

Chapter 521 Making A Stand

A question bubbled up from his mind. "Why does the MTA tolerate mind manipulation to this extent?"

"Why does the CFA prohibit everyone from building armed warships while they field countless armadas of them? Why do the Big Two prohibit the use of weapons of mass destruction while employing them liberally in punitive actions? All of them stem from the same reason. Can you guess why?"

Ves frowned and puzzled over what they shared in common. "Is it because the CFA and MTA is powerful enough to ignore their own rules?"

"That's part of it. They aren't being hypocrites for the fun of it. The reason why they break their own rules is because doing so increases their power. It's simple as that. Do you think humanity will last against the the aliens occupying the other half of the galaxy if we outlaw all of our warships? That's too naive! It's the same story with weapons of mass destruction. Just because our society moved past their use doesn't mean we can afford to abandon them entirely!"

This was a familiar refrain to Ves. The Common Fleet Alliance often justified the necessity of wielding enough power to wipe out every inhabited planet in human space by claiming that they needed it to stop the aliens from doing it themselves.

It helped that the two trans-galactic organizations largely kept by their promises and didn't abuse their power. Humanity had begun to take their neutrality and self-appointed caretaker roles for granted.

Despite their obscure leadership and murky governance, trust in the two overarching organizations never wavered after the commencement of the Age of Mechs. They guarded the current order and most humans in the galaxy thought they did a pretty decent job.

Anything beat the waning days of the Age of Conquest.

"Okay, just because the CFA and MTA are allowed to get away with breaking their own rules doesn't mean that mech designers should be allowed to do the same. Is the power boost really worth the risk of irrevocably damaging the brains of elite pilots?"

"Your tone suggests that even the slightest risk will lead to disastrous consequences. That's not the right way to look at this issue. Everything of value carries some risk. Take fire, for instance. Long before our race has left for the stars, our primitive ancestors hunted animals and foraged berries to sate their hunger. The discovery of fire advanced their civilization to a remarkable degree. Fire can hurt, yes, but it can also cook our meals or help with forging the building blocks of a permanent civilization."

"Fire is different from mental manipulation through a neural interface. You could argue that the former is absolutely necessary for the advancement of humanity, but mechs work fine without the latter."

"I disagree." She said. "Beyond a certain point, there is a limit to how much we can maximize the performance of a design. Highly advanced technologies and miraculous exotics are extremely expensive to licence and reproduce. On the other hand, up to a certain point, neural interfaces are mostly identical. It's not the hardware, but the software that gives them an edge. An exquisitely-programmed neural interface can elevate the performance of a man-machine combination by as much as fifty percent, all without adding to the material cost of the mech!"

Ves shook his head. "Just because it's cheap isn't a good reason to resort to such a dangerous practice."

"Then let me give you a more practical reason. Even if you decline to make use of this tool, others won't. The entire reason why every elite mech makes

use of mental manipulation is because their competitors are certainly trying to maximize their utility. Not only can they complement the mental blind spots of their mech pilots, they also make it a lot easier and more intuitive to call upon resonance. Remember Lord Javier's flashy last stand. You might think he's an idiot for naming and calling out his special moves, but it's a way to trigger a predetermined routine that facilitates the activation of a specific resonance effect. Granted, most mech pilots don't broadcast their moves in the open air."

"Hold on for a couple of minutes. I need to think this through."

This was new information to Ves. Perhaps that was why Lord Javier didn't go down easy. Constantine Reeve must have incorporated a custom neural interface that covered for the weaknesses in his piloting style. In addition, if the neural interface registered all of his special techniques beforehand, then it was extremely easy to trigger them by calling out specific phrases.

This put the issue in a complicated light. Though Ves had only heard about this from Iris, Ves didn't need to corroborate her claims from another source. She was an expert in this matter and had no reason to lie. His intuition also led him to believe that she spoke the truth.

Where did that leave him? Should he revise his entire stance towards manipulating the minds of mech pilots?

In truth, it wasn't as if Ves did something similar with the X-Factor. As he grew increasingly more proficient in Spirituality, his designs began to make a definite impact on the moods and thoughts of the mech pilots that used his products.

Was he a hypocrite to accept his own brand of affecting minds while rejecting something similar through the use of neural interfaces?

Ves closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

No, it was not the same. Neural interfaces were exceedingly delicate and it only took a single misstep to damage a mech pilot's mind. As for the X-Factor, though they might push a mech pilot to do things they didn't want to perform, as far as Ves was aware of, a mech's spirituality never hurt any mech pilots.

They worked on two completely different levels. Neural interfaces manipulated through physiological means, while the X-Factor worked in the imaginary realm. The former imposed specific behavior onto mech pilots, while the latter expressed the living thoughts and instincts of the imaginary entity that Ves attached to the designs.

One was dead, while the other was alive.

"That's the difference."

Other mech designers treated mechs as a lifeless tool. Tools weren't alive, and certainly wouldn't be able to express their own thoughts.

In contrast, his mechs possessed the spark of life. As living entities, they deserved a say in the manner of which they would be used. Through the X-Factor, mechs transferred some of their thoughts, instincts and skills to their pilots so that the latter wouldn't dominate the man-machine connection.

"It's a partnership."

Perhaps his rationalization sounded a little dubious, but it resolved his dilemma concerning the use of X-Factor. Ves no longer felt conflicted about influencing the minds of mech pilots through this transcendent method.

Ves could describe his forays into the X-Factor and Spirituality as an attempt to elevate mechs into becoming equal partners to mech pilots. It was a noble if fanciful goal that Ves aspired to achieve some day.

As for resorting to crass manipulation through the neural interface, Ves felt nothing but disgust at the method. It was like trying to get a mech pilot to adopt a certain pattern of behavior by injecting them with stimulants.

Strangely enough, Ves felt as if something changed within him as he resolved his internal struggle. He suspected that his nascent design philosophy became a bit more substantial after defining some of the thoughts he previously took for granted.

He turned back to Iris. "I don't agree with your notion. I believe that mechs can still be good without the use of such a dangerous method. Do elite mechs exist that don't resort to manipulative neural interfaces?"

"There are, but they're very rare. A mech simply isn't responsive enough if they come with the most restrictive neural interfaces. I don't think I've heard of any mech designer who advanced into a Master Mech Designer while ignoring the obvious advantages of a custom neural interface. What you're pursuing is a dead end."

Maybe she was right, but Ves didn't give up. His design philosophy pushed him to make a stand. He may be able to lie to everyone, but he couldn't lie to himself. Even if he opted for the hardest choice, he didn't regret his decision.

"I'm sorry, Iris, but I truly can't agree with your proposition. Call me a fool, but as a mech designer, I believe that every dead end can be engineered around. An alternative just hadn't been found yet."

"Many mech designers have tried and failed." She sighed. "Will you follow in their futile footsteps? Trying to avoid one dead end simply leads to other dead ends. The best and brightest of the galaxy have tried to tackle this problem and failed to come up with a solution without any exception. Do you believe yourself to be a messiah who can save us from the oppression of manipulative neural interface? Give me a break, boss."

Ves sensed that he might have lowered her regard for him with his mule-headed resolve. He couldn't help it. In order to maintain the integrity of his design philosophy, he couldn't allow himself to compromise on his ideals. Even a single exception could introduce a crack in his design philosophy, and might even bar him from advancing to Journeyman for the rest of his life.

"Even if we disagree on this matter, that doesn't mean I don't find your lessons useful." Ves spoke in an attempt to placate her. "I'd like to learn the ins and outs about neural interfaces, if only so I can understand their workings and recognize if they are being fudged. You can tailor your lessons in this direction."

Though Iris looked as if she wanted to leave the office, she relented and resumed her teaching, if only begrudgingly. Ves attentively listened and with his incredible Intelligence, he had no problem trying to follow the theories she espoused.

At the end of the shift, Ves received enough of a crash course to embark on his own studies, though it would be very troublesome to get his hands on the restricted books.

"Does your access to the central database allow you to access a textbook on neural interfaces?" Iris asked.

Ves tried it out but quickly faced a block. Even head designers couldn't unlock any materials regarding neural interfaces. He'd have to knock on Professor Velten's door to remove this block.

"It's a shame, but maybe it's for the better. I can't imagine that those who read these books from scratch have a high chance of screwing up."

That meant he would be reliant on continued lessons in order to develop a shallow but broad of neural interfacing technology.

"You better teach me well for my trouble, sir." Iris demanded. "I'm in a lot of trouble for telling you this much already."

"You definitely won't lose out, Iris."

They separated at the end of the day. While Iris left the office first, Ves stayed back and did some last-minute work to prepare for what might happen next.

"We're scheduled to arrive at the next star system sometime tomorrow."

Throughout the past few days, Ves received word of intel that their destination star system might host unwanted guests. From Iris, he heard that the regional rebels hadn't managed to deliver on their promises. What that actually entailed, Ves didn't know. Iris directly brought the news to Major Verle, upon which he quickly issued some orders that increased the battle readiness of his task force.

All signs pointed out to immediate trouble at the other end.

"Is it Imodris? Have they finally caught up with us?"

As one of the most powerful duchies in the Vesia Kingdom, Ves had long believed they wouldn't let the Flagrant Vandals go without a fight.

The past week of inactivity only increased his unease. If Imodris wanted to take revenge for the raid of their star systems, then the next star system should be their last chance to do so themselves. Once the fleet crossed into the Venidse Duchy, Imodris wouldn't be able to follow them through as they would encroach on the territory of their rival.

"We'll see what happens tomorrow."

Chapter 522 Mines

Ves felt grateful to Iris for opening his eyes. Learning the truth about the incorporation of manipulative neural interfaces in custom mechs and elite mechs gave him another goal to work towards.

Rather than lamenting the deplorable practices of today, Ves aimed to effect a change. Whether he was being arrogant or inspiring remained to be seen. He believed that no matter whether he was right or wrong, the best mech designers should be bold and confident in their direction.

After all, if Ves followed the most popular path, he wouldn't be treading any new ground. What was the point of becoming a mech designer if every mech he designed was no different from anyone else's?

"It's safer to imitate than to innovate."

That sounded somewhat familiar to Ves. He thought back to the time he looked up the first original designs of his colleagues within the fleet. Many mech designers who never started their own businesses simply opted to tread the path of least resistance by designing obvious rip offs of existing designs.

Ves disapproved of such a lazy choice, but he was realistic enough to know that copying each other's works happened all the time. A mech designer with a limited skill set could flex their design prowess in so many ways. Though they should have taken the effort to expand their reach and learn how to design a true original mech, Ves didn't blame anyone for opting for the convenience of cribbing a famous existing design.

"They'll only be limiting their own future progress."

This wasn't any great secret. Opting to stick close to established designs allowed mech designers to overcome the difficult hurdles at the start of their careers. Many mech designers weren't even able to get off the starting point, so the desperation was evident. An easier start was well worth the price of facing a harsher bottleneck in the future.

Where did that leave Ves, for that matter?

"I'm different from the others. Unlike most of my colleagues, I can depend on my comprehensive Skills and my Creativity to design an original creation. I won't be lost if I don't have any recipes on hand."

Naturally, he had to admit that making use of the System made it a lot easier to get to this point. If Ves remained a conventional mech designer, then he might have needed at least a century of dedicated study and work to reach this level. Having reached this point in two-and-a-half years since the start of his career sounded very promising.

"I can afford to be bolder in my choices since nobody can match my specific advantage. I don't need to follow a conventional track to advancement."

Working for the Flagrant Vandals may have curtailed opportunities to design his own mechs, but the circumstances he became exposed to helped him in many other ways. Each difficult problem made him reflect on his design philosophy and forced him to make some tough decisions. No matter what answer he came up with, they all fleshed out his vision towards mech design.

"I probably won't be able to advance to Journeyman during my time here, but I'll be able to accumulate more insights."

Still, all of those thoughts didn't help him with the task force's more acute problems. Ves needed to rest before the fleet emerged out of FTL. He wanted to be in the best condition.

Ves stretched his arms and retired for the day. Strictly speaking, he could go without sleep, but he still benefited if he kept to a regular human sleeping pattern.

