

Mech 2161

Chapter 2161 Secure Communications

Ves owed a debt of kindness to several people. Tristan Wesseling, Major Verle and the Swordmaidens all lent a hand to him without being obliged to do so. Regardless of their ulterior motives, he deeply appreciated their sacrifices.

Paying back these debts was quite difficult. As someone who frequently fell victim to betrayal and hated it to the bone, Ves did not wish to do the same to his benefactors.

The Swordmaidens used to be a great pirate gang. Now, Commander Dise only managed to hold on to a tenth or less of their original numbers.

It was easy to lose hundreds of mech pilots. It was incredibly difficult to replace them with new ones!

Due to the unique and incredibly punishing training regime the Swordmaidens insisted upon, they not only suffered from a lot of dropouts, but also required at least several years to produce another elite mech pilot.

Ves believed it was worth it, though. If he wanted to pursue quantity, then he could have just focused on expanding the Living Sentinels.

Not even the Golden Avatars maintained a training intensity as high as that of the Swordmaidens.

There were two reasons why Ves held a lot of optimism towards the Swordmaidens. First, Commander Dise was a powerful expert candidate who only needed to experience one more breakthrough to advance to expert pilot.

Once she reached this level, she would not only turn into one of the greatest champions of the Larkinson Clan, but also elevate the strength of the rest of her sisters!

Second, the Swordmaidens managed to produce mech pilots who were so skilled that they did not lose out to the elites of the Mech Corps and the Kronon Dynasty!

Their courage, discipline, battle will, unity, piloting skill and other criteria were uncommonly high despite the poor conditions of the frontier. If not for their lack of resources, the Swordmaidens would have been able to dominate a corner of the Faris Star Region!

Now that the Larkinson Clan absorbed the Swordmaidens, none of them lacked for resources anymore. Their budget was so generous that they were able to procure excellent training tools that significantly enhanced the training of their next generation of mech pilots.

The hundreds of promising female mech cadets that the Swordmaidens took under their wing would definitely turn into competent second-class mech pilots in a few years!

As for the current generation of Swordmaidens, their effective strength had risen as well. Though they still piloted commercial third-class swordsman mechs, each of them were quite expensive.

So long as Ketis promoted to Journeyman in a timely fashion, the strength of the Swordmaidens would definitely soar!

Once he helped her with her mech designs, Ves believed he would fully be able to repay his debt to the Swordmaidens.

"That's just one debt taken care of. I still have to pay back several other people." He sighed.

The journey from the Sentinel Kingdom to the Nyxian Gap proceeded quietly. Task Force Predator encountered no obstacles along the way. With an effective strength that was not inferior to one of Sentinel's mech divisions, only the stupid strayed close to the task force's security perimeter.

During this time, the technicians and engineers in charge of setting up the Darkbreak module had finally integrated it into the Scarlet Rose.

Ves paid a personal visit to the new compartment that had been renovated specifically to accommodate the sizable equipment from the MTA.

Though it functioned similarly to a quantum communication node, Ves eventually opted to keep the original on the ship instead of tearing it out. This made it a bit difficult to fit the Darkbreak module into the ship. Eventually, he decided to convert a spare compartment into a highly-secure armored chamber that was specifically designed to protect and isolate the new module.

When Ves met with the Battle Crier engineer in charge of the installation operation, the man bowed with respect.

"Sir. My life is yours." He spoke with absolute conviction.

"Yes, yes, yes. You don't need to say something like that. Tell me about the Darkbreak module instead."

The engineer gestured towards the armored hatch. "Let's head inside."

They first had to go through a mandatory security check, which took a while. The preciousness of the Darkbreak module was not that much worse than Cassandra

Breyer's escape pod, hence why Ves insisted on stationing a strong team of security officers in front of the entrance.

Once they passed through the hatch, they entered a silent compartment that was wrapped with meters of armor plating and signal-dampening materials.

"Originally, this compartment was twice as large, but in order to meet your demands, we had to shrink its available space in order to offer sufficient protection."

Ves soon came face-to-face with the module that he managed to win from his latest design duel. It looked like a black rectangular slab of metal from the outside, but he knew there were all kinds of sophisticated components inside.

"Have you been able to scan the insides off this machine?"

The engineer shook his head. "We employed some of the best scanners at our disposal, but to no avail. This Darkbreak module is still a black box to us. We truly have no idea what is hidden inside. The most we are able to do is make inferences by comparing it to a regular quantum entanglement node."

Though the answer disappointed Ves, it was to be expected. The MTA did not bestow him the Darkbreak module for him to reverse engineer its technology. The documentation that came along with this module already warned him that any attempts to break it open would cause it to disintegrate.

"What can you tell me about its capabilities?" He asked.

"Well, it's extremely resistant against damage. No matter if a mech shoots at it with a laser, a railgun or simply stomps on it with its foot, the outer casing will likely survive without suffering a single scratch."

"What?! It's that strong?"

The engineer knocked his knuckles against the smooth, dark surface of the large component. "This shell here is a first-class alloy, the same used for armoring the MTA's first-class multipurpose mechs! If you want, you can even mount a brace around it so that one of your knight mechs can use it as a shield. I don't think there are any pirate mechs in the Nyxian Gap that are strong enough to leave a mark on this casing!"

That was exaggeratingly strong! Ves looked astonished at the Darkbreak module, which suddenly appeared much more imposing than before.

Though the engineer had been joking, his plan was actually viable!

"So it is nearly impossible to damage the module I see."

"It gets even better. According to the manual, it can even repair itself!"

Self-regenerating alloy! That was an extremely luxurious treatment for a component even for the MTA. Ves underestimated the importance of this module.

"Are there any limits?"

"Yeah. Though I haven't been able to test this for obvious reasons, apparently you need to feed the damaged module with a lot of energy and exotics in order to activate its self-repair functions. It won't be able to rebuild itself from the ambient energy in its surroundings."

"That sounds reasonable."

There were several ways to add self-repair functionality to machines.

Some relied almost completely on the intrinsic qualities of naturally-regenerating exotics. The Belisarius expert mech that Venerable Foster once piloted was one example. Ves found it a pity that he hadn't managed to obtain any Rorach's Bone. He would have loved to obtain some to upgrade some of his gear.

Other methods instead tried resorted to nanotechnology. The Devil Tiger that Ves still took pride in did not just rely on its expensive ASMAS to put itself back together when damaged. It also allowed the Devil Tiger to upgrade itself, thereby allowing it to grow to unimaginable strengths over time!

Aside from that, there were even more unusual ways to fix up a mech, such as the method that Joshua had displayed during his promotion to expert candidate. When Ves studied the logs of the Purgatory Envoy, he knew that its power reactor couldn't have restored itself so easily.

Joshua's force of will was based around life, and that seemed to have given him the power to sustain the vitality of his mechs!

Out of all of these methods, Ves believed the Darkbreak module likely relied on nanotechnology, but he couldn't rule out more advanced solutions. The MTA mastered so much high technology that they definitely hid a lot of surprises.

Ves turned his attention back to his fancy new communication device. "Have you turned it online yet?"

"We were just about to do so upon your arrival, sir. We have already tested out this chamber's ability to isolate signals. While we cannot guarantee that the Darkbreak module contains any means of breaking through all of the layers of signal-blocking and signal-dampening materials, it will definitely have to exert a lot of power to do so, which means we will at least receive warning."

Of course, that did not preclude the possibility that the Darkbreak module contained some kind of functionality that bypassed all of that protection.

If that was the case, Ves could pretty much give up on any attempts to isolate the Darkbreak module from his ship and communications network.

"Turn it online."

"Very well, sir. Please stand back."

Ves stood calmly with his hands folded behind his back. He observed the engineer tapping a certain section of the module's smooth surface. A projection of a control panel appeared in front of his face. After inputting some security codes, the projection disappeared. The module began to hum as certain portions of its surface lit up in several different colors.

It was as if a slumbering dragon slowly came to life. The momentum of this single activation was no less than that of a ship!

Soon enough, all the humming and lighting disappeared.

The entire chamber descended into silence again.

"..That's it?"

The engineer tapped the surface of the module yet again. He studied the readouts to figure out how to make use of it. He soon found the answer.

"The module has established a connection to a remote network and is currently downloading some unknown software updates!"

The chamber had only been built to block the Darkbreak module's short-ranged sensor and communication capabilities.

There was no way for Ves to hinder the functioning of its paired particles. It worked on an entirely different principle that did not care for distance or the materials in the way. Only intense spatial or temporal warping and other exotic means could hinder its functioning.

After several minutes, the module released a pleasant tone.

"It finished updating its software?"

"Yes, but.. it's already establishing another connection!"

Before Ves could ask another question, a lifelike physical projection of a person appeared in the chamber!

The uniformed woman who appeared looked curiously around the chamber. Both Ves and the engineer fell silent as the projected woman turned around to inspect the condition of the Darkbreak module.

Only when she was satisfied with what she saw did she turn to Ves. "Hello, Mr. Larkinson. I see you have finally activated your new prize."

Ves held mixed feelings as he bowed in front of the projection. "Greetings, Master Willix. To what.. do I owe you the pleasure?"

The Master Mech Designer that Ves least wanted to see calmly explained her appearance. "Normal quantum entanglement nodes are relatively insecure means of communications. They are managed by the Comm Consortium, which is a joint venture of both the CFA and MTA. I try to avoid the galactic net as much as possible because there are too many parties monitoring my communications. The Darkbreak module is different. It is developed completely by our Association and is connected to a network that is completely in our hands."

A huge realization suddenly dawned upon Ves. His face imperceptibly darkened as he looked at the Darkbreak module in a new light!

"With this new module.. you can call me whenever you want.. and keep the contents of our discussion completely within the hands of the MTA!"

"Correct." Master Willix smiled. "I do not have to travel to you in person in order to communicate with you. Is that not a boon?"

"That is.. fantastic.. news."

Damnit! This was a trap from the start! Master Willix didn't enable him to win the Darkbreak module so that he could have a good time in the Nyxian Gap.

Instead, she sought to establish a direct channel with Ves! This meant that she could call him anytime she wanted!

Chapter 2162 Unusual Talen

It was a disaster!

He got done in by Moira Willix once again!

This Master in the employ of the MTA might present herself as an amiable mentor, but her schemes ran deep.

Installing the Darkbreak module inadvertently invalidated the main reason why Master Willix withheld herself from calling Ves. Since it operated on an exclusive, MTA-managed network, there was nothing stopping her from dropping in and saying hello to Ves whenever she was in the mood.

There was nothing Ves could do about it. What was he supposed to do, tear out the Darkbreak module and throw it inside a container?

He still needed it to maintain a channel to Gloriana who had stayed behind at Cinach.

For now, he could still rely on the Scarlet Rose's conventional quantum entanglement node to talk to his fiancé. He would still be able to connect to her when he crossed into the outer periphery of the Nyxian Gap.

It was only when he reached the inner periphery where the connection became a bit unreliable. The spatial warping fluctuated so strongly in the zones which contained a decent amount of higher-grade exotics that the quantum entanglement functionality became too wonky to transfer signals properly.

It was as if two aquatic ships on an ocean tried to communicate with each other with signal flags in the middle of a furious storm at night. It was almost impossible for one of the ships to pass on a coherent message to the other ship!

The Darkbreak module on the other hand could still pass on data despite these arduous conditions. It functioned like a lighthouse in the dark in a sense.

Ves intended to rely heavily on this capability to maintain constant contact with Gloriana and the Rim Exchange even as he ventured into the more dangerous parts of the inner periphery.

There was no way Ves could afford to give up this advantage!

Yet in order to ensure he could do so, he had to accept all of the consequences that came with the decision. Right now, the physical projection that appeared in the isolated chamber made it clear that Ves had overlooked a very important factor.

Master Willix was still interested in him! Even if she didn't bother to board her Ubiquitous Force and travel to him in person, she could still maintain contact in other ways.

Certainly, Ves could just leave the hall and ignore Master Willix's projection. He could just pretend to be busy, or board another ship, or just find some other excuse to reject her calls.

Yet would he really be able to do so? Even though Master Willix had been nothing but friendly to him so far, she still represented the upper ranks of one of the most domineering organizations of human civilization!

