

Mech 551

Chapter 551

A hatch slid open, allowing Ves entry into the dinghy compartment . Compared to the clean and relatively tidy interior of the rest of the Shield of Hispania, Ves had entered what should have formerly been a backup storage area .

A large closet, in other words .

Now, the compartment had been turned into a lounge of some sorts . A couple of sofas, some pots with alien plants and a simple table surrounded by chairs took up much of the room while muted projection of archival mech duels played in the background .

Chief Technician Carletta Haine, Chief Engineer Morgan Avanaeon and Lieutenant Command Lisea Soapstone already sat on three of the four chairs . They all greeted Ves as he took the final seat .

"Good to see you Larkinson . "

"Been working hard today, eh?"

"You still owe me three tons of platinum!"

"I'll make it up to you, Soapstone . " Ves said somewhat tiredly . "I hadn't anticipated using it as a substitute material for my repairs . "

Chief Haine who set up this compartment in the first place pressed her finger against the table, causing a projection of a sophisticated board game to appear on the table . The game featured miniature mech and ship models, only a couple of which the players started out . The space above the table turned into a three-dimensional star map where the game would be played out .

"Pirate Empires again?" Chief Morgan whined as he whipped out a bottle and glass from somewhere and poured himself a drink . "This game is over a century old . No offense, but you see the same strategies play out over and over again . "

"That's the beauty of this game . " Soapstone said with a smile . She gripped the projection of a random assortment of identically scaled mechs and ships and rolled them around like they were dice . "If we're all familiar with the same strategies, the game becomes a contest of mind games . Why do you think chess is still the same after several millennia after its inception?"

"I'm running this game with all the latest expansions . " The chief technician added . "The threat of a major alien invasion will spice things up if you want to deal with an extra challenge . What do you think, head designer?"

Ves yawned a bit . "I'm not very familiar with the last couple of expansions, but I'm aware of the rules . The game developers have added even more randomization in the game, I hear . That's going to be annoying to deal with . This game is pretty much ninety percent about luck and ten percent about skill . "

"You're wrong, Larkinson . " The chief engineer replied . "That ninety percent luck you're talking about really refers to your ability to manage fortune and risks . Good and bad things happen in every game . It's your ability to mitigate the bad outcomes and benefit from the good outcomes that determines whether you are winning . "

Pirate Empires was a game of exploration, conquest and profiteering . Having been developed in the galactic rim, it proved to be a breakout hit and became a rim-wide phenomenon . Riding on its success, the developer actively published countless of expansion packs, add-ons and star sector-specific flavor packages over the years .

The premise of the game was that players took on the role of an outfit leader . The only choice provided by the base game used to be a pirate captain, but later expansions added the option of playing as a legitimate mercenary commander or the leader of a treasure hunting expedition .

Whatever the case, the goal of the game was to amass a set amount of wealth in money or assets through killing, plundering, cheating, or hundreds of other ways allowed by the rules . All of this took place in the frontier beyond the border of human space .

Ves never paid too much attention to this game in his youth, but he played a few matches here and there . Recently, he gained a lot more appreciation of the game because it served as a somewhat accurate depiction of what the owner of an outfit had to deal with . The game treated the frontier as a region where opportunity and danger coexisted .

"Let's begin . I've waited long enough to get this session started!"

The four players chose their roles and began to make their first moves into the untamed stars . Each of them picked the exact same roles as last time . Everyone's choices appeared to reflect their personalities .

As a chief technician, Haine always leaned towards playing a pirate . The key to running a successful pirate operation was to keep your unruly subordinates under your thumb . Haine had a lot of experience knocking some sense into the skulls of mech technicians .

"What's the difference between a pirate and a mech technician?" She asked one day .
"A pirate is led by a lawless maniac while a mech technician is led by a lawful maniac!"

Haine's usual strategy leveraged her skill in managing all kinds of bastards and scum to amass a pirate fleet in the early phases of the game . If the other three players let her

build up a veritable armada, then it was too late to stop her from steamrolling them one by one .

The chief engineer pursued the opposite strategy . Avanaeon pursued quality over quantity, and therefore opted to play as a mercenary commander . His outfit always stayed small, but through a steady accumulation of wealth through low and medium-risk ventures, he amassed a collection of elite mechs and ships, all crewed by some of the skilled and deadliest subordinates available in the game .

