

Mech 2691

Chapter 2691: The Pursuit of Glory

The Eager Condemnation followed her sister ships to the grave, but not before someone made it out before the final moment!

Just as instructed, the Transcendent Punishers targeted a specific section of the hull that encompassed one of the fleet carrier's hangar bays.

After blasting through the hull plating and creating a large breach, a cockpit of all vehicles flung out of the gap!

It turned out that Aisling had secretly holed herself up in the spare cockpit of the Charlemagne!

"Someone is escaping! Stop the traitor!"

Predictably, the rest of the Eager Condemnation's crew weren't happy about that. The surviving ranged mechs quickly began to fire at the escaping cockpit, but its shell was built to take a punishment.

The cockpit survived long enough for the Larkinson to suppress or destroy the Fridaymen mechs that stuck their necks out to kill the defector!

The most forward Larkinson mechs soon reached the escaping cockpit and carefully escorted it back to the Spirit of Bentheim.

The crew of the Eager Condemnation knew that they had failed. General Pierce shook his head and gave the command.

"Let us end this farce before more of us try to escape. Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honor to serve by your side!"

"For the Friday Coalition!"

The last escaping deep strike fleet carrier exploded violently! The space around the vessel became filled with debris as an uncountable amount of pieces flung in every direction.

While this was going on, the pursuit against the ships and mechs of the Praetors and Planats proceeded a lot less smoothly.

Unlike the Fridaymen, the traitor clans still retained around a thousand functional mechs when their commanding officers ordered a retreat.

The Cross Clan was determined to prevent their escape! The bad blood between the three clans was too great for either side to give up their vendetta against each other.

However, the remnants of the enemy mechs were heavily outnumbered. Just as Ves and the others discussed, there was no need to get too close.

The artillery mechs of the Golden Skull Alliance calmly maintained their distance while bombarding their enemies from afar. By concentrating their firepower on hostile ranged mechs first, they first neutralized the enemy's ability to retaliate.

Once they completed this step, the artillery mechs began to fire at the remainder of the enemy mechs with impunity. They also fired at the propulsion systems of the fleeing enemy carriers.

Just like the Fridaymen, the traitor clans opted to split up their ships and flee in separate directions.

This tactic was a lot more effective this time!

While the Praetor Clan and Planat Clan only brought three capital ships, they also brought over 50 combat carriers. While a number of those vessels had already fallen in battle, plenty of them were left to carry their surviving crews back to safety!

"It's useless." A tired Ylvainan mech pilot said as he mechanically pointed the guns of his overstressed Transcendent Punisher at another fleeing combat carrier. "Even if we miss 90 percent of our shots at this distance, it's still useless. Space is empty. There is no escape from our guns."

It would have been a different story if the battle took place in the orbit of a planet or in the middle of an asteroid belt. There would have been plenty of natural terrain for the fleeing opponents to shelter behind.

It just so happened that the enemy strike force ambushed the expeditionary fleet when the latter was on its way to another destination.

There were no satellites or asteroids worth nothing in the vicinity. If that was the case, it would have been impossible for the expeditionary fleet to transition out of FTL in this area.

It wasn't as if the Praetors and Planats were unaware of this truth. They were all experienced and professionally-trained soldiers. They could read the outcome of the situation as well as their enemies.

Venerable Damira Planat and Venerable Albert Praetor held the final word in their respective detachments.

Even though they had safely ejected from their broken expert mechs and returned to their flagships, neither of them were in a good mood.

In the Vicious Mountain Star Sector, every mech pilot knew that pursuing glory and victory in battle was a dangerous road. Those who fought for fame, honor or territory did so with the full knowledge that the losers often met an unfortunate end.

In truth, conflicts in the Garlen Empire rarely ended in death. That would just weaken the powerful second-rate state excessively.

Most conflicts amounted to limited territorial border conflicts where one tribe or clan tried to nibble a couple of star systems from their neighboring rivals.

These campaigns were so minor that the Garleners didn't even regard them as proper wars.

No matter who won or lost, the losing soldiers were usually ransomed back. For those that couldn't, the winning side usually absorbed the losers in their ranks.

In many cases, this wasn't a big deal. Mech pilots and other soldiers switching their allegiances to a winner was not an objectionable act as long as it was an 'honorable' defection.

How the Garleners determined that was rather opaque. In general, as long as the treachery wasn't ugly, it was tolerable.

The reason why the natives of the Vicious Mountain Star Sector easily accepted this reality was due to two reasons.

First, they all shared a common identity as citizens of the Garlen identity. This effectively meant that every internal conflict amounted to a factional struggle. Defecting to a different state was much more egregious than switching over to another faction.

Defection was a core component of every factional struggle. The faction that achieved the most success or presented the best vision naturally deserved to take in a lot of people.

Second, the overwhelming majority of citizens in the Garlen Empire simply didn't matter. No matter if they were lowly mech technicians or influential ministers, they were all painted with the same brush.

The only people who truly called the shots were expert pilots and ace pilots. The latter were treated like monarchs or presidents even if they didn't know anything about governing billions or trillions of people!

This was why the entire crews of the Praetor and Planat carriers didn't dare to act on their own accord. The captains of the ships and the senior command staff also refrained from acting presumptively.

As long as their expert pilots told them to shut down their vessels and surrender to their pursuers, they would fulfill their instructions without hesitation.

Of course, Damira and Albert never even considered that option.

The Crossers were far too vengeful to let anyone off. Surrender or not, the Preators and Planats that had survived up until now were destined to die!

Since that was the case, they might as well meet their ends with dignity.

Both expert pilots had retreated to their respective staterooms in order to talk in private over the comm. They faced their projections with a heavy sense of failure.

"Our gamble failed." Albert stated the obvious. "It's regrettable that we can't bring any of our forces back to our clans. The clansmen back home will probably resent us for decades for depriving them of so many assets and mech pilots."

Venerable Damira Planat was even more miserable. As a high-tier expert pilot, her fall represented a major loss to her clan.

Yet despite this awful outcome, she did not show any remorse. Expert pilots did not doubt their decisions. Whether the outcome was good or bad, they acted according to their judgement.

While it was difficult to understand why they had taken such a considerable risk to attack a clan that was already exiled from the Becker Tribe, it made complete sense to Damira and the other ringleaders.

Their animosity towards the Cross Clan ran deep. Many of the participants in this failed attack had personally lost a lot of comrades and relatives. Damira had personally vowed to take revenge on the Crossers whenever possible. There was no way for her to shy away from this opportunity when the odds looked so good.

It turned out that she had been far too dismissive of the combat strength of the allies of the Cross Clan.

She rubbed her hand over her shaven head. "It is not a shame to lose to the likes of the Larkinson Clan. Their fighting spirit and unique methods already proves they are bound for greatness. The two of us will probably occupy an important place in their annals. We'll be remembered for the strength and valor we have shown in battle."

Venerable Albert eased up after hearing that. "You're right. The Crossers might spit on our names, but the Larkinsons.. are different. We should have befriended them rather than turning our guns at them. The Cross Clan is so lucky to get to them first."

The two fell silent for a time. While they knew what they had to do, it was still difficult for them to pull the trigger.

Venerable Damira sighed. "I was sure that succeeding here would serve as the catalyst for me to advance to ace pilot."

"Truly?" The former pilot of the Imperial Verdict reacted with surprise. "Is the vow of revenge you've taken that important to you?"

"I am always sure about these matters. Do you know what separates ace pilots from expert pilots?"

"We must find our calling. It is not enough to abide by a principle or conviction. We must dedicate ourselves to a cause that is greater than what our current strength can handle. The reason why most expert pilots stall in their growth is that they are subconsciously content with their current strength."

Expert pilots never advanced if they felt that they were already capable of resolving every issue.

Only those who truly yearned and needed the strength of an ace pilot were able to push themselves beyond their limits!

"That's true, but it's not the complete picture according to my understanding." Damira quietly replied.

It was never that simple. If this was the sole requirement, then a lot of expert pilots would have broken through a long time ago. Only those who were close to the threshold like Venerable Damira and Patriarch Reginald understood the greater requirements.

"Is it related to the Saint Kingdom?" Albert guessed.

"I don't know. All I can tell you is that it's not enough to talk the talk. You must walk the walk. If you go against your convictions even once, you can forget about becoming more than an expert pilot."

This was an incredibly onerous demand, but hardly any expert pilot objected to it. Their dedication was legendary. They wouldn't be who they were if they betrayed their principles as often as they changed their clothes.

An ace pilot was overwhelmingly superior to an expert pilot in all aspects. It was a given that they should be even more unflinching towards their chosen conviction!

"What separates a Saint from a Venerable is not just putting all of your thoughts and words into auction." Damira continued. "We also need to earn recognition from enough people. Gods are worshipped by mortals, are they not? Since we all walk the path to god pilot, we must separate ourselves from our humble origins and assume the mantle of greatness in our society. If we managed to succeed in killing off the remnants of the Cross Clan.. then the entire Planat Clan would have recognized my accomplishment."

Albert looked astonished. He never heard this theory in the Praetor Clan! "Is this true?"

"I don't know. This is what my predecessors in the Planat Clan thought. They themselves learned it from another clan, so I can't determine whether this hearsay is correct. Still, it makes too much sense to me. This is the truth of the Garlen Empire. It explains everything about our great state. The pursuit of glory is not just about becoming immortalized. It's also a path of ascension to ambitious mech pilots like us. Expert pilots are never able to advance in isolation. Each of us needs the help of norms to lift us higher."

"I see..." Venerable Albert Praetor looked fascinated, but only for a moment. "It's unfortunate that this knowledge doesn't help us in any way. I won't live long enough to earn any further glory."

Both of them lowered their heads. Eventually, Venerable Damira lifted herself up. She was ready.

"Let's do it. Don't leave anything behind for the Crossers."

"Very well."

All of the ships of the Praetor Clan and the Planat Clan in the star system blew up at the same time!

Chapter 2692: Solid Protection

Vincent slowly woke up from his slumber. His mind was foggy and he could barely feel anything. As his eyes began to perceive more details about his surroundings, he discovered that he was surrounded by white.

White ceiling, White bulkheads, White furniture. White bed.

"This.. where am I? Why do I feel so.. fuzzy?"

"Vincent! You're finally awake!"

He looked to the side, only to see his girlfriend looking at him with concern and happiness.

As she was wearing a hazard suit right now, Vincent figured out that not a lot of time had passed since he was forcibly put to sleep.

"The battle..?" He weakly groaned.

Raella Larkinson smiled at him in a reassuring manner. "It's all over. We've won. While the losses we've suffered are considerable, I'm glad you're not among them. You're a hero, Vincent. You stepped up when it mattered the most. You confronted the Trost head-on despite facing an overwhelmingly superior mech and mech pilot. Everyone in the clan recognizes how much courage it took to face an enemy that could have easily crushed you like a bug."

The memories flowed back into Vincent. If his body wasn't so weak, he would have jumped out of his bed!

"I fought an expert mech!" He shouted in shock. "Not only that, I survived!"

He knew how fortunate he was for being able to wake up like this and face his girlfriend with his mind intact. Thousands of other mech pilots had fought against the enemy expert mechs as well and did cruel and unjust deaths.

Expert mechs were too powerful!

Every attack aimed at them either stopped in front of their resonance shields or bounced harmlessly off their fantastic armor.

Whenever an expert mech made a move, it could easily tear through the defenses of any standard mech as if they were made of leaves.

Expert mechs and standard mechs didn't even belong in the same category of machines. Vincent barely remembered what was going through his head when he pushed himself to fight against the Trost and actually managed to fare better than most.

"Wait a minute.. Didn't I advance to expert candidate?"

It was only now that he recognized that something inside of him had changed. As his mind slowly cleared up even further, he instinctively felt a source of strength that matched the descriptions of what he read about expert candidates.

"I committed to something?" He looked puzzled.

It was common knowledge among mech pilots that expert candidates and expert pilots always dedicated themselves to a certain goal, principle or ideal. This was the source and foundation of their extraordinary will and dedication.

When Vincent explored the changes in his mind, he felt as if he had become larger than life as soon as he thought about his masculinity.

