

Mech 2551

Chapter 2551: Obligatory Mission

A dwarven star sector. Ves almost couldn't believe it at first. How the hell did these repressed variants of humans succeed in toppling many third and second-class states in the span of just a couple decades?

It was too fast and too unreal!

The story made more sense when Ves thought about who actually benefited from this abnormal development. If Ves ignored the dwarves, then it became clear that the Big Two and more specifically the MTA definitely benefited!

This implied that the Smiling Samuel Star Sector was under greater observation. That was bad news to Ves as he would be stepping into the territory of someone else's experimental grounds.

Scientists hated it when external factors affected their experiments!

Ves should know as he was one of them. Though he wasn't sure how much he could do in Smiling Samuel, he doubted that the MTA or at least someone in the organization would be pleased if he disrupted the normal order of the Vulcan Empire.

This meant that Ves had to maintain a low profile if he wanted to enter this dwarven star sector. Perhaps he might have to leave his entire fleet behind in order to enter Smiling Samuel as a guest.

All of these restrictions made him feel more ambivalent about his goal of taking out the Timpala Steel he buried in the star sector.

Though Ves liked to take a gamble every now and then, he did not relish the prospect of entering a region filled with hostile supremacist dwarves!

"What's even worse is that they're dwarves of my own making!"

Ves never expected Smiling Samuel to spiral out of control to this extent! He fully realized the horror of being able to change the past!

After he finished his discussion with Major Verle, he returned to the Scarlet Rose and began to read up on Smiling Samuel, the Vulcan Empire and the Vulcan Faith.

According to the galactic net, there were no functional differences between the three. The Star Sector was dominated by a single second-rate state. The state was highly intertwined with its main religion.

The Vulcan Faith originated out of the former mining slaves of Desala X. It seemed that after Ves had helped the rebels escape, the MTA took in their complaints and heavily sanctioned House Kantis.

The noble house actually had to hand over its assets to the dwarves!

This gave the freed mining slaves a territory of their own which couldn't be taken back. It was there where the Desala Resistance Movement transformed into the Dwarven Justice Movement, which aimed to liberate dwarves beyond the Desala System.

It was also at this period in history where the original rebels began to propagate their belief in Vulcan!

"These dwarves are too gullible."

Belief in Vulcan spread rapidly. The former mining slaves didn't know anything and easily got hoodwinked into worshipping a non-existent god.

Much of the foundation of the modern Vulcan Empire originated from this period. By attracting a lot of outside help, the freed slaves developed vigorously.

The more Ves read about the Vulcanites, as the dwarven citizens of the Empire called themselves, the more he became abhorred at the monster he created.

Phrases such as 'death to the tall folk' and 'the galaxy belongs to dwarvenkind' were uttered with distressing regularity. Any notion of peaceful coexistence with humans instantly drew widespread condemnation from the dwarven supremacists.

Every dwarf hated normal humans! The only difference was to what extent they wished death and ruin to the tall folk. Some wanted to turn the tables against the humans and enslave them. Others wanted to wipe them out wholesale!

Fortunately, despite their big talk, the dwarves never spread beyond Smiling Samuel. The surrounding states and star sectors were highly on guard against the heavy gravity variant humans. Each of them signed a treaty that called for forming a blockade that kept the dwarves bottled up in their own star sector!

This was the current status quo. The Vulcan Empire had the power of life and death in Smiling Samuel, but the Vulcanites instantly lost all of their deterrence power once they stepped outside.

The lack of mutual respect and understanding between humans and dwarves caused the two groups to intensify their hatreds towards each other.

If Ves rashly entered the Smiling Samuel Star Sector, he would likely attract a lot of dwarven hostility!

"This is impossible!"

Sneaking in was possible, but difficult. The Vulcanites intensely patrolled their own space and ruthlessly rallied as many nearby elements as possible in order to crush any intruders!

Obtaining an exemption was difficult. Even if he had one, there were plenty of radicalists who were willing to disregard the consequences in order to kill a human encroaching on their space.

"There is another alternative..."

The mere thought of transforming his body into that of dwarf repulsed him. He did not want to change his body! It would be one thing if he was born a dwarf, but he was not. He grew up into a human with normal proportions. His current body was a part of his identity, and he was largely happy with it. He would be betraying himself if he changed into a different form!

"That's not all. I haven't even considered Gloriana's reaction yet." He muttered.

There was no way his wife wanted her perfect husband to turn into a dwarf! She would kill him if he walked up to their bed with a shorter and stockier form!

While Ves had heard the body morphing procedure was reversible, it was not a trivial matter. Otherwise, a lot of dwarves would have been able to turn themselves into tall folk.

No matter how Ves looked at it, the difficulty of entering Smiling Samuel, retrieving the hidden batch of Timpala Steel and making it out alive was immense!

The threat posed by the Vulcanites surpassed that of the Nyxian pirates.

While the Allidus Alliance had grown to the point of being able to field warships, its lack of legitimacy, its limited resources and its barren population base meant that its actual strength was quite manageable.

The pirates only managed to fend off the Big Two by taking advantage of the tricky environment and by borrowing the strength of the dark gods.

As for the Vulcanites, they weren't a bunch of scummy pirates. They formed a proper state that ruled over thousands of star systems and trillions of dwarves.

The Vulcan Empire was at least equal to the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony, if not greater!

"Well, at least I have time to come up with a plan. I don't have to solve this problem right away."

His fleet first had to leave the Yeina Star Cluster, pass through the Bardo Star Cluster, enter the Fermi Star Cluster before coming within reach of Smiling Samuel.

Depending on how many stops he made, it would probably take around two years to reach the dwarven star sector. He should address more immediate priorities first while calmly plotting how he wanted to retrieve his great prize.

To be honest, if Ves had a choice, he would rather skip this goal. The Vulcan Empire was way too dangerous for him to mess around. Retrieving his precious stash was bound to be tough.

This shouldn't be the only source of Timpala Steel. Perhaps he might be able to stumble upon another sample in the Red Ocean. Even if the dwarf galaxy lacked this ultra-rare exotic, as long as he grew powerful enough, there were other ways of obtaining what he wanted.

Yet.. Ves feared the System might not take kindly to this course of action. He might be patient enough to wait, but the System might not. It was impossible to tell how urgently the System needed the materials stipulated by the Supply Missions, but they had to be at least somewhat vital.

What would the System do if its current user ignored an opportunity to replenish some of its lost strength?

If Ves was in its place, he might decide to change to another user!

He was unsure whether the System was willing to do so. The more Ves learned about the System and the Five Scrolls Compact, the more he understood his own value. Mech designers like him were hard to come by. The System also shared an unknown relationship with his mother.

That said, the uncertainty surrounding the System's motives left Ves in the dark. He did not dare to act too presumptuously. The risk of provoking a backlash from the System loomed over his head like the sword of Damocles.

Though Ves was very proud of himself, he knew he wouldn't have been able to make it this far without its help. The System helped him rise to prominence. It could easily tear him down.

"Ugh. Let's get to Smiling Samuel first. For now, I should get back to designing my mechs."

While the Larkinson Clan became preoccupied with integrating the incoming shipments of mechs and starships, the Design Department finally completed its initial preparations.

Ves, Gloriana and Juliet stood in front of the design lab. The three Journeymen faced the Braves and Erudites.

Due to the bad blood between Gloriana and Juliet, the two women stood far apart from each other. The two didn't even speak together, let alone collaborate at the same time.

Their problematic relationship continued to give Ves a lot of headaches. While it wasn't impossible for the two of them to collaborate on a mech design, they had to work sequentially instead of concurrently. This did not facilitate cooperation and would definitely affect the quality of the end product.

He had no choice. Ves should be happy that the two women were willing to compromise to this extent. It would have been a lot worse if the two refused to work on a mech design that their adversary had touched!

"In the past several weeks, we have fleshed our six projects." Ves addressed the crowd. "With the data gathered by the Design, Marketing and Product Research Departments, we know where we stand on our proposed mech designs. Each of them are viable according to the data, and that is enough to go on. Today, we shall officially commence all six design projects!"

Every mech designer who listened to him immediately became hopeful. While second-class mech designs were far more complicated to design, they also represented the future of the Larkinson Clan. It was essential for every assistant mech designer to become proficient in working with them if they wanted to keep up with the lead designers.

Gloriana took over from Ves. "Different from before, we shall assign two design teams to every design project. Your workload is higher, but the overall impact you can make is smaller. Don't be disappointed by that. The work you will engage in will push you until you become more accustomed to working with second-class mechs. As long as you prove you are able to handle this level of work, you will be entrusted with more important work. Becoming a second-class mech designer on par with us is just around the corner if you reach this point!"

"We have six months of time to complete our projects." Ves crossed his arms. "Regardless of the state of the mech design in question, we will finalize it once the deadline looms closer. Your help is crucial. You will receive additional Larkinson merits if we meet our goal."

Everyone's eyes lit up. The prospect of being able to work on second-class design projects was not as attractive as earning more merits. The Braves had already been

bragging about how many merits they received from participating in the Nyxian Gap Campaign.

Ves quickly explained some other matters of importance. Tackling six second-class mech designs was very strenuous for the Design Department, but it was fine as long as everyone did their jobs.

The only problem for Ves was that the Erudites were better equipped for the challenge than the Braves. The former may have missed out on experiencing battles up close in the Nyxian Gap, but they didn't waste their time in Cinach. The Erudites were definitely further ahead when it came to absorbing knowledge!

Chapter 2552: Carnivores of the Battlefield

The ripples from the wedding between Ves and Gloriana faded. As much as this glamorous event captured the imagination of the public, people's memories were short.

To many ordinary citizens, the affairs of the rich and powerful were too far away. Life went on and neither the Miracle Couple nor the LMC exerted any direct influence on their ordinary civilian lives.

That did not apply to everyone. The products of the LMC became increasingly more popular throughout the region.

The Komodo Star Sector was its home market. Yet the availability of LMC mechs was not uniform.

One half of the star sector was devoid of these distinct machines. The Friday Coalition completely banned the use of LMC mechs.

This was not an unusual rule in itself. The Coalition already banned the use of mechs designed by Hexers or anyone aligned to them. However, a lot of avid customers were forced to relinquish their precious mechs.

The Desolate Soldier and its variants, which played a major role in the Sand War, no longer showed up in the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate. A lot of states that relied heavily on Ves and Gloriana's work became closed to the LMC.

That did not apply to the other half of the star sector. The lesser states that fell within the Hexer sphere of influence did not receive any prohibitions against using LMC mechs. Their local governments were free to decide whether they wished to allow the LMC to expand their business operations in their mech markets.

Most of them did. The LMC may not be a part of their domestic mech industry, but the comprehensive value of its products was undeniable!

At this time, the LMC's product catalog consisted of a handful of third-class mechs.

Despite the lack of choice, a lot of the offerings were very compelling to many customers.

The Desolate Soldier model was the original bestseller of the LMC. It sold over a million copies during the Sand War and continued to sell millions more as the mech company expanded its reach across other star sectors.

From a performance standpoint, the Desolate Soldier and its variants was not that stellar. The lastgen model was dated and did not take advantage of the innovations of the latest generation. Its design was optimized for use against the sandmen and did not fare as well as other competing models when fighting against mechs.

What was even worse for the LMC was that its product margin was abysmally low. The large number of intermediaries involved in the production, distribution and sale of the mech model all took a cut of the earnings.

By the time the remaining profits trickled into the coffers of the LMC, perhaps only 50,000 hex credits remained out of the 600,000 hex credits the customer had paid!

Despite all of these shortcomings, plenty of customers in the surrounding regions continued to purchase the Desolate Soldier in greater numbers. Not only that, but the cheaper and less robust Proudful Soldier sold in great quantities as well!

Their glows were just too good. The duty-based glow of the Desolate Soldier was useful for law enforcement, militaries, mercenary corps, security companies and more customers. Everyone except pirates derived a lot of value from leveraging this morale-sustaining glow!

If not for the low profits per sale, the sales of the Desolate Soldier could have financed all of the Larkinson Clan's capital ship expenditures for the next decade!

The Aurora Titan failed to match the grandeur of the Desolate Soldier. Its extreme specs and its incredibly unwieldy handling turned it into a very niche product.

The rise of Venerable Jannzi Larkinson hardly boosted sales of this defensive space knight. Not even the growing reputation of Ves or the expanding reach of the LMC boosted sales that much.

Many Larkinsons within the LMC considered the Aurora Titan to be a flop. It wasn't even worth it to include the mech model in the company's product catalog anymore.

