

Mech 2171

Chapter 2171 Limit Testing

The Sentinels lost 15 mechs in battle. Though all of them were still in salvageable condition and could be restored in working condition in a matter of weeks, the fact that the pirates managed to overwhelm them in the first place was a huge problem!

Commander Magdalena was livid. The Living Sentinels should have easily been able to wipe out Davy's Ghosts with their accumulated advantages. Yet the rookies had all shown that they were less prepared for battle than everyone thought!

Certainly, in a more normal battle, the rookies might have performed closer to standard. Under the command of Ves, Major Verle had deliberately stacked the deck against the rookies.

First, instead of dispatching three ordinary mech companies, he instead pulled out every rookie spread among the Living Sentinels and grouped them together.

The rookies had all trained alongside veterans and more experienced mech pilots. Now that they had been robbed of this pillar, they had no one reliable to turn to for guidance!

Second, Major Verle deliberately deprived the rookies from the supportive glows that they had been exposed to on a daily basis. They had to fight against the pirates without a single form of moral support!

It became clear that the rookies had become far too pampered by the glows. Their unexpected absence left them with little time to adjust, causing them to lose their composure to a greater degree than they should have.

These reasons and more all resulted in a fairly awful result. Major Verle had basically set up his own men!

As the person responsible for ordering Major Verle to screw over the rookies, Ves felt no remorse. He was always a believer in practical lessons, and there was no better way to drive a lesson home than to show the worst that could happen!

He didn't care whether the rookies shamed and dishonored themselves. Ves would rather humiliate his own men than to fawn over them and inflate their egos. Once they deployed in a serious battle, the failure they experienced today might take place with much more lives at stake!

The assistant mech designers that Ves had brought along this expedition all looked thoughtful and introspective. None of them experienced any actual battles up close. The most they knew about battle all came from viewing and studying archival footage during their student days.

As much as Ves resented the Bright Republic for its insistence of drafting as many low-ranking mech designers to the frontlines as possible, he was grateful for the harsh lessons he learned back then. The Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens had allowed him to acquire a much more comprehensive use of mechs and the difference that mech pilots could make.

Now, he hoped that all of his assistants learned some of the same lessons that he did in this practical demonstration.

"This is true mech combat." He told them. "They are never as clean or standard as the battle footage that you have seen before. The truth is that many of your teachers have never experienced a mech battle up close. When they select which footage to show to you, they are often affected by selection bias. They do not always understand the importance of the human element either."

This couldn't be helped. Ordinary mech designers had no place on the battlefield. The more talented and capable they became, the more they stayed away from battle.

As a result, a disproportionate amount of successful mech designers had never experienced any serious danger in their long lives. They always spent their time on stable planets and designed their mechs in well-guarded compounds.

Many of the academics and the theorists in the mech industry developed fantastic innovations and made amazing achievements. Yet when it came to understanding the messiness of actual battle, they were far inferior to the mech pilots they supposedly served!

Fortunately, not every mech designer possessed this shortcoming. Mastery experiences that allowed mech designers to relive the experiences of veteran mech pilots allowed the former to experience the complicated nature of battle at minimal risk.

In addition, a mech designer could always hire consultants or advisors who had lived through many battles. As long as the mech designer sincerely listened to the words of wisdom of various veterans, their mech designs would doubtlessly be better adapted to a chaotic battlefield!

Though Ves could have relied on these alternate methods to wisen up his assistants, he decided to aim for a practical demonstration.

Not just his assistants, but the rest of the Task Force Predator also learned their lessons!

Just because they were part of the Larkinson Clan didn't mean they were invincible! Compared to their counterparts from other third-rate states, the circumstances of the Larkinson mech pilots were numerous times better. Their mechs were all excellent compared to the machines fielded by regular outfits.

This was something that Ves had always dreamed of. He wanted to invest in a strong, loyal mech force that could help him survive the challenges to come.

Yet Ves knew that all of that building up was partially meaningless if the rapid expansion in strength remained untested.

The outcome of the battle against Davy's ghosts only confirmed his suspicions.

His clan had grown too rapidly. If the mech pilots that engaged the pirates all consisted of trueblood Larkinsons, they would have never exhibited so many mistakes!

Cleaning up the aftermath of the battle only took a few hours.

The exhausted Living Giants expressed a bit of wariness towards the Larkinson Clan until they finally verified their rescuers weren't pirates themselves!

Commander Ulbert Rilven wanted to speak to Ves in person to express his gratitude, but the clan patriarch didn't bother himself with this trivial chore. Major Verle took over in his stead.

Instead, Ves decided to pay a visit to the crestfallen Living Sentinels. He boarded a shuttle with Lucky which quickly reached one of the light carriers of the Living Sentinels.

The hangar bay descended into silence as every rookie that participated in the battle had gathered together. Commander Magdalena Larkinson adopted a stony expression as she conveyed her disappointment in her men without speaking any words.

When Ves finally appeared, she saluted him. "My apologies, clan patriarch. My Living Sentinels have failed your test."

He dismissively waved his hand. "Tests are meant to push limits. Sometimes those limits break. That is not an inherently bad outcome. What is more important is to learn the right lessons from them and make sure the same outcome doesn't happen again."

"Oh, I promise you, sir, I will not allow any of my Sentinels to enter into battle unprepared again!"

The Sentinel Commander harbored no grudge against Ves for masterminding this test. She understood as well as Ves and Major Verle that the Living Sentinels needed this wakeup call.

After exchanging a few more words with Commander Magdalena, Ves finally turned his attention to the rows of dejected rookies.

They had already been subjected to a lot of jeers and looks of disappointment from their fellow clansmen. The near-disaster still haunted their minds. If they had screwed up just a little bit worse, then some of their colleagues wouldn't be alive at this time!

Such a realization hit the inexperienced rookies particularly hard. Without any veterans to mentor them through their first real battle experience, their imaginations were already running wild.

Ves didn't worry too much about their mental states. The Larkinsons possessed institutional awareness of the importance of managing the mental health of their mech pilots.

He still felt like giving a speech, though.

"Mech pilots of the Living Sentinels. I know it hurts to disappoint everyone's expectations. You must be feeling pretty sorry for yourselves, correct?"

Not every glum mech pilot nodded, but their overall mood was plain to see to him. Hardly anyone was satisfied with their performance today!

"Though you have much cause to feel disappointed in yourselves, I think you should be happy instead."

That caused half of the 120 rookies to become startled.

"Each battle begins with mech pilots like you entering the fray. Not everyone gets to leave with their lives intact at the end. Be grateful that you have managed to defeat over 300 deadly pirate mechs without suffering any loss of life."

Certainly, the rookies managed to lose fifteen mechs, but as callous as that sounded to someone who considered them to be alive, Ves would rather lose a bunch of mechs than a single Larkinson mech pilot!

Mechs were built for a specific purpose. Though Ves wanted as many of them to survive as long as possible, it was inevitable for them to make the ultimate sacrifice. Ves did not feel sad about that. As long as the mechs received enough opportunity to fulfill the purpose that they had been created for, then they hadn't existed in vain!

Ves did not feel like employing any spiritual trickery today. He continued to address his Living Sentinels with plain words.

"I am sure that you have all realized the point of this battle. To be honest, I expected you to fail. I already took that into account. It isn't your job to feel disappointed at yourselves. That is something that is reserved for your bosses. Hopefully, they will learn sufficiently from this battle and revise your training. Trust in them. They want you to succeed as much as you do. The clan will always have your back."

A bit of warmth swelled in their hearts. They all expected Ves to express anger or disappointment. Why shouldn't he? His trained soldiers, which had taken up a lot of money to train to their current standard, fought worse than the pirates they confronted!

Yet not a single signal that Ves transmitted to his soldiers contained any negativity.

This gesture mattered. It was in their darker times that defeated soldiers needed a helping hand the most.

Their loyalty to him in person, which had already been high, rose to further heights!

The rookies no longer dwelled on their mistakes that much. Instead of looking back to the past, they instead started to look to the future.

A hint of determination swelled in their hearts.

They would definitely do better next time! There was no way they were going to disappoint everyone's expectations twice!

Both Ves and Commander Magdalena shared a quick glance.

Ves accomplished the goal he set to achieve. Not only did he set their minds a little straight, he also deepened their loyalty to him and the clan!

As for Commander Magdalena, she continued to maintain a stern expression. Though the rookies needed to be handled with care, they were still warriors and soldiers. Their job was to pilot a mech in battle, not to be pampered all day.

If participating in an actual battle was too much for mech pilots to cope, then the Living Sentinels would be better off forcing them into retirement.

After he finished his speech, Commander Magdalena dismissed the rookies. They would all be sent back to their assigned carriers and receive the care and instruction of their original units.

"The battle came very close to killing some of our men." She told him. "I have to thank the Avatars for protecting our ejected cockpits against enemy fire. If you don't mind, would you have felt any remorse if we lost any lives?"

"No." Ves honestly replied. "I would have been happier instead. An actual disaster drives the point home a lot more effectively than a near miss."

Though the Sentinel Commander obviously didn't like his answer, she understood his rationale, as cold and ruthless as it sounded.

The sentiment was common in the Mech Corps, where incompetence wasn't tolerated. The Mech Corps was already weaker than the Mech Legion. The Brighters always had to fight harder than the Vesians in order to defend their state!

"How far do you intend to push us, sir?" She asked.

"I expect to come out of the Nyxian Gap with a solid core that will form the basis of my future mech army." Ves replied. "No matter how many flaws and impurities I need to hammer out, as long as the refined product is strong enough, I am prepared to pay almost any price!"

Chapter 2172 The Military Advisor

Major Quinlist Verle-Larkinson entered the clan patriarch's stateroom.

The luxurious but elegant compartment reflected the personality of its occupant. Ves only made a perfunctory effort in decorating it. The stateroom looked good enough to impress visitors, but lacked a personal touch. Aside from affixing the emblem of the Larkinson Clan on every side, the space did not compare to those owned by people born into wealth and power.

The former officer of the Mech Corps preferred it that way. Despite the many masks that his new superior wore in public, Major Verle knew quite well that Ves did not indulge in himself that much.

Though he had grown his business and clan to the point where he could build his own colony on an untouched planet, Ves had no ambition to build an empire so he could retire in luxury.

Ves was a hard worker. He constantly pursued new challenges and always sought to push his limits.

Back when Professor Velten still presided over the 6th Flagrant Vandals, she always told Verle that successful mech designers possessed two traits.

Ability and discipline.

Those who advanced to Journeymann almost always had the former, but the latter was a bit more rare. According to the professor, many Journeymen began to get complacent as their progress stagnated and their minds grew slower due to age.

A lot of Journeymen constantly had to resist the temptation to skip their work in order to spend their accumulated wealth.

Ves was not that kind of mech designer.

He happened to meet all of the important criteria that Professor Velten had mentioned. In fact, he even surpassed some of them. This was why Major Verle unhesitatingly encouraged every willing Vandal to join him in applying to work under this rising star.

So far, Verle did not regret his choice. Ves had been more than generous to the former servicemen, and the Vandals quickly integrated in the Larkinson Clan after they realized all of the benefits to joining a wealthy, powerful and independent organization.

Though Major Verle did possess a lot of concerns about the future, in the present he knew he would always have the support of his new clan patriarch.

Even though he only joined the Larkinson Clan in less than a year, Major Verle already became the effective military leader of the clan. Aside from the Swordmaidens, he had the right to issue any order to the Avatars, Sentinels and other forces.

The clan patriarch entrusted a lot of power and a lot of responsibility to someone who wasn't tied to the Larkinsons just half a year ago. This was rather odd, because Ves did not trust other people easily.

From his intelligence training, the major knew that the current incarnation of Ves still reflected the trauma he accumulated after the harrowing experiences of the Aeon Corona Mission. His cold, ruthless personality emerged as an extreme response to the lessons he learned.

Even though Verle and plenty of other people were somewhat aware that Ves was a damaged person, no one said anything.

If Major Verle had a choice, he would rather follow someone who was always on guard and fully aware of the cruelty of the galaxy. It was better to be overprepared than the opposite, and the substantial buildup of military power in the hands of the Larkinson Clan was a much better guarantee for survival than hollow dreams and empty hopes!