The next day, the mood throughout the Shield of Hispania turned tense all of a sudden. The Vandal crewmembers traversing the corridors ceased their easy-going or jovial behavior and adopted a sense of preparation. Nobody

appeared to slack off, and everyone aboard readied the combat carrier for heavy action.

Ves stopped by his office to confirm his last preparations and to see whether his subordinates hadn't slacked off. To his disappointment, the results the other mech designers had achieved in the last few days was inconsistent.

Many of the lower-ranked mech designers definitely worked harder than usual due to the reward he dangled in front of them. The real problem was that the higher-ranked mech designers failed to match the enthusiasm of their lessers. Certainly, a small handful felt motivated to compete for the reward, but other mech designers didn't even seem to try to win the privilege of borrowing a valuable textbook from the Mech Corps.

"Iris, can you explain something to me?"

She sighed. "What is it, boss?"

"Why aren't the higher-ranking mech designers valuing the opportunity to borrow a textbook from the central database?"

"That's easy to answer, Mr. Larkinson. They already enjoy similar types of access. Maybe they've earned a lot of merits, or maybe they are part of an organization that offers much of the same."

"Even so, good textbooks aren't easy to access."

"Don't underestimate the backgrounds of your underlings. Someone like Bovis Mercator isn't arrogant without a reason, you know. Though none of us have the benefit of being apprenticed to a Master Mech Designer, we all have our reasons for making it this far."

That was a fair answer, and it sounded logical as well. Higher-ranked mech designers almost always relied on a strong advantage or two to reach this point. To certain people, obtaining excellent textbooks posed no trouble at all.

"Seems like my first carrot isn't working for everybody. I'll have to figure out some other bait to attract the rest."

"I don't see why you need to bother, sir. You're obviously aiming to establish a connection with those who want to learn from you. As long as you've formed enough relationships, you don't need to befriend the rest."

Ves thought it over and figured that she had a better point than him. In any case, he would eventually relinquish the position of head designer, so it wasn't worthwhile for him to invest too much.

"Are you ready to find out what we'll face in the next star system?"

"Not really." Iris shook his head. "From what I've heard, Imodris has mobilized a significant amount of emergency assets to lock down this part of space. I don't know for certain what we'll face, but it won't be good."

"If we enter into battle, make sure your emergency gear is working all-right. You never know when you might be forced to evacuate the Shield of Hispania."

She laughed. "Thanks for your concern, boss, but I have a lot of tricks up my sleeves."

The next hours progressed agonizingly slow as the time to transition out of FTL soon came to pass.

Just like last time during a space battle, Ves had been invited to the command center by Major Verle. This time, he invited Iris as well, more for her contacts with the VRF than any insights she could provide as a mech designer.

"Miss Jupiter." Major Verle greeted cordially. "Per our agreement with the Vesian Revolutionary Front, we've unlocked a communications channel for your use. You can find the option embedded in the menu system of your secure seat."

Ves sank his body down onto a familiar-looking chair. He knew that should the unthinkable happen again, his seat would envelop him in a crash ball and keep him safe as best as possible while they tumbled out into space.

This time though, they would likely fight away from any planets or suns. That meant if Ves got flung away in a random direction, his skeleton would very likely continue making this millenia-long journey through the void.

"Ah, major, the VRF has just transferred a new update to us." She said after reading the notice that had been queuing up in her comm. "Their scout vessels have been sniffed out from their hiding places by their counterparts from Imodris. They've been driven out of the star system short time ago. Some of their hidden bugs remain, but they don't have the numbers and fidelity to scan an entire star system."

"It's better than nothing. Provide me with their fleet composition."

"There are too many unknowns! Before they had been driven out, the rebels have counted at least twelve scout ships!"

"Damn! That many scouts means that the main fleet is right behind our heels!" Major Verle erupted. "How did they figure out our destination?"

He instantly set the fleet to the second-highest alert status. Anyone acting suspiciously or wandering in the areas off-limits to them would be arrested or fired upon immediately.

Ves looked fairly relaxed compared to anyone, but that was because he finished most of his work beforehand. He knew he needed to reserve most of his energy to serve as a mech analyst in order to provide Major Verle with sensible suggestions.

"Five minutes until transition."

He looked at Iris who was currently having a private conversation with someone from the VRF. She hadn't forgiven him yet for yesterday's clash. Ves hoped she would mellow out and forget the clash in beliefs after today. They had more things to worry about than a philosophical disagreement.

"Four minutes until transition."

Ves actually looked forward to resuming his lessons. Neural interfaces formed somewhat of a black hole to his knowledge base. Becoming familiar with how they worked allowed him to gain a head start compared to his peers."

"Three minutes until OOOPHHH!"

The Shield of Hispania lurched, and their stomachs lurched as well. Fortunately, everyone had strapped themselves down so nobody flew in wild directions. Only a couple of unsecured objects fell from the tables or other surfaces.

"Sitrep now!"

"We've been forced out of FTL! Detecting gravitic anomalies in the vicinity! An unknown force has planted an artificial gravity disturbance on our direct path to the destination star system! We are several light-minutes beyond our estimated emergence point!"

Ves, Iris, Major Verle and many others realized the significance of this act. Imodris or whoever laid in wait had deduced their exact trajectory and laid a trap at the end.

One of the combat carriers of the fleet lurched again as something exploded against her hull!

"Detecting mines! They are homing in on our ships!"

"Bring our Akkara mechs into position and sortie our mechs! We need all hands on deck to beat back this ambush!"

This was an ambush, plain and simple.

"Are there any mechs or ships in the vicinity?!" Major Verle asked the sensor operator.

"None found so far, sir, but they could be lurking nearby in stealth and with most of their systems off! The disruptors planted in the vicinity and the mines that are constantly exploding around us is interfering with our proximity scans!"

A minute passed as several ships got battered by mines. Ves understood that whoever laid this field opted to go for quantity instead of quality. The mines also didn't seem to be of the most expensive variant, so most of the combat carriers could cope with the blasts.

The real danger lay in what was next. This mine field appeared to be endless and they hadn't even met the actual culprits in combat yet. Furthermore, while the combat carriers could cope with the mines for now, their transports and logistics ships wouldn't be able to survive more than a single mine. Protecting them from the mines that homed in on them proved to be a demanding task, especially since it appeared the mines received some sort of signal that changed their targeting priority.

"The mines are trying to go around our combat carriers! They are targeting our logistics ships!"

"Keep firing upon them!"

Mechs emerged from the hangar bay hatches and moved to intercept the rather stealthy mines. While their payloads weren't very impressive, they made up for it in speed and maneuverability. Many ranged mech pilots exhibited a lot of trouble in trying to shoot them down.

"Our adversaries are trying to exhaust us!" A tactical officer asserted. "From what our scans have detected so far, this mine field encompasses an estimated amount of 100,000 mines!"

That was enough to blow up the entire task force ten times over if they all hit their ships!

Chapter 523 Delayed

Interception happened fairly frequently in chases. A force with a superior number of ships would cast a net over a range of star systems and observe every ship transitioning in and out of FTL. If they spotted a fleet heading into a specific direction, as long as the sensors captured enough details, it was possible to trace a line between the starting point and the end point.

Naturally, the line only served as a rough guide. FTL travel followed curves instead of straight lines, and a more turbulent gravitic environment distorted the actual route even further.

Therefore, intercepting a ship in FTL by laying down gravitic disturbances at the midpoint was plainly unrealistic. It would be like casting a man-sized net into an enormous river.

In addition, the current level of FTL technology at the Komodo Star Sector's disposal didn't allow ships to stop midway. Ships could only set their destination on some sort of gravitic anchor such as star systems, black holes or rogue planets.

Thus, setting a possible ambush at a possible midpoint was moot, because the ambushing force wouldn't be able to reach that area of space in the first place.

The best solution would be to ambush a fleet at or near the end destination. The closer a ship reached her destination, the more it funneled closer along the line that ran through the starting point and the destination point.

This made it possible to lay down a minefield and sprinkle it with gravitic mines to act as FTL disturbances.

Even then, the odds of catching a fleet was minimal due to unreliable intelligence and the randomness involved with FTL travel. In truth, the star system laid down several different minefields spread out over other possible approach angles.

This increased the odds of catching their prey.

In truth, the Verle Task Force was bound to be caught in a net of gravitic mines once they decided to jump to this system. The trapping force had cast too many nets at the mouth of the river.

"Identify those mines!"

"I got it!" Ves said as he finished matching the parameters of the mines to the ones in the database. "It's the MEX-LIGHT 25-E, from the same manufacturer as the XX-REX missiles! They're military-grade light mines fabricated from Imodris!"

Imodris had finally caught up to them!

"Tell me more!"

Ves quickly read through the traits of these mines. "The MEX-LIGHT mines are meant to be employed as traps. They're stealthy, light, networked, cheap and are built to be fast! They aren't very evasive but due to their speed it becomes possible to spread them very wide, covering the highest volume possible. Their only weakness is that they don't have much of a payload, but because they're employed in an enormous volume that isn't too much of a problem!"

"We are getting stung by a hive of bees." Major Verle concluded.

This succinctly described their current predicament. Bees couldn't deal much damage to a human, but once they gathered in a swarm, they gained the ability to deal fatal damage.

Because the minefield encompassed a huge volume, it took a lot of time for the mines to boost towards the ships in their midst.

Every space mine possessed powerful but short-ranged thrusters that allowed them to mimic missiles in some sense. Though they lacked some of the capabilities of true missiles, it nonetheless allowed them to approach their targets instead of passively waiting for their targets to bump into them at point-blank range.

Every second, more mines converged onto the task force. Fortunately, the Vandals had been prepared for every eventuality so they deployed remarkably quickly. The ranged mechs took out mines from afar while the Akkara heavy mechs that hid behind the bunkers built along the hulls of the combat carrier acted as the last resort.

Mine impacts began to decrease, but they never ceased!

The Flagrant Vandals never employed enough ranged mechs. Their bias towards melee mechs came to bite them back with vengeance. It would be suicide for melee mechs to destroy the mines up close, as they possessed just enough power to take out a mech in a single blast.

Still, while the Vandals didn't have much experience in dealing with minefields, they encountered this kind of situation a number of times.

"Arm the useless melee mechs with any spare rifles we can give them!" Major Verle ordered.

"Sir, that would put us at risk of a mech ambush!"

"No enemy force would want to mingle in this minefield! The odds of friendly fire is too great! Still, leave twenty percent as guards but arm the rest!"

The Vandals fielded an overwhelming amount of humanoid mechs, and this provided them with a lot of flexibility. Swordsman mechs and spearman mechs holstered their primary weapons for bog-standard laser rifles. The melee mechs wielded the rifles awkwardly, as their limbs lacked the delicate precision that was necessary to handle them with accuracy.

Nonetheless, the melee mechs didn't need to be too accurate. As long as they kept shooting, they were bound to hit one of the mines, especially since the mines single-mindedly approached the fleet at the cost of evasion.

The situation came under control as the task force intercepted most of the mines on approach.

"Damage report!"

"Light to moderate damage to armor cover throughout the fleet! The Antecedent sustained the heaviest damage!"

"Good!" Major Verle grinned.

The Antecedent was one of their fatter combat carriers. Though she lost her original compressed armor coverage, the bulk of her cheaper armor made her more resilient than the Shield of Hispania. During this ambush, the Antecedent released the strongest signals, acting as a beacon for ordnance to home in on.

Other ships suffered a fair amount of damage as well. Some impacts even targeted the same armor section, causing it to lose all protection and exposing the closest compartments to the vacuum of space.

Bee stings or not, successive mine explosions hurt the combat carriers a lot.

Even worse was this might only be the start.

"Minefields are never left alone! There should be some ships from Imodris lurking in the vicinity! Watch for signs beyond the minefield!"

Unfortunately, their sensors detected nothing at all. The constant mine detonations only made it harder to find an enemy that tried their best to hide.

"Identify the shortest distance to the edge of the minefield and orient our heading towards that direction! We need to escape this field!"

It took some more scanning but they finally managed to develop a vague estimation of the scope of the minefield. The Vandal ships had emerged from FTL in the lower portion of a massive sphere. They only needed to traverse a third of the sphere's radius to escape the minefield.

