

## Mech 1751

### *Chapter 1751 Echo Spears*

Ves cursed his luck. After numerous lucky breaks, Ves believed the chance of interception wasn't as big as he thought.

Throughout his entire journey through Ordent, none of his hunters or pursuers managed to get close enough to enter within effective combat range of his ship!

Yet as soon as his ship stepped into the Great Zona Republic, he immediately encountered a mercenary fleet at close proximity!

The good news was that the mercenary ships weren't in knife-fighting range. It took about forty minutes for the ships to fly within engagement range, upon which they would probably deploy their mechs.

The bad news was that the mercenaries had plenty of time to catch up with his fleeing ship!

While his mobile supply frigate possessed a clear edge in acceleration, the mercenary fleet just happened to be flying in relative motion in his direction!

Even without activating their thrusters, the light carriers were already drifting in his direction!

This head-start was an undeniably critical advantage!

If both the mercenary fleet and the Scarlet Rose started off stationary, then the latter ship's superior acceleration would quickly enable Ves to outpace his pursuers.

Yet all of that was not in consideration as soon as Ves confirmed the Scarlet Rose's calculations.

Her navigation systems hadn't made any errors. Within forty minutes, his ship would become vulnerable to long-ranged fire!

That didn't mean the mercenaries would fire at his ship. Ves believed it was extremely unlikely that the Friday Coalition issued a mission that called for blowing up one of their assets.

There was no way the mercenaries would ignore the temptation of capturing an intact second-class ship either!

Whether they wanted to abscond with the valuable mobile supply frigate or hand her over to the Coalition for a rich reward, Ves would fall into their hands regardless of what happened!

As time started ticking down, Ves rapidly contemplated his options.

"First, I can hop into one of the special escape pods and drift away."

This was a dead end. Even if he left the Scarlet Rose, where would he go? Ves purposefully traveled to a typical lifeless star system with nothing of value. There weren't any human settlements for him to shelter in, and neither would he be able to bump into another ship aside from the ones belonging to his captors.

"Second, I can sneak aboard one of their carriers with my escape pod."

As long as he maintained complete stealth, Ves was reasonably confident he could infiltrate a ship unnoticed. As long as the carrier's internal security wasn't too tight, he could probably find a hiding spot and remain hidden for weeks.

Yet what would this accomplish?

Even if he repeated his earlier feat and killed every crew member of the carrier, what could he do against the other four carriers?

The moment the rest of the fleet noticed anything wrong, they would doubtlessly disable and corner their compromised ship with their mechs!

At most, he would be able to keep himself hidden while the mercenaries took their prize ship all the way back to the hub system of some sorts.

There, they could process their new acquisition or make arrangements to hand it over to the Fridaymen.

The chance that Ves could reenter the Scarlet Rose and flee all of the presences at the hub system was comically small!

Ves had no choice but to rely on his personal capacities to navigate a foreign planet or space station and find some way to find passage away.

This was not an unacceptable outcome to him, but it entailed abandoning the Scarlet Rose.

"Is a second-class mobile supply frigate really worth all of the risk?"

If Ves still remained in his rational state, then he would likely choose this option. It was one of the best ways to preserve his life and make it back to safety!

The truth was that the Scarlet Rose was way too valuable and high profile for Ves to succeed in bringing her all the way to the Ylvaine Protectorate!

Once Ves got rid of this eye-catching space jewel, he could probably rely on himself to blend in the crowd and board some sort of ship that traveled away from the Friday Coalition.

Yet Ves was no longer as listless as before. Enough time had passed for most of his spiritual energy reserves to recover to full! His Grand Dynamo had worked hard to return him to his normal state!

While it still took at least a day or two for him to get topped off, Ves pretty much regained most of his emotions.

Right now, Ves felt very possessive about his new acquisition. If it was possible, Ves did not wish to lose his new ship!

"It will take years for me to earn enough money to commission a comparable ship!" He lamented. "How can I miss this opportunity to surpass Gloriana by bringing in a ship that's superior to her Stellar Chaser?"

Ves often felt inadequate when he compared his piddling Barracuda with her larger ship!

Now that he captured the Scarlet Rose, Ves would be damned before he gave her up! There had to be a way for him to retain the vessel he so painstakingly killed off an entire crew to obtain!

He set aside the previous option and quickly moved on to his other options.

"There is no way to outrun or hide from this mercenary fleet."

If there was some kind of satellite or asteroid belt in the vicinity, then he could have tried to shake off pursuit by taking advantage of the complex stellar terrain.

Yet this red dwarf system was so pathetically empty that there weren't any asteroid belts within a couple light-hours of his current position!

Only empty space surrounded his ship in each direction, ruling out any possibility of breaking detection!

"Then.. maybe I can negotiate."

Though Ves did not feel very hopeful about this option, he might as well give it a try.

He hailed the approaching ships. It took a brief amount of time before someone on the other end accepted the transmission.

An elder man in a black mercenary uniform appeared in view. His short grey beard and his short-cropped hair reminded Ves of the military.

His mood instantly sunk as he took in the opposing mercenary commander. The leader's straight, ramrod posture and his well-honed air of authority suggested that he was a really tough bone!

"Mr. Ves Larkinson." The old commander began. "I am glad you have reached out to us. You have saved us the effort of figuring out whether we are chasing after the right ship."

"It appears you already know. Could you introduce yourselves?"

"Why certainly. I am Leonard Quint, commander of the Echo Spears. We are a rather notable mercenary corps of the Great Zona Republic. We specialize in bounty-hunting and punishing pirates."

"I see. Could you please go elsewhere? Your ships are getting uncomfortably close to mine."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Larkinson, but that ship isn't yours. We have accepted a mission to return the Scarlet Rose to her rightful owners. As for you, the Coalition has offered a rich bounty for your capture. You're all alone on that ship, correct?"

"Who knows."

"Don't lie. There is no one on the bridge except for you. If you want to prove otherwise, then feel free to expand your projection."

Ves tried his best not to grimace. This was a very clever way of confirming that Ves hadn't picked up a crew along the way.

Knowing that he wouldn't be able to disprove Commander Quint's guess, Ves simply moved on and tried to find some way to get himself out of this predicament.

"I highly advise you to reconsider your current actions, Commander Quint. If you have studied my record, then you'll know that I have a history of surviving or coming out on top of confrontations. No matter how many advantages you think you have, I'll never give up! Don't make me overload the power reactor of the Scarlet Rose! I can do it in an instant as long as any of your ships or mechs get close!"

The commander did not look deterred. He offered Ves a knowing smile.

"We prefer to take our chances. Let me give you our own warning. If you do anything to the Friday Coalition's properly, we'll be glad to show you why that is a monumentally bad idea! I believe the Fridaymen won't mind receiving you in a less-than-healthy state! With their medical technology, we can cripple every part of your body without repercussion!"

Ves idly waved his hand as if he brushed the threat of torture aside. "You'll only be signing your death warrants if you do so. If you haven't heard, Lady Aisling Curver of the Gauge Dynasty is smitten with me! While I am not very willing to be with her, I'm sure I can tell her how hospitable you've been!"

"Let's not talk about this unpleasant matter any further. Time is running out. Let me ask you one more time. Will you cease your flight and surrender the Scarlet Rose and yourself to us quietly, or do we have to do this the hard way?"

Ves sneered and leaned forward. "You'll regret approaching my ship. This is my final warning. Back off or suffer the consequences!"

Unfortunately for him, the old dog did not take his threat seriously. As far as Commander Quint was concerned, Ves was purely empty air at the moment!

If the Scarlet Rose still possessed a crew, then the Ech Spears would have thought twice before closing in. Yet with no living person aside from Ves crewing the ship, there was no reason for the mercenaries to think they would suffer any retribution!

The mercenary commander soon ended the call when he realized there was nothing more to gain from the conversation.

Neither Ves or the Echo Spears gave in to the other's demands! A confrontation was inevitable!

"Damnit!" Ves slammed his fist against the armrest of the captain's chair.

Would he really be forced to give up his shiny new ship and become a stowaway aboard one of the carriers of the Echo Spears?

"I'm not giving up! Not when I still have options!"

He began to explore some other possibilities.

One option was to overload the propulsion system and increase the Scarlet Rose's acceleration to a very dangerous degree.

Perhaps he might be able to boost the acceleration by thirty percent or more depending on how much strain he was willing to put on the propulsion system.

Yet such a margin was still too small to evade pursuit! According to some quick calculation, the most he could do was to delay the interception by half an hour or so. This would only delay the inevitable!

"What else can I do?"

Another option was to force the FTL drive to transition into the higher dimensions without completing its cycling.

This was an extremely hazardous choice. While it was technically possible to force an FTL drive to engage just minutes after finishing a trip, it was extremely difficult to perform a so-called double jump or continuous transition!

Only a very good chief engineer who was intimately familiar with the ship and FTL drive model would be able to set the right configuration for a double jump.

Even then, a double jump was wracked with danger and uncertainty. Depending on the quality, tolerance and soundness of the FTL drive, there was a very significant possibility that it would explode or malfunction midway!

If the ship that performed the double jump managed to reach her destination safely, then the FTL drive would be in a very bad shape! Not only had its lifespan decreased by at least a couple of decades, but all of the damage it suffered along the way might very well disable it entirely, preventing the ship from fleeing any further!

In other words, since Ves was not a chief engineer, he could forget about pulling off this insanely complex technical feat!

"I can't run away in this fashion!"

Ves had to resort to other options to escape this predicament!

### *Chapter 1752 Easy Reward*

The Great Zona Republic offered fertile ground for many mercenary corps. The inherent instability in the outer regions of the state resulted in frequent battles.

Rebels fought against the authorities. The authorities fought against the rebels.

The people suffered while the chaos drew in other interested groups.

The closer to the border, the more public security deteriorated. All manner of pirates and other scum lingered in this region, aware that the military couldn't possibly handle every threat!

Ves expected he would encounter some lowlife gang or a bunch of bottom-feeder pirates.

Instead, his Scarlet Rose landed right next door to a fleet of disciplined mercenaries!

As the Scarlet Rose desperately tried to delay the inevitable interception, Ves took the time to connect to the galactic net and look up the Echo Spears.

It turns out that the Echo Spears was a force to be reckoned with in the Great Zona Republic.

Its leader was a former mech officer and still maintained ties to his former service. Over the course of several decades, Commander Leonard Quint managed to grow his mercenary corps from a small band of brothers into a formidable mercenary organization that fielded over ten light carriers!

That was a remarkable growth trajectory!

All of this sounded familiar to Ves. In the Bright Republic, many veterans tended to form or join a mercenary corps when they were discharged from the Mech Corps.

The veterans-turned-mercenaries were a cut above other mercenaries who never underwent military training. These veterans were much more reliable as they still adhered to a code of honor, and their extensive skill and experience insured that they achieved a lot of victories.

Some of these mercenary corps even maintained loose ties to the military or the government. With such solid backing, these mercenary corps gained an edge over the competition, thereby preventing other mercenary corps owned by less-desirable groups from dominating the local mercenary industry!

Though the record and the news articles on the Echo Spears did not mention anything about a military connection, Ves found many subtle clues. The mercenary corps developed far too quickly to have grown without backing.

"Ten light carriers and hundreds of mechs can't come from nowhere!" Ves muttered in a depreciating tone. "The mercenary business isn't that profitable!"

It cost a lot of money to acquire mechs and ships. It cost even more money to service and to replace them in the event of suffering losses.

It was actually very hard to make a profit in the mercenary business! Too many business-illiterate mech pilots ran their outfits to the ground while being mired in debt!

For an outfit like the Echo Spears to expand their forces so rapidly and consistently was a very good indicator of their competence in battle!

"These guys are tough." Ves concluded. "There's no way to defeat them easily!"

He wouldn't be able to resort to cheap tricks such as nagging them until they left like he did with the Blind Prophets.

With time running out and few viable options available to him, Ves felt as if a net was closing in on him. If he didn't do something, he might get caught!

"I have no choice!" Ves gritted his teeth.

He issued some commands to the ship before departing the bridge. He had some preparations to do, and he didn't have a crew to do it for him! If he wanted something done, he had to take care of it himself!

"Lucky! Where are you!? Get back to me! Are you going to help me or are you going to keep emptying my materials storeroom?!"

Half an hour passed by as the fleet of five light carriers indomitably caught up to the Scarlet Rose.

The latter ship accelerated faster than the mercenary ships.

There was no doubt as to why. The Scarlet Rose was significantly smaller than the carriers designed to accommodate up to forty mechs. She also incorporated much better tech and materials as a second-class vessel.

Ves constantly relied on these advantages to evade pursuit while his ship crossed through the territories of the Ordent Republic.

Yet now, no amount of acceleration that the Scarlet Rose could muster would allow her to evade pursuit long enough to transition back into FTL!

Contact was inevitable, and both sides knew it. Ves had already become resigned to the fact while the Echo Spears all anticipated the incredibly rich payout of capturing a stolen ship from the Friday Coalition!

As soon as the light carriers needed twenty more minutes to enter combat range, they cut back on their acceleration.

There was no reason to fly any closer.

This range was already close enough to deploy their mechs!

If Commander Quint thought that his target posed an actual threat to his forces, then he would have deployed his mechs earlier.



Yet since the Scarlet Rose posed no threat at all according to the intelligence provided by the Coalition Reserve Corps, the Echo Spears might as well save some fuel and energy.

It was pretty expensive to expend the energy of so many mechs! Even with financial backing, the Echo Spears still maintained the habit of saving costs whenever possible.

An intimidating sight bloomed as mech after mech launched from the mech hangars of the light carriers.

Since they were just commercial models, the large vessels didn't feature many main hatches. The mechs had to line up one by one and launch into space sequentially.

The Echo Spears only brought their spaceborn mechs this time. By the time the carriers finished deploying all of their assets, around 170 mechs formed up in three different elements!

The main element leisurely flew ahead, deliberately controlling its acceleration to provide time for the other two elements to swing around and surround the fleeing Scarlet Rose from the flanks!

Though this delayed their approach, the Echo Spears had more than enough time to capture their target!

The CRC had already passed on that the Scarlet Rose required at least five hours to cycle her FTL drive!

Without a crew or engineer, it was impossible to shorten this lengthy interval. Even if Ves possessed the abilities of a starship engineer, then he could only shave off an hour of the cycling time at most!

Since the Echo Spears had plenty of time at hand, they spread out their forces to envelop the Scarlet Rose and cut off all escape routes.

In truth, dispatching 170 mechs to capture a single, unprotected frigate was massive overkill. A single squad was sufficient to force the Scarlet Rose's surrender!

Commander Quint didn't want to damage the ship, though. The Coalition offered a much better reward if they managed to capture the ship intact!

For this reason, he chose to adopt an overwhelming approach and induce a surrender without firing a shot.

Anyone sane would never think to resist against so many mechs!

Unfortunately, the Echo Spears just happened to bump into someone who was less than sane!

As Commander Quint calmly instructed a squad of his more junior mech pilots to break from one of the main elements and close in on the fugitive ship, the command center suddenly sounded an alarm.

"Commander, the mech hangar hatch of the Scarlet is retracting!"

What?!

"Confirm that!"

"We have a direct optical view of the mech hangar retracting its hatch!"

The sensor operator activated a projection that showed the Scarlet Rose in all her splendor. Her thrusters burned bright as the ship vainly attempted to outrun her pursuers.

A hatch large enough to fit a medium mech with some room to spare slid open, giving Commander Quint and every other observer a clear view of the interior of the mobile supply frigate's mech hangar.

"What is Mr. Larkinson up to?" The mercenary commander wondered.

Soon enough, the answer became clear, as an agile spaceborn skirmisher launched into space with its radiant flight system glowing white!

"A mech?!" Commander Quint widened his eyes. "What is the meaning of this?! The ship was supposed to be minimally crewed, if crewed at all?! There is no indication that Mr. Larkinson managed to pick up a mech pilot!"

The intelligence was wrong!

The spaceborn skirmisher slowly took up position a few hundred meters away from the Scarlet Rose. Its flight system easily matched the pace of the stolen ship's active propulsion system.

The mech was obviously a part of Lady Curver's former mech compliment! Markings belonging to the Friday Coalition, the Gauge Dynasty and Clarion University still dominated its chest.

As a second-class mech, the skirmisher possessed a more varied loadout than the skirmishers fielded by the Echo Spears.

Aside from carrying a set of penetrating daggers, the Coalition skirmisher also wielded a compact pulse submachine gun!

Capable of firing rapid bursts of energetic pulsed particles, it was a deadly weapon at close range that inflicted a substantial amount of energy damage topped with a bit of physical damage!

Though a single skirmisher armed with short-ranged weapons was not enough to inspire fear in the Echo Spears, the Scarlet Rose was not done with disgorging appropriated mechs!

A dozen seconds later, a formidable-looking space knight emerged in space.

Compared to the space knights of the Echo Spears, this second-class mech not only excelled in defense and melee combat, but also possessed the ability to fight against ranged opponents!

Two retractable laser weapon mounts graced its shoulders, giving it the ability to punish any ranged mech that thought that they could kite and whittle down the space knight from a distance!

A third mech appeared soon after. The spaceborn rifleman mech looked bulkier than cheaper rifleman mechs, but still boasted a considerable amount of mobility!

Its large, dual-type laser-particle beam rifle was capable of outputting accurate fire at long range and devastating energy at closer ranges!

The final mech that emerged sent a shudder through the backs of the Echo Spears.

A spaceborn medium artillery mech emerged last. Larger than the preceding mechs, the mech barely fit through the open hatch!

Though large and heavy, its mobility was still good enough to match the acceleration of the space knight!

Unlike the defensive mech, the artillery mech packed a significant punch at longer ranges!

Its main armament consisted of a gauss cannon. Scaled up from a standard mech-sized gauss rifle, the cannon featured a slow firing rate. Its large projectiles also prevented the artillery mech from carrying too much ammunition.

Aside from its fearsome gauss cannon, the artillery mech also featured a pair of shoulder-mounted missile launchers.

Though the missile launcher pods looked no different from the ones mounted on third-class mechs, their true threat lay in the quality and payload of the missiles!

Once the four mechs of the Scarlet Rose exited her mech hanger, a brief delay ensued.

As if acting on command, the mechs abruptly moved!

The space knight and skirmisher mechs both hovered protectively alongside the artillery mech and rifleman mech.

The two ranged mechs slowly aimed their main weapons in the direction of the light carriers of the Echo Spears before opening fire!

"BRACE YOURSELVES!"

The flagship screamed in alarm as the rifleman mech's powerful dual-type rifle fired a powerful laser beam that was powerful enough to match the output of several third-class heavy mechs!

While this beam did not cause the light carrier to suffer any physical damage, the energy it packed was enough to vaporize multiple layers of armor plating, dumping a huge amount of heat in some of the bow compartments of the ship!

A combat carrier would have fared a lot better, but light carriers weren't supposed to be so vulnerable to laser fire!

This was the power of a second-class mech weapon! The disparity in power couldn't be more stark!

Just after the laser beam opened up a gap in the bow section of the carrier, a hyper-accelerated gauss cannon projectile quickly slammed into the cavity, causing the ship to suffer a substantial collision!

A large amount of debris sprayed into space as several compartments broke up in an instant, pulverizing plenty of bodies as the light carrier forcefully endured the sheer amount of kinetic energy crashing onto her hull!

Just two hits was enough to inflict major damage to one of the motherships of the Echo Spears!

