that Coalition partners held towards each other. Even after they merged in a single state, they still maintained a competitive outlook towards each other!

Not a single Coalition partner was their friend. They merely allied with each other out of necessity. It was impossible for the Gauge Dynasty to program their most sensitive military assets to roll out the welcoming mat to their rivals!

"..If that is the case, then we have no other way to go deeper aside from breaching every hatch and blast door in our way."

That was going to take a long time. When a fleet carrier as valuable as the Auralis wanted to keep people out, the barriers in the way could stall intruders for hours or even days depending on their breaching equipment!

"Well, at least our opposition will have it even worse." The combat engineer quipped. "The Auralis doesn't want to let us in, but she doesn't recognize us as hostiles either. If any of the Larkinsons or Hexers try to step aboard, the ship's active defenses will immediately wipe them out. Even if they manage to sabotage these countermeasures, they won't get the core systems in time. We have a head start on anyone who comes afterwards."

Ordinarily, the Fridayman combat engineer should be right.

Yet the first infiltrators the Larkinson Clan had sent was a single stealth shuttle.

The invisible vehicle had actually launched from the expeditionary fleet shortly after the Auralis became a ghost ship.

Even while mechs were still battling it out with each other, the stealth shuttle stayed far away from the hot zones and quietly slipped to the underside of the Auralis.

When the shuttle hatch oriented towards the ship slid open, two figures floated into view.

A heavily-suited woman and a cat clad in form-fitting black armor landed on the hull of the lifeless capital ship.

"You know what to do, Lucky." Calabast transmitted to the cat. "Follow the routines and instructions that I've sent to you. The ship diagram, hacking software and false data provided by DIVA should work. Even if they don't, just switch over to the backup plan. One way or another, we'll be taking over the ship, and it will all be thanks to you. Now get going if you want to have free rein over the ship's vault and material stores!"

"Meow!"

Lucky phased straight through meters of solid hull plating and other material designed to repel outside intrusion. Once he entered one of the outermost compartments, the cat was careful not to appear in open space.

Instead, he kept 'swimming' through solid decks and bulkheads, preventing even a shadow of his presence from getting detected by the ship's vigilant monitoring system.

When a ship like the Auralis was in lockdown mode, then her security systems became incredibly alert to any intruders!

It was one thing for other Fridaymen to step aboard the ship. It was another thing for Hexers and thieves to sneak their way inside!

Calabast had warned Lucky over and over again not to stick his head out. The cat had to rely on other senses to make his way to the center of the fleet carrier. Fortunately, his progress was fairly quick since not a single solid obstacle was able to stop a phased commando cat.

Lucky eventually passed through the reinforced layers that protected one of the core sections of the Auralis.

The primary data vault housed the AIs and much of the essential data of the Auralis.

This was an incredibly sensitive compartment. The core AI that governed the highest levels of the fleet carrier was incredibly sensitive towards any form of intrusion.

Not even the Hexers managed to figure out a way to hack or subvert the core AIs employed by the Sundered Phalanx.

As long as the core AI or the ship's systems detected anything amiss, the AIs would quickly activate a contingency plan that made taking over the ship impossible!

Fortunately, Lucky didn't need to mess with the core AI. Instead, he moved over to one of the data banks and retrieved a tiny chip from one of his Misfortune Harness' pockets.

He carefully took advantage of his phased state to attach the chip into an internal server port in one of the closed data storage units.

Immediately, the software and data inside this tiny chip went to work!

What was strange was that the Auralis did not reject the intrusion.

It would have been different if Lucky appeared into view and tried to drill a hole in the storage unit.

Yet because the chip appeared spontaneously, the initial actions of the hacking software took effect before the security systems put up its guard.

As long as the hacking program managed to get its foot in the door, the rest was easy!

It only took a couple of seconds for the contents of the chip to do its job. Soon enough, it broke apart into specs of dust.

Outside of the Auralis, Calabast and a boarding party from the Black Cats patiently waited. Upon receiving a subtle signal, the spymaster attempted to open the outer hatch.

It slid open without resistance. Calabast and her subordinates effortlessly flew inside and landed on the deck as soon as the artificial gravity took hold.

The ship greeted the new arrivals.

[Welcome back to the Auralis, Captain Arnlend. This ship is currently under lockdown. Your orders, ma'am?]

Calabast grinned. "Kill any unauthorized intruders. Don't leave any of them alive."

Chapter 2686: Reckoning

"War is cruel."

Ves stood proudly before the giant forward projectors on the bridge. His Unending Regalia along with his cape made him look exceptionally valiant.

As the leader of a victorious force, he felt incredibly relieved that he managed to retain his life.

If the battle had taken a turn for the worse, his opponents might have been able to gain a decisive advantage. Ves really didn't want to think about what would happen to him once the situation got to that point.

In fact, not just him, but every member of the Larkinson Clan would suffer a bad fate. As their leader and the person responsible for inviting them to take part in his grand expedition, he'd feel very guilty for making their life worse.

There was so much responsibility on his shoulders that he felt burdened whenever he had to make any decision. Even a simple matter such as how he spent his day could have a profound influence on the success of his clan.

Sometimes, he even thought about ditching it all, but it was far too late to make that decision.

For better or worse, his problems had become the Larkinson Clan's problems and vice versa.

This battle was a good example of that. If Ves hadn't meddled in the Komodo War by providing the Hex Army with usable glow-oriented designs, the Friday Coalition would have never sent 8 expert mechs and 5 deep strike fleet carriers to ambush a single Journeyman Mech Designer!

While he was happy that his side won in the end, he did not look forward to hearing the casualty figures. His clansmen were still in the process of performing search and rescue out into space.

A lot of mechs had broken apart with their mech pilots stuck inside while others limped back to the carriers with heavy injuries. Even mech pilots who appeared to be physically healthy may be in a lot of mental anguish.

Considering the destructiveness of the battle, Ves was already bracing himself for bad news. His thoughts already moved on to what would happen next.

What he worried about the most at this stage was the support he enjoyed among the crew. While a victory always boosted the reputation of the people in charge, a pyrrhic victory could easily erode his support even further!

This was especially after Ves had made the determination to avoid a repeat of the Battle against the Abyss.

"What do they call this battle?" Ves asked the dignified older woman standing by his side.

Grand Captain Daria-Maria Vraken did not look exhausted at all. Despite her responsibilities, she admirably kept the Spirit of Bentheim under control. Throughout much of the battle, her excellent direction essentially prevented any enemy attacks from getting past the energy shields and other defenses of the factory ship.

Even when the Trost had unleashed a myriad of weapons at the main thrusters of the Spirit of Bentheim, Captain Vraken along with the chief engineer made sure to lock everything volatile down and divert power and resources to limit the secondary explosions that might occur.

While the Spirit of Bentheim's sub-light propulsion systems were not in good shape, the ship still retained a portion of her mobility. Other ships had suffered worse. Many of the combat carriers of the Larkinson Clan were banged up due to the enemy's attempts to take out their bunker mechs.

"Every large-scale battle deserves a name." The captain smiled. "This is no skirmish. With twelve capital ships, hundreds of sub-capital ships, sixteen expert mechs and roughly 16,000 standard mechs, I'd say this is definitely a battle that is worthy to be added to the records of the Komodo War."