When he fought against the Trost, he felt compelled to face the threat as a man. He despised the thought of being regarded as a coward and a boy. The fear of being regarded as a failure overcame his fear of death!

That wasn't all. The last thing he wanted to do was to validate the stereotype that Hexers held towards men like him. A part inside him and his mech wanted to prove to everyone that men were more than savage monsters or incompetent little boys.

As death loomed closer to Vincent, he resolved to become more than an average mech pilot! He wanted to become stronger and achieve fame as the manliest mech pilot in human space!

Perhaps a normal mech pilot would feel ashamed at this aspiration, but Vincent only felt pride as he imagined becoming known throughout the galaxy.

This was what a real mech pilot should pursue!

He held no doubts about himself anymore. He knew who he was as a person. All of the doubts and confusion in his mind had faded away. No matter what uncertainties he might have, he knew that he would never get lost as long as he stayed true to his heart!

"I am a man." He declared with steel in his voice.

He felt greater and stronger than ever before. It was as if he had previously been muddling around without knowing what he wanted to do in his life.

He didn't need to drift around any longer. After spending his life as a descendant of a rich family, a rebel cadre, a hero of the Sand War and a member of the Larkinson Clan, he finally settled the matter of his identity once and for all. A smile settled on his face as he embraced his new truth.

He was a man.

"What are you smiling about?" Raella sharply poked his arm.

"Huh? Can't I enjoy a moment to myself? I'm an expert candidate now! I'm a hero!"

"You idiot. Don't you know what this means? You can't take part in our competitive circuit anymore. You're too strong now! Team Solo Vincent will have to go on without Vincent from now on because it will just be bullying if you duel against the other contenders."

His eyes widened. "Damn! I didn't think about that!"

He wasn't a normal mech pilot anymore. Even though his new strength paled in comparison to that of a genuine expert pilot, he was still capable of performing above the level of a normal human mech pilot.

As long as this was the case, it wouldn't be fair anymore for him to bully around others who fought like children in his perspective.

While he looked forward to his vastly-improved performance, he lamented the end of his brief and short career as a mech athlete.

He suddenly remembered something else.

"Wait.. what happened to my Adonis Colossus? I remember that my mech collided right into the enemy expert mech. Is my mech still...?"

Raella shook her head. "It's not in a good shape. Let me show you how it looks after we picked it up from space."

She tapped the wrist of her suit, causing a projection to appear that displayed a very vivid depiction of a ruined mech.

The Adonis Colossus was no longer as grand as before. It had lost its masculine contours and its pleasing appearance. Vincent's heart bled as almost nothing of the mech's frontal structure was left intact. The straight collision not only crushed and distorted the entire front of the frame, but also squashed much of the internals.

"I've spoken to a mech designer who was surveying the damage." Raella carefully said. "She said that while it is technically possible to restore the Adonis Colossus, it's too difficult to bring it close to its original condition without involving a mech designer who is much more skilled than an average Apprentice. As the mech is Ves' work to begin with, his involvement is essential."

That was basically impossible. The patriarch wasn't under anyone's beck and call. He had much more important matters on his agenda. While it was true that the Adonis Colossus was his personal work, Ves had moved on to greater and more impressive mech design projects.

"He won't bother with fixing up an old third-class mech." Vincent sighed in disappointment. "Our clan urgently needs both second-class mechs and expert mechs. Even I know better than to take up his time with a request to fix the Adonis Colossus."

Raella silently nodded. As a figure of authority within the Larkinson Clan, she understood this reality even more. The battle just now had painfully demonstrated to her and fellow clansmen what it was like to bring cannon fodder mechs in a fight involving lots of high-quality machines!

The two briefly discussed the changes in Vincent's life and what mech he should pilot next now that the Adonis Colossus was trashed.

"I haven't heard any mention of a hybrid mech from the Design Department, so you'll probably have to wait until the mech designers complete the Bright Warrior IB to pilot something that fits you somewhat."

Vincent had gotten used to piloting a mech with a myriad of integrated weapon systems, so he didn't really look forward to getting back to piloting specialized mechs.

"The basic mech types are too boring to me. I don't think that any of them reflect my current piloting style."

"Hey, it's not that bad. Just like the original version, the new Bright Warriors are all modular in nature. You can switch loadouts whenever you feel like fighting in a different way than before."

That hardly sounded ideal to Vincent. He knew that it took a fair amount of time to switch a Bright Warrior configuration. What he truly wanted was to have multiple options at his disposal during battle. As far as he was concerned, this was the key to surviving on the battlefield!

Just because he aspired to become the ultimate man didn't mean he was eager to throw away his life! He did not look forward to repeating his earlier life-threatening confrontation against the Trost!

As time passed by, Vincent felt more vigorous. His strength came back and he felt eager to hop out of his bed!

"Let's get out of here!" He declared while grinning saucily at his lover. "We just survived a huge battle. Do you know what that means? We should celebrate our victory in style!"

Strangely enough, his girlfriend panicked. "Wait, Vincent! Don't go up yet! There's something you need to know!"

He didn't listen to her. His thoughts had already strayed to the inevitable party that the Larkinsons would host on the 12th deck.

However, as he tried to push his body off the recovery bed, he strangely stayed in place.

"What's going on?" Confusion marred his face.

He drew back his blanket, only to learn why he wasn't feeling anything below his waist.

"WHAAAAHH?!! MY LEGS! WHERE ARE MY LEGS!"

Vincent discovered to his horror that the area below his stomach was covered by some white machine. It covered his entire waist and conspicuously did not leave any room for a pair of legs.

Unless the high-tech brace possessed a dimensional space pocket, the sight basically indicated that his legs were gone!

"Your legs were amputated." She told him. "When the rescue party pulled you out of your ruined cockpit, your lower body was in bad shape. When the cockpit of the Adonis Colossus became compressed, the interior essentially squashed your legs. While your piloting suit tried its best to keep you stable and alive, your situation was deteriorating by the minute. In order to prevent further damage and minimize the risk of death, your rescuers had no choice but to..."

She lifted her palm and made a sawing motion, causing Vincent to wince.

He suddenly recalled an even more important matter.

"Wait.. when they separated my lower body from my upper body, did they.. cut my third leg as well?"

His girlfriend fell silent. Vincent's heart sunk all the way to the bottom. Had his worst fears come true?

Just the thought of it alone almost caused his will to shatter! How could he regard himself as the ultimate man if he no longer possessed the organ that served as the core of self-image?

Vincent felt as if he had already descended into hell! Losing his manhood was a fate that was worse than death in his eyes!

"Hahaha!" Raella suddenly laughed. "You should see the look on your face!"

"What's going on?! Did I lose it or not?!"

"It's still there, Vincent! It didn't get crushed when the front of the cockpit pressed up against your lower body! Your third leg is too small for that, hahaha!" Raella wheezed.

Vincent coughed. While he was happy with this news, he didn't like how Raella left him in the dark for so long.

He truly worried about his future as a man for a moment!

"Don't be such a baby, you big hero. An injury like this will only inconvenience you for a couple of weeks. The docs are already regrowing a new pair of legs for you. They can

grow an additional organ while they are at it. Still, I do have to say you've lucked out this time."

Once he heard how close he came to losing his most sensitive organ, Vincent immediately made a vow to himself.

"I'll wear a solid codpiece next time. I'm not going to go out anymore without wearing sufficient protection!"

Chapter 2693: Value of a Mech Designer

Lady Aisling Curver almost couldn't believe her last-minute plan had worked.

Task Force Umbra initially set out to kill Ves Larkinson. The Fridaymen arrived with the force of thunder and made it clear that they did not intend to show any leniency towards their target.

It would have been great if they won, but the reality was crueler.

By now, almost every member of Task Force Umbra was dead. In fact, discounting the scattered Fridayman mech pilots who were stuck in derelict mechs, she might be the sole survivor left!

That frightened her on a profound level. How many servicemen had taken part in Operation Head Crusher? The Auralis alone was home to at least 20,000 crew members and the other fleet carriers definitely brought at least 15,000 people each depending on their size.

Now that all of those valuable fleet carriers blew up in order to prevent their enemies from deriving any value out of them, there was no way that any of those people made it out alive.

Surrender wasn't an option. The hatred went deep on both sides.

Aisling lowered her head as she sat on a comfortable chair in some kind of ready room. She brushed her hand over her tangled hair.

As soon as the Larkinsons brought back the spare cockpit ejected from the Eager Condemnation back to the Spirit of Bentheim, a team of security officers roughly pulled her out and stripped her of her hazard suit as well as all of her gear. While they had been generous enough to give her a comfortable jumpsuit, she felt terribly out of place.

She normally wore fashionable outfits or perfectly-fitted uniforms when she went about her day. She wasn't used to losing control.

"Well, at least the Larkinsons haven't treated me too poorly."

From what she could tell, the Larkinsons considered her to be a security risk, but that was all. They attempted to make her feel more at ease. She expected to be dragged to a cell or an interrogation room, but instead she was put into a ready room meant to keep pilots comfortable while they remained on standby.

That was probably the best treatment she could receive if Ves accepted the deal she offered.

"The data is all safe inside my head." She smiled.

As the administrator and supervisor of Unit L, she possessed extensive access to how the Charlemagne and the Scarra worked. While some of the data was still stuck behind very thorough encryption, it was still possible to gain access to it in time.

Her gift did not just encompass asymmetrical neural networks. She also possessed extensive resources that would allow anyone knowledgeable in neural interfaces to set up a basic neural network. This was the core crystallization of Master Toqueman Huron's lifelong pursuit. It was so refined and optimized that its applicability and ease of use was significantly greater than when the Master Mech Designer initially realized his design philosophy!

"Ves doesn't have any mech designer who specializes in neural interface technology." Aisling muttered.

This was the greatest source of confidence to her. As someone who tracked Ves' life as best as possible, she knew about every single mech designer who worked under the man she loved more than anyone else in the cosmos.

Not a single mech designer in the Larkinson Clan could harness the considerable amount of research data in her head!

The only one who qualified was Aisling herself! Even if Ves brought in an outsider with a background in neural interfaces, he or she would never be able to master Master Huron's proprietary trade secrets.

Only someone who specialized and dedicated her design philosophy to neural networks were best able to work in this specific field!

Considering what she heard about Ves, Aisling knew that she possessed a good chance to preserve her life and gain the acceptance of her crush if she showed her value.

Ves had proven that he was not completely in the grip of his wife by forcibly elevating Juliet Stameris to the position of lead designer.

"I'm definitely more useful than this Hexer mech designer!" Aisling confidently asserted.

Ves was sorely lacking a specialty like hers in his design teams. She was one of the few mech designers who were permitted to design custom neural interfaces. This was very useful to any mech design projects because she could optimize a neural interface to any specific design, thereby facilitating a smoother piloting experience.

This was especially relevant when it came to designing expert mechs! Neural interface specialists played an essential role in their design because most resonance-empowered abilities required custom neural interface programming and configuration in order to be activated and controlled.

While it was possible to design an expert mech without a custom neural interface, the efficiency of such a machine would definitely be impaired!

"Expert pilots are too different from normal humans. If the neural interface isn't expanded to accommodate their distinct properties, then they will always be held back from displaying their full might!"

Aside from this, Aisling was also a great mech designer in other aspects. She was fairly well-rounded and possessed a very broad and solid foundation. She was able to design mechs independently or lead mech design projects on her own. Her addition would definitely alleviate the manpower shortages at the LMC's Design Department.

The entrance slid open without warning, startling Aisling out of her considerations.

She quickly straightened her back and adopted a slightly soft and vulnerable demeanor.

This was not a situation where she could afford to throw her weight around. If she wanted to get past this hurdle, she needed to gain Ves' sympathy.

A pair of powerful suited forms entered the ready room. Ves, still clad in his sealed Unending Regalia, strode forward while his dashing cape fluttered in the air. His tall and heavily-armored bodyguard followed closely behind.

No one else entered the room, which quietly made Aisling feel relieved.

She was afraid that Ves would bring Gloriana. If she wasn't here, this meant that Ves clearly wanted to deal with the situation himself. That meant she had a chance!

"Hello, Ves." She started simply and plainly.