Small figures like Ves simply couldn't afford to offend the MTA!

Therefore, resignation had already spread through his body. He knew that from now on, Ves would have to obediently answer her summons whenever she rang the bell.

The physical projection of Master Willix floated around the chamber and inspected its properties. "This protection is.. adequate. It is better than what I have expected from you. There is still room for improvement, though. I will send you a list of materials and alloy formulas that you can use to enhance the protection of this compartment."

Ves felt like vomiting. Master Willix only showed up for just a minute and she was already starting to boss him around!

"I'll look into it, but please mind my budget."

"I am aware of your circumstances. You have been remarkably quick to spend the 5,000 MTA credits you have won from the design duel."

He shrugged. "I need power, not money. The latter is just a means to obtain the former."

"Well said! You aren't saying that to impress me, but truly understand the necessity that wealth is just a tool."

"It's hard not to think so considering I'm about to dive right into the Nyxian Gap."

"Ah." A coy smile appeared on the imposing woman's face. "I believe you are trying to complete a rescue mission, one that relates to Solok Reyva. It is a pity that he has been deprived from us. He would have become a great mech designer by now if he was still a part of our Association."

It shouldn't come to a surprise that Master Willix found this out. The Rim Guardians was just a faction of the MTA. Even if she wasn't a member of this fraternity, it shouldn't be too difficult for a powerful Master to uncover his movements in the Rim Exchange.

Seeing that she readily brought up the mission, Ves suspected that she might have called in order to lend a hand to him. If that was the case, he might as well take advantage of this opportunity! The mission provided him with far too little insight on Solok Reyva. Any additional information would doubtlessly facilitate his search!

She did not disappoint. The Master Mech Designer adopted a wistful expression as she looked up at the ceiling. "The MTA is often regarded as a paradise for local mech designers such as you. While it is true that we are able to enjoy fantastic treatment, the expectations placed on our shoulders are even heavier. If our rewards are a hundred times better, then we are expected to contribute a hundred times as much. This is very difficult to achieve. You cannot imagine the amount of mech designers within the Association whose careers have permanently stalled."

Even the MTA did not possess unlimited resources. Through its mature and sophisticated merit system, only the best performers enjoyed the greatest rewards. For every Master Willix, there were millions of mech designers who failed to pass enough tests.

"Where does Solok Reyva fall into this spectrum, ma'am?" Ves asked.

"He is.. a bright talent. An ambitious talent. He is a child to two accomplished mech designers within the Association. His parents have groomed him to follow their footsteps from the moment of conception. His genes have been altered and customized to such a degree that he might as well be one of the most artificially-gifted mech designers in this star sector."

The truth was probably much more severe than the Master had just revealed. With all that technology at its disposal, the Association could easily design its own babies to a very sophisticated degree!

Ves began to imagine Solok as someone whose entire life had been planned from birth. For some reason, that made him feel a bit sympathetic towards his target.

Life was supposed to be free. Life was supposed to be unconstrained. By optimizing Solok's genes so that he would make for an excellent mech designer when he matured, his parents basically precluded him from pursuing another occupation.

If he was born a little more naturally, would he have possessed the genetic aptitude to become a mech pilot?

What if he wanted to become an exobiologist?

All of those roads might still be open, but if all of his inclinations and talents leaned towards mech design, there was no way he could pick another career!

"Have all of those measures succeeded?"

"Solok has not disappointed his parents too much." Willix answered. "His intelligence is incredibly high, even without relying on augmentations. He has only grown more formidable as he grew up and enjoyed frequent gene treatments. When he studied at one of our academies, he graduated with honors. This is an incredibly high achievement. Though his advancement to Journeyman came a little slower than expected, the fact that he has managed to climb over this hurdle has already marked him as an individual worthy of great investment. This is especially so when we discovered that his mech affinity is very high! I dare say it is even higher than yours."

What a great talent! No wonder the Rim Guardians never gave up on trying to rescue him. It was too bad that the Nyxian Gap was not safe even for the MTA.

Still, even if Solok was such a great young mech designer 29 years ago, the MTA shouldn't be short of talent either. There should be more behind this story.

"What makes Solok special, ma'am?" Ves asked directly. Since Master Willix was in a talkative mood, he wasn't afraid of voicing doubts. "I understand he was a big deal back when he was with the MTA, but this guy is gone now for almost thirty years. There must have been tons of competitors who have eventually filled the void he left."

Master Willix shook her head. "That is true, but only if you consider Mr. Reyva to be a conventional mech designer within our ranks. The Rim Guardians have good reason to minimize their description of Mr. Reyva. If you are determined to seek him out, then I do not mind revealing what you should know."

Anticipation welled within Ves. It seemed that his target was a much more complicated figure than he expected!

"First, are you aware of the division between rational mech designers and passionate mech designers?"

Ves nodded. He did not need to hide that. "An.. acquaintance called Patricia Cain once explained the existence of rational mech designers to me. I believe you are one as well."

"That is very astute of you, though it is not difficult to make that guess. Many of my colleagues follow this difficult path." She nodded. "What you may or may not be aware of is that there are certain degrees of rationality. A wide spectrum exists between total rationality and total passion. Most successful mech designers tend to fall on the passion side of the spectrum, whereas most of the Association's mech designers occupy the opposite side. I am very much average in comparison. No matter how hard I try to eliminate my emotions, I cannot completely get rid of my feelings."

"Is that.. a bad thing?"

"Oh, it is highly inadvisable to sever all of your emotions on a constant basis." She shook her head. "It is different when it comes to mech design. When rational mech designers are tasked with designing a high-performing mech, we must adopt multiple perspectives at once. You cannot imagine the difficulty of doing so. The only way to make it easier to maintain multiple perspectives is to push even further towards rationality."

"Then.. Solok must be a mech designer who excels in this area?"

"He is even greater. He is one of the rare mech designers in the galaxy that is able to achieve perfect rationality!"

Perfect rationality! From the way that Master Willix emphasized those words, this must truly be something the MTA desired quite a bit!

"Does this mean.. he is able to shed all emotions?"

She nodded in acknowledgement. "Correct. To be honest, this is something our Association has uncovered years after Mr. Reyva went missing. After studying his prior work and the recordings of him at work at our headquarters, we have already ascertained that he has come very close to reaching this point. We did not expect that the few pirate mech designs we have managed to attribute to him actually show signs that he is able to achieve perfect rationality! If we knew this beforehand, we would have never allowed him to depart to the Nyxian Gap."

Ves blinked. This story didn't quite add up to him. "If his ability to achieve perfect rationality is such a great gift, why hasn't the MTA spent more resources to hunt him down?"

The Master looked tired. "We have tried. Suffice to say, we have suffered some losses. While perfect rationality is very valuable, it is not rare to the point where we are willing to risk losing significant assets in order to rescue him. The Nyxian pirates are cunning and know their terrain well. The Krella Alliance's main fleet has often fled deep into the core regions whenever there is any sign of our presence."

Therefore, the MTA could only rely on external associates such as Ves. Someone like him would never cause the Krella Alliance to be alarmed!

Now that Ves understood that Solok was a very unusual talent, he became more grave. He had a feeling that those 5 million MTA merits would be far harder to earn than he thought!

Chapter 2163 Too Strong

When Task Force Predator reached the edge of the Nyxian Gap, the transition became obvious.

Entering the Nyxian Gap was not that simple, but it wasn't difficult either.

Instead of traveling to a star system, any ship that wanted to reach the gap simply had to program the FTL drive to travel in its general direction. At some point, the spatial warping reached a point where a starship's FTL drive automatically shut down.

This condition essentially meant that any pirate vessel could easily shrug off pursuit! To any Peacekeeper outfit, the difficulty of determining the exact coordinates of the emergence point of a fleeing pirate vessel was nigh-impossible! Even a 0.01 deviation in angle could result in days or weeks worth of distance between the hunter and the hunted.

Many people therefore likened the Nyxian Gap as an abyss. Hardly anything that entered it went back outside. If the Gap did spit something up, then more often than not they were pirates looking to raid vulnerable trade convoys.

Not a single state had managed to tame the Nyxian Gap. Neither the Sentinel Kingdom nor the Hexadric Hegemony managed to exert effective control over the region. The MTA declined to invest the resources needed to root out all of the pirates, fearful of losing too many assets to the Gap's inexplicable anomalies.

"The only way to exert true control over the Nyxian Gap is through a slow, unstoppable invasion involving millions of mechs." Major Verle spoke as he stood alongside Ves. "Within this star sector, only the second-rate states are able to commit to such an operation. Neither will do so until the entire star sector is in their grasp."

Ves nodded. "Even then, they probably won't care. The Nyxian Gap might be a source of rare exotics that aren't commonly found elsewhere, but the yield is a little low. It's more likely that whoever wins the Komodo War will just treat the Nyxian Gap as a playground for their private outfits."

Anyone who performed a cost-benefit analysis would make the same conclusion as the MTA. Forceful conquest of the entire Nyxian Gap was too costly and too troublesome. It was much cheaper to contain it by stationing some garrisons outside while allowing mercenaries, treasure hunters, prospectors and other rabble to dive inside and find their fortune.

In fact, the Sentinel Kingdom and the other states surrounding the Nyxian Gap already adopted this strategy.

Though the Nyxian pirates sparked a lot of unrest lately, as a whole they were too scattered and weak to pose a serious threat to states.

The power of a faction or organization depended on a robust foundation. States held too many advantages in this area. They ruled over many stable and productive planets, each of which hosted populations that numbered in the millions to billions.

The entire population of humans in the Nyxian Gap only numbered a hundred million at the most, and that was one of the most optimistic estimates!

Just an average industrial planet such as Cinach XI alone already possessed more than ten times the population of the Gap. It's production output was also at least two orders of magnitude higher!

Pirates weren't known to be productive, industrious or capable of running prosperous states. The Nyxian Gap didn't offer an environment that was conducive towards founding major settlements.

As a result, the Nyxian Gap wasn't even worth colonizing.

"Don't underestimate the power of the Nyxian pirates." Major Verle nonetheless cautioned. "While the individual pirate organizations and alliances pose no threat to a state, it's a different story when it comes to smaller players like us. According to my research, there are a decent number of entrenched pirate organizations that have managed to survive the perils thrown at them for centuries and accumulated enough power to become a behemoth. It is rumored that their elite units consist of second-class mechs."

"I'm aware. Most of them are based in the core regions, though. As long as we stick to the periphery, we won't touch their bottom line."

It was incredibly difficult for Nyxian pirates to produce, field and maintain second-class mechs. Not only did they need to gather a lot of higher-grade exotics, but also acquire excellent production equipment and have someone skilled enough to fabricate the mechs.

Then, they needed to obtain the second-class mech pilots that were capable of wielding so much power.

Yet the biggest issue that plagued them was the expense and difficulty of maintaining these sophisticated machines.

Even if a pirate gang stumbled upon a derelict second-class mech in space and somehow got it to work, eventually the mech would falter due to an inability to maintain it. Such a machine required the care of knowledgeable and excellent mech technicians.

If there was one thing the Nyxian Gap had in common with the frontier, it was that technical personnel were very hard to come by! Most ship crew and mech technicians that ended up working for the Nyxian Gap either started off as fugitives, outlaws or kidnapped trade vessel crewmen!

Hearing all of this reminded Ves of the frontier. The circumstances might be a little different due to the complicated environment, but there were enough similarities to make him feel as if he entered familiar territory.

When over sixty vessels, most of which consisted of light carriers, entered into the endless field of asteroids, the Larkinsons officially entered the Nyxian Gap.

It became very obvious once they crossed into the threshold. Ves felt a bit sick as he felt as if his body had been stretched a bit.

"That's the spatial warping at work. You'll get used to it, though the sensations will get worse the closer you travel towards the center of the Gap."

While Ves had already expected to feel discomfited from reading various reports, he nonetheless frowned.

He sensed another form of instability around him. Rather than affecting his body, it affected his spiritual senses instead!

Ves recalled that the Ancient Sarcophagus that trapped Nyxie used to emerge from the Gap. Since the ancient alien tyrant possessed an immense amount of spiritual strength, it shouldn't have been surprising that the area he came from also exhibited unknown spiritual phenomena!