The Doom Guard was the second bestseller of the LMC. The striker mech possessed almost as many shortcomings as the Aurora Titan, but its glow was much more useful in combat.

It was a pity the Doom Guard underwent some changes. Its glow had changed characteristics, causing it to form a disorienting glow that disabled anyone who entered its range. This was a bit more difficult to take advantage of than scaring enemies away.

Sales of the Doom Guard were trending downwards for this reason. The release of a new mech model accelerated the striker mech's decline.

Compared to the Doom Guard, the Ferocious Piranha presented an all-around improvement. While it was a very different mech type, the Ferocious Piranha nonetheless captured the hearts of many mech buyers!

In the middle of an asteroid belt in Vicious Mountain, a squad of twelve Ferocious Piranha swooped forth!

A mercenary corps called the Thermal Ants accepted a mission to take down a pirate gang that was nestled within an empty star system.

While the pirates had hidden themselves well, somehow they exposed their whereabouts.

"Damnit! Who betrayed us?! Who sold us out?!"

"It's bad, boss! We need to run straight away!"

"There's no running from those light mechs. Our only choice is to fight!"

The pirates deploy a ragged swarm of 37 mechs. This was actually quite a respectable number for a simple pirate gang.

The Ferocious Piranhas clearly captured the emissions from the pirate mechs. Under ordinary circumstances, it was impossible for 12 light mechs to defeat twice their number.

While the quality and condition of the pirate mechs were horrible, their numerical superiority couldn't be overcome so easily!

The ranged pirate mechs began to fire at the light skirmishers. Unfortunately for them, the battlefield was not conducive to ranged combat.

The light skirmishers skillfully weaved through the attacks. They also made sure to take cover behind as many asteroids as possible.

With the abysmal marksmanship of the pirates, there was no hope of landing more than a few coincidental strikes!

The few laser beams that managed to strike the Ferocious Piranhas hardly left more than a shallow scorching scar. The thin but premium armor gave the Piranhas a lot more protection than other light mechs.

"Stop firing!" The pirate commander yelled. "Get back and give us some covering fire. Stay on guard against any other enemies creeping up on us from behind. There was no way the light skirmishers came alone!"

The pirates all thought the light skirmishers merely served as scouts for a greater force of mercenary mechs. They didn't expect an immediate confrontation as the pirates ought to be strong enough to make the mercenary light mechs pay if they approached.

Yet as the Ferocious Piranhas continued to advance, the pirates became confused.

Were these light mechs actually going on the attack?

The pirate commander grew furious! Just because the incoming light mechs looked a bit fancier than usual didn't mean they were qualified to challenge his mechs!

"These mercs consider us trash. Prove them wrong! Attack these idiotic scouts! As long as we crush them all, we can slip away unnoticed!"

That invigorated the other pirates. The pirate melee mechs surged forward.

Surprisingly, the mercenary light mechs did not veer away! Instead, as the range rapidly closed, their mech pilots each turned a mental dial.

Invisible fields formed around the light skirmishers. The mech pilots hardly felt anything different as their mechs wrapped a protective shield around their minds and the minds of their battle comrades.

With this essential protection in place, the light mech pilots continued to urge their mechs to advance.

Eventually, the two sides came within striking distance!

Shortly before the melee mechs were able to exchange blows, an enormous change took place.

The moment the Ferocious Piranhas came near, every single pirate mech froze or jerked out of control!

Some mechs flung their weapons away as their arms and fingers convulsed.

Other mechs locked up as their mech pilots became completely unresponsive.

Only half-a-dozen mechs managed to avoid the affliction that had overcome the other mechs. Yet even though the pirate commander and some of his oldest veterans managed to stay in control, their minds came under incredible strain!

"AAhhh!"

"What is this!?"

"My meds! Where are my meds!"

The pirate commander felt wild and excited at one moment, only to be doused in ice as a wave of calm forced him out of his high. Before he could even begin to get used to his new state, the wave of aggression came back just a second later!

There wasn't enough time for him to adjust!

"Pull.. back. Retreat. Don't let these mercs get close!"

The pirate ranged mechs overloaded their laser rifles in order to scare off the incoming light mechs. Even if most of their shots missed their marks, their increased rate of fire caused at least some beams to strike the Ferocious Piranhas.

Their attacks had no effect!

The light skirmishers rapidly closed in on the vanguard of the out-of-control mechs. The Ferocious Piranhas rapidly stabbed their daggers in the unprotected backs of their vulnerable targets.

Twelve pirate mechs lost functionality!

If two stabs didn't do the job, then four, six, eight or more attacks would do. Since the pirate mech pilots afflicted by the Ferocious Piranhas glow were unable to focus on piloting their mechs, their machines turned into sitting ducks.

What horrified the pirates even more was that the disabled mech pilots weren't even capable of ejecting their cockpits.

"Noo! Retreat! Don't fight these weird mechs!"

It was too late. The moment the light skirmishers entered their midst, the pirates had already lost their chance.

The light skirmishers split into two. Six Ferocious Piranhas rapidly closed in on the ranged mechs that were taking potshots at them. The other six continued to suppress the disabled pirate mechs until they were able to take their helpless targets down.

The pirate commander and his confidantes no longer thought about saving their buddies. They struggled to pilot their mechs away.

The wily pirates wordlessly split in different directions. In situations like this, grouping up only made it easier for their opponents to mop them up! The pirate commander gritted his teeth.

Even though fleeing in different directions was a good tactic to adopt, it wasn't the right response this time.

"You fools! We could have taken one of these light skirmishers down if we joined hands."

It didn't take a lot of time for the Ferocious Piranhas to mop up all of the disabled mechs. Soon enough, the light skirmishers split up in order to pursue the fleeing pirate mechs.

As the pirates largely made use of shabby-looking medium mechs, there was no hope of outrunning their pursuers.

It only took less than a minute for the Ferocious Piranhas to catch up to their prey!

"If you want to take us down, then you'll have to work for it!" The pirate commander roared!

His swordsman mech no longer flew away. Instead, the mech arced around in order to charge straight at one of the two Ferocious Piranhas on its tail!

"Ack!"

Yet as soon as the pirate commander came close, his mind once again came under the effect of the Ferocious Piranha's glow!

While the pirate mech still closed in for the attack, its movements weren't as fluid as before. The pirate commander's battle effectiveness effectively dropped by 30 percent, which was a huge margin in battle.

The targeted light skirmisher easily dodged the pirate mech's sword strike. As soon as the sword swooped past, the swift light mech boosted forward and struck its daggers deep into the weak points of its target.

Just a second later, the second Ferocious Piranha struck the back with a flurry of stabs, causing the flight system and several other vital systems to lose power!

The pirate commander despaired as his cockpit lost most of its functioning. These new light mechs completely crushed his pirate gang without giving his men any opportunity to show their strength.

"What horrible new mech is this?!"

He was just the first of many mech pilots that fell victim to the latest carnivores of the battlefield!

Chapter 2553: Surprising Counter

The performance of the Ferocious Piranha shocked the mech market!

The Valkyrie Redeemer already proved what a perverse glow was capable of. Now, the third-class mech market received their own version of a mobile mech that could make the lives of their enemies miserable!

Though the LMC uncharacteristically declined to announce the release of the Ferocious Piranha, the LMC's most avid customers all tried out this product.

The results completely surprised them! Against weaker opponents, the Ferocious Piranhas had the power to render them defenseless!

A lot of pirates, gang members and criminals wailed as the first waves of Ferocious Piranhas easily defeated at least twice their number!

The Ferocious Piranhas were especially deadly against melee mechs. Regardless whether the devilish light skirmishers managed to disable their opponents or not, any enemy mech pilot that managed to retain their wits had to fight under constant pressure.

This meant that even well-trained elites and military mech pilots experienced some problems. If even the Fridaymen mech pilots who had to fight against the Valkyrie mechs on a regular basis couldn't maintain their best condition, how could a bunch of third-class mech pilots fare any better against an even scarier glow?

In the first week of the Ferocious Piranha's release, a lot of footage of one-sided victories quickly flooded the galactic net. Every local mech community went abuzz as they tried to verify the authenticity of the dramatic footage.

"This is impossible! A squad of light mechs can't possibly defeat 37 pirate mechs without suffering any losses. This battle record must be fake!"

"The LMC is going too far with this publicity stunt. How can a single light mech possibly win ten duels in a row? It's completely obvious that the entire sequence is staged."

While a lot of people expressed their incredulity at the unreal battle reports, as time went by the proof kept pouring in. The existing customers of the LMC already possessed a lot of trust towards the unique mech company. As long as their mech rosters had room for some light mechs, they eagerly invested in some Ferocious Piranhas.

The only problem interested buyers encountered was when they learned how much they needed to pay for a single copy.

"Who the hell buys a light mech that is at least five times as expensive as a Desolate Soldier? This is a ripoff!"

"The LMC is getting greedier and greedier. It didn't used to be this way. Anyone who spends 3 million hex credits to buy a single light mech is stupid!"

Despite these comments, plenty of believers in the LMC bit the bullet. Their enduring trust in the company and the brand caused them to believe all of the hype and promises surrounding the Ferocious Piranha model.

"It's like the Doom Guard, but better!"

Many fans of the LMC were already familiar with the Doom Guard's glow. They recognized the value of transplanting that glow in a very swift and agile light mech.

Soon enough, squads and even companies of Ferocious Piranhas started to enter the battlefield. While the effect of superimposing their glows didn't lead to a lot of strengthening, the mechs were able to cover a lot more space!

In one battle, twenty-five Ferocious Piranhas enveloped a group of enemy mechs. The light mechs completely cut off any escape routes.

In another battle, a hidden Ferocious Piranha sneaked up to a derelict space station and slowly made its way over to a group of mechs taking cover behind a fixture.

As soon as the unsuspecting mechs detected an incoming signature from behind, the Ferocious Piranha erupted its glow, paralyzing the enemy mech pilots in place!

The glow of the Ferocious Piranha was a lot more effective when it took the enemy by surprise. As the afflicted mech pilots struggled to regain control over their mechs, the solitary light mech had already closed in and meticulously struck the vulnerable targets until they all lost battle effectiveness!

As the public became increasingly more convinced of Ferocious Piranha's amazing prowess, its sales spiked incredibly quickly. The third-party manufacturers the LMC contracted to produce the mechs simply couldn't keep up with the flood of orders.

The demand for the Ferocious Piranha exceeded that of the Doom Guard when Ves initially presented it to the public. The enthusiasm surrounding the new product had reached an even greater scale as the LMC's subsidiaries in Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal expanded the mech company's reach into more markets than ever.

Though the LMC's Marketing, Sales, Operations, Production and Relations Departments had become unprecedentedly busy, it was all worth it as an even greater flood of money poured into the company's coffers!

Unlike the affordable Desolate Soldier, the Ferocious Piranha was a premium product sold at a very high price tag.

Even with all of the middlemen taking their cuts, the LMC still received much more money per sale. In the initial month, the beancounters estimated that the Ferocious Piranha model might enrich the LMC by as much as 300 billion hex credits.

In the second month, that figure would probably double to around 600 billion hex credits.

In the third month, the mania surrounding the Ferocious Piranha may boost the LMC's fortunes by up to 1 trillion hex credits!

It was difficult to predict what would happen after that. Many optimists predicted that sales would continue to trend upwards as more and more people wanted to take advantage of the Ferocious Piranha's killer glow.

Other analysts were a bit more cautious. They didn't believe the Ferocious Piranha was allowed to reign supreme on the battlefield.

While the mech was incredibly effective up close, it was not unbeatable.

From the Doom Guard, many people already knew that the shared glow of these two mech models could be resisted.

The easiest way to do that was to force mech pilots to experience the suppressive glows many times.

Frequent exposure to this torturous glow allowed mech pilots to get accustomed to the effects. As long as the mech pilots trained their minds during these sessions, they became more and more capable of maintaining their battle effectiveness in the presence of a Doom Guard or a Ferocious Piranha.

While it might take months of intensive training to strengthen a mech pilot to the point where it was able to fight without losing control, even a couple of days of exposure was already enough to make a difference.

They just had to buy at least a single mech that featured this hellish glow!

"Damn this bloodsucking mech company! Why do they charge so much for a Ferocious Piranha?"

No matter whether someone wanted to buy a Doom Guard or a Ferocious Piranha, they had to hand over at least several million hex credits.

This was a rather hefty price level for most third-raters. In general, the bulk of the private sector made use of more affordable mechs that were generally priced below 1 million hex credits.

Yet no matter how much these reluctant customers cursed the LMC's excessive pricing strategy, they went through with placing their orders.