"The best hardware paired with the best people trumps anything you can throw in my way . "

Avanaeon knew his ships well, and invested in them very early . This allowed him to pick and choose his battles and avoid any attacks directed against him in the first half of the game . He would never be the first player to fall in every match .

The only logistical officer among them favored playing as the leader of a treasure hunting outfit . Different from pirates which usually raided other players or neutral human presences on the map, treasure hunters aimed to raid the unclaimed bounties of the stars . Treasure hunters strictly challenged the environment and often explored the most hazardous regions on the map .

"You fellows fight too much . " Soapstone often remarked . "This game is about hoarding the most wealth . Taking it from someone else all the time only builds up grievances among your enemies . "

That said, Soapstone did not fare very well once she entered a bad encounter against another human force . Her force mix predominantly focused on strengthening her landbound combat and exploration capacities, while most of her ships focused on maximizing their cargo capacity .

Each of the three had been familiar with each other since accepting their postings aboard the Shield of Hispania . One day, Chief Haine invited Ves to join their little circle, and out of curiosity he accepted the offer .

He quickly became immersed into the game . What he used to play for fun in the past served as a fun way to practice running his own outfit someday .

Harkening back to the Avatars of Myth he founded a while ago, Ves opted to play as a mercenary commander as well . In the first sessions, he experimented with a variety of strategies, but eventually settled on taking steady missions while preparing for a high-risk high-reward treasure hunting opportunity .

"Since this is just a game, I can go wild . I always love to make a big gamble . "

It was safe to say that Ves played a very risky game . He generally aimed to grow his mercenary corps as fast as possible without taking too much risks at the start . He preferred to go for mid-game value for money when acquiring new mechs and ships . This allowed him to tackle a big treasure hunting score when his search had finally stumbled upon a promising opportunity .

Anything could go wrong in these treasure hunting expeditions . From battling fire dragons while attempting to mine valuable exotics from a lava planet, to braving the risks of diving into the upper layers of a gas giant to harvest valuable concentrations of a very rare component ingredient of extreme-density fuel, his operations was always one step away from disaster .

His track record so far didn't look very good . In the current session, Ves bumped into a treasure hunting opportunity fairly early and was forced to go for it before others snatched his opportunity . His understrength collection of mechs suffered a lot of casualties on the field .

"Why do you insist on these stupid gambles?" Chief Avanaeon asked for the umpteenth time . "Chief Haine is snowballing again . I could have used to cut her pirate fleet down to size . "

Ves smiled ruefully as his latest venture appeared to be heading nowhere . "I'm not in the right position to help . It's not my fault my mercenary corps spawned on the other side of the map . "

The chief technician practically beat the chief engineer black and blue in the game . Playing pirates well required a good heaping of luck as well as excellent people management skills . Though Chief Haine's luck seemed to be average, her ability lent itself well in gathering a horde of low-quality pirate assets for an early game advantage .

Just now, she halved Avanaeon's forces and even added a couple of salvaged mechs to her own retinue . After this victory, Chief Haine began to focus on subduing other pirate gangs with higher quality ships and mechs .

Soapstone ignored the chaos that had erupted elsewhere and focused on taking commissions from foreign states to prospect valuable exotics for them to mine .

Ves on the other hand received a heavy thrashing from his initial failed venture . His mercenary corps licked their wounds while he accepted a couple of easier assignments . He never lost heart, though . As long as nobody hunting him down, he was still in contention .

That didn't change the fact that his mercenary corps had fallen behind compared to the other players . The only way he could salvage this unlucky turn of events was to roll the proverbial dice again . He prepared another his forces to go on another high-risk mission .

"Oh come on, do you really think that will work, Larkinson?"

"Hey, don't count me out yet . I'm the comeback kid . "

"Huff, if you're the combat kid, why are the repairs of our mechs behind schedule?" Chief Haine bit back . "Major Verle went through all that trouble sending our landbound mech pilots into a crash course on how to pilot spaceborn mechs . Some of them are pretty talented and decent at it, but they don't have any mechs to pilot!"

Each formally-trained mech pilot trained to pilot the machines for more than a decade . Every mech pilot acquired a basic proficiency on piloting landbound, aerial, spaceborn and in some cases aquatic mechs .