Though this was far from enough to cripple the ship, the damage the second-class mechs inflicted was enough to shock the mercenaries who expected an easy reward!

Within the mech hanger of the Scarlet Rose, Ves erupted into laughter as he stood in front of a large, improvised control panel.

"Did you think I was lying!? Not this time!"

The control panel was split into multiple sections. Four of them just happened to project the control interfaces of four different mechs!

"Let's give them another lesson! Fire!"

As soon as Ves pressed a couple of buttons, the rifleman mech and artillery mech fired another salvo at the enemy flagship!

"HAHAHAHA! Do you regret chasing after me? It's too late!"

### *Chapter 1753 Firepower Disparity*

In the time it took for the Scarlet Rose to pass through the territories of the Ordent Republic, Ves hadn't been spending his time in vain.

As someone who always indulged in paranoia, Ves never assumed the best case scenario happened all the time.

His temporary rational state did not diminish this aspect of his. Instead, he became just as paranoid as any casual probability analysis concluded that Ves would surely encounter a situation like this where the Scarlet Rose couldn't shake off her pursuers!

If not now, then later! Ves had to pass through too many star systems, giving his pursuers plenty of opportunities to prepare an ambush!

Aware that fleeing was not always a viable solution, Ves had to prepare another countermeasure!

If he was a qualified starship engineer with many different ship-related competences, then he would have decided to tinker with the Scarlet Rose.

Perhaps he might be able to boost the propulsion system of the ship to provide her with a temporary doubling in acceleration. If Ves happened to be very competent and in a gambling mood, then he would have taken his chances by performing a ruinous double jump!

Sadly, Ves only possessed a shallow understanding of starship engineering. While he could have spent some time by studying some of the textbooks in Aisling's comprehensive library, it would take months or years to become competent enough to manipulate the Scarlet Rose's complex engineering systems!

Trying to master the Scarlet Rose by himself was a waste of time!

Ves wasn't an engineer. He was a mech designer! Rather than attempt to mess with something outside of his expertise, he should rather be leveraging his strengths!

And what better could he apply his expertise to than the four dormant second-class mechs stored in the mech hangar of the Scarlet Rose?

When Ves first visited the mech hangar in person, the cleaning bots already took away the bodies left by Lucky's rampage.

A bit of scars signifying weapon discharges still marred some of the portions of the mech hangar, but by and large everything was fairly intact.

The mech hangar wasn't actually very big. The Scarlet Rose had to devote a significant amount of internal volume to provide enough space to accommodate four battle-ready mechs.

Each of the four mechs shared the same orange coating and markings of any mech affiliated with Clarion University.

Evidently, Aisling managed to replace the standard CRC mech compliment with four of her personal bodyguard mechs.

The design schematics and other files that Ves retrieved from her personal desk terminal proved to be extremely helpful in figuring out the mechs.

Without them, Ves would have wasted precious time and effort in deciphering the mechs!

Yet now that he possessed all of Aisling's notes about her own work, Ves rapidly understood the essence of the four mechs.

"These mechs are all reflections of her design philosophy!"

She designed and built these mechs for herself. This was different from designing mechs for external clients, who all possessed different demands.

Aisling's aim in designing these bodyguard mechs was to form a team of mechs that exerted as much strength as she could manage.

"The secret ingredient is neural interconnectivity!"

Grouping four random mechs together did not necessarily yield greater results. The challenge was to form four complementary mechs who each amplified each other's strength.

The goal was to achieve a level of performance that was stronger than the sum of its parts!

This happened to be something that Lady Curver excelled in! By employing a group of four, very close mech pilots and pairing them up with custom mechs that each connected to a neural network, the mech pilots were able to exert a level of coordination that was a level beyond what elite teams could manage!

While Aisling's application of neural interconnectivity was still immature to the more dramatic applications of Master Huron, it was enough for her four mechs to exert the effective strength of six or eight uncoordinated mechs!

Of course, all of that was rather moot to Ves. With no mech pilots on hand, particularly those who possessed the necessary training to pilot second-class mechs, Aisling's specialty couldn't be leveraged.

In fact, without any mech pilots, how could Ves even make use of these powerful machines?

Surprisingly, Calabast came to the rescue.

Part of the software and data packages she included in her transmission consisted of programs meant to take control over Coalition mechs!

Though it required a bit of hacking and hardware modifications, Ves and Lucky easily managed to follow the steps outlined by Calabast's instructions.

After modifying the neural interfaces and replacing its software with a Hexer-developed control program, they eventually managed to convert the mechs into bots!

Yes, bots!

"Well, perhaps I should call them drones."

Regardless of how he called them, after a lot of modifications spanning an entire week, Ves managed to turn the four second-class mechs into unmanned fighting machines!

Ordinarily, Aisling's bodyguard mechs did not come with any automation.

If Ves wanted to convert the mechs into bots without any assistance, then he would have taken at least a month. He would have been forced to spend most of the time on programming and configuring the AIs and control systems.

Calabast's timely gift provided him with a ready-made solution, allowing him to finish the conversion even before the Scarlet Rose left the Ordent Republic!

The end result made Ves excited. The four unique mechs that used to be piloted by humans now turned into a quartet of battle bots!

Of course, these battle bots only exerted a fraction of their original effective performance.

The automation of the mechs was fairly limited and lacked a lot of ingenuity. While it was no problem to command them to perform standard tasks, as long as they encountered formidable opposition, then the AIs controlling the mechs could easily be fooled!

This essentially meant that the four battle bots would certainly lose in a battle against four proper mechs if all else was equal!

In fact, the battle bots would still lose if they faced just two second-class mechs piloted by competent human mech pilots!

However.. the Echo Spears that managed to corner the Scarlet Rose did not come from the Friday Coalition.

The mercenary corps was a homegrown outfit from the Great Zona Republic!

Their economical light carriers and their large number budget mechs with a handful of midrange and premium mechs all indicated that they were not swimming in money.

The chance that the Echo Spears were capable of fielding second-class mechs was practically nil!

This gave Ves the confidence to deploy his new battle bots!

Even though it was rather ridiculous to think that four battle bots could defeat a force comprising of 170 mechs, the quality disparity was very significant!

Why did the Coalition Reserve Force dispatch monitors to foreign states without any escorts?

That was because they didn't need it in most cases!

Four second-class mechs was enough to deter every opportunistic attacker who drooled over capturing an expensive ship from the Coalition!

Though Ves was forced to make do without any mech pilots, the AIs and remote control system were enough to breathe new life in the pilotless mechs!

As the two ranged mechs fired their second salvo, Ves instructed them to sustain their fire on the light carrier that he identified as the flagship!



Both visual observation and tracking the source of the earlier transmission confirmed that the light carrier flying in the center was the flagship of the Echo Spears!

"Commander Quint must be feeling really uncomfortable right now!" Ves gloated as the two ranged mechs kept hammering the ship in question with an unrelenting staccato of laser beams and gauss cannon projectiles!

The former might not be too impressive, but the latter inflicted a devastating amount of damage to large but lightly-armored targets!

The Kravon, which was the name of the former artillery mech, was not very good at attacking mechs.

Its gauss cannon packed a huge punch, but it wasn't very good at tracing swift, mobile targets such as light skirmishers.

Instead, the Kravon was designed to take care of larger, more strategic targets such as space stations, fortified bases and starships!

The light carriers of the Echo Spears soon responded to the unexpected threat. They no longer flew mostly straight but adopted a very chaotic zig-zag pattern.

Their helmsmen each took direct control over the vessels and followed their training to evade in a way that frustrated most automated target prediction algorithms.

It might have worked if the ships were as small and nimble as light skirmishers.

Unfortunately, vessels designed to carry up to forty mechs in battles were pretty much the equivalent of whales in space!

Despite the extreme range, the Kravon already came with a very sophisticated targeting system!

Not only that, but the Kravon also possessed a powerful ECM and ECCM suite, allowing it to pierce through the pathetic attempt by the light carriers to frustrate its targeting!

In order to observe the movements of its targets closely enough to form an accurate targeting prediction, the Kravon exchanged a lot of sensor data with the Selzer.

The former spaceborn rifleman mech excelled in ranged combat against mechs. With its dual-type rifle switched to laser mode, the mech outputted a constant barrage of hot and energetic beams that was slowly softening up the flagship of the Echo Spears.

Powerful sensor arrays built into the frame of the mech constantly kept the flagship and the other assets of the Echo Spears in view.

If that wasn't enough, then the Selzer could also take advantage of the detailed sensor data provided by the Scarlet Rose!

With so much accurate sensor data at the Selzer's disposal, the mech never failed to hit its target!

Laser beam after laser beam continued to melt a hole at the exact section of the flagship! The Selzer's long-ranged accuracy was much higher than that of the Kravon!

Recognizing the threat, the flagship slowed down and turned her hull until the damaged portions no longer faced the battle bots!

"Hahaha! I was waiting for this!" Ves grinned.

He manipulated the interface to adjust the targeting priorities of the Kravon and the Selzer.

Instead of firing upon the solid exterior hull plating, the two mechs instead started firing on the exposed main thrusters of the light carrier!

When the enemy flagship rotated on her axis to turn her heavily-damaged bow away, she inevitably exposed her thrusters and vulnerable rear!

This decision made in desperation was a big mistake!

Soon, the Selzer fired first! A laser beam instantly impacted a section of the rear hull that squeezed just between the main thrusters of the light carrier!

Ves knew that there was little use in firing energy weapons directly in the thrusters. These components were built to be extremely resilient against heat.

Therefore, he instead opted to soften up the rear hull plating in preparing for the main attack!

Shortly afterwards, the Kravon finally fired its gauss rifle cannon. A projectile larger than the rounds fired by the Deliverer's Executor rifle traveled faster than anyone could conceive!

Ves had deliberately held back the power of the Kravon's main armament in order to increase its firing rate.

Now, the artillery mech fired a heavy round accelerated to greater speeds than before!

The gauss cannon round closed the distance so fast that the helmsman barely had the time to juke the ship.

Too late!

With the help of predictive targeting, the gauss rifle round managed to hit one of the main thrusters at an angle!

As a sensitive component, most forces did everything possible to avoid exposing the stern of their vessels to the enemy.

The reason why quickly became evident!

The Echo Spears underestimated the damage the Kravon could inflict! The round not only bore through the thrusters, but also penetrated deeper while transferring a cataclysmic amount of kinetic energy to one of the most sensitive sections of a ship, the engineering compartments!

A soundless explosion erupted from the stricken light carrier as her entire stern blew up!

The ship lost all propulsion and FTL capability as her entire engineering section became lost!

The mercenaries became stunned! How could their target, who was supposed to be alone and powerless, cripple one of their precious light carriers?

"This is impossible!"

"It's unfair!"

No matter how much the perplexed mech pilots complained, they couldn't deny the truth. Their seemingly-harmless target turned out to be a wolf in sheep's clothing!

#### *Chapter 1754 Impervious*

Though Kravon and the Selzer made a very powerful impression on the Echo Spears, Ves knew that his newly-converted battle bots weren't as invincible as they appeared.

Just like expert mechs, superior mechs could easily be overwhelmed by a mob of inferior mechs!

Quality only went so far in reducing the quantity disparity.

Fortunately, the mechs built by Aisling happened to be expensive custom mechs even by the wealthy standards of the Friday Coalition.

Not only did they feature numerous systems, their base performance parameters were also far superior to any third-class mech!

In terms of battle capability, all of the four machines performed better or on par to a third-class expert mech!

Of course, in an actual battle, the expert mech was liable to win any battle against a superior standard mech.

The difference in skill between an expert pilot and an ordinary mech pilot was too big!

Even when piloting lesser machines, any expert pilot from the Bright Republic could definitely run rings around a Coalition mech unless the mech type matchup was too unfavorable.

What all of this meant was that the four mechs of the Scarlet Rose were very much capable of defeating the 170 spaceborn mechs of the Echo Spears!

"It's too bad I can't field mechs." Ves regretfully muttered. "I can only make do with improvised battle bots."

As hard as he worked, his conversion efforts were still rather crude. Compared to battle bots designed to operate autonomously from the ground up, the four machines weren't capable of bringing out more than half of their potential.

Almost all of the strength currently exerted by the battle bots relied solely on its superior quality. The disparity in materials and tech resulted in an undeniable firepower advantage that Ves had to employ to the best effect.

When Ves initially observed the Echo Spears, he had to make a very important choice.

What should he target first?

He first considered directing the Kravon and Selzer against the 170 mechs deployed by the enemy mercenary corps.

The spaceborn mechs consisted of a balanced arrangement of rifleman mechs screened by a large number of melee mechs.

As suggested by their name, the Echo Spears appeared to have a preference of spear-wielding mechs. Ves spotted a powerful subformation of thirty-or-so lancer mechs that could definitely inflict a lot of damage when they managed to complete their charge.

Ves did not fear the ranged mechs. Regardless of whether they were armed with ballistic, kinetic or laser weapons, the budget mechs didn't bring enough firepower to take down the Scarlet Rose or his battle bots in a brief amount of time!

What Ves truly feared was the melee mechs. While the ranged mechs needed a lot of time to penetrate the armor of his assets, the melee mechs were much more variable in this regard.

As long as dozens of melee mechs mobbed the Kravon and Selzer from all sides, his ranged battle bots would definitely lose battle effectiveness!

He only had two melee battle bots to screen his ranged assets.

The Paravin, the space knight, featured exceptional defense, but was rather mediocre in fending off melee mechs, especially without a mech pilot skilled in swordsmanship in control.

The Fliskin, the light skirmisher, was in an even worse position! The high-speed melee combat that a light mech excelled in was heavily dependent on the judgement and battle sense of a skilled mech pilot.

His cousin Raella happened to be very deadly when piloting landbound light skirmishers! Even if she piloted lighter and cheaper mechs, she often came on top in her duels by relying on her excellent skills!

"A light mech scales even more with piloting skill."

The skill expression of this weight class was very high! This meant that while excellent mech pilots were capable of achieving astounding results, bad mech pilots were liable to trash their machines!

The problem that Ves faced right now was that the Fliskin didn't even have a bad mech pilot.

It didn't have any mech pilot at all!

The rudimentary AI controlling its basic operations wasn't customized for the Fliskin at all. Without customizing its programming to the parameters of the mech, the skirmisher mech would only perform as well as a typical bot.

Perhaps the Fliskin could still rely on its superior performance to crush three or four mechs at once, but once the Echo Spears threw over a dozen mechs at it, the pilotless light skirmisher would quickly expose its shortcomings!

"I can't let any of the Echo Spears get close!" Ves concluded.

As long as the Echo Spears were willing to absorb some losses and bull through the firepower that he brought to bear with his battle bots, they could definitely overwhelm his bots and ship!

This was why he directed the Kravon and the Selzer on the enemy ships rather than mechs.

He wanted to discourage the Echo Spears from pursuing him any further!

His goal wasn't to defeat the Echo Spears or kill Commander Quint. Ves could care less about these Zonan mercenaries.

What he truly wanted was to get away!

To achieve this goal, it was enough to force the Echo Spears into a retreat. As long as they gave up the chase, the Scarlet Rose's FTL drive would finish cycling and allow him to jump away from this star system!

"What better way than to distress a mercenary corps than by attacking their ships?" He grinned.

Every seasoned outfit was always prepared to lose some mechs over the course of an intensive battle.

While it was a bit more painful to lose their mech pilots, as long as they ejected fast enough, the loss of life would probably be bearable even if the Echo Spears lost half of their spaceborn mechs.

Were the mercenaries willing to sacrifice so many mechs to complete this mission?

Ordinarily, no, but this was different! The Coalition Reserve Corps issued this mission itself, and as a mighty arm of a powerful second-rate state, it was not short on money!

The CRC could definitely compensate all of the material losses suffered by the Echo Spears and issue a rich reward on top of this princely sum!

So attacking the mechs would not do much to force the mercenaries into abandoning their mission, especially when they were led by determined military veterans.

This left their ships!

As long as a company of mechs lost their motherships, the Echo Spears would suffer a devastating blow!

A light carrier was worth more than the cost to commission the vessel. While already worth a hefty investment of funds on their own, the mech technicians, ship ratings, officers and captains were all precious assets of the mercenary corps.

As long as they lost their lives, the Echo Spears would lose decades worth of trained and loyal subordinates, whose costs could be measured with money!

In addition to losing all of the men, the mercenary corps would also lose all of the expensive materials and supplies stored on the mechs. This would certainly worsen the outfit's financial position.

Aside from this, destroying the ships also affected the mechs they carried in a very significant fashion!

The 170 mechs in space wouldn't be able to last long in space on their own. In this lifeless star system, it would definitely take at least a couple of days to rescue the stranded mechs.

All the while, the mechs would have to conserve their energy while their mech pilots had to subsist off the emergency stashes and life support systems built into the cockpits.

This was a very frightening prospect!

Who wanted to drift for days or weeks through space while locked inside a metal coffin?

Anyone could drop by and mess with mechs, whether they were friendly, neutral or hostile.

Heavens forbid if a pirate gang, which were quite common in the periphery of the Great Zona Rebpulic, happened to encounter over a hundred homeless mechs!

Ves did not give the Echo Spears too much time to consider their options calmly.

"Fire! Keep firing!" He shouted excitedly as he manually tweaked the targeting priorities of the Kravon and the Selzer.

While the battle bots would definitely fare poorly in a battle against actual second-class mechs, against a huge and lumbering ship, they never missed!

Light carriers might include the word light, but that was only relative to the carrier classes. Any ship that possessed enough capacity to carry dozens of mechs inevitably flew like a sluggish tub in space!

Distressed by the crippling of the flagship, the Echo Spears responded according to their training. Their melee mechs sped up faster while their ranged mechs started to fire at the distant battle bots and mobile supply frigate.

Unfortunately, they didn't have enough to close into the effective range of their weapons!

There was no single standard for the effective ranges of weapons. It depended heavily on their quality, tech, design, materials and other factors such as the effectiveness of the sensor and targeting systems.

One thing was for sure though. The effective range of second-class weapons often exceeded that of their third-class equivalents!

That meant that while the Kravon and Selzer continued to pound a second light carrier with unerring accuracy, the enemy laser beams and ballistic projectiles often flew wide without coming close to hitting their targets!

Ves briefly directed his attention away from controlling the battle bots to adjusting the navigation instructions of the Scarlet Rose.

The relatively nimble mobile supply frigate started to adopt a vigorous evasion pattern. Side thrusters frequently engaged at abrupt intervals as the ship appeared to roll or sidestep a significant amount of enemy fire!

Though plenty of ballistic and kinetic rounds missed the mark, a lot of lasers still managed to hit her exterior.

So what?

The weak laser rifles employed by the mechs of his opposition only inflicted shallow scorch marks on the hull plating of his ship!

While the Scarlet Rose was fairly light by the standards of the ships of the Friday Coalition, her exterior hull plating was actually tougher than the armor plating of a typical second-class mech!

"If you think that will hurt me at all, then think again! Hahahaha!"

Even the weak points of the ship was far more resilient than the Echo Spears could handle.

Seeing that it would take many hours to whittle down the exceptional armor of the Scarlet Rose, the mechs instead poured their firepower towards the battle bots!

In this, the mercenary mechs barely achieved better results.

The Selzer possessed decently high mobility. As long as its flight system flitted randomly in many different directions, it was able to evade a lot of firepower!

What little attacks impacted the Selzer might leave some marks, but without repeated attacks, the chance of penetration was too low!

