

The Mech 4921

Chapter 4921 Oppression From Afar

Captain Richard Litgow was being driven mad.

His mech company consisting of light mechs ranged ahead of the main formation in order to detect traps and other dangers in advance.

In order to perform their duties better, the mechs under his command rarely grouped up together. They often split up into different teams or pairs in order to cover more ground.

While it was always dangerous to separate from the main body of a larger mech force, the light mech models assigned to his units relied on a combination of superior speed, agility and efficiency to make themselves as elusive as possible.

Even if these models weren't the best of what the Bontue armed forces could offer, Captain Litgow's mech pilots trained with them for years.

Of course, as his mech company was part of a planetary garrison unit, the models weren't particularly costly. Their armor was rudimentary at best and the light rifles they were armed with could only scare away aerial mechs and opposing scout mechs at best.

Ever since the Bontue Republic's forces in the Korinna System launched their counterattack, Captain Litgow's mech company enjoyed a smooth ride at first.

Though it pained him to see so many cities of his planet get devastated to the point where they killed many millions of local citizens, there was no point in protesting the decisions of the higher ups. He could only lay the blame of the atrocities at the feet of the invaders that disrupted the peace of the planet.

As the Bontue vanguard units advanced in the direction of Dershin with haste, Captain Litgow expected to encounter little resistance.

The Quillim invaders had obviously been caught flat-footed and could barely keep themselves together without their precious starships. The remnant survivors found in the ruined cities quickly collapsed after suffering a single blow.

To go from mopping up scattered and disorganized mechs to approaching a fortified enemy location under fire was like going from heaven to hell!

BOOOOOM!

An enormous orange blast engulfed a surprisingly large area at the rear of the vanguard formation in pure destruction!

An offensive knight mech that possessed just enough mobility to keep up with the rapid mech force had been caught at the edge of the blast radius.

Normally, an artillery strike shouldn't be able to do more than inflict moderate damage onto an expert mech, but it was clear that the long-ranged attacks weren't normal in the slightest!

Once the smoke and fury cleared, the knight mech had lost half of its frame. Many different pieces had been torn from the mech and flung tens if not hundreds of meters away.

Yet another Bontue mech had been lost!

"Damnit! No one told us that the Iron Hedgehog had become this strong! What sort of shells have the Quillims dug up from their storerooms?"

"Have the Quillims gone mad? These expensive supershells are normally reserved for sieging fortresses or suppressing expert mechs. Which enemy commander allowed Venerable Mox to waste these deluxe shells on normal mechs such as ours?!"

The Bontue troopers possessed a general awareness of the enemy expert pilots and their respective expert mechs. They had no idea that a newborn spiritual cat was secretly amplifying the attacks launched by the Iron Hedgehog. Their lack of information caused them to assume that the Iron Hedgehog was throwing lots of money away by foolishly depleting her extremely expensive warheads in advance!

Even though Captain Litgow and many of his fellow Bontues understood that the Iron Hedgehog was supposedly squandering a trump card in advance, that still did not give them a lot of comfort during this phase of the engagement.

BOOOOOOM!

This time, a spearman mech piloted by a mech lieutenant of a different mech company got blown up! Despite the best efforts of the mech officer to evade the incoming shell, it was already too late for him to evade the incoming shell.

The blast radius was just too ridiculous!

Captain Litgow winced just before the powerful shell had landed. The distant enemy expert heavy artillery mech fired once every twenty seconds or so. The frequency of attacks had been irregular at first, but it seemed that Venerable Irene Mox had found her rhythm, much to the detriment of the Bontue vanguard forces.

Although 20 seconds was a fairly long interval of time, the fact that the powerful enemy expert pilot was so skilled that she could strike down at least one mech with every shot was outrageous!

"How is she able to whittle us down at this range?! We are still well over the horizon!"

"If this goes on, we'll be down 200 mechs or more by the time we can effectively launch our own attacks."

"It will be even worse once we reach the 50 kilometer mark as it becomes much easier for Venerable Mox to aim her attacks at our mechs."

"Why didn't we bring our own heavy artillery mechs?"

"It's useless. The Iron Hedgehog will eat them all up like breakfast."

BOOOOOOM!

The defenders of Korinna V had quickly gathered up thousands of mechs, so a loss of 200 mechs was not that significant in the greater scheme of things.

The Bontues also noticed that the Iron Hedgehog only fired one of its howitzers at a time. This suggested that the enemy expert mech clearly had problems with its ammunition reserves. Perhaps the powerful machine might lose its relevance in the later phases of the battle.

However, that was from the perspective of the commanders in the rear. To the mech pilots who piloted these unfortunate machines, they felt as if they were playing an oppressive game of Russian roulette!

The impact this had on their morale was disproportionately large, especially due to the long period of time it took to cross the remaining distance!

The mech pilots had been piloting their mechs for several hours already, so they were anything but fresh.

BOOOOM!

Stopping to rest and resupply within artillery range of the enemy was extremely foolish, so Captain Litgow and the other Bontues had little choice but to press their advance and immediately go on the attack once they reached the city in their sights!

Soon, the depressed Bontue mech officer received a new order.

"Captain Litgow! I need your mechs to press further and strangle those Quillim scout mechs! The main reason the Iron Hedgehog is able to accurately target our mechs is because the enemy scout mechs are transmitting accurate observation data to their rear. I am dispatching several more light mech companies to completely drive those scouts away."

"Understood, sir."

BOOOOM!

Privately, Captain Litgow did not have high hopes for this. Scout mechs were extremely fast and elusive. They were difficult to catch and could easily lead pursuers on a long and fruitless chase.

Fortunately, the vanguard forces were not short of light mechs. Even if many of their models were not as good as the military mech models employed by the Quillim invaders, their speed combined with their advantage in numbers should be able to drive the enemy scouts back!

It did not take long for over a hundred light mechs sprinted forward at greater speeds and closed in on the Quillim scout mechs.

The latter could not possibly fare well in a direct confrontation, so they helplessly stopped their attempts at recording and transmitting rich observation data to the rear.

Though Captain Litgow's mechs were able to open fire at the retreating enemies with their light rifles, it was anything but easy to land consistent hits under these circumstances.

Even if their weapons occasionally struck the rear of the enemy scout mechs, the damage usually wasn't too serious at first.

The Quillim scout mechs turned out to be better than the ones employed by the Bontues, so the range between the two never decreased.

BOOOOM!

Though it was impossible to eliminate the enemy scout mechs outright, Captain Litgow was already pleased with driving them away.

Combined with the fact that the Bontue aerial mechs had flown forward in order to push back the Quillim's own aerial assets, there was no way the Iron Hedgehog should be able to bombard the vanguard formation as easily as before!

Everyone waited for Venerable Irene Mox to miss her first artillery strike. The Bontue mech pilots already regarded her as a devil, so they looked forward to pulling her off the throne they constructed in their minds!

Over thirty seconds had passed since the Iron Hedgehog's last howitzer attack had landed in their midst.

This should have been a reassuring sign, but Venerable Mox had pulled off so many amazing shots already that Richard Litgow and the others started to grow nervous.

Soon enough, the friendly aerial mechs in the air detected a supershell approaching from the distance.

Although it was not that difficult to detect the incoming shell in advance, the resonance-empowered projectile closed in so fast that the Bontue mech pilots barely had any time to react!

Different from the previous attacks, the potent enemy warhead dropped a lot sooner from the air than before!

Captain Litgow's eyes widened when his mech sounded a distinct alarm.

"She wouldn't dare!"

Though the idea that entered mind was too outrageous for him to believe, he did not waste his time on any further thought and desperately flung his machine towards the left.

The light mech he was piloting could just catch the bright orange trail of the rapidly nearing shell arcing towards his mech unit.

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

Though the shell turned out to land far enough away for his mech to come out unscathed more or less, the powerful shockwave released by the excessively powerful explosion buffeted all of the nearby machines.

The resonance-empowered blast even spread an inexplicable wave of hostility that briefly caused mech pilots such as Captain Litgow to shake in their seats.

They all felt as if they had been one step away from having their bodies and mechs torn apart by the explosive power of the enemy expert heavy artillery mech!

It took a few more seconds than normal for Captain Litgow to regain his wits.

"The Iron Hedgehog has shifted its firepower to our scouting mechs!"

"Continue your mission but do your best to keep your units spread and ready to evade. Do your best to eliminate the scout mechs. The sooner they are taken out, the sooner the Iron Hedgehog will lose its range advantage."

BOOOOOOOOOM!

Captain Litgow winced as he lost another subordinate.

The nature of the highly destructive artillery attacks made it nearly impossible for the targeted mech pilots to eject from their cockpits.

The muzzle velocities of the artillery cannons of an expert mech was considerably higher than that of an ordinary mech.

Each time the aerial mechs detected an incoming resonance-empowered artillery shell, it was already too late for the mech pilot in trouble to transmit the ejection command.

Before the cockpit managed to blast out of the rear of a mech, the fast warhead already reached the end of its journey!

BOOOOOM!

The repeated attacks on his mech unit already depressed the morale of Captain Litgow's mech company even further.

If this went on any further, even he might break from the pressure!

"Stand by for reinforcements."

"What reinforcements?" The mech captain inquired.

A bright blur raced across the battlefield and passed by Captain Litgow's mech unit from behind!

Numerous seconds later, four Quillim scout mechs quickly collapsed as an unstoppable sword sliced through their torsos while hardly encountering any resistance!

The Bontue light mech pilots instantly regained their good mood as they realized what had happened!

"The Blue Amazon has taken action!"

The Blue Amazon was one of the few Bontue expert mechs on the planet. It was an expert swordsman mech that happened to be piloted by an older heroine who was forced to retire from the frontlines after suffering a severe injury.

Though the expert pilot still hadn't returned to her peak, she was more than capable enough of returning to the fight.

The Blue Amazon was one of their main solutions against a threatening expert mech such as the Iron Hedgehog!

Just as the powerful expert swordsman mech advanced towards another enemy scout mech, the Blue Amazon hastily changed direction and even leapt away in an undignified manner!

BOOOOOOOOM!

A rapidly closing shell struck the area in front of the Bontue expert mech!

Chapter 4922 Emma Power

This was the first time Ves created a companion spirit for an existing demigod.

He truly had no idea what the results might be before he created Emma.

It turns out that companion spirits derived from active expert pilots were much more powerful and useful from the start!

Part of that was because Emma was not just a pure spiritual entity, but also gained a lot of might and substance due to integrating the extraordinary willpower of an expert pilot.

Another part of that was more specific to Venerable Irene Mox as her domain was largely centered around destruction.

The intrinsic power she gained after she completed her apotheosis gave her the ability to amplify the might of her expert mech's explosive attacks.

This was not a surprise. Expert pilots who dedicated themselves to artillery mechs often developed similar capabilities.

Although this ability could be extremely potent, there was one major downside.

It was most effective at increasing the power of explosive warheads at closer ranges!

The further an explosive shell or missile traveled, the harder it became for the expert pilot to maintain a state of true resonance on the munition.

This was also one of the reasons why an expert mech as powerful as the Iron Hedgehog was limited to firing specialized shells.

Not only did every projectile have to be tougher and more resilient in order to endure the greater power of the Iron Hedgehog's cannons, they often incorporated resonating exotics as well.

The weaker projectiles only integrated a small amount of generic resonating materials.

The stronger ones integrated larger quantities of more specialized resonating materials.

While it was possible for expert pilots to resonate with projectiles without any resonating materials, it became a lot harder to keep them empowered once they flew into the distance.

The cost to keep an expert mech armed with serious projectile weapons was not low, but it was often worth the investment!

Expert mech-grade physical weapons often inflicted considerably greater damage than energy weapons!

This was an especially crucial factor in fights between expert mechs. Their resonance shields and resonance-empowered armor systems could resist a lot of attacks under normal circumstances.

By empowering attacks with greater resonance, it became easier to 'cancel out' the defensive resonance effects of the enemy.

