

The Mech 4911

Chapter 4911 City Strike

Ves finally realized what a proper heavy artillery mech was like.

Although he already formed his own answers through all of the theory he learned recently, all of the textbooks answers he came across could not equal a live demonstration!

It did not matter whether there was a 200 year gap between the current time and his own present time. The way that mechs fought hadn't really changed all of that much in the intervening years.

It also did not matter that the Iron Hedgehog was an expert mech rather than a standard mechs. Many rules in combat remained universal regardless of the properties of the individual combat machines.

Ves was able to distinguish all of these factors and model a combat scenario involving a group of standard heavy artillery mechs.

When Ves imagined how his Transcendent Punishers would fare in similar scenarios, he quickly concluded that the battles would never be able to progress so well!

"They don't have a strong capacity to attack with indirect fire."

The Transcendent Punishers were first and foremost designed to function as bunker mechs.

Indirect fire was pretty much non-existent in a spaceborn environment as gravity did not alter the trajectories of projectiles with mass.

When put on land, the Transcendent Punishers became much more limited. The luminar crystal cannons that Ves had always been proud of were only capable of direct fire, which meant they could not fire over structures and always had to come close enough to expose them to direct counterattacks!

Although the Transcendent Punishers could still rely on its pair of heavy gauss cannons to reluctantly strike targets from a distance, Ves knew that they were not designed to be operated in this fashion.

"Two cannons aren't as good as eight cannons, let alone sixteen cannons!"

They were designed to operate in space over longer distances where muzzle velocity was one of the most important parameters of combat effectiveness.

It was difficult to reduce the power settings of these gauss cannons to a large extent, but this was often necessary in order to allow them to arc over hills and buildings and strike at targets with a reasonable amount of effectiveness.

Though Ves was unsure whether he should design a dedicated landbound heavy artillery mech in the future for his clan, he preferred to solve his Transcendent Punisher's deficiencies in this aspect.

"Maybe there is a way to get the best of both worlds..." He muttered.

He came up with the idea of making his Transcendent Punisher more modular. Why settle for one configuration or another when the Eye of Ylvaine could change the weapon loadout of its heavy artillery mechs before a deployment?

"This is actually a great idea!"

It adequately solved the dilemma between optimizing a mech for spaceborn and landbound combat.

The mech pilots might grumble at the need to train two substantially different skill sets, but his mech pilots should be able to handle the additional challenges.

As for his first mech commission with Davute, Ves was more inclined to design a dedicated landbound heavy artillery mech.

It was not suitable for large military forces to bet too much on a one-size-fits-all approach. The Larkinson Clan could get away with it because its fleet possessed a limited mech capacity and could compensate for many performance drops by investing lots of money!

The Federal Military of Davute could not adopt such an approach because its circumstances were much different.

Although Ves didn't exactly know whether he wanted to make his first commissioned mech for Davute viable in space battles, it must definitely perform well on land!

Ves truly desired to replicate Venerable Irene Mox's amazing performance in this campaign.

The combination between her meticulous calculations and the Iron Hedgehog's weapon loadout resulted in an impressive impact on the battlefield, one that could be replicated as long as Ves designed the right heavy artillery mech!

He became inspired by how well Venerable Irene Mox was able to expedite the conquest of this city.

Dozens more difficult cities like this still remained on Korinna V, but it became clear that the defenders had no solution against the Iron Hedgehog.

"There aren't enough expert mechs among the Bontue defenders." Ves concluded.

This admittedly helped a lot. Venerable Irene Mox wouldn't be able to shell the Bontue positions so brazenly if she had to remain on guard against attacks launched by enemy expert mechs.

However, expert pilots were rarely assigned to second echelon units such as planetary garrisons. They were much more often assigned to main mech forces that were expected to undertake the most difficult responsibilities.

"The Bontues on this planet are doomed if they continue to go on like this. The Iron Hedgehog is too great of a force multiplier!"

After conquering the city, the Quillim mech battalions spent a brief moment of time repairing their mechs and stocking up on supplies.

They stayed only as long as it took for the higher ups to send another mech unit to occupy and rebuild the city.

There was no need for the powerful mech battalion and its incredibly useful expert mech to stick to defense.

Just as the Quillim mech forces were about to advance to another city, the situation in space had changed!

"We are suspending our offensive."

"Keep restoring the defenses of this city!"

"The Bontues blew up the titan shield generators! There is no way to restore them. We can only put our own ones into place, but headquarters have yet to assign any replacements to this site."

"Get ready to pull out in a hurry. Don't waste your time on dragging away our heaviest supplies. Leave them behind if we must!"

It did not take long for the optimism among the men to take a turn for the worse.

A mech officer swung by Venerable Irene Mox in order to give her an update.

"The Bontues have unexpectedly sent reinforcements to this star system. The arriving enemy mechs outnumber our spaceborn assets by over two-to-one. It is not tenable for our forces to remain on this planet."

Venerable Irene Mox felt pissed at the thought of undoing much of the hard work in taking over this planet city by city, but there was nothing she could do to affect what was happening in space.

"Will we get pulled out?" She succinctly asked.

"Yes. You are a priority asset, so you will board the first combat carrier that touches down."

Once it became clear that the Quillim forces on the ground were beginning to pack up and leave, Ves wondered whether his Mastery experience would come to an end at this time.

He already got what he wanted for the most part. He had learned what good heavy artillery mech were like and understood the routines of a highly proficient expert pilot.

This was more than enough material for him to develop a solid and highly impactful heavy artillery mech concept for Davute!

As Ves continued to think about what he learned from an expert pilot who possessed the potential to become one of humanity's strongest heroes in the far future, Irene boarded her expert mech and moved it towards an open park that offered enough space for a landing combat carrier.

Several Quillim ships that were previously resting in orbit had begun their descent and started to become visible to the naked eye.

"Wait... is that smoke trailing from the combat carrier...?"

"Please contact the ship and ask for an update."

"Our hails aren't going through! Communications are either jammed or the ship isn't picking up our signals."

"Uh sir, if the descending combat carrier doesn't begin to slow down soon, it will violently crash onto the ground."

"This is not the only ship that is falling in an uncontrolled descent!"

"GET TO COVER!"

Once it became clear that the starships that were supposed to bring them away had lost control over their flight, everyone became afraid and quickly ran for shelter!

The faster mechs had no problem reaching the entrances of the half-ruined bases that they had captured from the defending forces.

The slower mechs were not as fortunate!

The Iron Hedgehog possessed an incomparably powerful set of weapons. Its armor was also thick enough to resist plenty of enemy counterfire.

However, its mobility remained poor, just like any other heavy artillery mech. Its four limbs helped with maintaining stability and traversing more complex terrain, but it did not do much to speed up its flight towards the nearest shelter!

Venerable Irene Mox rapidly estimated the time it took for her mech to reach a safe area.

She also tried to calculate the trajectories of the crashing combat carriers and estimate how much devastation they could unleash.

She even tried to estimate whether the underground bases would collapse due to the impending crashes!

Ves may be smart and good at performing calculations himself, but only his Spirituality had made it through the Time Gate.

Since he did not have the support of his cranial implant nor his augmented brains, Ves quickly found himself unable to keep up with Venerable Irene Mox's rapid calculations.

He did not know what kind of conclusions the expert pilot had made, but she eventually stopped her flight and adjusted the aim of all of the weapon systems under her control.

Each of them began to aim their muzzles at the approaching combat carrier that was beginning to grow increasingly larger!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Irene did not dare to take her time and fired her weapons after she quickly formed her firing solutions!

Ves looked with amazement as his host was likely fighting for her life at this moment!

The Iron Hedgehog fired its projectiles at a faster rate than before.

The heavy gauss rounds struck the inoperative combat carrier first. Their resonance-empowered strikes crumpled the bow armor of the vessel. Subsequent attacks penetrated the compartments of the ship, but did not do much in breaking the vessel apart!

This was why it was important for the Iron Hedgehog to rely on its explosive shells to break the ship apart.

The shells possessed different flight characteristics. Irene had to form separate firing solutions for them, yet during this time of danger, none of the shells fired by the howitzers failed to land in the holes formed by the gauss cannons.

BOOOOM! BOOOOM! BOOOOM!

The falling combat carrier quickly began to look increasingly ragged at the front as the resonance-empowered explosive shells shattered numerous compartments and inflicted heavy damage to the structural elements!

Irene knew she was locked in a race against time. If her Iron Hedgehog wasn't able to break up the ship completely, the bulk of her hull structure would crash close enough to the expert mech's location to cripple or destroy it utterly!

She was not reconciled with her death!

She still needed to take revenge on the Bontues!

Her eyes almost turned manic as her potential bloomed considerably greater than Ves expected of an expert pilot at her level!

Irene's resonance strength spiked, allowing her to empower the damage output of her expert mech to an even greater degree!

BOOOOOOOOM!

Eventually, her continuous strikes through the middle of the hull finally bore fruit. The Iron Hedgehog had weakened the crashing combat carrier to such an extent that it finally broke into several pieces!

BOOOM! BOOOM! BOOOM!

The Iron Hedgehog kept firing in order to break up these pieces into smaller chunks of debris. The continuous explosions also helped a lot with diverting the downward trajectories of the remains of the combat carrier.

Once those pieces of debris were about to hit the surface of Korinna V, Venerable Irene Mox resonated with her expert mech as much as possible in order to strengthen and reinforce its resonance shield!

BOOOOOOOOM!

The entire ground around the park rumbled and went into upheaval as thousands of tons of starship debris crashed into the city and cratered the landscape!

The powerful crashes not only ruined an entire city district, but also heavily impacted the Iron Hedgehog!

Its resonance shield managed to resist the incoming impacts to an extent, but quickly broke as a large hull section directly collided against the expert mech!

The shockwaves produced by the violent collisions also caused the ground underneath the Iron Hedgehog to shake like nothing else Venerable Irene Mox had ever experienced!

Chapter 4912 Ruination

The city had become devastated.

This was the result of having a combat carrier crash into it from above!

Large impact craters and toppled office buildings had made the landscape unrecognizable.

Dust particles and strange gasses filled the air and obscured everyone's vision.

Deep rents had been dug into the ground as the hardest pieces of metal somehow remained intact enough to be recognizable.

No bodies had been left intact. The supremely powerful collisions had pulverized all of their bodies to the point where not even their organic cells had been left intact!

Fires burned. Structures in the periphery that had managed to survive the initial crash event finally couldn't take it any longer and crumbled apart.

Hell had arrived in the city! The downtown areas were completely wiped off the map.

It took an unknown amount of time before movement stirred the landscape.

Several pieces of rock and metal materials rippled until they were cast aside.

A battered but somewhat intact mech had managed to push itself out of the pile of wreckage that had piled on top of its large and heavy frame.

The qualities of an expert mech helped the Iron Hedgehog a lot during the destructive crash.

Even though it hadn't been fast enough to flee the impact site, its resonance shield along with its resilient exterior enabled it to survive the worst!

As Venerable Irene Mox groggily tried to push back the headache in her mind and regain her situational awareness, she quickly called up the status of her expert mech in order to inspect the damage.

The Iron Hedgehog was in the worst state it had ever been since she first received it from the Quillim Mech Army!

She called up a projection that displayed a wireframe diagram of her expert mech. Many parts had turned from green into yellow. A number of exterior components had even turned red!

"3 gauss cannons and 4 howitzers were destroyed. Frontal armor has received heavy damage and cannot offer substantial protection. Mobility is reduced by at least 30 percent. Sensor systems are degraded."

These deficiencies were the most obvious deficiencies of her expert heavy artillery mech, but the machine suffered from so many other ailments.

A standard mech exposed to the same conditions would have been flattened or torn apart a long time ago! Even weaker and lighter expert mechs might not be able to withstand the destructive power unleashed by the violent impacts.

Fortunately, the expert heavy artillery mech that was designed to take a beating by enemy ranged mechs possessed enough defenses to safeguard its most critical parts and systems.

