

Chapter 171 A Proposal

Ves spent the first day going over his available assets. First, he checked the terminals as well as the machines he had to work with. The Ark Horizon possessed multiple workshops, many of them meant to repair or replace large amounts of broken components over the course of a campaign.

"A fleet carrier serves as a central staging point for a planetary invasion." Chief Ramirez explained to Ves. "If we wanted to, we can stuff more mechs inside the Ark Horizon, but as soon as they incur major damage, we won't be able to use them again until we bring them back to a usable condition."

In other words, the fleet carrier offered any substantial mech force a large boost in staying power. With the Ark Horizon as the backbone of the fleet, Lord Kaine could squeeze every bit of value out of his mechs.

"The workshop servicing the Hunting Platoon is the smallest one aboard the ship, but it has all of the basic necessities."

Ves widened his eyes as he beheld the workshop in its entirety. He only briefly glanced at the 3D Printer and assembly system. Instead, he turned his full attention to the other machines in the open space.

"Is that an alloy compressor and a chemical treatment machine?"

"Aye. The previous guy hand-picked the models himself. He might be a self-serving coward, but he knew his stuff."

Chief Ramirez quickly shut his mouth once Ves tried to ask more about his predecessor. It appeared the previous mech designer became something of a taboo existence in the expedition.

If Ves had access to the galactic net, he could find more information about House Kaine and the mech designers they contracted. Unfortunately, Lord Kaine had already taken measures in restricting every quantum entanglement

nodes aboard every ship in the fleet. They hadn't even left the Mancroft System and already they were cut off from the rest of the galaxy.

"When will we depart and how long will it take to reach our destination?" Ves asked, curious about his timetable.

"I'm not privy to the full details, but word around the grapevine is we'll be setting off as soon as our fuel tanks are topped off. That will take half a day. After that, the fleet will be following a roundabout path to the Groening System. That might take a couple of weeks or so."

Ves grew alarmed. "A couple of weeks isn't enough to improve all of those mechs! There's not enough time!"

Time waited for no one. Groening IV's metal storm only subsided at a fixed schedule. No matter how much Ves wanted to delay the expedition, he could do nothing against the forces of nature. The expedition already wasted a lot of time and they only received a new mech designer at the very last second.

"Lord Kaine waited a long time to recruit a talented mech designer." Ensign D'Amato suddenly spoke up by his side. "In truth, he cast his net fairly wide. He received a large amount of offers, but rejected them all. They lack the qualifications to work on something important as his great granddaughter's first command."

"I can understand why he would reject the lowest tiers of mech designers." Ves replied. "But surely there must have been more qualified mech designers knocking on his door."

"I am not aware of how the negotiations went between the applicants and Lord Kaine. In any case, he rejected their terms."

Journeyman Mech Designers often presided over a growing business empire. They didn't lack for money if they possessed enough sense. They'd only sign

up for dangerous expeditions if they got something substantial out of it. Lord Kaine must have rejected their excessively greedy demands.

As for the Apprentice Mech Designers like Ves, Lord Kaine must have had some reservations. Apprentices were always fairly young and thus lacked practical experience. In truth, Ves possessed a flimsier resume than other apprentices, especially the core disciples who had been groomed to take over their master's legacies.

Did Lord Kaine go with Ves because the deadline of the expedition forced him to accept any candidate? It would certainly explain the cold shoulders he received so far. No one really expected him to make any difference in the coming weeks.

With a glowering expression, Ves resolved to prove them all wrong. His first task was to see what he had to work with. He spent a couple of hours going over the systems and inventory he had at his disposal. He expedited his checks because he didn't believe his predecessor went through the trouble of sabotaging the gear in the first place.

As someone who cross-trained in hacking, Melkor also lent a hand by checking over the software. "I haven't detected anything wrong with these systems. That's not to say they are clean, but whatever bugs they carry is beyond my capacity."

Chief Ramirez smiled. "Don't worry about it, our ship doesn't lack for computer specialists. My men will be happy to hear they can stop borrowing the other workshop's facilities."

Just as Ves wanted to discuss his tentative plan, a shipwide alert stopped everyone in their tracks. A strange tone sounded out that prompted everyone on the deck to stow away their gear and secure any loose pieces of equipment.

"What's that?"

"The expedition is about to set off." Ensign D'Amato answered.

After they finished sweeping anything that hadn't been bolted down, D'Amato and Ramirez guided Ves and his silent companions Melkor and Lucky to a set of crash seats placed to the sides. Everyone strapped themselves in.

"It's customary to button down the entire ship once the Ark is about to go underway." The ensign explained as he activated a projector installed next to his seat. He fiddled with the settings until the display showed the entire fleet. "We'll be departing the Mancroft System very soon."

Ves saw that the smaller ships left their orbits and paved the way for the Ark Horizon. The huge fleet carrier engaged her thrusters and slowly ascended from her stable orbit over Mancroft I.

Despite the awesome power propelling the two-kilometer ship forward, Ves only sensed a tiny vibration from his seat. The ship's inertial dampeners and artificial gravity systems worked in tip-top shape to ensure no one got splattered by the shift.

Such a major movement must have attracted the eyes of everyone in the Mancroft System. Some of the treasure hunters must be wondering about their final destination. The escort ships did a good job scaring them away when they dipped close.

The excitement on the lower decks quickly died down once the brass gave the all-clear. Everyone resumed their current tasks.

As for Ves, he led Ramirez, D'Amato and Melkor to an empty office. "I think I've got a decent picture of what's going on right now. I've already formed a plan. The question is, who do I have to convince to implement any changes?"

Ramirez and D'Amato looked at each other before the ensign replied. "I'm mostly present as an observer. I'll step in when I think you are going astray, but other than that I'll leave you be."

"The buck stops with Captain Kaine. She's in command." Chief Ramirez answered after a thought. "I'll listen to your proposals and if I think they won't piss her off, I'll pass it on to the captain."

If Ves had to convince Captain Kaine, then he had to start small. He already adjusted the plans formulating in his mind. "What about this. Let me work on the Ajax Olympian. The heavy knight is the largest but also the simplest models of the three. It's the lynchpin of our hunting strategy so it requires extra attention. It also has the fewest numbers available so I'm confident that we can improve both frames before we arrive at the Groening System."

All of his reasons had merit. Even Chief Ramirez nodded at some of them. Still, would he trust Ves to do a good job?

"Well, the big man did hire you in the end. It'd be stupid to let you sit around doing nothing during the entire expedition. I won't let you make any changes immediately, but if you come up to me with an updated design, I'll let you try and convince the captain."

Ves immediately went to work after receiving the chief's permission. He first sat down in front of a terminal and called up the design of the Ajax Olympian.

While he studied the design, the entire expeditionary fleet had reached one of the Mancroft System's Lagrange points. Several scouts jumped in first before the Ark Horizon transitioned into FTL. Her movements immediately sent ripples throughout the higher dimensions. Anyone with access to sophisticated technology would know that a capital ship had crossed the borders.

Every mercenary vessel had to operate under strict conditions. The men Lord Kaine stationed on their vessels made sure that all means of communicating with the outside universe were clamped down. Even the relatively tiny Barracuda had to put up with a stone-faced security officer who kept a careful watch over the female spacers.

The expedition's grand departure attracted a lot of unwelcome attention. Various shady forces had already sent scout ships ahead to keep track of the Ark Horizon. The leaders of these forces justifiably believed that Lord Kaine grasped the coordinates of an extremely resource-abundant planet. Everyone wanted a piece of the action.

During the Ark Horizon's first hop, everyone aboard the carrier worked quietly to prepare her mechs. Once they entered sandmen space, they had to be ready to deploy against both sandmen and pirates. Only the people attached to the hunting platoon had it easy for now. Their time to shine came later.

While Ves looked up the design of the Ajax, Chief Ramirez went back to supervising the mech technicians. He couldn't spend all day watching over the shoulders of their new mech designer, so Ves only had Melkor, D'Amato and Lucky for company.

He might as well pick their brains if they were here. "What do you think about the Ajax Olympian?"

Since Ensign D'Amato came from the Grey Willow Star Sector, he should know a thing or two about the mech.

"The standard Ajax is a mainstay in many local forces. As you know, heavy mechs are extremely expensive, so House Kaine has opted not to purchase a model from the top segment of the market."

In other words, the Ajax and most of its variants tried to offer the most bang for your buck. It became a popular model among many middle-sized influences due to this reason.

As a dependent of a second-rate state, House Kaine couldn't afford to underinvest in their mechs. All of the models Ves had seen so far could beat any model used by the Bright Republic's Mech Corps in a direct clash.

"How would you describe the Ajax Olympian's strengths and weaknesses?"

The ensign had to think about his answer. "I'm not a specialist in mech design, but from what I know, the Ajax has an almost unbreakable shell. Its compressed armor has a reputation for weathering a storm. On the other hand, its internal structure can't keep up in prolonged engagements. It always breaks down long before the armor is breached."

"So that's why the expedition uses a variant." Ves remarked. "I suppose this version has implemented some measures to improve its shock-absorbing capacity."

"Right, but it has also driven up the cost and difficulty of repairs."

Ves referenced the design of the Olympian and found how they solved the problem. "The internal frame is reinforced by supports made out of compressed alloys."

A heavy knight possessed a lot of volume due to its extravagant size. The alloys used by the model also used up a lot of exotics.

Once Ves thought things through, he decided upon a course of action. "Cost should not be a concern. The Ark has an ample store of raw materials. I think it's best if I attempt to strengthen its shock resistance even further while lengthening its operating time under difficult conditions."

The Ajax Olympians were expected to operate for forty days straight. Any time taken away for repairs would prove extremely detrimental to the task of hunting down the hexapod kings. Without keeping these giant beasts in check, the other mercenaries wouldn't be able to hunt the regular hexapods in peace.

The only problem was that Ves had too little time. Heavy mechs required a lot of time to refurbish, so Ves had to submit a new design as soon as possible.

"A week. I only require a week."

Chapter 172 Peak Performance

In the coming days, the expedition set off with a tumultuous fanfare. The main thrust of the fleet encountered several scouts from other forces along the way. In order to avoid leaking out the location of the untapped Groening System, Lord Kaine employed the mercenary ships to chase away the snooping scouts.

"Destroy every ship that doesn't make way!"

Some of the bolder scouts tried to play games, but they couldn't outfox the swift corvettes owned by the Stray Phantoms. They possessed a decisive technological edge against the riff raff of the frontier. Even the advanced Barracuda couldn't match their performance, which proved the Grey Willow Star Sector's strength.

Under Lord Kaine's arrangements, Captain Silvestra jumped ahead of the main fleet. As a civilian corvette, the Barracuda wasn't suitable to be employed as a combat vessel. Instead, she functioned as the expedition's own scout and provided advanced warning to the main fleet via a limited transmission through her restricted quantum entanglement node.

Overall, the expedition had a rocky start. House Kaine severely underestimated how much eyes they attracted when they arrived in the Komodo Star Sector.

Back at home, a fleet carrier in the hands of a noble house might be ostentatious but not too rare.

At the frontier, such a phenomenon instantly turned the expedition into the talk of the town. Especially considering that everyone knew that to take a capital ship into sandmen space was asking for trouble.

Thus, the first week of the expedition bogged down due to Lord Kaine's insistence on removing each and every scout. While his measures might have scared away the ships, even he could do nothing against covert sensors hidden throughout every star system in the way.

Still, the amount of stars in the galactic rim couldn't be counted. No matter how many sensors they planted, they couldn't have seeded every star, especially the ones deeper into sandmen space. While passive sensors were nearly undetectable in deep space, they lacked the resolution to determine the precise coordinates of the main fleet's route.

In addition to chasing away the scouts, House Kaine and their mercenary partners employed many methods in order to obscure their route. As an outsider in charge of improving a small number of mechs, Ves didn't have the right to know anything more.

His minder, Ensign D'Amato, might know more, but the young man carefully kept his lips sealed. Over time, Ves noticed that D'Amato understood a fair amount of engineering principles. He likely specialized in engineering or some or related field. This meant that Ves couldn't hide too many things from his watchful minder.

Due to his constant company, Ves didn't dare to access the Mech Designer System. He started working on the Ajax Olympian using the workshop's existing design suite, which impressed him with its extensive features. It might not match the System in sheer breath and versatility, but it provided a fair amount of conveniences that helped save some time.

After familiarizing himself with the variant's design, he started asking other people's opinions on the Ajax. Ves followed Ramirez's advice and approached the mech technicians who worked on the two heavy knights for years.

Not all of them opened up to him. Captain Kaine still didn't trust him, so the mech technicians assigned to the hunting platoon adopted the same mistrustful attitude. It took a lot of pestering in order to convince the friendlier ones to throw him a bone.

"The Olympian is a steady mech. It's built to last. If something happens to break, it takes a lot of effort to replace because the armor isn't meant to be removed that often."