Even so, mech pilots such as Venerable Irene Mox were long accustomed to seeing their projectiles lose extraordinary power as soon as they were launched.

This was why Emma had become so special. Venerable Mox quickly realized that embedding her new 'companion' to a shell could essentially circumvent this restriction!

Ves watched with awe from Irene's mind as she controlled Emma with greater and greater enthusiasm.

Each time the orange cat merged with a shell, she fully maintained her awareness and continued to radiate Irene's willpower right until the moment the warhead finally detonated!

"This is truly amazing." Irene said as a living explosion once again reformed inside the cockpit of her expert mech. "I have never imagined that it would be so easy to channel my full power onto a warhead that is launched over a hundred kilometers away. I have heard that even ace pilots struggle to make this happen."

Miew!

As Emma continually launched out of the barrel of a howitzer, the newborn spiritual cat did not look weak or exhausted in the slightest.

Ves grew more and more interested in the strengths and weaknesses of a companion spirit directly formed out of the force of will of a strong expert pilot.

Blinky flew in front of Irene again. "Does it hurt whenever Emma blows up along with the explosive ordnance she is attached to? Does it take effort to reform your cat next to you? How many times can you keep this up in your estimation?"

It took a few seconds for Irene to address these questions. She had become incredibly engrossed in exploring the new options that Emma introduced. If not for her growing gratitude towards the purple cat, she would have remained silent.

"I feel that Emma is born for this. It is in her nature to explode and release her power, so it doesn't seem to hurt her at all." Irene steadily replied even as she formulated her next targeting solution. "It doesn't take much effort to remake her body either. This is all new to me, so don't ask me how this works. Doing all of this is slightly draining to me. I do not know how often I can launch these kinds of attacks, but I feel I can easily do this over a hundred times."

That was fairly amazing! Emma not only complimented Venerable Irene perfectly, but also provided a significant boost in combat effectiveness.

This shouldn't be surprising in hindsight. Ves recalled that he heavily needed to limit the strength of the companion spirits he bestowed to his children when they were still growing in Gloriana's belly. They were far too young and weak to support anything stronger, and their intrinsic spiritualities also made for weak ingredients.

In contrast, a solid mid-tier expert pilot such as Venerable Irene Mox could start off with a much more powerful companion spirit from the start. Her force of will also made for an excellent main ingredient because it was not only extremely powerful, but also exhibited a perfect fit with its source!

Ves looked forward to granting companion spirits to all of his Larkinson expert pilots as soon as he concluded this Mastery experience. He needed no more testing and verification to know that this spiritual augmentation would permanently transform the combat power of his own champions!

As Venerable Irene continued to make use of Emma, she and Ves soon figured out the limitations of her ability to amplify the explosive power of warheads.

"Is there a way for you to split Emma up so that you can empower multiple warheads at the same time?" Blinky asked.

"No." Irene shook her head. "I have tried my best, but I only have a single cat."

"That's a shame. Your Iron Hedgehog has 8 howitzers, so you won't be able to maximize their firepower in this way. I think that once all of this is over, you should issue a request to your superiors to commission a brand-new expert mech that takes advantage of your new capability. I do not think your higher-ups should refuse because this is an extremely powerful 'talent' that can change the outcome of entire battles."

Ves already guessed that this was likely the household ability of the future Destroyer of Worlds!

He felt infinitely proud for playing a decisive role in facilitating the eventual emergence of a strong god pilot! His contributions to human civilization were so enormous that the MTA should award him with a trillion MTA merits!

Of course, there was no way that Ves dared to claim any credit for this accomplishment. If Divine Irene Mox made an earnest effort to keep Emma confidential throughout her later career, then no one should ever be able to find out that he had somehow managed to travel back in time.

In any case, even if the current Irene was way too far away from reaching her god-like level, she had already become a greater existence on the battlefield!

The observation data transmitted from the front showed that the Bontue vanguard mechs already started to show signs of deflation. The terror of getting instantly killed by a supremely powerful explosion gripped the hearts of every enemy mech pilot.

Irene was able to do a better job at suppressing the enemy with a single super howitzer attack than with eight regular artillery discharges!

"Maybe... you are right." The expert pilot spoke as she continued her efforts to take down one enemy mech after another. "My Iron Hedgehog isn't as good for me anymore. I would gladly trade away 6 of my howitzers in order to get a supersized artillery cannon that can fire shells that are twice as large and powerful."

Ves already came up with a lot of interesting ideas for an expert mech that complemented its expert pilot in several different ways, but it was a pity that he wouldn't be able to stick around long enough to contribute to its design.

"Are you able to empower the physical rounds of your gauss cannons in a similar way? Will they explode or hit harder or something?" Blinky asked next.

The enemy mechs hadn't come close enough to make it worthwhile to fire the gauss cannons, but Venerable Irene Mox already formed a guess based on the available information.

"I can probably harden one gauss round at a time so that they will hit even harder, but that is all. This will be helpful when I need to attack tougher enemies. The shells empowered by my cat may look drastic, but much of their destructive forces are dispersed over an area."

Ves agreed with Irene. This was simple physics.

Soon enough, a new development took place.

An expert mech showed up and quickly raced to the front in order to slice apart the friendly scout mechs that played a crucial role in marking the coordinates and movement characteristics of the advancing Bontue mechs!

"That expert swordsman mech can slaughter all of the scout mechs on our side if left untouched!" Blinky warned!

Although the Quillims deployed other expert mechs at New Kreon, none of them accompanied the scout mechs for fear of getting defeated in isolation.

The Quillims were actually uncertain how many expert mechs the Bontue defenders had at their disposal. It also remained unclear whether the Bontues were willing to assign them to this vanguard troop.

The appearance of the Blue Amazon answers many of these questions. It was a known quantity to the Quillim Mech Army, so Venerable Irene Mox quickly gained access to an intelligence on the expert mech and its expert pilot.

She didn't have time to go over it in detail, though. Several of her Quillim comrades had already died in a short amount of time. Each of them had played a crucial role in giving her enough vision on the distant enemies to allow her to land her attacks without fail!

Miew miew!

Emma quickly merged with another shell in a howitzer that was ready to fire.

Once Irene formulated a quick targeting solution based on the movement patterns of the Blue Amazon, the artillery cannon fired once again!

BOOOOOOM!

Irene and Emma put a bit of extra effort into this attack, so the resulting blast just managed to reach the enemy expert swordsman mech!

Once the powerful explosion faded, the Blue Amazon looked pristine, but that did not mean it remained comfortable.

"Its resonance shield has taken a slight hit." Blinky said. "It will take dozens of more glancing blows to push it to its limits, but you can strip the resonance shield much faster if you can land your shells closer to the Blue Amazon's position."

This was already a fairly good result!

Irene nodded. "I know. Stay quiet and let me concentrate. My new target is much harder to pin down."

A howitzer fired again. The Emma-embedded shell managed to strike fractionally closer to the Blue Amazon despite the latter's best efforts to evade the attack.

Even so, its resonance shield still looked as if it could withstand a lot of abuse!

The following attacks produced mixed results. One strike even missed as the enemy expert pilot successfully read Venerable Irene's attack!

Even so, Irene did not break her concentration. She grew more and more intense as she started to get a better feel of her distant adversary's movement and evasion characteristics.

"It's time."

One of the howitzers of her expert mech started to load a different explosive shell than the ones that came before.

The shell was larger and covered with brighter markings. Its mass and shape were slightly different, indicating that it contained a substantially different warhead!

Once Emma began to merge with it, the special shell glowed with much more true resonance than before!

This was an expensive projectile that was specially designed to damage enemy expert mechs!

Chapter 4923 Blue Amazon

The Iron Hedgehog used to have access to a lot of special ammunition. This included hundreds of luxurious gauss rounds and explosive shells that possessed a high degree of potency against enemy expert mechs.

It was a pity that much of these expensive rounds became lost after the fall of the city that it was stationed in. Several starships used to hold substantial reserves of spare ammunition, but they were lost as well.

The ammunition supplied by HQ in Dershin didn't amount to much. The proportion of high-grade ammunition was even more paltry, which meant that Venerable Irene Mox had to cherish every single projectile that could effectively damage stronger targets.

The Iron Hedgehog only had 10 high-grade explosive shells at its disposal. Each of them were particularly effective against expert light mechs, though the probability of hitting them was low.

The Blue Amazon was a fairly fast offensive expert mech. It clearly relied on superior speed to advance and retreat whenever it wished. It also possessed a flight system so it could hardly be caught in most circumstances.

It was extremely challenging for a machine like the Iron Hedgehog to land a successful attack at this extreme range.

Every expert pilot possessed a sharp intuition towards danger. They already received a warning even before an opponent pulled the trigger!

Against this unreasonable ability to avoid serious threats, Venerable Irene Mox had to leverage all of her skill, experience and judgment to predict the enemy expert pilot's reaction and adjust her firing solution in accordance.

Of course, the Blue Amazon's expert pilot also understood that Irene would try to predict her evasive maneuvers. The Bontue pilot would do her best to break her pattern and move in an unexpected direction.

This could go on and on to the point where both pilots no longer thought consciously about their actions anymore. Relying on pure logic and calculation would only cause them to be read by their opponents, especially when they were on the same level!

After Irene had tested out her current adversary by launching relatively ordinary explosive shells, she already understood that the Blue Amazon was a tricky machine.

It was not only fast, but was also controlled by a skilled and experienced expert pilot. She could sense that the pilot of the expert swordsman mech was much older than herself!

It was not wise for Irene to spend one of her precious high-grade shells on attacking the Blue Amazon at this extreme range.

It would become much easier for Irene to pressure the Bontue expert mech when it advanced far enough to come into visual range!

Irene decided not to adhere to common sense this time.

The joy she experienced after obtaining a massive upgrade to her combat power had given her an inexplicable confidence in this confrontation.

She believed that even if the odds were stacked against her, the amplification granted by Emma would enable her to accomplish the impossible!

Just because other expert pilots could not take out an enemy expert mech at such an extreme distance did not mean that she was beholden to the same restrictions!

Irene considered the Blue Amazon to be a test. If she wasn't able to take down the expert mech before it could come close enough to inflict a lot of damage to the Quillim defensive line, then she would not be worthy to obtain Emma's power!

Ves fell silent as he sensed Irene's growing resolve. It was only during times like these that she showed the willpower and mentality of a mech pilot that was repeatedly capable of surpassing her limits.

Though Ves now theorized that obtaining a companion spirit massively increased Irene's chances of completing the infamous Mech Body Merger Process, Irene would never have been able to make it this far if her mentality was not good enough!

Once Irene grasped the right timing, she instantly pulled the trigger!

One of the howitzers mounted on top of the Iron Hedgehog instantly fired with greater power!

The shell that exploded from its muzzle glowed brighter and exuded considerably greater danger than the ones the expert mech had previously fired!

It also gained considerably greater speed as well, allowing it to reach its target significantly faster as well!

The swift and rapid passage of the high-grade shell left a long and bright trail of light during its passage.

The sight impressed the Quillim mech pilots while simultaneously inducing greater fear among the Bontues on the other side of the field!

The veteran expert mech pilot at the receiving end already perceived the deadly threat. She did not hesitate to command the Blue Amazon to jump forward while simultaneously activating its flight system at full power!

Though the Blue Amazon's frame came under enormous strain by performing these demanding emergency maneuvers, the Bontue expert pilot could not care about that at the moment!

Even as the Blue Amazon leapt into the air, the blazingly bright comet quickly approached its position though at a slight different angle.

However, just before the shell struck the ground, it exploded at roughly the same altitude as the expert swordsman mech!

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

A blast radius that was roughly 1.5 times larger than the previous ones completely engulfed the area!

Not even the Blue Amazon was able to make it out in time!

Not only that, but the intensity of the orange explosion was much stronger as well!

The high-grade shell was primarily designed to damage expert mechs, so the potency of its destructive power needed to be much greater in order to make them succeed.

Before the explosion faded, the distinctive blue shape of an expert swordsman mech dove out of the fiery globe.