The only problem was that the sphere was in the process of contracting. Every mine received instructions from a hidden vessel that transmitted the exact coordinates of the Vandals. Thus, it would take a lot of time to build up speed and shake off the mines.

Major Verle ordered the ships to move in any case. Mines generally couldn't move for long before running out of fuel, so the most effective way to shake off the mines was to wait for them to expire.

Yet to do so would take too long.

A change overcame the mines. They no longer tried to press into the Vandals as frantically as before. Their pacing became more measured. Fewer mines came in, allowing the defenders to relax and even rotate their defense.

"We haven't managed to detect any enemy vessels in the vicinity, sir." The tactical officer reported. "This tells us that Imodris likely hasn't deployed enough ships to threaten us. This minefield has been laid out on a contingency. If Imodris has readied a fleet, it must be elsewhere. It will take at least an hour to several days for that fleet to converge on our location. The

minefield is has gone from trying to destroy our ships to trying to delay our escape."

Though this reduced the chances of sustaining significant damage, no one smiled, including Major Verle. "Reinforcements are on the way. If we fall for their stalling tactics, it will be too late to escape once their main fleet arrives. Seems like Imodris has learned from Venidse."

Ves and Major Verle expected to face these kinds of situations from Venidse. It was right out of their playbook. First, they spread out mines and mixed them with gravitic emitters. Once their nets caught a fish, their heavy fleets converged on the fish that frantically tried to escape. Once Venidse's forces caught up with the trapped fish, they would ground it down and make it impossible for it to escape.

"We need to get out this trap!" Verle stated. "Find me a solution!"

The endless mines made it impossible for the ships to transition back into FTL. It was as if someone tried to sleep but the person next to them snored like a trumpet. There was no escape from their predicament unless they changed their situation.

Ves tried to look through the central database to see if they developed any hacking solutions for the MEX-LIGHT mines. He found nothing. "The mines are too new. The Mech Corps hasn't been able to crack their programming yet."

Relying on the hackers serving with the Vandals to hack the mines was unrealistic. They needed months or years to overcome their virtual security. Imodris would only give them a day at most to get away.

Ves concluded that unless they retained a genius hacker, the Flagrant Vandals wouldn't be able to do a thing about the mines. Other than shooting

them, they would continue to obey the programming of the hidden Imodris stealth ship lurking just outside the minefield.

Even destroying the stealth ship wouldn't change anything as the mines would continue to follow their last instructions. Even without any human holding their hands, mines could persist for decades trying to follow the same order.

"How long until we escape this minefield?!"

"At least six hours, depending on their fuel reserves!"

"Too long!"

The mines obviously switched to some sort of fuel-efficient mode. This allowed them to move around for an extended period of time. That the controllers opted to switch to this mode meant they felt confident that their reinforcements would arrive in less than six hours.

As the command center's officers attempted various solutions, often without result, Ves continued to scour the database for possible solutions.

He couldn't find any viable solution. The military-grade space mines left no loopholes for them to exploit. Ves also lacked the expertise to attempt to hack the mines himself or interfere with their programming.

He wanted to pull out a solution so badly, but with no mechs in sight, most of his expertise couldn't be brought to bear.

Right now, the mech officers kept it all together. Their mechs had been split up into three shifts. Each of them took turns to shoot down the relentless mines. Once a shift ran low of energy or ammunition, they swapped with the next shift and replenished their supplies. This happened on and on for hours because they couldn't think of anything better.

All the while, a hidden doomsday clock ticked above their heads. At the predestined time, their end would come in the form of a massive Imodris punitive fleet.

"Iris. Is there no way the rebels can lend us a hand?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry but all of their assets have been chased away from this star system. Besides, they won't be of much help even if we do enlist their aid. They aren't particularly well-equipped."

This highlighted their helplessness in the face of an enemy trap. No matter what, for their FTL trajectory to be predicted accurately to this extent meant that they had some traitors among the Vandals. At the very least, an insider leaked valuable navigation data to the enemy.

The traitor might even be transmitting their telemetry to the enemy right now!

Ves looked up and activated a rare command. He wanted to speak to Major Verle in private.

Chapter 524 Phantom

Ves conveyed his suspicions about a traitor among the Vandals to Major Verle after the latter accepted his request for a private conversation. Privacy screens enveloped them both as they talked among themselves.

The mech commander didn't look pleased. "Even I can figure that out Mr. Larkinson, but what will that help? My ships and mechs are surrounded by mines and it will take hours for us to disentangle from them! If your solution doesn't help us get out faster, it's not worth my time!"

"Sir, we already inferred there is at least one Imodris stealth ship in the vicinity that is directing the minefield. What if the traitor in our midst is transmitting our telemetry to them? I want to find this traitor not to shut him up, but to piggyback on his signal to the enemy presence. Once we know the

approximate coordinates of the enemy ship, we have more options available to us."

Ves actually didn't know how useful that information would be, but Major Verle definitely took note. "I'm intrigued, but I can't allocate any personnel to search for the traitor. You can be assured that our quantum entanglement nodes are locked down, so those who are attempting to transmit something will have to resort to regular methods."

The major basically foisted this task on his lap without any further help. Ves was only willing to pursue this matter because he didn't have anything else to do. Trying to crack the mines was impossible, while the enemy hadn't shown off any mechs for him to analyze.

Ves did keep one eye on the status of each mech designer in the task force. So far, they all remained at their stations and on standby. No mechs sustained any damage so far, and the most complicated operations the mech technicians had to perform was to replenish supplies.

They could do without his supervision. In any case, they wouldn't try to pull anything off while Imodris aimed to kill them all. With their survival at stake, the mech designers definitely did their best.

At least he thought so. "Could one of our mech designers be the traitor?"

The possibility was real. If they worked for the enemy, they could do a lot of damage. Their position enabled them access to many mechs, all of which they could tamper in various ways. They also possessed the technical acumen to screw around with computer systems, thereby installing some sort of backdoor through which they could transmit hidden signals to an unknown receiver.

After some thought, he eventually ruled it out. First, the Mech Corps already screened everyone's identities, and even if the Vandals got the dregs, they

still passed at least a minimal security check. Secondly, mech designers never worked in isolation. All of their actions received scrutiny, whether it was from the everpresent security surveillance or from the mech technicians that received their instructions from them. A mech designer almost never worked alone.

Still, that didn't rule out mech designers entirely as a risk. Since they fell under his responsibility, Ves checked them out one by one. He pulled up live feeds that watched over the mech designers and skimmed them over, looking for any signs that seemed suspicious.

Though he eventually found a handful of figures who attempted to do some shady activities, Ves tentatively ruled out the possibility that they passed on information to someone else.

"Too many of them are working alongside the mech technicians."

He took a step back and regarded the Flagrant Vandals as a whole. If Ves wanted to put a traitor with the Vandals, who should he pick?

"Mech pilots are under too much scrutiny. It should be a ship crewmember of some sorts. Not enlisted personnel, since they often worked alongside their colleagues. It's more likely that the culprit is an officer. Perhaps a communications officer or a sensor officer."

Major Verle at least handed him a temporary boon that allowed him access to the task force's entire surveillance system. If Ves wished the Vandals ill, he could do a lot of damage with this expanded access.

Perhaps the only reason why Major Verle expanded his access privileges was because they occupied the same compartment. The mech officer would always be able to keep an eye on his actions while Ves did the heavy lifting.

Ves shrugged at that. They all shared the same goal in the end, and that was to make it out of this trap alive and free.

He began to scour through the feeds depicting the communications and sensor officers with a very wide sweep. He projected dozens of feeds in a grid and ran the footage simultaneously. He strained his enhanced mind to cope with the sheer amount of multitasking needed to interpret the footage.

"Nobody?"

None of the people looked suspicious. They all did their jobs with varying levels of enthusiasm, but Ves didn't care about that. Though there were many ways in which someone could hide something dastardly in front of someone's eyes, Ves wouldn't be able to tell. He didn't specialize in sniffing out deception. He only investigated these Vandals on a hunch.

"So it's not the officers, and looking through the enlisted spacers takes too much time."

Where did the traitor hide, presuming that the traitor even existed in the first place. This could all be a suspicion borne out of his habitual paranoia. Only a vague sense of intuition pushed him to continue his search. He thought it would be worthwhile to go through with his investigation. Even if he couldn't achieve anything else, he would feel better if he verified the trustworthiness of every Vandals.

After ruling out certain officers, Ves shifted his mind onto a different track.

"What if it's not the ship officers at all? Many of our mech pilots come from shady or troubled backgrounds. Who's to say that they are all repentant and sincere in their time with the Vandals.

Questioning the loyalty of mech pilots was an exceedingly contentious issue. Nobody wanted to be foisted with a baseless accusation of being a traitor, and mech pilots often lashed out with physical violence.

"Eh, what do I care. They're either sitting in their mechs on standby or have deployed into space to intercept the mines. I only need a brief look to placate my concerns."

Ves began to do the same thing he did with the officers. He called up many feeds and stacked them next to each other so that he could save time.

From looking at their faces, Ves understood that the mech pilots lost some of their edge at the start. The constant and predictable stream of mines made it easier for the Vandals to cope. However, this in fact lulled the Vandal mech pilots into a false sense of security.

The worst thing about their complacency was that Ves couldn't tell them to pay more attention. The constant mine bombardment would definitely stretch out over hours, so every mech pilot had already prepared to deploy for the long haul.

As Ves swiped his hand over the projection and let another set of footage play in front of his eyes. The same pattern of complacency appeared yet again.

"This might even be the full scope of their trap. Imodris intends to delay our escape, wear down our nerves and lull us in a false sense of security."

Iris turned her head to Ves and nodded. "That's what makes it so important to get rid of this minefield. There are too many ways in which our opponents can mess with us. They're only stringing us along because it will take some time to gather enough ships that can match our half-regiment."

Ves already understood that. Imodris had cast a lot of nets, expecting most of them to accomplish nothing of note. The spread of traps over many star systems placed the punitive fleets in a fairly awkward position. They couldn't possibly split up their forces and garrison each planet with a small handful of military-grade combat carriers.

Ves bet that the main enemy force parked in the most centrally-placed star system. This meant there was an inevitable delay before they arrived at the star system that hosted the net that caught their enemies.

"It's strange for Imodris to employ this kind of trapping strategy. Do you think that Imodris has let down some of their pride and asked Venidse to collaborate on our capture?"

"That's simply not possible! Even if their capital planets are bombarded from orbit, they would never deign to ask their rivals for help. Their mutual disagreement is intense. Imodris believes that Venidse's suppliers charge too much for their export materials, while Vendise thinks that Imodris is taking advantage of them. The rivalry between them reaches the very top, from what we've gathered."

"Okay, I can see the chances of collaboration is low. Venidse might not even want to stop us as long as we are still inside the borders of the Imodris Duchy. They want to see their rivals suffer a humiliating defeat."

"That only make Venidse more eager to catch us themselves." Iris pointed out with resignation. "How better to show that they are better than Imodris than to catch a prey that their bumbling neighboring territory had let slip from their grasp?"

"We can worry about that tomorrow. Right now, we need to get out of our current fire."

Ves kept flitting over footage of mech pilots out in space or held back until their shift came up. His eyes raked over hundreds of faces, which all responded in a variety of ways at their current predicament.

Suddenly, Ves stopped swiping his hands to bring up the next set of pilot footage. His eyes narrowed into slits as he studied the peculiar behavior of one of the pilots.

He read out the brief summary of the mech pilot's profile. "Nemo McAllister. Male, twenty-eight years old. Three-year veteran. Light mech specialist. Known for being a violent drunk. Never let him close to a drink."

Nemo piloted an Inheritor mech. The light skirmisher didn't come with any ranged weapons that would have been useful in shooting down the mines, but the Vandals handed it a light laser rifle they had in stock. Nemo frantically fired at the mines that entered his arc like his very life depended on it. He wasn't too bad of a shot either.

This immediately caught his attention. "A three-year veteran isn't really a veteran at all. We might be facing an onslaught of mines, but they haven't reached the point of threatening our lives so far. This guy is way too panicky to match our current circumstances."

