

Mech 2921

Chapter 2921: Lull

The airfleet under the command of Ves entered into a slightly awkward state. In a matter of weeks, it had ballooned in size and strength. However, it became increasingly harder to sustain this pattern.

People weren't stupid. Even after a lot of criminals and anarchists took advantage of the situation and inflicted a lot of death and destruction, it was impossible for them to engage in wanton destruction for so long!

These crazed murderers either killed each other off, got cleaned up by a stronger force like Ves' airfleet, or simply sobered up and went into hiding.

The outskirts had calmed down. While many ordinary citizens were in dire need of aid, they were no longer under great threat.

One notable development was that millions of refugees who resided in the downtown areas had fled to the periphery. Many of them didn't dare to take the risk of travelling in biovehicles because any random mech might shoot them down for random reasons.

This has led to an enormous migration of people on foot. They fled from the center of Veoline like a tide of slow-moving ants. Many of them suffered from various indignities along the way, but their situation became a bit better once they started to group up and organize themselves.

The Larkinsons paid careful attention to the refugees passing by the airfleet. Compared to the citizens who lived in the outskirts, the downtown folk were much more desirable.

There was a greater proportion of well-educated professionals among their population. Lawyers, managers and even low-ranking biomech designers could be found among their ranks!

It was easy for the airfleet to persuade these valued human resources to join the Larkinson Clan. After getting caught up in the devastation of the civil war before fleeing through a long stretch of dangerous and lawless streets, their sense of security had sunk to the bottom.

They welcomed any chance of joining a strong and well-armed organization!

Though the Larkinsons had to put the Aspect of Healing to much greater use in order to treat traumatized city folk, Ves was happy with this development. The supply of highly skilled professionals was so great that his Larkinson Clan wouldn't be short of excellent medical doctors, geneticists, implant surgeons, beast designers and other biotech experts as long as he could bring them all back to his expeditionary fleet!

Normally, it would have been much harder to poach these elite personnel. They were largely lifelong employees of established biotech companies. There was no reason for them to quit their promising careers and abandon a state that was entirely geared towards fostering their development!

However, wars had a way of changing people's minds. When shells started flying over their heads, the Life Research Association didn't seem like a good place to them anymore! No amount of support for the biotech sector was worth the risk of death!

"How are we doing in terms of recruitment?" Ves asked as he sat behind his desk.

"We're doing extremely well compared to before, sir." Commander Rivington answered. "Our numbers have just broken through 20,000 members. The stress of absorbing so many Lifers into our clan is enormous, but upon your orders, we have tried our best to pick up every desirable professional that we can find. In fact, many of the refugees have already heard about us and wish to join. We have to slow down and impose a lot of restrictions in order to cope with the current situation. We are nearing our limits, so we have to be a lot more selective than before."

Recruiting more than 20,000 people in a short amount of time was not as great as it sounded at first. This was because only a third of them were actually desirable. The rest consisted of spouses, children and maybe other extended family.

The Larkinsons had no choice but to accept these excess people, and Ves wasn't too upset about the situation. His clan prized family, so he couldn't be hypocritical about it. Besides, the needs of the extra refugees weren't great. They just needed a small amount of space in a vehicle in order to keep them happy.

"Have you managed to pick up any senior professionals?" Ves asked.

Rivington shook his head. "Journeyman Mech Designers and other people at this level have better ways of escaping the current chaos. They are either working for an established organization or they have relied on their guard forces to flee from the city center. They don't need to take shelter with us in order to secure their lives."

"A pity."

Ves already expected as much. It didn't matter. The kind of personnel he had already managed to recruit already plugged the lack of doctors, researchers and other necessary personnel in the Larkinson Clan. In this regard, Ves fully met his original goal for visiting the Life Research Association.

If he was able to leave the planet right away, then he would not feel as if he had wasted his opportunity.

It was just that Ves still felt he was missing out by giving up the opportunity to obtain a vial of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum.

He constantly reconsidered his difficult decision throughout his day! He felt so bad about backing off that he always had to remind himself that courting death was not a good way to get ahead in life!

He vigorously shook his head. "Maybe I need to spend some time with the Aspect of Rationality."

His mood lightened after he thought about his latest innovation. The organic statues had all demonstrated their value in different ways. The Aspect of Transcendence was a particularly epoch-transforming existence!

Though Ves had reached a bottleneck in his research where he wasn't able prevent his test subjects from dying or failing to arouse their spiritual potential, at least he was heading in the right direction!

For something as promising as being able to induce spiritual potential in people who originally possessed none, Ves was not in a hurry to achieve quick success.

He knew that something as fantastic as this could not be done with a rudimentary amount of knowledge and experimental results. Ves had to keep performing experiments, keep trying something new and keep gathering more data in order to progress this long and difficult project.

Perhaps he might not even be able to achieve a truly successful result unless he achieved another breakthrough in his understanding of spirituality and spiritual engineering.

Considering the current circumstances, Ves suspended his experiments. There were way too many people in the airfleet now and who knew if one of them were perceptive enough to notice some clues.

Besides, the supply of convicted criminals had dried up. The airfleet had become so notorious in the region that every malcontent had long moved away!

In essence, the forces under the command of Ves essentially replaced the Planetary Guard as peacekeepers!

Their excellent reputation and good deeds had spread far and wide. No one cared that the Larkinsons were a bunch of foreigners who didn't fully embrace biotechnology. During these troubling times, safety was more valuable than national pride!

Now that he suspended his experiments, Ves suddenly had a lot more time on his hands. Though he could still spend his time on analyzing data, managing his ballooning airfleet and more, a part of him missed the opportunity to engage in his primary passion.

"I'm a mech designer. Why am I not designing mechs?"

Technically, he could do so at any time, but it was pointless. He needed to coordinate with his fellow Journeyman and his design teams in order to start a serious project.

Even if he came up with a fantastic new idea, it wasn't his turn to lead the next round of design projects this time. Gloriana had waited a long time to take the helm in designing the first expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan. She was in charge of coming up with the initial mech concepts and determining all of the important design choices.

If he dared to come up with a competing idea, Gloriana would probably scream in his face!

"Hmm, perhaps I might not be able to design any mechs soon, but that doesn't mean I have to sit still."

The upcoming expert mech design projects would probably be his best products for a very long time. Ves wanted to design an individual mech that exceeded the quality and potential of his Devil Tiger for a very long time!

He saw a lot of hope in his upcoming projects. He had at least six chances to succeed in his aim.

"I have to make sure that Venerable Joshua's expert mech is the best out of the batch!"

He had an opportunity to implement some of his recent ideas. For example, he could apply the principles of prime mechs to them. He could also integrate some organic components in them in order to amplify his design philosophy.

All of this required a lot of thought and preparation. Even if Master Willix promised to provide her assistance to the projects, she was only responsible for solving the problems that were beyond the capacity of Journeymen to deal with. She was not supposed to dictate the direction of the mech design projects!

Still, that was already enough. Ves had to make the best possible use out of this unique opportunity. Master Mech Designers were very busy and they rarely volunteered their services to little Journeymen!

What was even more important was that the upcoming expert mech designs would play a pivotal role in defining the high-end mech power of the Larkinson Clan for years to come.

The stronger his expert mechs, the longer they remained relevant. Ves did not want to design a mediocre expert mech and be forced to replace them a few years later because their power level couldn't catch up to the competition in the Red Ocean!

"Maybe I should find a way to incorporate a battle network in them as well."

Venerable Dise and the Swordmaidens already showed they didn't need to rely on a design spirit to unleash a lot of power.

As Ves mused about creating new battle networks centered around his other expert pilots, his comm beeped an alert.

"What's going on, Casella?"

"The occupied warehouse complex is under attack! A third party has just started to bombard the site!"

"What?! I'll head to the command center straight away!"

Ves dropped his prior ideas and immediately started to think about who would want to attack the paramilitaries. Obviously, this third party must have learned there was something valuable at the complex.

This strengthened his suspicion that the life-prolonging serum that he was drooling over may actually be buried underneath the site!

When Ves reached the command center, he immediately observed the projections. They currently showed several live feeds of hidden scouting drones that his forces had planted in the vicinity of the warehouse complex.

All of them showed a lot of activity! The recently-installed organic turrets along with a number of biomechs armed with ranged weapons were firing their weapons into the sky!

Numerous explosions erupted in midair as all kinds of ordnance attempted to bombard the warehouse complex!

Only a handful of explosive shells managed to reach their destinations, but that was not the extent of the bombardment.

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

Powerful kinetic impacts roiled the entire site. Mechs suffered heavy damage and the ground started to get cratered as a lot of purely kinetic rounds slammed onto their targets with unstoppable force!

Due to their extremely high kinetic energy, it wasn't easy to intercept them! They not only traveled incredibly fast, but also couldn't be stopped through regular means.

The paramilitary force was forced to erect energy shields to protect their most strategically-important positions!

However, as dozens of kinetic projectiles slammed into these barriers, the shield generators keeping them up were quickly reaching their limits!

"Who the hell are attacking them?" Ves questioned.

"We've dispatched our scouts. We'll get an answer for you soon enough!"

Chapter 2922: Inexplicable Attacks

The paramilitary force was taking an awful beating!

Yet they were not without the power to hit back!

The projections showed that the besieged side was already starting to fire projectiles at the origin point of the long-ranged artillery fire.

The counter-battery fire might not be as accurate due to the lack of preparation, but it should at least exert a bit of pressure on the attacking side!

Ves carefully observed the artillery duel as both sides continued to sling projectiles at each other.

Due to the nature of this kind of exchange, neither side resorted to energy weapons. It seemed the paramilitaries were prepared for this situation. A lot of biomechs armed with laser weapons and positron weapons decisively dropped their main weapons and took out spare projectile weapons.

Even if their models weren't optimized for physical weapons, they could still add to the weight of fire. Their accuracy might be worse, but it was already worth it if at least one in ten shots hit the mark.

Ves continued to observe the artillery duel for a while before Commander Casella realized something important.

"We need to distance our airfleet from the battle site, sir. Right now, we are close enough to make it seem as if we can take part in the battle. If we continue to stay in our current position, both sides can easily misconstrue our intentions and gang up on us in order to remove an unstable factor."

Although this possibility sounded unreasonable, Ves did not dismiss Casella's words. It would be very odd for the airfleet to stay in the vicinity of a random battle that didn't have any relations with the Larkinsons!

A typical uninvolved party would panic and move away as quickly as possible.

"Alright. Start up the emergency evacuation plan. Get us out of here as quickly as possible. Fly as far away as possible from both the paramilitaries and the unidentified attackers. I don't want to generate any misunderstandings."

"Very well, sir."

The Larkinsons did not forget that they were still stuck on a dangerous planet. It was essential to prepare a way to leave their current location as soon as possible.

Still, it took a lot of time for everyone to get back to their vehicles. It took even more time to transport all of the supplies and equipment back to their transport vessels.

In the end, the Larkinsons were forced to leave a significant amount of assets behind in order to speed up their evacuation.

Roughly twenty minutes after ordering the evacuation, the entire airfleet briskly rose into the air. Every biovehicle and biomech moved away from the direction of all of the explosions and impacts.

Every clansmen felt relieved as they were distancing themselves from the active battlefield. None of them were eager to put themselves in harm's way after surviving the outbreak of violence in Prosperous Hill VI.

Ves didn't feel too bad about this. The mobility of his fleet was high enough that it wouldn't take much time to turn around and reach the battlefield. He doubted that the situation would change in a short amount of time.

As the artillery duel continued, it had become clear that this was not the prelude of a decisive engagement.

The scout drones dispatched by the Larkinsons failed to detect any large troop movements. This meant that the third party initiated a bombardment for other reasons.

When a scout mech finally managed to reach the location of the attacking force, the colors and markings of the biomechs immediately elicited a reaction from Ves!

"It's these guys again!"

"Do you recognize them, sir?"

"It's the ultralifers!"

Both Ves and Commander Rivington did not have a good impression of these radical nationalists. They dispatched numerous soldiers and mechs on a mission to slaughter the foreigner who humiliated their state.