The Kravon was a bit too big and did not possess the mobility to evade many attacks. Ves addressed this shortcoming by assigning the Paravin to shield it from most damage.



The Paravin's large kite shield withstood or absorbed countless attacks, many of them leaving just tiny marks on its surface!

Even if an errant laser beam or ballistic shell impacted the frame of the mech, the damage was likewise superficial!

However, Ves quickly noticed that the quantity of hits was a little distressing. A thousand pinpricks could still destroy the space knight!

He therefore decided to frustrate his attackers by repositioning the mechs to take cover behind the Scarlet Rose.

Most of the attacks started to impact the almost-impervious exterior of his ship, preventing his battle bots from enduring the attacks directly!

With the safety of his battle bots guaranteed, the Kravon and Selzer completely let go and pounded the second light carrier until all of her bow sections turned into scrap!

Though the Echo Spears hesitated to change the ship's orientation, they soon had no choice!

When the targeted ship rotated a little bit on her axis, Ves pounced on the tiny opening.

"Launch missiles!"

The Kravon finally employed its secondary weapon system. A salvo of twenty small and compact missiles flew from its shoulder launchers and rapidly accelerated towards the distant fleet!

The battlefield became the canvas of an unequal exchange of fire.

The full spaceborn mech contingent of the Echo Spears desperately poured their firepower at the Scarlet Rose in an attempt to stop the battle bots from threatening their ships!

Yet the bulk of the mobile supply frigate shielded the bots too well! The ship's though armored surface was designed to withstand a decent amount of firepower from Hexer mech units.

While the might of a hundred ranged mechs was a sight to behold, the Scarlet Rose danced around in space and evaded much of the incoming fire!

Whatever struck the ship harmlessly bounced away as her armor withstood virtually all of the impacts while suffering only a minimal amount of damage!

While it was possible for the Echo Spears to breach the armor of the Scarlet Rose if their mechs concentrated their fire, the range was too long to achieve pinpoint accuracy!

Even if the Echo Spears closed in and reduced the distance, the Scarlet Rose nimbly rotated like a drill, causing every volley of fire to spread across the entire circumference of her hull!

Like a torrent of rain, all of the laser beams and projectiles that struck the former Coalition ship failed to penetrate her surface!

The desperate mech pilots fired their weapons without regard for heat or ammunition concerns.

Their motherships were in danger!

As mechs depended heavily on carrier ships to travel through the void of space, losing them was a catastrophe!

How could they risk becoming homeless by allowing their target to blow up all of their ships?!

"Keep firing!" A mech captain ordered over the command channel. "No ship can resist so much damage forever! Even if we have to damage the mission target, don't stop firing! Bringing back half a ship is better than bringing back nothing at all! Keep flanking and circling around the target! Those mechs can't hide from every angle!"

The plan of the Echo Spears was sound. As long as their mechs caught up to the Scarlet Rose and surrounded her from every direction, there was no way the more vulnerable mechs could avoid their attacks.

Compared to a large and sturdy vessel like the Scarlet Rose, the four mechs were much more susceptible to their attacks!

There was no way the artillery mech and the rifleman mech would be able to last for long against a sustained bombardment!

While Ves was aware of this threat, he did not exhibit any panic at all. Instead, he grinned as the battle proceeded exactly according to plan.

While he wasn't a military officer, he had been through enough battles to develop a rudimentary understanding of contemporary warfare.

Combined with his keen understanding of mechs and all manner of technology, Ves gained enough confidence to navigate through this crisis!

"The key is to cripple their motherships! Without their light carriers, where can their mechs return after a battle?"

After spending a lot of time among the Flagrant Vandals and several other outfits, Ves understood how much a mothership weighed in the hearts of mech pilots.

If necessary, they were willing to accept the loss of their mechs. As long as they ejected, they could always return to their motherships and wait until their superiors assigned them a replacement!

By threatening or destroying this safety net, the morale of the mech pilots would certainly plummet!

If there was one thing he learned from the likes of Major Verle, it was that changes in morale, confidence and conviction could affect the outcome of a battle just as much as taking out a large number of mechs!

The moment Kravon released an imposing missile volley, the Echo Spears panicked!

They knew the threat of the missiles as well as anyone!

The missile models employed by the Friday Coalition were much more powerful than those employed by the Great Zona Republic!

Each missile cost as much as a premium mech, if not more!

Though expensive for something that was meant to be a consumable, an anti-ship Coalition missile potentially packed enough punch to shatter the armor of the Scarlet Rose!

Against an inferior vessel such as a third-class light carrier, a handful of missiles might be enough to shatter their hulls in half!

Though the Echo Spears weren't able to guess the potency of the missiles launched by the artillery mech, there was no way the missiles were harmless!

"Intercept the missiles! Don't let them reach our ships!"

The Echo Spears all redirected their firepower from attacking the Scarlet Rose to intercepting the missiles.

Yet how could it be so easy to strike them down?

Ves programmed the missiles to spread out and disperse like a net, making it harder for them to be taken out simultaneously.

Not only that, but the missiles possessed an excellent ECM system that scrambled every targeting system, causing most of the attacks aimed at the missiles or their flight trajectory to miss!

Though a handful of shots managed to down a couple of missiles, that was more due to luck than skill!

On top of all of this, the missiles accelerated far faster than the missiles that the Echo Spears were accustomed to! Their insane acceleration caused the missiles to accumulate so much velocity that they reached the position of the vulnerable light carriers far too quickly!

Commander Quint and the other Echo Spears could barely react to the sudden onset of the missiles! Just as the missiles were about to strike the light carriers, they missed!

"What!? How come these missiles are passing us by? Is their programming faulty?"

"Maybe our ECM managed to fool them at the last second!"

"Idiot! How could our ECM systems ever beat Coalition tech?"

"Watch out! They're circling around!"

The missiles may have missed, but they continued flying along a tighter arc! After circling around the light carrier several times, they finally achieved an angle that allowed them to strike at the vulnerable rear of the fleet formation!

Just as the crews of the three undamaged light carriers received the order to brace themselves, the salvo of missiles each impacted their exposed stern, detonating numerous small explosions!

"Thank the president! They aren't ship-killer missiles!"

"Don't get complacent! They're still dealing a lot of damage!"

The missiles launched by the Kravon was a light missile type designed for intercepting heavy fire and hitting small but exceptionally agile targets.

They weren't designed to attack ships. Against a Hexer starship, the missiles would only inflict minor to superficial damage.

Against a light carrier from the Great Zona Republic, their payloads were much more threatening!

Explosions powerful enough to ruin some of the interior compartments of the Scarlet Rose ruined the propulsion systems of the affected vessels in an instant!

Every thruster and every related system turned into wreckage as the detonations swept through the nearby compartments and threatened the engineering section!

One light carrier suffered an unlucky explosion that affected a critical fuel line! A secondary explosion soon occurred that breached the engineering compartment, sweeping all of the engineers and the vulnerable ship components away!

The other two light carriers managed to avoid this unfortunate fate, but their conditions weren't much good either.

After losing their main propulsion systems, the light carriers could no longer accelerate and keep up with the Scarlet Rose's flight!

After crippling the flagship, heavily damaging a second light carrier and disabling the propulsion systems of the remaining three vessels with a single missile volley, the mobile bases of the Echo Spears all turned into sitting ducks!

Ves widened his eyes as he witnessed the results. The missiles performed much better than he anticipated! He only expected a small portion of the missiles to make it through, and he did not dare to dream that he would be able to cripple all three targeted ships!

"The disparity in ECM is too big!"

The countermeasures built into the missiles of the Coalition completely negated the targeting systems employed by the mercenary mechs. Their mech pilots had been forced to aim their weapons manually without benefiting from aim assist or accurate sensor data!

"It's too bad I don't have enough missiles." He sighed.

The Scarlet Rose was not on a combat mission, after all. She only carried a standard amount of ordnance, and none of them were impressive by Coalition standards.

While the Scarlet Rose possessed enough supplies to sustain a couple of more battles, eventually Ves would run out of missiles!

He could not afford to squander his limited assets!

Fortunately, the effect of this singular missile volley had been good. After continually shocking the Echo Spears, this final strike appeared to be the straw that broke the camel's back!

On board the crippled flagship, Commander Quint no longer maintained a controlled and confident demeanor.

The chaotic command center conveyed all kinds of awful news to him. Each and every light carrier sustained severe damage! Aside from a single ship, all of his other ships were no longer able to keep up the chase!

The Scarlet Rose continued to burn her thrusters, accelerating further and further away from the crippled mercenary fleet.

Commander Quint had to make a very difficult decision.

Should he recall the mechs deployed to intercept the Scarlet Rose?

If he let the mechs continue their mission, then they would only fly further and further away from the light carrier!

If they expended too much fuel or energy, then they might not have enough juice to return to their motherships!

If he recalled the mechs, he would essentially have to give up on the mission and miss a huge payout. Not only that, but he would also have to force the Echo Spears to go in the red in order to raise enough funds to repair the damaged light carriers.

This was very expensive!

The mercenary commander contemplated whether he could have it both ways, but the intimidating firepower from the ranged mechs of the Scarlet Rose instantly doused this option.

If he split up his forces, then the mechs of the Scarlet Rose would definitely be able to annihilate his weakened pursuit force!

In the end, Commander Quint possessed a responsibility to his crew. None of them were willing to undergo battles where they lost just as much as their opponent!

Most of his mech pilots and support personnel never received military training! They lacked the will and discipline to endure punishing battles!

Even if the mech pilots managed to eject their cockpits from their broken mechs, with the light carriers stranded in space, how long would they have to wait for rescue?

Thinking of all the damage his mercenary corps would suffer if he pushed through with the mission, Commander Quint finally issued the order that was best for the Echo Spears instead of his clients.

"Cease fire recalls our mechs. Stop the pursuit and let the Scarlet Rose go. Mr. Larkinson has won this battle."

Though his announcement cut deep, many of the Echo Spears inwardly sighed in relief.

Who knew what kind of other deadly surprises the Scarlet Rose and her mechs would show off next?

As soon as Ves observed the mechs breaking off their pursuit, his grin bloomed into a brilliant smile!

"Haha! I won! They finally gave up the chase!"

The Scarlet Rose happily flew away from the battle site as the mercenary mechs started to gather protectively around their crippled motherships.

Ves believed that word would definitely spread about this battle. With that, most outfits who aimed to intercept his ship would definitely think twice before trying to intercept her! Even a mercenary corps capable of fielding 170 mechs had been forced to abort the mission in the face of all of the firepower at his disposal!

"It's only going to be more difficult from here, though." He sighed.

Exposing his cards meant that the rabble should no longer block his way. However, those who were strong and powerful to cope with the threat would definitely be undeterred!

Out of all of the possible enemies that might pursue him, Ves never discounted the possibility that a force dispatched by the Friday Coalition would manage to intercept his ship!

In this case, Ves would no longer be able to crush his opposition by virtue of his tech disparity!

After giving up the chase, the Echo Spears no longer had any chance of completing their primary objective. The distance to their mission target constantly increased until it was far too late for the mechs to catch up no matter how much power they dumped into their flight systems!

The fleeing ship's FTL drive calmly continued its cycling process as if nothing special happened.

Without any engineers to optimize this process, Ves had no way to hurry up this highly-regulated process.

After a total of five agonizing hours had passed, the FTL drive finally became available.

Ves instantly instructed the ship to punch in the coordinates of his next step. The ship's navigation system took care of the rest, automatically calculating and forming the right configuration to reach his intended destination!

As soon as the Scarlet Rose transitioned into FTL, Ves could finally relax.

"Finally!"

He looked up at the four slightly-marred battle bots that had saved his skin a few hours ago.

Despite confronting an entire mercenary corps, the four former mechs exhibited no major battle damage!

Even their more vulnerable weapons made it through the battle largely unscathed!

"This is the might of true second-class mechs!"

Each of the mechs designed and built by Aisling Curver fell in the premier price category of the Coalition mech market.

Ves did not even dare to guess the exact market price of these mechs! He feared he would faint at the amount of cols it took to build or buy one of these custom mechs!

At the very least, Ves would have to fork over billions of coalition credits to obtain mechs of comparable quality and performance!

It felt nice having all of this might at his disposal. Though the lack of mech pilots meant that most of their potential remained dormant, what little he could bring to bear was already enough for him to fend off opportunistic outfits like the Echo Spears!

Now that he gained some self-preservation against weaker opponents, Ves believed his journey through the Great Zona Republic would not be as fraught with peril as he initially expected.

The performance of his battle bots exceeded his expectations!

"These are some really good machines!"

If possible, Ves wanted to retain them and bring them back to his new base and take the time to study them from top to bottom.

There was much that Ves could learn about the characteristics of second-class mechs. Each of the four machines incorporated many interesting design principles and standards.



Each of the mechs carried the character of Clarion University, a top mech design institution of the Gauge Dynasty. Lady Curver also inherited many design principles from Master Huron, a very distinguished mech designer who enjoyed a high position in the Friday Coalition.

Though studying the machines along with all of the related files risked contamination, Ves believed he was strong enough to endure any undesirable changes.

"If nothing else, I can just drain my spirit and temporarily turn myself into a rational mech designer." He muttered.

In the past week, Ves personally experienced some of the benefits that Patricia had alluded to. In his low period, his emotions might be muted, but they also became much less susceptible to outside influence!

It was as if his mind and Spirituality became out of phase with the rest of reality. Whenever Ves delved into the design of Aisling's mechs while he was converting them into battle bots, he noticed that his design philosophy didn't even come close to being threatened!

Ves realized the implications of this reaction. As long as his design seed and design philosophy no longer became affected by outside impulses, he could study or explore all kinds of knowledge regardless if they clashed with his original ideals!

"It's like working with fire and ice at the same time!"

Ordinarily, fire and ice always clashed. Neither could survive while the other was there! Yet upon forcing himself into a low period, the fire in his body suddenly became shielded from reality. Even if he placed a clump ice next to the fire, only a faint reaction would occur depending on his spiritual energy depletion rate!

Ves fully understood the value of rational mech designers at this point.

No wonder the MTA valued them so much!

Rational mech designers might not necessarily be good innovators, but they excelled at integrating all manner of existing inventions no matter how obtuse they were! As long as they obtained enough theory, they could definitely assimilate them in their own body of work to a certain extent!

Did Ves want to go this far? Not necessarily. He did not feel any desire to do what Aisling could do. Messing with neural interconnectivity sounded like a good way to piss off the MTA.

Since Ves sought to earn a lot of merits and redeem a beyonder ticket from the powerful organization, he could not afford to get caught with breaking one of their major rules!

"That doesn't mean there is nothing for me to learn."

Aside from learning the characteristics of second-class mechs, Ves also wanted to gain inspiration from Aisling's design philosophy.

Just like with exchanges between mech designers, careful exploration of another mech designer's work might yield new ideas and perspective that enriched his application of his own design philosophy.

In recent times, Ves became somewhat intrigued by the possibility of replicating the effects of a neural network on a spiritual level.

From his limited understanding of spirituality, Ves believed it was possible to facilitate a spiritual connection between two different mech pilots.

After all, his design spirits were already capable of maintaining connections with many different mechs.

Yet a human was different from a powerful spiritual entity.

How could any human mech pilot, particularly those who lacked spiritual potential, be capable of forming a spiritual connection with a fellow comrade-in-arms?

Ves lacked the answer to this question, hence why he became so interested in exploring Aisling's works in depth.

He hoped he might gain some inspiration that pointed him towards a possible solution.

"What would it be like to form a network between mech pilots that transcends the man-machine connection?"

He could scarcely imagine the results. By forming a spiritual web of connection between mech pilots, they would become capable of exchanging all manner of thoughts and information.

If the mech pilots took advantage of this exceptional state, they would be able fight and move as a single entity! Even better, the mech pilots might be able to achieve resonance between each other that amplified their effective piloting performance!

Of course, Ves did not believe that such a strong result would emerge on the first attempt.

Without the physical bond of a neural interface, the spiritual network would likely be weak. Perhaps only a trickle of data could be exchanged between mech pilots.

Yet that was already enough to make a difference in battle!

Ves shook his head. "Every unknown innovation is a double-edged sword. Leaving aside the question whether it is even possible for me to form such a network, the potential risks are exceptionally great!"

Just like how reckless experimentation with neural interface technology often led to fatal outcomes, messing with spirituality was also fraught with peril!

The crude form of spiritual surgery he performed on William Urbesh was already proof of how bad things it could get if he played with forces beyond his understanding!

"I'll have to limit my experimentation to test subjects rather than my customers."

Despite the risks, Ves seriously wanted to explore this avenue. Not only would he be able to add another application of his design philosophy to his arsenal, he also wanted to achieve something greater.

He already formed a tentative but ambitious plan to strengthen his fighting forces and grant them a unique edge!

While a spiritual network wasn't necessary, if he managed to pull it off, he could definitely achieve a lot of synergy by combining it with his next idea!

Just thinking about the mechs that incorporated these innovations practically sent him over the moon! As a mech designer, he loved nothing more than to turn the impossible into the possible!

"These will be my next research directions!"

He indulged himself for a few minutes longer before returning to reality. He could leave them for later once he passed the immediate crisis.

Now that his ship transitioned into FTL, he was safe for a couple.

"Before my Scarlet Rose emerges back to realspace, I have to make sure my assets are ready for battle."

Ves proceeded to inspect the battle bots and tally the damage they incurred. He also ran a diagnostic of the ship in order to find out if any of her systems sustained any damage.

Fortunately, the Scarlet Rose only suffered minor damage. Aside from some surface components such as sensor modules and other fragile devices, the mobile supply frigate managed to make it out of the battle unscathed.

Though she endured a lot of enemy firepower, her exterior armor was largely intact. Part of that was because the ship's constant rotations spread out the damage across

her entire hull, thereby preventing any single exterior section from accumulating too much damage.

Even so, the minor cracks and chips represented a permanent reduction in armor integrity.

As long as the Scarlet Rose kept bumping into enemies, the damage would continue to accumulate until a breach finally occurred!

Given time, Ves might be able to patch up the holes. Yet Ves did not possess the expensive exotics required to fabricate replacement armor that was up to standard. He could only settle for the materials he had on hand to fabricate inferior replacements.

The same went for the mechs. Each of them only suffered light damage, but the dearth in materials made it difficult to repair any damage.

Lucky was partially to blame for his poor logistical circumstances!

The moment he stepped in the exotics storeroom, he found a near-insensate gem cat lying in a pile of half-eating minerals as if he was sleeping on a bed of money!

"Wake up, you thieving cat!"

Ves kicked the sleeping cat, causing Lucky to yelp and bounce against the bulkhead of the storeroom!

"MEOW!"

Lucky hissed indignantly at his owner!

"Oh don't be so dramatic! With all that you've managed to devour, a kick against your bottomless stomach is the least you deserve!"

When Ves gave permission for Lucky to eat the Scarlet Rose's exotics stash, he expected his cat to take a while to digest his food.

Yet as he approached some of the locked drawers and pulled them out, he encountered nothing but an empty cavity!

Every sample of a critical material was gone!

Ves inspected multiple drawers and found that some other valued materials had disappeared entirely!

As for the lower-grade exotics, Lucky only sampled occasionally.

"Lucky.." Ves gnashed his teeth. "While I didn't set any limits on what you could eat, I thought you'd be sensible enough to leave some to repair my stuff! If the Scarlet Rose goes down because you ate all of my repair materials, then you have only yourself to blame!"

