

Mech 2831

Chapter 2831 - Too Distant

"GENERAL VERLE!" A female voice screeched!

The entrance to Verle's office slid open to allow for the entry of a very irate woman and her cat. Gloriana stomped over to the front of the desk while holding a vigilant-looking Clixie.

"Miaow!" The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat hissed.

"What is your wish, madame?"

"Why aren't you dispatching our entire fleet to Prosperous Hill VI already?! Why are we still parked in the outer system as if nothing has changed?!"

"Calm down, please. Raising your tone will do no good." General Verle urged as he put down his current work.

The woman sighed and sat down on the chair. "Speak."

"The Life Research Association is in the grip of a revolution. The so-called Supreme Revolution has turned allies against allies and friends against friends. The Lifers are so split up right now that they are attacking each other for both deliberate and inane reasons. We can't afford to get caught in the middle of their fight."

"Why not?!" Gloriana frowned. "We don't have a stake in this fight. We're not their enemies."

"You may have kept yourself out of this fight, but your husband is different, ma'am. Patriarch Ves took part in the event that directly triggered the revolution. While we all know it isn't his fault that the opposition factions have risen up against the conservative faction, not everyone sees it that way."

"Then doesn't that mean it's even more vital for us to pull Ves out of that hellhole as soon as possible?"

"It's not that simple. Even though the Lifers are fighting against each other across the entire state, they still maintain at least some common agreements. One of them is that they should never let a third party become the ultimate benefactor of their internal struggle."

"Well they're doing a very poor job at that. With the way the civil war is going, half of the LRA is going to be wrecked, and my poor husband is caught up right in the middle of this mess!"

"It won't last! I have not been twiddling my thumbs all this time. I have been in contact with many people and the Black Cats have provided me with a wealth of intelligence. According to my reading of the situation, the main factions will soon clamp down on the fringe groups and anarchists who aren't willing to play by the rules."

"And when will this begin?"

"Days. Weeks. The situation on the ground is a bit chaotic. It's a lot more difficult to restore order to a densely-populated planet."

"Then does that mean we'll just sit here and watch as Ves gets shot from every direction?!"

"We don't have much choice but to trust the Lifers will see some sense soon." General Verle sighed. "Besides, if we ignore the warnings and push our fleet into the inner system, the military garrison will push us back by force. It has already happened a number of times."

"Then how the hell are we supposed to get anyone in or out of the planet?! Last I heard, the system's exclusive transportation service has ceased all interplanetary travel!"

"That's why we must wait! As long as the situation calms down, some traffic will be restored in time. No matter what, Prosperous Hill is still a port system and its industry and commerce are incredibly vital to the continuation of the LRA. No matter how much the conservatives and the opposition hate each other, they are not willing to kill one of the greatest economic lifelines."

His explanation made sense, but both of them knew it was more complicated than that. The time delay, the various complications that might arise along with the divergent thoughts of the people on the ground could all postpone Prosperous Hill VI's return to calm by weeks or even months. It was the greatest hotbed of the Supreme Revolution and there were way too many squabbling groups on the planet to suppress them all in a short amount of time.

"Will Ves and the Larkinsons on the ground be able to last this long?" Gloriana asked with concern.

"It will be difficult, but the patriarch has lived through worse crises. He's a resourceful leader. Chaos brings danger, but not just to him. The same problems that affect us also apply to all of the other groups on the planet. It will be difficult to organize an action against him. It's inconceivable for an entire mech regiment to mobilize against our patriarch!"

As Gloriana and General Verle continued to talk, it became clear that the latter already had his options and found there was little he could do. He could make some preparations within the fleet and hope the situation on the ground improved.

One of them was the production of LMC mechs. The Spirit of Bentheim had never fallen silent throughout all of this time. Every day, a few Bright Warriors, Ferocious Piranha's, Valkyrie Redeemers or Eternal Redemptions rolled off the production lines.

Due to the expedited shipping that took place in the final days, the Larkinson Fleet received an extensive amount of raw materials. It was enough to keep the factory ship occupied for months!

Before Gloriana left, she asked one more question.

"I've already talked with Colonel Ariadne Wodin. She's willing to do anything to get Ves back to the fleet. However, I'm not sure whether the Cross Clan is willing to go to the same extent."

The Cross Clan was much less close to the Larkinson Clan than the Glory Seekers. The latter was both her personal guard and an extension of the Wodin Dynasty. The former was merely a group of allies that Ves had persuaded to join his expedition.

While the Larkinsons respected the Crossers, their relative lack of familiarity with the Vicious Mountain exiles prevented the two groups from developing a greater degree of trust. Fighting a single battle together was not enough to turn them into bosom buddies!

Virtually every other Larkinson worried about Ves. His leadership had played a huge role in stabilizing the clan. As long as he was present, the clansmen could always count on his direction.

Now that he was absent, morale had dropped and no one was able to fill the void he left!

Fortunately, the Larkinson Clan did not descend into chaos just because Ves was indisposed. Everyone knew that he was probably still alive on the surface. It was just not possible to pull him out at the moment. As long as news of his demise did not spread, the clansmen wouldn't be having any other ideas.

At this time, the various leaders of the clan had to make up for the missing patriarch and make some important decisions that usually went to Ves.

General Verle and the mech commanders held the most sway at the moment. Their actions and decisions might play a critical role in the coming weeks and months.

Over at the massive Hemmington Cross, the two effective leaders of the Cross Clan met in a private compartment.

Patriarch Reginald Cross and Professor Benedict Cortez both stood side by side as they looked out of a window.

The view not only showed the partially-reconstructed fleet of the Cross Clan, but also provided the two older men with a good glimpse of the activity within the Larkinson Fleet.

"Patriarch Ves has found himself in a troublesome situation." Reginald Cross gruffly began. "These damn Majestic Tealers are too double-faced. In one moment, they are all sincere. In the next, their duplicity acts up. You can never trust a promise from the people of this star sector."

Professor Cortez smirked as he took a sip of locally-produced brandy. The Lifers definitely knew how to brew the best drinks.

"You can throw that accusation at everyone. No one is innocent in the cosmos. The Majestic Tealers may have acquired a reputation for double-dealing, but that doesn't mean your former star sector is a bastion of honesty. Didn't your former Saint succ.u.mb through trickery as well?"

The empty glass in Patriarch Reginald's hand cracked into pieces as the high-tier expert pilot lost control of his emotions!

"THOSE TRAITORS HAVE COMPLETELY TARNISHED THEIR HONOR! THEY ARE A MOCKERY OF TRUE WARRIORS!"

Despite the Cross Patriarch's strong outburst and accompanying flaring of will, Professor Cortez remained completely calm. His mental strength alone was enough for him to endure this storm without expending any effort.

"Instead of looking down on the Lifers, we should focus on what we should do. I believe that neither of us wants Patriarch Ves to die or go missing."

"I still need his help to design an expert mech for me." Reginald stated after he calmed down. "There is hardly any point for us to remain in the Golden Skull Alliance if the most important Larkinson can no longer assist my promotion. If I knew that he would end up in this situation, I would have offered to assign escorts of my own to him! This reckless kid. Even I know that I don't have to do everything in person."

"Well, you can teach him a lesson after he returns to the fleet. Now, what shall we do to help?"

"Hmm. There is not much we can do. The Lifers still insist on keeping external traffic in the outer system. Without any way of reaching Prosperous Hill VI, we can only act from a distance."

This was the biggest dilemma facing everyone.

"What if I can tell you that this doesn't necessarily have to be true anymore? What if I tell you that there is a way for us to cross?"

"What are you suggesting, professor?"

The Senior Mech Designer swept his arm to the view outside. "Look at us. We have hundreds of sh.i.p.s and thousands of mechs, and we are just one fleet. How many other fleets are lingering in the outer system? There are thousands, if not tens of thousands of different fleets and individual sh.i.p.s in this star system. The vast majority of them are foreign, and they must all be chafing to get close to Prosperous Hill VI in order to pick up their officers, crew members, family members and so on. While they are all deterred by the military patrols of the LRA at the moment, as long as everyone moves into action at the same time, it's impossible for the local authorities to stop our advance!"

Patriarch Reginald's eyes widened. He could easily imagine such a sight. As long as every foreign fleet or starship ignored the warnings and boldly crossed into the inner system, then it was impossible for the local garrison to shoot them all down!

Not only would the local patrols be overstretched, but killing so many different foreigners would also land the LRA in hot water!

While Patriarch Reginald was attracted by the idea, he quickly began to frown.

"How can we possibly implement such a plan? We'd have to gain the cooperation of many different organizations, all the while keeping the Lifers in the dark."

Unlike the Larkinson Clan, the Cross Clan didn't have anything comparable to the Black Cats. Yet. The Crosser intelligence and covert operations capabilities were very basic!"

"Let me worry about that, Reginald." Professor Cortez smirked. "I can probably work together with the Black Cats on this, but I can accomplish a lot on my own. The foreign visitors here are much more agitated than you think."

He would know. He had plenty of experience with getting people to act according to his wishes!

Chapter 2832 - Split Hangar

It felt frustrating to Ves and everyone else to interrupt their escape due to an unforeseen outcome.

Their original escape plan became invalid because the armored transport and the escort mechs they were supposed to meet no longer existed!

Without those four extra Infinity Guard mechs, the remaining four biomechs would have to endure a lot more pressure. A lot less people wanted to mess with eight mechs as opposed to half that number!

While the scale of combat within the massive tunnel complex was rather small, it became worse as the areas got bigger. For example, the massive underground hangar space up ahead hosted several different groups of mechs!

Perhaps the Roving Hunter mechs could fight against one of these groups, but if another group joined in, then the situation would quickly spin out of control!

Both Ves and Captain Rivington were aware of this possibility. After fighting off the ultralifers, the four mechs that they had left were all in damaged condition. Their ability to fight was not as good as before!

Should they turn back and escape in another direction? They didn't know. Every decision introduced a host of new problems.

"The longer we stay here, the greater the risk we'll get swept by one of the bigger groups of combatants that are currently fighting on the surface." Ves explained his thoughts over the private communication channel. "If we turn around and try to find an alternate path to the surface, we'll have to cross through a lot of terrain. At every junction, we risk bumping into hostile mechs. The other viable exits might not even be as secure as we think."

Captain Rivington grimaced. "We can't go forward either. From the sensor readings you've passed to me, it's clear that the different groups of mechs have already shown a lot of aggression. They're fighting with each other even as we speak, but the intensity of their attacks is very conservative. They're all on guard against newcomers who might come in and take advantage of their depletion."

Ves looked at the sensor readings and wished that his Odineye could glean more details. While he was quite amazed at its capabilities, continued use also allowed him to figure out its shortcomings.

He couldn't figure out who they answered to or what organization they were a part of. They weren't sending any transmissions outside the hangar and all of their internal communications were too difficult to intercept.

Lucky noticed his glance. "Meoow..?"

"Can you go out there and take a look at the different fighting forces inside?"

"Meoowwww..." Lucky's tail drooped.

Too little time had passed for Lucky to recover from his earlier exertions. The gem cat overexerted his phasing ability and had to pay the price for tapping so much into his power.

Ves didn't blame his cat for his inability, but he blamed himself for getting into this position in the first place. He had built up his clan into a formidable independent power that could have easily squashed much of the unrest at Ruuzon Arena if all of them deployed at once!

Yet despite this immense accumulation, Ves was only left with his cat, a paltry number of bodyguards and two expert pilots, one of which had lost his borrowed biomech!