Even if they had no intention of fielding LMC mechs in battle, they at least had to secure a machine in order to toughen up the minds of their mech pilots!

"If I don't do this, who knows whether my outfit will become history after being assailed by a squad of Ferocious Piranhas."

As the Ferocious Piranha model continued to gain momentum, a lot of people began to demand a counter to the mech.

"We can't let this overpriced light mech take over the mech market. We have to find some way to beat this monster!"

"What about using O-K alloy?"

"Too expensive! Leave this toy to the Fridaymen. I need actual solutions."

Unfortunately, no one found a great answer. They only came up with a couple of obvious ideas.

The Ferocious Piranha inherited the same strengths and weaknesses of every light skirmisher.

This meant that while it was incredibly quick and difficult to strike, once it got hit, it should incur significant damage.

To the regret of many critics, this maxim did not apply as well to a premium mech such as the Ferocious Piranha. However, as long as a large group of ranged mechs opened fire on a group of approaching Ferocious Piranhas, it was not impossible to defeat these nefarious mechs before they were able to get into point-blank range!

In practice, it was not that easy to take the Ferocious Piranhas down in this way. As long as the light mechs came under intensive fire, they were always capable of changing direction and seeking ways to avoid or mitigate the incoming attacks.

"Are you idiots? As long as we are the defenders, we can repel this scourge by deploying striker mechs!"

Striker mechs were the natural counters of light skirmishers. Their potent flamethrowers and shotguns posed a significant threat against any mech with weak armor.

However, the results were not as good as expected.

As one group of mercenaries assailed another group of mercenaries, the defending side suddenly trotted out a handful of shotgun-wielding striker mechs!

"Take this!"

The shotguns unleashed blasts of tiny projectiles that sprayed outward. The cones of projectiles easily collided against the light mechs that attempted to evade the attacks.

Unfortunately, the Ferocious Piranha was not as fragile to these attacks as other light mechs. The striker mechs deployed by the defending side were too cheap. Their weapons hardly dented the frames of the approaching threat!

"Aggh!"

The striker mechs abruptly slowed down once the Ferocious Piranhas got close. The shotguns continued to fire another time, but the mech pilots were unable to keep their aim straight.

Even though their shotguns possessed a lot more potency at closer ranges, the Ferocious Piranhas reigned supreme, which defied common sense!

The striker mechs fell as easily as any other mech that got close to the latest product of the LMC.

"Wait a minute. If we have to buy a striker mech, why not try out the Doom Guard?"

This was an interesting option! Though expensive, the mech shared the same glow.

As mech buyers began to experiment with deploying Doom Guards to defend against Ferocious Piranhas, the results were surprisingly good.

Sure, the Doom Guard was slow. Sure, the Doom Guard was expensive. Sure, the Doom Guard required a strong-willed mech pilot. Yet as long as someone overcame

these hurdles, the LMC striker mech proved to be remarkably effective against the Ferocious Piranhas!

First, the Doom Guard's identical glow allowed its owners to exercise the mental resilience of all of their mech pilots.

In battle, friendly mech pilots were able to acclimatize themselves to the Doom Guard's glow, thereby preventing any enemy Ferocious Piranhas from taking them by surprise!

Second, the Doom Guard's premium price delivered premium performance. Its 34F Enison Spreader flamethrower might not have a high range, but it fanned out in an impressively wide area in front of the mech.

No matter how swift and agile the Ferocious Piranha tried to avoid the flames, it was futile against such a powerful flamethrower!

Not only that, but the Enison Spreader also happened to be very lethal as long as any mech was being sprayed. Even the tougher-than-normal Ferocious Piranhas couldn't last very long when doused by a Doom Guard!

The third reason why the Doom Guard performed exceptionally well against the new terror was that its glow was actually effective against the mech pilots of the Ferocious Piranha!

"What? Are you kidding me? I thought the mech pilots of the Ferocious Piranhas were immune to the glows of their own mechs!"

"The rules don't work that way. Not just the Doom Guard, but also the Ferocious Piranha can be used to counter these expensive light skirmishers."

This resulted in a number of very odd confrontations.

The Ferocious Piranha's glow may spare its effects against friendlies, but enemies were fair game!

Therefore, there were some battles where the Ferocious Piranhas of both sides became crippled as their glows acted against each other!

The Ferocious Piranhas didn't offer any mental training opportunities. This meant that the mech pilots of the light skirmishers were just as vulnerable to the glow as the rest!

It was different for the Doom Guard. In order to make use of it, the mech pilot already had to be strong enough to withstand its influence.

For this reason, the mech pilot of the Doom Guard exhibited no changes if enemy Ferocious Piranhas came close.

A lot of expensive light mechs soon started to burn into husks at greater frequencies. Their mech pilots got a taste of their own medicine!

Chapter 2554: Ferocious Impact

The release of the Ferocious Piranha redefined space combat.

This was not an exaggeration. Wherever the mech showed up, both friendlies and enemies had to shift their battle tactics.

Many outfits stubbornly resisted the need for change. They were already accustomed to using mechs developed by their favorite mech designers or sold by their favorite mech companies.

In fact, a fair number of established mercenary corps and security companies entered into favorable long-term contracts with specific mech manufacturers. While they usually weren't penalized for buying mechs from other companies, dedicated customers received generous discounts and extended after-sales support if they stuck to a single provider.

The Living Star Club set up by the LMC was hardly unique when it came to capturing customers.

Even without these contracts, there were other reasons for outfits to look away from the Ferocious Piranha.

Larger mech companies always organized their mech models in product groups. These groups consisted of products that were designed to work in unison.

Mechs designed and sold by a single mech company were specifically designed to synergize with each other in battle. They easily covered each other's weaknesses so that every mech could fully exert their strength.

Product groups also brought significant benefits out of battle. The mechs usually shared some of the same materials and components. This simplified the logistics of an outfit as they could easily keep a mech company supplied with a lower stock of spare parts.

The introduction of an expensive mech like the Ferocious Piranha introduced a significant burden to its buyers.

First, the outfits had to fork over a lot of money. The Ferocious Piranha sold for 3 million hex credits.

For a light mech, that was an exorbitant price!

Outfits could have bought five budget mechs or two to three mid-range mechs for the same amount of money.

If customers were short on carrier space, then they could have invested the money in a space knight such as the Aurora Titan with a bit of money to spare.

While mech companies sold many different mech types at every conceivable price level, many consumers assumed that the price of a mech should be proportional to the mass and dimensions of the product.

It was normal to pay more money for bigger and fatter mechs. Their increased volume and surface area meant they carried more protective armor. Since the armor system of a mech was often its most expensive portion, the mech market simply became accustomed to paying more for knight mechs and other well-protected mechs.

The opposite was true for light mechs. They weren't as tall as medium mechs. Their limbs and torsos were also slimmer while their armor plating was at least half as thick. With so much armor shaved off their frames, the cost savings were significant.

Light mechs should be cheaper for this reason!

The mech market's tolerance for expensive light mechs was very low. Light skirmishers that sold for more than 1.5 million hex credits were immediately scorned by most consumers. The only outfits who bought premium light mechs were those who wanted to empower their mech champions or mech officers who happened to be specialized in this swift and agile mech type.

Outside of mech militaries and very large organizations, it made no sense for outfits to assign premium light mechs to their rank-and-file!

Light mechs were usually utilized as scouts, troubleshooters, harassers and flanking units. These roles did not necessarily call for expensive mechs. Cheaper ones usually did the job just as well.

It didn't help that outfits tended to assign light mechs to their least-skilled mech pilots. To them, the quality of their assigned machines hardly affected their performance. Due to their low skill and lack of experience, they weren't capable of making the most out of powerful light mechs.

This was the prevailing paradigm of light mechs in the third-class mech market. While the story was different in the second-class mech market, at the lowest tier light mechs simply couldn't accommodate enough features to make them worthy of greater investment.

The Ferocious Piranha broke this pattern.

Certainly, the new light skirmisher model offered decent performance for its very premium price. Its thin but surprisingly resilient armor system surprised both its pilots and enemies alike by how much damage it was able to resist.

"You get what you pay for! Do you think this mech is truly overpriced? Its armor is the real deal."

While the mech was harder to take down than other light mechs, it cost quite a lot to repair any damage it incurred. Its expensive armor system directly gave its buyers a lot of worries. If they wanted to restore a damaged mech to peak condition, they had to buy or make parts made out of expensive materials, thereby worsening their financial situation.

"It's worth it, though! Repairing a damaged mech is better than trying to salvage a destroyed machine."

As more and more outfits began to employ the Ferocious Piranha, they discovered the benefits of fielding expensive light mechs.

Casualty rates among light mechs was often the highest. While it was not that difficult to figure out that fielding more expensive mechs allowed them to survive longer, many times the cost wasn't worth the gain.

It was different for the Ferocious Piranha. Outside of its premium specs, it also came with a feature that was completely independent from the size of its frame.

The number one reason why so many customers bought this expensive product was for its glow. The advantages it brought were very useful. Not a single outfit hated the glow. The ability to discomfort or outright disable enemy mech pilots irrespective of the mechs they piloted opened up a lot of new options.

Just as with the introduction of the Doom Guard, no longer were large mobs of undisciplined ruffians able to bully smaller outfits at will. Any time a Doom Guard or a Ferocious Piranha showed up, pirates and other scum suffered disproportionate losses!

In fact, in the Hexer half of the Komodo Star Sector, the incidences of pirate attacks had dropped by as much as 10 percent ever since the Doom Guard came onto the scene.

This figure would probably double or triple once the Ferocious Piranha became more ubiquitous!

Unlike the Doom Guard which was only confined to a defensive role, the Ferocious Piranha possessed great offensive potential.

It shouldn't be a surprise to the LMC that its most avid buyers turned out to be the Peacekeeper outfits of the Sentinel Kingdom!

During the Larkinson Clan's stay in the Cinach System, the LMC entrenched itself in the powerful third-rate state. The company not only forged ties with many noble houses and local companies, but also built up its brand.

When the Ferocious Piranha entered the market, the LMC already projected that the Peacekeeper outfits would embrace it. A lot of mech factories started to pump out Ferocious Piranhas straight away, thereby allowing most outfits to obtain at least a couple of copies to integrate into their combat system.

Though it took some time for the Peacekeeper outfits to bring their new purchases to Nyxian Gap, once they did, the results were astounding.

"What is this new mech!?"

"Damn, it's the Ferocious Piranha! Run away!"

The pirate gangs that infested the outer perimeter of the Nyxian Gap experienced the terror of the LMC's new light skirmisher. The mech's mobility allowed it to approach and chase after pirates with great ease. Once its glow enveloped the pirate mechs, the Ferocious Piranha almost always faced an easy fight!

Wreckage Paradise suddenly welcomed a lot of new debris. Peacekeeper outfit after Peacekeeper outfit began to experiment and refine their usage of their latest purchases. The pirates who normally terrorized these lanes each turned into their unwilling punching bags!

It didn't used to be this way. The pirate gangs roaming the outer perimeter usually fared a lot better against the outfits who came from civilized space.

Pirate scouts were always on the lookout for strong Peacekeeper elements. As long as they spotted anything amiss, they quickly packed their bags and fled. Due to all of the asteroids floating inside this region of warped space, it was too easily to shake off any pursuit.

The Doom Guard wasn't able to change this pattern. While its introduction offered a lot more security to the Peacekeepers, it did not give them a lot of options against pirate gangs that tried their best to slip away.

If the Peacekeepers dispatched pursuers in the form of light mechs and fast-moving medium mechs, then these fragile elements might easily encounter a ferocious pirate ambush.

It was too difficult to pursue a fleeing band of pirates!

The Ferocious Piranha changed all of this. As long as an outfit dispatched enough of the new mechs, these light skirmishers were very difficult to ambush. Its disorienting

glow was able to act upon a lot of mech pilots, so outnumbering the Ferocious Piranha didn't always work.

Only strong-willed pirate mech pilots were able to resist the glow, but how many of them were actually there? Perhaps the more powerful pirate groups situated closer to the center of the Nyxian Gap might have these rare elites, but the bottom-feeder pirate gangs that were based in the periphery of the Nyxian Gap were not so fortunate!

Stories soon began to circulate about small numbers of Ferocious Piranhas wiping out entire pirate outfits by themselves!

"This is unreal! How can this be? Are the pirates this weak?"

"It's all due to the glow. It's too cancerous!"

The light skirmishers didn't even have to wait for reinforcements in order to defeat the pirates. Their good specs, relatively good armor and killer glow gave them all the tools they needed to upend enemy outfits.