Its resonance shield no longer looked as stable as before. Though it still possessed plenty of strength, its wobbling appearance showed that the Bontue expert pilot expended a considerable amount of effort into defending against the earlier attack!

"It's effective!" Blinky finally spoke out. "Did it take more effort to amplify this expensive warhead?"

Venerable Irene curtly nodded. "Emma and I can channel much more of our strength through it than before. I won't be able to keep this up as long as I keep launching these premium shells, but it will be worth it if I can take out the Blue Amazon in advance."

The next phase of the battle turned into a tense duel between two expert mechs that were too far away to observe each other directly.

The Iron Hedgehog apparently gave up on bombarding the enemy standard mechs in favor of wearing down the Blue Amazon's defenses.

Each time the Blue Amazon received substantial damage meant that its buffer became more and more feeble.

It didn't matter too much if Irene failed to destroy it entirely. So long as it reached New Kreon in a ragged condition, it would no longer be able to contribute as much to the battle anymore!

This was why the commander of the Quillim mech forces acquiesced to Venerable Irene's targeting priorities.

At the same time, the Blue Amazon could forget about wiping out the Quillim scout mechs. Forcefully pursuing the scouts would only cause the expert mech to become too predictable.

There was nowhere for the Blue Amazon to go in order to escape the Iron Hedgehog's lock. It had long entered the effective range of the expert heavy artillery mech. Even running back the other way would not save it from getting surrounded by explosions!

There was no effective cover in sight that could grant relief to the poor expert swordsman mech. The surrounding landscape was not entirely flat, but it was not filled with large and awe-inspiring mountains either.

No hill, forest, river or structure could hinder the Emma-empowered shells of the Iron Hedgehog from closing in on the Blue Amazon's position!

The expert swordsman mech initially took flight and tried to use its superior flight speed to increase its ability to escape the center of the empowered explosions.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

However, this did not work out for Bontue expert pilot. Her expert mech's linear speed may have increased by a considerable degree, but its ability to shift in direction and redirect its momentum was significantly worse!

To normal mech pilots, the turning speed of an offensive expert mech was blazingly fast, but to an expert pilot like Irene Mox, the Blue Amazon's aerial maneuvers were awfully sluggish!

Of course, that still didn't mean that the Iron Hedgehog was capable of shooting down the Blue Amazon from the air, but the combination between a high-grade shell and an explosive companion spirit completely changed the game!

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

After several successful strikes including one where the Blue Amazon had been caught close to the center of a powerful blast, its resonance shield had already lost over 50 percent of its capacity!

This was already an amazing result considering that the expert swordsman mech had never managed to take out any further Quillim mechs during this period of time.

"You're already doing a great job." Blinky said as he continually stared at Emma each time she reappeared out of nowhere. "The Blue Amazon should no longer be able to fight as vigorously as before."

"I'm not done yet." Irene gritted her teeth. "I won't stop until it is completely finished."

"You only have 4 high-grade shells left, Irene! That is not enough to whittle down the Blue Amazon's remaining defenses, especially now that it has descended onto the ground."

"I can do it, Blinky! I have taken the measure of my enemy!"

The Blue Amazon's traversal speed on land was not as fast as in the air, but its footing was much more solid, allowing it to jump aside and change direction with much greater ease.

It was a bit trickier to land an effective hit under these circumstances, but Irene did not intend to conserve her few remaining high-grade shells in the slightest!

"FIRE!"

A howitzer unleashed yet another bright orange comet!

The Blue Amazon on the other end had already begun to jump to the right in a desperate attempt to escape the blast radius once again.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

Unfortunately, it only made it two-third from the center of the explosion before it briefly disappeared from view!

Once it showed up again, its resonance shield looked even more distressed.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The Blue Amazon made a fairly unexpected maneuver that allowed it to escape the brunt of the next strike. Though its resonance shield rippled again, it only lost a marginal amount of integrity.

Yet before 10 seconds had passed, another blazingly bright orange comet had descended onto its position in advance!

It turned out that Irene had cut short the time she spent on aiming her howitzer and instantly fired one that was loaded with a high-grade shell as soon as Emma reappeared once again!

Even though the expert pilot received a timely warning from her highly attuned intuition, the break in timing had caught her off-guard and prevented her from moving her expert mech away quickly enough!

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

This time, the Blue Amazon looked as if it had just escaped from hell!

Its resonance shield was close to collapsing at this point as it had suffered a much greater blow than before.

At this point, the enemy commanding officer already ordered the Blue Amazon to retreat, but it was far too late.

Miew!

As Emma reappeared yet again, she looked just as energetic and bloodthirsty as Irene!

The companion spirit quickly dove into the final remaining high-grade shell and began to resonate with it as best as possible.

Venerable Irene Mox took her time at this point. She still did not think about firing her other cannons at the same time in order to add further pressure onto her target.

She focused solely on aiming her most crucial howitzer.

Twenty seconds passed without incident.

Thirty seconds passed while the Blue Amazon utilized all of its speed to run back while following a zig-zag trajectory.

Forty seconds passed until Irene finally launched the attack that she would remember for the rest of her life.

"DESTROY!"

The final orange comet seemed to soar through the air a little faster than the previous ones!

The Blue Amazon tried its best to escape the blast radius of the tenth and final super-powered attack, yet just as it cleverly dug its sword onto the ground and used it as a pivot to jump towards the left, the final high-grade shell practically struck the expert mech head-on as if it had run straight into the deadly attack!

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

"What?!"

"It's a direct hit!"

By the time the furious blast faded from view, the Blue Amazon still remained standing, but only barely!

Its resonance shield had completely disappeared.

Not only that, but its left arm along with its head were torn apart. Its sword had been flung over 150 meters away while its entire surface looked scorched as if it had dug its way out of an oven!

Just when it looked as if the expert mech barely managed to stay online, it slowly started to tip over until it fell flat on its face.

"The Blue Amazon... has fallen."

"Its systems has lost power! Its reactor has been knocked offline!"

"Look! The Bontue mechs... have stopped their advance! They're turning around!"

"Wait... are they retreating?"

"The Bontues have aborted their offense! They no longer possess the will to fight!"

Chapter 4924 The Power of Deterrence

The significance of taking out an expert mech was too great. This was especially when it took place at an enormous range.

It was not unusual to take out expert mechs over a hundred kilometers away in space. Battles that took place in the great void. It was especially easier to strike distant targets with most energy weapons.

The circumstances this time were completely different. For one expert mech to be able to destroy a distant expert mech in a planetary environment completely frightened the Bontue soldiers advancing towards New Kreon!

They had already endured a lot of suppression beforehand when the Iron Hedgehog took out one mech after another with every single attack.

When the mech pilots under fire thought they needed to endure this threat hanging over their heads, their enthusiasm for this battle sapped with each step taken by their mechs.

Once the Blue Amazon came under fire, these pilots became even more discouraged.

Artillery mechs weren't supposed to be able to threaten expert mechs over the horizon. The delay between firing a projectile and impact was so great that the Blue Amazon should have ample means to avoid getting harmed.

What happened today completely broke the rules!

Not only did Venerable Irene Mox manage to do an excellent job at predicting the movements of the Bontue expert pilot, the Iron Hedgehog's explosive shells also exploded with much greater power than before!

The Bontues all thought that the Quillim invaders had reserved a secret stash of super-deluxe premium shells in case of emergencies!

Even if the Bontues suspected that the Quillims did not have a large supply of these premium shells, the wind had already been taken out of their sails.

Since the planetary invasion had already taken place for some time, the Bontue defenders already possessed a good understanding of the expert mechs at the enemy's disposal.

Several of them including the Iron Hedgehog were certainly awaiting the Bontue mechs at New Kreon.

The Blue Amazon played an important role in constraining these powerful machines.

So far, the Iron Hedgehog managed to depress an entire mech force as well as take out its strongest combat asset.

Now that it had been taken out of the fight, the only other way to overcome a disparity in the number of high-level mechs was to sacrifice a lot of mechs to overwhelm the powerful enemy murder machines!

The battle was bound to be tragic. Not only would many mechs get destroyed, their mech pilots were unlikely to survive as well due to the excessively high attack power of expert mechs.

In addition, it was one thing to gang up on an expert melee mech that could only effectively slaughter its opponents at close range. A typical expert swordsman mech's group killing efficiency was not particularly high.

The Iron Hedgehog was completely different in this regard. It gave up any pretense of being able to duel against other expert mechs up close, but what it got in return was an unparalleled capacity to destroy entire areas!

So far, the Iron Hedgehog managed to depress an entire mech force as well as take out its strongest combat asset.

It did so by relying on just one of its howitzers!

The Bontues knew that once they came closer, they would once again face the full brunt of the expert mech that had breached the fortifications of many of their cities and turned the tide of many skirmishes!

Even if the damaged expert heavy artillery mech had yet to regain the function of all of its formidable cannons, it still had plenty left intact that it could harvest half-a-dozen mechs if not more with each salvo!

The officers and analysts on the Bontue side weren't stupid. They knew extremely well that launching a straightforward attack on a fortified position that was guarded by an expert heavy artillery mech was a recipe for disaster!

In the end, the Bontue commanders acknowledged that their offensive would likely fail if they insisted on pressing on. The premature loss of the Blue Amazon not only deprived them of an important lynchpin in their operation, but also had a strong negative effect on the morale of their remaining troops!

Once the troops lost their willingness to fight, their chances of succeeding had already dropped to the bottom.

"Our vanguard troops lack the heavy support they need to suppress the Iron Hedgehog and break through enemy lines. Let us pull back and wait for our main troops to catch up before pressing on to Dershin. The Quillims aren't going anywhere now that we have wrecked all of their starships."

"We can constrain and limit the movements of the stranded Quillim mech forces as long as we disperse our mechs and have them fight a guerilla war for the following three or four days. The Iron Hedgehog may have an amazing range, but it cannot be everywhere."

The Bontue leaders all assumed that time was on their side. Even if their vanguard failed to press the attack, it would not change the inevitable outcome.

Due to all of this, the Bontues made the logical decision to call for a retreat.

This surprised Venerable Irene Mox and many of her fellow Quillim soldiers. They thought that since the Bontues had managed to reverse the situation, their old enemies would be eager to finish the job!

"Damn, they're trying to take the Blue Amazon's frame away!"

A pair of Bontue mechs had quickly approached the collapsed mech and tried to drag it away, but Irene wasn't having it. Letting the enemy take it back meant that it could quickly be repaired and put back into the fight a few days later.

This time, she no longer held back. The Iron Hedgehog armed all of the howitzers and gauss cannons that it could bring to bear at this time.

She intended to make another statement this time. With Emma empowering the solid round loaded in one of the gauss cannons, the reinvigorated expert pilot intended to cement her victory!

"Hold your fire, Venerable Irene!" A voice instructed over the communication channel.

"What?! Why, sir?! The Bontue mechs are well within the range of my Iron Hedgehog! I can promise you that I can easily wreck a hundred of them before they move too far away!"

"The battle is over, Venerable. You have done your part. Colonel Harvey Dost has just negotiated a 24-hour ceasefire with the Bontue commanders. Neither side is allowed to attack each other for an entire day. It may be frustrating to us to let our enemies retreat with a shred of dignity, but do not

forget what we are fighting for. One of the clauses of the ceasefire agreement is that the Bontues are not allowed to get close to Dershin and New Kreon."

Irene fell silent. She did not feel the fight was over at all. It frustrated her enormously that the Bontue soldiers who sought out to kill all of the Quillims trapped on Korinna V would be allowed to turn tail and run without suffering any further punishment for their transgressions.

Blinky spoke up at this point. "Do not give in to your baser desires. Control yourself. You are a soldier, not a rogue mech pilot. Remember that keeping the Bontue forces away from Dershin was the whole point of making a stand in New Kreon. It doesn't matter how your side is able to accomplish this goal. If you can accomplish your objective without suffering further bloodshed, then we should take it. Just look and listen at the mech pilots around you. See what you have accomplished by successfully deterring the Bontue vanguard from committing its assault."