Although the ultralifers hadn't showed up again after Ves and his followers reached Gentle Lotus Base, the animosity hadn't gone away.

Ves found it strange that these ultralifers chose to attack the paramilitaries occupying the warehouse complex.

Why weren't they trying to finish what they started? After all, it was not exactly a secret that Ves and his Larkinsons had amassed a formidable airfleet in this area.

If the ultralifers had enough courage to attack the grey mechs, then they should have enough strength to attack his airfleet!

Ves could only conclude that the ultralifers prioritized the warehouse complex and the secrets it may hold over pursuing a trivial vendetta!

"Interesting." He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Well, I'm no friends with either side, so there's no harm in letting them beat each other up. I hope they destroy each other in the process."

However, this was a vain hope. Neither side appeared to be eager to escalate the fights. After two hours of constant bombardment, the ultralifers ceased their efforts and pulled back their artillery biomechs and accompanying escort force.

For their part, the paramilitaries simply let the attackers go. The base personnel were already in the process of repairing the battle damage and clearing all of the rubble.

Ves and his advisors could only guess at the reasons why this engagement ended in such a tepid manner.

"This doesn't really make sense." Ves frowned. "If the utralifers wanted to take over this complex, then they should have waited until they could launch an all-out attack. They should have dispatched an assault force after softening up the defenders with artillery barrages. Since the ultralifers chose to pull back, they're giving the paramilitaries plenty of time to fix the damage and restore their defenses!"

Commander Rivington also looked puzzled. "The ultralifers lost the advantage of surprise. The moment they started to shell the warehouse, they exposed their hostile intentions. The paramilitary organization will definitely be on guard against another attack. This will make it harder for the ultralifers to achieve good results next time."

"There are other reasons why the ultralifers chose to attack the site in this fashion." Casella stated. "For example, the two sides might be engaged in negotiations. If the ultralifers are displeased with the direction of the talks, they may have decided to exert pressure on the other party by resorting to bombardment. Even though their efforts resulted in a considerable amount of material and psychological damage, the paramilitaries didn't actually lose that much combat effectiveness. This means that the two sides have not completely turned into irreconcilable enemies."

That explanation made quite a bit of sense, but no one knew for sure. There could be a dozen other possible explanations.

Ves grunted. "We'll just have to wait and see. From what I know about the ultralifers, they're not exactly the most restrained bunch of people in this state. I bet they will definitely launch another attack tomorrow."

His prediction turned out to be correct. Different from last time, the ultralifers didn't engage in another bombardment.

Instead, a couple of their mech companies sneaked close and launched a brief and momentary close assault. A dozen turrets got wrecked and a lot more biomechs incurred varying degrees of damage.

After just ten minutes of fighting, the ultralifer mech companies immediately retreated.

Again, the paramilitaries didn't pursue. They remained stubbornly in place and guarded themselves against other attacks.

Even though the Larkinson airfleet had pulled back by 50 kilometers, they were still able to observe what happened by relying on scout mechs and observation devices.

There was definitely something fishy taking place. Ves had the impression that he was a spectator to another game. It felt strange for him to be uninvolved in a fight. Usually, he would find himself right in the middle of a crisis.

"Do you think the ultralifers will launch an all-out attack?"

"It's a possibility." Casella answered. "The ultralifers have acted with caution up until now. If they stick to their pattern, then they will launch another harassing attack tomorrow. However, this could be part of a greater ploy to lower the vigilance of the paramilitaries."

Ves and the Larkinsons waited for tomorrow in order to see how the situation evolved.

As expected, the ultralifers launched another tentative attack. They decided to put their artillery mechs in action again. The warehouse complex came under bombardment yet

again, but this time the paramilitaries erected significantly more countermeasures against persistent shelling.

Ves expected the base defenders to fire back at the artillery mechs.

However, a couple of mech companies that belonged to the paramilitaries suddenly showed up at the flanks of the bombardment units and collided against the ultralifer artillery units!

A furious skirmish ensued! Ves watched with rapt attention as he observed a battle between two groups of biomechs. He keenly took note of the strengths and weaknesses of the different biomech models.

The short but furious engagement caused both sides to lose dozens of biomechs. After a harsh struggle, the ultralifer units received orders to retreat. They left the field while leaving their downed biomechs behind. The paramilitaries quickly picked up the valuable wrecks and disappeared from view.

Ves became more and more confused. If the ultralifers weren't confident enough to win against the paramilitaries, why did they engage in hostilities in the first place?

"At least we have managed to confirm one of our guesses. The paramilitary organization has more biomechs at its disposal. Their assault force did not come from the warehouse complex. The biomechs on guard over there are all accounted for." Commander Casella said.

This was hard proof that there were much more biomechs out there than what was visible to the Larkinsons!

Ves felt more and more at ease with his decision to lay low and retreat. Sure enough, these paramilitaries did not unveil their full strength!

However, this caused him to feel more and more powerless. There was no way he could defeat the current occupants of the warehouse complex. Who knew what the paramilitaries were doing over there. Perhaps they had already succeeded in breaking into the pinnacle lab!

"Goddamnit Lucky. Why are you still sleeping like a baby?"

If Lucky had recovered, Ves could have dispatched his commando cat in order to find out whether there was actually a pinnacle lab. Right now, he was only guessing at the truth, and that uncertainty was gnawing at him. He constantly dreamed about getting his hands on additional vials of serum.

He could create and boost a lot of design spirits! He could permanently bolster his upcoming expert mechs! He could use all of the abundant amount of life energy to create powerful new spiritual constructs!

There were so many uses for life-prolonging treatment serum that Ves was starting to feel more and more tortured by his decision to stay away.

It was as if he was undergoing withdrawal symptoms!

Every bone in his body wanted to get closer to the warehouse complex!

"Goddammit! I need to resist this impulse!"

Ves thought about subjecting himself to the Aspect of Tranquility or the Aspect of Rationality. However, he was too wary of altering his mindstate to do so. Besides, his mental strength was formidable enough that he was able to resist their effects.

He knew that the best way to deal with this situation was to rely on his own willpower to suppress his urges. Self-control was essential to his continued survival.

For a long time, Ves neglected this quality, but perhaps this was a good opportunity for him to exercise this neglected side of him. No matter how much he wanted to obtain the valuable serum, he could not afford to lose the gains he made so far. His airfleet was too weak to take part in the fighting.

However, his plans couldn't keep up with reality.

On the fourth day, the ultralifers did not choose to launch an attack on the paramilitary force.

Instead, their artillery mechs opened fire on the airfleet!

Explosions rippled through the slow-moving biomechs and biovehicles as distant attackers launched an unprovoked attack on the Larkinsons!

"We're under attack!"

"Red alert!"

"Intercept those attacks!"

Chaos immediately spread among the clansmen as they were completely caught off-guard!

Chapter 2923: Lack of Rigor

The 'majestic' airfleet of the Larkinson Clan resembled a giant animal armada.

Almost every vehicle and mech was organic in nature. Their exterior either consisted of resilient flesh, skin or bone. Combined with the deliberate bestial aesthetic that the local designers adored, the airfleet might as well consist of hundreds of primal creatures!

Though the vehicles looked incredibly disturbing to humans who weren't citizens of the Life Research Association, the local citizens were accustomed to seeing them. The sight of the massive airfleet awed and reassured many people, especially as the Larkinsons started their peacekeeping operations.

Over the weeks, the newly-inducted clansmen increased the cohesion of the fleet in various ways. Aside from unifying command and control, seasoned Larkinsons such as Commander Casella Ingvar paid close attention to the uniforms and color schemes of the recent additions.

Issuing the same uniforms to every new recruit was a great way to increase everyone's belonging and identity to their new clan!

The Larkinsons also changed the color scheme of every biomech and vehicle in order to match the standard red color scheme of the Larkinson Clan. This caused the airfleet to look like a tide of red. The extra touches of white, black and golden motifs broke the monotony and made the biovehicles look more impressive.

In truth, the airfleet was just a giant caravan of random biomechs and refugee vehicles. The only reason why it gained a reputation of strength was because it had never clashed against a strong adversary.

This became very evident when chaos started to spread after the airfleet got shelled!

The biovehicles under fire quickly began to perform evasive maneuvers regardless of the fact that they were in the middle of a formation!

Some of the fleet elements left the protective envelope and flew away from the crowd. Other vehicles paid so little attention to where they were moving that they almost collided against other vehicles! If not for the automated safety and anti-collision features of these advanced organic vessels, a lot of passengers would have lost their lives due to the mistakes of fellow clansmen!

Ves witnessed all of this happening by looking at the projections in the command center. The proud and famed airfleet he managed to build up over the course of his forced stay on the surface of Prosperous Hill VI was already starting to fall apart at the seams!

The newly-recruited Larkinsons showed their lack of rigor at this time. Unlike the Larkinsons in the expeditionary fleet who had been baptized in war, these former Lifers did not undergo any training and experiences where they could toughen up their mentalities.

The original Larkinsons that Ves brought to the surface tried their best to reassert control.

Commander Casella urgently issued new instructions on the command net. "Spread out but don't move on your own initiative! Follow your new track and await further orders!"

As shells continued to rain down the airfleet from afar, a couple vehicles that got hit multiple times already started to crack, bleed or even fall apart!

Numerous smaller shuttles which were more fragile than other vessels even began to crash to the ground!

Some clansmen managed to evacuate their vessels in time, but the initial volleys already harvested the lives of hundreds of Larkinsons.

"Knight mechs! Shield the most vulnerable vessels!" Venerable Jannzi roared as her Bright Warrior flew in front of a damaged biotransport that carried dozens of families!

Under the rallying cry of an expert pilot, many mech pilots regained their composure and performed their duties.

The biomechs with shields covered the beleaguered air vessels as they spread out and slowly lowered their altitude.

The mechs with ranged weapons either fired back at the calculated origin point of the enemy shelling or tried to intercept the incoming ordnance.

Ves was not satisfied with the slow and sluggish reactions. The quality of the clansmen at his disposal was worse than he thought. The irregular recruiting effort along with the lack of veteran Larkinsons in the ranks caused him to have an overinflated impression of their competence.

Their first true setback as a member of the Larkinson Clan cruelly exposed their actual readiness!

While bombardments were scary, the airfleet was not without the means to resist. Ves and his leaders based their current strategy around the assumption that they would be able to deal with this kind of situation.

Unfortunately, the mostly-civilian mech pilots they employed in recent weeks rarely encountered this kind of situation.

Getting shelled by heavy mechs only happened in wars, not small-scale skirmishes between private outfits!

The shock and surprise factor caused many of them to believe that they were being attacked by an entire mech army!

Though the Larkinsons in the airfleet slowly began to sort themselves out, the speed at which they did so left much to be desired. They were acting like headless chickens who only formed up because others were forcing them to move to the right spot.

Ves became rightfully pissed, but this was not the time for him to blow up at his own subordinates. Right now, they needed to resolve the immediate crisis!

"Tusa!" He directly called his cousin.

"Your orders, sir?" Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson replied as he jumped inside the cockpit of his mech.

"Get out there and lead a bunch of fast-moving mechs to annihilate the attackers!"

"Will do, sir, but let me warn you that our other mechs won't be able to keep up with my machine."

"It doesn't matter, just go ahead first! If my guess is correct, the ultralifers have deployed modest-sized detachments of artillery mechs and escort mechs. You don't have to touch the latter but you must absolutely neutralize the former! The faster the shelling stops, the more lives you save. Speed is of the essence!"

Venerable Tusa welled with fury. "You've gone to the right person for that. I'll take care of it pronto!"

When the Piranha Prime emerged from a mech transport, it zipped forth at full speed, not even bothering to wait for backup to gather.

Even though he still didn't have access to a genuine expert mech, Tusa had gained an abundant amount of confidence in his ability to defeat regular mech units.

The crimes and depravities he witnessed during his stay on this planet parsed through his mind. Recalling each of these incidents caused him to accumulate more and more indignation.

He had an especially strong dislike towards the ultralifers. What did Ves and the Larkinsons do to them? Why did they insist on launching unprovoked attacks over and over?