"Good morning, sir." He greeted as Ves looked up from his terminal.

"Meow."

"Hello to you too, Lucky." Verle smiled.

The tiger-striped mechanical cat was crunching on a piece of mineral that Ves had thrown at him. The cat eagerly bit at it, causing crumbs of exotic particles to fall down onto his owner's dark hair.

Ves took no notice to his cat's antics.

"Have a seat. Let's discuss the state of our task force."

When the major took his seat, he began to report the usual details. He mentioned the state of the ships, the state of the mechs, the overall mood and morale of the members of the task force and the preoccupations of the leaders presiding over the different elements.

"Commander Magdalena has taken the disappointing performance of her rookies to heart. She has intensified the training and drilling sessions of the Living Sentinels. Though a lot of complaints have emerged from their ships, we are seeing steady jumps in performance."

Ves smiled at that. "They have finally stopped being complacent. It was a good idea to give them a smack in the face."

"It's not just the Sentinels who have become more serious. The Avatars, Vandals and so on have also stopped being complacent. Seeing Davy's Ghosts fight so ferociously even after they lost their leaders has served as a wakeup call to many complacent Larkinson mech pilots who think that their excellent training, superior mechs and glows will allow them to run roughshod through the Nyxian Gap."

Pirates dominated the Gap for a good reason. Though many of them were trash, the more successful ones had the capital to pose a threat against the Larkinson Clan!

"Hmm.." Ves leaned his clean-shaven cheek against his fist. "If we encounter any other beatable pirate groups like Davy's Ghosts, don't be in a hurry to exterminate them. Each pirate encounter is another training opportunity. You know as well as I do that many of the new hires among the Avatars but especially the Sentinels still need to be bloodied."

"My thoughts exactly, sir. I have already told Commander Melkor and Commander Magdalena to draft their rotations. Everyone will get to have their turn against the pirates."

Not everyone who ventured in the Nyxian Gap would have the gall to treat vicious, cunning pirates as training dummies, but the Larkinsons still dared to do so as long as stronger enemies weren't in the vicinity.

The major also reported on the developments of their newest expert candidate.

"While he hasn't deployed into battle since his sudden promotion, Joshua Larkinson has become a much stronger mech pilot. His skills, which have long reached their limits, are rapidly improving. He is much more formidable in battle once he enters the fray with the Quint."

"What about his elite squad? Have we set that up yet?"

"We have just completed its formation. We gave Joshua the choice to set the name and overall focus of his elite squad, and he decided to call it the Bright Companions. I'm sure

it won't surprise you that their main mech model of choice is the Bright Warrior. In general, the Bright Companions will try to fulfill an assault role, which is a very welcome addition to our lineup."

"Bright Companions, huh?" Ves weighed the name. "It sounds a bit plain, but I can see why Joshua chose those words. It not only reflects his origin, but also his piloting focus. Joshua is the only mech pilot who understands the true nature of my mechs. I look forward to witnessing his performance in the future, and I hope that the mech pilots he takes under his wing will also learn a thing or two. We need more mech pilots like Joshua."

It wasn't unheard of to assign a number of like-minded mech pilots to expert candidates and expert pilots. They were not only powerful warriors, but excellent teachers. Putting regular mech pilots close to powerful figures was a good way to train future cadre!

"Has Joshua made any specific requests that I should be aware of?" Ves asked.

The major nodded. "Well, Joshua believes that the Bright Warrior model will soon outgrow him and his Companions. He hopes that you will spend some time on upgrading the Bright Warrior from a bridge mech to a fully-fledged second-class mech."

Ves frowned. "That is.. difficult at the moment. There are only so many major projects that our Design Department can handle at the same time. There are also even more high-priority mech designs on the horizon. Tell Joshua to be patient. Once our pipeline clears up, I'll revisit the Bright Warrior as well as my other older mech models."

"Understood. If I may say something, I have been tracking the training efforts of all of our mech pilots. A small proportion of our warriors are already qualified to pilot second-class mechs. In the next year, that proportion will quickly rise before tapering off a bit. The more rigid mech pilots will likely require a few more years to adjust to piloting higher-powered mechs, but by then the majority of our men will be able to make effective second-class mechs."

"What is it you are telling me, major?"

"Our clan has invested a lot of effort and resources in their training." The Major spoke. "It's a waste to keep them in third-class mechs for a couple of years. After our business in the Nyxian Gap is done, we should look to procuring commercial second-class mechs if you cannot quickly design the mechs by yourself. With the Larkinson Clan's current financial strength, it shouldn't be a problem to acquire a couple of thousand second-class mechs. They will pair very nicely with the second-class ships that we will soon acquire."

The suggestion caused Ves to look irritated. He wanted to provide his men with mechs that he personally designed, but the time constraints did not allow him to do so in a short amount of time.

He eventually sighed. "Look into this option. Coordinate with the Larkinsons we have left behind at Cinach to see if we can allocate enough money to replace our lesser mechs."

"Good choice, sir. Do you have any requirements?"

"Don't splurge too excessively. We'll just use the commercial second-class machines as stopgap solutions until I have designed more ideal mechs for our clan. The mechs only need to be strong enough to deter other second-class threats, no more."

They discussed the composition of their future mech roster and which mech models that the Larkinson Clan ought to prioritize.

The major brought up a final topic.

"There is something else that we should focus on, sir." He said. "We should try and look into pushing all of our mech pilots to become proficient into piloting mechs on land and in space."

"I don't necessarily disagree with that, but I heard that it's a bit difficult to accomplish that. We are already forcing all of our mech pilots to learn how to pilot second-class mechs. I don't want to burden them any further."

"The training can be conducted sequentially rather than in parallel. The highest priority is to upgrade our men to second-class mech pilots. Only after they have accomplished this can we focus on expanding their versatility. This is still doable, though we will have to make many compromises. It would be very helpful if we pair these versatile mech pilots with mechs that can operate in both atmospheric and vacuum conditions."

This would save a lot of space in the future. By fielding mechs and mech pilots that could operate effectively on land, in the air and in space, the clan would be able to make full use of all of its fighting forces regardless of the battle environment!

Though Ves looked swayed, he did not look very confident. "Versatility always comes at a price. All of this comes at the cost of specialization. It sounds nice to do as you say, but if each individual mech performs twenty percent worse in their non-ideal environments, then we will definitely suffer."

Major Verle shook his head. "I respectfully disagree. We can compensate for the reduction in individual battle strength by increasing the numbers. While I admit that abandoning specialization is not worth it for third-class mechs, I have studied how second-class forces are put together extensively, and this doctrine is very common among spacefaring organizations like ours. It's all about extracting the maximum amount of benefit from a limited number of mechs and mech pilots."

"..Very well." Ves acquiesced. "Make a plan and consult the commanders. If your plan is thorough enough, we can give it a try. On my part, I'll try and design suitable multi-environment mechs in the future."

"You won't regret, sir."

Chapter 2173 That's Illegal

Wreckage Paradise was littered with three objects.

First, the asteroids.

Though this specific part of the Nyxian Gap boasted a lower concentration of space rocks than elsewhere, they were still ubiquitous enough to force the ships of the Larkinsons to make frequent course adjustments.

The asteroids were not only safety hazards, but also posed as excellent ambush points.

Due to all of the junk floating in space, many sensors became impaired. This was especially so because a lot of asteroids contained at least a small amount of exotics, some of which generated some interference in the surrounding space.

When a lot of these interference fields overlapped with each other, it became a lot harder to detect something at longer ranges!

Pirates gladly took advantage of these conditions. They cleverly placed their sensors and scouts behind asteroids and constantly monitored the most commonly-traveled routes.

One day, the scouts deployed by the Flagrant Vandals detected another pirate group. The Larkinsons even managed to identify the group in question.

This time, they were lucky enough to encounter one of the bigger players. According to the Black Cats, the Rust Grinders possessed a peak strength of up to 600 mechs, and while their quality was inconsistent, each of them were piloted by competent, veteran pirates.

The pirate commander was a deserter and war criminal called Veron Upander. No one knew why he ran afoul of the Phantasm Republic and fled all the way to the Nyxian Gap. The fact of the matter was that Veron was not only strong, but also exercised good leadership compared to other pirate leaders.

One peculiar note about the Rust Grinders was that while they possessed an abundant amount of strength, they weren't known for being bloodthirsty.

Part of the reasons why the Rust Grinders managed to survive for so long was because they placed a lot of importance on scouting and never pushed their victims too much.

Rather than attacking, robbing and killing anyone they encountered, the Rust Grinders instead demanded tribute. As long as the Peacekeepers or any other force gave up a reasonable amount of valuables, the Rust Grinders always abided by their word and let their victims go on their way.

That said, anyone who thought they were weak were sorely mistaken. The Rust Grinders annihilated several rival pirate groups that thought they could take advantage of Commander Upander!

The Rust Grinders managed to survive for more than a decade, which was a testament to its longevity. Their penchant for extortion rather than outright murder caused them to form an accord with the Peacekeepers.

It was too bad the Larkinson Clan did not care about any hidden deals the Rust Grinders may have formed with the Peacekeepers or certain Sentinel noble houses.

Any pirate group that was weaker than Task Force Predator were automatically categorized as target practice!

The Larkinsons harbored little to no sympathy to the pirates. All of them functioned as cancers to society. Whether that cancer was benign or malignant, the Larkinson Clan's reaction was the same.

Annihilation!

During previous pirate encounters, the forces accompanying Task Force Predator each enjoyed their turn. The pirate gangs they encountered up until now were too small and weak to merit a serious response.

Most of the time, the mech pilots deployed into battle mostly consisted of rookies and those that could use the exercise.

This time was different.

First, the Avatars of Myth finally received their turn.

Second, the Rust Grinders were strong and numerous enough to merit a greater deployment. This time, the Avatars sortied into battle!

Soon enough, the surrounding space became filled with gleaming, gold-coated mechs. The Avatar mechs eagerly deployed from their carriers, hoping to be the lucky ones to confront the pirates.

The elite combat forces of the Larkinson Clan finally received an opportunity to showcase their strength!

Hardly any Avatar mech pilot wanted to skip this battle. Some even lamented that the Rust Grinders didn't appear to be strong enough to last for a long time.

The Avatars hungered for battle!

Only a couple of them remained reserved. Jannzi Larkinson stood at a ramp in the hangar bay of the Redfeather. She observed her Shieldbearers steadily launching their Aurora Titans into space.

Her boyfriend, who also happened to be the newest expert candidate of the Larkinson, kept her company for the moment.

"You don't seem eager to deploy into battle." Joshua spoke.

"There is hardly any need to attack the Rust Grinders." She responded. "They never demand tribute to those who are stronger than them. Instead, they resolutely make way. As far as I'm concerned, we're looking for trouble."

Ever since Joshua successfully advanced, he gained a lot more confidence in his relationship with Jannzi. He was a lot more willing to voice his own opinions!

"Pirates are pirates. As soon as these scum chose to enter the Nyxian Gap, they already deserve to be cleaned up. While we may not be troubled by the Rust Grinder in the beginning of our journey, who can tell if they will stay away when we are on our way out? If our fleet has suffered too many losses, we might turn into a juicy prize to them. It's better to get rid of them right away."

Jannzi did not look pleased at him. "Not everyone in the Nyxian Gap chose to become pirates. The pirates have coerced many captive ship crew to join their ranks."

"That's an unfortunate reality." Joshua admitted. "While I'm sympathetic to them, I won't hold back against any attackers. Perhaps we can rescue these unwilling captives after we have dismantled every threat."

That was a hollow promise. The Larkinsons hadn't exactly been merciful towards pirates so far. The Nyxian Gap didn't fall under any jurisdiction. Those who entered it did so at the risk of giving up the protection of every law.

No one cared about the innocents who lived in the Nyxian Gap. Everyone who resided in this region was a criminal as far as the public was concerned!

Some time passed before Jannzi and Joshua deployed last.

Their two gold-coated mechs seemed to shine like suns in a backdrop of stars.

