

Chapter 861 Caged Tongs

Ves spent more time on analysing the mechs fielded by the Caged and the Red Tongs. The more he watched the footage, the more he wanted to palm his head and smack the chief technicians in charge of keeping the mechs in working condition.

"I really don't know what their chief technicians are thinking."

Among the Vandals, the chief technicians may be a stubborn lot, but Ves made sure they paid equal amounts of attention to every Vandal mechs. That didn't mean they were immune to politics, but Ves kept such a tight rein over their work allocation that they couldn't pull off any games under his watch.

It was a completely different story among the Caged Tongs. Favoritism appeared to be rife among their maintenance crews, and they wastefully allocated an excessive amount of manpower and resources into keeping their leader mechs at their best condition.

"The amount of time, manpower and resources they've spent on keeping a leader mech in tiptop shape is enough to address the problems afflicting ten of their regular mechs!"

The law of diminishing returns applied to mech maintenance as well. Some problems could be fixed by a single mech technician within a couple of minutes, while other problems demanded an entire crew of mech technicians to disassemble half of the mech to repair its insides.

In any case, it wasn't as if the Vandals skipped out on those thorough repairs as well. The difference between the pirates was that the Vandals never skimmed out on logistics. It was well-known that pirates were always short on mech technicians, engineers and other support personnel.

Even the Swordmaidens relied on slaves to fulfill those roles! And they were one of the better-run pirate gangs in the frontier.

Ves noted that the mechs fielded by the Caged were in a marginally better condition than the mechs that belonged to the Red Tongs. They emerged from the restrictive Roppo Principality and couldn't quite shake off the hierarchical, rule-bound tendencies of their home state.

As for the infamous Red Tongs, this bunch of maniacal pirates became famed for transplanting alien tongues in their mouths and genetically modifying their digestive systems so that they could indulge on both alien and human flesh!

It was no surprise to Ves that the mechs of the Red Tongs continued to fall apart as they were on the warpath. Over the past several hours, three of their mechs suffered a critical malfunction that stopped them from advancing!

The enemy didn't seem to care. They continued to march forward while they left the broken mechs behind. Overworked crews of mech technicians picked up the fallen mechs onto makeshift transports that trailed after the main fighting force.

It was impossible to repair these broken mechs in time for them to contribute to the battle.

"Really." Ves shook his head. "If they can't take care of their own mechs, how can they expect to take care of ours?"

Many mech pilots found logistics and proper maintenance to be a tedious, boring and costly affair. They would rather focus on the battles rather than the lengthy preparation that happened in between.

Yet to Ves, he found that good preparation already won them half the battle. Comparing the ramshackle state of the enemy mechs to the reasonably well-maintained mechs of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens, Ves believed the disparity might tip the balance between the forces by more than thirty percent!

Such an advantage was inestimably valuable! This was on top of the numerical advantage the Flagrant Swordmaidens already enjoyed.

Because of all these advantages, Ves couldn't figure out why the Caged Tongs were so eager to pit themselves into battle against the Flagrant Swordmaidens. Didn't they know what they were up against?

"Probably not." He scoffed. "They only spotted our energy tornados from a distance and decided to go on an attack. They never sent out any scouts. Even now, their scouting efforts is half-hearted."

The Vandal scout mechs practically ran rings around the scouts of the Caged Tongs. The scout mechs couldn't move very fast and their overall state looked like they spent half-a-decade in the dumpster. Their mech pilots didn't seem to enjoy a very high position within their organisations as they never exerted themselves, preferring to stick close to their buddies.

Still, even if the Caged Tongs presented a sloppy image to Ves, he still didn't dare to say whether the Flagrant Swordmaidens possessed an advantage. Their best mech pilots piloted mechs in good condition. They may be few in number, but they served a vital role in propping up their morale.

In addition, who knew how their wild gods added to the table. Many Vandals puzzled over how the Caged Tongs managed to subdue and subordinate the feral wildlings and their proud and arrogant wild gods.

After Ves filed his report, word quickly spread among the Vandals and the Swordmaidens about the awful state of the enemy mechs. Ves guessed that Captain Byrd eagerly spread the word in order to boost everyone's confidence about the upcoming battle.

"This is going to be easy!"

"I heard their mechs are so fragile that they break after suffering a single hit."

"Serves the scum right for neglecting their maintenance."

"I always wanted to wring their necks ever since their fleet threw artificial meteorites at us! I lost a buddy from the bombardment!"

The overall opinions expressed by the servicemen edged dangerously close to dismissing the actual threat of their foes. Ves didn't think it was wise to discount the strength of the enemy so readily.

Still, compared to the mild apprehension that wracked the men and women earlier, he found that the mech pilots were much more willing to commit to the battle now. With their confidence swelled, they eagerly wanted to thrash the scum and take revenge for their spaceborn counterparts to bomb the Flagrant Swordmaidens out of existence!

Ves looked on as the Vandals and Swordmaidens prepared their individual mech companies for combat.

He directed his interest on a couple of noteworthy assets.

For example, ever since Venerable Xie landed on the surface, he spent most of his days training in vain. The Vandals never found an opportunity to employ his Pale Dancer in a meaningful capacity.

Those days of collecting dust were over now. The Pale Dancer was being prepped for war!

Almost everyone looked forward to the performance of their new expert pilot. Many Vandals idolized Venerable Xie and wished they could become as skilled as piloting mechs as him one day.

Another asset that Ves paid a keen amount of attention on was Qilanxo. This time, Captain Byrd and Commander Lydia planned to make use of her in a supportive capacity. The biggest vulnerability of the Flagrant Swordmaidens

was that they brought over fifty different legged transports, all of which held vital facilities and supplies.

To guard against long-ranged potshots that could easily take out the fast and heavy transports from a distance, the vehicles would stick close to Qilanxo at the very rear. If the Caged Tongs thought they could cripple the supply train of the Flagrant Swordmaidens, they had another thing coming!

The third asset consisted of the ten or so Akkara heavy mechs that the ground expedition retained. The fleet used to send down some extras during the battle against Pairixan, but they were far too heavy for their own good.

Right now, the Flagrant Vandals on the ground held on to just ten of them, but they possessed an unimaginable amount of firepower if employed correctly.

A loose rule of thumb was to equate the combat power of a heavy mech with five medium mechs.

In essence, ten Akkara heavy mechs brought the equivalent of fifty additional mechs to the table!

This rule of thumb only applied during conventional battles and was often inaccurate after the fact, but that didn't stop people from putting their faith in it. Only mech duels fell outside its scope.

"Those heavy mechs are going to cook the wild gods into barbeque."

The Akkaras still had some artillery shells left over from last time, but the heavy cannons would only employ them as a last resort.

Captain Byrd mainly wanted them to employ their powerful laser cannons against the huge and sluggish wild gods. From what they gathered from Qilanxo, not a lot of wild gods acquired defensive powers.

Even if a wild god did possess a defensive power, it was impossible for a single exobeast to protect the sprawling mob of mechs, wild gods and dwarves.

Ves looked forward to the performance of the Akkaras the most. There was something majestic about witnessing them pound a distant foe into scrap or a puddle of charred flesh.

"One hour remaining until battle commences! Get a move on, fellas!"

The Vandals and the Swordmaidens rapidly finished their preparations and split up into several units. They moved out by mech company and spread out into a half-moon formation designed to envelop the approaching mob from the front and sides.

Since they possessed the advantage of numbers, they might as well try to go for broke!

While spreading out their forces to this extent risked their middle elements, the Flagrant Swordmaidens possessed enough confidence to be able to hold against the initial charge. The Swordmaidens placed their best Devil Razors and Silver Valencias in the middle. Their main job was to stop any advance from reaching the Akkaras and the supply train in the rear.

With half an hour to go until the first elements of the enemy came into range, Ves entered the mobile headquarters and sat behind the nearest available console. He booted up the console and began to call up the status of the Akkara mechs.

Right now, the Flagrant Swordmaidens couldn't afford to lose their heavy mech. Losing one of them hurt as much as losing five medium mechs, after all.

Time ticked by as the Caged Tongs began to enter into extreme range. From time to time, various officers and specialists called out several noteworthy observations to Captain Byrd.

More and more details began to emerge, but Ves paid little attention to most of them. He began to check up on the status of every Vandal mech. All of them should be fit for battle if the mech technicians had done their job correctly.

"What is the status of the Pale Dancer?"

"Venerable Xie reports that he is in position at the rear. He's ready to ambush the main pirate formation from the rear whenever he receives the go ahead."

"Tell him to maintain distance for now." Captain Byrd spoke. "Now is not the right time to slip a knife into the backs of the Caged Tongs. Wait until the aggressors commit to the battle."

"Captain, the enemy horde is stalling! Their march has slowed down!"

"Their scouts finally got a good look at our forces. I think they've finally learned what they are up against!"

Ves diverted his attention to study the projection that depicted the current actions of the enemy horde. The mechs that Ves identified as belonging to the Caged continued to stall while the mechs that belonged to the Red Tongs started to regain their courage.

"They're not united! The Caged and the Red Tongs are likely arguing over their next course of action!"

"Let's give them a little push." Captain Byrd grinned. "Can our Akkaras hit the position?"

"Their laser cannons don't have a direct line of sight to the enemy forces as of yet, but we still have a sufficient amount of long-ranged artillery shells that can

theoretically reach that far. We only have enough shells left for two complete salvos, ma'am."

"Fire one artillery salvo at the suspected commander of the Red Tongs and fire another salvo in the middle of their wild gods!"

Captain Byrd wanted to incite the enemy! It would have been rather troublesome if the Flagrant Swordmaidens had to come to the enemy, so she opted for a brazen attack that was sure force the hand of their enemies.

The Akkara mechs boomed as they fired their artillery cannons! A score of special long-ranged shells designed to fight against the planet's heavy gravity arced into the air before landing close to the position of the best and most expensive looking pirate mech!

Chapter 862 Strafing Runs

The sensor systems of the pirate mechs detecting the incoming shells as they arced towards some of their leader mechs.

Yet what could they do? They barely had a second to respond before the shells landed in their midst and exploded!

The wavering ranks of Roppongans and Ravienne Alliance-aligned pirates rippled as the shells blasted nearby mechs away!

As the dust and smoke faded away, the scout mechs keenly captured the damage done by the shells.

"One leader mech suffered direct hits and is destroyed! Three leader mechs sustained heavy proximity damage and have lost combat effectiveness! Fifteen mechs suffered light damage but can still fight!"

"Not bad for a single artillery volley." Captain Byrd commented. "Fire the second salvo of artillery shells at the wild gods. Let's test their defenses."

Ves studied the damage of the initial artillery salvo and found that the shells only managed to deal so much damage because the Caged Tongs were caught off-guard. The special long-ranged artillery shells the fleet shipped from orbit sacrificed impact for range. Mechs ordinarily wouldn't be taken out at once unless they suffered a direct hit, and even then tougher mechs could still keep walking.

However, the pirate mechs idiotically bunched without any rhyme or reason. They likely hadn't kept up their guard against long-ranged shelling for a very long time. The sudden artillery bombardment by the Vandal Akkara mechs served as a brutal reminder that they faced a proper mech force this time!

To their credit, the Caged Tongs quickly took action. The more disciplined mech pilots of the Caged reacted immediately and spread out their formation. The Red Tongs followed suit only after their pirate leaders gave the command, and sometimes those orders only came thirty seconds too late.

"Damn, if only we had more long-ranged shells."

"They're too costly in rare materials. The fleet only sent us this much after they squeezed their material stockpiles dry."

The biggest reason why the Flagrant Swordmaidens took the Caged Tongs by surprise was because they hit them beyond a range where they thought they became vulnerable.

After the Caged and the Red Tongs suffered from this attack in which they reacted with an embarrassing amount of confusion, they quickly grew angry. Both the Caged and the Red Tongs felt that if the Flagrant Swordmaidens could shell them once, they could shell them again!

"The Akkara heavy cannoneers are firing their second salvo!"

This time, the sensor systems of the pirate mechs alerted their mech pilots to another artillery salvo. Several mechs immediately tried to bend down or cross their arms, yet the shells didn't land on any mech.

Instead, they exploded all around the clump of twelve wild gods that accompanied the pirate mechs.