"These ultralifers need to be cleaned up!" He growled. "If these radicals think that the Larkinsons are willing to continue taking hits, then they have another thing coming!"

It took a lot to make Tusa truly angry. The more he stayed on Prosperous Hill VI, the more he questioned his ideals. The reality of the situation brutally crushed his overly-optimistic views on freedom and put him in a cycle of confusion and self-doubt.

Yet at this moment, the expert pilot pushed all of those difficult questions aside.

His clansmen were under attack!

Though the refugees who recently joined the clan barely qualified as Larkinsons in his eyes, he still had an obligation to treat and defend them like any other clansman!

Seeing the newest batch of Larkinsons suffering and dying in front of his eyes sent him over the edge! As he urgently piloted his light mech to cut through the air and fly over hundreds of different tree structures, he gradually realized that his earlier dilemmas were distracting him from what truly mattered.

His doubts faded from his mind. While he still hadn't resolved the questions in his mind, he recognized that some freedoms mattered more than other freedoms.

The freedom to live was one of the most essential rights of humans. Tusa strongly believed in his principle.

Yet his attempts to police this planet had taught him that there was only so much a single expert pilot could do. In addition, a lot of scum didn't deserve the freedoms they enjoyed.

He was not an ally of justice or a beacon of righteousness. It was futile to try and make everything right in human space.

He recognized that he should focus on activities that were within his capacity to fulfill.

"I can't fight for every innocent human in the galaxy, but I can definitely fight on behalf of my family and comrades!"

As a trueblood member of the Larkinson Clan, it was his right and duty to stand up for the Larkinsons. He saw nothing wrong with showing favoritism. The freedoms he enjoyed such as the right to pilot the unique Piranha Prime came from the clan to begin with. There was no future for him if he did not ensure the freedom of his fellow clansmen!

Righteousness burned from his force of will as it flowed into his prime mech. Its receptive Unending alloy began to resonate with his burning fury.

"The ultralifers must be punished!"

Although the Piranha Prime did not excel in aerial combat, the mech that Tusa piloted was an upgraded variant. It contained a lot of high-end parts that forcibly elevated the performance of the prime mech!

It took less than five minutes for the Piranha Prime to reach the hostile artillery unit.

Venerable Tusa rapidly took in the numbers, mech composition and positions of the enemy force.

Just as predicted, the ultralifers fielded around three biomech companies. Only fifteen consisted of heavy artillery mechs, though they barely fit this description.

The six-legged biomechs looked similar to the Swarm Monarch that Doctor Navarro deployed in the design duel. The only difference was that the artillery mechs in the hands of the ultralifers were smaller, slimmer and apparently more mobile. The artillery cannons mounted on their backs were smaller in caliber but dangerous nonetheless.

Each of them were loosely surrounded by a plethora of light and medium humanoid and bestial biomechs. The escort force consisted of many different mech models, but Tusa did not spot any signs of disorganization despite the sporadic counter-fire they received from the airfleet's counterattack.

He knew that would change very soon.

"Catch me if you can!"

His prime mech dove towards one of the artillery biomechs, dodging numerous shells, positron beams and kinetic rounds along the way. Though some of the attacks hit the mark, the Unending alloy layer ensured that none of them dealt a lot of damage.

"DEATH!"

The Piranha Prime came close enough for its heavy, disorienting glow to affect every nearby mech pilot in the vicinity.

Tusa noticed that the ultralifer mech pilots didn't expect to get exposed to suppressive glows. He grinned wider as he saw that numerous mechs momentarily froze or lost control.

The daggers of his prime mech sunk into the artillery biomech without effort! The force of the Piranha Prime's dive practically forced the poor insectile machine to its knees. The attacking mech kept stabbing the wounded mech at various points until it collapsed while bleeding a copious amount of blood.

"Next!"

The Piranha Prime jumped into the air and soared onto the next artillery mech, completely ignoring the futile counterattacks by the escorts.

Every melee mech that attempted to come close quickly collapsed as their mech pilots were unable to handle the duel pressure of a heavy and suppressive glow.

Every ranged mech that attempted to fire their weapons at the rampaging light mech either missed their shots, held their fire for fear of hitting friendly mechs, or simply achieved no observable damage due to their target's unreasonable defensive properties.

It took less than two minutes for the Piranha Prime to silence all of the heavy artillery units! Their limited mobility ensured that none of them were able to retreat before Tusa exacted his retribution!

By the time the first wave of Larkinson reinforcements arrived, the nightmarish Piranha Prime was already in the process of slaughtering the escort mechs.

Now that the ultralifers were finally aware that the single high-quality light mech was not something they could deal with, their commander decisively ordered the surviving biomechs to scatter!

The attackers who ambushed the Larkinson airfleet were running like dogs!

Chapter 2924 - Indignation

The red airfleet carefully hovered over the ruined site where over a hundred biomech wrecks were sprawled across an area spanning several kilometers.

Most of the remains of the green-coated biomechs were concentrated on an open road. The most conspicuous among them were the fifteen ruined heavy artillery mechs. Each of them bore a copious amount of stab wounds on the surface that had all been dyed with insectile blood.

Almost everyone riding aboard the vehicles or piloting one of the mechs on protection duty observed the aftermath of the slaughter.

Only a handful of the fallen mechs consisted of red-coated Larkinson biomechs. They succumbed after trying to hold back a superior number of hostile biomechs that tried their best to run away from the Piranha Prime!

Though powerful and fast, it was beyond the ability of the Piranha Prime to hunt down lots of fleeing biomechs if all of them scattered in many different directions.

In order to ensure that the ultralifers suffered much greater losses than the Larkinson Clan, the reinforcements that followed after the Piranha Prime had done their best to contain as many fleeing enemies as possible.

Though there was a decent amount of risk of flying over a wreckage field while knowing that the ultralifers could return at any time, Ves chose to do so because he felt it was necessary.

"Do you see what has become of our enemies?" He addressed his clansmen in a confident but also solemn tone. "Witness the fate of those who dare to attack our brothers and sisters. Just one of our expert pilots is enough to crush this formation. The enemy mech pilots barely lasted a couple of minutes before they lost their demeanor as warriors."

The command center broadcasted hastily-edited footage of the short battle that ensued. The Larkinsons all became fascinated by how domineering the Piranha Prime dismantled the enemy artillery mechs while weaving through many other hostile mechs!

"Don't fear our enemies. Even if they are strong, we are stronger. Just look at their reaction! After learning first-hand that attacking Larkinsons comes with a price, their courage fell short. After giving in to their selfishness, they abandoned their mission and only sought to save their lives. The craven mech pilots even ejected prematurely from their biomechs in order to get out of our reach! Now tell me, do we have anything to fear from these bullies?"

"No!" The Larkinsons in the airfleet roared!

"I wish I could strangle them myself!"

"Our expert pilots are invincible!"

Ves carefully observed the reactions of the Larkinsons stationed in the command center.

They not only felt satisfied at the fact that their force managed to crush the enemy artillery unit, but also tried to hide their shame at their initial reactions.

Many of the Larkinsons who recently joined the clan had never lived through an event like this. Their primary reasons for joining the growing airfleet was to seek safety in numbers. The Larkinsons implicitly promised to protect the lives of everyone who sought refuge here. This unspoken contract came under significant strain now that the airfleet lost numerous biovehicles.

Out of the thousands of people in the airfleet, hundreds of them had perished from the unprovoked bombardment!

This was a trivial loss in relative terms but a heavy loss in absolute terms. The confidence of the newly-recruited Larkinsons had grown shaky in the span of a single hour.

Ves immediately recognized the threat to the continued existence of his powerful airfleet!

This was why he immediately set aside every other matter in order to hold a speech that would hopefully restore everyone's morale.

He knew that he had to project an image of strength at this time. He and his fellow Larkinsons should not be seen as helpless and incapable of defending their fellow clansmen!

Fortunately, the audience was receptive to his ploy. They became more and more engrossed by his narrative as he continued speaking.

"We have crawled up from adversity and shed blood in order to earn our success. We have lost many lives and mechs, but we have gained much more in return. Our clan is not a pacifist organization. In this dangerous cosmos, we can only rely on ourselves to maintain our existence. This grievous attack sought to break us. It did the opposite. Do not let the ultralifers have their way. This attack won't go unanswered. This I promise. I will not rest until we have punished the people responsible for killing our fellow clansmen!"

"Kill the ultralifers!"

"We need to track them down and destroy their base!"

"Are we making the right decision!"

A lot of clansmen were eager to take revenge, but there were numerous Larkinsons who possessed a more sober mind.

It was not wise to attack the ultralifers. Ves was well aware of the shortcomings of his current force. Their airfleet was constantly vulnerable and needed continuous protection. Their biomechs were too heterogeneous. Their mech pilots were lacking in training and coordination.

However, the most important shortcoming that Ves had recognized in his band was the lack of fighting spirit.

Tvu ulnzao tu hmznl ovfo Vul vft imre ezmjr fhhlplomqut om ar val uknutaoamrfzw diuuo jfl urozuiw fgluro vuzu. Tvu lqfii rpqguz md suouzfr Lfzcarlmrl ovfo Vul vft araoafiiw gzmpervo juzu ovu mriw mrul jvm qfarofarut ovu lurlu md nzatu frt hmrdatu rhu ovfo Vul vft nfarlofcaeiw dmlouzut msuz ovu wufzl.

If the new recruits were surrounded by his regular Larkinsons, then the former would quickly take after the latter through passive osmosis.

However, because the former Lifers didn't know anything better, their development in this aspect was too rudimentary!

This was a problem, especially when they were still stuck on a planet filled with hostile forces. Ves decided to take matters into his own hands.

If his new recruits all lacked a fighting spirit, then he would ram it down their throats!

He snarled. "The utralifers are completely ignorant to the fact that they have provoked a dragon. No matter how many times they outnumber us, we will not back off from making them bleed ten times as much as we did! Our scout mechs are already backtracking the route of the artillery unit we have defeated. We'll be able to uncover their hideout sooner or later. Once we have collected enough intelligence on our adversaries, we will storm their gates and overrun their biomechs with the strength of our righteous fury!"

"For the clan!" Commander Casella Ingar cried!

"FOR THE CLAN!"

"FOR THE CLAN!"

Ves ended the broadcast at this high note. He sensed that he had sufficiently aroused the fighting intent of his clansmen. For now, they were not thinking about acting selfishly or splitting off from the airfleet. While Goldie was strong enough to make these people reconsider such decisions, he did not wish to rely on this unnatural safeguard, especially when it already exhibited some flaws.

Hu ukaout ovu hmqqftrt hurouz frt urouzut f lqfii quuoare zmmq jaov val duiimj hmqqftrtuzl.

Now that they were out of view, Commander Casella and Commander Rivington dropped their enthusiastic facade.

As the people in charge of leading the Larkinsons in the airfleet, they were much more aware of their actual condition. They were also cognizant of how this aggressive approach could go wrong.

Casella was most upset about Ves' response to the attack. "Did you really have to push us into this confrontation, sir? I won't argue with you that the ultralifers pose a threat to us. However, do you realize that we are on their home ground? From what my sources have told me, the ultralifers may be a fringe group, but they still enjoyed a lot of support over the years. They have a long foundation in Prosperous Hill VI and will certainly be able to field a lot of biomechs. If they are as strong as I think, then defeating them is

either impossible or extremely costly. We've already lost a painful number of Larkinsons. Please don't exacerbate our losses by seeking conflict against a stronger opponent."

She made some good points. Though she was just as pissed with the ultralifers as Ves, she did not feel it was worth the risk of attacking the ultralifers.

He did not respond to her points. "What do you think, Commander Rivington?"

"Weren't you targeting the paramilitaries? They're still occupying the warehouse complex that you have been eying all of this time. Why are you turning your attention to one of their enemies? If we attack the ultralifers, we not only incur a lot of losses, but also fail to attain any strategic goals. In contrast, the paramilitaries can just sit back and watch as we do their dirty work! In the end, we'll weaken ourselves while ridding the warehouse occupants of a significant threat!"

