

Chapter 591 Important Reminder

A lot could change in three days. Transforming a collection of low-grade parts into a single mech required both effort and thought. Ves supplied the latter while the mech technicians supplied the former. Neither of them held back in their attempts to transform the limited Pointed Sentinel into a strong and valiant New Sentinel.

Working day and night, the sleep-deprived mech technicians sacrificed much to maximize their productivity. Under the constant babysitting of Chief Haine, the techs found the will to keep pushing onwards and complete a week's worth of work in less than half the time.

At the latter half of the three-day period, the mech technicians started to slip up. Even if they could push themselves to stay awake with the help of stimulants, their concentration inevitably suffered. Plenty of work had to be redone due to small mistakes. This was also why the tech crew hadn't managed to finalize the assembly of the New Sentinel up to now. They still needed to catch up to the last tasks that needed to be done.

Everyone was dead-tired right now except for Ves, whose physique easily sustained a few extra sleepless nights. All of them yearned to drop into comfortable beds. Hell, they didn't even need a bed.

"Seeing is believing." Chief Haine said as she admired the frame of the New Sentinel that she had practically shaped by proxy. "I didn't think your frankenstein mech would work, to be honest. There's so much complexity involved in mating those different parts together that I didn't believe a few hour's worth of design planning can solve all of the compatibility issues."

Ves looked at his New Sentinel with pride. To outside eyes, the contours of the mech did not differ too much from the Pointed Sentinel. Though the arms and legs appeared to be different, Ves had deliberately selected stronger

limbs that nonetheless match the proportions of the original ones. This prevented a lot of troublesome compatibility issues such as disrupting the balance due to grafting a muscled arm onto a thin female's frame.

Outwardly, the New Sentinel hadn't changed too much. Inwardly, the mech had practically gone through a rebirth. Ves replaced virtually every core component with stronger ones salvaged from various mechs. Besides the cockpit and the internal support structure, hardly anything was left from the Pointed Sentinel.

"With a new engine, power reactor, sensors, a set of energy cells and more, the upper ceiling on the New Sentinel's performance is roughly twice as high as its predecessor." Ves predicted. "That should be more than enough to cope with Captain Orfan's demands."

"I'm still a bit iffy about the transplanted artificial musculature. That's an enormously risky operation, you know. It's not every day we do something like that."

"Even if there are minor errors in the implementation, the New Sentinel can cope with it. The raw power that the mech will gain from this transplant is more than worth the risk."

Ves highly prioritized the act of unifying the artificial musculature. All of those limbs came from different mechs. The biggest compatibility issue that arose from merging them with the torso of the Pointed Sentinel was that the muscles simply wouldn't match. Trying to fudge them around until they mated with each other took too much time.

So Ves decided to do something drastic. He ripped out all of the old muscles and transplanted a set of new one. This set came intact from a single complete mech wreck. Ves would have no worries about incompatibilities as a

consequence, but trying to make them compatible with the New Sentinel was an extremely difficult challenge.

This momentous task consumed an enormous amount of time and effort from the mech technicians.

"I hope the mech won't lock up its muscles when we first boot it up." Chief Haine prayed. "We'll suffer a fatal blow if it turns out that all of our work is in vain."

"Your work won't be in vain. I can promise you that." Ves replied confidently.

He had a good feeling about the New Sentinel. Despite its unfinished state, the mech radiated a subtle aura of spirituality. The X-Factor had taken root in its frame. It not only infused a copy of the heavenly horse, but also carried the earnest aspirations of the mech technicians that worked on the frame.

The latter influence was miniscule, so they didn't pollute the spiritual quality of the mech. Ves even figured that it added some complexity to the X-Factor. The untamed ferocity of the heavenly horse was the dominant component of the X-Factor and should help unify the different parts into a single whole.

"All that is left is to load in the software." Ves spoke.

He stepped on a lifter platform that brought him over to the opened cockpit. After slipping inside, he loaded in the software and started making some final tweaks that he had been saving for last. This was necessary because the physical state of the New Sentinel didn't completely match the theoretical design schematics.

"A few screw ups and misinterpretations can pile up and lead to significant change."

Therefore, Ves had to spend a precious hour configuring the software to match the actual condition of the mech.

"Finished!"

It took a little longer than he thought, everyone tentatively finished up their work on the mech. Every part was in place and the whole frame was put together nicely.

The entire crew looked at their mech with emotion. All of their sweat, blood and tears had been poured into this frame. Its complexity went far beyond a civilian mech.

Now was the time to put the mech to the test. Captain Orfan walked over in full piloting gear. During the last three days, she hadn't been idling. Ves had loaded in the virtual design of the New Sentinel to the simulator pod so she could become accustomed to its properties.

"Are you ready to mount your steed?" Ves asked the captain.

"I'm ready to roll!"

Boundless confidence radiated from the mech captain. She had never flinched away from the upcoming duel to the death. To a mech pilot like her, representing the honor of the Flagrant Vandals was a pivotal achievement in her career. The possibility of death had never swayed her courage!

"Be careful, captain. The physical copy won't move as smoothly as the virtual version. When you test it out, don't go full throttle just yet. Start off with the basic movements and slowly work your way up there. I might need to make more adjustments along the way."

"Got it. I'm not stupid, you know."

After the captain boarded the mech, everyone stepped far away as the mech finally booted up. Its humanoid eyes lit up as its power reactor started supplying power to the entire mech.

Ves sat behind a control panel and vigilantly stared at the telemetry transmitted by the New Sentinel. Though he already spotted a couple of minor hiccups, they didn't affect the performance of the mech too much. He already started performing some tweaks and uploaded the changes into the operating system of the New Sentinel.

The mech immediately became less discordant. So long as Ves didn't plan on making any drastic changes to the programming, he could continue to adjust the performance of the machine as it stayed operational.

"You can start moving, captain! Please move the limbs one by one!"

The New Sentinel slowly lifted up an arm. Nothing hitched up. It then started to rotate the limb around before performing increasingly more complex maneuvers. It repeated the same routine with the other limbs.

Throughout the testing process, Ves ceaselessly smoothed out the wrinkles to insure the programming didn't become a hindrance in the operation of the mech. As the New Sentinel moved over to a testing ground and started to put its frame to its paces, the mech continued to hold up.

"It's a success!"

"I can't believe we got a frankenstein mech to work!"

"How is it possible that this mech runs so well!?"

By the time Captain Orfan had to stop in order to rest up for the upcoming duel in the evening, everyone looked gratified that their efforts hadn't been in vain. At the start, many of them held doubts. They thought that Ves foolhardedly picked the most complex approach to improving the Pointed Sentinel.

Now that they witnessed the increased performance of the New Sentinel firsthand, they knew that the sacrifice was worth it. The unrestrained power the New Sentinel exhibited significantly exceeded their expectations!

"Hah!" Orfan laughed as she hopped out of the cockpit. "I wasn't sure I'd be able to pilot such a good mech in battle, but you sure delivered on your promise, Mr. Larkinson! That Avid Serpent won't stand a chance with my new mech!"

The performance of the New Sentinel couldn't match her service mech, but it came close enough to accommodate her fighting style. This was a mech with very good bones and muscles. Even if it was clumsy in some areas, it did not lack in reaction speed and agility!

Compared to a piece of trash like the Pointed Sentinel, the frankenstein mech was a machine fit for the arena!

"Go take a break and prepare yourself for the upcoming event." He told her. "I'll hang back and perform some minor optimizations."

Ves didn't require anyone's help, so he dismissed the tired mech technicians as well. They deserved a well-earned rest.

Left alone in the workshop, Ves looked at the fruit of his labor and sighed to himself. This project only took three days, but the difficulty involved with getting it to work rivaled the challenges he faced when he designed the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord.

"In some way, the New Sentinel is my third original mech design."

He missed the experience of designing a mech. Spending so much time with the Vandals taught him a lot, but one thing he regretted was that the Vandals didn't allow him to showcase his design ability.

When this honor duel first came about, Ves immediately skipped the easier options because they amounted to nothing more than modifying an existing mech. Such changes didn't go far enough in his eyes.

"This is what I live for. A mech designer can't do without designing mechs."

This experience reminded him that he should never lose sight of his core purpose.

Ves met many mech designers along his way who fell off the correct path. Many mech designers who failed to jumpstart their careers shifted into other jobs such as repairing or appraising mechs.

Other mech designers who hadn't been able to stand up on their own in the market joined larger influences and became part of large design teams. Though this still allowed them to contribute to new designs, they would never gain as much compared to the lead designers.

Only by making all of the major design choices by themselves would mech designers be able to refine their ability to design a mech!

"Every other path except for designing your own mech leads to a dead end."

This was what he believed in. Though talented designers could still climb up the ranks as part of a design team, they inevitably developed gaps that might be hard to make up in the future.

"I have to find a way to keep designing mechs." He concluded. "I'll stagnate if I stop for a long period of time."

This was easier said than done. The mech designers of the Mech Corps worked in rigid design teams where Seniors decided everything. Ves was far from reaching that height.

"Hm, unless there's a drastic change, I'll likely remain in charge of administration before going back to being a number cruncher."

The positions he took up with the Vandals rounded out his experience, so he hadn't wasted his time. The experiences he went through would serve him well for the rest of his career once he became involved with more collaborative projects.

Ves shook his head and dragged his mind out of the clouds. "I shouldn't pat myself on the back too soon. I still need to touch up the New Sentinel before it's ready to fight for real."

Chapter 592 Honor Duel

Many people caught up to Harkensen III in the past few days. All of the hype surrounding the honor duel between Captain Orfan and Avid Serpent attracted lots of mech fanatics.

The underground arena made a killing by selling tickets at inflated prices. The demand for a seat was so huge that the arena decided to add floating stands to the arena in order to stuff as much people in their venue as possible. They intended to make the best use of the open space above the arena!

Part of the reason why tickets became hot was that underground arenas prohibited any broadcasts and recordings. Even though the authorities didn't care about shutting them down, the underground still needed to remain out of sight from the public. The underground arena utilized loads of jamming and interference technology to uphold this custom.

This basically meant that the honor duel was an event that someone might only experience once in their lives! Ves could imagine how many people wanted to catch up to the duel.

"When something hot becomes rare, its value spikes."

Ticket prices shot into space, crowding out the regular folk who could only spare a thousand marks at most. Last Ves had heard, the cheapest tickets sold for 20,000 marks!

Though it seemed that the entire Harkensen System went crazy, in actual fact only a small proportion of visitors and locals were caught up in the hype. Many tourists never heard about the Flagrant Vandals and didn't particularly care about the honor the Vesia Kingdom.

Still, many Vesians and Brighters attached a lot of importance to the outcome of this duel. Citizens of the Republic and the Kingdom practically felt duty-bound to attend, though the extreme ticket prices scared many of them away.

The underground arena already made a killing by selling inflated ticket prices, but their appetite hungered for more. They opened up betting stations in many places in the Harkensen System.

In this, they failed to grab the lion's share of the market. This was because the more established betting companies moved first. With their existing infrastructure, they held a definite advantage over the underground arena that had to keep most of its operations in the shadows.

No matter how Ves looked at it, the Reinaldans brazenly profited from the honor duel. "It's like they can't let off any attempts at earning money."

All of the betting elevated a sober duel between two mech pilots from different states into a match with billions of marks at stake. Ves was worried that some might seek to pressure one of the duelists to throw the match. He wasn't naive to think such cheating never happened, particularly in the underground circles where enforcement was lax.

"Well, it probably won't work this time."

The Flagrant Vandals backed Captain Orfan, so anyone wishing to coerce her into throwing the match would have to face the fury of an entire mech regiment.

As for Avid Serpent, she wouldn't initiate an honor duel if she didn't value her principles. To some people, honor was everything. To others, honor was

something that they couldn't touch or sell. How could they value something that didn't really exist?

"Well, even if Avid Serpent is only for show, the worst she can do is tarnish the Vesia Kingdom's honor. Any sabotage from her side won't affect the honor of the Vandals."