The Shield of Samar piloted by Jannzi joined a squad of nearly-identical-looking Aurora Titans. The Shieldbearers wouldn't be playing a very big role in the upcoming battle due to their abysmal mobility. They merely served as a defensive reserve in case the Rust Grinders launched a counterattack.

Instead, everyone Avatar looked expectantly at the Quint. The masterwork Bright Warrior mech seemed to command everyone's attention as it approached a squad of regular Bright Warriors.

"Bright Companions, are you ready?!"

A roar sounded in response!

Every Bright Companion consisted of Larkinson mech pilots who exhibited the best performance with the versatile Bright Warriors.

Each of them were capable of piloting at least 2 out of the 4 configurations of the modular mech platform with great effectiveness. This versatility allowed them to bring the right configurations to the right battle.

Right now, the Quint and half of the Bright Warriors opted for a purely offensive approach. The Shining Warriors all came equipped with lances and enhanced, shock-absorbing armor plating.

The other half took up a fire support function. The Illuminating Warriors were armed with the same high-powered laser rifles they used against Davy's Ghosts.

There was no need to deploy any Solar Warriors. Everyone expected the Rust Grinders to get smashed, so there was hardly any need to deploy too many space knights.

The Avatars deployed 600 mechs in total, of which around 200 remained in reserve.

400 mechs in total received a very simple instruction from Commander Melkor.

"Smash the Rust Grinders into pieces as fast as possible!" He transmitted to every Avatar mech pilot. "Don't hold back. This is a demonstration to the clan patriarch and everyone else that we are the strongest mech force in the Larkinson Clan. Do us proud!"

Ten mech companies soared straight past the asteroids and into the zone occupied by a large pirate fleet.

The forward scouts of the Rust Grinders may have missed the approach of the sneaky Flagrant Vandal scout mechs, but the strong energy signatures of so many mechs flying closer couldn't be missed!

Even before the golden reflection of the Avatar mechs reached the optical sensors of the pirate scout mechs, the main pirate fleet already received enough warning!

"Damnit, who are these guys?!"

"I don't care if you're sleepy! Hop into your mech as fast as possible and fend off those pretty boys!"

The Rust Grinders could not possibly miss the underlying message behind the bold advance of the Avatars. Their battle-scarred carriers hastily deployed pirate mech after pirate mech.

Commander Veron Upander deployed in person as well. His powerful cannoneer emerged into space with a huge cannon mounted on its right shoulder.

Once the Avatar mechs came into visual range, the confidence of the Rust Grinders already sunk. Even the most ignorant pirate could tell that these mechs and the people piloting them were strong!

It was unfortunate that there was no way to run from the approaching aggressors. Without any forewarning from their scouts, it was too late for their ships to begin accelerating away!

Even as Commander Upander desperately hailed the incoming mechs in order to negotiate a deal, the imposing Avatar mech companies showed no sign of slowing down.

Each of the Avatar mech pilots had already received their orders. No one was allowed to talk to the pirates!

"ARRRGHH! So be it, then!" Upander cursed! "Do you think the Rust Grinders are that easy to bully? Let me show you what I've been relying on to survive all of these years!"

The pirate commander's mech flew back towards the broadside of his flagship and entered a strange bunker.

Multiple bunkers had been installed on the surface of the large vessel. Various cannon-wielding mechs had already moved into place.

Subsequently, something very astonishing happened.

Large connectors extended from the interior of every bunker. They each began to slot into a port built into the rear armor of every cannoneer mech.

A huge amount of power began to pour into the power systems of the mechs. Soon enough, the oversized cannons mounted onto the shoulders of the mechs began to fire an enormously powerful volley of thick laser beams!

When those lasers raked past the Avatars mechs, the Larkinsons all reacted with surprise!

Ves and some of the other assistants in the design lab gasped as they observed the half-dozen laser beams raining down on the advancing Avatar mech companies.

"Wait! That's illegal!"

Hardly anyone could believe at first that the pirates had actually violated one of the most important taboos of human civilization.

Yet the truth was right in front of them. The sensors precisely captured what went on at the pirate flagship.

"The power level of those laser beams exceeds that of third-class artillery mechs!" Someone shouted. "Unless we're being fired upon by second-class mechs, it's likely the Rust Grinders have illegally modified one of their starships!"

The laser beams already inflicted serious damage to some of the Avatar mechs that had the misfortune of eating those laser beams head-on. Owing to their premium construction, the mechs with thicker armor managed to remain functional, but the same could not be said for the lighter mechs!

"We've already suffered casualties! Three mechs have already been downed with at least twelve more suffering debilitating damage. It's not just the power of those laser beams that's a problem, but also their firing rate!"

Once the cannoneer mechs completely hooked up their systems to a starship, their offensive capabilities had reached an entirely different level!

Ves knew he had fallen into his own trap of sorts. He had underestimated the Nyxian pirates.

The Avatars soon mustered up a response. They shifted their formations so that the Bright Warriors took the lead.

Once those powerful laser beams rained on the Bright Warriors, their Breyer alloy resisted the attacks with hardly any sign of damage!

The losses rapidly subsided after that, but the attacks still struck a number of Avatar mechs that weren't entirely able to take cover behind the Bright Warriors.

"Take out those cannoner mechs as fast as possible, Joshua!" Commander Melkor ordered.

"With pleasure, sir!"

The Quint and a half-dozen lance-wielding Bright Warriors accelerated ahead of the main group and began to charge against the distant Rust Grinders!

Chapter 2174 Paper Walls

The surprising firepower unleashed by the Rust Grinders fully showcased why the Big Two imposed so many limitations on ship bunkers and artillery mechs.

With a little bit of jury-rigging and a dose of ingenuity, a crew of pirate technicians, engineers and perhaps a low-ranking mech designer or two were able to turn the flagship of the Rust Grinders into a warship!

Certainly, compared to affixing massive turrets and weapon mounts onto proper warships, mounting a ranged mech into a bunker didn't sound very impressive.

However, the crucial advantage of this method was that it was very simple! The pirates didn't need to enlist the services of a high-ranking mech designer or a CFA engineer.

They could simply cobble the systems together with low-tech means. Though it was a bit troublesome to hook up a ranged mech to the formidable power systems of a starships without anything overloading, once those problems had been dealt with, the ranged mechs effectively never ran out of power!

If the enormous heat generated from continuous weapon discharges was handled as well, there was almost no functional difference between a bunker mech and a warship turret!

Right now, the Rust Grinders had become so intimidated by the advancing force of Avatar mechs that Commander Upander decisively revealed his trump card.

His mech along with five other ship-mounted cannoner mechs fired at the hostile mechs without holding anything back!

Commander Upander personally selected the mech pilots with the best marksmanship scores to pilot the cannon mechs. Even though most pirate mech pilots earned their awful reputations, there were at least some gems in every pirate group.

Now, Upander and his hand-chosen elites managed to down thirteen Avatar mechs in a short amount of time.

Though only six high-powered laser beams raked the Avatars with every volley, the next volley followed very quickly!

Normally, mechs wielding laser weapons needed to control their firing rate. It was too easy to overheat their weapons and drain their energy cells if the mech pilots kept pressing their triggers.

No matter how fast they fired their cannons, their mechs never ran out of power!

No matter how much heat their weapon discharges generated, they were never at risk of overheating!

The power of a mech was limited by its physical constraints. If the cannoner mechs tried to attack the Avatars while floating in space, they would have been forced to cease fire minutes ago. Instead, their fortified cannon muzzles kept spitting out beam after beam of energy without any reduction in power!

That wasn't all. Once the Avatar mechs came close enough, the other ranged mechs of the Rust Grinders which had flown to the sides opened fire as well!

The pirates adopted a simple crossfire approach that allowed them to bombard their enemies from slightly different angles.

Every defensive mech that tried to guard against attacks in one direction was unable to block the crossfire from another direction!

For this reason, casualties continued to mount among the Larkinson mechs. A handful of cockpits had already ejected from the critically-damaged mechs.

Jannzi Larkinson and her Shieldbearers quickly left the reserved and advanced. Instead of futilely trying to catch up to the attack force, the Aurora Titans instead tried to cover for the escape pods as they quickly flew back to the main fleet.

Though the Avatars endured a continuous rain of fire, the ranged mechs among them did not remain silent.

More laser beams began to light up the surrounding space! The Bright Warriors configured for ranged combat precisely targeted and took out the pirate rifleman mechs.

At the same time, a couple of Avatars fired at the bunkers placed on the broadside of the flagship of the Rust Grinders.

Unfortunately, the bunkers held too well!

The pirates may not have access to the best materials and technology, but Commander Upander acquired or stole the toughest and most resilient materials and piled them all onto the broadside and the bunkers of his flagship!

It took far too long to chew through all of those layers!

Commander Melkor already understood what he needed to do. "Focus fire on their rifleman mechs! They're much easier to take out and removing them from the battle will considerably lighten our pressure."

"What about those illegal bunker mechs?"

"Let the Bright Companions take care of them! Joshua and his men are already on their way!"

A chevron-shaped formation of Bright Warriors had already advanced ahead of the main group. Owing to their lancer mech configurations, the Bright Warriors possessed substantially greater forward acceleration, which they utilized to build up a very formidable charge!

At some point, the Bright Warriors no longer accelerated any further. Even so, the mechs still coasted straight towards the Rust Grinders with a huge amount of momentum on a straight, ballistic trajectory.

"Don't speed up any further!" Joshua warned his men. "Our Bright Warriors are tough, but not invincible. Charging the side of a starship is different from charging a floating mech. The former is much more solid!"

What the Bright Warriors attempted to do was to charge straight into a solid wall! This was very dangerous and could easily crush their frames if their mech pilots weren't careful.

Even though Joshua risked flattening his mech, he only grew more and more excited. Lancer mechs existed to punch through hardy targets!

His fellow mech pilots possessed similar inclinations. They all intensified their bonds with their mechs as they began to embody the aggressive aspect of their machines.

The Rust Grinders did not let them approach with impunity.

Soon enough, Commander Upander recognized the danger. The bunker mechs soon began to shift their fire towards the charging Bright Warriors, achieving solid hits with every volley.

Joshua and his fellow Bright Companions did not bother to juke or perform any evasive maneuvers. They simply kept on charging straight ahead, confident that the armor of their mechs could hold against this degree of firepower!

The Rust Grinders observing the advancing lancer mechs increasingly grew more incredulous.

How could a bunch of mechs resist so much firepower?

Realization soon dawned upon them. "Those aren't third-class mechs... they're second-class mechs!"

"What the hell?! Are they Hexers?!"

"No! Those mechs all look male, so they're not Hexers."

The identities of the attackers didn't matter. All that mattered was that the rapidly-approaching hostile mechs couldn't be taken down so easily!

Commander Upander grew increasingly more panicked even if all of his shots landed on the lead mech.

"I don't believe a second-class mech can withstand this much firepower! Look! The frontal armor is already starting to melt!"

In truth, the extremely powerful energy beams did inflict some damage to the surface of the Bright Warriors. Though they managed to withstand the first volleys, all of the impacts rapidly heated up their surface.

If this pattern continued, then the Breyer alloy would soon be subjected to enough heat to melt Cassandra Breyer's escape pod!

Even so, Joshua and his fellow Bright Companions refused to abort their attack run. The armor of their mechs may not last forever, but their charge had already reached their final stage!

Due to all of the high-powered laser beams hitting the Bright Warriors, the machines all appeared to glow. Like shooting stars, the rapidly-advancing lancer mechs seemed to come down on the Rust Grinders like divine punishment.

After Commander Upander issued a few hasty commands, a large number of mechs began to form just in front of the bunkers. The pirate mechs almost strayed in the path of the constant volleys of powerful laser beams as they used their own mass as a shield against the incoming lancer mechs!

"Hahaha! It's no use!" Joshua laughed as the adrenaline fully rushed through his body!
"Accelerate a bit more! Don't let any obstacle slow us down!"

With a final speed-up, the seven Bright Warriors finally made contact with the Rust Grinders.

The knight mechs that cleverly angled their shields against the charging lancer mechs were instantly crushed aside!

Their thick tower shields formed no effective protection against the immense momentum of the Bright Warriors!

The shooting stars only minutely lost some speed as they crashed through the layer of mechs, which lasted no longer than the first pirate mechs.