That was a more important counterpoint to Ves. "You're not wrong, commander. Attacking the ultralifers will indeed reduce our chances of taking over the warehouse complex. I still believe my course is correct. Right now, I'm not thinking about accessing a hidden pinnacle lab or obtaining any high-grade life-prolonging treatment serums. I'm thinking about keeping our men together. Remaining passive and running away from this awful attack will have a devastating effect on the confidence and morale of our fellow Larkinsons. What do you think will happen if we are confronted by another unprovoked attack?"

Both Casella and Rivington looked dour. They might not fully understand his considerations, but they were still experienced enough in leadership to know that Ves was rightfully worried about this problem!

"I don't think the consequences will be as awful as you say, sir." Casella softly said. "I agree with you that stepping back from a provocation will depress the confidence of our men, but I am sure that we can still keep our clansmen together. Going on the attack can easily lead to much greater losses! Death is permanent. It's not worth the risks of attacking an unknown enemy force. Not when we are lacking in too many capabilities. Our lackluster intelligence capabilities mean that it is very difficult to figure out anything critical about the ultralifers. We'll be going in blind if you insist on launching a reckless assault!"

Vul liaevoiw jarhut. Waovmpo Cfifgflo frt qfrw md vuz Bifhc Cfol, ovu Lfzcarlmrl vft nzuhامل iaooiu Inaul frt ardmzquzl mr ovu ezmprr. Wvaiu ovuw vft niurow md dmzquz Laduzl ar ovuaz zfrcl jvm juzu zuifout mz fhypfarout jaov ovmlu jvm nmlullut pludpi ardmzqfoamr, ovuzu jfl f iaqao om vmj qphv ovuw hmpit iufzr, ulnuhafiiw jvur hmqqprahfoamr vfl tuouzamzfout mr oval nifruo!

Still, he had a number of other ideas in store to compensate for this lacking capabilities. He also wasn't resigned to letting Lucky claim more sick days!

"I haven't lost my reasoning, commanders. I won't attack unless I am reasonably certain that the deck is stacked in our favor. We can work on the issues you've mentioned. What we can't do is sit still or turn back. We have to keep moving forward. We have to signal to every Larkinson that we are warriors, not cowards!"

Try as he might, the two mech commanders still harbored a lot of misgivings about the direction that Ves had chosen.

In fact, he felt rather helpless about his current predicament. He needed to show bold leadership and turning his ire towards the paramilitaries made no sense. The only legitimate group that he could justifiably attack was the ultralifers!

Even if attacking them was fraught with peril and did not advance any greater strategic purpose, his concerns about the airfleet's morale along with his personal hatred against the ultralifers was enough for him to settle on this choice!

The damned radicals had punched his face over and over again. Did they think the Larkinson Clan consisted of herbivores? No! The Clan of the Golden Cat might not have chosen the most impressive animal as its mascot, but every kitty had claws!

"I have already made my decision, fellows." He told his commanders. "Don't try to persuade me any further. Instead, work with me to ensure that this operation will go as painlessly as possible. Don't worry. I'm not stupid. If the ultralifers are too strong, we'll take our revenge in other ways."

Chapter 2925 - Mobility Conundrum

Did Ves make a stupid decision? Commander Casella and Commander Rivington certainly leaned in this direction.

Many other senior Larkinsons also doubted their new objective. While it was awful that they had suffered an attack, most of them had managed to survive. Wasn't that good enough? Why must they go on the offensive when their main goal had always been to wait until they were able to leave this dangerous planet?

"You're making the wrong decision, Ves." Jannzi confronted Ves as she picked up a listless-looking Lucky and started to pet his tired form. "Look, I am just as upset with the ultralifers as you, but some forces are too strong for us to challenge. Let's assume that the ultralifers on this planet are not too numerous. Have you ever considered that they might have allies? There are many different factions and other groups on this planet, and from what I have learned, many of them maintain at least some ties to each other. The agenda of the ultralifers may be repugnant, but it probably resonates with at least a couple of other organizations."

Ves hadn't thought of that.

"Meoooooww..." Lucky cutely turned his body in her ??p.

"See? Even Lucky agrees!"

"He's just being lazy. He doesn't want to go out on another infiltration mission." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "Look, even if you are right, many groups are too busy trying to fend for themselves to take care of an ally. Mechs are worth their weight in exotics during dangerous times. I seriously doubt that anyone is willing to risk the loss of many mechs and mech pilots to help a beleaguered friend."

"You'll regret it if you test this ?ssumption, Ves."

"No I won't. We'll just have to perform more research and collect more intelligence." He firmly stated. "I'm willing to slow down the timetable in order to ensure our success. I'm not asking for too much as well. I'd like to destroy the ultralifer presence on this planet if possible, but I'm okay with giving them a bloody nose. My primary motivation for going on the attack is to shape our clansmen and condense their fighting will. If they can't even gain the courage to fight before we are able to return to space, then what is the point of retaining them? We don't seek trouble, but every Larkinson should be capable of fighting adversity when danger comes."

"Danger that you often attract on your own accord."

"Not this time!"

Venerable Jannzi sighed. They held this kind of discussion many times. Though she was an expert pilot known for her steadfastness, there were some realities that even she couldn't change. She had spent enough time with Ves to realize that changing his mind on certain matters was a herculean task.

She relaxed in her seat while continuing to massage Lucky's belly. She frowned as she observed his condition.

"What's wrong with your pet? Lucky usually isn't like this. Does he need an oil change or something?"

Ves shrugged. "I don't know. He's been this way for a while. He just needs time to recover. He'll be back up in no time."

"Meeeeoooooww..."

Though Jannzi felt there was something odd about Lucky's condition, she did not pursue this matter further. She did not have any technical acumen so she was completely in the dark on how to fix the mechanical cat.

"If you insist on confronting the ultralifers, can you modify my Bright Warrior?" She requested. "I miss my Shield of Samar. I can do a lot more if I have my main mech, but I can still cope with piloting a Bright Warrior if there isn't any other choice. I can do more with it if you improve it. Can you turn it into a prime mech?"

"You're asking too much!" He sputtered in response. "I need a lot of Unending alloy to do so. It's easier to procure an expert mech for you! Look, our clan doesn't have any Unending alloy left to spare. This is also why your Shield of Samar is only partially clad with this material. In addition, even if we have some extra tons of this material on hand, it's impossible for me to retrieve it from the Spirit of Bentheim. You'll just have to make do with a more normal mech."

She looked quite upset at that answer. "Tusa gets to pilot his own prime mech."

"That's because his mech looks small and innocent enough to get approval from the inspectors after a cursory examination. Your Shield of Samar is way too big and intimidating for that. Speaking of that, do you have any ideas about what weight class you wish to retain for your expert mech?"

"My expert mech?"

His shameless attempt to change the topic of the conversation succeeded as Venerable Jannzi immediately changed tracks.

She couldn't help it as the Shield of Samar was not only her primary mech, but also her lifelong partner. She had waited a very long time to witness its conversion into a true expert mech that was strong enough to keep up with her capabilities!

"Your wife approached me a few times on this issue." She answered. "I haven't made up my mind yet. A super-medium space knight is the most familiar choice for me, but it doesn't make much sense now that the limitations in the past don't exist anymore."

Ves was not surprised to hear that Gloriana already started to quiz his expert pilots in private. Her design philosophy and approach compelled her to learn as much as possible from her clients. She needed these details in order to achieve the best possible fit.

"Are you thinking about stepping up the weight class to a heavy mech?"

Jannzi fell silent for a moment. She softly scratched Lucky's cheeks, which caused him to utter a pleasant mewl.

"I'm thinking about it. In the past, it was unthinkable for us to field heavy mechs. Now, we have hundreds of Transcendent Punishers in our fleet. A heavy expert mech better complements my piloting style."

"You're aware that will mean that your new mech will remain slow, right? In some of our previous battles, we were never able to put you to good use. Your mech is too slow to keep up with offensive actions and it is too slow to chase after attacking melee mechs. The only real use for your mech is to block enemy firepower, but this is largely redundant as of late now that we have converted to beefier second-class starships."

"What are you trying to say, Ves?" Jannzi frowned.

She even paused in petting Lucky, which prompted the spoiled cat to lodge a complaint!

"Meoow!...."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Do you want another belly rub?"

"Meow meow..."

Lucky exaggeratingly wiggled his body until Jannzi brushed his plated belly. His eyes squinted as he enjoyed his luxurious treatment.

Getting pampered by an expert pilot was one of the most pleasant experiences in his life!

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion at his gem cat. Was Lucky really as infirm as he sounded and acted?

Ves coughed a bit. "The utility of a heavy defensive mech is extremely limited in space combat. Distances are magnified because the void is simply too big and empty. The rapid speeds of other spaceborn mechs means that a heavy space knight can't effectively intercept them without resorting to unusual options such as grappling chains. Our expeditionary fleet spans at least twenty kilometers on average. An attacking mech force can easily fly in a wide circle around your Shield of Samar and attack our starships without worrying too much that you'll catch up to its mechs."

Mobility was king in space combat! The ability to move was so vital in space that good maneuvering could literally decide the outcome of a battle!

"Look, heavy knight mechs make more sense when deployed on land." He elaborated. "Their relative speeds are higher because it is a little easier to speed them up when they walk on legs. Distances are far shorter on solid ground and there are numerous terrain features that further make it easier to funnel enemies in a narrow area. Vertical movement is also more limited on land. Unless we are facing a lot of aerial mechs, you can easily force an enemy to confront your Shield of Samar head-on in the right circumstances."

Indeed, landbound heavy knight mechs were more abundant on certain land-based battlegrounds. Some military regiments often liked to field them in order to defend against a siege or to push an assault against a fortified position.

While all of this sounded nice, Venerable Jannzi was aware that moments that the Larkinsons deployed on land would not happen too often. Moments like these where they were forced to fight on land were more of an exception than the rule, and even then she was unable to pilot the mech she wanted.

Ves could see that his words were having an effect. "Don't forget your core purpose. You have to defend as many Larkinsons as possible. The expeditionary fleet is our home base and houses most of our clansmen. It should go without saying that you should be equipped to defend it as best as possible, but under the current circumstances, any spaceborn mech with decent mobility can simply outpace you and prevent you from hindering their actions."

"Expert mechs are top-of-the-line machines!" Jannzi retorted. "They are always faster than standard mechs! As long as you upgrade their flight systems, I won't necessarily be outpaced by light mechs."

"That.. is true." Ves admitted, but he did not leave it at that. "It is doable to speed up your heavy expert mech to the point it can win a race against the Ferocious Piranha, but its design will have to incorporate a lot of tradeoffs that might not be cost-effective. What is more concerning to me is that you won't have any chance of catching up against a mobility-oriented expert mech. Any light expert mech and most medium expert mechs will easily be able to run rings around you! It just so happens that these hostile elements happen to be the ones that you have to stop the most!"

He made a very good point! Though Jannzi was already aware of this issue at some level, she always dismissed it out of helplessness.

"I don't need to fulfill every role, Ves. I can just try to be the best at what I do. We have other expert pilots who can do a better job at chasing after other expert mechs. I don't necessarily need to shoulder this responsibility."

"You have too few responsibilities in battle as it is." He painfully pointed out. "If we can slim your Shield of Samar down during its expert mech conversion, then you can finally catch up to most combat actions in space. You won't be a useless rock in space anymore!"

"I am more than just a useless rock! Don't belittle my contributions!"

"Look, I don't want to change the weight class of your mech either, but if you want to do a better job at defending our fellow clansmen, then you need to adapt to our needs! Your current approach is not a good fit to what we need to defend our fleet against fast

and agile melee mechs. You need to stop being so selfish and do what is best for our clan!"

"I am not being selfish!" She defended herself, but her words rang a little hollow as she couldn't refute its logic.

She stopped petting Lucky as she fell into a difficult situation. She was comfortable with piloting tough, immobile mechs. Moving around too much wasn't her style. She is on the other side of the spectrum from Venerable Tusa in this regard.

Yet as she recalled the many times that Venerable Tusa took action and achieved fantastic results due to the amazing mobility of his prime mech, Jannzi couldn't help but feel a little jealous.