"We're not fighting on behalf of the Hegemony." Ves grimaced. "We were just defending ourselves."

"Let's not kid ourselves, Patriarch Ves. You are anything but a bystander in our war. This battle only came about because the Friday Coalition considers you its enemy. That

alone means you are a core participant in the struggle for domination in the Komodo Star Sector. Even if you run to an entirely new galaxy, your mechs are still advancing the Hexer cause."

That was nice to hear. Not.

He lightly coughed. "Anyway, what is this battle going to be called?"

"Well, I doubt you would want to commemorate our victory here by referring to it as the Battle of 347342-E-348312 or something." She crossed her arms and chuckled. "The survivors here need a more.. expressive name to remember it by. I've noticed that the martial wing of your clan speak quite solemnly about the Battle of Ulimo Citadel and the Battle against the Abyss. I can already tell you that your clansmen will speak of this confrontation in the same light, so you should take some creative liberties."

There weren't any official rules that governed how a battle should be named. It was not solely determined by the location. As long as enough people accepted a common name, it became official. Battles could even have multiple names if the two sides disagreed.

"Are there any good ones circulating around?"

"There are a few. Some have started to call it the Battle of Retribution due to all of the bad blood involved. Others have taken a liking for calling it the Battle of Divinities, due to the outsized roles of expert candidates, expert pilots, expert mechs and prime mechs."

Ves immediately frowned. "Let's not take it too far. The bulk of this battle was won through the efforts of thousands of ordinary mech pilots. They may not be so flashy, but they have done their duty and should be recognized for that. I don't want their contributions to be overshadowed by the handful of expert candidates and expert pilots that already enjoy a lot of attention."

"Your concern for your lesser clansmen is admirable, but I don't think they will mind if the spotlight is shone on the likes of Venerable Joshua Larkinson or Pilot Taon Melin. I think it will do more good than harm if you rally your clan around a grand and bold name. It will help with dealing with the inevitable backlash from suffering so many losses."

She had a point.

"Do you have any suggestions?"

"The Glory Seekers have taken to calling it the Battle of the Superior Mother's Reckoning. She has acted twice in this battle. The moment when the Superior Mother

slew the Bloody Herons and harvested the lives of the crew of the Auralis is the most unforgettable moment in this battle."

Ves immediately rejected it. "I need a more inclusive name, but I like the word reckoning. Revenge is both the main driver and the ultimate result of this clash. Plenty of people satisfied their need for revenge while others paid for their misdeeds. Perhaps.. we should call it the Battle of Reckoning."

It was a bit plain, which Ves preferred, but it also conveyed enough meaning to those who lived through it. While it was not the most unique way to commemorate a battle, it still passed his requirements.

He transmitted his choice to Major Verle and other leaders. They would take care of the rest.

Speaking of revenge, Ves received a surprising notice from Major Verle.

"We've picked up a couple of very special survivors, sir. If you're interested, you can pay a visit to them. We've transferred them to a secure and isolated treatment facility aboard the Spirit of Bentheim. So far, we have kept the news under wraps."

Ves became intrigued.

"Who are the survivors?"

"It's.. Venerable Relia Foster and Venerable Ghanso Larkinson."

"What?! They're alive?!"

"Yes, but... they're not in good shape. You'll know when you see them, sir. One of them is stable but the other is deteriorating. If you want to talk to the latter, then you should head down there quickly before it's too late."

"I'm on my way!"

Ves exited the bridge post-haste and took a floater platform down a handful of decks at the highest priority, forcing every other floater platform or cargo bot in the way to move aside.

He didn't actually expect that both of them made it through, but in hindsight he should have taken the possibility into account.

Expert pilots were strategically valuable. When Seniors or Masters designed their expert mechs, they invested heavily in the protection it afforded to its occupants.

In particular, the cockpits were virtually bunkers in themselves. They were not only armored as much as possible, but also contained a range of protective and medical functions to preserve the lives of expert pilots as much as possible.

The tech stuffed inside these extravagant cockpits were so good that expert pilots should still be able to survive if their heads had been cut off their necks!

Of course, whether such an expert pilot was capable of piloting expert mechs again was another question.

When Ves reached the entrance to the medical bay, he met up with Dr. Ranya. She personally took charge of the treatments due to the sensitive identities of the two patients.

"Patriarch." She greeted as she wore a high-quality white hazard suit that was customized for medical purposes. "My team and I are keeping the two expert pilots alive as best as possible, but it's not going too well."

"What's the problem, doc?"

She gestured towards the hatch leading into one of the sterilized treatment rooms. "Venerable Relia Foster has received considerable body injuries. The traumatic injuries she suffers suggests that a giant sword sliced through her limbs. With a weapon of that size and force, the damage that Foster sustained is not as simple as some clean cuts. Her entire body endured a lot of shock."

"Is she dying?"

Ranya hesitated. "We can keep her alive, but that is the extent of what we can accomplish with our medical equipment and the expertise we have at hand. To be honest, we need to clone replacement organs for her because her current ones are constantly on the verge of failing. She's completely beat up from both the inside and outside. It's only due to her excellent helmet and piloting seat that her head is still intact. A concussion is nothing compared to the damage inflicted on the rest of her body."

This was a very meaningful observation to Ves. As long as the head and brain of an expert pilot was still intact, then their ability to pilot mechs was still intact. Every other part of the body was replaceable.

"If Venerable Foster is the stable patient, then Venerable Ghanso..."

"Your cousin is dying. We don't know how or why. While his cockpit had been breached, he only suffered some bruises and some other impact wounds. Physically, that is anything but life-threatening. Yet for some reason, his life signs are fluctuating downwards and he is in constant mental pain. Whatever he is suffering from is not something that we can grapple with. Perhaps.. you might know more."

Dr. Ranya looked very upset at her inability to treat Ghanso's injuries. She took it as a personal failing.

She knew that there were many unknowns in the galaxy. Just like every other Larkinson, she had been watching the battle as well. She clearly witnessed how the Valkyrie Prime and the Glory Seekers launched an unconventional attack on the Charlemagne.

She was glad it was effective. If not for that, Venerable Ghanso could have overpowered the Larkinsons. However, she was also filled with curiosity about the nature of this novel new attack method and how it was able to bypass every barrier and affect humans directly.

Ves simply smiled at the doctor. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I don't know as much as you think. If not for our desperate circumstances, I wouldn't have tried to harness powers that I don't understand."

"It doesn't appear you'll be giving it up, though. If you intend to further your research in this area, you should think about your safety and the safety of your clansmen. It is prudent to learn how these unknown energies affect the health, mentality and physiology of humans."

"You have a good point." Ves reluctantly nodded. "Right now, my research is far too sensitive to be spread around, so I'll have to consider this matter carefully. Anyway, I didn't drop by to chat about my research. Ghanso is dying, right? Let me meet with him before it's too late."

No matter how much Ghanso had given him grief, he still carried the Larkinson name.

Chapter 2687: Dignity

Plenty of expert pilots survived after their expert mechs fell in battle.

