Chapter 851 Trash Can Mech

What the Flagrant Vandals needed the most was to get their hands on a mech that beat the breakdown effect.

It would be best if Ves designed a mech that fully resisted the breakdown effect, but he knew his capabilities and didn't think he'd be able to accomplish something like that. It was fine to dream, but when it came to fulfilling an immediate project, he found it best to be realistic.

"Let's begin with the basic priorities."

The breakdown-proof mech didn't need to last for years like conventional mechs, but it absolutely had to keep working for several weeks under arduous conditions. The complexity of the design had to be as small as possible to provide fewer opportunities for faults.

The more complex a mech, the more prone to faults it became.

Therefore, in order to maximize the reliability of his mech, Ves had to abandon many modern advancements in the field of mech design and turn to older styles of mech design.

Mechs from two-hundred, three-hundred and even four-hundred years ago were a lot more simpler and less complicated in their construction. The continued advancements in the field of mech design mostly came as the result of a combination of better materials and more sophisticated applications of technology.

The latter in particular basically traded simplicity for performance.

It was like the question of transportation. A person on foot traveled slower than a person riding on an aircar. A person on an aircar traveled slower than a person riding a shuttle.

Right now, mechs had reached a very refined state where they incorporated many advanced systems to deliver much greater performance than before. However, this came with the downside of being much more difficult to fabricate and maintain.

Even mech pilots suffered from the added complexity.

Once, it took five or so years to become a decent mech pilot. Now, they could forget about it unless they trained at least ten years to pilot the most basic mechs. To most mech pilots, they would only be able to become decent mech pilots after attending the mech academies for at least fifteen years!

As the Age of Mechs flourished, mechs were no longer as simple as someone traveling on foot. They slowly upgraded to traveling with aircars, until they finally reached a state equivalent to traveling aboard a shuttle.

However, if Ves wanted to design a mech that resisted the breakdown effect, more complexity only added to the difficulty of his project. "The current state of mech design emphasizes performance over reliability. If a mech designer can achieve five percent better performance at the cost of a five percent increase in breakdowns, then they wouldn’t hesitate to make this tradeoff!"

After all, breakdowns were a matter of chance. As long as the MTA validated the mech design, it shouldn’t be too shabby in terms of reliability! With proper maintenance and care, a high-performing but brittle mech still provided a lot of value to their buyers.

Yet now the situation was completely different. Ves expected mechs to suffer malfunctions left and right the closer they got to the Starlight Megalodon. Who cared about how well a mech performed when it crashed every couple of days? Which mech pilot wanted to put their lives on the line in a mech that could fail at any second during a battle?

"Reliability should be a top priority of my new mech design!"

So instead of developing something as complex as a shuttle for the purpose of transportation, he should draw back and resort to older but more reliable applications of technology. Going back to traveling with an aircar or even on foot may impact the performance of his design in a drastic fashion, but as long as it worked under pressure, so what?

"Besides designing a mechanically simple mech, it also has to be able to last independently while withstanding the planet’s crushing gravity."

The second demand for his original mech was that it should be able to operate under six times the gravity of Old Earth without depending on gravitic backpacks. Those backpacks emanated a useful antigrav field that lightened a mech enormously, but the antigrav modules built inside the backpacks were highly prone to breakdowns themselves.

The larger the backpack, the higher the risk of shutting down! This would be a highly fatal event if the gravitic backpacks shutdown in the middle of a battle!

The only area where Ves intended to incorporate an antigrav module was inside the cockpit of the mech. He could place several small, redundant antigrav modules inside a cockpit in order to shield the pilot from the debilitating effects of heavy gravity.

Even if one of the antigrav modules failed, one of half-a-dozen of spares could instantly kick in and pick up the slack!

"The rest of the mech should be able to move under its own power."

That made the mech as slow as fast transports or the god species at best. Ves took particular inspiration in the god species. They survived and thrived for thousands of years on this planet despite being huge, slow exobeasts.

What did their existence signify?

"Even under six gravities, it’s not impossible to design a mech that can last for a standard day without replenishing its power cells."

However, this placed incredibly stringent demands on his mech, as Ves already discussed with Mayra. The mech could only be a quadruped light mech that incorporated the most lightweight alloys they could get their hands on. The mech would also be slow due to the need to conserve energy when fighting back against the planet’s heavy gravity.

This was also why he didn’t favor designing a melee mech. While they were lethal up close, how long did it take for them to enter effective range?

Still, melee mechs held a definite edge over fragile ranged mechs in complex terrain. The frontline mechs that Ves envisioned would only be dominant if they fought on flat and open terrain.

"It’s a shame that I don’t know what kind of terrain we’ll encounter upon the crash site. There’s no question that the terrain will be weird in some way. As the heart of the anomaly that isolates this entire star system, I doubt the terrain has remained unaffected by all the weird shenanigans that take place!"

Still, it wasn’t as if ranged mechs lost all their value on complex terrain. It just made things more difficult for them. Ves could only make a decision and stick to it in the hopes that his envisioned mech wouldn’t fare too badly at the mission site.

It wasn’t until now that Ves began to draft the outline of his mech in his mind. Now that he set his priorities as well as the basic properties of his mech, the mech that he imagined in his mind became clearer and more defined with each second.

At first glance, Ves mistook the mech his creativity cooked up as an ugly-looking trash can turned into a killer bot.

"Urgh, what’s this abomination?"

For some reason, he envisioned a thin and fragile-looking cylindrical base resting atop a set of four, fairly sturdy-looking legs. Of course, the legs were only sturdy compared to the legs of other light mechs. They were still a ways off from the robustness of medium mech legs.

"The legs are the most important parts of a breakdown-proof mech."

The legs were thicker than average light mech legs because they required the strength to fight back against the planet’s heavy gravity.

The cylindrical torso that resembled a certain style of trash cans presented tricky angles to any ranged opponents that made it a little more challenging to pierce its armor with laser weapons.

The rotating laser cannon barrels affixed to the side of the trash can torso gave his mech its teeth in true frontline mech fashion. Replacing humanoid arms with laser cannon barrels significantly reduced the complexity of the mech and reduced the influence of the breakdown effect.

Ves did not intend to add a head to the mech. While it made mech pilots unused to piloting frontline mechs uncomfortable, Ves decided to place the main sensors onto the upper torso.

Basically, the mech in his vision looked as ugly as hell. It looked like a trash can on legs or a top-heavy bar stool.

"It’s not a good idea if the mech is too tall and narrow." He reminded himself. "Such a mech will have a high center or gravity, which means as soon as it leans too much on one side, it’s prone to tipping over."

It would be extremely troublesome for his frontline mech to climb back up to its feet if it ever fell on its sides. This was the number one weakness of frontline mechs! Without any articulating arms, it wouldn’t be possible for it to stand up without external assistance!

Bestial mechs suffered from the same problem, actually, but their limbs were sometimes designed to be flexible enough to cope with such situations.

"I can’t include everything in my mech. Adding an extra arm or two for the sole purpose of righting the mech when tipped over is a costly luxury."

He wasn’t willing to make such a tradeoff. With great reluctance, he made a design choice to leave this weakness intact. The price of mitigating it was too high for Ves to pay.

Overall, this mech looked unbelievably crappy for a quadruped mech. It lacked the leanness of a dog mech, the primal ferocity of a tiger mech, the versatile grace of a centaur mech or the maneuverability of a spider-legged mech.

Ves couldn’t help but shake off the impression that it looked like a giant trash can.

"Maybe I can shape the torso into a more complex shape?"

Yet what would be the point? A simple shape reduced the complexity of his mech enormously. If he shaped it like a human torso, then the difficulty of fabricating the armor plates increased by three-hundred percent or so.

In contrast, it didn’t take too much effort to fabricate interchangeable uniform rounded armor plates. A cylindrical torso shape also eased the challenge of keeping the center of gravity in the center of the mech while granting a sufficient amount of internal volume to stuff an abundant amount of energy cells inside.

As a mech reliant on laser weapons and meant to last for up to an entire standard day, it would certainly consume an enormous amount of energy. Beefing up its energy reserves was high on his list of priorities.

The one thing he couldn’t quite get over with was the relative height of the mech.

"The relative height of the mech also provides it with a small height advantage when firing their laser cannons, but overall it will be quite the disadvantage if it is withstanding a strong impact. Tipping over is a very real possibility, though possessing four legs will mitigate that risk to a certain extent."

Ves slightly revised the shape of the legs in his mind. He contemplated for a while and instead of adding straight legs to his trash can design, he instead curved them outwards in order to provide a much more stabler footing. Ves essentially borrowed the design principles of an artillery mech, which often based their designs around semi-mobile firing platforms.

Instead of looking like a narrow bar stool, the trash can mech now resembled a trash can mated with a four-legged spider.

It still looked ugly to Ves, but when he mentally made the trash can shorter and wider, it sort of resembled a thick medallion on legs.

Ves really couldn’t describe the appearance of the mechs in words. He only knew that his latest change increased the stability of the mech and enormously reduced the chance of tipping over.

In addition, even if it lost a mech due to battle damage, it could still make do with moving around on three legs. In fact, if Ves approached the design of the legs a bit more cleverly, he could even ensure its mobility on just two legs!

Chapter 852 The Significance of a Name

After two days of working on his vision of his third original design, Ves finally started nailed down the overall vision for his third original mech design.

He still retained the mech’s short but wide cylindrical torso and its four, thick spider-like legs. Instead of calling it a trash can mech or a barstool mech, he now regarded it as a crawler mech.

"It sounds much more elegant to call it a crawler-type frontline mech than calling it a trash can on legs."

The main trait of crawler mechs was that they sacrificed mobility for stability. They weren't designed to run as fast as humanoid mechs or most bestial mechs. What they excelled at the most was managing a mech's center of gravity and navigating through extremely rugged terrain.

However, most mechs that adopted crawler legs tended to be heavy mechs. Their incredibly heavy weight and inability to move fast without allocating a ludicrous amount of power to its engines made them a good match for crawler legs.

For light mechs that relied heavily on mobility to fulfill their roles and evade any incoming attacks, they would never resort to something as silly as crawler legs that needlessly dragged down their mobility.

Did light mechs need the additional stability afforded by crawler legs? No!

"However, the equation is completely different if the weight of the mech is multiplied by six."

Regardless of the configuration of the legs, the light mech would never be able to move fast enough to sprint. The only way for Ves to accomplish such extreme mobility would be if he designed an extreme mech that basically amounted to an engine on legs.

Such a mech would be able to move quickly even under Aeon Corona VII's crushing gravity. However, the limited amount of energy cells and lack of room for any other features turned it into a short-lasting sprinter that couldn't do anything else.

Therefore, Ves firmly settled on the crawler type as his light mech would be able to take maximum advantage of the extra stability. As for the impact on speed, Ves didn't expect it to be much slower.

Slowly, the mech in his vision changed from a creepy crawler to something that resembled a turtle in shape. It moved as fast as a turtle and shared its overall shape sans the head. The only difference was that the mech he envisioned lacked the toughness of a turtle shell but gained some laser cannons in return.

"Did I inadvertently design a bestial mech?"

Besides the omission of a head, the shape did indeed resemble that of a turtle. The other major difference was that the legs of his so-called turtle mech was a lot longer and thinner.

"It doesn’t actually resemble a turtle or share much of its traits except for its general body shape, so technically it’s not a bestial mech."

Ves did not draw upon existing animal shapes to envision his mech, so in his perspective it was still a frontline mech rather than a bestial mech.

This distinction mattered a lot because mech pilots approached frontline mechs and bestial mechs with different mindsets.

Bestial mechs took advantage of the shape of animals or exobeasts to empower it with advanced movement options and unconventional attack methods.

The bestial supremacy movement claimed that predator animals possessed an undeniable advantage in melee combat. It was much easier for them to leverage their mobility to add weight to their attacks.

However, the humanoid supremacy movement contended that mech pilots adjusted much easier if they piloted human mechs. Besides, humanoid mechs possessed a lot more flexibility and could easily switch weapon loadouts when the situation called for it. Yet it was also undeniable that it was difficult to empower their melee attacks without depending on specific fighting styles.