"Damnit, these Ferocious Piranhas are so unfair. Any melee mech that gets close turns into a punching bag to these evil machines."

"Forget about fielding melee mechs. I'm going to get my hands on as many rifleman mechs and striker mechs as possible."

"We need to get our hands on as many Doom Guards as possible! In fact, we need to get some Ferocious Piranhas ourselves!"

As more and more Ferocious Piranhas showed up on the battlefield, the demand for the Doom Guard and this new model continued to skyrocket.

Even pirates were trying to obtain these expensive mechs!

While the LMC and its vendors refused to sell their products to pirates and illicit organizations, that did not stop black market organizations from taking advantage of the situation.

They simply used figureheads to buy the mechs before delivering them to specific pirate customers.

Naturally, these smugglers charged a high markup for their services. Pirates from the Nyxian Gap and elsewhere were bleeding money and valuables due to the need to obtain some LMC mechs.

Any pirate gang that didn't possess a Doom Guard or a Ferocious Piranha was considered vulnerable to the changing patterns of the battlefield.

Either they embraced the change, or became swept by it. There was no middle ground!

The Ferocious Piranha introduced so many problems and solutions that the popularity of this mech model continued to spread even further.

Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal already embraced the mech. What was truly noteworthy was that some of the more distant star sectors began to utilize the mech at a greater scale as well.

Not even the Winged Serenade Star Sector was left out! Even though the LMC only established some small subsidiaries in the middle of the Yeina Star Cluster, the early adopters were already popularizing the new product at a rapid pace.

Success was crucial here. As the most prosperous and influential star sector of the Yeina Star Cluster, any trends that rose up here quickly spread to the surrounding star sectors.

This caused the LMC to receive an increasing amount of orders from customers who were based in areas where the LMC had yet to enter.

Even other star clusters began to show some interest! The impact of the Ferocious Piranha was simply too great to ignore no matter the distance!

Chapter 2555: Predator Beyond Comparison

The Living Mech Company or simply the LMC became a household name to many people.

Not just the mech community, but also normal people who didn't care anything about mechs learned of the company.

Its products were making an increasing impact on society. Industry, trade, security and other spheres experienced significant changes due to the ripple effects generated by each additional LMC mech.

Starting from the Desolate Soldier model, mechs with different glows sparked a lot of chain reactions. Starting from where the mechs were used, the consequences continued to ripple further until even average people were affected by the mechs designed by the Miracle Couple!

In fact, the impact generated by the LMC's commercial mechs was significantly greater than the mechs commissioned by the Hexers.

While the Blessed Squire and the Valkyrie product line changed the course of the Komodo War, the consequences were mainly confined to the Komodo Star Sector. At

most, the results of the war would only change how organizations in neighboring star sectors treated the eventual winner.

The greatest limitation of the Blessed Squire and Valkyrie Redeemer models was their narrow appeal. The same properties that made them incredibly attractive to the Hexer people also caused them to be repulsive to every other person.

Who wanted to pilot a mech that was designed to advance the interests of female supremacists?

Who wanted to bask in the glow of a mech that made women crazy and men feel inadequate?

No matter how much the second-rate states in the Yeina Star Cluster wanted to make use of the two models, they simply couldn't.

Certainly, people tried. With the Hegemony's mech industry ramping up production of the two LMC mech models, it was relatively easy for foreign intelligence operatives to smuggle a handful of mechs. The Hex Army hardly noticed if half-a-dozen copies went missing for some reason.

Stealing the design schematics was even better. No matter how much the Hex Army tried to keep the schematics hidden, it was impossible to lock them in the toughest safes considering that a lot of mech companies needed them to produce the mechs.

Yet even after the spies succeeded in their mission, the people who received them still couldn't make good use of the stolen schematics.

So what if they could reproduce the Blessed Squire and Valkyrie Redeemer?

If the foreign organizations from Vicious Mountain or Majestic Teal faithfully fabricated a mech according to the schematics, all they ended up with was a Hexer mech that came with a glow that repelled every non-Hexer!

Yet that wasn't the real reason why these foreign powers wanted to steal the design schematics.

Their actual purpose was to modify them in order to develop a variant that could be harnessed by their own mech pilots.

Unfortunately, the mech designers who secretly tried to adapt the Blessed Squire and Valkyrie Redeemer designs encountered some very familiar problems.

A lot of mech designers had already licensed every popular commercial mech design from the LMC. No matter if it was the Desolate Soldier, the Doom Guard or the Ferocious Piranha, any substantial modification practically ruined their glow!

What was even more frustrating was that no mech designer was able to change the properties of the glows. Other than weakening them, there was no other way to transform them into other forms!

This meant every attempt to make the Blessed Squire and Valkyrie Redeemer designs more universal yielded no useful results.

Stripping the designs of their glows was pointless. They merely turned into generic Journeyman-level mech designs. Any Senior or Master could design something comparable in their spare time.

After a lot of fruitless efforts, the mech designers who were tasked with reverse-engineering any LMC mech design gave up their efforts.

"This design philosophy is too opaque. I don't understand any of the principles behind its mechanisms!"

A lot of mech designers had already learned this lesson, but there were plenty more who needed to experience failure in person before they threw in the towel.

Due to the inability to develop third-party variants for any LMC mechs, the increasingly more popular Ferocious Piranha remained an outlier among other bestsellers.

Usually, mechs that sold really well almost always had to compete against variants developed by competing mech designers.

Yet the products of the LMC continued to be an exception to this rule. Even though plenty of mech designers and mech companies recognized the huge profit potential of the Ferocious Piranha, their inability to retain its valuable glow in a different variant ruined their schemes.

"Why hasn't anyone come up with a cheaper variant of the Ferocious Piranha? I can't afford to pay so much for a light mech!"

"These damn profiteers! Is the mech industry colluding against us? This mech costs as much as an old starship."

Complaints about the Ferocious Piranha's excessively high price continued to flood the LMC. The lack of cheaper variants that retained the same functionality as the base model exacerbated the public criticism towards the mech company.

The company's reputation actually incurred significant damage due to this controversy!

Too many outfits were pressured into buying LMC products. They really didn't want to spend so much money on a mech they originally didn't plan to buy, but because they

needed an answer against enemy glows, they had no choice but to change their buying patterns.

Even though the mech market began to regard the LMC as a villain for sparking so many undesirable changes, the company continued to sell its mechs without interruption.

This was the true value of holding a monopoly. The mech company would have never been able to get away with charging so much money for its products if there were other competitors.

While there were many different mech models that offered great value to their customers, none of them were able to do what LMC mechs could do. As long as glows remained exclusive to the mech company, mech buyers simply couldn't take their business elsewhere.

As the grumbling surrounding the Ferocious Piranha continued to dog the LMC, the new mech model also sparked some positive outcomes.

Its value and capabilities were already amazing with normal usage. Yet the Ferocious Piranha along with every other LMC mech began to showcase a different benefit.

With hundreds of thousands of Ferocious Piranhas already circulating in the mech market, all kinds of people and personalities piloted them in battle.

Many mech owners already discovered that the personality and inclination of a mech pilot largely determined their compatibility to a specific mech.

Those who were more dutiful and honorable meshed well with a Desolate Soldier.

Those who were strong-minded and steady in mind were considerably more suited to pilot the Doom Guard.

The Ferocious Piranha welcomed a wide variety of mech pilots, but those who were aggressive and foolhardy tended to be especially compatible with them. It took a lot of guts to pilot any light skirmisher, let alone a light mech that was often outnumbered on the battlefield!

In the outskirts of the Vicious Mountain Star Sector, a local mercenary corps called the Quasar Dwellers assigned to guard an asteroid mining operation suddenly came under attack!

A rival of their employer had hired another band of mercenaries to attack the mining operation.

Even though both sides employed upright mercenary corps under the auspices of the Mercenary Association, the combatants did not hold back in their attacks.

These kinds of situations were very common in human space!

In general, mercenaries had to uphold their promises to their employers. This was the criteria they were judged upon. No matter the identities of their opponents, they had to make a sincere effort in fulfilling their mission!

"It's the Shell Bombers! They're too well-prepared!"

The Shell Bomber Mercenary Corps under the lead of Commander Pearson possessed a notorious reputation in the local region.

As their name suggested, the Shell Bombers developed a penchant for deploying lots of destructive ranged mechs. Employers who wanted something wrecked often turned to them as they were some of the best outfits when it came to wrecking industrial operations.

Right now, the Shell Bombers that showed up in the distance did not come closer. Instead, their units maintained positions as their cannoneer mechs unleashed large volleys of explosive shells at the mining vessels and facilities protected by the Quasar Dwellers.

"Close in! Don't let these Shell Bombers attack us with impunity."

Commander Rita Valson had no choice but to send out most of her mechs to attack the Shell Bomber mechs.

Fortunately, the Quasar Dwellers splurged on three very expensive Ferocious Piranhas.

The new light skirmishers grouped up with a number of other light mechs and advanced ahead of the other Quasar Dweller mechs.

Using the asteroids as cover, the light mech squad were able to avoid much of the attacks of the Shell Bombers.

Yet just as they came close enough to charge straight at their enemies, a large number of other mechs flew out. These other mechs had cleverly hidden themselves behind other asteroids!

The new mechs boasted different colors from the Shell Bombers. It became clear that they belonged to a separate outfit.

"It's the J Warriors!"

While their name sounded a bit unusual, the J Warriors were just as notorious as the Shell Bombers. The J Warriors excelled in close to mid range combat and often accepted raiding missions.

Now that they paired up with the Shell Bombers, the Quasar Dwellers realized that they were completely outmatched.

"Retreat!" Commander Rita Valson commanded. "We can't win this fight! Pull back and buy the mining vessels some time to evacuate. If these enemy mercs don't want too much damage, they won't go after the evacuees!"

"We can't!"

Unfortunately, the Quasar Dweller light mechs had gone too deep! The J Warrior mechs surrounded them from three directions and began to pepper them with fire from all sides.

The Ferocious Piranhas attempted to do something about it, but the J Warriors weren't ignorant of their threat. The attackers had adopted a very wide dispersed formation. Even if the Ferocious Piranha was able to catch a couple of enemies with its glow, the majority of other J Warriors remained unaffected!

"They've come prepared." Elmer Conta gritted his teeth as he desperately attempted to turn this situation around with his new mech. "We can't break through!"

His Ferocious Piranha became trapped in a jar. The J Warriors may not have deployed any LMC mechs, but the tactics they adopted were still effective against this latest terror.

If the Quasar Dwellers had deployed more copies of this mech model, then their enemies might not be able to pull off this tactic. Yet because they were only able to afford three Ferocious Piranhas, the J Warriors gained the upper hand.

"Dion!" Elmer shouted.

To his horror, one of the other Ferocious Piranhas succumbed after being focused on by the ranged mechs of both the J Warriors and the Shell Bombers.

No matter how well the Ferocious Piranha was able to dodge attacks, it was impossible to remain untouched after being focused upon by over fifty guns.

As the enemy mechs focused their fire on a second Ferocious Piranha, Elmer began to feel more distressed.

Even though his Ferocious Piranha managed to close in on a couple of J Warrior mechs before taking them out, it wasn't enough.

Defeat loomed closer than ever. As the second Ferocious Piranha broke up under all of the concentrated attacks, something finally snapped within Elmer.

"The Quasar Dwellers shall not fall today!"

The final surviving Ferocious Piranha began to shake and glow all of a sudden! As Elmer Conta's will solidified, his mech shakily began to exhibit a resonance field that happened to resist many of incoming attacks!

"Someone just broke through!"

"What?!"

"It's an expert candidate!"

The Ferocious Piranha immediately gained speed out of nowhere. It advanced onto the J Warrior mechs with much more aggression than before.

With just a couple of stabs, every mech targeted by the Ferocious Piranha fell in battle. With the power of an expert mech, the mech piloted by someone who had just broken through turned into a predator beyond comparison!

Chapter 2556: Josephine Isa

Elmer Conta's breakthrough was but the first of several mech pilots who broke through while piloting the Ferocious Piranha.

In fact, he wasn't the first customer to break through while piloting an LMC mech.

Under desperate circumstances, numerous mech pilots of the Desolate Soldier, Doom Guard, Blessed Squire and Valkyrie Redeemer broke through as well!

Those who tracked these breakthroughs tried to figure out whether the LMC mechs produced more of them than normal. Interest in this study grew a lot greater after the Larkinson Clan welcomed a lot of new expert pilots and expert candidates after its adventure in the Nyxian Gap.

Were LMC mechs truly capable of producing more expert candidates and expert pilots?