While Ves didn't concern himself too much about foul play, he still made some precautions of his own. Ever since the New Sentinel came into being, he never let it out of his sight. Anyone who wanted to tamper with the mech had to overcome his vigilance first.

Fortunately, as the time of the duel arrived, nothing went wrong. By the time Captain Orfan returned and entered the cockpit for the upcoming show, Ves felt reassured that nothing would go wrong from now on. He followed an arena attendant out of the workshop and sat down at a seat reserved for him at the very front.

He looked around and saw only strangers. It was too bad that Chief Haine and the mech technicians declined to attend. Sleep haunted them for days. They deserved their rest.

Right now, the final pre-show ritual came to an end. Due to the honor duel, the regular duelling schedule had been ditched. Nothing was allowed to upstage the honor duel.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Vesians and Brighters, Reinaldians and Roppongans, wherever you hail from, welcome to the main event!"

Anticipatory music pumped through the entire arena, affecting the moods of two-million attendees. Ves looked up as a massive floating stand of seats hovered over his head. Above those floating stands was another set of floating stands, and so on. If their antigrav modules ever suffered a

malfunction, hundreds of thousands of people would crash into the people sitting below.

"Damn, is this even safe?"

It wasn't as if the underground arena was required to adhere to any safety rules.

He forced himself out of his worries and turned his attention back to the stage.

"There is no greater rivalry in this corner the battle for supremacy between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom! Two different states with two very different ideals have clashed for several hundred years without a winner in sight! Has anyone heard of a conflict that lasted so long?! Only the rivalry between the Terrans and the Rubarthans comes close!"

Many audience members laughed and jeered at the Vesians and the Brighters. Their constant warring had become something of a joke in the Komodo Star Sector.

The Vesians were portrayed as mule-headed dunces for their repetitive wars of aggression that never seemed to win them anything at the end.

The Bright Republic on the other hand gained a reputation for being punching bags for the Vesians.

They were like a dysfunctional couple where an abusive husband kept hitting his wife.

Ves glowered a little as the Reinaldans amused themselves into thinking they were better. "Without the Frozen Leaf Alliance, would you still be able to make fun of the Vesians?"

After a few minutes of blathering, the announcer finally moved on to the duelists.

"Without further ado, let us welcome the mech pilots who will stake their lives over this duel! Two may enter, but only one will leave!"

Two separate gates opened up, allowing two separate mechs to enter the field.

Ves held his breath as he beheld the Rogue Breaker. While Ves had transformed the Pointed Sentinel into something new, he never believed his competitor would stay still.

"Look at Avid Serpent! What are those add-ons attached to the frame of her mech!?"

Some people recognized the strange external components that surrounded the joints and other parts of the mech.

"Those are force boosters!"

Force boosters basically enhanced the movements of the mech at critical moments. They weren't seen very often because of their complexity and high energy demands. Still, in a short duel, these force boosters could easily amplify the power exerted by the Rogue Booster by a significant amount!

"And that's only the external changes."

Ves couldn't see anything different about the Rogue Breaker from within. Someone as good as Creta would never neglect the internal structure of the mech. Only when the fighting started would Ves be able to see what his rival had changed.

"Certainly, Captain Orfan won't have it easy."

There was one aspect in which the New Sentinel surpassed the Rogue Breaker. Though Avid Serpent had attracted a lot of attention, her mech didn't appear to be too special despite the external additions.

Though the New Sentinel looked a little duller, the mech somehow possessed a faint charm that compelled most of the audience members into admiring its form. Its cheap armor inherited from the old Pointed Sentinel did little to cover up its allure.

"Does this spearman mech look a little different from last time?"

"Why do I feel like I'm looking at a whole other mech from three days ago?"

"I thought the Pointed Sentinel was a trash model! How come I'm itching to buy one right now!"

Though Ves wasn't able to access the System, he estimated the strength of the New Sentinel's X-Factor to be in the low C-grade or high D-grade. Though this paled in comparison to the B-grade of the Crystal Lord, this was still sufficient enough to stoke people's desires.

It was too bad that no one equated the special nature of the New Sentinel to Ves. As always when it came to mechs, the mech pilots attracted all of the attention while the contributions of the mech designer faded into the background. Ves smiled ruefully as the announcers never even credited Mr. Creta and him for elevating the mechs to new heights.

"Before we start this duel, do any of you two ladies have second thoughts? This is your final chance to withdraw! After the signal is given, the gates will remain locked and the energy screens will remain up until blood has been drawn! Cockpit ejections are blocked and leaving your mechs won't do you any good! This will be a true fight to the death with no exceptions!"

The consequences of failure was serious. Even if one side wished to be merciful, the arena organizers wouldn't brook any diversions from the script. As the guarantor of the honor duel, they had taken up the responsibility of enforcing the terms of the duel to the letter. Their reputation would be ruined if they failed to uphold the terms.

"I have never feared death! All of those who slandered me are wrong!" Avid Serpent yelled from her mech. As always, her identity remained a secret and the voice scrambler did a very good job in obscuring how she truly sounded. "As the challenger of this duel, I will not disgrace myself by going back on my vow! Come what may, I will bear the consequences of my actions!"

Her valiant statement won over a significant part of the public. Her story had an air of mystery and tragedy around her. Despite being labeled as a deserter, Avid Serpent had done a good job in presenting herself as a tragic figure who had left the Mech Legion for reasons other than cowardice.

Every person's imagination harbored a different story of Avid Serpent's fall. Some imagined her to be a noble lady whose entire House fell overnight. Hunted down by the forces of a rival House, the lady had no other choice but to flee the Kingdom and throw a cloak over her identity to escape pursuit.

Others figured her to be a talented commoner who had slowly risen up the ranks of the Mech Legion. One day, a noble ponce took a fancy upon her and wished to bed her. Avid Serpent violently resisted his advances and a major accident happened which claimed the playboy's life. Enraged, his House sent assassins and bounty hunters after the woman, who had no choice but to find refuge in a neighboring state.

Many such stories circulated from people's mouths and on the galactic net. Even Ves became intrigued by her origins. Who was she, really? Even Ves couldn't tell.

"Hah! You Vesians are all the same!" Captain Orfan broadcasted from the New Sentinel. "You're all bark and no bite! You better ready yourself for a beatdown, because by the time I'm done with you, you wish you were dead!"

Ves almost wanted to palm his face. The way she spoke made it seem as if the Flagrant Vandals was made up of nothing but boors. Even though that

statement was somewhat accurate, Orfan could at least put their best foot forward.

Many thousands of Brighter visitors stood up and cheered for Captain Orfan and the Vandals.

"Go beat down that venomous snake!"

"I love you, Rosa! Please marry me!"

"Show these Reinaldans that us Brighters aren't pansies!"

Once both sides had their say, the duel couldn't be postponed anymore.

"What courage! Neither duelists have flinched! Let us witness their ferocity and see whose convictions will stand at the end! BEGIN!"

An explosion erupted in the air above the dueling ground which served as the signal for the start of the duel. Both mechs instantly exploded into action. One wielded a spear, the other held an axe. The opening moves of the mechs revealed their true strength for the very first time!

Chapter 593 Treasure Trove

The Harkensen System in the Reinald Republic welcomed many visitors every year. From tourists looking for excitement to outfits dropping by to conduct business, the lively star system was one of the most popular destinations in the region.

Many outsiders who weren't fans of mechs or the shady transactions, they regarded the Harkensen System with contempt. "That den of thieves and greedy merchants is a hollow place. There's no honest work to be found there! If the sun went supernova one day, nothing of value in the Komodo Star Sector is lost!"

Obviously, the Harkensen System seemed like a place where only thugs and thrill seekers gathered. There was hardly a sense of class to be found, and

what luxuries Harkensen I offered appealed more to the nouveau riche than the true power brokers.

This was the Harkensen System on the surface. To the vast majority of the Komodo Star Sector, this was all there was to it. Such a shallow destination required little consideration.

However, all of this was a facade.

To be more precise, the Harkensen System operated on several different levels. What everyone saw could only be considered as the shallow layers. What was observable from the surface meant nothing to the secrets hidden below.

To those who operated on the highest level, the Harkensen System was not as pleasant and tourist-friendly as everyone had thought.

"Did you hear? The honor duel between a captain from the Flagrant Vandals against some Vesian deserter has just started!"

"If I hadn't blown my entire budget at the casino earlier, I would have been able to afford a ticket!"

"Those blood-sucking Reinaldans! Who is crazy enough to pay 20,000 credits for a single seat?!"

Right now, a significant part of the Harkensen System became enthralled with the duel that happened in the arena underneath Black Belle City.

In other words, the duel diverted a lot of people's attention, leaving others free to move in the dark.

On the other side of Harkensen III, a group of fit men and women walked through the streets of a medium-sized city. Their path led them from a commercial district to a decayed industrial district. This area of the city used to

be a prime location for smaller mech manufacturers, but all of them folded one by one in the last couple of decades.

Many old factories looked shuttered and emaciated. The decay and blight attracted many lowlives who hung out in these streets due the lack of monitoring. The sensor network in this area hadn't been updated and had long been tampered with long ago. Each gang that took up residence in the factories installed interference devices that blocked most small devices from making recordings or patch into local communication network.

This basically turned this blighted district into a lawless place.

Some thugs noticed the newcomers and approached them while holding their hands over their guns. They were about to bark the group of strangers away, but halted when one of them held up a token.

"We're expected."

The lead thug huffed at that. "Hmph. The boss is at the end of the street."

Not a single gang member looked for trouble with the outsiders as they walked by. Nobody made any rash movements. Any group in possession of a token was allowed to enter their territory. That was the rule.

Ten minutes later, the group reached a fallen factory that looked no different from the others. Nonetheless, the newcomers shoved aside the rusted gate and entered the main structure.

The darkness inside made it difficult to navigate the factory floor. However, none of them activated any lights. Instead, they each took measured steps in the dark, relying on nothing but memorized instructions to get through the invisible maze. Not once did they bump into anything.

Once they reached the entrance to another hall, they went through a door on the left, which finally led them into a bare metal room with not a single piece of furniture inside.

The only sight that greeted them was a dozen men in heavy combat armor standing guard from the opposite side of the room. Two men in business attire greeted the newcomers.

"Welcome, welcome. I am glad to see you've made it here in time, Major Verle."

Impressively, the man in the center of the group in plainclothes turned out to be the commanding officer of the Verle Task Force! This man who led over ten-thousand Vandals had declined to attend the duel with the honor of his mech regiment at stake!

"The situation has changed." Major Verle grimaced at the person on the opposite side. "Too much attention is being cast on the Flagrant Vandals. Though the attention-grabbing duel has disrupted many of our plans, it has given us a good opportunity to sneak to this meeting."

"Were you followed?"

"Do you doubt our professionalism?"

The room fell into a brief silence.

"Let's move on." The man on the other side said. "Our next step required us to bundle all of our strengths. After all, the Starlight Megalodon rests for no one. If we don't hurry up, others will reach the derelict first."

Everyone present in the room pumped up once they heard that name. The Starlight Megalodon was not a casual phrase to be uttered whenever someone felt like it! Even now, the name remained a legend in the frontier.

"The Starlight Megalodon..." Major Verle uttered. "I really can't believe we're on the trail to that legendary battleship. A partially-intact derelict of the Common Fleet Alliance. Even if she's a few hundred years old, the treasures we can recover is enough to overturn the entire star sector!"

"It all depends on whether we can get our hands on the keys." The other man said and turned to the person standing next to Major Verle. "Isn't that right, Lord Javier?"

The Vesian noble had surprisingly accompanied Major Verle without any restraints or restrictions. "Relax, I know where to find the Things you are looking for. I know for sure that one of them is on this planet."

"Good, good. As long as we can gather all the keys, we can reconstruct the final route of the Starlight Megalodon!"

