

Mech 3261

Chapter 3261: Subtle Approach

The latest phase of the battle had grown a lot more chaotic than the previous ones. The neat and tidy lines and formations of the Vulcanites had been disrupted. Too many dwarves died at once and the successive psychological attacks inflicted on their minds didn't help any matters.

As a result, even though the dwarves still enjoyed a slight superiority in numbers, the invigorated human mech forces had managed to gain the upper hand for the first time since the start of the battle.

Many Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers finally saw hope of victory and fought with as much determination as possible. They all recognized that their highest priority was to transform their temporary advantage into a permanent one. As long as they eliminated enough enemy mechs when the latter was weak, it would be the humans who decisively outnumbered the dwarves!

Of course, if the expeditionary forces were able to figure this out, then so did the dwarves who remained sober.

General Kebrinore gripped his fists until they shook. The casualty figures were continuing to rise upwards as he saw that many of his mech were slow to get back into fighting condition.

According to the evolving statistics, 27 percent of the surviving Vulcanite mech pilots were fighting significantly below their usual performance levels. They fought at least twenty percent worse than normal due to a combination of terror, doubt and unstable emotions.

What was worse was that 5 percent out of all of the Molten Hammers pilots had stopped fighting or piloting their mechs entirely and 57 dwarves even began to turn their weapons against their fellow comrades!

"Order our men to disable the mutinous mechs with prejudice! Inject stimulants into the bloodstream of the remaining underperforming mech pilots." Kebrinore ordered as he swept his thick and stubby arm! "If these men cannot regain control of themselves, then we will push them over the edge ourselves!"

"Sir, that's illegal!" A tactical officer hastily responded. "The forcible injection of combat stimulants in the bloodstream of a dwarven mech pilot is a violation of our military code. It's barbaric!"

"We'll die if we don't turn ourselves into barbarians!" General Kebrinore roared. "I will take full responsibility for what happens. We cannot allow our ineffective mech pilots to

remain paralyzed. They will lose their mechs and die regardless if we don't force them to defend against the advancing enemy mechs!"

Back in the old days, the dwarven mech pilots were a lot less disciplined and courageous than before. Not every dwarf who fought to create a dwarven state was as willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause.

This was why the dwarven rebels started to take advantage of stimulants that amplified the battle lust of their mech pilots. There were countless different formulas available that could induce a variety of different mental states that made mech pilots fight a lot harder.

Of course, the repercussions were also severe. Not only did they encourage mech pilots to take a lot more risks, but they also caused them to fight less rationally and become less responsive to orders.

The man-machine connection also grew more unstable as the wild fluctuations of the mech pilots severely impacted their coherent control over their mechs.

All in all, the use of combat stimulants especially without the consent of the mech pilots in question was an extremely controversial subject in the galactic mech community.

General Kebrinore couldn't afford to consider those matters at this moment.

His orders soon took effect. The more sober and loyal dwarven mech pilots all moved quickly to suppress and disable the comrades that had become bewitched by the human deceiver.

The stimulants loaded into the cockpits of the dwarven mechs also entered the bloodstream of the unsuspecting pilots. The drugs were fast-acting and took immediate effect.

"Haa... death to the tall folk!"

"For Vulcan!"

"Heretics must die!"

Many dwarven mech pilots that had previously fought half-heartedly or not at all suddenly became a lot more frenzied. Their mechs fought more explosively and ferociously than before, startling the human mech pilots who thought they could harvest easy pickings.

The Ferril mech forces regained a lot of momentum all of a sudden, especially in the center!

"Stand fast, Vulcanites! Victory will be ours as long as you follow us into battle!"

The dwarven expert pilots also picked up the slack. The simultaneous entry of the Gatecrasher and many other dwarven expert mechs immediately reversed the local hotspots that threatened to turn into a runaway collapse if they weren't reinforced!

With each expert mech repelling dozens of human mechs at a time, the heroes of the Ferril Provincial Army instilled a lot of hope in the hearts of the dwarven soldiers who had never truly experienced the horror of real warfare.

The unblooded dwarven mech pilots slowly managed to regain their composure due to these emergency measures. Though their cohesion and coordination had not returned to their old levels, many dwarven mech units at least regained a significant degree of battle effectiveness.

Ves was not pleased to see this recovery. Though his stratagem had definitely caused a lot of disruption, he did not expect the dwarves to mitigate the consequences so quickly.

Fortunately, he did not waste his time. Many Larkinsons could tell what happened when a lot of dwarven mechs suddenly fought like berserkers. Their out-of-control mech pilots did not exhibit any patience and exhibited a lot of difficulties in trying to stay in formation.

While the mechs piloted by drugged enemy mech pilots were individually hard to fight against, they had ultimately turned into wild animals that were easier to take down than if they fought as solid soldiers.

It was the enemy expert mechs that gave the expeditionary forces a lot of consternation!

Though the Golden Skull Alliance had already planned and anticipated their arrival, it was still difficult to adjust to the major swing in battle.

Collectively, the thirteen dwarven expert mechs represented the greatest threat to the expeditionary fleet now that two out of three mech divisions had been cut down to size.

As long as the Larkinsons and their allies were able to control the enemy expert pilots, they had a good chance of routing the regular dwarven mech units!

The expert mechs of the Golden Skull Alliance immediately went into action!

The Amaranto began to fire at the various expert mechs that had flown to the front of the dwarven lines. Though alternating her targets resulted in reduced pressure to each, the suppression she exerted with her powerful shots still forced the dwarven expert pilots to restrain their aggression.

The First Sword immediately sought to do battle against the Paravad, thereby causing the powerful mid-tier avian expert mech to become too preoccupied to retaliate against

the elite Swordmaiden mech company that was ravaging the crippled Hivar Roarer mechs.

The Riot charged right into a hammer-wielding Molten Hammer expert mech, its speartip fluctuating with unstable resonance that inflicted a lot of damage to the dwarven expert mech's resonance shield.

The Dark Zephyr acted much more discreetly. Whereas the other expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan ostentatiously confronted the nearest dwarven expert mechs, Venerable Tusa only had one target in his sights.

"The Gauss Baron is mine." Venerable Tusa whispered as his expert light skirmisher swung around the thick of the battle.

The Dark Zephyr advanced towards the dwarven fleet with only a single purpose in mind. The expert mech had to reach the Lemogo Distat that was positioned in the center of the Slug Raider formation.

This was a daunting prospect as the Dark Zephyr would not be accompanied by the Speed Demons or any friendly unit.

Trying to avoid detection and evade as much incoming fire as possible was just the first hurdle. Since the Dark Zephyr was flying right towards the Slug Raider fleet, Venerable Tusa had to be prepared to get targeted by hundreds if not thousands of powerful cannons that want to get close to the Lemogo Distat.

The second obstacle that Venerable Tusa had to get past was the horde of defending melee mechs. The Slug Raiders did not limit their mech roster to ranged mechs. They still fielded plenty of melee mechs that were solely there to defend their ships from getting raided by enemy melee mechs.

Though the Dark Zephyr was powerful enough to bypass many of these obstacles, if the mech pilots did not hesitate to give their all, they could form solid walls of mechs that could pose a heavy hindrance to Tusa's attempt to reach the Gauss Baron!

Destroying the escorts would take too long. The Dark Zephyr was an assassin, a skirmisher and a raider. It was not designed for mass destruction and did not contain any weapons or abilities that assisted in this role.

"I need to get around them as much as possible somehow." He murmured.

The difficulties didn't end when he got close. The Gauss Baron was situated in the most solid and well-protected bunker on the Lemogo Distat. A lot of mechs had attempted to fire upon it but the bunker cover was made out of the same quality materials that was used to make expert mech-grade armor!

"I'm going to need a lot of help for that perhaps."

If he was somehow able to bypass the thick and sturdy bunker cover, he still had to finish the job. The Gauss Baron may look like a formidable heavy artillery mech that didn't carry any weapon systems aside from its eight formidable gauss cannons, but looks could be deceiving.

An expert mech was never simple, and bigger ones like the Gauss Baron likely contained at least a handful of surprises against potential assassins such as the Dark Zephyr!

Any ordinary mech pilot would quake if he received the task of overcoming all of these obstacles to assassinate the most powerful and well-protected heavy artillery mech in the enemy fleet.

Not Tusa. As an expert pilot, his will had undergone many trials and tribulations and evolved to the point where he no longer felt fear.

To him, a mission was either doable or not. Even if there was only a 5 percent chance of success, he would still attempt to fulfill it to the best of his ability because he knew that only skill and guts would allow him to grasp that slim opportunity!

This was no suicide mission. This was a very necessary task that only he could do out of all of the other expert pilots.

In fact, a part of him even felt eager to test himself against the might of the Slug Rangers. He had practised his and his mech's evasion capabilities several times against his clansmen, but this was the first time he put his powerful capabilities to the test against real enemies!

"Failure is not an option! Success is the only outcome that I must attain!"

The Dark Zephyr sped up but did not accelerate too hard. Its energy signature remained low as Venerable Tusa tried to control his expert mech's temperature, speed, flight path and other emissions as much as possible. He deliberately did not activate the resonance shield as well for that reason. Nothing stood out more in the dark of space than a glowing light show!

He even began to employ trickery by following a trajectory that swung around in an arc that suggested that he was attempting to flank the Molten Hammers from below.

It wasn't until his flight path did not hit the rear of the Molten Hammer lines as 'planned' but instead arced towards the Slug Ranger fleet that the dwarves finally detected the incoming threat!

"Detecting incoming expert mech! It's... it's a light skirmisher and it's heading right for the Lemogo Distat!"

"It's attempting to assassinate our Gauss Baron!"

"Reinforce the escort around its bunker. Venerable Leiva and her crucial expert mech must never be touched, do you understand?!"

"Yes, sir!"

Venerable Tusa immediately recognized that the game was up when a lot of artillery mechs began to open fire in his expert mech's direction.

However, if the dwarves thought they could pick off the Dark Zephyr with ease, they had another thing coming!

"We missed!"

"That's impossible. My aim is solid!"

"It's the expert mech... We're looking at an illusion. The real enemy expert mech is probably hiding nearby!"

Chapter 3262: Peak Duel

When the Gatecrasher initially charged into the lines of the expeditionary fleet, it was as if a wolf had entered a flock of sheep.

"ALL MURDERERS OF DWARVES MUST PAY!" Venerable Orthox roared as his expert mech charged straight into a rifleman mech and smashed it to pieces with its shield!

The boiling red resonance shield that surrounded the Gatecrasher like an erupting volcano not only invalidated any ranged attack, but also made it impossible to resist against its might up close.

If not for the fact that the Gatecrasher was an expert offensive space knight that possessed limited attack capabilities compared to other expert mechs, Venerable Orthox would have been able to defeat thrice as many enemy machines in the same amount of time!

Still, a high-tier expert mech was still a force to be reckoned with. The typical limitations that characterized the strengths and weaknesses of these powerful machines no longer applied so strictly anymore.

For example, while it didn't possess any ranged weapon systems, it was able to swing its hammer and release a powerful resonance wave attack that struck any target that was out of the Gatecrasher's immediate reach.

Against other opponents, the Gatecrasher's was able to launch powerful grappling hooks that dug into the frames of enemy machines and reeled them back with great force just so that Venerable Orthox could hammer them into pieces!

Not a single Larkinson or Crosser mech unit were able to maintain their cohesion when the Gatecrasher arrived. Extreme grief and vengeance fueled Venerable Orthox's hatred against the tall folk. The more he thought about the comrades he lost, the stronger he resonated with the Gatecrasher! The resonance meters pointed at the unstoppable expert mech kept registering stronger and stronger readings.

As soon as the Gatecrasher turned and initiated a charge against a formation of vulnerable Crosser mechs, Venerable Orthox suddenly aborted his expert mech's approach when another red comet entered its flight path!

Unlike other opponents, Orthox was immediately able to judge that his current challenger was different.

Surrounded by a lighter and more fiery red resonance glow was a medium-heavy hybrid mech that incorporated multiple different weapon systems.

The tall and armored expert mech wielded an axe in one arm and a shotgun in the other arm. A pair of compact positron turrets were mounted on its shoulders and one of its thick wrists carried a hefty wrist-mounted plasma launcher.

The Gatecrasher's sensors failed to detect more weapon systems but Orthox confidently judged that the enemy expert mech definitely contained more integrated weapon systems. It was what all hybrid mechs of this caliber possessed.

Two different expert mechs were silently surveying each other as their expert pilots already knew that they were about to confront the toughest opponent on the battlefield.

Even without exchanging any words, they could already tell a lot about their opposition.