Roars of pain and fury sounded out as the shells blasted their forms. However, Ves and the other Vandals looked disappointed as the damage they inflicted was much less than they expected.

As biological exobeasts who grew up on a Super Earth and massed heavier than a heavy mech, their flesh was thick, dense, hard and strong. These wild gods occasionally fought against themselves, and the one with the weaker bodies always perished!

Even though the fury of the exploding artillery shells could dent or rupture the armor plating of a mech, the wild gods surprisingly endured most of the shelling without cracking their extremely hard scales. Only direct impacts managed to break through the scales, but the huge bulk of the exobeasts meant the blasts ran their course fairly quickly before they even came close to their internal organs.

Despite the fairly disappointing damage inflicted onto their bodies, the shelling still alarmed the wild gods! Neither the god beasts nor their wildling beast riders ever encountered something so foreign and alarming before!

The dwarf riders all survived the shelling despite their proximity to the blasts that would have at least ruptured their eardrums due to some unknown energy field covering their bodies. Yet even the best energy fields couldn't protect them from the psychological impact of enduring powerful explosions at close range!

"The wild gods have gone berserk! They're charging forward as well!"

Unfortunately for the enemy, the wild gods may be hiding a lot of destructive potential, but they weren't very fast! Compared to the pirate mechs who all wore heavy-duty gravitic backpacks, the wild gods fought against the gravity of the planet on their power.

This led to a strange situation where the pirate mechs clearly outpaced their wild god auxiliaries. This forced the Caged Tongs to slow down in order to keep up with the exobeasts.

"There's something up about the wild gods. Why are they slowing down?"

"The wild gods are probably their trump cards. Just think about how many wild gods we've met that can summon an earthquake or a firestorm. They are probably planning to bring them close enough for them to do their magic!"

After the Akkara mechs ran out of artillery shells, they readied their laser cannons and began to fire at the distant wild gods even if the interference in the air made it difficult for them to land a hit.

The intuition of their mech pilots and the advanced targeting systems both compensated for the initial misses. The thick and powerful laser beams quickly began to land against the bodies of the bewildered wild gods who have never been hit with lasers before.

Unfortunately, the thick scales of the god beasts coupled with their active energy fields mitigated much of the damage. Even so, every hit drained their internal energy reserves faster.

"The energy reserves of the wild gods are steadily decreasing!"

While the Akkara mechs steadily wore down the defenses and energy levels of the wild gods, the ranged mechs from both sides started to skirmish against each other.

Ves watched with eagerness as he witnessed a dynamic dance between rifleman mechs.

Both sides moved across the mildly hilly and uneven terrain at full speed with their gravitic backpacks flaring at full.

While the Caged Tongs may have their priorities skewed when they decided which mechs to service and to what extent, they weren't silly enough to neglect the maintenance of the gravitic backpacks.

Both sides didn't spare any effort and expended their energy cells at an alarming rate. The laser rifleman mechs strafed at full tilt while firing their laser rifles. The frontline mechs, of which the Red Tongs fielded a considerable amount of them, ran with their legs aligned in an oblique angle while their barrel-like torsos pointed straight towards their foes.

The enormous distance, the interference in the air, the passive and active ECM systems built into the mechs along with pilot errors all resulted in very few hits from both sides. The strafing runs looked dramatic as laser beams turned the battlefield into a light show, but they hadn't entered into medium range where the frequency of hits actually rose to a meaningful level.

However, the distant duels still continued as the ranged mechs from both sides restrained each other. If one side stopped firing, the other side would be able to take their time to aim and land accurate hits.

Therefore, the ranged mechs never stopped running, because halting literally meant being blasted by a hundred or more laser beams in the next three seconds!

"Our ranged mechs are holding back our opponents and have gained the edge!"

The duels tilted slowly towards the Flagrant Swordmaidens due to their numbers and quality advantage.

However, the most dramatic factor skewing the ranged duels into the defending side's favor was the substantial difference in maintenance levels!

When Ves peered at the footage of the enemy mechs relayed by the scout mechs, he recalled the time when he accompanied Walter's Whalers in the Glowing Planet campaign.

The local Cloudy Curtain gang paid so little attention to servicing their mechs to the point where their mech technicians were lazy bums. They didn't even hire a chief technician to keep their maintenance crews in line!

What Ves predicted came to pass. Their cheap, awfully maintained mechs folded easily during high-intensity battles.

This crucial difference played out again this time as some of the mechs of the Caged and the Red Tongs crumpled or collapsed after suffering only three or four laser hits that just so happened to land on their weak points.

A dozen mechs already folded, and even more started to fall as the enemy crossed the expanse.

"Some of the wild gods are activating their powers! The wild gods are speeding up somehow!"

One of the massive exobeasts somehow glowed in yellow and spread that glow towards the other eleven wild gods. This caused them to abruptly run five times faster!

That was a massive boost in speed!

"What is happening?!" Captain Byrd immediately demanded.

"We've detected temporal anomalies around the wild gods, captain! They are marching at the same speed, but a time field is distorting the influence of time upon them so that they are effectively gaining more ground!"

"How long can that wild god keep that time field up?!"

"Not too long, ma'am! The energy levels of that wild god is dropping drastically! It can only keep it up for ten minutes at most!"

That still allowed the wild gods to eat up a lot of distance. The Akkara mechs already blasted the bonded exobeasts with lasers as frequently as possible, yet the thick-skinned and thick-muscled beasts were like giant slabs of alloy in their damage-absorbing capacity as long as they kept their energy fields up!

Even starship plating succumbed faster than their abundant flesh!

"Facing twelve wild gods is like facing twelve expert mechs." Ves spoke out, putting a light damper on their moods. "While they aren't actually equivalent to expert mechs, at the very least their resilience is on par. However, just like expert mechs, they can't sustain their energy fields for long if they suffer too much damage."

Their heavy mechs just needed to continue pounding on the wild gods in order to exhaust their internal energy reserves. Unlike sacred gods, the wild gods mostly powered their abilities through their murky crystal and the energy suffused throughout their bodies. That effectively meant they ran out of juice a lot quicker.

Yet would the heavy mechs be able to exhaust the wild gods now that they moved five times faster all of a sudden?

Another wild god activated his powers. An obscuring mist formed around the wild gods that enveloped their forms and blocked most of their sensors.

However, this didn't deter the Akkara mechs at all!

"Feed back the sensor data to our processors and send the results to the Akkaras!"

An ample amount of scout mechs kept their sensor systems pointed at the wild gods. While they mostly captured garbled noise, they fed back the data to

the mobile headquarters where powerful processors rapidly calculated the real-time positions of the wild gods hiding within the field of mist.

The lasers continued to land upon the bodies of the humongous wild gods without stopping!

"Captain, the Swordmaiden melee mechs have moved from their positions! They're charging forward to meet the Caged Tongs into battle!"

"What?!" Captain Byrd rose up from her seat. "Those numbskulls! It's not time yet! We haven't cleared the wild gods yet!"

The Swordmaiden mech pilots took no notice of the original plan. With waves of enemy mechs about to descend upon their lines, the aggressive female mech pilots no longer held themselves in. They gave in to their urges and charged out without any regard for strategy or timing!

Half of the Vandals cursed at their pig teammates. Couldn't they just follow a single battle plan without turning into mindless battle maniacs?

Having spent a lot of time with Ketis, Ves understood the impulsive nature of the Swordmaidens a little better than others. They spotted weakness among their foes and attempted to close in on the enemy before they regained their composure.

It wasn't a half-bad solution, but the problem was they dismissed the threat of the wild gods!

"We need to do something about the wild gods now!"

Chapter 863 Bewildering Abilities

Ever since the scout mechs brought back footage of one or more large dwarf tribes marching together with the Caged Tongs, the analysts among the Vandals tried to figure out the relation between the two disparate forces.

Foreigners from the stars had nothing in common with the nomadic wildling tribes! For what reason would they work together all of a sudden?

Most of the Vandals immediately believed the dastardly pirates coerced the helpless, innocent dwarves into fighting on their behalf. A large tribe may be a force to be reckoned with against other native threats, but any half-decent mech force could run rings around them, especially from a distance.

It would be too easy for a mech force to subdue a dwarf tribe no matter how many wild gods they bonded with. Even the Flagrant Swordmaidens came up with a couple of contingency plans of this nature if they hadn't already gained the cooperation of Qilanxo.

What puzzled the Vandals the most was that the dwarves and their bonded wild gods all seemed to march into battle with fervor that did not fit with a narrative that revolved around exploitation.

"Are those dwarves brainwashed or something? They don't look like prisoners or slaves! It's as if they are completely dedicated to the cause!"

The best guess the analysts came up with was that the Caged Tongs somehow hoodwinked the dwarf tribes and their bonded wild gods into worshipping them as a greater authority. Everything about the foreigners from the stars impressed the natives, from their powerful metallic mechs to their amazing medical technology that could cure a lot of old ailments.

"The natives are like frogs in a well. When someone outside the well drops inside, how can the frogs not worship the outsider as a higher being?"

Whatever the case, the frogs no longer ruled the inside of the well but yielded power to the seemingly omnipotent outsiders!

While the energy levels of the wild gods as the Akkara mechs kept wearing down their energy fields with accurate laser fire, the exobeasts just didn't go down fast enough!

"Ma'am, the Swordmaidens aren't responding to our hails. What is your command?"

Captain Byrd fell into a difficult dilemma. They drafted the original plan in order to handle the most unstable factor first. Once the wild gods succumbed to massed lasers, the rest of the enemy force fell within their calculations.

Yet the Swordmaidens didn't see it that way. They never backed down against challenges and never showed fear against new and unknown threats!

It wasn't as if they never gave into their fear, but they didn't see the need in holding back at this time!

"Send out our melee mech companies after the charging Swordmaiden mechs." Captain Byrd finally decided. "Let the Swordmaidens absorb the initial brunt of the clash and back them up after they stall. Make sure to keep our own mechs on the second line. Don't let them get caught up in whatever wide-area powers the wild gods have in store."

The Vandal melee mechs moved out rather helplessly as they trailed after the charging Swordmaidens.

The battle entered a heated phase as the ranged mechs from both sides scored much more hits as they entered medium range. Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs started suffering serious damage from the laser impacts hitting their frames, but their armor managed to hold out long enough for them to pull back before the damage proved fatal.

While Captain Byrd felt confident enough about their chances for victory, she wanted to minimize the damage and lose as few mechs as possible. Every mech that sustained substantial damage or had their armor broken received orders to pull back before they got trashed.

In the perspective of the mech technicians, it was much easier to replace a lot of broken armor plating than to repair a single crippled mech with serious internal damage!

Of course, if the battle went sideways for some reason, Captain Byrd wouldn't hesitate to throw the damaged mechs back into battle.

The Swordmaiden mech pilots roared as they endured the lasers hitting their mechs and rapidly closed the distance. The diminishing amount of pirate mechs armed with lasers already had their hands full surviving against the coordinated laser volleys of the Flagrant Swordmaidens, so they couldn't divert much of their firepower against the closing the swordsman mechs.

"The mist around the wild gods is dispersing!"

The wild gods came back into view. Most of their bodies started to look ugly and scorched as some of the potent damage from the laser beams bled through their energy fields. Their energy reserves already dipped to less than forty percent!

However, that was still too much in the eyes of the Vandals. Some of the wild gods started glowing as they channeled their unique abilities against the closing Swordmaiden mechs.

"Five wild gods are channeling their powers!"

"Divert all of our Akkara mechs on two of them! Prioritize draining their energy reserves! Allocate a ranged mech company to assist their efforts!"

The Akkara mechs stopped targeting the wild gods randomly and evenly and instantly brought their cannons to bear upon two of the glowing wild gods at the front. Now that the range shortened considerably, the targeting systems of the Akkara mechs delivered pinpoint accuracy for each hit.

Two wild gods each suffered the combined attention of five Akkara mechs each. When the laser beams spread out among their ranks, the wild gods didn't show any fear. Yet now that the heavy cannoneers started focusing their firepower, the two targeted wild gods abruptly flustered.

Shortly after that, over thirty laser rifleman mechs hit the wild gods with a flurry of weak but rapid-fire laser volleys.