Venerable Irene had always set her sights on the enemy mechs over the horizon. She had largely retracted her awareness of her immediate environment.

Once she pulled back her focus and paid attention to what was taking place around her, she noticed the joy and relief of her fellow Quillim comrades.

"We made it through! We bought ourselves a lot of time!"

"I really don't want to fight while being heavily outnumbered."

"None of the Bontues can break our defenses as long as we have Venerable Mox on our side!"

The soldiers were not only relieved after learning about the cease-fire, but they also expressed a lot of gratitude towards Irene!

Hearing all of the praises directed against the expert pilot made her feel fulfilled in a way that was difficult to describe.

She had often received a lot of appreciation from her fellow troops, but with so many lives at stake this time, the easy victory that she delivered to the Quillims tasted especially sweet this time!

This was what she was fighting for. This was why she pursued greater strength!

Miew!

Even Emma grew excited! Her tail lifted upwards as she basked in the positive emotions that surged around the Iron Hedgehog. The companion spirit might be a force of destruction, but she was also a cat!

The Battle of New Kreon eventually ended abruptly before it could properly start. The Iron Hedgehog along with the support of the Quillim scout mechs started and ended this engagement in a domineering fashion.

Every Quillim stationed in Dershin and New Kreon cheered Irene's name!

Once Irene pulled back her Iron Hedgehog and finally shut it down in order to enjoy a well-earned break, she continued to revisit the earlier battle and analyze all of the decisions she made during that time.

She also took the time to summarize all of the new capabilities she gained after she received her own companion spirit.

Miew~

The spiritual cat that only she and Blinky could observe in her current state brought unexpected benefits to Irene.

The expert pilot had always been fairly quiet and reclusive. Her identity among the Quillim soldiers was too high, and she even found it difficult to talk to other expert pilots due to their vastly different piloting styles.

Emma managed to dispel her loneliness to an extent. Perhaps Irene might have gone mad for treating the cat as a different individual rather than another aspect of herself, but the darkness in her heart eased a lot after she started to hug and talk to her invisible cat.

"My bestie..." Irene showed a rare moment of weakness away from prying eyes.

Ves respectfully remained silent during this time. Though he still kept an eye on the expert pilot's thoughts and deliberations regarding the previous engagement, he had no interest in her private affairs.

Twenty-four hours came and went without incident. The Bontues never showed any sign of breaking the ceasefire agreement. They instead spent their efforts on gathering their troops from across the planet in preparation to launch an overwhelming offensive.

The Iron Hedgehog may be able to deter a couple of thousand enemy mechs, but it would be much harder for it to hold back enough machines to form several mech divisions!

The Quillims hadn't been doing nothing all of this time.

On the surface, it looked as if the trapped invaders were preparing to make a last stand.

In reality, they had taken full advantage of the guaranteed period of quiet to accelerate the repairs on the Peyton Phoenix while preparing to evacuate with every available shuttle and transport that they could obtain and convert to their own use.

Once the reinforced Bontue mech troops had just begun to launch their general offensive, the Quillims finally pulled off their retreat!

Hundreds of shuttles and transports brought all of the surviving personnel trapped on the ground.

Not only that, but they also had enough transport capacity left over to bring away crucial mechs such as the Iron Hedgehog!

Though the Bontues had a few ranged and aerial assets that could shoot down numerous vulnerable vehicles, the lack of preparation and the lack of proximity hindered this effort!

Most of the vehicles managed to reach the barely repaired Quillim fleet carrier without issue.

Although the engineers and technicians who secretly snuck aboard the Peyton Phoenix warned that the chances of pulling off a successful FTL transition was not high, the Quillims were more than willing to make the attempt!

The shuttles and transports that just delivered their important payloads to the Peyton Phoenix did not become useless all of a sudden.

Many of them started to extend chains that attached to different points of the damaged rear half of the fleet carrier.

They soon began to fly in a unified direction. Combined with the minor thrust power that the Quillim engineers had just restored, the battered hull slowly managed to move to the nearest Lagrange point.

With the Iron Hedgehog and plenty of ranged mechs and flight-capable mechs on guard, none of the enemy's attempts to interfere with the evacuation had any chance of success.

Soon, the Payton Phoenix reached the Lagrange point. Though her systems groaned a lot, her recently-installed FTL drive finally did its job and propelled the shortened hull out of the Korinna System!

The crisis had truly passed at this point. Many Quillim survivors felt relieved and no longer remained on guard.

As the most important hero of the campaign, Venerable Irene Mox received a lot of thanks and appreciation.

She had no time to bask in her accomplishments. She withdrew to a spare room in order to hold one final talk with Blinky.

The expert pilot had a strong feeling that this may be the last time they could communicate with each other.

Chapter 4925 Amiable Farewell

Ves had been using much of the time after the short engagement of New Kreon to reflect on the role and the value of heavy artillery mechs.

For many years, his design work largely centered around spaceborn mechs. This was where the Larkinson Clan fought most of its battles.

Since it was important for Ves and his Design Department to meet the needs of his own clan first, it was natural for them to work on a lot of spaceborn mechs and multi-environmental mechs.

Ves thought it was fully worth it to dedicate himself towards spaceborn mech combat. All of the mechs that he and his fellow Larkinson mech designers pumped out in the last few years performed so well in space that they were highly competitive against other second-class spaceborn mechs.

However, this also deprived him from a lot of opportunities to familiarize himself with planetary mech combat. Space and land were two completely separate environments that had few intersections with each other.

This was why he felt grateful for his decision to go on another Mastery experience. He felt as if he reconnected himself to the more basic battles fought on land.

He not only gained a lot of valuable reminders and insights on how a war was fought in a planetary environment, but also enjoyed a powerful first-hand perspective of how battles on land were fought from the perspective of an artillery mech!

Ves harvested more than enough observations to help him understand the essence of heavy artillery mechs.

He was brimming with a lot of potential ideas on how he should work together with Master Decimus Horst and design his first 'proper' heavy artillery mech that was built for war!

It was vital for this powerful machine to incorporate a hefty complement of physical ranged weapons.

Although Ves had a clear preference for luminal crystal weapons in all of his mechs, more traditional artillery cannons brought a whole host of possibilities that he had never properly explored in the past!

He developed the desire to go out and hire a kinetic or explosive weapon specialist as soon as he returned to his present time!

Energy weapons were better at inflicting sustained damage, but Ves fully fell in love with the greater punch and much stronger deterrence power of physical weapons.

Only a machine armed with heavy physical cannons such as the Iron Hedgehog was able to destroy an opposing expert mech and scare off an entire mech force by virtue of its firepower alone!

If the Federal Military of Davute was able to strengthen this aspect to an enormous degree with the help of his work, Ves would succeed in influencing the upcoming war between the two colonial states!

The heavy artillery mech he envisioned would have a disproportionate effect in any battle on land. The grueling campaigns on the surface of many planets would proceed a lot smoother if he could realize the mech that took shape in his imagination!

Of course, his work might not be too useful in battles fought in deep space, but that was not his problem. He was willing to shape his second major mech commission around a strong bunker mech if Davute wanted him to fulfill this niche

He also wanted to reserve a bit of time to completely reinvent his Transcendent Punisher model.

Ves was fully willing to accept all of the additional expenses and compromises to turn the Mark III edition into a semi-modular heavy artillery mech that could dynamically swap its weapon loadout depending on the environment.

This was not going to be easy as every heavy artillery mech needed to be precisely attuned and optimized in order to land their shots as accurately as possible at extreme ranges.

Part of the reason why machines such as the Iron Hedgehog produced such amazing effects was because they were effective at longer ranges.

They did not have to be too precise in their targeting, but if they could not deter a hostile mech force at longer ranges, then they weren't worth the additional expense and mass!

As Ves continued to think about how he should maximize the value of his next artillery mechs, he snapped out of his musings after his host called out for Blinky.

"You're leaving, aren't you?" Venerable Irene Mox quietly spoke as she sat down on her bed aboard the Peyton Phoenix.

Blinky appeared into view yet again, though Ves had made sure that it was only visible to him and his host.

"Mrow."

Emma emerged out of Irene's head as well. The pulsing orange cat flew closer to Blinky and started to act like a cat.

Miew~

"I am no longer needed here." Blinky said.

A part of Irene was sad that she would no longer enjoy the company of a knowledgeable helper. Blinky had already done so much for her, but it made sense that he would move on now that the Korinna V Campaign came to an end.

Ves could already feel the Time Gate starting to pull him back to the System Space in his present time.

He could trigger his return in an instant or delay it to an extent by resisting the recall force.

There was no way for him to stick around for too long, though. He did not belong in this time period and felt increasingly more estranged from his environment.

Though Ves was ready to return and throw himself onto his work with renewed inspiration and enthusiasm, he did not want to waste this moment either.

The current Irene had no idea of the heights she would reach in the far future!

Compared to the Destroyer of Worlds who had grown and matured for over two centuries, the current version of Irene was much more approachable!

Ves would be a fool if he did not take advantage of the goodwill he built over the past few days!

"Where are you going?"

"I can't say." Blinky responded. "I will show up here and there. It will take longer than you think for me to settle down. My work is never done."

"I see..."

Emma landed on Irene's lap. The companion spirit enriched the expert pilot's life. The spiritual cat's value exceeded that of her expert mech as far as she was concerned!

"Will we ever meet again?"

"That depends..." Blinky mysteriously responded. "Perhaps there may be an opportunity if you live long enough. Grow strong. Keep fighting. Embrace your mission. Powerful pilots such as yourself have gained strength far beyond the means of other humans, but there is no point of possessing such might if you do not contribute to the society that we belong to. Each of us has an obligation to assume responsibility. Do not reject it once you have become powerful enough to make a difference. That is enough of a repayment for all of the boons you have gained."

The expert pilot nodded while maintaining a solemn expression. A small part of her could feel the weight of history and destiny in those deep words.

"I will promise you that I shall not squander my strength and gifts."

Blinky smiled. "The cosmos is much vaster and more encompassing than you think. What you know as a citizen of the Quillim Principality only scratches the surface of what takes place within the Milky Way and our society. The end of the Age of Conquest has given the human race a chance to restore the damage of the past, but that does not mean that all threats have disappeared. There are both internal and external contradictions that will slowly build up until they explode. If you are able to make effective use of your talents and grow stronger as a result, I hope you will not stand by and let everything come to ruin."

"I shall do so if that ever happens." Irene seriously spoke.

Much of what the purple cat spoke was too distant and high-minded to her limited cognition. She only assumed that she would have the power to protect her second-rate state from future turmoil.

How cute.

Though Blinky wanted to mention more hints about the future, he was afraid that would draw too much suspicion towards him. He also did not want to distort her legendary growth process.

Any god pilot grew to this height by learning how to overcome one impossible challenge after another by tempering their willpower and solving problems by themselves. Nothing good would come if they grew too dependent on others.

Just as Divine Irene Mox assumed a huge amount of responsibility in the future, Ves also took the responsibility to strengthen humanity's ability to resist external enemies through whatever means possible.

Ves already started to treat the Destroyer of Worlds as his 'work'. The god pilot might not be as malleable as his mech designs, but he felt fully justified in taking credit for enabling her astonishing rise!

The pull of the Time Gate grew stronger. This reminded Ves that he needed to finish this little session.

Blinky stared speculatively at Irene. The cat then turned his gaze towards Emma.

starship. I am not afraid of paying back my debt to you, Blinky."

"Don't be in such a hurry to agree. You see, what I truly want from you is... a piece of Emma."

Miew?

"I have a small request, Irene. It is a little sensitive. You may choose not to fulfill it, but it would be incredibly helpful to me if you are willing to make a sacrifice."

"You have given me so much help already." Irene said in a friendly tone. "I am not an ungrateful pilot. I have yet to decipher your motives or your origins, but that does not stop me from acknowledging that your intervention has likely saved my life and that of all of the Quillims that have made it to this starship. I am not afraid of paying back my debt to you, Blinky."