"Meow meow meow!"

Lucky did not look contrite at all! As far as he was concerned, Ves would have never been able to capture the Scarlet Rose without his help! It was all him! Ves only contributed 5 percent to the capture of the ship at most!

Since Ves claimed the Scarlet Rose and her complement of mechs, then Lucky could only settle for the high and medium-grade exotics stored on the ship!

After a lot of arguing, Ves finally managed to convince Lucky to slow down his consumption!

"I don't care whether you've leveled up or grew stronger! A single cat won't get me back to friendly space! Only a ship can do that, so it is in both of our interests to keep the Scarlet Rose intact!"

"Meoow!" Lucky suggested while suggestively swishing his tail.

"That's ridiculous! I don't want to get stranded on a ship without an FTL drive!"

"Meow."

Lucky glowered resentfully at Ves as he enjoyed his breakfast after a good night of rest.

"I shouldn't have killed the chefs." Ves muttered. "The meals produced by the automated cooking machines always taste off."

In order to sate his hunger, Ves went back to his old staple and ate a nutrient pack directly from its packaging.

"Hmm.." Ves evaluated the taste of texture of the nutrient pack type he decided to sample for this morning. "Not bad, but not as good as the last one. It will probably taste a lot better with a few decades of aging."

He was quite surprised with the quality of nutrient packs in the possession of the Friday Coalition.

Unlike the cheaper ones that Ves was used to, the Coalition invested a lot more in quality.

Not only was their nutritional value higher, but their taste was actually palatable!

Ves wouldn't be surprised to find out that most people already replaced their regular meals with Coalition-standard nutrient packs!

Of course, the nutrient packs still weren't comparable to real food. He still missed the gourmet food prepared by Dr. Lupo and Gloriana's personal chefs.

"The sooner I get back, the sooner I can fill my stomach properly."

Perhaps Lucky didn't care that much, but Ves really wanted to return to his companions and get back to designing mechs.

All of this fleeing and fighting reminded him of the many perils he went through while he served with the Flagrant Vandals.

Unlike then, Ves wasn't surrounded by competent military servicemen! He could only depend on Lucky and himself to get out of this predicament!

The good news was that he already managed to get through the first half of his journey.

After overcoming the ambush of the Echo Spears, Ves did not encounter any other ambushes in his next couple of stops.

The most he encountered at these desolate star systems was a bunch of listening posts and a small number of corvettes assigned as scouts.

Instead of reassuring him, Ves only grew more concerned.

The battle against the Echo Spears probably achieved the intended effect of scaring away the weaker groups.

Yet that only made him feel as if his opposition was preparing a bigger surprise down the line!

"Well, I'll deal with it when it comes." He sighed in resignation.

He had a lot of confidence in his battle bots. After he repaired and serviced them as best he could on his own, he continued to study and tweak them in an attempt to draw out some of their buried potential.

In order to increase the automated fighting consciousness of his converted mechs, he explored the galactic net and downloaded a bunch of highly-regarded piloting AIs.

He carefully inspected their programming and selectively incorporated the safest and most relevant portions of them to the existing control systems.

All of this was complicated and delicate work. If Ves botched something, the battle bots might glitch during battle, exposing them to countless counterattacks as they became inert!

However, if his suspicions came true, then Ves had no choice but to assume this risk! The faults of his battle bots would definitely become evident to his enemies once they studied the battle footage!

"If only I can pilot the mechs myself!" He sighed.

He could still increase his control over the battle bots until he turned into their surrogate mech pilots. By assuming more direct control, he could use his own human judgement while still leaving the AIs to do all of the heavy lifting.

Such a semi-direct piloting method was the main way for non-potentates to pilot mechs.

While the lack of neural connection prevented the mech from reaching its full potential, it was better than nothing!

For this reason, Ves took the time to add the ability to manually override the piloting AIs and control the functions of the mechs more directly.

He tried out this added functionality in a couple of simulations.

It was like playing one of the mech games he used to play in the past. The simplified controls and lack of tedium allowed Ves to focus on what was truly important.

Though Ves had no confidence in beating an equivalent second-class mech, it should be enough to bully a huge mob of third-class mechs!

"The Paravin and Fliskin aren't pushovers anymore." He smiled with satisfaction as he observed the two melee battle bots with appreciation.

The space knight and light skirmisher both possessed some ranged armaments, but they were obviously not their focus.

Their true strengths lay in melee combat. The supplemental programming that Ves copied from the galactic net had come with a lot of adaptive fighting routines that adjusted well to the characteristics of the Paravin and Fliskin after a lot of optimization.

This allowed the mechs to fight off numerous third-class melee mechs without falling into disadvantage.

All of these efforts gave him a lot of confidence in confronting twice or thrice the number of mechs that the Echo Spears brought to bear last time.

"My next opponents won't be as complacent, though." He reminded himself.

Anyone ambitious enough to hunt down a stolen Coalition ship protected by a bunch of powerful battle bots should not be incompetent!

Ves already exposed his most important cards. This left him with precious little means to reverse any unfavorable outcome should his enemies come with greater strength than he could cope!

In addition, he also feared that he wouldn't be encountering an overwhelming number of third-class mechs, but something worse.

As long as a small interception force from the Friday Coalition managed to trap him, then his four pitiful battle bots would definitely be defeated by an equal or greater number of second-class mechs!

"They shouldn't be so common in this region of space." He muttered.

That was not to say that the Friday Coalition was absent in the Great Zona Republic. It was just that most Coalition assets in the third-rate states consisted of trade vessels and civilian ships.

There was little reason for the Coalition to station a heavy military presence in a trivial foreign state.

From the correspondence and other documents that Aisling left behind, Ves possessed a decent estimate on how many Coalition assets were available in the state.

It was not enough to ensure a guaranteed interception.

When the Scarlet Rose arrived at a star system, he could often choose his next stop among more than a hundred possible choices!

The range of the Scarlet Rose's FTL drive was quite formidable. Though it was limited when Ves limited himself to traveling to dimmer star systems, he still had plenty of desolate star systems to choose from in order to avoid a prepared ambush.

Though the listening posts and scout ships always tracked the Scarlet Rose's orientation as she transitioned into FTL, it took time to scramble enough assets to lay an ambush at her next destination!

Even if the ambushers arrived at the estimated destination in time, the emergence zone often encompassed a volume that stretched for at least a quarter light-hour or more!

That was a humongous amount of distance! A mech firing a laser weapon would have to wait fifteen minutes until it struck its target!



With that much time, the randomized pathing of a ship or mech would have definitely deviated from the projected trajectory!

In space, no one was stupid enough to travel in a straight line!

While traveling straight minimized waste and maximized efficiency, following a predictable trajectory allowed any hooligan to accelerate a small asteroid to relativistic speeds and collide with the unsuspecting vessel!!

In any case, with such a large emergence zone, the chance that the Scarlet Rose would enter the range of prepared ambush fleet was not very large!

What complicated the matter even further was the relative positions and velocity between the two elements.

Nothing in space truly sat still. Everything was constantly on the move depending on which frame of reference someone adopted.

Even the emergence zones moved according to the relative motions of the star systems and the gravitic tides raging in the higher dimensions!

"It all depends on chance."

Whether he would be lucky enough to avoid a confrontation at his next destination was not set in stone.

Ves was forced to roll another dice after arriving at each subsequent stop.

As long as he suffered one unlucky roll, then all of his prior efforts were for nothing! Once he ended up in the hands of the Lady Curver and the Friday Coalition, he doubted they would treat him as well as they did before!

He not only proved himself to be dangerous, but also had a lot of Fridayman blood on his hands!

Killing the crew of another CRC was not a crime that could be brushed away!

And considering how much the Echo Spears already knew when they confronted Ves, he figured out that the Friday Coalition hadn't kept his exploits secret!

"My notoriety has probably shot through the roof after this news became known!"

Ves groaned and held his head. What of his reputation? What of the LMC's standing in Coalition-aligned states?

"The LMC should be safe for now. The Sand War still isn't over. My Desolate Soldiers and Deliverer mechs are still too essential to the survival of many states!"

That did not preclude the possibility of betrayal once his products no longer became vital. As soon as the Sand War ended, Ves and the LMC had to tread very carefully when doing business with Coalition-aligned space.

"I can't stay in the Ylvaine Protectorate." He concluded.

It was pretty much an island in an ocean of Coalition-aligned states. Staying there would only put a bigger target on the Protectorate. Ves did not wish to taunt the Fridaymen into overrunning his benefactors!

"The Protectorate isn't suitable for me and my organization anyway."

The Ylvainan culture didn't appeal to the members of the Larkinson Family who decided to follow him. He couldn't imagine Melkor, Raymond or Clinton turning into devout Ylvainan believers at all!

In order to escape the reach of the Friday Coalition and provide his relatives and subordinates with a more compatible living environment, Ves needed to settle in a different state.

The only state he could think of was the Sentinel Kingdom, which was very far away from the Friday Coalition.

With the entire Hegemony in the way, Ves didn't believe that Lady Curver and the CRC could dispatch forces to kidnap him again!

Yet just thinking about staying in a state that was in close proximity to the Nyxian Gap sent shivers through his spine.

He would only be exchanging a lesser threat for a greater threat!

Ves frowned and crossed his arms.

Escaping Coalition pursuit was not the end of his troubles. The hasty evacuation of the LMC from the Bright Republic had doubtlessly produced a lot of problems.

Yet even if he had to leave the Mech Nursery and all of his accumulations in the Bright Republic behind, he didn't regret his choice!

Ves no longer dared to trust any state, whether it was the Bright Republic or even the Ylvaine Protectorate.

As long as he made enemies with at least one faction, Ves would always be exposed to schemes!

While his Avatars of Myth ought to be capable of fending off all kinds of threats, it was still a stretch to resist the authorities!

This was a problem that couldn't be solved in a short amount of time!

At this time, his comm suddenly beeped.

The control module of the quantum entanglement node suddenly received an incoming comm call.

Due to his paranoid security precautions, he did not allow the control module to connect directly to the communication systems of the Scarlet Rose.

Ves had to walk all the way to the compartment of the ship which held the quantum entanglement node in order to accept the call.

"Well, whoever called me is very patient for ringing me for six minutes straight." He noted as he activated the interface and pressed the buttons that accepted the call.

The projection of a familiar figure appeared in front of Ves.

"Hello Ves."

"Hello Tristan."

An awkward silence ensued as Ves silently stared at Tristan Wesseling's projection.

Previously, Ves always treated Tristan as a friendly acquaintance. Though they hadn't talked many times, the Fridayman mech designer always took the initiative to show some goodwill to him. Their shared connection to the Rim Guardians meant that it was very likely they would cross paths in the future.

Yet it was different now. Tristan's status may not have changed, but Ves single-handedly deteriorated his relationship with the Friday Coalition in the most violent fashion!

Whereas before he might have only been an incidental mech designer who sided with the Hexers, now the Coalition almost certainly labeled him as an enemy!

He had Fridayman blood on his hands! No matter how he managed to do it, there was no question he was involved in wiping out the entire crew of the Scarlet Rose!

Technically, Ves and Tristan should be enemies.

Yet neither of them showed any willingness to abide by the expectations of their identities.

Without exchanging a word, both of them understood each other's measure.

They had no special feelings for the Komodo War and the conflict between the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony.

While this rivalry still affected their lives, they already set their sights higher! Their ambitions stretched far beyond the Komodo Star Sector!

After implicitly understanding what he had in common with Tristan, Ves subtly relaxed his posture.

His counterpart followed likewise. He had been waiting for a friendly reaction.

Though both of them had managed to relieve the tension between them, that did not mean that everything was okay.

"So.. is it okay for you to take the initiative to talk to me?" Ves eventually broke the silence.

Tristan looked completely at ease. "Reality is never black and white. Do you think the Friday Coalition cares about an individual mech designer? While it's true that our evaluation of you has dropped, you're still a small fry in our eyes. Only Lady Curver and some of the people within the CRC are paying attention to you. As for the rest, the war against the Hexers is a big greater priority!"

That made a lot of sense. Compared to a trivial Journeyman who possessed an odd design philosophy, the Fridaymen had to exert their full effort into preventing the Hexers from annihilating their state!

One was just a stain on their dignity, while the other threatened their entire existence!

Ves felt pleased that he managed to stay under the radar of the Friday Coalition. Just thinking about their awe-inspiring might and vast resources at their disposal sent a chill through his spine.

If the Friday Coalition allocated just 0.1 percent of its total strength into annihilating him, Ves would certainly die without a doubt!

"Even so, I imagine it's not exactly proper for you to be contacting me. Why did you call? Did Aisling put you up to it or something?"

"I'm no friend of Lady Curver." Tristan immediately shook his head. "She's an alumni of Clarion University, which is one of the foremost mech design institutions of the Gauge

Dynasty. I'm a graduate of the Leemar Institute of Technology, which hails from the Carnegie Group."

"And that matters because...?"

"To make the long story short, we're bitter rivals. The competition between Clarion and Leemar is very intense. We compete on everything from the amount of academic papers our professors publish to the degree of success enjoyed by our graduates. The competition for the comprehensive ranking of mech design institutions is particularly acrimonious!"

All of this had nothing to do with Ves. He adopted a bored expression.

"Does this rivalry even matter these days? A common enemy is bearing down on you both!"

Tristan sheepishly shrugged. "You'd be surprised by how far people would go to reinforce their cliques. War brings pressure. War limits resources. War imposes stricter control. All of this means that there is an intense competition to be in charge. Those who become leaders will inevitably benefit those who belong in the same camp!"

"I see."

It seems the Friday Coalition wasn't as unified as he initially thought. While Ves already caught a portion of this from Aisling's correspondence, he was distracted by all of the initiatives meant to foster cooperation.

"Don't get me wrong, Ves. We know the score. We are still capable of getting along when it truly matters. It is just that the Carnegie Group is situated directly in the path of the Hexers. My state is under a huge amount of pressure as Hexer raids and invasions frequently destroy or deprive us of our infrastructure."

This was the misfortune of being one of the partners of the Coalition that directly bordered Hegemony space.

Though the Carnegie Group prepared their defenses for centuries, the Hexers hadn't spent this time in vain!

Upon this realization, Ves studied Tristan's projection carefully and noted that he didn't seem very hopeful.

"What's up with you?"

"This will be the last time we can talk to each other in a while. Duty calls. I think you can understand."

"You don't sound willing."

"Whoever wins the Komodo War, the Carnegie Group likely won't be among them. Do you understand?"

"Is the war going that badly for you guys?"

"The Hexers are strong, that's for sure. Even if we manage to defeat them, they'll take down plenty of Fridaymen with them. We just happen to be the closest in their line of fire."

From the way Tristan talked, he must not be very optimistic about the Carnegie Group's future!

Yet regardless of what he believed, he still had to meet his obligations!

As a talented Journeyman mech Designer and a direct disciple to Master Katzenberg, Tristan enjoyed benefits from the Carnegie Group. It was only right for him to repay the debt he owed by contributing to the partner's secret design projects!

"Good luck with whatever you are doing."

"That sounds strange from someone on the opposite side." Tristan amusingly chuckled.

"As you've said it yourself, us Journeymen are small fries. The Coalition and Hegemony are too powerful to pay attention to the little guys. I think we have gone past treating our allegiances as the main determinants of our attitudes."

""What do you think about Lady Curver, then?"

"If she wasn't so decisive in running from the Scarlet Rose, I would have killed her myself!"

"That's not a good idea, Ves." Tristan shook his head. "One of the reasons why I called is to tell you that you need to be more careful with how far you pursue your vendettas. Direct disciplines like Aisling and I explicitly enjoy the backing of our Masters, do you understand?"

Ves scratched his head. "Not really."

"Direct disciples are considered to be extensions of a Master Mech Designer's research interests. Whatever progress we make on our branching design philosophies, our Master also benefits from the results we achieve. Do you think a Master will stand by when a promising student who is exploring another avenue of their core specialty is under threat? What do you think will happen if someone actually has the temerity to kill their disciples?"

If Ves was in that position, he would definitely be mad as hell! A direct disciple was pretty much a free research surrogate!

"What's about nominal disciples?" Ves asked.

"It's different for nominal disciples like you used to be. Unless someone wanted to target Master Olson, she isn't inclined to retaliate should anything happen to you. In the mech community, nominal disciples are mostly external helpers to Masters. They extend a Master's influence and network and can be useful in various ways. However, unless they advance to Master Mech Designers themselves, nominal disciples will always be regarded as helpers."

"Does this only apply to Friday Coalition or is it something universal?"

"We aren't that different from the rest of human space in this regard. Perhaps disciples are less valued in more prosperous star sectors as it is much easier to cultivate talents there. However, here in the galactic, every Journeyman is still a valued asset."

"So it's only because our star sector is so poor that every disciple is important."

Ves understood his point. Due to various reasons, many people with a talent in mech design never got to study it or make something out of their career. The mech industry simply wasn't prosperous enough to accommodate so many talents.

Those with gifts often had to give up their dreams and pursue a lesser career due to an inability to attract investment and fund their own ventures.

Ves imagined that the conditions were slightly better in the galactic heartland and galactic center

While the competition was much more intense, the barrier to entry was probably easier to overcome as long as mech designers had some money at their disposal.

"To get back to the point, you should really think twice before you threaten the life of someone like Lady Curver. She's one of the brightest graduates of Clarion University. Not only does her alma mater appreciate her a lot, but she has also become Master Huron's latest investment. If you happened to kill her, I can guarantee you that Master Huron will never let you go! He's a very sentimental mech designer and values his relationships very highly! Killing Lady Curver is not only an attack on himself, but also an attack on his sensibilities!"

He noted the difference between the two.

Officially, Lady Curver was Master Huron's direct disciple. According to Tristan's explanation, killing her would materially affect Master Huron's research interests!

Yet if Master Huron was someone who appreciated Lady Curver as a person, then he would definitely go mad with rage!

After a bit of thought, Ves recalled that Master Huron specialized in neural interconnectivity. This specialization probably warped his personality into valuing relationships to an extreme degree!

This meant that killing Aisling would definitely provoke an irreconcilable enmity with a powerful Master Mech Designer!

Sweat poured down his back. If Ves had been a little more reckless, then the Friday Coalition absolutely wouldn't be as lackadaisical towards him as now! As long as someone important enough pressured the Friday Coalition to take care of him, Ves would definitely be unable to make it so far in his escape as now!

Fortunately, Aisling and Patricia already fled the ship before Ves and Lucky approached the mech workshop.

After almost getting killed by a missile, he would have definitely urged Lucky to slaughter them both regardless of their identities!

"Should I be concerned by Master Huron?"

"I'm not sure." Tristan looked uncertain. "Since Curver managed to escape unscathed, you didn't cross his bottom line. Depending on his personality, he probably sees his disciple's misfortune as a teaching moment. As long as she learns from this ordeal, she will be much more formidable in the future. You practically did him a favor if he adopts this mindset."

"And if he doesn't think this way?"

"Then you're definitely in trouble. Who knows what he is thinking. Masters don't think like normal people. Especially when they lived for over two centuries." Tristan shrugged. "If you ask me, Master Huron is probably spending all of his time on the Komodo War. As one of the best mech designers of our state, his work is vital in increasing our odds of victory. How can he allow himself to get distracted? At the very least, my own Master is like this. Every important Fridaymen has become incredibly busy since the outbreak of the war."

The two chatted some more about the conditions in the Friday Coalition. The state had entered into a total war footing.