Was it really right for her to insist on piloting a sluggish mech?

Chapter 2926 - Stubborn Determination

As an expert pilot who dedicated herself to piloting a single defensive mech, Venerable Jannzi Larkinson did not make her life easy.

Ves already discovered that every expert pilot was abnormal. They were defined by their deviating qualities.

Still, there were differences between different expert pilots. Some of them exhibited more eccentricities and abnormal behavior than others. Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Joshua both existed at the opposite ends of the spectrum in this regard.

He had long tried to guess the reason behind these differences. If possible, he wanted to steer the development of future expert pilots so that they didn't all end up following Venerable Jannzi's footsteps.

Right now, the doubt and stubbornness shown by Jannzi with regards to the future configuration of her expert mech gave Ves a powerful clue.

Becoming more narrow-minded and developing a strong adherence to specific values and self-imposed principles all helped to hone one's will. At the same time, a strong will also caused expert pilots to become more focused and eccentric.

It was a positive feedback loop. As expert pilots continued to develop their unique strengths, they became more obsessed with their personal causes.

From what little Ves knew about ace pilots, it appeared that it was not only essential for expert pilots to remain true to their convictions, but to go a step further!

The more a high-ranking mech pilot progressed, the more he or she became removed from their prior humanity.

Was this a good or bad development? Ves didn't know. He hypothesized that expert pilots that leaned towards Jannzi's approach would be able to progress faster and reach greater heights.

As for less-focused and more 'human' expert pilots like Joshua, they had to navigate a lot more hindrances in order to keep up with others.

Yet Ves did not believe this was the full story. The phenomenon of high-ranking mech pilots was much more complicated than he currently knew. The MTA poured centuries worth of studies on them and still couldn't explain anything. How could Ves possibly do any better?

Sure, his unique background allowed him to make observations and delve into theories that many other researchers were clueless about, but he seriously doubted that Star Designers and the top researchers of humanity made no achievements!

Therefore, he did not fully commit to the assumption that expert pilots like Venerable Jannzi had a brighter future ahead of them. Of course, he also had a bias for more human expert pilots, and he wasn't afraid to admit it. The fact that Joshua happened to be his biggest fan and helper also played a significant role.

Ves would rather have a single copy of Joshua than five copies of Jannzi!

Venerable Joshua was an obedient, open-minded expert pilot who could easily be manipulated. Not only that, he was open to piloting all kinds of mechs, allowing Ves to choose his role according to the needs of the Larkinson Clan. Any mech designer would love to work with a pliable expert pilot!

Therefore, even if Joshua followed a more difficult path to the top, Ves was more than willing to invest in him and help him overcome his barriers. He might also learn a lot about how expert pilots progressed, thereby allowing him to apply the lessons he learned to other powerful individuals.

Al dmz Jfrxa... lvu vft hvmlur vuz mjr tazuhuamr. Vul tmpgout ovfo lvu ruutut mz jfroul val arnpo.

Besides, Qilanxo was already her patron. The big lizard's understanding of spirituality was very comprehensive, if not entirely applicable to humans. Regardless, the former exobeast entered into a symbiotic relationship with Jannzi, so it was in her best interest to help her human partner thrive.

As Ves thought about the peculiarities of expert pilots, Venerable Jannzi remained in thought while petting Lucky. The tired and exhausted cat continued to luxuriate on her ??p.

It was as if Lucky was Jannzi's baby!

Though she hadn't made her thoughts known yet, Ves could feel how her thoughts swung by reading the changes in her force of will. The strong protective vibe she exuded rippled in different ways according to her thoughts.

The direction of these fluctuations started to make Ves more and more concerned. He did not like where this was going.

Her eyes sharpened as she looked up from the mechanical cat she was pampering.

"Ves." She spoke, her tone making it clear that she had already made up her mind. "You have brought up some good points. It is untenable for me to fight the way I have done so far. I cannot deny that I have failed to do my duty by stopping the Trost piloted by Venerable Kelvin Praetor during the Battle of Reckoning. I have been reflecting on that moment many times myself. If I piloted a faster mech, I could have cornered the Trost by coordinating my movements with the Amphis piloted by Venerable Linda Cross."

In the end, the Amphis managed to entangle the Trost with its chainsword, but that was only after Vincent Ricklin and Taon Melin bailed the Larkinsons out by breaking through to expert candidate.

His forces had to learn how to secure victory without relying on low-probability events like sudden breakthroughs! Ves couldn't keep depending on winning a lottery to get himself out of a difficult situation. It was much more reassuring to win battles in the most direct fashion rather than resorting to creative solutions.

Tvu ifoouz jfl f hmrluypurhu dmz guare omm jufc!

Therefore, Ves never stopped in trying to find more ways to strengthen and improve his mech forces. The constant recruiting efforts increased the quantity of his soldiers, but he also couldn't neglect his high-level combat power.

This was why it was in his best interest to persuade Jannzi to agree to a change that would make it easier for her to play a role in the coming battles.

Yet instead of succeeding, Jannzi appeared to dig in her heels even harder!

"I understand the needs of our clan as well as you do. I regularly check up with other Larkinsons and keep myself informed of the development within our clan." She stated. "I am not blind to the fault you have pointed out, but I am still committed to piloting a mech

that pursues the maximum possible defensive power. All of the other expert mechs that you'll be adding to our ranks are offensive in nature. They can't do what my Shield of Samar will be able to do. Whether it is shielding a critical weak point of one of our starships or providing excellent cover to one of our ranged expert mechs, I doubt that Venerable Joshua or Venerable Dise will be able to fulfill these roles!"

"Those are overly passive roles that easily be covered by other ?ssets." Ves pointed out. "For example, a ship that has suffered a severe breach and is vulnerable to further internal damage can just drop out of formation and hide behind the bulk of another starship. Our ranged expert mechs can probably take care of themselves, but if they have need of cover, they can just use the Spirit of Bentheim, the Graveyard or one of our other capital ships as their fortress. What you have just suggested are dispensable roles. What can your Shield of Samar bring to the table that only expert mechs can fulfill?"

His counterpunches landed hard. What was the point of piloting the Shield of Samar when other fleet ?ssets could substitute its role with much less effort?

No matter how much area an expert mech was able to cover, its size and dimensions were incomparable to that of an armored vessel!

The many combat carriers of the Larkinson fleet did not carry all of that armor for nothing. What was even better for Ves was that the recent addition of the Graveyard to his fleet roster gave him access to a very powerful defensive bulwark!

Perhaps the hull armor of the Graveyard was not as impervious to damage as the Unending alloy cladding the frontal surface of the Shield of Samar, but quantity had a quality all on its own. It took an immense amount of firepower to chew through millions of tons of solid metal!

Vuruzfgiu Jfrxa eimjuzut. A nfzo md vuz jfl eift ovfo ovu Lfzcarlmr diuuu efarut lphv f nmjuzdpi tudurlasu ?lluo. Sv u huiugzfout frw tusuimnquro ovfo jmpit qfcu vuz duiimj Lfzcarlmrl lfdz.

Yet she could not deny that the recent addition of a defensive capital ship put her current role in doubt.

She only entertained her doubts for a moment before ruthlessly crushing it with her stubborn will.

"I haven't changed my mind, Ves. To me, the Shield of Samar is a mech that should always be a rock. To change it into a feather is a betrayal of its identity and a futile endeavor. While I welcome an increase in speed, I do not want it to come at the expense of making it less solid!"

Ves wanted to palm his face! Why couldn't get it through her skull that she was making herself more irrelevant in battle?

"You're being stubborn for stubbornness sake, Jannzi. While heavy space knights may have a role in certain military mech regiments, our mech forces aren't set up in a way that allows a single defensive mech to play an outsized role in combat. Our fleet is too big for that! What happened during the Battle of Reckoning will happen again and again as long as you don't have a way to restrain or damage fast and distant enemies. Are you willing to sit on the sidelines during every battle?"

"HAVE SOME FAITH IN ME, VES!" Venerable Jannzi blew up! Her force of will flared as her emotions grew more heated! "Just because you designed the Shield of Samar doesn't mean you understand its character better than myself! What you are trying to push will change it beyond recognition!"

"Meooooow!...." Lucky became so alarmed by the outburst that he tried to roll away from Jannzi's ??p.

Unfortunately, the woman kept a firm grip on his metallic body!

Her temper reined in a bit, but that was just because she converted it into another form. Her determination grew stronger.

"I don't believe that your choice is the only one available to me. I have studied other defensive expert mechs in my spare time and I have seen several different solutions to the problem that you have mentioned. If my mech isn't able to catch up to the enemy, then I will make sure the enemy will be forced to confront me one way or another. The Amphis has a chainsword, but there are much more exotic technologies out there that can allow an expert mech to catch a distant opponent!"

Ves shook his head. "You're dreaming! These solutions all have limitations and their addition to your Shield of Samar will inevitably weaken its other properties. Not only that, but most of them are not that effective against other expert mechs. The Amphis itself was too slow of a space knight to catch up with the Trost, remember? Your Shield of Samar will be even slower if you insist on this course, so you will be even more useless than Venerable Linda Cross!"

"I WILL FORCE MY ENEMIES TO PASS THROUGH ME!" Venerable Jannzi declared as she stood up!

"Do you know how difficult that sounds?"

"I won't give up as long as there is a solution! If you don't want to work on this problem, then fine! I'm sure that your wife will be more than happy to take on this challenge. She is much more aware of what expert mechs are capable of than you! I know I can count on her support! In the meantime, I'll focus on trying to develop my own solution as well."

She stormed out of his office while her force of will boiled with determination. It seemed as if she was not going to rest until she managed to bend reality to her whims!

Ves sighed as he summarized the outcome of this little discussion. He didn't know whether he should applaud or admonish Jannzi's stubborn decision.

"Joshua is much easier to work with. Why can't there be more expert pilots like him?" He wondered.

Chapter 2927 - Lacking Strength

His little spat with Venerable Jannzi was a minor distraction from his day. The next round of mech design projects wouldn't be starting anytime soon as long as he was stuck on the surface of Prosperous Hill VI.

He was starting to get crazy the longer he stayed on this chaotic plane. He disliked the Lifers. The citizens of the state not only developed all kinds of weird beliefs about biotechnology, but also suffered from a deadly degree of complacency.

Their lack of readiness and their fragile mentalities left them very underprepared for the current situation.

Ves missed the times when he lived in the Bright Republic. His fellow Brighters frequently had to fight against the Vesians every generation. The constant cycle of war and preparing for war toughened everyone up and left them much more prepared to deal with dangerous and unexpected crises.

"Evidently, the Life Research Association doesn't ascribe to the Societal Revival Theory."

He found that to be a rather interesting detail. So far, many states he visited in the past showed at least some signs of generating a certain degree of conflict in order to keep their people lively.

The Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony sharpened their weapons in order to prevent their archenemies from overtaking them. Even before the Komodo War broke out, the mech militaries of the two states did not dare to slack off! If they showed any weakness, they had no doubt that their enemies would pounce!

The Sentinel Kingdom did not play such a high-stakes game. Instead, their royals and nobles cleverly made use of the friction between their state and the Nyxian Gap to maintain a level of tension and keep their mech pilots on their toes.

Ves didn't know what it was about the Majestic Teal Star Sector that caused them to fight much less battles, but he did not favor the approach by the locals. The fact that the Life Research Association suffered so much damage after the outbreak of hostilities

was a clear sign that maintaining long-term peace only caused them to atrophy from within!

"I can't wait to get out." He muttered. "I have to make sure I get my dues, though."

His contempt for the LRA also came paired with a sense of resentment towards its people. The conservative faction, the radical faction, the combinants, the ultralifers, the unknown paramilitaries and all the other scum on this planet had screwed him over in different ways.

He was done getting beat up all the time. His decision to go on the offensive was not just necessary to preserve the morale of his newly-recruited Larkinsons, but also served as a means to vent his frustrations!

Being proactive was better than being reactive. Rather than leave open the possibility of the ultralifers attacking him for a fourth time, he was much more inclined to preempt their aggression and take the initiative!