"All the flashy marketing states that the Olympian variant excels in wrestling, but they're exaggerating its flexibility. There's no way a heavy mech is capable of performing even the simplest acrobatics. The Olympian can barely grapple another mech and force it down against the ground."

"Heavy knights don't focus much on speed but the Olympian is slower than the original Ajax! You can't imagine how many times the mech pilots of the hunting platoon are grumbling about their speed. Chief Ramirez tweaked the Olympians in our hands as best he could, but he's no miracle worker."

The feedback from the humble mech technicians proved to be a boon to Ves. Even if they only possessed a shallow technical background, they were well-versed in the Ajax Olympian's many quirks. They possessed an intuitive understanding of its design that was worth gold to a mech designer like Ves.

Ves heard enough. He considered the hunting platoon's mission profile and compared that with the current Ajax Olympian's capabilities. Normally, he'd discuss his findings with Chief Ramirez and Captain Kaine in order to take advantage of their input, but their attitudes made him feel unwelcome.

No matter. He still had Melkor and D'Amato. First, he explained his most critical observation.

"The way I see it, the role of the hunting platoon is a critical one. They're the only group of mechs that stand a chance of winning against a hexapod king. As the tanks of the platoon, the Ajax Olympians perform an essential role in their hunting strategy. It's natural for the platoon and the mech technicians to treat it like a treasure, but they're valuing the heavy knights way too much."

Ensign D'Amato frowned at this strange remark. "We only have two Olympians in our entire contingent of mechs. Even I know that heavy mechs are very difficult to get ahold of. It would be an unimaginable loss if we lose one of them during this expedition."

Ves knew what D'Amato hinted at. On average, heavy mechs weighed five times as much as a medium mech, so they normally cost five times as much as well. They could only be fabricated with specialized, expensive machinery and cost even more to maintain.

As a design catered to second-rate states like the Constance Grand Kingdom, the Ajax Olympian came with an unimaginably high price tag. Ves made the calculations himself and found that the Ajax Olympian cost around five billion bright credits!

Five billion credits! Ves could fabricate over two-hundred Marc Antony Mark II's with that much money! Most of that money had been spent on fabricating the Olympian's highly sophisticated armor system which consisted of various layers of exotic alloys.

"That is why this entire unit are taking the wrong approach. Mechs are meant to be used. How many hexapod beasts are running around in the underground world? How hard will it be to make up for the loss of an Olympian? What I'm telling you is that everyone is making a mistake by deifying the heavy knights."

Ves pressed on. "A high-class mech like the Ajaxes are ordinarily built to last several campaigns. It's hopeful if you think you can keep these big mechs intact, but they'll be facing extremely hostile conditions on Groening IV. Currently, the Ajax Olympians aren't optimized to withstand the incredible amount of abuse for forty days straight."

"What are you suggesting, then?"

"Treat the heavy mechs as disposable tools. I know several ways of increasing their power and speed. It won't take too much time for me to come up with a modified design that won't take too much time to implement."

This shook D'Amato's mind. As a young officer who aspired to be an engineer, he had always been taught to eschew short-term gains in favor of maximizing stability, reliability and longevity. Ships always cost vastly more than mechs, so everyone expected them to last decades. Ves suddenly introduced a different perspective that went directly counter to what he learned.

"What kind of performance boost are you expecting then? And how long will the models last?"

"I can easily boost its performance by twenty percent. This performance will slowly degrade over time, but the first measurable drop won't happen in months under normal conditions. Heavy combat will accelerate this breakdown, but even I'll make sure they'll last the entire forty day window."

What Ves proposed frankly astounded the ensign. It took a lot of effort for him to get a grip on the radical suggestion, but once he thought it over, he thought it might have some merit.

"I can accept that the expedition will increase their odds of success if the Olympians gain a short-term boost. However, it won't be easy to cover the loss of two heavy mechs. I'm not so sure that Lord Kaine will allow such a travesty to happen."

Ves started to smirk. "It seems to me that Lord Kaine is gambling everything on a single throw of the dice. It's impossible to succeed every time. Besides, it's not like the mechs are worthless if they have drawn their last breaths. As long as you can salvage the wrecks, you can recycle most of the exotics used in their construction."

He eventually convinced D'Amato of the merits of his plan, but he was merely the gatekeeper. A decision of this magnitude went above Felicity Kaine's head. Only Jeremiah Kaine himself could give the green light on this plan.

When the ensign notified Lord Kaine directly, they waited for hours before they received a simple reply.

"Show me a design."

Ves took that message as an encouraging sign. While he hadn't received definite approval to mess around with the Olympians, he finally pried open the door.

In addition, his radical suggestion bypassed Captain Kaine and Chief Ramirez. While he did no favors by going over their heads, he also wouldn't have to deal with their irrational obstinance.

Once he got the okay, he immediately went to work. Due to the fact that he'd likely be letting the mech technicians do most of the work, he didn't spend too much effort on nurturing the X-Factor.

After all, he intended to produce a variant of a variant of another design. Not only that, he also planned to modify existing mechs that already possessed an identity of its own. Ves did not wish to spend an excessive amount of time on fostering an X-Factor that would only end up stillborn when he finished he finally laid down his tools.

"It's better to focus on the hardware this time."

Ves unintentionally drew on Master Olson's teachings, but in the opposite direction this time. Her extensive lecture on battle mechatronics obsessed on how to prolong the service life of a mech.

Put simply, he intended to invert these methods in order to squeeze out every bit of latent potential out of the Ajax Olympians.

Many of these methods involved tweaking the performance of a design so that it flattened out. This lowered the maximum capacity of its systems but prevented them from being strained by short but excessive bursts of power.

A normal mech designer striving to build up a solid reputation always designed mechs that were intended to last. No one wanted to acquire a mech that only promised to perform up to spec for a year. Even heavy knights meant to take a beating incorporated many excessive buffers and failsafes in order to prevent a premature breakdown.

By going in reverse, Ves insured that the mechs would be able to exert much more power. While the excessive stresses reduced the effective lifetime of the mechs in question, the sacrifice was worth it if Ves insured the models maintained their peak performance during the mission.

He chuckled a bit to himself. "I don't think my master thought I'd apply her teachings in this fashion. She's probably slap me to death if she can see what I've cooked up."

He spent a fruitful week whipping up a hasty but effective design. He kept it fairly simple and avoided any major redesigns. Instead, he tore out a lot of duplicate components that raised the Olympian's redundancy but only really came into being at the end of the model's life cycle.

Certainly, Ves risked condemnation for reducing the redundancy of a mech that sorely needed it. Therefore, he tested the design himself and gathered the data to back up his decision.

Once he freed up some space, Ves started to rearrange the internal architecture. He increased its capacity to deliver a higher performance by widening some channels, bulking up the artificial muscles, adding in some amplifiers and tweaking the programming of some of the components.

He ended up with an Ajax on steroids.

Chapter 173 Convincing

Finishing the design only meant that Ves fleshed out a plan. It didn't mean anything if his client denied him the opportunity to implement his changes.

Ves believed his redesign had a lot of merit. The reworked Ajax Olympian lasted a bit longer under heavy pressure and could exert a lot more force through its limbs. This helped the heavy knight contend against the hexapod kings in terms of brute force.

Still, nothing came for free. Maintaining a constant level of peak performance severely degraded the longevity of the frame. Running all of that excess power through systems that hadn't been rated to handle them meant that the mechs would slowly burn themselves out.

Its pristine layers of armor could still be salvaged, but the internals would have to be torn apart entirely.

"The cost is worth it." Ves tried to convince himself as he prepared to meet Lord Kaine in person again. "As long as the expedition can recover the heavy knights, they'll only end up with a temporary loss."

Melkor, who always accompanied him by his side, shook his head. "The hunting platoon won't see it that way. You don't know mech pilots like I do. The pilots assigned to the heavy knights have trained with their individual frames for years. They're practically lovers at this point."

What Melkor said momentarily worried Ves. Mech pilots indeed developed a bond with their mechs. This was natural human instinct. Right now, he pushed out a proposal that basically kidnapped their lovers and injected them with highly lethal stimulants. Such a naked violation of their partners would deal a heavy blow to their psyches.

"Tough luck then." Ves eventually replied, his eyes as cold as steel. "The expedition doesn't revolve around their interests. All of the mechs serve at the pleasure of Lord Kaine. If they have to be used up in order to increase the odds of success, then so be it. It's a fair tradeoff."

House Kaine invested an incredible fortune to put this expedition together. Even then, they could only nurture a small number of hand-raised elites to tackle the awesome hexapod kings. Everyone of those mechs played a critical role, but that didn't mean they should be treated as heirlooms.

With the way Lord Kaine obsessed over the expedition, Ves expected him to make the smart decision.

"Pissing off the pilots of the Olympians is the least you've done. You completely disregarded the hunting platoon's leadership. Captain Kaine will only think worse of you."

"There's no way I can negotiate with her in the first place. Not with so little time."

If Captain Kaine and the hunting platoon approached him with a genuine desire to cooperate, then he might be able to make some compromises. Too bad they hadn't recovered from the betrayal of the previous mech designer.

In any event, Ves didn't come here to build up a relationship with these foreigners. After finishing his mission, he'd return to Cloudy Curtain while the Ark Horizon went on her merry way back to the Grey Willow Star Sector.

Like a lawyer making a case before a judge, Ves stood before Lord Kaine behind his imposing desk. "If I'm allowed to implement my design, the Ajax Olympians will be able to perform beyond their regular parameters by around twenty percent."

"Downsides?" Lord Kaine asked idly while he browsed through the extensive notes that Ves had written up.

"Besides the obvious degradation that won't really matter, the mechs will drastically increase their energy consumption by around fifty percent or so. I've already tried my best to preserve as much efficiency as I can, but you always have to pay a huge price to squeeze out a little bit more performance."

"Hm, we'll have to increase the supply of spare energy cells."

An experienced leader like Lord Kaine always knew the right questions to ask. Even if he held some animosity to Ves, he was capable of putting it aside in favor of advancing his cherished expedition.

However, just as the meeting drew to a favorable conclusion, the main hatch slid open and an angry wildcat entered the stateroom.

"Grandpa!" Felicity growled and stomped over to Ves. She abruptly grasped his collar and used her prodigious strength to lift him up. "I just heard what this bastard intends to do. He wants to butcher the Ajaxes!"

"Sit down Miss Kaine!" The older gentlemen roared, forcing Felicity to halt her impending tirade. "Remember your duties. We are not playing games right now!"

Felicity let go of Ves, allowing him to breathe. She slowly calmed down and squeezed her fists. "Sir! I respectfully wish to issue an objection to Mr. Larkinson's stupid idea. The men assigned to pilot the Olympians have trained with the heavy knights for years. Abruptly implementing major changes will throw away their familiarity with their mechs. I can't guarantee they will be able to perform up to standard when everyone is counting on them!"

She certainly adjusted quickly. Ves admired her excuse. It sounded quite plausible. "Captain Kaine has a point, but the redesign will not offer a vastly different piloting experience. The new Olympian is still the same, it just has higher limits now."

"We don't have the time to indulge in your flights of fancies! You spent so little time on this design. I don't believe you eliminated all of the flaws! Besides that, it also takes an incredibly long time to reconfigure a heavy mech, let alone two. There's no way you can finish converting the Olympians to your new design!"

"I think you underestimate my assembly skills." Ves shook his head. "Under my supervision, I'll be able to direct the mech technicians in your department to take the best paths. I can guarantee you that I'll be able to get it done in ten days."

"Ten days? This is not a flimsy light mech you're talking about. These are heavy mechs!"

Just as it seemed the argument would go on, an alarm suddenly blared. A brief but complex tone sounded out that caused the faces of both Kaines to pale.

Lord Kaine immediately activated his intercomm. "All hands prepare for action! Set condition yellow!"

Felicity already left the room in order to lead her hunting platoon. As for Lord Kaine, he frowned as he studied the incoming data sent to his terminal. He gritted his teeth.

"Opportunists!"

Then, he suddenly remembered that Ves hadn't left. "Mr. Larkinson, you have my permission to implement your design. Begin your work immediately and don't report back until you have finished the overhaul."

"You want me to convert the Olympians right now?"

"A naval battle can drag on for days. The expedition can't afford to keep you idle. Corral the mech technicians assigned to the hunting platoon to assist your efforts as long as it doesn't interfere with the defense of my fleet."

Ves acknowledged the order and promptly got kicked out of the office. The entire fleet carrier transitioned into condition yellow, which was better than condition red but worse than condition green. Basically, the Ark Horizon raised her guard and prepared for battle, even if there might not be an imminent threat.

"What's going on?!" He asked.