It was one thing to complain about his weakness when he was still poor and lacking in resources.

It was another thing to lament about having control over thousands of powerful mechs but not being able to reach any of them in a life-threatening situation!

Even though Ves enjoyed a thrill every now and then, he did not enjoy any part of the current situation!

Right now, he didn't want to give up going forward. The exit was relatively close and they could get far away from the active zone of fighting if they took one of the exits that was originally reserved for discrete entries and exits.

"We need to take a closer look and examine the people who are fighting in greater detail." He concluded. "Not all of them are necessarily our opponents. If we can co-opt one of the groups of mechs, we stand a much greater chance of getting away!"

"That's.. a workable idea."

One of the honor guards volunteered to go forward in order to observe the mechs and transmit the findings back to Ves so that he could make informed decisions.

This was a high-risk mission, but the honor guard gladly fulfilled this vital duty. It didn't take much guessing that he was a Kinner.

While the hangar had turned into an active battle site, that didn't mean that everyone got shot on sight.

There were plenty of civilians and random people running around inside. They either holed up in their vehicles in the hopes of riding out the crisis or attempted to activate them in order to flee the entire area.

It was too bad that some of the groups didn't want anyone to escape! While these belligerent mech squads didn't bother to waste their energy or ammunition on shooting at random people on foot, it was a different story for moving vehicles!

When the honor guard discreetly snuck in and observed the closer gatherings of mechs, he sent a directional burst transmission back to Ves and the Roving Hunters.

There were six different groups of mechs in the underground hangar. Each of them claimed their own side while their ranged mechs shot at the positions of other groups.

"I recognize those guys with the black-coated mechs." Captain Rivington quickly spoke up. "They're the Trezin Showstoppers. They're a visiting competitive team that was scheduled to take part in a match against a local team this week."

"Are you friendly with them?" Ves asked.

"No. Not at all. In fact, they come from a more rural province of the LRA. The Lifers living in the more remote star systems of our state are always at odds with people like us who come from the bigger planets and star systems. In fact, the Trezin Showstoppers outright hate us because they think that we are s.u.c.k.i.n.g up too much funding and development."

"That doesn't sound like a serious problem." Ves replied. "The Showstoppers might be at odds against people like you under ordinary circ.u.mstances, but not that their lives are at risk, I think they will be much more open to teaming up with fellow mech athletes."

"You don't understand what the Showstoppers are like. These are bullheaded hicks who have always felt aggrieved."

Ves found that strange. Shouldn't fellow mech athletes be able to trust each other in these times? No matter how much they opposed each other in the arena, there was a difference between enemies and competitors.

If the Roving Hunters and the Trezin Showstoppers were not involved in this giant mess, then they should be looking to pool their strength in order to increase their chances of getting away!

Still, Captain Rivington was a sober and clear-headed team leader. If he expressed his misgivings about the Showstoppers, then Ves was willing to take this opinion seriously.

Captain Rivington pointed out another group of mechs. "Those are the mechs of the Ruuzon Guard, or what is left of them. Look at the large quantity of broken mechs that bear their colors. They used to hold a numerical advantage but were ganged up by multiple other attackers. They only have a fraction of their number left. I don't know why no one got rid of the remaining surviving mechs, though."

According to the observation data, the Ruuzon Guard initially maintained a respectable guard force of 15 mechs in the hangar bay. Now, they were whittled down to just 3 surviving mechs. Each of them bore considerable scars, but could still do considerable damage under the right conditions.

While Ves wanted to trust in the integrity of the arena guards, Ves had witnessed too many problems to put his fate in them. Why did Ruuzon Arena suddenly transform into a war weapon? Who triggered the command to turn the spectator platforms into death traps? How many Ruuzon Guards were part of this conspiracy?

If Ves wasn't able to answer these questions, then he had no choice but to remain suspicious.

The Ruuzon Guard could have been co-opted by different factions and interest groups in the same way the Planetary Guard had split up. The uniform they wore and the markings on their mechs was not an accurate indicator of their true allegiances!

He turned his attention to the group with the largest amount of intact mechs. "Do you know who those seven mechs belong to, captain?"

"Mhmmm. They're from the Brakkard Consortium. They're bad news, Mr. Larkinson."

"How so?"

"While the name of their organization sounds respectable, they're just a bunch of thugs. The Brakkard Consortium is one of the major gangs that control the underworld of Prosperous Hill VI. I've heard stories about the stuff they do, but they never seem to get into trouble. They do a lot of stuff that somehow gets swept under the rug."

"That likely means that they're aligned to a political faction." Ves quickly judged. "The Brakken Consortium might even be a subsidiary of one of those factions. If this is the case, then they pose a very considerable threat. Who knows what kind of orders they are acting on. If they have been tasked with sowing as much chaos as possible, then they won't let us off if we enter."

Ves wasn't too afraid of the Brakken Consortium, though. They might have the most biomechs, but their organic machines are all substantially worse in quality. This was consistent with gangs.

The fourth group of mechs consisted of five mechs, three of which were actually knight mechs. This caused them to maintain their numbers even after they were frequently being shot at by some of the other groups.

"I don't know who they are." Captain Rivington admitted. "Let me ask around."

None of the Roving Hunters recognized them either. Their purple and brown-striped coating didn't ring a bell to any of the locals. The purple biomechs either didn't come from Prosperous Hill VI or hailed from an obscure organization that normally didn't show itself in the public.

Ves didn't know what to think from this group of mechs. He wasn't able to determine whether they were friendly or hostile and what they thought of him. They might care less about foreigners like Ves or they might treat him as a devil!

The fifth group of mechs were so peculiar that Ves was able to guess who they belonged to. "These are cybernetic mechs. These are very rare in the LRA. They either hail from the combinant faction or are tied to it in some way."

"Sounds plausible, but you never know. Are you friendly with them, Mr. Larkinson?"

"I don't know. I made a deal with Master Brixton, but I don't know if he even remembers his promise or told anyone else. Maybe I can catch their attention when I mention the Master's name."

Ves set his sights to the last group of mechs. Different from the rest, the mechs were fully metallic and mechanical!

"I know those guys. They're the Right Siders. The red mechs are part of a foreign mercenary corps that has been lingering on this planet for a couple of years now. I've seen their mechs in and around the arena several times, but I never learned why. They may have been hired to provide extra security, but that doesn't really make sense. If Ruuzon Arena really needs to beef up its guard presence, then it could easily contract local mercenary outfits or simply expand its own strength."

That sounded weird. If the Right Siders consisted of locals who fielded regular biomechs, then hardly anyone would question why they hung around the arena. Yet since they were foreigners who didn't seem to have any business with the arena, then their continued presence was very suspicious!

As Ves examined these six groups, which ones should he approach?

Chapter 2833 - An Appeal

Six different groups of mechs occupied the massive underground hangar. In fact, from all of the wrecks strewn around the massive space, there might have been more!

Ves couldn't figure out why they were all hostile to each other. While the mechs aligned to powerful factions might be compelled to fight their opponents, there were many other people and organizations who didn't appear to have anything to do with the factional struggle!

For example, the Roving Hunters and the Trezin Showstoppers were fighting for sport, not for a cause. They only cared about winning titles and defeating their opponents in the arena. There was no reason for them to actively fight against anyone in a civil war unless they had to defend themselves.

"And what are those other groups doing, exactly?"

The mechs of the Brakkard Consortium and the Right Siders did not just huddle in place but actively shot at other mechs. Were they showing aggression in order to project strength or were they truly trying to kill everyone?

All of this violence seemed senseless. With so many different sides in a single active battlefield, clear goals got lost amidst all of the chaos. Ves didn't feel as if any of the six groups were accomplishing anything that met their goals.

He suspected that they were just fighting each other at this point because they got pulled into battle!

Inertia caused them to keep firing because not doing so implied weakness.

Because all of the other mechs were still actively fighting, a group that just wanted to quit and leave was forced to defend itself by continuing to fire their guns!

This theory explained why the fighting continued but the intensity had died down. Every side incurred varying degrees of damage. A lot of ammunition and energy cells got expended as well so the mechs all had to ration their remaining resources.

"I might be wrong, though." Ves recognized.

He simply didn't have enough information to know for sure. His Odineye was powerful in many ways, but it was not a hacking tool. Using it did not allow Ves to magically tap into highly-encrypted and certain types of tightbeam communications.

He didn't have much time to think. The situation in this area was already volatile and it would doubtlessly become a lot more difficult for him to survive if time went on. His past experiences with crises taught him to always seize the opportunity when the variables were still relatively favorable.

The mounting pressure caused him to think more rapidly than before. Several different ideas flitted through his mind until he made an important realization.

"Why approach one of them at a time when I can appeal to all of them at the same time?"

Trying to communicate with the groups one by one was inefficient and dangerous. What if he approached the wrong fellows? What if one of them consisted of complete nutjobs

who would stop at nothing to hunt Ves down because he was one of their priority targets?

Of course, if Ves spoke to all of them at once, he might definitely trigger the aggression of multiple hostile groups at once, but then again he may also be able to persuade friendly groups to join his side.

He did not believe that everyone who happened to be stuck here wanted to get embroiled in all of the fighting. The outbreak of the Supreme Revolution may have been a planned operation, but he seriously doubted that a large group of people knew about it beforehand!

"Captain, Rivington."

"Yes, Mr. Larkinson."

"Let's go bold. What I am about to do is not without its risks, but I think it's the best way to resolve our current dilemma."

It took a bit of time to sway the Roving Hunters. They had a lot of reservations about his plan, but Ves was far too confident in his abilities to stop.

What was important was that the Roving Hunters had no other way to get out themselves. Even if they turned around and sought another path out, they would doubtlessly bump into one of the aggressive mech squads that roamed above and below ground. The indirect sensor readings provided by the Odineye made it clear that the fighting was at least ten times more intense closer to the arena!

Ves emerged out of the secure container along with his bodyguards. Even though Nitaa protested vehemently about his course of action, he directly overruled her concerns.

"We're already knee-deep in danger. Rather than hiding in the shadows like a rat, I would rather face the danger head-on! Besides, I am not without protection."

He tapped his Unending Regalia for emphasis.

The group cautiously approached the entrance and emerged right into the large hangar.

Due to all of the fighting, the place looked like a mess. The cavernous underground hall exhibited impact craters and melted surfaces in every direction.

Few shuttles and transports survived the crossfire. Some of them had been blown up to the point their organic remains had spread to every corner. Others exhibited a massive hole as a powerful beam or projectiles punched right through the thin and weak flesh and membrane of the civilian vehicles.

The larger the vehicle, the greater the chance of getting wrecked!

If Ves hadn't closed his armored suit beforehand, his nose would have been assaulted by all kinds of disgusting smells!

The spread of damage also damaged much of the illumination systems. This caused the overall light level of the massive hangar to dim. Some areas were so shrouded in darkness that only silhouettes were visible with the n.a.k.e.d eye.

Their entry did not go unnoticed. If Ves and his bodyguards entered alone, then they probably would have blended in with the other helpless people running around without aim or hiding helplessly in their vehicles.

Yet the appearance of four damaged but still battle-worthy mechs represented the emergence of a new threat.

Previously, the different groups only had to worry about fending off five possible opponents. Now, their burden increased once more, which none of them liked!

Ves knew he had to change this impression quickly.

He briefly considered whether he should hide his identity and hide behind the name and reputation of the Roving Hunters, but he felt this was counterproductive.