The power reactor worked fine and the mech engine had only suffered light damage.

The Iron Hedgehog was most definitely not in a healthy condition. Irene had developed a deep familiarity with her machine and could readily tell that it was deteriorating by the minute.

While the expert mech was designed and built to high standards, that only enabled it to slow down the inevitable breakdown of parts that had suffered badly not too long ago. The Iron Hedgehog's automated damage control systems could only do so much to keep its powerful frame together.

Once Venerable Irene Mox understood how badly her expert mech had suffered, she immediately shut down numerous systems in order to reduce the strain on her machine and preserve its integrity as much as possible.

She then tried to connect to her comrades. The communication systems of her Iron Hedgehog had received a bit of damage as well. Her expert mech had lost connection to her mech battalion's command net, so she was unsure whether the others had made it through.

Her Iron Hedgehog slowly navigated through the messy and uneven landscape while trying to hail anyone who could still pick up her signals.

"Mox here. Anyone alive?"

"Please respond to my hails."

Her expert mech only picked up static and nonsensical signals. The post-apocalyptic landscape gave Irene the illusion that she had been the only Quillim to survive this calamity.

Despair overtook her mind for a moment before her strong willpower surged and forced her to maintain hope!

"I am not alone! There are bound to be survivors!"

Her expert mech steadily crawled over to the entrances to the underground fortifications.

All of them had collapsed.

Not only that, but the entire ground had sunk down. The crashing combat carrier had done more than wipe out every structure on the surface.

The debris from the starship had also damaged the tunnels and halls underneath the ground!

The closer they were to the surface, the less likely they remained intact!

As the Iron Hedgehog continued to move around in a desperate attempt to reconnect with any surviving units, Venerable Mox continued in her effort to cling to hope.

It was a pity that her strong will and desire could not alter reality to this extent. The Iron Hedgehog began to gather an increasing amount of evidence that any mech or individual that had taken shelter underneath the ground had suffered just as badly if not more than those that had remained on the surface!

It wasn't just the Quillim troops that had fallen victim to this extinction attack.

Many Bontue civilians who originally lived and worked in this city had perished as well!

There were so many of them who hadn't been able to evacuate from the city after the invasion had begun.

The underground shelters they took refuge in had collapsed as well. Only the ones that were buried deeper underground or were located far enough away from the center of the city had made it through.

As Venerable Irene Mox vainly tried to hail her unit again and again, her voice turned feebler and feebler.

She eventually instructed her expert mech to hail friendly units within communications range on repeat and fell silent.

Her expert mech could hear nothing from the city except for the desolate winds, the scattered fires and the regular building collapses.

Other than that, the damaged city had turned into a lifeless and unwelcoming ruin.

Though Irene Mox was an expert pilot who could endure a lot of shocks, what happened to her and her comrades exceeded her tolerance!

She was struggling to comprehend what happened, so much so that she wasn't spending any of her attention on what she should do next!

Ves, who quietly witnessed everything that Venerable Mox experienced, grew distressed at what had befallen the future hero.

He had no idea why the combat carriers descending from orbit had lost control and crashed. It became clear that the Bontues had somehow messed up the attempt of the Quillims to evacuate their assets from the surface of Korinna V.

If this was the case, then this was just the beginning!

"There is a lot of bad blood between the Bontues and the Quillims."

Even though the Terrace War was 'just' a proxy conflict between the Terrans and the Rubarthans, it had become a vendetta to the soldiers doing the actual fighting!

Crashing the combat carriers that were meant to pick up the Quillim forces deployed on the planet was a clear escalation in hostilities!

"The Bontues are up to something."

The move they pulled off was extremely costly. Not only did they expose the fact that they had managed to infiltrate and sabotage so many Quillim starships, the Bontues also allowed the combat carriers to crash onto their own population centers, thereby killing many millions of their own citizens!

The infrastructure and population of Korinna V had evidently been sacrificed to fulfill a greater purpose, and Ves did not think the Bontues had anything trivial in mind.

He soon gained another clue as the Iron Hedgehog's damaged but intact sensors finally managed to detect activity at the edge of their range.

The alarms prompted Venerable Irene Mox to pull herself out of her daze and ignite her hope.

Had her expert mech manage to regain contact with surviving Quillim units!?

It wasn't until her expert mech informed her that the incoming mechs not only lacked the familiar IFFs, but also did not match the signatures of known Quillim mechs.

Instead, the emission profiles and silhouettes of the mechs approaching from afar resembled the Bontue mechs that she and her comrades had driven out of the city a few days prior.

The defenders had returned to confirm the elimination of the invaders and finish off any stragglers that had been lucky enough to survive the calamity!

Since the Iron Hedgehog actively sought out to communicate with those distant mechs, it had stupidly revealed itself to the approaching Bontue forces!

Just the thought of her enemies caused her anger to resurface.

She could think about regaining contact with her comrades later. She first needed to wipe out the Bontue vultures that sought to finish the job!

The expert pilot summoned up her professionalism and focused completely on her current priorities.

She may have lost contact with the officers of her mech battalion, but she was still capable of taking the initiative if necessary.

A quick survey of the surrounding terrain showed that the area had become messy and uneven and that it was difficult to obtain a clear line of sight of any opposing mechs.

Her damaged expert mech moved to higher ground. At the same time, the 4 intact howitzers began to adjust their firing angles until they became fairly steep.

Once Venerable Irene Mox became certain about her estimates, she pulled the trigger and caused the howitzers to launch their shells!

They flew high in the messy and dust-filled air and quickly arced down until they landed and engulfed a small area with a spread of resonance-empowered explosions!

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Irene knew that this was not the time to hold back. The intact howitzers continued to fire as fast as her expert mech could load the new explosive shells.

This continued onwards for several more salvos until she was sure that her expert mech's area attacks had destroyed much of the enemy units that had approached from a distance.

She probably didn't manage to eliminate every Bontue mech, though. The expert pilot remained alert even as her Iron Hedgehog managed to reach a better vantage point.

Several minutes passed in silence until her expert mech picked up movement behind a few mounds of debris!

The howitzers of her expert mech fired a salvo of shells at minimum power. They launched almost straight into the air until they dropped down and engulfed the streets behind the debris mounds with explosions.

Just before these shells struck the ground, a handful of swift and slender mechs zipped out of cover and rapidly advanced towards the Iron Hedgehog!

"Light mechs!"

These light skirmishers might not look impressive, but they could pose a substantial threat against a ranged mech.

Irene had little reason to fear them if her Iron Hedgehog was still in its prime.

However, her expert mech was hardly in a position to defend against an onslaught of melee mech. Its resonance shield was still down and many sections of armor had already been destroyed.

Its internals had become exposed and vulnerable to attacks! Any mech could inflict heavy damage to the Iron Hedgehog. Even light skirmishers could take down the expert heavy artillery mech as it was never designed to operate in isolation!

Fortunately, Venerable Irene Mox had been ready to defend against targets who managed to get closer. The intact gauss cannons of her expert mech had already been aiming in the right direction.

As soon as the fast and agile light skirmishers approached the Iron Hedgehog while performing evasive maneuvers, Irene rapidly took in all of the data and quickly adjusted the aim of her gauss cannons.

There was no time for her to second-guess her judgment or fine-tune her calculations. She even skipped over many steps and relied heavily on intuition to make up for what was missing!

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

Five Bontue light skirmishers collapsed at once as each of them had been nailed by resonance-empowered gauss rounds at the same time!

Their evasive maneuvers had not availed them at all as the Iron Hedgehog managed to strike them square in their torsos!

No more mechs showed up for the time being.

Chapter 4913 The Weight Of Responsibility

Venerable Irene Mox could not tell whether the Bontues had lost all of the mechs sent to sweep the ruined city or whether her enemies had pulled back the rest.

The expert pilot had become isolated again. Only her expert mech kept her company, but it was a pity that the machine was not alive.

Its mechanical operating system provided no warmth and companionship to the woman. Without the stimuli of her familiar comrades, Irene's thoughts took a darker turn again.

Ves mentally frowned when the expert pilot mechanically tried to search for any surviving Quillim soldiers even when it had become clear that none of them should have been able to survive the calamitous crash!

Even if Ves had lost contact with his own cranial implant due to his special state, he was still able to perform enough calculations by himself to estimate that the mechs and support personnel that took shelter in the captured underground base were almost certainly gone!

They would have been able to survive if the former Bontue stronghold was fully intact.

However, when the defenders initially decided to give up on holding the city, they had sabotaged many of the installations before they pulled out. Though the base still remained intact enough to use as a temporary staging point, Ves guessed that the Bontues had actually turned it into a trap!

"This is a premeditated counterattack!"

If this was the case, then Venerable Mox needed to get out of this city and rendezvous with any Quillim units that managed to survive this wave of attacks!

It was unfortunate that the dazed and traumatized expert pilot did not do anything of the sort.

Instead, she spent half an hour of her time in vain trying to contact her familiar compatriots. Her expert mech utilized its four legs to dig through the rubble as if that would help it pick up any signals transmitted from the collapsed tunnels.

"Ugh. Can't you do anything useful?!"

Ves became frustrated by her increasingly more senseless actions. Ever since her expert mech eliminated the Bontue mechs that had apparently been waiting in the outskirts of the city all of this time, Irene did not spare any thought about the danger she was in and what she needed to do next.

Korinna V had clearly turned into a deathly trap!

The Bontues would most certainly try to eliminate all of the invaders that had become stranded on the planet.

Whether they would seek to capture or kill Venerable Irene Mox outright, Ves didn't know.

He didn't recall reading anything like this in Divine Irene Mox's biography! Perhaps the popular book deliberately skipped over this event because it was not acceptable to read about humans deliberately crashing starships onto their own planets!

The lack of awareness of what took place in this period of Irene's life caused Ves to grow increasingly more concerned.

What if... an accident might happen that would lead to the death of the expert pilot?

Although the Iron Hedgehog remained in decent fighting condition, there was no way for it to repel every attack.

Even if it was able to stand its ground for a time, the expert heavy artillery mech would most certainly turn useless once it ran out of ammunition!

The most prudent choice that Irene could make at this junction was to surrender to the Bontues, but as Ves continued to eavesdrop on her thoughts, Venerable Mox had developed such a vehemence towards her enemies that she resolved to die before contemplating surrender!

This was not just an idle thought to her. Venerable Mox actually went as far as making a solemn promise to herself!

"I shall never give the Bontues the satisfaction of turning me into their prize. I shall blow up my expert mech and end my life before I ever allow my enemies to use me as a bargaining chip!"

Her words rang true. She was being utterly serious about never giving in to the enemy.

Ves observed with amazement as the woman's force of will surged with strength yet again. It had undergone a small evolution that had made it more condensed.

Venerable Irene Mox had grown substantially compared to a few days ago, but that did not change the fact that she was still a single mid-tier expert pilot who only had a damaged expert heavy artillery mech at her disposal!

There was no way she could fight against all of the Bontues left on the planet. The most logical step that the enemy would make after pulling off their shocking stratagem was to muster all of the local garrison troops and launch a comprehensive counteroffensive!

Even if the defenders didn't have the strength to defeat the surviving Quillim invaders, they could still keep their opponents in place long enough for reinforcements to arrive.

Once the Bontue reinforcement fleet arrived in orbit and formed a blockade, there was no way that Venerable Mox could get away at this point!

"Get out of this city, goddamnit!"

Irene did not do anything productive after she made an incredibly foolhardy decision to embrace death rather than allow herself to be captured.

When ten more minutes passed without any obvious changes, Ves grew incredibly alarmed.

Making a stand in this ruined city was the last thing that Irene should do! If she did not seek a way out soon, her awfully slow expert mech wouldn't be able to avoid the next wave of Bontue mechs that were most certainly on their way to this ruined city!

This realization put Ves in an awful bind.

If the stupid expert pilot could not wake herself up from her self-destructive thoughts, then human history might irrevocably change.