"Don't be in such a hurry to agree. You see, what I truly want from you is... a piece of Emma."

The expert pilot blinked. "Pardon?"

"I have many interesting uses for the energies that make up the bodies of strange life forms such as your new companion." Blinky frankly explained. "You cannot imagine the value that Emma possesses. Many people with mysterious backgrounds would do anything to get their hands on your cat, or at least a piece of her. This is why I have warned you to never expose her to anyone. Even I cannot resist the urge to bite her form and harvest a piece of her energy."

Though his explanation sounded distressing, Irene did not exhibit any fear or wariness towards Blinky.

The pilot raised her arm. Emma flew up and presented herself before the other cat.

"Take what you need from Emma." Venerable Irene decisively said. "You have brought her to life within my very own head. It is only right for you to take what you are due."

Blinky smiled. This was easier than he thought!

"Thank you, Irene. This is going to hurt a bit, but I hope you can keep as still as possible. I don't need much from your new companion. It will be like drawing blood from a body. Emma will become a bit deflated after I am done, but she should be able to get back up with sufficient time and rest. I just hope that you won't act rashly if you ever sense this piece of your cat at any point in the future."

Ves did not delay any further. His companion spirit slowly drew closer to Emma until he was able to bite the orange cat's flank.

A modest amount of Emma's spiritual energy came loose. Blinky quickly swallowed it and contained the destruction-attributed energy in his body.

Even though this was not really the case, Ves felt as if he had just pulled off a heist against a god pilot!

Just the thought of this ridiculous act made him feel euphoric! He would have laughed if he wasn't afraid of inadvertently exposing his real self!

"That hurt Emma a lot more than I thought." The expert pilot spoke with difficulty.

Miew miew...

Emma had grown a lot more tired than before. The damage she suffered was a bit too much for a companion spirit that had only just been born. Even if her starting point was much higher than normal, she had not yet fully grown into her power.

The explosive cat quickly quickly dove back into Irene's mind so that she could heal while staying dormant.

This was it. Ves had no more reason to stick around. Blinky stared into Irene's eyes one last time before he raised his front paw in greeting.

"Goodbye, Irene. Take care and pursue your own future. I hope we will still stay friends if we ever meet again in the centuries to come."

The expert pilot smiled and bowed. "Thank you. I look forward to our reunion. I shall definitely live long enough to make this come to pass."

Chapter 4926 Enriched Understanding

Woosh!

The Time Gate swirled until Ves and Blinky finally returned to the System Space!

The mysterious construct that had enabled them to go all the way back to 197 AOM in the old galaxy slowly started to wind down and return to dormancy.

Even though Ves had returned to the time of his present, he still felt a lingering attachment to that earlier and more hopeful time period.

The mechs at the time were a bit simpler. The Red Ocean was just one of many dwarf galaxies that orbited the Milky Way at an unimaginable distance.

The Larkinsons in the Bright Republic struggled to grow their family in vain as the founding families deliberately prevented other groups from rising above their stations.

The Polymath wasn't even alive in this early time period!

Alas, Ves did not belong to this time period. If he truly had to make a choice, then he would definitely embrace his present time.

The opening of the Red Ocean played a massive role in his rise and success. The opportunities of the new frontier had allowed him to compete on a more level playing field and harvest many benefits that would normally be robbed by other people after too much time had passed!

As Ves regained his original mentality and recalled all of the issues that were on his mind before he passed through the Time Gate, he slowly got rid of his momentary disassociation.

He turned around and swept his gaze across the dreamy and idyllic mountain landscape. He spent time on this little 'vacation'. It was time for him to get back to work.

Before he exited the System Space, he briefly called out Blinky. The companion spirit dove out of his head.

The Star Cat did not look as if he was about to explode due to swallowing a food that was too strong to be contained!

Mrow mrow mrow.

"I can sense that as well. It appears that the System Space is quite isolated from our main reality."

This was good news. The last thing Ves wanted to do was expose an extension of a god pilot to the current environment!

"Mrow~"

As Blinky carefully coughed up the spiritual fragment that he harvested from Emma, the crystallized energy glowed like an explosion that was frozen in time.

The power and potency of this fragment was nothing impressive to be honest. The only remarkable aspect about it was that the infusion of Venerable Irene Mox's willpower had imbued it with a greater capacity to affect reality than normal.

Ves did not dare to bring it out into reality, at least not in its current form.

He had no idea what would happen if he took Irene's spiritual fragment in the same reality where the Destroyer of Worlds currently resided.

The most destructive god pilot was still stationed at the border between human space and numerous threatening alien empires somewhere in the galactic center.

Her power and deterrence factor was the greatest out of all of the existing god pilots, so it was logical for her to be stationed in this region.

Divine Irene Mox had also become a guardian of the New Rubarthan Empire at this point, so it was also more convenient for her to reside within the borders of her current state.

Despite being physically separated from the god pilot by several hundred-thousand light-years, Ves had no confidence that he would be able to avoid attracting her attention if he took out the long-lost piece of Emma!

He could not guarantee that Divine Irene Mox would 'reconnect' with the spiritual fragment and cause it to transform to the point where it became a direct medium for her to extend her will and consciousness!

Ves did not want to reconnect with her for the time being!

Not only was he afraid of exposing truths that he would rather wish to remain confidential, he also did not want to lose too much control.

The power difference between the two was too great. Ves was a complete nobody in front of a sacred and all-powerful god pilot.

Even if Ves had great potential, he was still a Journeyman Mech Designer that had a long way to go before he could become a galaxy-shaking figure.

In contrast, the Destroyer of Worlds commanded the respect of the entire New Rubarth Empire!

She also wielded a huge amount of influence within the highest offices of the Mech Trade Association.

Even if her direct authority was rather limited, she most definitely befriended dozens of god pilots and Star Designers. She could do almost anything as long as she took advantage of her amazing network of contacts!

As for Ves, he might enjoy a little special attention from the Polymath, but that was far from receiving her direct protection. His backing was still too weak in the face of a god pilot.

There was no way that Ves wanted to give up all of the initiative and hand over complete control to his 'friend'. It was best if he pretended that he did not know her at all. As for Blinky, he could keep using his companion spirit to assist in his design work like before.

"Let's not be too hasty with this spiritual fragment." Ves decided. "I need to form a proper plan before I can properly make use of this valuable ingredient."

There was no question about the exceedingly high value of this spiritual ingredient. It was practically begging to be turned into a design spirit!

Now that he settled his thoughts on the matter, he descended down the steps and deposited the spiritual fragment in the Vault of Eternity.

He hadn't been certain whether it could do more than store material objects. Fortunately, it accepted the spiritual fragment without any rejection.

"That's convenient."

Now that he thought about it, Ves would be better off if he stored all of his spiritual ingredients in the Vault of Eternity. It was completely secure and attached to him at all times.

The only downside was that Ves needed to pay the annual rent in Ascension Points in order to make use of this useful function.

Ves could think about earning Ascension Points later. He still retained a hefty reserve due to his prior efforts.

"Let's return."

It only took a blink of an eye for him to return to his bathroom in his Royal Mansion.

He raised himself from his toilet seat and looked around to see if there was a god pilot hiding in the corner or something.

"Phew. She's not here. I'm in the clear."

Practically no time passed since he went in and out of the System Space. After he carefully inspected the bathroom to make sure that it still remained free of bugs and hidden observation devices, he forced himself to relax and went to his bedroom.

He mentally wrote down all of his observations and insights now that his memories were still fresh. He carefully stored his latest virtual documents in the depths of his cranial implant. He planned to revisit them later once he was ready to work on his first mech design commission for Davute.

"All in good time."

Ves returned to his old routine more or less. He continued to devote most of his time to bringing the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project to completion.

At the same time, he occasionally relaxed by continuing to study the ins and outs of heavy artillery mechs.

His latest Mastery experience helped him enormously in this regard. Not only was he able to understand and digest all of the relevant theories to an impressive degree, but he was also able to discuss his views with Master Decimus Horst on a more equal level!

The man's expression looked impressed in the projected image. "You are a better mech designer than any student that I have taught in the past. You have made great strides in understanding the essence and purpose of heavy artillery mechs. You only need to improve your artistic vision of this mech type before you are ready to start our collaborative design project."

That was high praise from a Master who previously treated Ves like a kid.

His latest Mastery experience not only helped him set up his next mech design commission, but also provided him with ideas on how to tweak and improve the designs of his next two expert mechs.

Even if Venerable Irene Mox piloted a completely different machine from the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project, there were still many common elements to piloting any expert mech!

The first-hand experiences he gained from his latest time jaunt had directly increased his overall understanding of expert mechs and their interactions with their powerful pilots.

In the past, Ves always found it difficult to fully envision what it would be like to pilot the expert mechs he contributed to. He had to rely a lot on dubious assumptions to fill up the gaps of the Amaranto and the Everchanger while he was working on their designs.

That was no longer the case. Ves possessed a much higher understanding of what pilots such as Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Zimro went through once they interfaced with their respective expert mechs.

The suggestions and improvements he made over the course of the following weeks were so much better that his wife immediately noticed the difference!

"How come you understand expert mechs so much better all of a sudden?" She expressed her confusion. "I spent years studying expert mechs. I patiently endured the eccentric personalities of many different expert pilots so that I could thoroughly interview and analyze them over a long period of time. It is ridiculous for you to catch up to me to this extent in a matter of days! You even obtained insights that I have yet to touch!"

What could Ves say to this? He could only shrug and reply with a perfunctory answer.

"I just had an epiphany, that's all. Don't feel jealous of me, honey. These epiphanies are helpful, but they are no substitute to systematic learning. You will always be better in that regard."

Gloriana quickly lost her irritation. She smiled with satisfaction after her husband stroked her ego. "It is good that you acknowledge my superiority in this area. You could help me become even better if you help me pay for a first-class cranial implant."

"Didn't we already talk about this? Let's wait until we complete our current batch of projects!"

Several months went by as the much-anticipated expert mechs came closer and closer to completion.

Though numerous mech designers such as Gloriana and Master Benedict tried their best to elevate these two critical designs by implementing fresh improvements, no one worked as hard on them as Ves!

His passion, enthusiasm and innovative vision caused him to become the most productive participant of the two expert mech design projects!

The Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project undeniably carried his stamp as a mech designer!

Once the Design Department completed the first iterations of the expert mechs, Ves and the others knew that they had essentially completed the bulk of the work.

It was always difficult to optimize the designs of expert mechs. The material costs were so insanely high that it was impractical to perform live tests with the help of physical prototypes.

In order to guarantee that the two upcoming Larkinson expert mechs started off on the best possible footing, Ves began to think of a way to leverage the Mech Simulation Training System to test the crucial designs in a much better simulation environment.

"Since it is possible to realistically reproduce the performance of existing mechs and expert mech within the MSTS, why should that hinder it from reproducing the performance of virtual mechs?"

Though the idea sounded great, the results were anything but satisfactory!

It turned out that it was impossible for him to realistically simulate the expert mechs in the absence of concrete data.

All he had was estimations, projections, guesswork and feelings. That was far from enough for him to be able to use the MSTS as a substitute simulation program for his design work!

Since this little idea didn't work out, he had no choice but to fall back to more traditional testing methods.

Chapter 4927 Closer To Completion

The optimization process of the two expert mechs proceeded with difficulty.

It was hard to simulate the performance of a mech that incorporated such a dazzling combination of resonating exotics, high-grade exotics and spiritual applications.

The best that Ves and Gloriana could do was devote a small amount of precious raw resources to fabricate scale models of specific parts of their future works.

Even then, these practical tests only explained a fraction of the expert mech's actual performance in the field.

"It would be great if I can just upload a design to the MSTS and have it simulate our work to an accurate enough degree." Ves sighed as he sat next to Gloriana during a scale model test.

The two mech designers continually observed the data panels as well as the miniature arm of the Ghost Project that they had installed in the testing chamber.

After activating a command, the arm began to disappear from view. All of the sensor and scanning systems pointed at it suddenly found themselves unable to detect anything unusual.