As long as they managed to eject their cockpits, they stood a decent chance of making it back to safety.

For example, the Cross Clan only lost 1 out of 4 expert pilots. The Planat Clan still retained Venerable Damira Planat while the Praetor Clan managed to recover Venerable Albert Praetor.

As for the Fridaymen, more than half of their foreign expert pilots actually perished. This was not just because their cockpits were of a lower grade than the rest, but also due to the sheer amount of opponents they fought.

The end was especially brutal. When four Fridayman expert mechs wanted to stall the expeditionary forces as long as possible, they became swamped by a thousand mechs.

There was no way any of the hostile expert pilots would be able to survive after their cockpits were struck by a couple of hundred attacks!

Fortunately, the circumstances surrounding the defeat of the Charlemagne and Jeanne D'Arc were different. There were no hostiles left remaining around them so there was no risk of dispatching a rescue shuttle to pull out the trapped and injured expert pilots.

Better yet, the two expert mechs fell rather close to the Spirit of Bentheim, so the rescue shuttle directly deposited the patients back to the ship with the best medical facilities in the Larkinson fleet.

After hearing that Venerable Ghanso's case was very dire, Ves did not dare to dilly-dally around. He swiftly entered the treatment room where Ghanso's body was laid onto some kind of medical platform.

Despite all of the hardware, none of the medical equipment was able to do anything to stabilize the mentally-anguished expert pilots.

In fact, Ves felt it as soon as he entered the chamber. His mind became swept by a highly-erratic force of will that appeared to be very unstable.

"Ahhh! Ves! I'll.. kill you! The Larkinsons.. must be restored!"

Well, at least some things hadn't changed.

Hearing Ghanso's curse immediately caused Ves to discard all of the sympathy he briefly held for the fallen Larkinson.

"Hello, cousin." Ves casually greeted as he walked up to Ghanso. He didn't forget to activate the jammer function of his Unending Regalia. "It looks like you won't be getting your wish."

The closer he got, the more difficult it was for him to keep his cool in the face of Ghanso's unstable force of will.

Ghanso's mind was like a leaking tub. No matter how much the expert pilot wanted to keep himself together, the barrier that protected and contained his mind had deteriorated to a heavy degree.

It was like a city wall that had been subjected to heavy bombardment. Too many parts of the walls had been damaged for it to serve its purposes. Unless Ghanso or someone else was able to plug all of the gaps, there was no way to prevent Ghanso's mind, will and spirit from eroding due to a combination of leakage and outside exposure.

The human mind wasn't meant to exist in the open. Much like how regular human bodies easily got infected or polluted by toxins if they suffered cuts, Ghanso's open

mind was simply incapable of defending itself from all of the consequences of losing its defenses.

While he didn't show it, Ves was taken aback by what he saw. He frequently experimented on spirituality. What if he triggered an accident that caused his mind barrier to form holes as well?

Was treating it as simple as patching it up with spare spiritual energy?

Ves had an urge to try this solution out on Venerable Ghanso on the spot. While he didn't want to make Ghanso better, it was worth it to conduct an experiment. Anyway, it wasn't as if his cousin could resist becoming his next test subject.

"Why.. are you staring me.. Like that? Talk to me.. Already!"

"Shut up for a moment." Ves snapped as he concentrated his mind.

Without caring for what Ghanso felt, Ves began to extend a firm spiritual projection that performed some simple actions.

He basically grabbed a piece of Ghanso's force of will and tried to mold it into a patch that covered one of the holes in Ghanso's mind barrier.

"AHHHH! I'LL KILL YOU!"

It didn't work. The patch was too insubstantial and impermanent.

Ves tried again. He grabbed different parts of Ghanso's mind and also varied the quantity he utilized.

Nothing worked. Ves even made use of his own spiritual energy, but that led to a bad reaction that caused Ghanso to utter another curse.

In the end, the expert pilot's mental barrier hadn't improved at all. In fact, its holes and tears were becoming wider. Ves estimated that it would collapse entirely after 20 or 30 minutes.

He sighed. "You're dying."

"You didn't.. need to tell me that." Ghanso glared at the object of his loathing. "At least.. give me the decency.. of looking you in the eyes. Get rid.. of that dumb helmet."

Ves tapped the side of his helmet, causing his faceplate to turn completely transparent.

"I'm not taking off my helmet. Who knows what kind of hidden weapon you are hiding in your body."

"I'm bound here!" You have a bodyguard right behind you! I'm completely at your mercy!"

"That makes me want to keep my helmet on even more."

"You insufferable bastard!"

Ves crossed his arms. "Look, I don't like to wear a bulky suit of armor that interferes with my movements either, but it's people like you who keep forcing me to wear it."

"You deserve it! I.. hope someone else.. can succeed where I have failed." Ghanso gasped.

Even upon his dying breath, the stubborn Larkinson still clung to his hate. Ves did not sense a single measure of remorse in his cousin's resentful tone.

He felt disappointed. He had hoped that Ghanso would regain an inkling of his sanity at the onset of his death, but Ves felt as if he was facing an old grandpa who still clung to his outdated biases to the very end.

There was no way to redeem Ghanso.

"You're really pathetic, you know that?" Ves spoke as he looked down on his captive. "You went through all of this trouble to pursue a goal that no Larkinson can agree with. Have you ever thought that you don't actually represent the will of the Larkinsons?"

"You're wrong! I.. am a true Larkinson! Only I am continuing the legacy of our predecessors. You.. you ruined everything! The entire family has gone astray because of your greed!"

Ves snorted. "I find it rather silly that you think you are the hero of your own story. Circumstances can change, Ghanso. The political environment has changed. The economic environment has changed. Our relations have changed. Our capabilities have changed. Clinging to the past when it no longer fits the present is how species die off. Nothing lasts forever. Only a stubborn fossil like you thinks the old ways are still viable."

This was a philosophical debate that was destined to go nowhere. The acid glare that Ghanso threw at Ves encapsulated the expert pilot's obsession. His entire identity was centered around the illusion that he was the 'savior' of the Larkinson Family. He never paid any thought of whether he was wrong on anything.

Perhaps his mind and spirit might shatter completely if he was forced to recognize his faults.

What a sad expert pilot.

Ves turned around and extended his hand.

"Book, please."

Nitaa handed over the Larkinson Mandate to his armored hand.

Ves placed the tome next to Ghanso's restrained body.

"Goldie? Can you come out, please?"

Nyaaaaa.

The Golden Cat emerged out of the book and materialized her body. She looked a bit downcast due to the many losses the Larkinson Clan had suffered.

"What is that?!"

Ghanso initially regarded Goldie as a projection, but his crumbling and leaking force of will was still functional enough to recognize the extraordinary nature of the ancestral spirit's existence.

Ves lovingly caressed Goldie's back, though his gauntlets made the experience a lot rougher than unusual.

Nyaaa.

"She is.. the purest distillation of the Larkinson Clan. Every true Larkinson is kin to her. As long as you are a Larkinson who is supportive to other Larkinsons, then Goldie will bless you with her warmth. Are you feeling okay right now?"

"Get this filthy animal off me! I hate cats!"

Nyaaaa!