Life changed drastically for every Fridaymen as they couldn't afford to lose the war that decided the future of their state!



Compared to this pivotal conflict, the border struggle against the sandmen attracted no attention at all! Even as many beleaguered states called for help, the Fridaymen completely turned a deaf ear on them! At this stage, they only cared about themselves!

Tristan illuminated several facets of the Friday Coalition that Ves only only brushed upon when he read Aisling's correspondence.

Though both of them were direct disciples of famous Masters, they each belonged to different groups within their large and expansive state.

Lady Aisling Curver was part of the most powerful and self-assured partner of the Friday Coalition. She mostly communicated with people from the same side, so they all infected each other with the pride and confidence that was seared into their bones!

It was different for someone like Tristan who came from the Carnegie Group. As a partner who bore the brunt of Hexer aggression, he not only stood to lose the most, but also possessed a much greater understanding of the enemy.

The lack of confidence exhibited by Tristan sent a very depressing message in itself!

Not that Ves particularly cared. The Carnegie Group and the Vermeer Group which Master Olson hailed from could go to hell for all he cared. He long cut ties with both partners.

Instead of worrying about the Friday Coalition's precarious internal situation, Ves paid a lot more attention to their external moves.

Since he had a friendly Fridayman on the line, Ves might as well take advantage of him to answer some of his doubts!

"What is the deal with monitors like Lady Curver? If the Friday Coalition truly wanted to keep an eye on foreign states, why not send a diplomat or a spy?"

"There are several reasons for that." Tristan replied without hesitation. "First, diplomats and spies have already been dispatched. The former are high profile while the latter are low profile. Regardless of their responsibilities, they are doing most of the actual work in keeping tabs on a foreign state."

"Then what is the purpose of dispatching mech designers like Aisling?"

"The answer should be obvious." The Fridayman replied. "As mech designers, what do we do best?"

"Designing mechs."

"And building them. Have you taken a good look at the material stockpile aboard the Scarlet Rose?"

"It's not enough to build another second-class mech." Ves instantly replied. "There aren't enough high-grade exotics available."

In fact, Ves had even less at his disposal now that Lucky gobbled up the choicest exotics!

"That's because the so-called monitors aren't expected to do so. In a foreign third-rate state, which mechs are the most common?"

"Third-rate mechs."

"Exactly!"

"What is the purpose of this?" Ves puzzled.

"It's for allowing agents to blend in with the locals."

"If the Fridaymen want to blend in, why not buy a mech from the market?"

"That's because blending in is only one of their purposes. Oftentimes, a mission involving mech pilots often requires a mech that blends in with the locals while simultaneously possessing sufficient power to complete the mission. Such mechs have to be tailored to the circumstances, hence the need for a mech designer who is close to the situation."

Ves finally understood the role of Lady Curver. Even though none of the systems and logs alluded to it, a mech designer assigned as a monitor actually served as an equipment provider who facilitated the clandestine operations of her state!

"Does that mean that the Friday Coalition is secretly meddling in the affairs of the Bright Republic and other states?"

Tristan didn't answer his question. Instead, his mouth remained shut.

His silence was an answer in itself. Ves understood that Tristan had already been unusually generous with his information. There were some topics he couldn't afford to go into, though.

Ves felt his heart sinking as he went over the implications. The Friday Coalition might have compromised the Bright Republic already!

At the very least, Ves bet that the Cavendish and Ramza Families were already in their pocket!

"Will.. will the Friday Coalition extend the war to the third-rate states?"

Tristan sighed. "I'm no strategist, and I'm not privy to the plans of my state. All I can guess is that if we are losing trend, we'll definitely pull out all the stops! Dragging in the rest of the star sector in the war will add more variables to the mix. This will give our side more opportunities to reverse our decline!"

"How does that work?" Ves asked. "No third-rate state is stupid enough to attack a second-rate!"

"They don't have to. It's enough to change their stance and stop their formal and informal ties to their patrons. States like the Bright Republic serve as an important source and shipping conduit for several important materials. They encompass both bulk goods such as titanium and palladium to strategic materials such as high-grade exotics."

"Stopping this trade means weakening a second-rate state, is that right?"

"You got it, Ves. The idea that the Bright Republic and the other third-rate states are bystanders in the Komodo War is incorrect. While your weaker states all like to bury their heads in the sand and pretend that they are neutral, from our perspective you are already vessels to us or the Hexers."

The revelation came as a very disconcerting surprise to Ves. Though he already suspected as much on some level, Tristan's confirmation still discomfited him a lot!

If his words were true, then the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate would definitely get dragged into the conflict in time!

"Does that mean that our states will soon be home to battles between Fridaymen and Hexers?"

Tristan pressed a lip against his finger. "I doubt it. All of our best fighting assets are still needed at the frontlines. What will most likely happen is that the third-rate states will be pressured to double down their commitments to their respective patrons and wage war against the states aligned with their enemies!"

"What!? Really?!"

"I'm not sure it will happen this time. In past conflicts, it only happened occasionally, because you can't predict how well the third-rate states aligned to you will fare against the opponent's vassals."

"How likely do you think the Friday Coalition will resort to this solution?"

"It's probably likely. It's no secret that the Friday Coalition enjoys a broader base of support in the star sector."

Ves smiled sardonically. The Hexers didn't exactly make for attractive allies! Their overbearing culture and well-known biases against men made it really hard for foreigners to form a good impression of the female supremacists!

The only lesser states that maintained friendly relations with the Hexadric Hegemony had no choice.

Religious states like the Ylvaine Protectorate simply didn't get along with the secular Friday Coalition!

Secular states like the Sentinel Kingdom were much more compatible with the Fridaymen, but because they were situated too far away from Coalition space, it was already foreordained that they would focus on building ties with the Hegemony!

In both cases, the third-rate states really wanted to pick another patron, but were forced to play nice with the Hexers.

The ties between the Hexers and their 'vassal states' were anything but warm!

Ves realized that the Friday Coalition would definitely be able to take advantage of this disparity and force its vessels into strangling the states that supported its archenemy!

"Does that mean the Bright Republic will attack the Ylvaine Protectorate?!"

"It's possible, but I really can't say for sure." Tristan slowly answered, reluctant to say anything more lest he come across as a traitor. "However, with the Sand War battering your states, I can imagine that your leaders will be very resistant to yet another war. The Friday Coalition must be seen as benevolent, so it can't be too heavy-handed in forcing its vassal states to act as its thugs."

All of this sounded way above their heads. Tristan was mostly speculating at this point, but what he said so far was enough to make Ves concerned!

Though Ves no longer held any affection for his home state, many of his relatives still pledged loyalty to the state.

As for the Ylvaine Protectorate, Ves strongly appreciated its support. The Transcendent Messenger, Holy Soldier and Deliverer designs cemented his friendship with the Ylvainan people!

If war ever broke out between the two states, Ves could not bring himself to support either side!

Because that would mean going against the other side!

"What a mess." He groaned.

"That's war for you. The Sand War has already done a number on your states. Our own war might engulf you all as well. You should take that into account, especially since you've become a person of interest to our state."

The two talked some more about the Friday Coalition's attitudes towards external states. Ves gained a few more insights on how people like Tristan regarded the lesser states.

Even without any treaties, the second-rate states truly regarded the lesser states they maintained relations with to be their vessels!

What was worse was that there was no way to fight back against such an arrogant disposition!

If the Friday Coalition declared the Bright Republic to be their little brother, then the latter state had no choice but to smile and bear with the pronouncement!

The power disparity between the two was similar to the differences in power between his battle bots and the Echo Spears!

"Thanks for telling me all of this." Ves spoke appreciatively. "You didn't have to reveal so much to me. I feel like I'm taking advantage of you. Do you need anything from me?"

As a mech designer, Ves was uncomfortable with unequal exchanges with his fellow peers, especially those he respected!

He had no problem with screwing Lady Curver over and stealing her assigned ship. She had it coming!

Yet for Tristan, Ves had truly taken too much advantage of him without paying anything back in return. The debt that weighed on his mind constantly rose with no sign of stopping!

Though Tristan wanted to dismiss the offer, he halted and fell into thought. This was the last time they would speak for some time.

"I have a question that has been bugging me for some time. Your design philosophy has always been a mystery to me and anyone who has paid any notice to it. I think I figured some of the gist of what you are doing. It has to do with.. the P-word, right?"

Tristan emphatically tapped the side of his head with his finger, thereby alluding to the phenomenon known as psionics.

His guess came awfully close to the truth. Ves really didn't want to confirm Tristan's guess, especially since he suspected that the call might be monitored by the spies of the Friday Coalition and all manner of other groups, including the MTA!

Yet.. was it still a secret? Anyone who studied his mech designs in detail such as Gloriana already guessed that Ves found some way of leveraging psionic power to form the sources of his glows!

Since the cat was already out of the bag, Ves might as well own up to it. The more he exposed, the more he could leverage his design philosophy in the open!

"It's very complicated, but your guess is very close to the truth." Ves carefully answered.

"I thought so! You must possess a very unique mindset to be able to do what you can do! Is there anything I should take note of when I perform my own work?"

Ves pressed his lips into a thin line. While he was more than willing to give Tristan some pointers, he didn't want to give his eavesdroppers any freebies!

He decided to issue some general advice that he didn't mind leaking out. It was not as if many people took him seriously.

"One of my central ideas has always been that mechs are alive. I think it's a mistake to see your mechs as dead and lifeless machines. You don't have to go as far as me, though. As long as you alter your mentality towards mechs and treat them with respect, I think you'll definitely be surprised when they pay you back!"

"Interesting." Tristan looked intrigued. With how sincere Ves sounded, he didn't dismiss this strange advice out of hand! "I'll think about it. My design philosophy doesn't really go into this direction at all, but I'll see whether I can benefit from your view. Thank you, and goodbye."

"Goodbye."

An empty field of stars suddenly became the backdrop to a massacre!

Hundreds of mechs, many of them bearing the colors and markings of several different mercenary outfits, swarmed towards a single point in space!

That point happened to be the position of the Scarlet Rose!

All manner of missiles, lasers and projectiles slammed against the surface of the mobile supply frigate like hail impacting the roof of a house!

Though the ship's exterior armor withstood the rain of attacks well enough, the outer layers slowly deteriorated, signifying that the ship couldn't remain impervious forever!

Opposing them were Kravon and the Selzer.

The artillery battle bot fired its gauss cannon at a far higher firing rate than before in order to damage as many opposing mechs as possible! Its missile launchers emptied its ammunition canisters without any notion of conserving them for later.

As for the Selzer, the rifleman mech desperately fired laser after laser at the vulnerable ranged mechs. With the power of its rifle, the mech only needed a couple of shots to down a mech! Some even succumbed after suffering just a single hit!

Neither of the two ranged mechs bothered to threaten the carriers that brought these mechs into battle.

The ambushers learned from the previous attempt! Knowing that the motherships were exceptionally vulnerable against their target, the mercenaries involved in this attack had deliberately kept their vessels at a distance, thereby keeping them well out of range of the Kravon and the Selzer's formidable weapon systems!

With no other alternative, the two battle bots could only resist the aggression by whittling down the opposing ranged mechs!

Not every mech stayed back and unloaded their firepower onto the Scarlet Rose.

A handful of mech companies bravely flew forward and attempted to close in on the fugitive ship in order to cripple her propulsion system!

As long as they could get close enough, they could probably sabotage the thrusters and engine systems in short order!

Standing in their way, the Paravin and Fliskin hovered around the Scarlet Rose protectively, fending off any melee mechs that flew too close!

The knight mech shielded the relatively immobile Kravon. Without the space knight providing cover, the former artillery mech would have gotten overwhelmed!

As for the Fliskin, the swift and agile light skirmisher covered the rear, preventing any mechs from attacking the stern of the Scarlet Rose!

Both melee battle bots exhibited superior strength, speed and defense! Compared to their third-rate counterparts, the second-class machines soundly crushed their opposition without any contest!

Although the bots did not fight in an imaginative and crushing manner, the superiority of their specs was enough to compensate for their shortcomings!

The Paravin and Fliskin did not succumb at all even when they were surrounded by dozens of mechs!

A single crushing sword chop bisected an attacking mech in an instant, prompting it to let go of its spear even as some of its components exploded, engulfing the exposed cockpit portions to the deathly aftermath!

The pilot didn't even have the opportunity to eject!

The Fliskin fought much more insidiously. Lacking the strength and reach to cut mechs in half with its superior specs, it instead took advantage of its superior mobility to dance around its opposition.

No matter how hard the mercenary mechs tried to surround the Fliskin with a sphere-like formation, the mech cleverly flew through the cracks before the net closed in on it! Not only that, but the mech swiftly turned around and attacked the clumsy formation from the rear by stabbing its sharp and nigh-unbreakable daggers straight through the thinly protected rear of the mechs!

Though it was a lot more efficient to attack the flight systems of the enemy mechs to end their participation in the battle, the Fliskin acted on much different instruction.

It unflinchingly stabbed its daggers in the positions that best ran the blade through the cockpit!

The Fliskin moved so fast and attacked so quickly that its targets hardly had the time to eject!

Even if they did so, the mech still reacted within milliseconds and made sure to stab the escaping cockpit cabins before they got away!

A shudder swept through the backs of the mech pilots assigned to attack the Scarlet Rose and her escorts.

The casualties suffered by the coalition of mercenaries exceeded everyone's imagination!

In their prior battles, the mercenaries rarely lost too many mech pilots. Most mechs were resilient enough to grant their mech pilots enough time to eject!

Mercenary mech pilots tended to value their lives very highly, so many of them already had their fingers on the ejection buttons or levers!

Yet even then, the two melee battle bots showed no regard for their attempts to preserve their lives! Instead, they harvested them one by one as they rapidly overwhelmed every mech foolish enough to challenge their might!



With so much blood being shed, the Zonan mercenaries quickly lost heart. The ambush wasn't supposed to proceed this way!

According to the plan their mercenary commanders had formed, they should have just swarmed and overwhelmed the four powerful machines by sheer weight of numbers.

Ideally, they would be able to defeat the four second-class mechs and gain possession of the Scarlet Rose.

If the mercenaries failed to do so, then they hadn't necessarily lost.

The Friday Coalition already offered them a rich reward for consuming the strength and resources of the Scarlet Rose!

The powerful state offered enough money to compensate the mercenaries of the losses they suffered and added even more money as an appreciation for their efforts!

With such rich remuneration, no mercenary corps lost out even if they were defeated in the end!

It was too bad that Ves already saw through their plan.

"I won't allow you to enjoy a lossless transaction!"

His instructions to his autonomous battle bots forced all of them to do their best in killing the mech pilots as opposed to their mechs!

Since material losses were meaningless in the eyes of the enemy mercenary corps, Ves instead targeted the one asset that money couldn't easily replace.

Mech pilots! In particular, loyal and skilled mech pilots!

Many of the mercenary corps participating in this ambush consisted of outfits operating for several decades.

Each of them were led by seasoned mercenary commanders who completed all kinds of difficult and bloody missions.

They might have experienced much, but Ves doubted that they encountered an enemy with the might of second-class mechs and the ruthlessness of an unscrupulous mech designer!

To prevent the mercenaries that heavily outnumbered him from overwhelming his meager forces, he had to hit them where it hurt!

Such ruthlessness was very rare on the battlefield. Most mech pilots were more concerned with defeating enemy mechs rather than aiming at the lives within.

Even if the mech pilots wanted to kill their counterparts, they didn't have the power and skill to accomplish such a difficult objective!

Therefore, after encountering the depraved battle bots that breached cockpit after cockpit, several mercenaries already exhibited cold feet.

"Halt! Let's not go in too fast! Let the other guys go first!"

"Those cowards want to drive us to our deaths! Don't fall for their trap!"

"Retreat! Our boys won't be a part of this anymore! We've already lost over thirty percent of our mech pilots! We've suffered enough!"

Too many mech pilots became deterred by the show of force from the Scarlet Rose.

Though the mech captains and the mercenary commanders knew that they brought enough mechs to overwhelm the four deadly machines, who wanted to send their brothers and sisters to the meat grinder?

Continuing the assault resulted in nothing but death until the mechs went down!

Seeing as how the four battle bots only suffered scratches and surface damage so far, they probably wouldn't go down until at least hundred mercenary mech pilots consumed their strength!

This was a very brutal calculus!

If the outfits in question were part of the military, then their mech pilots and commanders would definitely pay the price as long as the mission was important enough!

Yet even if the outfits shared some ties to the military, most of their mech pilots and support personnel consisted of civilians!

With no military training to speak of, their discipline and willingness to pay the ultimate price was very shaky!

After harvesting over a hundred-and-twenty lives, the mercenary mechs all backed up. Not a single mercenary mech pilot retained the courage to continue the costly assault!

Even as their mercenary commanders or other mech officers ordered them to resume the assault, not a single mech pilot dared to confront the seemingly godlike war machines!

Ves did not let the mercenaries linger in the vicinity of the Scarlet Rose.

"Redirect fire towards the melee mechs!"

The Kravon and Selzer stopped firing their weapons at the distant ranged mechs and instead brought their weapons to bear against the stagnant melee mechs!

Mechs exploded and entire parts vaporized as lasers and gauss cannon rounds impacted the exposed mechs!

"Retreat! Abort the assault!"

When the first mercenary corps decided to give up on the mission and recall their surviving forces, the ones who remained came under a lot more pressure!

This was especially when Ves instantly ordered his two ranged battle bots to cease firing at the fleeing mechs and instead direct their lethal firepower towards the mechs that didn't receive any orders to pull back.

The hesitating mercenary corps instantly suffered more casualties!

At this close range, it was impossible for the Kravon and Selzer to miss their shots! Each weapon discharge resulted in another shattered mech!

With so many precious mech pilots dying along with their fragile machines, the remaining mercenary corps that originally banded together to tackle the Scarlet Rose finally issued the necessary orders!

"Retreat!"

"Pull back!"

"Get away from the Scarlet Rose!"

"No more! Enough is enough!"

The diminished mech companies retreated step by step depending on how quickly their leaders issued the order to retreat.

The mechs still maintained a semi-random formation as they retreated, fearing pursuit from the Paravin and the Fliskin!

Ves smirked when he saw this result. He ordered the Kravon and the Selzer to cease firing their weapons.

What the mercenaries didn't know was that both battle bots had almost reached their limits. The Kravon didn't carry that much ammunition and the Fliskin's heat levels had been rising at a very worrisome rate.

If the battle went on for five more minutes, then the two battle bots would definitely stop firing, thereby exposing a crucial gap in his defenses!

Fortunately, the mercenaries did not take advantage at this temporary reprieve. They had long lost heart in this battle. Even if they guessed that the two battle bots had almost reached their limits, none of them wanted to be the ones to test this assumption!

After all, the melee mechs still appeared to be in good shape! It was no problem for them to fight a while longer and harvest at least a hundred more lives!

Though both sides fought vigorously against each other just moments ago, neither side attacked each other the moment the mercenaries called for a total retreat.

Ves did not wish to agitate the mercenaries. His actions so far presented a very clear message.

Attacking him resulted in losing their lives!

Leaving him alone meant that Ves would leave their lives intact!

With such a clear message, the frightened mercenaries all chose the second option! They retreated honestly and ran out of engagement range as fast as their mechs could carry them out!

Ves observed the retreating mechs quietly. He kept his battle bots on standby without attempting to resupply them. If he showed any weakness at this stage, the mercenaries might change their minds!