There was a reason why everyone looked fervent at the thought of tracking down the Starlight Megalodon. That was because she was a battleship packed with wondrous materials and technologies into the size of a small city! Over a dozen kilometers long and armed with massive planet-cracking weapons, the CFA predominantly utilized this ship class to wage decisive battles against tough alien civilizations.

Not long after the Komodo Star Sector came into being, the Starlight Megalodon was the flagship of a small CFA task force meant to press the sandmen back. Unfortunately, the task force encountered a freak accident during FTL travel, knocking most of the ships out of FTL. By the time the CFA ships converged with each other, they found to their surprise that the battleship that served as the nucleus of their force was gone!

Back then, the CFA tried hard to track down the Starlight Megalodon, but their search was in vain. They eventually concluded that the massive and expensive battleship was lost with all hands.

Nobody outside of the CFA really cared, and anyone that did took their word for it. Everyone soon threw the mystery of the Megalodon out of their minds until certain forces discovered the presence of descendants of the crew in the frontier!

Only a very small circle of people knew about the descendants, and immediately grasped them without alerting anyone else, including the CFA!

The secret movers learned many things from interrogating the descendants. However, tracing back their route to the Starlight Megalodon wasn't as straightforward.

This was an operation years in the making. By now, the group collectively gathered almost all of the keys. After acquiring the ones exposed by Lord Javier, they could finally make an attempt at looting the valuable battleship!

How could they not be excited?! As an organization that shouldered the defense of humanity's outer borders, their technology exceeded the lofty standard of the Terrans and the Rubarthans.

Almost nobody in the Harkensen System knew what was at stake. The Starlight Megalodon wasn't even a footnote in history to most people.

Right now, Ves hung on to his seat at the front row of the underground arena. Captain Orfan's New Sentinel charged at Avid Serpent's modified Rogue Breaker without any qualms!

"Come on, captain! I put on my money on you, so you better win!"

"Die Vesian!"

Once the two mechs came close, the New Sentinel thrust out its spear with considerable momentum.

Clang!

A loud ringing noise reverberated in the arena as Avid Serpent deflected the initial stab with a flick of her mech's axe.

The two mechs separated. Neither pilot was in a hurry to press their advantages.

Inside her cockpit, Captain Orfan felt as if her entire mech urged her forward. Though she really wished to up the ante and unleash a flurry of blows at the Rogue Breaker, she couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

This wasn't like a regular deployment. In a real battle, she still possessed the leeway to retreat from battle and live another day. Right now, both of their mechs lost the ability to eject their cockpits. There was no way out after commencing the duel!

Either she lived, or she died! With her entire life at stake, Orfan couldn't treat this duel as a casual romp.

"Damn it, Mr. Larkinson wasn't kidding when he said my opponent's mech will be powerful."

What little the Rogue Breaker revealed already placed it on par with premium mechs. When it came to movement and attacks, the axeman mech certainly emphasized offense over defense!

"I'll have to take it slow and steady." The captain concluded and shifted her mech into a defensive posture.

True to her prediction, Avid Serpent took the initiative and lashed out. It ran close and chopped with its axe. The moment the New Sentinel lifted up its spear to block the attack, but one of the force boosters attached to the weapon arm of the axeman mech suddenly glowed! The limb gained a lot more power as usual and accelerated forth at a blazing pace!

Clang!

However, Captain Orfan was an experienced mech pilot. She had never let down her guard after spotting the weird boosters attached to the mech. She managed to parry the axe chop in time!

"Don't think these little toys can give you the edge! Taste my spear!"

Captain Orfan realized the force boosters allowed Avid Serpent to unleash a devastating attack. The New Sentinel still suffered from the aftershock of the weapons collision.

Perhaps the New Sentinel wouldn't be able to last for the entire duel after blocking a handful of full-powered attacks!

This compelled the captain to go on the offensive. With the long reach of her spear, Captain Orfan quickly regained the initiative. She unleashed a flurry of stabs, leaving no openings for Avid Serpent to exploit.

For a minute, everyone thought that Avid Serpent would never be able to escape from those shackles. However, the axeman mech fought calmly while making sure that the spear never touched its armor.

"They're both keeping up with each other's movements!"

"Look at how different the two mechs move!"

Ves saw that Captain Orfan piloted the New Sentinel in an extremely aggressive manner, which was completely different from the game plan they set up!

"She's wasting too much energy!"

This duel wouldn't be decided within a short amount of time. Rationing the energy reserves of a mech was a basic priority for every mech pilot.

Worst of all, Avid Serpent maintained a sober mind throughout the assault. It always chose to jump out of reach, but when that wasn't possible the Rogue Breaker fended off the spear stabs with the minimum amount of exertion.

"The Vesians are playing the long game."

As long as the New Sentinel exhausted itself, Avid Serpent only needed to make a single push to achieve a win!

Chapter 594 Probing Attack

Ves thought that Captain Orfan lost her mind after melding with her mech. Ves had infused the New Sentinel with the unbridled fury of the heavenly horse.

"Did I go too far?"

Ves constructed the image of the heavenly horse with an eye towards offense. However, too much offense was not a good thing.

Avid Serpent displayed a lot more self-control right now. The axeman mech she piloted cleverly showed off its nimbleness by dancing and dodging out of the way of unrelenting spear flurry aimed in its direction. Its axe rarely deflected the spear stabs.

"Stay still you rat!" Orfan yelled as the New Sentinel's feet thundered forward.

"I've no reason to do that, you mangy dog!"

The Rogue Breaker refrained from showing off its cards. Its force boosters remained dormant, as Avid Serpent hadn't found it necessary to draw upon their strength while on the defensive.

At some point, Captain Orfan ceased her constant aggression. Even she began to feel some strain after keeping the offensive going. The quirks and imperfections of the New Sentinel prevented her from piloting the mech as an extension of her limbs. Compared to her service mech, this frankenstein mech moved like a creaky robot.

The two mechs circled around each other before they went on the attack again. This time, the two mechs refrained from making any elaborate movements.

"They're probing each other." A stranger said next to Ves. "They both acknowledged each other as worthy opponents. Since they can't take down their opponents quickly, they're taking a step back by trying to learn the other's strengths and weaknesses."

The cautious probing and slow-paced movements caused the audience to become annoyed. Many of the audience members booed at Avid Serpent and Captain Orfan for being timid cowards. Where did Captain Orfan's passion go? Why didn't Avid Serpent display her full strength?

Only the more astute mech pilots understood that the battle had only just begun. Both of them were in it for the long haul.

"Has anyone found out the face behind Avid Serpent's mask? I always thought her identity has issues."

"Hell, better men have tried. It's like she's a ghost in the Harkensen System. Before she showed up here, she hadn't made a splash at all. Not a single Vesian knows who she is! For all I know, Avid Serpent might not even come from the Vesia Kingdom."

"Why would anyone lie about her backing?"

"I don't know. Maybe she wanted to put herself in the spotlight and took advantage of the war between the two states."

Ves listened to the rumors around him but did not even come close to figuring out the true identity of Avid Serpent.

Not that it mattered too much in this case.

Seeing Avid Serpent move her mech even nimbler than the New Sentinel, Ves felt a little jealous at Mr. Creta's accomplishments. The first time Ves saw the Rogue Breaker in battle, the mech exhibited a good amount of agility.

Under the care of an apprentice of Master Klaisewist, the Rogue Breaker experienced a transformation of its own that wasn't any worse to what Ves had done to the New Sentinel.

Ves glanced around the nearby seats and spotted Mr. Creta calmly observing the fighting happening beyond the energy screen.

The Vesian mech designer abruptly turned towards Ves, and their gazes collided with each other. After a few seconds of staring at each other, Creta politely smiled at Ves and tipped his finger at him as if in salute before turning his attention back to the duel.

"What a tough adversary." Ves muttered. The man came from an earlier generation and possessed a definite advantage in age and experience. "It's like facing someone who's almost a Journeyman."

From the smooth performance of the Rogue Breaker, Ves could already tell that the mech experienced a large-scale strengthening. The mech was much more robust than before and its defensive strength had received a minor improvement as well. Overall, every performance characteristic had been strengthened without exception. None of its aspects became weaker.

This balanced strengthening contrasted sharply with what Ves had done to the New Sentinel. He had butchered the old mech and cobbled together an entirely new frankenstein mech. This boosted several of its performance characteristics to a whole new level, but the sloppy and hasty work had also impacted its integrity and other performance characteristics.

This led to two contrasting sights. One mech fought smoothly while the other fought with power.

"Enough of this dance. Take my Dervish of the Axe God!"

The axeman mech suddenly ceased to probe the spearman mech and started to commit to the battle. Some of its force boosters activated which abruptly put

the mech into a spin! With its axe stretched out, the mech became a force of nature which could hack anything apart which strayed into its vicinity!

Despite spinning around like a figure skater, Avid Serpent's mech somehow approached the New Sentinel with an alarming amount of speed. The Rogue Breaker's Dervish of the Axe God was unavoidable!

Inside her cockpit, Captain Orfan began to sweat at the sight. "You don't do things by half-measures, do you?"

The New Sentinel couldn't escape this calamity. It was too near to its opponent! By the time it turned around and ran, the spinning axe would have already hacked against its frame!

It could only meet the forceful spin head-on!

Captain Orfan did not dare to put all of her trust into the New Sentinel's spear. Against the momentum driving the axe into a spin, if the New Sentinel dared to parry it with the shaft, it was liable to snap!

This was also why she skipped the option of carrying a shield. Axemen mechs were known as shield breakers, and the Rogue Breaker had definitely been designed to tear them apart.

Ordinarily, Orfan knew she had to rely on her mech mobility to negate the attacks of an axeman mech. However powerful they were, they still needed to connect to be effective!

If not for Mr. Crete's force boosters and other enhancements, Captain Orfan could have dodged throughout the entire match.

After waiting for the spinning axeman mech to come close, Orfan didn't lose mind. Though the sight looked dreadful to the audience, the mech captain ignoring the spinning axe blade and jabbed the New Sentinel's spear downwards.

"My mech's reach is greater than yours, and no matter how fancy you spin your mech, it can't do anything with the footing to keep it up!"

The tip of the spear failed to strike the nimble legs that kept the Rogue Breaker into a spin. However, the threat successfully diverted the unstoppable momentum of the dervish. After the New Sentinel struck again, it managed to trip one of the moving limbs which destabilized the axeman mech.

Yet Avid Serpent hadn't spun her mech in vain. Just before Captain Orfan tripped up her mech, she commanded the Rogue Breaker to let go of its axe!

The hefty weapon spun into the air before striking the New Sentinel square into its chest!

BANG!

Many shards of armor plating erupted from the chest of the spearman mech. The flying axe had carved through almost every layer of armor plating! If Captain Orfan hadn't adjusted her mech at the last moment, the axe might have cut off the arm of her mech!

Right now, she couldn't afford her mech to lose an entire limb! Therefore, she took a gamble that the New Sentinel could take the axe hit without damaging the internals.

Her gamble paid off!

The free hand of the New Sentinel went up to grip the axe embedded into the chest, but Avid Serpent activated a mental command on her mech that recalled the axe back to its hand!

"Look! The axe is connected to the weapon arm of Avid Serpent's mech! It can reel the weapon back in after it has thrown it out!"

This wasn't an unusual sight with higher-end axeman mechs, but Ves was pretty certain the original Rogue Breaker didn't incorporate such a feature. For

Mr. Creta to add this feature to a mech in three days was very impressive because such systems easily broke!

"Avid Serpent isn't retracting the axe completely! What is she doing?"

The Rogue Breaker kept the axe hanging onto its arm. Instead, it started to swing its weapon arm with the weapon still attached to the alloy cable.

The subsequent attack arrived at the New Sentinel a lot faster than Orfan anticipated. Her mech hastily put up its guard, allowing it to deflect the cable-bound axe with great difficulty.

Orfan tried to unleash a counterattack, but Avid Serpent merely sent out the axe yet again!

Right now, the spearman mech's reach advantage had been reversed. The New Sentinel could no longer bully the Rogue Breaker by taking advantage of its reach. The proficient way in which Avid Serpent threw and retrieved its axe had baffled over half the crowd.