No. That wasn't right. Divine Irene Mox had definitely survived this disastrous campaign.

Had a transport arrived from afar to pick up one of the Quillim Mech Army's most important assets?

Ves didn't know. He couldn't afford to bet on the possibility that the Quillims were free enough to retrieve Venerable Irene Mox.

What if the Quillims had suffered so much damage that they couldn't take care of anything else?

He knew from reading Venerable Mox's thoughts that the Quillims had established their headquarters in Dershin, a medium-sized city that the landing forces had taken over first.

The Quillim troops that had landed in Dershin had put a lot of effort into fortifying it with defenses and stocking it up with an abundant amount of supplies.

There was no other suitable location on this planet where the Quillims could regroup and find a way out for themselves!

Why wasn't Irene thinking about heading to Dershin?

She didn't even think about the possibility that the Quillims might retrieve her and her expert mech!

After all, the city had suffered so much damage that it didn't seem that any of the Quillim mech forces had managed to survive this disastrous event.

In a situation where every single vehicle had become incomparably precious, it was not worthwhile for the Quillims to explore every city, especially when the Bontues could shoot them all down!

Ves struggled to make up his mind whether he should intervene and do his best to save her life.

If Venerable Irene Mox was just a random expert pilot who never really accomplished anything important enough in her life, then Ves had no compulsions about leaving her to die.

These Mastery experiences were primarily for his benefit. It was easy for him to sympathize with his hosts, but that did not mean he had to lift a finger in order to save their lives. He had become especially wary of accidentally changing the course of history by making careless moves.

However, Irene Mox was not a forgettable individual from the past.

She was the mech pilot who would steadily climb her way up the ranks until she finally became the Destroyer of Worlds that countless humans revered!

Her future was so bright and brilliant that every human had an obligation to do whatever they could to protect them against the threats that they could not defend against for whatever reason!

Ves never imagined that he would be put into this difficult and unenviable situation.

He began to wonder whether Venerable Irene Mox managed to survive this campaign and went on to ascend to godhood expressly because he actively chose to intervene in her life.

This was the problem with time travel. All of the information he possessed so far indicated that 'he' had already chosen to intervene in this situation!

A part of himself felt resentful at this notion. He impulsively wanted to resist this outcome and see what would happen, but his more responsible side felt it was too disastrous to rely on the Quillims or Irene herself to save her life!

Ves knew that exposing himself to a future god pilot would produce a lot of uncertainty to his life, but... when he thought about his responsibility to humanity, he felt that he was being overly selfish for refusing to do what was necessary to preserve the life of Irene Mox.

He had always clung to the identity of a human. It was an important source of strength and sanity to him. No matter how much his body deviated from the baseline human norm, he could always take comfort in his place among his fellow humans.

However, now that he was in a position to save or ruin the life and future of a woman that was bound to become a god pilot, Ves found that his identity as a human had become a shackle that compelled him to make sacrifices for the greater good of the human race!

He did not like this at all. He sought every possible excuse to shirk his duty and let Irene Mox fend for herself.

Nonetheless, his attempts at denial did not prevent him from analyzing Irene's awful circumstances and form a lot of pessimistic conclusions.

He felt that this situation had not only turned into an important junction of Irene Mox's life, but also had massive implications for his own future!

Did he have a responsibility to safeguard humanity's future?

He wanted to say no, but that was the typical answer of a weak or selfish individual. Ves did not deny that he was both weak and selfish, but that was mostly due to necessity. He wouldn't have been able to make it this far in his life if he was as foolish as his more idealistic family members.

What Ves was concerned about was his future.

Once he amassed more power and gained the strength to influence human civilization, would he assume responsibility over it? Would he follow the footsteps of many Star Designers and rise above every mundane concern so that he could fight for humanity as a whole?

A part of himself became attracted to this noble mission. He felt that there was nothing better a mech designer could do than to protect and change humanity for the better. It would be the ultimate form of fulfillment to a creator and service provider!

He mentally took a deep breath. He already formed an answer in his heart.

Just as Venerable Irene Mox changed a fundamental part of herself when put in a desperate situation, the mental shift that Ves had made had caused his Spirituality to sublimate in a subtle manner.

He felt as if he had become more mature and responsible than before.

Now that he had made up his mind, he decided to pull the trigger.

Ves concentrated and tried to shake off the out-of-phase effect that was obscuring his presence from his host.

Thinking that Irene might lash out against him if he revealed himself and spoke directly in the sanctity of her mind, he decided to change his plan and leverage his companion spirit.

Venerable Irene Mox snapped out of her malaise as soon as her cockpit began to light up for no reason!

Her thoughts completely froze as a shimmering form began to emerge in midair.

Seconds passed as a transparent purple cat eventually emerged a short distance away from her seated body!

The ghostly cat raised his palm in greeting.

"Mrow."

"What."

Chapter 4914 Friendly Cat

What would people do if a magical ghost cat abruptly showed up in front of them without any warning?

They would definitely feel confused, that was for sure.

Out of everything that had happened to Venerable Irene today, she never expected to be confronted by a strange cat that looked like a projection gone rogue!

Had the Iron Hedgehog been hacked?

Did the Bontues manage to slip malicious code in the programming of her expert mech?

Had the mech technicians who serviced her machine decided to prank her by slipping in a joke AI in the operating system of her Iron Hedgehog?

Irene quickly snapped to attention and thoroughly inspected the state of her expert mech. All of her inspections showed that the software of her machine was not compromised in any fashion.

Besides, her intuition already told her that the strange cat whose purple fur was embellished with moving star trails was not a projection.

It was something different.

She experimentally stretched out her arm and passed it through the body of the odd-looking cat.

Her limb did not encounter any resistance, but her willpower allowed her to sense that the cat was not completely without substance!

The cat was made up of an intangible form of energy that felt alive and surprisingly human.

Her instincts did not detect hostility or ill intent from the strange life form, so she refrained from pulling her pistol from her holster.

She still remained on guard, though. Irene knew better than to rely solely on her intuition to distinguish between friend and foe.

There was no explanation where this cat came from. She knew just as little about the creature's intentions.

"What are you? Who are you? Why are you here? What is your allegiance?"

The cat possessed friendly but undoubtedly intelligent eyes. Irene stared deeply into them in order to glean the intentions of this strange apparition.

A part of her attention shifted to the small but bright gem that was set in the center of the cat's forehead.

It was brimming with power of a different sort. Irene detected a lot of threat from that intangible gem.

The cat possessed the ability to threaten her life.

This realization caused her to raise her guard a bit more. One of her hands was already hovering over the grip of her holstered sidearm.

"Answer me!" She roared in her cockpit!

"Mrow mrow mrow mrow!"

"..."

It was at this time that Irene remembered that she had no way of understanding cat speech.

An awkward moment of silence ensued as the expert pilot and intangible cat both became stumped by the situation.

The cat eventually swished his black-tipped tail and raised his furry paw yet again.

"Hello Irene." A male voice spoke from the animal.

"You can speak like a human?!"

"I can."

"Identify yourself, then! Who are you and who do you represent!?"

As Ves used Blinky to converse with Venerable Irene while keeping his real self hidden as best as possible, he became troubled by the questions.

Ves could read Irene's thoughts, so he knew that she would definitely not trust anything from the strange cat unless he clearly identified himself.

Though Ves was tempted to lie and call his cat Benny or something, his intuition and judgment told him that he wouldn't be able to get away with falsehoods.

Expert pilots possessed an uncanny intuition in this regard. Since Ves and Blinky were actually attached to her mind, Irene's ability to sense anything amiss had become extra strong!

Ves had no choice but to alter his strategy and adopt an approach that he had reserved for interactions with ace pilots.

"My name is Blinky." The cat spoke in an accent that was so close to galactic standard that Irene could not figure out where he originated from. "I am the Star Cat, and I am here to help you navigate through this crisis. To be more precise, I wish to lead you back to your fellow Quillims who are also trapped on this planet and work together with them to escape the trap prepared by the Bontues."

Though Irene still remained incredibly vigilant of this odd cat, she already started to relax a bit as she detected no malice from the random creature.

The cat did not hide its intentions and conveyed a lot of sincerity. It was hard for Irene to remain hostile in the face of such a cute and friendly feline.

There wasn't anyone else she could talk to anyway.

If Irene was still in the company of her fellow Quillim soldiers, then she would have turned to her officers and let them sort out this strange cat.

However, now that she was beginning to admit that she was out here all alone, she became much more open to talking to this odd creature.

"Tell me what you want to do." She demanded.

The cat gestured outwards with his paw. "It is not safe here anymore. The Bontues have already sent one wave of mechs to sweep these ruins. They are most certainly aware that those mechs have fallen. The next wave of mechs will be even stronger, as I am sure that their command is aware that you and the Iron Hedgehog had fought here. No matter whether your enemies intend to kill you or capture you, there is no way for you to escape their clutches if you foolishly stay in place."

A surge of anger and indignation welled in her mind. The thought of enemies coming to attack her almost caused her to go out of control!

It was only due to her discipline and willpower that she managed to suppress this violent and disastrous impulse.

"What do you propose then, cat?"

"The name's Blinky. Don't forget it, please. I am not a thing. I am an intelligent cat! I even have a university degree, you know!"

Irene's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"No school has ever enrolled a cat as far as I am aware. Where did you graduate from, Blinky?"

"Ah, that is not important." The cat rolled his body in the air. "What I want to say is that I want to urge you to flee this site as soon as possible. If there are any surviving Quillims who remain buried and stuck underneath the surface, then there is no feasible way you can pull them out in the time you have left."

That caused her mood to darken. She hated the thought of abandoning the Quillims who trusted her and fought alongside her for years. It was against her principles to callously leave them behind.

The cat rolled his eyes. "I know what you would rather want to do, but that will only lead to the defeat of both you and anyone trapped underground. You have sworn an oath to protect the Quillim Principality, right? You will do your state a massive disservice if you foolishly put yourself at the mercy of the Bontues. Don't be selfish. Do what is best for the Quillims who can still be saved."

Irene shrugged with her conflicting desires and ideals.

Fortunately, her pragmatism and sense of duty overcame her emotional attachments to her mech battalion.

"Tell me what you have in mind, Blinky."

The cat smiled and moved his forepaws in an animated manner. "You need to reach the city of Dershin. If the headquarters of your invasion force has survived this calamity, then it should have already transmitted orders to recall all mech units in the field. You may be powerful, but you are not strong enough to save yourself in your current state."

The expert pilot frowned. "I cannot make it back to Dershin in time. I am piloting the slowest expert mech in our mech army. The damage to its legs has dragged down its speed even further."

"I know. That is why you need to hijack a vehicle that can take you away. There shouldn't be any left intact in the center of this city, but the outskirts are less affected by the crash. If that doesn't work, you can always move to a neighboring town or city and find transportation there, though I think that won't work out for you since the Bontues will catch up to your expert mech by that time."

Speed was of the essence. Irene understood this truth, so she did not object to the cat's suggestion any further.

Her Iron Hedgehog began to turn and move in a specific direction. She had already called up a map of the original city and identified an industrial district located in the periphery of the city that was most likely to offer suitable transportation.

Irene remained silent for a time as she continued to study the data that was still stored in her expert mech.

The fall of the command net had caused her to lose access to a lot of useful information, but she could still form her own conclusions.

"Why are you helping me?" She opened her mouth and asked. "You never gave me a clear answer to these questions. I still don't exactly know who you are. You are clearly not a Quillim, and I seriously doubt you have been dispatched by the Rubarthans. This is not their style."

The purple cat smirked and arrogantly lifted his feline head. "Oh, you would be surprised. I would have you know that I am descended from pure Rubarthan stock! Anyway, it is inconvenient for me to expose my true identity and allegiance to you. Some pieces of information can be extremely dangerous. It would do you more harm than good to know who I am. Instead of guessing who I am, it is better to focus on saving your own life. The only way you will be able to fight the Bontues another day is if you escape from Korinna V."