In the end, no one called his bluff. Ves relaxed as the mercenary mechs flew well out of range.

"Well, I hope these mercenaries truly stop bothering me now!"

This was the third ambush he encountered ever since he crossed into the borders of the Great Zona Republic!

While he always managed to crush his opposition, each battle resulted in a significant consumption of his battle strength.

If this went on, his Battle Bots would become nothing more than ornaments after a couple more battles!

"The consumption is too great!"

#### Chapter 1755 Tech Disparity

The battlefield became the canvas of an unequal exchange of fire.

The full spaceborn mech contingent of the Echo Spears desperately poured their firepower at the Scarlet Rose in an attempt to stop the battle bots from threatening their ships!

Yet the bulk of the mobile supply frigate shielded the bots too well! The ship's though armored surface was designed to withstand a decent amount of firepower from Hexer mech units.

While the might of a hundred ranged mechs was a sight to behold, the Scarlet Rose danced around in space and evaded much of the incoming fire!

Whatever struck the ship harmlessly bounced away as her armor withstood virtually all of the impacts while suffering only a minimal amount of damage!

While it was possible for the Echo Spears to breach the armor of the Scarlet Rose if their mechs concentrated their fire, the range was too long to achieve pinpoint accuracy!

Even if the Echo Spears closed in and reduced the distance, the Scarlet Rose nimbly rotated like a drill, causing every volley of fire to spread across the entire circumference of her hull!

Like a torrent of rain, all of the laser beams and projectiles that struck the former Coalition ship failed to penetrate her surface!

The desperate mech pilots fired their weapons without regard for heat or ammunition concerns.

Their motherships were in danger!

As mechs depended heavily on carrier ships to travel through the void of space, losing them was a catastrophe!

How could they risk becoming homeless by allowing their target to blow up all of their ships?!

"Keep firing!" A mech captain ordered over the command channel. "No ship can resist so much damage forever! Even if we have to damage the mission target, don't stop firing! Bringing back half a ship is better than bringing back nothing at all! Keep flanking and circling around the target! Those mechs can't hide from every angle!"

The plan of the Echo Spears was sound. As long as their mechs caught up to the Scarlet Rose and surrounded her from every direction, there was no way the more vulnerable mechs could avoid their attacks.

Compared to a large and sturdy vessel like the Scarlet Rose, the four mechs were much more susceptible to their attacks!

There was no way the artillery mech and the rifleman mech would be able to last for long against a sustained bombardment!

While Ves was aware of this threat, he did not exhibit any panic at all. Instead, he grinned as the battle proceeded exactly according to plan.

While he wasn't a military officer, he had been through enough battles to develop a rudimentary understanding of contemporary warfare.

Combined with his keen understanding of mechs and all manner of technology, Ves gained enough confidence to navigate through this crisis!

"The key is to cripple their motherships! Without their light carriers, where can their mechs return after a battle?"

After spending a lot of time among the Flagrant Vandals and several other outfits, Ves understood how much a mothership weighed in the hearts of mech pilots.

If necessary, they were willing to accept the loss of their mechs. As long as they ejected, they could always return to their motherships and wait until their superiors assigned them a replacement!

By threatening or destroying this safety net, the morale of the mech pilots would certainly plummet!

If there was one thing he learned from the likes of Major Verle, it was that changes morale, confidence and conviction could affect the outcome of a battle just as much as taking out a large number of mechs!

The moment Kravon released an imposing missile volley, the Echo Spears panicked!

They knew the threat of the missiles as well as anyone!

The missile models employed by the Friday Coalition were much more powerful than those employed by the Great Zona Republic!

Each missile cost as much as a premium mech, if not more!

Though expensive for something that was meant to be a consumable, an anti-ship Coalition missile potentially packed enough punch to shatter the armor of the Scarlet Rose!

Against an inferior vessel such as a third-class light carrier, a handful of missiles might be enough to shatter their hulls in half!

Though the Echo Spears weren't able to guess the potency of the missiles launched by the artillery mech, there was no way the missiles were harmless!

"Intercept the missiles! Don't let them reach our ships!"

The Echo Spears all redirected their firepower from attacking the Scarlet Rose to intercepting the missiles.

Yet how could it be so easy to strike them down?

Ves programmed the missiles to spread out and disperse like a net, making it harder for them to be taken out simultaneously.

Not only that, but the missiles possessed an excellent ECM system that scrambled every targeting system, causing most of the attacks aimed at the missiles or their flight trajectory to miss!

Though a handful of shots managed to down a couple of missiles, that was more due to luck than skill!

On top of all of this, the missiles accelerated far faster than the missiles that the Echo Spears were accustomed to! Their insane acceleration caused the missiles to accumulate so much velocity that they reached the position of the vulnerable light carriers far too quickly!

Commander Quint and the other Echo Spears could barely react to the sudden onset of the missiles! Just as the missiles were about to strike the light carriers, they missed!

"What!? How come these missiles are passing us by? Is their programming faulty?"

"Maybe our ECM managed to fool them at the last second!"

"Idiot! How could our ECM systems ever beat Coalition tech?"

"Watch out! They're circling around!"

The missiles may have missed, but they continued flying along a tighter arc! After circling around the light carrier several times, they finally achieved an angle that allowed them to strike at the vulnerable rear of the fleet formation!

Just as the crews of the three undamaged light carriers received the order to brace themselves, the salvo of missiles each impacted their exposed stern, detonating numerous small explosions!

"Thank the president! They aren't ship-killer missiles!"



"Don't get complacent! They're still dealing a lot of damage!"

The missiles launched by the Kravon was a light missile type designed for intercepting heavy fire and hitting small but exceptionally agile targets.

They weren't designed to attack ships. Against a Hexer starship, the missiles would only inflict minor to superficial damage.

Against a light carrier from the Great Zona Republic, their payloads were much more threatening!

Explosions powerful enough to ruin some of the interior compartments of the Scarlet Rose ruined the propulsion systems of the affected vessels in an instant!

Every thruster and every related system turned into wreckage as the detonations swept through the nearby compartments and threatened the engineering section!

One light carrier suffered an unlucky explosion that affected a critical fuel line! A secondary explosion soon occurred that breached the engineering compartment, sweeping all of the engineers and the vulnerable ship components away!

The other two light carriers managed to avoid this unfortunate fate, but their conditions weren't much good either.

After losing their main propulsion systems, the light carriers could no longer accelerate and keep up with the Scarlet Rose's flight!

After crippling the flagship, heavily damaging a second light carrier and disabling the propulsion systems of the remaining three vessels with a single missile volley, the mobile bases of the Echo Spears all turned into sitting ducks!

Ves widened his eyes as he witnessed the results. The missiles performed much better than he anticipated! He only expected a small portion of the missiles to make it through, and he did not dare to dream that he would be able to cripple all three targeted ships!

"The disparity in ECM is too big!"

The countermeasures built into the missiles of the Coalition completely negated the targeting systems employed by the mercenary mechs. Their mech pilots had been forced to aim their weapons manually without benefiting from aim assist or accurate sensor data!

"It's too bad I don't have enough missiles." He sighed.

The Scarlet Rose was not on a combat mission, after all. She only carried a standard amount of ordnance, and none of them were impressive by Coalition standards.

While the Scarlet Rose possessed enough supplies to sustain a couple of more battles, eventually Ves would run out of missiles!

He could not afford to squander his limited assets!

Fortunately, the effect of this singular missile volley had been good. After continually shocking the Echo Spears, this final strike appeared to be the straw that broke the camel's back!

On board the crippled flagship, Commander Quint no longer maintained a controlled and confident demeanor.

The chaotic command center conveyed all kinds of awful news to him. Each and every light carrier sustained severe damage! Aside from a single ship, all of his other ships were no longer able to keep up the chase!

The Scarlet Rose continued to burn her thrusters, accelerating further and further away from the crippled mercenary fleet.

Commander Quint had to make a very difficult decision.

Should he recall the mechs deployed to intercept the Scarlet Rose?

If he let the mechs continue their mission, then they would only fly further and further away from the light carrier!

If they expended too much fuel or energy, then they might not have enough juice to return to their motherships!

If he recalled the mechs, he would essentially have to give up on the mission and miss a huge payout. Not only that, but he would also have to force the Echo Spears to go in the red in order to raise enough funds to repair the damaged light carriers.

This was very expensive!

The mercenary commander contemplated whether he could have it both ways, but the intimidating firepower from the ranged mechs of the Scarlet Rose instantly doused this option.

If he split up his forces, then the mechs of the Scarlet Rose would definitely be able to annihilate his weakened pursuit force!

In the end, Commander Quint possessed a responsibility to his crew. None of them were willing to undergo battles where they lost just as much as their opponent!

Most of his mech pilots and support personnel never received military training! They lacked the will and discipline to endure punishing battles!

Even if the mech pilots managed to eject their cockpits from their broken mechs, with the light carriers stranded in space, how long would they have to wait for rescue?

Thinking of all the damage his mercenary corps would suffer if he pushed through with the mission, Commander Quint finally issued the order that was best for the Echo Spears instead of his clients.

"Cease fire recalls our mechs. Stop the pursuit and let the Scarlet Rose go. Mr. Larkinson has won this battle."

Though his announcement cut deep, many of the Echo Spears inwardly sighed in relief.

Who knew what kind of other deadly surprises the Scarlet Rose and her mechs would show off next?

As soon as Ves observed the mechs breaking off their pursuit, his grin bloomed into a brilliant smile!

"Haha! I won! They finally gave up the chase!"

The Scarlet Rose happily flew away from the battle site as the mercenary mechs started to gather protectively around their crippled motherships.

Ves believed that word would definitely spread about this battle. With that, most outfits who aimed to intercept his ship would definitely think twice before trying to intercept her! Even a mercenary corps capable of fielding 170 mechs had been forced to abort the mission in the face of all of the firepower at his disposal!

"It's only going to be more difficult from here, though." He sighed.

Exposing his cards meant that the rabble should no longer block his way. However, those who were strong and powerful to cope with the threat would definitely be undeterred!

Out of all of the possible enemies that might pursue him, Ves never discounted the possibility that a force dispatched by the Friday Coalition would manage to intercept his ship!

In this case, Ves would no longer be able to crush his opposition by virtue of his tech disparity!

#### Chapter 1756 Damage Accumulation

After giving up the chase, the Echo Spears no longer had any chance of completing their primary objective. The distance to their mission target constantly increased until it was far too late for the mechs to catch up no matter how much power they dumped into their flight systems!

The fleeing ship's FTL drive calmly continued its cycling process as if nothing special happened.

Without any engineers to optimize this process, Ves had no way to hurry up this highly-regulated process.

After a total of five agonizing hours had passed, the FTL drive finally became available.

Ves instantly instructed the ship to punch in the coordinates of his next step. The ship's navigation system took care of the rest, automatically calculating and forming the right configuration to reach his intended destination!

As soon as the Scarlet Rose transitioned into FTL, Ves could finally relax.

"Finally!"

He looked up at the four slightly-marred battle bots that had saved his skin a few hours ago.

Despite confronting an entire mercenary corps, the four former mechs exhibited no major battle damage!

Even their more vulnerable weapons made it through the battle largely unscathed!

"This is the might of true second-class mechs!"

Each of the mechs designed and built by Aisling Curver fell in the premier price category of the Coalition mech market.

Ves did not even dare to guess the exact market price of these mechs! He feared he would faint at the amount of cols it took to build or buy one of these custom mechs!

At the very least, Ves would have to fork over billions of coalition credits to obtain mechs of comparable quality and performance!

It felt nice having all of this might at his disposal. Though the lack of mech pilots meant that most of their potential remained dormant, what little he could bring to bear was already enough for him to fend off opportunistic outfits like the Echo Spears!

Now that he gained some self-preservation against weaker opponents, Ves believed his journey through the Great Zona Republic would not be as fraught with peril as he initially expected.

The performance of his battle bots exceeded his expectations!

"These are some really good machines!"

If possible, Ves wanted to retain them and bring them back to his new base and take the time to study them from top to bottom.

There was much that Ves could learn about the characteristics of second-class mechs. Each of the four machines incorporated many interesting design principles and standards.

Each of the mechs carried the character of Clarion University, a top mech design institution of the Gauge Dynasty. Lady Curver also inherited many design principles from Master Huron, a very distinguished mech designer who enjoyed a high position in the Friday Coalition.

Though studying the machines along with all of the related files risked contamination, Ves believed he was strong enough to endure any undesirable changes.

"If nothing else, I can just drain my spirit and temporarily turn myself into a rational mech designer." He muttered.

In the past week, Ves personally experienced some of the benefits that Patricia had alluded to. In his low period, his emotions might be muted, but they also became much less susceptible to outside influence!

It was as if his mind and Spirituality became out of phase with the rest of reality. Whenever Ves delved into the design of Aisling's mechs while he was converting them into battle bots, he noticed that his design philosophy didn't even come close to being threatened!

Ves realized the implications of this reaction. As long as his design seed and design philosophy no longer became affected by outside impulses, he could study or explore all kinds of knowledge regardless if they clashed with his original ideals!

"It's like working with fire and ice at the same time!"

Ordinarily, fire and ice always clashed. Neither could survive while the other was there! Yet upon forcing himself into a low period, the fire in his body suddenly became shielded from reality. Even if he placed a clump ice next to the fire, only a faint reaction would occur depending on his spiritual energy depletion rate!

Ves fully understood the value of rational mech designers at this point.

No wonder the MTA valued them so much!

Rational mech designers might not necessarily be good innovators, but they excelled at integrating all manner of existing inventions no matter how obtuse

they were! As long as they obtained enough theory, they could definitely assimilate them in their own body of work to a certain extent!

Did Ves want to go this far? Not necessarily. He did not feel any desire to do what Aisling could do. Messing with neural interconnectivity sounded like a good way to piss off the MTA.

Since Ves sought to earn a lot of merits and redeem a beyonder ticket from the powerful organization, he could not afford to get caught with breaking one of their major rules!

"That doesn't mean there is nothing for me to learn."

Aside from learning the characteristics of second-class mechs, Ves also wanted to gain inspiration from Aisling's design philosophy.

Just like with exchanges between mech designers, careful exploration of another mech designer's work might yield new ideas and perspective that enriched his application of his own design philosophy.

In recent times, Ves became somewhat intrigued by the possibility of replicating the effects of a neural network on a spiritual level.

From his limited understanding of spirituality, Ves believed it was possible to facilitate a spiritual connection between two different mech pilots.

After all, his design spirits were already capable of maintaining connections with many different mechs.

Yet a human was different from a powerful spiritual entity.

How could any human mech pilot, particularly those who lacked spiritual potential, be capable of forming a spiritual connection with a fellow comrade-in-arms?

Ves lacked the answer to this question, hence why he became so interested in exploring Aisling's works in depth.



He hoped he might gain some inspiration that pointed him towards a possible solution.

"What would it be like to form a network between mech pilots that transcends the man-machine connection?"

He could scarcely imagine the results. By forming a spiritual web of connection between mech pilots, they would become capable of exchanging all manner of thoughts and information.

If the mech pilots took advantage of this exceptional state, they would be able to fight and move as a single entity! Even better, the mech pilots might be able to achieve resonance between each other that amplified their effective piloting performance!

Of course, Ves did not believe that such a strong result would emerge on the first attempt.

Without the physical bond of a neural interface, the spiritual network would likely be weak. Perhaps only a trickle of data could be exchanged between mech pilots.

Yet that was already enough to make a difference in battle!

Ves shook his head. "Every unknown innovation is a double-edged sword. Leaving aside the question whether it is even possible for me to form such a network, the potential risks are exceptionally great!"

Just like how reckless experimentation with neural interface technology often led to fatal outcomes, messing with spirituality was also fraught with peril!

The crude form of spiritual surgery he performed on William Urbesh was already proof of how bad things it could get if he played with forces beyond his understanding!

"I'll have to limit my experimentation to test subjects rather than my customers."

Despite the risks, Ves seriously wanted to explore this avenue. Not only would he be able to add another application of his design philosophy to his arsenal, he also wanted to achieve something greater.

He already formed a tentative but ambitious plan to strengthen his fighting forces and grant them a unique edge!

While a spiritual network wasn't necessary, if he managed to pull it off, he could definitely achieve a lot of synergy by combining it with his next idea!

Just thinking about the mechs that incorporated these innovations practically sent him over the moon! As a mech designer, he loved nothing more than to turn the impossible into the possible!

"These will be my next research directions!"

He indulged himself for a few minutes longer before returning to reality. He could leave them for later once he passed the immediate crisis.

Now that his ship transitioned into FTL, he was safe for a couple.

"Before my Scarlet Rose emerges back to realspace, I have to make sure my assets are ready for battle."

Ves proceeded to inspect the battle bots and tally the damage they incurred. He also ran a diagnostic of the ship in order to find out if any of her systems sustained any damage.

Fortunately, the Scarlet Rose only suffered minor damage. Aside from some surface components such as sensor modules and other fragile devices, the mobile supply frigate managed to make it out of the battle unscathed.

Though she endured a lot of enemy firepower, her exterior armor was largely intact. Part of that was because the ship's constant rotations spread out the

damage across her entire hull, thereby preventing any single exterior section from accumulating too much damage.

Even so, the minor cracks and chips represented a permanent reduction in armor integrity.

As long as the Scarlet Rose kept bumping into enemies, the damage would continue to accumulate until a breach finally occurred!

Given time, Ves might be able to patch up the holes. Yet Ves did not possess the expensive exotics required to fabricate replacement armor that was up to standard. He could only settle for the materials he had on hand to fabricate inferior replacements.

The same went for the mechs. Each of them only suffered light damage, but the dearth in materials made it difficult to repair any damage.

Lucky was partially to blame for his poor logistical circumstances!

The moment he stepped in the exotics storeroom, he found a near-insensate gem cat lying in a pile of half-eating minerals as if he was sleeping on a bed of money!

"Wake up, you thieving cat!"

Ves kicked the sleeping cat, causing Lucky to yelp and bounce against the bulkhead of the storeroom!

"MEOW!"

Lucky hissed indignantly at his owner!

"Oh don't be so dramatic! With all that you've managed to devour, a kick against your bottomless stomach is the least you deserve!"

When Ves gave permission for Lucky to eat the Scarlet Rose's exotics stash, he expected his cat to take a while to digest his food.

Yet as he approached some of the locked drawers and pulled them out, he encountered nothing but an empty cavity!

Every sample of a critical material was gone!

Ves inspected multiple drawers and found that some other valued materials had disappeared entirely!

As for the lower-grade exotics, Lucky only sampled occasionally.

"Lucky.." Ves gnashed his teeth. "While I didn't set any limits on what you could eat, I thought you'd be sensible enough to leave some to repair my stuff! If the Scarlet Rose goes down because you ate all of my repair materials, then you have only yourself to blame!"

"Meow meow meow!"

Lucky did not look contrite at all! As far as he was concerned, Ves would have never been able to capture the Scarlet Rose without his help! It was all him! Ves only contributed 5 percent to the capture of the ship at most!

Since Ves claimed the Scarlet Rose and her complement of mechs, then Lucky could only settle for the high and medium-grade exotics stored on the ship!

After a lot of arguing, Ves finally managed to convince Lucky to slow down his consumption!

"I don't care whether you've leveled up or grew stronger! A single cat won't get me back to friendly space! Only a ship can do that, so it is in both of our interests to keep the Scarlet Rose intact!"