The weird breakdown-proof mech that Ves envisioned ultimately fell outside of bestial and humanoid mechs. It belonged to a third category called frontline mechs.

"Frontline mechs are mechs solely designed for battle."

They represented the essence of mechs at their purest form as machines geared for unending battle. They were cheap to mass produce and required much less training to master than piloting humanoid mechs.

In the early days of the Age of Mechs, everyone believed that frontline mechs represented the future direction of mech design. That was because their designs were extraordinarily efficient for their cost. They exemplified the belief that quantity trumped quality.

Yet history had a way of turning expectations upside-down.

Two reasons emerged that explained why frontline mechs failed to become the dominant mech type.

First, as mechs that emphasized quantity over quality, mech pilots generally hated piloting them. Only the poorest mech pilots with the worst genetic aptitudes preferred to pilot these weak but simple mechs.

Talented mech pilots needed better mechs to fully showcase their combat ability!

Cases where a group of four high-quality mechs defeated more than a hundred frontline mechs through waging guerilla war sometimes appeared on the news. In addition, the existence of expert mechs and expert pilots almost completely subverted the idea that quantity mattered the most!

The second reason was that mech pilots generally weren’t as abundant as everyone thought. Only a small portion of the population possessed the right

genetic aptitude to pilot mechs, and only a fraction of those possessed the grit and mindset to set foot on the battlefield.

As disgraceful as it sounded, a majority of potentates actually consisted of cowards. They were willing to go along with the training in order to take advantage of the status afforded to potentates. Yet when it came to risking their lives, they turned into crybabies who would faint at the sight of blood.

Therefore, the pool of mech pilots in any state or region only possessed a limited depth. If a mech military foisted all of their available mech pilots with cheap, disposable mechs, then their manpower would run out sooner or later while achieving a disappointing amount of impact on the battlefield.

"The ultimate bottleneck a mech military has to contend with is manpower. There are so many mech pilots to go around. It makes more sense to make the most out of the limited pool of manpower by pairing them with better quality mechs that last longer on the battlefield."

These two reasons basically restricted the rise and overwhelming dominance of frontline mechs. Still, the frontline mech supremacy movement still held out hope for the future. These fanatics predict that they enjoyed the last laugh.

This was because frontline mechs became a lot more viable in two different scenarios. First, when automation advanced to such an extent where AI mech pilots performed better than human mech pilots.

The second scenario that favored frontline mechs was when genetic aptitude no longer limited the pool of possible mech pilots. When twenty, fifty or a hundred percent of all humans could pilot a mech, a sea of change would sweep through all of human space!

No longer would the privilege of piloting mechs be restricted to 3.5 percent of all humans! This significantly increased the pool of manpower able to pilot

mechs and lead to a much more devastating wars as the quantity of mechs on the battlefield multiplied by at least an order of magnitude!

Ves did not dare to make predictions of what might happen in the far future. He was not delusional enough to believe that mechs would be able to reign supreme forever. Perhaps some new weapons of war emerged in the future that replaced mechs as the primary weapons of war.

"The sunset of the Age of Mechs. I wonder how far off this future will come into being."

Hopefully, Ves enjoyed a long and fruitful career of a mech designer by the time mechs began to decline. At best, he wanted to pass on from his life while mech still flourished and where everyone still remembered his legacy.

Ves shook his head. "What am I thinking?"

He refocused his mind back to his frontline mech. Now that he pinned down its shape and basic traits, he wanted to add some personality to the design in his vision.

"It needs a name."

Obviously, he couldn’t call it the Trash Can or the Turtle. As a frontline mech, its overall shape resembled neither of the two.

A name should have meaning. A name should represent something. With these two demands, Ves tried to narrow down a name for a frontline mech with unusual traits.

"A name sends a message to the mech pilots on what the mech stands for. A good name therefore puts the mech pilots into the right mindset."

How did he envision his mech in battle?

Ideally, they formed small teams and navigated rough terrain in unison. Whenever they faced a threat in the distance, they pelted it with accurate, long-ranged laser cannons.

They moved slow. They possessed a lot of endurance. They were resilient to mechanical breakdowns. They hit hard from afar. They avoided melee combat.

"Out of all these traits, my design’s resistance against the breakdown effect is the most important one by far. This alone justifies its existence."

Ves started to motivate his Spirituality. His vision began to take on substance as Ves started suffusing it with his formidable Spirituality.

"A mech that resists failure is a mech that stands eternal. Eternal! What a familiar concept!"

He once designed eternal variants of his mech designs intended for display purposes. Yet to tack on the meaning of eternal to his third mech design would not be appropriate.

"A cheap mech won’t last very long. It only has to be resilient in the first month or so of its lifespan. What happens after that is not important, because they’ll be scrapped or recycled anyway."

The mech in his vision was therefore anything but eternal. It was a fleeting design and only served a brief purpose before Ves retired it. What could he call such a transient design?

"My mech is like a suicide bomber. It only exists for a brief period of time, but it intends to stay alive long enough to complete its objective."

That was a tasteless comparison. He shouldn’t equate his mech design with suicide bombers, or else the mech pilots would gain the mistaken impression that they should sacrifice their mechs and lives in battle.

"What then?"

After two hours of puzzling, Ves came across a final idea.

"Protector. My design is a protector. After all, isn’t its purpose to escort our infantry to the Starlight Megalodon and secure their extraction route?"

The main goal of his frontline mechs was to protect the infantry. For this mission, the mech needed to endure difficult circumstances and resist the strengthened breakdown effect at all times.

The mechs needed to endure in order to fulfill their protection mission!

The concept resonated with Ves and his vision. He felt as if he encountered a fitting label for his mech design.

Still, Ves felt that calling his mech design the Protector lacked a little flavor. It needed something extra to distinguish its role and make it sound less generic.

"The second priority of the frontline mech is that it has to last long. It needs to operate under crushing gravity while being as efficient as possible with its energy expenditure."

Frugal. Efficient. Long-lasting. Ves flitted through various words that he could use to tack onto the concept of Protector.

"What about Enduring?"

In the context of mechs, the meaning of the word enduring meant that a mech could last all day on the battlefield. They stood in stark contrast to peak performance mechs that had an immediate impact on the battlefield at the cost of running out of juice in a matter of hours or even minutes.

"Enduring Protector."

In this case, the word carried a double meaning as the word Enduring also implied a capacity to resist difficult conditions. In this case, this resistance

wasn’t against external attacks, but from internal wear-and-tear which the breakdown effect magnified to an enormous degree.

"It sounds a little boring, but I like it. Let’s run with that name."

Chapter 853 Versatile Imagination

Calling his design the Enduring Protector sounded simple and blunt. Yet the target market for his original design mostly consisted of boors who lacked the sophistication to understand any subtlety.

A direct name served as an obvious signal to the mech pilots assigned to the mechs. This was not a mech for individual heroics, nor something to be piloted by aspiring duelists.

In Ves’ imagination, squads or half-squads of Enduring Protectors moved in unison and worked together as a team to destroy any opposition in the way, whether they consisted of mechs or wild gods.

Their simple mechanical construction and resilient internal architecture allowed them to fare against the breakdown effect much more effectively than any standard mech. It was the job of the Enduring Protector to endure the strong and pervasive spacetime distortion that wreaked havoc on all machines.

"It’s first job is to protect. It’s second job is to endure."

Simple. Direct. Sometimes, a mech didn’t require too much depth. They simply needed to be good enough to fulfill their jobs.

If Ves aimed to design a product for the mech market, then choosing a direct and boorish name would work against him. Not to mention that millions of mech designers likely christened their designs with similar names, mech buyers generally sought to buy something special.

A subtle, opaque and symbolic name served to arouse a potential buyer’s interest. Selling a mech was much like seduction game. Like any game, it

abided by certain rules and conventions that increased the chance of a successful sale.

A name with depth continued to add meaning to a mech that didn't necessarily exist except in the imagination of the buyer. However, as long as they were satisfied with the purchase, what was wrong with being a little romantic?

Take for example the first two designs that Ves came up with. The Blackbeak alluded to the dominant image of his offensive knight. It sounded dark, ominous and contrarian, much like the black phoenix that gave it a spark of life. It's primary message conveyed that his Blackbeak mechs differed substantially from defensive knights that only sat back and withstood incoming for for their more vulnerable comrades. Instead, it ought to be put to offensive use!

The Crystal Lord carried a domineering name. Ves picked this name deliberately both to honor the spiritual fragment of a long-dead alien leader and to elevate the role of his mech. While it worked fine in a team, its true purpose was to dominate the battlefield using its unique advantages bestowed by the alien crystal technology incorporated into its chest and laser rifle. This was a mech fit for a leader or an elite marksman!

"Both their names are classy and meaningful. Each mech pilot will develop a unique understanding of their names."

For example, one might argue the Crystal Lord served as a mech reserved for officers and leaders. Others might argue that the name meant that it was a king among laser rifleman mechs, and could beat any lesser mech that relied on laser armament!

As for the Enduring Protector, Ves did not expect it to be used for a longer period of time. He knew from his marketing studies that mech pilots continued to ascribe more meaning to their mechs the longer they fought with them. It

was human nature for warriors to value their wargear and establish an emotional connection to them, just like how warriors of the past considered their rifles and swords to be their lifelong companions.

Yet if the Enduring Protector would only be put to use for a short period of time, such a process ended before it picked up steam. Intensive combat and harrowing battles for survival rapidly increased a mech pilot’s emotional connection to their mechs, but a true long-term bond simply couldn’t emerge.

This was very relevant to the next step in his design process. It was time to bring life to his vision and empower his design with spirituality. He already readied his Triple Division technique.

The Triple Division technique superimposed three images into a single spiritual entity that occupied the same space. Either they fought, merged or co-existed. No matter what, their strengths partially covered their weaknesses and amplified what they were already good at. While not all of this was possible in reality, the imaginary realm wasn’t bound by common sense.

It sounded like an amazing technique, but with the passage of time, Ves thought he could do better. He developed the Triple Division technique as a means of ascribing more traits to the X-Factor of his mechs than a single coherent image ever could. Yet was this the limit?

Having experienced numerous new applications of spirituality from the likes of Lucky, the Church of Haatumak and the natives on Aeon Corona VII, Ves realized what he figured out so far only touched upon the surface of this limitless attribute.

"I should experiment with something new to replace the old when I have the time."

Due to the brief relevance of his upcoming design, Ves declined to add a growth element to his images. The mission simply didn’t afford his mechs the

time to grow into their roles and distinguish themselves according to their usage, experiences and quirks from their mech pilots.

Instead of taking the time to cool a proper meal, Ves had to deliver an instantly-edible nutrient pack to the Vandal mech pilots assigned to pilot the Enduring Protectors.

"The first step is to form an image of the base model."

This was the easiest part. He already formed a preliminary vision of his intended design. Right now, he concentrated his Spirituality and breathed life to that vision. He empowered his conception of a breakdown-proof frontline mech that vaguely looked like a turtle without a head.

The image gained life as Ves bestowed it with an abundant amount of Spirituality. It might be his imagination, but he felt as if his Spirituality grew in volume and strength for some reason. It became a bit more easier than he thought to empower the image of the base model.

After Ves fed a sufficient amount of his Spirituality to the base model to the point it felt full, he put the image aside and proceeded to the next step.

"Simplistic this technique may be, there is something mystical about it. I missed this experience." He sighed.

The act of creating something from nothing, even if it was limited to the imaginary realm, fascinated him to no end. He already obtained plenty of proof that spiritual entities had the power to affect reality.

Perhaps the ultimate goal of his design philosophy was to bridge the gap between the real and the imaginary and allow his spiritual images to fully descend upon his mechs.

This sounded like an extremely far-fetched goal, but for some reason, Ves never doubted he could accomplish this magical feat one day.

"It’s good to be ambitious."

He felt he was on a roll right now. Having worked as an administrator, repairer and researcher for so long during his time with the Vandals, he unexpectedly received the opportunity to design a real original mech!