To Ves, it felt as if the man tried too hard to convey his fears to his observers. This act might not have looked out of place immediately after they dropped out of FTL, but now that a lot of time had passed, everyone should have calmed down somewhat.

"Iris, look at this fellow, will you? Do you think he's a fake?"

Iris took a brief glance at Nemo. "If he's a spy, he's a really bad one. Maybe he's faking it for another reason. No matter how long I stare at him, I can't see him as a spy at all."

Even if Nemo wasn't the phantom that Ves was looking for, his abnormal behavior still merited a closer look. Ves leaned forward and pulled up the Inheritor's telemetry. Having studied and worked at its design for an extended period of time, Ves gained a good understanding of its workings.

The biggest advantage to becoming head designer was that the Vandals finally pulled open the curtain that hid some of the inner workings of the core components. Parts such as the power reactor or the flight system no longer

appeared in the form of black boxes. Ves could intimately study how they ticked at his leisure, though the risks of contaminating his design philosophy still remained.

Though Ves had been busy ever since he became the head designer, he hadn't neglected this opportunity entirely and briefly studied the uncensored versions of Inheritor, Akkara and Hellcat designs.

This was why he immediately spotted an anomaly in Nemo's Inheritor.

Chapter 525 Issuing Orders

Who was Nemo McAllister?

Ves didn't know. He appeared to be one of the younger and more recent Vandal mech pilot recruits. His proficiency in piloting light mechs matched well with the Inheritor light mech, causing his performance to be better than some veterans who normally gravitated towards medium mechs.

Initially, Nemo drew attention due to his panicking expression. It looked very genuine, which was strange since the Flagrant Vandals currently had the situation under control. So long the ambushers from Imodris aimed to stall their escape, they didn't have to worry too much so long as they continued to shoot down the converging space mines.

This discrepancy prompted Ves to look over the telemetry of Nemo's Inheritor to see if it exhibited any anomalies.

Ves immediately detected something strange with his sharp eyes. Oh, to a normal mech designer, the telemetry being broadcast appeared absolutely normal.

Its power reactor fed enough power to its flight system and weapon.

Its borrowed light laser rifle heated up and expended a predictable amount of energy with each beam being unleashed.

Its sensors entered the most appropriate scanning mode and linked up with the Vandal battle network to share its readings with the combat carriers.

All of it showed that the Inheritor worked properly, if not for one subtle mistake. The fuel for the emergency boosters embedded in the cockpit did not react properly to the changes in the interior of the mech.

Oh certainly, the fuel warmed up when the interior warmed up, and it cooled down when the heat got shunted away. Yet the rate in which it changed temperature seemed a little strange to Ves. He knew what kind of fuel the cockpit utilized.

Cockpit fuel needed to be steadier than normal in order to insure it wouldn't spontaneously ignite. They underwent expensive treatment in order to make them safer. It wouldn't have been cost-effective to let fuel-based mechs run with stabler mixtures of fuel, but it was worth it when it came to infrequent purposes such as feeding the boosters of a cockpit as it ejected from a dying mech.

Ves happened to know the traits of the fuel, so the temperature shifts that Ves witnessed from the telemetry didn't match up. He came to a quick but incomprehensible conclusion.

"The telemetry in this section is faked."

He scratched his head at the puzzle. Why would anyone attempt to fake the readings for cockpit fuel? Was there something else taking the place of fuel for the ejection system?

Ves tried to dig into this issue a little deeper, but he failed to find out more due to his lack of privileges. It was extremely dangerous for a mech to be too networked. As a remote mech designer, Ves barely possessed any rights besides being able to access the Inheritor's telemetry.

"I need physical access to inspect this mech."

In the meantime, he couldn't come to any conclusions. Why would anyone try to tamper with the fuel? And was this the reason why Nemo seemed panicked?

"If someone fudged the cockpit's ejection system, then Nemo has no escape. If his mech ever got damaged, he'll have to go down with his mech."

This might be why Nemo constantly looked like he wanted this battle to end as quickly as possible. If he knew about this strange anomaly, then he should certainly cherish his life. At least the other Vandal mech pilots could count on ejecting in time.

He still didn't understand the point of this. All he knew that a small part of Nemo's Inheritor was not as it seemed. The best Ves could tell, some mech designer or mech technician removed something in order to make way for another component.

Something important and sensitive enough to hide. Perhaps a hidden transmitter?

He shook his head. It didn't appear to be a transmitter, as none of the mechs in the vicinity detected any transmissions from the Inheritor. None past the usual transmissions, anyhow.

Ves looked up Nemo's berth and noted down his Inheritor's mothership. He dug up some logs and saw that the same trio of mech technicians serviced his mech.

Working on a hunch, Ves inspected some of the other mechs serviced by those mech technicians. Most mechs appeared to be normal to his eyes. Yet his persistence was rewarded when Ves found the same anomaly on another Inheritor mech.

"Again?! What is the purpose of this?"

Besides the two Inheritors, all the other mechs that this group of mech technicians serviced appeared normal and untampered. All of this puzzled Ves to the point where he questioned whether this was an issue he should be digging into right now.

"My goal was to find a possible spy in the crew. Nemo and that other fellow don't seem like spies."

Nemo looked afraid while the other pilot seemed unaware of his predicament. No matter what was going on, Ves couldn't allow these unauthorized modifications to persist. Who knew what the suspicious bunch of mech technicians tried to pull off.

The question that came to Ves was what he should do about it. He thought about reporting it to Major Verle, but the issue might only distract the mech officer from the battle. Since mechs came under his purview, Ves decided to solve it on his own.

Since the two mechs were compromised in some fashion, Ves needed to treat them as if they could blow up at any moment. In no way would he feel secure in bringing the mechs back to their berths where they could potentially explode and devastate an entire hangar.

Whether this strange occurrence had anything to do with spies or something else, Ves thought they would be better off if the two suspicious mechs could be cleared before he decided to bring them back to the Finmoth Regal, the high-capacity combat carrier from whence they came.

Ves began to smirk as he began to come up with a devious idea. He turned to his comm and called his deputies, putting them in an impromptu conference call.

"Head designer?"

"Mr. Larkinson."

Ves nodded at Mercator and Trozin. The two most senior mech designers under his command hadn't outwardly worked against him in the past week. They faithfully discharged their responsibilities without fault, so Ves couldn't pick a bone with them on that.

No matter. He could still jerk them around in other ways.

"A situation has come up. Two Inheritor mechs that are currently deployed in space exhibit anomalies in the telemetry they send back to the battle network. Both of them happened to be serviced by the same group of three mech technicians. I can't determine what is different with these mechs, but the lack of documentation or permission for these changes as well as the attempt to hide them from our network warrants an immediate investigation."

"What do we have to do, sir?" Mercator asked impatiently. "Do you wish us to send some guards to detain the mech technicians?"

Ves waved his hand in dismissal. "I'll leave that to someone else. Your jobs are much more important. Those compromised Inheritors have to be inspected as fast as possible, but it is too risky to bring them back to the Finmoth Regal. I want you two to board a shuttle and go to each Inheritor mech and make an inspection of its cockpit and the internals around it on the spot."

Both of the mech designers looked shocked.

"That's suicide, sir!" Mercator suddenly blew up. "This is an outrageous demand! You'll be sending us out into space where hundreds of mechs are firing all kinds of ordnance! You'll be sending us out into an active battlefield where space mines are constantly exploding all around us!"

Trozin objected as well, though she at least maintained her cool. "Head designer, I respectfully urge you to reconsider. We are currently engaged in a running battle. Our ships and our mechs are constantly accelerating in order

to outrun this mobile minefield. If we need to perform an inspection on a mech under these circumstances, the mech needs to stay online with its flight system engaged in order to avoid being left behind. It's too difficult to inspect a mech's internals with all of these complications!"

Ves attempted to stare sternly at the two. "Orders are orders. Those mechs could either be carrying bombs that are meant to cripple one of our ships or transmitters that is feeding valuable data to the enemy. I can't tell, and that's bad, because this issue might concern the safety of the entire fleet. You two are my best mech designers, so there is none who are more suitable to be sent out than the two of you. Or do you want me to report you two to security for insubordination?"

Both of them shuddered at that threat. The Mech Corps took a dim view on insubordinate behavior, especially when it popped up during battles. Mech pilots could be willful and rebellious, but when the fighting started, they came together as brothers and sisters in arms.

Mech designers might not completely fit in the hierarchy of the Mech Corps, but they happen to share most of their penalties. During an active engagement, Ves was their superior and could issue any reasonable orders to them. Of course, the exact definition of reasonable differed from person to person.

That made the order to investigate the two Inheritors so dangerous. Mercator and Trozin took a brief look at the telemetry that Ves had shown them, who pointed out the anomaly. Though they wouldn't have been able to detect anything suspicious at the start, once Ves told them what to look for, they sensed the strangeness of these mechs as well.

"What if it's a bomb?" Mercator tried again. "This is a reasonably possibility, sir. Getting close to probe the suspicious may even cause them to detonate prematurely."

"Haste is of the essence. I'll generously allow you to borrow some diagnostic bots from the workshops. You can inspect them first via remote. However, we can't rely on machines to do the probing for us. Once the bots clear the Inheritors of apparent threats, I want the two of you to do a personal inspection. Both of you must exit the shuttles to do so."

Despite their objections, Ves refused to be swayed by them. What he suggested might be risky for his deputies, but it was the safest decision when considering the entire fleet.

Actually, it would have been safer to order the mech pilots to abandon the compromised mechs on the spot, but that left his questions unanswered. Ves really wanted to know why that same group of mech technicians tried to hide.

His deputies eventually gave up as they saw that Ves was determined to send them off. With his authority, they requisitioned shuttles for themselves and some crew to man them and assist them with the inspection. The vehicles soon set off.

In order to hasten the inspection and reduce some of the risks, Ves marked the two mechs out with his authority. As the highest-ranking mech designer among the Vandals in the task force, his word carried a decent amount of weight. If he claimed that the two mechs needed to be pulled out of the line of a battle for an emergency inspection, the Vandals didn't argue against his expert opinion.

Thus, Ves watched with trepidation as the two Inheritors pulled back from the defensive envelope and neared the shuttles launched from the fleet. Once a shuttle came close to one of the suspicious mechs, they matched velocities and acceleration, keeping their relative distance stable.

The shuttle hatches opened up soon after, releasing bots that hovered around the Inheritors while performing scans. Ves stared at his console and saw that

the bots hadn't helped very much. Their scans lacked the power to penetrate the deceptive readings.

"Enough dallying around!" Ves ordered. "Go out there in person!"

The bots returned to the shuttles after another minute of fruitless scanning. Moments later, Mercator and Trozin emerged from the same hatch and began to float towards the mechs. Both of them had chosen to be encased in the thickest hazard suits they could get their hands on, and carried a whole pack of tools on their backs.

Once they reached their assigned mechs, they began to make a thorough investigation. All the while, mines continued to detonate around them while laser beams and projectiles disgorged into space by the hundreds.

Chapter 526 More Entanglemen

"You're a bastard, you know that?" Iris remarked as Ves filled her in on his actions. "You sent your deputies out into space with nothing but shuttles and hazard suits to protect them from mine blasts and errant projectiles! If Professor Velten was here, she would have overruled your decisions on the spot!"

"Well, it's too bad that she's not here." Ves said as seriously as possible. Even if he possessed ulterior motives, he needed to act properly in front of any hidden recorders. "The issue is too delicate to leave for later, for if the mechs are hiding transmitters we should shut them down as fast as possible."

"And what if they contain bombs instead? Sending your deputies out to their deaths will not look good on your record."

"I don't really care about a leadership position among the Vandals anyway. I'd rather let a proper Journeyman Mech Designer take charge. All I want is to coast through this war with my life intact."

Ves had no opinion on whether Mercator and Trozin came back alive or not. If the mechs hid some sort of bomb or self-destruct sequence, then it would have been a shame for them to perish deep behind enemy lines. Ves would shed no tears for their passing.

He only accepted his appointment as head designer because he didn't trust the rest to do as well as him. The moment someone competent arrived, Ves would willingly relinquish his authority on the spot.