Discovering this came as an unwelcome surprise. Ves couldn't handle too many complications. However, possessing the ability to sense spiritual disturbances might not be detrimental. Perhaps he would be able to sense potential threats ahead of time.

He would have to see when his fleet dove deeper into the Gap.

In order to scout for danger and prevent a hazard zone from swallowing them all up at once, Major Verle initiated a rotation where certain carriers and mech companies had to scout ahead and around the main fleet.

Ves wanted his own troops to gain some exercise, so he ordered Major Verle to keep the Penitent Sisters in the rear. Not only would the fleet have no concerns about being ambushed from the rear, the formidable Hexer combat carriers and second-class mechs would also be out of sight, thereby giving the illusion that Task Force Predator consisted entirely of third-class assets.

Despite these measures, a few days went by without a pirate in sight. None of the sensors picked up any active elements.

The only sign of humans they uncovered were the numerous wrecks and debris floating between the asteroids.

An increasingly higher concentration of low-quality metals and materials bumped against the hulls of the ships traversing through the endless asteroid sea.

Even the mechs got hit at some times despite their attempts to circumvent the flinging bolts and other minor debris.

The impacts didn't pose a threat to the mechs and ships. Whenever the Larkinsons encountered something larger, they either shot it to pieces or evaded it. Some of the commanders in the task force even used them as target practice.

When Ves analyzed the scans of some of the debris, he found that some of them were more than a century old, while other pieces had only been severed from a ship or mech a few weeks ago!

No wonder this portion of the Nyxian Gap became known as Wreckage Paradise. If the debris wasn't so worthless, then scavengers would likely have to spend decades to pick up all of the pieces!

Clearly, a lot of skirmishes took place in this zone, yet so far the vanguard of their task force found no hide nor hair of any pirate gangs.

"Where are the pirates?" He asked Major Verle one day.

"They're evading us like the plague, I believe. The pirates that prey on passerbys here have a very keen awareness on who they can afford to attack. All of them have access to the galactic net, as their connections aren't blocked this far from the center of the Gap. The clever and more pirate outfits are even in touch with information brokers. Since we haven't made any attempts to hide the formation of our task force, many pirates here already know about the strength we can bring to bear. There is no reason for them to throw away their lives."

Sadly, the pirates knew the importance of intelligence as well. The pirate gangs that neglected to collect enough intelligence usually didn't last very long. The true survivors of this environment picked their targets carefully and never made any moves that resulted in more losses than gains.

The problem here was that the Larkinsons did not do a very good job at disguising themselves. The Flagrant Vandals combat carriers were very conspicuous and still bore much of their military characteristics.

The mere sight of them already caused many bottom feeder pirate gangs to flee in the opposite direction!

Ves looked very upset once this reality dawned on him. "How can my forces get any practice if pirates keep making way?"

"Don't worry, sir. Your warriors will have plenty of enemies to fight once we get deeper. Maynard Fields is much more chaotic due to the denser concentration of asteroids. The effective range of sensors is much lower, which means that the pirates are much less likely to discover the full might of our fleet. In addition, if the roaming pirate fleets still refuse to attack us, we can simply target the fixed pirate bases instead."

"I suppose that will do." Ves sighed. "Let's just pass through Wreckage Paradise as quickly as possible then. There is nothing here of interest."

With nothing happening outside to hold his interest, Ves instead turned inward and holed himself up in his design lab again.

Since his departure, he had already been thinking about designing some new mechs.

The one that occupied most of his thoughts was a rehash from the past.

Several years ago, Ves just started off as a Novice Mech Designer with a single mech workshop and a lot of debt on his hands.

In order to extricate himself from his impending bankruptcy and launch his career, he had to design several virtual mechs and fulfill several missions issued by the System.

One of the most iconic mechs he designed for Iron Spirit, the most popular simulation game for mech pilots, he designed an impressive aerial light mech called the Seraphim.

As a variant of the slim, female-shaped Fantasia 2R, the Seraphim resembled a lethal valkyrie with its oversized wings and colorful particles trailing from them during flight.

Though it primarily functioned as a light marksman mech, it could nonetheless launch a devastating dive attack with its combat knife against immobile ground targets.

Though Ves had long put this early work out of his mind, Gloriana found the design to be very charming despite its many flaws and lackluster performance.

She encouraged him to revisit his old Fantasia 2R Seraphim design and reimagine it as a second-class mech.

"It has everything Hexers want." She told him. "It's mobile, it's aggressive and it provides a lot of agency. The air war is very important in planetary combat and a second-class version of the Seraphim can help a lot, especially when they are deployed in teams."

The thought of Hexers fielding formations of Seraphims, each of them releasing their iconic rainbow particle trails, sent a shudder through his spine.

A part of him felt intrigued enough to explore this idea!

Chapter 2164 Valkyrie Redeemer

Ves waved his hand, causing a projection of the original Fantasia 2R Seraphim to emerge into view.

Lucky, who was lounging on a table while crunching a chunk of mineral, looked up at the impressive female-shaped mech.

"Meow."

"Yeah. Those were the days. Back then, I couldn't have imagined earning even a single MTA credit."

Though it was only five years ago, Ves had risen from a humble Novice into one of the most successful young Journeymen in the star cluster in this span of time. The contrast was immense, and anyone who studied his rapid progression would have been astounded.

It was no surprise that outside observers suspected that Ves had not been able to make so many accomplishments alone!

His average performance at the Rittersberg University of Technology should have never produced a mech designer who was able to trounce a peer from the MTA in just five years of time.

Only Ves and a handful of others like Calabast and Nitaa knew he took advantage of the Mech Designer System to rapidly improve his design capabilities.

Everyone else who tried to figure out the truth had all been misled by their mistaken assumptions. They collected too little information and couldn't conceive that Ves owned something as mythical as the long-missing Metal Scroll.

These kinds of misunderstandings continued to deflect suspicion from him, which was very convenient to him. While he had no illusion that these misunderstandings would protect him forever, as long as he survived his early growth phase, he and his clan would definitely be able to grow strong enough one day.

He shook his head. "That will take a while."

He returned his attention back to the Seraphim. As one of his earliest variants, he didn't need to be as discerning as Gloriana to spot the countless flaws and suboptimal implementations.

That along with the primitive, early generation components caused the mech's performance to be very lackluster compared to modern mechs.

The difference was night and day!

The performance of the Seraphim was so bad that mech cadets with only a few years of training under their belt could already pilot it proficiently. In the first century of the Age of Mechs, mechs weren't nearly as complex and complicated to master.

Various innovations that gave mech pilots greater power and control over their machines only emerged in subsequent generations. Neural interfaces grew increasingly more capable. Their greater bandwidth and fine control allowed mechs to control almost every function of a mech down to the output of a single servo motor!

Despite the frankly awful state of his Seraphim design, Ves still gazed at it with rose-tinted glasses. Despite the various difficulties he encountered, he still missed those simpler days.

"Well, that's over now."

As much as he liked to return to simpler times, he couldn't afford to do so. Even with the help of the System, he had worked hard to climb his way up to success while overcoming many threats to his life.

Finally, he achieved a measure of power that allowed him to shrug off the control of most states and power players. The LMc had grown to the point where it could easily rival established second-class mech companies. His Larkinson Clan rapidly shot up past the point where it could readily establish and maintain its own sovereignty.

Yet as far as he had come in five years, this was just the start. He needed to go much further if he wanted to fulfill any of his great ambitions.

Part of the steps he needed to take was to procure an excellent factory ship.

"And to do that, I need to fulfill my end of the deal with DIVA." He muttered.

His eyes continuously studied the projection of his Seraphim design. The more he reminisced about the virtual mech, the more he comprehended Gloriana's desire for them to modernize and reimagine it for the modern battlefield.

"It's already pretty much a Hexer mech."

The original Fantasia had been designed as an explicitly female mech. It tried to form a contrast against all of the stocky masculine-shaped mechs that already became the dominant trend since the early generations.

Ves grew curious and began to call up the statistics and usage data of the Seraphim.

Despite being several years old and not that good of a mech design, it still enjoyed a decent amount of popularity in Iron Spirit. While it wasn't exactly a competitive mech design at the low tiers, it was a very fun and pleasurable virtual mech to pilot.

Any mech pilot would feel a rush by piloting such a fast and impressive-looking mech.

"Since that's the case, my reimagined mech design should definitely appeal to female Hexer mech pilots!"

Ves understood the other reason why Gloriana suggested him to design a mech based on his early Seraphim design.

If he disregarded all of its flaws, it was quite an attractive mech to women.

In order to fulfill their deal to DIVA, the Miracle Couple had to design eight Hexer mech designs. This was a hefty number, and Ves did not wish to waste all of his time on designing modest, constrained male Hexer mech designs!

The gap in performance and impact between male and female mech designs in the Hex Army was very apparent!

"Those damn Hexers. They're not even letting off mechs in their obsession to discriminate by gender!" He cursed.

The problem for him was that he was a man. If he wanted a bunch of man-haters to adopt a mech designed specifically for their stuck-up female mech pilots, then he needed to overcome their intense opposition and bias.

Ves already anticipated a lot of resistance towards his recently-completed Blessed Squire design, and that was just a supportive male Hexer mech design.

The backlash would probably be ten times as worse as soon as he tried to introduce a female Hexer mech design!

In short, there was a lot at stake. Ves could not afford to fail this design project. If he did, then he could forget about designing more female mech designs!

He waved his hand, causing the projection of the primitive Seraphim design to be replaced by a sketch of a much more sophisticated design.

The sight of the sketch caused Ves to curl his mouth in a smile. "Gloriana inherited some of my flair."

The 'Valkyrie Redeemer' concept she came up with inherited most of the charm of the Seraphim design, but introduced a few more Hexer elements.

The mech had been beefed up a bit. Its curves became a bit more pronounced as its slightly thicker armor plating provided a lot more protection to the mech.

"It's not a light mech anymore. It's a light-medium mech."

The weapon loadout of the mech diverged from the original Seraphim. Instead of kitting it out with a marksman rifle and a combat knife, Gloriana instead chose a set of weapons that better reflected the aggressive tendencies of female Hexer mech pilots.

"Female Hexer mech pilots usually leave long-ranged fire support to their male counterparts." Ves reminded himself.

The Valkyrie Redeemer instead came armed with a pulse submachine gun. Though it wasn't as powerful as full-sized weapons, the submachine gun still packed enough punch to tear through most light mechs.

As a pulse weapon, the submachine gun fired a lot of powerful particles that mainly inflicted energy damage. The weapon mainly needed to be replenished with energy rather than physical ammunition, which meant the mech wouldn't be too unduly encumbered.

"This is a good fit for the Valkyrie Redeemer."

Even though a single pulse submachine gun wasn't very threatening on its own, it could still allow a squad of mechs armed with the weapon to tear through any mech, especially when circled!

However, the submachine gun was not the Valkyrie Redeemer's primary focus. It merely offered the aerial mech a way to defend itself against more mobile targets and harass tougher opponents.

The real focus of the mech was its iconic-looking spear and shield. The latter was curved and shaped like a hexagon. There was nothing else going for it aside for being rather modest in size.

The spear was also rather simple. It was shorter than most spears, but long enough to function as a very potent stabbing implement.

Taken together, the spear and shield granted the Valkyrie Redeemer a lot of assault choices.

Gloriana's Valkyrie Redeemer was merely inspired by the Seraphim. What worked in Iron Spirit might not necessarily work that well in the Komodo War. That, or the Hexers already fielded a very good light aerial marksman mech.

When Ves tried to imagine the Valkyrie Redeemers on the battlefield, he became immersed by their dazzling performance.

Squads of Valkyrie Redeemers would prowl the air. Though slower than light mechs, they were still fast enough to evade powerful enemies and fortified defense posts.

Instead, they would prowl the flanks of the battlefield and look out for opportunities. As soon as they spotted an enemy on the ground that they could take, they would begin to dive to the surface while firing their submachine guns to herald their incoming charge.

Once they got close enough and built up some momentum, they would holster their submachine guns and take up their spears and shields.

With gravity assisting their dive, they closed in on their targets like a charging formation of lancer mechs!