The might of each individual laser beam fired from the rifles might not be very powerful, but the horrendous volume of repeated laser beams practically blinded the targeted wild gods into a stupor! Their glow diminished as the bewildered wild gods aborted any attempts at offense in order to channel their full power towards bolstering their rapidly diminishing energy fields.

However, even as the Vandal ranged mechs managed to stall the devastating attacks of two of the exobeasts, the other three wild gods faced no hindrances at all. After gathering their strength for twenty seconds, they each unleashed the full might of their abilities!

"Pull back!"

Surprisingly, the Swordmaiden mechs at the very front moved seconds earlier than the Vandal mechs trailing after them from a distance. It was as if the Swordmaiden mech pilots already planned their abrupt reversal beforehand!

Each of the three wild gods called down different powers onto the battlefield.

One of them summoned a corrosive wind that spread out over hundreds of meters. The strange properties of this acid wind rapidly ate through armor plating of the Swordmaiden mechs that fell into range!

Most of them managed to escape the affected area looking like sorry, rusted junkyard machines. A handful suffered worse than others. When their gravitic backpacks or their leg joints failed, the mechs lost all of their mobility. The

Swordmaiden mech pilots helplessly ejected their cockpits before the corrosive winds ate through the ejection mechanisms.

The heavy gravity did its best to pull down the flying cockpits, but their integrated antigrav modules lasted long enough for them to fly back to the rear.

The ejected pirate cockpits on the other hand displayed more mixed results. Half of the time, their antigrav modules failed to fire up, causing the cockpits to slam against the ground after traveling only a couple of hundred meters.

Evidently, their mech technicians hadn't checked the cockpits in a very long time.

That said, a significant amount of pirate mech pilots became trapped in their own mechs as their mechs keeled over before they could release their gravitic backpacks and allow their cockpits room to eject.

Because the gravitic backpacks shifted the center of gravity of the mechs slightly to the rear, many mechs that stopped functioning had a tendency to fall onto their backs, which was the worst outcome as far as mech pilots and mech designers were concerned!

Right after the first wild god summoned a corrosive wind, a second wild god activated his powers in a different area. Tens of Swordmaiden mechs fell into an area that suddenly turned muddy.

The soil didn't grow wet and muddy. Instead, it became as pliable as soft clay, causing most of the mechs in the area to sink down into the ground.

This was a fatal trap to mechs, and it had caught over twenty Swordmaiden mechs over a wide area!

Even without orders from Captain Byrd, the Akkara mechs abruptly stopped firing their laser cannons at the two stalled wild gods and instead blasted the exobeast responsible for turning the terrain into a soft pit.

The blistering lasers immediately halted the wild god's efforts of attempting to sink the affected mechs into the ground! The soil abruptly hardened, trapping the Swordmaiden mechs and turning them into sitting ducks against errant laser fire from some of the pirate mechs.

Most hadn't sunk deep enough to trap them for long. They forcibly pulled out their legs or hacked the ground with their extremely sharp greatswords until they loosened it up enough to break out.

Still, a handful of Swordmaiden mechs sunk deeper than others, to the point where they couldn't free themselves on their own power. As more and more pirate mechs fired their lasers at the immobile mechs, the Swordmaiden mech pilots decisively bailed out and ejected from their cockpits.

"These impatient hags!"

"Are their brains filled with muscles or something?"

Many Vandals groaned as the Swordmaidens incurred unnecessary losses from these incidents. Why couldn't they hold themselves back and wait for their ranged mechs to take out these wild gods and their bewildering powers from a distance?

"Focus on suppressing the wild gods! Instruct the Akkara mechs to focus their firepower on any wild god that begins to glow!"

At this time, the first wave of Swordmaiden mechs finally slammed against the pirate mechs. While many of their mechs suffered setbacks or delays due to the appearance of the corrosive winds and the quicksand pit, their line stretched out over kilometers, allowing most of them to close the distance unscathed.

The Swordmaiden mechs instantly tore the mechs of the Caged and the Red Tongs to pieces during the initial clash!

The difference in strength was too wide! As a whole, The Devil Razors outmatched the budget and bargain bin mechs of their opposition by a wide margin, both in cost and in maintenance levels.

The latter may sound a bit boring but it drastically affected the reaction speed and the amount of damage the enemy mechs could endure before they got wrecked.

What really sealed the deal was the disparity in training, discipline and skill! The mech pilots of the Caged fared a lot better than the unruly Red Tongs, who mostly earned their fame from the atrocities they committed instead of displaying valor on the battlefield!

The Vandal mechs in the second line faltered in their charge when they saw that the Swordmaidens didn't need any help at the moment. The vicious Swordmaidens currently fought like wolves among sheep, felling pirate mech after pirate mech with alarming speed!

"Those ladies are tearing the pirates apart!"

The only meaningful opposition came from the enemy leader mechs. Their pristine states along with their skilled veteran mech pilots propped up the faltering lines of the Caged Tongs. They even fought evenly against their Swordmaiden counterparts!

Yet time wasn't on their side. The Caged Tongs continued to lose more mechs, causing their local numbers advantage to diminish by the second. Already, the Swordmaidens started to gang up on the superior pirate mechs.

The cunning Swordmaidens adopted a devious tactic where one Swordmaiden mech occupied the enemy machine in front while two other Swordmaiden mechs targeted its gravitic backpack!

A single mech couldn't cover against three foes at once! Once the Swordmaidens managed to destroy the lightly-armored gravitic backpacks, the elite pirate leaders for all of their battle prowess became imprisoned in their own mechs as they slowed down to a crawl!

The Devil Razor or Silver Valencias occupying the mech at the front didn't need to display any fancy anymore. They simply stabbed their swords straight through the chest plating and through the cockpit of the trapped pirate mechs!

While the brawl at the frontlines slanted heavily towards the Swordmaidens, the third wild god that quietly charged up her strength despite the lasers hitting her energy field finally activated her power!

She abruptly disappeared from view.

"One of the wild gods has disappeared!"

"Where has the beast gone?!"

An alert suddenly sounded inside the mobile headquarters.

"The wild god teleported from her position! She's right in the middle of our supply train!"

Everyone abruptly became alarmed. The heavy transport that served as their mobile headquarters was right in the middle of the supply train as well!

The teleporting wild god somehow circumvented hundreds of mechs including the Akkara heavy cannoneers and landed straight in the middle of the most vulnerable area of the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

Chapter 864 Quiet Dance

The Vandals and the Swordmaidens left a light guard force of mechs around their legged transports. Yet they all positioned themselves around the supply train, not inside it. The ranged mechs didn't dare to fire their laser rifles in fear of landing a hit on a vulnerable legged transports.

The fast and heavy transports possessed many merits, but durability wasn't one of them! In order to produce them fast and quickly, Chief Dakkon made huge compromises with regards to their armor and internal structure.

Since they had no use in battle, why invest in their armor? It was extremely wasteful for the Vandals and the Swordmaidens to clad them in expensive battle armor when they could have used the same resources to improve their mechs.

Yet who would have thought a wild god existed with the power to teleport? This completely made no sense! The vast majority of human forces didn't even have access to teleportation technology, so how could a wild god develop such a highly-desired ability?!

"The wild god is moving to attack one of our cargo transports!"

"Tell the legged transports to disperse! Get away from the exobeast right now!"

The wild god took some time to reorient herself in her new position. When she recovered her wits, she instantly roared while her crazed dwarf rider instantly pointed her towards the nearest heavy transport that tried to run.

Emphasis on tried. As a vehicle devoid of antigrav modules due to energy constraints, the heavy transport moved far too slow to escape the wrathful wild god!

The crew of the heavy transport evacuated far too late as the wild god slammed into the heavy transport. She outright crunched one of the legs of the transports with its maw. Her strong and heavy limbs battered the main body of the transports. The front of the heavy mech deformed from the fierce barrage of attacks. The containers in the ruptured cargo holds broke and spilled large amounts of spare parts and ingots of processed metals.

However, the savage attacks of the wild gods abruptly ended as an even larger exobeast slammed into the side of the wild god.

"Qilanxo has arrived!"

"Who is riding her right now?"

"Captain Orfan is currently interfacing with Qilanxo, ma'am!"

"Tell her to constrain the wild god! Don't let their battle spill over the other transports!"

The wild god and the sacred god both entered into a furious close-ranged brawl. Since neither side possessed any offensive powers, they resorted to old-fashioned claw and bite attacks as well as slamming their bodies against each other to bruise their opponents!

The savage battle caused the two heavy exobeasts to be pushed back and forth, sometimes inching close to a heavy transport that vainly tried to flee the vicinity of the fighting. Only after Captain Orfan's reminder did Qilanxo regain enough clarity to stop the wild god from damaging the vulnerable vehicles.

As the Vandals in the mobile headquarters became flustered to the point of considering whether they should evacuate, Captain Byrd forcibly slammed down her fist.

"There will be no running without my express orders! Are you Vandals or are you cowards? Qilanxo and Captain Orfan have the wild god well in hand. Get back to work and trust in our comrades!"

The fast transports already left the vicinity long ago on their swift legs. Several Vandal and Swordmaiden melee mechs crept in through the cracks, but they mainly placed themselves in front of the heavy transports.

Right now, the mechs didn't see any opportunity to intervene in the wild brawl between Qilanxo and the wild god.

In any case, Qilanxo had the battle well in hand. As an older exobeast, she possessed a definite advantage in size and weight. She also entered the battle in a fresh state while her opponent already endured a significant amount of laser beams.

The energy levels of the wild god dropped into critical levels after a couple of minutes of mindless brawling. In contrast, Qilanxo still maintained a healthy energy level as she slowly drew upon the stored energy reserves of her god crystals.

The main difference between sacred gods and wild gods was that the former possessed a much larger pool of energy to fuel all of their abilities. Qilanxo possessed nineteen of them, which placed her in the upper range of her kind!

While she didn't have time yet to call down an energy tornado, Qilanxo fared just fine with her current reserves. At some point, she finally managed to pierce through the faltering energy field of the wild god and raked her claws through the scales protecting her enemy's neck.

The wild god suffered severe damage! Gouts of blood escaped from the screaming creature's neck, but the wild god's resilient physique forcibly stemmed the bleeding.

Yet that didn't stop their allied sacred god from doing it again! Another claw strike brutally raked one of the wild god's front limbs. The claws dug deep enough to scrape against the bones, eliciting another pain-wracked cry from the wild god and her beast rider!

"Qilanxo is going to town on the wild god!"

The battle in the middle of the supply train no longer held any suspense. A wild god without an energy field was like an expert mech without an energy field. They mainly relied on their bodies and frames to resist damage.

This might avail them for quite a bit against weaker opponents, but against an equivalent threat, such defenses stood no chance at all!

While Qilanxo treated the wild god as her scratching post, the battle at the frontlines took a turn for the worse for the attacking side.

Even if the Vandals openly questioned whether the Swordmaidens possessed a sound mind, they did have a magnificent intuition for timing. Their blunder against the wild gods aside, they hit the ranks of the Caged and the Red Tongs when their leadership became preoccupied by several matters.

First, the wild gods aligned to their forces suffered heavy laser bombardment. The Caged Tongs planned to employ the wild gods as their trump cards, but who knew they barely showed their strength before they drowned in continuous laser fire that rapidly drained their energy reserves!

Second, their ranged mechs rapidly diminished in number as the better-equipped and better-trained opponents outplayed them. Just the difference in maintenance alone proved to be the decisive factor!

Third, the Pale Dancer finally entered the field.

Through all of the chaos that went on in the frontlines and in the middle of the Flagrant Swordmaiden supply train, few people initially took notice of the lone white mech in the rear.

The Pale Dancer didn't jump onto the stage. It glided onto it. Even though the bone-like coloration of the Pale Dancer should have attracted a lot of attention among the darker-coated mechs, Venerable Xie effortlessly weaved his expert mech closer to the rear of the enemy lines.

Hundreds, if not thousands of dwarves mounted on juvenile godlings stood in his way. The expert pilot took no notice of the ants underneath the feet of his mech and crunched their bodies flat with the sheer weight of his mech!

With bloodied feet, the Pale Dancer trod a bloodied path to the unsuspecting rear of the Caged Tongs.

It was not as if the enemy posted scouts that kept an eye to the rear. Due to the pitched battles happening in front, the undisciplined mech pilots diverted more than half of their attention to the action.