"I'm only doing this job because it's necessary."

He valued developing his abilities as a mech designer over learning how to lead. If it came down to it, Ves would always be able to find some trusted helpers to manage those matters on his behalf. The most important priority to Ves should always be to push his Skills to their limits.

Minutes passed as the two mech designers carefully opened up some ports along the frame of the Inheritors. They peeled aside some layers of armor and began to peer inside the hot and active internals. If not for their hazard suits, the hot rays would have cooked their flesh even through vacuum.

"They aren't carrying any bombs."

This news came as a relief to the deputies out in open space. Somehow, this news disappointed Ves somewhat. Still, he remained intrigued as the scans pierced past the clever electronic camouflage and revealed the truth.

"It's a transmitter!" Mercator exclaimed as he parted the veil a little faster than Trozin. "I've never seen a transmitter of this design in my life! It's larger than any other communications device I've seen on a mech!"

Trozin happened to know a little more of the hidden component. "It's a one-way transmitter that is built for stealth. It's ideal for subtle transmissions over a fairly short distance. The gravitic coils you see on its exterior is meant to

propagate according to special frequencies. It's a way of communicating through gravity!"

"Does it contain any self-destruct?"

"None so far as I'm aware of in the rest of the mech, sir, but I'm unable to say for sure when it comes to the gravitic transmitter."

"That's good. I want the two of you to dismantle this gravitic transmitter in order make certain the mechs don't contain any hidden threats!"

"What about the mech pilots?"

"Have them put the mechs under remote command and tell them to board the shuttles. I don't want to take the risk of sparking a panic or emotional outburst."

Ves closed his eyes and sighed. So the Vandals carried some spies after all. From the looks of it, the culprits shouldn't be mech pilots who cluelessly or apprehensively brought their mechs out in the open.

It was possible to control mechs without a mech pilot. Some mechs came installed with so-called autopilots. While they wouldn't substitute for an actual mech pilot in battle, these stupid AIs still found some use as valets and if a mech pilot fell unconscious.

The autopilots of the two Inheritors kept up with the fleet as Nemo and the other pilot dutifully emerged from their cockpits while in space. Even though the mech pilots had a lot of questions, the current crisis didn't allow for them to make any requests. They needed to get out of the way as quickly as possible.

Ves had to hand it to them, but his deputies didn't get flushed. They utilized a variety of bots to operate their tools from a safer distance. This was fairly

delicate work, but Mercator and Trozin appeared to possess some experience with operating tools through bots.

Thus, the transmitters carefully lost their protective layers, allowing Ves and his deputies to study their inner components.

"There doesn't seem to be anything dangerous, but it looks as if the transmitter might fry itself if someone tampered with it. This is a little difficult." Ves determined from his own inspection.

"What do I do, Mr. Larkinson?"

Both his deputies had finally realized the import of their findings. Despite their complaints to Ves, they withheld their acid tones because they truly needed to cooperate at this moment. This crisis was bigger than their internal rivalries.

"Continue to take it apart. Even if everything gets fried, it's better than leaving them active."

As his deputies resumed the dismantlement, Ves finally composed a report to Major Verle. The situation had grown to a point where the commanding officer needed to be informed. As soon as Ves sent the command, the major immediately began to read his words.

Verle looked up quickly. "Gravitic transmitters? Inside one of our mechs? Unacceptable!"

He quickly issued an arrest order for the trio of mech technicians that presumably installed the gravitic transmitters. Major Verle nodded to Ves in appreciation.

"You're doing a good job, Mr. Larkinson. You're more diligent than Mr. Brandstad in some ways. However, don't make any major decisions without my say so again."

"Understood, sir. I'll try to bring you into the loop sooner."

Now that Ves handed over his findings to Major Verle, he could rely on the Flagrant Vandals to continue the investigation without his help. Right now, they still needed to fight, but once their current crisis faded away, he definitely intended to follow up on the matter.

Ves thought about the implications. He strongly believed the gravitic transmitters had been installed to communicate with any nearby Vesian assailants. There shouldn't have been any other purpose to their inclusions because the gravitic waves easily lost a lot of strength as the distance stretched further.

"Who would do such a thing?" Ves asked aloud. "How can spies even infiltrate our ranks?"

Iris paused her own work and patted his back. "The Flagrant Vandals isn't a standard mech regiment, boss. They get the dregs of the Mech Corps, remember? Their background checks aren't as formidable as the ones performed by an elite mech company. All manner of scum could have slipped past."

"I happen to be one of them." Ves stated for some reason. "The Mech Corps was evidently concerned about my conflicts of interests and foreign ties that they didn't dare send me anywhere important. I think they must have wanted to put me away in some forgotten corner of the front. They probably never thought the Vandals intended to perform a deep raid."

"Well, it seems like the Mech Corps has proven their point, sir. This kind of sabotage would never work with a genuine mech regiment."

Ves couldn't completely rule out the Vesians as the culprits, but for lack of a better explanation, Ves simply rolled with it. He found the idea that a third party lurked while the Vandals and the forces from Imodris duked it out to be implausible.

"Occams razor. The simplest explanation for these gravitic transmitters is that they are intended to convey data to the Vesians, or perhaps Imodris in particular."

While Ves waited for the strange modules to be dismantled from their mechs and the battle to enter a new phase, he reflected a little more on what he discovered. He eagerly wanted to patch into the interrogation of those mech technicians, but internal security appeared to operate through a completely different set of channels, denying him the opportunity to request anything from the people who kept the Vandals in line.

This mystery really nagged at his mind. He felt as if he bumped into a huge threat, of which he uncovered the tip of the iceberg.

Fortunately, a mutation in the battlefield distracted him from this half-resolved issue.

"Detecting numerous FTL transitions!"

"Give me a count!"

"Seven ships have emerged from FTL! Our systems have tentatively identified them as three scout vessels, two transport vessels and two combat carriers. The combat carriers are launching mechs! Their hull markings match the emblem of the 3rd Imodris Legion!"

"Lady Amelia's bloodhounds! They're here to stall us while the rest of Lady Amelia's disposable forces can catch up to us!"

The Vesians didn't hide their intentions. This small flotilla of seven ships emerged right at the point where the Vandals tried to emerge from the minefield. This added an additional hurdle to their escape plan. The eighty-odd mechs of the Vesian combat carriers would never be able defeat the Vandals, but clever tactics might easily enable them to stall the task force for hours on end.

Trouble continued to pile up on their shoulders!

Ves didn't need to receive any orders to begin to analyze the Imodris mechs. If the Vandals wanted to fight past the newly emerged force after exiting the minefield, they needed to finish the battle quickly.

The automated system connected to the central database quickly identified the mech profiles to the ones that had recently showed up in the morale-crushing Bentheim raids. "The mechs match the profiles of the 2nd Calico Dancer Bats! They're a light to medium spaceborn mech regiment!"

The Calico Dancer Bats acted as the scouts, raiders, harassers of the 3rd Imodris Legion. They utilize some of the same designs as the Flagrant Vandals. While the latter fielded more medium and heavy mechs in order to operate independently, the Calico Dancer Bats exclusively focused on light and skinny medium mechs in order to fulfill their niche very well.

Their light mechs all obtained proper development support. Up to a hundred mech designers must have contributed to the refinement of each of their main designs.

All of this bode fairly ill for the Vandals. The Calico Dancer Bats was a proper military mech regiment, while the Flagrant Vandals routinely struggled to pay the bills. The disparity not only touched upon the design quality of their mechs, but also their relative cost.

Ves only needed to take a simple glance to see that the Dancer Bats employed significantly more expensive designs for their mainstay mechs. The Inheritors wouldn't stand a chance in an even fight.

Their only advantage so far was that the Dancer Bats only arrived with two mech companies! Faced with the five-hundred-or-so spaceborn mechs of the Vandals, the difference in quality wouldn't make any difference.

Ves conveyed all of his findings to Major Verle, who figured most of this out by himself. He opened a private channel. "The Dancer Bats are true frontline fighters. They have a rich tradition and enjoy ample support from Imodris. Yet worse than the two mech companies is the thought that Lady Amalia and her main force won't take long to arrive. The fact that they only sent out this light flotilla so far proves that they are confident that their reinforcements can catch up in time."

"Sir, if I may suggest something."

"Go ahead, Mr. Larkinson."

"I believe this minefield, while annoying, poses no threat to us. However, facing the experienced Calico Dancer Bats in a delaying action will only lead to further entanglement that we cannot afford. Their light mechs are faster, deadlier and more durable than our own. Our Inheritors are plainly not up to the task of defeating them all within a short amount of time."

"What is your point?"

"They only sent two companies of light mechs. While our regular mechs will find it very challenging to destroy them fast, it shouldn't be an issue for Venerable O'Callahan to do so."

Ves put forward the only suggestion that made sense to him. Only an expert pilot could save them from this predicament.

However, Major Verle did not appear to be relieved. "Impossible. O'Callahan will never choose to deploy in this situation."

Chapter 527 The Price of Lifespan

"Deploying Venerable O'Callahan at this junction is not a good idea." Major Verle responded with uncharacteristic patience. Perhaps Ves had proven himself enough times for Verle to appreciate his help. "There are two major problems with asking the Venerable to fight. He won't easily rouse himself

from his sleep. If he finds out we woke him up just to ask him to take care of some small fries, he'll immediately quit right after this action."

Ves had hoped that Major Verle would try to convince the Venerable of the necessity of their situation. After all, if the Vandals got stalled long enough for Lady Amalia's main forces, even an expert pilot wouldn't be able to escape the calamity that would ensue.

No matter how skilled or fantastic an expert could pilot a mech, it was impossible for them to resist an onslaught of thousands of mechs at a time.

At his current aged and decrepit state, Venerable O'Callahan could only muster a resonance strength of thirty laveres. This figure was around the middle when it came to expert pilots, and would be barely enough to mop up a hundred mechs at once.

The second problem compounded on the first one.

"You know what type of mech our resident expert pilot utilizes, Mr. Larkinson. We distinctly chose to retain him for his ability to deter and restrain opposing expert pilots. Mopping up a swarm of cannon fodder has never been his job description."

Just as regular mech pilots specialized in different types of mechs, so did expert pilots. They continued to hone their skills and newly developed resonance abilities on top of the foundation they built before they advanced.

No expert pilot would choose to switch to piloting a different type of mech. A laser marksman would never dabble with swordsman mechs, while knight mech pilots wouldn't dream of piloting a skirmisher mech. Such an abrupt switch invalidated at least two-thirds of their hard work and all of their specialties.

Thus, as a rule, an expert pilot stuck to their specialty for the rest of their lives. Though this didn't bar them from piloting other types of mechs, it was just a massive waste to do so.

The issue concerning the Verle Task Force was that Venerable O'Callahan piloted a mech that excelled in battling elite opponents.

As O'Callahan piloted a lancer mech, he almost exclusively employed charges. His Parallax Star accelerated very quickly, and while it wasn't very agile, it only needed to connect its lance to an enemy mech for a single instant to demolish it. Ves may not have witnessed it in action, but he'd seen how the hapless mechs unceasingly disintegrated upon getting hit.

This ability to kill with a single charge came at a cost. It took a significant amount of time for the Parallax Star to reorient and build up an unstoppable momentum. Chasing down flighty light mechs one by one was an arduous task even for a lancer mech.

Even worse, light mechs formed something of a counter to the Parallax Star. It loved nothing more than to pierce through a fat, immobile target no matter how much armor they put up. Agile and flitty light mechs had a realistic chance of dodging the tip of the lance as it honed in on them as long as the mech pilots kept their heads cool.

Compared to the only other expert pilot Ves had witnessed at close hand, the difference couldn't be greater. Ves mingled with the 4th Bentheim Division during the Glowing Planet campaign, where Venerable Stanton Drake piloted an aerial striker called the Fire Drake. With a single charged flamethrower attack, the Fire Drake would easily be able to engulf a closely-packed formation of enemy mechs, vaporizing dozens of them at a time.