Adouz lusuzfi tfwl md lufzhvare frt gfhcozfhcare ovu fzoaiuzw prao ovfo vft ifprhvut fr prnzmsmcut foofhc fefarlo ovu fazdiuuo, ovu Lfzcarlmrl darfiw talhmsuzut ovu vmqu gflu md ovu piozfiaduzl.

Their hideout was a little closer to downtown Veoline than Ves liked. It turned out that the ultralifers occupied a massive underground fortress that had remained fairly unnoticed up until now. While not much was visible above the ground aside from some normal-looking tree structures, their underground fortifications turned out to be quite sturdy and expansive!

"The ultralifers invested many decades in building up their fortifications." Captain Reina Ember reported to Ves after she helped to gather some of the intelligence. "According to one of the contractors I've managed to track down, the underground base goes at least several hundred meters deep. Further scanning and investigation has revealed that the underground fortress possesses enough of a volume to fit at least a thousand biomechs."

Ves observed the projection that showed a map of the site in question. He clearly noted that the scans were rather fuzzy. There was too much uncertainty to know for sure whether the display conformed to reality.

In order to keep their intentions a secret, the Larkinsons did not dare to act too overtly. The scouts they dispatched up until now did their best to keep their presence hidden. This inevitably limited the amount of intelligence they could gather.

Once again, Ves wished that Calabast was here. She would be able to gather a lot more reliable intelligence in the same amount of time.

It seemed that after Ves finished bolstering and elevating the biotech side of his clan, he should take a look at its intelligence gathering capabilities. The Larkinsons could do much better in this aspect as well.

"How strong are the defenses of this underground fortification?"

"I'm sure you can interpret the technical data better than us, sir. The outer walls are thick and there are certainly shield generators onsite that can help with fending off breaching attempts. What's more, the organic nature of the base structure allows it to recover quickly when fed with high-grade nutrients. We need to punch through the defenses straight away in order to succeed."

As Captain Ember continued to outline the defensive measures of the underground base, Ves became less and less hopeful about cracking it open.

"What about the mechs stationed in the base? Do we have any solid idea how many of them reside inside?"

"We don't entirely know, sir. If we take their previous battle losses into account, our estimates of their numbers range from 500 biomechs to 1200 biomechs."

In other words, the ultralifers probably had way too much for the Larkinson airfleet to defeat in an even battle.

What was worse was that attacking the base would hand the ultralifers a powerful defensive advantage. If their underground fortification was strong enough, then the inexperienced and inconsistent mech pilots at his disposal would certainly break before they could succeed in their assault!

He wondered. "It's clear we can't attack the base directly, then. What about their movements? How often do the ultralifers dispatch mech companies and larger units from their base?"

"We have been studying their past patterns for a while now after sourcing several pieces of data. The ultralifers are apparently quite active. Every day, around five to eight mech companies exit the main entrance of the base and go out to fulfill specific tasks. They usually return within the same day, though there have been instances where they have remained in the field for several weeks. This is the exception rather than the rule, though. We've also noticed that the ultralifers have cut back on dispatching mech units after we defeated their artillery unit."

"Have they closed their gates entirely?"

Captain Ember shook her head. "They are still dispatching scout mechs and other smaller elements. In fact, they have grown so vigilant that our own scouts have to back up even further in order to avoid exposing their presence."

These ultralifers might be insane, but they weren't stupid. After suffering a severe and unexpected loss, the radical nationalists withdrew their units and gathered them all in their base to guard against possible retaliation.

Their unusually clever decision gave Ves a headache. How was he supposed to take revenge if the bastards kept hiding within their turtle shells?

Cuzofariw, ovuaz dmzoadahfoamr jfl lofoah frt lofoamrfzw. Uriacu val fazdiuuo, ao hmpit rmo qmsu ar frw tazuhuamr, lm ao jfl spiruzfgiu om lplofarut gmqgfztquro.

Yet the amount of power and effort required to go past all of that soil and break through the other defensive layers was unreasonably large. It would take a long time to breach the underground base from the top by shelling the ground on top of it. During this time, the ultralifers could employ many methods to counter the siege.

For example, they could secretly dispatch their mechs to the surface by making use of secret tunnels. Once these hidden mechs attacked the airfleet from multiple sides, his inexperienced mech pilots would likely panic from the sudden developments!

Another way the ultralifers could relieve their difficult situation was to call upon allies! Though the Larkinsons failed to figure out whether the ultralifers had any friends they could call upon, it was best to assume that this possibility existed unless proven otherwise.

All of this added to the difficulty of punishing the ultralifers.

Ves did not hope for anything as extravagant as uprooting their entire base and killing everyone inside. He just wanted to inflict enough punishment on them in order to finish what he started.

If his airfleet didn't do anything soon, then the morale he had just restored would quickly start to backslide!

Right now, the fighting spirit of his newly-recruited clansmen was still vigorous, but he doubted it would last if he didn't take any action within the next few days.

Being patient was not a virtue this time!

"If we can't rely on our own strength to hurt the ultralifers, what about working together with their other enemies?" Ves wondered. "For example, the paramilitaries occupying the warehouse complex have a considerable degree of animosity towards these bastards. Why not contact them and ask whether they are willing to pool our strengths?"

Tvu Lfzcarlmrl tat lm. Tvuw talnfohvut f lareiu ursmw ar mztuz om ulofgialv zuifoamrl frt lmprt mpo ovu nmlagaiaow md efreare pn mr ovu piozfiaduzl.

Unfortunately, the paramilitary force did not entertain this proposal. Their spokesperson didn't reveal anything to the Larkinson envoy. Instead, they sent the messenger away.

Ves cursed at these developments. "These cheapskates! They just want to sit in their conquered site and reap the benefits of our counterattack against the ultralifers!"

The paramilitares benefited from this situation most of all. Regardless of what the Larkinsons and the ultralifers did, everyone else would have less to fear from the two organizations after they damaged each other.

Ves hated the thought of being taken advantage of. Why should he be forced to take the lead and do all of the difficult work of teaching the ultralifers a lesson? There ought to be plenty of other organizations who developed a lot of animosity towards these aggressive radicals!

"Aren't there any other ways of attacking the underground base?" He asked. "Why not pump toxic gas into the ventilation systems or something?"

Commander Casella Ingvar did not look amused at that suggestion. "That is very illegal, patriarch. Even if we do as you say, a fully-equipped defensive installation is like an armored starship that is buried underneath the ground. It is a fully-contained, self-sufficient fortification that can generate its own air and remain completely sealed from the outside world. Even if we manage to break a hole in its exterior and pump toxins inside, the defenders will simply close off the breached section."

There were probably a lot of other safeguards in place that negated many different forms of attack. From flooding the ground with a torrent of water to trying to induce an earthquake, a modern second-class underground fortification already had answers to many of these calamities!

"The only way to seriously put a dent in this base is if we can drop an artificial asteroid from orbit, sir." Casella said in an exasperating tone. However, the devastation in the surrounding civilian city districts will be immense. The Big Two will not sit still if we drop a rock that is way too big in the middle of a population center."

Ves did not put much stock in this suggestion. "We don't have any ?ssets in orbit to do something like that, so we should just forget about it. Let's collect more information. There has to be an opening that we can exploit. The ultralifers are decently organized but they are not elites."

Hu frt val duiimj Lfzcarlmrl gflahfiw vft rm emmt atufi mr vmj om foofhc ovu piozfiaduzl fo oval qmquro. Tvu Lfzcarlmrl qfw vfsu fqfillut f tuhuro fazdiuuo, gpo ovuw juzu rmo uypannut om hmrtpo f laueu!

Since his current combat ?ssets weren't strong enough to attack the ultralifer base in a conventional way, Ves had no choice but to look for creative solutions.

One day, Ves developed an interesting proposal...

Chapter 2928: Exploiting Crazies

When Ves convened a meeting with Commander Rivington, Commander Casella, Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Tusa, the latter four grew quite curious at what he had to say.

"What's this all about, Ves?" Tusa asked as he casually sat next to his fellow expert pilot. "Did Lucky finally recover from his condition?"

"My lazy cat is still dozing off as usual." Ves responded with a brief grimace. "No, I have something else in mind today. I think I may have figured out a solution to our current conundrum."

They became attentive. They had all grown frustrated at the lack of action in the past few days.

After all, Ves had made a high-sounding speech about how Larkinsons were warriors. If they stopped at this junction without achieving anything substantial, wouldn't that put his credibility into doubt?

"Don't tease us any longer, Ves. Just spit it out. You must have come up with another scheme." Venerable Tusa said.

Ves grinned. "Perhaps. Let me start from the beginning. First of all, in order to defeat the ultralifers, we have to understand them first. What do you recall about their group?"

The Larkinsons in the meeting room exchanged glances.

"The ultralifers are extremists, sir." Commander Rivington eventually said. As a former Lifer, he understood them best. "They're very proud about the Life Research Association and its highly-developed biotech industry. The problem is that they go too far. They're not normal fans. They're obsessive fanatics who can't tolerate a single word of criticism. During normal times, they mostly fought back using words, protests, intimidation and so on, so they were never branded as terrorists or anything like that. Everyone else just learned to ignore their antics."

Ves snorted. "Well, they're a lot less harmless than you all thought. How could the authorities overlook this massive underground fortification? How could the Planetary Guard be okay with allowing these bunch of radicals to accumulate hundreds of dangerous biomechs when they don't allow private individuals to own more than a couple of machines for protection?"

This was a glaring inconsistency and one that made him feel quite resentful about the LRA's government. The obvious answer was that there was definitely something shady about this development. The local administration was rotten to the core.

Rivington shrugged. "I can't tell you anything about that."

"Then tell me more about their ideology. What do they want? What are they working towards?"

"Well, there is nothing more to them than what is already available in public. The ultralifers have never hid their agenda. They want to make the LRA and the local biotech industry more prosperous. The difference from other citizens is that they want to go through great extremes. They think that biomechs, designer beasts and other applications of biotechnology are vastly superior than the alternatives and that the LRA has a great responsibility to spread its model to the surrounding states. They're not shy about advocating war in order to force the spread of biotechnology."

"In other words, they're super fanboys." Venerable Tusa remarked on the other side of the meeting table. "These kinds of people exist everywhere. They're so fanatical about something that their judgement simply disappears whenever their interests come up. They can not only tolerate any faults, but they take any attack on their interests personally."

Ves smiled when Tusa mentioned one the keys to his proposals. "You have stated something very critical about the ultralifers. They're biased. Their judgement is clouded. They can't think straight when it comes to the objects of their admiration. This is one of their strengths, but it can also be their greatest weakness."

Everyone else looked confused at that. The extreme ideology of the ultralifers was a powerful motivator to them. This differentiated them from mercenaries who didn't fight for any cause and constantly weighed the possible gains and losses for every action they took.

Fanaticism conveyed strength! This was a lesson many Larkinsons had learned!

"How?"

Ves did not keep them guessing any longer. His smile grew wider as he activated a projection. It showed a live feed of the clansmen who were enjoying their brief five minute session in the presence of the Aspect of Tranquility and the Aspect of Healing.

He pointed his finger straight at the projected statues. "How do you think the ultralifers will react if they encounter a copy of my living statues?"

" ... "

"Uhm..."

The others looked flabbergasted for a moment. They did not expect that the strategem that Ves hinted at turned out to be related to the angel statues of all possibilities!

Venerable Jannzi grew annoyed. "Ves..."

"Yes, cousin?"

"Are you being serious?"

"I am. No wait, hear me out." Ves raised his palm in order to forestall her angry reply. "First, look at the clansmen who are eagerly queueing up to experience the glows of my new statues. Look at how much admiration they have in their eyes as they look at the statues in the distance. I have queried many of them shortly after I created the statues. Each of them felt attracted by my new creations. Compared to other organic statues, mine exude a special charm that not only makes them more alive, but also causes them to give the impression that they are much more perfect and impressive!"

This mainly had to do with the incredibly high compatibility between his design philosophy and organic matter. A normal Sanctuary mech projected a fairly regular version of Lufa's glow. While it had the same effect as the glow projected by one of the Aspects of Lufa, the metallic mech itself only looked slightly more charming.