This allowed the Pale Dancer to strut forward into medium range from completely open terrain without alerting the enemy scouts at all. This subtle technique alone alarmed those who remembered the expert pilot's existence!

How could such a bright mech stroll into range so effortlessly?

In any case, the Pale Dancer lifted up its customized laser rifle and instantly fired a high-powered laser beam right into a weak point in the rear of a leader mech.

There was absolutely no deviation in Venerable Xie's aim! Despite the mild interference and other factors that could have skewed the Pale Dancer's aim, the expert pilot somehow managed to land his laser beam exactly where he wanted with almost no discernable drift!

Venerable Xie's judgement also proved to be keenly accurate, as even Ves could hardly identify a better weak point on that leader mech.

The rear of a mech often enjoyed the least protection. This time, though, a gravitic backpack sat in the way. Yet despite the hindrance of the backpack, the high-powered laser beam possessed enough strength to punch straight through the thin covering and the delicate internal components of the backpack and bore straight through the weak point in the armor before dealing catastrophic damage to the power reactor buried deep inside the stricken mech.

Before the leader mech even realized it suffered a hit, it shut down immediately as its power reactor underwent an emergency shutdown.

The mech got wrecked without any chance of retaliation!

"That initial shot is impossible to land for any normal mech pilot!"

Yet the Pale Dancer managed to do so while on the move! Even now, it continued to run a bloody path over the mindless dwarf tribesmen who mistakenly thought they contributed to the battle.

Even though plenty of dwarves cried out in pain or fear, the mech pilots of the Caged Tongs hadn't noticed anything amiss as of yet. The Pale Dancer quietly positioned itself in the optimal angle before releasing another deceptively thin laser beam.

Another well-maintained enemy mech abruptly shut down.

By the time the Pale Dancer harvested the third leader mech, the Caged Tongs finally became aware of the threat at the rear. At first, they didn't recognize the Pale Dancer as an expert mech. They dismissed it as a lone rifleman mech that somehow got lost or looped around.

A half-squad of light mechs received new orders and diverted from the reserves to pursue the Pale Dancer.

A medium rifleman mech could never outrun a light mech!

Yet this speed advantage never came to the fore. Before the light mechs got anywhere close, six rapid laser beams erupted from the Pale Dancer's rifle. This time, Venerable Xie tuned down the power so that the laser beams carried just enough energy to pierce the thin armor of the agile light mechs.

No matter how fast they tried to evade or spoil the aim of Venerable Xie, the expert pilot unerringly struck them all right below the chest armor and bore straight into their cockpits!

None of the mech pilots survived as the powerful laser beams vaporized their bodies instantly!

The sudden deaths of the light mechs caused the already burdened leaders of the Caged and the Red Tongs a lot of distress. With the Swordmaiden mechs tearing apart their frontlines, the presence of the Pale Dancer stabbing at the rear proved to be especially fatal!

Fear spread among the leaders as the Pale Dancer resumed targeting their mechs. It took no discernment at all to separate the officers and champions from the rank-and-file. Venerable Xie merely had to see whether the mech he targeted looked clean and flawless. The vanity of the leaders became their downfall as the foreign expert pilot harvested their lives as effortlessly as a god!

At this moment, the Pale Dancer became the embodiment of the god of death!

The split focus of the enemy cadre along with the battering from both sides eventually broke the enemy. While the Caged admiringly persisted and held together even when their cause seemed lost, the much more cowardly Red Tongs broke away from the battle without any guilt. They ran and instinctively split up, forcing the Swordmaiden and Vandal mechs to run in pursuit.

"The battle is decided!"

"It's not over yet, but we've got this in the bag!"

"Don't get complacent yet! The Caged are still fighting and some of the wild gods are still alive. Tell the mech pilots to keep up their guard. The fleeing enemy mechs can still turn the tables against their pursuers."

No matter what the Caged Tongs attempted to do, nothing could save them anymore now that they lost cohesion and broke their ranks.

Ves quietly sighed in relief at the outcome of the battle. While they sustained a bit more losses than expected, the Flagrant Swordmaidens overwhelmingly stomped the attackers who misjudged their strength!

Chapter 865 Carpe Diem

The battle against the Caged Tongs and its auxiliaries ended in a decisive victory for the Flagrant Swordmaidens. While it took more than a day of pursuit, none of the routing mechs of the aggressors made it away, mostly because they eventually ran out of energy.

Perhaps the most tiresome aspect about the Caged Tongs was the sheer amount of random dwarf tribesmen they enthralled. The crazed dwarves continued to charge at the mechs of the Flagrant Swordmaidens without any iota of sense or fear.

The mechs didn't bother to waste their energy on firing their laser rifles or swinging their weapons at the insane dwarves. They merely walked among the dwarves and stomped thousands of them beneath the feet of their mechs.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens casually committed mass dwarficide in order to stop the idiotic dwarves from hammering the legs of their mechs and transports with their bone clubs.

The bonded wild gods also knew no fear. They fought back with incredible ferocity, and each had to be lasered to death from a distance.

The only exception was the teleporting wild god. Qilanxo managed to get the upper hand in the brawl and managed to subdue this special wild god without killing her and her dwarf rider.

Still, the wild god sustained such heavy wounds that the exobiologists weighed the cost of saving her life.

"It's not worth it." Dr. Tillman said. "We'll have to expend too much medical supplies in order to save her life."

Hours later, the stench of blood, guts and other unpleasant smells suffused the entire battlefield. After making sure that no existing threat remained, rescue parties started to descend on the wrecks.

They ignored the pitiful cries of the surviving dwarves and instead prioritized the rescue of their own mech pilots first. Only after that did the rescue parties recover the mech pilots of the Caged Tongs trapped in their wrecked mechs or ejected cockpits.

A detachment of Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs also ranged out and found the meager supply train of the Caged Tongs. They easily overwhelmed the token mech escorts and secured the badly-built pirate transports, for all the good it did, because a cursory inspection of their assets revealed they were practically running dry of many essential goods.

The battle hadn't been worth it in the standpoint of the Flagrant Swordmaidens. Over eighty mechs sustained varying amounts of battle damage, and half of them either got wrecked or sustained such severe damage that the mech technicians needed to rebuild them from the ground up.

Ves already foresaw a massive pile of work awaiting the mech maintenance department.

At this moment, many Vandals and Swordmaidens started interrogating every member of the Caged and the Tongs they managed to capture alive. They particularly screwed the thumbs of the mech pilots who emerged the well-maintained pirate mechs.

In the meantime, a horde of mech technicians and other personnel started scouring the battlefield to recover any repairable wrecks or identify any notable salvage among the remains.

They walked past flattened and heavily-injured dwarves, casually shooting any approaching dwarf who managed to survive the massacre with their laser pistols.

"Ugh. These dwarves are everywhere." A mech technician muttered in the comm channel as he kept his grip on his smoking laser pistol. Right now, the stench of dead dwarves and the fumes released from wrecked mechs forced everyone who stepped on the battlefield to keep their helmets closed. "What do you reckoned is wrong with these stupid dwarves?"

Another mech technician grinned in his closed hazard suit. "I heard from someone who interrogated the first Red Tong captives that they slipped something into their food. Their exobiologists cooked up something devious. It made the dwarves pliable and drove them in a frenzy when commanded to. They even formulated something special for the wild gods."

Teams of mech technicians inspected the mechs belonging to their own force first and marked them out according to their state. Some mechs only needed a couple of replacements to get back into shape, while others required far too much time in the workshop to be worth the effort of restoring them to their former glory.

The Flagrant Vandals mostly avoided incurring major damage to their mechs. Ves was pleased to hear that only a handful of Vandal mechs would be scrapped for parts.

The Swordmaidens on the other hand sustained more severe damage. Many of the mechs that got caught up in the bewildering abilities of the wild gods couldn't be used anymore and needed to be scrapped as well.

They kind of got what they deserved by deviating from the plan, yet the Swordmaidens didn't seem to mind it. They already started claiming the bulk of the salvageable wrecks from the Caged Tongs to provide new rides for the ejected Swordmaiden mech pilots.

In general, both the Vandals and Swordmaidens lost relatively few mech pilots as both had been commanded to eject early rather than go down with their mechs.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens valued every mech pilot. As long as they retained their pilots, they could always provide them with new mechs, especially if they retained control of the battlefield after the battle.

Ves currently stood with Mayra as they overlooked the sprawling field of wrecks and flattened dwarves. He had recently concluded a division of salvage. While the Swordmaidens claimed most of the intact mechs, he made sure the Vandals got their fair share as well.

Even if they didn't plan to restore the pirate mechs, they could still strip the wrecks of their most valuable parts or rare materials.

As the Caged Tongs already demonstrated, a severe lack of maintenance and supplies resulted in dire implications for the effective strength of a deprived mech force!

"I've got a question." Ves said. "Why did you Swordmaidens decided to charge all of a sudden? I don't believe Commander Lydia and your Swordmaiden officers are blind to the strategic implications of deviating from the plan."

While Ves already developed a couple of notions why, he wanted to hear the reasons from Mayra herself, as he might be wrong.

The pirate designer pressed her lips. "Lydia's Swordmaidens are different from the Flagrant Vandals. A military mech regiment like yours carries several responsibilities. You fight on behalf of your Bright Republic. We fight on behalf of ourselves."

"What difference does that make? Don't you value your lives?"

"Not as high as you Vandals value your own lives. You have to consider that in the frontier, life is very cheap. Anyone can get killed at any time for no reason at all. Retirement is a luxury that many sons and daughters of the frontier don't get to enjoy. The frontier mindset is to live in the present and make the best of your time while you're still alive and capable of pursuing your dreams. For the Swordmaiden mech pilots, there is nothing more desirable than to participate in a worthy battle. Even if they die, the glory and valor associated with a grand battle is more than worth the price."

"Carpe diem. Seize the day."

"Exactly." Mayra nodded.

The martial tradition of Lydia's Swordmaidens oriented completely around fostering elite pirate mech pilots. While Ves admired Commander Lydia for successfully raising a somewhat competent elite force, the Swordmaidens themselves sacrificed much of their individuality and humanity to become the ferocious fighting force that tore apart the frontlines of the Caged Tongs in short order.

"Isn't it wasteful to drive the Swordmaidens to their deaths?"

Mayra shrugged. "We take bold but calculated risks. We recognize reality when it stares us in the face and we avoid unwinnable battles whenever we can. However, according to Commander Lydia, too much calculation breeds doubt and cowardice. There are times when you want to avoid pulling the trigger due to various concerns. The Swordmaidens are trained to just pull the trigger instead of giving in to their doubts."

Such traditions didn't make sense in civilized space, yet it was a way to survive in the anarchic frontier. Only by showing that they were willing and capable to fight back did the Swordmaidens managed to deter any evil designs on them. Their impulsiveness may have landed them in trouble

numerous times, but the trigger-happy reputation they acquired deterred many more threats.

"What do you think about the Red Tongs?" Ves asked, changing the topic.

"It's clear that they've been driven to desperation. From what we've gathered, the lack of support from the fleet along with dwindling supplies forced them to go on the warpath. Incidents like this happens much more often than you think. Poor planning and operating in an area with very few space stations and supply points has defeated more pirate gangs than direct battles."

The people that pursued a career in piracy never tended to be the brightest bulb in the shed in the first place. Among the spectrum of pirates, the cannibalistic Red Tongs ranked near the bottom in terms of long-term planning.

It was a wonder they made it to the Aeon Corona System at all.

In any case, the interrogations still went on. Once the Vandals and the Swordmaidens wrung every bit of intelligence from their tortured bodies, they planned to dispose each of them without mercy.

The Caged Tongs had no value as prisoners.

The Caged already opposed the Flagrant Swordmaidens in multiple occasions. From partnering up with the Masters of Combat, to participating in the orbital bombardment that threatened to wipe out the ground expedition, the Roppongan gang more than lost their chances at redemption.

As for the Red Tongs, their peripheral connection to the powerful Ravienne Alliance deterred the Flagrant Swordmaidens only briefly. These utter bastards that liked to munch on human flesh had not only drugged and enslaved the native dwarves, they also replaced their rations with raw dwarf meat!