Yet even with these disadvantages, Ves still made another attempt. "Sir, I understand your concerns, but this is a good chance to achieve a victory

without significant losses. Maybe if he's alone, Venerable O'Callahan wouldn't be able to take care of the opposing mechs. However, if we combine his threat with our own mechs, we'll be able to roll them over through overwhelming force."

An expert pilot backed up by hundreds of regular mechs could split their focus and cover each other's weaknesses. The regular Vandal mech pilots would be able to tie down the enemy light mechs while O'Callahan demolished their ships.

Without their combat carriers, the enemy mechs became homeless. Their morale would inevitably plunge and they would lose the support and coordination of their officers.

Yet Major Verle shook his head again. "It's complicated. Maybe it's time to fill you in. The truth is that we've made a deal with Venerable O'Callahan. The man is old and far past his prime. While his body condition isn't too bad, his lifespan is nearly at an end. Every second is precious to him. The only reason he still manages to live is because his body is put in a state of artificial hibernation. This slows down his aging process and stretches out his remaining lifespan."

"How much time does he have left, sir?"

"A couple of years at most. Mr. Larkinson, you have to realize that no human wishes to die. Especially to former heroes like O'Callahan, the closer they come to death, the more they fear their inevitable end. Those among us who fall in the ranks of elites treasure their lifespan above all else. It is an obsession that drives the likes of O'Callahan and Professor Velten to extremes."

Ves closed his eyes and recalled the old elites he met. Eminent figures such as Lord Kaine, a noble from the Constance Grand Kingdom, and Professor

Velten, a Senior Mech Designer, all achieved incredible success in their lives. They climbed on top of many rivals and peers and reached heights that only a few could surpass.

Yet despite their abundant wealth, power and achievements, age cared nothing about those matters. Death would come from them whether they were as poor as paupers or as rich as someone from a first-rate superstate.

Ves knew that both of them benefited from at least one round of age-prolonging treatments. This expanded their natural human lifespan by at least a hundred years, allowing them to live at least two-hundred years if nothing happened.

Both of them had also enjoyed a second round of age-prolonging treatments. Ves knew very little about this privilege that was only handed out to the best of the elites, and that the treatments differed in cost, stability and outcomes.

Master Olson didn't look older than her thirties, and she was over a hundred years old. Everyone could tell that she benefited from at least one round of very high-quality age-prolonging treatments that rejuvenated her body and turned back her biological clock in a fashion.

In contrast, the second round of treatments applied to Lord Kaine and Professor Velten had evidently suffered complications. It was clear to Ves that their treatments hadn't prolonged their ages at all. As a matter of fact, the opposite happened, and their aging process accelerated several times over.

Such outcomes made it clear to Ves that age-prolonging treatments always came with risks. If even a former patriarch of a noble House of a second-rate state suffered a botched treatment, then it could be seen that the odds of failure were significantly high.

Yet even then, these elites accepted the treatments without reserve. What did this signify?

Nobody wanted to die! Especially not when they had the opportunity to stretch out their lives by another hundred years!

In comparison to Lord Kaine and Professor Velten, Venerable O'Callahan was younger by at least eighty-years, but he looked just as senile and decrepit as the former two elites.

This was the tragic fate of expert pilots who didn't make the cut. Their brain mutations meant that ordinary age-prolonging treatments didn't work for them. They needed to undergo a modified treatment that was significantly more expensive and troublesome to arrange.

As much as expert pilots enjoyed the worship of millions or billions of people, their worth ordinarily didn't merit an expensive treatment.

As callous as it sounded, a state could always nurture more expert pilots over time. They only emerged through happenstance, but with a large enough population base, a state would generally be able to count on a steady trickle of younger expert pilots to replace the older ones who became wracked with age.

The Bright Republic evidently wrote off Venerable O'Callahan as an elite worth investing in. With his peak performance of forty-four laveres at his prime, it was evident that he would never be able to come close to advancing to ace pilot even with hundreds of years of practice. His potential had already been exhausted.

Due to the cost of pilot-compatible age-prolonging treatments, states only prolonged the lives of expert pilots that stood a chance of advancing into ace pilots. As long as their resonance strength didn't stagnate, they would be deemed as possessing enough potential to continue to grow.

In practice, these expert pilots with a lot of promise ahead of their lives almost never showed up.

The Larkinsons nurtured a decent number of expert pilots since their establishment during the founding of the Bright Republic.

Even then, none had been found worthy of benefiting from age-prolonging treatments.

Nobody except for the Larkinson Ancestor, at least.

In short, the scarcity of lifespan and everyone's demand for extending it was a natural human obsession. Venerable O'Callahan couldn't be moved by threats or enticements. Money held no value for him, and even the prospect of piloting a better mech wouldn't excite him very much.

The only factor that could make him move was when it concerned his life.

O'Callahan would fight if the Vandals risked annihilation, because he stood to lose his life as well if the Vandals lost all of their mechs and ships. Besides that, he would only move if someone offered him some additional life.

"Everytime O'Callahan wakes up, his remaining lifespan diminishes at a faster rate than when he slumbers. This cost is magnified when he pilots the Parallax Star into battle. The stress and exertion accelerates his aging by a month in a lengthy battle. Do you understand, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves reluctantly nodded. "I understand, sir. Chasing down two companies worth of light mechs is not cost-effective in the Venerable's perspective."

In other words, the gains they made from his deployment didn't match the cost of his decreasing lifespan. Venerable O'Callahan would likely demand a ruinous price from the Vandals if he was forced to follow the plan proposed by Ves.

"That still leaves us with little options." Ves said, resigned to the idea that they wouldn't be able to borrow Venerable O'Callahan's power. "The two companies from the Calico Dancer Bats can run rings around us. Their light

mechs are so fast, I'm not even sure our Inheritor mechs are able to catch up."

"You're not alone in your concerns, Mr. Larkinson. However, don't forget that you are not alone. We'll figure something out, or we won't be able to call ourselves the Flagrant Vandals. Trust in our officers."

With that, the major closed the channel and shifted his attention to other matters. The problem concerning the Vesian reinforcements didn't need to be addressed until they exited the minefield, which should still be a couple of hours away.

Still, the seven ships that arrived first might just be the vanguard of what would come. Ves figured that the Calico Dancer Bats split up their companies to cover several star systems in order to insure they had enough spread to catch the fleeing Vandals.

It would take some time for those split elements to converge on this star system, but it wouldn't take more than a day for the Dancer Bats present in the neighboring systems to arrive.

"There's not enough time. If a second wave of reinforcements decide to tangle with us, we'll be tied down for days. That's enough for at least half of the 3rd Imodris Legion to arrive and cut off our escape."

Chapter 528 Finmoth Regal

An alert sounded out in the command center just as the task force was about to emerge past the minefield. The mines turned out to be a slightly modified version with shorter reach in exchange for a reduction in cost. This was why the 3rd Imodris Legion hadn't hesitated in laying down millions of mines.

Ves didn't recognize the alert, but most of the officers looked up in alarm.

"The Finmoth Regal is reporting internal damage! Explosions have set off in one of her hangar bays and engineering. Her thrusters have lots propulsion!"

The Finmoth Regal! That was the ship where the two suspicious Inheritor mechs came from. After Ves identified the strangeness in Nemo McAllister and the other pilot's mechs and passed it on, Major Verle immediately tasked the security department to pick up the thread.

No matter what, a hidden and unauthorized transmission device represented a profound betrayal to the Vandals!

"Give me a sitrep! Why is the Finmoth Regal losing propulsion?!"

"Sir, the security department has attempted to apprehend the three mech technicians that have serviced the suspect mechs. When the mech technicians at the hangar saw the approaching officers, they panicked and self-destructed. The hidden explosives on their bodies killed the security officers along with several other mech technicians! In addition, another explosion went off at engineering that killed two junior engineers and heavily damaged the engines!"

"The Finmoth Regal has stopped accelerating! She's falling behind!" Another operator warned.

Major Verle clenched his fist but maintained control. "Command the Antecedent and the Gorgon's Gaze to hook the Finmoth Regal and drag her out of this minefield! Tell the Regal to get her engines back online!"

The ships adjusted their formation as the Antecedent and Gorgon's Gaze drifted in front of the faltering Finmoth Regal. Major Verle deliberately picked out these two combat carriers because they possessed some of the more powerful engines among the ships in the task force.

After aligning themselves in a triangle, hatches opened up from the rear of the two carriers. Thick but flexible alloy cables shot out from the openings and latched onto specialised slots embedded along the exterior of the Finmoth Regal.

Once Regal secured the cables through various means, the two ships in front increased the power to their engines and thrusters. In truth, every ship in the task force matched their speeds with the slowest ships in the fleet. In this case, the fat, lumbering logistics ships weighed them all down.

However, this also served as a benefit in their current circumstances as the powerful combat carriers never engaged their sublight engines to full capacity. Right now, the Antecedent and Gorgon's Gaze almost managed to catch up to the rest of the fleet even as they towed the entire weight of the Finmoth Regal.

Major Verle ordered his other ships to match their pace to the acceleration of the towing combination. This extended the time they would be able to escape, but no one disagreed with the choice. They didn't want to leave anyone behind.

Ves had seen towing actions like this before. Evidently, towing happened often enough for the ships of the Vandals to incorporate a standardized system of cable launchers and attachment points.

"Thank heavens we aren't slowed down too much."

Besides him, Iris nodded in relief as well. "The combat carriers are very powerful. If not for the need to accompany and shield the supporting vessels, we could have raced out of this minefield hours ago."

Certainly, the one course of action everyone had in mind was to evacuate and abandon the transports and logistics ships. Taking none but the extra crew, the unburdened combat carriers would be able to depart from this star system with significant haste.

The only problem was that they would lose virtually all of their gains from the Detemen System, as well as make their supply crunch worse. Verle couldn't afford to destroy their long-term hopes by pursuing a drastic short-term benefit.

After the immediate problem was dealt with, Major Verle directly called the chief security officer that presided over Finmoth Regal.

"Explain to me why your ship has blown up from the insides! Is every threat taken care of or is there still an ongoing crisis?"

Against Verle's pressing questions, the chief security officer looked haggard and not at all prepared.

"We're still surveying the damage. Several fires have broken out that we are in the process of putting out. One of our hangar bays is completely locked down while the other ones are paralyzed due to fears of other bombs. We are sweeping the Finmoth Regal back and forth but it will take at least an hour to scour every nook and cranny. Even then, I'm afraid we won't be able to catch everything, sir."

"I don't care about that! How long do you need to get the engines back to work?!"

"Sir! The chief engineer has told me that the damage is limited but precise. Key components need to be fabricated on the spot, while the damaged engines need to be disassembled and reassembled almost completely. The shortest time frame our engineers can give is four hours."

Four hours was a long time to go for the task force to traverse. Major Verle heavily depended on the acceleration of the ships under his command to shrug off their pursuers.

As long as they possessed enough speed, they could outrun every opponent and transition back to FTL where they would be safe!

"If it speeds up the repairs, don't hesitate to borrow additional engineers from our other ships! Every second that the Regal is immobile will only delay our departure further!"

"U-U-Understood, major! We will get on it and restore the engines as quickly as possible!"

That was the best they could hope for. Like any ship component, their engines converted an enormous amount of power to propel the vessels forward. They served different purposes from mech engines, and all of them looked huge and imposing in many ways.

Ves knew that damaging a critical part such as the engines of a ship needed a lot of time to resolve. Their size added a lot of complexity to their workings. While that made the engines more powerful or flexible, it also made it harder to get around their dimensions and weight when they needed to repair or service them. Repairing damaged ship engines within four hours already sounded like a stretch.

Fortunately, a ship didn't require any working sublight engines to transition into FTL.

Ships traversed through the higher dimensions through some esoteric means via their FTL drives. The principles involved were exceedingly complex and not something that Ves would ever understand. He only knew the bare basics that was taught to any school child.

In any case, they hadn't fallen into despair yet. A ship could lose its sublight engines, but it could never afford to lose their FTL drives.

The FTL drive and power reactor therefore enjoyed the highest level of protection. They would be much harder to tamper with compared a slightly less important component such as the engines.

No matter how Ves looked at it, the suspect mechs and the three suspicious mech technicians shouldn't have led to catastrophic damage to the Finmoth Regal.