They were able to sense the powerful force of wills that resonated so excellently with their expert mechs. Both expert pilots were able to glean a hint of each other's convictions by interpreting each other's wills.

Venerable Orthox's eyes narrowed. This newcomer's will was not only strong and drenched with ambition, but also possessed the tempering of someone who had lived through true war and suffering.

In fact, he was impressed by the tenacity he sensed from the human expert pilot! No matter what reason the foreigner fought for, Orthox was able to respect at least that quality in his opponent.

"This is going to be a tough fight..." He muttered to himself.

As for Patriarch Reginald, he felt anything but reluctant to duel his opponent. He was only slightly displeased at the realization that he wouldn't be fighting against this powerful dwarven expert pilot under equal circumstances.

Trying to block the powerful death energy attack released by the Penitent Sisters had to have sapped a portion of Venerable Orthox's strength!

"At least there is no fault in his reason to battle." Reginald grinned. "This dwarf has all the reason in the cosmos to destroy me. Good. Only those who sincerely wish me dead are worth going all out!"

The more the Cross Patriarch observed his opponent, the more he became eager to fight. The Gatecrasher did not look like a deadly enemy who not only threatened to end his life, but also annihilate the clan he inherited from his father.

To him, the Gatecrasher was nothing less than a gift from heaven to the battle-starved and glory-hungry patriarch!

Venerable Orthox was just powerful enough to give Patriarch Reginald an abundant amount of pressure, but not enough to hold a crushing advantage.

The Gatecrasher was tough but should not contain too many unexpected surprises. The expert space knight posed a considerable threat to his Bolvar Rage at point-blank range, but was a lot more manageable at longer ranges.

As long as Patriarch Reginald kept track of the Gatecrasher's grappling hooks, his expert mech wouldn't have to worry about getting entangled.

The outline of the battle became increasingly clear to the expert pilots as they mapped it out in their minds.

The Gatecrasher was primarily a melee mech and possessed ungodly amounts of power up close. Whether it utilized its prodigious acceleration to build up momentum and slam into an enemy like a hammer blow from Vulcan or simply hacked its power-filled hammer with continuous blows, the Bolvar Rage probably wouldn't last long if it got banged up too many times.

Since his Bolvar Rage was a hybrid mech, the most ideal distance to the enemy was around a hundred meters or a little more. In fact, Patriarch Reginald preferred to

maintain a greater distance from the enemy, but he doubted that Venerable Orthox would let him keep his distance.

Both of their mechs saluted each other by raising their main weapons. No matter what side they were on or what cause they were fighting for, they both held great respect for their opposition. They were true warriors who had risen above the rest and had come close to taking their next step to ascension.

They exchanged greetings.

"Venerable Orthox De Massie."

"Patriarch Reginald Cross."

Both of them had read the intelligence reports, so they knew who they were dealing with. They did not share any meaningless words and platitudes. They were older men who had already formed and developed their own convictions.

"Let's begin." Reginald suggested.

"May the best pilot win."

In one moment, their expert mechs remained still.

In the next, they exploded into action!

A titanic duel between apex expert pilots had begun as the Gatecrasher charged into the Bolvar Rage straight away!

A wave of exploding red surged towards the Crosser expert mech like a comet about to unleash a cataclysm! The Gatecrasher apparently possessed a powerful burst acceleration ability that kickstarted the expert space knight so that it did not have to waste any time to get up to speed.

Anyone with average reaction time wouldn't even be able to respond to the threat until it was too late!

Fortunately, Patriarch Reginald and his expert mech were anything but average. From the moment the Gatecrasher's resonance grew hotter, the Crosser expert pilot already recognized that Venerable Orthox planned to go on the attack.

Reginald couldn't count the amount of times he dueled and fought against expert melee mechs that want nothing more than to hack or bash his Bolvar Rage to pieces.

Knowing that his expert hybrid mech would not fare well if Orthox had his way, Reginald instantly moved his Bolvar Rage out of the way!

Just as it looked as if the red comet was about to miss the hybrid mech, the Gatecrasher launched a grappling hook that flung towards the Bolvar Rage with amazing speed!

However, Reginald had never lost sight of his opponent's grappling hook. Even though there was only a split second time to react to this unavoidable threat, the Bolvar Rage's hammer accurately dinged the grappling hook, deflected it to the side.

The two expert mechs passed by without a decisive result. As soon as the Gatecrasher passed by, Reginald's eyes gleamed as his glowing mech began its counterattack!

While the Gatecrasher was still in the process of arcing back in order to perform another charge, the Bolvar Rage spun around and began to fire its weapon modules at the fast and powerful dwarven machine.

The shoulder-mounted positron turrets accurately tracked and struck the exploding red resonance shield of the Gatecrasher. Reginald knew that he had to invest a serious amount of effort in order to peel open the defenses of a high-tier expert space knight, so he immediately resonated with his energy weapon mounts in order to strip his dwarven foe of its first layer of defenses.

A couple of compact but powerful missiles launched from the rear of the Bolvar Rage. These weren't average missiles but ones that were specially designed by Professor Benedict and utilized the highest and most potent materials the Cross Clan could obtain.

Venerable Orthox did not sense that much threat from the Bolvar Rage's positron weapon mounts. Though the energy weapons dealt a fair amount of damage, he had plenty of ways to endure or mitigate their damage potential.

Those missiles were different. The two incoming warheads accelerated quickly and homed straight towards the Gatecrasher as if their target locks was impossible to break!

Space knights tended to possess little in the way of ECM and jamming systems. Part of it was because they were designed to attract fire. Another part of it was because they were too big and massive to hide from electronic sensors in an efficient manner.

In fact, even if the Gatecrasher was as quiet as an expert light mech, the missiles still wouldn't have been fooled. Patriarch Reginald had split his concentration and directly took control over their flight trajectory. Through his efforts, the two missiles approached the Gatecrasher from opposite sides and crashed headlong into its resonance shield.

Two small but intensely powerful explosions ensued! The reason why the blasts hadn't expanded too much was because most of the explosive power was directed towards the front, thereby making sure that it expended as much of its damage potential towards the target as possible.

The Gatecrasher's resonance shield lost a huge chunk of strength and looked a lot more unstable than before. Venerable Orthox grunted as his force of will suffered the repercussions of withstanding a couple of powerful blows.

Though Patriarch Reginald wanted to fire a second salvo of missiles, his expert mech only carried a limited amount of them. Each of them were laced with high-grade exotics to maximize their explosive potential and also contained a trace of resonating exotics that allowed him to empower them with his own will.

Considering the thick armor and even thicker shield of the Gatecrasher, Reginald believed he needed to save most of his burst damage potential when he had an opportunity to crack its shell.

"It's not yet time."

The Gatecrasher's resonance shield was incredibly strong, as befitting a space knight. It also possessed an energy shield generator that Orthox had yet to activate in order to conserve energy.

Every action and every expenditure mattered. Neither of the two could afford to waste their resources. This was looking to be a long and extended duel.

When the Gatecrasher finally turned around, it charged towards the Bolvos Rage yet again.

Different from before, Orthox did not accelerate his expert mech to the limit. Instead, the Gatecrasher approached the Bolvos Rage at a controlled pace before striking out with its hammer!

A silent boom erupted as the Gatecrasher landed a powerful blow on the Bolvos Rage's resonance shield. However, the Bolvos Rage had not only peppered the Gatecrasher with continuous positron beams, but also splashed the dwarven expert mech with hot matter released by its wrist-mounted plasma cannon!

The two expert mechs continued to dance and collide against each other with fury and valor. Neither the Gatecrasher nor the Bolvos Rage gained any immediate advantages. Instead, both mechs chipped and hacked at each other's defenses while trying their best to conserve as much of their defenses as possible.

Neither Patriarch Reginald nor Venerable Orthox paid any attention to the wider battle... They could not afford to split any concentration off their opponent. Even a split second of inattention was enough to decide the outcome of this impactful duel!

Chapter 3263: Elusive Zephyr

Now that the Ferril punitive fleet put their expert mechs into play, the expeditionary fleet had sent out its response!

Just as intended, Patriarch Reginald's Bolvos Rage rapidly intercepted the wolf that was feasting on the sheep. Now that the expert hybrid mech locked the hardy Gatecrasher into a duel, neither of the two high-tier expert mechs could assist any of their comrades or take care of their other comrades.

Ves did not dare to hope that Patriarch Reginald could achieve a quick and decisive victory against Venerable Orthox.

The latter piloted an expert space knight. Even if it leaned a bit more towards offense than defense, it did not change the fact that durability was its strongest property.

It would take a long time for the Gatecrasher to fall into a disadvantage!

Thus, the next-best outcome of this battle would be for both expert mechs to hammer at each other's defenses for a long amount of time. No matter who won or lost, as long as Patriarch Reginald managed to stall Venerable Orthox for at least fifteen minutes, the expeditionary fleet could do much to increase its advantage!

"Don't do anything stupid, Reggie." Ves whispered as he sat on his observer's seat while lazily swinging his hammer in random directions. "I know you're desperate to break through, but please don't perform any insane stunts!"

Other expert mechs had found their match as well.

The Dark Zephyr had bypassed most of the battle lines and began to close in on the enemy fleet as fast as possible.

However, the stretch of space it was attempting to bridge was completely empty and devoid of any mechs, ships or even pieces of debris. The environment offered absolutely no form of cover for the expert light skirmisher to block incoming fire.

"Don't fire at the light skirmisher. It's a projection or something." A Slug Ranger analyst told the mech pilots. "The enemy expert mech has to be in the vicinity in order to project this image without any obvious traces. We need to sniff out the stealthed machine's coordinates."

"Mech Crackers, saturate the wider area around the apparent mech with shards! Make sure to fill up a zone of at least 5 kilometers at all times!"

The elite Steel Rain mech regiment may have received a lot of battering in the ongoing artillery duel, but most of the mechs that got knocked out consisted of Land Crackers and Ship Crackers.

Their ultra-heavy and heavy gauss cannons posed enormous threats to the ships of the expeditionary fleet and had been the focus of the Eye of Ylvaine and other human ranged units from the start.

As a result, there were too few Land Crackers left and the amount of active Ship Crackers had also diminished.

Of course, the Eye of Ylvaine also lost a substantial amount of Transcendent Punishers in the process.

It was painful for the Larkinson Clan to lose them before the Eye of Ylvaine employed its new battle network, but the time wasn't right for the youngest mech legion to employ its trump card.

This left plenty of Mech Cracker mechs unscathed. While the 'lightest' artillery mech model of the Steel Rain did not boast an impressive caliber, it carried eight medium gauss cannons that were able to pump out a rain of projectiles.

Every mech Cracker was capable of showering an area of a hundred meters and greater with deadly shards that could easily punch through a shuttle despite their smaller sizes!

As the obvious target of this lone assault, the Gauss Baron couldn't sit still either. It also joined in on the party. The expert heavy artillery mech ceased its job of suppressing the Amaranto and exerting pressure on the other human expert mechs in order to address the immediate threat.

"I'm not going to let you get close!" Venerable Leiva boomed as she began to switch the firing mode of her expert mech.

Soon afterwards, all eight gauss cannons fired a salvo that propelled a different kind of round. Just like the projectiles of the Ship Crackers, the Gauss Baron's rounds splintered and fractured after reaching a predetermined distance.

Different from the output of the regular heavy artillery mechs, the shards originating from the Gauss Baron possessed a lot more lethality. Venerable Leiva did not try to conserve her energy and expended a copious amount of effort to strengthen the damage potential of her cannons.

With so many shards flooding the space around the fake Dark Zephyr, it was only a matter of time before the real mech got exposed.

In actuality, a couple of shards did indeed hit the Dark Zephyr, but the odd thing was that the dwarven analysts failed to understand the distorted perception that frustrated their attempts to take the incoming expert mech down.

Still, there were plenty of mech designers and other engineers that were researching the properties of the enemy light skirmisher. A dwarven Master Mech Designer who was providing support by remote finally deciphered the effect they were trying to overcome.

"The human expert mech is employing the properties of Perfidious Steel. It's making this evasion-oriented light skirmisher far more difficult to target. What you're seeing is the actual mech but its actual position is shifted from our perspective due to a distortion of our perspective. The most troubling variable we need to deal with is that the expert pilot can vary the degree and direction of the distortion. The distance between the actual expert mech and its apparent coordinates can vary on the fly! The greater the range, the greater the maximum distortion!"

All of this technical talk mostly flew over the heads of the dwarven mech pilots. However, they received enough instructions to know what they had to do to pressure the Dark Zephyr.