A rapid succession of crashes took place within a blink of an eye as none of the lancer mechs hit anything solid enough to bleed their speed by a significant amount.

It was as if a human ran through a succession of paper walls. No matter how many sheets of papers blocked their path, they were simply too weak to hold back the power of a human body!

Right now, the shabby pirate mechs of the Rust Grinders played the role of paper walls. Even though they consisted of stronger materials, the disparity between their toughness and the toughness of the charging Bright Warriors was simply too great!

Commander Upander didn't even have the time to register this fact before the Bright Warriors finally collided against the bunkers!

A sharp lance and a formidable mech punched through all of the armor placed on top of the bunkers and instantly crushed the cannoner mechs sheltering inside.

The simultaneous impacts unleashed so much violence that the flagship of the Rust Grinders had been minutely displaced to the side!

The broadside of the vessel spat out several different rains of debris as the broken pieces of mechs and bunker plating flung in every direction!

As the dust and debris parted from the craters, everyone could see the damage the lancer mechs inflicted.

Only complete devastation remained of the bunkers! Hardly any cannoner mech was left intact. The lances not only punched straight through the solid frames of the illegally-modified machines, but also endured an even greater impact from the rest of the mech, causing them to suffer the same fate as the previous mechs that stood in the way of the Bright Warriors!

Horror began to dawn upon the rest of the Rust Grinders. Nothing was left of Commander Upander and his cannoneer mech!

The Quint, which inflicted thirty percent more impact damage than a regular Bright Warrior, had completely disintegrated its target!

The ship began to groan and spin in an uncontrollable manner.

Aside from demolishing the bunkers and the cannoneer mechs, a seventh Bright Warrior had charged the aft section of the flagship. Its lance managed to inflict crippling damage on the propulsion system.

Even though it wasn't really necessary to cripple mobility of such a large and sluggish vessel, the morale among the pirates sunk even further after seeing such a powerful display of might.

"Damnit! Don't get distracted! The rest of those golden boys are coming!"

A huge and messy battle ensued. Bright Warriors and other Avatar mechs eagerly entered the fray. After suffering several unnecessary casualties, the Avatars were in no mood to play with their food. They wanted to exact vengeance and wash away their shame in the most brutal manner possible!

Joshua and the rest of his Bright Companions did not sit idle after they completed their charge. They focused on attacking the starships of the Rust Grinders, making sure to cripple their mobility and force their power reactors to shut down.

After witnessing the devastating charge of the Quint and the Bright Warriors, the morale among the Rust Grinders had already sunk to a low point. They only fought back because they knew they wouldn't escape death.

This was the fate reserved for every pirate! When they no bothered to abide by any laws, they lost the right to be protected by them! Pirates were so universally hated by civilized space that hardly anyone bothered to bring them to court.

Death was the main form of punishment for piracy!

In the end, the Avatars vented all of their bloodthirst upon the hapless Rust Grinders.

Jannzi Larkinson, who had rejoined the reserves floating in the back, frowned minutely at the savage sight.

Though she understood that pirates did not deserve to earn her pity, she nonetheless expressed distaste at the brief, one-sided massacre.

Who were the barbarians in this battle?

Chapter 2175 Outstanding Bounties

The battle against the Rust Grinders shook many Larkinsons out of their complacency. After encountering a small succession of weak pirate gangs, their battle against a stronger pirate opponent taught them that not all of their opponents rolled over so easily!

The longer a pirate outfit lasted in the Nyxian Gap, the more they possessed the capital to survive. Through a process of survival of the fittest, those that were unable to fend aggression no longer existed!

The Rust Grinders apparently relied on a mix of diplomacy and hidden weapons to maintain their footing in Wreckage Paradise.

Encountering mechs mounted onto starships had been an incredible shock to Ves and the assistant mech designers on their ship. Never could they have imagined that humans willfully broke the rules that kept the warring in human space to a controllable level!

Over four centuries had passed since the end of one of the darkest chapters of human history. The rule that forbid star-faring vessels from mounting weapons had become an ingrained instinct to almost every human.

Unfortunately, pirates were some of the few people who possessed the guts to defy the Big Two! As humans who lived outside the law, they didn't care a damn about the prohibition against owning warships!

Perhaps the main reason why warships weren't more prevalent among pirates was because it took a lot of technical expertise to build and maintain the powerful weapons.

Another reason why they did not show up too much was because everyone who paraded taboo weapons received bounties on their heads!

The moment Ves heard that he could earn a bounty from defeating targets that violated the rules, he began to look at the battle against the Rust Grinders in a different way!

This was especially when he heard he could earn merits as long as he submitted proof to the MTA or CFA!

According to the article that Ves read up on, the exact merit award depended on many factors such as the strength of the violators, the harm they inflicted on society and the severity of their rule breaking.

Every case needed to be judged on an individual basis. This was because there had been plenty of organizations in the past who secretly armed some hapless pirates only to 'harvest' them later to earn some easy merits!

He briefly paused when he read that he needed to contact the MTA directly.

"Damn."

He did something that he would normally avoid at any cost.

He entered one of the isolated compartments of the Scarlet Rose and activated the Darkbreak module. On a whim, he first attempted to call Jovy Armalon, but the MTA mech designer's comm rejected every call.

"Oh well. I guess I'll have to call the standard MTA line then." He muttered.

Ves browsed the interface of the Darkbreak module and found an information line that handled this business. He tapped the right command and waited for the line to go through.

The Darkbreak module activated a shimmering physical projection.

Unfortunately, instead of encountering some sort of android or secretary, Ves instead came face to face with the projection of a very familiar senior dignitary.

"Master Willix!" Ves coughed. "I mean, ahem, uh, I must have called the wrong line."

The Master Mech Designer, who should normally be aloof and distant to tiny figures like Ves, gently shook her head.

"No. You called the correct line. Your call has been automatically rerouted to my address. I added a special instruction to the communication network of the MTA, you see. As long as I am available, I will be handling all of your direct requests and inquiries towards the MTA. To be honest, I am quite interested in what you will encounter in the Nyxian Gap. You should feel honored for receiving my personal attention."

Her gracious gesture made him feel sick. Didn't Master Willix have something better to do than directing her attention towards him? He was just a mech designer! The MTA oversaw countless mech designers, many of whom were much more interesting! What did he do to deserve this constant persecution?!

Of course, Ves did not dare to voice any of his thoughts. Instead, he maintained a brittle smile. "I am... grateful... that you favor me so, Master Willix, but I do not wish to take up your time with trivial matters. You can just redirect me to the normal information line so I won't take up your valuable time anymore."

Master Willix shook her head. "Let me be the judge of that. Let's hear your request first."

Seeing no other choice, Ves accepted the inevitable and briefly explained his encounter with the Rust Grinders. He even showed some initiative by transferring some select sensor data.

"I see." Master Willix dropped her polite smile. "This is indeed a matter that requires the MTA's attention. This is not the first time a Nyxian pirate has crossed this particular line, and it won't be the last time."

"So... I heard there are some merits to be earned by teaching these rulebreakers a lesson. Am I eligible to receive a bounty, ma'am?"

The woman paused as she studied all of the data. "I have just verified that the proof you provided is authentic. That's good. I would have stripped you of all of your accumulated merits if you have attempted to defraud us. I have seen too many mech designers assume they can take advantage of the MTA, and I hope that you will not follow in their footsteps."

A cold sweat ran through his back. He possessed a healthy fear of the MTA and experienced first-hand some of the amazing technology they had at their disposal. Ves would never dare to put his merits at risk!

"That said, the Rust Grinders are... rather inconsequential, all concerned. Their violations aren't too egregious either. Even if they managed to build an interface between the power system of their cannons and the power system of their ship, the output of their energy weapon is still within a manageable range. Your Bright Warrior models managed to fend off the laser beams while suffering minimal damage, after all. We cannot award you with too many merits for taking down such a minor foe. Regardless, you still managed to exact punishment on our behalf, so I will award you with 25,000 MTA merits for this service."

This was a rather considerable amount of merits to ordinary people. The Rust Grinders was a moderately powerful pirate group that fielded more than 600 mechs. Combined with the added firepower at their disposal, a regular Peacekeeper outfit would have suffered substantial losses to defeat the pirates!

That said, someone like Ves was long used to bigger awards. The creation of two certified masterwork mechs in the form of the Quint and the Little Angel already yielded 2 million MTA merits in total!

Still, any little bit helped. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Keep up the good work." She said. "As an orthodox mech designer who falls under our jurisdiction, you are obligated to uphold our rules no matter where you go. The vibrant society that we have managed to build in this age cannot be taken for granted. Though many voices in the galaxy wish to tear the prohibition against warships down, it is for everyone's own good that they are deprived of such toys."

"I understand." Ves nodded. "As a mech designer, I do not wish to see the return of warships in human society either."

Now that he had gotten what he wanted, he was in no mood to chat with Master Willix any further.

Just before he ended the call, Master Willix raised her palm.

"Before you go, let me inform you of additional opportunities. There are multiple pirate groups in the Nyxian Gap who have committed much worse violations than the Rust Grinders. I will send you an up-to-date list of some of the groups that we have identified."

The Darkbreak module instantly received a modest data dump. Ves took a brief glance at its contents before deciding to hand it over to Calabast.

"If these groups are stronger than the Rust Grinders, then I can't promise you that my forces will confront them, ma'am." Ves cautiously said.

"Bounties are opportunities, not obligations. Any pirate that has earned a bounty will succumb sooner or later. If not by enterprising individuals such as you, then their rivals might make a move instead."

Ves briefly widened his eyes. What a devious measure! By pitting pirates against each other, the MTA made sure that every pirate group that fielded warships would have to think twice!

"If you are particularly desperate for merits and lucky enough to encounter the Allidus Alliance, consider sabotaging or removing Lord Hivex's prized warship."

The Master raised her finger, causing a very formidable looking ship to emerge into view.

Ves could immediately tell she was armed. Her hull wasn't studded with bunkers. Instead, various mech-sized gun turrets lined the surface. Each of them were capable of firing a torrent of laser beams and clouds that could quickly chew up a couple of approaching mech companies!

And these were just the secondary weapons.

The hull of the haphazard-looking ship also boasted three huge triple-barreled gun turrets. Their caliber was so formidable that half a mech could fit through the muzzle!

With such a formidable armament, the pirate warship could probably take down any starship at a huge distance with just a single volley!

Ves shuddered at the sight of all of the firepower of this vessel. Not even the Penitent Sisters would be able to survive against this might!

"The Gravada Knarlax is a pirate-built heavy cruiser that the Allidus Alliance built in secret over two decades ago." Master Willix explained. "The pirates invested a lot of years and resources in her construction. Once built, she immediately carved out a place in the core regions. Over the years, the Knarlax not only enabled the Allidus Alliance to hold on to their hotly-contested territories, but also elevate Lord Hivex into a powerful pirate lord. Taking him down will net you 1,500,000 merits, while destroying the Gravada Knarlax will earn you 4,500,000 merits."

That was 6,000,000 MTA merits in total!

Though Ves briefly drooled when he heard the astonishing rewards, he quickly sobered himself up. There was no way he could earn those merits. The higher the merit award, the greater the difficulty! The MTA never engaged in charity.

If the Allidus Alliance built the Gravada Knarlax over two decades ago and still managed to hold on to their heavy cruiser, then that meant the pirates likely defeated a lot of challengers already!

Ves firmly put the Gravada Knarlax out of his mind. It was just like some of the many outstanding missions issued by the Rim Guardians. No matter how many merits they promised, he would only be committing suicide if he took them seriously!

"The strength of my forces does not allow me to pursue these bounties." He plainly said. "I think this matter is best left to more qualified people."

"As you wish. At the very least, you should go over the list I sent. There are many lesser groups that are not as formidable as the Allidus Alliance. Good luck, Mr. Larkinson."

The call finally ended. Ves did not do anything until he exited the isolated chamber.

"Goddammit!"

He thought he could escape the clutches of Master Willix and the MTA once he entered the Nyxian Gap. It turned out that he was too naive. He was certain that this persistent Master Mech Designer targeted him for some reason.