"Meow!" Lucky suggested while suggestively swishing his tail.

"That's ridiculous! I don't want to get stranded on a ship without an FTL drive!"

Chapter 1757 Future Uncertainties

"Meow."

Lucky glowered resentfully at Ves as he enjoyed his breakfast after a good night of rest.

"I shouldn't have killed the chefs." Ves muttered. "The meals produced by the automated cooking machines always taste off."

In order to sate his hunger, Ves went back to his old staple and ate a nutrient pack directly from its packaging.

"Hmm.." Ves evaluated the taste of texture of the nutrient pack type he decided to sample for this morning. "Not bad, but not as good as the last one. It will probably taste a lot better with a few decades of aging."

He was quite surprised with the quality of nutrient packs in the possession of the Friday Coalition.

Unlike the cheaper ones that Ves was used to, the Coalition invested a lot more in quality.

Not only was their nutritional value higher, but their taste was actually palatable!

Ves wouldn't be surprised to find out that most people already replaced their regular meals with Coalition-standard nutrient packs!

Of course, the nutrient packs still weren't comparable to real food. He still missed the gourmet food prepared by Dr. Lupo and Gloriana's personal chefs.

"The sooner I get back, the sooner I can fill my stomach properly."

Perhaps Lucky didn't care that much, but Ves really wanted to return to his companions and get back to designing mechs.

All of this fleeing and fighting reminded him of the many perils he went through while he served with the Flagrant Vandals.

Unlike then, Ves wasn't surrounded by competent military servicemen! He could only depend on Lucky and himself to get out of this predicament!

The good news was that he already managed to get through the first half of his journey.

After overcoming the ambush of the Echo Spears, Ves did not encounter any other ambushes in his next couple of stops.

The most he encountered at these desolate star systems was a bunch of listening posts and a small number of corvettes assigned as scouts.

Instead of reassuring him, Ves only grew more concerned.

The battle against the Echo Spears probably achieved the intended effect of scaring away the weaker groups.

Yet that only made him feel as if his opposition was preparing a bigger surprise down the line!

"Well, I'll deal with it when it comes." He sighed in resignation.

He had a lot of confidence in his battle bots. After he repaired and serviced them as best he could on his own, he continued to study and tweak them in an attempt to draw out some of their buried potential.

In order to increase the automated fighting consciousness of his converted mechs, he explored the galactic net and downloaded a bunch of highly-regarded piloting AIs.

He carefully inspected their programming and selectively incorporated the safest and most relevant portions of them to the existing control systems.

All of this was complicated and delicate work. If Ves botched something, the battle bots might glitch during battle, exposing them to countless counterattacks as they became inert!

However, if his suspicions came true, then Ves had no choice but to assume this risk! The faults of his battle bots would definitely become evident to his enemies once they studied the battle footage!

"If only I can pilot the mechs myself!" He sighed.

He could still increase his control over the battle bots until he turned into their surrogate mech pilots. By assuming more direct control, he could use his own human judgement while still leaving the AIs to do all of the heavy lifting.

Such a semi-direct piloting method was the main way for non-potentates to pilot mechs.

While the lack of neural connection prevented the mech from reaching its full potential, it was better than nothing!

For this reason, Ves took the time to add the ability to manually override the piloting AIs and control the functions of the mechs more directly.

He tried out this added functionality in a couple of simulations.

It was like playing one of the mech games he used to play in the past. The simplified controls and lack of tedium allowed Ves to focus on what was truly important.

Though Ves had no confidence in beating an equivalent second-class mech, it should be enough to bully a huge mob of third-class mechs!

"The Paravin and Fliskin aren't pushovers anymore." He smiled with satisfaction as he observed the two melee battle bots with appreciation.

The space knight and light skirmisher both possessed some ranged armaments, but they were obviously not their focus.

Their true strengths lay in melee combat. The supplemental programming that Ves copied from the galactic net had come with a lot of adaptive fighting

routines that adjusted well to the characteristics of the Paravin and Fliskin after a lot of optimization.

This allowed the mechs to fight off numerous third-class melee mechs without falling into disadvantage.

All of these efforts gave him a lot of confidence in confronting twice or thrice the number of mechs that the Echo Spears brought to bear last time.

"My next opponents won't be as complacent, though." He reminded himself.

Anyone ambitious enough to hunt down a stolen Coalition ship protected by a bunch of powerful battle bots should not be incompetent!

Ves already exposed his most important cards. This left him with precious little means to reverse any unfavorable outcome should his enemies come with greater strength than he could cope!

In addition, he also feared that he wouldn't be encountering an overwhelming number of third-class mechs, but something worse.

As long as a small interception force from the Friday Coalition managed to trap him, then his four pitiful battle bots would definitely be defeated by an equal or greater number of second-class mechs!

"They shouldn't be so common in this region of space." He muttered.

That was not to say that the Friday Coalition was absent in the Great Zona Republic. It was just that most Coalition assets in the third-rate states consisted of trade vessels and civilian ships.

There was little reason for the Coalition to station a heavy military presence in a trivial foreign state.

From the correspondence and other documents that Aisling left behind, Ves possessed a decent estimate on how many Coalition assets were available in the state.



It was not enough to ensure a guaranteed interception.

When the Scarlet Rose arrived at a star system, he could often choose his next stop among more than a hundred possible choices!

The range of the Scarlet Rose's FTL drive was quite formidable. Though it was limited when Ves limited himself to traveling to dimmer star systems, he still had plenty of desolate star systems to choose from in order to avoid a prepared ambush.

Though the listening posts and scout ships always tracked the Scarlet Rose's orientation as she transitioned into FTL, it took time to scramble enough assets to lay an ambush at her next destination!

Even if the ambushers arrived at the estimated destination in time, the emergence zone often encompassed a volume that stretched for at least a quarter light-hour or more!

That was a humongous amount of distance! A mech firing a laser weapon would have to wait fifteen minutes until it struck its target!

With that much time, the randomized pathing of a ship or mech would have definitely deviated from the projected trajectory!

In space, no one was stupid enough to travel in a straight line!

While traveling straight minimized waste and maximized efficiency, following a predictable trajectory allowed any hooligan to accelerate a small asteroid to relativistic speeds and collide with the unsuspecting vessel!!

In any case, with such a large emergence zone, the chance that the Scarlet Rose would enter the range of prepared ambush fleet was not very large!

What complicated the matter even further was the relative positions and velocity between the two elements.

Nothing in space truly sat still. Everything was constantly on the move depending on which frame of reference someone adopted.

Even the emergence zones moved according to the relative motions of the star systems and the gravitic tides raging in the higher dimensions!

"It all depends on chance."

Whether he would be lucky enough to avoid a confrontation at his next destination was not set in stone.

Ves was forced to roll another dice after arriving at each subsequent stop.

As long as he suffered one unlucky roll, then all of his prior efforts were for nothing! Once he ended up in the hands of the Lady Curver and the Friday Coalition, he doubted they would treat him as well as they did before!

He not only proved himself to be dangerous, but also had a lot of Fridayman blood on his hands!

Killing the crew of another CRC was not a crime that could be brushed away!

And considering how much the Echo Spears already knew when they confronted Ves, he figured out that the Friday Coalition hadn't kept his exploits secret!

"My notoriety has probably shot through the roof after this news became known!"

Ves groaned and held his head. What of his reputation? What of the LMC's standing in Coalition-aligned states?

"The LMC should be safe for now. The Sand War still isn't over. My Desolate Soldiers and Deliverer mechs are still too essential to the survival of many states!"

That did not preclude the possibility of betrayal once his products no longer became vital. As soon as the Sand War ended, Ves and the LMC had to tread very carefully when doing business with Coalition-aligned space.

"I can't stay in the Ylvaine Protectorate." He concluded.

It was pretty much an island in an ocean of Coalition-aligned states. Staying there would only put a bigger target on the Protectorate. Ves did not wish to taunt the Fridaymen into overrunning his benefactors!

"The Protectorate isn't suitable for me and my organization anyway."

The Ylvainan culture didn't appeal to the members of the Larkinson Family who decided to follow him. He couldn't imagine Melkor, Raymond or Clinton turning into devout Ylvainan believers at all!

In order to escape the reach of the Friday Coalition and provide his relatives and subordinates with a more compatible living environment, Ves needed to settle in a different state.

The only state he could think of was the Sentinel Kingdom, which was very far away from the Friday Coalition.

With the entire Hegemony in the way, Ves didn't believe that Lady Curver and the CRC could dispatch forces to kidnap him again!

Yet just thinking about staying in a state that was in close proximity to the Nyxian Gap sent shivers through his spine.

He would only be exchanging a lesser threat for a greater threat!

Ves frowned and crossed his arms.

Escaping Coalition pursuit was not the end of his troubles. The hasty evacuation of the LMC from the Bright Republic had doubtlessly produced a lot of problems.

Yet even if he had to leave the Mech Nursery and all of his accumulations in the Bright Republic behind, he didn't regret his choice!

Ves no longer dared to trust any state, whether it was the Bright Republic or even the Ylvaine Protectorate.

As long as he made enemies with at least one faction, Ves would always be exposed to schemes!

While his Avatars of Myth ought to be capable of fending off all kinds of threats, it was still a stretch to resist the authorities!

This was a problem that couldn't be solved in a short amount of time!

At this time, his comm suddenly beeped.

The control module of the quantum entanglement node suddenly received an incoming comm call.

Due to his paranoid security precautions, he did not allow the control module to connect directly to the communication systems of the Scarlet Rose.

Ves had to walk all the way to the compartment of the ship which held the quantum entanglement node in order to accept the call.

"Well, whoever called me is very patient for ringing me for six minutes straight." He noted as he activated the interface and pressed the buttons that accepted the call.

The projection of a familiar figure appeared in front of Ves.

"Hello Ves."

"Hello Tristan."

Chapter 1758 Research Surrogate

An awkward silence ensued as Ves silently stared at Tristan Wesseling's projection.

Previously, Ves always treated Tristan as a friendly acquaintance. Though they hadn't talked many times, the Fridayman mech designer always took the initiative to show some goodwill to him. Their shared connection to the Rim Guardians meant that it was very likely they would cross paths in the future.

Yet it was different now. Tristan's status may not have changed, but Ves single-handedly deteriorated his relationship with the Friday Coalition in the most violent fashion!

Whereas before he might have only been an incidental mech designer who sided with the Hexers, now the Coalition almost certainly labeled him as an enemy!

He had Fridayman blood on his hands! No matter how he managed to do it, there was no question he was involved in wiping out the entire crew of the Scarlet Rose!

Technically, Ves and Tristan should be enemies.

Yet neither of them showed any willingness to abide by the expectations of their identities.

Without exchanging a word, both of them understood each other's measure.

They had no special feelings for the Komodo War and the conflict between the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony.

While this rivalry still affected their lives, they already set their sights higher! Their ambitions stretched far beyond the Komodo Star Sector!

After implicitly understanding what he had in common with Tristan, Ves subtly relaxed his posture.

His counterpart followed likewise. He had been waiting for a friendly reaction.

Though both of them had managed to relieve the tension between them, that did not mean that everything was okay.

"So.. is it okay for you to take the initiative to talk to me?" Ves eventually broke the silence.

Tristan looked completely at ease. "Reality is never black and white. Do you think the Friday Coalition cares about an individual mech designer? While it's true that our evaluation of you has dropped, you're still a small fry in our eyes. Only Lady Curver and some of the people within the CRC are paying attention to you. As for the rest, the war against the Hexers is a big greater priority!"

That made a lot of sense. Compared to a trivial Journeyman who possessed an odd design philosophy, the Fridaymen had to exert their full effort into preventing the Hexers from annihilating their state!

One was just a stain on their dignity, while the other threatened their entire existence!

Ves felt pleased that he managed to stay under the radar of the Friday Coalition. Just thinking about their awe-inspiring might and vast resources at their disposal sent a chill through his spine.

If the Friday Coalition allocated just 0.1 percent of its total strength into annihilating him, Ves would certainly die without a doubt!

"Even so, I imagine it's not exactly proper for you to be contacting me. Why did you call? Did Aisling put you up to it or something?"

"I'm no friend of Lady Curver." Tristan immediately shook his head. "She's an alumni of Clarion University, which is one of the foremost mech design institutions of the Gauge Dynasty. I'm a graduate of the Leemar Institute of Technology, which hails from the Carnegie Group."

"And that matters because...?"

"To make the long story short, we're bitter rivals. The competition between Clarion and Leemar is very intense. We compete on everything from the

amount of academic papers our professors publish to the degree of success enjoyed by our graduates. The competition for the comprehensive ranking of mech design institutions is particularly acrimonious!"

All of this had nothing to do with Ves. He adopted a bored expression.

"Does this rivalry even matter these days? A common enemy is bearing down on you both!"

Tristan sheepishly shrugged. "You'd be surprised by how far people would go to reinforce their cliques. War brings pressure. War limits resources. War imposes stricter control. All of this means that there is an intense competition to be in charge. Those who become leaders will inevitably benefit those who belong in the same camp!"

"I see."

It seems the Friday Coalition wasn't as unified as he initially thought. While Ves already caught a portion of this from Aisling's correspondence, he was distracted by all of the initiatives meant to foster cooperation.

"Don't get me wrong, Ves. We know the score. We are still capable of getting along when it truly matters. It is just that the Carnegie Group is situated directly in the path of the Hexers. My state is under a huge amount of pressure as Hexer raids and invasions frequently destroy or deprive us of our infrastructure."

This was the misfortune of being one of the partners of the Coalition that directly bordered Hegemony space.

Though the Carnegie Group prepared their defenses for centuries, the Hexers hadn't spent this time in vain!

Upon this realization, Ves studied Tristan's projection carefully and noted that he didn't seem very hopeful.

"What's up with you?"

"This will be the last time we can talk to each other in a while. Duty calls. I think you can understand."

"You don't sound willing."

"Whoever wins the Komodo War, the Carnegie Group likely won't be among them. Do you understand?"

"Is the war going that badly for you guys?"

"The Hexers are strong, that's for sure. Even if we manage to defeat them, they'll take down plenty of Fridaymen with them. We just happen to be the closest in their line of fire."

From the way Tristan talked, he must not be very optimistic about the Carnegie Group's future!

Yet regardless of what he believed, he still had to meet his obligations!

As a talented Journeyman mech Designer and a direct disciple to Master Katzenberg, Tristan enjoyed benefits from the Carnegie Group. It was only right for him to repay the debt he owed by contributing to the partner's secret design projects!

"Good luck with whatever you are doing."

"That sounds strange from someone on the opposite side." Tristan amusingly chuckled.

"As you've said it yourself, us Journeymen are small fries. The Coalition and Hegemony are too powerful to pay attention to the little guys. I think we have gone past treating our allegiances as the main determinants of our attitudes."

""What do you think about Lady Curver, then?"



"If she wasn't so decisive in running from the Scarlet Rose, I would have killed her myself!"

"That's not a good idea, Ves." Tristan shook his head. "One of the reasons why I called is to tell you that you need to be more careful with how far you pursue your vendettas. Direct disciplines like Aisling and I explicitly enjoy the backing of our Masters, do you understand?"

Ves scratched his head. "Not really."

"Direct disciples are considered to be extensions of a Master Mech Designer's research interests. Whatever progress we make on our branching design philosophies, our Master also benefits from the results we achieve. Do you think a Master will stand by when a promising student who is exploring another avenue of their core specialty is under threat? What do you think will happen if someone actually has the temerity to kill their disciples?"

If Ves was in that position, he would definitely be mad as hell! A direct disciple was pretty much a free research surrogate!

"What's about nominal disciples?" Ves asked.

"It's different for nominal disciples like you used to be. Unless someone wanted to target Master Olson, she isn't inclined to retaliate should anything happen to you. In the mech community, nominal disciples are mostly external helpers to Masters. They extend a Master's influence and network and can be useful in various ways. However, unless they advance to Master Mech Designers themselves, nominal disciples will always be regarded as helpers."

"Does this only apply to Friday Coalition or is it something universal?"

"We aren't that different from the rest of human space in this regard. Perhaps disciples are less valued in more prosperous star sectors as it is much easier to cultivate talents there. However, here in the galactic, every Journeyman is still a valued asset."

"So it's only because our star sector is so poor that every disciple is important."

Ves understood his point. Due to various reasons, many people with a talent in mech design never got to study it or make something out of their career. The mech industry simply wasn't prosperous enough to accommodate so many talents.

Those with gifts often had to give up their dreams and pursue a lesser career due to an inability to attract investment and fund their own ventures.

Ves imagined that the conditions were slightly better in the galactic heartland and galactic center

While the competition was much more intense, the barrier to entry was probably easier to overcome as long as mech designers had some money at their disposal.

"To get back to the point, you should really think twice before you threaten the life of someone like Lady Curver. She's one of the brightest graduates of Clarion University. Not only does her alma mater appreciate her a lot, but she has also become Master Huron's latest investment. If you happened to kill her, I can guarantee you that Master Huron will never let you go! He's a very sentimental mech designer and values his relationships very highly! Killing Lady Curver is not only an attack on himself, but also an attack on his sensibilities!"

He noted the difference between the two.

Officially, Lady Curver was Master Huron's direct disciple. According to Tristan's explanation, killing her would materially affect Master Huron's research interests!

Yet if Master Huron was someone who appreciated Lady Curver as a person, then he would definitely go mad with rage!

After a bit of thought, Ves recalled that Master Huron specialized in neural interconnectivity. This specialization probably warped his personality into valuing relationships to an extreme degree!

This meant that killing Aisling would definitely provoke an irreconcilable enmity with a powerful Master Mech Designer!

Sweat poured down his back. If Ves had been a little more reckless, then the Friday Coalition absolutely wouldn't be as lackadaisical towards him as now! As long as someone important enough pressured the Friday Coalition to take care of him, Ves would definitely be unable to make it so far in his escape as now!

Fortunately, Aisling and Patricia already fled the ship before Ves and Lucky approached the mech workshop.

After almost getting killed by a missile, he would have definitely urged Lucky to slaughter them both regardless of their identities!

"Should I be concerned by Master Huron?"

"I'm not sure." Tristan looked uncertain. "Since Curver managed to escape unscathed, you didn't cross his bottom line. Depending on his personality, he probably sees his disciple's misfortune as a teaching moment. As long as she learns from this ordeal, she will be much more formidable in the future. You practically did him a favor if he adopts this mindset."

"And if he doesn't think this way?"

"Then you're definitely in trouble. Who knows what he is thinking. Masters don't think like normal people. Especially when they lived for over two centuries." Tristan shrugged. "If you ask me, Master Huron is probably spending all of his time on the Komodo War. As one of the best mech designers of our state, his work is vital in increasing our odds of victory. How can he allow himself to get distracted? At the very least, my own Master is like

this. Every important Fridaymen has become incredibly busy since the outbreak of the war."

The two chatted some more about the conditions in the Friday Coalition. The state had entered into a total war footing.

Life changed drastically for every Fridaymen as they couldn't afford to lose the war that decided the future of their state!

Compared to this pivotal conflict, the border struggle against the sandmen attracted no attention at all! Even as many beleaguered states called for help, the Fridaymen completely turned a deaf ear on them! At this stage, they only cared about themselves!

#### Chapter 1759 Vassal States

Tristan illuminated several facets of the Friday Coalition that Ves only only brushed upon when he read Aisling's correspondence.

Though both of them were direct disciples of famous Masters, they each belonged to different groups within their large and expansive state.