"What can a skinny cable do? I'll hack it apart!" Captain Orfan yelled.

The New Sentinel dashed forward and dodged the spinning axe sent into its direction. Immediately after, it swung its arm in an attempt to cut the cable with its spear.

Ding!

Unfortunately, the collision showed that the cable remained steadfast throughout any attempts at breaking it apart. The fearfulness of Avid Serpent's mech increased. What was more depressing to Captain Orfan was that she couldn't get any close!

"Hahaha!" She laughed after her mech fended off the latest flying axe. "I'm usually the one who bullies others with my reach. If you think an old dog like me can't think of another trick, then don't blame me for losing your life!"

When Avid Serpent threw out another axe, the New Sentinel jabbed its spear yet again. This time, it didn't bother with trying to cut the resilient alloy cable. Instead, it pushed the shaft of its spear against the strength and forced it to coil around it. It looked as if someone winded up a piece of loose cable!

"Caught you!"

With a mighty heave, the New Sentinel dragged the Rogue Breaker closer and unleashed a kick at the axeman mech that battered the mech's internals a bit. However, somehow the cable gained a life of its own. The axe quickly shook off the entanglement with the spear and returned to the waiting palm of the Rogue Breaker as the kick it received had pushed it back.

"You're not the only one here who can pull off a special move."

She declined to call out the name of the move, but that didn't detract from the New Sentinel's imposing manner. The spearman mech gripped its spear with both hands and stepped forth like the weight of the galaxy rested on its shoulder. Once it came into fighting range, the mech started spinning its spear!

Different from the Rogue Breaker's Dervish of the Axe God, Captain Orfan didn't intend to spin around her entire mech. Instead, the footing of the New Sentinel seemed like it was connected to a mountain! Knocking it off balance wouldn't be easy!

"Come! Taste bewilderment!"

As the New Sentinel marched closer, it abruptly turned its spin into a slash that scratched one of the arms of the Rogue Breaker. Avid Serpent hadn't anticipated the attack!

Just after completing the slash, the New Sentinel resumed with spinning the spear. Seconds later, it repeated the slash, this time succeeding in digging

through the cockpit of the Rogue Breaker. This affected some of its sensors, causing Avid Serpent no small amount of difficulties.

"What's this wheel of spears?!"

"That's a party trick. It's nothing complicated. Spearman mech pilots like to practice it because it improves our fine control over our mechs."

"If you want to copy Captain Orfan's moves at home, I suggest you don't do it in a populated area. Once you make a mistake, the spear will go flying and is liable to hit an innocent bystander!"

Right now, Captain Orfan had caught her opponent off-guard by using this parlor trick to obscure her attacks!

Chapter 595 Wrestle

As the match entered a heated phase, the strengths of the Rogue Breaker became more evident. Ves constantly had to adjust his estimation of Gabriel Creta's competence.

Although the apprentice of Master Klaisewist had not yet advanced to Journeyman, his technical competence alone revealed that he was extremely close to the threshold. This was by far the toughest match that Ves had ever faced!

Ves realized he made a mistake in underestimating his counterpart. "I can't dismiss Apprentice Mech Designer out of hand."

He used to believe his System-upgraded Skills gave him an edge over other Apprentices. Now, he realized he didn't factor in everything when comparing himself to other mech designers of the same level.

"There's a difference between knowing how to do something and applying them correctly."

Though Mr. Creta's work exhibited some specialties that Ves couldn't replicate, most of the fundamental modifications on the Rogue Breaker wasn't beyond his understanding. Basically, what Creta did, Ves could do as well.

"Yet even I wonder if I can accomplish the same in three days."

The two mech designers adopted different strategies to strengthening their mechs. Ves discarded the old and created something new. Mr. Creta on the other hand retained the quintessence of the Rogue Breaker but upgraded almost every aspect to a higher level.

The difficulty of the latter was lower, but it would be hard to achieve a major boost without a lot of work and clever planning. Mr. Creta somehow managed to compress a week's work of modification work in three days, which was the same as Ves had done.

This basically meant his adversary's design ability wasn't any inferior to his!

"Mr. Creta doesn't know as much as I do, but his management ability and his application of what limited knowledge he accumulated is better than mine."

Ves felt as if the fog that obscured the path to Journeyman receded a bit. Accumulating an enormous amount of theoretical knowledge did not necessarily make him a better mech designer. That only turned him into a huge bookworm with a lot more tools at hand.

A true mech designer only needed a couple of tools to create an amazing result. That represented true ability. "A mech is a product of science and art."

People could easily quantify the former. Science existed to define reality. Its language was expressed in math and rules.

As for art, this was something much more abstruse. It came from the wellspring of creativity and achieved results that was more than the sum of its parts.

With the design and construction of the New Sentinel, Ves had conceitedly patted himself on the back for turning low-grade goods into a higher grade mech. Yet his opponent not only matched his stride, but even exceeded it through different means!

Throughout the duel between Captain Orfan and Avid Serpent, the latter always managed to regain the initiative.

The parlor trick that Captain Orfan used to confuse Avid Serpent's judgement was quickly seen through by the latter. Spinning around the spear like a ferris wheel subconsciously attracted her attention and messed up her rhythm. Once Avid Serpent learned to disregard the spin but focus instead on the footing of Captain Orfan's mech, she managed parry her opponent's attacks again and again.

This was because if the New Sentinel wished to launch an attack, it inevitably had to step forward!

"Looks like the jig is up." Captain Orfan said and stopped spinning her spear. Though it didn't consume as much energy as the Dervish of the Axe God, it wasn't very efficient either. "Then let's see if you can handle the storm!"

Captain Orfan did not give up on her offensive. Giving Avid Serpent an opportunity to attack even a single time might prove fatal to her. The enhanced Rogue Breaker had almost broken right through the New Sentinel's chest armor with a single blow! This was the thickest part of the spearman mech's armor!

If Avid Serpent managed to land another hit, the New Sentinel would certainly suffer crippling damage. This wasn't something Captain Orfan wanted to see, so she maintained her offensive despite expending large amounts of energy.

The New Sentinel moved forward and pushed the Rogue Breaker backwards with repeated spear stabs. This time, the spear didn't surge forward in a

repetitive motion, but contained a random rhythm that made it hard for Avid Serpent to judge when the attack would land.

Clang!

The Rogue Breaker barely deflected another stab, but the spear had surged forward like an unstoppable tide that had only slightly been bent. The speartip managed to scrape the Rogue Breaker's arm and sheer through several layers of armor.

The hit created a weak point in the Rogue Breaker's arm! If the New Sentinel managed to land another hit at the same spot, the axeman mech was liable to lose a limb!

Both mechs weren't built like knights. Besides their chest and some strategic points on their frame, their overall armor coverage was lackluster. Both mechs relied on speed and technique to mitigate damage. While this prevented the two mechs from inflicting reliable damage to each other, once they managed to score a hit, the damage would always be severe.

Having gained an advantage, Captain Orfan smelled blood. She yelled out a guttural warcry and intensified her offensive. The Rogue Breaker continually receded as it tried to dodge or deflect the surge of spears.

"You can't hold out forever, Avid Serpent!"

It was not that the Rogue Breaker wouldn't be able to solve this attack, but Avid Serpent hoped to keep her cards close to her chest. Throughout the match so far, she predominantly played the long game. Now, it seemed she needed to expose one of her cards.

Avid Serpent carefully watched the incoming spear stabs and prepared her timing. When the spear shot forth yet again, the Rogue Breaker not only succeeded in deflecting it, the axeman mech also hooked the spear shaft with its weapon and drew it away.

For a moment, the New Sentinel left an opening.

This allowed the Rogue Breaker stepped into knife-fighting range and grab the New Sentinel's shoulder! Just as it attempted to exert some force, the New Sentinel immediately retaliated by letting one limb off the spear before grabbing the opposite in a similar grip.

Both mechs started to push against each other!

With both the spear and axe stuck in a temporary deadlock, both mechs started to push and shove each other with their humanoid mech limbs. The amount of force an arm could exert in this manner was limited. Too much pressure risked damaging the limbs, but neither side could tend to this matter.

That was until the Rogue Breaker suddenly kicked out with a force booster-enhanced leg!

Captain Orfan widened her eyes as she only had a split second of time to fend off this sudden attack. Even though the Rogue Breaker momentarily weakened its footing with this attack, its leg whipped forward with destructive force!

Almost every countermeasure she could think of took too long to defend against the kick!

Then her eyes became savage. "If I can't defend, then I might as well attack!"

The New Sentinel quickly jumped forward and off the ground while simultaneously letting go of its spear! Though the Rogue Breaker kicked landed against one of its leg, dealing serious damage, the fact that the New Sentinel had jumped meant the damage was less serious than expected.

This was because the New Sentinel basically pounced on the Rogue Breaker!

Due to its awkward kicking stance, the axeman mech couldn't withstand the force, and started falling backwards!

Bang!

The mech landed with its back against the sandy soil. Though the New Sentinel had let go of its spear, that left both of its arms free to take advantage of the situation. The New Sentinel knelt on the waist the Rogue Breaker and started wrestling and punching against the helpless axeman mech.

When the Rogue Breaker attempted to slam its axe into the New Sentinel, the latter mech quickly held on to the arm of the axeman mech and restrained it from completing its attack!

With an enormous amount of weight pressed against the frame of the Rogue Breaker, Avid Serpent thoroughly fell into the leeway at the moment. The New Sentinel attacked and attacked with its other arm and only stopped when the Rogue Breaker grabbed it with its other arm.

The two mechs resembled wrestlers of sorts as both mechs tried to push each other around with their arms taking hold of each other.

All of these moves put a lot of stress on their internals! They were dealing just as much damage to their own mechs as each other!

However, Avid Serpent was thoroughly on the losing end right now. The waist of the Rogue Breaker began to become deformed as Captain Orfan's mech kept pressing it from above.

She finally couldn't take it any longer!

"GET OFF!"

Over half of the Rogue Breaker's force boosters activated at full strength. An enormous surge of power suffused the axeman mech, allowing it to overpower the spearman mech and push it off its frame!

Sand sprayed all over as the axeman mech quickly climbed up to its feet!

As for the spearman mech, Captain Orfan hadn't fought against the powerful surge of strength, but instead borrowed its force to roll her mech in the direction of its fallen spear. It quickly picked up its fallen weapon before rising up to its feet in a ready stance.

The Rogue Breaker hadn't gone for the attack. Instead, the mech retrieved another axe from a hidden compartment in its rear. The hand axe looked smaller than the original one, but its lethality was without question.

Ves remembered that Avid Serpent's mech used to hide a laser pistol in the same compartment. Now it seemed that Mr. Crete had fashioned a small axe that fit the same area.

With a second weapon in hand, Avid Serpent's mech had shifted into duel wielding a pair of axes. Before Captain Orfan could process the change, the Rogue Breaker dashed forward. Its axes rose high before plummeting over the head of the spearman mech.

The New Sentinel barely held up its spear shaft to block the heavy attacks, but with force boosters strengthening the duel attacks, the defending mech almost buckled!

"Again!" Avid Serpent screamed and her mech unleashed another attack!

This time, she went all-out, saving none of her energy reserves. The Rogue Breaker turned into a chaotic storm as both of its axe-wielding limbs attacked in an independent fashion. Each axe chop came at a different angle and timing, causing Captain Orfan a lot of grief.

The New Sentinel's spear shaft started chipping from the force of the axe blows. Even though Captain Orfan tried to dodge as best as she could, her mech simply couldn't move fast enough to evade the blocks. Only by blocking would her mech be able to hang on. If not for those force boosters, the Rogue Breaker would never be able to chip away at Captain Orfan's spear shaft!

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The New Sentinel continually stepped back as it found itself unable to breathe through the current crisis. The duel-wielding axeman mech practically attempted to suffocate its opponent through unleashing constant attacks.