So far, the results were inconclusive. Compared to the mech pilots of other mechs, those who piloted mechs such as the Desolate Soldier and Ferocious Piranha possessed roughly the same chance of breaking through. There was no statistical advantage to advancing in rank when piloting LMC mechs.

This result disappointed a lot of people who were interested in gaining more expert pilots.

No one was more disappointed in these results than the Hexers. With the Friday Coalition gaining more and more momentum with the help of foreign expert pilots, it became more important than ever for the Hexers to obtain more expert pilots.

At this point in the Komodo War, dozens of Valkyrie Redeemer mech pilots managed to advance. This was not a remarkable figure in itself. Expert candidates showed up every once in a while. Since the Hex Army began to field millions of Valkyrie mechs, it was a given that expert candidates would show up shortly after its release.

The true test was whether these expert candidates managed to advance expert pilots.

Until that happened, these expert candidates were only a bit more skilled than their regular counterparts. Outside of their breakthroughs, they were unable to evoke any resonating abilities. There was no point for them to pilot expert mechs.

This meant that many of the expert candidates who broke through while piloting an LMC mech continued to utilize the same machine.

Unknowingly, these expert candidates developed deeper bonds with the mechs that facilitated their breakthroughs. Their mechs had become more alive and they fed back more benefits to their designated pilots.

Many expert candidates progressed faster than usual for this reason.

Even without this hidden interaction, other expert candidates began to pilot LMC mechs as well.

In the Komodo War, the most expensive variant of the Valkyrie Redeemer began to show up in greater numbers.

The incredibly expensive Valkyrie Brunhild soared onto battlefields at the head of a larger formation of Valkyrie mechs!

In space, a Valkyrie Brunhild piloted by a Hexer expert candidate charged forward. Hundreds of Valkyrie Interceptors fired their light pulse carbines at a distant group of Sundered Phalanx mechs.

The mechs of the Gauge Dynasty fired back with a barrage of rifles and cannons. If there was one lesson the Fridaymen had learned, it was that it was best to take out the Valkyrie mechs at a distance!

The ranged capabilities of the LMC Hexer mechs was not as good as its close combat capabilities. The light rifles wielded by the Valkyrie mechs failed to pose a serious threat against the Sunderers.

Josephine Isa, the expert candidate who piloted the Valkyrie Brunhild, knew that harassing the enemy from afar wouldn't do much. The Sunderer mechs were too well-protected!

"Prepare to charge!" The mech commander in charge shouted.

Acting in coordination with other Hexer elements, the Valkyrie mechs began to ready their spears and shields while accelerating forward.

Their targets immediately knew what the Hexers intended. No one participating in the Komodo War was ignorant of how the Valkyrie mechs fought.

If the Sundered Phalanx mechs consisted of lighter and more mobile elements, then they would have withdrawn by now. This was not the case. The assault mechs all boasted enough armor to shrug off the ranged attacks of the Valkyrie mechs, but that also meant they couldn't outrun their opponents.

If the Hexers wanted to force a confrontation, then the Fridaymen had no choice but to accept the challenge!

The Sundered Phalanx mechs began to adopt a different formation. They deepened it so that the charging Valkyrie mechs were only able to attack the front half. Through trial and error, the Fridaymen managed to learn that as long as they kept enough mechs unaffected from the initial charge, they were able to counterattack with greater success.

Even through the Hexer mech pilots witnessed the changes, they did not abort their charge.

"These inferior Fridaymen are too weak. Don't be intimidated, sisters!"

The Fridaymen ranged mechs poured a lot of firepower at the incoming mechs. Ever since the Valkyrie Redeemer and its variants became more ubiquitous, the Fridaymen deployed more ranged mechs in order to whittle them down.

The casualties among the Valkyrie Interceptors quickly shot up! The enemy ranged mechs wielded weapons that were much better equipped to pierce through the armor of the charging machines.

This was one of the shortcomings of Valkyrie mechs! Their armor plating was not as thick as that of other medium mechs. While the materials that made up their armor system were quite valuable, the enemy wasn't weak.

Unlike the situation facing the Ferocious Piranhas, the Valkyrie mechs never fought against inferior opponents!

Whether it was the Fortune Legion, the Oni Guard or the Sundered Phalanx, every Coalition military organization fielded military-grade mechs that were just as powerful as the mechs fielded by the Hex Army.

Due to this relative parity, the armor of the Valkyrie mechs only lasted for a short time against concentrated attacks.

Dozens of Valkyrie mechs fell in rapid succession! More were incurring serious damage.

Even the Valkyrie Brunhild began to attract a lot of fire!

"Haha!" Josephine Isa laughed. "Fire at me all you want. My mech can take much more of a beating than you think!"

The Valkyrie Brunhild's thicker and larger shield silently shook as gauss rounds and laser beams continued to impact on its surface. Yet despite all of this firepower, the shield hardly deformed under all of the impacts!

This was the power of a mech that cost 1.6 billion hex credits to produce. The Valkyrie Brunhild was considerably closer to an expert mech than a standard mech in this regard.

Even with some errant projectiles impacting the unshielded sections of the Valkyrie Brunhild, Josephine hardly took notice of these incidental attacks.

As the Valkyrie Interceptors closed in on the prepared Sundered Phalanx formation, the mechs finally initiated their Mark For Death abilities.

Beams of ominous light shone from the third eyes on their foreheads and struck some of the melee mechs positioned up front.

No matter how much the melee mechs tried to dodge and evade the light beams, they were unable to shake off the locks!

"Ahhh! I will not bend! Your Superior Mother can't put me down!"

While a number of Sundered Phalanx mech pilots became immersed with visions of death, most of them were strong enough to retain their focus.

Weeks after the Valkyrie Redeemer terrorized the Fridaymen, various institutions within the Coalition sought solutions posed by this new Hexer mech model.

While some came in the form of counters, others advocated for other means.

The Gauge Dynasty opted to train the mental strength of its mech pilots through special means. While the Sundered Phalanx mech pilots weren't able to shrug off the glows

projected by the Valkyrie Interceptors, they managed to maintain a bit more battle effectiveness than in the past.

Even if they lost control for whatever reason, the AIs embedded in their mechs would automatically take control!

The Hexer mech pilots who drove their Valkyrie mechs forth were already aware of this. However, they still had to fight. The Hex Army had to slow down and stall the Fridaymen as much as possible.

As the leading edge of the Valkyrie Interceptor formation was about to collide with their foes, a single shining mech appeared in the front of the Sundered Phalanx mechs.

Josephine Isa's eyes widened.

The axe-wielding mech that had previously hidden behind a pair of sturdy space knights was surrounded by two different fields.

One of them was an energy shield. Every powerful mech incorporated one. Even the Valkyrie Brunhild possessed a shield generator, though its capacity wasn't as impressive due to its compact size.

The axeman mech did not suffer from this problem. Larger and bulkier than the Valkyrie Brunhild, the remarkable Fridayman mech boasted far more protection.

What was truly remarkable about the enemy mech was that it was surrounded by a resonance shield!

"Damn, it's an expert mech!"

Though more and more Hexer mech pilots recognized the threat, it was too late for them to pull back. Due to all of their forward momentum, it was impossible for the Valkyrie mechs turn away or reverse their course!

"Continue the attack!" The Hexer commander ordered. "Charge forth and punch through the other side. This is the only way for us to survive this battle!"

Seconds later, the two sides collide against each other!

The Valkyrie Interceptors not only widened their glows when they came close, but also released disorienting pulses the moment their spears hit their targets.

Almost a hundred Fridaymen mechs became impaled!

However, hundreds more enemy mechs were spared from the attack. The Sundered Phalanx mechs immediately launched their counterattack.

As the Valkyrie Interceptors fought hard to disentangle themselves from their opponents, the enemy expert mech began to tear into their midst!

Every axe blow downed another Hexer mech. The expert mech exhibited surprising speed despite wielding a hefty weapon. In the span of thirty seconds, the powerful melee mech already demolished twenty Hexer mechs.

What was even more alarming to the Hexers was that the enemy expert mech carved a path straight towards Josephine's mech!

As the Valkyrie Brunhild dispatched a pair of Sunderer offensive mechs in question succession, Josephine tried to suppress her panic as she saw the powerful mech approach.

As more and more Valkyrie mechs were cut in half or swatted away like flies, the Hexer expert candidate strangely came under a fatalistic mood.

Expert candidates stood no chance against expert pilots. This was especially the case when the latter piloted an expert mech.

Though Josephine recognized her impending death, her fury against the Fridaymen intensified.

If the enemy expert mech wasn't here, she and her fellow Hexers might have been able to survive. Yet because of this single variable, most of her battle comrades would likely meet their deaths today!

"NO!" She roared. "Death is not in your control! Only I decide who shall live and die!"

To the surprise of everyone, the Valkyrie Brunhild began to show a large amount of activity!

The mech began to glow and a field began to form around it. This was the tell-tale sign that Josephine Isa successfully advanced to expert pilot!

Unnoticed by anyone, the glow of the mech, which was actually weaker than that of the base model, grew considerably.

Yet for some reason, Josephine felt the changes in her mech. A grand and powerful presence seemed to touch her mind as she underwent apotheosis.

"The Superior Mother." She whispered.

The Supreme seemed to impart a blessing to Josephine. Not only that, but the Superior Mother's glow seemed to harmonize with her newfound strength.

With the strength of her breakthrough, the Valkyrie Brunhild charged forth and slammed against the enemy expert mech!

Shields collided and broke as the Valkyrie Brunhild fought like a woman possessed against the strongest Fridaymen threat. Due to the short-term advantages granted by the breakthrough, Venerable Josephine was able to exert much more strength than the enemy mech!

As her overpowering force of will resonated with her Valkyrie Brunhild, some of her empowered will began to touch the hidden portion of the mech.

The spiritual foundation as well as the design spirit resonated with Venerable Josephine's desire to slay her opponent.

The third eye of her mech, which was already glowing at its brightest, suddenly projected a solid beam of light onto the enemy expert mech!

The axe-wielding machine seemed to pause and slow for a moment as its expert pilot experienced a feeling of doom that was stronger than he had ever felt!

At this rare and exceptional moment, it was as if he was being stared at by the Superior Mother up close!

This brief pause did not escape Venerable Josephine's attention. Her Valkyrie Brunhild charged forth and thrust its glowing spear through the lower torso of the Fridayman mech!

The speartip pierced through the armor but failed to inflict too much damage. However, the attack destabilized the axeman mech long enough to generate another opening.

With a rapid maneuver, the Valkyrie Brunhild reached the flank of the axeman mech before launching a powerful blow against the flight system of its target!

Several components shattered! Shards spread out from the back of the expert mech as its mobility became impaired!

Unable to turn around as quickly as before, Venerable Josephine channeled her entire will and conviction in her final blow.

"I SENTENCE YOU TO DEATH!"

For a brief moment, the Valkyrie Brunhild shone brighter than ever! A faint but enormous shadow of a woman seemed to surround the Hexer mech as it thrust its shining spear straight through the back of the expert mech.

Even though the rear armor of Josephine's target was very tough, the Valkyrie Brunhild's spear punched through the expert mech as if the weapon was blessed!

The expert mech was beaten!

As the Valkyrie Brunhild began to lose its resonance field, the mech withdrew its spear.

Every mech surrounding duel had frozen. Both the Fridaymen and Hexers were shocked at what had occurred.

The Valkyrie Brunhild suddenly raised its spear in victory!

"The Superior Mother is with us!"

The surrounding Fridaymen mech pilots despaired.

Chapter 2557: Guiding Principles

With the increasing proliferation of LMC mechs, more and more expert candidates and expert pilots emerged from those who utilized the machines.

Their breakthroughs were different from that of other people.

Elmer Conta, Josephine Isa and many other warriors were shaped by the mechs they piloted.

In the mech community, everyone knew that a lot of factors determined the extraordinary character of a high-ranking mech pilot.

Their parents, their upbringing, their education, their work environment, their friends, their colleagues and their individual views all influenced their guiding principles.

While state militaries invested a considerable amount of effort into steering the views of their expert candidates and expert pilots, they were only able to shape them within a broad range of ideologies.

For example, it was easy enough for the Friday Coalition or the Hexadric Hegemony to prevent their future expert pilots from developing any sympathy towards their enemies or turning against their own state.

Yet that still left a lot of options. How these mech pilots eventually developed was largely out of anyone's control. Not even the mech pilots themselves could consciously choose their own convictions.

Mech pilots derived strength from their hearts, not their minds. The former was a lot harder to control than the latter.

Fortunately, their specialization and the mechs they piloted exerted a moderate influence in the formation of their guiding principles.