Ensign D'Amato studied his comm for a moment. "A large fleet has arrived in our current star system. Considering the remoteness of our current location, the new arrivals are likely targeting our expedition. While they can't match our numbers, they possess enough ships and mechs to pose a threat to Ark Horizon."

"Is the Ark in danger?"

"I'm not quite sure. Our force is bigger so it will be strange if they decide to commit their forces. We still don't know what they're hoping for that's giving them so much confidence." The ensign turned to Melkor. "Do you wish to contribute to our defense?"

The fleet carrier offered a large amount of reinforced bunkers that allowed mechs to shoot against approaching enemies. Melkor's Stanislaw might prove useful.

He shook his head. "I'll only be in the way. It's better if I keep an eye on Ves."

Melkor didn't fit in their chain of command and never trained to take up a defensive position aboard a fleet carrier. In this unfamiliar environment, the last thing he wanted to do was to attract suspicion.

"We'll hole up in the workshop." Ves declared. He wanted to be out of the way in case something dangerous happened. "Lord Kaine has given me his orders, so I best get to work."

The hangar bay where the hunting platoon holed up turned into a hive of activity. Ves, Melkor and D'Amato had to make way for important people going on important business. Their imposing stances revealed that they expected the worst.

Even the hunting platoon had begun to mobilize. Captain Kaine corralled her subordinates to ready every mech. Mech technicians hurriedly cancelled their routine maintenance tasks in order to free up the mechs.

The Emyreans readied themselves to be employed in one of the Ark Horizon's bunkers where they could employ their railguns to the fullest.

The Volmars stayed in their stables. Their mech pilots sat close, ready to hop in if they were needed to repel any boarding parties. Their relatively relaxed faces showed that they didn't think it would come to that. The Ark Horizon possessed a lot of teeth.

As for the Ajax Olympians, no one prepared them for deployment. Felicity Kaine had already been notified that they'd be modified and she had no time to waste on the matter now that the fleet had been set to condition yellow.

This provided Ves with an unexpected boon. Many mech technicians assigned to the hunting platoon had nothing to do for the moment. The story might be different once a battle erupted, but from what everyone surmised, the fleets were out of range and stayed that way for at least several hours.

"Has the Ark Horizon ever been tested in battle?" Ves curiously asked Chief Ramirez.

"Not since House Kaine got their hands on her. We've received excellent training, but we've never been tested in actual battle."

That didn't sound encouraging. Hopefully, the Ark Horizon's impressive capabilities and her abundance of mechs deterred the pirates from testing the expedition's readiness.

In order to prevent any leaks, the entire ship locked down on any form of communication. When Ves activated his comm, he found he couldn't view the current disposition of the fleet. For all he knew, the fleet was flying straight into a star.

The lack of information caused him to feel slightly claustrophobic. It was as if he was trapped in a space elevator that suddenly descended uncontrollably.

Ensign D'Amato patted his back. "It's nothing unusual to feel uneasy about what's going on outside. Trust in our crew. They've got our backs. It's better if you focus on your own duties."

Indeed. One good thing that came out of this course of events was that Ves received permission to go ahead with his plans without coming to blows with Captain Kaine. Even though she probably hated his guts, her feelings on the

matter didn't matter. The entire ordeal proved that the young scion of the Kaines possessed little actual power.

Together with D'Amato and Ramirez, Ves delegated the difficult assignment of converting the Ajax Olympians to a new design. This was his first time working with a large number of subordinates, but through the help of his two liaisons, they came up with a workable schedule.

"Jobs like these are split up in two. First, you've got to fabricate the new parts. As far as I see it, there's nothing challenging in fabricating these extra parts. I'm not familiar with half of them, but they're not too complex."

"Just because they're simple doesn't mean you can slack off." Ves quickly warned. "In order to make sure they're able to withstand the shocks they're likely to face, they have to be reproduced exactly according to specs. We absolutely can't afford to cut corners in this matter. The tolerances have to be extremely tight."

"I'll make sure my men won't slip." Ramirez promised with fiery eyes. "We all know what's at stake. I won't forgive anyone if he thinks he can get away with sloppy work."

The chief's supervision lifted a weight off Ves. "That's good. If you can insure the parts are fabricated without faults, I'll make sure the technicians know how to go about and reassemble the Olympians. They have to open up the entire frames and carefully remove the right parts. Then, they have to install the freshly fabricated parts in the right order. I expect this won't go so smooth."

Ves didn't trust the low-class mech technicians to know the correct order. He directly took charge of the most difficult aspect of this conversion project.

"I'll tell the men to listen to your orders. If they give you some lip, just smack them around."

Everyone nodded. Ves felt relieved that Chief Ramirez didn't put up any roadblocks. He knew when to follow orders. Since the current project had been authorized by the big man directly, Ramirez certainly knew he couldn't fob off his responsibilities.

Chapter 174 Dragons of the Void

Even if every channel of communication had been shuttered, it didn't stop people from talking. While most of the crew possessed some propriety, a small number of loudmouths couldn't help but pass on gossip. Of course, everything they said happened hours ago and didn't relate to the current condition of the expeditionary fleet.

"The expeditionary fleet avoided a minefield. They put some really nasty ones out in space. I heard that they had some impressive homing capabilities and their movements are stealthy enough to sneak up on us to about a hundred kilometers. After that, it activates this enormous booster than propels it straight into the biggest ship it can find!"

"Some of the merc ships in our fleet are dragging their heels. I heard Lord Kaine has been shouting their butts off for refusing to meet the enemy. I told you guys the local mercs are scum! They're good little soldiers as long as nothing happens, but they're acting as scared as rabbits as soon as actual combat is involved!"

"The brass keeps arguing on how to handle the pirate fleet. Lord Kaine directly butted heads with the Big Three! Even the three big mercenary groups don't agree on what to do. George's Cavalry want to conduct a pitched battle, while the Stray Phantoms is hoping to drag out the engagements."

"What about Adila's Chosen?"

"The hell if I know what those religious nuts are thinking about. They're praying to themselves half of the time."

"The Stray Phantoms raked their vanguard! I heard they chewed up dozens of mechs at once in a single pass! The attack caused the entire pirate fleet to pause!"

The constant chatter apprised Ves and the others of the situation and gave them some perspective of what went on in space. Though he didn't know how the lower ranks got their news, it sounded as if the entire engagement had just begun.

Ves slowly got used to working under an elevated alert level. He had to watch his actions and make sure he didn't get up to anything suspicious. Ensign D'Amato kept a laser-like gaze on him while he directed the partial disassembly of the two Ajax Olympians.

As heavy knights were meant to absorb damage, they possessed an extremely complex armor system. Every layer and every plate connected to another one, and untangling them took a lot of care and effort.

Fortunately, the mech technicians in this department possessed plenty of experience in peeling back the armor. They expertly stripped away the dense and heavy plates and set them aside. Ves didn't even have to get his hands dirty.

"Alright, we've opened up the Ajaxes." Ves announced the the technicians that Chief Ramirez had placed under him. "Now, carefully dismantle the components marked in the chart according to the order I set out."

The feeling of leading an entire work crew made Ves feel like a queen among a hive of bees. It helped that the bees all possessed their own competences. As an influence from a second-rate state, House Kaine would never hire idiots.

Ves also gained an unexpected benefit in this process. He personally witnessed the various methods the mech technicians used to coordinate with

each other and keep track of their progress. All of their sophisticated means had been laid bare before his eyes. If he ever wanted to expand his production capacity, he wouldn't be starting from scratch.

"Even if I don't gain much on this trip, this experience is already worth it. I should start hiring some mech technicians once I return home."

Over at the workshop, Chief Ramirez had already begun to fabricate the new components. Ves didn't worry too much because the design mostly demanded auxiliary components that didn't possess any complex functions. Neither did they incorporate a lot of finicky exotic materials.

The Ark Horizon's workshops all came stocked with powerful but compact 3D printers. It possessed similar qualities to the gigantic Dortmund but took up half the space. With the help of these advanced machines, the production of the parts proceeded on schedule.

A change happened in the third day. The Ark Horizon vibrated briefly, interrupting everyone's work. Ves looked up from the diagram he studied and frowned. "What's going on?"

Ensign D'Amato looked concerned. "That's the thrusters of the Ark Horizon. The ship is accelerating at its maximum speed!"

The alert light that everyone previously ignored turned from yellow to red. Everyone quickly received a new set of orders.

"Stop your work and secure everything in sight! Change into your hazard suits and ready your gear!"

The hunting platoon started to rouse. Every mech except for the Ajaxes came online. The Volmars gathered together and lumbered towards the center of the hangar bay while the Emphyreans gathered their railguns and headed towards their assigned bunkers.

The mech technicians split in two. The first half remained in the hangar bay and waited to receive damaged mechs. The other half joined various damage control parties that stood by to mitigate the damage the Ark might incur.

Ves started to get very concerned. From what he gathered so far, the expeditionary fleet acted cautiously in front of the pirate fleet. An abrupt course change and full acceleration meant the Ark was either running away or turning headlong into the enemy.

Ensign D'Amato kept trying to find out the current situation, but his junior rank stopped him from obtaining anything solid. Ves shook his head and stormed directly to Captain Kaine. The woman had already changed into an armored piloting suit and started to head for her private mech stable.

"Please wait a moment!"

"What do you want?" Captain Kaine spat out as she look at him as if he was a worm.

"Tell me what is happening!"

Though she wanted to brush him off, she glanced at Melkor who always stood by his side and reconsidered. "Another round of treachery occurred. Some of the local mercenary outfits turned coat and ambushed the ships that belong to the mercenaries who are still on our side. The opening round alone devastated dozens of mechs and crippled three small transports!"

Ves felt as if he had been struck by lightning. "I thought House Kaine had a handle on the mercenaries!"

"They somehow conspired to betray House Kaine from the start. The traitor mercs hid a number of assets aboard their ships and attacked our security officers who had been placed aboard their ships to prevent any mutinies. Some of them are still holding out!"

The expeditionary fleet possessed a lot of assets, so the betrayal hadn't managed to threaten the Ark Horizon. However, the pirate fleet led by a menacing pirate gang called the Dragons of the Void had begun to swoop in for the kill.

Instead of shying away from a fight, Lord Kaine decided to directly put his powerful fleet carrier into play. The entire expeditionary fleet redirected their course in a direct heading towards the pirate fleet.

Lord Kaine intended to bull right through the enemy's formation!

Ves wanted to curse at his client's recklessness. "Let me help! I'm a mech designer. I'm good with anything that involves mechs."

"I'm sorry Larkinson, but the last thing we need is another outsider butting in where he doesn't belong. Your place is here. If you want to help, then ask Chief Ramirez for something to do. Whatever you do, don't leave this department."

The woman turned around before Ves could say anything else. He missed his opportunity to make a difference.

He wanted to cross over to the other side of the hangar bay and help work on the spaceborn mechs that started to deploy into space. Ves had never come close to seeing an actual spaceborn mech, let alone perform any maintenance on these special mechs.

An hour went by as more than half of the mechs in the hangar bay had left. The mechs that remained all waited for their turns to deploy.

Over time, damaged mechs started to fly back into the hangar. Their damaged frames passed through the security screen that acted as a membrane to keep all of the air and pressure inside the hangar stable.

Even if the security screens malfunctioned, everyone had already changed into hazard suits, including Ves and Melkor. These hardened vacuum suits provided their wearers with a lot of protection against explosions, shrapnel and radiation. Their boots possessed a strong magnetic sole that helped everyone stay on their feet even at zero-G.

Ves spent most of his time helping Chief Ramirez securing the workshop and mech stables for any loose ends. The two Ajaxes especially remained vulnerable. Most of its heavy armor plating that protected its delicate internals had been placed to the side.

If a pirate happened to drop by and fired a volley of shots from a regular infantry rifle, he'd be able to do a massive amount of damage.

"Keep attaching as much armor as you can!" Chief Ramirez frantically yelled at his henpecked technicians. "I'll dock your pay if I see a single exposed section in an hour!"

Everyone frantically raced to put some measure of cover on the exposed Ajax frames. Even though it might not help that much if a missile went off, it would at least limit some of the shock damage.

Throughout all of this chaos, Melkor stood largely forgotten. As a mech pilot and bodyguard to Ves, he lacked access to both a mech and a personal firearm. The expedition's admittedly justified caution towards outsiders relegated him to the role of an observer. His only job these days appeared to be keeping hold of Lucky.

The cat happened to detect something strange. He loudly meowed and tried to catch his owner's attention. Melkor tried to stifle the cat due to the commotion he caused, but Lucky remained undeterred.

Ves had learned to trust his mechanical companion. "What's wrong, Lucky?"

The cat stretched his paw towards one of the entrances of the hangar bay. The harness prevented him from utilizing his full range of motion.

"Okay, enough of this crap!" Ves turned around and borrowed a cutting tool from a work table. He turned it on and carefully cut apart the restrictions that kept Lucky largely immobile. Once all of the shackles broke, the cat quickly lunged in the direction of the nearest entrance.