Ves cherished this opportunity, because designing mechs brought him closer to his advancement to Journeyman.

The second step was to imagine a suitable totem animal that gifted his design its instincts.

While he could invest any animal he wanted, he already became inspired by the local wildlife. What better animal could he choose than the god species?

Though it seemed like a poor fit to match together the majestic god species with a cheap, disposable mech, Ves wanted to utilize this image because he possessed a strong and detailed impression of the exobeasts.

As a heavily-engineered life form, it adapted extremely well to this planet. In particular, Ves took inspiration from the wild gods who survived on every corner of Seven and became its apex species. They sat on the top of the food chain and nothing else than sacred gods and ascendant gods could defeat these dominant predators.

"The wild gods may be supplanted by the wildlings in time, but that will only be the case if the dwarves are allowed to evolve over a span of hundreds of thousands of years without any outside intervention. For now, the exobeasts are the most prevalent expression of adaptability and power on this planet."

Ves shaped a non-existent wild god in his mind with the power to project damaging beams of lights. Though he witnessed many wild gods over the months, some of whom demonstrated their powers, he never saw any wild god flinging lasers at their opponents.

That didn’t matter, as he could just invent a wild god that did possess this power.

This wild god shared a few commonalities with the frontline mech. They were slow, resilient to spacetime distortion and fought primarily by lasering their opponents from a distance before they could close into melee range.

He proceeded to spend some hours on building a backstory for this wild god. He spun a tale of harrowing growth. It fought to survive and survived by fighting in his godling stage. Upon growing up to become a wild god, it became particularly protective of its godling offspring.

Contrary to the rest of its species, this laser-flinging wild god was an attentive parent! It protected its godling offspring and raised them by protecting them from outside threats.

Ves didn’t know whether such caring wild gods existed. Most of the wild gods they encountered in the wilds were ferociously selfish. At best, they completely ignored their godling sons and daughters. At worst, they ate their own children as yummy snacks!

"Even if a caring wild god doesn’t exist before, it at least exists inside my mind."

This was the beauty of forming an image from his imagination. He could break the rules and invent something that shouldn’t exist without any repercussions.

After working for such a long time under many limitations, it felt liberating for Ves to cast open his mind and lift up his middle finger against the rules that constrained reality.

"That should be it for the totem animal."

Now he turned to the most complex image, the human myth. This portion of the Triple Division technique imparted logic, rationality, decision-making and other higher-order thoughts to the X-Factor.

The human myth strained his creativity the most as he not only needed to invent a myth-like figure, he also needed to construct a complete setting and historical background for that character.

Ves remembered that he subverted this approach last time with the Crystal Lord. Instead of inventing a spiritual entity from scratch, he adapted a spiritual fragment from a long-dead alien.

This new approach augmented the Triple Division technique and helped him breakthrough a persistent bottleneck in empowering the X-Factor.

Yet right now he didn’t have anything like that at his disposal.

"How can I obtain spiritual fragments anyway?"

Perhaps he could pick up the remains of some dwarves and try to see whether he could trace some of its lingering existence.

Still, the thought of basing the human myth around the primitive and tribal savages disgusted Ves. How would his mech pilots act if they became influenced by the chaotic thought patterns of an unenlightened dwarf?

Yet Ves found the idea of basing the human myth around a dwarf to be extremely compelling.

A native wildling not only fit with the environment, they also worked well with a wild god. Perhaps a surprising interaction might occur if he put the image of a wild god and dwarf together.

"Is it possible to set images up to synergize with each other?"

After all, the native dwarves were genetically engineered to interface with the god species. Instead of fighting each other, the images might instead combine their forces!

What would the result of their mutual cooperation look like? How would the image of the base model fit in? Ves grew incredibly curious at what might happen if he put the images together in a single space in his mind.

"I have to invent a decent dwarf first."

Should he refer to the subsequent image a human myth or a dwarf myth?

Chapter 854 Bubal

Having worked a lot with the local variety of dwarves, Ves considered himself as something of an expert concerning this subspecies of humanity.

"I may not be an exobiologist or a doctor, but outside of that there is no one among the Flagrant Swordmaidens who is more familiar with the wildlings." He grinned.

Dwarves. Wildlings. Cursed people. All of them referred to the savage heavy gravity variant humans that nomadically roamed the lands that harkened back to humanity’s primal roots.

There was a simplistic charm to their nature. They were wild, uncivilized and devoid of any sophistication, but could you blame them? They lived in an extremely inhospitable planetary environment for baseline humans and managed to survive and thrive without the aid of any sophisticated technology!

While the Flagrant Swordmaidens usually found their tribes to be undesirable nuisances, they had their uses. Not only did they polish their mech pilots through the mental resilience training sessions, they also enabled the Vandals to develop the god crystal generators that powered most of their energy-hungry machines these days!

Ves had observed the ’generators’ in action frequently. Every standard day or so, the Vandals induced the dwarf brains that served as the organic controllers of the generator to call down an energy tornado that filled up its energy reserves.

The Vandals subsequently instructed the brains to discharge the higher-dimensional energies stored within the god crystals into a more usable form of energy to recharge loads of spent batteries and energy cells at a time.

Once they began to operate the generators, the Vandals inadvertently came across some unintended side effects.

"Those energy tornados are visible from a hundred kilometers away."

When a tornado stretched from the astral winds in the skies all the way down to the surface, it pretty much telegraphed the exact position of the ground forces to every wildling tribe, wild god and who knew what in the surrounding area!

There was no way the Flagrant Swordmaidens could hide their presence as they methodically called down energy tornados every standard day.

Up until now, the Vandals hadn’t figured out a way to draw energy from the vault of the gods in a more discreet fashion.

For now, the problem wasn’t so serious, as they weren’t afraid of any wild gods or dwarf tribes.

Yet what about their rivals from human space? They weren’t as backwards in the art of war as the natives. Once they identified the exact position of the ground forces through tracking the immensely tall energy tornados, they could easily prepare an ambush against the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

Still, if the alternative to broadcasting their position every day was to run out of energy, the Flagrant Swordmaidens vastly preferred their current situation.

In any case, the native dwarves were hardy, resilient and possessed a lot of untapped potential. Whoever engineered the wildlings must have been a genius.

Still, right now Ves wanted to adopt a dwarf as the human myth for his upcoming design. However, if he picked a random savage dwarf chieftain as his inspiration, the image would sow chaos among his mech pilots!

Obviously, it was a horrible idea to base his human myth around the current incarnation of the cursed people. They were too savage and uncouth and directly contradicted the other two images!

Fortunately, Ves didn’t have to base his human myth to the existing dwarves.

He decided to invent a smart wildling.

For a moment, he couldn’t get around to this idea. For such a long time, he often dismissed the dwarves as underdeveloped savages. How could he reconcile his impression of the wildlings with his current goal?

To Ves, a smart dwarf sounded like an oxymoron.

Still, he reminded himself that anything was possible in his imagination. A smart dwarf may not exist in reality right now, but he could easily create one in his mind!

He started to form a prodigal dwarf called... Bubal. Each dwarf tribe possessed their own language, but certain savage sounds kept being repeated. Bubal sounded just like what the dwarves might say.

He started imagining the appearance of this atypical dwarf. His skin was a little lighter than the other dwarves, and unlike the rest of his kind he paid a lot more attention to his hygiene.

Bubal took on a much less savage appearance and adopted a veneer of civilization.

He knew he was an oddball among his unenlightened kind.

In fact, his appearance and behavior resembled the blessed people so much his fellow tribesmen even suspected that he was a mixed blood!

Whether this rumor was the truth, Bubal suffered a harsh life among his unenlightened tribesmen. Eventually, the tribe became so hostile to his un-dwarflike behavior that they exiled him from the tribe, leaving him with nothing but some ragged hides to cover up his body!

Bubal wandered the lands alone, managing to survive and keep himself clean through using his developing smarts. He grew more cunning during his time alone in the wilds, and managed to do the impossible by being the first dwarf who managed to survive and thrive without the support of a tribe!

Unsatisfied with spending his time alone, he sought out other dwarves, not to join their tribe but start one of his own!

He picked up strays, survivors and other exiles along the way. He taught them superior hunting and gathering methods and began to form a small tribe of his own. This tribe quickly expanded in size as Bubal started figuring out several methods that enhanced the strength of his tribe!

Over a period of several decades, his tribe grew from a collection of misfits and outcasts into a large dwarf tribe that gathered an unprecedented amount of bonded wild gods underneath his banner. Bubal became the most formidable dwarf chieftain on the planet!

With his power and influence, he could finally embark on the dream he always wanted to fulfill since his youth.

Casting a jealous eye at the ancient cities ruled by snobby blessed people and incredibly hostile sacred gods, Bubal diverged from the more aggressive dwarf chieftains by resisting the urge to invade the ancient cities.

He knew that many tribes attacked these fortified cities over the years. None of their attacks succeeded no matter how many dwarf tribes pooled their strength.

Ves imagined an older, wiser grey-haired Bubal standing atop his bonded wild god, giving out a speech in the guttural language of his dwarf tribe.

"Why must we fight and die for a city that never belongs to us? Let us build our own city, a city built by dwarves and welcome to dwarves! The time is right to end our wandering existence and break the curse of the soil!"

The wildlings listening to the speech didn’t understand half of what Bubal said, but that didn’t diminish their enthusiasm for his lofty goals!

Ves cut the story short at that point. He wanted to take this wise, older dwarf chieftain who was at the highest point of his long and eventual life and adopt him as the human myth for his Enduring Protector design.

"As a slow and methodical frontline mech, the Enduring Protector needs to be piloted with a steady, patient and responsible mindset."

This differed remarkably from his previous original designs and many other mech designs for that matter. The general consensus of the mech industry was that mechs and mech pilots should be employed aggressively and proactively.

However, while the Enduring Protector may be a light mech, it was not as speedy and agile as a light skirmisher. Its actual fighting patterns resembled artillery mechs and marksman-oriented rifleman mechs more than anything.

Ves knew what kind of mech pilots the Vandals assigned to their laser rifleman mechs. They were an eclectic bunch, but mostly rowdy and aggressive. They preferred to fight at medium range and take advantage of the mobility of their mechs to perform coordinated hit-and-run attacks.

Obviously, these mech pilots specialized in piloting rifleman mechs couldn’t employ the same tactics when piloting the Enduring Protectors. For one thing, the mechs simply moved too slow!

Therefore, the Enduring Protectors needed to be piloted by calming, more deliberate mech pilots who considered their actions before enacting them. They could also benefit from Bubal’s experience as a dwarf chieftain. As a leader among his people, he often worked hard to protect his fellow tribesmen.

Ves became satisfied with the three images he formed over the span of a day. While the base model was as boring as he expected, he found it to be an inspired decision to base the totem animal and the human myth off the natives.

"Let’s put them together."

He concentrated his mind and released the separation that kept them from interfering with each other. He corralled the three images in a single space in his mind.

What happened fell partially within his expectation.

Instead of clashing immediately as his strong-willed images tended to do all the time, they studied each other and made their moves!

First, the image of Bubal immediately approached the image of the laser-flinging wild god and attempted to bond with it! As Ves had developed quite a thorough understanding of the organic neural interfaces hidden within the heads of the wildlings and the wild gods, his imagination actively simulated the bonding attempt.

The wild god was a proud and independent creature. While he cared for his godling offspring, it didn’t mean he rolled over for every dwarf that came along his way!

The wild god resisted the mental bonding attempts!

However, Bubal didn't give up and continued to ply the wild god with his thoughts. He wanted to crack open the gates and enter the wild god's mind in order to come to an accord.

After dozens of attempts, Bubal finally achieved a breakthrough when he found out how protective the wild god was of its offspring. Bubal offered a partnership where the dwarves and the wild gods collectively took care of each other's offspring!

A thriving civilization needed to protect its young!

After finding out that Bubal and the wild god had a lot more things in common, the totem animal stopped resisting.