Like a weight pressed against her body, Captain Orfan felt as if she couldn't endure for long. She cursed at herself for giving her opponent the opportunity to unleash her own attacks. The fearsome momentum of an axeman mech on the offensive was no joke, especially when it wielded two axes at the same time!

This time, their roles were reversed! With the New Sentinel on the defensive, it could hardly find the opportunity to strike back at its opponent. Meanwhile, the Rogue Breaker's offensive seemed unstoppable, but in actual fact it drained a lot of energy!

What this did signify? It basically told Ves that Avid Serpent figured out everything she needed to know!

Chapter 596 Squashed

The face of Ves turned ugly when the Rogue Breaker pressed the New Sentinel with its flurry of attacks. The duel-wielding axeman mech exhibited a distinct superiority over its adversary, and never stepped out of range, giving the New Sentinel very little room to maneuver!

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Each swing of the axe landed with the force of a hammer. The Rogue Breaker seemed to dance on the arena ground, causing the public to become mesmerised by its ferocious movements. Even Ves found the view to be compelling in a way. There was a pattern to Avid Serpent's chaos, but it was too abstruse for Ves to figure out.

The reason why Captain Orfan found it difficult to defend against the assault was because of the random nature of Avid Serpent's attack routine.

Sometimes, the force boosters lent more power to the blow, while other times they remained inactive. The irregular activation of the force boosters left the New Sentinel unbalanced as its pilot was unable to adjust its defense.

Captain Orfan gritted her teeth as she endured the assault. She had been afraid of this outcome! Giving the Rogue Breaker a single breather had been enough to turn the tide!

"My mech isn't any weaker than hers!"

The Vandal mech officer was pleased with the New Sentinel's performance up to now. The machine may have been somewhat weird, but it was mostly able to keep up with her movements.

However, it still missed a pace compared to her service mech! That difference was subtle in some aspects, but huge in other aspects. These limitations constantly frustrated the captain and prevented her from performing her desired moves.

The duel between the two mechs had entered a superheated moment. The entire audience stopped speaking as they concentrated on the current phase. Nobody wanted to miss the moment where something changed. This might be the last seconds before the New Sentinel succumbed!

Ves bit his lip. He knew the New Sentinel the best. Captain Orfan had done her utmost and squeezed out every bit of performance it could unleash.

The spearman mech accumulated more battle damage as time went on. The New Sentinel currently bore two major wounds. The first one was the chest wound where Avid Serpent's axe had dug into its chest armor. The second one was the leg which suffered major damage from the Rogue Breaker's kick.

The other mech wasn't in a good condition either. One of its arms suffered a cut, while a couple of other attacks spread the mech with wounds. However, the most significantly damaged portion of the Rogue Breaker was its waist area.

When the New Sentinel knocked down the Rogue Breaker and climbed on top of the prone mech, Captain Orfan's mech had pressed down with its entire weight. The Rogue Breaker hadn't been able to bear this weight, thus its waist became deformed!

Somehow, this hadn't impacted the performance of its engine, but the same couldn't be said for its leg joints. The Rogue Breaker had to move its legs forcefully in order to keep up its offensive.

"The honor of the Flagrant Vandals is at stake! I can't falter like this!"

She had proudly stood up and answered Avid Serpent's challenge three days ago. This was because she felt boundless confidence in her own ability to overcome Avid Serpent. The Vesian hadn't shown off any exceptional ability back then.

It turned out that Avid Serpent fooled them all!

Even though the Vesian piloted a much-improved mech, that wasn't of much use if her skills couldn't keep up. The problem was that Avid Serpent's performance exceeded everyone's expectations.

This meant that Avid Serpent had definitely held back at least twenty to thirty percent of her strength when she dueled Broken Claw!

This additional boost in skill was the difference between an average advanced pilot and a peak advanced pilot. It separated the rank-and-file from the officer-level mech pilots in the military.

Captain Orfan bet with at least eighty percent certainty that Avid Serpent used to be a mech captain as well! Her opponent's courage and judgement stood out from regular mech pilots like a crane among chickens. It reminded her of the time she clashed against the recently-advanced Venerable Foster!

The suffocating pressure emanated by Avid Serpent threatened to engulf Captain Orfan. "Really sneaky of you, Avid Serpent! You've hidden yourself well!"

"It's not my fault you imbecile Vandals fell for my ruse." Avid Serpent taunted back as her mech kept unleashing more and more attacks without any signs of depleting its energy reserves. "How else would I be able to goad you dumb brutes into stepping onto the arena field?"

"Do you even care about your own honor? Hiding your identity like a rat and relying on subterfuge to get ahead of us, do you feel proud of yourself?"

"My pride is nothing you should concern yourself about! I hope the Vandals have prepared your coffin, because your broken corpse is about to rest in it! Sleep well and know that your defeat will be the stepping stone to my redemption!"

The New Sentinel's spear became more ragged as it had to block more axe attacks. Although the material held up against the strikes for now, it wouldn't be able to hold out for much longer, especially when her opponent didn't have any scruples about conserving the energy of her mech.

"I can only choose to suffer!"

Captain Orfan let go of her desire to defend. Instead, she stridently controlled the New Sentinel to flip its spear in an offensive stance. The mech ignored the incoming axe attacks and instead thrust out with its spear in a desperate jab!

The twin axe strikes landed upon the unguarded New Sentinel without any hindrance. One axe bit deep into the side of the New Sentinel, while the other one heavily damaged one of the spearman mech's shoulders.

Its performance had definitely suffered a significant impact this time as its internals received significant damage! However, because the axes had dug into her mech, the Rogue Breaker had momentarily exposed itself to Captain Orfan's counterattack.

The spear stab almost went straight through the abdomen of the Rogue Breaker. However, the abundant layers of armor ultimately prevented the spear from penetrating into the internals.

The New Sentinel's attack lacked sufficient force! Its sudden attack came out of nowhere, and while this had caught Avid Serpent off-guard, the New Sentinel hadn't been able to put much weight behind the thrust.

Still, even if the spear stab hadn't managed to pierce the abdomen, the kinetic energy behind the blow wasn't easy to shrug off either! The shock incurred by the internal components underneath the abdomen was sufficient to hitch up the Rogue Breaker for a single instant.

This was enough for the heavily-damaged New Sentinel to disengage. Bearing new scars on its shoulder and its sides, it practically lost most of its functionality of the arm attached to the damaged shoulder. For all intents and purposes, the New Sentinel could only choose to fight on with a single arm.

"Kill the Vandal! She's a sitting duck now! Finish her off!"

"The Bright Republic always comes back from behind! Go Captain Orfan! You can still do it!"

"Damn, who told me that betting on a mech captain is a sure win?! My marks, my precious marks!"

The crowd erupted in an explosion of emotion at the end of this sequence of attacks. The Rogue Breaker proved to be more valiant than the New Sentinel! Its unending flurry of axe attacks had finally achieved the desired result and crippled the New Sentinel into a one-armed mech!

Though Ves momentarily felt despair, his mood still contained some hope as Captain Orfan had successfully disengaged without giving her opponent the opportunity to finish off her mech. As long as the New Sentinel still kept standing, she still retained the opportunity to win. All Ves could do was hope she had what it took to turn the situation around.

The next minute went by without any suspense. The New Sentinel continually had to give up ground as the Rogue Breaker advanced again and again. Its twin axes became huge threats to the New Sentinel because it couldn't block the attack with only a single working arm.

Both its offensive and defensive ability had been halved!

Despite her overwhelming advantage, Avid Serpent sought to finish off her opponent as quickly as possible. She held nothing back and activated her force boosters again and again with much greater frequency.

The longer the match went on, the greater the chance of an accident!

Perhaps her opponent wasn't clear about the Rogue Breaker's situation, but her axeman mech expended over two-thirds of its energy reserves. The imposing level of performance granted by the force boosters demanded a heavy price that would soon come to roost if Avid Serpent wasn't able to trundle up her opponent.

"This will be easy." She smirked as she saw how flurried the spearman mech had become. "What can you do with a single arm?"

Again and again the axes landed glancing blows against the faltering New Sentinel. Captain Orfan tried to evade the attacks at all costs, but the damage

incurred by her mech worked against her. Her mech was wounded and bleeding and her opponent did not have a single merciful bone in her body!

Under this enormous amount of pressure, Captain Orfan tried to stall her opponent in any way she could think of. The main reason she fell behind was because her mech's upper body suffered a substantial amount of damage.

Losing the functionality of an entire arm ended all of her hopes of winning through superior spearplay!

The captain wracked her brain for a way to turn the situation around. She refused to accept her defeat, not when more than two million people watched her disgraceful performance!

"Think! What can I still do?!"

She suddenly thought back of the Rogue Breaker's abrupt kick. If the New Sentinel's upper body was no good, what about the lower body?

Though one of the legs suffered some damage, it wasn't to the point of crippling it entirely. Captain Orfan's face adopted a resolved expression. With her back against the wall, she decided to lash out one more time with the most desperate move she could think of!

The New Sentinel dropped to the ground at her command! The two axes that whizzed in its direction only met empty air as Avid Serpent did not anticipate such a move! Still, her reaction speed was great, as the Rogue Breaker immediately sought to step onto the fallen mech and crush it with the weight of its entire frame.

"Not today, you snake!"

While the Rogue Breaker directed one of its feet forward, the legs of the New Sentinel snapped forward in a scissor that clamped down onto the stretched leg of its opponent.

"Caught you!"

The upgraded musculature of the New Sentinel showed off their power. It pulled the Rogue Breaker into a fall, straight into the spear held ready and waiting!

However, the Rogue Breaker chopped down with its twin axes as it fell, both of them aimed straight at the torso of the mech on the ground!

A huge collision occurred that boomed throughout the entire arena! The Rogue Breaker had fallen on top of the New Sentinel with both of their mechs unleashing their final attacks!

Some audience members screamed. Others winced. Most of them leaned closer in order to see which mech had survived the final clash.

As the dust cleared away, the audience gasped as they beheld the damage. The New Sentinel's spear had ran straight through the middle of the Rogue Breaker! Meanwhile, the axeman mech had embedded both of its axes deep through the wounded torso of the other mech.

Both mechs landed their strikes around the area where the cockpit was situated at!

"Is it... a draw?!"

"That can't be! Maybe someone missed!"

A mutual kill would be a devastating outcome to the duel. Though it excited some of the rumor mongers, most people who put money behind one of the mech pilots hoped dearly that one of them made it through.

After a few seconds of suspense, one of the mech exhibited movement. Then the other mech moved as well.

"Both of them survived!"

Yet... what happened now? Both mechs didn't seem to be in a shape to continue the fight. The Rogue Breaker was practically impaled, while the spearman mech was squashed underneath the other mech.

Chapter 597 Stem From My Hand

The duel had reached its end stage. Everyone in the audience held their breath after the dramatic turn of events. They all thought that Avid Serpent possessed the advantage. Not only did she cripple her opponent's mech, but the offensive she put out fully denied her opponent the opportunity to make a comeback.

Yet Captain Orfan found a way to fight back after all. She did so by performing one of the greatest taboos in mech combat, which was to drop her own mech to the ground!

There was almost no reason for a mech to lay prone on the ground. Not only would the machine lose most of its mobility, but it also put stresses on its frame which the designer had never anticipated. Furthermore, a mech that had collapsed on the ground was a sitting duck for any enemy mech. They could easily wreck a prone mech by stepping on it once!

Yet before the New Sentinel completely fell down, it had somehow succeeded in tripping the Rogue Breaker. Not only that, but the mech had also positioned its spear with its butt against the ground in a prime position to impale the falling axeman mech.

"What an amazing desperation move!"

"How did the Vandal mech manage to pull that leg down?"

"Finish off the Vesian!"

When the two mechs exhibited movement, the crowd started rooting for their favored mech pilot. With the Rogue Breaker impaled by a spear that miraculously held on up to now and the New Sentinel being squashed by the

former mech with axes embedded into its chest, which mech still possessed the energy to finish the match?