Goldie raised her tail and hissed at Ghanso.

Obviously, there was no affection between them at all. Whereas other Larkinsons always felt comfortable being in the presence of the Larkinson Mandate or the Golden Cat, Ghanso simply reacted as if he was touching a hot coal.

"Interesting. Goldie, you can return now if you don't want to stay."

That was exactly what she wanted. After expressing her dislike by hissing at Ghanso one last time, she dove back into the Larkinson Mandate as if she was eager to escape a stinking bathroom.

"Well, I've made up my mind." Ves muttered. "If even Goldie hates you, there really is no reason for me to feel remorseful over your death."

"Don't bother with your falsehoods. You.. would probably dance on my grave."

"I'm very happy to see you gone." His glee showed through his transparent faceplate. "I won't lie about that. I'm still a decent human being, though. I've already won. You're a challenging opponent, so the least I can do is to give your body the respect it deserves. I promise to give it a dignified burial."

Though Ves sounded smug as hell, Ghanso relaxed a bit after hearing that Ves had no intentions to defile or dishonor his corpse.

"Thank you..."

"We are civilized people here. War is unquestionably gruesome, but it also produces the most noble moments in human history. I think it is important that our Larkinsons stay true to their noble ideals. I don't want them to descend into barbarism. The best way to reinforce that trend is to give your remains a respectful sendoff."

"Even at this time, you still think about exploiting others.. figures.."

"Our society is based around interests. Cooperation is gained through shared interests and conflicts are usually sparked by competing interests. No one does anything for free. That's stupid. Then again, I don't expect you to understand. Even now, you think that the Larkinson Family must return to the Bright Republic in order to become their war dogs, is that right?"

"It's not like that!" Ghanso angrily replied. "There is honor in service! We must continue the legacy of our predecessors!"

Ves just shook his head at that. He was losing patience in this conversation.

Just as he was about to open his mouth, a chime sounded from the entrance hatch.

"Come in."

A bot floated inside that carried a number of metal boxes.

"Ah, I've been waiting for this delivery."

Ves took one of the boxes and brought it next to Ghanso.

The expert pilot looked confused. "What is.. that?"

"Oh, it's just a prop for my next experiment."

An ominous feeling swept over Ghanso as he looked at Ves' increasingly more enthusiastic expression. Whatever was left of his intuition screamed in alarm!

"Get.. back... I don't want.. to get involved with whatever you have in mind!"

Ves amusingly chuckled. "What makes you think you have a choice? While I don't want to do harm to any kin of mine, you're no Larkinson. Not to me. You're a test subject, Ghanso. Enjoy your final moments as a living human being."

"Wait.. we can talk about this! I have rights, Ves! You can't do this to me! ARRGGHHHH!"

Venerable Ghanso experienced an overwhelming amount of mental pain!

Ves mustered up his entire Spirituality to do something that he had always dreamed about but never dared to implement due to the taboo it represented.

Yet now that the Battle of Reckoning happened to serve a dying expert pilot to him on a silver platter, how could he possibly resist?

"You're not getting rid of me so easily, Ghanso!"

Ves roughly scooped into Ghanso's mind and tried to pull out as much of the expert's mental stuff as possible.

This was a rough, painful and extremely destructive process because it was impossible to extract an expert pilot's mind and spirit in a single go. What this essentially meant was that Ves was literally tearing pieces of Ghanso's mentality with every scoop!

Whatever piece of will, thought, spirituality or other mind junk he managed to grab quickly entered the P-stone that Ves had just received.

The P-stone ensured that the mental pieces did not deteriorate any further due to outside exposure. If Ves was able to separate an expert pilot mentality as a single whole, then it may be possible to keep the individual in question alive in the truest sense.

Sadly, Ves wasn't at that level yet. He could only employ this crude and destructive method to salvage as much of an expert pilot's mind, will and spirit as possible.

Venerable Ghanso's body convulsed! His body was shaking as if he was being shocked by a current.

The signs so bad that Dr. Ranya forcibly intruded into the treatment room. She attempted to get closer, but Nitaa firmly blocked her advance.

"What are you doing?!"

It was too bad that Ves had no time to answer the doctor. He sped up his scoping until he hollowed out Ghanso's completely collapsed mind.

While there were a few tiny bits and pieces that Ves had missed, they quickly disappeared into the imaginary realm without any protection.

The body ceased convulsing. It had become completely braindead without a spirit.

"He.. he's dead, isn't he?"

"He is." Ves nodded as he carefully closed the box holding the P-stone filled with his latest experimental materials. "Don't bother to wake him up or anything. He's a goner. Just keep the body in this state. Let's make it look as good as possible for its upcoming burial."

Ghanso Larkinson had officially died.

Chapter 2688: Satisfaction

"The Vesia Kingdom will pay a lot for my ransom."

Venerable Foster did not let her emotions overtake her reason. She immediately started off with saying something that maximized her chances of survival.

Ves found her opening quite refreshing after dealing with Ghanso's diehard attitude to the end. Perhaps this conversation would go a lot better than he anticipated.

"You've grown up." He stated to Foster's heavily-injured form.

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" She responded with a muffled voice.

Not a single part of her body was visible. Her body from the neck downwards was stuffed in some kind of tank filled with healing fluid that comprehensively stabilized her heavy injuries. Though Ves couldn't see any details of her wounds through the opaque liquid, he could vaguely see that the expert pilot had lost a good chunk of her legs as well as her left arm.

As for her head, it was covered by some strange form-fitting covering whose purpose escaped Ves. It made it seem as if Foster's head was mummified.

He was actually surprised that Venerable Foster was still in a condition to talk. From her calm tone and her repressed force of will, she retained enough lucidity to hold a normal conversation.

It seemed that even though her body was broken, her mind and spirit was still as vigorous as ever. Her condition was essentially the reverse of that of Venerable Ghanso.

If Ves wanted to harvest her mind like he did with his cousin, then he would likely fail. Venerable Foster was far too strong. Perhaps he might have a chance of breaching her tough mental defenses when she was sedated, but he doubted it would go well.

After an awkward pause, the injured expert pilot turned her head. "The Vesia Kingdom places great value on my life. As long as you allow my home state to redeem me intact, you will be richly rewarded."

"I doubt a third-rate state can offer me anything of interest. Besides, I'm not sure your value is high enough to make it worth it to trade you back."

"You'd be surprised." She said before lowering her voice. "If my guess is right.. the Vesia Kingdom may even be willing to return the shares of the LMC."

"THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE! My company's shares are worth much more than a single expert pilot! Besides, those shares are in the hands of the Bright Republic and Ylvaine Protectorate."

"That's not a problem. The Vesians have a lot of influence in that region of space. The Bright Republic is too weak to hold onto its stake in the LMC while the Ylvainans.. can be persuaded."

Ves was amazed to hear that from Venerable Foster. What happened to the vengeful woman who vowed to wipe out every pirate that threatened the Hafner Duchy?

It seemed that expert pilots were capable of growth as well. Still, he had no illusion that Venerable Foster was putting up a polite front because she respected the Larkinsons. She just wanted to prevent her captors from taking her life, thereby preventing her from continuing with her lifelong pursuit.