Lady Aisling Curver was part of the most powerful and self-assured partner of the Friday Coalition. She mostly communicated with people from the same side, so they all infected each other with the pride and confidence that was seared into their bones!

It was different for someone like Tristan who came from the Carnegie Group. As a partner who bore the brunt of Hexer aggression, he not only stood to lose the most, but also possessed a much greater understanding of the enemy.

The lack of confidence exhibited by Tristan sent a very depressing message in itself!

Not that Ves particularly cared. The Carnegie Group and the Vermeer Group which Master Olson hailed from could go to hell for all he cared. He long cut ties with both partners.

Instead of worrying about the Friday Coalition's precarious internal situation, Ves paid a lot more attention to their external moves.

Since he had a friendly Fridayman on the line, Ves might as well take advantage of him to answer some of his doubts!

"What is the deal with monitors like Lady Curver? If the Friday Coalition truly wanted to keep an eye on foreign states, why not send a diplomat or a spy?"

"There are several reasons for that." Tristan replied without hesitation. "First, diplomats and spies have already been dispatched. The former are high profile while the latter are low profile. Regardless of their responsibilities, they are doing most of the actual work in keeping tabs on a foreign state."

"Then what is the purpose of dispatching mech designers like Aisling?"

"The answer should be obvious." The Fridayman replied. "As mech designers, what do we do best?"

"Designing mechs."

"And building them. Have you taken a good look at the material stockpile aboard the Scarlet Rose?"

"It's not enough to build another second-class mech." Ves instantly replied.

"There aren't enough high-grade exotics available."

In fact, Ves had even less at his disposal now that Lucky gobbled up the choicest exotics!

"That's because the so-called monitors aren't expected to do so. In a foreign third-rate state, which mechs are the most common?"

"Third-rate mechs."

"Exactly!"

"What is the purpose of this?" Ves puzzled.

"It's for allowing agents to blend in with the locals."

"If the Fridaymen want to blend in, why not buy a mech from the market?"

"That's because blending in is only one of their purposes. Oftentimes, a mission involving mech pilots often requires a mech that blends in with the locals while simultaneously possessing sufficient power to complete the mission. Such mechs have to be tailored to the circumstances, hence the need for a mech designer who is close to the situation."

Ves finally understood the role of Lady Curver. Even though none of the systems and logs alluded to it, a mech designer assigned as a monitor actually served as an equipment provider who facilitated the clandestine operations of her state!

"Does that mean that the Friday Coalition is secretly meddling in the affairs of the Bright Republic and other states?"

Tristan didn't answer his question. Instead, his mouth remained shut.

His silence was an answer in itself. Ves understood that Tristan had already been unusually generous with his information. There were some topics he couldn't afford to go into, though.

Ves felt his heart sinking as he went over the implications. The Friday Coalition might have compromised the Bright Republic already!

At the very least, Ves bet that the Cavendish and Ramza Families were already in their pocket!

"Will.. will the Friday Coalition extend the war to the third-rate states?"

Tristan sighed. "I'm no strategist, and I'm not privy to the plans of my state. All I can guess is that if we are losing trend, we'll definitely pull out all the stops! Dragging in the rest of the star sector in the war will add more variables to the mix. This will give our side more opportunities to reverse our decline!"

"How does that work?" Ves asked. "No third-rate state is stupid enough to attack a second-rate!"

"They don't have to. It's enough to change their stance and stop their formal and informal ties to their patrons. States like the Bright Republic serve as an important source and shipping conduit for several important materials. They encompass both bulk goods such as titanium and palladium to strategic materials such as high-grade exotics."

"Stopping this trade means weakening a second-rate state, is that right?"

"You got it, Ves. The idea that the Bright Republic and the other third-rate states are bystanders in the Komodo War is incorrect. While your weaker states all like to bury their heads in the sand and pretend that they are neutral, from our perspective you are already vessels to us or the Hexers."

The revelation came as a very disconcerting surprise to Ves. Though he already suspected as much on some level, Tristan's confirmation still discomfited him a lot!

If his words were true, then the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate would definitely get dragged into the conflict in time!

"Does that mean that our states will soon be home to battles between Fridaymen and Hexers?"

Tristan pressed a lip against his finger. "I doubt it. All of our best fighting assets are still needed at the frontlines. What will most likely happen is that the third-rate states will be pressured to double down their commitments to

their respective patrons and wage war against the states aligned with their enemies!"

"What!? Really?!"

"I'm not sure it will happen this time. In past conflicts, it only happened occasionally, because you can't predict how well the third-rate states aligned to you will fare against the opponent's vassals."

"How likely do you think the Friday Coalition will resort to this solution?"

"It's probably likely. It's no secret that the Friday Coalition enjoys a broader base of support in the star sector."

Ves smiled sardonically. The Hexers didn't exactly make for attractive allies! Their overbearing culture and well-known biases against men made it really hard for foreigners to form a good impression of the female supremacists!

The only lesser states that maintained friendly relations with the Hexadric Hegemony had no choice.

Religious states like the Ylvaine Protectorate simply didn't get along with the secular Friday Coalition!

Secular states like the Sentinel Kingdom were much more compatible with the Fridaymen, but because they were situated too far away from Coalition space, it was already foreordained that they would focus on building ties with the Hegemony!

In both cases, the third-rate states really wanted to pick another patron, but were forced to play nice with the Hexers.

The ties between the Hexers and their 'vassal states' were anything but warm!

Ves realized that the Friday Coalition would definitely be able to take advantage of this disparity and force its vessels into strangling the states that supported its archenemy!



"Does that mean the Bright Republic will attack the Ylvaine Protectorate?!"

"It's possible, but I really can't say for sure." Tristan slowly answered, reluctant to say anything more lest he come across as a traitor. "However, with the Sand War battering your states, I can imagine that your leaders will be very resistant to yet another war. The Friday Coalition must be seen as benevolent, so it can't be too heavy-handed in forcing its vassal states to act as its thugs."

All of this sounded way above their heads. Tristan was mostly speculating at this point, but what he said so far was enough to make Ves concerned!

Though Ves no longer held any affection for his home state, many of his relatives still pledged loyalty to the state.

As for the Ylvaine Protectorate, Ves strongly appreciated its support. The Transcendent Messenger, Holy Soldier and Deliverer designs cemented his friendship with the Ylvainan people!

If war ever broke out between the two states, Ves could not bring himself to support either side!

Because that would mean going against the other side!

"What a mess." He groaned.

"That's war for you. The Sand War has already done a number on your states. Our own war might engulf you all as well. You should take that into account, especially since you've become a person of interest to our state."

The two talked some more about the Friday Coalition's attitudes towards external states. Ves gained a few more insights on how people like Tristan regarded the lesser states.

Even without any treaties, the second-rate states truly regarded the lesser states they maintained relations with to be their vessels!

What was worse was that there was no way to fight back against such an arrogant disposition!

If the Friday Coalition declared the Bright Republic to be their little brother, then the latter state had no choice but to smile and bear with the pronouncement!

The power disparity between the two was similar to the differences in power between his battle bots and the Echo Spears!

"Thanks for telling me all of this." Ves spoke appreciatively. "You didn't have to reveal so much to me. I feel like I'm taking advantage of you. Do you need anything from me?"

As a mech designer, Ves was uncomfortable with unequal exchanges with his fellow peers, especially those he respected!

He had no problem with screwing Lady Curver over and stealing her assigned ship. She had it coming!

Yet for Tristan, Ves had truly taken too much advantage of him without paying anything back in return. The debt that weighed on his mind constantly rose with no sign of stopping!

Though Tristan wanted to dismiss the offer, he halted and fell into thought. This was the last time they would speak for some time.

"I have a question that has been bugging me for some time. Your design philosophy has always been a mystery to me and anyone who has paid any notice to it. I think I figured some of the gist of what you are doing. It has to do with.. the P-word, right?"

Tristan emphatically tapped the side of his head with his finger, thereby alluding to the phenomenon known as psionics.

His guess came awfully close to the truth. Ves really didn't want to confirm Tristan's guess, especially since he suspected that the call might be monitored by the spies of the Friday Coalition and all manner of other groups, including the MTA!

Yet.. was it still a secret? Anyone who studied his mech designs in detail such as Gloriana already guessed that Ves found some way of leveraging psionic power to form the sources of his glows!

Since the cat was already out of the bag, Ves might as well own up to it. The more he exposed, the more he could leverage his design philosophy in the open!

"It's very complicated, but your guess is very close to the truth." Ves carefully answered.

"I thought so! You must possess a very unique mindset to be able to do what you can do! Is there anything I should take note of when I perform my own work?"

Ves pressed his lips into a thin line. While he was more than willing to give Tristan some pointers, he didn't want to give his eavesdroppers any freebies!

He decided to issue some general advice that he didn't mind leaking out. It was not as if many people took him seriously.

"One of my central ideas has always been that mechs are alive. I think it's a mistake to see your mechs as dead and lifeless machines. You don't have to go as far as me, though. As long as you alter your mentality towards mechs and treat them with respect, I think you'll definitely be surprised when they pay you back!"

"Interesting." Tristan looked intrigued. With how sincere Ves sounded, he didn't dismiss this strange advice out of hand! "I'll think about it. My design

philosophy doesn't really go into this direction at all, but I'll see whether I can benefit from your view. Thank you, and goodbye."

"Goodbye."

#### Chapter 1760 Great Consumption

An empty field of stars suddenly became the backdrop to a massacre!

Hundreds of mechs, many of them bearing the colors and markings of several different mercenary outfits, swarmed towards a single point in space!

That point happened to be the position of the Scarlet Rose!

All manner of missiles, lasers and projectiles slammed against the surface of the mobile supply frigate like hail impacting the roof of a house!

Though the ship's exterior armor withstood the rain of attacks well enough, the outer layers slowly deteriorated, signifying that the ship couldn't remain impervious forever!

Opposing them were Kravon and the Selzer.

The artillery battle bot fired its gauss cannon at a far higher firing rate than before in order to damage as many opposing mechs as possible! Its missile launchers emptied its ammunition canisters without any notion of conserving them for later.

As for the Selzer, the rifleman mech desperately fired laser after laser at the vulnerable ranged mechs. With the power of its rifle, the mech only needed a couple of shots to down a mech! Some even succumbed after suffering just a single hit!

Neither of the two ranged mechs bothered to threaten the carriers that brought these mechs into battle.

The ambushers learned from the previous attempt! Knowing that the motherships were exceptionally vulnerable against their target, the

mercenaries involved in this attack had deliberately kept their vessels at a distance, thereby keeping them well out of range of the Kravon and the Selzer's formidable weapon systems!

With no other alternative, the two battle bots could only resist the aggression by whittling down the opposing ranged mechs!

Not every mech stayed back and unloaded their firepower onto the Scarlet Rose.

A handful of mech companies bravely flew forward and attempted to close in on the fugitive ship in order to cripple her propulsion system!

As long as they could get close enough, they could probably sabotage the thrusters and engine systems in short order!

Standing in their way, the Paravin and Fliskin hovered around the Scarlet Rose protectively, fending off any melee mechs that flew too close!

The knight mech shielded the relatively immobile Kravon. Without the space knight providing cover, the former artillery mech would have gotten overwhelmed!

As for the Fliskin, the swift and agile light skirmisher covered the rear, preventing any mechs from attacking the stern of the Scarlet Rose!

Both melee battle bots exhibited superior strength, speed and defense! Compared to their third-rate counterparts, the second-class machines soundly crushed their opposition without any contest!

Although the bots did not fight in an imaginative and crushing manner, the superiority of their specs was enough to compensate for their shortcomings!

The Paravin and Fliskin did not succumb at all even when they were surrounded by dozens of mechs!

A single crushing sword chop bisected an attacking mech in an instant, prompting it to let go of its spear even as some of its components exploded, engulfing the exposed cockpit portions to the deathly aftermath!

The pilot didn't even have the opportunity to eject!

The Fliskin fought much more insidiously. Lacking the strength and reach to cut mechs in half with its superior specs, it instead took advantage of its superior mobility to dance around its opposition.

No matter how hard the mercenary mechs tried to surround the Fliskin with a sphere-like formation, the mech cleverly flew through the cracks before the net closed in on it! Not only that, but the mech swiftly turned around and attacked the clumsy formation from the rear by stabbing its sharp and nigh-unbreakable daggers straight through the thinly protected rear of the mechs!

Though it was a lot more efficient to attack the flight systems of the enemy mechs to end their participation in the battle, the Fliskin acted on much different instruction.

It unflinchingly stabbed its daggers in the positions that best ran the blade through the cockpit!

The Fliskin moved so fast and attacked so quickly that its targets hardly had the time to eject!

Even if they did so, the mech still reacted within milliseconds and made sure to stab the escaping cockpit cabins before they got away!

A shudder swept through the backs of the mech pilots assigned to attack the Scarlet Rose and her escorts.

The casualties suffered by the coalition of mercenaries exceeded everyone's imagination!

In their prior battles, the mercenaries rarely lost too many mech pilots. Most mechs were resilient enough to grant their mech pilots enough time to eject!

Mercenary mech pilots tended to value their lives very highly, so many of them already had their fingers on the ejection buttons or levers!

Yet even then, the two melee battle bots showed no regard for their attempts to preserve their lives! Instead, they harvested them one by one as they rapidly overwhelmed every mech foolish enough to challenge their might!

With so much blood being shed, the Zonan mercenaries quickly lost heart. The ambush wasn't supposed to proceed this way!

According to the plan their mercenary commanders had formed, they should have just swarmed and overwhelmed the four powerful machines by sheer weight of numbers.

Ideally, they would be able to defeat the four second-class mechs and gain possession of the Scarlet Rose.

If the mercenaries failed to do so, then they hadn't necessarily lost.

The Friday Coalition already offered them a rich reward for consuming the strength and resources of the Scarlet Rose!

The powerful state offered enough money to compensate the mercenaries of the losses they suffered and added even more money as an appreciation for their efforts!

With such rich remuneration, no mercenary corps lost out even if they were defeated in the end!

It was too bad that Ves already saw through their plan.

"I won't allow you to enjoy a lossless transaction!"

His instructions to his autonomous battle bots forced all of them to do their best in killing the mech pilots as opposed to their mechs!

Since material losses were meaningless in the eyes of the enemy mercenary corps, Ves instead targeted the one asset that money couldn't easily replace.

Mech pilots! In particular, loyal and skilled mech pilots!

Many of the mercenary corps participating in this ambush consisted of outfits operating for several decades.

Each of them were led by seasoned mercenary commanders who completed all kinds of difficult and bloody missions.

They might have experienced much, but Ves doubted that they encountered an enemy with the might of second-class mechs and the ruthlessness of an unscrupulous mech designer!

To prevent the mercenaries that heavily outnumbered him from overwhelming his meager forces, he had to hit them where it hurt!

Such ruthlessness was very rare on the battlefield. Most mech pilots were more concerned with defeating enemy mechs rather than aiming at the lives within.

Even if the mech pilots wanted to kill their counterparts, they didn't have the power and skill to accomplish such a difficult objective!

Therefore, after encountering the depraved battle bots that breached cockpit after cockpit, several mercenaries already exhibited cold feet.

"Halt! Let's not go in too fast! Let the other guys go first!"

"Those cowards want to drive us to our deaths! Don't fall for their trap!"

"Retreat! Our boys won't be a part of this anymore! We've already lost over thirty percent of our mech pilots! We've suffered enough!"



Too many mech pilots became deterred by the show of force from the Scarlet Rose.

Though the mech captains and the mercenary commanders knew that they brought enough mechs to overwhelm the four deadly machines, who wanted to send their brothers and sisters to the meat grinder?

Continuing the assault resulted in nothing but death until the mechs went down!

Seeing as how the four battle bots only suffered scratches and surface damage so far, they probably wouldn't go down until at least hundred mercenary mech pilots consumed their strength!

This was a very brutal calculus!

If the outfits in question were part of the military, then their mech pilots and commanders would definitely pay the price as long as the mission was important enough!

Yet even if the outfits shared some ties to the military, most of their mech pilots and support personnel consisted of civilians!

With no military training to speak of, their discipline and willingness to pay the ultimate price was very shaky!

After harvesting over a hundred-and-twenty lives, the mercenary mechs all backed up. Not a single mercenary mech pilot retained the courage to continue the costly assault!

Even as their mercenary commanders or other mech officers ordered them to resume the assault, not a single mech pilot dared to confront the seemingly godlike war machines!

Ves did not let the mercenaries linger in the vicinity of the Scarlet Rose.

"Redirect fire towards the melee mechs!"

The Kravon and Selzer stopped firing their weapons at the distant ranged mechs and instead brought their weapons to bear against the stagnant melee mechs!

Mechs exploded and entire parts vaporized as lasers and gauss cannon rounds impacted the exposed mechs!

"Retreat! Abort the assault!"

When the first mercenary corps decided to give up on the mission and recall their surviving forces, the ones who remained came under a lot more pressure!

This was especially when Ves instantly ordered his two ranged battle bots to cease firing at the fleeing mechs and instead direct their lethal firepower towards the mechs that didn't receive any orders to pull back.

The hesitating mercenary corps instantly suffered more casualties!

At this close range, it was impossible for the Kravon and Selzer to miss their shots! Each weapon discharge resulted in another shattered mech!

With so many precious mech pilots dying along with their fragile machines, the remaining mercenary corps that originally banded together to tackle the Scarlet Rose finally issued the necessary orders!

"Retreat!"

"Pull back!"

"Get away from the Scarlet Rose!"

"No more! Enough is enough!"

The diminished mech companies retreated step by step depending on how quickly their leaders issued the order to retreat.

The mechs still maintained a semi-random formation as they retreated, fearing pursuit from the Paravin and the Fliskin!

Ves smirked when he saw this result. He ordered the Kravon and the Selzer to cease firing their weapons.

What the mercenaries didn't know was that both battle bots had almost reached their limits. The Kravon didn't carry that much ammunition and the Fliskin's heat levels had been rising at a very worrisome rate.

If the battle went on for five more minutes, then the two battle bots would definitely stop firing, thereby exposing a crucial gap in his defenses!

Fortunately, the mercenaries did not take advantage at this temporary reprieve. They had long lost heart in this battle. Even if they guessed that the two battle bots had almost reached their limits, none of them wanted to be the ones to test this assumption!

After all, the melee mechs still appeared to be in good shape! It was no problem for them to fight a while longer and harvest at least a hundred more lives!

Though both sides fought vigorously against each other just moments ago, neither side attacked each other the moment the mercenaries called for a total retreat.

Ves did not wish to agitate the mercenaries. His actions so far presented a very clear message.

Attacking him resulted in losing their lives!

Leaving him alone meant that Ves would leave their lives intact!

With such a clear message, the frightened mercenaries all chose the second option! They retreated honestly and ran out of engagement range as fast as their mechs could carry them out!

Ves observed the retreating mechs quietly. He kept his battle bots on standby without attempting to resupply them. If he showed any weakness at this stage, the mercenaries might change their minds!

In the end, no one called his bluff. Ves relaxed as the mercenary mechs flew well out of range.

"Well, I hope these mercenaries truly stop bothering me now!"

This was the third ambush he encountered ever since he crossed into the borders of the Great Zona Republic!

While he always managed to crush his opposition, each battle resulted in a significant consumption of his battle strength.

If this went on, his Battle Bots would become nothing more than ornaments after a couple more battles!

"The consumption is too great!"