"Did everyone let down their guard or something? That chief security officer doesn't inspire much confidence."

"That's how it is with the Vandals." Iris remarked. "They receive way more incompetents than any other mech regiment of the Mech Corps. It shouldn't be a surprise that the ranks are rife with incompetents. Positions still need to be filled even if there is no one suitable to take the place. I would argue that your temporary field promotion is out of helplessness as well. They wouldn't have chosen to promote you to head designer."

Ves couldn't refute her words, especially since he directly benefited from it. Still, Ves inwardly complained about the lack of competence and professionalism around the Flagrant Vandals. The mech regiment's inherent nature forced them to accept subpar recruits even if they wished to kick them away.

The entire mech regiment still needed running somehow! If the Vandals constantly tilted up their noses and arrogantly rejected most of the people they received, they would quickly lose their strength and reputation.

Ves tried to dig in more at what happened at the Regal. The latest updates on the internal network suggested that the Regal's security officers had already flagged the three mech technicians as people that warranted extra attention.

Somehow, the security contingent aboard the Regal never followed up on the early warnings. The alert notices got lost in the system and became forgotten, all the while the trio started to scavenge and cobble up something together during their off-hours.

Naturally, the incompetent security officers of the Finmoth Regal only found out about the latter after the explosions occurred.

The issue didn't appear to be so simple. An average mech technician would never be allowed to enter the hangar bay. It was off-limits to anyone except ship crew that needed to be there for some reason.

"Are the mech technicians really spies, or did they have something else in store for us?"

The most obvious signs pointed towards a straightforward infiltration by pirates. His overactive imagination blanked out for a bit as he considered various alternatives. Yet without any proof, it was useless to speculate.

In the end, this incident only served as a distraction for the main event. If nothing else, the sudden sabotage prompted every other ship in the fleet to double-check their critical sections for similar signs of sabotage.

This was mainly a concern for the ship officers. The mech officers on the other hand urged some of their squads to return to the hangar bays and replenish their supplies before going back out again.

Within minutes, the mechs would shift their priorities from shooting down mines to taking down the Calico Dancer Bats. The coming engagement was a critical one where the Vandals needed to escape the entanglement of the Vesian light mech regiment.

Ves felt regretful that he hadn't come up with any clever tactics or any other tricks that could land them an easy victory. The Dancer Bats were simply too well-funded to field mechs with numerous vulnerabilities.

On the face of it, the entire match-up seemed ridiculous. How could eighty light mechs contend against a force of over five-hundred spaceborn mechs?

"The answer is speed, or rather distance."

The flotilla from Imodris split up in two. The corvettes nimbly spread out to serve as additional eyes on the battlefield while the lumbering transports escaped before they could be targeted.

Only the combat carriers mattered. They possessed slightly better specs than the combat carriers fielded by the Vandals. Even when it concerned their combat carriers, the Calico Dancer Bats never stopped prioritizing their speed!

This absolute suppression of speed gave the Vesian mech regiment ample confidence in preventing their prey from escaping. The only thing they needed to do to prevent the Flagrant Vandals from escaping into FTL was to throw a bunch of gravitic mines at them. These didn't need to be expensive or all that powerful. If they brought enough gravitic mines, they could even drag it out for several days.

Ves looked depressed when the Vandals hadn't managed to come up with another solution besides a risky one he happened to disagree with. The only way to overcome the acceleration gap was to overload their fastest mechs, which in their case happened to be the Inheritor mechs.

He couldn't help but warn Major Verle of the consequences of his decision. "Those mechs will be ruined after an hour or more of fighting. Even if they can end the battle faster, they'll need extensive servicing to bring them back to a usable condition."

"At this stage, we don't have any other choice. The only way we can satisfy our thirst is to drink poison. Considering our options, overloading the Inheritor mechs is less lethal than any other poisons we can opt for. It should be sufficient to overload a hundred of them for a start."

Chapter 529 Martial Tradition

The time for battle arrived. Though the Flagrant Vandals already spent hours reducing the space mines homing in on them, they posed a nuisance at best.

In the eyes of mech pilots, only other mechs could threaten mechs.

The 2nd Calico Dancer Bats of the 3rd Imodris Division enjoyed a rich martial tradition.

The martial tradition of a mech regiment formed the core of their identity and strength. Measured in years, they served as a convenient measuring stick to compare to other mech regiments.

The Flagrant Vandals had only been founded less than two generations ago. With less than sixty years of development since their founding, they built up an adequate but lackluster martial tradition.

As for the Calico Dancer Bats, their founding was several hundred years ago. Entire generations had been raised to serve in the Dancer Bats. Some mech pilots could even point back to their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and so-on as generational Dancer Bats.

Over hundreds of years, the Dancer Bats evolved into a unique mech regiment that was truly unique in the galaxy. With a rich culture and strong camaraderie, their willpower was practically unbreakable. No matter how badly a battle progressed, they never faltered in the line of duty. They fled only when ordered to and they wouldn't hesitate to fight to the last man if the stakes were high.

Their rich martial tradition not only strengthened their belief, they also refined their battle methods. With their abundantly-staffed design teams, they designed the most optimized mechs for the roles the Calico Dancer Bats demanded out of their mechs. Over many decades, they practiced, tested, and revised their tactics and strategies with their unique mech models until they honed themselves into a razor sharp killing machine.

The Calico Dancer Bats nominally consisted of a spaceborn light regiment, but that belied their ferocity in battle.

Some light regiments exclusively dealt with reconnaissance, harassment, stealth and anti-stealth warfare. Such regiments acted as support for the heavier regiments that did all of the fighting.

The Calico Dancer Bats didn't believe in letting other mech regiments do the fighting in their stead. While they often fulfilled support roles, more often than not they sought to enter the fray in earnest. This earned them a lot of renown over the years as a true battle regiment.

The Vesian regiment's rich tradition and exemplary battle record weighed down heavily upon the Flagrant Vandals. They hadn't even clashed yet, but already most mech pilots started to feel suppressed.

It was ridiculous, but over five-hundred mech pilots felt apprehensive about going into battle against a meager force of eighty Calico Dancer Bats.

That was because the Dancer Bats embodied their name in battle. They developed exquisite tactics and routines that allowed their light mechs to pose a serious threat against a larger but clumsier force. Their favorite tactic was to disperse into a chaotic sphere around a slower group of mechs and pelt them endlessly with their light submachine guns.

Though the Dancer Bats wouldn't be able to deal much damage at the start, neither could the enemies do anything to the annoying circlers. The Bats were too hard to hit with ranged weapons and they were too fast to be caught by melee mechs. Their marksmanship with their famous submachine guns wasn't too shabby either.

Ves had quickly read up on these facts from the intelligence section of the central database. As their mortal enemies, the Bright Republic possessed a good understanding of each Vesian mech regiment, especially one that showed up often during every Bright-Vesia War.

"The difference between the Calico Dancer Bats and the Flagrant Vandals is too big." Ves spoke softly.

Iris nodded in agreement. "The Calico Dancer Bats are one of the premier light mech regiments from the Imodris Duchy. Their mech pilots throw themselves into battle without hesitation. That's not so unusual, but the remarkable thing about them is that they are crafty in battle. They always manage to survive or turn around a bad situation. Their adaptability is their strongest trait."

Perhaps the Calico Dancer Bats wouldn't be as good in raiding ships and facilities as the Flagrant Vandals, but when it came to large-scale mech brawls, the Vesians would feel right at home.

In this situation where the Vandals almost lost heart even before the battle had begun, Major Verle stood up and activated a fleet-wide broadcast. Every serviceman halted their work as projections of their commanding officer emerged in the middle of each compartment.

"Vandals. We stand at the precipice of annihilation. I won't mince words with you. If we don't depart from this star system in the next hour, we might never be able to leave forever. Standing in our way are the fine warriors of the Calico Dancer Bats. They are but eighty active fighters among them. Will we allow ourselves to be disgraced by an outnumbered force?"

"No!"

Indignation swelled among the Vandals.

"The Calico Dancer Bats are formidable, but so are we! With our numbers and our grit, it's impossible for the Dancer Bats to overcome us! Don't be fooled by their reputation, their mechs are just as vulnerable as ours! There is nothing to fear from them, because they are but an egg trying to smash against a rock!

Believe in yourself and believe in your comrades! Remember who you are!
We are the Flagrant Vandals! We take what is ours!"

"We take what is ours!"

Major Verle didn't let his speech go on forever. The mech pilots only needed a slight reminder to regain their confidence.

Ves witnessed as the various mechs finished their resupply. By now, most of the mines had lost most of their fuel. They only retained a fraction in the case the minelayers returned to retrieve them. In any case, the mines had done their job. The initial strikes peeled away a significant amount of armor from several combat carriers while the rest had rattled the Vandals and exhausted some of their stamina.

Thus, the Vandals deploying into battle at this moment weren't fresh anymore. Though they had been trained to endure adverse conditions, their readiness couldn't compare to the eighty Calico Dancer Bats that stood in opposition.

Their pristine mechs split up in two companies and awaited the arrival of their adversaries. In any case, the Vandals needed to take the initiative, leaving the Dancer Bats free to react whenever they wanted.

Against the menacing burgundy and black Vandal mechs, the mechs of the Calico Dancer Bats coated their mechs in their namesake calico-colored pattern. On their left chest, they bore the emblem of their mech regiment, which depicted a stylization of a cheeky calico-colored bat.

The two companies employed two different mech models in equal proportions. They consisted of a submachine gun-wielding skirmisher mech and a longer-ranged frontline spaceborn mech. Ves already read the details on their designs. The former was called the Pinprick and the latter became known as the Brain Scrambler.

Both the Pinprick and the Brain Scrambler served as the mainstay mechs of the Calico Dancer Bats. They hadn't brought any other models along, but the two that showed up so far enabled them to employ plenty of tactics already.

If the Flagrant Vandals couldn't overcome a force that deployed their two lightest and cheapest mechs, then they might as well disband their regiment on the spot.

Compared to the cohesion and uniformity of the ranks of the Dancer Bats, the Vandals appeared a lot shabbier despite fielding over three-hundred spaceborn mechs.

Major Verle decided to throw almost all of the Inheritor mechs at his disposal as well as some frontline mechs of their own to chase after the enemy mechs. Meanwhile, he would put their slower mechs on reserve, which included the Hellcat hybrid knights.

He was rather helpless in this decision because the mechs and combat carriers of the Calico Dancer Bats were all capable of swift acceleration. They could both outpace the Inheritors in ordinary circumstances.

Unfortunately for them, this wasn't a regular circumstance.

"Sir, the Inheritors are ready to be deployed."

"Send them in! Follow the plan and don't overload too early."

A sweeping number of Inheritors and a smaller group of frontline mechs that provided ranged support accelerated away from the task force. They started to close the gap to the Calico Dancer Bats and would eventually bridge the entire gap in fifteen minutes.

The Bats didn't want to get caught so early, so they immediately increased their propulsion to match the pace of their pursuers.

Naturally, they also didn't forget their primary duties. Their long-ranged mechs occasionally fired long-range laser beams at the Vandal ships. The attacks dealt little damage against the armored prow of the combat carriers, but nobody felt good about being pelted all day.

The Vandals replied with at least double the number of laser beams. However, their level of marksmanship was much lower, so they missed more often than not. They focused most of their fire against the enemy combat carriers, but the ships waded through the laser grids like graceful dolphins.

The few laser beams that scorched their exterior hardly affected any section of armor.

This was just an appetizer for both forces. Nobody took these errant laser beams seriously. What mattered more was whether the Vandals would be able to catch up with the fleeing Calico Dancer Bats.

Their reputation was not for show. As soon as it appeared the Vandals inched closer with each passing second, the ships and mechs and the Dancer Bats accelerated at full power. The distance widened yet again.

In these circumstances, the Inheritor mechs had no choice but to overload their power reactor and flight systems in order to have any chance of catching up.

Every minute they overloaded their systems, the affected components suffered months worth of wear and tear. Fighting for an hour at this level would already be a commendable feat.

They needed to finish this in half an hour or less. Otherwise, the Inheritor mechs would degrade up to the point where they became total write-offs after the battle.