The four Aspects of Lufa were different. As the source of the glows, the statues that resembled real, life-like angels seemed to maintain a very convincing illusion that they were truly alive and divine!

This was a level of craftsmanship and flesh shaping that was beyond anything the Lifers had seen!

Commander Casella narrowed her eyes. "Are you trying to exploit the fact that the ultralifers are insanely obsessed with great applications of biotechnology in order to win them over or something? You managed to do so with the former members of Spiritus Sancti, who also happen to share some similarities with the ultralifers."

This was a radical plan, but sadly Ves did not believe the ultralifers would be so easily fooled.

He shook his head. "The ultralifers still hate me. I'm not confident that they will drop all of their animosity towards me just because of this. I think it's better to take a step back and predict how they will react to the appearance of the statues without associating them with a troubling identity such as mine. What do you think they will do if we place a few copies of my living statues just outside their underground fortress?"

A few seconds passed before Rivington made a guess. "I think... they'll instantly fall in love with the gifts. They'll bring it back to their base and worship the statues as if they are gods or something."

Everyone could easily imagine this result. After all, most applications of biotechnology couldn't come close to the beauty and charm of the Aspects of Lufa!

Still, not everyone believed this would go as smoothly as they hoped.

"All of this sounds great, but the ultralifers couldn't possibly be that stupid." Venerable Jannzi stated. "We can't expect all of them to drop everything aside and spend their entire days under the influence of their glows. There are bound to be leaders among them who know that they can't afford to allow every mech pilot to blank their emotions at the same time. It's probably that they will set up the same restrictive rotations as we did and limit exposure to the statues for a limited amount of time. They will also make sure to thoroughly scan the statues in order to confirm that they aren't hiding any bombs, listening devices or other improper devices."

Ves nodded in agreement. "Those are my thoughts as well. The ultralifers are well-organized and have access to decent equipment. They will have protocols in place that will likely cause any attempt of sabotage to fail. This is why I have developed another plan."

"Please tell us, oh genius."

"First, I'll make a bunch of copies of the Aspect of Tranquility." He said as he began to mark out a few spots on the projected map. "Then, I want them to be placed outside the main entrance of their base. After that, we just wait until the ultralifers crawl out of their defensive fortification and come to experience the glows in person."

The others didn't look convinced. There were way too many holes in this simple-sounding plan!

"Why the Aspect of Tranquility. Don't you have other statues that might have a stronger effect than blanking out conscious thoughts and emotions? Why not create something more dangerous?"

Ves shook his head. "I don't want the statues to appear too suspicious. The Aspect of Tranquility has the simplest and most neutral effect. I don't dare to tamper with its glow or make any dangerous changes to it. The ultralifers must be willing to approach the copies I make without worrying about their lives. Don't underestimate the intuition of certain people. If any of the ultralifers have a bad feeling about my statues, then they will definitely show a lot more vigilance."

"Then... what stops them from picking up your statues and bringing them to their base? We can't attack the people basking in the glows if they are hiding inside their fortification. I thought drawing them out is your main purpose."

"There is a simple solution to this problem. We just have to make the statues worthless as long as they are moved or tampered with in any way."

"By blowing them up?"

"No." Ves shook his head. "As we've discussed earlier, if there are any signs of harmful devices inside the statues, the ultralifers won't be eager to worship them anymore. What I have in mind is much simpler and much more straightforward. I'll just turn off the glows of the statues once something happens to them that I don't like. Moving the statues, building new walls around them, trying to dissect them and so on are all triggers that will prompt me to take action."

"You can do that from a distance?!"

Most Larkinsons didn't know that Ves could deactivate the glows of his own mechs by remote! Just learning about this had massive implications to the mech pilots.

Ves didn't feel the need to be circumspect about this capability. "Yes. I can do that. I won't explain the mechanics, but just be reassured that I can easily make the statues lose the qualities that make them special. When the ultralifers first encounter my statues, they will definitely try to do the stuff I've mentioned. What I have to do is to deactivate the glows whenever something happens that I don't approve of. After a few attempts, the ultralifers will slowly learn that leaving them in place is the best way for them to preserve their value."

"Will that actually work? It sounds... stupid."

"That's because you aren't fanatics like them. I think there is a significant chance that they can't resist the temptation of my statues. Just look at our own clansmen. In fact, I can even go a step further and raise or lower the intensity of the glows depending on what they do. For example, the more ultralifers experiencing the glows at the same time, the stronger and more fulfilling the effect."

Venerable Jannzi widened her eyes as she comprehended the diabolical nature of this scheme!

"You intend to train the ultralifers as if they are animals!" She accused Ves. "You intend to combine both positive and negative reinforcement in order to incentivize your victims to act in a way that falls in line with your goals. This is brainwashing!"

Ves awkwardly coughed. "I wouldn't say that! I am merely... giving the ultralifers what they want. Don't they like excellent bioproducts? I just happen to be able to fulfill their needs. They just need to pay a price to enjoy my creations."

Chapter 2929: Ves the Charlatan

The plan that Ves came up sounded very dumb, especially to the Larkinsons born in the Bright Republic.

Their strong secularist upbringing caused them to develop an instinctive revulsion for anything related to religion and superstition.

Idolatry was an extension of that. Even if it did not come in an overt religious coat, the extreme worship and veneration of objects and people was a kind of behavior that Brighters had learned to be wary of at all times!

It was one thing to be a fan of people like expert pilots. These hero-like figures fought hard and overcame unimaginable hurdles in order to become larger than life.

Yet to turn your brains off and accept anything dubious or harmful just because it came from the object you admired was another thing!

Excessive worship of high-ranking mech pilots led to warped societies such as Vicious Mountain's Garlen Empire. Strong as it may be, the tragedy of the Cross Clan taught Ves and many Larkinsons that letting expert pilots be in charge was as primitive as allowing the strongest caveman to be in charge of an ancient tribe!

It may have made some sense back in the primordial era of humanity, but modern states were much larger, more complex and more intertwined with technology and other systems.

Brighters like Ves always learned that the ideal human should discard as much superstition, bias and prejudice as possible and instead engage in critical thinking. A bit of scepticism was always reasonable, but being contrarian to the point of becoming a conspiracy theorist who only adhered to unfalsifiable theories was yet another form of bias.

It was not that easy for anyone to remain enlightened in a society where many different interest groups sought to persuade people to their viewpoints. Family, friends, the media, the local sports club, schools, the government and even the Big Two all sought to convert people to their particular pet causes, and they weren't above playing dirty to gain support.

The Life Research Association was actually supposed to be an enlightened state. Ruled by a cabal of highly intelligent scientists who rose through the ranks by proving their

worth through achieving actual research results, the state was the closest thing to a technocracy that Ves had ever encountered.

Yet for all their smarts, the biotech researchers themselves were prone to the same faults that enlightened states were supposed to suppress!

Their partiality towards biotechnology was so strong that a lot of Lifers simply couldn't comprehend why the rest of the galaxy didn't follow suit!

The ultralifers happened to be the most extreme among them. Though not overtly religious in nature, their overly-passionate defense of anything related to biotechnology and the LRA pretty much meant they were indistinguishable from cultists like the ones from the True Ylvaine Dynasty and Spiritus Sancti.

That gave Ves a rather bright idea.

Why not give the fanatics what they wanted?

Though the scheme cooked up by Ves sounded so stupid that anyone with a decent brain would have been able to see through it right away, he felt there was actually a decent chance of success this time.

Everything he had observed about the ultralifers suggested that they were the kind of extremists who were true believers rather than hypocritical opportunists.

In other words, they walked the walk the walk and were actually sincere about their extreme devotion towards biotechnology.

It didn't matter if there were a handful of enlightened sceptics among their ranks. As long as they were in the minority, the peer pressure from the rest of the crowd would ensure that the naysayers followed along. If not, then the deviants would inevitably get pushed out of the group instead of having their warnings respected!

This was one of the most poisonous aspects of cults. The lack of internal dissent and the high pressure towards conformity even if the prevailing consensus was wrong resulted in a strong bubble where $2 + 2 = 5$ and green was red.

This gave him an even greater confidence in his ploy.

"If these guys are as stubborn about the greatness of biotechnology as Gloriana is about the superiority of Hexers, then I can definitely hoodwink these stupid ultralifers!"

His abundant personal experience with Gloriana's strong biases gave him ample knowledge how to approach the ultralifers.

The most important factor that Ves had to take into account was to set up the right narrative. Ves had to manipulate the circumstances in a way that played to all of his target audience's biases without inserting any discordant elements.

For example, Ves' identity absolutely couldn't be associated with the statues that Ves intended to use. This was not too difficult as only the Larkinsons who recently joined the clan were aware of the Aspects of Lufa.

Ves had made sure to keep their existence a secret and ordered every Larkinson to stay quiet about them. While this was not a completely foolproof way of keeping his latest invention unknown, he doubted that the ultralifers were up to date.

"Let's just try. Even if they know, they might get too dazzled by my work to question any further."

The main reason why Ves was able to persuade everyone to try out his plan was because no one could come up with any better. In any case, it only took a day or two to put together some new statues and see whether the ultralifers were truly gullible as he predicted.

If his guess was wrong, then the Larkinsons would just try out something else.

Just as Ves was about to convene a work crew by calling Dr. Robert Swindell along with a number of other biomech technicians, he suddenly gained a bit of inspiration.

"Why settle for an inanimate statue when I can do more with a moving sculpture?"

If he was able to create a simple bot covered with organic matter, he could use that to manipulate the ultralifers to an even greater degree!

As a mech designer, designing and creating bots was a simple matter for him. The complexity was at least an order of magnitude simpler, especially when Ves did not need to incorporate many of the features that normal bots possessed.

His demands were not great!

"I need to get access to a workshop!"

Fortunately, his airfleet included an imported transport vehicle that happened to incorporate a mobile workshop that centered around conventional technology. This happened to be one of his most useful spoils during his raiding runs.

It took Ves less than two hours to come up with a very basic design for the bot that was meant to serve as the inner half of his statues.

The humanoid design had to be able to move, maintain its balance, carry its own weight, respond to his commands, ignore everyone else's commands and... that was it, essentially.

It didn't need to sustain any damage.

It didn't need to carry any weapons.

It didn't need to draw a lot of power.

It didn't need to incorporate a cockpit so that it could be piloted by a human.

It only had to look pretty and move like a doll!

Ves didn't even bother to add any speakers to the rudimentary design. If his statues started speaking, then there was a significant chance that his target audience would see through his ruse.

"It's better to be vague and rely on body language to convey my meaning." Ves hummed as he tweaked his projected design. "If I keep the statues open to interpretations, then the ultralifers will rely on their imagination to fill up the gaps. This is a much better way to ensure I won't break my narrative."

Fabricating the mechanical internal frame took a lot more time, but that was mainly because of the lack of powerful production equipment. The overwhelming majority of production sites and production equipment in this area were geared towards biotechnology.

At least that made the next step easier. When Ves started working with Dr. Swindell to cover his metallic skeletons with flesh, they made use of higher-quality synthesized tissue that was a bit more durable and pretty than the low-quality tissue that covered his original four statues.

Just like before, Ves decided to make a batch of four moving statues. In fact, one of them should already be able to do the job, but he decided to make duplicates to ensure there were spares if the ultralifers initially mistook them for threats and blasted them apart.

At the end of the production run, Ves and his crew of biomech technicians looked admiringly at their handiwork.

In the final moments, the crew had to maintain a healthy distance from the end products and perform the final work by remote and with the help of bots.

This was because the four simple bots all exuded the same glow as the Aspect of Tranquility!

"You know, sir, when I first learned of your plan, I thought it had no chance of working." Dr. Swindell said.

"Do you still think that way?"

"Seeing those four organic bots together makes my spine shiver. If I didn't participate in their making, I would have become tempted to see them as gifts from a god."

Ves smirked. "That's exactly the point. I hope the ultralifers don't think too hard on where they came from. They don't have to think. They only need to obey."

After a bit of preparation, the Larkinsons sneakily transported the organic bots close to the entrance of the ultralifer underground fortification.