The two images melded together, but did not assimilate into a single entity.

Instead, they superimposed together in a stacking manner, basically combining their forces without losing anything that made them unique!

Ves watched on with interest as Bubal and the wild god formed a single combined image of Bubal as the beast rider sitting atop his bonded wild god!

During the process where Bubal convinced the wild god to combined their forces, the base model hadn't stepped in at all. It didn't possess any motivation to fight from the start!

It could have halted the partnership between its rival images by helping the wild god resist Bubal's persuasion. Yet it did not do so because it didn't help its mission.

Instead, it patiently waited for the beast rider and bonded wild god image to emerge before stepping up to sacrifice itself to the strengthened combination.

Yes, it voluntarily sacrificed itself!

"That’s surprising."

It shouldn’t be. Ves instilled the base model with a high degree of responsibility and protectiveness. On its own, it didn’t have anyone or anything to protect. Yet somehow the base model recognized these traits in the other two images.

Why not contribute its own strength to help the beast rider and wild god combination protect their loved ones better?

Therefore, the base model of the frontline mech that Ves envisioned didn’t hesitate and allowed the combined image to devour its spiritual essence and strengthen the combination even further.

What emerged was a vastly strengthened beast rider combination with a strong emphasis on both endurance and protectiveness!

Because the base model gave up its essence voluntarily, it was able to exert greater control over what the opposite party inherited!

The confrontation and fusion process had finished. After so much effort in trying to imagine three separate images, Ves finally obtained an image worthy for the Enduring Protector.

He called the combination Beast Rider Bubal!

Chapter 855 Drafting Another Design

The image of Beast Rider Bubal emanated both strength, resilience and a duty to protect. In his mind, it appeared as a small dwarf riding atop a massive lizard-like wild god. Despite their size disparity, Bubal formed the dominant intelligence due to his vastly superior mind.

Ves was exceptionally pleased with this image. While it didn’t completely fit with the concept of the Enduring Protector, it nonetheless focused on all the traits that Ves wanted to impart on his mech design’s X-Factor.

Beast Rider Bubal was a mature combination image of both Bubal and the wild god at their prime. Ves left no room for future growth, but that also meant their present potential had reached their highest state.

Any Enduring Protectors the Vandals fabricated immediately started off in their best state! Ves imagined that the image of Beast Rider Bubal immediately empowered the mechs with a strong drive towards responsibility and foresight.

This unconscious adjustment should temper the Vandal mech pilots assigned to pilot them and put them into a more appropriate mindset to the correct usage of their mechs.

The beauty of this method was that all of this went on at a spiritual level, leaving no traces for Vandal instruments to capture.

This was in stark contrast to the tampering that Ves had done to Venerable Karol Xie’s mechs and simulator pods. While no bystander should be able to find out what he did unless they dug into the programming of the neural interface, which almost no one ever did, it still represented a vulnerability that could bite Ves back in the butt.

"I should do something about that at some point. I can’t leave any traces behind."

Ves smirked as he imagined Venerable Xie’s mood these last couple of weeks. As the breakdown effect started hitting the mechs harder the closer they got to their destination, the Pale Dancer suffered the most.

Expert mechs may be ten times stronger than a normal mech, but they were easily ten times as complex as a normal mech as well!

All of this complexity allowed the breakdown effect to enjoy free reign over the expensive but fussy expert mech.

While the strong, high-quality materials of the Pale Dancer somewhat mitigated the chances of breakdowns, some problems were unavoidable. Overall, the Pale Dancer easily malfunctioned at least five times as often!

No matter how Miss Lisbeth strengthened or modified the customized rifleman mech, nothing could block the pervasive breakdown effect from wreaking havoc.

Faced with the prospect of losing his strongest asset, Venerable Xie was flailing around lately according to Talkative Jimmy. The foreign expert pilot even started practicing with the other mechs of the Vandals as a contingency option.

Perhaps Venerable Xie would only be able to make a meaningful impact on the battlefield with a bog-standard rifleman mech instead of his tailored expert mech!

"Seems like the breakdown effect is ruining everyone’s lives."

He wondered how the other forces fared against the breakdown effect. The Vesians would likely adopt the same solution as the Flagrant Swordmaidens and develop a dumbed-down mech that fared better under these circumstances than their main mechs.

As for the pirate forces, Ves doubted whether they possessed the mech designers, equipment and supplies necessary to take up such a venture.

Ves only had to look at Lydia’s Swordmaidens to see how pirates often tended to neglect logistics. They only prepared the minimum because they were used to quick skirmishes and raids. Spending months or years on the surface of a planet likely hadn’t factored into their plans!

"While it’s tempting to dismiss the pirates as incompetent, I shouldn’t underestimate them. Who knows what tricks they have up their sleeves. Out of all the competitors that sought to obtain the keys to the Aeon Corona

System, these bunch of scum have triumphed where many of their fellow mercenaries, gangers and pirates have fallen short."

None of the pirate forces in orbit and on the surface should be weak, to be honest.

"Although that time when the spaceborn fleet of Caged and the Red Tongs indiscriminately bombarded the surface was kind of stupid."

Even if the Starlight Megalodon of all entities hadn’t stepped in, the rival fleets would have combined their forces to wipe them out. It broke the unofficial accord that always came about under these circumstances.

The Vesians could have bombarded the surface, the Flagrant Vandals could have bombarded the surface, the pirates could have bombarded the surface.

Yet they didn’t do so for a long while until the Caged and the Red Tongs idiotically stepped in. Because even if they successfully wiped out the ground forces of the Flagrant Swordmaidens, the other fleets would have sought out and bombarded the ground forces of the Caged and the Red Tongs in retaliation!

"Of course, ever since we entered the storm lands, we don’t need the accord to protect us from orbital attacks."

The astral winds were much thicker and more impenetrable on the hemisphere which housed the crash site. The golden higher-dimensional particles energetically spewed outwards and frequently roiled above their heads, acting as protective concealment that isolated every means of observation and detection.

Ves was thankful for this rare protection because it didn’t make ground operations irrelevant.

If the vault of the gods didn’t exist, the rival forces would have sought a decisive battle in space. Only until every other fleet was wiped out would the winners be able to land their forces onto the surface and have them seek out the Starlight Megalodon in peace.

"Well, the situation is different from the worst case scenario. Deliberately or not, the astral winds cuts off any possibility to coordinate with the fleets in orbit from the ground."

He wouldn’t have to come up with the concept of the Enduring Protector if the astral winds didn’t exist.

Yet they did, so Ves had a job to do.

Now that he ended up with the image of Beast Rider Bubal, Ves proceeded to draft out his design. He already drafted the mech in his mind, but only until he finished creating the image for his mech did he proceed to put the design he imagined into visible form.

He entered a special mind state where his concentration had reached the peak. With Beast Rider Bubal at the forefront of his mind, he opened up the design software installed on the terminal and proceeded to let his imagination loose.

His gauntleted fingers stretched over the projection, leaving out rough lines in the air. He quickly drafted the outer contours of the mech. The Enduring Protector’s vaguely turtle-like shape diverged from the animal it ostensibly resembled.

The appearance Ves had drafted in a single hour looked like a fat medallion with crawler legs. The deliberately cylindrical and symmetrical torso made it easy to fabricate and provided the mech with a significant amount of internal volume for a light mech.

The crawler mechs were large enough to withstand and push against the heavy gravity and no more. If the legs got any heavier, the entire mech would have been weighed down too much as the engine strained to keep the legs moving.

Two laser cannon barrels were affixed to each side of the mech. Ves contemplated their energy expenditure and started to reconsider their caliber.

He wiped away the laser cannons and replaced them with thinner, weaker but considerably cheaper laser rifle barrels. Both barrels were affixed to a simple mount to the side and could rotate around in almost every angle.

Ves hadn’t filled in the internal components as of yet. While they were important to the functioning of this mech, it didn’t really matter what components he chose to fill up his mech with as long as they worked.

At this stage, Ves felt kind of lonely. He always designed his mechs by himself, but he didn’t neglect the importance of soliciting feedback.

"Before I do any more work and flesh out this design, I should show it around and see what everyone thinks about it. A mech designer shouldn’t be too out of touch with their clients."

He exited the office and started showing around his draft design to the mech technicians. He only explained the basic concept of the Enduring Protector, skipping most of the intricacies and technical details for brevity.

"Uhh.. it looks fine, I guess?" A mech technician absent-mindedly said.

"It’s a great design, sir!"

Ves immediately directed his attention to the mech technician who said that. "Why do you think it’s a great design?"

"Uhhh... because it looks like a turtle? Turtles live long, right? That means it will definitely survive on the field!"

"Anything else?"

"...I don’t know."

Ves didn’t know what he should have expected. Even the chief technicians couldn’t offer any substantial feedback. They knew how to work with existing mechs, but they didn’t possess the imagination to envision the performance of his draft design.

Seeing the futility in asking the mech technicians their opinions on mechs that they had never seen before, Ves shook his head and exited the workshops. "These military mech technicians are less imaginative than their civilian counterparts. Is it a matter of training?"

He found this difference to be rather peculiar. Before he worked alongside the Vandal mech technicians, he always held the impression that mech technicians in the military were far superior to civilian mech technicians in every way.

While they did underwent more thorough training, they didn’t have to go through some of the experiences that civilian mech technicians sometimes encountered.

In the end, he chalked it up to a different emphasis on their training.

He visited the mech pilots next. As the Flagrant Swordmaidens halted for the day and set up their camps, Ves visited the mess hall and approached some off-duty mech pilots silently eating their meals.

"Hey folks, mind if I show you something?"

"Ah, Mr. Larkinson!"

The mech pilots jumped at his voice and scooted away from him on their benches. It was as if they met the devil in person!

Ves frowned. "I’m not going to torture your minds or anything. Cut the crap and tell me what you think of my draft design."

He projected the draft design from his comm and repeated his short spiel.

As Ves deliberately chose to approach mech pilots assigned to laser rifleman mechs, the men contemplated the draft design with a bit more importance than the mech technicians.

"Sir, this mech looks like an awful idea on four legs. It’s armor is paper thin! Who cares how robust the internals are against the breakdown effect when a couple of laser volleys can poke a hole through its lightweight armor! Now this isn’t so bad normally, but you’re also telling us that its mobility is as bad as heavy mechs because we don’t get to pilot it under an antigrav field. That turns this mech into a sitting duck!"

"You’re right, of course, if you employ his mech under normal circumstances." Ves explained with a smile. "We won’t. It’s going to be employed in a special area where the Enduring Protector likely won’t be facing any mechs that are substantially better. It’s physically impossible for the other forces to deploy a normal mech at the heart of the breakdown effect!"

Ves explained his reasoning, yet the mech pilots all had difficulty believing in his claims. Some of the mech pilots even believed that the breakdown effect was a huge exaggeration and that everything would be fine if they entered the critical zone with their regular mechs.

Still, unlike his last audience, the mech pilots did leave him with some useful feedback. Some of them went into the nitty-gritty of piloting rifleman mechs. If Ves didn’t acquire a Mastery in rifleman mechs, he would have dismissed some of their concerns as trivial or nitpicking. Yet because he understood these pilots better than they thought, Ves noted their opinions seriously.

Overall, the mech pilots didn’t prompt him to change the major aspects of his design, but he did get a better idea on how to tailor them to the Vandal mech pilots.

"Thanks for the feedback. I’ll be in touch as the development of the Enduring Protector is progressing."

Chapter 856 A Heavenly Match

Word of Ves designing a peculiar breakdown-proof mech spread around the camp. Many Vandals expressed various opinions about what they heard even without Ves showing them the draft design.

"Did you hear about the new design?"

"I heard it’s a huge failure of a light mech. What is Mr. Larkinson thinking? Whoever heard about a four-legged frontline mech? On top of that, it’s as slow as a turtle but as fragile as a bedsheet!"

"Enduring Protector? How can it endure anything? It’s awful in close combat and bad at long-ranged combat. Forget about protecting anything else, it can’t even protect itself!"

"Well, I heard that it’s particularly good at not breaking down in the middle of a battle."