No matter how badly she wanted to steal his design philosophy, Ves would never give in no matter how helpful she seemed!

He did not believe in charity! Everything had a price, and the MTA just happened to be the biggest profiteer in the galaxy!

"I think I will have to leave this star sector in order to get rid of her!" Ves concluded. "In fact, it's better if I leave the Milky Way while I'm at it. There's no way she'll follow me all the way to the Red Ocean!"

Chapter 2176 Loot Box

Once Ves confirmed that he received 25,000 MTA merits, he did not order his forces to depart from the battle site immediately.

Instead, he instructed Major Verle to board the flagship of the Rust Grinders and sweep her from top to bottom. With her propulsion system down, there was nowhere for the vessel to go. The cowardly crew had also surrendered long ago when it became clear the pirate mechs stood no chance against the might of the Avatars of Myth.

A couple of shuttles entered the hangar bay of the damaged pirate ship. Ves, Lucky, some bodyguards and twenty-six assistant mech designers emerged from the vehicles.

Even though the air was still breathable inside the ship, everyone who entered the ship wore hazard suits out of an abundance of caution. There was no telling whether the life support systems might introduce some nasty toxin in the air or if some of the compartments suddenly opened up to vacuum.

The young mech designers each looked fascinated by what they saw. A handful of heavily-damaged mechs rested on the deck. Various tools and other gear the pirates used to service the mechs were strewn all around.

If not for the lack of cleanliness and the random piles of detritus shoved into corners, the hangar bay of the pirate vessel looked no different from that of another ship!

Ves smiled as he saw their fascinated expressions. Aside from Ketis, this was their first time stepping aboard a bona-fide pirate vessel. They had heard many lurid stories about them that the experience of entering one of them was very remarkable.

Due to her extensive expertise, Ves assigned Ketis as their tour guide today.

"As you can see, pirates normally aren't very thorough in their work." She told them. "The Rust Grinders are better than most because I don't see any stains on the deck that suggests that some of the pirates do their bathroom business on the spot."

Disgusted faces appeared on Catherine Evenson and other assistants.

"Do pirates really do that?!"

Ketis smirked. "You'd be surprised. All sorts of desperate people are forced to become pirates. Many of them aren't quite right in the head."

They toured the hangar bay a bit before entering the interior of the pirate ship. Numerous Larkinson clansmen clad in vacsuits, hazard suits and combat armor strode through the corridors as they continued to sweep the vessel.

Ketis explained why that was necessary. "Pirate ships like this one tend to be riddled with traps. Attacking other pirates in order to hijack their stuff is very common. There is no rule prohibiting pirates from targeting their own kind. In order to deter rivals from attacking them, the pirates will often try to make it as hard as possible to profit from their defeat. From wiping out the data banks to adding a hidden trigger that sets off a huge bomb, pirates employ many ways to get the last laugh!"

Many of the assistants suddenly looked alarmed, which amused both Ves and Ketis. It was funny to witness their realization that they had essentially entered a trap-filled ship!

"You don't have to be concerned about your safety." Ves attempted to soothe their nerves. "Hours before we stepped aboard this ship, the Black Cats, Flagrant Vandals and Battle Criers have already taken control of her and neutralized all of the threats."

"Could they have missed something?"

"Likely not. I'm especially confident in the Black Cats. Otherwise, I wouldn't have stepped aboard this ship in the first place. The power reactors of this pirate ship are fully shut down and under guard. In truth, my men have temporarily brought aboard some temporary reactors in order to supply minimal power to the vessel. Nothing will blow up while we are here."

If that wasn't enough, then Lucky should be sufficient enough to detect anything that Calabast's subordinates had missed. Ves turned towards his cat with an expectant gaze.

"Meow?"

"You know what to do."

"Meow meow."

"Yes, you can take a bite out of anything good you find, but make sure to leave some for me! Keep an eye out for any hidden supply caches."

"Meow!"

His cat quickly zipped down the corridor in search for juicy exotics and other treasure!

This wasn't the first time the task force boarded pirate ships in order to look for booty. It was just that the Larkinson Clan's previous opponents were too small and weak to carry anything valuable.

According to the initial sweeps conducted earlier, this time was different. The Rust Grinders truly carried some valuable spoils that they had accumulated through accepting continuous tribute.

Ves couldn't help but feel a little excited about it. Perhaps pirates were truly onto something. Robbing others could be very lucrative sometimes!

"Pirate ships are like loot boxes. Once you obtain them, you can't help but get addicted to opening them up in order to see what goodies they contain!"

They spent some time touring the various decks and compartments of the pirate vessel. Though the boarding parties had already taken care of the crew beforehand, the blood stains and marks denoting weapon fire still provided sufficient proof that the takeover had been anything but peaceful.

Some of the assistants looked queasy at the various sights. Hardly any of them looked like they enjoyed this tour. They were too used to living in civilization to imagine that humans could live this way.

When they entered a compartment that held the data banks of the ship, Calabast calmly supervised a team of hackers as they disarmed all of the security precautions that prevented them from accessing the data.

"How is it going?" Ves asked.

"We have already decrypted numerous data banks." She responded. "Though much of it is filled with junk, we have gathered a wealth of intelligence, though much of it still needs to be processed. It will be worth it, though. No matter how much intelligence we've gathered in the Sentinel Kingdom, nothing beats obtaining first-hand and second-hand information."

"Have you captured some important pirate officers alive?"

"My men are already in the process of interrogating a number of Rust Grinder officers. While it is unfortunate that the Quint violently tore Commander Veron Upander to pieces, we at least managed to secure Elmer Nodan, the captain of this ship. We're trying to extract everything he knows about the local pirate community. Would you like to take a look?"

Ves briefly glanced at his assistants, who looked as if they wanted to return the Scarlet Rose as fast as possible!

"Sure."

The entire group left the data compartment and moved to a compartment that the Black Cats used as one of their interrogation chambers.

Despite what his imagination had conjured up, the Black Cats did not beat up Captain Nodan or cut open his body.

Calabast laughed. "Did you think we would be so crass as to torture our captive? There are more effective ways to extract information out of the good captain."

A pair of trained female interrogators leaned on the pudgy captain shoulders as he sat strapped to his chair. The black-clad females whispered sensually in the man's ears.

The captain giggled as his unfocused eyes tried their best to look at the women pressing on his side.

"Hehehe.. I can already tell you that the Gose Boys are no longer in charge of Yvis Station. From what my contacts have told me, a new group called the Inster Brotherhood have already taken it over. The Gose Boys managed to flee with at least half of their ships intact, though. Be careful if you travel near their fallback point. They are grabbing every pirate that they can lay their hands upon in order to bolster their numbers for a revenge attack."

Ves blinked at the sight. He and the rest of the mech designers found the interrogation to be a bit befuddling.

Compared to their reactions, Calabast looked fully at ease.

"There are many drugs that can make someone talk, especially given the funding you have provided to my department. As long as they don't carry any anti-interrogation augmentations, it is quite trivial to induce them in a state that makes them very willing to reveal information on their own accord."

Though Ves already understood that, he looked askance at the two Black Cats who were in the process of toying with the drugged pirate captain.

"Is it truly necessary to have those.. ladies.. by the captive's side?"

Calabast smirked. "Not strictly, no, but it does make it easier to extract valuable and pertinent intelligence from men. This is one of the most effective interrogation methods employed by Hexers, and I see no reason to fix what isn't broken."

"..Okay. I'll let you get to it, then."

Ves soon guided his assistants away. He led them through other sections of the ship. They took a peek at the engineering bay, where they discovered that the pirate ship didn't actually possess an FTL drive!

An engineer from the Flagrant Vandals explained the reasoning behind the conspicuous absence. "FTL drives are expensive, complicated and difficult to maintain. They also

don't work at all in the Nyxian Gap. If a pirate outfit doesn't want to leave, then they don't have to mount any FTL drives onto their vessels."

A ship without an FTL drive demanded a lot less engineering and technical expertise to operate, so their existence eased the difficulties of many pirate groups. The only downside was that the ship couldn't be brought into civilized space.

The tour group eventually moved on and entered the cargo bay, where a number of clansmen were cataloging the valuable goods they found up until this point.

"The total value of the goods in the cargo hold aren't particularly impressive. Their estimated market value is just 35 million hex credits."

That must be a considerable fortune for the Rust Grinders, but to Ves that wasn't enough to produce a single Blessed Squire!

"What else is there?" He asked the quartermaster.

"We found greater spoils when we ransacked the personal quarters of Commander Upander and Captain Nodan. Both of them have hoarded some remarkable items.

The quartermaster guided Ves towards a table which displayed various jewels, cards, data chips, weapons and other notable goods.

He picked up a ring that looked like a laurel wreath. A shiny green jewel topped the ornament.

"That's a fallen house's noble signet ring. If we hand it over to the right parties, we can earn a modest reward."

Ves picked up a data chip next.

"The data chip contains the encryption key to an anonymous bank account. Commander Upander squirrelled away 134 million hex credits over the years."

After that, Ves focused on a case that contained a gnarly rock.

As soon as he looked at it, he began to sense something odd about it. The moment he tried to poke it with his spiritual senses, he suddenly felt as if he encountered a wall.

Ves immediately became interested.

"Ah, that is one of Captain Nodan's possessions. The man evidently placed it close to his bed for some reason."

The more Ves inspected the rock, the more astonished he became.

Wasn't this an ultra-rare B-stone? The only material that Ves had discovered so far that could block spiritual energy?

He hit the jackpot this time!

After years of possessing just a single lockbox made out of B-stone, Ves finally obtained another sample!

Anything that could block spiritual energy was valuable! Though the sample he obtained wasn't enough to build a protective suit that could shield his entire body, at least he came one step closer to fulfilling this personal goal!

"Hahahaha!" He erupted in laughter. "This is truly a great find! This exotic is wasted on the Rust Grinders!"

The only spiritually-reactive exotics that Ves could reliably obtain were P-stones. He never expected to encounter a long-sought B-stone out of the blue! It would have been even better if he stumbled upon an F-stone as well, but he had no complaints.

"I see! Entering the Nyxian Gap is the best way to obtain more rocks like these! The closer to the source, the greater the likelihood of obtaining what I want!"

Chapter 2177 Chalice Crown

Task Force Predator eventually moved on after collecting the spoils. The Larkinsons didn't bother to bring any of the bulk goods, but everyone was already satisfied with the detailed intelligence and portable valuables they gained.

Ves made sure that the Larkinson Clan allocated a generous bonus to the Avatars of Myth. Everyone who took to the field and fought deserved to be compensated for their efforts.

The battle against the Rust Grinders wouldn't be the last time the task force fought against pirates. The fleet hadn't even left Wreckage Paradise yet. There were much more powerful pirate groups calling the shots at Maynard Fields!

So far, the casualties his forces suffered only consisted of a handful of broken and damaged mechs. The mech technicians assisted by low-ranking mech designers were already at work trying to restore them to working condition.

However, Ves knew that in the future that real casualties were unavoidable. Once their opponents grew strong enough, the Larkinson Clan had to take into account that they might start losing mech pilots!

Regardless if they were adopted or trueblood, every Larkinson mech pilot was precious. Ves did not wish to lose any of them, but it was unrealistic to think he could conclude his adventure in the Nyxian Gap without suffering some serious losses.

From a transactional perspective, Ves already accepted the fact that he might have to trade the lives of hundreds of Larkinsons in order to chase after opportunities and allow his clan to accumulate some battle experience.

Was this trade off worth it? That was difficult to say. How many losses would the Larkinsons have to suffer before it wasn't worth it anymore? How many lives was Ves willing to sacrifice to obtain 1,000,000 MTA merits?

The entire premise of setting a market price in blood for merits was distasteful in the extreme. Ves momentarily struggled with his conscience before he simply shrugged his shoulders and threw the problem outside of his mind.

"Ah, hell. Whatever. I'll just meander along and see how I'll fare!"

Perhaps his clan might be able to avoid serious losses in the next couple of months. Ves had to remind himself that he was fully in charge of this excursion. He was responsible for every aspect of the task force, and he was also its ultimate decision maker.

This meant that Ves was fully capable of managing his own risk exposure!