If a number of enemy mechs survived the inevitable collisions, the Valkyrie Redeemers weren't helpless in melee combat. With their spears and shields, they were able to adopt several different fighting styles in order to tackle their opponents!

The Valkyrie Redeemer was not a marksman mech. It was not a spearman mech or a lancer mech either.

"It's an aerial marauder mech." Ves concluded.

Unlike light skirmishers, the Valkyrie Redeemer placed a bit more emphasis on its ranged capabilities. As long as he could pair the mech with a second-class pulse submachine gun, then it could pose a considerable threat to any opponent at medium range!

Sure, the weapon wasn't suited to pierce through thick defenses, but that wasn't the point. The Valkyrie Redeemer possessed superior mobility due to its powerful flight system and should take full advantage of this strength to attack the enemy's flanks.

If the Valkyrie Redeemer wasn't able to crack a tough defense, then that was when it should employ its dive attack! With a charge that was not that much inferior to the charge of a lancer mech, the Valkyrie Redeemer should easily be able to break the shield of a knight mech.

In order to finish off exposed enemies, the Valkyrie Redeemers should possess enough strength to overwhelm them at close range.

"Their strength lies in their versatility." Ves concluded. "With at least three different modes of attack, the Valkyrie Redeemer can pose a threat to almost any weaker target."

Though Ves was confident he could fulfill the offensive criteria of this mech concept, he knew that it would come at the cost of defense.

Even if second-class armor systems were incomparably resilient compared to third-class armor systems, the weapons they faced were significantly more powerful as well.

No matter what, the Valkyrie Redeemer was not a mech that could take a lot of hits. The only way the mech could mitigate some of the incoming damage was to rely on its hexagon-shaped shield.

Even then, in order to preserve the mobility of the mech, Ves couldn't pair it with a thick and heavy tower shield.

Overall, the Valkyrie Redeemer emphasized both offense and mobility. It was not designed to absorb a lot of hits, just like other marauder mechs.

"It's a mech designed to pick a battle of its own choosing, just like pirates." Ves chuckled. He found the comparison to be apt. "Maybe that is why marauder mechs are called this way."

When Ves began to evaluate the difficulty of this design project, he knew that he had a challenge on his hands.

The capacity of the mech was too small for his liking!

Chapter 2165 Marked For Death

In order to have any hopes of satisfying the demands of the Hex Army, the Valkyrie Redeemer needed to offer competitive performance.

The Hex Army was famed for fielding just 600 different mech models across all of its mech divisions. Many millions of identical and uniform mechs fought alongside each other on every battlefield.

Compared to the relative lack of importance of male mech designs, the mechs designed for females were far more critical to the Hexers. Teams of Hexer Master Mech Designers poured all of their efforts into designing the powerful and exquisite female mechs.

The performance of these Hexer-approved mech designs would definitely be top notch! If the Valkyrie Redeemer wanted to occupy any space in the Hex Army's exclusive mech roster, then it had to offer stellar performance!

This was difficult for Ves and Gloriana to accomplish when the marauder mech design did not offer that much capacity.

Ves already understood that he needed to find an optimal balance between firepower and mobility. He could not afford to sacrifice either in order to strengthen the other.

"What is worse is that even if I try to balance them out, their performance parameters can't dip below a certain standard!"

If he tried too much to balance the two aspects, he risked compromising them both!

Still, even if Ves and Gloriana weren't able to match the technical excellence of Master Mech Designers, they only had to come close enough!

Both of them already accepted the inevitable gap in performance.

What Ves needed to do was to compensate for this shortcoming by relying on his unique strengths!

Just as in the case of the Doom Guard, the value of mech design did not solely depend on its specifications.

As long as he could add value through applying his specialty, the Valkyrie Redeemer would definitely be able to beat out the Hexer-designed competition!

A considerable amount of anticipation welled in Ves. Since he published his Doom Guard design, he has achieved a major breakthrough in his design philosophy.

Spiritual constructs! Triggered abilities! Under the pressure and stimulation of having to compete against Jovy Armalon, Ves had finally unearthed some of the untapped potential of the spiritual foundation of his mech designs.

The Purge and Purify abilities that Ves had 'programmed' into the Purgatory Envoy both worked as he intended.

This was just the start. Ves was very sure he only scratched the surface of what he could do. "Still, it's unlikely that I can develop an ability that can strengthen a rifle's damage output or increase the defense of a section of armor plating."

This was something that went beyond the scope of his specialty. Only mech designers who dedicated their entire lives to improving these aspects were able to achieve these effects, if only modestly.

Outside of that, the only other way to strengthen the performance of a mech was to rely on resonance. While powerful, it was only limited to a small number of high-ranking mech pilots.

Mere mortals weren't capable of achieving resonance!

"I should forget about these fantasies."

While he couldn't develop abilities that physically affected the performance of a mech, he could at least stick to familiar ground and find more ways to influence both friendly and enemy mech pilots.

A vision already started to form into his mind.

Valkyries were often associated with the dead. They flew over battlefields and chose which warrior had the right to die and enter Valhalla.

Though Ves wasn't particularly well-versed in this ancient myth, the inspiration it offered already caused him to paint a vivid vision of his mech design.

"The Valkyrie Redeemer shall represent the phase of death!"

He imagined a squad of aerial marauder mechs swooping over the battlefield, using its mobility to cover a large amount of ground and remain elusive.

Once the Valkyrie Redeemers stumbled upon a target that was worthy of death, they swooped in to help the victim on their way to the road of death!

In the context of Hexer beliefs, the Valkyrie Redeemers lived up to their name by 'redeeming' its enemies through death!

"The glow of the Valkyrie Redeemer has to compliment this vision." Ves murmured.

He decided to pair his mech with a suppressive glow akin to that of the Doom Guard. Its primary function was to induce fear and the threat of death to the Valkyrie Redeemer's targets.

If the Valkyrie Redeemer dove upon an enemy that was already discomfited by fear, then the chances of success would doubtlessly be greater!

However, the biggest obstacle to implementing such a useful suppressive glow was that its range was not that large.

An aerial marauder mech would likely fly several kilometers in the air before spotting a target. Once it dove, the Valkyrie Redeemer would give the target ample time to evade or prepare a counterattack.

With the velocity the Valkyrie Redeemer built up during its dive, its glow would only affect an enemy for a couple of blinks before impact!

"That's way too little time for a suppressive glow to have any effect!"

The most it could do was to startle the enemy at the final moment. While that sounded like a useful way to surprise an enemy, Ves was not impressed.

"The problem is that all of the glows of my mechs until now are like stars!"

Stars radiated an immense amount of energy in the form of electromagnetic radiation. Yet for all of their power, they shot it out in every single direction, thereby dispersing all of that energy very rapidly.

Ves looked at the draft design of the Valkyrie Redeemer and began to manipulate the design interface.

He selected a tool that allowed him to draw a transparent sphere around the draft design.

The sphere basically represented his estimate on the effective range of its glow.

The exact range depended on many factors, such as the strength of the design spirit, the strength of the spiritual foundation and how closely the mech matched the original design at the start.

Regardless of the range, it did not extend across a battlefield.

Ves never really felt bothered by the lack of range in the past. Most of his mechs possessed supportive glows. They were primarily meant to boost the mech pilot and any friendlies in the vicinity. The range of his spherical glows were sufficient enough to cover a sufficient amount of friendly mechs.

Yet when it came to targeting enemies, this range was not necessarily good enough.

He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin for a moment before coming up with a possible solution.

He raised his fingers and altered the sphere. He narrowed it down into a half-sphere before reducing the angle even further.

In the end, he reduced the original sphere all the way down to a very narrow cone.

"Will this work?" Ves frowned.

He had no idea. He had never attempted to concentrate the glows of his mechs. Though theoretically it should increase the range and strength of a glow in exchange for narrowing its area of effect, Ves had no way to quantify the benefits.

Without a sufficient theoretical basis, he could only resort to trial and error to see if he could accomplish this radical new application of his glows.

His eyes lit up. "As long as I succeed, I can apply this trick to any mech!"

Depending on how far he could extend the narrowed glow, he might be able to implement it in all of his subsequent ranged mech designs!

A month ago, he never would have conceived of a way to extend and concentrate the glows of his mechs. He had always taken it for granted that they functioned like stars.

Now, Ves believed he had the means to turn these stars into flashlights. By turning an omnidirectional source of glow into a directional source, he hoped to extend its range by at least several kilometers. This should be sufficient to grant his mech a powerful psychological advantage over its opponents!

"This will be my primary focus for this design project."

He planned to implement this feature as a triggered ability. He wanted to bestow the mech pilots of his Valkyrie Redeemers the ability to 'mark' a target for death from a distance.

Once the Valkyrie Redeemers placed the mark, the target should feel as if death was rapidly closing in. Unless they were mentally resilient enough, they should definitely become affected by fear!

The only snag in this plan was that second-class mech pilots weren't weak. The mech militaries of the Friday Coalition trained their mech pilots to an excellent degree, which meant it shouldn't be easy to make them break a sweat!

Ves had already seen that the elite personnel of the MTA easily resisted the glow of a Doom Guard. While the soldiers of the Friday Coalition weren't as stellar, they shouldn't be pushovers either!

"Perhaps that is where concentrating my glow can help. The narrower the cone, the higher the intensity of the glow. At least, that is what I think will happen!"

As long as a glow grew strong enough, Ves refused to believe the Fridayman servicemen would remain fearless!

Ves began to document his vision and ideas while continually letting his imagination run wild.

What other triggered abilities should he implement in his Valkyrie Redeemer design?

He had many ideas, but Ves wasn't confident he could realize them with his current capabilities.

He also had to take the properties of the design spirit into account.

The Superior Mother might be strong, but she did not possess the predictive capabilities of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

Different spiritual attributes were suitable for different abilities.

What Ves had to do was to see how he could employ and combine the spiritual attributes of the Superior Mother to produce useful abilities.

"The Superior Mother embodies both mothers and the six phases of existence." He reminded himself. "It's an ancestral spirit that is tied to every Hexer!"

It also happened to contain a portion of his mother, though Ves had not found a trace of her so far. Each time he inspected the dormant Superior Mother, he only identified its original spiritual attributes.

This was what he had to work with. Fortunately, the Superior Mother was not a one-dimensional spiritual entity. In order to fit all of the six phases of existence, Ves had introduced a lot of different spiritual attributes in a single spiritual product.

Ves was actually pretty surprised the Superior Mother had turned into a coherent spiritual entity. Before conducting the ceremony that led to her birth, Ves half-expected to create an abomination or an incoherent amoeba.

Instead, he managed to create a spiritual product that possessed the strength of six different spiritual entities at the same time!

There was no way Ves would forgo the advantages of this condition. So far, he only came up with the Marked for Death ability that corresponded to the phase of death.

"I should offer a boost to friendlies as well."

Ves did not wish to design a second Doom Guard. He wanted his Valkyrie Redeemer to be a mech that female Hexers could look forward to piloting.

As an aerial marauder mech, the mobility of the Valkyrie Redeemer allowed it to do more than hunt isolated targets.

It could also be used in larger battles as an emergency responder!

Once the Valkyrie Redeemer descended to assist a faltering friendly unit, Ves wanted the beleaguered Hexers on the ground to greet their rescuers with hope!

A strong boost of morale at the right time could do wonders in reversing a losing engagement!

Ves believed that adding this boost would truly be able to achieve a drastic effect on the battlefield.

"This is the bare minimum!"

So far, Vese did not know how many triggered abilities he could fit in a single mech design. He already discovered with his Purgatory Envoy design that he could only shape so many spiritual constructs before the spiritual foundation of a mech became compromised.

Even so, he did not feel he had reached his limit back then. It was only due to lack of time that his Purgatory Envoy ended up with only two simple triggered abilities.

Chapter 2166 Minor Projects

Though the ambitious and novel Valkyrie Redeemer design occupied most of his attention at the moment, Ves did not wish to spend all of his time on a single project.

This wasn't the past anymore where the LMC's Design Department only possessed enough design capacity to handle two major projects at most.

With the addition of fifty fresh and eager assistant mech designers, Ves believed he could adopt an entirely new structure.