"Hey, what are you doing? That pet is not allowed to roam free!" Ensign D'Amato yelled and pulled out his laser pistol.

Even if D'Amato hadn't aimed his pistol at anyone, Ves still raised his hands. "Hey, I don't mean any harm! My cat has a really good nose. He might have detected something fishy!"

"That's ridiculous!" The ensign exclaimed with an incredulous expression.

"The Ark Horizon is the flagship of this fleet! Every compartment and every corridor is monitored day and night. Nothing that can threaten the ship and her crew can ever get close!"

It all came down to trust. Ves hoped that his stay aboard the Ark had proved he could be trusted to advance the interests of the expedition. Ensign D'Amato went beyond his job as an observer and frequently helped out Ves by providing his own insights.

Yet as soon as Ves crossed the line, D'Amato acted like someone pressed his reset button. It hurt a bit to be treated like a stranger and a potential threat after so many days of camaraderie.

Melkor already stood in front of Ves. "Calm down, the both of you! Ensign, Lucky is not a toy. I believe in Ves when he states that Lucky is capable of sniffing out any threats. I suggest you warn whoever is in command on this deck to prepare for the worst."

Just as Ensign D'Amato was about to reply, a large explosion near the entrance interrupted his words. The blast knocked all of the spacers off their feet and blew away various pieces of junk in the vicinity. Some of the mech technicians who still remained standing even got hit by cabinets and unsecured tools!

Another explosion triggered close to the security screen, instantly disabling it. The entire hangar bay suffered from explosive decompression as all of the air inside the massive bay departed into space. A few more loose components flew off into vacuum.

"Lucky!" Ves called as his hazard suit sent out an alert. His suit came with two hours of oxygen, but his stress caused him to deplete his reserves faster.

"Lucky, where are you?!"

Vacuum transmitted no sound. Ves couldn't call out for his cat. He disregarded the wounded and hobbled over towards the first blast site.

A shiny bronze cat appeared from nowhere. The cat appeared frazzled.

"There you are!"

Ves grasped Lucky's body and inspected him for damage. He sighed in relief once he saw his cat only suffered a glancing blow from a random piece of shrapnel.

Melkor and D'Amato raced to his position and beheld the carnage around them. The blast hurt a fair amount of unsuspecting mech technicians.

Just as it appeared that things couldn't go worse, a strange, damaged mech coated in red descended onto the hangar bay.

"Pirate mech!"

Chapter 175 Critical Repair

Before switching to condition red, the two fleets danced around each other.

The expeditionary fleet centered around the Ark Horizon kept trying to transition into FTL.

In order to bar their way, the Dragons of the Void kept bombarding them with miniature gravity bombs. These bombs did nothing much but radiate a strong local gravity field that quickly tapered off. However, they were cheap to make so thousands of these bombs rained over the expeditionary fleet at any moment.

At its current state, the expeditionary fleet's FTL drives couldn't handle the disturbance. The constant ejection of the bombs was like throwing stones into a formerly placid lake. The ripples that ensued when the stones touched the water prevented the ships from going into FTL.

However, the Dragons of the Void miscalculated. In order to disturb the expeditionary fleet, their own pirate ships had to come fairly close. When Lord Kaine decided to turn his ship straight into the pirates, he surprised everyone but putting the Ark Horizon in the vanguard.

Putting his flagship in the heart of the offensive thrust exposed the valuable ship to significant enemy fire, but also allowed him to use his best ship in the best possible way.

The expeditionary fleet's maneuvers had caught the Dragons of the Void off-guard. Lord Kaine ordered the fleet to close up its formation and assemble into an arrow. The man wanted to pierce straight through the dispersed formation of pirates before they could do the same.

Their disparity in strength became evident after the two fleets collided. The vast distance between each ship ensured no actual collision occurred. However, many spaceborn mechs came into medium or close range to each other, which allowed House Kaine to flex its superior ships and mechs.

The pirates fell short on both firepower and armor. Many pirate vessels simply consisted of civilian transports converted into improvised mech carriers.

These ships generally didn't possess exceptional armor and their keels and support structure were never rated to handle heavy abuse.

On the other hand, the ships controlled by House Kaine and their partners boasted thick layers of exotic armor. Each ship cost a fortune, but all of them made it through the thick of the fight with nothing but scratches.

In terms of offense, House Kaine chewed up the pirate fleet with its abundant number of riflemen and cannoneer mechs. They had been equipped to handle the sandmen, so they possessed a large amount of kinetic weaponry such as ballistic rifles and railguns. These weapons possessed a very large punch and were capable of crippling any small-to-medium sized ships in a couple of volleys.

Yet the pirates didn't go down without a fight. After experiencing the ferocity of the forces from the Grey Willow Star Sector, they shifted the bulk of their firepower towards the mercenaries who remained loyal to House Kaine.

The mercenary ships already had to deal with their colleagues who turned their coats. They suffered heavy casualties once they became the focus of the enemy mechs, especially considering that most of them carried mechs kitted out for melee combat.

While George's Cavalry eventually swooped in and came to their rescue, even they couldn't cover every direction. The mercenaries sustained casualties up to around thirty percent.

In the meantime, some pirates went crazy and plunged straight towards the Ark Horizon. The massive ship utilized both her broadside bunkers to lay down a massive field of fire in two directions. Her prodigious firepower disrupted the pirate formation and softened them up to follow-up blows.

While many pirates valued their own lives and tried to fly away, some daredevils running on stimulants dove straight towards the behemoth. The defenders aboard the Ark Horizon focused their fire towards these dangerous lunatics, but some of them managed to get through.

The pirate mech that sneaked into one of the hangar bays made for a sorry sight. It lost an entire arm and much of its torso lost its armor plating. Despite the catastrophic damage, it held on to its laser rifle with its remaining arm and tried to raise it towards a group of bewildered mech technicians.

The mech suddenly crunched into pieces as a dazzling white mech fell on top of its prone form. The newly arrived mech featured a light feminine contour with marvellous red streamers hanging from its head. From the way it collapsed a pirate mech merely by stomping on it, the white mech must be a highly advanced mech.

The white mech flourished its spear, the tip of which glowed in a mysterious white glow. The mech transmitted Captain Kaine's voice to everyone's hazard suits. "Lock down the hangar bay! Close the ramp and man the defense turrets!"

Everyone sprung into action. The huge opening that exposed the hangar bay to space started to close up. Just as the ramp covered the giant gap, another pirate mech appeared and slammed a sword through one of the mechanisms.

The ramp abruptly stopped midway, leaving enough space for more intruders. A handful of pirate mechs that survived the initial barrage flocked to the opening and tried to squeeze into the vulnerable hangar.

The pitfalls of deploying a fleet carrier straight into the fray finally became apparent. In the end, the Ark Horizon lacked the armor coverage and anti-mech defense systems of a true warship.

"Mechs, hold your ground! Repel the invaders!"

A significant amount of House Kaine's mechs remained on standby. All of them mobilized at this moment in order to respond to the new threat.

In the meantime, Melkor raced towards his own mech which had been stowed in the corner since their arrival. His Stanislaw wielded a deadly mid-range laser rifle which could wreak havoc if he recklessly fired the weapon. Thus, as soon as his mech came online, he dialed down the power and aimed carefully before firing at the pirate mechs making a mess of things.

Internal defense turrets came online at this moment and helped repel the pirates. Some enemy mechs collapsed after suffering a couple of blows, while other mechs required much more effort to defeat. All of the latter mechs carried the emblem of a white-and-black dragon's head.

"Turrets, focus on the rabble. Leave the Dragons of the Void to us!"

As the mechs started to fight around the broken ramp, Ves hurriedly sought out Chief Ramirez. The man had hunkered down behind a control terminal. He hastily tried to activate various settings only to encounter error messages.

Ramirez cursed. Everyone on the local channel heard his frustration. "The pirates knew where to strike! The earlier explosion wrecked the primary power channel to the ramp. The damage the pirate mech inflicted to the mechanism shouldn't be able to cripple the ramp if it still had full power!"

Perhaps the random attacks hadn't been so spontaneous. All of the evidence so far pointed out that the local mercs weren't the only ones dealing with questionable loyalties. Still, Ves shook his head. Now was not the time to sniff out any traitors. Ramirez just pointed out an area where he could be of use.

"Calm down!" Ves demanded and put his hands over the chief's broad shoulders. "We have to repair the broken power channel!"

"What? Now?"

The repair work had to be done out in the open where almost any mech could fire a stray shot at the location. Chief Ramirez didn't dare to send out any men to fix the broken channel. Even if he cut every possible corner, the work would still take over ten minutes of frantic working!

"If the ramp stays open, the pirates will keep pouring in! The longer this goes on, the higher the chance our Ajaxes will suffer damage! I don't need to tell you how much it will set back the expedition. Chief, make a decision. We have to get that ramp moving again!"

Ves had a very good point. Even as the Ark Horizon threaded her way out of the pirate formation, the large amounts of reckless pirates deployed in space ensured that a trickle of enemies would always squeeze through the opening.

The chief gritted his teeth. "Fine!"

The man finally got his head back together and ordered a team of his most solid mech technicians to grab some tools. Meanwhile, Ves and Ramirez entered one of the storehouses and retrieved the materials to replace the broken power channel. They couldn't lift the load by hand, so they piled it on top of a loader bot and brought it with them back to the main hangar.

"Let's go, boys!"

The group of technicians tried their best to remain inconspicuous. They slowly neared the main entrance of the hangar and entered the area affected by the initial explosion. The wounded had already been retrieved while the dead still lingered where their breaths snuffed out.

Most of the dead wore simple vacuum suits covered with simple work coveralls that provided them with an abundant amount of pockets. They provided little protection against a serious blast like the one that broke the power channel. Ves felt a little queasy walking past the unfortunate dead.

Lucky on the other hand revelled in his newfound freedom. The harness had irritated him for weeks, preventing him from running around without restriction. Now that Ves had cut off his bonds, he eagerly took the lead and made sure that the repair team encountered no other threats.

Too bad he couldn't help if a pirate mech decides to shoot in their direction. Ves might survive on account of his shield generator, but everyone else only had their hazard suits to protect their bodies.

Once they reached the affected portion, Ves and a number of competent technicians turned on their plasma cutters and separated the wrecked portion of the power channel.

They worked for several minutes, trusting their comrades to cover their back. Melkor in particular shot at every mech who turned their weapons to the work team, drawing attention away from their vital effort to secure the hangar.

Captain Kaine also intervened with her top quality machine. Unfortunately, her mech lacked a flight system and had to borrow a spare ballistic rifle in order to fight back against the pirates.

While she might be an excellent warrior with a spear, her marksmanship barely sufficed. Many of her shots missed her target and traveled on to hit the deck or bulkhead. Despite her abysmal hit rate, she succeeded in distracting the pirates, causing them to forget about the puny humans who worked out in the open.

Everyone in the repair team made brisk progress trying to improvise a new channel. They couldn't afford to go through a checklist of procedures. They merely settled for a crude and improvised channel that would hold up to the stress of channeling a significant amount of power. It already sounded good if it lasted for an hour before burning out.

"Skip the safeties! Work faster! Don't wait for the couplings to settle in. Just skip to the next part!"

While Ves possessed a vast amount of theoretical knowledge, the best mech technicians surpassed him in handling the tools and conducting the actual repairs. The mech designer had been pushed in a supervisory capacity and made sure the mech technicians took the right actions to repair the power channel quickly.

Several minutes flew by as the ugly-looking kludge took shape. Once the power channel finally took shape, Ramirez raced to the nearest console and forcibly tried to order the ramp to close.

The half-broken ramp shook, then abruptly moved as its remaining mechanisms powered through. The few remaining pirate mechs tried but failed to sabotage the ramp again. Reinforcements arrived just in time to contain the rogue mechs.

The ramp finally slid shut and powerful locks kept the heavy cover in place. The hangar bay now enjoyed as much protection as the rest of the ship.

The repair team led by Ves and Chief Ramirez collapsed on the ground. The stress of working under fire completely drained their energy. After giving everyone a minute of rest, Ramirez started to kick his men up their feet.

"Get up! This is no time to sleep! We still have work to do!"

The battle wasn't over yet. The Ark Horizon paid a significant price in her attempt to cut the pirate formation in half. While the expeditionary fleet succeeded in disintegrating the enemy formation, a lot of ships and mechs suffered various amounts of damage in turn.

Chapter 176 Groening System

The majority of the Dragons of the Void fought to the death. They clung to the heels of the expeditionary fleet and tried to gnaw through as much flesh as

possible before they perished. This diehard behavior was completely uncharacteristic of opportunistic pirates who only cared for money and their lives.