The impressive Seferath AQ-3M was doing its job. Even as Gloriana slowly dialed up the detection power of the various different sensor systems, the arm remained remarkably unnoticeable to most of them! The only sensors that managed to sense anything amiss were those that made use of physical particles or had been specifically designed to detect stealthed units.

None of this fell outside of the expectations of the couple. They already understood that there were too many ways to defeat active stealth systems at closer ranges. It was already impressive for the Seferath AQ-3M to be able to hide itself completely when it was not being actively searched upon.

"I think the MSTS can already be used to test a large range of standard mechs." Gloriana shared her own views even as she adjusted the settings of the sensor systems. "It already has a fairly realistic ability to simulate ordinary physics. The greater the similarities between mech designs, the lower the chance the simulation results will deviate from reality. It is the abnormal designs that incorporate a large range of new exotic materials and unusual applications that throw off the calculations. This applies to both the MSTS and more conventional virtual simulation programs."

The Design Department was slowly expanding its output rate. The recent recruitment of Miss Beatrice Hendrix opened up numerous new opportunities to design mechs with improved modular configurations.

Ves had also been looking to recruit a Journeyman who specialized in artillery mechs or explosive weapon systems, but all of the good ones had already been picked up by other employers.

A part of him regretted that he had listened to his wife and let Jocasta Clive go. The Design Department was lacking in ranged weapon specialists.

Though the Larkinson Clan had grown so popular that the recruiters received applications from dozens of eager and ambitious Journeyman Mech Designers a month, none of them were worth a damn.

Ves even rejected a few names proposed by Gloriana because the applicants did not possess the spark of brilliance that he sought in his future subordinates and collaboration partners.

As far as he was concerned, the only Journeymen worth his consideration were those who had the guts and confidence to measure themselves up against their peers in mech design tournaments.

It was easy for mech designers to score easy successes by competing in a regulated mech market or receive favorable commissions from a compromised party.

Ves vastly preferred to evaluate potential candidates when they needed to compete directly against other peers.

Working for the Larkinson Clan was not safe. If his mech designers could not handle the pressure of publicly showcasing their work in mech design competitions, then they had no business participating in dangerous expeditions!

Of course, his wife was an exception to this rule. She was a special mech designer.

Once Ves and Gloriana concluded the expensive scale model test, they studied the data and took note of any discrepancies.

Even with the unique little quirks and modifications they applied to the Seferath AQ-3M active stealth system, its real performance did not significantly deviate from their expectations.

That was good news. The Ghost Project came one step closer to reaching its finalized state.

Gloriana looked satisfied. "We have been making such good progress that we should probably complete the second iteration of the Ghost Project over the next week."

"I think it's time to prepare for the fabrication of this expert mech." Ves declared.

His wife immediately frowned. "Isn't that premature? The Ghost Project is extremely complex. It is packed with advanced technologies and new innovations. The Geist System alone is a mystery box due to how little of it is based on conventional physics. We should thoroughly verify our design over several more months so that it will become as flawless as possible when we finally bring it into reality."

Ves couldn't wait that long anymore.

"No. Enough is enough. Our ability to test our expert mechs is too limited at this point. Any improvements we can make at this junction are marginal at best and counterproductive at worst. Don't forget that this is just the starting point of our first expert stealth mech. We can always fix any shortcomings that become obvious after we have fabricated our work."

His wife did not look pleased after hearing this. She clearly wanted to maximize the probability of gaining another masterwork certificate.

Although Ves wanted this as well, he did not want to delay too much over this obsession. The Golden Skull Alliance had spent enough time in Davute. It was time to restart the Trailblazer Expedition and continue to chase after greater riches.

The completed Ghost Project played a large role in his future plans. A fully functional expert stealth mech was one of the most effective scouts that an expeditionary fleet could ask for. There were so many ways they could tilt a situation in the clan's favor.

Expert stealth specialists were exceedingly rare in the mech community. The Larkinson Clan was blessed to have one in their ranks. The Larkinsons would be stupid to ignore such a precious asset!

Though Ves and his wife disagreed on many matters, the Ghost Project truly needed to be made sooner rather than later.

"We are not going to waste additional time on iterating the Ghost Project any further." He insisted. "The more we play with theoretical data, the further it becomes removed from reality. What we need at this junction is a real mech that can produce solid data for us. Besides, Venerable Zimro Belson has been doing little actual piloting during all of these months. He has been awfully patient towards us, but it won't do us any good to deprive him of a machine when he still hasn't completely solidified his new state."

Zimro only broke through a relatively short time ago. When expert pilots initially came into existence, their force of wills were still in flux and could easily be grown through practice.

Every week was precious while Venerable Zimro remained in this temporary state. Once they missed a precious window of opportunity, the expert pilot would have to put four to ten times as much effort to grow at this astonishing rate!

As much as Gloriana wanted to deliver perfection right out of the gate, she could not ignore the greater needs of the Larkinson Clan.

"If it turns out that we missed out on fabricating a masterwork mech, it will take years if not decades for my god body to produce a qualitative transformation." His wife grumbled. "The MTA likely won't issue masterwork certificates to us as the methods used to attain this result do not comply with the rules."

Ves rolled his eyes. They already had more than half-a-dozen masterwork certificates on their belt while they were still at the Journeyman stage. One more virtual document did not make much of a difference.

Besides, Ves had a different perspective on what it took to turn a mech into a masterwork. Whenever he looked at the designs of his next two expert mechs, he became so excited that he felt his head would explode with ideas!

This was a good sign in his experience. The more enthused he felt about translating an innovative design into reality, the greater the chance that he would get caught up in a fever of inspiration!

Still, even if he missed out this time, it was no big deal.

"I also plan on completing the Dullahan Project soon as well." Ves notified his wife. "It will take a little more time on completing the iteration of this larger and more massive expert mech, but I see no reason to bother with a third iteration for the same reasons as I have mentioned before."

His announcement did not do anything to lift Gloriana's mood.

"Are you sure you want to do that for Venerable Jannzi?" She questioned him. "Your cousin has been waiting to regain a version of the Shield of Samar. The consequences are dire if you fail to meet her expectations. She has placed so many hopes on the outcome of the Dullahan Project."

"I am sure. You know how much work and effort I put into this design." Ves reminded her of his vastly improved productivity. "There is no need for me to work over its design for an additional 6 months because I already did double or triple as much work as before."

"That may be true, but that only applies to work. What about me, Ves? We both know that you are more effective at the early stages of a mech design project. Now that we have reached the later stages, my expertise is much more relevant. If I had access to the same augmentations as yours, I would have been able to complete the third iterations of the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project in another month!"

Ves let out a tired breath. "You don't need to remind me about that fancy implant that you want to obtain. I promised you that you will get what you want once we complete our current batch of expert mech design projects. We need you in your current peak condition in order to complete them in a timely manner. By the way, how far have the Bloodripper Project and Greenaxe Project progressed?"

"Both of them are proceeding at a slower pace than before. It is hard for me to spend too much time on them when you have put such a high priority on the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project. I estimate that we will be able to complete them within two months if we do not spend as much time on optimizing them as we should."

"Hmm. Understood. It will be a little inconvenient to transfer them back to Davute once they are complete. Both Venerable Pedro Rodrigo Venerable Kolak Glendale have stuck to their decisions to join the 77th Warborn Division, right?"

Gloriana nodded. "General Ark Larkinson has already taken the two new expert pilots under his wing. He had been training and tutoring them so that they will get off on a good start once they receive our completed works."

Ves could only shrug at that. He didn't really care about two new Larkinson expert pilots as his expeditionary fleet already had plenty at its disposal.

Now that familiar heroes such as Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson, Venerable Joshua Larkinson and Commander Casella Ingvar passed the threshold of mid-tier expert pilot, there was greater room to upgrade their existing expert mechs into much more powerful versions than before!

Ves truly looked forward to upgrading the likes of the Everchanger and the Minerva into domineering quasi-first-class expert mechs!

However, before he could embark on these ambitious upgrade projects, he still needed to verify his experimental innovations and improved design applications. That could only be done by fabricating his much-anticipated expert knight mech and expert stealth mech.

"Soon."

A week was practically nothing in his opinion. As these two crucial projects came closer to completion, Ves began to contemplate an important decision that he had withheld from his wife.

Which design should he Superpublish?

Chapter 4928 Superpublish Dilemma

Ves did not often make use of the System's Superpublish function.

He did not really want to take credit for work he didn't really do. He always lost a sense of ownership towards the designs he worked so hard to make over the course of many months.

Abusing the Superpublish function was a good way to grow lazy and overly dependent on external help. This was not conducive to the growth of a mech designer. People like Ves needed to figure out stuff by themselves and learn how to push through increasingly more difficult research problems.

He would rather squander his Superpublish opportunities or use them on his less important mech designs if that was what it took to preserve his integrity as a mech designer.

Perhaps many people would scold him or criticize him for wasting these chances, but Ves always stuck to his own ideas on how he should approach his work.

That said, he felt he was ready to make use of this powerful System feature.

There was no way he could ignore the rich benefits of a Superpublished mech.

When applied to a sufficiently complex and experimental design, the System's myriad of improved design solutions could teach many lessons to Ves and other participating mech designers!

By getting in touch with the refinements of their initially crude design work, they could skip years if not decades worth of trial and error!

This was one of the more decisive reasons why Ves and Gloriana managed to improve by leaps and bounds while they were still in their thirties.

Now, Ves saw another opportunity to advance his comprehensive understanding of mech design by at least half a generation.

He had previously applied the Superpublish function on the Crystal Lord, the Bright Warrior and the Amaranto designs.

He harvested progressively greater benefits after every use as his design ability and the sophistication of his work reached new heights.

This was because the value of Superpublishing a mech design grew at a geometric rate. The more Ves progressed his design philosophy, the more time and effort it took to make any subsequent improvements to his work.

There were many Master Mech Designers such as Moira Willix that completely set aside many priorities in order to chase after meaningful evolutions of their already impressive works. They did not hesitate to dedicate many decades of their lives to invent revolutionary new design applications!

Of course, the Superpublish function was not capable of conjuring original new innovations from nowhere.

What it actually did was turn existing design solutions into better versions of themselves!

"Instead of settling for a Version 1.0 of my latest invention, I can immediately skip to Version 2.0 or Version 3.0!"

Who didn't want to receive a later update of the same work?

Both the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project contained several major innovations that he painstakingly worked on in the past several months.

The Dullahan Project currently contained two notable innovations.

The less important one was the Rainbow Shield. Based on leveraging the spiritual energies of a dozen or so different design spirits through prime leverage, Jannzi gained the ability to generate multiple different attributed energy shields.

This could become a potent defensive option once Jannzi's resonance strength grew stronger. She had already started to master increasingly more tricks after spending months practicing with Object 431.

Improving the Rainbow Shield was helpful in many ways, but what Ves truly cared about was the Blood Pact.

The Empowered Blood Sharing System that he devised after ingesting the Blood Cult Scarlet Oak Tree Growth Manual enlightenment fruit.

He became so inspired by the endless power and possibilities of blood that he combined what he learned with his existing expertise to come up with the novel concept of a Blood Pact!

He originally planned to design the Blood Knight Project first in order to test all of his theories and assumptions related to the Blood Pact in reality.

His plan couldn't keep up with the changes. By rushing the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project above everything else, he had no time to fool around with the Blood Knight Project anymore.

This left him in a rather precarious situation. The concept of blurring the line between mech and mech pilot even further by making them circulate the same blood throughout their bodies sounded absolutely insane!

In fact, his other design partners such as his wife forced him to design the Dullahan Project in a manner where he could easily remove the parts related to the Empowered Blood Sharing System!

Ves had a lot of faith in this hybrid tech, though. He believed in his theoretical framework and strongly believed that the invention of the Blood Pact was a boon to highly dedicated mech pilots such as Venerable Jannzi!

So far, Ves had only been able to test the safety of the EBSS by conducting small-scale tests where he hooked up the bodies of different test animals to fake mechs.