The Mech Crackers concentrated on filling up a zone around the Dark Zephyr with deadly shards. They did not focus on penetration, knowing that the shards they propelled were simply too weak to penetrate the armor of an expert mech, even if it came in the lightest and slimmest package.

Indeed, whenever the splintered shards fired by hundreds of Mech Crackers hit the surface of the Dark Zephyr, Venerable Tusa did not even deign to channel a resonance shield. He put his complete trust in the Unending alloy armor plating that covered his expert mech.

The problem was that as the Dark Zephyr came closer, the degree of distortion grew less exaggerated. It became easier and easier for the Mech Crackers to achieve more frequent strikes.

It was like tracking an invisible soldier in the rain. The soldier might remain out of view but the gap in the rain clearly exposed his position!

Though the mechanics were slightly different in this case, the dwarves employed a lot of AIs and processing power to track, calculate and predict the Dark Zephyr's movements.

The more data the Slug Rangers gathered, the more precise they were able to establish the Dark Zephyr's current position and where the mech was likely to be found a few seconds later.

The Slug Rangers filtered and condensed all of this raw data and supplied the necessary details to the Gauss Baron.

Venerable Leiva Hinder was an experienced expert pilot. Though she did not excel in precision or prediction, as a ranged mech specialist she was not a dummy in this aspect.

She already gained a decent understanding of the Dark Zephyr and its expert pilot. Both of them were challenging to hit even if she received the most precise targeting data.

"So what?" The female dwarven expert pilot grinned. "I've got eight cannons to work with and my cluster rounds will tear your thin mech to shreds!"

This was a huge advantage! Not only was the Gauss Baron able to flood a larger zone with simultaneous volleys, it could also alternate its fire in an attempt to track the Dark Zephyr and inflict continuous damage onto its frame.

After doing the former for a minute, Venerable Leiva finally gained enough confidence to switch to the latter firing pattern!

"Ah! Lay off me!" Venerable Tusa grunted as his expert mech continuously rumbled after getting hit by an unrelenting rain of resonance-empowered shards!

Venerable Leiva grinned even as her breath grew heavier. Unlike her opponent, she had already expended a considerable amount of energy and resources in the earlier phases of the battle.

"Maybe I shouldn't have put so much pressure on the enemy masterwork expert mech." She muttered.

She did not regret her decision, though. Any other ranged mech would lose badly in a duel against the surprisingly powerful and accurate Amaranto. If not for her constant suppression effort, Venerable Stark would have massacred at least thrice as many Cracker mechs as now!

The emergence of all of the other dwarven expert mechs freed her from this role. Though the Amaranto was quite powerful, the Slug Rangers still had expert rifleman mechs to spare.

Two of Leiva's comrades were already working together to pin down the Amaranto and rob it of any opportunity to take its time to aim. With Venerable Zellie Abermas and Venerable Lloyd Kitserig on the job, the chances were extremely slim that the masterwork expert mech would be able to accomplish anything of notice.

Venerable Leiva therefore felt free to concentrate fully on alternating her Gauss Baron's cannons so that they continually kept track of the Dark Zephyr's movements.

It helped a lot that the distance between the incoming expert light skirmisher and the Lemogo Distat had shrunk by a considerable margin. The delay between pulling the

trigger and seeing a shard hit the exterior of the Dark Zephyr grew smaller and smaller, giving Venerable Tusa a much harder time in trying to get rid of the tracking.

He didn't bother to activate his resonance shield. Against the Steel Rain artillery mechs alone, it would have been able to block a fair deal of ordnance, but against the resonance-empowered attacks of the Gauss Baron it would shred like paper.

"I really hope you can hold it together, Dark Zephyr. This dwarf isn't letting up on us!" He gritted his teeth as his mech began to rattle harder and harder.

Though ordinary vibrations weren't a threat to a well-designed and well-built expert mech, he knew that could easily change once Venerable Leiva switched to heavier ordnance.

"What is up with this expert mech?"

Venerable Leiva had put the Dark Zephyr under continuous bombardment for over two minutes now. The shards she launched with the eight gauss cannons she had at her disposal wasn't shredding the enemy expert mech as they should.

She did what many expert pilots did when they encountered something weird. She called in technical support.

"What the hell is going on?! Why is this human expert mech so durable!?"

"Ma'am, our analysis on the approaching expert light skirmisher indicates that it is clad with dense and abnormally resilient armor plating. We have never encountered this unknown alloy before, but our preliminary conclusion is that it is a pseudo first-class material!"

"What?!" She reacted with alarm. "Are you saying that the Larkinson Clan built an expert mech that is covered with better armor than my Gauss Baron?!"

"It's not just the light skirmisher we have identified as the Dark Zephyr that possesses this excellent armor system. Two more expert mechs along with two other abnormal machines fielded by the Larkinson Clan are also clad in this material. They are impenetrable by ordinary weapons and it is possible that even your heaviest shots can't penetrate the Larkinson Clan's expert mech."

"Then how do we take down this target?!" Venerable Leiva demanded.

"Please stand by. We are interpreting the sensor data and deliberating on the countermeasures you can take. In the worst-case scenario, we will recall an expert mech to block the enemy light skirmisher's approach or box it in with the help of additional melee mechs. A mech that cannot be destroyed can still be neutralized."

"Then hurry up and figure out a response!"

Chapter 3264: Light vs Heavy

The dwarven tech support quickly supplied Venerable Leiva with an explanation and a potential solution.

"The performance of the Larkinson expert mechs do not conform to first-class standards so there is a high probability that their internals are not as sturdy. High-powered single impact or explosive damage should do the trick. You need to maximize the impulse of your shots. The greater the force, the greater the shock to the enemy mech's systems."

"In other words, just shake it until it falls apart from the insides. Got it. Exchange my magazines, then. I'm still loaded with lots of cluster rounds."

Eight half-empty magazines dropped from the Gauss Baron. Bots entered the bunker and quickly brought the hot containers away.

At the same time, eight more bots arrived and slotted in the fresh replacement magazines in the open slots.

The brief pause also granted the Gauss Baron a quick time to rest its eight cannons and perform a lot of internal diagnostics in order to ascertain its current condition. The expert mech performed many minor adjustments to various systems in order to compensate for any deviations that had taken place as the expert mech endured a lot of wear and tear over the course of the battle.

Once the Gauss Baron was ready, Venerable Leiva immediately fired solid, glowing slugs at the Dark Zephyr.

"Yikes!" Tusa shouted as he hastily jerked his expert mech aside. "That's a big attack!"

Though the hit rate of the Gauss Baron decreased massively, its damage output had become a lot more threatening. Tusa didn't need to reference any numbers to know that getting slammed even once was enough to give his precious expert mech a concussive blow to its internals!

"I can't get hit! I'll lose a lot of momentum if I get hit even once!"

He tried his best to dodge and foil the prediction of his opponent as best as possible. He felt way more stressed at this moment than he had ever been when he sparred against Venerable Stark!

Venerable Tusa was highly grateful that he got a lot of practice in this aspect, though. All of the skills he developed while acting as Venerable Stark's target dummy came really handy at this moment!

He knew that if he got hit by one of the Gauss Baron's powerful projectiles even once, it would not just shake his expert mech a bit. It would give his Dark Zephyr a powerful push that was enough to stagger its flight and interrupt its movement for a brief amount of time.

If the enemy expert mech was sharp enough, which he thought was highly probable, then the Gauss Baron's subsequent attacks would take advantage of the Dark Zephyr's momentary incapacitation and continue to stagger it in the same way as keeping a volleyball in the air.

Venerable Tusa felt more pressure than ever as he focused fully on anticipating his opponent's attacks and staying one step ahead of the incoming attacks. His mech zipped left, right up and down at erratic times just before a powerful glowing slug zipped just a couple of meters past the exterior!

"Hahaha! Is that all!? You'll never hit me at this rate!"

His reaction time was on point and the Dark Zephyr's boosters came in very handy. Their greatest advantage was that they gave the expert mech an immediate impulse that displaced it in another direction with hardly any warning.

Though the compact but surprisingly powerful booster modules were limited by their fuel supply, Tusa estimated that he would have enough juice left to close in on the Gauss Baron's bunkers.

However, as the Dark Zephyr began to get close enough to the Lemogo Distat that he was easily able to distinguish her enormous hull with the naked eye, his luck finally ran out just as he thought he would keep his mech untouched by his powerful opponent.

The effect of Perfidious Steel heavily dropped off this range, allowing Venerable Leiva to rely more on her own senses and judgement rather than the data fed by AIs and algorithms.

Venerable Stark had always warned Tusa that he unconsciously adopted patterns in his decision-making. Every skilled ranged mech pilot learned how to detect the habits and other repetitive patterns of their opponents. As long as they identified at least a single rule, they could anticipate a movement and attack in the location that their target was expected to be a moment later.

Though Tusa had expended a huge amount of effort into preventing this from happening, the more he got fired upon, the higher the chance that his expert mech would get hit. This was much worse than in his practice sessions because his opponent had eight primary weapon mounts and could employ trial and error to a much more liberation fashion.

"AHHH!"

At one point, whether due to skill or through happenstance, one of the eight cannon shots hit the Dark Zephyr in the leg, causing the frame to become unbalanced and lose control over its flight trajectory.

The impact was so powerful that the resonance-empowered round exploded with dark orange power.

Fortunately, just as Tusa expected, the armor of his expert mech held, though the internal telemetry stated that the damaged sections had dented by as much as 28 millimeters.

Though that did not sound like much, this was just the result of a single impact! If a more important section of the Dark Zephyr suffered continuous impacts on the same spots, the denting could get very serious!

"Damn, this expert mech hits as hard as a tactical nuke!"

The more serious indication of damage came from the delicate internal components. They were too weak to withstand heavy damage but were usually well-protected enough to become vulnerable to external attacks.

The issue was that the Gauss Baron's powerful cannons were just too powerful. Venerable Leiva did not spare any of her energy. She paid no effort to her increasing strain and mental exhaustion and powered her attacks as much as her expert mech and projectiles could allow.

"I can't let this mech get close!"

The Slug Rangers had also become alarmed at the continued approach of the surprisingly-resilient Dark Zephyr. The mech division reassigned more melee mechs to protecting the bunker where the Gauss Baron was housed.

However, because the dwarves underestimated the threat of Venerable Tusa's expert mechs, it was too late to recall one of the melee mechs of the Ferril Provincial Army!

Expert light skirmishers were proficient in bypassing or fighting through a lot of regular mechs.

Not only that, but the expeditionary forces were constantly paying attention to every corner of the battlefield. When General Verle noticed that the Slug Ranger was building an increasingly denser and thicker wall of mechs around the bunker of the Gauss Baron, he grinned at the sight.

"Did you think we wouldn't take advantage of such an easy target? Then think again!" He laughed for the first time in a while. He opened a communication channel to the Eye of Ylvaine. "Commander Taon! Please direct as much fire support as you can spare to

the mechs shielding the Gauss Baron's bunkers. I've just transmitted detailed targeting instructions. Open up a path for Venerable Tusa no matter what it takes!"

"We're already on it, sir."

The Eye of Ylvaine could only spare fifteen Transcendent Punishers for this additional task, but that was enough!

By this time, the heavy artillery mechs of the Larkinson Clan had already fired their primary weapons for some time. Even if the mechs were still unscathed, the machines had accumulated quite a lot of heat as well as wear and tear. The Ylvainan mech pilots had not been sparing to their mechs, knowing that it was crucial to output as much damage as they could compress in as little time as possible.

Their positron beam cannons were already overheating to the point where the bunker had to spray cooling fluids onto them in order to increase their heat dissipation. Their gauss cannons were not well off either. The energy coursing through their coils and the powerful physical forces the cannons had to endure on a repeated basis took a toll on their physical structure.

Malfunctions were thankfully rare and only occurred when the enemy dwarven mechs had breached the bunkers and dinged the Transcendent Punishers.

Though their design wasn't brilliant in comparison to the Cracker series, the first heavy artillery mech designed by Ves and Gloriana benefited from a generous design budget that incorporated plenty of expensive reinforcement materials that did their best to keep the Transcendent Punishers together.

Now, fifteen of these powerful and battleworn artillery mechs were opening fire on the distant Slug Ranger mechs.

Bright lances of positron beams almost instantly emerged from the muzzles of the Transcendent Punisher's energy cannons and burned into different dwarven mechs an instant later! The tight formations off the melee mechs worked against the Slug Rangers as the mechs that got struck did not have as much to maneuver as they liked.