The importance of this luxury couldn't be understated. Unlike before when Ves had to abide by the will of other people, this time he could decide to pull back whenever he felt he was in danger.

Once Ves carefully stashed his newly-obtained B-stone in the Scarlet Rose's vault, he paid a visit of Calabast's office.

The spymaster currently poured over the valuable intelligence her subordinates obtained from the Rust Grinders.

"Hey, kid. We are still analyzing and verifying all of the information we have gathered."

"I won't be here for long." Ves replied. "I'd like to know if you have obtained a greater understanding of the distribution of pirate forces in Wreckage Paradise."

"Ah, we have already obtained a lot of up-to-date clues as well as a number of interesting navigational charts. I believe they are all reliable enough to allow us to chart a course that will minimize the frequency of pirate encounters. If we are lucky enough, we might be able to reach Maynard Fields without engaging in any hostilities."

"No."

"Pardon, kid?"

"I don't want to avoid the pirates along the way. I want to confront as many of them as possible as long as they aren't too strong!"

Calabast frowned and stopped her work. "Are you crazy?"

"Look, we already obtained some valuables and gathered a lot of valuable intelligence from the Rust Grinders. I bet they're not the outfit who has managed to obtain a B-stone. Do you remember my request to look out for more B-stones and F-stones? I think this is the best opportunity to obtain these rare exotics! Besides, don't you want to corroborate all of the intel you have gathered so far?"

"I do, but that does not mean I am in favor of engaging in needless battles. The pirates that are more likely to possess what we want are never easily taken down. The Rust Grinders already surprised us with a number of ship-mounted cannoner mechs. Who can tell if the next batch of pirates won't resort to something worse? This isn't civilized space, Ves! Anything goes in these parts, and that includes employing nuclear weapons, bioweapons and so on! The Nyxian Gap is notorious for a good reason!"

The possible threats she mentioned sobered Ves up a little. He acknowledged her point, though the prevalence of weapons of mass destruction in the Nyxian Gap was not alarmingly high.

No matter what, the bounties issued by the Big Two formed a serious deterrent to anyone who crossed this line, even if they were technically beyond the jurisdiction of any authority!

The two argued a bit before Ves had his way. Calabast might hold one of his most sensitive secrets, but the task force abided by whims!

"Very well." The former Hexer sighed and ran her fingers through her luscious hair. "I will work with the navigators to chart a new course. I think we can pass through the territories of at least half-a-dozen established pirate groups along the way. Is that enough to satisfy your greed? Mind you, every battle will delay our progress by at least half a day, but often more. If we suffer too many delays, we might not be able to return to Cinach in time to attend your wedding!"

Ves dismissively waved away her concern. "It's okay. We'll just have to do our business at Maynard Fields faster, then. Regardless of how much progress we have made, we'll drop everything as long as our time is up. That, I promise."

"I'll hold you to that, Ves." She replied, though she looked very skeptical at him. "I don't need to tell you what Gloriana will do to you if you are late."

Ves shuddered. "I know. You don't need to remind me. I'll definitely return in time!"

"Good. There is one positive development that might help us shorten our stay in the inner periphery. After digging through some of Commander Upander's private files, I managed to find a reference to someone who might allow us to get in touch with Solok Veyra."

Ah. Ves almost forgot about the primary goal he wanted to achieve for this excursion. Though he could earn even more credits if he assassinated Pirate Lord Hivex and destroyed the Gravada Knarlax, there was no way that Task Force Predator could even come close of the heavy cruiser!

The Allidus Alliance mainly resided in the core regions, which was deeper than Ves was willing to travel. It was best for him to focus on achievable goals and settle for rescuing a kidnapped MTA mech designer.

"Who is this person who can possibly get us in touch with our target?"

"He's called 'the Flutist'. No other name. Don't ask me why he's called this way. The Flutist is a rather notable merchant and information broker who has currently set up shop at a pirate base called Frostbite Fortress."

"It must be pretty chilly there."

Calabast nodded. "Frostbite Fortress is built on a moon-sized asteroid in Maynard Fields. While the Nyxian Gap is already very cold due to the lack of active stars, Chalice Crown is even colder. Every vehicle that approached the planetoid will have to be especially resistant against ultra-low temperatures."

"Doesn't that make it impossible for ordinary pirates to approach the fortress?" Ves frowned.

"That is exactly one of the reasons why it is so defensible. Ordinary mechs simply aren't resistant enough to the unnaturally penetrating chill that Chalice Crown exudes. The exotic deposits that are buried deep in the planetoid is responsible for fending off many abortive attacks."

"How does anyone even get there in the first place? If the Flutist is conducting business there, then there has to be at least some flow of traffic."

"The Children of the Chill, who are in charge of Frostbite Fortress, have built a fleet of special-purpose shuttles and transports that can resist the extreme cold. Any transportation to and from the pirate base depends on their vessels. There is no other choice."

The entire arrangement sounded a bit convoluted, but very secure. With the Children of the Chill occupying a base built on a planet that could freeze any normal mech, Ves believed that hardly any other rival would bother with attacking Frostbite Fortress.

The cost was far too great!

"How strong are the defenses of Frostbite Fortress?"

"Don't think about storming it from the outside." Calabast shook her head. "The Children of the Chill are one of the major factions in Maynard Fields. They are mining a very substantial amount of Kavenit every day, which they mostly spend on expanding their forces and increasing the defenses of their base. Let me just say that even the Penitent Sisters might not succeed subjugating Frostbite Fortress!"

That sounded very serious. With an amazing defensive advantage and thousands of mechs at their disposal, Ves did not dare to engage in hostilities against the Children of the Chill.

Some pirates were simply too strong for him to challenge!

"So how can we obtain any clues about Solok Reyva from the Flutist, then?"

Calabast told him her plan. "We will have to infiltrate Frostbite Fortress by passing ourselves off as pirates. By 'we', I mean our subordinates. Neither you or I are obliged to put our lives on the line. I have plenty of trained personnel who can obtain what we need from the Flutist. This is the privilege of being in charge."

He fully agreed with her sentiment, even if a part of him strongly wanted to don a pirate disguise and step foot inside Frostbite Fortress! This was the first time he had ever heard of such a unique and defensive pirate base.

Sadly, even if Ves decided to enter the Nyxian Gap, he did so as the man in charge instead of a footsoldier who did all of the heavy lifting.

"I will defer to your judgement." He leaned his head towards his strategic partner. "All I want is to catch up to Solok Reyva in time to rescue him from the Krella Alliance and return to civilized space. How you go about it is up to you, though I hope you will at least keep some people in the loop."

"I will do my best, but we won't share too much with the other Larkinsons."

Once they finished this discussion, Ves asked one more personal question before he left.

"Now that you are part of the Larkinson Clan for a time, how do you feel about what I have started?"

The woman did not answer immediately. She leaned back in her chair and took her time to compose her answer.

"I'm satisfied. I'm also worried."

"Could you tell me anything more?"

"I am very appreciative of the values that define the Larkinsons. Even if I myself don't abide by them, it is good to be in the company of people who are more straightforward. As for my worries, I have already shared them with you. Your recent stunts have attracted so much attention that I don't need to perform any investigation to determine that there is a target on your back. I'm very fearful that you will get into an unnecessary conflict in the Nyxian Gap."

"Most pirates have better things to do, I think. We aren't weak at all, and that is our strongest guarantee of safety."

"Being well-informed is also essential." Calabast turned back to her terminal. "I will continue to analyze the data and send my report to you by tomorrow."

"Sounds good. Oh, before I forget, did you look into why Captain Nodan placed the case that held the B-stone on his bedside table?"

"Apparently, the B-stone as you call it helps him sleep easier at night. If you haven't noticed, the Nyxian Gap exerts a faint but fairly disturbing pressure on our minds. Captain Nodan found out that the rock he has obtained is able to shield his mind from these disturbances, allowing him to sleep in complete comfort."

"That's it?"

To think that a pirate captain obtained an extremely rare and valuable B-stone, only to use it as a sleeping aid sounded ridiculous to Ves!

These pirates didn't know what treasure they possessed. They deserved to be robbed!

Chapter 2178 Huge Vortex

Ves grew curious about Captain Nodan's usage of the B-stone as a sleeping aid.

He decided to try it out himself.

Surprisingly, just placing the B-stone in the vicinity of his bed while he slumbered truly increased the quality of his rest!

When Ves woke up the next day, he shoved Lucky's body from his face and turned his head towards the case holding the B-stone on the bedside table.

If he looked at it with his normal eyes, he didn't see anything special. The rock was completely inert.

It was only until he observed with his spiritual senses that he detected a subtle change.

Ever since Task Force Predator entered the Nyxian Gap, Ves felt as if he entered a huge interference field.

The difference wasn't immediately apparent at the outermost edge of the region, but as time passed by, the disturbance in the surrounding space gradually grew stronger.

This was rather worrisome to Ves, though everyone else just thought it was another unique quirk of the Nyxian Gap. The Nyxian pirates and everyone who entered this region had already taken it for granted. Aside from making people restless and not entirely at ease, the widespread interference field didn't seem to do any other harm.

Ves felt there was more to this field than what everyone else thought. The Nyxian Gap held too many mysteries, chiefly why such a weird place popped up in the first place. Reality did not entirely work normally here, and the endless amount of asteroids floating around was just scratching the surface!

"Hmm. Everything seems to point to the center of the Nyxian Gap. It's the origin of everything. If I want to obtain answers, I'll have to travel deeper."

The periphery was the least-affected region of space. Wreckage Paradise only offered visitors a preview of what was in store.

If what he suspected was true and the strange spiritual interference field grew stronger at Maynard Fields, then the demand of an object that could dampen or restrain the disturbance would grow stronger!

"If the pirates know that B-stones can make them feel at peace, then they will definitely hoard them if they manage to get their hands on them!" Ves realized with a gleam.

That said, Ves highly suspected that B-stones were so rare that not every pirate leader had the privilege of owning them. He would have to raid a lot of pirate fleets in order to obtain the loot he desired.

The problem was that the smaller pirate gangs shouldn't have the capital to possess something so rare, while the stronger pirate groups and alliances would definitely bleed his forces!

For now, attacking every pirate force in Wreckage Paradise shouldn't be a problem, but Maynard Fields was a different story.

Not only were the pirates who managed to establish a foundation in the inner periphery rather strong, they also had at least some friends. The Larkinson Clan could easily attract the hatred of dozens of pirate groups if his fleet recklessly offended everyone within reach.

Calabast and Major Verle already warned him that they should change their approach once they exited Wreckage Paradise. Though Ves was loathe to do so, he did not wish to put his clan under excessive risk.

Earning merits came first. Obtaining B-stones was just an unexpected bonus. Ves should firmly keep his priorities straight.

He freshened himself up and prepared himself for another of work. When he prepared a bowl of exotics which he appropriated from the Rust Grinder flagship for Lucky, he began to partake in his own breakfast.

He felt a bit lonely despite the presence of Nitaa, who wasn't all that talkative in the first place.

"I miss Benny."

His executive assistant stayed behind at Cinach. Though Ves felt tempted to take Gavin along, there was no great need for his presence.

With the Doom Guard already on sale for a time and no new product releases on the horizon, the LMC's growth had smoothed out. The regular reports that Ves received sufficiently kept him in the loop. There was no need for him to be appraised of the state of his mech company in person when he should direct most of his attention to his dangerous excursion.

"That reminds me, some of my mechs are apparently acting wonky."

Once he finished his breakfast, he took Lucky and boarded a shuttle that brought him over to a light carrier owned by the Living Sentinels.

Since the fleet did not travel through FTL, there was nothing stopping him from visiting the other ships of Task Force Predator.

Once he stepped into the hangar bay of the light carrier, he greeted the captain of the ship before immediately ignoring the fellow.

Instead, Ves carefully observed the handful of LMC mechs that had been put on standby.

When Ves observed them with his spiritual senses, he found to his puzzlement that their spiritual nature differed from his expectation.

Though the differences were subtle, he felt as if all of the glows of the Aurora Titans and Desolate Soldiers had undergone some minor amplification.