After the vanguard led by the Ark Horizon completed their firing pass, much of the pirate fleet lost their coordination. Every ship and every mech on their side ended up in random positions. They couldn't gather into a cohesive formation anymore that could withstand the concerted efforts of House Kaine.

Most of the other pirate gangs fled. They made for easy pickings and more than half of the pirates never made it very far before they got shot to pieces.

In contrast, every mercenary corps suffered losses. Lord Kaine hired them to hunt hexapods, so they possessed the wrong loadout to fight a space battle. Combined with the defection of some other mercenaries, the expeditionary fleet lost about half of its original force of local hired help.

The mercenaries hadn't signed up to be cannon fodder. They were just about to mutiny until Lord Kaine granted them full salvage rights. Every wrecked ship and mech that belonged to the pirates were free reign. The clever measure placated them and caused most mercs to descend on the derelicts like bees in a hive.

After all, any wreck contained a lot of untapped treasure. Any mech or ship contained many millions of credits worth of exotics. Even if they lacked the facilities to extract the most valuable resources out of the wrecks, they still cut away the juiciest bits and intended to sell them to a professional salvager once the expedition returned to civilized space.

Ves found out that Keller's Blades distinguished themselves in battle. They possessed a small number of spaceborn mechs and helped put down the traitors when they caused a ruckus. The Vesian mercenaries even received a public commendation from Lord Kaine.

As for the Ark Horizon, the fleet carrier adopted a somewhat somber mood. A small number of spacers and mech pilots lost their lives in the ensuing chaos, not helped by Lord Kaine's abrupt decision to plunge the flagship into the enemy formation. While his maneuver succeeded in breaking the pirates, it also left much of the crew unprepared for a pitched battle.

"You should go with us to the funeral service." Chief Ramirez said as he wore a dress uniform. Around sixty people lost their lives in total, half of them killed by traitors who set off explosives. "You and your cousin fought alongside us. Even if you're not a part of our crew, you're comrades nonetheless."

"Alright."

Ves and Melkor switched their antigrav clothes to something more appropriate before joining the rest of the maintenance department. They entered the largest hangar bay where a large space had been emptied near the ramp. Although a security screen kept the vacuum out, everyone wore skintight vacsuits underneath their dress uniforms just in case.

As soon as Ves saw the coffins, he started to turn a little numb. When Lord Kaine arrived and presided over a brief ceremony, he kept staring at the coffins with morbid fear.

"I could have ended up in one of those coffins."

Only now did the danger of the expedition truly sink in. They hadn't even met the sandmen in battle and already the expedition lost half of its peripheral mercenaries. Though House Kaine and their core mercenary partners hadn't lost too many assets this time, they might not be so lucky next time.

After sending off the coffins into the endless road of stars, everyone resumed their duties. The mech technicians became twice as busy as several mechs came back from the battle in a damaged state.

Even Ves and Chief Ramirez had to make do with fewer mech technicians as every department became short-handed. Still, the overhaul of the Ajax Olympians still continued largely on schedule. Lord Kaine personally sent them a memo telling them not to reassign too many men away from this project.

"The big man himself wants to see these mechs up and running before we set foot on Groening IV." Chief Ramirez told Ves. "There will be hell to pay if we end up holding up the timetable. We've already suffered too many delays."

Everyone soon got over the deaths and went back to work with determination. This time, the hunting platoon didn't regard Ves as a busybody who had no place in their midst. While Captain Kaine still avoided him like the plague, he got along a bit better with the rank and file.

Even Ensign D'Amato mellowed out. He gave permission to Melkor to carry his personal sidearm and allowed Lucky to stroll around with just a tracking collar. Ves appreciated the amount of trust House Kaine extended to him. He felt a little safer now that Melkor could respond immediately.

"Will the expedition still be viable?" Ves asked the ensign one day. "We lost an awful lot of mercenaries. Will Lord Kaine be able to hunt enough hexapods to make up for his massive investment?"

"I'm not privy to the costs, but from what I know, Lord Kaine has already taken the loss into account before we even set off for this expedition. We always knew that we'll be losing a lot of mercenaries along the way. They're not exactly the most trustworthy bunch."

His remark made Ves look up at him. "You guys intended to cull the mercenaries from the start."

It sounded really devious now that he thought about it. He always wondered why Lord Kaine hired so many mercenaries to begin with. The man appeared

to invite disaster by keeping so many potential enemies close. Now it seemed that the wily old fox had other intentions in mind.

The ensign smirked. "There might still be some people with questionable loyalties among the mercenaries, but they won't have the numbers to threaten our fleet. We've already cleaned up the worst of the bunch together with their pirate associates."

A few questions remained, however. Post-battle analysis revealed that much of the Dragons of the Void fought to the death except for the flagship of the pirate group. The pirate commander ruthlessly threw away his entire force and fled without a single shred of decency.

Once investigators began to dig in to the wrecks, they found to their surprise that much of the crew had been hopped up with stimulants. The poisonous cocktail fanned their aggression and lowered their inhibitions. In particular, they stopped fearing death.

To everyone's surprise, none of them had been forcibly injected with them. Instead, an unknown force subjected many of the pirates to a sophisticated form of brainwashing. The mech pilots had it particularly worse as their neural interfaces had been tampered with. When Ves had been asked to take a look, his face turned white as a sheet.

He beheld the half-broken neural interface helmet like it was a live grenade. "This thing is pure insanity. Messing around with the neural interface without express permission from the MTA is never a good idea. They've touched on a fundamental taboo."

The human mind was sacred. No one condoned brainwashing, not even if it happened to pirates. In the long history of humanity's rise to the stars, they dabbled plenty of times with various forms of brainwashing and mental

conditioning. The horror of forming a society of human-form robots had once threatened humanity's dominance over the galaxy.

Still, the professional investigators working for House Kaine kept the details close to their chest. They only briefly consulted Ves on his opinions of the mechs they salvaged from the battlefield.

"They look like what a well-off pirate group is able to offer. It doesn't look like anything they fabricated themselves. Much of these mechs are pretty much off-the-shelf models that you can find in any corner of the Komodo Star Sector."

"Besides the tampered neural interfaces, are there any other anomalies in these mechs?" The lead investigator asked. His own men must have already checked the salvaged wrecks, but it didn't hurt to obtain a second opinion.

"I haven't spent enough time to make a definite judgement. The Dragons of the Void don't seem to be a fan of custom mechs or custom loadouts. This is all standard gear."

Not every fleet enjoyed an abundant amount of trained and skilled personnel. Generally, only criminals and degenerates resorted to piracy. Skilled mech technicians and engineers enjoyed way too many job prospects. Anyone with a brain would never volunteer to become an outlaw that had to run from the authorities like a dog for the rest of his life.

Days went by as Ves and the maintenance department assigned to the hunting platoon finished the overhaul in time. Under his personal supervision, Ves made sure that nothing went wrong with regards to the final reassembly of the Ajax Olympians. When their surly pilots entered the cockpits and brought both mechs online, the diagnostics revealed that everything ran according to specs.

"We did it!" Ramirez bellowed and cheered along with the other technicians. They certainly outdid themselves in transforming the heavy knights into a much more formidable machine. The twenty percent boost in strength on top of their already prodigious power ensured that they stood a much better chance at subduing a hexapod king.

They only had a few days to smooth out the kinks. Ves worked hard to ensure the Olympians could take the abuse for an extended amount of time. They finished right on time as the expeditionary fleet finally arrived at their fabled destination.

The Groening System's size and wealth exceeded everyone's expectations. The system possessed nineteen planets and many more moons. Much of these planets didn't amount to much. The expedition had no interest in exploring the lifeless rocks or boring gas giants. They made their way straight towards the inner system and to the only planet that possessed an atmosphere.

When D'Amato showed Ves a projection of the planet, the metal storms had already started to subside. "It truly looks like a treasure."

The constant storms had smoothed out the surface of the metal ground, causing it to adopt a pattern of dream-like waves. The Groening System's active yellow dwarf cast a glossy sheen atop the metal globe.

The ensign hadn't come up to Ves with this projection without a reason. "It's good that you appreciate the planet's beauty, because you'll be part of the ground team."

"What?!"

Ves knew that despite its exotic look, the planet hid a lot of threats. Who knew if the logs of the previous expedition encompassed all of the wildlife. In addition, things might have changed after more than twenty years.

"Lord Kaine gave the word himself and wants you on the ground. Even though the metal storm has entered its low period, it's still too dangerous to expose our shuttles to the planet's hostile atmosphere. We also have to take the hexabats into account. Each trip will degrade the integrity of a shuttle or transport, and we only brought so many to this expedition."

The hunting platoon and the mercenaries deployed to the underground paradise couldn't operate around the clock. Their pilots needed rest and the mechs might need some quick repairs.

Just like the previous expedition, House Kaine intended to establish a temporary base camp at a defensible position. With some hasty entrenchment, the camp should be able to withstand a horde of hexapods for a limited amount of time.

That still didn't mean that Ves could treat this trip like a vacation. The hexapods had already proven their lethality and Ves didn't look forward to seeing one in the flesh no matter how many walls the base camp erected.

"You're assigned to assist the hunting platoon. You can't do that effectively up in orbit." D'Amato explained. "Lord Kaine doesn't want to see you slacking off. Your contribution to improving the performance of our Ajax Olympians isn't enough to pay for your services."

In other words, Lord Kaine wanted to squeeze every little bit of value from his presence. Ves understood that the hunting platoons and other mechs might face some difficult problems. A mech designer like him could prove very useful in various ways. He couldn't come up with a viable excuse to shirk this duty.

"Very well. I'll prepare to join the ground team."

He should have expected to be employed in this fashion. From what he experienced so far, Lord Kaine and the rest of his men hardly valued the lives

of their mercenaries. While they had to treat their formidable mercenary partners from the Grey Willow Star Sector with care, they obviously didn't extend the same amount of concern to the help they picked up in the frontier.

Even if the hexapod kings all rose up and wiped the base camp off the map, then so what? If Ves ended up in a hexapod king's belly, House Kaine already earned a massive fortune from their earlier harvests. Even the Clifford Society didn't seem so scary once the Ark Horizon left the Komodo Star Sector.

Chapter 177 Descen

The night before planetfall, Ves and Melkor gathered together in their bunk. Ensign D'Amato also turned in for the night, so they didn't have to worry about any nearby physical presences. Ves turned on his trusty Privacy Shield which doubtlessly blocked all forms of hidden monitoring.

"It's safe to talk now." He said.

Melkor immediately brought up his suspicions. "Have you noticed how this expedition is vastly over-prepared for a mere hunting expedition on an untamed planet?"

"Huh, I never thought about it that way. You're right in that House Kaine has brought way too many mechs, but aren't they making sure they'll be harvesting as much monoexurite as possible?"

"Even with all the losses, they are bringing in so many mechs that the local ecosystem will definitely notice. The scale of this expedition is vastly larger than the previous one."

The surveyors who stumbled upon the Groening System came as explorers and mappers. They only possessed a handful of smaller ships and only several dozens of mechs at most. The expedition organized by House Kaine was at least a magnitude larger.

When Ves thought about scale of the entire venture, he started to suspect the motives of House Kaine. "You're right. A hunting trip doesn't require a capital ship like the Ark Horizon. Half of the fleet is geared to fight the sandmen, which is strange since no one has explicitly mentioned any plans to raid sandmen space."

What did that mean? Either Lord Kaine intended to attack the sandmen, or he had good reason to believe the sandmen might take the initiative.

Unfortunately, neither of the Larkinsons could figure out the real aim of the expedition. They lacked a lot of information and had no way of gathering more. Ensign D'Amato made sure that Ves didn't wander around or ask too many uncomfortable questions, not that anyone in the lower decks knew anything important.

The only person who might know the full picture was Captain Felicity Kaine. As an up-and-coming scion of the House, she had to be informed of the real score.

Ves found some reassurance to the fact that she and her entire hunting platoon would also be deployed to the underground world. The need to provide safe haven to the hunting platoon meant that the base camp should be safe as well, up to an extent.

In order to increase his chances of survival, Ves decided to spend a large portion of his DP. He accumulated a few thousand more Design Points in the last month. Besides the ongoing sales of his virtual mechs, he also earned a little extra through the sale of his physical mechs.

"I think it's time to boost some of my physical attributes."

Groening IV posed a lot of challenges to those deployed on the ground. Not only did everyone had to contend with 1.4 times the gravity of Ancient Earth, it

also featured a dense atmosphere filled with toxic, heavy gasses. Everyone had to wear customized hazard suits in order to function normally.

Those with feeble constitutions like Ves might not even last an entire month in those conditions. Even if the base camp offered pressured accommodations where workers can get rid of their bulky suits, the brutal work schedule ensured that no one had enough time to laze about.