Knight mech pilots tended to dedicate themselves to protecting others. Light skirmisher pilots leaned towards attaining greater speed. Lancer mechs often strove to exceed their attack power.

Yet even then, there was a lot of variance in how they ended up exactly.

For example, Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was a light mech specialist. It would have been normal if his force of will was dedicated towards pursuing greater speeds or assassinating the most powerful mechs.

Instead, his force of will strayed towards an unusual direction. Venerable Tusa longed for freedom, both literal and figurative. While he was fine with staying in the Larkinson Clan, he was not as attached to it as other Larkinsons.

This was why Ves knew he had to offer solid benefits to Tusa in order to keep him in the clan.

Naturally, Ves hated expert pilots like Venerable Tusa. He also hated sanctimonious, self-righteous expert pilots like Venerable Jannzi. Both of them developed force of wills that were oriented around principles that weren't entirely compatible with what Ves had in mind.

It would have been great if Ves was able to shape their progression in a more harmless direction.

This was why Ves took in the news conveyed by Gavin very seriously.

"Are you certain about this news, Benny? I have never heard of mechs that were able to produce expert candidates and expert pilots with such a high degree of uniformity."

His assistant nodded. "While we are still in the process of gathering more data, the details of the known cases are very clear. When mech pilots break through while piloting our products, their guiding principles largely align with their mechs to a much greater degree than usual.

Gavin transmitted a report to Ves. It contained all of the cases that the LMC was aware of and performed some analyses in order to prove or disprove some relationships.

What immediately stood out was that out of the hundreds, many of them embodied their mechs.

"Since the Desolate Soldier is our oldest bestseller, the data on its mech pilots is very rigorous." Gavin explained. "Over the past couple of years, we have surveyed hundreds

of mech pilots who have broken through while piloting this machine. Over half of them live and breathe duty. Whenever they pilot a Desolate Soldier, their immersion in their mechs shoot up and they are able to harness the glows of their mechs to a remarkably finer degree than ordinary mech pilots."

Ves let out a rueful smile. "That sounds useful, but only if their mechs can keep up with their strength. A budget rifleman mech model like the Desolate Soldier is only fit for cannon fodder. It is completely inappropriate to assign an expert candidate or expert pilot to such a flimsy machine."

The value of an expert candidate far surpassed that of a single Desolate Soldier!

The value of an expert pilot was even greater!

It made no sense for them to continue to pilot the Desolate Soldier despite their amazing compatibility with this trust old mech model. It was simply too weak to keep up with their newfound strength.

According to the report, every Desolate Soldier pilot who broke through were no longer allowed to pilot their old mechs. Their superiors assigned higher-quality mechs to them so that they could express much more skill.

While all of this made sense, it was a pity to the mech pilots. Without piloting the LMC mechs that shaped their convictions, Ves didn't know how many benefits they were missing.

This was why only regular mech pilots broke through while piloting the Desolate Soldier. No one was willing to allow valuable expert candidates to pilot a fragile mech. It was not that difficult for enemy mechs to breach the cockpit of a Desolate Soldier!

For a long time, the LMC lacked enough data on breakthroughs of expert candidates to expert pilots. Too few employers were willing to let their precious expert candidates pilot a regular commercial mech.

"That has changed as our products became more popular." Gavin noted. "In the last half year, we have begun to output newer mech models. Your Hexer commissions are especially noteworthy. Even though it has only been a short time since the Hex Army embraced the Valkyrie Redeemer and its variants, the early data paints a surprising trend."

Ves continued to read through the report and eventually arrived at the incidents of expert candidates breaking through to expert pilots.

With excellent LMC mechs such as the Valkyrie Avenger and the Valkyrie Brunhild, the Hex Army wasn't shy about letting their precious expert candidates pilot these superior variants.

When some of the first Hexer expert candidates finally broke through while piloting these Valkyrie mechs, the outcome was very shocking.

Almost each and every expert pilot aligned with the Valkyrie mechs!

While the sample size was very small, the fact that every expert pilot dedicated their hearts and souls to the Superior Mother was very extreme.

Not just that, but the new expert pilots also became aligned with the death phase of existence. This caused them to utilize the glows and triggered abilities of their Valkyrie mechs to a much greater degree!

Unfortunately, these new Hexer expert pilots faced a common problem shared by every LMC mech pilot.

They outgrew their mechs.

"The Hex Army is in the process of arranging expert mechs for them. Without a machine that can resonate with them, the new expert pilots don't stand a chance against their Fridayman equivalent."

"What happens to their older machines?"

"Their Valkyrie mechs are reassigned to other Hexer mech pilots."

"Try and keep an eye on what happens to the new recipients of these mechs." Ves commanded.

"That's going to be difficult, boss. The Hexers are only sending us a limited amount of data that they think is necessary to design better Hexer mechs. It's a bit difficult to justify why we need these specific data points."

Ves frowned. "I see. Well, just find a way without giving too much information away. It's quite important for me to see how these specific mechs interact with their new pilots."

According to his theories, every Valkyrie mech that hosted a mech pilot that managed to advance should have received a lot of high-quality spiritual feedback. This meant that their spiritual foundations might have been enhanced to the point of reaching the cap of 25 Ves.

This was a rather low level of saturation, but Ves was still interested in how other Hexer mech pilots fared in these machines.

His thoughts went back to the expert candidates and expert pilots that were shaped by their LMC mechs.

He wasn't the only one who pondered over this issue.

"We might be attracting a lot more attention soon." Gavin warned. "Previously, there wasn't enough data to make any solid guesses, but it's different now. There is enough data to infer some patterns. The Hegemony and an increasing number of customers are inquiring about how LMC mechs are able to shape the orientation of high-ranking mech pilots."

Ves attempted to puzzle out why his mechs produced this pattern.

It didn't take much effort to develop another hypothesis.

Each LMC mech contained two vital spiritual elements that allowed them to stand out from the competition.

The spiritual foundation formed the root of their identity and character. While mechs designed and made by other people were able to gain a spiritual foundation as well, they were usually muddled due to lack of focus.

Due to his design philosophy, Ves consciously cultivated the spiritual foundation of his mechs. Their foundation grew stronger and purer than the products of other mech designers.

This was the most essential quality of his products. Even though a strong spiritual foundation did not necessarily do very much by itself, it breathed a lot of life in his products. It also made for excellent building blocks that Ves could shape into spiritual constructs.

The second spiritual element was the design spirit. Though it was an external property instead of an internal one, the design spirit was responsible for bestowing his products with their most defining property, their glow.

Glows acted on the minds of people in a passive but irresistible way. Unlike other spiritual interactions, glows were a manifestation of auras. As Ves utilized it more in his products, he began to develop some theories why they worked so well on mech pilots when other spiritual attacks had to pass through the man-machine connection.

One of his more radical theories was that mechs were just as susceptible to glows as living entities. Therefore, a glow acting on both the man and machine would not provide much inherent advantages.

Another theory he developed stated that glows were not active phenomena. Instead, the interaction happened in reverse.

In other words, powerful spiritual entities such as the Golden Cat did not actively output energy. What happened instead was that mech pilots and other living entities possessed an intrinsic sense of beings of greater power.

This meant that a glow could not be blocked unless the mech pilot in question developed a method to halt this instinctive spiritual sensing ability!

While Ves favored this theory, he had no proof to back it up. He could only leave it in the growing pile of other unconfirmed ideas.

In any case, understanding the spiritual nature of his products gave Ves a framework that was able to explain the phenomena described by his personal assistant.

Of course, he couldn't expose too many sensitive details. In order to keep his trade secrets secure, Ves spun out a vague story.

"Our living mechs are different." He confidently grinned as he leaned back on his floating office chair. "Every other mech piloted by someone who has broken through is as dead as a piece of rock. From my own understanding of breakthroughs, these remarkable events are very mysterious. Expert candidates and expert pilots are not just shaped by their own beliefs, but also the mechs they are interfacing with. An ordinary mech might not be able to react to their breakthroughs, but that does not necessarily apply to living mechs. I can't say anything further than that as I have not performed any in-depth studies on this topic. Anyway, these are my thoughts. Please convey them to the Hex Army and any other curious customer."

"Will do, boss. I don't think that will stop them from asking other questions."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "Just tell them that this is a confidential matter. Master Moira Willix of the MTA is already investigating this phenomenon in greater detail."

"Okay. That works I guess."

The best part about this excuse was that it was probably true. Master Willix was so interested in his design philosophy that she never passed up on an opportunity to gather more unusual data related to his products.

As Ves dealt with this issue, he began to think about how he should make use of what he learned. If LMC mechs truly exerted a powerful influence on the progression of mech pilots, what did that mean for the Larkinson Clan?

Chapter 2558: Nurturing Mech Pilots

When Gavin finally finished his daily report, he departed the stateroom, leaving Ves alone with Lucky and his bodyguard.

His cat was currently dozing off on his desk. The mechanical cat had been growing lazy lately.

Ves grew a little irritated. He tapped his cat on his head.

"Meow?"

"Aren't you forgetting something, buddy?"

"Meow meow." Lucky innocently blinked.

"When was the last time you paid your rent?"

"Meow?"

"Don't act stupid in front of me." Ves grumbled at his cat. "Your diet is a lot better than before. Do you know why? It's because of all of the mechs I've designed! Do you think that all of the time and effort I've invested in my work is all for the sake of keeping you fat and happy?"

"Meow meow meow!"

"Don't give me that! It's been many months since you did anything useful. Ever since you passed the so-called Antithesis Essence gems to me, your rear end has gone remarkably silent. That seems rather strange to me since the quality and quantity of your daily meals has tripled. There's a reason for that, you know! I'm not feeding you all of those yummy medium-grade exotics for free. I'm expecting a return on my investment!"

Sadly, his cat remained unsympathetic towards his expectations. Lucky flippantly swished his tail and phased through the desktop.

"Hey, don't get away from me! Explain yourself!"

The gem cat had run away. Ves scowled. The cost of keeping Lucky sated this past month amounted to over a billion hex credits. He paid for the exotics because he expected to obtain some good gems.

He would have been a lot more reluctant to do so while he still remained inside the Nyxian Gap. The strange environment somehow caused Lucky to produce a lot of weird gems such as the Minor Chaos Remnant and the Unstable Chaos Essence gems.

Their exact uses were unclear to Ves. While he had utilized them to create spiritual explosions and to empower his wedding bands, he did not believe that was the extent of their use. What would happen if he embedded them into a mech?

"I'll have to try that out once I get the opportunity." He muttered.

It was too wasteful to employ his gems onto ordinary mechs. Sadly, his recent attempts to make a masterwork mech had all ended in failure. He wasn't developing any expert mechs either so that ruled out another good opportunity to utilize his gems.

Of course, just because he couldn't use up his existing gems didn't mean he was content with what he had. He possessed an excess of weird chaos gems but retained very few gems with normal effects.

He briefly retrieved his pouch and inspected his current stash.

"Only three, huh? That's way too few."

[Maiden's Affection]

The desire of an ancient maiden is locked within this gem. Increases the attraction of a mech by 40 percent to females.

[Bastet's Whisper]

The echoing whisper of a feline patron can be found within this gem. Enhances the acceleration of a tiger mech by 30 percent.

[Whipping Boy]

The fear of a boy towards women is encapsulated within this cursed gem. Increases the dread of a mech by 50 percent to males.

His face distorted when he observed the third gem. The Whipping Boy disgusted him. He wanted nothing more than to throw it away, but that was far too wasteful. He could not bring himself to miss out on a potential payoff.

"Ugh, forget about it. I'll just reserve this gem on a mech I don't care about." He muttered and put back all of his gems.

He returned his attention to the report he received. He reread the document and analyzed the data in greater detail.

"Why does this data differ from what I've observed of my own expert pilots?"

It wasn't hard for him to figure out some answers.

For one, not all of them piloted LMC mechs. Sure, Ves customized a number of Bright Warrior mechs for them. However, the mech model's spiritual character was fairly vague

compared to his other mechs. With Goldie as its design spirit, the Bright Warrior's glow was not as focused as the glows of his other mechs.

To be honest, Ves mainly intended Goldie to serve as the guardian spirit of the Larkinson Clan. He did not want her character to be too centered around specific traits such as aggression or protectiveness. Her main role was to foster greater loyalty and affection towards the clan.

While these traits made Goldie compatible with pretty much every clansman, they did not steer anyone towards a specific outlook or fighting style.

It made sense to pair her with a versatile mech like the Bright Warrior. Yet her lack of defining strengths also meant that any expert candidates or expert pilots that emerged while piloting Bright Warriors tended to develop in scattered directions.