His initial experiments admittedly produced a lot of fatalities, but Ves already expected that this would happen.

It took weeks for him to refine the application of his EBSS in his spare time. The more he iterated on his work, the greater the chance his test animals survived the risky process.

He eventually managed to work out many of the kinks. The latest version of the EBSS was still rough, but he believed that it would not kill a strong and healthy mech pilot such as Venerable Jannzi even if it did not live up to its promises.

However, this did not change the fact that he was essentially subjecting one of his strongest combat assets to a dubious and highly unethical human experiment!

"If I use this chance on the Dullahan Project, I can remove much of the risk of producing a crippling or fatal outcome."

He felt rather mixed about that. It felt like a cop-out. Innovations were supposed to be associated with risks and dangers. How could he retain his full enthusiasm if the stakes weren't so high anymore?

Of course, Ves did not forget that he had an obligation to do right by the mech pilots he served.

It was already highly irresponsible for him to include an untested biotech system such as the EBSS in the Dullahan Project in the first place.

The least he could do was to use any means at his disposal to minimize the risks to her life and career!

Ves frowned deeper. "That said, the Ghost Project also makes a good case."

As far as value went, the Ghost Project provided much more immediate benefits than the Dullahan Project.

An expert knight mech was only useful in pitched battles against challenging opponents. Aside from that, the Larkinson Clan could easily solve other problems by relying on its other assets.

An expert stealth mech was always useful no matter the situation. Ves did not need to reiterate its incredible ability to strike a crippling blow against the enemy in combat, but it was its uses outside of an active battle that he truly valued!

There were two crucial aspects that the Ghost Project relied upon to excel in its intended roles.

First was the Seferath AQ-3M transphasic active stealth system.

Despite frequently cooperating with the developers working for Optaar Integrated Solutions, Ves could not ensure that he applied the Seferath AQ-3M correctly to his expert stealth mech design.

He never extended that much trust towards Professor Reylon Kavanaugh and his fellow Rubarthan engineers. They were all frighteningly smart, but that increased his determination to withhold confidential material related to the essence of the Ghost Project!

He even went as far as altering the design and operation of the Seferath AQ-3M by himself!

He never shared any of this secret work to Professor Kavanaugh. He did this to prevent the faint possibility that Optaar would expose a method that could expose the Larkinson Clan's expert stealth mech with trivial ease!

It went without saying that it was extremely difficult to match or surpass the work of specialized scientists and engineers in their field of expertise. Ves was sure he botched a few elements here and there. The actual performance of the Seferath AQ-3M was probably a bit worse due to his fumbblings.

His paranoia forced him to accept this unpalatable tradeoff. He would rather work with a slightly more flawed active stealth system than to leave potential backdoors into one of his most strategic expert mechs!

"Besides, there is still a decent chance that my alterations are effective."

He always felt dissatisfied that the Seferath AQ-3M only utilized phasewater in a defensive capacity. Why did it not make use of this rare and expensive substance to enhance its stealth performance?

The changes Ves applied to the Seferath AQ-3M were meant to correct this shortcoming. He took advantage of its transphasic materials to work out a mechanism where the expert mech could dump a portion of its emissions into a higher dimension.

Ves was only able to get started on this complicated and sophisticated experimental work because of his vastly improved affinity and comprehension of phasewater.

He regularly borrowed the expertise of the Phase King in order to figure out a few difficult solutions.

So far, the small-scale tests showed that his alterations did not make the active stealth system worse, but that did not guarantee success.

If the full implementation of his modified Seferath AQ-3M was severely flawed or glitched, then Ves would have little choice but to revert his changes and settle for a more standard active stealth system.

"I can skip this if I choose to improve the Ghost Project."

The System would definitely correct a lot of flaws and hidden dangers if it exerted its power onto his customized transphasic active stealth system!

This meant that Ves could assign riskier infiltration missions to the completed Ghost Project without worrying about getting caught!

"That's not all. There's also the Geist System."

This was a much more metaphysical component to the Ghost Project than anything else. None of the people assigned to work on the Ghost Project fully understood how it worked.

Not even Ves understood all of the mechanics behind empowering spiritual fiends so that they could bypass every obstacle but nevertheless inflict real damage when it mattered!

No conventional science could help him improve or perfect it any further. Ves needed to expand his understanding of spiritual engineering to a massive degree in order to increase the performance of the Geist System!

This was fairly troublesome as Ves had no idea how good the Geist System would be if he fabricated the expert mech.

The fiends it would be able to dispatch from its frame might be strong enough to destroy critical components of an actively running starship.

At the same time, they might also turn out to be so weak that they could not even lift a tiny data chip!

If he Superpublished the Ghost Project, he would not only have greater guarantees that the Geist System was closer to the former case, but also gained an invaluable opportunity to learn a lot of lessons on spiritual engineering!

After all, if he was able to compare his original implementation of the Geist System to one that was much more refined, he could directly spot the differences and figure out the reasons why they worked!

"Damn, this is such a difficult choice." He muttered while looking increasingly pained.

He had agonized over this decision for months. He never managed to make up his mind as the completion dates came closer.

It would have been better if he could stagger the expert mech design projects over a year so that he could Superpublish both of them, but that was not practical.

He could only improve one of them before he fabricated both of his long-awaited expert mechs.

Although it was always possible for him to Superpublish an old design that he had already placed in his archives, the benefits of doing so were much less.

He couldn't procrastinate over this life-changing decision any further.

"I think I need a second opinion."

Who should he talk to? He certainly couldn't not spill anything related to the System to his wife.

Other colleagues such as Ketis and Sara Voiken lacked the perspective to provide qualified advice.

There was only one name he trusted with this matter.

"I think it's time to pay another visit to Master Benedict."

Chapter 4929 Demand For High-Quality Skulls

It was easy for Ves to pay a visit to Master Benedict's design lab.

Both the Cat Nest and the Cross Production Complex were located inside Industrial District 2.

If Ves wanted to, he could just walk over to the large industrial complex further down the street.

There was no need to tempt fate. Ves settled for boarding an armored shuttle and made a short transit to the CPC under heavy escort.

The members of the Cross Clan briefly looked up as the ostentatious Larkinson mechs hovered protectively around a fairly unassuming black vehicle.

They soon ignored the sight and returned to their own activities. Ves had visited the CPC enough time for his arrival to turn into a routine occurrence.

Ves didn't even need the help of an attendant to reach the Primary Cross Lab.

As the counterpart of the Larkinson Clan's Genesis Lab, the Primary Cross Lab is the primary engine of mech design and technological innovation of this branch location.

When Ves and his bodyguards passed through the main entrance, he waved to the receptionists and guards and easily passed through the checkpoints without taking up a lot of time.

It took around five minutes for Ves to enter an underground design lab where Master Benedict Cortez conducted his latest research.

The fairly new Master Mech Designer did not bother to suspend and hide his latest research activity.

Benedict somehow managed to get his hands on a collection of nunser skulls. The alien skulls were carefully stored in transparent containers that were stacked against a wall.

"Good afternoon, Ves." The preoccupied Master called out as he continued to tinker with a device connected to one of his nunser skulls. "You look troubled today. I assumed you would be in a good mood considering that you are close to completing your new epochal works."

Even the head designer of the Cross Clan recognized the transformational meaning of the Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project.

"What are you working on, Benedict?" The visitor asked as he moved closer until he was able to get a good look of what was on the workbench.

He already had a good idea what Benedict wanted to accomplish after he recognized a lot of familiar elements to the experimental mechanisms.

"As you know, the Endex System that I have devised is a substitute for my Original Energy Bridge System." Master Benedict calmly explained even as he attached a few wires to the holes that he had drilled in the alien skull. "While the Endex System can play a useful role to high-end mechs such as your Dullahan Project, it simply does not replicate the full power of the original solution that I have developed for the Mars."

"I don't think the MTA will like it if you start using the skulls of expert pilots left and right." Ves stated the obvious.

The older mech designer nodded. "That is so. This is why I have decided to develop a variation of the OEBS but with alien skulls instead of human remains. After consulting with numerous exobiologists, I have learned that the nunser race is the best starting point. Compared to the other intelligent indigenous races of the Red Ocean, the nunsers are strong in body but also remarkably firm in mind. They possess tough and tenacious attitudes and are known to fare well under adversity. They are the closest alien substitute to high-ranking mech pilots that I can readily obtain."

Eccentric mech designers certainly had a habit of starting unusual research projects. Only a nutcase would think that experimenting with alien skulls was a legitimate research direction.

Ves remained skeptical, though. "Expert pilots are demigods whose bodies are mildly transformed by their extraordinary willpower. As far as I know, ordinary nunsers do not possess these traits. They should be completely normal."

"I do not completely believe that is the case." Master Benedict replied. "At the very least, the upper echelon of nunsers are all obsessed with incorporating phasewater in their bodies. They engage in a variety of different methods that are meant to strengthen them beyond a norm. Don't underestimate my new collection. The skulls that I bought are taken from high-quality stock. I believe that there should be at least one skull among my current collection that has developed qualities that are somewhat similar to that of a human expert pilot or at least an expert candidate."

That actually sounded reasonable. Ves actually became a little more optimistic about Master Benedict's chances of making a small breakthrough.

That was far from enough to make his latest idea practical and viable.

"There should be a limit to the power that you can draw from a relatively normal nuns skull." Ves pointed out. "The only ones that are truly worth taking are the skulls of phase lords. I bet you can produce much more drastic results if we have harvested the head of the Trampler of Stars."

A strong yearning expression appeared on Master Benedict's face!

"It is such a pity that the Trampler of Stars managed to escape from our clutches. When we resume our Trailblazer Expedition, I would like to prioritize the search of other phase lords. These native 'gods' are the most ideal ingredients and test subjects for my current research. If our expeditionary fleet has successfully captured or killed an actual phase lord, I would like first dibs on the spoils."

Ves casually nodded after hearing what the Master Mech Designer needed. "Your need for them is the greatest, so it shouldn't be a problem to meet your request. However, I have my own uses for phase lords, so I would like to claim the second one for myself."

Benedict didn't ask what Ves had in mind for the phase lord. He merely nodded in acceptance. "Very well. It will be more inconvenient for us to compete for the same spoils, but as long as we put more effort into hunting down these rare and precious phase lords, we should both be able to have our fill."

"Phase lords can be tough to take down, Benedict. They might not be as strong as actual phase whales, but even the Mars struggled to contain the Trampler of Stars."

"The Jedda Sandivar and the Royal Jeem are much better at defeating strong individual targets. We can turn them into effective phase lord killers as long as we apply targeted improvements to these ace mechs."

"I doubt the Adelaides and the Boojays will allow us to rashly tinker with their greatest trump cards, Benedict. Besides, if these two ace mechs do all of the work, the groups they belong to will earn the greatest share of the spoils. You will have to make a lot of concessions if you want to grab the corpse of an alien god from their hands."

They continued to talk about the practicalities of hunting phase lords. They were not that common and Ves didn't even know whether Ylvaine was strong enough to track these alien transcendents.

It took five more minutes before Ves finally saw an opportunity to bring up the matter he truly wanted to talk about today.

"Would you like to hear a story about the Amaranto?" Ves suddenly asked.

"Mhmm?"

"Once my design team along with Master Willix completed this mech design, we did not fabricate it straight away. Instead, I chose to send off our work to a... friend, who subsequently refined and optimized the entire design. This friend of mine not only improved the work of Journeymen such as myself and my fellow Larkinson mechs, but also improved the work of Master Willix to the same degree."

It took a few seconds of Master Benedict to understand the implications.

He went still. He immediately understood the implications of receiving the guidance of an anonymous mech designer. An individual of this caliber could not only understand the essence of his life's work, but also applied many ingenious solutions while simultaneously pointing out so many viable improvement directions.

The older man slowly turned around and looked straight into Ves' eyes. "Are you telling me that your 'friend' is willing to extend the same service to you again?"