"So what? A couple of lasers hitting our mechs will destroy this new toy far faster than the breakdown effect ever could!"

Obviously, opinions abounded. Ves had to admit that the Enduring Protector did not make a stellar impression upon the Vandal mech pilots. If Ves listed the estimated parameters on a spec sheet, it would have been in contention for the worst light mech in the galaxy!

Yet Ves paid little attention to the criticism, especially when it didn’t offer any way to improve his mech. While the criticisms all had a point, it was human

nature for people to complain. They wanted perfection but always got something far short of such an impossible standard.

He knew what he wanted to design. The Vandals now knew as well. They expressed opinions. Ves gathered them all up and tried to see if anyone pointed any valuable nuggets.

Besides the small but meaningful feedback from the mech pilots assigned to rifleman mechs, Ves hadn’t obtained anything particularly useful. Frankly, the peanut gallery didn’t know what they were talking about.

Still, the overwhelming doubt he received from the men caused him to doubt his work as well. Did he go astray somehow? Had he made a bad design choice?

"Compared to normal mechs, the Enduring Protector is an awful mech. Yet how much better can a mech be if they have to work next to the very source of the breakdown effect? I can scarcely imagine anyone coming up with substantially a better mech design than mine, especially in field conditions."

The last qualifier was an important one. Every force seeking to plunder the Starlight Megalodon only brought a limited amount of expertise, equipment and supplies. The Flagrant Swordmaidens should be better off than the pirates, but the Vesians should be even better prepared.

Ves frowned a little bit at the thought of the Vesians. What little glimpse the Vandals gained from their long-ranged sensors in the previous star system showed that their biggest rival came in even greater numbers.

In a stroke of luck and happenstance, they suffered significant damage from the ambush attempt by the Church of Haatumak. However, the backstabbing cultists underestimated the trump cards of a fully-fledged military unit and hadn’t taken into account the possibility that the Vesians fielded an expert pilot who single-handedly snatched victory from the jaws of defeat!

"We'll definitely encounter that Vesian expert pilot on the ground." He murmured.

The question was whether the Vesian expert pilot chose to deploy in the so-called red zone that ranged a hundred kilometers from the Starlight Megalodon. If so, then the expert pilot would have to give up all the advantages of a powerful expert mech because these kinds of machines simply couldn't withstand the breakdown effect.

"If there's anything good about the weird conditions on Aeon Corona VII, it's managed to put everyone on an even starting line. The forces who came better prepared will have an edge over the forces who neglected logistics."

The Flagrant Swordmaidens already struggled trying to stay afloat. How much worse could it be for their rivals? Ves didn't believe that scum like the Caged and the Red Tongs brought a lot of mech designers and exobiologists to their expedition.

Besides soliciting the mech pilots for feedback, Ves also approached a mech designer. He didn't approach Mayra due to political considerations, but he didn't see the harm in showing off his draft design to Ketis.

The Swordmaiden mech designer puzzled over the Enduring Protector. "I heard about how bad your design is, but I know what you're like. You never design anything bad. Still, I can't help but feel it's awful."

Ves smiled at her. "Do you think you can do better under the circumstances?"

"Heck no!" She playfully stretched out her tongue. "I really don't envy you and Mayra for trying to design a decent mech that doesn't malfunction under all of that spacetime distortion."

"It's easy to throw shade on other people's designs, but when it's your turn to produce something better, you'll realize it's far harder than it sounds." He said.

While the public did have a right to express any opinion they wanted, a mech designer shouldn’t necessarily value every voice. Ves knew that some mech designers listened to every piece of feedback and tried to please all of them, to the point of losing their own design style.

You couldn’t please everybody.

Not every opinion was valuable.

You shouldn’t lose your vision.

Ves knew exactly what kind of mech he wanted to design, and he remained confident even in the face of negative feedback. As far as he was concerned, he only needed to stay on the good side of a single client. As long as Captain Byrd didn’t pull the plug on his design project, he didn’t have to pay so much attention to the crowd, unlike if he wanted to design a mech for the market.

Any mech designer who wanted to publish a design for the mech market depended heavily on good PR. A flood of negative opinions could spoil the commercial success of any design regardless of its technical merits.

When Ves explained what he planned to incorporate in the Enduring Protector design, Ketis understood his intentions, though she doubted its effectiveness.

"Your frontline mech design is something of a glass cannon. It packs a decent punch, but it can’t take what it dishes out. I can see how it’s effective against melee mechs when it has a clear line of fire, but how in heck can the Enduring Protectors win a firefight against a group of other ranged mechs?"

This was the most valid and poignant critique against his draft design. Ves tried to work around the restrictions as best he could, but he failed to provide his design with any meaningful defense measures!

A mech on the battlefield either relied on armor or mobility to survive on the battlefield! Heavier mechs leaned more towards the thickness and quality of

their armor while lighter mechs overwhelmingly relied on their speed and evasion to avoid getting hit.

This was an iron-hard rule that applied to almost every modern mech in existence!

Of course, some argued that mechs that relied on stealth, camouflage and misdirection formed a third category of defense.

Yet the Enduring Protector, despite what its name suggested, fell outside these three main categories!

Ves was very well aware of these flaws. "If I design the Enduring Protector as a medium mech, it will run out of energy three to four times as fast. It will also be so slow that I doubt it can move faster than our walking speeds!"

Such a slow mech would be virtually useless because they'd never be able to reach the Starlight Megalodon from the edge of the red zone before they ran out of energy!

"Yeah, but how are you expecting it to fight? Do you intend to pair it up with Mayra's new design, only to use her mech as their meat shields?" Ketis frowned.

She cared deeply about the Swordmaiden mech pilots. If Ves ever expressed his intentions of doing so, he'd immediately put her in a difficult position. Ves expected that for all he had done for Ketis, she would still side with the Swordmaidens over a mech designer she only knew for less than a year.

He did not intend to put her in a difficult spot. He grinned. "Did you forget about the big lizard that's tagging along our ground expedition?"

"Qilanxo?" She widened her eyes. "So that's your plan! You never intended to field the Enduring Protectors by themselves!"

Ves loudly clapped his gauntlets together. "No mech can win a battle by themselves! The whole point of specializing a mech is because mixing and matching different mech types can achieve greater synergies. One mech's strength can cover another mech's weakness. The Enduring Protector is good at offense but terrible at defense. Qilanxo is excellent at defense but her offensive power is limited to attacking with her body at close range. They're a match made in heaven!"

"Really!? Ah, I see now!"

He always factored in the presence of Qilanxo. As a living organism, she wouldn't be affected by the spacetime distortion that normally wreaked havoc on any mechanical equipment. The exobiologists couldn't fully explain why this was so, but most people just shrugged and accepted this pattern as a fact.

In any case, given Qilanxo's formidable strength as a sacred god, the Flagrant Swordmaidens would be fools to leave her behind.

Ves intended to make use of her formidable space barrier to cover for the critical weakness of his upcoming design!

"While we haven't made any decisions yet on how to deploy Qilanxo, she's far more useful inside the red zone than outside of it. Just think about the power of her space barrier. It can withstand an hour's worth of artillery bombardment and only cracked when we basically threw the equivalent of three tactical nukes at it! In the red zone, there's little chance that Qilanxo and the Enduring Protectors will face a threat that can break the space barrier!"

Ketis nodded, but quickly frowned. "What about other sacred gods and wild gods? We shouldn't be the only ones who thought about substituting mechs with the god species."

"I've considered that." Ves said. "It's far harder than it sounds. We only managed to complete the beast rider project because I happen to dabble in neural interfaces. Do any of the other forces possess the same expertise? Out of every possible rival, only the Vesians can match or exceed our research capabilities."

Even as he said that, he didn't completely discount the other rivals. Who knew what kind of trick they came up with to beat the breakdown effect.

"Designing a mech on your own is really hard." Ketis remarked. "I don't envy you. Everyone has a bad word about your design."

Ves shrugged. "Most of them haven't figured out yet that it's not meant to be deployed by itself. By the way, have you heard how Qilanxo and the beast riders are doing lately?"

Her eyes immediately glowed. "I heard that Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise are having the time of their lives! Their bond with Qilanxo is so strange. It's as if the sacred god is directly bestowing her strength on the two. There's even talk of trying to rotate other mech pilots in as beast riders to benefit from the transformation induced by the man-beast connection. Qilanxo refused, though."

"Everything has a price. Besides, Qilanxo isn't a slave we can exploit on a whim. To sacred gods, their bonds with their chosen is a solemn affair."

While Ves no longer paid close attention to Qilanxo and the beast riders, he still heard plenty of stories about them. Qilanxo began to see the Flagrant Swordmaidens in a better light, while the two beast riders slowly started to find out how their addition strengthened the sacred god.

The god species had always been engineered to work together with compatible human minds! When exobeasts and humans combined their minds, the result was greater than the sum of their parts!

The exobiologists continued to study what made the man-beast connection between the two so powerful. It was as if they had touched upon a hidden fundamental force. This force had always been present among humans, but rarely did they ever get in touch with such a strong and obvious application of this hidden force.

Only Ves knew that this strength was the power of spirituality!

Chapter 857 Classic Components

After Ketis left for parts unknown, Ves finished his feedback session and planned to resume his design work. After gathering a bunch of opinions, most of which Ves immediately threw away, he gained a broader perspective on the application of his mechs.

As light frontline mechs that had more in common with slow artillery mechs, the mech pilots of the Enduring Protector had to adhere to different rules in order to survive and thrive on the battlefield.

A mech designer like Ves could never completely envision all the possible uses of a mech. Every design profession suffered from this myopia. Although his mastery partially compensated for his lack of practical, in-depth familiarity, he therefore listened more carefully to the opinions of the laser rifleman mech pilots.

"My client may be Captain Byrd, but my target audience are those mech pilots specialized in piloting ranged mechs."

This was a crucial distinction. The people who approved of a design and procured the mechs may not be the ones who piloted them. Ves had to please both of them, but if it came down to it, he needed to place the demands of the client over the mech pilots that had to live with the design choices he made on their behalf.

"Fortunately, there isn’t much of a conflict between the two at the moment."

Ves knew that eventually he'd be faced with a situation where he might be forced into listening to the demands of a client who didn't know what he was talking about. This often happened in the case of custom mechs where the client could dictate every aspect of the design.

A certain customized mech with a codpiece came to his mind for some reason. He quickly shook his head and tried to scrub his mind of that awful memory.

"Well, let's move on to the next step of the design process."

Having performed some minor corrections to his draft design, Ves wanted to flesh it out by defining its internal components and defining the final shape of its exterior.

He didn't particularly care for the components this time as they needed to be reliable and resilient. This was very different from his previous selection criteria where he carefully chose to incorporate components by the cost of their licenses and the performance edge they provided.

"I'll have to pick and choose from a library of obsolete component designs."

Modern mech components were way too finicky and vulnerable to the breakdown effect for Ves to make use of. Ves already fixed his mind on making use of components from earlier mech generations.

Having designed a bunch of virtual mech designs based off obsolete technology and component licenses, Ves was very familiar with the styles of older mechs and mech parts. Miniaturization hadn't reached the extent as it had today so mech parts consisted of a smaller number of larger subcomponents.

The local database of the Flagrant Vandals contained a vast library of old and obsolete component designs. They were so worthless that their original

developers no longer licensed them out and simply allowed the MTA or other organizations to release them in the public domain.

There was really no point in trying to milk out any mech or component design that was older than a hundred years or about three to four mech generations. Supply vastly exceeded the paltry demand for the right to use such old and easily copied designs that licensors could only conceivably sell their licenses at a nominal cost of ten credits or so.

The administrative costs alone surpassed the licensing fees. Therefore, even if they didn't want to, licensors had no choice but to let go of any intentions to exploit their obsolete designs.

When Ves browsed through the design library of the local database, he nodded with satisfaction at the selection of component designs. The database only stored so many designs, and the Mech Corps made a clever selection accounting for many different motivations to opt for older components.