His reputation was much bigger and more profound than that of a single competitive team. No one would take the Roving Hunters seriously, and what he could offer in his own name was much more than Captain Rivington could ever dangle in front of their heads!

Ves used the flight capabilities of his suit to float in the air and stop right above the Perringer's scavenged tower shield.

If anyone took the initiative to take potshots at Ves, he could always dive down and shelter behind the protection of the thick shield!

Venerable Jannzi activated a spotlight mounted on the frame of her borrowed biomech. This was a trivial stage technique that instantly directed the attention of every mech pilot to Ves!

The different groups all interrupted their shots. They all wanted to know what the newcomers wanted to do and whether they posed another threat.

When Ves saw that he succeeded in attracting everyone's attention, he began to channel a portion of the Golden Cat's glow.

The presence he exuded became magnified. With the help of this old trick, Ves knew that all of his deeds and words gained greater weight. It was an excellent method to captivate a crowd!

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am Ves Larkinson, the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan and one of the most successful Journeyman Mech Designers of our star cl.u.s.ter. May I have your attention, please?"

No one raised their rifles and fired at him. Ves considered that a good sign.

He deliberately phrased his introduction in a way that emphasized his prestigious and highly-accomplished identities.

Compared to an average second-rate citizen, Ves had leapt way past their status and occupied a position that was firmly above their heads!

Whether he acted as a patriarch of a rising spaceborn clan or a mech designer who accomplished a huge amount of sales, his current identity likely surpassed everyone else's in the underground hangar by at least a hundred times!

Ves didn't want to come across as their equals. He wanted to assume a high and unassailable image to them so that they wouldn't even think of disrespecting him at this time!

"Contrary to what you might think, I do not have an agenda in this fight. My sights are set in the Red Ocean, not in this star sector. My current goal is to leave this area and return to a safe area. Now, I don't know who you are and why you are fighting each other. Frankly, I don't care what you have done. What matters is getting out. I am sure that many of you share the same goal. Do you really want to fight and die in this dark hole without accomplishing anything meaningful in your life?"

He was met with silence. That was good. Since he still managed to capture everyone's attention, he quickly resumed speaking.

"Think about the current circ.u.mstances and your place in it. The Life Research Association has completely fractured. No matter how long this civil war lasts, it will inevitably ravage large parts of the state and inflict a lot of suffering and misery to everyone. That not only includes the masses, but also you and your families. Do you really believe it is worthwhile for you to get pulled into this quagmire?"

Ves swept his arm across the entire hangar. "Look at these fallen mechs and bodies. These poor mech pilots and bystanders all died in this obscure area. No one will remember their sacrifice. No one can even tell what they accomplished with their deaths. This could be you one day. No matter who you fight for, do you really want to be used by pawns in this senseless conflict? Make no mistake. This is not a war that is driven by liberty. It is a war that is purely motivated by selfish motives."

Perhaps he was a bit uncharitable towards the warring factions, but with all of the innocent people who died, it was very hard to consider either side to be righteous!

"If you are disgusted by what is happening in your state, then choose not to take part in it! The rebels may have wronged many citizens by enabling all of the violence, but they are right when they claimed the LRA has deteriorated. If you want to fight for your cause, then feel free to do so, but if you are not a fan of it, then you have another choice!"

Ves extended his palm in a welcoming gesture. "Join me! Join my clan and free yourself from the vortex that has gripped your state! Our Larkinson Clan welcomes any strong and talented mech pilot. You can bring your families and friends along with you as well as long as they are not opposed to us. Let me offer you a better future where you are part of one big family, where all of us are working towards greatness and where you can pilot the only mechs that can unlock your full potential!"

He transmitted a silent signal to the Perringers.

Venerable Jannzi began to excite her force of will. The knight mech seemed to gain more definition as the Larkinson expert pilot began to announce her identity in a way that other mech pilots were able to recognize!

"I have facilitated the rise of many expert candidates and expert pilots." Ves shamelessly boasted with a grin. "No one knows more about how to elevate mech pilots than I. With my specialized mechs, my clansmen have a greater chance of advancing in rank than anyone else. The statistics are clear! If you are content with remaining as an ordinary mech pilot, then stay in the LRA if you want. However, if you wish to attain greatness and become a hero that everyone looks up to, then grasp your chance and join my clan!"

Chapter 2834 - Entrust

Ves couldn't tell how well his audience received his speech.

On many different occasions, Ves spoke in front of a crowd of people. Their expressions and emotions were very clear to him. He could read the air and sense the mood up close.

This was different. The groups of mechs were all spread out across hundreds of meters at the very least. Even if any of the mechs were closer, his inability to observe their expressions and body language was a major hindrance in predicting their reactions.

A tense moment went by as silence met his plea. What he had just offered to them all was not a decision that any of them could make lightly. Almost no one would be able to decide to drop everything in order to join a spacefaring clan that was on an expedition to a different galaxy!

This was as if Ves was fighting against an enemy army, but suddenly asked them to abandon their oath and everything they worked for in order to defect to his side. Such an absurd situation would never happen in reality!

However, this was a different situation. Ves bet that most if not all of the armed groups in the hangar weren't intimately involved in the revolution. If they were merely bystanders rather than committed soldiers, then the offer he made should sound very appealing!

Several more seconds passed as some of the mechs made ambiguous movements. It seemed that some of the mech pilots were arguing fiercely with their fellow mates.

It took thirty seconds for the first group to issue a response. The flashy biomechs with the emblems of sponsors painted on their surfaces were the first to finish their decision!

"We're in, if you will have us, sir."

"Our clan is glad to welcome brave and upright mech pilots. What is your name and what do you seek for you and your men?"

The lead mech took a step forward but took care not to raise its weapons.

"You can call me Captain Inkar Devlin. I'm the big chief of the Trezin Showstoppers. We're far away from home, so we want to get out of this star system as soon as possible and go back to check up on our families. If our home planet has turned into a battlefield as well, then we'd like to ask for help from your clan in evacuating our loved ones. Can you do that for us, rich guy?"

"It depends on how out-of-the-way your home planet is, but I have thousands of mechs and dozens of combat carriers at my disposal. If it isn't possible to divert my main fleet to your home, I can dispatch a small flotilla or hire some mercenaries to do the job in my stead. Don't underestimate the wealth and resources I have at my disposal."

Apparently, that was enough to convince the Showstoppers! The mechs took the initiative to emerge out of their cover and approach the Roving Hunter mechs at a slow and cautious pace.

The tension in the hangar rose. This was because no one was able to gauge the sincerity of the Showstoppers!

Before the Roving Hunters had entered, the Trezin Showstoppers fought hard against several enemies. They definitely managed to down their fair share of mechs if they had managed to remain standing up to this point!

Since the Showstoppers had blood on their hands, they definitely weren't as simple as they sounded. There was a considerable chance that Captain Devlin had merely made

an empty promise in order to lower Ves' vigilance and attack him when he let down his guard!

"You're making a mistake!" Captain Rivington told him on a private command channel. "Those Showstoppers are sc.u.mbags who won't feel any qualms in killing you. The more powerful and important you make yourself sound, the more they will be tempted to do something to you! Maybe they'll kidnap you in order to earn a lavish ransom, or maybe they'll just take your life straight-away in order to claim a bounty that someone must have put on your head."

"I'm aware of that, but I have a plan." Ves quietly retorted. "If you want to help, then look strong and keep an eye on any potential attackers."

Ves knew he was playing with fire at this moment, but he had little choice at the moment. In order to reduce the chance of betrayal from the Showstoppers, he had to persuade another group to come over by his side.

Now that the remaining ones saw that the Showstoppers achieved success, the next group began to entertain his offer!

"You guys are rich, right? How much do ordinary mech pilots earn in your ranks?"

"Please introduce yourself."

"Lieutenant Zinez Serin. Currently in the service of the Right Sider Mercenary Corps."

"Currently?"

"Well, if the pay is good enough, you might convince me and my boys to change employers."

Ves smiled. "To be honest, salaries are not a big deal in our clan, but that is because the benefits we provide are already massive. Aside from being able to earn merits to redeem our exclusive in-house augmentations, we also offer you the opportunity to pilot unique mechs and learn from the very best."

"What do you mean by the latter?"

"Our clan has five expert pilots." Ves gestured to the Perringer, which was enveloped with Jannzi's force of will. "The alliance we are part of boasts even more expert pilots, including a high-tier one that is closer to advancing to ace pilot than you will ever meet! While I cannot speak for others, every expert pilot in our clan devotes at least some of their time to providing tutoring and guidance to fellow clan members. Perhaps with the assistance of one of our supreme mech pilots, you might also be able to elevate yourselves in their ranks!"

From what he knew about mech pilots, what Ves just promised should sound extremely compelling to them. Hardly any mech pilot was content with remaining average. The idolization of expert pilots and higher-ranking mech pilots was so pervasive in the Age of Mechs that everyone who piloted mechs had definitely aspired to become extraordinary one day.

It was too bad that most mech pilots didn't receive enough guidance to get close to touching the extraordinary threshold. Insufficient training and guidance played a major role in this. This was also why state military forces possessed a much greater advantage in this aspect compared to private sector outfits.

Compared to high-ranking mech pilots, everyone below them were basically amateurs. Some amateurs were slightly more skilled or more difficult to defeat, but regardless of the relative strengths of regular mech pilots, even the better regular mech pilots wasn't skilled or strong enough to provide the best instruction to other regular mech pilots!

The best way to train amateurs was not to put other amateurs in charge of their training.

Instead, a true professional was much more able to analyze the shortcomings and areas of improvement of other mech pilots!

While Ves couldn't tell anything from the Right Sider biomechs, he felt that this argument should be very persuasive.

Eventually, Lieutenant Serin made a decision.

"We'll take you up on your offer. Working for you sounds like a much better deal than who we are working for at the moment."

"This is a permanent commitment, lieutenant." Ves warned. "Joining our clan is not as simple as working for a regular company. You need to prove your sincerity and be with us for the long haul. That said, as long as you don't have any other thoughts, you won't have to be afraid of getting fired either. We're a family."

"Sounds great."

Lieutenant Serin and her three subordinate mech pilots expressed the intention to defect to the Larkinson Clan on an individual capacity. The Right Siders actually had a lot more people than just the four of them, so it was impossible for a mere lieutenant to commit the entire mercenary corps!

Ves didn't care about that. He just wanted to resolve the current crisis as fast as possible, and converting four possible enemy mechs enhanced his degree of safety by a considerable margin!

The acceptance of the four Right Sider mech pilots caused the dynamics in the hangar to shift even more!

If the Trezin Showstoppers intended to double-cross Ves and launch a sneak attack on him, then their chances of success dropped considerably with the addition of another group of mechs!

Venerable Jannzi and the three mech pilots of the Roving Hunters weren't able to contain the Trezin Showstoppers by themselves. Yet if the four mech pilots of the Right Siders joined their side, then the mechs aligned to Ves could easily suppress any single group!

Of course, there was a chance that Lieutenant Serin wanted to launch a sneak attack on Ves as well. Then she faced a similar problem. Who could tell whether the Trezin Showstoppers would allow her to kill their new patron?

That said, there was still a chance that both groups were faking their sincerity, but Ves had a feeling that this was not a likely possibility.

Before Ves entered the massive hangar space, he already observed considerable friction between the Showstoppers and the Right Siders. Their ranged mechs shot at each other enough times to prove that they weren't friends.