To an expert pilot such as her, it was unbearable to be unable to fight on behalf of her state! Even if it was disgraceful, Venerable Foster was still willing to bend her head and lower her posture if that was what it took to return to service.

She was right to feel worried. Generally, the MTA disallowed killing expert pilots outside of mech combat.

However, this was not an absolute rule. There were certain exceptions such as if an expert pilot randomly pulled out a gun and pointed the weapon at a random person on the street. The latter had a right to defend himself even if his opponent belonged to a protected class of people.

Another instance where expert pilots lost their protection was immediately after the end of a battle.

As far as the MTA was concerned, the capture of an expert pilot was still within the scope of a mech battle that had just concluded. How the people who took an enemy expert pilot into custody decided to treat their battlefield spoils was their business.

Naturally, expert pilots still deserved to be treated with dignity. The MTA as well as the entire mech community heavily sanctioned anyone who tortured or subjected a captive expert pilot to cruel treatment.

Expert pilots were demigods. They were beyond human and stronger than almost any other person in the galaxy. No matter which side they fought for or what cause they pursued, they still represented some of the best mech pilots that human civilization had produced.

Ves had no intentions to screw around with Venerable Foster. He was so disappointed by Ghanso that he was glad that his other captive was reasonable.

Yet whether her attitude helped to keep her alive was another matter.

"Let me be honest, Venerable Foster. You took part in an unprovoked attack on the Larkinson Clan and its allies just as we were about to leave the Komodo Star Sector behind."

"You are not innocent, Mr. Larkinson. The services you are providing to the Hexadric Hegemony not only harms the Fridaymen, but also the third-rate states in our star sector. If the Hexers win, you know as well as I do what will happen to the original customs and cultures of the surrounding states.

Though Relia's eyes were covered with bandages, Ves seemed to feel her glare through her agitated force of will.

He fully agreed with her statement. Ves did not enjoy enabling the Hexers and giving them a greater chance to expand their poisonous culture to other states. It was too bad that his current circumstances didn't give him another choice.

"It wouldn't have come to this if the obstinate Fridaymen just ignored me. Instead, they keep coming after me because they're afraid of what I might possibly do to strengthen the Hexers. Don't they realize that they're just driving me in the arms of the Hexers this way? Right now, I feel like raising a giant middle finger to the Friday Coalition."

"An eye for an eye will make the whole world go blind."

Ves snorted. "That's rich coming from you. You still want to kill me, right?"

An expert pilot like Foster couldn't lie.

"I do, but my intentions are noble. While I regret the Friday Coalition's approach, I still want to defeat you in battle. The Vesia Kingdom must not become a vassal of the Hegemony."

"It doesn't matter what reason you use to justify your hostility towards me. As long as you become my enemy, you deserve everything you get. I'm just a mech designer, but people keep finding reasons to bully me. If I don't stand up for myself, I'll keep getting harassed."

Ves seriously hated the Friday Coalition. Their continued actions against him had driven his attitude towards the state to a new low point. While he and his clan may have gained a lot from winning the Battle of Reckoning, they also lost a lot! If any of them had a choice, they would have preferred to avoid this bloody clash.

"Don't you think the cause you are fighting for is too small?" He changed the topic. "Even now, I am a bit in awe at your strong presence. You've developed quite a lot since we last met. The Vesia Kingdom is too small for a mech pilot as talented as you. You could enjoy a much better trajectory if you signed on to a second-rate state. Of course, I don't recommend you to pledge your loyalty a state as duplicitous as the Friday Coalition."

"I have never wavered in my purpose. I wouldn't have developed up to this point if I grew up anywhere else. I will defend my state to my death!"

"I see."

Well, at least some part of Foster was still similar to Ghanso. When it came to her bottom line, she never compromised.

Venerable Foster calmed down. "Have you considered my earlier proposal?"

"Um, what?"

"Offer to return me for a ransom." She urged. "Don't be hasty and base your decision-making on your assumptions. Contact the Hafner Duchy first. Your demands will definitely be satisfied."

Her urgency had grown. She wanted Ves to stop wavering and accept her suggestion.

To be honest, he couldn't make up his mind.

Emotionally, he wanted to end Foster's life in order to satisfy his primal need for vengeance against an enemy who wanted to kill him on multiple occasions.

Rationally, he knew that he could potentially gain a lot more benefits if he ransomed her. Satisfying his vengeance might make him feel good for a time, but it didn't really provide him with any solid benefits.

Ves constantly pursued greater advantages in order to elevate him as quickly as possible. From a logical perspective, Venerable Foster was much more valuable when she was alive rather than dead.

As he kept considering his choices, Ves received another notification.

Someone demanded entry into the treatment room.

When Ves unlocked the entrance, a pair of suited women immediately entered with their greatswords clasped between their hands.

"Venerable Dise! Ketis! What are you two doing here?"

"Isn't that obvious?" Ketis lifted up her weapon. "We're here to finish the job. This moment is long overdue. The murderer over there has too much Swordmaiden blood on her hands! If we let her stay alive for another day, we'd be disgracing the memories of our fallen sisters!"

Ves immediately felt a headache. He turned to the older and hopefully more mature woman. "What about you, Dise?"

"Ketis has already said everything that I want to say." The female expert pilot gruffly spoke. "One way or another, Commander Lydia's death will be answered. I made sure to keep Foster alive. Killing her while she's piloting a mech is not as satisfying as running my sword through her heart with my own hands. She's mine, Ves. Don't make me move you out of the way."

Ves immediately stepped aside. He conveyed his stance very clearly.

"Hey, I don't intend to stand in the way of your satisfaction. You are one of the most loyal fighters in my service. I haven't forgotten the sacrifices of the Swordmaidens."

Venerable Dise smiled. "You are a good man. The Swordmaidns are glad to fight for a leader who understands us. Please forgive us for the mess we are about to make. What will happen next will get rather.. bloody."

Ves awkwardly coughed. "The MTA has rules that govern the treatment of expert pilots."

The expert pilot swung her long and sharp blade in the air. "Just keep your jammer active while we do what we must. We don't care what the MTA says. Just pretend that my mech has smashed her corpse when my mech sunk its blade through the cockpit."

"You can't do this, Larkinson!" Venerable Foster desperately cried! "Think about it! I can absolutely guarantee you that you will gain at least half of the shares in the hands of the Republic and the protectorate back to you if you follow my suggestions."

"I can get back all of those shares once the Hegemony wins the Komodo War."

"Hah! As if that will happen! Even if the Friday Coalition loses, the governments in charge of the shares will find a way to keep them out of the hands of the Hexers."

That may very well be true. There were a lot of good lawyers in those two states. Governments excelled at bending and exploiting the rules when it was in their best interests to do so. They rarely followed the spirit of the law if it inconvenienced them in any way.

Ves fell silent, making Ketis and Venerable Dise nervous.

He didn't keep them waiting for long, though.

"I've decided."

"And...?"