They grew stronger. The difference was minor, but as somehow who created them in the first place, the fact that every LMC mech received some sort of minor boost regardless of their individual differences was very odd!

As Ves quietly observed the mechs some more, he frowned deeper.

The mechs were spiritually active. Both their spiritual foundations and their design spirits were rooted in a different realm.

Now, it seems as if they were both being affected by some sort of omnipresent external influence.

It did not take long for Ves to tie this effect to the weird spiritual interference field that encompassed the entire Gap!

If this was true, then the glows of his mechs might grow even further!

He made a note in his implant to keep track of the fluctuations in strength of his glows.

Once he completed his inspection, he boarded his shuttle and returned to the Scarlet Rose.

Though he was supposed to head to the conference and evaluate the mech design proposals that the LMC's assistants had come up with, Ves was distracted by the observations he made.

Everything he had learned today suggested that spirituality and spiritual energy behaved in a different fashion inside the Nyxian Gap.

Though the changes were mild so far, what if other anomalies emerged when his fleet traveled deeper into the Nyxian Gap?

Ves did not believe that the changes were limited to a gradual increase in spiritual strength! His intuition strongly hinted that there must be something else at work!

On a hunch, Ves began to concentrate his mind and did something he hadn't done for a while.

He cast a projection of his mind from the material realm and entered the imaginary realm.

Once he did so, corrosive winds immediately battered his projection! Ves was surprised at the ferocity of the wind, and immediately pumped more spiritual energy in order to maintain his projection's integrity!

"Strong!"

The corrosive spiritual energy blew stronger in this region of the imaginary realm! It was as if the distortion of the material dimensions also affected the higher dimensions!

As Ves adapted to the stronger winds, he cautiously explored his surroundings. He soon noticed another peculiarity.

In normal places such as Cloudy Curtain, Kesseling VIII and Cinach VI, the corrosive winds that blew through the imaginary realm pretty much followed random trajectories.

Just like normal wind, it could blow in every direction at any location. Though there were likely larger patterns directing the winds to be biased in a certain direction, they weren't very apparent to Ves unless he performed a systematic study.

It was different inside the Nyxian Gap.

The winds did not blow in random directions.

Instead, the wind distinctly traveled in a single, uniform direction. It was as if someone poked a hole in the hull of a starship, causing all of the air in the breached compartment to press through the cavity!

Ves became unsettled as he equated the conditions in the imaginary realm to his analogy. He felt even more disturbed once he vaguely ascertained that the so-called hole that sucked up all of the corrosive winds was very likely situated in the center of the Nyxian Gap!

When he attempted to gain a broader impression of the corrosive winds, he faintly noticed that they were slightly curved over longer distances.

The pattern he constructed and extrapolated in his mind reminded him of a vortex. The huge, circular vortex seemed to attract loose spiritual energy from an incredibly huge region space!

It was not hard to tie this huge phenomenon to the abnormal existence of the Nyxian Gap. Ves felt as if he had just been exposed to a very profound secret.

This pirate-infested region became even more unfathomable in his eyes. The spiritual activity taking place in the imaginary realm was not a trivial issue at all. Not only did it cause his mechs to behave differently, Ves also suspected that his own spiritual powers might be affected!

Was this another reason why his parents fled to the core regions?

Aside from being able to avoid pursuit by taking advantage of the difficulty of navigating through the asteroids, perhaps his mother also took advantage of the spiritual phenomena!

The overall strengthening effect meant that his mother likely had an easier time with maintaining her unusual state. Her powers also grew stronger, and the interference field might also interfere with the means the Five Scrolls Compact employed to track her across unimaginable distances.

In fact, the unusual spiritual phenomena in the Nyxian Gap should also be highly interesting to the Compact. It shouldn't be a surprise that the cultists set up their regional headquarters close to the center of the Gap!

When Ves thought through the implications, he felt as if a veil had just been torn away. Right now, he was far enough from the abyss to turn around and leave its influence.

Yet.. another part of him urged him to step closer. He wanted to get closer so that he could finally obtain some answers to the questions that had plagued him for years.

Still, he reluctantly reined in his urges. As much as the strange spiritual phenomena offered a lot of attractive research opportunities, he could not abandon everything just to satisfy his curiosity.

"What do you think, Lucky? Should I go deeper or should I stick to my original plan?" He asked.

His cat playfully floated in front of his body. "Meow."

"Yeah. I'm not strong enough to enter the core regions."

"Meow meow."

"I agree. Gloriana won't like it if I don't make it back in time for our wedding."

"Meow."

"If my mother repeatedly warned me to stay away, then she has good reason to do so. Whatever is going on in the center of the Nyxian Gap is none of my business."

If Ves was still by himself, he might have chosen a different course, but his many responsibilities and obligations held him back. His attachments to Gloriana and the Larkinson Clan restrained him from following his impulses.

He felt as if he was being shackled.

"That's not necessarily a bad development." He recognized.

Ves knew that acting without any regard or constraint was not always the best choice. Plenty of fanatics along with the cultists of the Five Scrolls Compact always acted on their extremes no matter how much harm they inflicted on themselves and other people.

Though a part of Ves longed to become free and unrestrained, modern society had no place for people who possessed no bottom line. If he wanted to avoid becoming a fugitive, he had no choice but to accept his shackles.

"Maybe it will be different one day." He idly hoped.

The more powerful he became, the more leeway he gained to act out on his own. He needed to advance Master first before he should even think about breaking some of his shackles!

"Until then, I should keep my head down and behave!"

Chapter 2179 Rejected Proposals

A lot of mech designers entered the conference room aboard the Scarlet Rose. Just like before, the brave mech designers aligned to Ves took their seat on one half of the long, oval table.

Soon enough, the projections of the erudite mech designers under the supervision of Gloriana appeared on the other side of the table.

Two distant locations connected together through the link that the Scarlet Rose still maintained to the galactic net.

Ves did not have to worry about any communication blockades in the outer periphery of the Nyxian Gap. It was only when he entered the inner periphery that he might have to rely on the Darkbreak module in order to maintain a stable connection.

While Ves briefly greeted and chatted with Gloriana, their cats also enjoyed their brief reunion.

"Meow." Lucky pushed his paw through the projection of Clixie, causing it to go right through.

"Miaow."

"Meow."

"Miaow miaow."

Shortly afterwards, Ves commenced the session.

"Alright. Everyone here has submitted their proposals on what minor projects we should work on for the next couple of months. Many of your suggestions are interesting, creative and useful. Today, I would like to go over a couple of the mech concepts that

you have proposed in order to illustrate how relevant they are. The LMC's design capacity is still limited, so we can't explore every idea."

He waved his hand, causing a projection of a sketch of a very odd artillery mech to appear above the table.

"First, let's go over the 'PDL-F/D', a mech design proposed by Estelle Lynwood."

He nodded towards the woman seated close to him. Estelle Lynwood just happened to be one of the assistants he picked out right at the start of the selection process. Her spiritual potential was particularly notable, which meant she had a high chance of advancing to Journeyman once she applied herself.

Of course, that didn't mean she was guaranteed to become one. She still needed to work hard and develop her design philosophy properly. Ves could only lay some of the groundwork for her. Estelle still needed to do most of the work.

"Miss Lynwood, would you please explain your concept to us in your own words?"

The assistant in question nodded and stood up. "The name of my mech stands for Planetary Defense Laser, F/D grade pilots. It's a land and aerial-based mech that is designed to strike orbital targets as cost-effectively as possible. By itself, it is a mobile mech that can drill into rock and soil in order to hide itself and use the very land as a giant heatsink."

She manipulated the projection, causing it to fire a very thick and powerful laser straight through the clouds in the simulated environment.

"The mech completely revolves around its laser cannon, which is guided by a highly-automated targeting system. Once the mech fires, it must relocate very quickly using its flight capabilities before the enemy can retaliate. Due to the automation and simple operation of my mech, the demand on the mech pilot is very low. Those with a genetic aptitude as low as F or D are usually neglected. With the PDL-F/D, they can still contribute to the defense of a planet!"

A lot of assistants looked intrigued or appreciative of the idea that Estelle came up with. Her mech concept might not be the most sophisticated or well-rounded, but it packed a very powerful punch without demanding a lot of resources!

"Comments, anyone?" Ves asked.

Someone raised his hand. "Sir, the PDL-F/D is a very efficient mech. However, it will be rather difficult for it to survive after it has exposed its existence after firing a shot."

"That's why the mech is designed to be disposable." Estelle responded.

Some more people spoke up and made some remarks. Ves and Gloriana were glad to see that a constructive discussion had broken out. Everyone may be rivals, but they were also passionate about mechs.

"Ahem." Gloriana attracted everyone's attention. "Despite the advantages this mech design conveys, it possesses a fatal flaw. Can any of you tell me why my partner and I decided to stop exploring it any further?"

A brief silence ensued before Miles ventured his guess. "It looks like a mech. It is piloted by a mech. It's not actually a mech, though. It is too.. specialized. It can't defend itself against other mechs at all."

Gloriana slapped her palm against the table. "Correct! The PDL-F/D is essentially a movable turret platform. Its heavy dependence on an automated targeting system to hit targets high up in orbit means that the mech pilot is only responsible for moving the mech around. Since that is the case, why not go a step further and eliminate the mech pilot entirely? If you turn it into a conventional self-propelled artillery platform, then any norm can pilot this vehicle!"

The realization stunned the assistants. Now that they thought about it, self-propelled artillery platforms that could hit orbital targets already existed to some extent. There was hardly any need to use up scarce mech pilots for a duty that could be easily performed by a trained norm!

"Estelle Lynwood's mech concept is a good one, make no mistake." Ves summed up his opinion. "However, just because a mech concept is good doesn't mean it translates into a good product. In order for a mech to find a place in the market, it has to justify its existence. The wider context must always be taken into account!"

The assistant in question looked a bit dejected. She knew she had made a mistake. "Thank you for pointing out this shortcoming, sir."

"That's okay. I expect you to do better next time."

Ves waved his hand, causing the projection of the PDL-F/D to make way for a depiction of an unusually-shaped areal mech.

The flying mech resembled a bird in flight as it flew across a battlefield and released a lot of bombs. The ground underneath erupted in explosions as the bombs turned an entire stretch of land into an inferno!

Winston Starmond, who came up with the concept, explained his proposal.

"The Twilight Phoenix is an aerial mech designed for bombing purposes. Unlike regular bomber craft, my proposed mech is designed to navigate through dangerous airspaces with high amounts of signal interference. So much jamming is deployed on battlefields

that it is usually very hard for air support to do their job effectively. In my proposal, the Twilight Phoenix is not only able to rely on its anti-ECM systems to cope with the jamming, but can ideally rely on a glow that can offer navigational help!"

At least half of the assistant had included some mention of possible glows in their proposals. They assumed that Ves was capable of creating any glow and tried to imagine how that would work with their mech concepts.

When Winston finished his explanation, his colleagues began to make remarks.

"The bomber mech suffers from the same problem as the last mech concept. The same job can easily be performed by a regular bombing vehicle."

"I don't entirely agree." Catherine Evenson shook her head. "Aerial bomber mechs still have a place on the battlefield due to their considerable capabilities. Vehicles piloted by norms perform substantially worse and are always easily shot down from the air."

Ves nodded in agreement. "Mr. Starmond's proposal has a place on the battlefield. However, aerial bomber mechs generally aren't great sellers. They can't fend against other aerial mechs, so they require escorts. If you want some place bombed, it is generally more convenient to rely on landbound artillery mechs. A mech like the Twilight Phoenix will always draw a lot of fire because their targets won't allow anything to drop bombs over their heads for free!"

The weak market demand for bomber mechs in the Komodo Star Sector was the decisive factor in rejecting the proposal. It was too much of a niche product in the regional mech market.

They moved on to a couple of other mech design proposals. Each time, Ves allowed the assistants to figure out the reasons behind rejecting them. He wanted them to become more familiar with the criteria that he and Gloriana used to decide which mech concepts they found suitable enough to turn into actual products.

The projection of a team of large, broad mech appeared next. In the simulation, the humanoid mechs approached a giant reptilian exobeast.

Surprisingly, the mechs did not take out any weapons. Instead, they surrounded the exobeast and wrestled it on the ground with their considerable weight and physical strength!