The metal storm that raged about the surface only slumbered for a limited amount of time. Everyone had to work overtime in order to make sure that the ground team harvested as much monoexurite as possible within their forty-day window. He'd be physically exhausted a long time before the end of the window if he kept his attributes at their shabby level.

[Endurance Attribute Candy]: 800 Design Points

[Endurance Attribute Candy]: 900 Design Points

[Endurance Attribute Candy]: 1,000 Design Points

[Strength Attribute Candy]: 800 Design Points

[Strength Attribute Candy]: 900 Design Points

[Strength Attribute Candy]: 1,000 Design Points

Ves quickly ingested all of the candies in succession. He groaned a bit but kept his pain to himself. While the candies came with a much milder effect, it still took a lot of effort to rein in his agony. The increase in strength and endurance to a level just above an average human should come very handy without attracting an excessive amount of attention.

Minutes later, he finished his transformation. A thin layer of sweat suffused his body as he beheld his firmed up muscles. He hadn't bulked up a lot, but he definitely gained a bit of mass. As long as he wore a bulky hazard suit, no one would find out his body gained a sudden upgrade.

After that, he considered a way to improve his chances of making it out safely in the event of an unforeseen crisis. The truth was that he couldn't do much if the hexapods decided to storm the base camp. Ves pretty much had to put his faith in others.

"Will a stealth augment even be of any use?"

He'd be able to hide from hexapods and people with ill intentions with a permanent augment. He could also wrap his comm around Lucky and let him sneak into restricted places. The utility of complete stealth at his fingertips should serve him well throughout his career.

[Comm Upgrade - Privacy Shield - Level 0 - Augment - Full Stealth]

Price: 30.000 DP

Duration: 5 Minutes

Upgrades a level 1 Privacy Shield to emit an overpowering field that disrupts any means of observation. It is capable of obfuscating every possible means of observation that is known to the Mech Designer System.

Even with his minor fortune, Ves couldn't afford the level 1 version of the stealth augment. He had to take a step back and buy the gimped version. This energy-inefficient augment gobbled up so much power that it only lasted five minutes in total.

"It's better than nothing. Five minutes should be more than enough to save my life."

Normally, a comm possessed enough power to last for months. Hardly anyone bothered to recharge their wrist devices every night, something which Ves planned to do now that he had a stealth augment in his hands.

"This should be the last time I open up the Mech Designer System. It's too dangerous to fiddle around with it once I'm on the ground."

Ves already browsed some of the plans of the base camp. It featured extensive monitoring and shielding of every kind. In such a sensitive location, Ves didn't dare call up the System. Using the Privacy Shield without Full Stealth also risked attracting a lot of attention.

"Status."

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Apprentice Mech Designer

Specializations: None

Design Points: 1,648

Attributes

Strength: 1.1

Dexterity: 0.8

Endurance: 1.1

Intelligence: 1.8

Creativity: 1

Concentration: 1.7

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Apprentice - [3D Printer Proficiency III] [Assembler Proficiency III]

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Incompetent

[Electrical Engineering]: Apprentice - [Structural Pathway Configuration II]

[Mathematics]: Apprentice

[Mechanics]: Journeyman - [Jury Rigging II] [Speed Tuning III]

[Metallurgy]: Journeyman - [Alloy Compression II]

[Metaphysics]: Incompetent

[Physics]: Apprentice - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization II] [Lightweight Armor Optimization I] [Mediumweight Armor Optimization III] [Melee Weapon Optimization II]

Abilities

[Superpublish]: Available. Can be activated once a year.

Evaluation: A mech designer who graves the abyss.

Ves completely splurged his reserves of DP this time, but he didn't regret it. The utility of his stealth augment should see him through a lot of crises from now on. He deactivated his Privacy Shield and removed his comm in order to place it on a charging station on a counter next to his bed.

After a good night's rest, Ves woke up to a busy day. A large amount of mechs had been partially disassembled and packed into standardized containers in order to ease their shipping down to the surface. Even Melkor's Stanislaw joined the stacks of containers waiting to be loaded into heavy-duty transports.

"Good morning, Ves."

"Morning, Ramirez."

Most of the mech technicians busied themselves with packing up their inventory. The maintenance department had to make sure they had every essential tool and material on hand.

"We'll be joining the second wave." Ramirez continued. "Last night, the survey bots sent out from the Ark have found a good location to establish a beachhead. The first wave is largely composed of mechs and scouts and will make sure that there isn't anything nasty waiting for us down there. Once they clear the site, we'll be joining them to construct the initial facilities to support a medium-term occupation."

The ground team had to construct a rudimentary wall and a barracks before the end of the day. After that, they'd put up mech stables and workshops while continuing to expand the base's security envelope. At the end of the week, the base camp should be fully operational.

"I'm not sure how much use I will be if I go in this early." Ves dubiously replied. After all, he didn't know anything about construction.

"There's little reason to delay your deployment. Relax. There are plenty of things to do outside of erecting some walls. A lot of screwups happen in the process of unpacking the mechs from their containers. It's always the patch jobs and sloppily applied mods that get in the way of such things."

The chief had a point. The mech technicians likely needed someone with a brain in order to handle any complications that arose without damaging the entire mech.

After several hours of waiting, Ves, Melkor and Lucky followed the rest of the maintenance department into boarding a reinforced passenger shuttle. The pilot wasted no time in setting off once everyone strapped to their seats. The shuttle smoothly glided out of the Ark Horizon's shuttle bay and started to plummet downwards.

No one came in a skinny vacuum suit this time. Even Ves had changed into the hazard suit issued by his client. The suit came with gravity compensators that eased the alien planet's elevated gravity. It also came with special lining

that worked great against blocking out the persistent level of radiation they'd face in the underground world.

The shuttle started its violent descent down to the planet. Groening IV possessed a thick atmosphere filled with toxic gasses and dense metal shards even when the periodic storms entered their resting phase.

Everyone aboard the ship felt the vibrations and the shuttle strained to fly through the metal mist. Even with a magnetic screen pushing aside most of the metals in its way, the shuttle still suffered plenty of impacts.

Fortunately, nothing happened when the convoy of shuttles and transports finally reached the surface of the planet. The flight flew over the smooth and shiny surface of the planet before coming across a gaping cavern in the ground. Every shuttle plunged into the abyss and followed a series of narrow tunnels before ending up in a vast underground jungle.

As the sensors readjusted to the lower intensity of light, everyone beheld the beauty of the underground kingdom. The primal alien flora and fauna gave the environment an enchanting promise of hidden wealth and buried treasures. Anyone who braved the dangers could certainly stumble across a fortune.

"Alright, we're setting down in five minutes." Chief Ramirez spoke through the local communication channel. "Stick to the plan and don't wander off. I don't need to tell you what will happen if you end up in the belly of a hexapod."

The chief only spared a couple of words in order to keep the men and women from doing anything stupid. The novelty of landing on an untapped alien planet always sparked some delirium among the more excitable people.

Once the shuttle finally reached its destination, everyone stepped out into the open air.

The first thing Ves noted when he looked at his flourishing environment was that he couldn't see very far. All of the particles in the air along with the

constant electromagnetic disturbances caused everything beyond fifty meters to be obscured in a hazy grey mist.

This mist obscured more than sight. It also played a lot of havoc with communications, to the point where the ships in orbit wouldn't be able to communicate with the base camp in real time. The base had to rely on its fragile quantum entanglement nodes in order to keep in touch.

The restrictions on communications also effectively cut off the mercenary teams when they went out to hunt. Anything might happen deeper in the jungle. House Kaine could hardly do anything if the mercenaries were up to mischief, not that they particularly cared all that much.

With the Ark Horizon and the rest of her fleet keeping a watchful eye in orbit, no one had the chance to make off with smuggled goods. Every haul the mercenaries brought back would be handed over at the end of the day. By controlling the metaphorical gates, House Kaine possessed an ironclad insurance that nothing went up without their say so.

"Buckle up, Ves." Ramirez bumped his chest. "We're going to have a lot of work on our hands. You can forget about relaxing for the next forty days."

Ves nodded in agreement, but had other thoughts in mind.

Chapter 178 Base Camp

The construction site bloomed into existence as the first shipments arrived. The prefabs took little effort to put together, though they took up a large portion of the cargo. The extremely rigid ground and soil made it highly difficult to dig through, but the construction team achieved some progress with the help of high-powered diggers.

The first wave of mercenary mechs arrived shortly after the shuttles finished hauling the construction materials. Despite the insufficient facilities, the plan called for unpacking them immediately in order to help secure the base.

As expected, a lot of hijinks happened in the process of taking the mechs out of their containers. The partially detached limbs required a bit of finesse to put them back into their sockets. Having to work in the awful conditions outdoors made everything worse.

"No no no, don't put that back together without cleaning the joints! All of the gunk in the air has fouled the connectors. We're not working in a modern workshop environment right now!"

"Have you forgotten how much gravity we're dealing with right now? Those loaders aren't rated to lift at maximum capacity under our current gravity levels! It's a wonder they're even lifting off in the first place!"

"Start with the light mechs first! They're easier to put together and we need them to scout the perimeter. Doesn't matter what outfit they're a part of, start with the lightest mechs and work your way up!"

The heavy workload kept Ves up all night. House Kaine wanted every mercenary mech up and running within three days, which he found utterly unrealistic. Around two hundred different mechs in total joined the operation. If it hadn't been for the previous battle, that number could have reached as high as four-hundred mechs.

Compared to the mechs belonging to the forces from the Grey Willow Star Sector, the local variants didn't seem impressive. None of the Komodo mercenaries belonged to the elite. Some mercenaries piloted their mechs so badly that Ves wondered how they graduated from the academy in the first place.

"This is a real mess." Melkor commented in a disdainful voice. "I bet that half of the mercs have embellished their track record. There's no way that the expedition accepted them otherwise."

The lack of training and professionalism among much of the mercenaries also caused the slowly emerging base camp to be a rowdy site. The security officers keeping the peace had their hands full trying to prevent the various grudges between individual mercenaries to come to blows.

In order to keep the mercs busy, Commander Tregis sent out the mercs to begin their first hunting expedition. Tregis took charge of the entire base as it slowly took shape. Under his leadership, the mercs stopped brawling with each other and cleaned up their act.

Ves found him to be a highly competent leader. As the man in charge of the expedition's only settlement, Tregis eased into the job like his entire life revolved around the role. The man must have prepared for the job many years ago. It showed when he argued with the civil engineers on how to tweak the existing wall designs to accommodate their current terrain advantages.

The base camp sat on a low hill that overlooked a vast swathe of terrain. The metallic foliage surrounding their site obscured much of the wildlife, but the view afforded them plenty of warning should a hexapod king decide to attack their base.

On the second day, the first team of mercs arrived from their successful hunt. Everyone put down their work and welcomed the squad of mechs that came back with a bunch of scratches on their coating. They dragged over two incredibly formidable corpses of hexapods that instantly attracted everyone's attention.

Even Ves came over to touch the recently perished hexapod. While they weren't as impressive as a king-sized beast, the regular adults posed a significant threat against isolated mechs. Only through teamwork could the mercs hunt these beasts without incurring significant losses.

"It's pretty big." Chief Ramirez remarked as he knocked his armored fist against the dead hexapod's surface. The beast possessed some kind of palm-sized scales composed of an organic composite. Different hexapods derived the metals from their diet in different proportions, leading to many variations of colors.

Commander Tregis tried to get everyone back to work, but the crowd continued to converge around the carcasses. They waited until a team of exobiologists personally harvested the heat organs.

In order to cut open their extremely tough scales and hides, they employed a specialized surgical mech to make the necessary incisions. The mech's awesome power easily parted the skins, allowing more delicate tools and bots to sever the heat organ from the bodies and store them into a transparent container.

"Is it me, or are the heat organs glowing?"

"All those exotics packed into a single mass of tissue is bound to act weird."

Everyone returned to work after that. Ves found the hexapods to be remarkable creatures to be able to thrive in these difficult circumstances. The vast galaxy possessed an uncountable amount of stars, but only a handful possessed the right conditions to support a form of life.

Humanity had the misfortune to evolve from a star system devoid of any exotics. This shaped the race in a way that provided them with hardly any innate superiority compared to other forms of life.

As a rule, the most formidable forms of life evolved to make use of the exotics present in their native environment. This granted them many special and even metaphysical capabilities, such as a near-total immunity to heat, a passive form of telepathy that spans the entire race, or an intelligence that mimics quantum computers.

Strangely enough, all of these innate strengths came with a major downside. All of these extremely dangerous aliens were constrained by their dependence on specific types of exotics to procreate. They couldn't propagate as fast as the human race because they constantly had to seek out star systems that contained deposits of the right types of exotics.

This constraint formed massive invisible shackles among the various alien races. Some of them transcended the stars hundreds of thousands of years ago or even more. Despite their higher levels of development, humanity had beaten them back through luck, trickery and sheer numbers.