Ves examined his expert pilots one by one.

"Venerable Jannzi, Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise are special cases."

Each of them developed special bonds with Qilanxo, causing them to slant towards protection.

However, the influence of defense-oriented design spirit was not able to override their inclinations.

From what he could tell, Venerable Jannzi best embodied what Qilanxo stood for. A very strong factor in her development was the mech that had accompanied her throughout her rise.

The Shield of Samar started off as the first production copy of the Aurora Titan. However, through constant spiritual and physical upgrades, it grew into something more.

Nonetheless, the Shield of Samar still stayed true to its origin. The Aurora Titan design defined this custom mech and also shaped Jannzi's development as an expert pilot.

A weird expression suddenly appeared on his face.

"Compared to my other products, the Aurora Titan is singularly focused on defense."

He envisioned a space knight focused on extreme defense when he initially designed the Aurora Titan. He did not hesitate to compromise every other trait in order to squeeze more defensive power out of this mech.

This was very rare!

Most mechs had to possess at least some rounded capabilities. Without mobility, how would it be able to move? Without offensive power, how would it be able to threaten opponents?

It was just that Ves paid less attention to this demand when he designed the Aurora Titan. His extreme approach caused the mech to develop an extreme spiritual character.

It didn't help that Ves had designed it shortly after he went through a Mastery experience where he rode along Eloise Pelican's desperate attempt to reunite with her son. Her strong maternal feelings and her amazing feats served as strong sources of inspiration.

In fact, Ves derived the name of his mech design from the energy projection generated by Venerable Pelican's perfect resonance!

As Ves reflected on the history and evolution of the Shield of Samar, he began to comprehend why Venerable Jannzi developed such an extreme character.

"It's my fault."

He overlooked how much of a role her mech had played in her development. From the moment she adopted the Shield of Samar as her lifelong partner, she had already begun to assimilate the properties of her machine.

In fact, it wasn't just Jannzi learning from her mech. The Shield of Samar also grew in alignment with its mech pilot.

The latter wasn't important at this time. What mattered more to Ves was how to shape the development of his expert pilots.

An engineer abhorred uncertainty. If there was a way to specify how mech pilots progressed, then Ves would not let go of this opportunity!

"Venerable Jannzi's development represents one end of the spectrum." He muttered. "Venerable Joshua and Venerable Tusa should be closer to the other end of the spectrum."

Venerable Joshua mainly piloted the Quint. Venerable Tusa piloted other light mechs for a long time.

In both cases, their mechs did not push them into a specific direction. Like any other Bright Warrior, the Quint gave Joshua plenty of room to find his own way.

Ves was pretty thankful for that, because Joshua encountered no hindrances when he chose to go with his heart. Due to all of the LMC mechs he piloted, Joshua eventually developed a force of will based around life.

As for Venerable Tusa, Ves was not as knowledgeable about his development. Nonetheless, the mechs he piloted before did not constrain him very much, causing him to orient his force of will around a principle of his own choosing.

The situation was more complicated for Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise. As far as Ves was aware of, their force of wills were offensive in nature. This caused them to develop some contradictions towards Qilanxo's influence.

The pair of seasoned leaders eventually managed to reconcile these contradictions while still remaining true to their original mindsets. They both focused on offense, but fought with the explicit intent to protect their own people.

As Ves considered these outcomes, he didn't know what to think.

"It's kind of like being a neglectful parent." He muttered. "I basically let my expert candidates do what they wanted. I didn't exert any control at all on how they progressed. The end result is a bunch of mixed results."

If he did not force the expert pilots to develop along specific paths, then he wouldn't have been able to get a grand prize like Venerable Joshua.

On the other hand, if he had treated them more deliberately, then Venerable Jannzi wouldn't have turned into his political opponent.

It was too late to do anything about it. The transition from expert candidate to expert pilot solidified their convictions. As far as Ves knew, expert pilots were no longer capable of changing their minds on a whim.

"It's too late for my expert pilots, but not my expert candidates!"

Ves suddenly realized that he had been a bit neglectful towards the development of the Larkinson Clan's expert candidates. He spent much more thought on his mature expert pilots.

After all, compared to expert candidates who were barely stronger than before, expert pilots were beyond human. Even without an expert mech to resonate with, their incredible skill and fighting capabilities were not something that anyone could ignore!

While Ves recognized that he should never neglect his expert pilots, he needed to be more hands-on with the development of his expert candidates.

While they had all formed a nascent force of will, it was still malleable. As long as Ves increased his influencing efforts on them, he might be able to determine how they ended up as expert pilots!

"This should be possible!"

Ves wanted to meet with his expert candidates. He needed to know them on an individual basis in order to tailor an individual development plan for each of them. In order to prevent the emergence of another obstinate expert pilot such as Venerable Jannzi, he had to make sure they were not exposed to any detrimental influences!

He composed a quick message to Gavin to invite all of the current expert candidates to the Scarlet Rose.

Once he did that, he leaned back on his chair and thought again.

He had to develop a systematic approach as soon as possible while the expert candidates were still susceptible to outside influence.

There was nothing wrong with allowing his expert candidates to develop their wills organically. Life was unpredictable, so a part of Ves preferred to take a hands-off approach towards this issue.

However, another part of him called for exerting much more control over the evolution of his expert candidates. If he engaged in targeted development, then he might be able to 'design' his future expert pilots!

This was very valuable!

Different force of wills produced different effects. Some of these effects were more useful to Ves than others.

For example, Ves might be able to obtain more expert pilots like Venerable Joshua if he designed a targeted training program!

The only challenge was that it was very difficult to obtain a specific result. Right now, Ves didn't really have a good idea on how to steer any of his expert candidates into embracing life.

Chapter 2559: Expert Candidate Survey

The expert candidates of the Larkinson Clan all answered the summons with no hesitation.

No matter whether they were taking a nap or in the middle of practice, they all put down what they were doing and boarded a shuttle that brought them to the Scarlet Rose.

The mobile supply frigate didn't have enough space to accommodate so many shuttles arriving at once. Ves grimaced as he saw a small queue forming at the aft of his personal ship.

"I need a bigger boat."

Ever since Ves hijacked the Scarlet Rose from the Coalition Reserve Corps, he fell in love with her advanced features and stellar performance. His prior ship was the Barracuda which was really just a toy for rich people.

Yet just a few years after acquiring her, Ves no longer felt impressed with his personal ship. The Larkinson Clan grew bigger and Ves grew busier. The scope of his work grew bigger and his demands on external facilities increased.

Even though mobile supply frigates were designed to address the needs of mech designers, the Scarlet Rose was no longer adequate for his purposes.

He looked forward to obtaining his factory ship. The humongous volume of this 2 kilometer long vessel possessed ample room to satisfy all of his needs in the next couple of decades.

Only a capital ship was able to keep up with his growth. His new factory ship would not only serve as the industrial heart of the Larkinson fleet, but also serve as his personal seat of power for the times to come.

Incidents such as the minor traffic jam forming in front of the cramped hangar bay of the Scarlet Rose would no longer take place.

A short time passed before the first invited expert candidate entered his stateroom.

Lucky, who had showed up again for some reason, raised his head in curiosity.

"Meow."

Commander Casella Ingvar saluted Ves as soon as she stepped inside and approached his desk.

"You've summoned me, sir?"

"I did. Please take a seat."

As Casella sat down, her pet flapped her wings and launched in the air.

"Chirp. Chirp."

The goldfinch-like bird flew above Lucky in a teasing manner.

"Mirrie. Don't tease Lucky like that."

"Chirp chirp!"

"Meow!"

Even though Mirrie was flying high in the air, Lucky used his flight abilities to soar straight upwards before capturing the poor bird!

"Chirp chirp chirp!"

Fortunately, Lucky was merely toying with Mirrie. He let her go as soon as he indulged in his victory. The bird was not resigned to this defeat and began to flap her wings even harder!

Ves and Casella ignored the sideshow.

"So, commander. I've heard you are adjusting well to your new position. How are the Sentinels?"

The Sentinel Commander nodded. "They are getting better, sir. I've implemented some morale-boosting measures to drag them out of their slump. I'd like to thank you for allocating some of the new second-class mechs to us. A lot of Sentinel mech pilots have grown excited about piloting these machines. Our only regret is that we don't have enough of them to satisfy all of my men. For now, I've set up a rotating schedule to give every mech pilot an equal amount of time to practice with the new additions."

"That sounds quite fair, but have you ever thought about setting up a reward scheme? By letting the best-performing Sentinels gain more access to the second-class mechs, you can motivate them into working harder."

Casella faintly shook her head. "Magdalena suggested that as well, but for every winner, there are at least ten losers. We need to foster cooperation, not competition."

Though Ves didn't quite agree with that, he did not bother to argue with her. Perhaps her approach worked out better.

Ves began to ask more questions. Casella freely answered them with clear passion in her voice.

The more they talked, the more Ves recognized that Casella was in her element.

The Living Sentinels loved their new commander. As an expert candidate, Casella gained a lot of admiration from the start. This made everything easier for her. When she began to implement some reforms, hardly any of the Sentinels resisted her ideas.

Ves figured that without her identity as an expert candidate, Casella would have faced a lot more resistance from her own men. The Living Sentinels were in a pretty bad shape once the Nyxian Gap Campaign concluded.

It wasn't fair, but so was life. Casella did not reject the boons granted by her piloting accomplishments but leveraged them instead. Through her proactive leadership, the Sentinels were finally beginning to move forward again.

Through this little discussion, Ves gained a strong impression of Casella as an expert candidate.

It was clear that she wanted to dedicate herself towards leadership and responsibility.

In fact, Ves even saw the shadow of Colonel Ark Larkinson in the Sentinel Commander.

Casella was different from Commander Orfan and Commander Dise who were warriors first and officers second. The latter two were mainly passionate about their martial skills. While they did not reject the need to command their subordinates, they did not obsess over it as much as other people.

From what he could see, Casella was in her element when she was commanding. If Ves took this away from her, hardly anything would be left.

What was strange to Ves was that her active and developing spiritual potential was very unusual in nature.

It was difficult for him to describe her spiritual attributes. As best as he could tell, her attributes were dark, shadowy, silent, thoughtful, patient, calm and cold.

Yet while Casella embodied all of these traits, she did not seem to be too extreme.

Frankly speaking, Ves was confused. Both Casella and her brother possessed peculiar spiritual attributes that were actually opposite in nature. Their complex spiritual attributes originally compelled him to hire them, but now that he had them, he was a bit lost.

He inwardly shrugged. He didn't have to pay too much attention to the interaction of her spiritual attributes. As far as he could tell, Commander Casella was all about leading people, and that was enough.

Now that he had her measure, Ves returned to his original purpose.

"If you happen to advance to expert pilot, what would you like to do?" He asked.

The direct question stumped Casella for a second.

"I'm not sure, sir. According to regulations, I'm supposed to relinquish my position and move over to the Hall of Heroes. It's just..."

Ves offered her a friendly smile. "Are you reluctant to leave your command?"

"I am. I enjoy my current work and I don't see that changing if I ever manage to advance." She admitted.

"You may have a chance of keeping your command once you become an expert pilot."

Her eyes widened. "Isn't that against regulations?"

He chuckled. "Perhaps it's best to understand the context behind this rule. The Hall of Heroes serves a special purpose. Its goal is to form a separation between our expert pilots and the rest of our clan. We do this not to marginalize our expert pilots, but to limit their influence so that they don't dominate everyone else. The Larkinson Clan must be governed by every Larkinson, not a select few clansmen."

Casella frowned. "Won't it be dangerous to make an exception for me in that case?"

"The threat is there, but the benefits outweigh the costs. It only makes sense to apply the rules when they yield the most gains. I think in your case that our clan is much better served if we allow you to keep your command."

A lot of happiness flowed from Commander Casella. She felt enormously relieved now that Ves had given her an opening!

"Thank you, patriarch! This is a very welcome piece of news to me. I even thought about suppressing my progress if I couldn't gain an exemption."

If Casella really did that, then the Larkinson Clan would be missing out! Even though the Larkinson Clan had too many expert pilots right now, he would not forgive himself if he allowed an expert candidate to hold herself back due to a single rule!

Though it wasn't entirely proper for Ves to contradict one of his own rules, he didn't care. As the Patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, he could get away with breaking them once in a while.

After he wrapped up his conversation with Casella, she stood up, took her bird and exited the compartment.

Ves made some notes in his implant. In his opinion, he should reinforce Casella's development as an expert pilot by providing her with a custom mech that was oriented towards command, leadership and responsibility.