If the local database contained a completely random selection of components, then Ves would have to tear his hair out because most of the components that developers came up with never became good enough to achieve commercial success.

The same applied to mech designs for that matter. Any mech designer who graduated from a university or institution could design a mech from the first day on the job. That didn't necessarily mean that they ought to. As Ketis constantly struggled with lately, it was extremely hard to put theory into practice and design an appealing mech that was good enough to compete against the competition.

As Ves dug into the origin of the component designs, he found them to be a mix between retired components designed in-house by the Mech Corps and components that used to be bestsellers when they first came out.

The quality of both types of components were fairly high, and Ves had nothing to complain about when it came to their optimization and efficiency.

"However, none of them are specifically designed to resist something as inconceivable as the breakdown effect."

Just because these obsolete component designs were less complex than their modern counterparts didn’t mean that Ves could adopt them without a problem. Vulnerabilities still existed no matter how much the components dumbed down as Ves turned back the clock.

Instead of chasing after perfection, Ves had to settle for a selection of components that were good enough.

He spent extra care in picking out the parts such as the power reactor, engine, laser rifle barrels and etcetera. He picked the newest parts he could get away with, but most of the parts were so complicated by their very nature that Ves had to go back more than three-hundred years for the engine design alone.

As the source of the motive force of a mech, the mech engine was the most prone to breakdowns short of the legs. Ves actually spent an entire day of filtering through thousands of individual engine designs.

The brief but vital lessons he received from Master Olson in the field of battle mechatronics helped him out a lot. Mech endurance and mech engine design were both part of her specialties.

Making use of what he learned, Ves evaluated the parts that entered his vision with a critical eye until he finally became satisfied with what he selected. He felt as if he was a kid in a candy store shopping for the yummiest treats.

"Still... is this the best I can get?"

Ves frowned when he projected the main component designs on his desk. All of the parts he picked out weren’t impressive by any means, but they delivered exceptional results in terms of reliability.

Yet for some reason, Ves had a nagging urge that he could do more with them if he modified their original designs.

After all, their designers didn’t know as much in the past. Technology had come a long way since then, and Ves possessed enough confidence to improve on these obsolete component designs.

He resisted the urge to do so, though. "I’m not experienced in component design. The chances of screwing up is significant. Any change I make has to go through a round of simulation and optimization before the improvement is set in stone. How much time does that take?"

Besides the lack of time, Ves also lacked a lot of manpower. He couldn’t possibly do all of the work alone within a year. To help him complete the improvements faster, he needed to solicit the help of many other mech designers as assistants.

Yet how many of them were at his disposal? The Vandals always received far less mech designers than other mech regiments, and even fewer followed him down to the ground. They mostly consisted of forgettable low-ranking mech designers who were barely competent enough to replace the role of a chief technician.

They were sorely needed in their current positions and couldn’t be diverted no matter what.

Faced with the lack of time and manpower, Ves gave up any fanciful notions about improving the component designs and decided to work with their original incarnations unless he was compelled to make a change.

"Now that I've filled up my basket of parts, it's time to work them into my design."

Ves continually focused his mind with the image of Beast Rider Bubal as he proceeded to flesh out his draft design. Having performed these actions many times, he worked deftly and without too much delay.

This process stretched out for several long weeks.

Different from his previous design attempts, Ves couldn't close himself off and isolate himself inside a locked chamber. Each day, he needed to resume his regular duties and make the rounds around the workshops. He also had to take care of the necessary paperwork that came with his position and decide on a couple of crucial matters that required much thought.

The frequent interruptions grated on Ves. It took a lot of effort for him to concentrate his mind and fall into a groove where his design work flowed from his mind. In his highest state of design focus, the image of Beast Rider Bubal actively assisted him with his design choices.

Such an experience was sublime. It was as if a god guided his design work. He didn't have to think about certain decisions or procrastinate about a range of options. He simply left the matter to Beast Rider Bubal who instinctively guided him towards the most appropriate choices, even if they didn't seem very good at first glance.

Yet how could Ves endure it when he only fell into this state for an hour or two at most before his responsibilities pulled him away?

Still, while Ves never quite got used to the frequent halts, he resolved to endure them and continue his vital work despite the difficulties.

As the days went by, he didn't claim to have adjusted fully to this hectic schedule, but at least he didn't enter a sour mood as soon as he was pulled away from his zen-like design moods.

To Ves, it was kind of like living in a non-soundproofed apartment next to a busy intersection. While the noise of vehicle and foot traffic penetrated the apartment, Ves simply got used to it and stopped letting it bother him as much.

He still preferred to live out in nowhere rather than anywhere noisy, though.

"It’s kind of like living among the dwarves who never invented a proper toilet." He scoffed to himself. "Their smell is unbearable, but the dwarves who grew up with their stink probably got so used to the odor that it’s like perfume to them at this point."

Due to the low-tech nature of his components and mech design, Ves didn’t take very long to flesh out his draft design. The Enduring Protector had a lot more in common with his virtual designs such as the Young Blood and the Old Soul rather than his production designs such as the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord.

"Simple is faster. It was much easier to design a mech in the past."

Just as mech pilots underwent more training to cope with the increased complexity of mechs over time, mech designers also had to keep up with the developments in the industry.

It became more and more difficult to graduate with a degree in mech design, though this didn’t stop the hopefuls from trying. Far too many people aspired to become a successful mech designer.

The most challenging aspect of designing his frontline mech was designing its internal architecture from scratch. However, this also provided him with complete control over this aspect, allowing him to stretch his imagination and design the internal architecture in a way that resisted the breakdown effect the best.

He took a lot of inspiration from the problems that frequently rolled into the mech workshops. Having seen almost every possible way a mech broke down, Ves was determined to avoid the same design choices that led to those vulnerabilities.

After more than three weeks of intermittent design works, Ves finally finished the first iteration of the Enduring Protector.

While it still needed to go through a round of testing and iteration, Ves felt inordinately proud for what he accomplished over the weeks.

"It’s not a good-looking mech by any means, but its reliability is rock-solid."

Beast Rider Bubal expressed satisfaction in his mind. Ves knew he was on the right track when his image was happy.

Chapter 858 Doom Crawler

Ves did not choose to optimize the design as of yet. Instead, he put the current iteration of the Enduring Protector through its paces by subjecting it to several extreme simulations.

He skipped out on most simulations that a mech designer normally subjected their designs to because there was no point. "It’s not like we’re going to deploy the Enduring Protector on a low gravity moon or in an arctic environment or anything."

With the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord designs, Ves needed to account to a wide variety of environments where they could be deployed. Short of extreme environments such as volcano planets and Super Earths, Ves simulated their performance in many different locales, each of which different in terms of temperature, climate, air pressure, corrosive elements and more.

As for the Enduring Protector, Ves did not envision deploying it anywhere else than the red zone of the Starlight Megalodon. Although the Flagrant Swordmaidens hadn’t reached the red zone as of yet, they did model its

approximate environmental conditions based on the conditions elsewhere on the planet.

Ves didn’t see anything too exotic besides the warnings about rugged terrain and the all-too-obvious breakdown effect.

Therefore, he put the first iteration of the design through a battery of tests to get a read on the mech’s approximate performance in temperate environments under heavy gravity.

Ves took note of the simulations. The four crawler-type legs that Ves adapted from an old component design provided the Enduring Protector with exceptional stability.

However, it also moved fairly slow under heavy gravity. In fact, it moved slower than he initially anticipated.

In order to save energy, the quadruped mech moved forward by lifting only one of its legs at a time. Whether it moved its front limbs first and its rear limbs afterwards, or if it moved its left side first and its right side next, each time the mech only lifted one of the legs at a time.

It was slow. Really slow.

However, it also spared the mech from wasting its energy. This movement pattern was very efficient and allowed the mech to sustain operations for a lengthy period of time.

This was very important to Ves because the Enduring Protector relied on its laser armaments to fight. Any mech that depended on energy weapons to fight only remained relevant as long as it possessed enough juice to power both its movements and its weapons!

"What’s the point of reaching their destination faster if they only have enough energy to fire a couple of salvos?"

Ves likened the current performance of the Enduring Protector in the simulations to a type of heavy mechs referred to as Doom Crawlers.

As their overly-dramatic nickname alluded to, Doom Crawlers represented certain death to any enemies they met on their way.

These heavy mechs that came in shapes that resembled crabs, turtles or spiders moved slowly. Mobility wasn't their strong suit.

Yet their armor made up for this deficiency, possessing enough frontal armor to resist a squad of medium mechs for a short period of time.

Of course, Doom Crawlers didn't get their name from being vegetarians. Their designers mounted them with powerful medium armament that blasted apart any mech in their way!

Doom Crawlers distinguished themselves from regular artillery mechs in that they excelled in direct combat. They gave up long-ranged weapon systems that could deliver death from afar and preferred to stare death in the face.

If enemies figured they could easily dismantle the Doom Crawlers at close range, they were mistaken. The armaments of Doom Crawlers hit harder at closer range, and they possessed a variety of weapon options that allowed them to track nearer targets that moved at high speeds.

For all of their might, Doom Crawlers did suffer from a couple of disadvantages. Their low mobility combined with their lack of long-ranged options, particularly over the horizon, made them exceptionally vulnerable to long-ranged shelling or missile bombardment. They couldn't effectively retaliate against any mech or weapon system that outraged them. While their plentiful armor allowed them to resist a couple of volleys of fire, even an elephant could be felled by a million mosquito bites.

The second major downside was their cost. Not only did Doom Crawlers demand the best heavy armor, they also demanded hard-hitting weapons that

could wipe out any enemy in their way before the enemy inflicted serious damage. All of these capabilities added to the cost of such a powerful heavy mech.

Heavy mechs already cost way much more than the other weight classes. Developing and deploying something as expensive as Doom Crawlers was generally considered as a foolish decision. It was like putting all of your eggs in a single basket. As long as the Doom Crawlers engaged the enemy in a frontal clash, they nearly always won.

However, their abysmal mobility and vulnerability to long-ranged bombardment allowed enemies to circumvent them or destroy them from a comfortable range as long as they came prepared.

It made more sense to most mech militaries to specialize their heavy mechs into either heavy knights or artillery mechs. The former retained the heavy armor but sacrificed every ranged weapon option. The latter excelled destroying enemies from extreme ranges but turned into sitting ducks if any enemy mechs came close.

However, all of these weaknesses could be dealt with as long as a force combined different mech types together. It was the same story with Qilanxo and the Enduring Protector.

"It’s too bad that the Enduring Protector, for all its resemblance to a Doom Crawler, fails to live up to their battle prowess."

Still, the beauty of the situation was that the Enduring Protectors could still replicate the performance of Doom Crawler-type mechs if they fell under the protective umbrella of Qilanxo’s space barrier.

"Qilanxo’s space barrier is the strongest form of defense we’ve ever encountered on Seven. Even if the Vesians or anyone else shows up with

loads of artillery mechs, we can still withstand the bombardment with plenty of time to spare."

Indeed, as Ves inserted something akin to a space barrier into the simulations, the performance of the Enduring Protector soared. In many battle simulations, they all got felled within the first minute if they faced ranged opponents that occupied the high ground.

With the space barrier, the Enduring Protectors could leisurely take their time to maneuver to better positions or angles. While the inability for the Enduring Protectors to fire their lasers through the space barrier was a major drawback, as long as the frontline mechs took advantage of it to save themselves from heavy shelling or moving to a better position made a huge difference.

Many times, the advantage bestowed by Qilanxo’s space barrier outright swung the outcome of a scenario from a disastrous defeat to an effortless victory.

"This is a hopeful sign. At least I have proof that my design is effective under the right circumstances."

Out of curiosity, Ves flung the Enduring Protector into simulations where they faced off against modern mechs instead of similarly-crippled mechs. Did his mechs stand a chance when the breakdown effect no longer restricted modern mechs?

"Ouch." Ves winced as he saw the results.

A full squad of Enduring Protectors barely possessed the power to defeat a medium swordsman mech or a medium knight mech that approached from a distance.