She made sure to restrain herself from saying anything more. She had to be very careful with how she presented herself. She carefully controlled her posture, her demeanor, her pitch and her phrasing according to the training she received.

"Hello, Aisling." Ves eventually replied.

Aisling couldn't read too much from his response. His damned armor prevented her from gleaning too many details from his body language and his expression remained frustratingly expressionless.

"Have you considered my offer?" She gently asked.

"I have." He said haltingly. "I'm not entirely convinced. I don't like you at all, though I can't deny your talents are useful. The problem is that you haven't managed to offer enough arguments to make me forgive your very serious transgressions. Tell me why I should look past the crap you've put me through and bring you into the fold."

"I'm sure you already know what I can bring to the table as a Journeyman and a neural interface specialist, so I won't bother to elaborate on that. Let me explain what it means to gain access to the data in my mind."

She began to outline some of the benefits of neural networks. She tried to use as few words as possible to describe all of the advantages of the unique knowledge she held in her head.

"The Bloody Herons showcased a relatively high-level application of neural networks. The selection of mech pilots is rather strict because it's not easy to find people who meet all of the requirements. However, the results are very much worth it, as the previous battle has shown. As long as the mech pilots are sufficiently trained, they can fight as one with the help of an active neural network for an extended period of time. It is applicable in nearly any situation and battlefield."

Ves crossed his arms. He looked intrigued. Compared to his battle networks, the classical neural network could be sustained over a much longer period of time. This was a huge benefit for battles where the use of trump cards was excessive.

"I can't say that I'm not tempted." He casually replied. "However, why must I keep you around? If I want to, I can extract that valuable data straight from your implant."

"That won't work! I've employed enough safeguards to rule out any method of accessing the data stored in my implant unless I am fully onboard with it. If my implant is accessed by a third party, it will immediately erase all of the data. If any of its programming or parameters are altered, it will immediately erase all of the data. If I don't feed a specific code in intervals of less than a minute, it will immediately erase all of the data. In the long journey to this ship, I have set up hundreds of different safeguards like these to account for every conceivable contingency."

Ves frowned. He had hoped that she would be careless, but she was too technically literate to leave herself open to all of these vulnerabilities.

Only by making him give up any attempt to steal her valuable research data in a dishonest manner would she be eligible to negotiate with him. Aisling was not naive

enough to believe her charm was enough to make Ves treat her in such a cordial fashion.

As she was about to proceed with the negotiation she set up, Ves began to turn around without warning.

The hatch soon slid open to allow a woman to enter the ready room. The new entrant wore a stylish purple protective suit patterned with hexagons.

Aisling's composure quickly broke down when she realized who Ves invited into the room.

"Of all of the people I expected to see in the flesh, I never imagined I would come face to face with you." Gloriana said with a deceptively calm voice.

Panic had swept through Aisling! The appearance of Ves' wife signalled a very dangerous turn of events!

"Ves!" Aisling ignored Gloriana's looming presence. "Please consider what I can offer to you. I promise that I will forget about all of my former loyalties and completely dedicate my expertise to you and your clan. I can help you design better mechs in a way that no other neural interface specialist can compare. I've noticed that you developed some mechs that work really well together. You must have become inspired by Master Huron's work, right? You can probably push their cooperation to the next level with the help of myself and the knowledge I carry!"

Ves did not immediately respond to her pleas. Instead, he kept looking at his wife.

"How do you want to deal with her, honey?"

"She's not worth my time." Gloriana arrogantly huffed. "Ever since I married you, other women don't stand a chance anymore."

"Don't you want to teach her a lesson or something?"

"I'm not a savage, Ves! I'm a dignified woman. There is no need for me to stoop to Aisling's level. Just kill her so we can move on to more productive matters."

"Nooo! Please don't listen to her, Ves!" Aisling begged. "If you kill me, you won't get any of my data! My implant will immediately fry and self-destruct. There is no chance for you to retrieve anything valuable from my head!"

Ves looked at her as if she was already dead.

"I don't care."

Those simple words sealed her fate. Aisling gradually realized that Ves never really cared about all of the benefits she could bring to him. He was fully okay with forgoing her valuable knowledge!

Her body shook. "Can.. can you tell my why?"

"I might as well, if only to ease your passing." Ves shrugged. "It's very simple. You screwed me over. You wanted to take me away from everything I built and forcibly turn me into someone else. This is unforgivable. I simply can't get over it. While I don't deny my interest in the research data that you hold, I'm already a successful mech designer in my own right. As an innovator, I am already accustomed to making my own inventions. I don't need to rely on anyone's research to progress. The most it can do is serve as a source of inspiration. That's not enough to offset your transgressions, but even if you offered a hundred times more value, I still would have rejected you out of hand."

It turned out that Aisling didn't understand Ves sufficiently at all! His grievances took precedence over his greed!

"Don't forget about me." Gloriana smirked in an incredibly smug fashion as she leaned her suit against Ves' solid form. "Ves knows better than to entertain you when he's married to me. He's mine, Aisling. I will never give you a chance to worm your way into his heart."

That was that. Neither Ves nor Gloriana had any reason to keep their valuable captive alive.

She lowered her head. Tears began to leak from her eyes.

When she looked up again, her vision became filled by the barrel of a very ornate laser pistol.

The weapon was aimed straight at her unprotected heart.

"Any last words?"

"I will always love you, in life and in death."

A bright red flash blinded her eyes!

Chapter 2694: Most Valuable Salvage

Gloriana looked sick. She couldn't help but turn around in order to block her view of what remained of her former 'rival'.

"I thought I could handle it, but it's too much for me. It's too disgusting!"

"Corpses are never pretty." Ves remarked as he dematerialized his Amastendira.

He looked down at the body which had gained a very large and conspicuous burn hole through the chest.

Unlike Ves, Aisling did not possess a Jutland organ or the like. Her augmentations and genetic treatments purely focused on upgrading her cognitive functions. Ves was pretty sure her head was tougher than it looked, though he doubted it could resist the firepower of his favorite laser pistol!

Gloriana tried to cheer herself up. "I'm glad that she got what she deserved. Aisling Curver is a horrible woman. She doesn't respect or love you like I do. You would have become a puppet of the awful Friday Coalition if she managed to sink her claws into you. Aren't you happy that I got to you first?"

Ves knew without a doubt that he would definitely suffer if he didn't answer to her satisfaction!

"I am, haha! You're a wonderful woman, Gloriana. I couldn't ask for a better wife to spend the rest of my life with. The mechs that we will design together will be just as perfect as our love!"

"Oh, Ves..." Gloriana softened up and released a loving sigh. "If not for the awful lump of burning flesh next to us, I would have given you a reward by now. As it is..."

"It's a long day, honey. I still have a lot of duties to attend to. I'll probably be busy for several days straight in order to handle the aftermath of the Battle of Reckoning."

He had never taken part in a battle of scale, and neither did most of the Larkinsons. A lot of work had to be done to wrap everything up and allow the expeditionary fleet to resume its journey in the best condition possible.

Ves hadn't even spoken with Colonel Ariadne Wodin and Patriarch Reginald Cross yet about how to distribute the rich spoils they managed to secure. He was already salivating to get his hands on as many expert mech remains as possible!

Gloriana eventually moved to leave.

"I really can't stand being in the same room as a dead body. Please make sure to clean up the mess. I don't want any piece of her to remain intact and whole."

"Don't worry. I'll just look and see if I can salvage anything from her brain and implant before I dispose of the bodily remains."

His wife snorted as she walked away. "Don't bother. The typical security arrangements of a high-quality implant rules out any way to retrieve any data."

Even though he knew that, he still held a treasure hunter's mindset. He didn't want to rule out any option until he received solid proof.

When Gloriana exited the room, Ves turned to his bodyguard.

"Give me another box."

Nitaa passed over a familiar-looking metal box. When Ves opened it, he inspected the P-stone resting within. Once he saw that it was completely empty, he turned his attention to Aisling's body.

A fair amount of time had passed, causing Aisling's mind to collapse and dissipate.

Ves already expected to encounter this situation. Unlike expert pilots, mech designers were wired in a different fashion. They did not possess an unnaturally high willpower, but instead concentrated their spirituality in a condensed design seed for a lack of a better word.

From his own understanding of design seeds, they were very dense and resilient.

Ves speculated that once Journeymen died, their design seeds wouldn't evaporate in an instant like the rest of their fragile minds.

His guess hit the mark. Aisling's design seed still looked as solid and whole as a minute ago. It didn't seem to deteriorate anytime soon.

Of course, Ves had no idea what happened to them. Would they break down at a slower pace than normal? Would they slip into the imaginary realm and evolve into something else? Would they just.. fade out of the material dimensions and enter into a realm that is specific to mechs?

No matter what was supposed to happen, Aisling's design seed could forget about getting away!

Ves may not be able to salvage the valuable research data in her implant, but it was a different matter when it came to her spiritual essence!

As a mech designer himself, he knew that the rest of a Journeyman's mind was not that essential. Ves had no interest in retaining any portion of Aisling aside from the literal crystallization of her design philosophy.

He could think about how to make use of it later. Right now, he just wanted to add it to his collection.

Salvaging the design seed was as simple as picking up the design seed with a spiritual projection before depositing it into a waiting P-stone.

It seemed that when Aisling died, her mental barrier and all of her mental defenses had collapsed. Her mind and design seed should have reacted violently to any intrusions if she was still alive, but since that was not the case, Ves didn't encounter any opposition.

"Interesting."

As Ves looked carefully at Aisling's intact design seed, he became a bit uncertain.

Was Aisling still alive? Was there any living part of her that still resided in her design seed? Did the design seed exist as a separate autonomous life form or was it purely an extension of the mech designer who created it? All of these questions and more momentarily overwhelmed his mind.

"Ah, whatever! I'll figure this out later!"

All that mattered for the moment was that he collected all of the spiritual loot he could obtain from this battle.

His only regret was that he had missed out on too many opportunities to harvest more spirits. The enemy fielded 11 expert pilots in total! He could have used up all of his P-stones if he was in a position to salvage the crumbling will and spirits of those extraordinary mech pilots!

Sadly, it wasn't as if he could hop on board a shuttle and fly next to an expert mech that just got wrecked while the battle was still raging hot. The risks were far too great. If his shuttle was attacked by a couple of mechs, then Ves didn't think his Unending Regalia would be able to protect him against the excess shock or heat that would sweep over his entire body!

By this time, the spiritualities of all of those dead expert pilots had already faded away. It was no use even if the Larkinsons brought back the bodies before his feet. He had already tried to do so for Venerable Kelvin Praetor when the Trost got demolished right next to the Spirit of Bentheim, but too much time had passed.

These failures taught him that the only way he could realistically harvest an expert pilot's spirituality was to be right next to them with a P-stone within reach when they died!

"What an onerous restriction!"

It was too difficult to ensure that Ves would have more opportunities to expand his collection. His expert pilots would not only have to fight against an opponent that was at least equally as dangerous, but also achieve victory without taking any lives.

Ves shook his head. "I shouldn't be too impatient. Perhaps I'll figure out a better solution one day."

He decided to take stock of his spiritual spoils.

The three special containers were still within his reach. He opened every box and inspected the contents of every P-stone resting inside.

Obviously, Ghanso's spiritual remains were not in the best of shape. The method that Ves used to extract his spirituality from his mind was so crude and destructive that the P-stone was filled with several ugly pieces.

Ves expected them to merge back together, but it seemed they weren't capable of doing so. He didn't detect much activity in any of the remnants.

While Ves speculated that it might be possible to 'resurrect' Venerable Ghanso in a spiritual form, he probably wouldn't be the same as his old self. Too much had been lost.

"Of course, I have no intentions of reviving an enemy of mine."

He might as well point his Amastendira at himself and pull the trigger if that was the case!

Instead of seeking to bring an aspect of Ghanso back to life, Ves would rather use his powerful spiritual remains as an ingredient for a greater project.

As long as Ves cleansed and stripped the broken pieces of Ghanso's spirit of everything hateful, he would still be left with something strong that could empower any design spirit!

"Hehe. Rest well, Ghanso." He grinned. "I know you don't want to, but you'll be working for the Larkinson Clan one way or another. Death is not an escape when I'm involved!"