He shared his thoughts with Gloriana many times. Both of them harbored different opinions about how many projects their expanded Design Department was able to work on simultaneously.

Though Ves exhibited a lot of confidence and thought they could potentially assign a mech design project to every design team, Gloriana vehemently disagreed.

Her only other experience with design teams outside of the LMC was when she contributed to other Hexer mech design projects. The established Seniors and Masters she worked for had all been in the business for at least many decades, and they commanded an army of hundreds, if not thousands of assistants!

This skewed her perspective a bit. Perhaps in time, it was possible to reach this level, but for now the LMC was still a middle player in terms of the overall spectrum of mech companies.

Once they came to a consensus, both of them decided to announce their decisions in their first full conference meeting.

Twenty-five assistant mech designers along with Ketis filed into the conference room. They all took their seats at the long, oval table.

The newcomers only occupied half of the table. Ves already stood head on one side. Lucky didn't show any interest in the upcoming meeting at all and instead spent his time teasing Goldie, who resided in the Larkinson Mandate placed on the surface of the table.

The Larkinson Clan's ancestral heirloom and its warm glow calmed every assistant present. Even though they were excited at the thought of finally escaping the drills and starting on some projects, they all made sure to behave themselves.

The occasional glares thrown by Ketis suppressed any excessive behavior. Even the hotheads such as Rina Orion-Larkinson and Catherine Evenson-Larkinson had to bow their heads against the most barbaric mech designer in the LMC!

Soon enough, a chime sounded in the conference room. The Scarlet Rose established a remote connection to Cinach VI. The other side of the oval table suddenly shimmered as the projection of the other assistant mech designers appeared in place.

The erudite mech designers had arrived, and each of them stared curiously at the somewhat bedraggled but excited states of the brave mech designers.

Gloriana herself stood proudly at the opposite side of the table with Miles sitting closely by. Seeing the latter made Ves a bit regretful that he couldn't bring the former Tovar family member with his mission.

Unlike Ketis who was born in the frontier, Miles had been born with a silver spoon. Even if he faced a lot of internal competition within the Tovar Family, he was still part of the Bright Republic's ruling elite.

It wasn't suitable to drag such a figure to the Nyxian Gap. His various skills and inclinations turned him into a much more useful asset if he stayed by Gloriana's side and managed the erudite mech designers on her behalf.

Ves thumped the table with his fist. "Alright, everyone is here, so let's start. First, to everyone who has joined us in the last month, you might have been wondering whether you will get to design a mech at all during your time in the Larkinson Clan. Well, wonder no more, because today you will all be assigned to work on a mech design project!"

A lot of jubilation appeared on the faces of the assistants, especially the ones from his own camp!

The endless drills, the lack of sleep and the absence of any mech design had grated on all of their nerves. Even if they knew that it was necessary for them to learn how to cope with various shipboard emergencies, they still possessed the arrogance of an accomplished mech designer.

No other employer would dare to mistreat talents as if they were recruits who just joined bootcamp! If they wanted to live a regimented life, then they would have joined the military!

Gloriana, who stood on the other end of the table, took over from there. "My partner and I have deliberated on how many active projects we can sustain and how to allocate your work. In the end, we have decided to stick to a simple rule. We will work on one major design project for every Journeyman Mech Designer within our Design Department. That currently means we can tackle two major projects at most at this time."

Someone raised a hand. "What is a major project?"

"Those are mech design projects which cannot be completed without the involvement of one of our principal mech designers, which is currently my partner and I." Ves answered.

His fiancé nodded. "Perhaps it is better to explain what minor projects are as well. These are the projects that are relatively lower in priority and difficulty to the LMC. We plan to hand over most of the responsibility of completing these projects to you, our assistants."

This was what many of the assistant mech designers had been waiting to hear! Each of them longed to design a mech. What was even better was the prospect of making meaningful design choices. They all wanted their own contributions to be reflected in the end product!

Ves knew what they wanted, and he did not disappoint. "Gloriana and I plan to adopt a relatively hands-off approach towards these minor projects. While we will still be setting the framework of the projects and supervise your progress along the way, you will largely work autonomously within the limits we have set. Basically, your supervisors will be responsible for the broad strokes, while you take care of the details."

Many assistant mech designers understood his approach. It was a lot more generous than what other employers allowed, but it did not provide them with the power to decide everything. They had to work within the specifications and design choices that Ves and Gloriana already prepared.

This approach towards project management served to make the most out of Ves and Gloriana's design expertise with the least amount of time investment.

Certainly, the pair would definitely be able to do a much better job than any of the assistants. The problem was that their time was limited. Both of them believed that the two of them could only devote their full attention to two major projects at most.

This was why they decided to set up a structure where they only needed to spend a couple of minutes a day at minimum to make sure the minor design projects proceeded on schedule.

In many cases, the problems that emerged in these projects might take a long time to solve, but neither Ves nor Gloriana planned to do the heavy lifting. As long as they diagnosed the problem and explained how to solve it, they could leave the tedious crunch work to their assistants.

Ves did not need to explain this rationale, as many of the assistants already understood the point of this structure. This was one of the many benefits of employing young but successful assistants.

"I'm sure you have already guessed it, but our minor projects will mostly revolve around third-class mech designs." Gloriana said. "The two major projects that Ves and I are working on will predominantly be based on second-class mech designs. At this moment, none of you are qualified to work on something so advanced. Keep studying the books in our library and work your way towards mastering the knowledge that is necessary to reach this level. Second-class mech designs will soon become the main focus of the LMC."

A fire lit in everyone's eyes. Every assistant that Ves and Gloriana had hired were ambitious in their own way. All of them were third-class mech designers, and all of them had long yearned to enter a higher circle of mech design!

"We have twelve design teams at the moment, with six assistants in each team." Ves stated. "After some deliberation, Gloriana and I have decided to allocate three design teams to each minor design project. This means that our pipeline is wide enough to accommodate four minor design projects at the same time!"

The implications were obvious. The assistants not only needed to develop a close partnership with the mech designers in their own team, they also had to learn to get along with their rivals in the other teams.

Ves planned to shuffle the design teams assigned to minor projects on a regular basis in order to make sure that every assistant did not get overly familiar with the same faces.

"Now that these organizational announcements are out of the way, let's get to the fun part. I'm sure you are all eager to hear what projects we will all be working on for the next couple of months."

He waved his hand, causing an empty list to appear over the table.

The list was split up in six sections. Only one of them contained any information.

"My partner and I have already begun work on the Valkyrie Redeemer Project. This is a major project which we cannot reveal any details due to its classified nature. You will have to satisfy your curiosity later."

Every assistant had already gone through some lectures about confidentiality. In fact, they should have already been familiar with the rules during their student days, but it didn't hurt to remind them of the seriousness of leaking information.

Ves absolutely could not tolerate betrayal, and he wanted to make sure that every new hire knew the consequences of crossing him. Forget about being black-listed, Ves had even hinted that he would take care of them in a more permanent fashion if they stabbed him in the back!

None of the assistants showed any further curiosity towards the Valkyrie Redeemer Project despite their burning curiosity.

Gloriana raised a finger, causing the slot of the second major design project to reveal some information.

"Our second major design project isn't as confidential, so we do not mind sharing what we will be working on. The project is codenamed Cat's Paw, and it is centered around designing a heavy artillery mech exclusive to the Larkinson Clan!"

That caused a fair amount of assistants to be shocked!

Usually, only the military fielded heavy mechs. They were large, expensive, cost-inefficient and unwieldy, which meant that they never sold very well on the market.

However, they did offer some advantages to wealthy customers and states. Aside from their abysmal mobility, their firepower and defensive parameters were often several times greater than that of a medium mech. Though these boosts came at a very high price, the space these mechs took up was not that much more!

This meant that while heavy mechs were very inefficient in terms of cost, they took up comparatively less space on a carrier than a bunch more medium mechs.

This was the main rationale for employing heavy mechs. If someone wanted to transfer a certain amount of firepower to a destination, they could dispatch a single carrier loaded with heavy mechs rather than two carriers loaded with medium mechs!

Ves explained why the Larkinson Clan was finally ready to field heavy mechs. "While I cannot explain our full circumstances to you yet, our clan is in the process of acquiring a lot of lovely new ships. Many of them are built for war and feature many bunkers on their hulls. It would be a shame to fill these bunkers with regular mechs, hence why we have decided to design our own heavy mech to add some teeth to our new vessels!"

The Cat's Paw Project was just as important as the Valkyrie Redeemer Project! Ves wanted to design a mech that was vastly superior to the Bright Warrior in its rifleman mech configuration in terms of offensive power.

The new heavy artillery mechs would not only be stationed on his upcoming second-class factory ship, but also lend their firepower to his second-class combat carriers.

This was a very major project that would have a very major influence on the defensive power of his future expeditionary fleet!

Chapter 2167 Cat's Paw

In six months to a year, the Ves planned to renew the Larkinson Clan's entire fleet.

He wanted to get rid of the third-class light carriers and other flimsy vessels that weren't robust enough to withstand the rigors of inter-sector space travel.

While his current fleet was already powerful enough to roam through the lesser states of the Komodo Star Sector, as soon as it bumped into a decently powerful Fridayman fleet, it would likely collapse at the first blow!

So long as this vulnerability remained, Ves had no confidence in crossing over to Vicious Mountain or Majestic Teal.

Right now, the Larkinson Clan managed to maintain its existence by sheltering under the formidable umbrella of the Hexadric Hegemony.

Though powerful, the influence of the Hexers rapidly declined outside of their home star sectors. The second-rate states of other star sectors had no reason to pay attention to the deterrence of those man-haters.

Therefore, Ves was prepared to invest substantially in his fleet and build up its strength to the point where it could roam securely through neutral states regardless of their strength!

As long as the Larkinsons did not provoke a powerful second-rate rate, Ves believed his fleet should be strong enough to fend off any other aggressors.

The greater the price of attacking the Larkinson Fleet, the less challengers it would face!

Just acquiring a tough vessel wasn't enough. Aside from relying on spaceborn mechs to fend off attackers, Ves also wanted to add some heavy firepower to the mix.

The Cat's Paw Project aimed to design a new Larkinson-exclusive mech that would perfectly address this need for the upcoming decade.

The budget for the mech design was very generous. He wanted something that wouldn't become outdated in a couple of years like the Bright Warriors, so he wanted to design a powerful premier second-class heavy mech.

The current market price of the Doom Guard was around 2 million hex credits. This was a typical price for an expensive third-class mech.

The estimated market price of the Blessed Squire was 200 million hex credits.

The price disparity between a third-class mech and a second-class mech was very considerable!

For a mech that Ves planned to utilize as the main defenses of his extremely important factory ship and combat carriers, he planned to grit his teeth and allocate most of the LMC's current profits towards their production.

Ves set an upper limit of 600 million hex credits as the production cost of his upcoming heavy artillery mech!

This was a hefty amount of money that Ves felt very helpless about. Just five second-class heavy artillery mechs already cost as much as a single combat carrier! It sounded ridiculous, but neither he nor Gloriana wanted to settle for less!

First, heavy mechs were already typically four times more expensive on average than a medium mech. If they adhered to the same budget as that of the Blessed Squire, then their efforts would just yield a very hollow and fragile mech design whose bark was stronger than its bite.

This was unacceptable. If Ves and Gloriana set out to design a heavy mech, then they wanted to do it properly, and that required a lot of money!

Second, it was not as if all of that money went to waste. When a mech absorbed so much funding, a qualitative transformation took place.

Premier mech designs performed significantly better than premium mechs, especially if their expanded budgets concentrated on enhancing just a couple of aspects!

Though any heavy mech required at least a considerable amount of armor to keep them together, Ves already decided to spend the bulk of the budget on enhancing the offensive capabilities of the Cat's Paw design.

This did not apply to the weapon systems, which the mech design hosted a considerable amount of them, but also the support systems meant to keep them working at their best conditions.

The energy weapons needed a strong and stable supply of power. The heat generated from the weapons also had to be shunted from the mech to the ship. The standalone sensors and targeting systems had to be good enough to allow the mech to keep hitting its targets if the ship it was on suddenly stopped supplying the necessary targeting data.