It didn't hurt to obtain at least one expert pilot that excelled in command. Colonel Ark Larkinson set a stellar example of how such an individual could dramatically affect the performance of thousands of mech pilots.

"Next."

Casella's brother entered next.

Unlike her sister, Imon Ingvar was not as reserved. He marched over to the desk and saluted to Ves before sitting down.

His dog, Dalson, was already butting heads with Lucky.

"Meow!"

"Woof!"

"Well, Imon. I see you're still wearing the uniform of the Avatars. Why didn't you follow your sister?"

"The Sentinels don't suit me." Imon shrugged. "I feel great fighting alongside the Avatars. Each of them are brothers and sisters to me. If I move over to the Sentinels, I'll have to start over again with mech pilots who aren't as good."

"What is your aspiration?"

"I.. I want to become a great mech pilot! I want to surpass my limits. I've only taken the first step so far, but I'm confident I can become an expert pilot like Venerable Joshua. If he can do it, so can I!" Imon confidently answered.

That was a remarkably simple aspiration to Ves. It sounded rather shallow and not that serious, but he sensed Imon's sincerity.

The discussion continued on for another ten minutes. Ves asked a range of other questions about Imon's life in the Larkinson Clan and his time in the Avatars.

"I'm not like my sister. I don't know why others keep comparing me with her, but I'm completely different." He insisted. "I know she is doing great things over in the Living Sentinels, but I don't want to be responsible to so many people."

Ves quickly moved to reassure him. "You don't have to be afraid of that. Many expert candidates and expert pilots aren't suited to command. If you want to focus on developing your piloting skills, then we will provide you with ample opportunities."

Compared to his sister, Imon was a lot more straightforward. He was the kind of mech pilot who did not hesitate to dive head-first into battle. He was also a bit impulsive and did not always think matters through.

What was Ves supposed to do with a mech pilot as bone-headed as Imon?

Should he allow Imon to continue to progress along these lines or should he draw his own lines and force Imon to follow his arrangements instead?

Ves had difficulty deciding. A large part of him wanted to treat Imon as a remarkable control experiment. He wanted to avoid intervening the expert candidate's mental progression and see what happened if Imon ever broke through.

Well, it wasn't as if he was short of expert candidates. He could apply his ideas to his other expert candidates just as well.

Ves asked one more question before he let Imon depart.

"If you ever advance to expert pilot, what would your expert mech look like?"

"Isn't that what you're supposed to decide, sir?"

"As the recipient, your input matters. We cannot ensure a good fit if we don't know what you prefer to see in your expert mech."

"Well... I don't really know what I want in my expert mech." Imon furrowed his brows. "I like piloting swordsman mechs, but I can pilot other melee mechs as well. I suppose I'm good as long as you give me an expert mech with strong attack power. Don't give me one of those Hexer mechs, though! I'd rather die than pilot a female mech!"

"I will take that into account if the need to design your expert mech ever arises."

Chapter 2560: Trueblood Primacy

After interviewing Casella and Imon Ingvar, Ves proceeded to meet with the other expert candidates.

While he had met them before, he never really paid too much attention to them. This was rather negligent on his part because if any of them underwent apotheosis, their prior experiences would probably play a significant role in determining their final convictions.

Though Ves knew it was impossible to exert 100 percent control over how these pilots transformed, he could still manipulate the odds. It was already a win in his book if his attempt to steer their evolution succeeded 50 percent of the time.

He met all kinds of interesting personalities in the next couple of hours. Anyone who managed to make the first jump was already special in some way. Expert candidates possessed remarkably strong wills compared to ordinary people. This meant they were less inclined to conform to normality.

Of course, compared to expert pilots, these lesser individuals were not demigods yet. Ves was confident he could hold his ground in their presence.

"Mr. Tamarin Larkinson." Ves briefly studied the man's profile. "I'm glad to see a fellow trueblood here. We've gone through a lot of changes since we left the old family."

The forty-ish year old mech pilot offered Ves a weary nod. "That it is. It has only been a couple of years since we've left the Bright Republic, but to many of us, those days feel like ancient history. It's surreal to see so many of our fellow clansmen treating it as a lost era that is only available in the form of archival footage and historical records."

Ves chuckled. He immediately felt more connected to Tamarin. Talking about the 'good old days' even though they weren't very good always seem to bind the truebloods together. There were too few of them in the clan. Their shared origin was one of the few elements left that belonged to them and no one else.

"The reason why we treat the pre-clan days as if we lived during the Age of Conquest is due to how much we have grown. Just like how the Age of Mechs is unrecognizable to the prior age, our clan has climbed incredibly from the modest roots of the family. If you chose to follow my uncle Ark and stuck with the current iteration of the Larkinson Family, you would find that nothing much has changed. As far as I know, the other Larkinsons are still stuck with their shabby third-class mechs and light carriers."

It was impossible for the Larkinson Family to be as prosperous as the Larkinson Clan. Ark may be an excellent expert pilot and an inspirational leader, but he was not an industrialist!

Without Ves, there was no one in the Larkinson Family who was capable of generating a lot of revenue.

"It's not that bad." Tamarin responded. "The Larkinson Family still has those shares in the LMC. The dividends they've received lately is enough for them to start acquiring some second-class assets, though not as much as us. The family has some other plans in mind as well."

As Ves continued to chat with Tamarin, he noticed that the middle-aged mech pilot was very interested in the safety and the development of the Larkinsons.

The Avatar mech pilot took a lot of pride in his trueblood heritage. He paid special attention to the standing of the truebloods in the clan. He also tracked the progress of the Larkinson Family in order to make sure they were doing well for themselves.

If the Larkinson Family ever encountered trouble, then Tamarin would definitely feel distressed.

Ves didn't know what to make of that. Whenever he tried to talk about other topics such as his time with the Avatars of Myth, Tamarin exhibited much less passion.

To him, serving in the Avatars was merely an obligation that he had to meet. He fought in order to prove to everyone that truebloods like him were not freeloaders. His main motivation in growing stronger was to give more weight to the truebloods in the Larkinson Clan.

"The more outsiders we recruit, the less we matter." Tamarin explained. "We can't let the clan slip out of our control. So far, we only have two expert pilots out of five. This is a dangerously low proportion. We need to prove to the adopted clansmen that our superior Larkinson blood and genes makes us better! For this cause, I will do my best to follow the example of Venerable Jannzi and strive to break through as fast as possible."

"I.. see. Take your time, then. There's no hurry."

After Tamarin Larkinson left the stateroom, Ves rubbed his face and updated his notes.

Suffice to say, Ves didn't think Tamarin was engaging in productive behavior. Since the clan opened up its doors to outsiders, the integration of foreigners who initially had no connections to the Larkinson proceeded exceptionally smoothly with the help of the Larkinson Network.

These days, hardly any clansman paid attention whether someone was a trueblood Larkinson or not. Position, friendship, familiarity and other factors mattered more.

So far, most trueblood Larkinsons accepted this new reality because they were strong and capable enough to maintain their high standing within the clan. It would have been a different story if they visibly lost a lot of power and influence, but that was not the case at the moment.

Unfortunately, that did not stop truebloods like Tamarin Larkinson from becoming 'concerned' about their standing in their clan.

Though their intentions were good, Ves would prefer it if they didn't obsess too much over the purity of their bloodline.

Ves had long let go of the old definition of a Larkinson. To the clan, anyone who was a part of it was a Larkinson. That was it. There were no internal divisions and no ranking that stated that one Larkinson was better than the other one. Perhaps that was a very strange custom to other family organizations, but then again they didn't have anything like the Larkinson Network!

To be honest, aside from sentimentality, Ves didn't really care about his trueblood identity anymore. The clan operated by different rules and Ves wanted it to stay that way.

Ves had little patience for truebloods like Tamarin who wanted to turn back the clock!

"I definitely have to intervene in this stupid fellow's development before he turns into an even greater disaster than Venerable Jannzi!"

He thanked himself for investigating expert candidates like Tamarin more thoroughly. He couldn't afford to let this delusional idiot ruin the harmony of the Larkinson Clan.

"So what should I do?"

Well, first off, he had to pull Tamarin off his assigned Bright Warrior mech. The Bright Warrior was the quintessential Larkinson mech. Since the Golden Cat was its design spirit, Ves had a feeling that piloting the mech would only exacerbate Tamarin's biases over time!

"This is one of the blind spots of the network," Ves observed. "It instills greater loyalty in the clan but doesn't dictate in what way our clansmen should strive towards."

While Ves could have designed a stricter network, that would have been too obvious. He knew that the MTA was definitely keeping an eye on how his clan instilled loyalty in its members. For now, the effect was mild enough that it could easily be chalked up by constant exposure to glows, but if people completely changed their personalities, then that would definitely ring a lot more alarm bells!

He quickly wrapped up Tamarin's case by passing on a secret order to Commander Melkor. He wanted his cousin to reassign Tamarin to one of the new commercial second-class mech models.

He took special notice of the fact that Tamarin specialized in piloting knight mechs. That was even more concerning.

"In the future, I have to make sure he stays away from Bright Warriors and Aurora Titans."

Right now, Ves suffered from a lack of mech models that he could use as tools to shape the development of his expert candidates. He could only resort to changing other environmental aspects until he expanded the mech roster of his mech forces.

"Next!"

He met with a couple of other expert candidates next.

Isobel Kotin-Larkinson was another Avatar expert candidate. As an adopted Larkinson, she was very grateful to be a part of an ascending clan. Though she cared about her new identity a lot, she still possessed the humility of someone who used to be an average third-rater.

She turned out to be a marksman mech pilot who was very precise with a laser rifle. She not only excelled in marksmanship when piloting a mech, but also won tournaments when wielding laser weapons in person.

Aside from her calm and analytical mindset, she didn't stand out in any way aside from her age. She wasn't that much older than Venerable Joshua, which meant she possessed a brighter future than Tamarin.

It was too bad that she wasn't an Ylvainan. If she was an adherent of the Ylvainan Faith, then Ves would have arranged her to pilot his new Transcendent Punisher mech model.

"Thank you for answering my questions." Ves nodded towards her. "You may go now. I will discuss your situation with Commander Melkor and see if we can give you some more opportunities to improve your marksmanship."

Ves met with some Living Sentinel expert candidates next.

Percival Larkinson was a stoic and mature trueblood Larkinson who did not show as much respect to the clan patriarch as the ones that came before.

"I see that you've lived through some tough battles during the Nyxian Gap Campaign."

"I survived that hellhole of an abyss, yes. I can't say the same for the four-hundred Sentinel mech pilots who failed to make it out. They were my comrades, sir."

Oh boy. Ves expected to face some pressure when he met with a Living Sentinel, but Percival seemed to have quite a chip on his shoulder.

Predictably, the rest of the meeting did not proceed well. Percival kept his back straight and stared judgmentally at Ves. Obviously, the surviving Sentinel still reserved a lot of blame to Ves for dragging so many clansmen to their deaths.

Ves noted that Percival was a striker mech specialist. Though the skilled Larkinson mech pilot was capable of piloting other mech types, he preferred to pilot striker mechs. In fact, he previously piloted the Doom Guard when he was a part of Task Force Predator.

Due to the Doom Guard's double-edged nature, its mech pilot had to endure a lot of mental pressure. Someone like Percival must have subjected himself to a lot of torture in order to pilot this hellish machine.

Ves briefly grew concerned. What happened when someone with a lot of resentment piloted a torture machine every day?

He didn't think anything good would arise! If Percival Larkinson ever advanced to expert pilot, then it was very likely that he would turn into another political opponent!

"Okay, I've learned enough from you. You can return to your unit now."

Percival rigidly sat up, saluted Ves, and turned around.

As Ves watched the expert candidate go, he added some warning messages to Percival's private record.

To be honest, he didn't want Percival to become an expert pilot at all. However, he couldn't be too blatant in stifling the progress of an expert candidate. The Larkinson Clan was supposed to be an organization that prized fairness and equality. Ves couldn't arbitrarily suppress random Larkinsons just because he didn't agree with their views.

"Fortunately, I can still enact some measures."

As the most important mech designer of the Larkinson Clan, Ves was essentially able to dictate the mechs that his Larkinson mech pilots were supposed to pilot. This was a considerable power and one that he would always strive to keep.

Ves quickly composed another secret order that instructed Commander Casella to address Percival Larkinson's problematic views.

He did not add any additional instructions. Instead, he gave the new Sentinel Commander a lot of leeway in order to see how she addressed this issue.

"Consider this a test."

Ves couldn't babysit all of the expert candidates. It was up to their individual commanders to sort out the problem cases.

"I'm a mech designer, not a pilot designer."