As the mechs of the two groups closed in, Ves kept a very careful eye on the sensor readings of his Odineye.

Even though Ves stopped feeding external power to it, its current setting possessed enough range and power to detect any transmissions between the Showstoppers and the Right Siders.

If they transmitted any secret messages to each other, then Ves would certainly know!

Ves knew that if he wanted to gain control over the hangar, then he needed to form a coalition that outnumbered every remaining group!

Whether this coalition was temporary or permanent was not in his consideration. The veneer of cooperation was already sufficient for him to pass the current danger.

Since no one else took the initiative to speak to him, he directed his attention to the cyborg mechs.

"Do you hail from the combinants, by chance?"

Silence.

"I'm acquainted with Master Leehay Brixton. You probably know who I am talking to. While I am not a supporter of his cause, he owes a favor to me. He entrusted one of his apprentices to me. Perhaps he wants to make sure that his legacy won't be lost if he and his side loses this war. While I am glad to take one of his students away from this state, I can't meet this promise if I am stuck here. I don't know what mission you have right now, but are you willing to set everything aside to ensure that I will be in a position to achieve one of Master Brixton's objectives?"

One of the cyborg mechs finally transmitted a message.

"If what you say is true, we will not allow anyone to obstruct your departure."

This was a clear enough message. The cyborg mechs might not be in for the long haul, but as long as they guaranteed they wouldn't pull anything off, then that was a considerable gain!

The cyborg mechs moved in with the rest. With half of the groups of mechs joining with Ves, the remainders were left in an awkward position!

Neither the Ruuzon Guard, the Brakkard Consortium or the group unidentified purple biomechs showed any indication of responding to his outreach.

It didn't matter. Ves had already taken control of this situation. He had collected so many defectors that it was not viable anymore to attack him. His temporary coalition had grown too strong!

Chapter 2835 - Fast and Flimsy

Despite his success in charming three separate groups of mech pilots in joining his side, Ves felt anything but secure. He would only feel safe when he returned to Gentle Lotus Base.

While Gentle Lotus Base was hardly a bastion of safety due to a critical lack of mechs, Ves would at least be surrounded by his own Larkinsons!

Ves didn't have to worry about treason from his own men. Even if they held their own individual ambitions that weren't quite in line with the Larkinson Clan, Goldie made sure that no one harbored any treacherous thoughts!

Since these people weren't a part of his clan right now, he wasn't able to extend the same level of trust to them. They were complete strangers who only made a verbal promise to join up with him. Ves encountered many situations where people said one thing to him but did the opposite.

He briefly turned his gaze to Nitaa. His bodyguard was still carrying the Larkinson Mandate. If he wanted to, he could immediately induct the new mech pilots into his clan.

The problem was that if the induction attempt ever failed for some reason, then the hidden traitor would definitely become exposed. This might trigger a fight that Ves did not want to see!

This left Ves with an unpalatable choice. In order to avoid spooking anyone into acting drastically, he had to assume a confident image and pretend that everything was going according to plan.

Only by bluffing everyone would he be able to exert enough authority to ensure everyone's compliance. It would be a lot more difficult for anyone to start anything drastic when it appeared that everyone else would come to his aid.

As the mechs of the Trezin Showstoppers, the Right Siders and the Combinants reached his side, his temporary coalition ballooned to fifteen mechs!

The Ruuzon Guard, the Brakkard Consortium and the unknown purple outfit happened to have the same amount of biomechs.

Still, Ves had gained the allegiance of enough mechs to feel assured that none of the remaining groups wanted to provoke a fight.

Just as Ves wanted to instruct the mechs on side to advance as a single collective, his Odineye suddenly picked up concerning activity.

The Omni Sensor picked up a large amount of indirect activity. Vibrations, gravitic signals and more suggested that a large amount of mechs were on the way!

Ves didn't know who they belonged to or what their intentions might be. All he could tell was that there were at least forty of them and that they all moved in unison!

A lot of thoughts passed through his mind. The apparent direction and speed of these unknowns suggested that they were moving with purpose.

Why would anyone dispatch a mech company in this direction?

Ves didn't think that anyone here was their target. Neither the Roving Hunters, the Trezin Showstoppers or anyone else was worth hunting down. They were all grunts. Perhaps the only possible question mark was the identity of the mech pilots of the purple biomechs.

Yet it was too improbable that they were the target of the incoming mech company. The purple organic machines didn't appear to be too expensive and power.

No, the most likely possibility was that this was another attempt by the ultralifers to take him down. Since the initial mech squad failed to defeat him and his new allies, the ultralifers probably decided to dispatch a full mech company this time!

"Damn crazies." He muttered under his breath.

Ves knew he had to make a quick decision yet again. He decided to follow his instincts and transmitted the sensor readings to every mech regardless of their allegiance.

He decided to take another gamble!

"An unknown force of mechs are advancing on our position." Ves quickly broadcasted. "According to our sensor readings, they are closing in fast and are likely armed to the teeth. Unlike you guys, many of these distant readings are similar, which indicates that they are identical copies of the same model. In other words, these forty or more mechs are all united."

His words exerted a considerable degree of pressure on the others. Regardless of whether they had joined Ves' side or decided to stay apart, none of them had the strength or numbers to resist an entire mech company by themselves!

In fact, even if all thirty mechs in the hangar pooled their strength together, they would still be ten mechs short!

Even with the help of Venerable Jannzi, it was very unlikely that a band of outnumbered mechs that weren't even unified would be able to resist the might of a coordinated mech company!

This was especially considering that every mech here had already endured combat before. None of them were in pristine condition while there was a considerable chance that the incoming enemies were fresh!

Ves knew that he had to give everyone an impetus to move. In a situation that was rife with uncertainty, no one wanted to make a rash decision.

"I know you guys shot at each other." He spoke. "Perhaps you even killed someone's comrade. I'm not asking you all to set your grievances aside or anything. I just think that none of you want to get embroiled in a pointless fight while an entire mech company of possible enemies is boring down on your position. Any pettiness we show right now will only play into their hands. Now, do you want to live or do you want to die in this worthless hole?"

His Odineye detected a burst of private signal exchanges. The Showstoppers were speaking with the Roving Hunters. The Ruuzon Guard spoke with the Brakkard Consortium and the Combinants.

The only group that wasn't communicating with anyone was the one that fielded the unknown purple biomechs.

Ves narrowed his eyes in their direction. Their lack of identifiers or obvious markers seemed very suspicious. He felt a bit uncomfortable towards them. His inability to figure out their organization and motives did not sit well with him, but at this point he had little choice but to welcome them if they decided to play along.

A mech of the Brakkard Consortium took a few steps forward. "Larkinson! We've made a decision. We don't want to abandon our roots and leave our home, but we're okay with leaving together until we have moved far enough to go our separate ways."

"That's fine. I fully respect your decision."

With the acceptance of the Brakkard Consortium mechs, the remaining two groups were even more outnumbered.

One of the Ruuzon Guard mechs transmitted a resigned-sounding message.

"We shall work with you to extract ourselves from these premises."

The purple mechs didn't transmit anything at all, but they conveyed their meaning by stepping forward in an unthreatening fashion.

Ves grinned. "Good! The only way for us to make it out alive is to band together! Enemies are everywhere, so we must put up a united front as long as we are at risk. Don't split up until we have reached the final tunnel exit!"

Even though Ves sensed plenty of tension between the groups, they were clearly willing to compromise at this moment.

Since none of the mechs were making any aggressive moves anymore, Ves and the other people on foot quickly surged forward. He wanted to find a ride that could bring him away as soon as possible!

He quickly encountered a problem.

"Damn, I don't know how these organic vehicles work!"

Every shuttle or other vehicle that looked reasonably intact were all organic in nature!

While there used to be a few metallic shuttles in this space, all of them had fallen victim to collateral damage. Even if Ves was capable of repairing them, it would take hours before Ves could make them flight-worthy!

"You guys." He gestured towards the biomech technicians of the Roving Hunters. "Help us find an escape vessel that can fit us all. Don't worry about finding the perfect one. We just need a fast and survivable escape vehicle that you can subvert as quickly as possible."

The most senior technician frowned. "We've already examined the most intact vessels. The best bioshuttles are fast and tough, but these upscale vehicles are notoriously difficult to steal."

If the vehicles were mechanical in nature, then Ves could have gained control over them himself. If that wasn't enough, he could always rely on Lucky's hacking suite.

The programming of a biomachine was partially the same as modifying a living organism. Biotechnology adopted so many different paradigms that many purely technological approaches simply didn't work against biomachines!

"What can you give me?" Ves asked.

"It depends on what you want more. We don't have the skills and tools to hack into anything fancy, so we can only set our sights on the lower-end vehicles. Do you want to ride on a fast and flimsy shuttle taxi or a big and sluggish transit bus?"

"I take it the latter still won't be tough, right?"

"No, but it might prevent a single mech attack from killing everyone inside."

In the end, Ves chose for speed. The biomech technicians rushed forward and approached a modest-sized bioshuttle that was adorned with a rabbit head of all possibilities.

The organic vessel was covered in snow-white fur that remained surprisingly intact despite all of the marks of damage nearby.

Normally, Ves would rather die than be caught riding such a silly vessel, but this was not the time for him to be picky!

It turned out that the rabbit shuttle was a vessel that was especially designed to taxi children. Once the biomech technicians worked their way inside, they encountered a pink interior and lots of cute little seats that wouldn't fit anyone but children under the age of ten!

"Tear out these seats." Ves commanded. "They're in the way and won't allow everyone to fit inside."

His honor guard moved to remove the silly seats by force. Their swords and daggers were sufficient enough to separate the seats from the deck.

Meanwhile, the biomech technicians crawled all over the rabbit shuttle. Some of them entered the c.o.c.kpit in order to take over the controls. Others inspected the main thrusters while a couple more were examining the rabbit head.

Ves checked the Odineye and saw that the incoming mech company had come a lot closer!

"Damn! Everyone, get inside the shuttle. The unknown enemies will come in less than two minutes. If we don't get out right now, we'll be visible in their sights!"

"We can't! The shuttle isn't ours yet! The bioprogramming of this vehicle is a lot more difficult than we anticipated. We need at least five minutes to gain preliminary control!"

"We'll be dead if we continue to stay here for this time! Just get inside and lock the hatch. We don't need to gain control of this shuttle in order to evacuate?"

"How?"

"You'll see." Ves grinned.

Everyone stuffed themselves inside the shuttle in less than thirty seconds. The honor guard occupied a lot of space due to their large and bulky combat armor. Ves hardly had any space to move. He and Lucky were practically pressed in the middle.

Outside, two different biomechs carefully approached. The Optimon and the Perringer had both freed up an arm in order to grasp the rabbit shuttle and lift it up until the vehicle was securely in their grasp.

The two biomechs began to fly in the air and accelerate forward.

Even though it looked precarious, it worked! The shuttle and its passengers accompanied the rest of the mechs to the exit tunnels!

Chapter 2836 - Signal Interception

Thirty mechs flew through a long and dark tunnel. Each of them belonged to several different groups that had previously turned their weapons against each other.

Perhaps they would have continued to shoot and fight each other until they suffered a mutual defeat if outside factors hadn't interfered!

The intervention from Ves along with the approach of a strong external mech force prompted the groups to lay down their previous grievances. By accepting the offer to pool their forces together, the mech pilots stood a better chance of preserving themselves.

This did not mean that their grievances had melted.