Even if the Flagrant Swordmaidens stopped caring about the dwarves, the reprehensible behavior of the Red Tongs earned them a swift laser beam in the head before being dumped on a pile of bodies. The victors were too lazy to dig a mass grave or cremate the remains for the brutal pirates.

None of that concerned Ves and Mayra right now. They calmly ignored the death and suffering and toured the battlefield as well as the captured supply train of the Caged Tongs.

Just like the Flagrant Swordmaidens, the pirates opted to cobble up a cheap legged transport together. They only built around twenty heavy transports because they didn't need more room for supplies.

Most of their cargo holds no longer held any cargo except for miscellaneous junk. As Ves and Mayra inspected each of the cargo holds, it became clear that the Caged Tongs did not have long before their mechs lost combat effectiveness.

"There's nothing of value here." Ves grimaced as he glanced over the mobile workshop. The rusted tools and the broken 3D printers showed that the Caged Tongs had neared their limits in terms of repair capability. "All of this equipment isn't worth taking. You're free to take them if you want, Mayra."

"No thanks. The Swordmaidens have no need for them either."

Ves turned to a security officer who escorted him around the battlefield. "I'd like to have a chat with the boss here. Who is the highest-ranking mech designer or chief technician around here?"

The security officer briefly spoke to his commanding officer over the comm before he replied to Ves. "We've captured a number of chief technicians. Our men are interrogating them right now in an adjacent room. Do you wish to have access to them, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Why not? Take me to the most senior chief technician among the bunch. I'd like to have a chat with the fellow if you'll allow me." He said.

They reached an area repurposed as temporary holding cells and interrogation rooms to process the non-combat personnel from the enemy supply train. When the mechs of the Flagrant Swordmaidens rolled in, they instantly surrendered without any hesitation.

It wasn't as if they had any choice. How could they possibly resist the mechs without any of their own?

Chapter 866 Fallible Leader

"You're going to kill us all, aren't you?" The disheveled-looking chief technician from the Caged asked as soon as Ves and Mayra sat down on the other side of the table.

Ves glanced at the data pad in his armored hands. "Chief Glayce Retton-Fukumoto, is it?"

The grey-haired man gestured with his cuffed hands. "Just call me Glayce."

"Chief Glayce..." Ves stared at the face of the man who knew his ultimate fate. Against such a self-conscious man, lying wouldn't accomplish anything.

"Unfortunately, there is very little animus among the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens to extend any mercy to your forces. Neither your Caged nor your Red Tong allies have given us any reason to spare any of you. All I can say is that you played your games but lost."

A fatalistic mood struck the captive chief technician.

Glayce laughed to himself before cursing his commanding officer. "Our friggin' Sub-Boss Scornburned led us all to our doom. He insisted on continuing on this wild goose chase. It's all because of him that the Caged entered into an alliance with the filthy Red Tongs despite all of the protests from the rank-and-file."

"Tell us more about Sub-Boss Scornburned."

"We all thought he acted on orders of the main organization at first. However, we slowly found out that he never received any instructions from the Roppo Principality. All of the wild decisions he took, he did so by himself! Ever since we allied with the Red Tongs, it all went downhill for us. We Caged possessed a lot of pride, but the longer we hitched up with the awful pirates, the more our standards degraded."

Gl Bryce proceeded to ramble a bit about all the atrocities and stupid decisions the Caged undertook under the incitement of their erstwhile allies. To Ves, it sounded as if the Caged never enjoyed an equal position in this alliance. The Red Tongs fielded significantly more mechs, leveraged their superiority in strength and numbers to dictate the running of the alliance.

"Did Sub-Boss Scornburned do anything to fight for the rights of the Caged?"

"What did he care?" An apathetic Bryce shrugged. "The Sub-Boss increasingly hung out with the Red Tongs instead of our own folk. He might as well transplant an alien red tongue in his mouth, because I know for sure he participated in their depraved 'feasts'."

The chief technician didn't elaborate on what happened at the feasts. He didn't need to. Anything associated with the Red Tongs likely wouldn't be anything pleasant.

Ves turned his attention elsewhere. "Since your ground forces landed on this planet, did you ever develop a long-term plan to survive on the planet?"

"Not really." Bryce shrugged. "Even if some of us voiced concerns since the start, Scornburned didn't listen as long as it came with a price. Since he acted outside the orders of our main organization, he couldn't access the regular funds. He had to seek alternate sources of funding."

"Where did he get the money to equip the mechs with gravitic backpacks?"

"Some murky money source, I don't know. I'm not in charge of the finances. Now that you mentioned it, I think Scornburned was acting on the orders of someone else. There's no other reason why he pushed us to travel all the way out of our comfort zone and all the way into the deep frontier."

When Ves questioned Chief Glayce about this mysterious backer, the chief technician really couldn't tell them anything. The Caged might not treat their chief technicians as outright slaves, but they didn't enjoy a high position either. Most of the stories Glayce passed on mostly consisted of rumors rather than first-hand accounts.

"So what's up with the dwarves?" Ves asked instead.

"Well, despite our warnings, Sub-Boss Scornburned and the Red Tongs insisted on landing on this planet with inadequate supplies. We didn't have a lot of orbit-to-surface transport capacity as most of our flying transports wouldn't survive orbital entry. So we mostly did our thing in the first few weeks, and then our fleet got blasted to kingdom come."

"We didn't expect your spaceborn forces to suffer such retaliation either." Ves spoke. "Who knew that the Starlight Megalodon still possessed teeth?"

"Well, ever since then, all hell broke loose as far as we were concerned. We were homeless and no longer possessed an avenue for retreat. The only possible hope we could come up with was to seek our salvation at the Starlight Megalodon. Since the crashed battleship is functional enough to fire an antimatter torpedo, she must surely have some shuttles or transports, right?"

Ves doubted it, but it wasn't as if the Caged Tongs could ask the Flagrant Swordmaidens or any of the other rival forces for a ride home. "Your ground forces didn't have enough supplies to make it to the Starlight Megalodon, right?"

"Right. We warned the officers plenty of times, but Scornburned continued to hang out with the Red Tongs. Each time he came back from their revelries, it's like he lost a couple more brain cells. He always came back jacked up with highly potent stimulants and a belly full of booze. Our doctors had to flush out his bloodstream of intoxicants every day."

"So what does this do have the dwarves?"

"Well, even if the Red Tongs did their best to ignore reality, the strange phenomenon that causes our mechs to malfunction at an increasing rate along with our dwindling material stockpiles finally alarmed the stupid pirates. After weeks of arguing, they finally decided that if they can't make use of mechs anymore, we'd make use of the locals instead."

The Caged Tongs ambushed several large dwarf tribes and forcefully wrested control over them. While the dwarves and wild gods resisted at first, the handful of exobiologists in their midst eventually cooked up a bunch of addicting mind-altering substances that turned them into pliable slaves.

Ves frowned at that. "Our exobiologists have barely managed to formulate intoxicants that work on the hardy dwarves and wild gods. How come your scientists managed to

"The Red Tongs have a lot of practice." Glayce said. "This isn't their first rodeo. Besides, synthesizing extreme stimulants is one of their side businesses. They have an entire team of pharmacists and chemists at their disposal."

All Ves could say about this was that the Red Tongs only invested in logistics if it gave them their next high. Despite their dependance on mechs, they didn't really invest as much resources and funding as they ought to. Even without the disasters they suffered in this star system, they would have crashed and burned eventually.

What Glayce told him about their efforts at subverting the dwarf tribes in order to eventually form a huge amount of controllable wild gods really sounded ambitious in a way.

It reminded Ves that the other rival forces may be turning to this kind of solution as well, as not everyone possessed the means and capacity to develop and produce a handful of breakdown-proof mechs.

Ves continued to interrogate Chief Glayce about certain particulars, though the man didn't really deliver any notable intelligence. Mayra herself remained silent and let Ves do the talking.

The two may have been able to glean more relevant information from a mech designer instead of a chief technician, but the Caged Tongs didn't bring any of them along.

As the interrogation session came to an end, Glayce made a final request. "Can I ask you something, buddy? When it's finally time to dispose of me, can you allow me to dig my own grave? I'd also appreciate it if I can put a laser beam through my own head instead of letting one of your goons do the job. It's more personal that way."

Ves turned to a security officer that stood guard in the corner of the room. "Please grant Chief Glayce his wish. It's the least that we can do."

"Handing him a laser pistol poses a security risk."

"Just do it out of the way. It's not like a laser pistol can burn through your combat armor, especially if you lock it to a low power setting."

Ves carried a lot of weight within the Flagrant Vandals. Only moments later, the security officer passed on word from his superior that they'd be willing to make an exception.

"Thank you buddy!" Chief Glayce smiled with relief. "You don't know how much this means to us!"

Ves thought the man was too decent to suffer from his superior's misdeeds. Sub-Boss Scornburned deserved most of the blame for subverting the Caged under his command.

This event served as a cautionary tale to Ves. The Caged sounded like decent people from what he heard. Yet the unilateral decisions of an important leader within the gang led them directly into hell where they allied with devils dressed in human skin.

"It's a shame about the Caged." He said as they finished their inspection and returned to their workplaces. "A single bad apple in the wrong place at the wrong time drove tens of thousands of them to their deaths."

Mayra nodded sagely. "Leaders aren't always right. We elevate and worship them when they make the right calls, but we aren't very quick on the uptake when they make mistakes. They're fallible just like us. An organization that relies too much on a single leader is bound to that person's fortunes. The rise and fall of a single leader affects the rest of the organization in the same way."

"Does that apply to the Swordmaidens as well?"

Mayra wordlessly smiled at Ves, but didn't respond with a firm reply.

When Ves returned to the supply train, the Flagrant Swordmaidens already setup camp. They couldn't help it as the sheer amount of damaged mechs and salvage they had to go through necessitated a thorough amount of processing.

Ves deftly went through the damaged mechs and drafted efficient repair plans for each of them. He already had plenty of practice in this kind of work so he did so with admirable skill.

Over the next several weeks, Ves actually spent more time directing the salvage efforts. While the Caged and the Red Tongs mostly piloted garbage mechs, that didn't mean they held nothing of value.

Ves wanted to hoard as many spare parts and rare materials and exotics as he could get his hands on. Even if the Vandals didn't possess a robust recycling operation, Ves hated the thought of leaving any valuables behind.

The Caged Tongs partially met their end because of dwindling supplies. Ves did not wish for the Vandals to suffer the same fate!

All of the work on his lap forced him to put his design project on a temporary hiatus. While he found it regretful that he couldn't spend his time on finishing the Enduring Protector design, what he learned from repairing the Vandal mechs and salvaging the badly-maintained mechs of the Caged Tongs already provided him with a couple of new ideas.

He couldn't wait to add more revisions to his stalled design.

While the repair and salvaging efforts were fully underway, the security officers slowly managed to crack the more stubborn officers of the Caged Tongs.

An alarming piece of news spread among the ranks. The Caged Tongs didn't locate the Flagrant Swordmaidens through their own efforts. Instead, they received a mysterious transmission that provided them with the coordinates of the Flagrant Swordmaidens on the ground!

Someone else incited the Caged Tongs on the warpath!

"Who the hell sent those mad dogs to us?!"

"Damn it! If the sneaky bastard can do it once, he can do it again! Someone out there really wants to stop us!"

The Vandals developed the suspicion that whoever pointed the Caged Tongs in their direction didn't actually hope that the pirates would win. No matter how little chance they stood, at the very least the Flagrant Swordmaidens suffered an unavoidable delay.

As the rival forces slowly approached the eye of the storm, they also converged upon each other.

All roads led to the Starlight Megalodon.

Chapter 867 Disposable Design

The Flagrant Swordmaidens finally went back underway after seventeen days of rushed repair and salvage efforts.

Properly speaking, most of their mechs received only superficial repairs. Captain Byrd ordered the Vandal mech technicians to prioritize restoring the mobility of most of their heavily-damaged mechs.

They could complete other repairs along the way. The important point right now was to get back on the move in order to spoil the plans of whoever sicced the Caged Tongs at them. Humans instinctively resist the designs of others on them. The Flagrant Swordmaidens wanted to spite whoever forced them to suffer a delay.

While Ves still diverted much of his time with supervising the continuous repair efforts, he started to return to his design project whenever had the time to do so.