Ves helplessly lifted his arms. "Faced with a choice between satisfying my friends or my enemies, the answer is obvious. Relia, no matter how many benefits you can give me, I always stick to those who have been loyal to me. I'm not going to break the trust of those who expect me to care for them. That's not the kind of person I am! Ketis, Dise, the two of you can go ahead. I'll just stand here and wait until you are done."

"Thank you, Ves!" Ketis gave him a brilliant smile.

"You're making a mistake! If you don't want your shares back, the Vesia Kingdom can give you other compensation! Don't give me to these butchers!"

"Shut up!" Venerable Dise strode forward and pressed the edge of her blade against Foster's neck. "You're the butcher here. You showed no mercy to my sisters back on Aeon Corona VII. Now it's our turn."

"You're a savage, Ves! You're worse than a pirate! The MTA will find out about this! Justice will prevail!"

Ves ignored Venerable Foster's indignant words and turned to grab another metal box.

He was actually wrong on one consideration. Killing Venerable Foster did provide him with something other than emotional satisfaction. He might be able to harvest her spirituality when she finally succumbed to her injuries.

"It's raining presents today!" He smirked.

Chapter 2689: No Expert Mech

"Brutus!"

Gloriana entered a highly secure and luxuriously-furnished recovery room on the Indigo Tremor.

The Glory Seeker fleet carrier had become a lot emptier after the destruction of lots of mechs. Fortunately, the enemy hadn't prioritized her as a target so she incurred remarkably little damage.

For now, her crew were busy trying to recover the wrecks floating in space while also organizing a prize crew to facilitate the takeover of the Auralis.

Gloriana didn't care about that at the moment. She ran up to the bed where a tired-looking Brutus looked at his sister with happiness.

"You're safe."

There was little doubt about that as soon as word of their eventual victory reached his ears. However, seeing was believing. Only when he saw that her sister was safe did he feel reassured.

His protective force of will embraced the woman in a familiar fashion. On her part, Gloriana relaxed even further.

"Are you okay?" She asked as she tried to spot any injuries on his body.

"I'd be in a treatment machine if I was hit more seriously. Don't worry. My cockpit got banged up a bit, causing me to suffer some bruises that are easily treatable. You don't have to be concerned at all. My most serious problem is that I overloaded my mind. Trying to keep my mech alive as long as possible against the Charlemagne and those pseudo-expert mechs was the most challenging moment of my life. I pushed myself so hard to dodge more attacks and prevent all of those Glory Seekers from sacrificing their mechs to block incoming attacks. I.. I regret that I failed to protect all of those people."

"There was no choice, Brutus." Gloriana reached his side and retracted her suit so that her bare hand touched his shoulder. "Those Glory Seekers did their duty. Our expedition is much better served if you're alive."

"This isn't how I want to fight my battles. It's me who is supposed to be protecting you all. How can I possibly continue to pilot a mech when those brave female Hexers are risking their lives for me? This is a travesty!"

"They're doing it because of me!" Gloriana gripped his chin and turned his head around until their eyes met. "You are much more valuable than anyone else in the Glory Seekers. Even Colonel Ariadne Wodin is worth nothing compared to you! So don't think that everyone has their priorities wrong. If you die..."

The wounded expert pilot sighed. "You're being selfish again, sister."

Gloriana leaned in and kissed his cheek before staring lovingly in his eyes. "That's the privilege of power, brother. I only value two people in our fleet: Ves and you. The Glory Seekers exist to serve me, so I told them to do their best to keep the two of you alive. I am not going to allow you to make me sad by getting killed in battle."

"You..." Brutus was speechless.

As a soldier dedicated to protecting Gloriana and other Hexer women, his sister's declaration did not sit well with him. His honor and his duty compelled him to resist this policy!

Yet... Brutus couldn't go against his sister. She always had the final say in matters. No matter how unreasonable she sounded, her will trumped everyone else's as long as she didn't endanger herself.

They soon changed topics.

"I took a look at the Star Dancer when I was on my way to visit you." She said as she calmly sat down next to his bed. "I'm sorry to say that what is left of your expert mech is not in good shape."

Brutus looked pained. "The Star Dancer accompanied me well for several years. It served me well in this battle. I was hoping that it could serve a few years more."

Gloriana tried to smile. "It's okay, Brutus. Ves and I will try and make a replacement for you. I've prepared for this project for many months. We just need to determine what materials we can use and which Master we should partner up with to design a better machine. You should definitely look forward to what I have in store. The mechs that Ves and I are capable of designing are extremely special. Just look at the so-called prime mechs that my husband came up with. I still can't accept that the Valkyrie Prime along with several hundred standard mechs are able to wipe out a vast swathe of mech pilots along with the entire crew of a starship."

"You're not the only one who is wondering. No one in the fleet will underestimate his mechs from now on. While I detest the Fridaymen, a part of me feels that no one deserves to die from such an odd method of attack. It's... too destructive. It's practically a weapon of mass destruction."

As a mech pilot, Brutus instinctively repelled any weapon that diminished the lives of soldiers. It was one thing to get killed by getting shot by an enemy mech. It was another thing to get killed along with thousands of other comrades by getting blasted to pieces by a tactical nuclear weapon!

Gloriana was not as conflicted, though. Her smile stretched wider as she relished in her memory of that wonderful moment.

"The Fridaymen deserve to be slaughtered by the Superior Mother! Don't feel any pity for our loathsome enemies. If they didn't want to lose their lives this way, then they shouldn't have gone out to ambush us. They should have known better than to go up against Ves and his wonderful inventions!"

His sister was incorrigible, Brutus thought. Still, it wasn't as if he felt much differently. The battle had been close. Too close. If he fell too soon or if the others fought a little worse, then Gloriana and everyone else in the fleet might have been killed by now! Thinking what might befall of his sister wiped away any sympathy he held towards his opponents.

"When will I be able to get a new expert mech?"

"Uhm.. not soon." Gloriana slowly admitted. "My husband and I are very busy. Once we complete our current round of projects, we need to design a large amount of expert mechs for the Larkinson Clan. While I will do my best to push your expert mech up the priority list, don't expect any quick results. It might take up to a year before you can pilot an expert mech again."

This was not what any expert pilot wanted to hear. Still, it was not an unusual situation for them either. It always took time to develop a new replacement expert mech whenever an older one got trashed. The only way to cut the waiting time short was to fabricate another copy of an existing expert mech design.

"Why not remake the Star Dancer, then?" Brutus carefully suggested. "While I look forward to piloting a mech that is blessed like the Superior Mother, I'm worried about the delay. This battle has already shown me that the galaxy is a lot less safe than I thought. Can't you pick up the pieces of my original mech and put it back together?"

Gloriana shook her head and tutted. "Silly brother. It's not that simple. Your mech got struck by a lot of resonance-empowered positron beams. Do you know what that does to a mech? Too many parts and components are vaporized or melted into slag. Much of the damage is unrecoverable with our current means. We don't have the equipment and expertise to restore your Star Dancer. In my professional judgement, the only purpose the remains of your mechs is good for is to salvage whatever materials we can extract from them and use that to develop your next expert mech."

One of the most important benefits to winning the battle was the opportunity to salvage the wrecks floating on the battlefield!

Not just the Star Dancer, but the wrecks and pieces of plenty of other expert mechs were eagerly being picked up by the victors!