He inspected the P-stone holding Venerable Relia Foster's spirituality next. Different from Ghanso, Foster's spirituality was relatively whole and intact.

Even though she died in a very bloody and aggrieved fashion, her will and spirit had remained strong no matter how much pain that Dise and Ketis inflicted on her body.

Ves admired her perseverance. She truly exhibited the qualities of an expert pilot at that time.

Due to being ready to receive her the moment her broken body finally succumbed to death, he managed to harvest her entire spirituality with remarkably few problems.

Not only that, but Ves still sensed a powerful will from within. The P-stone actually radiated a weak force of will for that reason!

"This is much greater than with Ghanso!"

While Ghanso's spiritual remnant was also contaminated by his extraordinary will, it was much weaker and less active.

Whereas Ghanso's remains gave Ves the impression of a pile of body parts, Foster's remains seemed like a whole but comatose body. Her spirituality didn't appear to be conscious, but it still had some qualities that were definitely alive.

Frankly, Ves was amazed by what he managed to obtain. This prize might possibly be the most valuable haul from this battle. Not even the Auralis in her entirety could compare to the complete and relatively-intact spirituality of a promising and talented expert pilot!

The only problem was that Ves had no clue what to do with it. He supposed he could chop it up and turn it into an ingredient, but that sounded far too wasteful to him. He could draw upon plenty of ingredients to create his design spirits.

He should find another purpose for Venerable Foster's spirituality. One that would hopefully yield an entirely different result.

Would it be possible to transplant it into another mind or body?

"What if.. what if I clone Foster's body and put this spirit inside its new shell?"

It was theoretically possible. While there were bound to be a lot of problems, Ves guessed that he might technically be able to 'revive' Venerable Foster.

What a crazy and audacious plan!

Something like this was definitely unheard of. If he succeeded, the implications were enormous. Yet if he failed, he would have probably wasted a very strong and valuable spirit!

"I can't take this risk!"

There was no point to reviving Venerable Foster anyway. He wasn't short of expert pilots these days and the last thing he wanted to do was to revive one of his enemies.

"At the very least, I should cut some parts out while adding some other stuff inside."

Was it possible for him to turn Venerable Foster's spirit into a deeply loyal member of the Larkinson Clan by cutting out the parts that were hostile and implanting a spiritual fragment from the Golden Cat?

Even if it was possible, Ves instinctively repelled these measures. This was playing with life on a much deeper level than before. Human life was sacred. Toying with it in this fashion was far too close to playing god!

"I'm not a god!" He insisted.

He needed to forget about these macabre experiments and focus on how he could use his spoils to empower his mech designs. That was the right way to apply his spiritual abilities.

As soon as his thoughts strayed in this direction, he came up with an interesting idea.

"What if I design a self-resonating expert mech?" He wondered. "Would a normal pilot be able to gain the power of an expert pilot without actually being one?"

This was an interesting idea!

Chapter 2695: Spoils Spoils Spoils

The distribution of spoils was always a contentious issue.

After every battle, the side that controlled the battlefield received the opportunity to pick up a lot of valuable loot.

What was interesting was that the party that asserted control of a wreckage-filled battlefield was not always the winner.

For example, in the case of deep raids, the attackers could only stay in a hostile star system for a limited amount of time before they needed to leave. If they lingered too long in order to pick up all of the valuable scrap, enemy reinforcements might drop in and corner the greedy raiders!

Third parties might also be the final beneficiaries of a battle. If two pirate outfits smashed each other apart, the authorities might arrive at the end and defeat the exhausted victors with ease!

All in all, the issue of controlling the battlefield and dividing the spoils was of great importance to any combatant. Entire wars were won or lost due to arguments and mishaps surrounding the recognition of claims on salvage and other matters with profound financial implications.

This was especially the case when multiple organisations had to decide how to distribute the salvage!

Much of the wealth lying on the ground or drifting off in space came in the form of broken wrecks and debris. It took a lot of effort to convert them into valuable assets, either in the form of restored machines or recycled materials.

Most outfits generally didn't possess the industrial capabilities to process complex salvage, so they were accustomed to selling it to a dedicated salvage processing company at a discount. This became a lot more relevant as the amount of salvage far surpassed what any organization could reasonably process.

Suffice to say, this was exactly the case after the Battle of Reckoning. Not even the Larkinson Clan could process thousands of mech wrecks. The Spirit of Bentheim excelled at transforming refined materials into mechs and other industrial equipment. She did not possess extensive or efficient recycling and reprocessing capabilities.

Even so, no one wished to discard any of the salvage. No matter how difficult it was to extract value out of any broken piece, it could still be sold for a lucrative amount of money. Nothing on the battlefield was truly worthless.

The negotiations between the partners of the Golden Skull Alliance had already commenced as soon as the outcome of the battle was decided. The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers sent out various salvage shuttles and other vehicles to survey the debris fields and pick up the most valuable salvage before it could drift off any further.

The most valuable and controversial salvage of all was definitely the broken expert mechs!

Of course, every wreck that belonged to one of the members of the alliance automatically returned to them. The Glory Seekers retrieved the remains of the Star Dancer and the Cross Clan quickly gathered the pieces of the Bolvos Rage, the Conavis Mer and the Leskin without contention.

That left the expert mechs that belonged to the enemy. There were 11 expert mech wrecks in total. How to determine who deserved to obtain one was a difficult matter!

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers mostly fought alongside each other. Even if one side managed to occupy a given enemy expert pilot, the reason why they were left undisturbed was because other friendlies blocked other opponents from intervening.

To be honest, Ves didn't want to bother with all of the horse-trading. He threw the problem to Major Verle who in turn tapped other Larkinsons to do all of the talking.

After more than an entire day, the negotiations concluded. Just like any compromise, the final agreement satisfied no one. The way these talks worked was to make sure that none of the participants felt overly left out. The final outcome at least had to approach their psychological expectations.

"One of the reasons why the talks stretched out for so long is because it's difficult to determine a 'fair' distribution." Major Verle personally met with Ves at his office. "Those that made more accomplishments should obtain more spoils. No one disagrees with that principle. It's just that everyone has different ideas on how to score a contribution. Another point of contention is the compensation of losses."

"What's that about?" Ves questioned as he stroked Bygul's back.

[Mew~]

Calabast took Lucky on a trip to the Auralis, so Ves had little choice but to cuddle with a substitute.

Though Bygul was obviously less lively than his first cat, the AI-driven projection had become a lot more realistic in acting like a real pet.

The ASTERA's deep learning function constantly studied the cats on the Spirit of Bentheim and precisely tracked Ves' reactions to any given behavior.

The results became better and better. While Bygul initially came across as stiff and artificial, now he had become a lot less distinguishable from actual cats!

"All of us have suffered losses, but some have lost more than others." Major Verle pointed out. "Each of us have lost thousands of mechs and at least half as many mech pilots. To us, these losses aren't too heavy, because we can easily recruit other mech pilots given our open recruitment policies."

"What are our current losses?" Ves asked.

"The numbers are still in flux. We have a lot of injured who might not make it at the end of the day. However, the overall picture has become somewhat clear. Get ready, because the current tally isn't pretty."

"Just give it to me, major. I'm not a newbie when it comes to hearing these reports."

"Very well, sir." Major Verle took a deep breath. "Out of the 4300 mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan, around 1800 of them are no longer with us. This time, the Avatars of Myth, the Battle Criers and the Flagrant Vandals have lost a disproportionate amount of soldiers."

The three mech forces were responsible for fighting against the elite mech units of the Friday Coalition. Compared to the Praetor and Planat mechs, the Fridaymen mechs were not only stronger, but also fought a lot harder.

The detachments of famed elite mech regiments such as the Holvein Grenadiers and the Silent Swords were so overwhelmingly powerful that the flimsy commercial mechs fielded by the Larkinson Clan collapsed quickly without support!

Ves briefly closed his eyes. His decision to cheap out on mechs had led to the loss of almost half of the Larkinson Clan's main combatants. This was a grievous loss and would surely generate a lot of hard feelings among the other Larkinsons.

Of course, the Larkinson Clan was actually a lot weaker than these numbers suggested. The casualty figures specifically mentioned mech pilots. When it came to intact, combat effective mechs, Ves loosely guessed that the Larkinson Clan only retained around 20 percent of what it had before!

This left the Larkinson Clan remarkably vulnerable against any opportunistic enemies that might show up in the near future.

"What about our allies?"

"They haven't shared the full picture with us, but they still supplied us with a couple of estimates. The Glory Seekers lost around 1200 out of 2600 mech pilots. The Cross Clan lost around 1500 out of 3200 mech pilots. In both cases, the majority of deaths occurred during the attempt to contain the 8 destructive Fridayman expert mechs."

Ves had tracked that desperate fight with great attention. The Golden Skull Alliance simply didn't have enough expert mechs, so it had no choice but to field an overwhelming amount of cannon fodder in the hopes of drowning the vastly-superior opponents!

"Damn. Our allies have lost a lot of mech pilots, all of whom are trained to military standards. That represents a great drop in strength. How will they address this problem?" Ves inquired as he stroked his hand on Bygul's physically projected body.

He relished getting back to wearing more comfortable clothes.

Now that the entire area around the expeditionary fleet had been swept for threats, there was no need to wear any protective equipment any longer. The alert level had already been lowered to yellow, which meant that there was no need for the entire crew to be fully geared and permanently stuck at their battle stations.

"Let's start with the Glory Seekers, sir. The Hexers are in a bit of a bind because the Wodin Dynasty cannot reinforce them any further. Now that the Hexadric Hegemony is facing an increasing amount of pressure from the Friday Coalition, the Hexers truly need every single mech pilot. It is political suicide for the Wodins to transfer mech pilots away from the front."

That was understandable.

"How will the Hexers get back to full strength?"

"I'm not sure. You should know them better than I do, sir." Verle replied. "In my judgement, they will probably hire female mech pilots who are compatible with their ideology. It's the only viable way for them to get back to a level of strength that allows them to defend the Indigo Tremor and other valuable assets."

This was a desperate measure, but one that could not be avoided. The Indigo Tremor was a newly-built fleet carrier that incorporated state-of-the-art Hexer military technology. Yet no matter how many features she possessed, she would only become an attraction to thieves if there weren't mechs on guard to serve as a deterrent!

Ves looked nonchalant. "I'm not sure whether the Hexers can attract any decent mech pilot considering their.. eccentric culture, but maybe they'll surprise us all. What about the Cross Clan?"

"We haven't heard anything from the Cross Clan about this matter so far. It will likely take some time for them to come to a decision."

"Do you think the Crossers will open their doors as well?"

"They have no choice, sir." Verle firmly answered. "If they want to succeed in the Red Ocean, they can't arrive at the dwarf galaxy at half strength. They can't afford to wait decades for their descendents to grow up, so the only viable solution is to recruit outsiders. It will be difficult."

That was an understatement, but it wasn't any of their business.

Now that Ves gained a decent overview of the losses suffered by everyone in the alliance, he became a bit worried how they would proceed in the coming months.

Right now, the Golden Skull Alliance was at its most precarious moment. It would take at least several months for the injured mech pilots to heal and to restore, build or acquire enough mechs to make them useful again.

It might take a lot longer to replace the huge amount of mech pilots that had fallen in the Battle of Reckoning!

That made the next steps of their journey a lot more dangerous.

However, there was plenty of time to formulate a couple of plans. Ves was much more interested in the more immediate topic of distributing all of the juicy loot!

"Let's get back to dividing the spoils, major. Just give me the short version. Who gets what?"

"I'll start with our clan. We may have fielded the most mechs, but most of them are considerably weak. The only good performers we had were our prime mechs, our Valkyrie Redeemers and our Transcendent Punishers. While it's true we've pulled off some very astonishing moves, we didn't contribute nearly as much in the more punishing clashes."

"So we'll be getting less of the share of the spoils?"

"It's.. complicated. We obviously can't demand too much, but the fact that we have overturned the battle by wiping out the Bloody Herons and the entire crew of the Auralis at once cannot be ignored. In the end, our negotiators managed to hash out the differences by making some major concessions in exchange for obtaining some priority spoils."

Major Verle began to list out the full loot.