Even when he was stuffed inside the cramped rabbit shuttle, Ves could feel the underlying tension and vigilance of the different groups of mech pilots. Their formations remained tight and maintained a healthy distance from each other.

Of all of the groups that Ves had persuaded along the way, only the Roving Hunters were truly worthy of his trust. They had fought alongside the Larkinsons once before and they did not exhibit any signs of betraying him. Captain Rivington and his men came across as some of the most decent and normal Lifers that Ves had met so far. This was quite an accomplishment.

While Ves was used to dangerous situations where he didn't have as much reliable protection as he liked, he felt a lot more out of his element this time.

What frustrated him was the type of mechs that everyone utilized. The overwhelming number of them were biomechs, with only the Right Siders fielding purely metallic mechs.

Since Ves was not very familiar with the finer design paradigms of organic machines, he wasn't able to make detailed judgements of the biomechs utilized by the other groups.

For example, he could tell that the biomechs fielded by the Brakkard Consortium were cheaper and less refined than average, but he didn't know to what extent. Were they on the lower end of a midrange mech? Were they upper budget mechs? He wasn't able to make a definitive judgement!

In a dangerous and uncertain situation, every scrap of data was worth its weight in exotics. The more nuggets of intelligence he had at his disposal, the more informed decisions he could make.

Right now, the overall lack of solid information caused him to feel as if he was as blind as a bat! He had no idea where he was careening towards, both figuratively and literally.

Ruuzon Arena should already be pretty far away! If Ves and his current allies ascended to the surface, then the odds of encountering an ambush should be low. The only acute threat he had to be concerned about is getting shot at by aerial ranged mechs that were flying high above the premises of Ruuzon Arena and elsewhere.

"Mr. Larkinson, can you really hold all of these people together?" Captain Rivington asked through their private communication channel. "I have serious misgivings with your decision to put all of these different groups of mechs together. They were enemies to each other before you arrived!"

Ves sighed behind his helmet. "Beggars can't be choosers. I'm aware of the risks, but we can't be too picky. As long as they are willing to play along, I won't mind their presence."

"Look up. I think we are nearing an exit."

The tunnel noticeably curved upwards. There was obvious light at the end, so the exit wasn't obstructed.

Pretty much everyone had grown tired of the tunnels and underground environment. It was too confining and limited the performance of many mechs. Once the mechs reached the open sky, they could quickly get their bearings and navigate towards their destination with much more flexibility and choices than before!

The mechs flew a bit faster. They reached the open exit and passed through the gates without any effort.

Daylight and open skies graced their forms once again! The organic machines seemed to revel in their return to an open environment.

"We're free!"

"We made it out!"

Just as Ves expected, the tunnel that they had chosen to travel through led to the outskirts of Veoline. When Ves patched into the feeds, he observed that the district they were in was largely made up of low-class residential structures.

The area was largely made up of simple tree-like houses and apartment buildings interspersed with basic gardens and other touches of greenery. The tree structures were all smaller and less sophisticated than the ones in downtown Veoline, but other than that they were well-maintained due to the help of caretaker beetles.

However, this period of celebration lasted only a short time before the mechs detected a substantial group of mechs in the distance!

Alarms sounded and the mechs all adopted a vigilant, battle-ready posture while maintaining a very low altitude.

No one dared to fly high at this moment. Anyone who flew above the urban sprawl would merely turn into an open target that could be shot at from any position!

Even though the tree structures in this residential district weren't high, they were still massive and numerous enough to provide some cover.

As Ves examined the images of the distant biomechs, he quickly recognized their colors and markings.

"Those mechs are identical to the ones belonging to the Ruuzon Guard!"

"What are they doing out here?"

"Look at them. They must have gone through one hell of a fight."

The Ruuzon Guard weren't supposed to be stationed all the way here unless they were assigned to guard the tunnel exit.

The conditions of the distant biomechs did not look good. Many of them bore scorch marks, impact wounds and cuts. Blood of varying tints covered their organic frames. Their equipment didn't look in good shape either.

"Who did they fight?"

"I don't know."

Both sides were able to observe each other. The Ruuzon Guard stationed on the surface seemed to be taken aback at the emergence of a gathering of different groups.

Just as Ves thought that this stalemate would continue, his Odineye detected an encrypted signal being transmitted between one of the Ruuzon Guard mechs in the distance and one of the Ruuzon Guard mechs flying a short distance away from his rabbit shuttle!

Ves had a bad feeling about this. He already knew that many official organizations had been subverted by different factions and interest groups. Plenty of them had abandoned their duties in order to fulfill objectives that had nothing to do with their official responsibilities!

He needed to know what the Ruuzon Guard mech pilots were saying to each other. However, since the mechs communicated through organic systems, it was not possible to hack them utilizing ordinary measures!

"Lucky." He sent a discrete signal to the gem cat slumped on his shoulder. "Can you tap into the transmissions between the two biomechs?"

"Meoww..."

Though Lucky did not sound enthusiastic, the conditions were much more favorable this time. Since it was just a short time after the biomechs exited the tunnel, they were still relatively close to each other.

This meant it was much easier to intercept the tightbeam signals that the two mechs were transmitting to each other.

Unfortunately, the situation didn't work out the way he anticipated. While it was possible to intercept the signals, they were highly encrypted. Even though Lucky possessed formidable hacking powers, his brute-force cracking capabilities weren't impressive.

This meant that without a key or a clue on how to crack the encryption, it would take at least hours to decipher the lock!

"Meow..."

If Lucky was able to hack biocomponents, then this would have been a different story, but since this wasn't the case, Ves couldn't use him to listen in on the conversation that must be taking place!

Ves already noticed that the temporary coalition had slightly shifted their positions. They were slowly opening up some distance to the three Ruuzon Guard mechs they traveled with. If these biomechs joined forces with the twenty-one damaged mechs in the distance, then they might be able to overpower everyone else!

Just like everyone else, Ves wanted to know whether he could still regard the Ruuzon Guard as friends or foes. If the latter was the case, then he needed to know as soon as possible!

He suddenly came up with an alternate idea. He looked at the feeds and examined the distance between his rabbit shuttle and the Ruuzon Guard mechs.

"It's not too far.. but not too close either. Will it work?"

Some time ago, Ves came up with a class of spiritual creations he labelled as spiritual augments. These were temporary spiritual constructs that he slotted into his mind in order to channel his Spirituality in very specific applications.

He generally avoided using them because they took the essence that made him such a good mech designer and used it for another purpose!

However, this was an emergency situation and he wasn't designing any mechs at the moment. He decided to go through with this idea and pulled out an old design file stored in the deepest parts of his cranial implant.

A spiritual ear appeared out of nowhere. The simple spiritual recorder projection was capable of conveying sounds to him even if he put it in a different room.

The only issue with it was that its range was fairly limited.

"Jannzi."

"Yes?"

"I need to get closer to the Ruuzon Guards. Can you fly your mech a little closer in their direction? The closer, the better, but don't look suspicious."

"Why would you do that, Ves? The Ruuzon Guards aren't necessarily our friends anymore."

"I know, but just do it! Oh, and make sure the Optimon follows along."

The Perringer and Optimon continued to hold the rabbit shuttle as the biomech technicians were still working on gaining control over it. Ves didn't know how long it would take for them to be able to operate the shuttle independently, but he hoped it would be soon!

Since the groups weren't maintaining a constant position, it was easy enough for the biomechs holding the shuttle to drift a few meters closer at a time.

Ves concentrated on extending his spiritual ear to the Ruuzon Guard mechs. Just as he feared, his range fell short, though he found to his surprise that it was a bit longer than he initially expected.

His growth in Spirituality led to a growth in range. It was too bad that this was not enough to carry his ear all the way forward.

"Jannzi, forget about being discrete. Just fly twenty meters closer to them. If you get my shuttle this close, I can patch into their communications. I need to know what they are talking about!"

Though Venerable Jannzi knew this was an extremely risky course of action, she knew the urgency behind it. The Ruuzon Guard mechs had been transmitting a lot of signals to each other. Whatever they were discussing might be very important.

When the Roving Hunter mechs all moved closer to the Ruuzon Guard, everyone else became more vigilant. Were they joining forces with the arena guards or something?

Even the three Ruuzon Guard mechs appeared to be spooked. They were already flying away in order to open up some distance again.

This meant that Ves only got close long enough to listen in to a brief verbal exchange!

"...What are you doing? Don't give these rabble any indication that we are waiting for our allies to reinforce us. You only need to hold out for around five more minutes. By then, we can box these sc.u.m in and wipe them all out, starting with the foreigner. The revolution has begun, and we must make a statement."

Uh oh. This sounded very bad. The officer who spoke these words sounded quite determined. It was highly likely that he definitely belonged to a camp that was hostile to Ves!

Chapter 2837 - Out of Control

The temporary coalition that Ves had managed to form consisted of quite a decent number of biomechs. Gathering so many fighting machines together conveyed a lot of strength, but that did not mean that everyone was of the same mind.

Ves knew that the coalition of 30 mechs was inherently unstable. Different groups held different motives, and mashing them all together did not change their original goals.

Now that they encountered a group of Ruuzon Guard mechs, he was afraid that the situation was about to change in an undesirable direction.

His suspicions turned out to be true.

Due to the odd movements of the Roving Hunter mechs, Ves knew he had to make a quick decision.

He decided to present the evidence to the other groups. Nothing would convey the gravity of the situation better than revealing the Ruuzon Guard officer's plot!

Ves converted the sounds he heard into a digital audio file with the help of his implant. He then proceeded to transmit it to all of the mechs in the coalition aside from the Ruuzon Guard mechs.

He could sense the change in their demeanor. Their mechs flew noticeably more apart from the three Ruuzon Guard mechs in their midst. The Perringer and Optimon followed suit. They reversed course and tried to open up as much distance as possible!

They all felt threatened. In fact, Ves had emphasized the danger to them by cutting out the latter portion of the incoming transmission. By leaving out the part that made it clear that he was their primary target, the truncated message made it sound as if the Ruuzon Guard officer wanted to commit indiscriminate slaughter.

While all of these mechs reacted in such a distinct fashion, the other side clearly noticed the abnormality.

No one shot at each other. Yet. Since every mech had gone through some scraps, no one wanted to start a battle where they might easily die.

The best outcome right now was to take advantage of the period where these supposed reinforcements were still on their way and fly as far away as possible!

Twenty-three mechs gradually backed away. They wanted to distance themselves from the Ruuzon Guard mechs.

Their attempt did not succeed. The Ruuzon Guard mechs that they previously traveled with acted as if they were still a part of the temporary coalition. The Ruuzon Guard mechs in the distance were gradually closing in as well.

The range between the current coalition and the potentially-hostile mechs was getting shorter instead of longer!

This odd behavior increased the suspicion towards these units of Ruuzon Guard. If their officers and mech pilots were truly arena guards, then why were they stalking anyone who was trying to move away?

The only reason why neither side launched an attack was because both sides would likely incur a lot of damage. No one wanted to risk his life to achieve a pyrrhic victory at best.

At least that was what Ves thought.

Just as he was trying to think of a way to separate himself from the Ruuzon Guards without causing the situation to deteriorate into chaos, a single biomech lifted up its rifle.

"YOU CONSERVATIVE DOGS! THE RULE OF YOUR MASTERS IS OVER! THE REVOLUTION SHALL SUCCEED!"

To the horror of Ves and many other people, the rifleman mech of the Brakkard Consortium fired a positron beam at the closest Ruuzon Guard unit!