Gauss cannons silently boomed as large projectiles crossed over the entire battlefield and reached their destination at the other side. The powerful kinetic impacts wore down the Slug Ranger mechs hard, but they had enough space knights that they were able to endure the bombardment without losing mechs too quickly.

The Eye of Ylvaine wasn't focused on eliminating the dwarven escort mechs. The firepower of the fifteen Transcendent Punishers hit disproportionately hard because of the caliber of their cannons and the amount of weapon mounts they possessed.

Getting bombarded by 15 heavy artillery mechs felt the same as getting attacked by four to six times as many rifleman mechs!

In order to perform their role better, the Transcendent Punishers spread out their firepower so that many mechs got struck head-on by a powerful positron beam or a solid projectile. Many mechs incurred surface damage that were more disruptive than damaging.

When the Eye of Ylvaine mechs selectively concentrated a portion of their firepower on key targets such as identifiable officer mechs, the cohesion of the dwarven escort mechs dropped!

No one was capable of calmly enduring a sustained artillery bombardment! The suppressed dwarven escort mechs tried their best to hold their positions, but their nerves were getting to them and their mechs were constantly dropping in integrity.

"We can't hold the line for long!"

Numerous Ship Crackers received new targeting instructions and began to concentrate their fire onto the Transcendent Punishers that were putting so much pressure on the escort mechs.

While that helped by a fair amount, it took a lot of time and effort for the counter-battery fire to punch through the protective bunkers. The Eye of Ylvaine pilots did not bother to defend themselves but focused on the mission and disrupted the enemy formation as much as possible!

Venerable Tusa's eyes widened as he saw the developing situation as he rapidly approached the Lemogo Distat. Even though his mech had been battered numerous times by the Gauss Baron, his expert mech had more tricks up its sleeve than making use of Perfidious Steel.

"Ahh!"

A powerful resonance-empowered slug struck the Dark Zephyr's chest. Though the attack failed to dent the expert mech's resilient frontal armor, it unleashed a severe concussive blow that the armor system only partially absorbed. The remainder of the kinetic energy went on to shake the internals, which also included the cockpit!

Tusa quickly employed the remainder of his booster fuel in order to evade the follow-up attack that he was completely certain would arrive.

"Hah, you missed!"

It became harder and harder to mislead Venerable Leiva's prediction, but the intense pressure caused him to squeeze more potential out of him than ever!

Venerable Leiva, sensing a greater and greater threat to the oncoming expert light skirmisher, decided to override a number of safety features. This enabled her to forcibly increase the firing rate of her expert mech's gauss cannons by 20 percent!

"Drown in my fire, human!"

All of this took a terrible toll on the Gauss Baron's weapon systems, its expert pilot thought that it could fix the damage afterwards.

Right now, taking down the Dark Zephyr took precedence!

Chapter 3265: Endless

The Dark Zephyr had crossed an enormous distance in a short amount of time. Its speed wasn't as blazing as other expert mechs, but its skillful expert pilot and its emphasis on evasion allowed it to start its end run without suffering any crippling damage.

Many other expert mechs would have been torn to pieces by the Gauss Baron by now! It was a massive accomplishment for Venerable Tusa to get this close to a hostile expert heavy artillery mech by relying mostly on itself.

However, the hardest part came last. Not only did the Dark Zephyr have to bypass or fight through a horde of dwarven escort mechs, but it also had to find a way to get past the heavily-armored bunker that had taken an enormous beating but still remained fully intact.

Then, Venerable Tusa had to attack the Gauss Baron itself, and he seriously doubted that the expert heavy artillery mech would just roll over and allow itself to get butchered by a human expert mech.

Dozens of different scenarios swept through the expert pilot's mind as he still tried his best to evade as many attacks as possible. While Tusa could readily ignore the impacts from ordinary artillery mechs especially because most of them missed anyway, the Gauss Baron's firepower took an increasingly greater toll on his expert mech.

"Hang on, buddy! We're almost there!"

Numerous internal systems and components have already started transmitting error messages. Though mechs were large and robust enough to be able to function despite suffering from malfunctions, it was a bad sign that the Dark Zephyr had reached this condition.

The line that separated a slightly damaged mech and a heavily damaged mech was quite blurred! This was because even a single malfunction or misaligned element

created a vulnerability that could easily be exploited if the system in question received another substantial blow.

All of this meant that Venerable Tusa could not afford to delay his high-risk assault. The longer his expert mech was out in open space, the more opportunities the Gauss Baron and the Slug Rangers obtained to thwart his attack.

When he studied the enemy escort mechs getting pressured by distant artillery bombardment, he did not see many openings that his expert mech could squeeze through in order to reach the target bunker. The bombardment from the Eye of Ylvaine could only yield so many results.

"Then I don't have any choice but to resort to that trick..."

Compared to the Piranha Prime, the Dark Zephyr was a much more capable machine. He would have never had the guts to overcome these barriers when he was still piloting his previous mech.

Throughout this battle, Venerable Tusa had continued to increase his resonance with his own mech. The Dark Zephyr came more and more to life as Tusa depended on it to a greater degree while he was desperate to overcome the attacks launched by the dwarves.

With an entire expert heavy artillery mech doing its utmost to shoot down his expert light skirmisher, Tusa felt more free and untouchable than ever!

"We are untouchable!"

As the end run proceeded, the distance between the Dark Zephyr and the Lemogo Distat had shrunk down to less than fifty kilometers. In space combat terms, this was a tiny distance for a light mech!

A shimmering light blue form rapidly soared towards the flagship of the Slug Ranger. At this point, Venerable Tusa finally decided to activate his expert mech's resonance shield.

He did not activate it because he wanted to preserve the integrity of his mech. The thin layer of Unending alloy had done an admirable job at keeping everything critical in working condition.

Instead, Tusa wanted to borrow the special damage mitigating properties of resonance shields.

A silent impact struck the resonance shield of his Dark Zephyr as the Gauss Baron managed to land another powerful hit despite Tusa's best effort to dodge the attack.

However, unlike before, the Dark Zephyr hardly staggered this time. The resonance shield successfully absorbed a huge proportion of damaging kinetic energy and transferred it... elsewhere instead of transmitting the force to the expert mech frame.

If that happened, then the Dark Zephyr would have staggered just like before and disrupt Venerable Tusa's rhythm during these crucial moments.

"I'm not going to let you stop me! Hit me if you can, dwarf, but I shall always be free to move how I wish!" Tusa roared as he fully became invested in completing his mission!

As the sight of the Lemogo Distat rapidly grew in the Dark Zephyr's optical sensor readings, Venerable Tusa felt as if he had become incredibly in tune with his expert mech.

He not only utilized the Dark Zephyr in the ways it performed the best, but also conformed to the original design intent of this expert mech.

What Venerable Tusa was doing was exactly what Ves and the other designers had in mind when they spent months developing its design!

This not only made Venerable Tusa happy, but also evoked a lot of joy in the mech itself!

The former's deep investment in his difficult task and the latter's eagerness to fulfill its battle partner's demands caused the two to combine their forces in a wonderful way.

At the final stretch, the resonance shield of the Dark Zephyr had already turned ragged after blocking a couple of powerful resonance-enhanced blows. It was not a space knight or a heavy mech after all, so it did not contain a lot of defensive resonance materials that could add more durability to its resonance shield.

"It's enough!"

Tusa didn't need anymore as by this time his swift and elusive Dark Zephyr had finally reached the last couple of kilometers to the bunker of his primary target!

"Shoot it down! Block its way! Dogpile on it if you must! Don't let it get any closer to the Gauss Baron!"

Alarmed by the lone expert light skirmisher's successful approach, the commanders of the Slug Rangers ordered more ranged mechs to forget about their current assignments and direct their fire towards the Dark Zephyr, but even now the mech's evasive maneuvers were far too difficult for average mech pilots to track and predict.

"This light mech is too confounding!"

"I can't predict his movements!"

"Even if we get lucky, our shots aren't doing anything to this mech!"

The Dark Zephyr turned into a nightmare for the Slug Rangers. It was ridiculous how a single expert light mech managed to make the dwarves feel this way, but there was nothing funny about letting a deadly expert mech get close to a fleet.

During the Battle of Reckoning, the Larkinson Clan almost came to an end when Venerable Kelvin Praetor and his Trost had closed in on the Spirit of Bentheim.

If not for the sudden breakthroughs of both Taon Melin and Vincent Ricklin, the battle could have ended in a radically different way.

"A dwarf isn't going to break through right now, right?" Venerable Tusa momentarily thought before throwing this consideration away.

Even if a desperate dwarven mech pilot had reached the pit of desperation and managed to break through, so what? Tusa and his expert mech were in their element right now! The Dark Zephyr's blade was already starting to glow in anticipation of cutting apart an enemy expert mech!

"FORM UP! FORM UP!" A dwarven officer commanded the escort mechs! "Ignore the bombardment and form a wall! Even if your mech gets wrecked, it is still of use even if it only blocks the enemy expert mech for half a second."

The escort mechs did not just physically block the way to the bunker, but an increasing number of regular artillery mechs were frantically trying to flood the zone in front of it with as much ordinance as possible.

As long as the Dark Zephyr got caught in this zone for an extended amount of time, then the sheer weight of fire would definitely put it in a bad condition.

Venerable Tusa only had one shot!

"Stark! Are you ready?!"

"Go for it." The woman calmly replied.

The Dark Zephyr was ordinarily supposed to be a subtle mech, but now it glowed in bright blue as Tusa resonated with it as much as possible!

Just as his expert mech reached the wall of escort mechs, he employed a trick that he had recently managed to perform but wasn't in any of the manuals of the design.

"ENDLESS PATHS!"

Over a dozen different Dark Zephyrs sprung from the original mech as it almost reached the side of the Lemogo Distat!

The Slug Ranger capital ship loomed large as the extra Dark Zephyrs each followed an independent trajectory as they tried their best to pass or circumvent the blockade of mechs.

The opposing mech pilots all thought that the enemy light skirmisher had deployed yet another decoy ability.

Yet these successive expert mechs were not illusions or projections that barely held any substance. When they bulled through dwarven mechs or sliced their blades onto solid matter, each and every one of the Dark Zephyrs inflicted real damage!

In fact, even their resonance and will domains were real!

"Ahh! Isn't this supposed to be a decoy?!"

"The real one is here!"

"No, it's here!"

"They're all real!" A dwarf mech pilot reacted with horror.

Moments later, an incredibly sharp mech knife stabbed straight through the chest plating of his mech and instantly penetrated the cockpit!

"Triggering Alpha 5!" Venerable Leiva shouted as she pulled a special trigger!

In an instant, a massive explosion erupted from the sides of her bunker. The directional explosives were so powerful that many closer dwarven mechs shattered to pieces as they were included in the blast range.

Many of the Dark Zephyrs that looked like illusions but actually performed as if they were fully authentic disappeared as they got swept in the explosion!

As the blast wave slowly faded away, the integrity of the bunker was hardly affected. Instead, the sides looked torn and blackened as the explosives buried in those sections had torn an ugly rectangle in the hull sections around the bunker.

Venerable Leiva Hinder didn't care about the ruined aesthetics. She still remained on guard as she tried to spot where the actual Dark Zephyr had disappeared. From the durability it had shown a moment earlier, the explosive trap shouldn't have been strong enough to shatter it to pieces.

Still, the force of the explosion was so large that even sturdier and more durable expert mechs should have suffered a lot of malfunctions if they came close enough!

"Where are you?"

As Venerable Leiva fully concentrated her attention on her immediate surroundings in order to catch any hint of movement that suggested a lurking enemy expert mech, she almost became surprised when a distant but extremely powerful beam suddenly struck her bunker!

She sensed an extreme threat from this attack!

"MAXIMUM DEFENSE!"

The gun ports of her bunker slid shut and extra layers of armor continued to slide into place.

The resonance shield of her Gauss Baron also flared to life at its strongest setting just in case the earlier measures weren't enough!

Just as her mech began to get surrounded by a dark orange resonance shield, Venerable Leiva looked on with horror as the ultra-powerful beam sliced a wide hole right through multiple layers of expert mech-grade alloy plating as if it was butter!

Though the extremely strange and anomalous attack had expended much of its energy and dealt negligible damage to her mech's resonance shield, the danger had not yet passed.

A smaller but still relatively powerful resonance-enhanced beam shot right through the hole that had just been sliced open.

This time, the modest white beam impacted the powerful resonance shield of the Gauss Baron and destabilized it to such a degree that it was as if the expert artillery mech got struck by a hundred mechs at once!

The resonance shield soon fizzled out as Venerable Leiva was no longer able to resonate effectively with her mech. The powerful blow had inflicted a surprisingly large amount of strain to her will and mind!