Even as the exobeast struggled to break loose, the mechs that hadn't dogpiled the giant lizard instead pulled out some of the materials they carried in their backpack containers.

In the span of a couple of minutes, the mechs rapidly built up a cage around the restrained exobeast. Soon enough, a cage that was strong enough to contain the captive creature came into existence!

"This is another example of a creative mech concept." Ves told everyone. "As you can see, the Hound of Glory is geared towards hunting and construction. However, just like many of the other proposals, it is a niche product. While specialized hunting mechs exist, it is not very worthwhile for the LMC to enter this specific market."

A lot of mech designers, especially those whose proposals had been shot down, looked increasingly more upset.

Rina Orion raised her hand. "Are we even allowed to design a niche mech at all, sir?"

"It's not all about sales volume." Ves shook his head. "There are many reasons to design a mech. Sometimes, you just want to earn a lot of money. This is the main rationale behind designing the Doom Guard. Sometimes, you want to unleash your creative energies. That's the main driver behind the Aurora Titan design. Other times, you want to design something different and innovative. Designs such as the Deliverer is a good example."

"In short, what Ves is trying to convey is that we cannot design every mech we like just because they sound interesting." Gloriana followed up. "He often likes to say that our time is limited. We can only handle so many projects at the same time. This means it is important to pick the right projects that provide us with the most benefits out of the options available."

Ves nodded. "Every mech we have published serves a specific goal and benefits us directly upon release. The Bright Warrior, despite not being sold on the market, is a powerful mech that immediately strengthens our clan's ability to fight and defend itself. Without it, our clan would have never survived the CRC's surprise attack on Kesseling VIII! As for the Desolate Soldier and its variants, not only have they sold a lot and generated a lot of revenue, they have also played an instrumental role in defeating the sandmen."

"Can you give us an example of a good proposal, sir?"

"Why certainly." He smiled. He waved his hand once again, causing the projection to display a very plain and rather basic mech. "Merril O'Brian-Larkinson, would you like to present your mech concept?"

The projection of the former pirate designer and rational mech designer calmly stood up. The newer assistants weren't too familiar with her because she had been hired prior to the mass recruitment event.

While she never really attracted anyone's attention after she joined the LMC, Ves highly appreciated her mech concept!

"This is the Chiron." She gestured towards the plain-looking mech. The projection displayed slightly different weapon loadouts and configurations of the same design.

"When I studied Mr. Larkinson's old work, I stumbled upon two different virtual mech designs. Unlike many other mech designs geared towards mech cadets, the Young Blood and the Old Soul are both explicitly geared towards teaching specific skills to the next generation of mech pilots."

The Young Blood and the Old Soul were still piloted by many players of Iron Spirit to this date! Even though Ves had long stopped paying attention to his virtual mech designs, in truth the two teaching mechs had already influenced a considerable number of mech cadets throughout the Komodo Star Sector!

Now, Merrill formed a proposal that sought to revive something that Ves had neglected: designing teaching mechs! The Chiron was the successor to the Young Blood and Old Soul!

Chapter 2180 Chiron

Every mech academy possessed mechs to allow their pupils to experience what it was like to pilot actual machines.

A mech pilot that trained exclusively with virtual mechs would never perform well on the battlefield. There were simply too many lessons that could only be learned while piloting a physical mech!

For this reason, mech academies demanded special mechs that specifically accommodated their desire to educate mech cadets.

This was the origin of teaching mechs. They differed from normal combat mechs in several ways.

First, their lethality came under heavy restraints. Whether permanently or conditional, the firepower and damage potential of these mechs had to be reined in and kept under control.

A single ordinary mech was easily capable of wiping out an entire city block in an instant! Putting so much destructive potential in the hands of partially-trained teenagers was a disaster in the making!

Therefore, teaching mechs had to be designed from the ground up with many safeguards. Remote kill switches along with hard limits on performance allowed mech academies to field mechs that weren't capable of killing hundreds of students or wiping out entire schools.

The second requirement of teaching mechs was that they should offer a realistic learning experience to mech cadets. This meant that teaching mechs had to resemble combat mechs to a sufficient degree so that the people that piloted them could easily transition to piloting full-strength mechs in the future.

Obviously, the second requirement partially contradicted the first requirement. In many cases, mech academies tended to favor safety over providing a more realistic piloting experience.

Cheaper teaching mechs were only capable of fulfilling one of these priorities. Mech academies had to spend much more to obtain teaching mechs that were both safe and effective!

The third requirement was that they needed to provide as much protection as possible to its current pilot. If the mech cadet improperly handled the mech or suffered some sort of accident, the young student could easily put his own life at risk!

Teaching mechs needed to be robust enough to keep the pilot alive in the event of an accident. Basic mistakes such as the mech losing its footing and tripping on its feet could easily damage the cockpit of a fragile mech. Such incidents happened quite a lot in the early years. If a mech couldn't protect its mech pilot upon falling, it wasn't suitable teaching mech!

The fourth and last requirement of a teaching mech was that it had to be cost-effective. It not only needed to come at an affordable price, it also had to be resilient enough to withstand daily abuse for a very long time.

The longer the teaching mech lasted, the less money the mech academy had to spend on servicing, repairing and replacing it. These activities just happened to be the primary reasons why mech academies went bankrupt!

When Merrill calmly explained these requirements, she finally revealed how her mech design proposal tied into them. "The Chiron is an adjustable mech design that aims to provide an individualized teaching experience to any mech cadet that uses it for practice."

The projection of the Chiron displayed the proposed design in several different ways. Sometimes, the mech wielded a sword. Other times, it held a rifle. Some of the Chirons were taller and others were shorter. Half of the mechs featured a flight system and the rest could only walk on land.

The assistants observing the projection still recognized the same underlying DNA, but they were confused why the mech came in so many versions.

"The main emphasis of the Chiron is its adaptability. It is a humanoid mech that is designed to match the mech cadet's physique as best as possible. As everyone knows, people are always the best at controlling their own bodies. The Chiron takes advantage of this fact by incorporating several shape-changing mechanisms that can adjust its physical proportions."

There was more to the adaptability trait than just changing the length of its limbs.

"In addition, the Chiron is not specifically reserved to a single mech type. Just like the Bright Warrior, its overall configuration is partially modular. With the right configuration and loadout, it can function as a knight mech, a swordsman mech, a lancer mech, a rifleman mech and so on to a realistic degree. While the combat effectiveness of each configuration isn't very strong, a teaching mech doesn't need to be powerful."

Miles Tovar interrupted her presentation. "All of this sounds good, but adaptable and adjustable teaching mechs aren't foreign concepts. The more exclusive and well-funded mech academies often possess a number of them to train some of their elite mech cadets."

"That's a fair point." Merrill nodded in acknowledgement. "What I have mentioned up to this point is not strictly new. What makes the Chiron stand out from adaptable teaching mechs is the added value of its glow."

She manipulated the projection again, causing the Young Blood and the Old Soul to appear alongside the Chiron.

"The Young Blood is a spear-wielding knight mech that teaches mech cadets how to pilot melee mechs. According to user feedback, its mech pilots always feel as if there is something inside the mech that helps them in battle and points out the areas they need to work on. The Old Soul performs a similar function in the form of a marksman mech. Both of these mechs are products of Mr. Larkinson in the beginning of his career when he was just an Apprentice."

Her hand gestured towards the Chiron. "Now that our clan patriarch has grown in strength and developed his design philosophy, what would it be like to design a new teaching mech that reflects his current ability? If we look back at his most recent mech designs such as the Doom Guard, it is easy to imagine that the effectiveness of a teaching mech like the Chiron will be at least an order of magnitude greater than the Young Blood and Old Soul!"

Those who were aware of the two virtual mechs understood the potential of the Chiron better. However, even the assistants who became exposed to the virtual mechs for the first time understood the implication of a teaching mech with a complimentary glow.

If it was truly possible to design such a mech, then any mech cadet who piloted such a machine would essentially be able to receive instruction on a transcendental level!

Though such an amazing teaching mech did not replace the role of mech instructors and other teaching methods, it was a very fantastic complement that could make mech cadets become more outstanding.

Ves had instantly fallen in love with the mech concept when he first glimpsed it. The Chiron was simply too useful for him to pass up. He was also confident he could bestow it with a glow that facilitated the learning process!

He grinned. "The Chiron is an excellent example of a mech concept that takes a familiar and established premise but puts an entirely new spin on it with the help of a distinctive design philosophy. In fact, this is how several successful mech designers are able to stand out in the market. It is not enough to design a mech that is merely a retread of what the competition has already offered. You need to leverage your strengths and make the most out of your specialty."

He turned his attention to the projection and caused it to display some of his products that best reflected his point. The Desolate Soldier, the Deliverer and the Doom Guard each made a mark on the mech market due to their unique and distinctive strengths. This was despite their less ostentatious technical parameters.

"The Desolate Soldier is just a budget spaceborn rifleman mech. Yet because I imparted it with a glow that is based on duty, it has become a pivotal mech that successfully bolstered the morale of millions of mech pilots and starfighter pilots during the Sand War."

Ves shifted to the Deliverer.

"While my Deliverer mech was only relevant for a couple months, its impact in the later stages of the Sand War was only slightly less than the Desolate Soldier. In the hands of many mech pilots, it is merely a very unwieldy and clumsy spaceborn marksman mech. Yet as long as a devout Ylvainan mech pilot enters the cockpit, the mech's glow will finally settle in, allowing the Deliverer to gain an uncanny ability to snipe out sandman admirals in an immense swarm!"

He turned to the Doom Guard last.

"As for the Doom Guard, I'm sure that all of you need no introduction. Stripped of its glow, it is merely a well-designed spaceborn striker mech. Yet the glow that has caused it to become known as a fear machine not only adds another facet to this machine, but also compliments its role. Hardly any other striker mech is as good in area denial than our latest commercial product!"

The assistant mech designers weren't stupid. They all understood the underlying point that Ves was trying to make. It wasn't enough to design ordinary mechs. To make a proposal worthwhile for the LMC to pursue, it had to take advantage of the company's unique design strengths!

Right now, two Journeymen presided over the LMC's Design Department. Gloriana's especially was very strong in the right circumstances, but it wasn't easy to work with. In most mass-production models, her design philosophy mainly worked in the background.

This meant that the glows that Ves could bestow with his design philosophy should play a prominent role in any mech design proposal! The right glow could achieve a

transformative effect on the value and utility of a mech design. The LMC would be stupid to neglect this unique advantage!

"Do you understand, now?" Ves asked.

Everyone nodded their heads. They looked like chicks as realization dawned upon most of them. Aside from a few clever assistants who formed this conclusion on their own, the rest only realized until now what they missed!

Ketis still raised her hand, though. "I get what you are trying to say, but I think it's not good if everyone here obsesses too much about glows. This is something that belongs to you, not us. We can only borrow your strength, but we can never own it ourselves."

As expected of his student. As amazing as his design philosophy appeared to be, she was determined to follow her own path! The temptation of other specialties never swayed her from her own goals!

"You are right." He replied with a smile. "All of you can learn something from her. That said, right now, you are all employed by the LMC. As assistant mech designers, your primary role is to assist the lead designers. Part of that job entails learning about the specialties of your superiors so that you can take them into account in your work."

This was one of the unfortunate realities of their low positions. Assistants did not have the right to impart all of their own ideas and preferences in a mech design. They had to abide by the ideas and preferences of the lead designers instead!

Ves decided to give them a bit of hope. "It's a different story if you become a contributing designer or lead designer. As long as you work hard and develop your design philosophy, you might advance to Journeyman one day. At that point, you no longer have to withhold your own ideas. Within the LMC, Journeymen are qualified enough to make their own mark in our mech designs!"

It would take years or decades for those with spiritual potential to reach this point. As for the assistants who lacked this quality, they might have work on other people's behalf for their entire careers.

He found it a pity to let so much talent to waste. The presence or absence of spiritual potential decided the lives of many ambitious people without their knowing.

Perhaps he could do something about this. He managed to force William Urbesh into an expert candidate. He might be able to do the same with some of his assistant mech designers.