The powerful beam struck straight into one of the damaged sections of the c.h.e.s.t of a biomech. A considerable amount of flesh and internal organs burned or vaporized in an instant due to the accurate close-ranged shot. The biomech that got struck practically fell from the sky for a few seconds before it reluctantly regained control.

No one reacted for a few seconds. Nobody knew why the mech pilot of the Brakkard Consortium opened fire by himself. It didn't appear that the Brakkard mech pilots were unified.

"This idiot!" Ves angrily cursed. "What is up with their discipline?!"

He should have known better. Captain Rivington already informed him that the Brakkard Consortium was a gang. Ves thought that second-class mech pilots were much more disciplined and less drunk on the job, but maybe he needed to revise that impression.

The other Brakkard mechs joined in without too much consideration. It didn't even seem to matter whether one of their guys opened fire without orders. All they knew is that as long as one of their own made a move, the rest had to back him up without any reserve!

"OPEN FIRE!"

Their ranged mechs shot at the Ruuzon Guard mech that had just been hit. The beams and projectiles slamming into the poor machine quickly caused it to crash into the ground!

There was no way the Ruuzon Guard would let this aggression go unanswered. The two remaining Ruuzon Guard mechs that had played nice earlier all raised their weapons but flew backwards towards the larger group of mechs in the distance.

"Don't let these bastards reunite with the rest!" Ves quickly transmitted to the coalition. "Take them out while they are still vulnerable!"

His forceful words were meant to push the doubters forward. Only some groups responded to his command.

The unknown purple mechs did not hesitate too much before joining in on the attack. The cyborg mechs of the Combinants opened fire at the same time.

The remaining groups went on the attack as well! Their melee mechs remained in place but their ranged mechs all concentrated their fire on the two runners.

Since the two fleeing Ruuzon Guard mechs exposed their backs to the temporary coalition, the firepower easily overwhelmed their defenses! Two fleshy c.o.c.kpits soon blasted from the heavily-damaged mechs!

"We did it! We whittled down their numbers!"

However, during this process, the twenty-one biomechs in the distance were rapidly closing the distance. Their ranged mechs had already opened fire in return!

"You sc.u.mbags!"

The downing of the three Ruuzon Guard mechs seemed to inflame the rest that were closing the distance. Ves didn't know why the enemy went on the attack when they were down two mechs, but right now the rabbit shuttle was in great danger!

"Ahh!"

"We're all going to die!"

"We need to get out of this deathtrap!"

"Shut up! Don't disturb us! We've almost cracked the controls!"

The Perringer and the Optimon were having a lot of difficulty keeping the inactive rabbit shuttle stable and secure. The Ruuzon Guard mechs with ranged capabilities all directed their firepower towards the shuttle. They knew exactly who was inside and how much they could achieve if they killed the most important passenger!

Faced with all of the beams and projectiles attempting to slam into the organic shuttle, the Perringer had to block it all with its stolen tower shield with just a single arm while at the same time scrambling for cover somewhere below.

"I can't keep up with your movements, Venerable! Please don't make so many sudden movements!" Oliver Vlambeer complained.

"My sudden movements are the only reasons why my current mech is still in good shape. I cannot allow the enemy to focus on a single point!"

"The shuttle will fall or get crushed at this rate!"

The two mech pilots were anything but in sync. Venerable Jannzi fought on an entirely different level from regular mech pilots while Oliver was still an inexperienced mech athlete!

"Meooooow!"

Lucky clung his body tight against the Unending Regalia. The violent movements along with the realization that they were getting shot at frightened him to no end!

Even Ves felt his stomach lurching despite the inertial compensators in his suit keeping his body stable.

"I'm getting sick!" Vincent screamed from his position in the corner. His hover chair had to be pressed into place on a vertical orientation due to lack of space. "Kill me now! Just end my misery!"

There was nothing he could do. If the Rotenring was still in good condition, then he would have been able to avoid this nightmare.

Out of the coalition, the biomechs of the Brakkard Consortium fought the hardest, followed by the unknown purple organic machines. Both of these groups apparently had the greatest motivation to attack the unknowns.

The others were a bit more reluctant. The Trezin Showstoppers, the Combinants and the Right Siders clearly didn't want to bear the brunt of enemy attacks.

However, they didn't want their side to lose either, so they made sure to put in a serious effort.

It didn't take long before the first mechs started to fall. The most heavily-damaged mechs were attractive targets because they were easy to eliminate first. Faced with multiple attackers, these targeted mechs or biomechs quickly started to drop like flies!

Numerous c.o.c.kpits ejected from the broken mechs. Most mech pilots decided to err on the side of caution because their chances of survival were much higher if they ditched their mechs!

Even though losing their mech made the mech pilots vulnerable, there was no reason for them to hold their ground and fight to the death!

They only wanted to hang onto their fighting machines because power gave them more agency. If they wanted to do well in this civil war, then it was important for them to possess the ability to fight against other mechs!

Once they lost one, it was very uncertain if they would be able to get their hands on another one. This was why they did not abandon their mechs straightaway!

"We're too split."

What concerned Ves quite a bit was the fact that the Ruuzon Guard were on the winning side. Even though they started off with fewer mechs, their teamwork and coordination was much better!

"Jannzi, you need to join the fight. They won't last without your help!"

"I can't! I need to shield your shuttle."

Ves sighed. "I know, but we'll end up in a much worse situation if our battle line collapses. Just put the damn shuttle on the ground and help our comrades out! Leave the Optimon behind to guard against any sneak attackers."

In the end, the Perringer and the Optimon placed the shuttle behind a cl.u.s.ter of apartment tree structures. The latter biomech remained behind while the Perringer flew forth.

"I'm here now!" Venerable Jannzi shouted. "Captain Rivington, work with me! We need to crush the Ruuzon Guard as fast as possible!"

"Aye!"

The Perringer approached the Taragon's current opponent and attacked from the flank!

When Jannzi's mech drove its shield against a biomech of the Ruuzon Guard, the sword-wielding machine lost its balance.

Captain Rivington immediately spotted an opportunity. His Taragon stabbed forward and sunk its sword deep into the abdomen of its opponent!

Even though another Ruuzon Guard mech attempted to drag away the Perringer, Venerable Jannzi did not shift her target. With great skill, the Perringer avoided the spear thrust in its direction and chopped its sword onto the shoulder of the original target.

Soon enough, the latter fell to the ground! Before it impacted against the surface, the broken biomech ejected its c.o.c.kpit.

The Perringer and the Taragon already moved on to ganging up against another Ruuzon Arena mech. The teamwork they exhibited allowed them to dispatch their second opponent in less than a dozen seconds!

Their teamwork was impeccable despite their unfamiliarity. Captain Rivington was well-versed in team-based tactics while Venerable Jannzi was much more skilled than any other mech pilot on the current battlefield.

Their timing, positioning and skill quickly made a substantial difference. Eight Ruuzon Arena mechs fell in quick succession, causing the remaining ones to back off in panic. The subverted Ruuzon Arena mech pilots had lost their courage against the surprising might of their opponents!

While Ves wanted to celebrate this great success, his mood sank even lower. While the fight ended in his favor, Ves had never stopped paying attention to the tunnel they originally emerged.

According to his Odineye, a large amount of mechs were flying through it at this very moment!

The ultralifers were coming!

Chapter 2838 - Temporary Coalition

The coalition only had 18 mechs left by the time they repelled the Ruuzon Guard mechs. The Brakkard Consortium lost two biomechs while the Right Siders lost a metallic mech.

The remainder all incurred varying degrees of damage. While the Optimon only got shot at a few times, other mechs withstood powerful hits or lost limbs!

There was no way for this diminished coalition to repel the ultralifer mech company that Ves knew for certain was coming!

Ves transmitted the sensor readings to all of the friendly mechs. "We're not in a condition to fight off forty mechs. Let's depart from this location. We should fly as far away as possible from downtown Veoline while we still can!"

He deliberately used the word 'we' in order to strengthen the suggestion that they were all in it together. Whether it made a difference or not, Ves wasn't sure, but they were all following suit.

The Roving Hunters took the lead as the Perringer and the Optimon picked up the rabbit shuttle again. The other groups automatically followed as this appeared to be the most logical decision they could make.

In times of uncertainty, it was always better to group with friendlies! No one wanted to bump into a larger unit of hostile mechs.

If the coalition didn't exist, then every group had only three to five mechs at their disposal. While this represented a lot of power in isolation, it was nothing compared to the larger elements that the other organizations were fielding!

Even though Prosperous Hill VI did its best to prevent mechs from proliferating too much, the sheer amount of people living on the planet made it inevitable that there were at least thousands of them in Veoline alone!

Now, the city had turned into a warzone. As Ves examined the feeds of the city, he noticed plenty of rumblings in the distance.

Tiny specs that represented mechs were dancing around each other while firing their weapons or closing in to swing their blades.

Several tree structures collapsed as mechs collided against their trunks or explosions cracked them in half.

More structures were burning as laser beams, positron beams, destructive incendiaries and more caused the fire-resistant growths to become engulfed in flames!

The idyllic green city that used to project order and peace was groaning from the ravages of war!

Prosperous Hill VI had never been engulfed in a destructive conflict of this scale!

All of that clearly showed as the citizens didn't know what to do, the authorities were split and fighting amongst themselves and all kinds of fringe groups were free to inflict as much destruction as they wanted!

"What a dumb place." Ves quietly sighed before turning to a nearby biomech technician. "Hey, how is the shuttle takeover going? Why haven't you guys made any progress?"

"We don't know! An ordinary shuttle shouldn't be difficult to take over, but for some reason the owner of this rabbit vehicle upgraded its security suite! Apparently, this shuttle belongs to an elite school, so it has to be resistant against any form of hacking or tampering in order to satisfy the strict safety standards imposed by the government."

What the hell?! When Ves initially encountered the rabbit shuttle, he didn't think much of it. Its fluffy appearance and childish interior caused him to underestimate it. No one figured out that its security suite did not lose out to premium vehicles until it was too late!

Boom!

The shuttle suddenly shook as one of the two biomechs that held onto it had shifted!

"What's going on, Jannzi?!"

"We're under attack!" Venerable Jannzi responded. "A squad of unidentified yellow biomechs are attacking us from long range!"

"Who are they?"

"I don't know! I already asked the others but they are in the dark as well."

"Are there other attackers on the way?"

"We haven't detected any so far. The yellow biomechs haven't moved from cover."

If the yellow biomechs weren't determined to take their targets down, then why were they shooting in the first place? They were provoking way too many enemies if they fired indiscriminately at other mechs!

Ves didn't bother to decipher their logic.

"We need to reduce our visibility! Lose altitude and fly close to ground level. We won't be easy shots anymore if we're in the midst of all of these tree structures."

The temporary coalition was already doing so. They flew lower until they were close to touching the ground. The reason why they didn't land was because flying was faster for many of the mechs and biomechs.

What annoyed Ves quite a bit was that the surrounding tree-like houses were too low to cover the upper portions of mechs. Depending on the height of the houses, the heads, shoulders and even c.h.e.s.ts of biomechs poked out of the treeline!

This allowed the distant yellow mechs to continue to fire at the Roving Hunters and the other groups with abandon.

Due to the superior cover of the enemy, there was hardly any point in shooting back, especially when every friendly mech was running low on resources.

Everyone just wanted to get to safety at this point!

The incidents didn't cease. Veoline was a massive urban center and its outskirts were the size of provinces. There were plenty of tree structures in the distance no matter what direction they flew in. Some of them were even tall enough to rival the office structures of downtown Veoline!