The only snag was that mech pilots usually specialized fairly early . Piloting mechs on land was easier and more intuitive, so it attracted a lot of mech pilots . Those who opted to train in piloting spaceborn mechs tended to be more skilled and better learners .

Thus, getting spaceborn pilots to crosstrain into piloting landbound mechs was easy . Forcing landbound mech pilots into becoming proficient in piloting spaceborn mechs proved to be a massive challenge .

So far, Major Verle tentatively trained up over fifty cross-trained mech pilots that showed enough competency in the simulations to survive the first five minutes of a battle . That was better than nothing .

"Hah!" Ves erupted into a cheer . "My expedition hit the jackpot!"

His mercenary corps excavated an ancient alien ruin that held a bounty of interesting alien technology . Ves could easily trade his gains to the MTA or CFA for a very high price . Once his mercenary corps extracted from the dangerous planet that held the ruins, they bee-lined to a star system occupied by the CFA and redeemed his findings for an incredible amount of credits .

It was enough to expand his mercenary corps by five-hundred percent!

"You better ready yourselves for a fight, because here I come!"

Chapter 552

Ves instantly catapulted to the top, but that didn't necessarily secured his win . He was still far short of reaching the victory condition for the game, so he had no choice but to transform his newly-gained wealth into strengthening his battle capabilities .

With a much-expanded force of mid-range ships and mechs, Ves experienced a renaissance which he took full advantage off to batter Chief Haine's increasingly

formidable pirate armada . It was a shame that Chief Avanaeon's elite mercenary force begged off at this time .

"Avanaeon, scuttlebutt says that the slapdash installation of the FTL drives on our logistics ships is coming back to bite us . Is there any credence to this rumor?"

The engineer grunted . "All the chief engineers are pulling double duty in trying to keep those shoddy FTL drives in one piece . What do you expect? They're simply the wrong fit for the Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan . To a mech designer like you, it's like putting an engine for a light mech into a medium mech . The FTL drives constantly break something after each and every jump . That's why we've suffered so many many delays recently . "

This sounded very worrisome to the other occupants of the compartments . "Do we need to open the stockpiles for the repair effort?"

"No, it's fine . The lack of materials is not an issue . The main challenge we are grappling with is that we don't have a good understanding of FTL technology ourselves . Even the best of humanity hasn't figured out all the nuances, so us poor engineers from a backwater third-rate state are only scratching the surface in this field . "

"Aren't chief engineers supposed to master FTL theory?" Soapstone followed up .

Avanaeon laughed . "Impossible! You'll have to be as smart as a three-hundred year old theoretical physicist to understand maybe twenty percent of how FTL drives work . Engineers like us make do with maybe five percent . We mainly learn what each component of an FTL drive is suppose to do and how it should look like . Unlike mech designers, we don't need to understand the underlying workings of FTL drives in order to get it to work . "

"So you are essentially treating FTL drives as black boxes?" Ves asked .

Even though he knew that engineers didn't comprehensively grasp the theory of FTL travel, he severely underestimated how little they actually knew .

The thought disconcerted him a lot more than he thought . After all, he wouldn't be happy to know if he rode a shuttle piloted by someone who never graduated from piloting school .

"You don't want to mess around with FTL drives . One faulty component can cause a ship to get lost in the higher dimensions for centuries . That's the least-bad outcome by the way . It's much more likely to get dropped out of FTL only to get sucked into a random black hole . What a way to go . "

Everyone shuddered a bit at the thought .

Chief Haine's attempt to beat back the sudden incursion from Ves succeeded, but at great cost . Her pirate fleet lost most of their low-quality scum . Despite being used as sacrificial pawns, the stupid pirates rabidly held up the rear guard and fought to the death .

The strengthened mercenary corps owned by Ves lost a lot of time chewing through the cannon fodder . By the time they shrugged off the pirate scum, Chief Haine's elites had already made a getaway .

In the meantime, Chief Avanaeon's mercenaries actively hunted for Lieutenant Commander Soapstone's treasure hunting expedition . They followed the trail of breadcrumbs into uncharted territory and through sheer luck managed to arrive at the right star system .

"Hey! That's not fair!" Soapstone slammed her fist against the table . The vibration from the impact briefly scrambled the projection of the game . "Out of thirty-nine star systems your fleet could have jumped to, how come you picked the right one?!"