All in all, the fact that the heavy mechs were solely designed to be stationed in bunkers meant that Ves could readily forgo other priorities, such as the mobility of the mech!

Ves waved his hand, causing a fairly basic sketch of the design he had in mind to appear.

"This mech will be designed according to Hexer standards because the ships we are in the process of acquiring are also designed and built by Hexers. This means that the

mech will feature six legs that are designed to be anchored into the standardized slots built into the interior of the bunkers."

The hefty mech resembled a centaur mech of sorts. The lower body consisted of a fairly heavy base surrounded by six legs.

Individually, those legs were thick, but not very strong. At the very least, their mechanical power was not up to par compared to proper landbound mechs.

Since this heavy artillery mech spent most of its time in a bunker, there was no need to allocate too much capacity in increasing its movement speed.

The legs were also specifically designed to maximize heat transfer. The last thing Ves wanted to see was the mechs falling silent because they grew too hot to sustain their fire!

This was something allowed by the rules set by the Big Two.

Sadly, Ves couldn't apply the same solution to the power supply. The MTA and CFA specifically forbid anyone from connecting the heavy mech directly to the power network of a ship!

Such a design choice would allow a heavy mech to output damage similar to the damage of a warship, and that was absolutely taboo!

Therefore, despite the inefficiency, Ves had no choice but to play by the rules and make his Cat's Paw mech self-sufficient in terms of power supply. At most, he could make it a little easier for the mech to replenish its spent energy cells.

A very young assistant raised a hand to ask a question. "Pardon me, sir, but Cat's Paw is a weird name for a mech."

"It's just a temporary code name. I will come up with a more dignified name when we complete this project."

A powerful mech deserved a grand name. He did not want to embarrass the Larkinsons who were assigned to pilot the heaviest source of firepower to the Larkinson Fleet.

Someone else asked another question.

"Will this mech or a version of it be made available to the Hexers?"

That was a clever question. Ves had already basically admitted that the Cat's Paw design would be designed according to Hexer technical standards.

This coincidentally made them very similar to the heavy artillery mechs employed by the Hex Army!

Gloriana paused for a moment before she offered a response.

"This is a matter that is still under consideration. Heavy artillery mechs play a huge role in any mech military, and they are usually very advanced designs. We still need to prove to the Hegemony that we can design a heavy artillery mech that provides added value compared to what the Hex Army already fields."

In other words, Ves and Gloriana intended to design the Cat's Paw mech for the Larkinson Clan first. Once DIVA and the Hexers saw how well this mech performed, the Miracle Couple didn't mind designing a militarized variant for the Hex Army!

Of course, the premise of this rested on the ability for Ves and Gloriana to truly design a good heavy artillery mech. If the end product barely matched the performance levels of the Hex Army's existing heavy artillery mechs, then there was no compelling reason for the Hexers to adopt another model!

Though Ves felt very confident he could come up with something ingenious enough, he needed to think hard on how to differentiate his heavy artillery mech. He still hadn't fully come up with a solid vision or formed an outline of its glow and triggered abilities.

These were all key to making his Cat's Paw design truly special.

Once he answered a few more questions about the heavy artillery mech he intended to design, the discussion moved on to the minor projects.

Surprisingly, Ves and Gloriana hadn't specified them at this point.

"There are more mech designers in the LMC than my partner and I." Ves smiled. "We think it might be interesting to let you have a voice this time. Each of you have a couple of days to come up with a proposal for an interesting third-class mech for us to design. If your proposal is interesting enough, then Gloriana and I will adapt them and let you flesh it out into a design that is worthy of the LMC!"

This was an amazing opportunity for the assistants! Each of their eyes lit up as they realized that they could actually present some of the works they dreamed about!

"Don't disappoint us." Gloriana warned them all. "We are looking for practical, useful designs that either have great market appeal or can serve a useful purpose to the Larkinson Clan. Consider this a test as well as an opportunity. Those who have proposed excellent, workable mech designs will be rewarded with a handsome amount of merits."

The assistants tempered their enthusiasm a bit after hearing that. The competition would doubtlessly be intense, and they also had to abide by many practical constraints.

Even so, they already felt grateful for their employers for giving their proposals a chance. This was not always the case in other companies.

Ves did this not to motivate his assistants or to earn their favor. He wanted to develop them and turn them into greater assets.

While most assistants would probably work in this capacity for a considerable amount of time, he hoped that at least some of them would stand out in the coming years. Whether they advanced to Journeyman or not, Ves needed mech designers who could take charge of their projects!

Since every mech designer attending this conference pledged their loyalty to the Larkinson Clan, Ves did not need to be afraid that his assistants would leave the LMC once they believed they had 'outgrown' their roles. This was one of the biggest reasons why mech companies were reluctant to invest too much in mech designers.

They were simply too ambitious. Once they achieved a good measure of success and ability, many of them couldn't wait to start up their own mech company!

Though Ves hadn't actually figured out what to do in case an assistant mech designer wanted to leave the LMC but remain a Larkinson clansman, he truly hoped to keep everyone together as long as possible.

"Any further questions?"

The assistants looked at each other for a while.

Ketis raised her hand this time. "How much time do we spend on each project?"

"That's something we haven't fully decided upon yet. For now, let us set aside four months for each of them, whether they are minor or major projects."

With eighteen assistant mech designers working on every minor project, Ves refused to believe that they wouldn't be able to design a good mech in this span of time!

Seeing that no one had any questions, Ves finally ended the meeting.

"Alright, that's it for today. We will reconvene in a couple of days to discuss your ideas. Do your best to earn our approval!"

Ves smiled proudly as the assistants already started to buzz and swap ideas. Soon enough, the LMC's Design Department would be working on six design projects at the same time!

Even if only two of them centered around powerful second-class mech designs, that was still a considerable leap from before!

Once Ves became accustomed to designing six mechs at a time, he might expand the LMC's design capacity once again, especially once Ketis and a couple of other notable talents advanced to Journeyman!

Chapter 2168 Davy's Ghosts

Task Force Predator dove into the Nyxian Gap without fear. The relatively sparse concentration of asteroids did not hinder the advance of the fleet all that much.

Even so, none of the Larkinsons let down their guards. The Nyxian Gap already fell outside of the scope of civilized space for the most part, and that meant that different rules applied.

The abundance of ship and mech wreckage floating between the asteroids already served as sufficient warning. Those who traveled through the fields of Wreckage Paradise had to contend against the possibility of ambushes at any time.

It was only because the Larkinson Clan was too big and strong for most pirates to challenge on their own accord.

That did not mean the pirates let off other prey, though!

After several days of total silence, the task force finally stumbled upon their first pirate encounter!

Surprisingly enough, pirates did not target the Larkinsons. Instead, they were in the process in wearing down a damaged and exhausted Peacekeeper outfit!

The forward scouts of the Flagrant Vandals discovered the active battle first. The Inheritor light mechs sneakily hid their energy signatures behind the asteroids and pointed their passive sensors towards the ongoing battle.

At the same time, the Inheritors relayed the sensor data to another patrol of Vandal mechs that was stationed further back via a tight beam connection.

There was almost no chance that the sensors of the pirates would be able to pick up this transmission!

Once the Princely Jackal received the sensor data, Commander Orfan-Larkinson immediately woke up from her boredom.

"Huh, a battle you say?"

"Yes, ma'am. A Peacekeeper outfit is in distress. A total of four light carriers and a damaged supply ship are being protected by just seventy spaceborn mechs, and their numbers are slowly diminishing even as we speak."

"What about the pirates?"

"We haven't detected their starships. The pirates must have parked them onto the surface of an asteroid further back. All we can tell you so far is that the pirates are swarming the Peacekeepers with around 300 mechs."

"If they have so many mechs, why aren't they finishing off their prey in an instant? Why are they dancing around as if they are afraid of burning their toes?"

The sensor officer tapped a console, causing a projection of a couple of very familiar-looking mechs to appear.

"Doom Guards?"

Their shape was unmistakable! Though the outfit applied a different coating to the mech, the striker mechs still possessed the imposing might as befitting the LMC mech!

Their fearsome glows along with the sporadic billowing flames they unleashed continually stopped the pirates from charging in and mobbing their prey from multiple directions.

Even if the mechs deployed by the Peacekeepers were superior to that of the pirates, the latter still held all the initiative!

"We have already run the serial numbers of their ship through a database identified the outfit in question, ma'am. The Livid Giants is a registered Peacekeeper outfit that has been in operation for eight years. The Giants are led by Commander Ulbert Rilven, a military veteran."

"Mhmmm." Commander Orfan leaned her head against her fist. "That's clear. No average mech commander can instill such good coordination to his mech pilots."

Even though the Livid Giants mechs had to cover a lot of angles, they nonetheless maintained a tight defensive perimeter. The handful of Doom Guards they used as trump cards weren't enough to explain why they survived so long against the pirates!

"What about the pirates? Have you identified them yet?"

"According to the intelligence provided by the Black Cats, they are presumably Davy's Ghosts, one of the more formidable pirate gangs that show up in Wreckage Paradise every so often. They haven't made any notable achievements. They deliberately maintain a low profile and attack the weak."

Orfan sneered. "Typical. The Swordmaidens are a thousand times better than these scum. Warm up my mech! Let's clean up the trash right away!"

"Ahem, ma'm!" Another officer became alarmed. "We have already relayed the data we've gathered to Major Verle and the Scarlet Rose. We are to standby and await for further instructions!"

An ugly expression appeared on the Vandal Commander's face. "Damn. I forgot. We're not calling the shots anymore. I can't believe it took so little time for me to take orders from the little brat instead of the other way around."

The Larkinson Clan officially took the Flagrant Vandals under its wing. Everyone was a Larkinson now, though the Vandals often didn't bother using their compound names to reflect that reality.

Nonetheless, even if they felt a little bit willful about preserving their original identities, there were some lines they simply weren't allowed to cross.

Several minutes passed by as the main elements of Task Force Predator moved closer. Commander Orfan slowly noticed that the mechs deployed from their carriers weren't in a hurry to advance.

In fact, many of them were taking the long way around the site of the battle!

Soon enough, Commander Orfan received a call from Major Verle.

"Commander, the clan patriarch wants your Flagrant Vandals on standby. When we are ready to engage Davy's Ghosts, you are to block their way towards our main fleet. Unless the pirates attempt to storm your position, your men must refrain from attacking."

"Are you kidding me?!" Orphan exploded. "There's some easy prey in front of us, and you're telling us to stay put?! You were one of us, major!"

"I understand your frustration, but this is the will of our new superior." Major Verle calmly responded. "Look at our entire task force. It consists of a collection of different forces, some of which are more battle-tested than others. The Flagrant Vandals have existed as a mech regiment for decades and we have built up a considerable martial tradition. All of your men are all former servicemen who have lived through both the latest Bright-Vesia War and the Sand War. Only the Swordmaidens come close to matching our accumulated battle experience!"

The bigger picture slowly dawned upon Commander Orfan. "That kid wants to train his less experienced mech pilots?"

The major nodded. "In fact, I raised this suggestion as well. As long as there aren't any other threats in the vicinity, we plan to surround the engagement site so that Davy's

Ghosts have nowhere to go. Once the pirates are trapped in our jar, we plan to let our rookies have a taste of actual battle!"

Though Commander Orfan didn't like it, she silently agreed with this rationale. Davy's Ghosts posed no threat to the Larkinsons. Even if they brought ten times more mechs, the Living Sentinels alone could have easily toppled them over!

Once the Larkinsons heard what they were about to do, everyone became excited!

Though three-hundred pirate mechs possessed a substantial amount of destructive power, not a single Larkinson believed that Davy's Ghosts would be able to last very long.

They already showed serious strain in trying to overcome the tough defenses of the Livid Giants.

Once the Larkinsons arrived from the flanks, the pirates would inevitably feel even greater pressure!

The encirclement took some time to establish. In the meantime, the Livid Giants sustained more damage. A few more mechs had been shot to pieces. A couple of mechs pilots lost their lives as the pirates cruelly fired at their ejected cockpits. Only a handful managed to escape death as their comrades used their own mechs as shields!