There were sporadic signs of fighting in every district. The coalition distinctly avoided any sites of active fighting and tried to avoid any large concentrations of biomechs.

Unfortunately, it was unavoidable for them to bump into smaller concentrations of combat machines!

Ves felt nervous whenever he approached them, but he didn't need to be as the outnumbered biomechs made their way on their own accord. None of them wanted to mess with eighteen mechs!

Only a couple of them did not take the initiative to move away. In some cases, they were compelled to defend a fixed structure or location.

In other cases, the unknown groups of mechs noticed the diverse composition of the coalition and started to have ideas!

"Hey, are you trying to get out of this place? We'd like to join you guys. We have three sturdy biomechs! We can be of use to you! Please take us in. We've got money!"

Ves hesitated, and so did many others. After a biomech technician told him that the mechs belonged to a small-time gang, he decided to accept their entry.

His coalition had already lost a fair amount of mechs and the remaining ones were in poor shape. Adding three fresh mechs to his lineup inserted some much-needed strength to his hand.

Another gang had observed how the temporary coalition did not hesitate too long before accepting the strangers into the fold.

"We'd like to join as well! If you can take in the Moonsharks, you can count on us as well!"

The second gang brought five biomechs, which was enough to make Ves feel nervous. He only relaxed when he noticed that they were all weaker machines. The Taragon and the Perringe could probably chop them all up in an even fight!

"Fine." Ves responded. "You can join our lineup, but don't make any aggressive moves towards us. Watch where you are pointing your weapons and keep a healthy distance from the rest. If you decide you want to leave, then notify us in advance."

"Alright, boss!"

The growth of the coalition not only caused everyone who was a part of it to feel more secure, but also started to draw in other groups.

A third gang approached, then a fourth, then a fifth.

Not just gangs, but also other small-sized outfits joined. Biomechs that belonged to various mercenary corps, security companies and other random organizations all seemed to think there was safety in numbers.

The fact that Ves accepted all of them only encouraged more groups to join the growing collection of biomechs!

At some point, the new additions weren't confined to mechs.

"Will do, sir. We'd like to bring our crew and families along as well. Do you have room for a couple of extra shuttles?"

"Sure." Ves answered. "Hey, do you have a spare shuttle?"

"Uhm, I think we have one lying around here somewhere."

Ves, his honor guard and the biomech technicians of the Roving Hunters no longer had to cram themselves in the rabbit shuttle.

They all gave up on the blasted biovehicle and moved over to other shuttles that were already accessible. Even though there was a small risk that the vehicles came with backdoors, Ves didn't think that a local gang was sophisticated enough to hatch such a scheme.

Since they were no longer stuck in the underground hangar, Ves and the others had access to many more vehicles. If they wanted to, they could have approached and subverted any other parked vehicle on the street!

Ves and the Larkinsons decided to occupy their own shuttle. Now that they weren't forced to share space with the Roving Hunters, they enjoyed a lot more room.

"Finally!" Vincent looked relieved. "I can move on my own again!"

An honor guard who was trained in piloting shuttles took the helm. Even though an organic shuttle was very different from a conventional shuttle, most of the basic controls were virtually identical. Standardization stretched across tech bases. There was no reason for bioshuttles to adopt a completely different control scheme when the standard one already did the job.

After an entire hour went by, the coalition somehow grew from 18 mechs to 150 mechs.

150 mechs!

At least twenty-five different groups of mechs applied and joined the growing army of mechs and biomechs.

They also brought over 50 different shuttles, transports and other vehicles! Each of them were occupied with lots of people and some very valuable goods and supplies.

All of these groups had pretty much formed a spontaneous refugee train! Ves didn't even have to micromanage all of these different elements. Officers and underbosses rose up and organized the chaotic train on their own accord!

Under ordinary conditions, gathering elements from so many different gangs, outfits and other organizations would definitely stir up a lot of friction.

This was especially considering that there were plenty of rivals and natural opponents in the train!

Yet despite the underlying hostility between some of the elements, no one thought of pursuing their vendettas at this time!

While there were plenty of fringe groups that wanted to take advantage of the chaos, there were many other people and organizations who just wanted to keep their heads down and stay alive!

Right now, they were absolutely getting what they wanted. After the refugee train surpassed 100 mechs, no one with aggressive intentions in mind dared to approach the mechs that were nominally under the command of Ves.

There were way too many mechs!

Even if some people suspected that the mechs in the refugee train weren't united at all, no one wanted to put that assumption to the test!

Numbers were scary. Each and every mech in the refugee train was a working second-class killing machine. Even the cheapest and smallest one was already capable of destroying a lot of tree structures!

Ves became more and more worried that this house of cards would fall. Any strong opponent that could field at least two mech companies could easily make the refugee train fall apart!

Yet none of that happened. To his considerable amazement, they never encountered any mechs from powerful organizations such as the political factions or a highly-militarized organization like the ultralifers.

As Ves and his growing band flew further and further away from Veoline, it appeared there was nothing in the surrounding areas that were worth fighting.

That did not cause Ves to feel reassured, though.

As Gentle Lotus Base would soon come within sight, he had to face a very difficult dilemma.

Should he break up and disband the refugee train or should he bring them all back to his stronghold?

Chapter 2839 - Strength in Numbers

Ves couldn't feel more relieved as he and his growing band of refugees left Veoline's immediate sphere of influence.

Along the journey, the swarm had ballooned to over 200 biomechs and over a hundred different organic vehicles. Each of them came from various desperate groups that sought any scrap of order on a planet that had completely descended into chaos.

No matter if they wished to join the Larkinson Clan or not, no one split up once they became a part of the growing refugee train.

One of the most primitive ideas of humanity and many other sentient races was the recognition that there was strength in numbers.

While much of the chaos that had erupted in Veoline emerged as a result of smaller and weaker organizations rising up to take advantage of the lack of order, they were ultimately small fry!

Every decent armed organization possessed at least a handful of biomechs. While the authorities restricted the number of mechs that any single individual or organization could own, as long as the numbers remained limited, the local Planetary Guard never bothered to look too closely.

That was because the government was also aware that there was safety in numbers.

It was incredibly frightening if a single person or company suddenly brought a hundred mechs to the surface of Prosperous Hill VI!

Yet if there were twenty people bringing just five mechs each, then that was a much more manageable situation.

Naturally, those twenty individuals had to be separate and unaligned from each other. This was why the planet was tightly-monitored by the authorities. At any sign of collusion, the Planetary Guard would proactively step in to confiscate the war machines and break up the hidden collective!

For centuries, this had been the modus operandi of the rulers of Prosperous Hill. With entire government departments in charge of tracking every mech and biomech and the parties that owned them, there shouldn't have been a way for anyone to organize them together!

In the case of most small organizations, this was indeed the case. In the process of managing the small groups that had joined his temporary coalition, Ves already started to feel encumbered by managing all of the special needs and interests of these squabbling refugees.

Even if they were engulfed in a life-threatening crisis, people hadn't entirely got rid of their own desires and priorities!

The only reason why these issues hadn't led to serious problems yet was because the degree of danger was still enormous.

Back when they were still close to downtown Veoline, everyone could see and hear the enormous scale of fighting that took place over there. The burning and collapsing tree structures along with the hundreds and thousands of mechs clashing against each other served as a very clear warning that there were bigger threats at play!

Perhaps their mechs might not be that much stronger than the ones in the hands of private outfits, but there was one crucial factor why they posed a much more serious danger.

Their numbers were too great!

Ves scoffed. "Everyone has to abide by the rules except for the ones who set them in the first place."

In order to perform their enforcement and protection duties, the Planetary Guard, the local military garrisons and many other government entities did not have to abide by the

strict restrictions. They could bring as many biomechs to the surface as they could justify.

Normally, this shouldn't have been an issue since the war machines were all on the same side.

At least that was the theory.

Yet as the destructive scale of fighting that had led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands citizens showed, the government forces weren't on the same side!

Centuries of rot, bribery and subversion had taken root in these institutions. Ves didn't know how the radicals and other opposition factions had managed to command such firm loyalty of so many troops, but they succeeded to an extent that was inconceivable to the conservatives!

With the help of Master Brixton's explosive revelations, the public's respect and regard for the ruling faction had dropped to the lowest point in the LRA's history. Even if much of the masses didn't pick a side, there were still plenty of impressionable people who decided to throw their support behind the revolution.

All of these would-be revolutionaries were currently the main reason why the planet turned into a warzone!

Their numbers had grown to such an extent that Ves would never be able to survive if they directed their might at him. He and his refugee train simply didn't have the strength and cohesion to resist an attack from an organized faction!

"I need to keep my head down."

His only use was to participate in the design duel. Now that it had ended, his usefulness came to an end. There was no incentive to protect him or kill him. Rather than waste resources on an irrelevant foreigner, it was better for these factions to deploy mechs and troops against their main opponents!

He recognized that he didn't have to fear too much from them as a result. The conservatives and radicals had more important battles to fight.

The real threat came from the fringe groups, especially the ones that were stronger than ordinary outfits.

On the final stretch back to Gentle Lotus Base, Ves shared his concerns with Venerable Jannzi.

Although his relationship with the female expert pilot hadn't been good as of late, they were still family. There was no point in acting on their animosity towards each other when their lives and the lives of other Larkinsons on the planet were at risk.

"The threat hanging over our heads won't evaporate when we return to Gentle Lotus Base." He explained over a private communication channel. "We know that a bunch of extremists called the ultralifers want to kill me in order to avenge my perceived slight towards the LRA. While I don't know how strong they are, the quality of their biomechs, the training level of their mech pilots along with the apparent quantity of mechs at their disposal all point out that they definitely have the strength to crush us. We hardly have any mechs at our base!"

"Is that why you've gathered all of these armed refugees?" Jannzi asked.

"Well, originally, I just wanted to pool my strength with others in order to make it out of the city. Now that I've done that, it's wasteful to wave them all goodbye. I've already persuaded some of these groups to join the Larkinson Clan, but we won't gain enough mechs and biomechs to defend ourselves against a serious threat. If we can absorb all 200 mechs in our refugee train, then we won't be pushovers anymore!"

"...Do you truly think you can keep this rabble under control?" The expert pilot expressed her skepticism. "Sure, you might be able to persuade them to stick to our base in order to take comfort in numbers, but once a strong opponent shows up, I doubt that any of these Lifers are willing to lay their lives on the line to defend a group of foreigners."

Ves sighed behind his helmet. "That's why I'm trying to figure out a way to absorb them all into our clan. Once they become a Larkinson, they'll gain an immediate sense of belonging to our clan! You know what I'm talking about. Their odds of sticking around and fighting in unison will become a lot greater!"

At this point in time, Ves didn't care about the hidden dangers of rashly inducting groups of different Lifers into the Larkinson Clan.

Previously, the recruiters of the clan applied a strict set of criteria to everyone that applied to become a Larkinson. The people who wanted to become a part of the rising clan not only had to bring useful skills, but also possess a compatible personality.

The recruiters rejected everyone who was too violent, too abusive, too disrespectful to the rules, too uncaring of family and so on. This was because none of them wanted to introduce any timebombs into the ranks of the Larkinsons.

Yet at this time, Ves couldn't care about these long-term considerations. Compared to a vague and hypothetical threat that would only become relevant years from now, he was much more concerned with preserving his life for the next couple of days!

What he could see, Jannzi could see as well.