However, most light mechs or melee mechs in greater numbers brutally closed the distance and tore apart the Enduring Protectors who couldn’t run away even when their lives depended on it! With no defenses against melee

attacks, these slow and fragile frontline mechs simply couldn’t keep up against nimble light skirmishers or the like.

The Enduring Protectors also fared poorly against standard rifleman or frontline mechs. The latter mechs possessed a definite edge in mobility. In contrast, the Enduring Protectors moved so slowly that they might as well be stationary.

Such an extreme difference in mobility virtually condemned the Enduring Protectors to certain defeat unless they were piloted by excellent marksman.

"Something like that can only happen if someone like Venerable Xie is piloting one of the Enduring Protectors."

Overall, the results hadn’t fallen out of his expectations, though it dampened his mood anyway to see so many opponents crush the copies of his third original design without any effort.

Despite how painful it was to witness such an abject performance, he still found it necessary. There was a possibility that when the rivaling forces reached the Starlight Megalodon and mucked about in her interior, they deliberately or accidentally stopped her FTL drives from spewing higher-dimensional particles in the air.

Once the source of the astral winds stopped feeding them, would there still be any astral winds left? It would dissipate from the planet in a matter of minutes, and fade away from the rest of the Aeon Corona System within a week!

Without the astral winds, the spacetime distortion that led to the breakdown effect no longer wreaked havoc on all of their mechs.

This basically meant that the red zone no longer restricted everyone’s mechs!

"If such an event comes to pass, the race for the Starlight Megalodon will turn into a complete scramble!"

The role of his Enduring Protector ended at that moment. As the simulations just attested, it was better for the Vandals to evacuate these useless mechs right away than to continue to pit them in battle under extremely disadvantageous circumstances.

"Even the advantages bestowed by Qilanxo's space barrier won't do anything to mitigate its drawbacks. At best, it allows them to hang onto their lives for a bit longer."

In any case, now that Ves completed the first iteration of his design and subjected it to a quick battery of simulations, he felt he should go for a second round for feedback.

He first made an appointment with Captain Byrd in order to fill her in on his progress. When he entered her office, he showed her the design and a quick overview of its performance in the simulations through a projection.

"As you can see, the Enduring Protector is a decent mech design under the harsh conditions of the red zone, but turns into a powerhouse as long as it combines forces with Qilanxo. While the laser rifles are fairly underpowered compared to modern laser rifles, they are very efficient and allows for my design to last up to a day during low-intensity combat."

Captain Byrd studied the projection with a serious expression. "How long do they last during high-intensity combat?"

"I'm not sure, captain. It depends, I have to say, but it's not out of the question for them to last only four to five hours at most. Maybe less if they are firing their laser weapons non-stop, though that's not possible as they'll overheat at that point."

"That's not enough." The mech officer shook her head. "It takes hours, perhaps even a day for your new design to reach the center of the red zone from the edge. Your design needs to last longer."

"That’s hardly possible, ma’am. I’m already doing the best I can under all of the limitations imposed on my design. It’s internal volume is practically stuffed with energy cells, and even then I can’t ensure a longer operation time than what I’ve just mentioned. I doubt that any other mech designer can deliver anything better. We all face the same constraints."

This nonetheless put Captain Byrd in a difficult spot. "Then the only way we can ensure the Enduring Protectors can operate in the red zone for an extended period of time is if it is accompanied by a small supply train."

It would in essence replicate the circumstances of the ground expedition. None of their mechs could carry enough energy cells to walk forward for more than a day. Therefore, they frequently returned to camp and exchanged their spent energy cells with fresh ones recharged by their god crystal generators.

Captain Byrd eventually dismissed Ves with a pensive expression on her face. "Let me think about the situation. I’ll see whether it is viable to accompany the forces sent into the red zone with a legged transport or two. For now, I’m not satisfied with the endurance of your new design. I hope you can improve upon that aspect."

"Impossible. I’m sorry ma’am, but unless we mount a god crystal generator on the Enduring Protectors, there’s no way to extend their operational time."

Captain Byrd suddenly gained a glint in her eye. "What a curious suggestion, Mr. Larkinson."

Ves was taken aback by her sudden interest.

Eventually, Ves shot down Captain Byrd’s insane idea of implementing the god crystals into the design of the Enduring Protector.

"It’s not feasible." He replied as he rapidly went through the implications of her suggestion. "The god crystals aren’t very effective by themselves. A single

god crystal takes far too long to recharge. The dwarf brains that we've repurposed as their organic controllers lose concentration long before the recharge cycle is finished. We also can't recharge the god crystal very often for some reason. If the siphoning process is botched, we'll have to wait another day before they can be recharged."

Captain Byrd looked disappointed, but she offered a suggestion. "What if we commit a full god crystal generator aboard one of the transports accompanying the red zone force?"

"This... there are pros and cons to such a decision, captain." He said with a thoughtful expression. "As long as we can protect the god crystal generator, the mechs and troops entering the red zone don't have to worry about their energy budget at all. They can remain in the zone indefinitely as long as their other supplies last. However, committing a strategic god crystal generator is like putting all of our eggs in a single basket. If an enemy takes out the generator, it's a disaster."

"Can you design your mechs to take advantage of the available energy?"

It would entail a near-complete redesign, as Ves had not taken such an option into account. He designed the Enduring Protector around the assumption that energy would be extremely scarce.

"The performance of my mech can be boosted immediately if they don't have to take into account how much energy they expend, but it is still vastly underpowered compared to regular mechs. I can redesign the Enduring Protector to cope with a higher level of performance, but there are limits to how much I can expand its upper bounds. Resisting the breakdown effect is its highest priority, so it can't shake loose its dependence on obsolete, low-tech parts, ma'am."

Ves pointed out a couple of examples through the projector. Unless he completely scrapped more than three week’s worth of design work and begin anew, the Enduring Protector design would always be a design oriented around breakdown resistance and energy efficiency.

He always relegated performance as a third or fourth priority. He couldn’t afford the luxury of focusing upon it when he already had his hands full trying to keep his design afloat in the red zone where the breakdown effect reigned supreme.

After a brief discussion, Ves pointed out the greatest risk of bringing in a god crystal generator into the red zone.

"Our rivals are facing the same awful prospect as us, ma’am. With machines failing left and right, it gets increasingly harder to keep their power generators working. If we show up with a god crystal generator and call down an energy tornado that can be seen from a huge distance, aren’t we taunting them that we’re loaded with energy? There’s a huge chance that they’ll gang up on us if they haven’t developed any alternatives to their energy shortages."

"I think we can take that chance." Captain Byrd said confidently. "I have faith in our research prowess. As long as we maintain a decisive edge and pair your new design with Qilanxo and the melee mech design the Swordmaidens are cooking up, we can easily defeat a force that is ten times as numerous. When it comes to securing the treasures of the Starlight Megalodon, we have to be bold enough to resist the combined advances of all of our rivals at once."

"I’m not sure if it will be that easy, captain. I have a suspicion that the Vesians aren’t any worse than us in developing alternatives to cope with the problems we’ve been dealing with over the month."

"Mr. Larkinson, while we shouldn’t underestimate our foes, we shouldn’t overestimate their capabilities either." She said. "We possess inestimable

advantages and we must stake our lives on them if we wish to achieve success."

The meeting ended quickly after that. Ves left her office and remained pensive throughout his return to the workshops.

The statements expressed by Captain Byrd told him that she was done with trying to remain cautious. While many Vandals thought Captain Byrd was overly timid compared to Captain Orfan, that was only because the former didn’t throw herself headlong into a battle she wasn’t confident in winning.

However, all of the research gains the Flagrant Swordmaidens achieved lately strengthened their ground forces and made them vastly more powerful in this unique environment. Captain Byrd believed the time to gather their strength had gone long enough!

Now was the time to leverage their advantages and steamroll the opposition!

"Reckless." Ves quietly muttered to himself as he seated himself behind his terminal again. "How can she discount our threats so easily? The other forces aren’t so simple either. Even if they lack our research capacity, I’m sure they’re resourceful enough to think of another solution."

Still, Ves had his orders. As the highest commanding officer of the Vandal ground forces, Captain Byrd dictated their approach. If she wanted to adopt an aggressive strategy, then everyone else had to dance to her tune.

Ves looked at his Enduring Protector and thought of how he could increase the upper bounds of its relatively lackluster performance. Right now, it couldn’t fully leverage an overabundance of energy, because it couldn’t move fast enough or fire strong-enough lasers to expend all of that extra energy.

He hated the sudden shift in design priorities. If Captain Byrd expressed this kind of intention at the start, then Ves could have designed the Enduring Protector with an elevated level of performance in mind.

Now, his workload increased massively as his first iteration fit poorly in the strategy adopted by the Vandals.

The strategy changed mid-way!

"Arrggh!" He shouted in frustration. "Do I have to start all over again?"

He didn’t want to. He labored so much over the Enduring Protector’s design that he felt loathe to discard it like a piece of trash. He invested so much time and energy in developing a viable breakdown-proof mech that he felt sick at the thought of starting over.

He decided to retain the design, but modify it as best as possible to account for the new demands. Not only would it save time, it also allowed the Enduring Protector to cope with different levels of energy availability.

"Increasing its upper bounds in performance doesn’t mean the Enduring Protector will turn into an energy hungry design. As soon as their energy supply cuts off, they can immediately transition into a low power mode."

This gave his design some added flexibility in case their enemies took out the god crystal generator.

As Ves thought through the changes he needed to make in his design, he found that if he made some limited compromises, he’d still be able to retain the essence of his design.

"I’ll have to focus on channeling the extra power onto the components that best scale with it. There’s no need to stress the other parts when they’ll just drown in the extra energy."

He already formed a good idea where to channel the extra energy. After concentrating his Spirituality and allowing Beast Rider Bubal to settle into the forefront of his mind, he began to work.

The first thing he did was to scrap the underpowered laser rifle barrels and replaced them with a simple laser cannon barrel from the local database. Its design may be old, but it scaled incredibly well with varying levels of power settings.

The adapted laser cannons could fire a laser beam as weak as one shot from a laser pistol to releasing a full blast that was half as strong as a laser beam fired from an Akkara heavy cannoneer!

"This is more than enough power to hamper any crippled mechs designed to operate in the red zone."

The only major downside to using these cannons was that their tracking speed couldn’t keep up with the movements of fast-moving objects.

However, to Ves, this was no downside at all. The strong and pervasive breakdown effect prevented light mechs from bursting out with incredible speed because their gravitic backpacks were affected most of all!

"In the red zone, every mech is as slow as a snail, no matter if they are light mechs or heavy mechs. The balance between mobility and armor has shifted away from the former because it’s impossible for mechs to retain their speed."

What did this mean? It meant that replacing the nimbler and faster laser rifle barrels with larger and slower laser cannon barrels effectively came with no repercussions! The downsides associated with exchanging a lighter weapon for a heavier weapon didn’t apply at this time!

Ves spent a couple of days to incorporate this change. He optimized the placements of the new weapon systems and made sure the internal architecture could cope with the increased energy expenditure.

Once he became satisfied with his revision to the weapon systems, he found that his design began to have heat management problems.

If it fired its laser cannons at their highest power settings, it rapidly built up heat. This was an inevitable problem, and Ves couldn’t do much to compensate for it besides exchanging some redundant energy cells for extra heat sinks.

This tradeoff made it so that the Enduring Protector wouldn’t be able to last as long when cut off from a power source. However, the added heat sinks significantly increased the Enduring Protector’s lethality during high-intensity battles as it could fire a bit more full-powered laser beams without worrying about overheating their frames.

Beast Rider Bubal relished in the changes. Both the dwarf and the wild god preferred to fight quick and decisive engagements rather than drawn-out slugging fests.

Ves smiled at the eventual result. The only setback he suffered was when he tried but failed to divert extra power anywhere else. The power reactor couldn’t output much more juice and Ves couldn’t squeeze out any more performance out of the extremely outdated engine model.

He contemplated replacing the current engine with a different model, but declined to do so after browsing some of the alternatives.