Despite all of these tragedies taking place, the Larkinsons still calmly obeyed their orders. No one disobeyed orders and left formation in order to rescue the beleaguered Peacekeepers.

Sitting on the bridge of the Scarlet Rose, Ves calmly petted Lucky's back as he observed the giant projection displaying the battlefield from multiple perspectives.

"The Livid Giants are reaching their limits, sir." Major Verle spoke as he employed his considerable judgement and experience to determine how much fight the Peacekeeper outfit had left. "We can't wait to complete the encirclement any longer. We should dispatch our rookies immediately before it's too late."

Ves frowned a bit. He studied the map and saw that it shouldn't really matter much anyway. There was no way the pirates would outrun his forces at this rate.

"Very well. Give the orders. Let's see whether our rookies can match the performance they have shown in the practice simulations!"

Once the rookies received the orders, the prepared formation of Avatars and Sentinels quickly flew forward.

Not a lot of mechs flew into the sensor range of the startled pirates and Peacekeepers!

On the surface, only three mech companies surged forth. Most of them consisted of a collection of premium commercial mech models piloted by the mech pilots of the Living Sentinels.

It was a bit unfortunate that there weren't a lot of LMC mechs flying in their midst.

The only mechs that bolstered the confidence of the Sentinel mech pilots were the Bright Warriors flying in their midst. They adopted various configurations in order to respond to any possible situations that might occur.

To the Larkinsons, it became clear that their clan patriarch mainly wanted to exercise the Living Sentinels!

Out of all of his mech forces, the Living Sentinels numbered the most, but their individual strength was the weakest.

It couldn't be helped. Unlike the Avatars of Myth who hired the best, the Living Sentinels hired a greater number of less impressive mech pilots.

Though all of them enjoyed excellent training resources since they joined the Larkinson Clan, Ves was not in the habit of pampering his mech pilots.

They needed to earn their keep!

Though Commander Magdalena Larkinson vouched for the battle readiness of the rookies she assigned to this mission, Ves was not as confident.

He wanted to see for himself whether the recently-hired Living Sentinels earned the right to wear their grey-and-white uniforms.

"Whoever is in charge of Davy's Ghosts has finally called off their siege." Major Verle noted.

The pirate mechs no longer wasted time on exerting pressure on their prey. Even if they managed to achieve a breakthrough, the cost would definitely be significant and they would also leave themselves open to the approaching enemy!

The first instinct of a pirate when facing unexpected reinforcements wasn't to confront the enemy.

Instead, it was running away in the opposite direction as fast as possible! Davy's Ghosts did not even pretend to muster up a defense. The stained, scarred pirate mechs simply activated their flight systems as much as possible while they hurriedly ran away!

The sight looked pathetic. There was no order or discipline in their retreat. Davy's Ghosts fielded many different mech models, and each individual machine exhibited various levels of neglect. This caused the mobility of the mechs to be all over the place.

The result was that the swarm of pirates quickly strung out into a very disorderly string!

Despite the vulnerable nature of their 'formation', if you could even call it that, the Livid Giants showed no desire to pursue their enemies.

The Peacekeeper outfit lost too much strength, making pursuit unwise. There wasn't necessarily any profit in it either and its commander was also a bit wary towards the newcomers!

Just as the pirates thought they were able to shake off the Living Sentinels that appeared out of nowhere, a considerable number of mechs suddenly appeared in their path!

Rows and rows of resplendent gold-coated Bright Warriors and other Avatar mechs formed a high-impenetrable wall!

Even if Davy's Ghosts were completely unfamiliar with the Bright Warriors, the mechs already seemed invincible to the panicking pirates!

The pirates tried to fly straight downwards in an attempt to evade the blockade. Yet they only adjusted their course for half a minute before more Avatars mechs showed up!

No matter where they fled, the pirate mechs encountered enemies in every direction.

In their despair, Davy's Ghosts could only try to flee to the opposite direction, which was seemingly unblocked.

In order to do that, the pirates had to fight through the approaching units of Living Sentinels!

With their very lives at stake, the pirate mechs all banded together and charged at the weaker and less ostentatious mechs of the Sentinels!

"Break through at all costs, lads!"

Chapter 2169 Easy Pickings

A horde of over 300 panicked pirate mechs stormed right in the direction of around 120 Living Sentinels mechs.

Aside from being fortified by a number of Bright Warriors belonging to the Avatars of Myth, the rookie pilots who had donned the grey-and-white uniforms of the Sentinels had to fend for themselves!

Most of them consisted of commoners from the Sentinel Kingdom that the Larkinson Clan had picked up at Cinach VI. Though they had received a heap of piloting training and received a lot of indoctrination, none of them had been bloodied in their short careers.

The Larkinsons sought to hire talents. Though all of them possessed enough potential to become second-class mech pilots, raw ability was not enough to succeed.

The mech pilots had to be able to pull the trigger when it counted!

Even though the Sentinel mech pilots had killed thousands, if not tens of thousands of virtual mechs in simulations, it was entirely different now that they confronted real mechs piloted by actual humans!

The stakes were higher. Unlike before when the only suffering they inflicted was on a bunch of computer bits, now they needed to bring their weapons to bear on machines that possessed the power to end their lives!

Everyone in the expeditionary fleet paid attention to the ensuing clash. Each of them wanted to see how the outnumbered Sentinels mechs dealt with Davy's Ghosts.

Would their inexperience lead to blunders and unnecessary casualties? Would Davy's Ghosts collapse and split apart after realizing the Sentinels weren't soft at all? Anything could happen!

Within the design lab of the Scarlet Rose all of the assistant mech designers aboard the ship had gathered together. Each of them watched the plethora of projections that showcased the battle from multiple angles while at the same time presenting technical readouts as sophisticated scanners deciphered every observable attribute of the pirate mechs.

"I hope that each of you have developed a good impression of the pirate mechs." Ves spoke like a teacher. "Now, what can you tell me about their overall state?"

"The pirates don't have a mech designer. If they did, their mechs wouldn't be in such an awful state!"

"They don't have enough mech technicians either. Aside from the mechs that are presumably piloted by their sergeants and officers, the lowest-performing mechs are also those that are neglected the most."

"There are too many different models in their lineup. There is hardly any synergy at all. I think Davy's Ghosts likely stole them from their victims or salvaged them from the battlefield."

"How could they possibly salvage the mechs themselves?! They are clearly devoid of technical personnel!"

Ves clapped. "Alright, everyone here has made some good points. Almost all of what you have said has matched my judgement. Now, in many confrontations like this, the pirates usually outnumber their opponents by at least two-to-one. Yet the quality of their mechs isn't even half as good. Victory and defeat depends on many more variables. Now, my question here to you all is to make a judgement. Who do you think will win this clash? How many losses do you think our Sentinels will suffer before the pirates will go down? Will our Sentinels be able to succeed in blocking the pirate mechs from breaking through?"

A projection appeared in front of everyone's faces. Ves had already prepared a form for them to fill. The assistants soon began to input their answers according to their judgement.

Shortly afterwards, the projections disappeared. A small AI routine rapidly scanned through the answers and determined the overall sentiment.

Ves smiled in an amusing fashion. "Well, it looks like you are all confident in our Sentinels! Do you really think that 120 Sentinel mechs will be able to demolish 300 pirate mechs while only losing 5 to 10 mechs at most?"

That was a huge disparity in losses!

Someone raised her hand. "Sir, the Sentinels might be outnumbered, but they are piloting premium mechs in excellent condition. Almost all of them are clad with compressed armor, which can take a lot of punishment, so they won't go down quickly. If any Sentinel mech is in trouble, the other Sentinels will come to the rescue. That is how they are trained."

"The condition of the mechs matter as well. The Sentinel mechs are all new machines that the clan has acquired in the last four months. Not only are the mechs at the beginning of their product life cycle, but they have each received excellent care from our well-trained mech technicians. As for the pirate mechs, most of their foddors still feature unrepaired battle damage. It is trivially easy for our Sentinels to exploit the holes in their defense."

If both of these factors were taken into account, then it was indeed plausible that the Sentinel mechs could overcome the pirate mechs with ease!

"Let us see whether your optimism holds true." Ves said and turned his attention towards the main projection.

By now, the ranged mechs of both sides opened fire. An abundance of weak but rapid-firing laser beams sizzled against the resilient armor of the Sentinel mechs, blackening and vaporizing their silver coating in quick order.

To their credit, the ranged mechs of Davy's Ghosts exhibited at least some coordination. Every squad focused their fire on their designated targets. Though the accuracy of their weapons during flight and at longer ranges left much to be desired, numerous scorching red laser beams still impacted the targeted Sentinel mechs with alarming frequency!

The Sentinel reacted according to their training. The space knights in the formation shifted their positions and covered the targeted mechs with their shields.

This largely frustrated the pirates. It took way too many laser beams to chew through the defenses of the space knights!

The pirates began to shift their targets, but the space knights kept covering every focused target with ease.

Eventually, the coordination of the pirates fell apart, and their lasers just crashed against the entire formation of Sentinel mechs with hardly any discernible pattern!

Though the rain of incoming laser fire looked intimidating, in truth the pirates had given up any hope of disabling a Sentinel mech before both sides collided against each other.

The Living Sentinels weren't as helpless. Their rifleman mechs, though much smaller in number, all focused their firepower at the mechs in the center of the pirate formation.

The momentum of the pirate mechs soon began to flag a bit as the lead mechs came under intense fire!

The disparity in power between the beams quickly became evident. Most rifles in the hands of the pirate mechs were not only cheap, ill-maintained and lower-powered, they were also outdated!

The new mech generation had only swept the galaxy for a year. While the mech forces in civilized space promptly swapped their older models for modern ones at a decent pace, the pirates were much further behind!

The premium rifle models in the hands of premium ranged mechs hit incomparably harder. This was especially so because the new mech generation introduced several innovations related to directed energy weapons technology!

The cheap, second-hand mechs of Davy's Ghosts endured a lot of terror. Some mechs fell apart after suffering only a dozen hits. Others lasted longer, but the constant barrage of high-powered laser beams steadily chewed through their armor!

"Focus fire on their officers!"

When the range grew close enough to reliably target individual mechs, the ranged Sentinels suddenly shifted their fire to the pirate mechs that presumably led the pirate mechs!

A lot of sensor data recorded by the Larkinson mechs were being transferred back to the ships of the task force. The Scarlet Rose, the Princely Jackal and many other vessels collectively analyzed the data and rapidly came up with informed guesses on which pirate mechs hosted the leaders!

The analysis not only focused on the quality and condition of the mechs, but also looked out for the transmission of data.

The accuracy of these guesses were very high! As soon as the Sentinels knew which mechs to target, they systematically dismantled every mech piloted by a leader or sub-leader!

Panic began to spread among the pirates! The swarm grew less cohesive and less united as their officers were put out of action in quick order! Without any leaders, the horde of pirate mechs already showed signs of falling apart!

"Haha! Without their bosses to take charge, the pirates are easy pickings!"

"Don't underestimate them! Coordination or no coordination, they still outnumber us by quite a margin!"

As the distance rapidly decreased, the ranged mechs of both sides subsided down and flew to the sides. Both of them fired at each other and the ranged mechs that rapidly closed in on each other.

In truth, because the goal of the Sentinel mechs was to intercept the pirates and block them from advancing further, they had been accelerating in the opposite direction for a while.

If they did not do so, they would essentially perform a very rapid drive-by confrontation and rapidly zip very far away shortly afterwards!

The mobility of the Sentinel mechs wasn't good enough to swing around and catch up to the fleeing pirate mechs without wasting lots of time. The Sentinel mechs all had to modulate their flight systems carefully in order to stick to their enemies!

Shortly before the melee mechs speared against each other, a sudden change happened in the Sentinel formation.

"Avatars, change course!"

The Bright Warriors that basked every Sentinel mech in the vicinity with the Golden Cat's glow suddenly shot upwards and departed from the main formation!

The rookie Sentinel mech pilots quickly lost the psychological support provided by the Larkinson Clan's exclusive mechs. It was as if they all lost confidence. The absense of the glow came so abrupt and without warning that the Sentinel mech pilots became too distracted to maintain a tight formation.