The woman understood that, but that did not mean she was satisfied with knowing nothing substantial about the cat who had offered his services out of the blue.

"Is there nothing you can tell me at all, Blinky?"

"Hmm..." The cat looked thoughtful and started to rub his furry chin in a very human-like gesture. "If you truly must insist, then I suppose I can reveal who sent me to you. You may not know of him at this time, but I can guarantee you that you will be well acquainted with this name in the future. You can thank Mr. S. for allowing me to guide you through this crisis."

"...Mr. S.?"

"You will find out later." Blinky said. "He is older than you think. He is powerful beyond your imagination. He is a font of endless knowledge. He can decipher every mech. He is a tool of humanity. He is hunted by society. I am not exaggerating to you when I state that Mr. S. unfathomable."

Irene formed all kinds of guesses based on Blinky's vague descriptions.

"Is he a mech designer? A Master Mech Designer? A... Star Designer?"

The Star Cat teasingly squinted his eyes at Irene. He never responded with a direct answer, but his attitude already said enough.

"We are nearing the industrial district." He told her. "Focus the sensors of your mech on the lots that still look intact. At least a third of the complexes still remain standing. That is good. I suggest you first make your way over to that logistical center at the end of the street. There is bound to be a depot there that might have the transportation that we seek."

She did as instructed. Once her slow-moving mech finally intruded into the logistical center, her machine quickly approached a large depot for transport vessels and found a single damaged aerial vessel.

The Iron Hedgehog stopped in front of the small industrial transport and scanned it carefully.

Irene frowned again. "The good news is that it is probably flight worthy. The bad news is that it is completely locked down. I won't be able to unlock and fly this Bontue transport."

"That is not a problem. I can take care of that. I will have the transport flying within fifteen minutes."

"You can hack a transport vessel?!"

"I am a cat of many talents. Mrow~"

Chapter 4915 Calculating Against Irene

Ves understood that as soon as he exposed his companion spirit to Irene Mox, he essentially gave her a chance to track down the origin of Blinky.

Perhaps her search for her savior might not bear fruit in the next 2 centuries, but sooner or later the unique purple spirit cat would show up in the MTA's databases!

In fact, Ves was 100 percent certain that the MTA had already taken plenty of snapshots and recordings of Blinky in his present time. He hadn't been particularly diligent in keeping his other self a secret.

Besides, Ves had formally exposed the details of his companion spirits to the mechers in order to further his cooperation with the factions he was friendly with. It was futile trying to hide many secrets from the MTA, so he thought it was better to proactively offer them up in exchange for tangible benefits.

Jovy Armalon was already happily testing out his Eye of Providence on behalf of the Association. As long as the mechers confirmed that companion spirits were highly beneficial to their recipients, the mechers would probably embrace them on a wider scale.

This meant that from the moment Ves exposed Blinky to Irene Mox of the past, the god pilot known as the Destroyer of Worlds would definitely be able to track him down and figure out the connection between himself and what happened to her on Korinna V!

This was a dangerous move. Ves could land himself in a huge amount of trouble by showing off Blinky in two completely different locations and time periods.

Combined with the fact that the MTA likely found out that Blinky was Ves' companion spirit, an individual who had access to all of these clues may form all kinds of strange and unusual conclusions!

God pilots were known to merge with their god mechs, so their intelligence had definitely skyrocketed. There was no way that such a powerful human deity would be ignorant enough to miss all of these details.

Even so, Ves boldly proceeded to expose a select amount of information to a woman who would eventually evolve into one of the strongest human heroes alive.

Since he had already made the decision to break his earlier policy of non-interference and actively meddle with the events of the past, he might as well go all the way and maximize his gains!

Using Venerable Irene Mox as a medium to obtain another powerful backer his present time sounded like an incredibly dangerous but also incredibly rewarding way to get ahead!

Of course, he was well aware that his gamble could backfire enormously. He was playing with the life of a future god pilot. The power and status of The Destroyer of Worlds was comparable to that of the Polymath. Ves already had to watch his back in case he inadvertently attracted the latter's greed.

No sane person would go this far and hope for the best.

Ves was different.

He knew exactly what he was doing. His mentality towards this admittedly crazy and reckless strategy may be anything but normal, but this approach fell completely in line with his personality!

The reason why he was willing to bet on Divine Irene Mox's goodwill was because of two reasons.

First, what happened in the 'past' already radiated in the 'present'.

Since Ves had never heard anything from the Destroyer of Worlds up to the point where he chose to enter the System Space and pass through the Time Gate, then that meant it was unlikely that the female god pilot would have him captured.

In fact, the opposite may be the case. She may work behind the scenes and do her part to ensure that the Mech Trade Association did not treat him in an unreasonable manner.

The reason why he felt that this may be the likely outcome was because he already experienced the 'care' of the MTA in various ways.

Sure, his dealings with Master Willix and subsequently the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction could explain how he managed to get away with a lot of shenanigans, but that might not be enough when an inscrutable existence such as 'Mr. S.' became involved.

Ves became increasingly more confident that if he had any secret backers within the MTA, then the Destroyer of Worlds must definitely be on his side!

It may be strange for him to fear the Polymath's entanglement while simultaneously welcoming a deeper relationship with the Destroyer of Worlds.

This was because they were two completely different individuals.

The Polymath was a Star Designer and a suspected 'Holy Daughter' who secretly possessed a fragment of the Metal Scroll.

Ves and the most prodigal Star Designer in existence possessed a clear conflict of interest. Even if he had messed with her life in another time jaunt, he did not dare to bet on her goodwill if it became known that he possessed a secret relic that could massively strengthen her own design capabilities!

As for Divine Irene Mox, her moniker might sound scary, but she still had an excellent and upright reputation in human society.

Ves had dealt with plenty of expert pilots and numerous ace pilots in the past. Even if he had never interacted with a god pilot in the flesh, it was not hard to imagine that such an existence would retain much of her past traits and personality quirks!

Expert pilots were generally honest and fair in their dealings with other people. They always showed gratitude when they received a favor and despised betrayal.

Their promises held incredible value because they always abided by their word. If a high-ranking mech pilot ever broke their vows, no excuse would be able to save them from shattering their own way forward!

Since Divine Irene Mox had eventually transcended to a height that only a hundred or so of her peers had managed to reach, her trustworthiness probably ranked at the top of every human in existence!

Besides, unlike his entanglement with the Polymath, he did not have any conflicts of interest with the god pilot.

They may even share a cooperative relationship if he played his cards correctly!

All of this gave Ves a lot of confidence in cultivating a beneficial relationship with the Destroyer of Worlds, especially now that he was interacting with her younger and much more naive self.

There was no way that Ves would have the guts to calculate a real god pilot!

It was only because of the opportunity granted by the Time Gate that he thought he could get away with this outrageous move.

Of course, he knew that he could not go too far in this regard.

Ves understood enough about successful mech pilots to know that they became stronger by pursuing their goals in an unrestrained manner. The more they became burdened by promises that contradicted their true nature, the less likely they would be able to break through their limits.

In addition, people who tended to screw over high-ranking mech pilots did not last that long.

There were plenty of ways for a god pilot to retaliate against Ves if he attempted to turn a god pilot into his lackey!

No. The best way he could develop a safe and reliable connection with the Destroyer of Worlds was to treat her past self with sincerity.

Expert pilots were already sensitive towards these kinds of matters, and they would become even more attuned to goodwill and malice as they advanced up the ranks.

It was not difficult to imagine the Destroyer of Worlds recalling and reevaluating everything that happened during this special period of her life.

Every word, every action, every implication and every hidden clue would doubtlessly become exposed in front of the powerful and frighteningly clever vision of a god pilot!

Ves needed to restrain his greed to an extent and settle for a simple friendship with Irene Mox.

If he could ever make a fated human hero owe him a big favor, then he would definitely be able to harvest huge dividends in the future!

It would be hard for him to hide his true intentions to the Destroyer of Worlds, so he did not work too hard to obscure his motivations.

She would eventually learn to understand that he wanted to gain her favor, but so what? The fact that he helped her in her time of need was undeniable!

Of course, saving her was anything but easy. Ves still needed to put in the work to prevent her from ruining her incredibly illustrious future.

"Mrow."

Venerable Irene Mox watched with incomprehension as the strange purple cat appeared outside of the cockpit of her expert mech and inspected the damaged cargo transport from various angles.

Occasionally, the intangible cat phased through the metal exterior so that he could inspect the internal condition of the industrial vehicle.

It took three minutes in total for the cat to return to the Iron Hedgehog's cockpit.

"Alright, I am done with my inspection. I have good news and bad news for you, Irene. The good news is that the transport vessel was hit by a ranged attack that likely damaged its thrusters and adjacent systems. The rest of the cargo vessel is minimally affected, so all it takes to make her flight worthy again in the shortest possible timespan is to replace a few broken parts with intact ones that this logistical center has in stock."

"It is that simple?"

The purple cat shook his head. "Oh, no. I am only talking about the most expedient solution. The repair job will not be pretty. I cannot guarantee the stability of the transport and its flight speed will likely remain impaired. Don't worry, Irene. I can probably restore enough lift power to transport a mech as heavy as yours, though it is not advisable to bring any further cargo."

The expert pilot's expression eased after she heard this. "What is the bad news, then?"

The Star Cat made another donut in the air. "As you can see, I am not only a cat, but also unable to hold and manipulate any tools. I will need your assistance to jury rig a solution."

"I am not a technician nor an engineer. I am afraid I will not be able to offer you the assistance that you need."

Blinky grinned like a cheshire cat. "Oh, I do not intend to rely on ordinary means to fix up this transport. I need you to open yourself up to me and welcome my presence. This will be a highly uncomfortable experience for you. I need you to suppress your instincts and extend your trust to me. I shall do the same and it is only through this method that I can control your body and perform the necessary repairs."

This immediately caused Irene to fall silent. A lot of thoughts flashed through her mind as she struggled to decide how she should proceed after hearing this requirement.

Ves was able to observe her private deliberations with no hindrance, but he did not speak any further because it all came down to trust rather than logic.

Was Irene willing to lower her vigilance towards 'Blinky' and entrust her body and possibly more to this strange and inexplicable existence?

There was no way that the expert pilot would randomly believe in a feline ghost that showed up for no apparent reason under normal circumstances, but this was different.

With the Bontues clearly looking to entrap and eliminate every Quillim invader on Korinna V, Irene was not stupid enough to reject any form of help even if it came in the form of the strangest package that she could imagine!

Ves even became amused at the theories she came up with during her moment of thought.

She briefly wondered whether there was a secret society of intelligent cats that secretly controlled and ruled over human civilization.

Was Blinky one of many animal agents who covertly pulled on humanity's strings in order to maintain the supremacy of the feline species?

There was no way for her to know the truth, so Irene quickly set those matters aside and eventually made her choice by following her gut.

As her powerful eyes stared at the ghostly purple cat that had only ever helped her since he showed up, she started to lower her guard with difficulty.

"I... agree. Please... help in any way you can. I cannot... let myself get caught by the Bontues."

"You have made the right decision, mrow~. Now, relax and try to harmonize with my presence. It will be difficult, but you can do it as long as you do not reject me in any way."

Chapter 4916 Shaky Flight

It took less trouble for Venerable Irene to merge with 'Blinky' than expected.

Part of it was because Ves had already passed through her defenses in the first place. The Time Gate enabled him to observe Irene's perspective from one of her most deepest and intimate parts of herself. There was hardly any better way for him to get any closer to her core!

Aside from that, Venerable Irene was not a particularly distrustful or paranoid individual by nature.

She may be an incredibly smart and experienced god pilot in the far future, but at this moment of time she was only a simple second-class expert pilot in her thirties. She also spent most of her time in the Quillim Mech Army.