These days, humanity also depended on exotics, but only to augment their existing technologies. Only a couple of critical technologies such as the FTL drive couldn't do without exotics. As for everything else, humanity wouldn't collapse if every exotic material suddenly disappeared one day.

Weapons and armor would lose most of their potency and it would become more difficult to traverse the stars. Only the most primitive FTL drive worked without employing trace amounts of exotics to massively increase its range and effectiveness.

"It's pretty sad to see these awesome creatures devolve into six-legged bags of monoexurite." Ves idly commented. "They've been ruling this underground kingdom for how many years now? To think that all of this might end now that humans like us have descended down into their world."

"It's their misfortune to grow up alongside monoexurite." Ensign D'Amato smirked underneath his own hazard suit. "Life isn't fair. Our FTL drives hunger for the stuff. Every gram we extract from their chests will help a couple of warships fight back against the aliens who wishes to see us dead."

Since Ves didn't feel too much compassion for the hexapods, he merely shrugged before returning to work.

The base finally took on a semblance of order on the fourth day. An expansive set of walls in the shape of a five-pointed star enclosed the perimeter of the base. Extensive rows of flimsy prefabs provided climate-controlled berths for the mechs who returned from their hunt.

They also provided the bare minimum amount of space to allow the mech technicians to maintain the battered mechs.

The mercenaries definitely had to get used to hunting the hexapods. As the native predators of Groening IV, none of the hexapods went down without a fight. Each of them possessed the strength of a light mech at minimum, with a couple of them reaching the level of a medium mech.

A hexapod who fought without regard for its life could easily dish out a lot of hurt. Ves even had to lend a hand to the repair teams once in a while. He didn't mind the work, as he got to experience a variety of mechs suffering from different kinds of damage. The work opened his mind to how a real expedition worked.

The hunting platoon set off on the start of the fourth day.

Captain Kaine in her highly advanced white mech stood before the main entrance of the base. Ves found out that the model carried the name of Cathrec, which sounded a bit too masculine for such a slim and graceful medium mech. Despite its emphasis on mobility, the Cathrec was capable of piercing through almost any material with its powered spear.

Behind the Cathrec, the Ajax Olympians looked as sturdy as always. Few knew they packed a lot more punch than before. With its enhanced strength and various other kinds of boosts, Ves put a lot of faith in their ability to pin down a hexapod king. Still, he couldn't help but worry a little bit for the machines.

The Volmars and Emphyreans stood further back. Compared to the previous two models, they attracted less attention, but that didn't make them less important.

The Volmars looked and fought like brawlers or skirmishers. They possessed the right mix of strength, speed and agility to make full use of their staffs and maces to deliver crushing blows onto their prey.

As for the Emphyreans, no one expected them to vanquish the largest predators in the area with their railguns. Their weapons might be able to take down a king if they had the time to unleash a couple of volleys, but their prey wouldn't let them do so with impunity. Still, the ability to deal damage from a distance gave the group a large amount of tactical flexibility.

"Alright fellows, I'll be back with a trophy!"

Ves joined the others in waving at the elite group of mechs as they disappeared into the jungle. No one knew when they returned, not even Ves. The hexapod kings rarely made an appearance unless the expedition did something drastic. Even the current deployment of mechs hardly fazed the elder creatures.

Even as the initial rush of activity made way for a new routine, Ves and Melkor never forgot to keep an eye on what went on. Ves conscientiously built up a reputation among the work crew for his excellent work and sage advice.

With the absence of the hunting platoon, he mingled among the other crews performing maintenance on the mechs. He learned a variety of news concerning the other mercenaries involved in the expedition. Even though Ensign D'Amato kept a constant eye on him, even he grew bored of his job.

He found out something interesting one day.

"So you say these mechs have been digging into the ground?" Ves asked with minor astonishment. "How can they do so when the ground is as tough as ship armor?"

"They've been melting it, I guess." The bearded mech technician casually remarked. "God knows what kind of temperatures they're working with or where they are getting their gear in the first place. I haven't seen anything in the stores that's capable of pumping so much heat. They require energy cells the size of aircars as well."

A female mech technician added her own thoughts. "They're trying to locate the main deposit of monoexurite, I bet! The plants around this region has to get it from somewhere to be able to feed the hexapods with the stuff. With so many flora containing traces of monoexurite, there's bound to be a major concentration nearby that's been spreading it outwards."

That made some sense. Ves wondered what else could be found deep underneath. Perhaps the expedition aimed to uncover other kinds of natural treasures.

Chapter 179 Field Repairs

Since the hunting platoon left to scour the jungle for the alpha beasts, Ves sought to find more clues. Through regular contact, he learned that several mercenary teams received missions other than hunting the hexapods to harvest their valuable heat organs.

"This bunch of fellows came back with an uprooted tree! It's a small one, though. Like, no taller than you and me. It looks really old and gnarly and it definitely had been gnawed at by the beasts. Besides that, I don't have a clue why the mercs brought it back."

"This team encountered a hexapod and instead of slaughtering it on the spot, they pinned it down and shot lasers at it! I swear, they received orders to pump it full of energy before killing it. The beast thrashed so much the team

almost lost some of their mechs. It's going to take an extensive overhaul to bring those mechs back to normal."

Though he heard plenty of gossip, Ves didn't gain anything truly useful. The main factor that limited his exposure to information was that the core of the expedition gathered within the inner area of the base.

All of the mercenaries and most of the outsiders lacked the permission to enter this highly secure area. Instead, House Kaine had relegated them to the periphery of the base. Even Ves received the same treatment, though most of the maintenance department including Chief Ramirez also had to stay outside.

Ramirez shrugged at him when he remarked about it. "The only people who get to know the important stuff are those who need to know. Techies like us are only here to keep the mechs running. It doesn't matter what's going on. Even if the cavern is collapsing, we'll still continue to maintain everyone's mechs."

"You don't think they're hiding something from us?"

"Of course they're hiding the truth from us! Do you think they showed us the full recordings of what went on in the previous expedition? That's just the tip of the iceberg! I'm sure the hexapod heat organs are worth a lot of money, but even the dumbest mech technicians know Lord Kaine is after something else. There's no reason to take a high-profile approach otherwise."

Neither Ramirez or D'Amato answered any of his questions. They deliberately stifled him even if they knew something more.

Perhaps Ramirez had a point, but Ves couldn't leave things be. He constantly had a bad feeling about this entire venture. If he received some kind of advance warning, he'd be able to maximize his chances of getting through a crisis unscathed.

He also kept Master Olson's words in mind. So far, the expedition hadn't suffered any major setbacks. Besides the strange and unusual pirate attack, everything went according to plan.

Ves stared at the solidly guarded entrance to the inner sanctum of the base. Ves considered employing his stealth field to sneak into the inner sanctum, but he reconsidered after thinking about its limited duration. Neither he nor Lucky could accomplish anything in only five minutes.

With no other choice, he opted to wait. In any case, his workload kept growing as the mercenaries returned with dead hexapods and damaged mechs.

The highly competent mech technicians serving under House Kaine were able to fix most of the issues they encountered even without the help of a mech designer. He mainly found himself trying to fix extensively damaged components that took a lot of time and effort to replace. His much greater knowledge on the workings and composition of each part allowed him to bring almost anything back to life.

He managed to accomplish most of the challenges he faced due to his long-dormant Jury Rigging II sub-skill. The skill provided him with a mentality that prompted him to think outside the box. His solutions might not always be proper, but they always held up in the short term.

When Ves thought he'd continue to improvise solutions for the rest of the expedition, Ensign D'Amato suddenly received an emergency transmission.

"Ves, put down your work. You're needed elsewhere."

"Is there an emergency?"

"A critical one. The hunting platoon encountered a mishap. One of the Ajax Olympians suffered critical damage. Captain Kaine used up her only high-powered signal device to relay her help request to the nearest mercenaries, who eventually relayed her message back to base."

The news came as an unpleasant surprise. Ves worked so hard to upgrade the heavy knight's parameters. "What's the damage?"

The ensign consulted his comm. "Its entire left leg received extensive damage to the point of immobilizing the machine. The mech can't walk back to base and its too heavy to be hauled over. The rest of the hunting platoon is staying by its side, but the site highly unsafe."

As a heavy mech that weighed about five times as much as a medium mech, Ves knew that nothing they had on hand could bring it back to base. The 1.4 times gravity complicated the situation even more. The mech effectively weighed forty percent more on this planet, which made it impossible for any hauler platform to bring it back to base.

They made their way over to the eastern gate of the base camp. "What's the plan?"

"Commander Tregis has already formed a rescue party. You will lead a repair team over to the hunting platoon and bring the damaged Olympian back up its feet. It's vitally important that the heavy knight regains enough mobility to walk back to safety."

"I have to perform repairs on the spot?!" It sounded outrageous to Ves that he had to leave the safety of the base camp's walls and be forced to traverse an alien jungle.

"I'm aware that we're demanding a lot from you, Ves. You'll be safe inside an armored transport that will also bring the necessary supplies to facilitate the repairs. A couple of mechs will accompany the transport on the ground to make sure that no indigenous life forms will intercept the vehicle."

It still sounded crazy, but Ves had no choice but to follow orders. The success of the entire expedition hinged on the Olympians.

Commander Tregis worked fast. He commandeered an armored transport scheduled to ship their current harvests back to orbit and emptied it of its entire cargo. Chief Ramirez took over at this point and ordered his subordinates to load it up to the brim with tools, machines and materials.

Once Ves arrived at the transport, he wondered why they didn't intend to pick up the damaged mech from its current location. It sounded much more convenient to him if they could bring the mech back to base before attempting repairs.

"There's too many metal trees in the way. They're so tough and resilient that it's nearly impossible to form a clearing without creating a huge commotion."

The chief replied as he supervised the loading process. "Instead, the transport will be hovering above the site, allowing us to drop in our gear one by one."

The transport also wouldn't be sticking around for long. Once it unloaded all of the gear, the pilot had orders to return back to base. Otherwise, the transport risked attracting the attention to a flock of hexabats.

The expedition learned pretty early that their flying craft attracted the hexabats like moths to a flame. The heat from the thrusters and other active systems formed an irresistible attraction to the small but dangerous beasts.

Everything had to be done quickly. Ves barely took stock of the damage readings when Ensign D'Amato forced him to board the transport. Fortunately, Melkor also came along with his Stanislaw while Lucky slept in his embrace.

"Let's go!"

The transport slowly lifted off and headed east at a slow pace. A squad of seven mechs accompanied the low-flying craft on the ground and tried to navigate through the trees as fast as possible.

Except for the Stanislaw, all the other mechs consisted of elites from George's Cavalry. The supposed mercenaries navigated the alien jungle with a high

degree of proficiency. They hardly let the dense forest slow them down. It became apparent that they took to arboreal terrain like fish to water.

Impressively enough, the Stanislaw didn't lose out too much in speed. Melkor skillfully danced aside any obstacles in his way and always found the right footing to travel forward without tripping up. He only lacked the practical experience to match the older mercenaries who had already been through a lot.

The transport and its escort made good speed towards their destination. They encountered a couple of hazards along the way, but the squad of mechs took care of most of the issues.

The biggest danger occurred when a small flock of hexabats flew too close to the transport. They noticed its heat emissions and instantly went berserk. Melkor and the two other ranged mechs all aimed their ballistic rifles in the air and shot down the beasts with specialized airburst ammunition.

Despite the plentiful fire, the hexabats were so resilient that glancing hits only shrugged off their thick scales. A couple of bats reached the transport and tried to drill through its thin armor. It took quite a bit of effort to stamp them out for good.

"Continue on! We can't afford any delays!"

They reached the Olympian around a standard day later. The surrounding brush and ground exhibited a lot of traces of a furious battle. Despite the marks, the larger trees remained stubbornly intact. Nothing in their arsenal could take down these incredibly resilient plant life.

"We're here! Start lifting down our gear!" Ramirez then turned to Ves. "I want you down there first to take stock of the damage. We've already received the Olympian's internal telemetry, but who knows if it's complete. We've got to go down there and scan the damaged limb ourselves."

With that, Ves boarded a lifter platform that snuck him past the razor-sharp leaf cover until he finally touched the ground. As soon as he stepped off, he put down Lucky who eagerly started to explore.

Unlike Ves who had to wear his hazard suit, his feline companion roamed the toxic environment like a hexapod. As a mechanical beast, he didn't need to breathe in the first place. Lucky would still be fine if he ended up in vacuum. Even the constant levels of radiation hardly fazed the miraculous cat.

While he waited for the scanner module to be gently brought down, Ves studied the battered hunting platoon in order to figure out what happened.

Most of the mechs looked like they had better days. Only the Emphyreans looked pristine.

The only intact Olympian obviously had a rough time. Its robust shield featured many deep scratches. Its armor was in better shape, which was a testament to both its quality and the skill of the pilot.