In one of the front seats, Ves gripped his fists and hoped the damage to the New Sentinel wasn't as bad as it appeared. In times like these, he felt the pain suffered by many mech designers.

It was no secret that many humans in the galaxy wanted to become mech pilots. People like Ves only became mech designers after finding out that their aptitude would never allow them to interface with a mech. Though he had ultimately turned around and embraced his current career, a small part of him still craved to fight in a mech rather than supplying it to someone else.

This was a feeling shared by many mech designers. Back at Rittersberg, his professors sometimes touched upon this subject.

"As mech designers, we are destined to be the people cheering our warriors on. Our primary role in society is to support the mech pilots. Do not delude yourself to be one of them. Even if your causes are the same, their fight is not our fight. The winds and rains that they have to go through in order to survive another battle is theirs to endure. If one mech pilot dies, there is always another customer for you to engage."

Ves recalled those words as he silently rooted for Captain Orfan. Some mech designers believed they needed to be dispassionate to their clients. Others believed that mech designers should build a close connection to the mech pilots that used their products. The different schools of thought often fought against each other, and up to today neither side had achieved superiority.

He supposed he ordinarily fell into the school of thought that believed a mech designer should keep their distance with their clients and avoid becoming entangled with their affairs. If someone bought a Blackbeak one day and used

it to massacre an isolated village, Ves did not feel guilty at all. What did the actions of a lunatic have to do with him?

His cognition changed when he accompanied Walter's Whalers in their jaunt to the Glowing Planet. Ves found it hard not to care about their lives when he serviced their mechs. Still, even when most of the Whalers died in the hellish campaign, Ves hardly shed a tear for their loss. They were only acquaintances at most to him. He couldn't even recall the names of the fallen.

It was only when he rode with the Flagrant Vandals and assumed responsibility as a head designer that Ves had finally gone over to the other side. Ves cared a lot about the Vandals, and his heart bled whenever they suffered casualties in battle. This was especially because his fingerprints were all over their mechs. Though he hadn't serviced them personally, the men who worked on the machines largely followed his instructions from above.

Right now, Ves felt the same burden of responsibility crushing on his shoulders.

The strength of a mech depended on both the mech and the mech pilot. Though the skill of the mech pilot was beyond his purview, the state of the mech could not be separated from his hand. The Pointed Sentinel was an old creation of Ophidian-Wheelax Industries, but the New Sentinel was thoroughly a creation that transcended its origins.

"This mech duel isn't a one versus one. It's a two versus two."

Captain Orfan versus Avid Serpent.

Ves Larkinson versus Gabriel Creta.

Ves felt fully invested in this duel. Though he could never match the dedication of the mech pilots who put their lives at stake, Ves felt as if his own competence was at stake.

"The New Sentinel is a mech that stems from my work!"

Right now, with both mechs piled up against each other, the capabilities of the mech pilots ceased to be important. What truly counted at this moment was which mech designer fashioned a better machine!

Which mech would still be able to fight after suffering such heavy blows? Would the New Sentinel be able to push off the Rogue Breaker? Did the latter mech still have the capability to function after an entire spear was thrust through its chest?

The answers to both questions relied on how well the mech designers built the mechs!

"Come on! You can still fight!"

Though the New Sentinel suffered a lot more blows than the Rogue Breaker, the damage should have been rather shallow. Ves carefully looked at the axes embedded into the chest of the spearman mech and judged that the weapons hadn't penetrated too deeply.

Too bad the angle of view was rather bad for him. He turned to the sides and looked at the projections with a magnified view of the mechs. "There's a fifty percent chance that the power reactor or the cockpit has suffered a breach."

If the former had happened, then the New Sentinel was finished. Luckily, it didn't appear his frankenstein mech had reached that point. The axes stopped short of dealing direct damage to the power reactor!

"Since the mech is still moving, then the damage to the cockpit isn't fatal to Captain Orfan!"

Good! This meant that even if the New Sentinel suffered severe damage, it still possessed enough energy to fight!

Though Ves had not paid too much attention to improving his mech's internals, he nonetheless carried over many improvements in this area. He figured if the armor of the New Sentinel wasn't that good, he should at least strengthen the internals so that any breaches would not drag the entire mech down.

Considering that Ves faced a melee mech, he focused primarily on enhancing the New Sentinel's redundancy. This basically meant that if the mech suffered a crippling blow, it would still be able to retain some of its functions through other means.

This was also why he felt confident that Captain Orfan could still win the match. "With all the redundancies I've introduced, the power reactor should still be able to function at a diminished capacity.

The only variable that concerned Ves was whether Avid Serpent possessed the same opportunity! Though the Rogue Breaker looked as if it had seen better days, Ves feared that the spear had not inflicted enough damage. It depended a lot on what components the spear had actually damaged. Did the weapon pierce something important, or did it strike something of less value such as heatsinks?

A strange minute passed as both mechs fumbled against each other. Neither mech was able to exert a lot of power. Both had suffered serious damage that affected their motor capacities. The New Sentinel wasn't able to push off the frame of the opponent's mech, while the Rogue Breaker couldn't even lift up its axes.

"Punch!"

The two mechs eventually resorted to wrestling with each other. In this, both sides possessed distinctive advantages. The Rogue Breaker still possessed

two working arms, while the New Sentinel only had to make do with one. The upside was that the latter mech's arm retained a lot more strength!

"Keep punching, captain!"

With no weapon in hand, the New Sentinel had no choice but to bare its fists against its adversary. The mech kept punching against the axeman mech's torso. The continuous punches aggravated the condition of the mech as the energy transferred by the punches messed up its internals. Though the damage done by each punch was slight, the longer it went on, the greater the chance of a critical fault!

The Rogue Breaker attempted to counterattack, but its limbs had turned especially feeble! Ves looked closely and determined that while its power reactor still functioned properly, its transfer of motive power had been cut by at least eighty to ninety percent!

This meant that the axeman mech could barely summon the power to lift its own arms!

The entire crowd displayed a mix of responses to this turn of events. Many found it disappointing that such a heated match ended in such an exceptionally low note. Others still held out hope that Avid Serpent could stage a comeback.

Alas, the spear impaled through the Rogue Breaker's frame happened to cut through a critical junction to its engine! While Crete had been prudent enough to implement redundancies, the spare junction happened to be situated in the same line!

One junction at the front and another one at the rear. Ordinary battle damage would never penetrate from one end of the mech to the other end of the mech.

In truth, Gabriel Crete focused upon elevating the performance of the Rogue Breaker. He spent insufficient attention on increasing its redundancies!

Both mech designers had chosen different paths, and Ves appeared to have chosen wisely!

After a few minutes of punching and fiddling, the New Sentinel finally managed to pry open a gap in the torso armor of the other mech. Once it opened up this vulnerability, the spearman mech gleefully reached out with its fingers towards the axeman mech's cockpit!

It was too bad that both mechs seemed to have lost their speaker functionality. Otherwise, they might have been able to hear Avid Serpent's last words.

"Kill her!"

"Vesia will never forget this!"

"Stop! You don't have to kill her!"

The New Sentinel's finger finally breached the cover of the cockpit. With as much power as Captain Orfan could direct, the New Sentinel firmly pressed within the cockpit like finger pressing down an insect hiding within a hole!

When the finger drew back, a smattering of blood marked its surface.

The announcer suddenly came to life again. "Our sensors show no life signs within Avid Serpent's mech. The outcome is clear! The winner of this honor duel is Captain Rosa Orfan of the 6th Flagrant Vandals!"

The entire crowd went wild with glee or despair. A lot of people had bet their money on Avid Serpent, but even more bet on Captain Orfan! After all, one mech pilot was in the dark while the other was a strong captain from a military mech regiment!

Still, a lot of people rooted for Avid Serpent, including almost every Vesian in the crowd. Their faces appeared sullen as Avid Serpent's loss not only implicated her honor. It would have been acceptable if she suffered from her

own consequences. The problem was that she dragged down the dignity of the Vesia Kingdom upon her fall!

After displaying so much strength near the end of the match, how could she lose so ignobly at the very end? Every Vesian felt angry and ashamed. As much as they wanted to roar against the unfairness of it all, the fact of the matter was that they lost!

Chapter 598 Lost Days

That night, over two million witnesses to the duel went crazy. The story of how Captain Orfan's mech tripped the other mech before punching it to death became an instant legend in the Harksensen System!

The honor duel had been the most exciting arena battle on Harkensen III in recent memory! So many people hit themselves on their heads for declining to attend. If they only coughed up 20,000 marks, they would have seen the dramatic course of the events in person instead of listening about it in hearsay!

Those that attended the duel erupted in jubilation or despair. There was no doubt about it. Despite the unconventional ending of the duel, the match had definitely been worth attending!

Though the Vesians visiting the system all became depressed, most people thought that Avid Serpent fought very ably. She displayed a lot of skill and fought with ceaseless courage. If the engine of her mech hadn't been impacted so much, then she no doubt would have kept hitting back.

"Avid Serpent hasn't lost. Her mech failed on her. How could it break so easily after being impaled by a single spear?"

The Vesians sought out a scapegoat to vent their frustrations. There was no better target at the moment than Gabriel Creta. What Master's apprentice? What successful businessman? Your work fell short!

A lot of shade was being thrown at him, a lot of it without cause. Ves sympathized with his competitor. That could have been him. At the end of the match, Ves got to opportunity to meet Creta again. Both of them gathered in the underground halls leading to the workshops.

"Mr. Creta. I'm sorry for your loss."

The older man shook his head. He didn't appear to take the criticisms directed against him to heart. "She went into the ring expecting to win or die. Her death is not unjust. You've done an amazing work at transforming the Pointed Sentinel mech."

"It's a shame about Avid Serpent." Ves remarked. "I never got to learn her identity. Do you know who she is?"

"She never confided her identity to me. I think she hoped to take off her mask and announce her name to the public when she won the honor duel. Now that she has lost.. It's better to let sleeping dogs lie."

This could be considered a final mercy to the woman that bore the name of Avid Serpent. Though losing the duel hadn't affected her honor all that much, there was no doubt she dragged the name of the Vesia Kingdom through the mud. If the Vesians found out her real name, they would doubtlessly curse her name for a couple of months.

The two mech designers talked shop for a few minutes. Both of them briefly described what they had done. As expected, Creta hadn't gone as far as Ves! When the other mech designer heard that Ves went as far as turning the Pointed Sentinel into a frankenstein mech, he expressed his admiration.

"That was exceptionally risky of you, but it evidently paid off. Even I never expected that your mech could keep up with the Rogue Breaker after it had passed through my hand. All the time, I was modifying the machine with an

eye towards a comprehensive crush in performance against your mech. It seems I was very much mistaken at that."

After chatting some more, they finally said goodbye to each other. Ves enjoyed the talk. He faintly perceived that Mr. Creta was from the same mold as him. Compared to their allegiance, they cared more about designing mechs. Both of them harvested a tiny bit from their conversations.

"I really can't underestimate older Apprentices. Not all of them are stagnating at a lower boundary than me." He sighed as he watched the other mech designer walking towards the exit.

Ves hadn't been able to learn too many lessons from Creta's shallow exposition. However, he was still able to affirm that the other mech designer was able to utilize his knowledge more exquisitely than what Ves could accomplish by himself.

"This is what experience brings."

Someone who had been in the game for decades developed their own polished methods. In a situation where a mech designer wasn't able to increase the breadth and depth of their knowledge, they instead attempted to develop ways to utilize their existing knowledge better.

"He's making the best of what he has!"

Ves had mostly faced younger mech designers in design duels in his career. Rarely had he been able to compare notes with someone who could be considered a veteran in the business like Gabriel Creta. The direct comparison of their work this time illuminated Ves that he had a long way to go with regards to designing better mechs.

"The only problem is that progress of this kind only comes from time and effort. I can't accelerate this learning process through any other means."

Even if he acquired a million Skills and a hundred Attribute points from the System, he would still muck it up somehow. More tools at his disposal did not mean he could design a better mech. It was how he used it that really mattered.