In total, the Larkinson Clan received 20 percent of standard mech salvage. While this was a low proportion, the Larkinsons secured priority on all of the wrecks of the Bloody Herons and the Corundian Giants.

The Larkinson Clan gave up any claims on the salvage originating from the starships of the enemy strike force.

The only exception was the Auralis. The Glory Seekers and the Crossers easily conceded the whole fleet carrier to the Larkinsons for obvious reasons.

As for the most valuable loot, the Larkinsons gained just 2 expert mech wrecks in total. Ves became very disappointed when he heard he could only get his hands on the Charlemagne and the Jeanne D'Arc.

"It's not that bad." Major Verle tried to console his upset patriarch. "We got all of the Scarra mech wrecks as a package deal as well."

That was hardly a consolation.

Chapter 2696: Payment for Services Rendered

Obviously, the Larkinson Clan's major coup was the Auralis. No matter whether the Larkinsons attempted to bring her into service or sell her off, the ship was packed with value!

What was especially important here was that the Larkinsons gained sole custody of the deep strike fleet carrier. They did not have to share the ship with anyone else, which saved everyone a lot of trouble.

The problem was that the Auralis accounted for a huge proportion of spoils that the Larkinson Clan had to skimp out on other spoils.

The Larkinson negotiators filled up the rest of the quota of spoils by securing a relatively small amount of mech salvage and just two expert mechs.

Certainly, Ves was very interested in getting his hands on the Charlemagne and the Jeanne D'Arc. Despite their fall, the mechs were actually in decent shape. Aside from some missing limbs and some broken components, they could still be restored as long as Ves put in enough effort.

The Charlemagne was a special mech. It served as the focal point of Master Huron's asymmetrical neural network, so it should definitely be packed with all kinds of advanced systems.

The fact that the Larkinsons obtained a lot of Scarra mechs was doubtlessly helpful in any attempt to study or reverse engineer the asymmetrical neural network.

"It's a shame I didn't manage to gain any of the valuable research data in Aisling's implant." Ves sighed.

When Ves handed her corpse over to the Black Cats, their hackers quickly discovered that the implant was completely fried. All of its data storage facilities were firmly destroyed beyond any means of recovery.

There was no realistic way for the Larkinson Clan to field neural networked mechs on its own even if it secured the Charlemagne and as many Scarra mechs as possible.

It would have been much more useful to retain the services of the Aisling Curver and gain access to all of the proprietary research data in her head.

It was too bad that Ves had made a different choice. While he did not regret killing someone he loathed, he also had to accept the implications.

The Jeanne D'Arc wasn't as complicated. Its design was quite simple for an expert mech because its strength lay in its fundamentals. It hit hard, it flew fast and it could take an enormous beating.

The latter was the key feature of this swordsman expert mech. The Jeanne D'Arc needed no shield because its frame was clad with tough, regenerating armor.

When Ves discovered that Venerable Foster's former expert mech was augmented by Rorach's Bone, he immediately put it on his wish list.

He wanted it! Rorach's Bone had a special place in his heart and it was also very useful to boot. The only uncertainty he held was whether it was possible to extract the

Rorach's Bone from the Jeanne D'Arc without losing too much of its capabilities. Losses always occurred in any recycling process, particularly when it came to recovering volatile or energetic exotics.

Ves also had plenty of other uses for an expert mech like the Jeanne D'Arc.

By studying it, he would be able to gather a lot of clues and insights about the operation of an expert mech. The Jeanne D'Arc was the best choice to do so because it possessed the least complicated internal architecture out of the 11 broken enemy expert mechs.

On the flipside, the Jeanne D'Arc also had very little to offer in terms of proprietary tech and applications.

This was the extent of the spoils that the Larkinson Clan received. While Ves felt quite regretful that he didn't get to obtain more broken expert mechs, he was content with obtaining a complete capital ship.

As for his allies, the Glory Seekers enriched themselves with plenty of other salvage. The Hexers secured 30 percent of enemy mech wreck salvage, 35 percent of enemy starship salvage and 4 expert mechs.

The expert mechs they obtained were half of the Fridayman expert mechs. While these were less advanced machines compared to the mid and high-tier expert mechs of the traitor clans, the Hexers were quite familiar with how the Fridaymen built their expert mechs. This meant that the Glory Seekers should be able to make much better use of this salvage than others.

As for the Cross Clan, they arguably obtained the highest share of spoils.

Their powerful mechs and veteran mech pilots contributed a lot of battle strength to the alliance's lineup.

Their powerful expert mechs also stopped the equally-powerful Praetor and Planat expert mechs in their tracks.

The Erin Tear, the Imperial Verdict and the Trost were so powerful that they could easily slaughter thousands of mechs or entire starships if left alone!

What was even more crucial was that Venerable Banner Cross sacrificed his life in an attempt to help with containing the Fridayman expert mechs!

This was a very painful sacrifice for an organization that looked up to high-ranking mech pilots to an insane degree!

The Larkinsons and the Glory Seekers weren't heartless enough to discount Venerable Banner's role. If the Leskin did not keep the Charlemagne and the Jeanne D'Arc busy, the Fridaymen would have been able to leverage their advantage in expert mechs even better, leading to a much faster collapse of the Golden Skull Alliance's battle lines.

From an objective point of view, the Cross Clan definitely earned the most merits in battle.

Of course, it was also due to their presence in the expeditionary fleet that the Fridaymen managed to invite the traitor clans to take part in the ambush in the first place.

The alliance members didn't quibble over this detail. It was not as if the Crossers were obligated to help the Larkinsons and Glory Seekers fight the Fridaymen.

The moment they signed the alliance treaty, they formed a mutual defense pact that encouraged them to form a united front against external enemies.

In consideration of the Cross Clan's huge contributions, it gained the lion's share of spoils. The Crossers obtained 50 percent of mech wreck salvage, 65 percent of the enemy starship salvage and 5 expert mech wrecks.

In addition to obtaining the very valuable Erin Tear, the Imperial Verdict and the Trost, they also managed to rope in the Ulver Quinn and the Prava Lonestar.

Part of the reason why the Larkinsons and Glory Seekers agreed to hand over so much loot was to keep the Crossers happy enough.

If they perceived that they were being shortchanged, there was a very realistic possibility that they might leave the alliance!

Not even Professor Benedict Cortez or Patriarch Reginald Cross could stop all of the rank-and-file from demanding a separation. After all, they just lost a huge amount of battle comrades. Hardly any of the Crossers were in a mood to go on a risky adventure in the Red Ocean at this time!

"We need the protection of the Cross Clan even more at this delicate time." Major Verle explained to Ves. "Through this battle, we have learned that the Crossers are honorable, upright warriors who can be relied upon to cover our backs. It's quite difficult to secure valuable allies like these. Much of the spoils we have surrendered is actually their 'pay' for protecting us in the next couple of years."

"That's.. reasonable." Ves murmured.

He was fine with this. He wasn't particularly greedy for the other salvage. Their main value lied in how much money they could yield when sold to salvaging companies.

Was the Larkinson Clan short of money?

No!

Therefore, Ves personally felt it was beneath his clan to drop to its knees and grab as much trash on the ground as possible.

The Cross Clan was in the opposite situation. While the addition of their latest guest designer certainly alleviated their income concerns, Professor Cortez did not come with a large-scale mech company.

Their desire to restore the strength they used to hold back when they led the Becker Tribe meant they needed to make huge investments. They had to acquire a lot of starships, a lot of mechs and possibly hire and nurture a lot of talents.

All of that cost money! A huge amount of money!

It shouldn't be any surprise that the Crossers were very greedy for the salvage. In any case, Ves was fine with letting them hunt down all of the broken pieces strewn around in space.

There was no way that any of them could sweep the entire battlefield of valuable debris in a short amount of time.

Ves wasn't sure whether any of their starships had enough cargo capacity to store it all. Eventually, the expeditionary fleet had to resume its journey.

The debris field definitely attracted a lot of vultures. While individual outfits didn't pose a threat to the expeditionary forces, it would be a different matter if other Garlener clans and tribes dropped by.

Aside from that, staying in this border system also exposed the weakened fleet to attacks from other powerful state actors.

It was best to reach a star system that offered a much greater degree of protection.

Major Verle laid out their awful situation in very clear terms.

"We are effectively down to 15 to 20 percent of our original battle strength, sir. We not only lost a lot of standard mechs, but effectively lost all but one of our expert mechs. The Amphis alone cannot possibly shield us against a hostile force that deploys multiple expert mechs."

"We still have our prime mechs."

"Those mechs are subject to many limitations, and you know it. The fact of the matter is that we are simply not in shape to fight another battle. That's not a critical concern if we are near the Hexadric Hegemony or other friendly territory, but that is not the case right now. The only chance we have is to enter a neutral, trade-oriented star system where the local rulers guarantee the safety of visitors."

"We need to reach the Life Research Association as soon as possible." Ves concluded.

"Correct, sir. There's more. In my talks with Colonel Ariadne Wodin and Patriarch Reginald Cross, we came to the conclusion that our ratios of mechs-to-starships is so low that we cannot adequately ensure our safety for the next couple of months."

Something was afoot here.

"What are you getting at, major?"

"We.. are thinking about contracting mercenaries."

Ves immediately froze.

"Mercenaries?"

"Yes. Mercenaries." Verle confirmed. "They're not as bad as you think."

"That hasn't been my experience with soldiers-for-hire. They're cowards and can't be relied upon to fight against serious opposition."

"Mercenary corps come in all shapes and sizes, Ves. You can't paint them all with a single brush. While it is true that the lowest grade of mercenaries are unreliable, it's a different story as long as we pay serious money. Also, don't forget that second-class mercenary corps are much more trustworthy and professional than any third-class mercenary corps. They're also vastly stronger as well. The largest mercenary organizations can supply enough protection to guard us against any enemies for a reasonable amount of time."

These were reasonable arguments. Ves acknowledged that much of his views on mercenaries were colored by his mixed experiences with the Oodis Mudriders years ago. Then again, he should have known better to employ a mercenary corps with a black mark on their record.

Ves had another reason to be reluctant about hiring mercenaries.

"This is going to cost us a lot, right?"

Major Verle nodded. "Every partner will have to give up a portion of the share of the earnings gained from processing our spoils. In order to protect us against most possible

threats, we need to do business with powerful mercenary organizations that are at least the size of a mech regiment. They're very expensive to hire on short notice and without establishing an existing relationship. In the absence of favorable conditions, we can only secure a contract by paying a hefty premium. A short-term monthly contract will already cost us several billion hex credits, and that doesn't address their battle pay."

"What?!"

Chapter 2697: Reprieve

"Why do you look so upset, Ves?"

"We're about to hire mercenaries."

There was no way that Ves could remain calm when he learned of this plan. While he understood the necessity of temporarily bolstering their protection, he still had a very bad impression of mercenaries in general.

This was actually a bit unfair towards the mercenary community. There were plenty of reliable mercenary corps in human space. Many of them possessed clean and stellar records.

Yet there was a reason why few people liked to hire mercenaries in general.

The cheaper and weaker ones were unreliable. They were more than willing to stand their ground when faced with a weaker opponent, but were prone to running and saving their own hides as long as they encountered a stronger foe!

The stronger ones charged a different price for their services. Their reputation was much more important to them so they always abided by their contracts.

As long as a battle fell within the scope of the terms set in the contract, the mercenaries could be trusted to fight on behalf of a client.

However, it was impossible for professional mercenaries to leave themselves open to exploitation.

What if the client was attacked by an enemy that was ten times stronger than anticipated?

It would be unfair for the contracted mercenaries to fight to the death just because the client misjudged the strength of its enemy!

To prevent these incidents from ruining otherwise reliable mercenary organizations, they always specified a maximum limit on the strength of the enemies they were supposed to fight.

This was actually the biggest variable which determined how much it cost to employ any professional mercenary corps.

If Ves happened to be short of money, he could lower this strength limit. While this was enough to protect his forces from ordinary rabble, the mercs had the right to step aside without a fight if a serious enemy emerged.

In this situation, he only had himself to blame for skimping on the contract.

The only way to hire mercenaries that were willing to fight against strong opponents was to pay a lot of money.