"Get yourselves together! The enemy is right on top of us! We can still defeat with or without a glow!"

No sound traveled in space, but the collision of so many mechs would have caused a huge number of crunching sounds!

Spears thundered through chest plating, swords sliced off entire arms and legs, shields bashed against the entire frame of lighter mechs, causing their entire to rattle.

Sheer violence at its most primitive and brutal form had commenced!

Though the pirate mechs that clashed against the more solid and resilient Sentinel mechs all sustained serious damage, there were plenty of other pirate mechs that escaped the initial clash unscathed!

They swiped their weapons at the Sentinel mechs from the front or from the flanks. Some even swung around in order to attack the vulnerable rear of their opponents!

The Sentinel mechs desperately tried to finish off their opponents at the front in order to defend against attacks from the rear, but they didn't always succeed!

"I thought these pirates are leaderless! Shouldn't these cowardly scum be running away as fast as possible?!"

The behavior of the mech pilots of Davy's Ghosts didn't conform to their expectations. Amazingly, even without a pirate officers issuing any orders, the cruel and selfish pirate mech pilots still banded together and chose the correct strategy that made the most out of their advantage in numbers!

In truth, the Sentinel mechs and mech pilots should have been good enough to chop up some of the pirate mechs without wasting too much time.

However, the sudden disappearance of the Bright Warriors along with the pressure exerted by the pirates caused many of the rookie mech pilots to panic or forget portions of their training.

Without any veterans or blooded mech pilots in their midst to rally them or restore their confidence, the Sentinel mechs started to suffer serious damage!

A lot of clansmen observing the battle began to drop their anticipatory smiles. The thorough pirate thrashing that all of them had expected did not arise.

Instead, the rookie Sentinel mech pilots began to falter against their desperate pirate counterparts who literally fought with their lives on the line!

Soon enough, the first Sentinel mechs started to fall. Cockpits suddenly ejected from the fallen silver-coated machines. Some of the ranged pirate mechs even started to target the cockpits!

"No!"

Chapter 2170 A Harsh Lesson

Several rookie Sentinel pilots fell into deep trouble after numerous pirate mechs ganged up on their machines!

Though the Living Sentinels may have taken out their leaders, the remaining mech pilots of Davy's Ghosts possessed enough battle experience to know what they needed to do to overcome their powerful opponents.

Driven by desperation and smelling death, the pirates held nothing back! They adopted their favorite tactic, swarming, against the Sentinel mechs that looked slightly weaker than the rest.

Even though the quality of a third-class premium mech was incomparable to the second-hand trash used by Davy's Ghosts, a single mech could never adequately defend against the attacks of four or more mechs attacking from different directions!

The pirate mechs plainly disregarded the surrounding Sentinel mechs in order to unleash all of their attacks on their chosen targets. No matter if their swords, spears, maces or other weapons hit the solid chest plating or some inconsequential leg section, the rapid succession of hits eventually exploited some of the weak points of the mechs.

Vulnerable flight systems became compromised. The fingers responsible for gripping the weapons were sliced off. Some lucky pirates even managed to stab straight through the weak points of the rear armor!

The overly-rigid formation of the three mech companies of the Living Sentinels couldn't adjust fast enough!

The mech lieutenants and mech captains in charge of leading their men simply couldn't adjust to the changing circumstances fast enough. Without timely orders, the rest of the Sentinel mech pilots reacted with great delay.

Before they finally received orders to adjust their formation and come to the aid of their beleaguered comrades, the first Sentinel mechs had already been downed!

Even though the pirates already lost more than a hundred shabby mechs after the initial clash, the insane losses only drove the surviving members of Davy's Ghosts into an even greater frenzy!

"Fight, damnit, fight!"

"These new guys aren't so strong after all. They're practically shaking in their boots!"

"Hit them harder!"

When combat descended into a chaotic melee, many of the rules were thrown out of the window. No matter what precise formation the Sentinel mechs could adopt, the pirates were already on top of them and working together to disable their prey with the wildness of a cornered beast.

As soon as the battle proceeded further, the Larkinsons who observed the battle began to glower more and more.

Even if the mech pilots that had been dispatched today consisted of rookies, their performance against a horde of pirates was dreadful!

No matter how many pirate mechs the Sentinels managed to crunch, the handful of losses they suffered among their own had already reached an unacceptable level!

A dozen gleaming silver-coated mechs succumbed to the swarming attacks. They barely managed to launch their cockpits, carrying their precious mech pilots to safety.

The pirates didn't let off the escapees! While the cockpits had flown rapidly out of melee range, the pirate mechs armed with rifles automatically shifted their aim towards these vulnerable objects, they fired!

Several cockpits came under fire! Some of the laser beams even managed to hit them, causing many of them to show deep scars.

Though the outer shells of the cockpits all consisted of compressed armor, they were too thick to protect the mech pilots inside against the awesome might of a mech-sized laser rifle for long!

Friendly Sentinel rifleman mechs desperately intensified their fire in order to dissuade their pirate counterparts from killing any of their own comrades.

It was too bad that the pirate mech pilots persisted in their cruelty! Even if the ejected cockpits no longer posed a threat to Davy's Ghosts, the pirates all hungered for blood!

"Kill them! Kill them all!"

"No one messes with Davy's Ghosts!"

"Even if we die, we'll drag as many of these bastards to hell as possible. For Davy!"

The loss of their leaders had only made the remaining pirates crueler. Now that they were fully unshackled, they followed their violent impulses without any constraints!

The ferocity exhibited by the pirates completely overwhelmed the initial momentum of the Living Sentinels.

To many of them, this was their first real engagement in their lives. Even if they prepared for this life for ten to twenty years, they still showed many inadequacies.

Aside from their rigidity, some of the rookies also exhibited another flaw.

A lack of killer instinct!

If the Sentinel mechs just attacked the pirates with their full strength, then they wouldn't have ended up in such a pathetic state so quickly. Fear and nervousness rapidly impacted their battle effectiveness, causing them to perform at just fifty to eighty percent.

With the escaping cockpits under fire, it seemed as if the Larkinson Clan would suffer its first casualties after entering the Nyxian Gap.

The Living Sentinels would never be able to wash off this shame if that happened!

Just as one of the targeted escape pods reached a dangerous condition, rescue finally arrived!

One of the Bright Warriors that had separated from the main formation suddenly dropped down and arrived just in time!

Its advanced flight system allowed the mech to neatly keep pace with the desperately fleeing cockpit. Lasers began to shower across its gold-coated frame, achieving nothing but leaving behind some scorch marks.

No matter how many lasers impacted its surface, the excellent Breyer alloy covering the mech showed no signs of faltering.

The mech was practically invulnerable against the low-powered lasers wielded by the pirates!

The Avatar mech pilot did not let the pirates take potshots at him for free. This particular Bright Warrior had been kitted out in a rifleman mech configuration.

Even though its armor was thinner than that of the other configurations, the Avatar mech pilot still oozed confidence. The mech calmly raised its rifle and took careful aim before barking out some high-powered laser beams!

Powerful rays of death pierced past the fragile armor of the pirate mechs, downing them at a rapid pace!

The Bright Warrior only ceased fire once the ranged pirate mechs shifted their fire. As long as they didn't target any cockpits, they avoided certain death!

The escaping Sentinel mech pilots avoided death, causing all of them to feel a little relieved, but not too much.

Only a dozen Bright Warriors accompanied the three Sentinel mech companies! As long as the casualties mounted past this number, then the pirates might still be able to kill a retreating Sentinel mech pilot before they all went down.

This realization put an even greater amount of pressure on the shoulders of the remaining rookies!

"Come on! Get your heads back together! We trained for this! Help your squad mates and drive back the pirates!"

The Sentinel mechs belatedly adopted anti-swarming tactics. They huddled together and oriented outwards, causing them to cover each other's backs.

This was very difficult to do in space. If they pressed too close, they risked colliding their flight systems against each other. If they separated too far away, then they left enough gaps in their formation for a swift enemy mech to squeeze through.

Even so, the training of the rookies finally came through. Their mechs formed balls at the appropriate positions, allowing them to finally frustrate the frenzied pirate mechs that had already learned to target their rear.

Casualties decreased and the pirate attackers began to appear increasingly more frayed.

Even though the vicious outlaws managed to hurt their opponents, their mechs suffered grievously in exchange!

Every second that passed, another pirate mech collapsed. The difference in quality was not something that ferocity and cruelty could not entirely make up for. The total value between the two groups was simply too vast!

Slowly, the pirates lost cohesion as they no longer outnumbered their opponents. Their vulnerable ranged mechs had all been taken out a while ago.

With the loss of their ranged support, the remaining pirate melee mechs finally ceased their frenzied attacks.

Fear finally overpowered their vicious tendencies, causing them to completely lose heart.

"I'm out of here!"

"Split up! They can't get all of us!"

Perhaps understanding that they had performed abysmally in this battle, the rookies finally unleashed their vengeance on their opponents!

The shabby pirate mechs fled as fast as they could, which wasn't all that impressive. The faster Sentinel mechs easily caught up to the fleeing rats. Now that the pirate mechs had split up, their individual combat prowess no longer formed any deterrence. The angry rookies all managed to take the pirates down in quick order!

The battle had finally ended.

The rookies slowly began to police the battle site while the main fleet finally came within range.

Other mechs continued to keep an eye on the surroundings in case Davy's Ghosts dispatched any reinforcements.

Various vehicles flew towards the debris field in order to salvage the downed Sentinel mechs and any of their separated parts.

A lot of unpleasant discussions formed within the fleet.

Within the design lab of the Scarlet Rose, Ves crossed his arms. He glanced sternly at the group of crestfallen assistants.

Each of them were familiar with the mechs fielded by the Living Sentinels. Even if they accounted for a couple of losses, the performance of their fellow Larkinsons vastly deviated from their expectations!

In the end, fifteen out of 120 Sentinel mechs had been rendered combat ineffective. If not for the timely rescue of the Bright Warriors piloted by veteran Avatar mech pilots, some of those rookie mech pilots might have lost their lives in the outskirts of the Nyxian Gap today!

"So." Ves opened his mouth. "All of your estimates were off. Some of you projected that the Sentinels would lose seven mechs. Others guessed that they would lose five mechs. A handful of you were even braver! You posited that the Sentinels wouldn't lose any mechs!"

The faces of the latter group appeared more crushed than the rest! In the end, their estimates had been completely off, though none of them expected the Bright Warriors to depart at the final moment and deprive the Sentinels of their glows.

Their superior tapped his foot against the deck. "Anything can happen in battle. Unexpected variables can complicate matters at any moment, and fighting while outnumbered is always difficult. Most of all, you overlooked one incredibly huge factor when you guessed the outcome of this clash. Ketis, your guess was closest from the actual outcome. Can you enlighten your fellow colleagues what they missed?"

Though Ketis wanted to appear smug, she knew that this wasn't the time. She answered the question with a serious voice.

"The human element. Each of these dummies focused most of their attention on the mechs involved in the battle. Even if they paid attention to the disparity between mech pilots, they all assumed that the mech pilots of Davy's Ghosts would never amount to much. They are sorely wrong."

"Well said, Ketis." Ves smiled at her before frowning at the remaining assistants. "You are all mech designers. It is your job to learn everything you can on how mechs work and how you can put them together. Yet never forget that while mechs are machines, they are not autonomous battle bots! Each mech is controlled by a human, and that makes a huge difference."

Their mistake was to overestimate the performance of rookies. They had been misguided by the excellent training provided by the Living Sentinels. They overlooked too many psychological factors that ultimately caused the battle results to veer from their rosy projections.

"I hope that everyone in the clan has learned some lessons from this engagement." Ves spoke. "I'm sure that the Living Sentinels and every other mech force under my command will prepare their mech pilots more thoroughly from now on. As for all of you,

you need to delve into the human element a bit more. Never judge mechs in isolation. Always consider them in partnership with their mech pilots!"

Though Ves had taught his assistants a harsh lesson, he hoped this would be the only time he needed to do so. Every assistant ought to be smart enough to avoid making the same mistake twice.

The insights they gleaned from this battle would doubtlessly reflect on their work, which was one of the actual goals that Ves wanted to achieve!