Ves contemplated about this issue the entire way back to the temporary Vandal compound. As he crashed into his bed, he still hadn't figured out a way to improve his utilization besides designing lots of mechs.

"Maybe that's why designing multiple original mechs is one of the criteria to become a Journeyman Mech Designer. Without practical experience, how can a mech designer be any good at utilizing what they learned? A useless bookworm who can't design a mech on their own is unqualified to become a Journeyman."

It also explained why some mech designers stalled in the Apprentice phase despite designing scores of mechs. One of the factors that held them back was doubtless their poor grasp on utilization. If they robotically churned out design after design without putting all of their effort and passion into their work, they would likely consider it to be a chore.

No matter how much anyone had harvested from this duel, Ves had definitely won a lot. The path to advancement became a lot more clearer in his mind. That alone was worth all of the effort of designing a frankenstein mech.

The next day, everything appeared to go back to normal. Half of the Vandals enjoyed shore leave while the other half were hard at work at fixing up their assets.

The only thing that changed was that everyone felt like a winner. Captain Orfan's performance had put the Flagrant Vandals in a very good light! Despite being billed as a raiding regiment, Orfan showed the Reinaldians and the visitors that they still possessed teeth!

"Hahahaha! I can't forget what happened last night! Avid Serpent had us on the ropes, but we whalopped her good!"

"Hey! Have some respect for the girl!"

"Why should I? She's a Vesian, and a treacherous one at that! As far as I'm concerned, she got what was coming for her!"

The Vandals spoke non-stop about the duel. This wasn't a surprise as many of them attended the duel. Of course, they could never pay the entire 20,000 marks for a seat. Instead, the Vandals received a whole bunch of free tickets from the underground arena. Just like Ves, they received free tickets because they were all related the Vandals.

After breakfast, Ves joined his old group with lots of welcome and appreciation. Though Captain Orfan earned the most kudos out of the Vandals, the contribution of Ves had not been forgotten. It was thanks to his efforts that her mech held out despite suffering a lot of damage!

"I heard from a mech technician who worked on the captain's mech that you turned it into a frankenstein mech! Is that true?" Ensign Tiss asked.

As an engineer, Tiss was clearer than most people on how difficult it was to cobble up a frankenstein mech together.

"It takes a lot of smarts to prevent it from falling apart."

"What a boastful mech designer!" A mech pilot exclaimed.

"Alright, knock it off, Vandals." Lieutenant Nolsen Feray said. "I'm sorry you missed the last couple of days, Ves, but there are plenty of sights left to see. We only have a short time left on Harkensen III before we head over to the beaches of Harkensen I. Let's make the best of our time."

Their group had already drafted an entire schedule for their stay on Harkensen III. They already visited several iconic sights on Harkensen III such

as famous mech museums and historical monuments. They even visited the black markets in the evening.

As the group boarded a large-sized aircar that took off into the air, Ves asked what they experienced the last few days when he was absent.

"How are the black markets?"

"Very shady." Tiss said as she blinked at him with her big eyes. "It's a lot less friendlier than the grey market. They forced us to wear a sensor-blocking veil and mask that Nolsen scanned on his own to determine whether they had been bugged."

"Did he find something?"

"Surprisingly, no. The black markets are fairly scrupulous in this. They wouldn't be able to attract any customers if they're nosing the true identities of their visitors."

This told him that the black market wasn't without rules.

"Why do you look so grim then?"

"The black market isn't really a place for outsiders like us to mix in. It's a lot ruder than the grey market. Everyone is acting quiet and mysterious. Still, the things they have on sale can make you dazzle."

Ves could imagine the kind of products that circulated in the black market. Most of the goods had likely come from the hands of pirates. Still, that didn't detract from his interest.

According to the schedule, Ves still had an opportunity to visit a different black market. At that time, he would naturally be able to sample what the pirates and scummy treasure hunters routinely harvested.

The next couple of days, Ves made up for lost time by visiting many different sights on Harkensen III. The lively cities on the planet didn't pale too much in

comparison to Black Belle City. The only thing that disappointed him was that he missed out on visiting the capital city's black market. The other markets underneath the medium-sized cities all catered to a special clientele.

The one Ves had visited was a market for slaves. All kinds of humanoid and non-humanoid aliens could be obtained from this market. The sight disgusted some of the visiting Vandals. Even Ves found the practice to be repulsive.

Not only did they have to endure lifeless aliens stuffed into cramped climate-controlled boxes, the market also seemed especially desolate at this time.

"What's wrong with this place? Has something happened?" He asked.

"The Reinaldians are kind of spooked." Nolsen explained. "You might not have heard about it, but a little of trouble has stirred up lately. Last night, two unsealed mechs started fighting at some place called Kwanza City. In another city, an unknown group invaded a restaurant and slaughtered all of the customers!"

"That's brutal!"

"I heard it was some kind of gang hit because many of the guests were part of some local gang." Tiss said. "I'm not too sure about the details, but the Honored Ones are blaming the violence on the local gangs."

"What do the gangs have to say?"

"They're blaming the foreigners for all their troubles."

In other words, everyone was pointing fingers at each other instead of trying to cooperate to stem the tide of violence. Ves furrowed his brows. Why did such incidents crop up during the time the Vandals stopped over at this star system? Were the Vandals related to these incidents? Too bad he couldn't read any clues from the news reports.

"I'm already looking forward to shuttling over to Harkensen I." Ves said lightly, trying to disguise his interest in the incidents. "If this planet keeps blowing up all the time, I would rather spend my time on the beach."

Chapter 599 Upstream

The Flagrant Vandals slowly emerged out of the rut they fell into after reaching the Reinald Republic. Like a wounded bear emerging out of a fight, they emerged stronger and more resilient.

Captain Orfan's performance in the underground arena became a point of pride with the servicemen. Her demonstration of her individual fighting prowess propped up the other Vandal mech pilots. This not only lifted everyone's pride, but also increased their bond of brotherhood with their fellow Vandals.

Though these effects fell short of turning the Flagrant Vandals from a regular mech regiment into an elite mech regiment, the shift in mentality nonetheless formed a point of evolution in their martial tradition.

Many armchair generals spoke about martial tradition. It not only rose through steady accumulation, but also through major battles and sudden turning points. Each event deepened the history of the mech regiment, causing it to become more distinct.

Ves had mostly been out of sorts lately. It was a good thing that Harkensen I offered the perfect opportunity for him to relax and contemplate his recent insights.

Different from Harkensen III, the first planet from the sun aimed to create an entertainment paradise that had nothing to do with mechs. Practically no one received a permit to operate a mech on the surface of the planet. The only mechs around bore the colors of the Honored Ones, and these machines only patrolled the most strategic centers.

In every other place, the Honored Ones adopted a more discrete countenance. They toned down their physical presence on the streets and made do with much less heavy gear. Overall security was still good, but it became much less overt on the planet.

Pleasure, entertainment and fun became the focal points of Harkensen I. From its famous stretches of beaches, to the endless casinos and nightclubs, the planet touted itself as a famed holiday destination in the Komodo Star Sector.

The planet attracted two kinds of tourists. The regular kind made up the bulk of the visitors. The other kind consisted of mech pilots that needed to wind down. Though the latter category didn't spend as much as the whales, their presence on the planet attracted many people fascinated with mech pilots. As long as someone wasn't too rude, they would be able to interact with mech pilots on a daily basis!

The lack of overt militarization on the planet made it a prime therapy planet to mech pilots that experienced traumatic events.

With its proximity to Harkensen III, it was no surprise that many outfits tended to stop by in the Harkensen System. Just like the Flagrant Vandals, they found it convenient to service their ships and mechs while allowing their crew to decompress at the same time.

"The Reinaldians really take their no-mechs policy seriously here in Harkensen I." Ves noted curiously as his group strolled through a boulevard looking over a stretch of golden beaches. Thousands of vacationers dotted the area, each of them trying to forget about the worries of their daily lives. "On Harkensen III, it's impossible not to bump into a mech, but here you have to go to a military base to spot the mechs."

"Don't think the streets are unprotected." Nolsen cautioned them all. "I've spotted countless Planetary Guard patrollers in plainclothes. There are hidden turrets and defense fixtures all around. Though they can't withstand a determined attack, fending off a few random mechs is easy enough."

The security officer's words revealed that Harkensen I was nearly as well-defended as the mech-crazy Harkensen III. The vacation planet simply camouflaged its fangs.

"That's a lot more security than normal I think." Another Vandal said.

Ensign Tiss nodded at that. "It's no surprise that the Reinaldians are strengthening their security presence. All of the gang warfare and outbursts of random violence has thrown Harkensen III into turmoil."

Everyone's faces glowered for a moment. The so-called gang warfare that wracked the underbelly of Harkensen III disrupted an decades-old pact of keeping the fighting on the down-low. Even if a gang needed to hit their rivals, they should at least do it out of sight. Too much violence was bad for business.

"This is Harkensen I. There's no industry here and no mechs that can rampage around." Ves reassured everyone. "The gangs at sway on this planet leech off the tourists. There's no way they are willing to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs."

That lifted everyone up again. So far, none of the fighting had spilled over to Harkensen I and Harkensen II. Both of them were very different planets, and the Reinaldians had a better hold over security on those two planets.

"Look! There's a race going on!"

The group walked towards a crowd of beach goers surrounding a group of young men and women preparing for a boat race. Technicians surrounded the boats and continuously tuned them up.

Ves ignored the boastful talks and exaggerated claims of the racers. Instead, he swept his gaze over the boats. "They're kind of simple."

Maybe before, he would have dismissed the boats out of hand. The technologies involved were highly refined, but the principles of propelling a boat on water remained unchanged for thousands of years. Ves did not even need to study a manual to design a boat with nearly identical performance.

Yet he did not dismiss the water vessels out of hand. Perhaps before he would have thumbed his nose at simple constructions, but ever since the honor duel, he gained a new conception of utilization.

As his eyes raked over the technical construction of the boats, he found that he could spot a subtle difference between each vessel. Ves could vaguely determine which technician was simply going through the motions and which ones pursued greater perfection in their craft.

"Even if they are just boat technicians, there's a difference between a passionate one and a passionless one."

None of the boat technicians impressed Ves in terms of their technical prowess. If they had the ability to become a mech technician, then they wouldn't be out here tinkering with boats. Yet Ves had seen many mech technicians who were worse than some of the boat technicians at work right now.

"Ves! Let's head over to the betting station!" Tiss called as Ves was lost in thought. "I'm putting my money on Handsome Martinez! Just look at his smile! He's a total winner!"

Ves absentmindedly followed the group towards a betting station that was probably responsible for handing out the prize money to the winners of the race. He put a hundred marks on Handsome Martinez without much consideration.

"I'm telling you, Goosewing Red is definitely going to end up first! Just look at how hot she is!"

"No way, man! Mimi Stellion is the best babe around! I've put five-hundred marks on her name!"

After several days of contemplation, Ves could finally identify the crux behind utilization. Studying the boats and comparing the handicraft of the technicians against each other was no different than comparing different mechs. This was because the principles governing utilization applied to the entire engineering field, whether it was crafting toys or crafting mechs.

"The difference lies in passion!"

To be more accurate, the difference in quality came from the drive or motivation to improve. This was such a simple idea that most people instantly dismissed it as a platitude after hearing it. After all, wasn't it already common sense that more motivated people produced better results?

"There's a difference, though, especially when it concerns craftsmanship."

As the techs finished up their tuning and the boats raced off into the water, Ves watched the performance of the boats. Though the skills of the individual boat racer was the prime factor in whether they gained a lead, the quality of the boats played a major role as well.

Ves experienced a quiet breakthrough in thought. As most people around him cheered for their favorite racers, he alone focused on nothing but the boats.

"The will to improve! The desire to progress! That's it! That's the key!"

Every passionate craftsman desired to improve their craft. As long as they persisted in this motivation, they would eventually widen the distance between themselves and those with other motivations.