"I don't see the problem in this arrangement." Gloriana frowned. "The Wodin Dynasty has prior experience with hiring mercenaries. They're quite well-behaved as long as they get their money. How much revenue is the LMC pulling in these days? It's definitely over a trillion hex credits. I don't see why you should feel conflicted about paying somewhere between 5 to 15 billion hex credits to enjoy the protection of a powerful mercenary corps."

She was right, but Ves still felt pained at the thought of forking over so much money.

"These mercenaries will be making a killing by doing nothing but sitting around most of the time. Their business model is more about deterrence than actual fighting. As long as they show up and brandish their mechs, they'll scare away any opportunistic robbers. While that is doubtlessly useful, we are literally paying them the equivalent of several combat carriers a month!"

Gloriana picked up Clixie and began to scratch her furry cat's chin. "You're looking at it the wrong way. The cost of hiring powerful mercenaries is expensive, but losing our entire fleet and getting everyone killed is an even greater cost! In this situation, it's best to choose the lesser of two evils. If we get defeated by an enemy because you were too reluctant to pay a bigger share of our vast earnings, you'll feel as much regret as you did earlier when you realized what a mistake it was to procure cheaper mechs for your mech forces."

His face grew ugly. She had a point. The Larkinson Clan could have retained more mech pilots if they piloted premium mechs rather than budget mechs. It didn't matter too much if the more powerful machines were also more difficult to pilot. Their improved defenses alone would be enough to save a lot of precious lives.

"Hmm.. maybe you're right." Ves reluctantly conceded. "We'll have to set back a couple of plans if we spend this much, but this is a trivial cost compared to losing everything."

No wonder mercenaries could still stay in business even when they charged such exorbitant prices. There was always a need for protection in this dangerous galaxy.

Some needed more protection than others, and the expeditionary fleet just happened to fall into this category.

As Ves sat down at a couch next to his wife, he leaned into her in order to plant a modest kiss on her cheek. He also took in her fresh floral scent.

"Hihihi!" Gloriana turned her attention away from Clixie and kissed his cheek in return. "I'm so glad we survived in the end. I don't even mind it if we lost as long as we managed to make it out intact. We can always rebuild what we lost, you know. We're the most promising pair of Journeymen in this star cluster. That makes us desirable no matter where we travel."

That may be true, but how easy was it to get over the loss of so much family?

The Larkinson Clan had become more than just a vehicle for his ambitions as far as Ves was concerned.

Perhaps he might not care for the deaths of thousands of regular Larkinsons, but he would still feel pained if Melkor, Ketis, Raella and Joshua died in battle.

He shook his head and changed the topic.

"How are the Glory Seekers? They lost a lot of mech pilots without even reaching the Red Ocean. That must be a considerable setback."

Gloriana tapped his cheek with her finger. "They're not as depressed as you think they are. None of them are really angry, Ves. They fought against the Friday Coalition and managed to eliminate a considerably powerful force of deep strike fleet carriers, elite mech units and expert mechs. The casualties they suffered are quite reasonable in relation to our opposition. Not only did they manage to fight against a true enemy of the Hegemony, they also did so under the blessing of the Superior Mother. To witness her making a move in battle is the most glorious moment of their lives!"

"That.. is.. nice to hear..."

"I'm not worried at all as long as your mother is there to protect us all!" She pressed up against him in a loving manner. "Your mother is so strong. I feel absolutely reassured. Every Glory Seekers also feels the same now. We can defeat any opponent with a Supreme by our side!"

"My mother isn't as strong as you think! She can't fight all of our battles for us. We can't keep relying on trump cards like battle networks to bail us out. We need to develop our base strength as quickly as possible!"

Gloriana was banking way too much on the Superior Mother! That was a dangerous habit that Ves did not wish to see in anyone. While it might not be a big deal if his wife

was the only one who thought this way, the problem would be a lot bigger if the Glory Seekers adopted the same attitude!

"Ugh." Ves placed his head into his palms.

"Miaow?"

Clixie moved over to his lap in order to cheer him up. Her tail wagged in a cute manner as she looked up at him. Ves couldn't resist and stroked her head and tufted ears.

"Miaow miaow~"

"When are we departing?" Gloriana asked. "Do you know that already?"

"Not really. Our schedule is completely shot to hell. We'll probably linger on this battlefield for at least a week in order to pick up a sufficient amount of valuable salvage. We also need this time to perform large-scale repair operations on our starships and our mech assets. It's a lot easier to do this in realspace than in FTL because we can easily transfer parts, materials and personnel to each other."

The Spirit of Bentheim already began to act as a foundry for replacement parts for the entire expeditionary fleet. It was times like these where Ves appreciated his factory ship the most. It felt so great to be able to rely on their own capabilities to restore their hardware and produce new ones.

"Our clan has gained two expert candidates."

"I know. To be honest, I pretty much knew that Taon Melin would reach this point sooner or later. He's the golden boy of the Living Prophet. As for.. the other guy.. I'm not inclined to pay attention to him. We've got too many expert candidates. I was actually hoping that a couple of them would die in this battle."

Ves wouldn't have to develop as many expert mechs in the medium term if that was the case. He hadn't even started with designing expert mechs for his first batch of expert pilots yet! He would probably be forced to work himself to death if more expert candidates emerged!

"Did any of them die?"

"Unfortunately, no. They're just too damn good at preserving their lives."

While many of their colleagues were dying left and right, the expert candidates of the Larkinson Clan were able to rely on their greater skill and instincts to stay alive.

Every expert candidate ranging from Commander Casella Ingvar to Percival Larkinson performed admirably in the Battle of Reckoning. Ves truly couldn't find fault in any of them. None of them managed to achieve apotheosis either.

Each of the Larkinson Clan's existing expert candidates had advanced too soon. They still needed to accumulate for many months before they reached the bottleneck that barred their way to becoming an expert pilot. Only then would the impetus of battle be able to elevate them further.

There were a lot of other internal issues that Ves needed to address, but that could all wait. This was the first break he enjoyed since the end of the battle.

"How will we go forward?" Gloriana asked in a gentle tone. "Have any of your intentions changed due to what we had just been through?"

Ves rubbed his not-so-smooth chin. It had been too long since he shaved his cheeks.

"We're going to need to expand the Golden Skull Alliance as soon as possible. There is strength in numbers. I originally intended to take my time, but I think we need to hurry up in roping in more partners. I hope we can find at least one new partner in Majestic Teal."

Gloriana became a lot more intrigued. "Will you be looking for a partner in the Life Research Association? There are a lot of good biotech researchers in this state. As long as we attract a good organization, then we'll have access to a lot of advanced biotech-related services."

"I'm not so sure that will work, honey. The lifers are very attached to their biomechs. While I don't have anything against these biological machines, they rely on an entirely different infrastructure than mechanical mechs. It's not efficient to mix them both in the same force."

"Are you sure about that? Biomechs have their own advantages, Ves. I think it is worthwhile to field at least some of them in case we're faced in a situation where regular mechs fail."

"Pfff. As if that will ever happen. Ordinary mechs are dominant in human space for a reason. They can handle any situation as long as their design allows it." Ves declared. "Personally, I don't specifically object to them, but I don't think there are sufficient benefits to adding them to our fleet. What about you? I never took you for someone who has taken a liking for these odd mechs."

Gloriana smiled. "Some of them are quite gruesome, but the better ones are quite charming in their own way. They're.. natural and fluid in a way that no mechanical mech can compare. I think orthodox mech designers like us can learn a lot of useful lessons from studying biomechs. They're grown rather than assembled. There are many

implications to their design methodology because of that. The only flaw that I can't stomach is the high variance between copies."

Every biomech was unique. Even mass-produced copies from the same batch were distinguishable from each other with the naked eye!

Ves found that to be the most interesting part about biomechs. If it wasn't so difficult to get started on designing these organic machines, he would have tried it out by now!

Chapter 2698: Convenient Belief

A lot of salvaging work commenced in the coming days. Valuable goods flew aimlessly in space, just waiting to be plucked.

There were also a lot of restorable wrecks and parts floating around that could easily be put back into working order after expending a bit of effort. Now that the strength of the expeditionary fleet had dropped to a low point, the restoration of even a single mech was of utmost importance!

Turning broken mechs into functional mechs was difficult work. It took too much time to restore them back to peak condition or as close to them as possible.

"We'll have to do some judicious jury rigging." Ves decided. "It doesn't matter if a mech is only half as effective as before if it only takes a few hours to slap some random parts onto an incomplete frame. I would rather have half a mech at my disposal than nothing at all during another crisis."

In order to fix as many mechs as possible, Ves decided to halt all of his current design projects. No one in the Design Department was in the mood to go back to designing mechs at this time. The assistant mech designers were much more useful if they lent their expertise to the maintenance crews trying to fix all of the broken Larkinson mechs.

Ves also had a fair amount of work to do. Some of the Prime mechs such as the Valkyrie Prime, Piranha Prime and the Bright Spear Prime accumulated a fair bit of damage to their internals.

While the enemy completely failed to breach their Unending armor, a varying amount of shock and heat damage still managed to pass through and affect the more delicate internals.

"There are so many items on my agenda that I don't even have time to inspect the Charlemagne and the Jeanne D'Arc!"

Time was of the essence, and the Golden Skull Alliance had far too little of it. News of the battle had already spread. While the details in public were scarce, the first scout ships had already arrived in the star system.

Ves knew that this was just the beginning. As long as those corvettes observed the expanding debris field for some time, they would know that a lot of very valuable military hardware had been destroyed recently!

"We'll be welcoming all kinds of vultures soon!"

There was no order in this border star system. With no authority laying down the law, the only way for the expeditionary forces to deter opportunistic thieves was to have the biggest fist!

"The problem is that our fist is already bloodied and broken. We can't punch as hard as before."

The solution they came up with was to hire mercenaries. While Ves had his misgivings on this course of action, it was objectively the best solution they could make at this time.

They already signed a contract with a very large and renowned mercenary organization on an emergency basis. The cost of calling in a strong mercenary force on extremely short notice was considerable, but what choice did they have?

At the very least, Ves felt that he got what he paid for. The mercenary organization that was about to supplement the defense of his expeditionary fleet not only possessed a great track record, but was also a behemoth in the Yeina Star Cluster.

Any mercenary organization that operated multiple branches across multiple star sectors had to maintain an excellent reputation. Their credibility was important to them as the misdeeds of one branch could affect business in every other branch that operated under the same brand.

This was why these huge mercenary companies never turned against their own clients.

Considering the huge value of the expeditionary fleet, this was not an impossibility. As long as the benefits outweighed the very considerable costs, unscrupulous mercenaries were more than happy to turn against their own customers!

That was not going to happen here. The mercenaries the alliance chose to work with could earn much more money by doing steady business across the star cluster than performing a robbery just a single time.

Of course, it still took time for the local mercenary branch to mobilize all of their forces and travel to a border star system.

This meant that the expeditionary fleet would have to fend for itself for the foreseeable time.

"We'll manage, sir." Major Verle reassured Ves during another meeting. "Our surviving mech pilots are surprisingly optimistic after the battle."

Ves reacted with surprise. "Oh? If I recall, more than 1800 of their comrades-in-arms have died."

The senior military commander smiled. "You haven't been spending time among the men lately, haven't you? While there are plenty of Larkinsons who are depressed, the overall sentiment in the clan is still positive."

"How can that be? This doesn't make any sense."

"There are several reasons why the negative blowback is lower than anticipated. First, the Larkinson Clan is already inoculated against suffering considerable losses in major battles. The Battle of Kesseling VIII, the Battle of Ulimo Citadel and the Battle against the Abyss have all caused our clansmen to cope increasingly better with these kinds of outcomes."

"That.. makes sense."

"Not a single mech pilot of the clan is unaware of the risks we are facing. We have deliberately overemphasized the dangers in order to lessen any backlash. Throughout the short history of our clan, it has become increasingly clear that we are not destined to lead peaceful lives."

"Sorry about that." Ves lamely said.

There was no denying that he was the principal cause behind much if not all of the aforementioned battles. He bore the responsibility of disappointing so many Larkinsons who believed in his vision and wanted to be a part of it. Now, they were no longer among the living.