"There are better, newer engines out there that scale better with added power, but they’re far more prone to breakdowns."

It wasn’t as if a more powerful engine drastically increased the speed of the Enduring Protector. Snails were snails. A faster snail might move faster than a slower snail, but a hopping rabbit left them both in the dust!

A more powerful engine wouldn’t be able to speed up his design. The only solution was to find a way to allow the gravitic backpacks to work despite the breakdown effect doing its very best to screw them up. Yet for all the research

capacity the Vandals enjoyed, they hadn’t figured out how to improve the reliability of the gravitic backpacks at all.

Therefore, Ves gave up on channeling the extra power elsewhere. "It’s already sufficient for me to improve the offensive power of my design. This is it’s core function and its strongest suit."

An increase in offensive power directly magnified the combat effectiveness of a combined force that consisted of Enduring Protectors, Qilanxo and Mayra’s tiger mechs.

As Ves began the long and tedious process of optimizing his design and putting it through its paces in many different combat scenarios, an alarm suddenly sounded out in the workshop.

"What?" Ves looked up from his terminal. The alert signified that an enemy attack may be imminent in the next couple of hours!

And this wouldn’t be an attack by a single crazy wild god or anything. The tone of the alarm indicated that a mech force may be setting upon the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

Captain Byrd’s voice suddenly broadcasted from every available speaker. "Vandals, prepare for battle! Our scouts have detected an approaching force of mechs, wild gods and dwarves! They are aware of our location and are moving to attack us at their best speed!"

The energy tornados developed by the god crystal project gave away their position! On this huge planet, the odds of encountering a rival mech force should have been minimal, but all of that changed once the god crystal generators started calling down energy tornados left and right.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens finally paid the price for their inventions!

Chapter 860 Combined Arms

The ground expedition immediately halted their march. Preparations for battle already went underway, but due to the distance between the main convoy and the approaching enemy force, it might take six or so hours before a battle commenced.

Due to the urgency of the situation and the preparations that needed to be done, Captain Byrd held an emergency briefing by remote. Instead of gathering at the mobile headquarters, everyone entered a virtual conference room from their current positions, no matter if they were offices or mech cockpits.

Within fifteen minutes, most of the mech officers, chiefs and important experts attended the virtual meeting.

To Ves, the projection systems in his office weaved an elaborate illusion that completely changed the small decor of the office into a large and sprawling conference room.

The projections gave the illusion that he could look at people in the face while he addressed them. The only downside was that he couldn’t walk up to them and touch them, but who wanted to do something like that during a crisis?

Captain Byrd quickly began the meeting. She began with a brief summary of what their scouts managed to spot a fair distance away from the center of their supply train.

"Two of our scout mechs have managed to spot an incoming procession of mechs, wild gods and dwarves on godling mounts. We can pretty much ignore the threat of the latter, but the former two pose a very real threat. We are absolutely certain that they are bee-lining straight towards the center of our formation. They know our position."

Many Vandals grimaced.

"How many mechs and wild gods are on their way, captain?"

"We're not entirely certain." Captain Byrd admitted. "Our scouts don't dare to come into range of the incoming enemy force. They're keeping an eye while maintaining extreme distance. For now, the analysts that have poured over the initial sensor readings estimate that up to twelve wild gods and three-hundred landbound mechs are on the attack!"

"Three-hundred landbound mechs!"

While that sounded a lot, the Flagrant Swordmaidens combined numbered almost five-hundred mechs. While they lost a bunch of mechs due to the orbital bombardment raining down on their heads a few months ago, they still retained most of their strength.

Still, even if the odds were in their favor, the Vandals didn't express too much confidence. Even though they outnumbered the enemy, a battle could go in any direction.

Besides, the unexpected cooperation with one or more large dwarf tribes threw a wrench in their equations. How should they estimate the threat of the bonded wild gods? How close were the wildlings cooperating with the rival force?

All of these questions made it difficult for everyone to judge whether they still held the advantage.

"Do we know who's attacking?"

Captain Byrd nodded to a sensor officer, who answered in an uncertain tone. "The sensor readings from our scouts makes it difficult to be sure. There's too much interference in the air to get a clear view of their forces. From the markings and quality of the mechs that we've managed to observe, I can say with eighty percent certainty that we are dealing with a combined force of the Caged and the Red Tongs."

"Those bastards again!"

"Hah! They’re trapped on this planet now that an antimatter torpedo annihilated their spaceborn forces!"

"Idiot! That just makes them more desperate! They have nothing to lose!"

The Vandals argued among themselves about the significance of this revelation. They couldn’t judge the intentions of the Caged and the Red Tongs with common sense.

The landbound remnants of the Roppongans and the Ravienne Alliance-oriented pirates lost their means of escaping from this planet. With no way out, what were they up to? Did they decide to settle permanently on Seven or did they intend to fight even harder in order to open up an opportunity to evacuate on different terms?

None of the Vandals expressed any confidence in their guesses, and Captain Byrd finally stepped into the chaotic discussion. "There’s no point in questioning the motivation of the Caged Tongs without encountering them in person. All that matters is that they are inbound on our forces in an unmistakably aggressive approach. Let us decide on our defensive strategy."

Because calling the allied force of the Caged and the Red Tongs was a mouthful, the Vandals conveniently called them the Caged Tongs instead.

The Vandal mech officers cobbled together a defensive strategy. Since they knew the enemy was coming, they could spend crucial hours on setting up the battlefield to their advantage.

"We’ve already recycled down the artillery cannons." Chief Dakkon said when asked. "There is no way we can fabricate a new battery of artillery guns in less than a week."

As for addressing the hostile wild gods, one of the mech officers turned to Dr. Tillman. "Can we poison the wild gods like last time?"

"It’s worth a try." She said. "We haven’t spent any research on improving the formulas for the so-called candy bars. If the hostile wild gods are instinctive creatures, then they shouldn’t be able to resist the bait. However, if they are smart enough to fight against their instinct, they can resist the urge to eat the adulterated candy bars."

"The Caged Tongs won’t allow it. They aren’t stupid. They’ll destroy the candy bars before they can tempt the wild gods."

The Vandals decided not to repeat the trick. They may be able to the wild gods if they were only by themselves or accompanied by some primitive dwarves, but this time they faced a modern force!

Even if the Caged Tongs consisted of criminals and pirates, they operated under modern conventions of war. Although it seemed like they were storming at the Flagrant Swordmaidens in a straight charge, who knew what they really had in mind?

Therefore, the Vandal officers threw away all of their contempt and started treating the Caged Tongs as a serious threat.

"Even if the Red Tongs are a modern mech force, they’re not as thorough as a military unit. Their scouting efforts are lackluster and their strategy doesn’t seem to be more sophisticated than throwing all of their mechs at us in a single overwhelming attack."

"They might split up and flank us when the battle commences."

"Then let them! If they attempt to flank us, they’ll only be splitting up their forces into easily digestible chunks. We outnumber them, remember?!"

"I’m not so sure about that. They’re also bringing in wild gods, and who knows what powers they possess. Even if they’re weaker than the sacred gods, any wild god with wilde area powers can instantly disrupt our formations!"

The wild gods were the wildcards of the upcoming battle. They possessed such a large variety of powers that the Vandals couldn’t predict what they were up against.

"It’s easy to estimate the battle capabilities of the Caged Tongs. It’s not so easy to estimate the threat of the twelve or so wild gods that are boring down on us." Captain Byrd emphasized. "I don’t like unexpected surprises, so our first priority should be to take out these wild gods. As long as this uncertain factor no longer poses a threat, we can mop up the scum think they can match our strength!"

"Let’s employ the bulk of our ranged mechs against the wild gods. We should take them out from a distance before they get into range to activate their powers. If none of their wild gods have a ridiculous defensive power like Qilanxo’s space barriers, they’re pretty much sitting ducks!"

"The Red Tongs know that as well as we do. Are they really going to let us hammer the wild gods with impunity?"

"It’s either that or risk their own mechs."

"Captain, if I may make a suggestion?" A mech officer asked. "Let’s commit Venerable Xie to the battle. He’s more than ready to fight on our behalf."

The virtual conference room descended into silence. After a few seconds of thoughts, the Vandals grew hopeful.

The Pale Dancer might not be able to show its strength against the wild gods, but it was a completely different story when it came to enemy mechs!

Captain Byrd didn’t reject the suggestion. "I will task Venerable Xie with taking out their leaders and officers. The key to winning this battle in the most painless way possible is to cripple their command structure. Out of all of our assets, the Pale Dancer is the best mech for the job."

The planning stretched on for ten more minutes as the mech officers finalized their battle plan. To Ves, the broad strokes of their strategy was simple. Take out the wild gods from a distance before counter charging the Caged Tongs from multiple directions!

Since the Flagrant Swordmaidens outnumbered the Caged Tongs, why should they remain passive? They should attack and use their numbers to their advantage!

The only restriction that constrained the Flagrant Swordmaidens from storming off immediately was that they couldn’t expose their supply train of fast and heavy transports.

Even if the Flagrant Swordmaidens wiped out the Caged Tongs with ease, if the pirates managed to destroy their supply train, they may have won the battle but would have certainly lost the war!

After Captain Byrd issued specific assignments to the Vandals, she ended the meeting. "I’ll discuss the battle plan with Commander Lydia and see if she agrees with it. We may need to adjust some of the details."

Usually, the Vandals took the lead in the planning. The Swordmaidens generally weren’t very concerned about drafting detailed battle plans. They much preferred to throw their mechs straight at the enemy if they thought they were strong enough to beat them. They were still pirates, after all.

Ves received his own assignment as well. Captain Byrd tasked him with pouring over the sensor readings sent back by their scouts in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy mechs.

As the Vandals and Swordmaidens both mustered up for battle, Ves dug through the noise-ridden optical footage and tried his best to peer through the interference in the air. Ever since they entered the storm lands, it became increasingly harder to observe and transmit data over a distance.

Still, the longer the Vandal scout mechs did their jobs, the more footage they gathered. A single instance of footage might not be able to tell Ves much, but it was a different story altogether if the Vandals processed the data.

After the analysts processed the footage and reduced the noise, Ves obtained a clearer view of the enemy mechs.

"Is that it?"

The enemy mechs all appeared ramshackle! By far, most of the landbound mechs consisted of either budget models or bargain bin models!

Not only that, the state of the mechs didn’t seem very great! The maintenance of most of the mechs looked very poor to Ves! Some of them marched forward with a limp while others couldn’t move their arms anymore!

"It’s the breakdown effect!"

The breakdown effect spared no machine. The Flagrant Swordmaidens managed to cope with the rate of breakdowns because they brought an abundant amount of support personnel and supplies.

What about the pirates? Obviously, they didn’t pay too much attention to logistics and paid for it in spades!

Ves tried to go over the footage and see whether every mech suffered from a lack of maintenance.

"Some mechs look better off than others."

Certain mechs, mostly the more impressive-looking ones, didn’t show any signs of deficiencies. Their mech models were of higher quality and their

exterior sported several shiny symbols and trophies. The somewhat exaggerated appearances of those special mechs reminded Ves of how the Swordmaidens liked to puff up their individual achievements.

"These are likely the mechs piloted by their champions and officers."

It seemed that the mech technicians among the Caged Tongs only spared the minimum amount of work into keeping their regular mechs functional. Instead, they allocated an inordinate amount of effort into keeping the mechs piloted by their leaders at their best state!

"What a selfish allocation of resources!"

Ves couldn’t believe who came up with this decision. All of the extra attention bestowed on the leader mechs could have been spent on fixing the many ailments afflicting the badly-maintained mechs piloted by their rank-and-file. That would have been a much more efficient decision, yet for some reason the leaders didn’t want to share.

"Is it because the leaders needed strength to keep their subordinates in line?"

As long as the officers and champions piloted the best mechs, their underlings wouldn’t dare to revolt. This must have been a very real possibility ever since their fleet no longer existed.

In any case, the observations made by Ves should come as a welcome surprise to Captain Byrd and the rest of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.