"No!"

A third and different beam struck right afterwards! This one was even weaker but splashed onto the energy shield that the Gauss Baron automatically activated with extremely minimal delay.

The energy shield acted as if the expert mech had been struck by an EMP attack and lost a lot of stability.

Now, the only defenses the Gauss Baron had left was its armor, but it was also the most difficult defensive measure to overcome. The high quality of its armor system and its frontal plating was so thick that even the earlier powerful attack wouldn't be able to penetrate through all of this high-quality material!

Chapter 3266: Sacrifices

The successive blows to the Gauss Baron's layered defenses were so abrupt that Venerable Leiva hardly paid any attention to what had happened to the Dark Zephyr.

That was a mistake.

Much to her surprise, the intact and still combat-capable Dark Zephyr had reached the upper surface of the bunker and swiped its knives to tear through the gap in order to widen its opening.

It looked as if it had evaded the explosive trap that had engulfed many of its illusionary copies!

Venerable Tusa smirked. In fact, that was indeed the case. When he leveraged the prime mech properties of his expert mech and channeled the power of Arnold, he sent out every single iteration of the Dark Zephyr around the enemy mech blockade in different directions.

What no one noticed was that there was one Dark Zephyr copy that had slowed down and reversed course! Instead of going forward, it had stalled and even flew backwards to an extent.

This turned out to be a prudent decision as the Slug Rangers didn't hesitate to detonate a powerful explosive buried in the hull of the Lemogo Distat that destroyed or incapacitated over sixty dwarven escort mechs!

Apparently, the Slug Rangers thought it was worth it to sacrifice that many regular mechs just to take down a single enemy expert light skirmisher that threatened their greatest hero and expert mech.

It was a pity that Venerable Tusa's caution had caused this devious trap to fail, leading to a lot of friendly fire with no substantial results.

"VULCAN DAMN YOU!" Leiva roared as she commanded the Gauss Baron to fire its cannons through the opening in a continuous alternating pattern.

There was no way for the Dark Zephyr to go except through the narrow hole in the front. Even if it took the time to carve out another hole, it would still be easy for the Gauss Baron to hit the enemy light mech when it was this close and approached from such a limited angle!

"Hahaha! I'm never letting you get in! Come inside if you dare!"

Though heavy artillery mechs were known to be extremely vulnerable to melee mechs that had managed to close the distance, expert mechs did not play by the same rules.

The Gauss Baron still had several countermeasures in reserve. This was the advantage of piloting a big and fat mech. There was so much space and capacity that Venerable Leiva still had at least three emergency measures at her disposal that could repel any enemy mech that thought that her machine was vulnerable at close range.

Perhaps her opponent thought the same way because the enemy expert mech stopped cutting through the bunker and retreated from the immediate area.

"Gone?" She frowned.

This was highly unusual. The Dark Zephyr had worked so hard to cross the battlefield and run through a gauntlet of withering artillery fire, expending plenty of resources in the process. Now that it had reached the finish line, how could it abandon its greatest goal?

"Venerable Leiva! The hostile expert mech hasn't retreated. It is carving its way into the deck below you! Pull back immediately!"

"What?!"

The explosive trap that had devastated a lot of escort mechs also dealt a significant amount of damage to the hull of the Lemogo Distat. The rough rectangular grooves exposed enough openings for the Dark Zephyr to carve through the hull with quick, repeated attacks with its extremely sharp knives.

Though they didn't look like it, the Dark Zephyr's main weapons were quite good at carving through thick but not too resilient metal. Starship hull plating was typically characterized by these properties. The only problem was that there was too much material to carve through that it would take any mech a long time to create an opening.

Another problem was that many blades wore down rapidly if used in such a crude fashion.

It was fortunate that Venerable Tusa didn't have to worry about this problem. Not only were the knives of the Dark Zephyr made out of high-quality exotics, but they were also laced with Bissonat, the same resonance material that had been used to make the Decapitator, the masterwork mech sword forged by Ketis!

By resonating with his knives, he activated a resonance ability that massively increased their durability as well as their sharpness. The enormous hull plating became as easy to carve into as a freshly roasted turkey to the Dark Zephyr.

The only cost was that it took a lot out of Venerable Tusa. His earlier exertions had already taxed his will and now he was depleting the remainder of his mental strength at an alarmingly high rate!

"I have to end this quickly!"

Once the expert mech had dug a compact hole through the compartment below the bunker, Venerable Tusa drove his expert mech in without any concern.

He then began to press his mech upwards and carve its glowing knives right across the ceiling!

Though he encountered plenty of resistance, most of it turned out to be highly intricate and complicated mechanical systems. One of them happened to be the moving platform that was supposed to retract the Gauss Baron back into the interior of the Lemogo Distat!

Once the Dark Zephyr sabotaged this mechanism, the Gauss Baron had become stuck! Its thick, short but massive dwarven legs were slotted into the deck, both to increase stability and enhance heat transference.

Even though expert mechs were faster and more powerful by nature, the Gauss Baron wasn't designed to be an acrobat. It took a lot of time and effort for it to extricate itself from the malfunctioning platform, especially since its design didn't even include arms that would have enabled it to leverage its mechanical strength a lot better!

What happened next only took a few seconds. After literally carving its way through the deck where the Gauss Baron stood on, the Dark Zephyr had reached the rear of the expert mech that possessed the greatest firepower out of any single machine!

"YOU DON'T BELONG HERE, HUMAN!" Venerable Leiva boomed as she tried to reverse the orientation of every gauss cannon on her frame so that they pointed towards the rear.

It was too bad that out of eight of its formidable cannons, only two that were mounted on the top were capable of angling to the rear. After all, the Gauss Baron was designed to function exclusively as a bunker mech. One of the crucial reasons why the artillery mech's frame was able to mount so many powerful gauss cannons was because it made a lot of tradeoffs in its flexibility.

Now, these design choices had come back to bite the Gauss Baron from behind, literally in this case!

The Dark Zephyr quickly rushed to the back of the Gauss Baron and cut the powerful but slow-turning cannons into trash before digging its knives through the vulnerable rear armor of the heavy artillery mech with only slightly greater resistance!

Venerable Leiva's manic eyes glinted as the dwarven expert pilot made a ruthless decision. Ejecting from the mech was out of the question because the enemy mech stood in the way.

Many of the countermeasures that she had ready were invalidated because they were primarily designed to repel enemies from the front.

Venerable Leiva and the Slug Rangers had already failed by allowing the Dark Zephyr get this close. It was not a surprise that she didn't have any adequate solutions at her disposal.

Without the ability to move or turn around her heavy mech, she made the only decision that could still allow her to contribute to the battle.

"THE VULCAN EMPIRE BELONGS TO DWARVENKIND!"

Venerable Tusa instinctively sensed an acute threat from the thick and heavy mech he was carving up. It was taking too much time for him to disable it due to its enormous bulk.

"Oh, hell..."

He mustered up as much of his remaining resonance strength as possible! At the same time, he urgently resonated with his Dark Zephyr, causing it to appear increasingly more fuzzy just as the Gauss Baron exploded!

From an outside perspective, a huge explosion engulfed the side of the Lemogo Distat where the Gauss Baron's bunker was situated!

The power and force of the detonation was so mighty that the capital ship jerked and lost control of her flight trajectory for a short instant.

A lot of dwarven mechs, particularly those belonging to the Slug Rangers, momentarily faltered.

"The Lemogo Distat is hurt!"

"Venerable Leiva..."

The explosion that tore out of the Lemogo Distat's hull was so visually impactful that a lot of dwarven mech pilots felt chilled.

The capital ship looked like a wounded whale. The violent detonation had demolished dozens of compartments around the bunker and widened a huge and ugly cavity that represented an enormous vulnerability!

"Rotate our vessel by 180 degrees!"

Though wounded on her side, the damage to her functionality was relatively limited. With all of her major systems and ship components still in working condition, the bruised but still unbroken dwarven fleet carrier spun around her length until her gaping wound was no longer exposed to the human enemies at the front.

Regardless of this quick response, a lot of dwarves were still devastated. The Gauss Baron was one of the three most powerful guardians of the soldiers in the dwarven military fleet. Her powerful gauss cannons and her extremely helpful fire support had been key to suppressing powerful elements like the Amaranto, sieging hardy defensive ships like the Graveyard and wrecking a lot of key enemy mechs such as the Transcendent Punishers and the Eternal Redemptions.

Aside from that, the morale boost that Venerable Leiva Hinder and her Gauss Baron bestowed to the dwarven troops was also gone. What was worse was that her tragic loss inflicted a negative impact on their morale.

The Slug Rangers were especially hard hit!

In the same way, the expeditionary forces had become a lot more buoyed. Many Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers felt suffocated sometimes due to the prospect of fighting under the specter of getting blasted by powerful artillery at any moment. The Gauss Baron had destroyed or crippled hundreds of mechs before it finally went down.

The Dark Zephyr's daring intervention freed the human soldiers from a huge weight on their shoulders, allowing them to fight and serve with less reservations!

Yet a number of attentive people weren't entirely happy at this dramatic outcome. The Gauss Baron had unquestionably self-destructed, but what happened to the Dark Zephyr that had been a stone's throw from its target?

"Venerable Tusa, please respond! What is the Dark Zephyr's condition?! We have lost connection to your expert mech's data feeds and cannot ascertain its current state. Please respond!"

Ves grew increasingly more worried as nothing came back. The Spirit of Bentheim should have at least been able to receive some signals. Even from this distance and even with all of the heavy interference in the surrounding space, the Dark Zephyr should have been able to show signs of life... but only if it was functional enough.

He suddenly remembered that he had a good way of finding out whether a member of the Larkinson Clan was still alive.

"Book, please."

Nitaa stepped forward and passed over the Larkinson Mandate to him. He let his armored gauntlet keep hold of the relic and tried to immerse himself in the Larkinson Network.

As soon as he did so, he immediately noticed that there were less connections and distant presences than before. The Larkinson Clan had already suffered thousands of casualties. Not just mech pilots but also many ship personnel had sacrificed their lives in order to resist the Vulcanites.

Nya...

The Golden Cat who sat in the center of this remarkable network took each and every loss personally. As the embodiment of kinship, the ancestral spirit was not able to disregard the death of even the most inconsequential Larkinson.

"It's okay." Ves mentally soothed Goldie. "I know you don't like it but these soldiers died for a good cause. We can't get distracted by grieving for their losses right now. We need to continue the fight and make sure that their sacrifices were not in vain."

Nyaaa...

Chapter 3267: Escalating Ferocity

The expert pilots connected to the Larkinson Network were blazing stars compared to all of the dim lights of other clansmen. Ves easily recalled Tusa's light and ephemeral aura and noticed that the connection leading to such a presence was still intact!

"Tusa..."

The Dark Zephyr appeared just seconds later and a short distance away from the Lemogo Distat! Though the Unending alloy exterior actually looked dented and a bit burned in many places, the expert mech had still managed to survive the explosion at close range!

The data feeds came back online as well, providing the command center with solid data that the internals of the Dark Zephyr were still in a working shape, if only reluctantly.

The only matter of concern was that the mental indicators of the mech pilots had dropped to a low point. The Dark Zephyr's resonance strength had deteriorated to the point it wasn't able to form any true resonance anymore.

"I... made it." Tusa tiredly said over the communication channel.

"How?" Ves softly asked.

"I discovered the true meaning of my expert mech, that's all..."

"Well, you've done your job. Please distance yourself from the dwarven fleet and return to safety. You're not in shape to fight anymore. I'll be sure to order the Eye of Ylvaine to cover your retreat."

"No need, Ves. I can get back by relying on my own skill. I can still do that, at least."

Indeed, even though Venerable Tusa was no longer able to resonate with Perfidious Steel, the Dark Zephyr's mobility was still working fine enough to dodge and weave through all of the retaliation fire unleashed by the vengeful and grieving Slug Rangers!

"Venerable Leiva!"

"You must pay for destroying our Gauss Baron!"

"The cult is right! Humans are all murderers! We need to step them before they kill off our entire race!"

A lot of younger and inexperienced Slug Rangers lost control of themselves. They became beset with frenzy as they thought about the huge loss their mech division had suffered. Even the elite Steel Rain mech pilots became furious as one of their own had been forced to self-destruct her own expert mech to repel an enemy that was never supposed to get that close!

To see the Dark Zephyr escaping from the powerful explosion with hardly any serious damage on its surface was galling to the dwarves!

Venerable Leiva's heroic sacrifice would have been in vain if the Slug Rangers failed to finish the job she started!