"You don't need to feel sorry about anything, sir. You have always been transparent about the risks we incur. In fact, that is something that we have been emphasizing over and over among our men, both new and old. It's kind of cruel to put it in this way, but they only have themselves to blame. If you are at risk of losing your savings if you play at a casino, you don't have the right to complain if the worst-case scenario actually happens. It's the same with our clan. Everyone who we recruited into the clan wants to win the jackpot. That doesn't mean that they are entitled to win the grand prize."

Equating the Larkinson Clan to a casino was not exactly the most flattering comparison, but Ves found it to be an apt comparison. As long as every Larkinson adopted the same mentality, then he could see how there would be less hard feelings.

"Of course, that's not enough to placate the surviving Larkinsons." Verle continued. "One of the other reasons why we have managed to temper the consequences is

because of how well we treat the deceased and their family. Anyone who dies will be completely assured that their relatives will be taken care of. We don't kick any spouses and kids out of our clan. Instead, we give them generous pensions and provide them with preferential treatment. This alone is a cause worth dying for to many mech pilots."

The kind of people the Larkinsons hired all cared about family. Kinship was of great importance to the clan so those who got in were never too selfish or cruel.

Ves nodded in understanding. "Okay, I can see how those reasons have kept the reactions within a healthy range. I guess that our officers and leaders have also become better at managing the morale and expectations of our men. Are there any other reasons or is that everything?"

"There is.. one more factor that may be playing a role." Major Verle reluctantly said. "I'm not sure I should even mention it because of how silly it sounds."

"That makes me even more curious. Just tell me, major."

"If you say so. The truth is that there are an increasing amount of Larkinsons who... believe that the dead are still sticking around."

Ves resisted the urge to clean his ears. Did he hear that right?

"What the heck are you talking about?"

"I'm unsure how to explain it, sir. The best way I can describe it is that an increasing number of Larkinsons, particularly the more religious-minded ones, have developed the impression that the honorable deceased of our clan is still among us and watching over us. One interpretation even posits that the ancestors of the original Larkinson Family have been protecting us from the shadows all this time. It's a way to rationalize the invisible bond they formed to the clan ever since they joined."

"..."

Ves didn't even know where to begin. This was pure superstition. The Larkinsons who died were gone. He was pretty sure about that. He didn't know what happened to people once they perished, but they definitely weren't hanging around! He would have been able to spot any ghosts with his spiritual vision if that was the case.

The Larkinson Network may be remarkable in many ways, but it did not have any functions related to preserving any aspect of people's lives. It was not designed to substitute the afterlife.

Still.. now that he thought about it, was it possible to turn it into a new home for the dead?

What if it was possible to program the Larkinson Network in a way to capture and preserve the spiritualities of dead Larkinsons? Would it work on anyone or would it only work for those with spiritual potential?

What about the expert pilots of the clan? If Ves was able to preserve as much of their wills and spiritualities as possible, would it be possible for him to recycle them in the same way the expeditionary fleet intended to recycle the salvage they collected?

This was an incredibly audacious idea!

It was also an insanely difficult one to realize. Ves quickly dampened his excitement when he thought of all of the steps he needed to make in order to upgrade the Larkinson Network to this extent.

His current theoretical framework on spirituality was too rudimentary to develop such a crazy application!

He shook his head and threw the idea to the back of his mind where all of his other ideas were collecting dust.

"I shouldn't need to tell you that those beliefs have no ground. The dead are dead. They are not 'sticking around' or 'protecting us from above'. The only ones who can defend us against our enemies are ourselves."

"You should tell that to the Penitent Sisters and the Ylvainans. The incidents where they activated their battle networks seemed to have connected them to greater entities that have adopted some very difficult outlooks on life and death."

"Ugh. It figures."

He should have realized that exposing the minds of his mech pilots to Prophet Ylvaine and the Superior Mother would lead to this outcome. The Penitent Sisters and the Ylvainans just so happened to be the most religious and superstitious members of his clan!

Ves was too annoyed to deal with this problem. "Make sure that our officers don't encourage any of these baseless theories."

"That has been our stance from the start, but there are limits to this approach. You can't control what people believe, sir. You can encourage and discourage the propagation of certain dangerous beliefs, but we can't be too heavy-handed. It's useless anyway."

The believers would just go underground if that was the case. If Ves really wanted to, he could probably root them out as well, but that would just make the clan become a lot less pleasant.

"Well, whatever. As long as no one imposes any beliefs on anyone, it's fine as long as long as our mech pilots keep doing their jobs."

"Speaking of our religious-minded Larkinsons, there is something that you should know. Something has happened to a very influential leader of ours. I think you should pay a visit to him before it's too late."

"Who are you referring to?" Ves grew curious.

"It's James Ylvaine."

Chapter 2699: Step Up

Ves didn't have a habit of meeting with the Living Prophet. He detested religion and had no patience to listen to the gospel of any believer.

As far as he was concerned, he only needed to care about his immediate life. There were way too many unknowns in current science that he would need trillions of years to figure out all of the answers. There was no way he could spare the time to contemplate the more mysterious and philosophical aspects of reality and existence.

"I'm just a mech designer. Why should I bother with aspects that are completely unrelated to my area of expertise? Scams should be left to the professional scammers!"

Because of this, Ves rarely met with James. For his part, the Living Prophet was content with spending time with his adherents and trying to fool more unsuspecting Larkinson into his faith.

If there was one good thing that Ves had to say about the religious leader, it was that he looked the part.

Even though James was fairly young for a prophet, he was quite handsome. Of course, that wasn't special enough in itself. In an age where cosmetic treatments were highly-developed and commonplace among those with enough money, anyone could put on a pretty face.

What the Living Prophet had was a lot more special. He was persuasive and charismatic in a way that would probably make any politician and statesman green with envy!

Whether James trained hard to become such a good speaker or whether it was his natural talent, his charm was so compelling that even enlightened Brighters fell under his sway!

Ves expected to meet a handsome and charming man who was about his age when he paid a visit to the so-called 'Ylvainan Quarter' of the Spirit of Bentheim.

Instead, he encountered an aged figure whose appearance almost matched the classical depiction of Prophet Ylvaine!

When Ves entered the shrine where a disturbingly-accurate statue of himself was spreading out his hands in a welcoming gesture, a single figure knelt before the altar.

When that robed figure rose to his feet and turned around, Ves felt as if the original prophet had traveled forward in time!

The wrinkles, the loss of vitality, the decrease in energy and above all the greying hair all matched the original prophet back when he was alive during the time where his faith was at its peak!

This older version possessed a more subdued presence. A profound sense of wisdom and sagacity exuded from his thinner and frailer-looking body. The current James had taken on an appearance that many men would want to look like when they grew older.

Even Ves wanted to foster a similar kind of air when his body eventually aged to this level!

He quickly suppressed his yearning and focused on the more important matter.

"What happened to you?" He asked bluntly. "If I remember correctly, you didn't have as many wrinkles when we last met, and that was just before the Battle of Reckoning."

The older-looking James smiled in that annoyingly familiar fashion. It was the kind of smile that someone adopted when they knew something that the other person was ignorant of. It was the kind of expression that one took when they wanted to be smug about their information superiority.

"The battle that we have fought is indeed a reckoning, but not just to our enemies. They have all received the judgement they deserve, have no doubt about that, but we are not exempt either. There is a price for everything. In order to ensure a better outcome, I have decided to make a sacrifice that is well worth it considering the alternatives."

"This.. doesn't answer my question. What exactly did you do? Is it because of a lack of energy?"

James shrugged. "You might as well see it that way. I no longer have as many worshippers as before. While my influence in the Larkinson Clan is slowly expanding, it is incomparable to the flock that I used to have before."

Ah. Ves had already suspected as much. With the Ylvaine Protectorate doing everything possible to warp its interpretation of the Ylvainan Faith in a different direction, even the diehards had difficulty maintaining their grasp on their original beliefs.

With the loss of so many believers, the amount of people who supplied actual spiritual feedback to the Ylvaine the design spirit had dropped to a paltry level.

Aside from scattered believers living elsewhere in the Komodo Star Sector, the only core that the Great Prophet had left amounted to thousands of sincere believers.

While this was still a large sum in some respects, apparently it was not enough to fuel Ylvaine's demanding powers.

Ves couldn't hold his curiosity any longer.

"Are you dying?"

James nonchalantly shrugged. "Everyone is dying, Bright Martyr. Some die sooner than most. I suppose that I have fallen into this category as well. I can't say when I will finally succumb. It could be weeks. It could be years. All I can say for certain is that my current end has been shoved forward by a wide margin. It's a shame to skip over so many decades, but it is a worthwhile sacrifice considering how many lives I have saved through my actions. I would gladly exhaust my entire life if that is what it takes to grant salvation to every Larkinson."

The Living Prophet sounded as if his great sacrifice was just a trivial matter to him. Ves felt incredibly disturbed at this situation.

He didn't like it! He hated to be put into situations where he or the ones who were on his side had to sacrifice their lives or freedom to pull others out of a fatal situation.

Back in the past, he witnessed the destruction of the ground forces of the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens at the hands of Venerable Foster and her fellow Vesians.

During the Battle of Kesseling VIII, the Swordmaidens came to the aid of the Larkinson Clan and lost even more of their precious mech pilots because of their decision.

Now, it appeared that James had given up a considerable portion of his life to empower his design spirit.

Was it worth it? Certainly. The instance where the Transcendent Punishers systematically demolished the Destiny Hammers was a crucial turning point of the battle.

If the Ylvainans hadn't defeated their Fridayman counterparts so soon, they wouldn't have been able to provide as much support to the expeditionary forces in the later phases of the battle!

The role the artillery mechs played in the Battle of Reckoning couldn't be overstated! The Larkinson Clan would have definitely been in a much poorer state if Ves hadn't completed the design of the Transcendent Punisher in time!

Yet.. the mech still wasn't strong enough to carry the entire battle. The entire reason why the Larkinsons had to borrow the power of glows, design spirits, prime mechs and battle networks to begin with was because they were too weak!

Their mechs were too cheap. Their mech pilots didn't receive enough training. Their expert pilots lacked proper expert mechs.

Addressing these deficiencies became an even greater priority to Ves. He never wanted to end up in a similar situation in the future. He needed to work as quickly as possible in order to elevate his mech forces to their highest potential.

However, that was easier said than done. The reason why those problems hadn't gone away was because it took far too much time to address them all. There was only so much design work he could accomplish by himself.

Perhaps he should consider expanding the Design Department to a much greater extent than he originally planned. He needed to acquire more assistants to complete the grunt work faster. He also needed to obtain more lead designers in order to design more mechs concurrently.

In short, everything needed to go faster!

"I won't let this happen again." Ves spoke with a measure of steel in his voice. "We have a lot of resources at our disposal that we didn't enjoy before. I should have been more proactive in converting them into actual strength. I'll try my best to elevate our strength so that people like you don't have to make any choices again."

James gently shook his head. "That is a noble sentiment, but you don't need to work yourself to bone. The future is never as straightforward as you think it is. I wouldn't say that your previous approach is wrong. Time is a resource that every single existence is short of. Even gods wish they could conjure up more time for themselves."

They soon entered into a philosophical discussion about time. Ves didn't know why, but he became increasingly more caught up in the prophet's interesting perspective on this subject.

Their discussion only halted when a third person in uniform entered the shrine compartment.

"Ah, Taon. You are here. Please come forward, my champion."

The latest expert candidate of the Larkinson Clan strode forward with a greater measure of confidence than he previously held.

Though Ves hadn't spent much time with Taon either, he definitely sensed a change in demeanor.

"Prophet. Bright Martyr." Taon greeted them both in turn. "What do you require of me, sirs?"

"Are you strong enough to defend the clan?" James asked.

Taon frowned. "I dare not make such a claim. I can only state that I can fight much better than before. With the help of the blessing that you have bestowed upon me, I am ready to fight against any expert pilot if the need arises!"

"Hahaha! Do not be so quick to stand out. You still have a long way to go before you are ready to take on such a heavy responsibility." James patted Taon's shoulder. "Also, don't put too much stock in your blessing. The sole reason why you have become stronger is because of your merits."