While not all of the valuable materials they yielded might be useful, the valuable salvage would definitely help with accumulating the core materials required to develop their other expert mechs.

All of this was beyond Brutus' understanding.

"I trust you with the development of my next expert mech. Just make it even faster and more agile so that I can evade enemy attacks even better. I've progressed my piloting style after I've participated in this battle. I don't have the patience or the inclination to sit back in the rear and snipe my opponents from afar like Venerable Davia Stark. I need to be more in front so that I can be a lot more proactive in protecting you and my fellow Glory Seekers. A run-and-gun style suits me best."

Gloriana nodded. As his sister, she knew him best.

"I've already taken that into account. It's quite hard to design a mech that is highly mobile while at the same time boast a high amount of firepower. I'll do my best to push for a mech that excels at both, but it will cost us a lot. Our dynasty is funding this project, so they must be convinced to invest more in your expert mech."

"That.. might be difficult. According to what I am hearing from back home, every dynasty in the Hexadric Hegemony is tightening their belts. With how the Komodo War is proceeding, it looks like our state will soon be devastated by war. Everyone has to plan to defend their space while evacuating as many people and valuables as possible."

He was right. The Wodin Dynasty could not afford to be unprepared when faced with a possible enemy invasion. The Wodins had to acquire as much transportation as possible and establish several different escape channels. All of that cost a huge amount of money especially considering that the demand and therefore the price of starships had skyrocketed!

A part of Brutus felt as if he was in the same shoes as Davia Stark.

Previously, it was third-raters like her who were being threatened with invasion and annihilation due to the relentless advance of the sandmen.

Now, it was the Hexers who were beginning to panic and trying to obtain passage that could get them out before it was too late.

The internal stability within his home state had deteriorated! Too many Hexers who never thought they would lose were beginning to realize that the outcome of a war was never decided beforehand!

Both Wodins looked downcast. The situation back home was growing more pessimistic by the day.

"Will your next Hexer mechs be able to do anything to stop the Friday Coalition from advancing?" Brutus carefully asked.

"I don't know." She slumped. "We have some interesting projects on the way, but they're mostly auxiliary in nature. It's too difficult to design a mech that can counter expert mechs. We're trying out some ideas but I don't think they will work out as well as Ves expects. Expert mechs and expert pilots are too strong. This battle has just illustrated that. The amount of standard mechs needed to fight against a handful of expert mechs is too much. The Hex Army can't handle this loss ratio."

Even she could no longer maintain her upbeat confidence when all of the news she was hearing from the front was negative. While the Hex Army still achieved plenty of victories, the results didn't change the overall strategic trend.

As long as the mech armies of both sides remained roughly even, the disparity in expert mechs played a decisive role. No matter how hard the Hegemony tried, it simply wasn't possible for them to conjure additional expert pilots out of thin air.

Gloriana actually hoped that Ves was able to solve this problem. If he could produce in the Larkinson Clan, why shouldn't he be able to do the same for the Hegemony?

Unfortunately, he always put down her request by saying that the circumstances were different or that Master Willix prohibited him from spreading his experimental solutions.

It was so frustrating!

"What can I do?"

Chapter 2690: Unease

The fighting still continued long after the Battle of Reckoning was decided.

This was also the reason why everyone still wore their protective suits. No matter how safe the situation looked, there were still Fridaymen and Garlaners out there who were firing shots at the expedition forces!

Thousands of Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers were still actively fighting their opponents in some way. Whether it was chasing down the routed starships or

bombarding the hostile mechs that remained intact, people were still being killed hours after the initial confrontation!

The only difference from before was that the proportion of losses heavily tilted in the favor of the Golden Skull Alliance.

The rats fleeing before them no longer possessed the strength to win the battle, let alone preserve their lives! All of the chases devolved into a one-sided shooting match where the outcome was already set. This was how many space battles ended. There was no escape so long as one side was able to prevent the other one from transitioning into FTL travel.

One of the most notable operations was the attempt to take over the Auralis.

Inside and around the eerily-silent fleet carrier, the golden vessel had suddenly become active without any warning!

The boarding parties that were slowly making their way to the bridge, the primary engineering bay and several other important compartments had no clue that a cat had overtaken them. They were still breaching one hatch after another.

They thought that even if the Golden Skull Alliance won the battle, it would take a lot longer for their infantry troops to make any progress inside.

This was because unlike the Fridaymen, the Hexers and other foreigners would be met with active resistance from the ship's internal defense systems!

Of course, the expeditionary forces could also choose to employ a more destructive approach by breaching through the interior by borrowing the power of mechs.

This was an incredibly destructive approach that would inflict a lot of collateral damage to the Auralis. That was not conducive to taking over the ship in the best condition possible.

"Will they really keep their mechs out?" A CRC marine softly wondered.

"I don't know. I dare not say. Perhaps the Als will see sense when the enemy is tearing the ship apart from the inside. I hope the ship will unlock all of these hatches for us so that we can reach her critical compartments within minutes."

Nothing seemed to have happened so far, so the boarding parties were still progressing slowly.

"Hm? Did you hear that?" A combat engineer raised his helmet. "My sensors are picking up faint activity above and below us. Something is vibrating beneath the deck."

"What is your best guess?" A marine captain stepped forward while holding his rifle ready.

"According to my judgement, it's as if a large mechanical system is about to activate beneath us. The only possibility that I can think of is.. oh no! This is bad! We need to exit this hallway as soon as possible! The security systems are about to go online!"

The remainder of the boarding party didn't hesitate. Even if they had doubts, they weren't about to question the word of an expert.

Unfortunately, it was far too late! Before the engineer running in front managed to cross half of the distance to the entrance they came from, the entire deck shoved upwards all at once before squashing straight against the ceiling!

"AAAH!"

Sounds of pain, fear and agony spread out for less than a single second as the deck pressed their armored forms into the ceiling with great force!

Miraculously, none of them died, though plenty were dealing with broken bones or uncomfortable positions. The force that drove the deck into the ceiling wasn't powerful enough to flatten the tough combat armor worn by the marines.

This condition didn't last too long. A large laser projector emerged from a hidden port at the end of the hallway. It charged up briefly before firing a powerful beam that swept every trapped body in the narrow corridor!

It only took a couple of seconds for all of the protection to melt and burn under the sustained attack!

In the end, the deck receded back to its original position. Only several piles of slag and ashes remained out of the boarding party.

In another compartment of the Auralis, another boarding party suffered its end.

Their deaths were much more straightforward. Turrets emerged from the ceiling. They instantly locked on to the Fridaymen that the ship considered intruders and began to open fire!

"Crap! The Hexers took control of the ship!"

A torrent of laser beams and small explosive shells impacted the boarding party. While the marines fired back, the turrets were too well-protected!

Their firepower was also vastly superior to any weapon that could be carried on foot. They chewed through the resilient armor of the marines with great efficiency!

The Fridaymen were being killed off rapidly throughout the rest of the ships. Hundreds of visitors who wanted to take the Auralis away or at least deprive her from the enemy were completely at the mercy of the powerful internal defense systems.

There was no escape!