Blinky had been quite open and friendly so far. Ves was confident in his charm and he believed he had conveyed enough sincerity to earn Irene's trust. He also wasn't asking for much. He just wanted to take over just enough of her body to perform repairs.

Besides, an expert pilot was never truly defenseless. Her force of will could always take action and repel anything that felt wrong with just a moment of her thought!

"Do it before I change my mind." Venerable Irene spoke.

There was no way that Ves could take control over an expert pilot by force at his current level of strength.

It was already difficult for him to maneuver 'Blinky' into the right place. The nature of an expert pilot's willpower was highly exclusionary. Only deep and special family relations such as the ones cultivated by the Ingvar siblings and the Gemini Family could overcome this instinctual rejection phenomenon.

In the end, Blinky barely managed to assume control over Irene's body. The expert pilot clearly had to strain herself into preventing her willpower from restoring the sanctity of her body.

"Get on with it, cat." She gritted her teeth.

Ves did not fool around. As soon as he was able to pilot her body, he jerkily induced her to leave the cockpit and move over to a control station where he could access the workshop facilities of the logistical center.

There was no way for this facility to grant access to a random stranger, but that was not a hindrance to a mech designer who came from 200 years in the future.

He borrowed Irene's cranial implant and the processing power of the Iron Hedgehog to exploit a vulnerability in the ancient programming of the facility's operating system.

The hack might not be elegant, but Ves was happy as long as it worked.

Once he got in, the workshop partially came to life. Numerous bots and mechanical arms started to get into action. They meticulously pulled apart a few broken and ruined parts and started to slot in replacement parts pulled out of a secure inventory that he also had to crack.

Ves could not rely on these automated devices to perform all of the necessary repairs. They were good but their programming only encompassed standard operations.

It would take days for the automated routine to come to an end!

There was no way that they could wait that long, so at a certain point Ves manually stepped in and started to implement his own quick and dirty repair solution.

There were times where he had to command Irene's body to pick up a number of handheld tools and approach the sections being worked upon.

It looked extremely strange for an expert pilot in a high-quality piloting suit to work on a piece of machinery like a common mech technician!

Irene remained fully conscious and aware as 'Blinky' proficiently handled all of the tools like an experienced professional.

In fact, through her close connection with the purple cat that was possessing her body, she could gain a glimpse of the vast depth of knowledge held by this unexplainable existence.

When Venerable Irene compared the workmanship demonstrated by Blinky to the handling of many different mech technicians, she immediately concluded that there was an enormous gap between the two! The cat truly worked as if he had graduated from an advanced technical university!

"Alright, I am almost done, mrow." Ves communicated to Irene in the guise of Blinky. "This is a rather simple cargo transport vehicle that is built for long-term daily use. Its design is quite robust and incorporates many redundancies and failsafes. My improvised repairs takes advantage of these design traits

"You speak like a mech designer." Irene stated.

"Who says that cats can't design mechs?" He retorted. "As long as a feline is smart enough, he can master any human science! It's not as if we need opposable thumbs to learn a lot of theory."

"..."

Irene's body eventually retreated from the dubious-looking thrusters that looked as if they had only barely been put back together.

After entering the cockpit of the transport, the expert pilot's body fiddled around with the control system until it finally managed to take over the cargo vessel.

The main hatch finally started to slide open.

"Alright, we are done!" Blinky said as the cat quickly withdrew from the expert pilot's body and floated back outside. "I have programmed the autopilot to lift off and fly to Dershin in a winding path that circumvents many of the cities on the way. We cannot guarantee that the Bontues have regained control over them. You do not need to leave the cockpit while the vessel is in flight. I have

given your expert mech direct access to the transport's systems, so you can always adjust its route or command it to land whenever you wish."

"That is... convenient." Irene admitted. "Thank you for doing that. Does that mean that I can remain in the cockpit of my expert mech?"

"That is correct, mrow. The Bontues have already begun to launch their counterattacks. The airspace has become a lot more dangerous. I will need you to park your expert mech close to the open hatch and keep your cannons armed and ready to fire.

"That...!"

"I know it sounds dangerous, but it is our only choice." Blinky insisted. "Let us hope you will be able to find friendly units along the way. Your flight back to Dershin should become much safer once you have a proper escort."

The transport was bound to bump into a Quillim aerial patrol sooner or later. Ves just hoped that this happened quickly enough to save them from enemy interception.

Several minutes later, a civilian cargo transport shakily rose into the air and began to fly in a southward direction.

The aerial transport's flight was anything but smooth. From the hasty and incomplete repairs to the unbalanced weight distribution, there were many different problems!

Nonetheless, the vehicle did its job and that was enough. Irene had little choice but to suppress her discomfort and make sure that her Iron Hedgehog could maintain its accuracy under these difficult and unusual circumstances.

At first, nothing too unusual happened. The entire planet had undergone a lot of upheaval in a short amount of time. The Bontues were more preoccupied with recapturing the cities it had lost.

Even if many of the cities were ruined, the defenders of the planet still had to sweep away any of the invading forces that remained.

Nonetheless, the Bontues eventually noticed the anomaly that was flying through their airspace.

The transport may have been trying to avoid the busier parts of the planet, but it wasn't very good at hiding itself from sensors.

A pair of aerial mechs had diverted from their previous route and moved to intercept the transport!

"Be careful. Don't let them get too close." Blinky advised. "The Bontue mechs may choose to launch missiles or use other means to destroy our transport. You need to intercept them as soon as possible. Now would be a good time."

"Do you know how difficult it is to accurately strike a fast-moving target in the air from this elevation and distance?! What is worse is that this transport is wobbling and shaking from all of the turbulence. My chances of hitting not one but two aerial mechs are awful. If I cannot succeed right away, then the difficulty of hitting the Bontue mechs will drop massively as they will fully adopt an evasive flight pattern."

Blinky flew close and pretended to rub his face against her head. "You can do it, Irene. I believe in you. Expert pilots such as yourself are capable of doing the impossible as long as you put your heart

and soul into it. Don't think about your chances. Think about what you must do to survive and see your goals come into fruition."

Irene seriously contemplated his advice and did not reject his words. There was no point in giving up anyway. She needed to shoot down those distant mechs before it was too late.

The cat urged the expert pilot to make her move. "Hurry up. The Bontue mech pilots are probably in doubt because you are riding in a registered native vehicle, but once they discover that there is an enemy expert mech on board, they will open fire without hesitation."

"Please do not distract me, Blinky. I am trying my best to calculate my firing solutions."

Venerable Irene entered into familiar territory again. She had done this countless times, but never in such arduous conditions!

She leveraged all of the intact weapons of her expert mechs. 5 gauss cannons and 4 howitzers granted her 9 opportunities to strike down two fast aerial mechs.

This might sound like a lot, but it was impossible for a normal mech or mech pilot to land a hit under these circumstances!

It would have been a different story if the Iron Hedgehog was equipped with a missile system, but it had gone all-out on cannons as its only weapon systems.

With the pressure mounting on her shoulders, Irene became more focused than ever.

All of the extra variables that massively complicated her effort to find a good firing solution no longer bothered her that much. Even if she was unable to compensate for them, she tried her best to put her faith in her own abilities.

After studying the motions of the aerial mechs on approach, her willpower surged as she instinctively deviated from her firing solutions.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Soon enough, her expert mech opened fire!

The incredible recoil caused the transport to jerk and groan as it struggled to maintain control over its flight.

Nine different projectiles moving at two distinct speeds rapidly traveled in the air and quickly reached their target destinations!

One aerial mech instantly exploded as one of several gauss projectiles struck its left side with incredible force!

The resonance-empowered gauss round not only obliterated this entire side, but also disabled the other half that looked as if it was just about to collapse!

Its mech pilot had already died in an instant.

Irene had less luck in shooting down the second aerial mech as it had been a little more diligent in maintaining an uneven flight pattern.

Several heavy gauss projectiles whizzed by the machine, which completely spooked its pilot!

The Bontue soldier performed the right move under these alarming circumstances and abruptly commanded his mech to deviate from its previous flight direction.

This allowed the aerial mech to miss and evade the explosive shells that arced over shortly afterwards!

However, these shells didn't need to impact anything in order to pose a threat.

Once they reached their programmed coordinates, they exploded with resonance-empowered fury!

Venerable Irene had deliberately loaded the most bombastic shells in the howitzers of her expert mech, so the explosions in the air engulfed so much volume that the second enemy aerial mech could not completely avoid all of the damage!

"The surviving mech is impaired!" Blinky enthusiastically spoke. "Good job!"

Although the second aerial mech still remained in one piece more or less, it had suffered so much damage that its flight had been heavily affected.

The Iron Hedgehog easily finished it off after firing a second salvo.

Venerable Irene not only managed to save herself, but also felt incredibly accomplished by pulling off this improbable feat.

"Thank you... Blinky."

Chapter 4917 Dark Improvement

"Damn, you should have chosen a safer route!"

"Hey, there is no way to avoid enemy attention once we shot down two of their patrol mechs. We should be lucky that they haven't figured out that there is an expert mech aboard this transport."

Transport had not made it too far before another group of Bontue mechs moved to intercept the rogue vehicle.

Six of them were on approach this time. They not only approached from two different directions, but were also likely to open fire as soon as they entered into effective weapons range!

"What is the likelihood that the Bontue mechs carry missiles?"

"Not high, at least when it comes to the mechs assigned to the planetary garrison." Venerable Irene quickly replied. "Missiles are costly and not too effective under normal circumstances. That said, I cannot rule out the chance that one of those patrol mechs is equipped with missile launchers."

It did not take long for the Iron Hedgehog to generate an alert.

"INCOMING MISSILES!"

The orientation of the cargo transport slowly changed in order to give the Iron Hedgehog a viable firing angle. The flying vehicle turned awfully slowly due to its damaged state, but once it was done, the expert heavy artillery mech finally opened fire!

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The missiles were faster but also followed much more straight and predictable trajectories. The only difficult part about intercepting them with explosive shells was to time their detonations correctly.

Venerable Irene would have normally struggled to succeed in an action like this, but her mentality and willpower had improved so much that she no longer found it difficult to nail difficult shots.

It was surprising to see how much she improved after going through a tough time and listening to the advice of a talking cat!

Eventually, the formidable cannons of the Iron Hedgehog started to open fire at the aerial mechs that foolishly tried to close the distance.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Gauss rounds managed to slam into the relatively thin and light frames of the enemy aerial mechs.

No matter whether the projectiles struck them head-on or only managed to inflict glancing blows, the machines were utterly ruined!

The other aerial mechs that managed to avoid getting obliterated at once were later struck down after getting engulfed by resonance-empowered explosions.

Venerable Irene was improving rapidly. She no longer needed to attack a target twice once she had attacked it with her expert mech.

Even Irene understood that her speed of progression was unnaturally high. Her suspicions turned increasingly more to Blinky. She attributed much of her gains to the strange cat's intervention.

Ves had a different opinion, but he was not in a hurry to correct the expert pilot's misunderstanding.

The more she thought that Blinky helped her out, the more gratitude that the Destroyer of Worlds held towards himself!

To be honest, Ves was likely witnessing one of the strengths of a future god pilot. Venerable Irene Mox's ability to improve her skills was abnormally high, especially after she received strong stimulation.

The calamity that practically wiped out her mech battalion and all of the comrades she fought alongside with for multiple years was the strongest shock that she had ever suffered to her system!

If 'Blinky' hadn't pulled herself out of her negative feedback loop, she would have ultimately lost her resolve as an expert pilot and broken her force of will.

Didn't that sound similar to what happened to Venerable Davia Stark?

Though no one had been around to prevent her from falling into the deepest hole of her life, she eventually managed to regain her fire with a lot of assistance from Ves and Brutus.

Ever since then, Davia had grown rapidly. Her resolve became incredibly strong and she improved by leaps and bounds, especially when paired with a masterwork expert mech in the form of the Amaranto.

Venerable Jannzi also followed a similar pattern. Her life had been fairly smooth before the Battle of Pima Prime.