As Ves witnessed the interaction between James and Taon, he noted that Taon was still quite deferential despite advancing to the rank of expert candidate.

Many other expert candidates tended to develop a stronger ego after they had taken their first step in transcending their human limits. It was natural for them to become more conceited in their own importance. The widespread idolization of high-ranking mech pilots in human space only made the transformations worse.

While Taon definitely seemed to be more assured in a way, his change was not as drastic.

Of course, Ves knew that the biggest swing was yet to come. When Taon eventually underwent apotheosis, he would literally be born anew.

"Never forget who you are, Taon. Just because you are a Larkinson as well as a man of faith doesn't mean you have to stick to those categories. Think for yourself and fight for yourself before you devote yourself to others. The future is becoming increasingly turbulent. Escaping to the Red Ocean only delays the inevitable."

Taon immediately adopted an expectant posture. "Please share your wisdom."

James smiled sardonically. It made him seem like an indulgent old grandfather.

"Taon, it is no longer enough for you to be a follower. The capable must step up and lead the flock. When you grow in strength, more and more faithful will look up to you."

Every choice you make will have great implications to those who share the same beliefs."

"I understand." The expert candidate responded. "I have already taken charge of the mech pilots under our watch."

The prophet looked reassured and turned to Ves. "As for you, I have little advice to tell you. To be frank, even if I tell you something, you are too stubborn, biased and contradictory to pay any mind to my words."

"That sounds about right." Ves shrugged.

"Hehe." James shook his head before turning around before looking at the marble statue of Ves. "You are different from others. It is reasonable to make certain allowances for you. No one is perfect, not even gods. That doesn't mean you should give up. As long as you keep caring about the lives of your growing flock, they will help you become an existence that they can look up to. It is not nice to be alone."

What was James talking about? Before Ves could reply with his usual dismissal of gods, the robed figure standing next to him collapsed.

It happened so suddenly and without warning that both Ves and Taon were slow to respond.

"James...?"

The panicking expert candidate quickly lowered himself to his knees in order to feel the aged body's pulse. "He.. he has ascended ahead of time!"

It was as if an invisible shockwave had swept throughout the Ylvainan shrine.

"THE LIVING PROPHET HAS PASSED!"

Chapter 2700: Unusable

The passing of James Ylvaine came as a shock to the Larkinson Clan!

Not a single clansman dismissed this piece of news. While the Ylvainans had long been relegated to a minority within the clan, they still possessed a considerable amount of influence.

This was especially so after their stellar performance during the Battle of Reckoning! The Transcendent Punishers that only the Ylvainans could utilize at their full potential had performed so well that even the most strident secularists were grateful to the faith and its leader.

No matter what the clansmen thought about the unique existence known as James, the so-called Living Prophet possessed a sense of modesty and friendliness that few leading figures were able to match.

He was able to befriend and disarm the suspicions of many different Larkinsons. No matter if they were young, old, men, women, Brighter or Reinaldan, they always gained a good impression of James after just a short talk.

Of course, it was not that easy to convert random clansmen into believers. Perhaps James might be able to convert tens of thousands more believers if he adopted a more forceful approach, but that was obviously not allowed.

Ves had always been afraid that James would turn the Larkinson Clan into a cult, but the man knew his limits. There were just enough Ylvainans in the clan to bolster it, but not enough to affect its overall direction.

James was very tactful, Ves had to give him that. The Living Prophet was a good man and deserved to live longer.

Unfortunately, it was not to be. The body expired after running out vitality or whatever other energy the prophet expended in order to empower his flock.

"He was so young." Ves whispered.

Although clones were flawed forms of life, he didn't expect James to shed his mortal coil so soon.

The transition was too abrupt!

On one day, the religious leader was still as hale and healthy as other people in their thirties.

On the next day, James seemed to have aged by a century and could only chat with Ves one last time before he expired!

It was impossible for Ves to remain unmoved under the circumstances. He had just witnessed yet another person dying in his presence.

While Ves was not a stranger to death, he had become accustomed to witnessing it at a distance after he assumed a position of power.

Most of the loss of life took place much further away from his presence. The Battle of Reckoning killed thousands of Larkinsons and many more enemies. The amount of blood that had been shed could probably fill an entire starship!

Yet because all of this slaughter took place tens, hundreds or even thousands of kilometers away from his physical position, it was easy for Ves to dismiss the tragedy since it was presented to him in such an abstract fashion.

This was not possible this time. James not only died right next to him, but also spoke to him as if he knew that his time was already up. The words that the prematurely-aged clone had passed to his ears still lingered inside his head.

This was incredibly frustrating to Ves!

"This goddamn bastard! Couldn't you have died after my visit?! I wouldn't feel so upset if you just croaked when I'm on the other side of the ship!"

As Ves tried to process his mixed thoughts and emotions, the rest of the Larkinson Clan offered their sympathies to the Ylvainans.

Strangely enough, once the faithful processed the news, they quickly tempered their grief. They were sad about the Living Prophet's passing. That was not in doubt. However, they did not react as severely as Ves expected of fanatics.

None of the Ylvainans cried until they had no tears left to shed. They did not fall onto their knees in a fit of despair. It was as if they had already accounted for the passing of the Great Prophet.

"Death is another word for the beyond." Taon explained to Ves with a smile. "This is only the Great Prophet's second death that we know of. Besides, he's not really gone. He is with me whenever I pray to him. Our mechs still radiate his sacred aura when we go near them. A grand figure such as him is not bound by the same concerns as regular people."

Ves found this to be an odd sentiment, but he understood some of what the expert candidate said. Ylvaine the design spirit was still alive and well. In fact, it even appeared to have grown a little stronger.

As a consequence, the Transcendent Punishers also retained their pure and sacred glows. It was very hard for the devout Ylvainan mech pilots to accept that the prophet was really dead when their own mechs suggested that he was alive!

Ves just grew more confused at the situation. He really didn't know whether he should grieve a lot for James' passing or not. No matter what he claimed to be, Ves considered him to be a unique individual rather than an extension of a greater existence.

The disappearance of James represented the end of a unique personality.

As far as Ves was concerned, this was a true death. The Larkinson Network was not set up to catch any passing spirits, so it was impossible for the Living Prophet to still be around somewhere.

Ves was pretty sure he would notice a stalking prophet.

"You do not need to be concerned about us, Bright Martyr. James Ylvaine does not require any special arrangements. Please afford him the same burial treatment as the other Larkinsons who fell in battle. He deserves to be among our fellow heroes."

"I can do that."

This was an easy request. The funeral ceremony was scheduled a few weeks later.

Although the Larkinsons preferred to hold this ceremony sooner, the current star system had become far too busy. If the expeditionary fleet launched the bodies into space, the heartless scavengers would probably pick them all up in order to loot the materials used to make the coffins!

No. Special arrangements had to be made in order to hold a proper funeral.

The subdued reaction to James Ylvaine's passing meant that Ves ultimately didn't have to bother with the situation.

He had to say that the former Living Prophet had died in a very convenient fashion. The clone was at least thoughtful enough to minimize the mess he left behind.

Already, Taon along with other leading Ylvainan figures such as Ophelia Kronon were stepping up as leading figures in their movement.

As Ves observed their attempts to lead the faithful Ylvainans, he faintly imagined that this was how the original three dynasties rose up all those centuries ago. Everyone needed someone to look up to. While Taon was not a person who was comfortable with a leadership position, he didn't need to do all that much.

Other Ylvainan officers and experienced leaders were already doing a fine job at corralling the flock. Taon mostly played the role of a figurehead as his status as an expert candidate and future expert pilot granted him a considerable amount of prestige.

As long as Taon threw his support behind the new leaders of the Ylvainan movement, the faction remained stable within the clan.

Ves still felt uneasy for some inexplicable reason. He never quite knew what to expect when it came to the Ylvainans.

"I think it's good that James is gone." Gloriana told him after another day of work. "He's a threat to your authority and has constantly sought to steer our clan in a different direction."

"He's not that bad. James always had a sense of propriety."

"That's because he is smart enough to know that you would crack down hard if he ever overstepped his boundaries. This is our clan, Ves. Don't forget that."

Actually, it was his clan, not theirs, but Ves didn't think it was wise to correct her phrasing.

Once the small disturbance surrounding James' death had passed, Ves tried to get back to addressing his regular duties.

One of the questions that hovered over his head all of this time was what to do with their biggest spoils from the Battle of Reckoning.

While it sounded incredibly convenient for a huge and valuable capital ship like the Auralis to fall into the Larkinson Clan's lap, in practice this was just the start of a troublesome process!

When Calabast called Ves, her suited projection appeared in his office. Lucky was with her as well. His Misfortune Harness still protected his body as the Auralis was still a hostile ship.

"Ves. It's good to see you again."

"How are you?"

"It's not every day you can capture a Fridayman capital ship in such a pristine condition." She grinned. "I've enjoyed trawling through her vast archives. While the Gauge Dynasty has already scrubbed it of any information that isn't relevant to the mission, that still leaves us with plenty of intelligence nuggets that DIVA would love to obtain. With your permission, I would like to pass on what I have learned to my former employers."

Ves briefly frowned. "What kind of intelligence are you talking about?"

"Oh, it's all boring matters that aren't immediately useful to the Larkinson Clan. Think about encryption methods, technical specifications, internal discussions and references to the Friday Coalition's current war strategy. The crew of the Auralis died so quickly that they didn't even have the time to wipe out their data banks."

Ves wasn't really interested in keeping this information to himself. "You have permission to pass all of that on. I trust you not to transmit anything that compromises the safety of our clan. Please keep in mind where your current loyalties lie."

"I'd never make such an amateur mistake. I know what to do. You can trust me. Isn't that right, Lucky?"

"Meow!"

In the projection, Lucky flew up to Calabast's shoulder and nestled on it. The cat's armored form rubbed lovingly against the spymaster's neck.

"Ahem." Ves coughed. "Let's move on to the main reason why I've called. Please tell me your judgement on the viability to integrate the Auralis into our fleet. Is it safe to do so and how much effort do we need to expend to make that happen?"

"It's not easy at all." Calabast shook her head. "In short, the Auralis is a Fridayman ship through and through. She's a powerful and richly-featured vessel. That means that she also has the security of one. The Gauge Dynasty did not cut any corners when it came to securing her. In fact, if not for the fact that the ship has existed long enough for the Hegemony to develop solutions for some of the tech that she carries, we would have never been able to gain initial control of her so easily."

"The Auralis recognises you as her captain, correct?"

"You're not wrong, but the captain of a capital ship cannot unilaterally decide over everything. In addition, we don't know how traps and hidden surprises the Auralis are hiding. Just because none of them have triggered yet doesn't mean we're still safe here. In my professional judgement, it is simply too dangerous to add the Auralis to our fleet. We haven't even swept the Spirit of Bentheim of all of her bugs. It will take far too long to do the same for the Auralis."

Ves was afraid of hearing this answer, though he already expected it in his heart.

"I guess.. we have no choice but to sell this prize." He sighed. "It's too irresponsible to make use of her ourselves."

"You don't have to sell her. I can still figure out opportunities to clear the Auralis. For example, you can ask for help from the MTA or the Rim Guardians."

"No. The price is too great, and I don't want to annoy them with such a trivial request."

Calabast crossed her arms. "Then another alternative is to swap the Auralis with an equally valuable capital ship. She's a top military asset of the Friday Coalition. I'm sure that plenty of shipyards are interested in getting their hands on her. They can study the

shipbuilding methods of the Fridaymen while reverse-engineering any unknown innovations that are not widely spread."

That sounded more practical to Ves.

"Do we have to swap the Auralis with a pre-built capital ship or can we just use her as payment for a new construction?"

"Both are possible." She grinned. "In essence, as long as you are willing to wait a year or so, you can swap out the Auralis for a brand-new capital ship that is built exactly to your specifications. Alternatively, if you feel the need to acquire a capital ship right away, you can trade our prize for a pre-built or second-hand vessel."

Both options sounded attractive to Ves. Ordinarily, he preferred to choose the option that was more favorable in the long term, but recent events had changed his mentality.

Perhaps he might be able to add another workable capital ship to his fleet in the near future.