With cries and roars, A lot of Slug Ranger mech pilots disregarded their orders and unloaded their firepower onto the fleeing Dark Zephyr.

However, once the expert light skirmisher built up a respectable amount of distance, it became increasingly harder to hit the evading mech, especially considering that almost every ranged mech in the dwarven mech force was armed with physical weapons.

Only the Mech Crackers with their fracturing projectiles managed to ding the rear surface of the Dark Zephyr in a reliable fashion, but the expert mech incurred negligible damage. Even its rear was covered with a layer of Unending alloy. Light shards that shred forward posed no substantial threat to the powerful expert mech.

"He's coming back!"

Ves and many other Larkinsons quietly sighed in relief as they saw that Venerable Tusa was still able to take care of himself despite losing access to many of the expert mech's advantages. Even when his mental state reached near-complete exhaustion, he was still able to power through by relying on sheer willpower.

An expert pilot never gave up! They fought until they truly had nothing else left to give!

This was why Venerable Leiva decisively self-destructed her own mech. When escape was no longer possible, she took the best course of action available that still allowed her to serve her duty and fulfill her conviction without any hesitation.

"How scary." Ves whispered.

The determination of expert pilots was on display in other parts of the battlefield.

For example, Patriarch Reginald's immense hunger to advance to ace pilot drove him to ignore every other consideration of this battle so that he could throw himself onto the strongest enemy expert pilot without reservations!

The leader threw aside all matters concerning strategy, the preservation of Crosser lives and the survival of his capital ships. His perspective narrowed to such a great extent that he no longer even acknowledged every other mech around him aside from the Gatecrasher!

Massive resonance-fueled explosions and other violent outbursts regularly erupted from the center of the battlefield! Any mech that strayed into their exclusive fighting zone inevitably got demolished with disgusting ease.

The Gatecrasher rammed into the human mechs, causing them to shatter as if they were a loose collection of parts. The Bolvos Rage automatically directed a shoulder-mounted positron beam turret to disable any dwarven mechs with pinpoint precision.

No one was able to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing duel! Perhaps the only form of assistance that would help was to bombard the enemy expert mech from a distance, but that was difficult because both machines were extremely well-protected and much faster than their mech types suggested.

The same amount of firepower that was enough to slightly suppress one of the high-tier expert mechs could have been better spent on bombarding a couple of enemy mech companies to pieces!

That was also exactly what the artillery mechs of both sides were doing, alongside terrorizing each other. The Eye of Ylvaine and the Steel Rain had been going at each

other's throats for a long time. Many bunkers and enormous hull surfaces had been torn to pieces due to all of the ordnance impacting on each other vessels.

The Golden Skull Alliance already lost more than seventy sub-capital ships and the count kept rising.

Most of them consisted of lightly-armored sub-capital ships that were of little consequence. At this stage of their journey to the beyonder gate, it was fine if they got blown to pieces as long as they bought enough time for the expeditionary fleet.

What worried Ves a bit more was the damage done to the capital ships. Though he didn't experience it on the bridge, the Spirit of Bentheim had been the target of sustained bombardment. This was because her bunkers housed the most effective bunker mechs of the Larkinson Clan!

Combined with her importance as the flagship of the Larkinson Clan and the heart of all of its design activity, the Vulcanites were eager to pound the factory ship into scrap!

"Our cat head prow is taking an awful beating!"

"Better that than the rest of our hull!"

Due to the orientation of the Spirit of Bentheim, a lot of incoming artillery struck the giant animal head, causing its beauty and majesty to crumble with every minute that passed.

However, because the Spirit of Bentheim's bow was made of so many thick layers of Breyer alloy, the dwarves made little progress in actually drilling through the inner structure. Though it hurt to see this section being used as a damage sponge, it was truly the best possible way to preserve the integrity of the factory ship!

"Repairing and rebuilding the prow back to new is going to be a troublesome endeavor." Ves frowned.

So many chunks of valuable Breyer alloy had shattered and flung away from his capital ship. The valuable debris had gone on to join the increasingly more massive debris field that this battle was still in the process of expanding.

Anyone could easily get rich if they just picked up a few random pieces of space junk from this expanding field!

Ves shook his head and stopped thinking about that. There was no way that he would want to stick around long enough to salvage all of the valuable scrap when he was in the middle of enemy territory. He would just have to say goodbye to those treasures.

The overall state of the battle had turned into a messy slugfest at every corner. The stellar organization and clean lines of before were gone now that a couple of major incidents occurred.

The dwarves had become especially more disordered, but their aggression made up for it. They no longer exhibited the patience they showed before.

A lot of Ferril mech pilots had become furious after losing thousands of comrades and one of their great heroes in a relatively short interval of time.

Many more Vulcanite mech pilots fought worse than before. These were the individuals who questioned their lives after witnessing or living through the reality-defying battle formations employed by the Larkinson Clan. Hundreds more still maintained doubts about the righteousness of their cause.

Was the Larkinson Clan truly blessed by Vulcan? Even though most dwarves thought that this was a ridiculous question, the Ves' performance wasn't ordinary and those who fell for his story for various reasons began to question whether they were following the right version of Vulcan.

Then there were the berserkers. Any dwarven mech pilot who lost their confidence or willingness to fight for any reason quickly got injected with war stimulants. This cocktail of chemicals manipulated their physiology in ways that increased their hatred, raised their fighting instincts and reduced their rationality.

Though these drugged-up dwarves lost their discipline and their ability to work as a team, they had become frighteningly effective warriors who could outfight nearly any human opponent! Their unrelenting aggression and their lack of regard for their own lives caused them to make suicidal moves that also put their opponents in great danger!

"They're mere beasts, though. Between disciplined soldiers and feral beasts, it's much easier to deal with the latter!"

The mech units of the Golden Skull Alliance had not been adversely swayed by the dramatic turn of events. Instead, their morale and confidence had risen! The removal of thousands of dwarven mechs and the elimination of the Gauss Baron had wiped out a lot of threats that tilted the scales against the expeditionary fleet's favor.

The only concern was that the enemy dwarves still fielded a lot more expert mechs than the expeditionary fleet!

"In a way, the odds are even worse than before." Ves frowned. "Previously, we were able to deploy 7 expert mechs against 13 hostile expert mechs. Now, the ratio has turned into 6 friendly expert mechs to 12 enemy counterparts."

This was a less favorable ratio than before, but the numbers didn't tell the whole story. It was absolutely worth it to trade away the Dark Zephyr for the elimination of the Gauss Baron. The latter's powerful artillery capabilities could have profoundly affected the other expert mech duels, thereby giving the numerically-superior dwarven expert mechs an even greater advantage!

"The Dark Zephyr is a short-lasting expert mech anyway. It's not suitable for extended clashes so it is highly doubtful that it could defeat successive expert mechs."

Venerable Tusa was still a low-tier expert pilot who was just in the beginning stages of building up his resonance strength. He was far from comparable to the likes of Venerable Stark who held a much greater advantage in this area.

However, that did not make the guest expert pilot inexhaustible. In order to ensure the quick destruction of the Gauss Baron, the Amaranto briefly interrupted its duel against the enemy expert rifleman mechs and expended a hefty amount of effort to strip the Gauss Baron of its various defensive layers.

The masterwork expert mech's full-powered shot that tore apart the reinforced bunker layers sapped a hefty amount of energy from Venerable Stark!

Combined with all of the fighting she had done up until now, Venerable Stark's endurance had already reached the half-way point.

"She also exposed her full power." Ves reminded himself.

Shortly after she showed how much firepower her masterwork expert mech with its newfangled luminar crystal rifle truly possessed, the enemy expert pilots had become a lot more cautious in their fighting.

Aside from Venerable Orthox who was confident enough to block any blow, all of the other dwarven expert pilots maintained at least some vigilance towards the Amaranto. As soon as the deadly expert rifleman mech attempted to pick any of them off, they would be ready to dodge or employ other defensive measures!

"This is not going to end anytime soon..."

Chapter 3268: Dwarven Gang Fight

While the Larkinson mech pilots fought to defeat the enemy mechs, the spacers who served aboard the various vessels tried their best to keep their rides together.

Though their careers were not as glorious as that of the primary combatants, the humble ratings and officers who kept the crucial starships operational played a critical role in keeping the expeditionary fleet alive.

Tens of thousands of crew members dispersed across several different berths tried their best to mitigate all of the damage inflicted on the hulls of the various vessels.

"Fix those power lines now! Our #8 shield generator is depending on that juice!"

"Close the breach in compartment 36-3 ASAP!"

Damage control parties scurried forth in protective hazard suits in order to put out fires, close damaging breaches and prevent crucial systems from exploding and worsening the conditions of their ships.

Those serving aboard the various sub-capital ships had it much harder than their colleagues serving aboard the capital ships. The former were not only severely understrength, but also worked in places where there was previously little protection.

As long as an enemy artillery mech bombarded the sections the damage control parties were performing their duties, the loss of life was practically guaranteed!

Still, these humble but courageous Larkinsons did their duty without letting their fears dictate their decisions. Sure, they wanted to survive this bloody battle, but they knew that the best way to preserve the fleet and the clan was to make their ships last as long as possible!

Throughout the Larkinson fleet, many more individuals who decided to step up could be found. Some worked in the vacuum of space and others tried their best to keep the engines of their vessels running even if enemy bombardment had snapped off the front half of their ships!

The situation on the capital ships were different. As these vessels were the capital upon which the Larkinson Clan relied upon to succeed in the Red Ocean, there were many more active spacers keeping them together. A lot of personnel evacuated from the sub-capital ships had gone on to reinforce the existing work crews or formed into additional damage control parties.

The role of the latter was crucial to any space-faring vessel. Damage to ships could come in many forms. As starships were inherently large, technologically complex and interconnected, an initial enemy strike that only inflicted moderate damage at first could easily lead to a catastrophe if left unattended!

The primary role of damage control was to suppress and fix these dangerous incidents in a timely manner. Thousands of brave crew members address any serious issue such as short circuiting, fires, toxic chemical leakage and many other hazards. They did so despite feeling the vessel rumbling from sustained bombardment or facing the threat of getting voided into the cold embrace of vacuum if one of the enemy attacks landed close to their location.

The clansmen all did so knowing that they were making a substantial difference in keeping their fellow Larkinsons alive and well!

Aboard one of the most badly-affected capital ships, a team of technicians led by a low-ranking mech designer rushed to an outer compartment that had been rent by one of the Gauss Baron's final barrages!

The damage control party forcibly pushed open a jammed hatch only to enter a compartment that was missing a huge chunk of hull structure!

When they looked to their left, they could see the ships and mechs fighting in the distance. Continuous explosions and bright energy beams constantly lanced from one side of the battlefield to the other side. Less visible gauss projectiles traversed this stretch as well but they were too difficult to track with the sensors mounted on their hazard suits.

"Stop gawking and get to work! We need to erect a temporary bulkhead, fix the power and fluid lines and reinforce the damaged deck structure."

"Why bother?"

The mech designer dinged the helmet of a techie with a multitool. "Because the Graveyard is falling apart too quickly. We need to weld more scrap onto her hull but we can't do that if there are too many holes and not enough support on her hull. Got it? Then get to work!"

A combination of humans and bots began to perform rapid makeshift repairs. The assistance of the latter played a crucial role in speeding up their progress and getting more work done.

Even as distant artillery mechs continued to pound upon the heavily-damaged Graveyard, the ship kept rotating around her axis to prevent any single side or hull section from turning into easy targets. This considerably increased the survival chances of the Larkinsons working to fix up the breached compartment.

"Hurry up! Command has just sent a priority request for us to remove a stuck pillar."

As the work crews almost managed to close the breach with replacement panels, a random gauss round slammed right into the weak barrier and instantly tore through them until it finally collided against the inner bulkhead!

The enormous impact and transfer of kinetic energy was so violent that the bots and bodies of the work crews instantly shattered into pieces!

The entire damage control party had been wiped out by a single attack from a dwarven Ship Cracker mech. Not only that, but the attack not only negated all of the dead

clansmen's hard work, but also exacerbated the damage! Half-a-dozen more compartments had been breached and the secondary damage that resulted from this initial impact were still tearing through the hull of the Graveyard.

The hardy defensive salvage ship was taking a greater and greater beating with each second that passed!

General Verle remained stoic as he split his attention and tracked all of the important events taking place across the battlefield. He might not be an engineer, but he trusted the defensive capabilities of the Graveyard. The vessel was built to withstand a lot of punishment and he would take comfort in that as long as the captain of the vessel did not order an evacuation.