Benedict's voice quivered as if he was on the verge of winning the lottery!

Ves slowly nodded. "That is the case, but the caveat is that he is only willing to do it once. We can either hand over the design of the Dullahan Project or the Ghost Project. I am struggling to make up my mind. I can think of plenty of arguments in favor of either choice. Since you have played a substantial role in the design of both of these expert mechs, I figure that I might as well pull you into my decision-making process."

"Wise decision." Master Benedict said with appreciation. "Please explain your current arguments to me. I would first like to know your perspective before I add my own."

Ves did so. It took ten minutes or so to explain all of the possible pros and cons that he had thought of over the last few months.

As a Master Mech Designer, Benedict easily comprehended these views. His eyes twinkled with understanding.

"Interesting. I can see why you are struggling. Both choices are equally viable as far as I am concerned. Even I cannot fully make up my mind. The Ghost Project incorporates a highly abnormal variation of my Original Energy Bridge System. The Dullahan Project on the other hand contains my Endex System. A choice between the two is a choice between ultimate power and mass production."

The older mech designer looked enormously entangled as he had fallen into the same pit as Ves!

However, Benedict was not as young and shallow as Ves. He quickly cut through the fog of indecision and offered additional guidance.

"Since improving either expert mech designs provide benefits to your work in equal fashion, you should disregard these criteria entirely and base your choice on other factors. For example, think about the needs of your clan. Which one is more useful to you in the short-term?"

"The Ghost Project." Ves immediately replied.

"Which one is more useful to you in the long-term.

"The Dullahan Project." Ves admitted.

The value and utility of having an extremely powerful defense-oriented high-ranking mech was incalculable!

Once Jannzi advanced to ace pilot in the future, she could easily become powerful enough to withstand the attacks of weaker warships. The expeditionary fleet would gain a lot more leeway in escaping ambushes and confronting dangerous alien warfleets!

"Which one do you most want to turn into masterwork?"

"...I can't decide."

Benedict picked up an important clue from Ves' latest answer. His eyes turned more inquisitive as he regarded the Journeyman Mech Designer.

"Both your Dullahan Project and your Ghost Project are characterized by a number of radically different innovations of yours. I think that you have reached a point in your career where you need to make an important decision about the future direction of your design philosophy."

Ves looked confused. What did this have to do with the Superpublish function?

"Pardon, Master?"

"The Empowered Blood Sharing System and the Geist System are completely opposite from each other." Benedict directly pointed out. "The former is a metaphysical innovation that primarily aims to deepen and strengthen the relationship between mechs and mech pilots. The latter is an unusual application that seeks to qualitatively improve and strengthen a mech's utilization of external sources of power. One is internal and the other is external. Each of them are based on your design philosophy, but neither of the two are strongly related to each other. If you have to give up on one of them so that you can fully pursue the other, which research direction will you choose?"

"..."

Master Benedict directly explained the true dilemma that held Ves back from making a decision.

Ves felt even more certain that his answer to this crucial question would define his work and permanently shape the evolution direction of his design philosophy!

Chapter 4930 Different Development Strategies

Master Benedict Cortez had gone through a similar journey as Ves. He had lived for over 150 years, and spent much of it struggling to progress his design philosophy and explore his way forward.

As a pioneer of his own field, he had to make a lot of difficult choices on how he wanted to allocate his time. No mech designer could spend his time on pursuing every possible application of their field of specialization.

Aside from monstrous outliers such as the Polymath, every other mech designer eventually had to give up on pursuing other ideas to the limit in order to make sure they retained the capital to break through.

Ves understood that the choice between Superpublishing the Dullahan Project or the Ghost Project indirectly affected his subsequent career.

"You are at the point in your life where you have started to move beyond the limitations of a Journeyman Mech Designer." Master Benedict accurately pointed out. "What are Journeymen in your opinion?"

"Journeymen are explorers." Ves replied according to his own views. "Mech designers at this level have set a rough research direction, but they still need to invent many distinctive design applications from scratch. Since it is difficult for Journeymen to know what is good or what is valued by customers, it is always recommended to travel around and try out a lot of stuff."

"That is a good perspective, Ves. You have succinctly described the essence of Journeyman Mech Designer. The key here is developing an initial recipe of successful design formulas that you believe in. It doesn't matter how you accomplish this initial goal. Journeymen such as your colleague Ketis knew exactly what she wanted to design as soon as she advanced to this rank. She has spent all of her time on furthering her ability to design swordsman mechs. You on the other hand have devoted much of your time to exploring much of the limitless possibilities of your own design philosophy. As a pioneer in your own field, your competitive pressure is different, so there is a logic to delving into multiple different design applications."

Ves slowly frowned as Master Benedict lectured to him. "Are you suggesting that I won't be able to explore so many research directions once I become a Senior?"

The older mech designer smiled and leaned back on his chair. "Before we speak about that, I think it is better for you to gain a greater understanding of what Senior Mech Designers actually are. There is much I cannot reveal to you yet no matter how close you are. What I can tell you is that Seniors only have one overarching priority: to realize their design philosophy and advance to Master Mech Designer. Nothing else can surpass this goal. As such, do you think that a Senior who dabbles in three different research directions can break through as easily as a Senior that dedicates all of his work hours on deepening their progress in a single branch of their design philosophy?"

Ves grimaced. "I understand your point. A Senior that devotes all of his time on further developing a single research application has a greater chance of advancing to Master within his remaining lifespan."

"Why the glum face, Ves?"

"It's just... I don't really want to be forced into giving up on other interesting ideas." Ves admitted to the Master. "I once received a lecture on how a mech designer could develop his design philosophy into differently shaped trees. You can either shape it into a thin tree that can grow really tall, or opt for a wide tree that happens to be a little short."

The fact of the matter was that Ves didn't want to make a choice. His greed was too great.

He just realized that he possessed a Superpublish Voucher in his Inventory. He had obtained it from the System a long time ago but always kept it in storage because he rarely utilized the normal Superpublish ability to begin with. He would have left it in the dark for many more years under ordinary circumstances, but the current situation just happened to be an excellent opportunity to take advantage of this possibility!

Ves still wasn't certain whether it was worthwhile for him to use up this precious voucher at this junction.

"You have obviously chosen to grow a wide tree with many different branches." The former Skull Architect observed. "And now you have come to a point in your career where you are reluctant to nurture a single branch at the cost of neglecting all of your other ones. This way, your wide tree will eventually transform into a misshapen tall tree as one branch grows higher than all of the other ones."

Ves nodded. "I know what I am like as a mech designer. I can never stick with spending all of my time on exploring just one narrow design application. I like to travel around, gain lots of inspiration from interesting discoveries and find a way to create new possibilities. Choosing to give all of that up just so that I can increase my chances of realizing my design philosophy goes against my nature."

"It sounds as if you have become so attached to your development strategy as a Journeyman that you want to persist with it at the Senior stage. That is uncommon but not completely unheard of in the mech industry. Mech designers that fall within this category do not enjoy a good reputation in the industry. Certain circles have taken to calling them infants and other pejorative terms. The meaning is that while a mech designer has grown to become a Senior, his mentality has not grown in accordance. Like children, they still get distracted by whatever catches their fancy. Their inability to follow priorities and focus on a single research direction means that their chances of advancing to Master is miniscule."

"..."

Benedict studied Ves closely. "Are you feeling unreconciled?"

"I do, Master. It's just... my brain is telling me one thing while my heart is telling me another thing. I don't want to narrow my options."

"No one can do everything by themselves, Ves." The Master Mech Designer sagely said. "This is also one of the reasons why Senior Mech Designers start to mentor their own students. The former can continue to devote their full efforts on developing a single topic of research to their limits while the latter can take over responsibility over all of the neglected branches."

Ves still didn't look satisfied. "I already intend to teach more students when I am ready to do so, but that still doesn't sit well to me. No matter whether it is the EBSS or the Geist System, both are equally worthy of further development. I also have other ideas that I want to flesh out as well. I don't necessarily want to hand all of this over to my students and apprentices. I want to do it all myself."

Master Benedict chuckled and shook his head. "You may have heard many stories about this already, but the difficulty of realizing your design philosophy exceeds your imagination. There are good reasons why there are so many Seniors who grow old and die without leaving any permanent legacies behind. They have worked just as hard as myself or more, but they ultimately lacked sufficient discipline and decisiveness to embrace a strategy that was within their means. Do you think that you are good enough as a mech designer to successfully realize your design philosophy while sticking to your current scatter-brained approach?"

Though Ves had a lot of capital that he could count upon, he did not blindly say yes.

Underestimating the challenges ahead of him was a good way to grow stagnant as a mech designer!

He did not want to end up as Professor Velten and die while constantly holding regrets about the decisions made in the past.

Ves lowered his head for a moment. "Before I answer that question, can you tell me what it takes for mech designers to advance to Master with a broad research strategy? While you mentioned that the chances of breaking through under those circumstances are minimal, you did not say it is impossible. This implies that there are mech designers who succeeded. What are they like? What do they have in common? What allowed them to succeed where so many others have failed?"

The Master raised his palm in a calming motion.

"Whoa there, Ves. Slow down. I cannot answer all of those questions for you, but let me put it this way. The most extreme and defining example of a Senior who dabbled in everything yet managed to advance to Master based on the quantity of successful research results alone is the Polymath. I am sure you have read her biography already. Though it is painfully short on details, her intelligence, learning ability and imagination are off the charts. You may be the most brilliant Journeyman Mech Designer that I have ever met, but you do not come close to her level."

It was taboo for any mech designer to equate himself to a legendary Star Designer. Anyone who made these thoughtless claims deserved to be treated as a pariah!

"I am not that delusional, Benedict." Ves responded. "Besides, my research interests aren't nearly as broad as hers. What about other mech designers who succeeded with this approach?"

"Hm." Benedict paused for a moment. "I know of Master Mech Designers who match your description, but their starting points are unquestionably higher. They are first-raters without fail. Many of them are born in prominent families or grew up in families that are highly immersed in technology. They possess cranial implants and other augmentations that boost their intelligence and design abilities to a frightening height, allowing them to design mechs and conduct research at ten times the efficiency of their more normal peers. Even then, each of them had to fight a constant uphill battle in order to break through and realize their difficult and overly ambitious design philosophies."

Ves' eyes lit up as he heard these descriptions. Though his circumstances were completely different from these blessed sons and daughters, his gains over the years were not necessarily inferior!

He was utterly convinced that even if he was a little worse at the moment, he possessed the means to match or exceed these brilliant mech designers!

There was no way that Ves could hide these thoughts from a highly observant Master Mech Designer.

To his credit, Benedict did not rule out the possibility that Ves might succeed.

"I know what you are thinking, Ves, but you should not be in a hurry to make a rash decision. A more reasonable development strategy that you can take is to choose a single design application as your major. This will be your main contribution to the mech community and the basis of realizing your design philosophy. You can subsequently relegate all of your other possible research directions as your minors. You should organize your schedule so that you can budget a portion of your time on continuing your explorations of your secondary research projects."

That sounded like an acceptable and more realistic work approach for a Senior. Ves seriously contemplated whether he should take a step back and choose this approach instead.

"If your minors share complementary and mutually reinforcing relationships with your major, then you can leverage this synergy to realize your design philosophy in advance and start off as a Master with a much stronger footing than usual." Master Benedict explained. "This way, you will not waste the eclectic gains you have made as a Journeyman and Senior. You instead converted them into the foundation that has helped you propel your main research direction to significantly greater heights."

That was a compelling image. As Ves thought about all of the work he had done to this date, he felt that it might be more appropriate for him to narrow his research activities to an extent. If he could develop many synergies between his major and all of his minors, he could develop a grand framework that could turn into an entire new system in the field of mech design!

His eyes burned with passion! The more he thought about this approach, the more he felt that he could make it far while still staying true to his heart!

"Have you found your answer, Ves?" Master Benedict asked.

The younger mech designer firmly nodded. "I did. Thank you for your guidance, my friend. I think I know how I want to develop my design philosophy in the future."