They flew it over most of the way, but put the animated statues on the ground and have them walk over for the final stretch.

Ves was already aware that the ultralifers planted numerous sensors and listening devices in the vicinity, so the ultralifers must have picked up on the activity happening above their heads.

Fortunately, the base defenders didn't immediately muster out to shoot his new creations down. It helped that he had made a deliberate effort to make them seem as harmless as possible. Not only did they possess very low energy signatures, but they also lacked the organic and metallic materials that were usually associated with combat mechs.

Without the size, power and weapons of a mech, Ves hoped that his animated statues looked both harmless and attractive enough to lure a mouse.

"C'mon. Do something." Ves whispered as he observed the live feed.

It took half an hour before a side entrance opened up. A squad of very familiar-looking armored infantry soldiers stepped out and cautiously marched towards the four statues.

Ves had made sure to spread them out a bit. The squad remained cautious though and decided to circle around in order to approach the statue on the left while maintaining their distance from the rest.

As they approached the edge of the effective range of the angelic bot's glow, they halted.

They must have felt something remarkable about the statue. After reporting back to their superiors inside their base, one of them experimentally took a few steps forward.

That soldier gradually lost all of his thoughts and emotions. He automatically relaxed and holstered his weapon as he walked close enough to make his conscious mind completely tranquil!

This was the critical moment. Ves became highly alert and already gripped his controls. If the ultralifers regarded his creations to be a threat, then there was a large chance his plan would go bust!

Yet as the affected soldier's combat armor transmitted all of its telemetry back to his sergeant as well as the leaders monitoring the situation from afar, the ultralifers recognized that their comrade wasn't in immediate danger.

In fact, the soldier should have calmed and entered into a very relaxed state. It was similar to meditation, but not precisely since the man completely blanked out, which was essentially impossible to achieve under normal circumstances!

As time continued to pass, nothing much happened, but Ves became more and more hopeful.

Once the entrance opened up again in order to let out a team of field scientists, he knew his new creations managed to hook the ultralifers!

"Yes!" Ves grinned and punched his fist into the air! "Come closer, my children. Don't be shy. I have candy."

Chapter 2930: Cautious Ultralifers

The ultralifer fascination towards the four animated statues of Lufa escalated gradually.

They were cautious at first. No matter how compelling the new angelic bots looked to the people who studied it up close, the leaders in the rear were still cognizant of the fact that they were being targeted by the Larkinson Clan.

This vigilance caused the ultralifers to move very slow. Their team of field engineers and scientists cautiously set up some equipment in the vicinity and began to study the strange objects.

Their scanning results shouldn't have yielded any useful data. In fact, when Ves noticed that the scientists activated an especially deep and invasive scanning method, he remotely dialed the glows of the four statues down.

The ultralifers immediately noticed this obvious reaction! Not only did the people at the edge of the effective range of the glow feel an uncomfortable void, but the statues themselves seemed to have lost a large portion of their mysterious charm.

The latter change was very obvious to the humans up close, but they could not record the shift with their sensors and scanners. This was because the charm was spiritual in nature, and only affected the perception of humans. All of the recording equipment simply failed to register this invisible change.

This made it more difficult for the ultralifers on the field to convey their full experiences to the commanders in the rear.

Ves grew a bit consternated. Even though the soldiers and staff on the surface had already become fascinated by his angelic bots, the individuals who were truly in charge remained unconvinced!

"Damnit! Why are they so cautious? Can't they lower their vigilance a little bit and appreciate my Lufa statues?"

He did not give up, though. He continued to monitor the situation while changing the intensity of the glows in response to any behavior he deemed right or wrong.

Slowly but surely, the field scientists figured out some rules.

First, the more they scanned the statues, the lower the intensity of their glows. It took a bit of time for the statues to restore their splendor.

Second, the more people they dispatched within the range of their glows, the stronger the effect became.

Third, any attempt to move them by manipulating them with gravity or moving them with beetles immediately caused the statues to lose their glows. They only turned back to their old selves after they returned to their original positions.

Fourth, the statues did not respond to any form of communication like speech or text. The scientists gathered enough data to know the statues were not static, but they remained frozen regardless of what the ultralifers tried to convey.

Half a day went by as Ves grew increasingly more bored with keeping track of the interactions. He was the only person who could change the intensities of the glows of his own products, so he could not leave this task to someone else. Even if he could, he still would have insisted on taking care of this issue himself because he did not want others to learn too much.

Ves yawned as he casually petted Lucky's back.

His tired cat sprawled on the tabletop like a toy. His tail lazily swung back and forth like an old pendulum.

"Meow..."

"Hey, have some faith in my ability. These ultralifers may be too cautious for my liking, but if my predictions are correct, their higher-ups won't be able to resist the temptation to take a closer look. As the heads of a large group of extremists, how can they possibly not be fascinated by a unique creation of biotechnology?"

One of the common traits about cults and similar organizations was that the more fanatic members tended to get promoted up the ranks. After all, when devotion to a supported belief was one of the most important criteria of someone's worth in an organization, those who played by the rules better would often gain more appreciation from their superiors!

After all, they had to serve as role models to their underlings.

This pattern continued almost all the way to the top. While the highest leaders may have a bit more sense than others, if the rest of the hierarchy supported a particular belief, then the leadership had to play along as well or risk losing control over their own underlings.

Finally, some interesting movements took place. The larger entrance opened this time. Numerous mechs and soldiers on foot preceded the arrival of someone wearing a rich green uniform.

The decorative metals and symbols of authority immediately marked him out as a high-ranking member of the ultralifers!

Ves knew that the critical moment had come! This was the final hurdle to obtaining the complete acceptance of his enemies. As long as he could hoodwink this big guy, he would be able to capture the rest of the extremist organization!

"C'mon. Get closer. There's nothing suspicious about my latest work. They're angels, you see? They are messengers of gods, not heralds to your doom."

He was practically praying for the ultralifer commander to experience the glow of one of his animated statues. It was agonizing for him to see how the respected leader figure advanced slowly and remained outside the edge of the effective range.

A number of scientists and soldiers reported to him in person. Ves wasn't able to track the conversation because he didn't dare to plant anything more than a very simple optical recording device in the vicinity.

Half an hour passed by as the commander kept looking at the statues from a healthy distance. Even though he was close enough to observe their attractive and mysterious charm, it appeared this fellow was not simple. He was able to resist the temptation to take a step closer and experience the wonders of a tranquil glow!

Ves grew increasingly more concerned. "Do they know it's mine?"

This was not an implausible guess. Through his prior design duel, a lot of Lifers became exposed to the effects of his glows. Though his competition mechs hadn't exhibited anything like Lufa's aura, it shouldn't be too difficult to tie them together.

Yet if the ultralifers truly managed to connect the dots and recognized the insidious ploy, they should have been a lot more vigilant towards the statues!

He didn't know what they were thinking right now, but the excessive caution displayed by the ultralifer commander gave him a bad feeling.

"Why are you stalling so much? Just take a couple steps forward!"

The self-control exhibited by this fellow caused Ves to conclude that this was not a typical impulsive fanatic who immediately judged the situation at face value.

Ves feared that this guy would make the sensible and rational decision of not accepting candy from strangers.

He scowled. "If that's the case, then I'll ram my candy down your throat!"

Ves took hold of the controls and deliberately caused the statue closest to the ultralifer to take a few steps forward!

Clearly, the scientists, soldiers and mech pilots were all caught off-guard by the unexpected motion!

The statues hadn't moved since they initially approached!

"Don't shoot!" Ves quietly pleaded.

He was afraid that some of the trigger-happy soldiers would instinctively open fire on his fragile statue. Fortunately the ultralifers spent enough time around the statues to consider them valuable. They couldn't bear to open fire and ruin the lifelike angels.

Though the organic statue wasn't as tall as a mech, the first step it took already displaced the glow forward so that the unprepared ultralifer commander experienced its tranquil effect!

The man didn't immediately react. Instead, his shoulders loosened and his expression slackened a bit. It was clear that his mental fortitude was higher than his men, but even he couldn't resist the temptation of calming the waves of his mind!

"It's working!"

The soldiers didn't receive orders to destroy the moving statue. They never ordered a bot to take the ultralifer commander out. Instead, they patiently waited for around 20 minutes before someone finally pulled the affected leader away.

Ves wasn't able to figure out the discussion that ensued afterwards. The fact that the ultralifers didn't immediately destroy his works was a good sign.

An entire day passed as Ves patiently paid attention to the situation. He didn't move for the entire duration. He let his Unending Regalia take care of his bathroom needs and he straightforwardly filled his belly with nutrient packs and water.

He did not want to miss a single moment!

Through continuous observation, Ves began to develop a greater understanding of the thought processes of the ultralifers.

While they did not immediately embrace the organic bots, they were gradually warming up to their presence.

The ultralifers allowed more and more of their men to approach the four statues. As the extremists all experienced the benefits of spending time next to the great works, they began to rave about their experiences to their comrades.

This caused even more ultralifers to appear from the underground. The crowd of people looking to experience the wonders of the organic statues soon ballooned to hundreds.

"It seems this is the limit."

Ves could already tell that the ultralifers set up a rotation. The majority of their people still had to man the defenses and take care of vital base operations. It was impossible for the ultralifers to lose all of their senses and send out all of their men at once.

"Well, this is already good enough."

He paid careful attention to the ranks and roles of the people who showed up on the surface.

Many of the markings on their suits and uniforms didn't make sense to Ves, but there were plenty of symbols whose meaning was universal. He was faintly able to identify mech pilots, mech designers, engineers, staff officers, line officers and possibly even the highest-ranking base commander!

When the old and distinguished-looking man showed up under heavy escort and willingly approached one of the statues, Ves almost felt tempted to pull the trigger!

As long as he issued a single command to his own men, the ranged mechs and biomechs on standby would immediately open fire, causing the site around the four statues to become engulfed in flame and explosions!

Yet as he saw the subtle changes in the expression of this presumed base commander, Ves started to develop some other ideas.

He aborted his attempt to activate his comm and issue an order to begin the bombardment.

"Killing a couple of hundred ultralifers along with their base commander won't change the situation that much." He shook his head. "They have plenty of mech pilots and other personnel left inside. Even the base commander isn't that important. Other senior officers can take over if their highest-ranking leader dies."

Some cults and organizations concentrated an extreme amount of power at the top. Ves didn't perceive that this was the case. The ultralifers worshipped a cause, not a specific individual. It did not develop a cult of personality so assassinating the grey-haired base commander would not have the effect he wished.

He decided to be patient and wait for a better opportunity. He still wanted the ultralifers to become more attached to the statues.

The fact that they kept sending in beetles to move the statues, only for the latter to lose their glows, meant that the ultralifers had definitely become fans of his work!

It wasn't until the end of the second day since their appearance that Ves gained a bold new idea.

"Can this work?"

His latest plot seemed too obvious to Ves. He didn't know whether the ultralifers had lost enough vigilance to allow his new idea to take effect.

Yet the potential benefits were too great for Ves to ignore!

He figured that enough time had passed for the ultralifers to develop an unreasonable degree of affection and ownership to his statues.

It was obvious in the way they looked at his works when they weren't under the effect of their glows.

They looked similar to the customers who piloted his mechs and became lifelong fans of his products!

"Well, how will they react if the products in question walk away?"

He grinned as he started to control one of the statues to raise its arm and point in a certain direction.

The ultralifers immediately became bewildered by the rare motion. They urgently discussed what had prompted the change.

Soon enough, the other three statues pointed their fingers in the same direction.

While the ultralifers were trying to puzzle out the meaning, Ves began to order the statues to move in the direction they just pointed!

This time, the extremists became truly alarmed. The direction the impressive statues were walking towards caused them to move away from the underground fortification.

Instead, the angelic statues were marching in the direction of the warehouse complex occupied by the paramilitaries!

"Hahahaha! Come! Follow if you want to keep admiring my organic statues!"

Hopefully, the ultralifers would get the hint and follow suit. Ves didn't intend to give them any choice. Either they would follow, or risk losing the blessed organic statues forever!