It only took a minute to dispose of every enemy aboard the ship. Calabast observed the projections of the active incidents with satisfaction. Military starships of this caliber always featured extensive internal defense systems. Their lethality against hostile visitors was so great that successful boarding operations rarely happened in wars.

Of course, these internal defense systems did not wake up under normal conditions. There were plenty of safeguards and locks in place to prevent them from activating by mistake.

A ship could easily kill most if not all of her crew if it was hacked or glitched!

For this reason, the internal defense systems only activated when a human gave them permission to do so. In this case, Calabast was easily able to do so once the Auralis mistook her as the captain of the vessel.

The permission of the captain was the greatest and most authoritative. If she assumed the identity of an ensign, then it was very difficult to get any of the internal defense systems to fire upon other people!

"It's too easy." She muttered as she closed the projections.

While she couldn't guarantee that every intruding Fridayman was killed, none of them should have been able to reach the critical compartments of the ship. The Auralis wouldn't be at risk of blowing up if that was the case.

"Alright, Black Cats. The Auralis is under my initial control, but don't lower your guard. There may be infiltrators and other survivors scurrying about. It's impossible to sweep the entire Auralis with the manpower we have at hand, so just hold the critical compartments such as the bridge, the command center and the engineering bay until the rest of our fleet is able to dispatch follow-up parties. I've just registered your new identities to the Auralis so that you'll be recognized as her officers and engineers. That should be sufficient to unlock every hatch in your way."

The Black Cat operatives quickly entered deeper inside the Auralis. Unlike the Fridaymen who were blocked at every entrance, the hatches automatically slid open when a Black Cat came close.

This was the privilege that crew members recognized by the Auralis enjoyed.

Along the way, they encountered plenty of bodies along the way. What was notable about all of them was that their physical bodies were still alive.

The sight became more and more eerie as the Black Cats encountered more and more braindead Gaugers.

Hundreds of them littered the decks of large and important compartments such as the command center and the hangar bays.

At first, the Black Cats proactively fired their rifles at the bodies. They couldn't be sure if any of the original crew would wake up again.

It was only after killing a dozen or so crew members that they stopped bothering.

"They're not alive anymore."

Though Black Cats were trained to keep their cool under many different circumstances, the realization that they were on a ship with over 20,000 braindead crew members slowly dawned upon them. It was all well and good to hear about it from afar, but it was only when they started bumping into bodies left and right that they truly learned how horrible it was for all of these people to die out at once!

"This feels wrong. I don't think the weapon employed by the Valkyrie mechs should ever be used again."

An officer smacked the back of his subordinate's helmet!

"Shut up! We can't show any mercy to our enemies. If our side didn't employ this new attack method, we'd be the ones who would be lying on the deck. Our bodies would probably look a lot uglier than this, assuming the Fridaymen didn't outright blow up our ships."

Humans were creatures of emotions. None of them could rein them in when faced with the horrible sights of hundreds if not thousands of Fridaymen lying senselessly on the deck.

It would have been easier for them to accept the fate of their enemies if their bodies were riddled with holes and burn marks.

Instead, their hazard suits and combat armor were completely pristine. Not a single suit showed signs of physical damage and intrusion. Even now, their automated systems were still doing their best to keep the braindead Fridaymen in optimum condition.

It was as if they were still alive and well.

This juxtaposition was so jarring to the Black Cats that they were becoming more and more uncomfortable with being on the ship.

"Is the Auralis haunted?"

"Maybe the souls of the dead are still floating around."

"The Superior Mother cleansed the Auralis because the ship is unclean. We shouldn't be here."

Of course, the changes in mentality did not escape Calabast. She frowned deeper when she noted that the progress and efficiency of her operatives was dropping by the minute.

It was as if they thought they were on a ghost ship!

"I should step up their mental training. Their performance is completely unacceptable."

DIVA agents wouldn't be quaking in their boots in this situation. Instead, they'd be happy whenever they saw another Fridayman victim.

While the takeover of the Auralis was proceeding apace, the fate of the other starships of the enemy strike force was already being decided.

Task Force Umbra had lost its ability to defend itself. Aside from some scattered bunker mechs and some other heavily-damaged mechs, the Eager Condemnation, the Amagi, the Forward Momentum and the Orca Tyrant were constantly being pursued by a number of opposing mechs and combat carriers.

The crew of the Amagi and the Orca Tyrant both acted decisively. As soon as every window of escape was closed, the two deep strike fleet carriers exploded from within!

The pursuing Larkinson and Glory Seeker mechs abruptly turned around and tried to distance themselves from the two exploding vessels. The crews of the two ships had done so much work to maximize the power of the explosions that it was too dangerous to get too close!

Fortunately, the pursuers were already expecting this to happen.

"Two down, two to go!"

The Forward Momentum took a lot longer to meet the same end. She had accelerated away from the battlefield very quickly. Yet despite how much the crew overloaded her sub-light propulsion and decreased her mass, her fundamental nature as a capital ship didn't change.

She eventually exploded as well as the Vanguarders performed their duty to the end!

As for the Eager Condemnation, the Larkinson Clan received a secret transmission from the fleeing carrier.

Ves became notified as soon as it became clear that the transmission was addressed to him in person.

"Are you kidding me?" He looked skeptical. "Aisling wants to defect to our clan?"

"Yes, sir." Major Verle informed him over the comm.

"I don't think the rest of the crew will be happy to send her off on a shuttle."

"Lady Curver has already come up with a plan for that. She has already prepared an escape vessel, but she lacks an escape route. We'll need to open one up for her. She has sent a partial diagram of the fleet carrier to us in order to accomplish this. She specifically instructs our artillery mechs to concentrate their firepower at a specific section in the lower port hangar bay. That is the area where Unit L was assigned to. As long as we breach the right areas, the Fridaymen won't be able to prevent her escape."

Ves crossed her arms. "Why should we follow along with her plan?"

"She... not only offers her mech design expertise, but all of the confidential research data she has access to with regards to basic neural networks and asymmetrical neural networks."

"I see."

That changed his consideration. Ves quickly made up his mind. "Do it, then. I'm eager to get my hands on that data. Even if I can't use any of it, I can still gain a lot of insights by understanding Master Huron's methods."

Major Verle did not immediately disappear. "There's one more condition, sir. Lady Curver only agrees to hand over the data intact as long as you promise that you will keep her alive and treat her well. Not only that, she wants to join our clan and become one of us. As long as you don't promise that to her in person, the deal is off. She has assured us that we won't see any scrap of research data if we don't cooperate. She has stored it all in her implant and rigged it up with enough safeguards that it will all be corrupted if she isn't safe anymore."

Damn! Aisling knew him too well!

Ves felt really conflicted. He hated Aisling with a passion. Gloriana would probably love nothing more than to kill her as well.

Yet... he really wanted to get his hands on her data. With Aisling's considerable technical expertise, he fully believed that her safety measures couldn't be circumvented.

"Proceed with rescuing her." Ves commanded. "I still have time to make a final decision. I'll figure out my response when we bring her back to the Spirit of Bentheim. Just make sure that word doesn't spread."

The last thing he wanted to see was Gloriana finding out about this secret deal!