"Don't force these people to join our clan." She warned him. "No matter how desperate you are at bolstering our numbers, it's not right to coerce anyone into becoming a part of us. Those who are unwilling to abandon their old lives and leave their current homes don't deserve to get tricked. If you pull something like this off, I will stop you myself, do you understand?"

"Hey, who do you think I am? I would never do that to anyone! I have principles, you know!"

Inwardly, Ves cursed. It appeared he needed to make some adjustments to some of his plans. If he wasn't able to employ hard selling tactics, then he needed to switch to soft selling, which was much slower and less effective.

He didn't feel too upset, though. No matter if he employed harsh or gentle means to persuade the refugees into joining his clan, he was confident he would be able to sway the majority of them in due time!

"Once we reach our base, I need you to stay in your mech and continue to show off your presence. Your identity as expert pilot is one of the few stabilizing factors we have. The respect that ordinary people have towards demigods is universal. Whether they pilot biomechs or classical mechs, none of them can disregard your identity!"

Venerable Jannzi let out a sigh. "I will do my part. I can't keep all of these people quiet, though. You need to find others to manage these different groups."

"I'll try and see what I can do."

Their discussion ended just as they finally reached Gentle Lotus Base. The sight of the familiar prefab structures and walls not only relieved, but many others as well!

Now that they were on their own, many groups that had attached themselves to the temporary coalition didn't have anywhere else to go. While they may or may not have the resources to go into the woods and set up a disaster shelter or something, no one immediately requested to leave.

No one knew whether they would be accosted by a strong squad of mechs with less-than-friendly intentions in mind.

At the very least, the refugees did not dare to leave when the revolution had just begun. Who knew if the scale of fighting would expand in the next few days!

Everyone wanted to adopt a wait-and-see approach. If the fighting in the cities quickly died down, then many groups might not feel the need to stick together anymore.

Ves did not want to see that outcome. Any group of mechs that left was another missed opportunity to increase the strength of his indigeonous force!

One way or another, he wanted to take everyone over!

Ves realized that the people back in the base might not be informed.

"Wait!" He quickly transmitted to the base. "Don't shoot! These people are my helpers right now."

"Patriarch Ves? Is that you?" Commander Casella Ingvar asked.

"Yes. Due to some unfortunate circ.u.mstances, my initial Infinity Guard escorts fell victim to the ensuing chaos. I had to resort to desperate measures in order to fight my way back here. I'll explain everything once I'm inside."

"Please proceed, then. We have all been waiting for your return."

Chapter 2840 - New Promise

For a long time, the local authorities heavily restricted the amount of mechs the Golden Skull Alliance and the Infinity Guards were able to bring to the surface.

It wasn't until very recently that Ves managed to persuade Master Werther Cline in loosening these restrictions for him. After all, he had become one of the most controversial mech designers in recent memory due to the widespread promotion of the controversial design duel.

Ves thought he'd be able to ship hundreds of mechs to the surface, but the reality was less than optimistic.

The mechs that emerged from Gentle Lotus Base only amounted to just twenty-eight mechs!

To be sure, this was much better than before. The Larkinsons, the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan had only been allowed to bring a couple of mechs each. The Infinity Guards received a greater allowance, but only to a modest extent.

After the end of the first phase of the design duel, Master Cline pulled some strings to allow the different organizations to ship a couple more mechs to the surface.

The quantity was much less than everyone hoped, but at this point they were extremely vital in projecting a unified front against the refugee mechs!

While it seemed inconceivable for the paltry amount of mechs aligned to the Larkinson Clan to defeat a mob of 200 mechs, the former nonetheless projected a lot of strength!

The base defenders were all cohesive and unified. There was no doubt that their mech pilots would stand their ground and defend the base and its occupants at all costs!

The same determination was lacking from the refugees. The fact that they abandoned their previous homes and strongholds in order to attach themselves to a haphazard refugee train already indicated that they were lacking in courage.

In this regard, the ultralifers and the diehard rebels were much more superior!

In any case, the mechs deployed by the occupants of Gentle Lotus Base not only looked formidable due to their unity, but also their quality and distinctiveness.

Different from the biomechs employed by most refugee groups, the mechs utilized by the Golden Skull Alliance were all military-grade or equivalent to it! The quality of their armor systems, the power of their weapons and the discipline demonstrated by their mech pilots all made it clear that they were not to be trifled with! Each defending mech was at least four to ten times more expensive than the biomechs utilized by the refugees!

This was not a surprise to Ves. Second-class mechs were much less affordable on a relative basis. Their power was greater, but only wealthy people and organizations could afford to field and maintain them. If an outfit wasn't good at generating revenue, then it could forget about fielding mechs!

The fact that every individual group in the refugee train was able to field a handful of mechs indicated that they were all good at something. Even if they looked rather shabby and pathetic right now, it would be a mistake for Ves to doubt their competence!

"It will be quite difficult to manage them all." Ves muttered.

When the bioshuttle carrying Ves, Vincent and his honor guard arrived at the entrance of the base, the Larkinsons gladly let the vehicle inside!

The first action he took after emerging out of the shuttle was to invite the Roving Hunters inside.

He requested the Roving Hunter personnel to leave their vehicles and line up in front of him. Although Captain Rivington did not feel comfortable in doing so, he nonetheless exited the c.o.c.kpit of the Taragon.

"What's this all about, Mr. Larkinson?" The fit team leader looked puzzled.

"Before, I promised that you would have a place in our clan. I intend to keep this promise. Are you still willing to become a part of my clan?"

The Roving Hunters looked at each other. Most of them eventually looked up at Captain Rivington. His men trusted in their leader to make the right choice!

While the man weighed this important decision, Ves issued a couple of orders.

Nitaa approached and handed the Larkinson Mandate over to him. When his gauntlets held the heavy tome, he felt Goldie's care and concern.

"I'm fine." Ves communicated to her in a spiritual fashion. "I'll need your help, though. If we want to make it out of this place alive, we can't do it alone. We need to gain the cooperation of as many locals as possible, and the only reliable way to do so is to induct them into the Larkinson Clan."

Nyaaa?

"I know it will be difficult, but I hope you can do your best to welcome all of these newcomers. Don't be afraid to.. exert more effort into making them recognize the glory of our clan. I don't want any second-guessers in our midst."

Ves knew that Goldie could be counted upon to handle the influx of new 'recruits'. However, even she had limits. The effect she could exert on someone's minds was subtle.

No amount of persuasion would be able to convince stronger-willed people and fanatics!

While he did not think there were many of these kinds of people amongst the refugees, Ves already knew that the Lifers were awfully stubborn in certain matters.

Just like the Ylvainans, they would continue to hold onto their principles no matter if they did not fall in line with the Larkinson Clan!

Considering their origin, Ves could already predict that much of the new recruits would insist on utilizing biomechs and biotechnology in their daily lives.

This was very problematic as the Larkinson Clan currently didn't possess many accommodations for this tech base. The only exception was the recent acquisition of the Dragon's Den.

At least the clan managed to rush the capital ship swap!

"Mr. Larkinson?" Captain Rivington spoke up again. "After thinking about it, we would like to go through with it as long as you can give us an assurance."

"What is your request?"

"Will you continue to allow us to pilot biomechs? We have trained in piloting biomechs all our lives. While we can all pilot classical mechs to a degree, we aren't as good with them. If your clan doesn't allow us to pilot our preferred kind of mechs, then maybe it's best to go our separate ways."

That was an outcome that Ves did not want to see! Captain Rivington was not only a reliable comrade in battle, but he was also a level-headed leader.

Ves intended to put him in charge of the Lifer refugees who joined the clan. With someone like him looking after the people he knew best, he could solve a lot of problems without spilling over!

This was a significant decision. Fortunately, Ves had already weighed the matter beforehand.

"I can agree to that." Ves gently nodded. "You may not know this, but we recently acquired a capital-class bioresearch ship originally built in the LRA. With this new vessel, we can provide enough support for a decent force of biomechs. As the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, I can promise to you that biomechs will definitely have a place in our mech roster. We can flesh out the details later, but with our new capital ship, I can assure you that biomechs will not be an afterthought!"

"What about mech designers, sir? While I was initially okay with piloting commercial biomech models, now that I have seen all of your mechs up close, I feel that ordinary biomechs are too inadequate. Will you be able to provide us with high-quality biomechs designed in-house?"

That was a sharp question. Ves didn't expect Captain Rivington to note this important detail.

"I don't specialize in designing biomechs, but I can hire those that do." Ves honestly replied. "In fact, a local Journeyman who specialized in designing cyborg mechs is supposed to join my clan, but now that this state has become embroiled in war, I might have to look elsewhere."

The team leader looked steadily at Ves' armored form before nodding. "That's good enough for me. Since you're a mech designer, you should know better than a bureaucrat why it's important to supply us with biomechs. We'll become very upset if you can't fulfill this need."

"Oh, you don't have to remind me. Now, if you have no more questions, please step forward."

The Golden Cat did not exert too much effort to connect Captain Rivington to the Larkinson Network. This indicated that the man genuinely accepted the clan in his heart!

"Welcome to the Larkinson Clan. How do you feel?"

"I.. I never imagined it would be like this. If you weren't a Lifer, I would have thought for sure you're a local specialist!"

Ves awkwardly chuckled. "Well, I did win a design duel that was held in order to settle the question of whose living mechs are better. My research and understanding of life is much different from that of a typical biomech designer. I have applied some of my insights in surprising applications. What you just feel right now is just a taste of what our clan has to offer to its members."

While Captain Rivington was immersed with the novel sensation of becoming a part of the Larkinson Network, Ves proceeded to induct the other members of his competitive team into the clan.

To his surprise, not every member of the Roving Hunter passed Goldie's test. The most prominent person that felt very reluctant to abandon their old identities and start over in an entirely different organization was Oliver Vlambeer, the mech pilot of the Optimon!

"Oliver.. why?" Captain Rivington softly asked.

The rookie mech pilot looked apologetic. "I'm sorry, boss, but the LRA is still my home. I know that everything is getting worse at the moment, but that makes it even more important for mech pilots such as myself to remain in the state. Once the people at the top solve their argument, our state needs a lot of help to climb back up to its old level."

Both Ves and Captain Rivington sighed. This was a noble sentiment and maybe a naive one as well. It just so happened Oliver Vlambeer was still young enough to hold romantic notions about his mech piloting career.

Ves shrugged. "If this is what you wish, then we won't insist. Just make sure you are aware that you and your fellow doubters are separate from the comrades who have accepted our offer. They are Larkinsons now, not Roving Hunters, although I don't mind if they continue to call themselves that. What matters is that you aren't on the same side anymore. Do you understand?"

Oliver reluctantly nodded. He already noted that Captain Rivington, Carlie Jenten and many of the biomech technicians gained an entirely different demeanor after they went through the induction ritual.

Even though the young mech athlete had only joined the Roving Hunters a short time ago, he already knew his comrades well enough to notice such a significant change.

It was clear that the joiners were already sincere in their intentions to live a different life!

Captain Rivington moved over to hug Oliver and pat his shoulder. "Hey, I don't begrudge your decision. If you want to stick with the LRA, then that is your business."

"Our door is still open." Ves gently said to Oliver and the other refusers. "You can reunite with Captain Rivington and your old comrades at any time. Until then, please take note of our base restrictions. As guests, we can't allow you to bring your mechs past our walls. I'm afraid that your Optimon can only be parked outside."

"I understand. We won't break the rules."