The pressure on his shoulders was far greater than before. A battle involving multiple mech divisions and twenty expert mechs was beyond anything he had ever commanded.

Certainly, he had taken part in battles of this scale in the past, but that was back when he was a lower-ranked officer and intelligence operative who fought for the Bright Republic.

This time, he commanded a larger Larkinson Army than ever against murderous dwarves who still retained tens of thousands of combat effective mechs!

While the confrontation between regular mechs remained stable, the struggle to defeat or at least block the enemy expert mechs was a lot more precarious.

Since the Ferril punitive fleet brought so many more expert mechs than the expeditionary fleet, a situation has emerged where some friendly expert mechs had to fight against multiple dwarven expert mechs!

Honor? Fairness? Valor? Hah! None of that mattered when the recent losses had riled up the Ferrils and stoked their desire for retribution!

The dwarven expert pilots all assumed that as long as they eliminated the human expert mechs, the rest of the human forces would lose their only effective line of defense against their rampage.

This was why the dwarven expert pilots banded together and sought to gang up on their respective targets with no consideration for giving their opponents a fair fight. This was a war, and they shouldered the responsibility of preserving the lives of as many dwarves as possible.

On the devastated right flank, the First Sword had entered into dire straits. Not only was it trying to contend against the powerful Paravad, but also had to defend against the unrelenting harassment of two additional low-tier expert mechs!

The Morko Mark II piloted by Venerable Huubert Sontegan was also an avian mech like the much more famous Paravad.

The difference was that Venerable Merek Buulfuron's Paravad was configured as a marauder mech while the Morko Mark II was considerably lighter and faster.

The Morko Mark II may be armed with only a light weapon loadout, but its claws were strong, sharp and optimized for swooping attack runs.

Though the First Sword's Unending alloy armor handedly resisted all of its aggressive attacks, Venerable Dise still had to be careful lest the fast and agile Morko Mark II attacked a weak point such as the flight system.

Between its attack runs, the Morko Mark II remained well out of sword range from the First Sword while peppering the human expert mech with positron beams fired from its light wing-mounted cannon mounts.

Even if the positron beam attacks failed to penetrate the armor of the First Sword, they still transferred a lot of heat energy, causing Venerable Dise's expert mech to slowly build up heat.

Still, this fast and elusive avian expert mech was not her greatest concern. Compared to the light harassment from the Morko Mark II, the Domingo Daren piloted by Venerable Liset Darkham was a much more serious concern!

"Ah!"

Powerful impacts struck the rear of the First Sword just as it attempted to swing its powerful sword at the Paravad. The physical impacts interrupted the expert mech's attack and forced Venerable Dise to switch from offense to defense as she had missed the right moment to strike!

The Swordmaiden expert pilot constantly had to guard against the ranged attacks of the Domingo Darkham. The oddly-named machine was essentially the expert mech version of the Crumbleshell.

Unlike an ordinary Crumbleshell, the Domingo Darkham featured double cannons in all of its four gun ports and also boasted a much thicker and well-protected shell.

Though the expert turtle mech likely inherited all of the weaknesses of the Crumbleshell model, no one in the expeditionary fleet knew whether it hid any trump cards or additional weapon systems.

While its performance at close range was still a mystery, at medium range it was able to spin at a much faster rate and fire a lot more rounds than a regular Crumbleshell!

If not for her excellent swordplay along with the immense difficulty of dealing damage to an expert mech that was clad with Unending alloy, the three Hivar Roarer mechs would have long torn the First Sword apart.

With the Morko Mark II and the Domingo Darkham acting as support, Venerable Dise hardly had any room to breathe as she tried her best to resist the Paravad's powerful claw and beak attacks.

Just like its two helpers, the Paravad clearly identified the First Sword's flight system as a crucial weak point. It was impossible to cover it all up with armor and many sections of this complicated assembly were covered with thinner and lighter applications of Unending alloy.

According to the analysts working aboard the Roost, the flagship of the Hivar Roarers, a sufficient application of heat and physical force should be enough to break the First Sword's flight system!

Once the expert swordsman mech lost its wings, who cared whether it wielded a masterwork mech sword? Who cared whether its expert pilot was able to exert strength and skill beyond the norm? An immobile machine in space was nothing more than a sitting duck!

In fact, the most efficient and convenient way to deal with the First Sword after it had lost its ability to maneuver in space was to push it away from the battlefield with a powerful volley of artillery fire.

Once its course was set to drift away from the heat of the action, Venerable Dise could only watch in her resilient mech as the enemy expert mechs swept aside the other human expert mechs.

This was why she made damn sure that she exposed her rear to the three opponents as little as possible! It was incredibly hard to do so because the bestial expert mechs were piloted by skilled expert pilots who had trained years if not decades alongside each other. Their maneuvers and tactics spoke of tight and seamless coordination.

No matter which dwarven expert mech the First Sword attempted to attack, it would always be foiled by the combined efforts of the other two dwarven expert mechs!

Chapter 3269: Triple Dwarves

The First Sword had no choice but to endure the attacks of three enemy expert mechs. After Venerable Dise and her elite comrades successfully launched a battle formation attack, the Hivar Roarer mechs at the right flank lost a lot of battle effectiveness!

The large amount of cutting attacks they received was not that hard on their Crumbleshell mechs, but a large portion of the bestial mech regiment consisted of lighter and more agile models.

All of these lightly-armored bestial mechs behaved as if their wings had been clipped! With thousands of mechs unable to navigate or fight properly due to their damaged conditions, the Swordmaidens, Heavensworders, Flagrant Vandals and Glory Seekers deployed at this flank were having a feast!

The damage inflicted by the bladestorm wasn't limited to just material damage to the Hivar Roarer mechs. The extraordinary energy storm also carried Venerable Dise's will as it propagated through the dwarven mech formations, which meant that every dwarven mech pilot experienced the hostility that the Swordmaiden expert pilot held towards the enemies of her sisters!

One of the consequences of this mental trauma was that the Hivar Roarer mech pilots were still haunted and completely lacked the guts to confront the human mechs with confidence.

As a result, the expeditionary forces quickly managed to finish off hundreds of vulnerable Hivar Roarer mechs and were on track to overrun the entire right flank if not for the sudden entry of the three expert mechs!

Right now, the Larkinson and Glory Seeker mechs were partially suppressed due to the occasional interference of the Mokra Mark II and the Domingo Daren. The former could easily tear apart normal mechs while the latter fired powerful rounds that heavily damaged or outright destroyed every human mech the expert turtle mech struck!

The only obstacle that stood in their way of wiping out the expeditionary mechs on this side of the battlefield was Venerable Dise and her expert mech!

In just a few minutes of combat, the First Sword had already been smacked around many times. It was incredibly challenging for Venerable Dise to keep her new expert mech intact. There were many cases where she was forced to absorb hits because she wasn't able to evade incoming attacks. The Unending alloy armor plating may not look any worse, but all of the physical impacts and shocks were subjecting the internals of the expert swordsman mech to considerable stresses!

Fortunately, backup was finally on the way.

"Dise!" Venerable Imaris Cross of the Cross Clan called. "My Conavis Mer is almost at your side. Let's work together to stall these Hivar Roarer expert mechs."

Surprisingly, Venerable Dise shook her head. "Don't come to me. I don't need reinforcements. I can take care of these enemies myself. Head over to the center or the

left flank instead. There are additional enemy expert mechs there that can't easily be stopped."

Venerable Imaris Cross couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Are you crazy? You're outnumbered three to one!"

"Heh." The Swordmaiden expert pilot smirked even as her mech shook from getting bombarded by the Domingo Darkham. "There are expert pilots and there are swordswomen. I already have the measure of my opponents. These dwarves haven't tasted a lot of blood and don't have any refined fighting skills. The dwarves should be fearing me instead!"

Though Venerable Dise was not an overconfident woman, she recognized the necessity of transferring more expert mechs elsewhere.

From what she could tell, the dwarves deployed 13 expert mechs in total, of which one of them had already been taken out of action.

The Hivar Roarers fielded 4 expert mechs, of which Venerable Dise managed to entangle three of them. The remaining expert mech of this mech division was fighting on the left flank that was further away.

The Slug Rangers used to field 4 expert mechs as well, but the takedown of the Gauss Baron removed a huge threat in their lineup.

That still left three of their formidable expert mechs in the fight, though! Two of the Slug Ranger expert rifleman mechs were locked in a firefight against the Amaranto. Amazingly, it took two of them to suppress the masterwork mech made by the Larkinsons.

The main reason for that was because the Amaranto's firepower was too unreasonable!

The physical rounds fired by the dwarven expert mechs mostly damaged the Graveyard that Venerable Stark was still using as the Amaranto's all-purpose barrier.

In contrast, the Amaranto could snipe at either of the two enemy expert mechs with much greater ease because the latter were flying in the open!

Since the Ferrils were on the attack, a much greater proportion of their mechs were deployed far forward from their fleet. Their ships were built to be tough and sturdy but the need to pursue and intercept the expeditionary fleet left them bereft of many defensive options.

In fact, the two dwarven expert pilots that were exchanging fire with the Amaranto understood that hiding behind their friendly ships wouldn't have changed much.

"The firepower of this masterwork mech is too unreasonable!"

Though the two dwarves were too strong-willed to fall for the ridiculous claim that the human leader was Vulcan and that his works were proof of his divinity, the Amaranto and especially its glowing rifle were challenging the assumptions of many weaker-minded dwarven mech pilots.

For better or worse, the expert pilots battling against the Amaranto had to show their fellow Vulcanites that dwarven craftsmanship was not inferior!

While Venerable Stark was trying to cope with two of her attackers, another Larkinson expert pilot had an even harder time trying to stay in the fight!

Just like Venerable Dise, Venerable Orfan was currently being assaulted by three separate expert mechs fielded by the Molten Hammers.

Of the three dwarven mech divisions, the Molten Hammers fielded 5 whole expert mechs. Each of them were piloted by dwarven talents who emerged from their respective mech regiments.

This also meant that their expert mechs were similar to the regular mech models that the Larkinsons had already met in battle.

For example, the Gatecrasher was a more powerful and more offensive spin on the Molten Furies of the Vulcan's Chosen mech regiment.

The Trementine was a fast and hard-hitting expert axeman mech from the Avido Berserkers that was good at breaking shields and chopping through armor.

The Bashravar was an expert heavy hammerman mech from the Forgehammers that only possessed decent speed but could break or shatter through every form of defense if it managed to land a hit!

The Firemason was an expert striker mech from the Volcano's Wrath that excelled at engulfing large areas of space with intense flames!

None of the latter three were pleasant to fight against, but when they pooled their strengths together, Venerable Orfan was having a much more awful time!

"Hot hot hot! That burns, you bastard!"

The Riot's unstable resonance shield grew even shakier as the expert spearman mech was engulfed in corrosive flames that were enhanced with a resonance ability!

Although the Firemason was primarily designed to burn large amounts of regular mechs, it also incorporated several features that allowed it to put up a good fight against enemy expert mechs.

The ability it employed at the moment not only caused its flammable spurt to heat up to a much higher temperature, but also add a corrosive quality to its flames that allowed it to chew through resonance shields with remarkable effectiveness!

However, for some strange reason, the latter quality didn't seem to have much of an effect! The Riot's unstable-looking blue corona had wobbled since the start of the battle, but had never actually broken even after suffering a surprising amount of attacks!

"Hahaha, that tickles! Is that the best you can do, dwarves?" Venerable Orfan taunted despite the fact that her words only riled up the dwarven expert pilots more. "You stupid dwarves are just as incompetent as the ones I've met before. Those stinking savages didn't even invent the toilet yet and couldn't count beyond ten because they didn't have enough fingers."

"DO NOT INSULT US, CUR!" The furious expert pilot of the Bashravar bellowed!

His heavy mech accelerated forward and attempted to slam its massive glowing hammer straight onto the Riot!

Yet just as the Bashravar almost arrived on top of the bright and orange expert mech, Venerable Orfan smirked as she jerked her Riot aside and also managed to thrust her spear out that just managed to inflict a telling blow against the dwarven expert mech's resonance shield.

"Too slow!" Orfan laughed. "Did you really think I would just sit around and let you hammer my mech like I'm as intelligent as you folk? My expert mech can dance circles around yours! Whoever thought it was a good idea to design such a fat and heavy expert melee mech anyway? Just look at what happened to your buddies. The Big Momma managed to wipe all of them out because they ate too much!"

If the expert pilot of the Bashravar was already consumed by anger and grief at the loss of virtually all of the mech pilots of the Forgehammers mech regiment, now he had become absolutely livid!