After the Skorpion Kommando melted her Shield of Samar, Jannzi also suffered enormous mental trauma.

Ves had high hopes that the Dullahan Project would eventually heal her mental wounds and get her back on track, but perhaps she might be able to gain more from this disaster than a restoration of her old strength.

Was this what every mech pilot had to go through in order to surpass their limits and ascend to godhood?

It was an interesting theory, but he did not think it was that simple. He wasn't in a hurry to deliberately traumatize every expert pilot of his clan in an attempt to 'unlock their full potential' or whatever.

Whether Irene's rapid improvement was an intrinsic talent of hers or a consequence to all of the life-changing events she experienced in a short amount of time, it certainly came in handy.

The Bontues no longer sent out any other aerial mechs after their latest patrols had been downed.

"We are moving closer to Dershin." Venerable Irene said as the tension in her voice had eased to an extent. "We have bought enough time to distance ourselves from the original frontlines of the invasion. The Bontue mech forces are likely advancing from the opposite side, but their ability to take back their lost ground is limited. Advancing to Dershin is their highest priority at this time."

Blinky nodded. "Hm, I suppose you are correct."

Once the shaky transport flew far enough, a different patrol of aerial mechs showed up at this time.

Irene quickly grew alert, but she quickly grew ecstatic once her expert mech identified their IFFs.

"They are Quillims!"

The expert pilot quickly opened a communication channel with the patrol. The two sides quickly confirmed their identities and briefly shared their stories.

The Quillim aerial mech pilots were glad that one of the expert pilots on their side had managed to make it back from the frontlines.

"We have orders to keep an eye out for anything that enters this airspace, but my wingman will fly next to your transport to ensure it remains undisturbed. Is that acceptable, Venerable Mox?"

"I welcome any assistance that you can spare." Irene responded with a smile.

The probability of encountering enemy units was low at this point, but it was better to add extra insurance.

Once the transport continued to fly back to the original beachhead of the planetary invasion, Irene eagerly pumped the escort pilot for additional information.

"What happened in orbit?"

"I cannot tell you anything solid, Venerable. Our original fleet has been downed as far as I know. None of our ships in orbit managed to escape our enemy's machinations. Our troops on the ground have suffered enormous losses. Many of our battalions and regiments have fallen completely silent. We thought that yours was totally wiped as well. Many of our boys back in headquarters will be glad to see you make it through."

"Mmmh." Irene grunted. "What is the state of Dershin? It sounds as if it has made it through the enemy's initial counterattack."

"It did, but the situation there is not as good as you are hoping, Venerable Mox. Much of the city is ruined as multiple combat carriers crashed into its direction. The mechs and gun batteries we installed greatly helped with breaking them up. The titan shields managed to block much of the damage, but they eventually broke. Many of our mechs and personnel didn't make it. The survivors are still picking up the pieces."

"I understand." Irene frowned. The Bontues had made sure to target Dershin, which suggested that they had an ambitious goal in mind. "Are there still any intact vessels left that we can use to evacuate from this planet?"

"No. The spaceport is entirely gone. Many of the flight vehicles that remain intact are shuttles and transports such as the one you are riding in. They can take us into orbit, and a number of them can bring us to the edge of the star system, but that is the extent of what they can do. We do not have a single FTL-capable starship under our control."

That was bad news for Irene and Ves!

The Quillim Mech Army had completely lost the initiative as well as its numerical superiority in the Korinna System.

Once the reinforcement fleet dispatched by the Bontues came close enough, none of the Quillims left behind would be able to make it out anymore!

Time was of the essence. Irene felt desperate to solve this crisis, but she was only capable of fighting enemies with her powerful artillery mech. Figuring out a way to evacuate the Quillim troops that still remained on the ground was way outside of her area of expertise!

The flight continued. With the help of the Quillim escort mech, Irene managed to avoid a lot of potential difficulties. She even gained additional escort mechs as the importance of bringing back an expert heavy artillery mech was high!

Soon enough, the autopilot of the transport brought Venerable Irene and the Iron Hedgehog to Dershin, or what was left of it after several combat carriers crashed into the area.

The devastation initially looked no different from the city that almost turned into Irene's grave.

However, there were several overlapping circles where the urban landscape looked remarkably more intact!

Though many of the streets and structures were strewn with debris, the overall damage was not as ruinous as everywhere else!

Many different mechs, vehicles and crews on foot did their best to collect supplies, restore all of the mechs that were still salvageable and set up improvised defenses.

It was clear that the defenders of this crucial city were gearing up for a crucial battle and one that would probably decide the fate of all of the Quillims stuck on this planet!

It took quite a bit of time to navigate the hijacked transport to a landing zone that was close to an available workshop.

Irene had to go through another round of verification and inspection before she was allowed to bring her Iron Hedgehog to the workshop so that it could undergo emergency repairs.

"You are lucky that we still have a batch of spare parts for your expert mech in one of our intact stores, ma'm." A chief technician told the weary expert pilot. "None of my available men have any experience with servicing your Iron Hedgehog. We won't be able to fix up your expert mech in time for the coming operation."

"What operation?"

The gruff man smirked at her. "I will leave the explanations to the colonel. You should get all of the food and rest that you need. It won't take long before you will be put back into the field."

"I see..."

Venerable Irene Mox was glad that her fellow Quillims weren't stupidly waiting for defeat. She already guessed what the surviving commanders had in store.

Although their situation looked awful, they could still make it out as long as they managed to reach one FTL-capable starship.

It didn't matter whether there was enough room to accommodate any of their mechs or critical machinery. All of that could be cast aside in an emergency. It was much more important to preserve everyone's lives so that they could fight another day.

"Are you truly willing to cast aside the Iron Hedgehog?" Blinky asked.

Irene looked puzzled.

The purple cat continued to float in front of her, but somehow no one else was able to see his ostentatious form.

The chief technician who was standing close by didn't hear anything either.

The expert pilot glanced at her expert mech as it was starting to undergo repairs. Her expression turned mixed.

"If I had a choice, I would never let it go. Still... it is so big and heavy that you can put hundreds of people in its place. I won't insist on bringing the Iron Hedgehog away if we have to leave so many of our compatriots behind. I will wait until the mech designers supply me with another expert mech if I have to make a sacrifice."

Chapter 4918 Operation Black Dawn

After several hours of hasty repairs and preparation, the Iron Hedgehog boarded yet another transport.

Venerable Irene Mox was glad that she and her expert mech weren't forced to ride a dinky civilian cargo transport this time.

The Quillims in control of Dershin still retained a sufficient number of military transport vehicles that could quickly relocate slow and heavy mechs such as an expert heavy artillery mech.

In fact, the large heavy-duty transport also carried three other heavy artillery mechs. Their imposing weight certainly induced a lot of strain on the large vehicle's engines.

Many more transports flew in the air at a fairly low altitude. Each of them carried mechs, supplies and other goods necessary to put up a good fight. Hundreds of Quillim aerial mechs patrolled the entire perimeter and ensured that the Bontues would not be able to intercept the transport train.

There was no way to hide such a major movement from their Bontue adversaries. They originally reigned over the Korinna System in the first place, and every city and location on the planet still had ways of tracking movements and covertly transmitting the data to other locations.

It was good that the Quillims did not intend to hide their movements in the first place. The plan formulated by Colonel Harvey Dost and his staff counted on this. The entire mech force needed to serve as bait in order to occupy the attention of the Bontues.

Irene still recalled her shock when the colonel pulled her to a shielded chamber and personally briefed her on the full details of Operation Black Dawn.

"The purpose of deploying our forces to New Kreon is not just to block the Bontue vanguard troops that are trying to make their way to Dershin." The elderly man spoke to the expert pilot.

That caused the woman to frown. "You mean we aren't making a serious attempt to advance on one of the cities held by the Bontues in an attempt to hijack one of their FTL-capable starships?"

"It will never work." Colonel Dost admitted. "The Bontues have a million different ways to sabotage their own starships. At worst, they will blow up all of the combat carriers that remain grounded and cannot be taken away. While it may look as if we have become so desperate for an escape route that we are willing to disregard the truth, our actual operation is much more viable than this half-baked plan."

The commanding officer activated a projection that displayed Korinna V as a globe. Soon enough, lots of tiny points of light started to appear around the planet. One of those points of light was marked in red.

"When the Bontues sabotaged all of our starships by hacking their navigation systems and deliberately inducing them to crash onto the cities that we have captured, not all of the vessels fell out of orbit. Many of our vessels remained in high orbit, so the Bontues sabotaged them in different ways. From destroying their FTL drives to deliberately inducing them to collide against each other, the fleet in orbit have all turned into broken wrecks."

Irene frowned. "It is hard to believe that our old enemies managed to infiltrate and sabotage our fleet to this extent. It can't be done without the help of traitors who are deeply embedded in our mech army."

"We are already in the process of rooting out the turncoats embedded in our ranks. Now that we know what to look for, they should not be able to destroy our layout."

"What is this layout, sir?"

The colonel gestured at the red point of light. The projection zoomed in to display one of the most prominent starships of the original Quillim fleet in orbit.

"The Peyton Phoenix." Irene gasped.

The flagship of the fleet was once a proud and modern 3.2 kilometer-long fleet carrier. She was capable of carrying lots of mechs and supplies and possessed enough hull plating to enter into contested areas.

Now, the Peyton Phoenix looked as if she had been snapped in half. Her entire front half had been sheared off due to a combination of internal explosions and external collisions.

The rear half looked ragged as her entire hull suffered a lot of internal explosions as well. Her thrusters looked wrecked and her engineering bay was exposed to open space.

"This is our ticket out of the Korinna System." Colonel Dost declared.

"...Are you certain about this, sir?" Venerable Irene quietly asked. She wondered whether the colonel had completely lost his sanity after suffering a huge setback. "The Peyton Phoenix is dead. She can't fly anymore."

"It may look that way to you and the Bontues, but the damage does not look as bad as you think. My best engineers and technical staff believe she can still be restored to working condition." Dost claimed. "Capital ships of her class are designed and built with many backups and redundancies in mind. We have survivors who have confirmed the location of at least one spare FTL drive and power reactor that can quickly be hooked up and restore basic functionality to the capital ship."

"Colonel..."

"Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, this vessel shall fly among the stars once again, if only to take us back to the nearest base occupied by our fellow Quillims."

That sounded like a crazy plan!

It wasn't just Irene who looked shocked! Even Ves was astonished by the measures the Quillims planned to take in order to escape the trap set by the Bontues.

Irene continued to frown. She couldn't believe that this broken fleet carrier could be repaired quickly enough.

"Aren't there better choices up in orbit? It should be much simpler to restore a combat carrier."

"Combat carriers are also easier to break." Colonel Dost responded. "The Bontue sabotage has wrecked all of them to the point where the Bontues will have already completed their blockade on the planet before we can restore even one of those vessels. It is the Peyton Phoenix that gives us the best hope. The Bontues had to put much more effort into disabling our flagship, and even then she has managed to retain enough of her systems to bring her back to life."

Though Irene still couldn't wrap her mind around this bold and crazy venture, Ves eventually came around to support this initiative.

Blinky appeared into Irene's view and floated around Colonel Dost's head.

Strangely enough, the other man completely did not notice anything amiss!

"The good man is right, Irene." The Star Cat spoke to the woman. "Fleet carriers can hardly be vessels. If the engineers are good enough and as long as the ship infrastructure still remains decently intact, it may only take a day to install the replacement FTL drive and power reactor. The

Peyton Phoenix will only regain a paltry amount of functionality and many accidents may occur, but as long as she can jump to another star system, that is enough to buy time to implement more extensive repairs!"

A rust bucket could fall apart at any moment, but one that was actively being worked upon could last a lot longer.

Besides, the evacuees aboard the Peyton Phoenix might be able to get in touch with the rest of the Quillim Mech Army and be rescued at that point.

It was at this point that Irene understood what the operation was truly about.