Having gotten in touch with many mech designers, Ves recognized the differences in mentalities between them. If Ves disregarded their ranking and ability, the underlying difference became very clear.

The most impressive mech designer Ves had recently met was undoubtedly Gabriel Creta. The man not only refined his craft to a very high level, but from their brief talk Ves had sensed that the man constantly strived for more!

"This is how a mech designer ought to behave!"

Though his learning ability held him back from breaking through to Journeyman, the man's indomitable motivation kept driving him forward. Ves estimated Creta would certainly be able to advance in the next five years. His mentality and breadth of experience was too abundant to remain stuck in the Apprentice stage.

In contrast to driven men like Mr. Creta, Ves also encountered scores of low-ranking mech designers who had given up. Some of them had been drafted in the Mech Corps and currently served under his command. Others eked out a unprestigious existence in the private market as mech appraisers or mech repairers.

"These sideline jobs aren't enough to advance a mech designer. Only by designing mechs can someone of our profession truly improve."

The hierarchy of mech designers resembled a very wide and short pyramid. It only possessed a few layers, but the base was enormous compared to the tip. Too many mech designers lingered at the bottom level and never saw any hopes of advancing to a higher level.

Some mech designers only took months to advance from Novice to Apprentice. Others needed decades to reach the same height, while the vast majority never succeeded in taking the first step at all in their lives.

This highlighted the need for opportunity as well as motivation. Those with no ability or connections wouldn't be able to survive in the mech market. Ves had always fallen into the trap of thinking that his System-granted gifts would be sufficient to ride the tide to success.

Now he realized that such a mentality wouldn't gain him much in the larger scheme of things. Passively accumulating libraries-worth of knowledge was like depending on brute force to open a vault. He could smack the vault door with his fists all day and not even make a dent on the surface.

What Ves really had to do was to open the vault doors through the correct procedure, whether that was deciphering the right entry codes or fashioning the right keys.

Between brute force and finesse, mech designers always emphasized the latter over the former. The key to designing a mech that was far more than the sum of its parts was to employ the greatest amount of finesse.

"Utilization, motivation and opportunity all comprise the essential keys to advancement."

Ves understood a little better why the mech industry only started to take a mech designer seriously when they reached Journeymen. It wasn't just a matter of knowledge. Ves wasn't conceited enough to think he was the only Apprentice in the galaxy with an overabundant supply of knowledge stuffed in his head.

Why were many Journeymen able to advance despite possessing a much more shallow foundation in knowledge?

"It's because they've tempered themselves to the point where they can already design great mechs with only basic knowledge!"

Ves did not share the same opportunities as genuine talents such as Oleg or Patricia, but he possessed an even greater chance in the form of the System.

He always thought that as long as he milked the System, he would eventually be able to catch up and surpass his peers.

"Riding the river downstream will only lead me to the sea. There's no challenge to overcome if I ride the current. In order to temper myself and polish my utilization, I've got to swim against the current! Only by going upstream with I be able to reach a higher elevation!"

Ves had found his way.

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Perhaps many other mech designers already realized this insight from their superiors. Unfortunately, Ves did not have too much contact with other mech designers, let alone his nominal Master.

While Ves thought it was best to minimize contact with more perceptive mech designers in order to keep his secrets safe, he also found it a pity to miss out on useful little nuggets like this. Fumbling from Apprentice to Journeyman on his own was like treading a bumpy path. Every so often, he tripped or stumbled against an obstacle. With no one to lead him to the other side, Ves had to rely on his own efforts to make it through.

"It's not that big of a deal, though. I'm progressing fast enough as it is. This insight happened to come at the right time."

Certainly, Ves wanted to become a Journeyman sooner rather than later. He faintly thought that if he kept to his old habit of gathering more and more knowledge, it wouldn't do any good with regards to his advancement. The sheer breadth of knowledge contained within his mind might even become a giant distraction!

"I've acquired far more knowledge than an Apprentice should possess. Studying more is not going to be useful to my development. Instead, I've got to focus primarily on designing new mechs."

Practical experience polished his utilization of knowledge. Ideally, Ves would eventually reach the point where he was able to combine basic theories into amazing products!

"However, mindlessly designing more mechs won't cut it. I've got to form a solid drive towards improving my mech design ability."

Ambition welled within his mind. Ves did not feel the need to formulate a concrete motivation. Merely wishing to reach the pinnacle of mech design was bold enough to work for a lifetime. Ves had always hung onto his dream after he first received the Mech Designer System.

The only difference between now and then was that Ves knew he had to work for it regardless of his advantages. Solely relying on the gifts exchanged from the System hadn't strengthened his mech design mentality at all. He needed to fight for what he wanted.

"A passive ambition is merely a daydream. An active ambition is a goal that I am striving towards."

In the analogy of comparing between drifting downstream and swimming against the current, the latter resulted in a lot more harvest. Perhaps unconsciously Ves had already taken this difference to heart.

"Maybe this is why I'm eagerly attracted to challenges and adventure."

Staying in his private workshop for years on end in order to churn out mech design after mech design didn't seem like an attractive prospect to Ves. Yet many mech designers adhered to such a brutal schedule, thinking that each additional mech would bring them closer and closer to advancement.

The mech designers working for design studios basically turned into slaves that robotically produced design after design. Their efficiency was low, because the odds of producing a lackluster design was very high. Only the

rights of one in twenty or one in forty designs might be sold or licenses. And this was already a good conversion rate in the mech industry.

"A mech manufacturer can't operate like that. A company like the LMC needs quality over quantity when it comes to designs."

Low-performing mech models often led to severe losses to the mech manufacturer. Producing ten straight loser designs not only ate away a company's reserves, it also impacted its reputation in a negative way. If a mech manufacturer was perceived as having 'lost its way', they would lose at least half of their loyal customer base overnight.

A mech manufacturer on a downward trend had a very large chance of going bankrupt!

Ves never believed that producing the most amount of designs in the least amount of time was a recipe for success. He had always produced his designs depending on his needs and after a process of accumulation. His personal experiences provided him with fertile soil to develop new designs.

"I've been swimming upstream all this time without realizing it." He uttered to himself. "If I really wanted to, I could have avoided a lot of danger. Yet that would have also made me miss out on a lot of opportunities."

He summed up the major events in his career so far. The Young Tigers Exhibition. The Leemar Open Competition. The Groening mission. The Glowing Planet campaign. The Detemen Operation. The escape to Reinald.

Sprinkled with a few other challenges such as the recent honor duel, all of these experiences made him grow as a mech designer. From a fresh-faced graduate to a seasoned hand in the mech industry, Ves could never have reached this height by acting as a shut-in who perpetually locked himself in his workshop.

At first, the System prompted him out to do something by issuing missions to him. Later on, it largely fell dormant. Perhaps the reason why it rarely issued him a mission was because he was already on the right track. Ves craved for excitement and challenges even if he didn't consciously realize it. Now that he became aware of the reason behind his proclivity to adventure, nothing much had changed.

He was still the same Ves, only now he became more cognizant of his urges. No matter what, knowing why he felt different than many other mech designers was definitely a benefit. The importance of this realization couldn't be overstated.

The difference between an ape and a human was that the former acted on instinct while the latter acted on conscious thought.

It always disturbed him a bit to crave excitement despite his profession as a mech designer. He thought that while the experiences definitely allowed him to learn something new, this path to growth was an unconventional one. He felt like he was a deviant in a crowd of normal mech designers. Was there something wrong in his head?

Now he realized he had nothing to worry about his supposed abnormality. It wasn't the Larkinson blood and heritage that drove him to the edge of danger. His urge to head out in the galaxy and explore new sights came from his inner desire to swim upstream.

It didn't particularly matter what kind of events he encountered. As long as they challenged him in some way, he inevitably walked away as a better mech designer than the day before.

Lots of thoughts passed through his mind. The boat race happening in front of him became a very distant event. Ves didn't even care he lost his bet on Handsome Martinez.

As the Vandals leisurely enjoyed their stay on Harkensen I, his mind had already been cast towards the future. He felt he needed to define his future in order to drive his ambition from a passive state into an active state. Solid goalposts were easier to meet than distant aspirations clouded in fog.

"First, the Avatars of Myth needs to be more than a personal protection force."

Ves created the Avatars for multiple reasons. Not only did he wish to set an example to the market of what an outfit equipped entirely with his mechs could do, he also wanted to rely on them to proactively seek out adventure.

Whether he was fulfilling a mission for the Clifford Society or crossing into the frontier in search of treasure, owning an outfit completely loyal to him was an essential requirement. Ves would be a monumental fool to continue to rely on mercenary corps or private security forces to keep him safe!

His firsthand experiences with the Flagrant Vandals allowed him to become familiar to the inner workings of a large mech unit. Though a military mech regiment could not be equated to a private mech outfit, copying some of their best practices was probably a good deed.

"With enough numbers, a lot of opportunities will open up. If something can't be done by a single mech company, then what about three?"

If Ves wanted to make full use of the Avatars of Myth, then he should definitely expand its ranks. "I don't need to grow it to an exaggerated extent. The standard of a mech regiment works for the military, but will not necessary work for the private sector."

Large-scale mercenary corps existed with thousands of mechs on their combat rolls. Only rarely did they gather together in order to fulfill a momentous assignment.

Ves did not aim to start up a mercenary corps where his mechs would be hired out to other employees. Thus, he did not feel the need to field enough

mechs to conquer an entire planet. Matching the numbers of the Verle Task Force wasn't necessary either.

"Hm, five companies of mechs should be good enough. That's strong enough to bully around most fleets in the frontier."

Naturally, Ves needed to balance out the numbers between landbound, aerial and spaceborn mechs. The only problem was that Ves had not yet produced a serious original design in the latter two categories.

"This should be my next priority. I have to round out my mech catalog as fast as possible."

A mature mech manufacturer developed and sold entire product lines of mechs. These were mechs that shared many commonalities with each other, such as technologies, parts and design standards. An outfit that utilized multiple mech models from the same product line faced a much smaller logistical burden than if they utilized a wide variety of mechs.

The Vandals suffered somewhat from this problem due to their wide variety of random mech models. Each of them centered around different sets of core materials and technologies that it had been a daily nightmare for Ves as a head designer to keep it all together.

"Right now, I can't develop an aerial or a spaceborn mech, but I should at least pave the way if I decide to start in this direction."

Ves already became somewhat familiar with flight systems and the anatomy of spaceborn mechs from his time with the Vandals. Working constantly on the Inheritor and Hellcat mechs combined with the tutelage he received from Laida gave him a solid footing in this area.

"If I want to design a spaceborn mech, I can already produce a decent attempt."

That wasn't enough for Ves. If Ves wanted to pad the Avatars of Myth with mechs meant to keep him safe, then he had to go the extra mile and thoroughly master the intricacies of spaceborn mechs.

Taking a page out of the new book, Ves did not aim to solve his inadequacies by binge-reading textbooks on flight systems and spaceborn mechs. He already possessed the required knowledge to design a spaceborn mech from his existing Skills.

Rather than read a manual on how to combine those disparate pieces of knowledge from different Skills, perhaps Ves might be able to achieve a greater harvest if he compiled a method of his own.

"It's the difference between playing an existing song or composing a new song as a musician. Retreading existing work allows me to catch up faster and enables me to produce better output on the fly. But would I really be able to become a good musician? An imitator has never attempted to climb out of their molds are destined to be forgotten."

That said, composing his own songs may likely lead to a lot of bad or mediocre songs at the start. Perfection couldn't be reached in a single bound. Yet if Ves was willing to grit his teeth and tough it out, he was much more likely to sustain his growth trajectory after all of the imitators reached a halt in their progress.

Ves thought back on the strange theory proposed by Morgan who he met during mech designer boot camp. The older mech designer might have been onto something when he proposed that rushing to Journeyman with an insufficient foundation may stop them from advancing to Star Designers.

It was unfortunate that Morgan took a detour while he was on the right track.