"SHUT UP! I will not allow you to tarnish the honor of my battlesworn brothers! I shall shatter your expert mech to pieces and personally ensure that your body is flattened to the point where not a single molecule remains intact!"

The Bashravar's resonance shield boiled with total fury! The expert pilot's eyes had already turned red with absolute indignation!

Yet so what?

Anger might cause the expert pilot to resonate even stronger with his Bashravar, but that did not change the fact that it was still a slow expert mech!

The Riot wasn't exactly fast either but it was still a medium mech. Under Venerable Orfan's deliberate control, she always kept her expert mech a step ahead of the expert heavy hammerman mech.

Certainly, the other two expert mechs did not make her life easier. The Firemason constantly tried to cut off her escape route by launching concentrated fire, but her Riot was more than capable of soaking up the damage from this relatively tame attack.

"What does it take to burn you down?!" The expert pilot of the Firemason complained.

Only the Trementine gave Venerable Orfan a lot of cause for concern. The expert axeman mech fought just as aggressively as the Bashravar, but the difference was that it had the acceleration and agility to keep up with the Riot!

Most of Venerable Orfan's efforts were spent on parrying and deflecting the Trementine's powerful axe blows. The glowing axe hacked against the Riot's unstable resonance shield several times and caused it to grow even more shaky.

Yet despite wobbling like a drunken sailor, the Riot's resonance shield still hadn't gone down!

Even Venerable Orfan discovered that something funny was going on. In the small amount of practice sessions she conducted with her new expert mech, she had a decent understanding on how much damage her expert mech's resonance shield could withstand.

One of the resonating materials the Riot incorporated was BSN-17A. This provided the expert mech with an additional strong resonance barrier that could withstand a lot of punishment.

However, the current level of performance was too exaggerated!

Though she was glad that she was able to rely on the Riot's abnormally strong resonance shield to stall and occupy three enemy expert mechs, by her reckoning her Riot should have begun to block attacks with its physical armor by now. There was no way that any expert mech of its size and class should have been able to endure so many resonance-empowered attacks without paying a price.

"Wait a minute..."

Now that she paid attention to it, she noticed that any resonance-empowered attack that landed on the Riot's resonance shield grew a little weaker and unstable a tiny moment before impact.

The various attacks that landed on the Riot's resonance shield seemed to deal damage closer to the attack of an ordinary mech rather than a powerful expert mech that was able to empower its blows!

She was pretty certain that this was not an original feature of her Riot. When her thoughts began to lean in this direction, she realized that her expert mech felt different than before. During this battle, she faintly thought that her machine had grown a little more... chaotic.

She looked puzzled even as she directed the Riot to dodge yet another powerful but slow hammer strike.

"What changed?"

Chapter 3270: Unstable Riot

The Riot's abnormally hardy state could hardly escape the sharp eyes of Ves and Gloriana.

There was no way that the Riot could perform so much better for no reason. Before the battle commenced, Gloriana had especially spent time to tune up and perform last-minute checks on Venerable Orfan's expert mech.

Gloriana still remembered the Riot's condition back then. It wasn't much different from its base state.

"Then how can its resonance shield be so much more effective all of a sudden?"

Though expert mechs didn't always make sense, they still abided by a number of general rules. The effective performance of an expert mech was heavily dependent on the strength and mood of the expert pilot.

"Had Venerable Orfan experienced a minor breakthrough of sorts?"

When Gloriana called up the pilot telemetry of the Riot, she quickly dispelled this notion. According to all of the data, Venerable Orfan was excited, stressed and pumped up, but not to an abnormal degree.

The resonance strength meters also showed that Venerable Orfan hadn't progressed much since her last live practise session. The slight increase in resonance strength that she exhibited could be chalked up to the heat of the moment. Battle had always been an extra motivator to any mech pilot, not just expert pilots!

"There's something suspicious at work." Gloriana narrowed her eyes.

BSN-17A was supposed to provide an expert mech with an abnormally strong resonance barrier, but this was starting to get ridiculous! As she poured over the data and analyzed the Riot's defensive performance in greater detail, she also began to notice that many resonance-empowered attacks seemed to lose strength and cohesion all of a sudden.

To Gloriana, it looked like a signal passing through an interference field. Even if the signal strength was strong enough to transmit at least some data to the recipient, the quality of the message must have degraded by a significant degree!

This was a quality that the Riot absolutely shouldn't have! It also didn't conform with Venerable Orfan's resonance properties.

When Gloriana ruled out many different possible explanations why the Riot performed so much more effectively than before, she ended up with a single answer.

Her body shook as she realized a horrifying possibility.

She turned around her chair and activated a direct communication channel to her husband!

"YES! WHAT DID YOU DO?!"

"Uh, what is it, dear?"

"Don't you 'dear' me. Tell me straight. Did you upgrade the Riot recently with a scarce and precious resource?!"

The man on the other side of the communication channel abruptly coughed.

"Erkm... uhm... we're in the middle of a battle now! If you have anything to say, leave it for later. There's no point in talking if we're all dead because we were too inattentive to attend to our duties. Talk to you later!"

The communication channel cut off from the other side, leaving Gloriana frustrated as she essentially confirmed her suspicions.

"VESSSSS!"

"Miaow!"

Clixie, who was wearing a customized protective suit printed with a decorative pattern, jumped from the table as Gloriana expressed her current feelings!

As for the person responsible for making his wife feel upset, he was doing his best to shove aside his eventual reckoning. He still had a battle to win first. Compared to getting yelled at by his pregnant wife, death was so much worse!

His wife was still pretty sharp for catching on to the fact that the Riot performed a lot better at its current role due to a gem that he had installed on the expert mech.

To be honest, Ves didn't have much expectations for it. The so-called Unstable Chaos Essence as named by the System sounded so iffy to him that he hadn't dared to integrate it to any mech up until it became clear that battle against the Ferril Provincial Army was inevitable.

He had even used it as an improvised spiritual explosive during the Battle against the Abyss because of this suspicion!

Ves didn't know what came over him when he took a risk and integrated it with the Riot, but so far it was working out. The Riot's defense was so unexpectedly difficult to crack by a team of three dwarven expert mechs that he wanted to cheer and clap at Venerable Orfan's excellent performance!

He didn't even care if the Riot blew up or fell apart at the end of the battle due to the repercussions of employing this shady-sounding gem. As long as Venerable Orfan was still alive and intact, he could just recycle whatever salvageable materials remained and fabricate another copy of the Riot design. Expert mechs may be precious, but Ves was more than happy to use them up if the extra power boost increased his chances of winning a crucial battle.

"I hope that doesn't happen, though." He muttered.

Fabricating an expert mech was not only a time-consuming ordeal, but also difficult to accomplish if the Larkinson Clan didn't have the right materials on hand. A lot of volatile exotics and resonating materials were non-recyclable. Once they were processed in a finished product, they were permanently set and could not be restored because their material makeup had already undergone a non-reversible transformation.

Still, if Ves had the choice, he would not reject this necessity when the alternatives were worse.

"Is the mech truly falling apart, though?"

When Ves accessed the Riot's telemetry, he noticed a faint trend of stress buildup. Delicate parts were being worn out faster than usual, but that might just come from the fact that it was getting beat up on all sides by three different expert mechs!

Once the dwarven expert pilots understood that their current approach wasn't achieving much progress, they switched tactics.

As an experienced mech pilot and combatant, Venerable Orfan had been paying close attention to the approach of her opponents. Up until now, they employed a basic approach that just sought to surround her expert mech from three sides and deal as much damage as possible, hoping to overwhelm their opponent's defenses by sheer volume.

Now, they were doing something else. The Bashravar became the focal point of their new formation and tactics. While the heavy hammerman mech was still awfully slow, it suddenly became a lot harder for the Riot to stay away from the dwarven mech's huge hammer!

"Get off my back, you dirty dwarf!" Venerable Orfan shouted as she swung her spear back, causing its flat end to bash against the chest of the Trementine just as it sought to crash its axe onto the rear of the Riot.

The Firemason swept in from behind and above shortly afterwards and fired an extremely hot and large bed of empowered flames that practically turned the entire area behind the Riot aflame!

The sea of fire not only exuded a lot of heat, but also the dwarven expert pilot's will and determination to melt the human expert mech!

"Damn that's hot!"

Though Venerable Orfan wasn't necessarily afraid of this flame sea, the annoying part about swimming in it was that it partially blinded the Riot's sensors. She wouldn't be able to track her opponents as well if many of her sensors became invalid due to the excess readings they registered.

That, and getting cooked was unpleasant to begin with. The Riot's resonance shield already took a lot of beatings so far. Venerable Orfan still needed it intact in order to continue stalling these angry dwarves.

"Hey! Fight me one-on-one if you're man enough! Oh wait, you can't, because you guys are all shorties. You're far from a real man! Are you just as short in your pants as you are in your body length? Because if that is the case, then it's no wonder you dwarves are mad at regular humans all the time."

That seemed to trigger the expert pilot of the expert hammerman mech. In a single outburst, the heavy mech's flight system blasted to life, giving it a temporary but extremely powerful push that accelerated it right into the Riot!

The explosion of speed surprised Venerable Orfan, but not too much. She already anticipated that such a painfully sluggish expert mech would incorporate a solution to its greatest weakness.

"I'm outta here!"

The Riot jerked to the side as much as its mobility could carry it, which wasn't much. The spearman expert mech wasn't exactly known for its speed or agility.

Due to the powerful explosive start of the Bashravar, the Riot failed to dodge the huge and heavy hammer this time. The heavy weapon struck the human expert mech's unstable resonance shield at an angle and finally inflicted enough damage to cause it to collapse.

The only anomaly was that when the shield finally succumbed, it exploded, releasing excess energy in every direction!

The Bashravar which had just succeeded in breaking the Riot's first layer of defense only slightly got shoved backwards. The Trementine which had just attempted to come around the flank in order to hack the exposed Riot with its hefty axe got blown away a little further due to its lighter mass.

The Firemason was entirely unaffected due to its greater distance. When Venerable Orfan acted quickly to move her Riot out of its predicament, the pilot of the expert striker mech eagerly sprayed it with a jet of concentrated flames!

"Haha, burn now human, burn!"

This time, the flames had a lot more effect on the Riot than before. Now that Venerable Orfan's expert mech had lost its powerful resonance shield, it had also lost the property that allowed the machine to destabilize resonance attacks. The flames stuck onto the Breyer alloy layer of the Riot and immediately began to work away on the material!

The orange expert mech looked as if it had fallen right into hell as the Firemason continued to pour highly flammable substances onto the relatively soft armor layer!

"Burn! Burn! Burn!"

"Shut up, you dwarf!"

Even as the exterior of the Riot was visibly melting apart, Venerable Orfan's eyes turned ruthless as she accelerated her expert mech towards the Firemason, causing the expert striker mech to jerk back and increase the output of its flamethrower.

"Block it before it gets close!"

The Bashravar didn't possess the mobility to intercept the speeding Riot and the Trementine was still too far behind to catch up.

In an instant, the powerful Riot just managed to catch up to the Firemason and struck just as it pulled out a foldable shield from somewhere and formed a hasty defense!

"GET OUT OF HERE!"

With the momentum of the Riot driving its spear forward, Venerable Orfan also resonated with the speartip, causing it to glow as she had finally activated her expert mech's second resonance ability!

With a soundless ding, the spear shattered the Firemason's resonance shield and punched through its thin but still hardy physical shield before finally sinking halfway into the chest plating of the expert striker mech!

The power of this blow was surprisingly powerful!

The Firemason's pilot knew that it was extremely dangerous to stay in close range to the enemy expert mech. He immediately dislodged the pierced shield from the arm of the Firemason and commanded the mech to back off at full speed.

"Do you think you can get away?! I'm not done yet with you, shorty!"

Venerable Orfan smelled dwarven blood and she relentlessly advanced on the Firemason even as her expert mech continued to take hits from all sides.

Even as the Riot managed to poke multiple holes in the Firemason, it was still burning as the expert striker mech wasn't going down without a fight!

Meanwhile, the Trementine managed to catch up several times and chop apart entire sections of the Riot's weakened surface armor.

The Bashravar failed to get close enough to get another attack in, but its slow and steady advance exerted a lot of pressure onto Venerable Orfan.

Even so, she grinned as she controlled her machine to direct relentless aggression towards the Firemason. She ignored all of the attacks that began to scar and burn the exterior of her expert mech.

"Why isn't it as damaged as it looks?"

"There's a second armor layer underneath the surface layer! It's a lot harder and denser!"

"Vulcan's beard! We've been fooled! This is not an offensive mech. It's a defense mech!"