"You want us to hold New Kreon and pretend to advance just to buy enough time for your engineers to repair the Peyton Phoenix, is that correct?"

Colonel Dost grinned. "That is correct. Operation Black Dawn must succeed. We have already taken the first steps. Our stealth shuttle has secretly been ferrying our engineers, work crews and essential equipment to the derelict fleet carrier. It is paramount for us to hide what we are doing. If we do nothing but hold Dershin, the Bontues will eventually become suspicious and start looking in every direction. By launching a high-profile offensive, many of the enemy analysts and tactical officers will become preoccupied with strategizing against our units on the ground."

Irene nodded in understanding. "Stopping the Bontue vanguard troops from closing in to Dershin also makes it more convenient to trigger a general evacuation. All of the shuttles and transports bringing our fellow Quillim soldiers to the restored Peyton Phoenix won't be as easy to intercept by our enemies."

The operation sounded a lot more viable and well-thought than she initially assumed.

However, Ves could see that it was not without its problems.

Blinky gestured with his paws. "Don't overlook the details, Irene. The troops stationed in Dershin will be able to evacuate to high orbit without much issue, but the same could not be said for you and your fellow mech pilots stationed in New Kreon. The only way you can get out is to evacuate under fire. Many transports won't be able to escape the gravity well of Korinna V before they are downed by the Bontues who are eager to turn this planet into your graves."

That was true, but Irene did not actually mind it. She understood the necessity of doing her part to preserve the bulk of the Quillims trapped on Korinna V. She was not eager to meet her demise, but as long as her sacrifice could serve a greater purpose, she would not hesitate to do what was necessary!

The renewed conviction and belief radiating from Irene caused an immediate reaction from Colonel Dost.

The older man raised his arm and patted the expert pilot on the shoulder. "I am sorry, Venerable Mox. I should be keeping you and your expert mech here in Dershin so that you have the highest chance of making it back to friendly territory, but you can save a lot of lives if you participate in the fight at New Kreon. We need your firepower over there. The more Bontue mechs you can destroy, the less pressure our vehicle train in New Kreon will have to endure when they flee to orbit under fire."

"I will do my best to ensure that as many of our soldiers make it out of this star system alive as possible, sir." Irene reassured the colonel.

"Good. Your Iron Hedgehog will not be the only expert mech to hold the line at New Kreon, but our opponents have been able to gather large quantities of mechs from different locations. We also suspect that the Bontue defenders may be able to deploy an expert mech or two in this coming battle."

This was the final and most important battle of this campaign. If the Quillims could not hold New Kreon, then the general evacuation would come under serious risk!

Ever since then, Irene constantly poured over all of the data she could get her hands on. As the heavy-duty transport brought her Iron Hedgehog to the upcoming battlefield, she meticulously studied the map of New Kreon and even examined the surrounding terrain. She already tried to envision the routes that the Bontue mechs would take in order to close in on the city.

Ves had remained fairly quiet at this time as he did not want to distract Irene.

That didn't mean that he had been sitting still all of this time.

He had access to the same data as Irene. As he skimmed the intelligence reports on the advancing Bontue mech troops, he became more and more concerned at how badly the Bontues might possibly outnumber their Quillim adversaries.

The previous calamity had eliminated a huge amount of Quillim mechs originally deployed onto the planet.

The Bontues had suffered a lot of losses during most of the campaign, but they still retained or held back thousands of perfectly intact machines just so that they could launch a furious counterattack!

Though Venerable Irene and her Iron Hedgehog were good against massed enemy units, Ves began to feel increasingly more concerned that their might was not enough to turn the tide.

Maybe he should give the future god pilot a little boost in advance.

Chapter 4919 Blinky The Operator

Did Ves have a way of empowering Venerable Irene Mox?

He certainly did. He was both a mech designer and a spiritual engineer.

Even if his clan didn't exist and even if none of his design spirits had assumed their roles in this time period, he still had several ways to even the odds and give the Quillims a fighting chance to win the crucial battle!

He just needed to think carefully on what he was willing to expose. The debacle centered around the Vulcan Empire had taught him a painful lesson on how even the smallest and more careless actions might produce massive repercussions in the far future!

Ves quickly went over his possible options.

"There is not much point in upgrading the Iron Hedgehog's design and turning it into a living mech. The people here won't let an expert pilot mess around and there isn't much time for me to implement too many changes anyway."

Irene needed an immediate boost in battle power. Changing her Iron Hedgehog would do the opposite as she needed at least a few days to understand its altered parameters and work them into her fixed routines.

The Quillims couldn't afford to wait that long!

This was why Ves turned to human transformation. He happened to know a thing or two about that, but he had never augmented a pilot as strong as Venerable Irene Mox.

Any operation he performed on Irene would have massive and irreversible consequences to the woman who would eventually become known as the Destroyer of Worlds.

His efforts could easily cause her head to burst like a balloon if he made a mistake!

However, Ves quickly set all of these fears aside.

He would normally never contemplate such a foolish and reckless act.

Yet because Divine Irene Mox was doing well 2 centuries from now, Ves was 100 percent sure that whatever crazy experiments he pulled off during this Mastery experience, the outcomes turned into a smashing success in the end!

Ves briefly became excited at the reminder his future knowledge functioned as a cheat answer.

His concerns about hurting or impairing Irene to the extent that she was no longer able to fight as effectively in this battle became moot.

This was because if his measures failed, Irene was unlikely to survive this battle and live long enough to acquire the title of the Destroyer of Worlds!

Now, all he needed to do was convince Venerable Irene Mox that it was in her best interest to accept a drastic, life-altering augmentation from talking purple ghost cat.

...Maybe he needed to put a bit more effort in his attempt.

Blinky quietly showed up again. The cat's appearance inside the cockpit pulled Irene out of her intense study session.

"I appreciate all you have done, cat, but you are interrupting my work. If you cannot contribute anything useful, then please stay out of my way."

"Don't be so quick to dismiss what I have to offer, mrow. You should at least hear me out before you reject what I wish to propose. I cannot guarantee it will have a great effect at the start, but I can assure you that it will strengthen you in ways you can never imagine, especially later on when you have time to grow into your power."

The closeness between Ves and Irene caused the latter to take his words seriously, at least for the time being.

"Explain."

Blinky smiled while swishing his tail. "I am able to perform a secret method that can bestow new powers to individuals. Have you ever wanted to learn where I came from, Irene? Well, here is your answer. I am a product of this method."

That caused Irene to raise her eyebrows!

"You... originally came from another human? That... explains much. No wonder you are so good with technology. You were sourced from a mech designer."

"Mrow, what a clever girl! You deserve a prize! Would you like to acquire a helpful cat like myself?"

"How does getting a cat help me fight the Bontues?"

"I cannot tell you that." Blinky seriously responded. "Every cat is different, and each of them have different ways of empowering their progenitors. I cannot foresee the outcome, but I believe it will undoubtedly provide you with a lot of help in the coming battle, but only if you are able to endure the pain and other side effects."

He was making a lot of demands, but he conveyed so much confidence and sincerity that Irene felt attracted by the strange cat's promises.

Blinky had been nothing but helpful since he appeared. While his agenda, his origin and his reasons for assisting her were completely unclear, she intuitively sensed that the cat remained on her side.

At the very least, Blinky was not her adversary. Whether he could be trusted was another matter.

Could she believe in his claims? Was Blinky proficient enough in this secret method to pull it off without any serious problems? Would the consequences of accepting this augmentation give her enough time to recover sufficiently enough to fight in the upcoming battle?

So many questions and doubts plagued her mind before her strong force of will decisively swept them away!

This was no time for doubts and procrastination. She had studied the data and intelligence reports and understood that the Quillims had a tough battle ahead of them. Her Iron Hedgehog was not enough to overcome the dramatic numerical disadvantage.

Defeating the Bontue vanguard troops that were advancing on New Kreon at this moment mattered above anything else! Only by stopping these enemies would she be able to give her comrades on the ground a realistic chance of evacuating from this doomed star system!

"Very well." Irene said as she forcibly pressed down her discomfort. "Do what you must. I shall do whatever I can to cooperate."

Blinky smiled with satisfaction. "You won't regret it, though probably not at first. What I am about to do next will hurt you a lot. This is because to create a cat comparable to myself, I need to cut a piece of your 'soul' and breathe life into it so that I can shape it into a cat. Don't worry. While the cat will gain intelligence, your new companion will still be tied to you. It will be like having a second personality."

Irene had so many questions that she didn't know where to begin.

"This 'companion'... is supposed to make me stronger?"

"Yes, but as I have told you before, I cannot completely say how. I will have to 'operate' on you before I have a better idea. I can promise you that I will do my best to empower you in the short term. Your willpower shall be the medium in which you can enhance the might of your cat. Countless enemies shall tremble in the terror of your companion's power!"

Though he exaggerated his boasts, Irene nonetheless felt attracted by the visions evoked by his words.

What she needed the most was power. Without enough strength, she had no way of fulfilling all of her goals!

"Do it." She said. "I suppose I need to relax and let you rummage inside my head again?"

"Yup. This is going to hurt a lot, and every part of you will want to push me back and protect your inner self. Don't give in to your instincts. The process is damaging, but it is an essential step to your transformation. Endure the pain. Stick to your resolve. A brand-new future awaits you so long as you are able to pass this test."

Irene had overcome numerous challenges in her life. She did not want to suffer defeat at this junction!

It was a bit difficult for her to relax her mind and open it up to Blinky, especially when she also had to muster her strength to restrain any instinctual defensive reactions.

Once Blinky dove into her head and started to cut into her willpower-infused spirituality, a remarkably feminine scream escaped from her throat!

"Bear with it, Irene! You are stronger than this! I will do my best to expedite the following steps, but you must hold yourself back!"

"Ngggnnn!"

Ves could not afford to pay too much attention to Irene's condition. He had to work quickly and try his best to form a new companion spirit for an existing expert pilot.

It was fortunate that he already formed a plan to provide all of his Larkinson expert pilots with their own companion spirits.

It was much harder to pull this off with demigods than with normal people because the former were much harder to alter!

Their force of will was not only highly repulsive towards outside manipulation, but also consisted of some of the toughest ingredients he had to work with. Even with Blinky's excellent ability to break down and digest spiritual energy, the companion spirit struggled to overpower Venerable Irene's incredible tenacity!

Once Blinky reluctantly managed to separate enough of Irene's force of will to form a new living spiritual construct, the cat instantly began to shred the ingredient and infuse it with spirituality originating from Ves.

Though Ves felt regretful that he wasn't able to contribute additional ingredients to the creation process, Venerable Irene's potent spirit and willpower already provided a sufficient base!

Ves felt more and more deflated as Blinky channeled his life-attributed spiritual energy into Irene's companion spirit.

The woman stopped screaming in pain. The worst was over, though she still needed to do her best to restrain her willpower from producing a violent response.

"We are making good progress. Keep holding on. I am doing my best to finish this quickly."

Blinky skillfully infused the ingredients with the spark of life while simultaneously shaping the companion spirit into a cat.

Though he could have given Irene the choice to determine the appearance of her own companion spirit, Ves thought that it would only distract her and make this situation needlessly complex.

It was much simpler to just give her a spiritual cat.

As Blinky continued to shape the companion spirit, the cat that took shape began to resemble a tabby cat.

What was special about her appearance was that her fur started to pulse with varying tints of orange ripples.

It was as if the cat had become a personification of the exploding shells that Venerable Irene liked to launch at her opponents!

The cat's striking visual appearance fell in line with Irene's domain and spiritual attributes. She excelled at raining down destruction on her opponents and constantly put in a lot of effort into making her attacks more accurate and deadly.

Once Blinky quickly created a rather sloppy but functional companion spirit, the new creation soon settled into Irene's damaged force of will.

Since the companion spirit was originally a part of Irene and hardly contained any foreign ingredients aside from Ves' spiritual energy, her return did not evoke any rejection.