As for the Volmars, around half of them suffered damage. Claw and bite marks scuffed their weapons and armor, which wasn't supposed to happen in the first place.

Once the aircar-sized scanner module arrived, Ves steered the lifter platform in the direction of the crippled Olympian.

Its leg looked as if a giant beast chomped its thigh. Huge bite marks and traces of tearing suffused the entire limb. Its thick armor saved it from being gulped into the stomach of a giant hexapod, but it hadn't prevented the teeth from punching past the armor, dealing loads of internal damage.

"Don't move!" Ves instructed the pilot when the heavy mech tried to turn. "Just stay in place while I scan the affected portion."

The pilot frantically spoke back in the local voice channel. "Stay way and get to cover! He's back!"

"Who's back?" Ves turned around and noticed the high-strung hunting platoon getting ready to meet a formidable opponent. His stomach sank as he realized whatever chewed up the Olympian hadn't left the area.

Captain Kaine's Cathrec frantically gestured him back with its charged spear. "Larkinson! Move to the center of our formation! We can't let the doctor get his hands on you!"

Doctor?

"Hahahaha!" A loud screech echoed through the trees. Different from the earlier conversation, the awful voice hadn't been conveyed through any of the local communication channels. "A mech designer, you say? Delightful!"

While Ves still wondered who the voice belonged to, a gigantic moving object charged through the trees and impacted against the braced Olympian that met the charge. A loud impact sounded as the Olympian had been shoved back more than a dozen steps.

As for the beast itself, it looked nothing like a normal hexapod. In fact, it looked like a cross between a mech and a hexapod king. Various rusting mechanical parts had been married into a rotting but still largely intact hexapod king carcass.

"Is that an improvised mech?" Ves inadvertently blurted out.

The strange marriage between mech and beast sent chills through his spine. Even more remarkable was the ragged human man strapped to the top of the chimera's head. The man had obviously seen better days. His ragged lab coat had been scruffed to the point where its formerly pristine white composite fabric took on a disgusting black appearance.

Even now, the madman laughed. His amplified voice disturbed the entire rescue party. How could a human being even breathe the toxic gasses that make up Groening IV's incredibly hazardous air?

"Hahahaha! The interlopers think to stop my pet! The nerve! I am the king of the forest! No one disobeys me without paying the price!"

"Doctor Jutland!" Captain Kaine shouted out from her Cathrec as she quickly positioned her mech between the beast and Ves. "I know it's been long, but you're still human! Please allow us to treat you and we'll promise to return you to civilized space."

"Human? HUMAN? You DARE call me a human! I AM NO HUMAN! I AM A KING, THE ONLY KING OF THE FOREST! HAHAAAAHA!"

The madman atop the chimera went absolutely bonkers. Despite his evident madness, no one made a move. Despite the deplorable state of his chimera mech, it still possessed enough power to rip the hunting platoon to shreds.

Chapter 180 Doctor Jutland

When Ves was young, he used to watch a lot of dramas about mechs. Some of the staple villains of the shows piloted irregular mechs built with strange materials. The idea of cannibalizing a formidable alien creature's corpse and using it to form a chimera mech often horrified and fascinated the impressionable kids that watched these broadcasts.

He had never thought to come across an actual chimera mech in a serious setting. The maniacal Dr. Jutland sat on a crudely crafted chair welded to the top of the dinosaur-shaped hexapod king. The massive creature resembled an unholy amalgamation of rotted hide and rusting metal.

Despite its shoddy construction, the base materials exceeded those used by every other mech on site. Despite colliding with the intact Ajax Olympian

several times, its entire frame simply took no damage. An unknown but potent power source kept the chimera mech running at an astounding level.

"Hand over your mech designer!" Doctor Jutland raged as he ordered his chimera mech to bash through the Olympian standing in its way.

Through a combination of guts, the hunting platoon avoided getting bulldozed by the extremely powerful chimera mech. The Emphyreans tried to pin it down with their railguns, but the chimera mech hardly took notice of the high-powered kinetic projectiles. Even shooting at its head didn't work, as some kind of energy shield bounced away anything that could threaten the mad doctor.

Only Captain Kaine achieved some progress in pushing the monstrosity back. Her gleaming white Cathrec possessed a remarkable combination of speed and power that allowed it to threaten the chimera mech's incredibly tough exterior with its powered spear.

"Get out of the way!" The doctor bellowed as his chimera mech shied away from a deadly spear strike. "My subjects! Heed my call! Destroy these interlopers!"

Half-a-dozen adult hexapods answered his call and stormed the hunting platoon. The Volmars had their hands full fending off the berserk beasts. Unfortunately for Jutland, the sole functioning Olympian and the Cathrec continued to fend off the chimera mech.

The Olympian's shield looked increasingly tattered, but the Cathrec landed a couple of solid blows in exchange.

Evidently, the damage pained the doctor to the extreme. He wailed and shrieked in an inhumanly loud pitch that caused the nearby hazard suits to dampen their sound transmissions. Even Ves started to feel dizzy for a reason.

"Get back, Ves!" Ensign D'Amato urged as he showed up by his side. His other hand held a ballistic pistol that appeared completely useless to the situation at hand. "Doctor Jutland is trying to kidnap you. The last thing we want is to see you ending up in his hands!"

Under the ensign's guidance, Ves reached the base of a massive tree and holed up inside a hollow.

"What's going on? Who's Doctor Jutland?"

The ensign carefully watched the surroundings for approaching hexapods and considered his answer. "There's no use hiding it any longer. He's a survivor of the previous expedition that previously travelled the Groening System. We never expected him to cling to his life in this way."

Ves had so many questions. How could anyone survive for twenty-seven years straight on this planet? "Is he still alive or is he some kind of AI?"

"He's still human, for a given definition of it." D'Amato quickly explained. "He's an exobiologist who already extensively modified his body before he signed up for the previous expedition. Like many scientists, he flocked to the frontier in order to escape his past. He's vastly overqualified for the job. Our logs show that he conducting a small number of very reckless experiments during the previous expedition."

The battle continued to rage around the two. Mechs fought against hexapods while the chimera mech continued to chip away at the Olympian's shield.

Meanwhile, the mechs from George's Cavalry reluctantly offered their aid. They assisted the Volmars into repelling the maddened hexapods, allowing the hunting platoon to mop them up one at a time.

Though Ves still had questions about the doctor, D'Amato didn't know anything more. Instead, he turned to the chimera mech. "Who's controlling that monster? It doesn't appear that Jutland is controlling it directly."

"That's one of the questions we are wondering about as well. Take a good look. What's your judgement as a mech designer?"

Ves took a very good look at the chimera mech. Once he got past his shock, his fascination started to grow. For a mech that lasted more than two decades, it exhibited an astounding level of resilience.

"Jutland isn't employing a neural interface, nor is he using any physical controls. If we leave out the metaphysical possibilities like telepathy, then I'm guessing something else is piloting the chimera mech. Is he using the hexapod king's own brains to control the chimera mech, or is another survivor piloting the monster from within?"

Both possibilities sounded horrifying. If Jutland implanted a brain from a dead beast, then technically the chimera mech was an undead creation.

On the other hand, if a human pilot controlled the chimera mech from within, then he might be even madder than Doctor Jutland. Who knew how much a twenty-seven year isolation from human space took a toll on their psyches.

Ensign D'Amato held his hand over his helmeted head. He received new instructions. "Ves, Captain Kaine is ordering you to analyse the chimera mech's weak points. She wants to know the best way to disable Jutland's ride."

"I can do that."

He wanted this ordeal to be over as quickly as possible. Ves didn't relish being kidnapped by a mad doctor who had been stewing among the hexapods for so many years. The faster the hunting platoon destroyed the chimera mech, the faster he'd be able to repair the crippled Olympian and return to the highly guarded base camp.

Ves started to study the mech in greater detail, paying attention to the various holes in the rotted creation. "The chimera mech looks to be in an awful state,

but don't let its appearance deceive you. The hexapod king's hide and bones haven't degraded to the point where they are easily broken."

"That's not a weak point."

"I know, I'm just telling you not to focus upon its intact sections. The chimera mech has been through a lot of battles over the years. I'm seeing plenty of signs of battle damage. A lot of them has been patched up by improvised repairs. Whoever fixed the damage is no mech designer or mech technician. Some of the limbs are slower and have lost a lot of range of motion. You can try to pressure the joints of its middle left leg and its upper right arm."

The captain had evidently patched into their communication channel, because she immediately adjusted her targeting. Her speartip started to dart at the joints of those specific limbs. A single strike even struck a heavy blow near the joint that caused a handful of scales to fly away in a shower of sparks.

"Nonono!" Jutland screeched. "My Kaius! My lovely Kaius! This is unforgivable!"

Despite his indignation, the chimera mech lost a lot of its aggression. The mind that controlled the Kaius knew that taking a hit at its imperfectly repaired joints could result in a lot of damage.

By the time the Cathrec pushed the Kaius a fair distance back, the rest of the hunting platoon had finished off the hexapods with the help of George's Cavalry. The Volmars started to flank the chimera mech while the mercenaries stayed close to the transport that continued to hover above the tree cover.

This time, Ves determined another weak point. "I'm fairly certain the head is the cockpit. That must be the reason why it's protected by a shield generator."

"The shield generator is impervious." The ensign replied. "I know you are wearing one as well, so you should know that they are capable of resisting almost anything as long as they have enough power."

"They drain an enormous amount of power. I don't know what this Kaius is running on, but I bet there's a limit to what the shield generator can bear at a time. Even with an unlimited power supply, the shield generator won't be able to sustain the massive amounts of energy running through its systems."

A light went off in the ensign's head. "I see. I should have thought of it myself. As incredible as the chimera mech appears, it's still a machine. What do you suggest?"

"Keep hitting the head with simultaneous attacks. It doesn't matter if the blows seem ineffective. As long as the shield generator is working at its upper limits, it will only be a matter of time before it breaks down."

What Ves suggested allowed the weaker mechs in the hunting platoon to do something useful. As medium melee mechs, the Volmars lacked the strength to damage the chimera mech's weak points. Their staffs and maces constantly bounced off the Kaius when they struck the oversized machine.

Melkor's Stanislaw joined the Empyrean into pressuring the shield generator with carefully aimed volleys. Even though the Stanislaw's ballistic rifle lacked the punch of a railgun, its rate of fire made up for it. Both models held the Kaius back when it tried to retaliate against the flanking Volmars.

The doctor finally had enough. "Insolent creatures! You humans are always in the way!"

The doctor retrieved a strange, cylindrical device from his blackened lab coat and pressed a button.

"That doesn't look good! Get away!"

The Volmars that assaulted the Kaius from all sides reacted quickly and turned away.

The empty eye sockets of the Kaius started to glow in an unearthly blue light. The jaw of the chimera mech hinged down and a jet of blue-colored flames emerged from the opening that engulfed the Cathrec.

Captain Kaine frantically dodged her mech aside. The Cathrec suffered a nasty burn that caused the hand that held onto the spear to melt into slag. The captain's quick reaction saved her elite mech from suffering more substantial damage.

Having lost its initial prey, the Kaius turned its head towards the lumbering Olympian. The heavy mech couldn't step back fast enough to escape the effective range of the chimera mech's breath weapon and suffered a substantial amount of burns onto its entire frontal surface. Only its half-broken shield and its incredibly thick armor saved the mech from total annihilation.

The Kaius couldn't maintain its breath weapon for long. It drizzled out after a dozen seconds. The incredible heat washed over the entire area and even caused the ground to scorch and melt into a puddle due to the incredible amount of heat.

Even Doctor Jutland didn't look so fresh anymore, even though the shield generator saved him from getting cooked by proximity. Frustration marred his mad expression.

"Keep defying your fate! I shall return to take back my dues!"

The Kaius turned around and lumbered away on all of its six limbs. Even though the mech weighed more than the Olympian, its running gait could match the Cathrec in speed. Captain Kaine didn't order her mechs to pursue. Instead, she rearranged the hunting platoon in order to cover both of the damaged Olympians.

Ves and D'Amato emerged from the tree hollow as the mechs secured the perimeter. They approached the Olympian who faced the breath weapon head-on but couldn't get very close due to the lingering heat.

"The pilot reports that he can still move his mech." D'Amato related to Ves. "Is it safe for it to walk back to base under its own power?"

"While I'm certain there's some internal damage, the Ajax Olympians won't be taken down so easily. Their armor has an incredible capacity to withstand heat. It will need an overhaul once it returns to base, but it will hold up for several days without problem."

His pronouncement relieved the hunting platoon. The repair party only brought enough supplies to repair one Ajax Olympians. Ves and the other mech technicians had to repair the Olympian with the crippled leg as fast as possible before Doctor Jutland returned with a horde of a hexapods.