When Ves last touched the design, he upped its laser weapon caliber. This wasn't as simple as replacing its laser rifle barrels with laser cannon barrels and calling it a day. He also had to revise the internal architecture in order to cope with the increased energy expenditure and heat generation.

The work and the latest modifications diverged somewhat from his initial vision to design an extremely simple and reliable mech that could withstand the breakdown effect.

One of the assets the Flagrant Swordmaidens obtained from the Caged Tongs consisted of their databanks. When Ves browsed through the maintenance logs and other documents pertaining to the servicing of their mechs, he gained a much greater understanding of how devious the breakdown effect did its best to screw over mechs and other machines for that matter.

The logs from the fallen ground force provided a lot of interesting reading materials. The only unfortunate fact was that the Red Tongs weren't really diligent in their paperwork. Their records mostly consisted of haphazard reports written by mech technicians jacked up with three or more stimulants.

"It's a wonder they kept their mechs in working condition in the first place." Ves commented with disgust. "With this kind of work ethic, they probably do half the work in twice the time, and that's only on their good days."

At least the more sober and disciplined mech technicians of Caged knew how to do their jobs properly. The disparity in the meticulousness of their records underscored how much of a difference discipline and good direction made in the operation of a maintenance department.

If Ves had to glean any lessons from these observations, it was that he should never be too lenient and let his subordinates devolve into good-for-nothing bums.

While Ves had a lot to complain about when it came to the Vandal mech technicians, in the end their productivity ranked among the best of all the maintenance crews he witnessed. The only ones who worked better were those assigned to more proper military mech regiments.

He found it interesting that the same amount of personnel in different forces could exhibit such vastly different traits. Training, talent, age, upbringing, life experiences and more all shaped them into different forms of mech technicians.

While Ves hadn't obtained the formula on how to train the perfect mech technician, at least he knew what not to do. Doing awful stuff like allowing his mech technicians to work while drunk or injected with stimulants should be the biggest mistake. Letting them work without adequate supervision or direction was another mistake.

"I should get back to work."

He quietly resumed to perfect and optimize the design of the Enduring Protector. While Beast Rider Bubal started to grow impatient at being locked away in his mind, Ves firmly held the rambunctious living image in place. Once Beast Rider Bubal moved into the design of the Enduring Protector, many of its core aspects could no longer be changed without suffering repercussions.

He pitted the evolving iterations of his design through numerous simulations, modelling each and every aspect of its performance. He even spent some time to formulate a mathematical model that simulated the effects of the breakdown effect.

Once he subjected the Enduring Protector to this simulation, he roughly developed a rough impression on how long the mech could last on its own.

"One month or less." Ves grimaced. "Is that enough time to complete the mission?"

The Flagrant Swordmaidens had no idea what they might find at the crash site.

Perhaps the battleship degraded into a rusted heap of hull structures after a couple of millennia of being exposed to the elements.

Perhaps the survivors cannibalized large portions of the city-sized battleship and developed a thriving, high-tech stronghold around the crash site.

Perhaps the survivors broke into quarreling factions that flung all kinds of weapons of mass destruction at their camps, causing the entire surroundings of the crash site to be turned into a radioactive wasteland.

Depending on what the Flagrant Swordmaidens might encounter, the mission could last from a couple of days to a couple of months!

Despite the substantial delays, the Flagrant Swordmaidens knew they neared the most forbidden place on Seven. Deep in the storm lands, the Starlight Megalodon beckoned to them like a lighthouse in the dark.

"Time is getting short. I can't tinker around with the design forever." Ves sighed as he studied the latest iteration of his design.

He added less and less refinements over time as the law of diminishing returns came into effect. After solving most of the obvious flaws and weak points, it took too much effort to resolve the remaining problems.

While it annoyed Ves beyond belief to leave his third original design at a state where he could still improve upon, he knew that he needed to leave enough time for the next steps in the plan.

"It's time to pull the trigger."

Ves breathed deeply before concentrating his mind. The image of Beast Rider Bubal triumphantly entered the spiritual space of the design projected in front of his eyes.

The transfer finally happened!

As Bubal and his bonded wild god settled into their new homes with enthusiasm, Ves perceived that the design had instantly gained a compelling charm.

This was the effect of its X-Factor. It added spiritual weight to the design and forced every person to become affected by the values and messages that Ves imparted into it. Even the most spiritually blind person in the galaxy couldn't miss this design!

"Too bad I don't have a handy evaluation report in my hands."

Without the System, Ves couldn't tell how good of a job he did with the Enduring Protector. He guessed that many of its parameters received a low grade due to how much he prioritized reliability and endurance over performance.

Still, Ves felt as if the X-Factor of the Enduring Protector should be able to match the X-Factor of the Crystal Lord in strength. Even if Ves didn't rely on the spiritual fragment of a long-dead alien leader as the core of the image of Beast Rider Bubal, he found it extremely fitting to base his images around the local life forms.

The Enduring Protector design only needed to fulfill a single role during a single mission. Aeon Corona VII was one of the most extreme environments that Ves ever had to design a mech for, but he hoped that by instilling his design with the hardy and adaptable qualities of the wildlings and wild gods, it would be able to last a little longer than it did in the simulations!

"Mathematical models can calculate a lot of things, but it can't model inexplicable metaphysics."

Perhaps one day, humanity might be able to measure, quantify and define the effects associated with spirituality. When that day came, it wouldn't take long

for new mathematical models to emerge that could calculate spirituality to a highly accurate degree.

...Or not. Ves believed that spirituality was intricately associated with life, especially complex, sentient life.

"Even up to now, humanity has never managed to model a complete human consciousness, though not for lack of trying."

Future advancements aside, for now Ves needed to rely on the System or his own intuition to judge whether he had done a good job. Since he had a good feeling about the finished product, Ves did not see any cause for concern.

"My design is finally done!"

Ves had no one to celebrate his success with. No one else sat behind the banks of terminals in the mobile workshop. Ves wasn't close to any of the chief technicians, and Ketis already had her hands full with assisting Mayra in managing the Swordmaiden repair efforts. She put the lessons she learned to good use.

He sighed. "If everything goes according to plan, this should be the last time I design an original mech alone."

After he wrapped up his design project, he reported to Captain Byrd and presented the finished design. The meeting didn't last very long as the only major change from his prior presentation about the design project amounted to increasing the power of its laser armaments.

All the other minor tweaks and refinements elicited no interest from the mech officer. Only someone with a technical or engineering background would be able to realize the significance of those optimizations.

"Captain, do I have your permission to begin production of this new design?"
He asked at the end of his brief report.

"Might as well." Captain Byrd waved dismissively. She had grown a lot more tired over the months. Leading the ground expedition kept taking a toll on her health and peace of mind. "Start with one and see if it performs according to your expectations. We don't have the time to go through an elaborate testing process, so limit your adjustments to quick fixes only."

"Understood. Those are my intentions as well. I don't plan to let my design linger while we're only less than a month away from reaching the red zone."

The long trek finally neared their destination. Ves knew that he had to get a hurry on with this project in order to fabricate a sufficient amount of breakdown-proof mechs to become a significant factor in the upcoming deployment plans.

After Ves received the required permissions, he commandeered a crew of mech technicians and dumped the design on their laps. "This is the finished design of the breakdown-proof frontline mech that I've worked on. It predominantly consists of outdated but reliable parts so it shouldn't be any difficulty for you to fabricate them according to their specifications. Even though the parts are simple, I don't want to see any sloppiness from you bunch, got that?! I swear if one of you screws up, I'll force you to brush Qilanxo's teeth!"

With the amount of prestige that Ves enjoyed among the Vandals, he had no need to issue such a threat. He did so anyway because he really did not wish to screw up the very first copy of his design.

Even if the first production mech didn't carry any significance this time, Ves still wanted to be as thorough as possible. However, he also needed to be brisk and allow the mech technicians to become accustomed to fabricating its parts.

This was why he immediately involved the mech technicians in the fabrication process instead of doing everything himself. Right now, Ves did not care too much about imparting a gold label-like X-Factor on the first copy of the Enduring Protector.

"The mechs will only be of use for a couple of weeks at most. There's no need to invest an excessive amount of affection on these disposable machines."

In the following day, Ves supervised the mech technicians as they churned out part after part. The small, limited-capacity 3D printers worked far too slow to his tastes. The delicate machines suffered very poorly against the breakdown effect, and the mech technicians frequently had to halt their work in order to correct some minor misalignments inside the machine.

It took twice as much time to finish what should have been a fairly simple set of tasks.

"It's a good thing I've accounted for the additional delays." Ves sighed in relief. "Even with this poor level of efficiency, I think we can still manage to fabricate enough Enduring Protectors to form a complete squad."

Chapter 868 A Simple Mech

Ves felt very disappointed at the efficiency of the workshop, but what could he do? The ground expedition went so deep in the storm lands that all of their electrical and mechanical devices started fizzing at unexpected times.

He even feared for his own array of gadgets and equipment. Besides simple objects like the hidden knives and the Cadisis, every other piece of gear stuffed in his Earth Ant was susceptible to the breakdown effect.

Yet... for some reason none of his gadgets failed as of yet. This included the extremely sensitive high-powered gadgets slotted with ultracompact batteries.

Save for his gravitic backpack, military-issued officer comm, his spare laser pistol, his multitool, his multiscanner and a few other odds and ends, he

fabricated all of the gear by himself, including the C22 Earth Ant light combat armor.

"Is it because of my craftsmanship?"

Even if he possessed a spiritual touch that imprinted some of his considerable Spirituality on his products, it didn't explain why the other devices remained intact as well.

It was as if the breakdown effect encompassed the entire planet except for a small bubble around Ves!

Was it his Spirituality? Perhaps. Yet he couldn't conceivably explain such a matter. It would have been too easy to chalk it up to his Spirituality. As an engineer, Ves did not wish to settle for such a lazy explanation.

In any case, the surprising lack of problems silently reassured Ves, even if he still puzzled over the exception.

Just to be sure, Ves still performed daily maintenance on all of his gear. Every day, he partially disassembled most devices and checked them over. He even feigned adjusting bits and pieces so that everyone looking at him from a distance believed his devices had acted up as well.

Ves planned to keep an unexpected advantage like this wholly to himself. Who knew how the others would react if they found out he had become strangely immune to the breakdown effect. Perhaps they might load him up with sensitive equipment and send him straight into the red zone along with the infantry assigned to board the Starlight Megalodon!

"There's no way I can survive in the thick of the red zone and the interior of the Starlight Megalodon. This is a job for trained soldiers."

The best Vandal security officers already trained for months for what they might encounter at the mission site. Armorers recently finished fabricating

high-quality sets of light combat armor for them. The lightweight armor had been dumbed down to the point of stripping away all of its servos, yet it still offered substantial protection by making use of compressed armor.

A couple of combat engineer and specialist types accompanied the trained soldiers as well. These experts possessed a decent grasp in shipboard architecture, hacking, doctors, exobiologists and more.

Ves half-expected he'd be assigned to this group as well, but this time his high position saved him from the trouble. Instead, Ves had been asked to 'recommend' some 'volunteers'. He quickly foisted some random mech technicians and a low-ranking mech designer to the group of specialists.

"It's good to be the boss." He chuckled.

While the combat engineers and specialists underwent intensive training, Ves directed his attention to his work on the Enduring Protector.

When the mech technicians finally assembled the first production model together, Ves and the men watched with awe as the frontline mech finally revealed its majesty in the flesh.

Its strong X-Factor had already influenced the mech technicians, yet when it finally became whole, the first copy left an unforgettable impression on the men. It seemed larger than life!

With its four crawler-type legs, its short and broad cylindrical torso, the menacing-looking laser cannons affixed to articulating mounts on the sides, the frontline mech looked kind of silly if not for its strong, protective and enduring aura.

Even without saying so, those present vaguely felt that this was a mech designed to brave the breakdown effect and protect its charges by taking out threats from afar.

Objectively, Ves had a lot to criticize about the design. The irreconcilable problem concerning the Enduring Protector design was that its paltry mobility and armor simply couldn't keep up with the rigors of mech combat.

It depended too heavily on external assistance such as Qilanxo's space barrier to put up a decent fight.

Ves had no choice but to opt for these design choices. He faced too many limitations, and as a mech designer, he couldn't indulge in fantasy when it came to designing realistic products.