The Vandals couldn't push their Inheritor mechs too much. They still needed them in subsequent battles.

With that in mind, Ves minutely calculated the most optimal overload level to push their systems. Too little, and the speed boost was too marginal. Too much, and the mechs wouldn't be able to last the entire battle.

Because the mechs hadn't received any significant modifications to accommodate such abuse, Ves had been forced to pick a somewhat conservative overload level of twenty percent. This basically meant the mechs performed twenty percent better in certain areas.

With the sudden twenty percent speed boost, the Inheritors suddenly appeared capable enough to catch up to the Calico Dancer Bats.

This definitely surprised the Vesians. Several minutes went by as the Vandals waited for how their enemy would respond. Would they overload their systems as well to drag out this chase?

"What are the odds they will choose to overload their systems?" Iris asked Ves.

He shrugged. "How would I know? I'm not too familiar with the Calico Dancer Bats. If they want to fulfill their mission, they should choose to reciprocate. However, unlike us, they not only need to overload their mechs, but also their combat carriers. I can tell you that the consequences of overloading the propulsion of a combat carrier is no laughing matter."

The bigger and more complex propulsion systems of these robust vessels granted them greater leeway in overloading their systems, but the expensive was also ruinous. In addition, anything that could go wrong might blow up an entire ship. Thus, the Dancer Bats needed to decide whether to continue to stay out of reach or counterattack in order to preserve their carriers.

In the end, the Dancer Bats continued to flee without adjusting their current course. They chose to stall for time but preserve the integrity of their mechs.

"Looks like we won this first round." Ves sighed. He silently applauded Major Verle for being able to pressure the Dancer Bats without inflicting too much damage. "It looks like the Dancer Bats are too arrogant. For an aggressive mech regiment like theirs, fleeing to the point of overloading their systems is probably a step too far. They would rather let us catch up to them in order to beat us down."

Chapter 530 Hamburger

Soon, enough time passed for the Inheritors to enter into engagement range to the two Vesian combat carriers.

Ves kept an eye on the telemetry of a sample of Inheritors throughout the ordeal. He watched carefully for anomalies and other dangerous signs.

Several times, he detected latent dangers such as an excessive buildup of heat in one section or a weakening of the power draw in another section.

He was quite good at detecting these kinds of dangers. Each time he spotted something worrisome, he came up with a solution and sent the entire package to the mech pilot.

Naturally, every mech pilot that read the message attached to the setting tweaks couldn't understand a thing of what Ves proposed. All of the jargon and technical numbers looked like a maze to these brutes.

What, did you think mech pilots studied advanced calculus or engineering in the academies?

None of the pilots understood his tweaks, but since they came from the head designer, they all accepted them without too much consideration. After all, the head designer was the most knowledgeable mech specialist among them. Their belief in his capabilities was naively high.

These on-the-fly adjustments compensated for the quick and dirty last-minute modifications made to the Inheritors.

Throughout the time the task force waded through the minefield, Ves ordered the mech designers to supervise a frantic modification of the Inheritor mechs in order to squeeze more speed out of their skinny frames.

The suddenness of the Vesian ambush and the shortage of time precluded any major overhauls.

"If only we had a week's worth of warning." He sighed in the command center of the Shield of Hispania. "With that much time, our mech designers and mech technicians could have bolstered the internals of those Inheritors to withstand the overload."

Iris smiled ruefully at him next to his seat. "You can't predict anything in war. Events never progress the way we want to, because Lady Luck and our opponents are playing the same game as us. Be thankful that we are only facing two mech companies. This is far from our worst-case scenario."

The worst-case scenario would be getting cornered by an entire Mech Legion. There could be no escape if the famous Lady Amalia managed to throw all the mechs at her disposal at them. Even the arrival of two additional mech regiment cut down their chances of escape by ninety percent.

The Flagrant Vandals needed to mop up the two companies in record time in order to avoid more complications.

Ves was relieved to see that the overloaded Inheritors held themselves together so far. In order to speed them up even further, he enacted some modifications that didn't take much time to implement.

The mech technicians worked around the clock to complete these modifications. They deployed with only half of their energy cells, which saved them a fair amount of mass at the cost of halving their uptime. They also stripped various other components that wouldn't be needed in the coming battle.

Considering that they needed to finish this battle quickly, Major Verle approved of the changes. Fighting a lengthy engagement was no different from getting annihilated, so they needed to pull all the stops.

All of that sacrifice served their purpose. The Inheritors inexorably caught up to the Pinpricks and Brain Scramblers. Both of the latter mechs primarily relied on ranged weaponry, so the Vesians attacked first.

As their model name suggested, the Pinpricks didn't deal much damage. Their submachine guns fired light caliber ballistic shells at a rapid rate of fire. Nevertheless, they carried a fairly high amount of ammunition, so they could keep up their harassment for a fairly lengthy time.

Compared to laser weapons of the same power and capacity, ballistic weapons had the edge in lethality. The Pinpricks weren't meant to last forever in a battle of attrition. Their designers only opted for ballistic submachine guns because a laser weapon version simply possessed too little threat.

One of the downsides of the submachine gun was that it wasn't very accurate at long ranges. The Pinpricks needed to wait until the Inheritors came into medium range before they had a chance of hitting them. Even then, the inherent inaccuracy of the weapons and their awkward postures due to the chase didn't allow them to hit the Inheritors very often.

Still, even if they got hit a couple of times, the Inheritor mechs couldn't handle too much damage. They were light mechs after all, and many people likened their armor to fabric rather than plates of alloy.

If not for the extremely light payloads of the submachine gun shells, the Inheritors would have been forced to turn away after suffering a couple of hits at the same section.

As for now, they could probably endure half a magazine, but no more. The Inheritor mechs didn't allow their opponents the luxury to aim at the same

spots. They dodged and weaved even as they continued to close the distance.

The only mechs they needed to be wary of was the Brain Scrambler. As the spaceborn frontline mechs of the Calico Dancer Bats, the Brain Scrambler served as their medium to long-ranged fire support.

Frontline mechs stripped everything that wasn't essential to a mech to minimize their production cost and complexity of piloting them. The Brain Scrambler resembled a spacecraft more than a mech as it resembled an armed shuttle with gun barrels for arms more than some humanoid or bestial creation.

In truth, calling it a mech at all would be stretching it, as it completely lacked a pair of legs and a head. Everything except its weapon was embedded into their center body.

The only reason why people called such spaceborn crafts a mech rather than a fighter was because it needed a mech pilot to interface with the machine. Of course, due to lacking all of those complicated limbs, even the most untalented pilots could make a contribution with these simple mechs.

Replacing their humanoid arms with rotating gun barrels might have reduced their flexibility to a low point, but it gave them a considerable amount of firepower.

The worst thing about the Brain Scramblers was that they fired higher caliber high-explosive shells. Though they couldn't carry a lot of ammunition for that reason, their threat level was much higher despite being much less valuable than the Pinpricks.

"Boss, why are they called the Brain Scramblers?" Iris asked.

"The Brain Scramblers are mostly employed in large numbers and in pitched battles on the frontlines. Their purpose isn't necessarily to kill their targets.

Instead, they're meant to disrupt heavily armored mechs by rattling them with constant explosions."

"Is that why they run out of shells so fast?"

"Yeah. Their shells are heavier than what light mechs ought to fire, so the trade off is fairly serious. They won't be able to sustain this bombardment for very long."

A dozen Inheritors already fell through focused fire. The Brain Scramblers didn't scatter their fire over hundreds of targets and instead concentrated their fire on a handful of unlucky Inheritors. Dozens of miniature cannon shells bombarded a small box around their position.

The Brain Scrambler's advanced targeting systems did most of the targeting for the mech pilots. They linked up with each other and consistently targeted a small area around an Inheritor, which insured it would get hit no matter where it tried to dodge.

Through this tactic, they steadily reduced the Inheritors arrayed against them, though their ammunition stores also dwindled quickly. The Vandals suffered badly from this round of fire as the Inheritors didn't even bring their backup pistols to retaliate. The extra weight, however miniscule, would detrimentally affect their speed.

The only mitigating factor about the unilateral exchange of fire was that not a lot of pilots actually died. Though the Brain Scramblers possessed a fair amount of firepower, they were light mechs in the end, so their shells weren't immediately lethal to the Inheritors upon impact. Many Inheritors simply dropped out of the chase as their core components malfunctioned. Other mechs ejected their cockpits in time as their mechs started to show signs of breaking up.

The fallen mechs and ejected cockpits would be picked up later on by the task force as they trailed the chase.

Sometime later, the Brain Scramblers expended most of their reserves. They started to reduce their firing rate by a drastic amount. The Calico Dancer Bats wanted them to remain relevant, so they started to stretch out whatever ammunition they had left.

The cost to the Vandals was fairly grievous. Over fifty Inheritors either turned to scrap or sustained too much damage to continue the chase. Ves practically bled from his heart when he calculated the cost of restoring and replacing them in his head.

Even if the Inheritor mechs was one of their cheapest mech models, the nominal cost to replenish those mechs could easily reach a billion credits, and that only applied to normal market conditions.

In their current condition where they needed to scavenge for resources or get ripped off by trading them at vastly inflated prices, the effective cost was several times higher!

"Waging war is like throwing money into a gluttonous black hole! There's hardly any profit to be made!"

This was good news for mech manufacturers that supplied the mechs to the military. More fighting meant more mechs got wrecked. More losses meant a higher demand for replacement. Although the LMC wasn't worthy enough to partner with any mech regiment, even the private sector would sustain heavily losses during the war.

If they managed to survive these turbulent times, Ves figured that his company would be able to make a killing in sales.

With roughly a hundred-and-fifty Inheritors remaining in the vanguard wave, they finally came close enough to threaten the Dancer Bat mechs. Every

aggrieved Vandal mech pilot must be grinning right now as their mechs brandished their twin knives.

Major Verle issued a command. "Double Chevron Assault!"

The Inheritors immediately formed into double squad-sized chevrons that were two files deep. There was a fair amount of distance between the forward chevron and the rear chevron. For what purpose, Ves didn't know.

In any case, this tactic appeared to be more than a simple charge. As soon as every Inheritor took their places, they collectively raised their overload from twenty percent to thirty percent!

Ves almost stood up when that happened! The internal damage sustained by those light mechs was at least twice as much now that they endured an additional ten percent strain!

Nobody told him that the Vandals would do something like this! If Ves knew what they intended to do, he would have been firmer in his warnings!

Although an additional ten percent overload didn't sound like much, it supercharged the Inheritors. With the extra bump in speed and power, the chevron formations rapidly surged towards the Pinpricks that had been firing their submachine guns at the Vandals in a leisurely fashion.

The sudden acceleration came as a shock to the Calico Dancer Bats, but true to their rich tradition, they didn't panic. It took only a second for their commanding officers to reassert command.

Towards the incoming chevrons, the Calico Dancer Bats didn't choose to take them head-on. After all, the Brain Scramblers possessed no melee capability at all while the Pinpricks only treated their knives as a secondary weapon.

Their response appeared soon enough. The two companies split up into two. One angled upwards and the other angled downwards. They didn't separate too far, only enough before the chance of friendly fire became too great.

"What is this formation?" Ves asked. "It kind of looks like..."

"A hamburger." Iris finished for him. Though it looked comical, neither of them were in the mood to laugh. "It's the famous Hamburger Chaotic Bat Formation. It's a variant of their signature Chaotic Bat Formation, the one where they circle around their targets while pelting them with their SMGs. The hamburger variant is more suitable against larger formations."

True to form, the chevrons started to scatter in various directions as the hamburger buns that made up the Dancer Bat mechs tried to turn them into their meat patty.

Both sides pretty much lost their cohesion. The Double Chevron Assault never came into play, but the Dancer Bats didn't manage to sandwich the Vandals either.

The battle quickly devolved into a chaotic mass dogfight.

Ves initially thought that the Inheritor mechs should have the advantage in such a confusing melee, but Iris quickly disabused his notion.

"The Calico Dancer Bats are sometimes known as the Chaotic Dancer Bats. Don't think that they're at a disadvantage right now. The battle has just begun!"