The 'return' of her separated self also healed much of her intangible wounds and relieved her pain.

Irene Mox widened her eyes as soon as she formed a strong and instant connection to the newborn spiritual cat!

"This... this is similar to piloting a mech!"

The experience was considerably different in that the 'mech' was much smaller and possessed her own autonomous consciousness.

Still, the similarities were sufficient enough for Irene to quickly get accustomed to the novelty of obtaining her own companion spirit.

Though her force of will still needed to undergo a lot of healing, the damage was not as bad as Ves and Irene feared.

Soon enough, a splashy spiritual tabby cat tentatively emerged from the expert pilot's head.

...Miew...

"So cute!"

Blinky quickly appeared next to the explosion-themed cat! He licked the newborn cat's intangible fur, causing the latter to cry out in protest!

Irene looked weary and befuddled as she beheld her new 'pet'. She still didn't entirely understand what had happened and what she obtained.

"This..."

"She needs a name." Blinky told her. "What do you want to call her? Just say the first name that comes to mind."

"Emma."

"Uhm... maybe you should take your time."

Chapter 4920 Emma

Ves had always wondered how strong a companion spirit could become after undergoing many years of growth.

If nothing else, Irene Mox provided him with a fantastic opportunity to conduct a bastardized longitudinal study on this interesting research subject!

Though Ves had no way of monitoring the growth of Irene's new companion spirit at regular intervals in the following 2 centuries, it was already enough for him to be able to observe the difference in the far future.

Of course, that depended on whether Ves was able to observe enough clues from the Destroyer of Worlds once he returned to his present time. It might be a lot more difficult for him to complete this ambitious study than he wished.

Still, Ves strongly believed that granting Irene her own companion spirit would help her a lot, though he did not exactly know in what manner.

There were only two examples of companion spirits attached to human demigods before he jumped through the Time Gate.

Respa assisted Venerable Dise in combat by allowing her to form her own battle network with her fellow Swordmaidens.

Sharpie enabled Ketis to pursue the path of a swordmaster while still following her original trajectory of a mech designer.

Neither of these cases provided Ves with a good idea of how Irene's new companion spirit might assist the future god pilot. The new cat could do anything from acting as an extra supercomputer to helping the Destroyer of Worlds make accurate targeting predictions.

As the heavy-duty transport landed on the ground and allowed the Iron Hedgehog along with several other heavy artillery mechs to disembark, Ves briefly interrupted his study of Irene's cute new companion spirit in order to issue a complaint.

"Emma is not a dignified name!" Blinky protested.

Miew...?

Venerable Irene frowned at the purple cat. She possessed a much better understanding of what she was dealing with now that she had gained her own companion spirit.

"What sort of name do you propose instead, 'Blinky'?"

The Star Cat gestured with his paws. "How about something awesome like 'Ascalon' or 'Doom Cat'?"

The expert pilot did not look impressed. "You must come from a man. I am not changing my mind. My cat shall be known as Emma and nothing else. It is not as if many people will even know of her existence. Given that I have never seen or heard anyone able to pull out a cat from their heads, I assume that I need to keep her existence a secret."

Blinky nodded. "Yes. What I have just bestowed you is a method of augmentation that is highly experimental and difficult to replicate. It will literally take centuries to refine this innovative process to the point where it is stable and mature enough to be publicized and made available on a wider scale. Once that happens, the potential of humanity shall undergo a qualitative transformation. Many humans such as you will gain the capital to fight against the greatest threats to our civilization. However, there are many groups that do not wish to see this happen, so I humbly request that you keep this new capacity of yours a secret to everyone, from your own comrades to the most powerful leaders of the MTA."

All of this sounded incredibly profound and distant to Irene. She was far from the god pilot that she would become in the future, so any talk related to the survival of the human race and the affairs of the Mech Trade Association went right out of her head!

Perhaps her older self might interpret Blinky's words differently in the future, but that would happen long after his Mastery experience had ended.

An hour passed by as the Quillim troops that arrived at New Kreon immediately dug in and prepared to greet the advancing enemies.

The city was half-ruined like many of the other population centers that had a starship crash on top of them. Many structures were utterly ruined and lots of debris clogged up the streets.

What also posed a hindrance were all of the craters and uneven elevation that complicated the urban landscape. They made it difficult for mechs to traverse from one location to another, though they also provided additional cover against ranged attacks.

Currently, the Iron Hedgehog along with a dozen or so heavy artillery mechs readied themselves for action.

As the mechs with the longest range out of the forces deployed in New Kreon, it was up to these machines to soften up the Bontue mechs that were advancing from afar.

The intelligence gathered by the Quillims were accurate. The Bontues had indeed sent forth a vanguard consisting of all of the mechs that could quickly be dispatched to Dershin.

The Bontue vanguard was not meant to defeat the Quillim invaders outright, but to entangle and pin down their foes to allow for a follow-up force to catch up and deliver the coup-the-grace!

As such, it was vital to prevent the enemy vanguard troops from taking over New Kreon and use it as a springboard to siege Dershin!

"Venerable Mox, are you able to deplete the numbers of the advancing enemy mechs from this range?"

Irene evaluated the request as she studied the data fed through the command net.

The scout mechs tried their best to fend off the harassment of their Bontue counterparts. The real-time observation data was extremely precious and could theoretically enable her to make a lot of enemy lives miserable.

Still, she did not think that opening fire at this point was practical.

"How much ammunition do I have at my disposal?" She asked first.

It took a moment to call up the most up-to-date answer.

"Much of the special ammunition reserves for your Iron Hedgehog became lost after the destruction of your prior mech battalion. Our headquarters managed to scrounge up enough gauss rounds and explosive shells to give your expert mech two full reloads."

That was way too little. Heavy artillery mechs chewed through ammunition like nothing else. They relied on their volume of fire to rain down as much death onto the enemy positions as possible!

Irene Mox had always been accustomed to bringing a sufficient amount of spare ammunition to every battlefield. This allowed her to cast aside all concerns about restraining her firepower.

This was clearly not a good idea if she needed to count her projectiles.

"Then let us wait until the enemy troops come closer." She replied over the communication channel.

"The probability of damaging a mech at a range of over a hundred kilometers is too low. This is especially the case when the Bontue mechs are dispersed and ready to perform evasive maneuvers. I will only be able to strike a target once every thirty or forty shells under these conditions."

"Understood. Inform us once you are confident enough to make your shells count."

She felt bad for allowing these distant enemies to come close without pressuring them with an over-the-horizon bombardment.

Irene understood quite well that even if she wasn't able to attain a high hit rate, the suppression effect could do wonders in sapping the confidence of her adversaries. This was why she was always in favor of shelling her enemies early.

"Be patient, Irene." Blinky said as he hovered inside the cockpit. "You may as well bring out Emma and play with your new cat."

The mention of her new 'companion' caused Irene to recall all of the questions that she wanted to ask.

Her intuition told her that Blinky might not hang around for much longer, so she needed to cherish this opportunity to gain the clarification she needed.

"What is Emma exactly?" She asked. "On one hand, I feel as if she is myself. On the other hand, she has a mind of her own. Will she ever grow strong enough to go her own separate way?"

"No. That won't happen. It is difficult to describe who she represents, but you can treat her like a second personality of yourself. Emma is still you, but she happens to come in the form of a cat. It is highly unlikely for you to rebel against yourself unless you suffer from severe personality disorders."

Seeing that Blinky was being helpful, Irene asked a few other questions, each of which had to do with Emma.

Ves rarely provided any clear answers, but he made sure to give Irene enough answers to prevent her from doing anything stupid in the future.

"Emma will slowly grow and adapt to your personal struggles and experiences." Blinky told the expert pilot. "Starting from this battle, your actions and your desires will shape her powers. She will gain abilities that will grant you unique new abilities that no one else can replicate. The greater you desire power, the more Emma will augment your combat effectiveness. This is a completely automatic and natural process, so you don't need to do anything weird to upgrade her strength."

"Understood. That is convenient to know."

Blinky peered deeply at Emma. "Your companion cat should already come with at least one ability that is based on your strength as an expert pilot. Try and feel her out. You should instinctively understand what she can do. Your cat should have a power that is applicable to combat."

"I think... I have a slight idea of what that might be." Irene said as she tried to explore Emma in her own ways. "I need to test it out in order to learn more."

She grew so curious that she couldn't resist the impulse to take action. Blinky promised so much and she had suffered so much pain that it was unacceptable for Emma to end up as a cute feline mascot.

Irene contacted the commander in charge of the Quillim forces in New Kreon and made a request to open fire.

"You informed us not too long ago that it is too early to start your shelling."

"I may have a method to inflict effective harm onto the Bontue mechs at this range."

"You may do as you wish. We trust in your skill."

The Iron Hedgehog began to brace itself onto the ground and armed all of its howitzers.

The muzzle velocities of the expert mech's heavy gauss cannons was much higher, but the only way to take down a moving mech was to hit the target directly. This was obviously impractical under the circumstances so Irene did not bother to arm them at this point.

Instead, it was the howitzers that she counted on this time.

She typically opened fire with all 8 of them, but this time she prepared to fire only one of them. The expert pilot took her time to calculate a firing solution on a Bontue swordsman mech.

This particular model was known to be quite fast and deadly at close range, but its armor was rather insufficient.

"Fire!"

A single howitzer boomed, launching a shell that flew high in the sky and quickly disappeared in the horizon!

Irene and many other Quillims who paid attention to this shot waited patiently for the shell to travel further while constantly being affected by gravity and air resistance.

Once the shell came close enough for the Bontues to detect its approach, all of the mechs of the vanguard began to move faster and more erratically in order to reduce their chances of getting struck.

Boom!

The distant resonance-empowered explosion only barely managed to scratch the swordsman mech's side armor!

Many people reacted with disappointment with this ineffective attack. Now that the Bontues knew that the Quillims were ready to begin shelling, it would be significantly more difficult to land an attack that hurt.

Irene remained unaffected, however. This attack merely served as a baseline as far as she was concerned.

She prepared to fire another howitzer. She used the available data to formulate a second ultra-long-range firing solution, but this time she added an extra step!

Miew!

Emma seemed to know what she should do. The cat began to glow with power as Irene resonated with her new companion spirit.

Once the fiery cat exuded a desire to annihilate the opposition, she flew upwards and phased through the ceiling of the cockpit!

The intangible cat continued to move through the thick and heavy structure of the expert heavy artillery mech until it had reached the howitzer that was preparing to fire.

Emma quickly found the explosive shell in the chamber and dove inside the warhead.

Irene had already resonated with the special warhead, but once Emma had fused to it, the shell radiated a lot more danger than before!

"What!?" Ves became shocked at the implications of what he just witnessed.

Before he could ask Venerable Irene what she intended to do, the pilot decisively pulled the trigger.

The resonance-empowered shell launched out of the howitzer and quickly flew many kilometers away!

While this was not anything new to Ves, what did surprise him was that Venerable Irene's companion spirit was able to break the range restrictions that normally prevented her kind from moving too far away from their principals!

Time seemed to stretch on as the seconds ticked by. Eventually, the single shell came close enough to threaten the earlier Bontue swordsman mech yet again!

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

Just when it seemed that the enemy swordsman mech had moved beyond the blast radius of the Iron Hedgehog's shells, the explosion that erupted this time was much larger and much more powerful than before!

By the time the explosion had faded, the sensors showed that the swordsman mech existed no more!

It had become exposed to so much destruction that its frame had fallen apart into a million different pieces of shrapnel!

Its mech pilot had no time to eject and died as his body instantly became pulverized!

"..."

Ves turned completely speechless at this result.

He understood a bit better now why Divine Irene Mox eventually earned her famous title.

Just as he was beginning to wonder how Emma could possibly make her way back to the Iron Hedgehog, a miniature sun appeared inside the cockpit.

That little explosion grew and gained definition until it morphed into Emma's intangible body!

Miew miew miew!