After half an hour, their first test pilot arrived. Captain Byrd already selected a single squad of ranged specialists to take up the Enduring Protector. The mech pilot that arrived abruptly halted when he viewed the Enduring Protector. It looked much more valiant than the design schematics suggested!

Ves approached the test pilot. "This is a momentous occasion. Are you ready to test this mech?"

"I am." The mech pilot spoke confidently. "This mech should be a piece of cake to pilot."

"Even if the Enduring Protector is a simple mech, care must still be taken if you want it to last as long as possible. Making the wrong movements or stressing out the frame will wear it out pretty quickly." Ves warned.

"Uh, whatever you say, man."

Even if the Enduring Protector contained many safeguards against the breakdown effect, the mech pilot's actions still determined whether it could last up to a month without any major malfunctions.

The main limitation of the mech was its awful mobility. Its crawler limbs moved far too slow and could only effectively lift one of its four limbs at a time. Impatient ranged specialists used to running around in their nimble rifleman

mechs might push the Enduring Protector beyond its safe limits in an effort to gain a momentary advantage.

Ves couldn't do much to stop such behavior. While he provided the tools, it was up to the mech pilots to make use of them in their own ways. As much as Ves wanted to exert control over the mech pilots, his job as a mech designer precluded such rights.

Every mech designer faced these conundrums. They meticulously designed a mech to be used and piloted in a certain way. Yet if mech pilots wanted to use their rifles as clubs, who could stop them? Ves certainly couldn't do so.

Outside the battlefield, the mech technicians and mech designers reigned supreme. Once a mech entered the battlefield, the mech pilot gained completely control over his actions.

To Ves, designing mechs gave the illusion of being able to control them even after they rolled off the production lines. He felt a sense of ownership of his products even after he delivered them to their new owners.

The age-old question whether he should care for his products or wash his hands off them once he sold or delivered them to his clients always came back to him. A month ago, he leaned towards washing his hands off them, but now that he witnessed the test pilot carefully putting the first production model to its paces, he started to flip flop back towards caring for his products.

Ves couldn't make up his mind, despite making up his mind a while ago. Truthfully speaking, it wasn't healthy for mech designers to stay attached to their mechs, especially once their designs started getting sold by the thousands. At this scale, too many mech pilots emerged that abused their mechs or misused them for nefarious purposes.

"I can disown them, but they are still my children, in a way. Every mech carries a piece of my legacy. Whether they get used up in a couple of years or last for several decades, all of them are precious in my eyes."

His design philosophy compelled him to see mechs as something more than just commodities. It forced him to care for his mechs even if he wanted to wash his hands off them. Just like a parent seeing their children growing up and leaving the nest, they still couldn't help but care for their sons and daughters even after they went bad and committed murder or something.

Ves didn't pay a lot of attention to the testing process due to his sudden musings. In any case, it wasn't as if his attention mattered, as the Enduring Protector largely performed within expectations. Its realspace performance largely matched the performance the design exhibited in various simulations.

A simple mech design affected fewer variables than a more complex mech design. The Enduring Protector moved slowly and methodically, thereby allowing simulations to fully keep up with any dynamic situation that might occur.

Therefore, while the testing did reveal some minor deviations in performance, the differences could be chalked up to discrepancies in the actual construction of the mech.

"Alright! Let's end the testing for now! We've gathered enough data!" Ves commanded.

When Ves emerged out of his fugue, he already saw that further testing wouldn't be needed. They already gathered plenty of data and it wasn't like the Enduring Protector was capable of any acrobatics.

A simple mech could only perform a limited amount of maneuvers. The testing process for the Enduring Protector should be far shorter than any of the other original mechs he designed.

"It feels like we've gone back in time to the first couple of mech generations. Everything was simpler back then. The MTA's rigorous certification and validation procedures hadn't been in place at the start of the Age of Mechs."

Nowadays, mechs got much more complex. The potential for abuse lurked everywhere. The MTA cracked down on freewheeling behavior by unscrupulous mech designers.

To be sure, the state of mechs made enormous strides after more than four-hundred years of continuous advancements. Yet... Ves also felt that the mech industry lost some of its initial spark.

These days, mech technology mostly advanced at a steady, controlled pace. Radical innovations stopped emerging, or if they did, plenty of barriers stood in the way for others to make use of them. The galactic rim enviously looked on as the galactic heartland and the galactic center got to enjoy the latest toys.

Completing the Enduring Protector design and witnessing it in action gave Ves a sense of what the earlier mech designers must have felt when they explored the unknown. Back then, mechs had not become the monolithic war machines it became today. Nobody knew whether mechs held any promise.

Uncertainty. Promise. Risk. Reward. All of these factors along with the lack of regulations and restrictions gave Ves a sense of complete satisfaction. This was mech design at its purest!

As he basked in the feelings and insights of completing his third original mech design, some portions deep within his mind began to experience some transformations. Ves felt his design philosophy starting to sublimate yet again. He knew he came closer to advancing to the rank of Journeyman Mech Designer!

Comprehension welled within his mind. "I see now. The reason why Apprentices needed to gain practical experience in designing mechs in order to advance is so that they understand the essence of their profession. The key is to embody the word 'design'. As mech designers, how can we ever become masters of our own profession if we don't do any actual design work?"

This partially explained why mech designers relegated to side jobs such as fabrication mechs, repairing mechs, testing and simulating mechs and more never got the opportunity to advance.

He already came up with this line of reasoning, but only now did he truly experience how the act of designing a real and meaningful mech design led to transformations in the mind.

Ves felt as if his design philosophy started out as an imaginary entity. Yet through embodying his design philosophy and the meaning of the word 'design', he fed his design philosophy with his experiences, causing it to grow more substantial over time.

At some point, the imaginary accumulated a sufficient amount of experiences and underwent a final transformation. At that point, it became something real!

Chapter 869 Real Weigh

"Still, not any act of mech design will do. There has to be a sense of weight with the design. Any mech design that puts people's lives at stake is a design with weight."

The key to transforming a mech designer's design philosophy was not so much designing as much mechs as possible. While Ves derived some satisfaction when he completed the design of a virtual mech, eventually it felt too fake for him. How could something fake ever match up to something real?

Seeing his mech perform on the virtual battle arena simply couldn't beat the raw sensations running through his body when he saw actual battle footage of his mechs in battle.

All those mech pilots piloting his Marc Antony, Blackbeak and Crystal Lord designs right now trusted in their mechs and their designer to do them justice.

Ves had been away from his company for a long time, so he didn't know the exact number of copies of his designs in circulation right now. The figure definitely surpassed tens of thousands of mechs, which was a mind-boggling number to Ves yet was considered peanuts by large mech manufacturers.

Still, it basically meant that Ves indirectly influenced the lives of tens of thousands of mechs in the Komodo Star Sector. The designs he developed and the mechs his company produced changed the course of history in this region of space. However small his influence might be, he had already left his mark!

A sense of pride welled up in his heart. Ves knew his designs achieved moderate commercial success. Plenty of buyers opted to purchase his mechs over the many alternatives in the market. Even if the market shares of his mech models didn't seem impressive, at least a number of people valued them. How could he not feel satisfied?

The Enduring Protector he developed may never see the light of day in civilized space, but this design was just as impactful as his other two original designs. Even if only twelve or so copies existed at most, even if it would never be put to use outside of this planet, even if it would only be used for a month or so, its use was anything but trivial!

"Whatever happens at the Starlight Megalodon has the potential to steer history in different directions. Depending on what we can recover from the crashed battleship, perhaps even the course of the war will shift!"

This might be why Ves felt so affected by his accomplishments today. He could design a hundred virtual mechs and still not gain as much as completing this singular momentous design.

"Fostering a design philosophy requires a mech designer to turn it from something imaginary into something real. How can a mech designer drag their design philosophies into the right direction when they stick to playing with fake designs?"

Without reaching a state where Ves had developed his Intelligence and Spirituality to this extent, he may not have witnessed this transformation as it happened.

That said, all the other jobs had their own merits.

Playing with virtual mechs allowed him to accumulate practical experience as well as earn him some DP.

Fabricating mechs in person prevented him from growing out of touch of his own designs and increased his appreciation of the construction of mechs.

Repairing, tuning and modifying mechs brought him even closer to the essence of mechs as fallible machines. What might work out in the design schematic may not be such a good idea in reality as battle damage and wear and tear rapidly degraded the performance of various fancy features.

Mech designers needed to do more than lock themselves up in a lab all day and cook up various designs without ever seeing them for real.

This was also the main reason why a stint in a design studio wasn't such an ideal job. Mech designers ought to consider the job of designing mechs day in day out to be heaven, but reality proved otherwise.

Design studios pumped out too many designs, many of which ended up collecting dust in some forgotten database. Only one in fifty or one in a

hundred design variants may be licensed out to mech manufacturers and be put into production.

In any case, Ves enjoyed a very different position from the mech designers who slaved away in the employ of those slave-driving design studios. Even though he only designed three original mech designs so far, he felt as if he only needed to design a couple more mech designs with the same level of impact to precipitate his nascent design philosophy!

"More is not necessarily better."

The theory he heard so long ago about purposefully building up a proper foundation by designing many different mechs did not fit with his current understanding of the advancement process. Quantity could never match up to quality. A hundred fake designs never weighed as substantial as a single real design.

"Some mech designers take forty years to advance to Journeyman. Others only take a couple of years at most. The vast majority however never find an opportunity to advance."

Much of the latter likely never possessed the minimum level of spirituality required to form a nascent design philosophy and foster it until it became something real.

These differences illustrated the inherent unfairness of his profession.

An impulse compelled Ves to immediately seek out Ketis and lecture her of what he learned. Yet he quickly shook his head and dismissed the notion. The mech industry didn't go into too much detail about these rules, and it was probably for a good reason.

"A lesson learned by yourself is much more pertinent than a lesson taught by someone else. Sometimes, experience is the best teacher."

Ves had already lectured her on the basics anyway, back when he didn't entirely understand them himself. It was easy to state the rules existed. It was harder to actually start believing them without experiencing their relevance in their own lives.

In any case, Ves considered himself to have taken an enormous stride towards advancing to Journeyman now. He felt almost ready to take the biggest step and solidify his design philosophy.

At that point, he became set upon his path. His design philosophy would no longer be as malleable to outside changes as before. The only way for it to change was by evolving it to greater heights.

Ves considered his design philosophy and felt that for all of its flaws and restrictions, it fit his aspirations pretty well. He felt no regrets if the current incarnation of his design philosophy stuck with him for the rest of his life.

"Alright, I should get back to work."

As the Flagrant Swordmaidens crossed the final stretch to the fabled red zone, their progress slowed as the raging astral winds experienced turbulence a lot more frequently than from farther away. This close to the source of the anomaly, it was inevitable that the breakdown effect spiked more than a hundred times a day.

Yet even then, they persevered. Ves modified the designs of many Vandal mechs to make them last longer without requiring an extensive amount of servicing. Chief Dakkon designed the legged transports just like how Ves designed the Enduring Protector, so they needed a lot less babysitting than other machines.

While Ves supervised the fabrication of more and more parts for the Enduring Protector, the beast rider support group suddenly called him up for some reason.

Curious why his former subordinates requested his presence, Ves temporarily left the mech technicians to themselves and went over towards the infirmary.

Dr. Tillman greeted him there, which was strange as she wasn't part of the beast rider support group.

"We're keeping what we've found out a secret. If word ever gets out of what we discovered, all of our mech pilots will probably rise up in arms."

Ves frowned at her. Dr. Tillman's presence here signified that the Vandals discovered something extremely serious related to the beast rider project.

She didn't say much, but instead led Ves to an enclosed room. A pair of security officers stood guard, and only allowed them in after Ves temporarily relinquished most of his gadgets. The Vandals really didn't want any recording devices to be smuggled inside the guarded room.

Once he entered, he came face-to-face with Captain Orfan, who was strapped up in some kind of medical module right now. Doctors and exobiologists poured over the readings like eager hamsters.

"What is going on?" Ves asked.

"Come here and see this, Mr. Larkinson!"

Ves walked over to the bank of consoles and viewed a specific projection pointed out by one of his former subordinates. It displayed a very simple graph.

To most mech pilots, the line in the graph looked flat without any fluctuations.

Right now, however, the line oscillated up and down, but to such a small extent that the graph had to be zoomed in to visualize the fluctuations.

Even though such a difference was very minute, the fact that the graph displayed fluctuations at all was an extremely momentous development!

"This graph shows that Captain Rosa Orfan is capable of demonstrating a minute amount of resonance. Right now, her resonance strength is extremely limited, measuring up to only 0.00001 laves or less." One of the doctors said lightly.

Such a tiny figure seemed so tiny that most people might as well round it down to 0, yet to someone like Ves, this meant a sea of change!

"What we thought might happen has finally come to pass." He whispered with amazement. "Captain Orfan is now an expert candidate."

"It appears so, Mr. Larkinson."

"Why bring me here?"

"The transformation on Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise's bodies are ongoing. From your understanding of expert pilots, we'd like to hear your judgement whether Captain Orfan will be able to advance to the rank of expert pilot in a short period of time."

Ves didn't answer immediately. Instead, he directed his eyes towards Captain Orfan, who seemed bored as she was locked inside the medical module. Being prodded for hours at a time must have been an infuriating experience to someone so hands on as her. She looked as if she was one step away from ripping out all the sensors attached to her body!

He did not see her with his eyes, though. Instead, he directed his sixth sense in her direction.

He sensed a spark. A bright flame where none existed before. It was small, but it was substantially more real than any of the flames he sensed from other mech pilots.

"She's only at the starting line right now." He said. "While we don't know how expert pilots are formed, I don't believe the transformations induced by her

bond with Qilanxo can carry her over the hurdle. She won't be able to crawl her way to becoming an expert pilot. She needs to run in order to make it through the race."

"What are your suggestions?" Dr. Tillman asked.

Ves tried to formulate his theories carefully. "From my understanding of expert pilots, those that are capable of becoming candidates have already passed the most difficult hurdle. Their bodies and minds possess the right potential to allow them to become expert pilots. That is what it means to be an expert candidate. Yet many candidates with bold dreams never advance to expert pilots in their lives. Do you know why that is so?"

"No."

"It's because they lack the discipline, willpower and belief that comprises of an expert pilot's demeanor." Ves answered simply. "Weak-willed expert pilots don't exist. These are the lessons that the Larkinsons have learned after nurturing several expert pilots in each generation of our expansive family. This rare gift that Captain Orfan received from her bond with Qilanxo is precious, but I don't think it's powerful enough to do the work for her. She needs to do the rest of the work by herself for the road ahead."

Ves predicted that this might take a very long time, as Captain Orfan didn't seem to fit with the qualities he mentioned earlier.

As much as Ves wished that the Vandals obtain an expert pilot raised from their own ranks, if only to counterbalance Venerable Xie, he couldn't turn water into wine.

Chapter 870 Sending Off

Still, the fact that one of his predictions came true and that interfacing with a sacred god could induce a beast rider into transforming into an expert candidate already represented a major bombshell.

Forget alarming the Komodo Star Sector, something as explosive as this might shock the entire galaxy down to the very heart of the Big Two or the first-rate superstates!

It went without saying that only a limited amount of people knew of this inside secret. While the Vandals ordinarily played fast and loose with secrets and confidential matters, this time none of those in the know dared to leak out the news.

Even Lieutenant Dise of the Swordmaidens kept her mouth shut, only seeing fit to inform Commander Lydia of this development.

Ves sighed deeply at this outcome. From the first time he witnessed a successful interfacing attempt, he already predicted that Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise transformed into expert candidates.

Yet deep down, he hoped that such a transformation didn't succeed. Everything would have been much simpler if sacred gods couldn't turn any random mech pilot into someone capable of advancing into experts.

Too many mech pilots desired to advance! Some would hand over control over entire star systems in the galactic center for the opportunity to advance into expert pilots!

What would they do once they found out about this seemingly guaranteed method to turn them into expert candidates?

All hell would break loose in the galaxy!

It was too much for the pitiful Flagrant Vandals to bear. They were the scoundrels of the Bright Republic's Mech Corps. As a raiding regiment manned by dregs and cast-offs, how could they carry such an enormous burden on their shoulders?

This was why most Vandals remained ignorant of the truth. Rather than burdening their fragile shoulders with a weight that they couldn't possibly bear, it was better to let others carry the weight instead.

Unfortunately, Ves was one of the few who had been forced to share the heavy burden. This was a weight independent from the heavy gravity, but it pressed upon his body nonetheless as he left the infirmary.

The casual advice and insights he shared with the team of doctors and experts in the know already enlightened them to the exact nature of the significance of what it meant to be an expert candidate.

They also learned from him on how to guide Captain Orfan into using her new status as an expert candidate as a springboard to advance to a genuine expert pilot!

Ves normally wouldn't spill so much about his understanding of expert pilots, as some of them concerned valuable lessons learned by the Larkinsons over many generations.

However, the Flagrant Swordmaidens entered a period of unprecedented peril. Though he didn't hold his hopes that Captain Orfan might be able to advance in the near future, the faster she matured the higher their chances of survival.

Nobody despised more expert pilots on their side!

Ves decided to pay a visit to Qilanxo during the next rest period. He hadn't visited her in a while, so she showed some initiative and roared a friendly greeting when she spotted his approach.

"Haha!" Ves chuckled. "Glad to see you too. There's a lot of buzzing going on about what you did to your beast riders. You're amazing, you know that?"

Qilanxo roared expressively. It seemed her time with the Flagrant Swordmaidens and the beast riders finally mellowed her out. The events that happened near the ancient city of Samar finally started to fade from her mind.

By interfacing with both Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise, Qilanxo gained a whole new perspective on the foreigners from the stars. She was probably one of the most well-informed indigenous life forms on the planet right now.

Due to all of the ears around them, Ves didn't bring up any confidential matters. He only chatted idly about how she was doing, whether she was ready to fight, and so on. Qilanxo eagerly replied and roared back at him, and while he couldn't interpret her entire meaning, he got the gist of it anyway.

Still, the true purpose of their meeting was for Ves to probe Qilanxo on a spiritual level. He extended his sixth sense and risked activating his spiritual vision in order to see what changed since the last time he viewed her in this manner.

Qilanxo's spirituality was as huge as always. It was so enormous in fact that Ves felt oppressed even though it didn't seem very real. Ves tried hard to detect if anything changed since last time, and he finally sensed that her spirituality lost some strength.

It felt huge, but it was as if someone had taken a bite out of it. Was this the price Qilanxo paid to forcefully elevate her beast riders into expert candidates?

This confirmed to Ves that Qilanxo paid a heavy price for Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise's benefit. It explained why the sacred gods never bonded to the blessed people more than once at a time.

Ves grew curious how exactly Qilanxo managed to 'donate' a part of her spirituality to her beast riders. He believed that this process served as the key to turning other people into expert candidates. The other changes associated

with the transformations were merely side benefits as far as he was concerned.

In private, Ves surmised that such an elaborate and intricate transfer of spirituality could not have come naturally. This transformation and empowering process had been baked into the sacred gods by design!

Not just any exobiologist could have cooked up something like this. In fact, as Ves started to flit through the possibilities in his mind, he started to develop a creeping suspicion on who might be responsible for the grand design that had shaped the entire ecosystem of Aeon Corona VII.

The Five Scrolls Compact!

Only these crazy fanatics with their mixed awareness of spirituality could have cooked up something like this!

Yet how could this be their work?

There was only one answer in his mind. The Five Scrolls Compact managed to infiltrate the Starlight Megalodon, a proud and resplendent capital ship of the Common Fleet Alliance.

Ves would have expected the all-powerful CFA to vet their crew but especially the exobiologists, yet somehow they overlooked a scarily competent exobiologist's true origins. How could they have slipped up so much?

The mysteries of the Starlight Megalodon and what happened ever since she crash landed on Seven continued to dwell on his mind. The notion that vast conspiracies might have been at work to turn the situation as it was today continued to gain strength in his mind.

All of these revelations set Ves ill at ease, and he quickly begged Qilanxo goodbye before he left.

He sunk back into work for the next few weeks. He puzzled over the Starlight Megalodon, he puzzled over his equipment's strange immunity to the breakdown effect and he puzzled over how to advance to Journeyman in the fastest possible speed.

Ves felt as if his status as an Apprentice had turned into shackles. Only Apprentices who started to reach the age of fifty or higher would have felt this way, but Ves only started practicing his career a few years ago!

"Alas, there are no shortcuts here." He sighed at the last thought. "I still need to find an opportunity to design more mechs."

In the meantime, the mech technicians become more accustomed to the challenges of fabricating all of the parts for the Enduring Protector.

For now, Ves did not order the men to assemble them yet. Instead, they packed them off in some of the containers that had become empty after the Vandals used up the materials stored inside.

Many of their transports carried empty loads as the months went by. Their stock of supplies dipped significantly even after they carried away a lot of salvage from the battle against the Caged Tongs.

However, all of it was worth it because they finally reached the edge of the red zone after several weeks of marching!

"Finally, we are here!"

"The Starlight Megalodon is just a stone's throw away for our mechs!"

"Don't get complacent, boys and girls! Right now, we're a hundred kilometers away from the crash site, but I'll bet that our rivals aren't too far away! This is no time to sit back and relax!"

The Vandals and Swordmaidens knew that if they could manage to get this close to the fabled battleship, then so could others. Everyone kicked

themselves into a state of vigilance. The long days of monotonous work and marching was over now!

The heavy transports congregated in a circle around Qilanxo, who would be able to summon up her space barrier and defend their vulnerable supply train against any long-ranged bombardment.

Vast swathes of mechs arranged as scouts and patrols radiated outward from their position in a circle. They did not dare range their mechs too far. Not only would it be easy to bump into an enemy ambush, the breakdown effect had also grown extremely strong!

It wasn't so rare nowadays that mechs malfunctioned more than three times a day. If a mech patrolled more than two hours away from the temporary camp, they might not even be able to limp back under their own force as the mech continued to fall apart by the minute!

"How can anyone think of fighting a battle under this horrendous condition?" Chief Dakkon asked. "The breakdown effect will wreck more mechs than enemy attacks!"

"That's why Captain Byrd isn't so eager to send our mechs out to sniff out the trail of our rivals." Ves calmly replied.

"Our jobs are going to be extremely hard nowadays. Mechs and machinery are both breaking down at an unprecedented rate. Frankly, we should be pulling back a bit."

"Captain Byrd won't allow it. We need to hold this position so that the people and mechs we send out to the red zone has somewhere safe to go back to. It won't be long now before they deploy."

A day later, the time to send out the troops finally arrived.

The so-called exploration party consisting of security officers and specialists finished their training and preparations. All of them wore simple suits of light combat armor and carried very simple but reliable gear.

The Swordmaidens prepared their own warriors as well. While they hardly sent in any experts, they more than made up for it with extremely deadly greatsword-wielding battle fanatics. As far as the Swordmaidens were concerned, the breakdown effect was a blessing to them! With most advanced technologies rendered useless, they wouldn't face so many sophisticated weapons this time.

The breakdown effect had no effect on something as simple as their swords!

All of the men and women on foot boarded special fast transports laden with supplies. Chief Dakkon personally designed these transports to be even more reliable and breakdown-proof than the other vehicles, incorporating much more durable and expensive materials to make them last longer.

Of course, one of the most significant assets one of the transports carried was a god crystal generator. As long as the exploration party brought one of these generators along, they would never have to worry about their mechs and machines running out of power.

Ves stood with Chief Dakkon and some others as they were about to send off the exploration party.

"The mechs are coming!"

Two squads of mechs poured out of the ranks of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens.

Twelve complete Enduring Protectors marched out slowly on their four crawler-type legs. While every Vandal had already seen glimpses of them during the last few days, this was the first time they witnessed all twelve moving out in unison.

Their auras blended together and amplified their effects, causing them to form an imposing impression to the Vandals. Even the Swordmaidens looked mightily impressed at the invisible feelings they somehow managed to conjure.

They couldn't help but believe that with these mechs around, the members of the exploration party would be in safe hands!

Yet Ves did not pay too much attention to the Enduring Protectors, as he already knew everything about them. Instead, he turned his attention to the side of the Swordmaidens. He finally witnessed Mayra's breakdown-proof design.