"I'm just lucky, haha!" Avanaeon laughed as he sent his elite mercenaries to decimate Soapstone's civilian-grade ships . "Prepare your booty, because I'm coming to take them all!"

Soapstone's expedition had been caught in the middle of a planetary exploration phase and faced two difficult choices . Either she could abandon her considerable landbound assets and preserve all of her ships, or she could make a stand in an attempt to buy enough time to evacuate her landbound forces .

The first option led to guaranteed survivor, but represented a major setback . The second option might cause her to bow out of this game .

The former option wasn't even a viable choice at all . Chief Engineer Avanaeon loved to run with very fast ships, so there was no running from his pursuit .

The outcome of the battle arrived quickly enough . Soapstone hadn't devoted enough resources to defend her fleet from spaceborn threats and paid for it . Even though Avanaeon fought with a diminished force of mechs, their outstanding quality allowed him to defeat the much more fragile ships and mechs of Soapstone's treasure hunting expedition .

The logistical officer was the first player to be taken out of the game .

"You lucky dog . "

"Good game . "

With three players left in the game, the session transitioned into the late game phase . Every side accumulated a core force of high quality people and assets . Instead of racing to accumulate enough wealth to satisfy the victory condition of the game, everyone tried to hunt each other in order to take their opponents out directly .

"Come on, Haine . Where is your mighty pirate fleet?"

"I'm swaggering towards you! Just you wait! Our final battle will soon begin!"

"Speaking of final battles, how high are the odds we'll be forced into a battle against the Hafner Duchy?" Avanaeon asked .

"My gut feeling tells me that Hafner won't let us go without a fight . " Haine remarked . "I've managed to survive up to now by listening to my gut feeling, so you better take my warning seriously . "

Ves shrugged at that as he drove his mercenary corps in a search pattern . "I've studied Hafner's strategies extensively, and one thing that stands out is that they've erected a massive monitoring web at the border between the Kingdom and the Reinald Republic . According to Miss Jupiter, there's no way the local rebels can sabotage this monitoring network . We'll definitely trip an alarm as soon as our ships near the border . "

"Hafner has a reputation for responding quickly to alerts . Their ships catch up fast . "

"I'm very concerned about Hafner . All the information I've read about them suggests that they are zealous pirate hunters . Added to the fact that they know we'll have to cross their borders, they'll be ready to take us out . Frankly speaking, if not for the two-month deadline of our mission, we should have tried to go around and avoid this territory entirely . "

After jumping through several star systems, Ves finally cornered Haine's pirate fleet . A massive battle ensued as both sides fought to the death .

One of the more annoying aspects of Haine's pirates was that she always managed to max out their loyalty scores . The last time he played pirate, all of his subordinates deserted him once he sustained twenty percent losses . The gutless pirates under his command showed no appreciation for his command .

Mercenaries fit better with his playstyle anyway . Most mercenaries possessed a sense of honor, and if nothing else they were lured by generous pay and hefty pensions for their loved ones should they fall .

Right now, his mercenaries gained the edge . Pirate elites or not, criminals mainly sourced their mechs and ships from the black market, which wasn't known for their quality control . At least a fourth of the hardware that Chief Haine bought from a pirate station suffered a malfunction during the battle .

"Those numbskull profiteers! Isn't it too much to ask for me to get what I paid for?!"

Ves laughed at that as his forces slowly gained the advantage . "That's pirates for you . They're utterly lawless . Without the need for the MTA to certify their mechs, they can pull off any scam they can get away with . I can think of a million ways to fleece my customers if I have no morals . "

"Pff . Mech designers . Always thinking about profit before duty . "

"Well, you are about to lose!" Ves replied, not taking offense at her jeer .

The battle took a sudden turn when the Chief Engineer showed up out of nothing . His reconstituted force of elite mercenaries instantly dove into the battle .

"Haine! Truce?"

"Sure! Let's kick this arrogant mech designer's butt!"

"Avenaeon! That's low! Fighting alongside pirates is a great taboo!"

"Not if we keep our distance!" Avenaeon responded with a grin . "Besides, once I clean up your dinky little mercenary corps, I'll immediately prove my law-abiding ways by finishing off what you started . "

The chief technician and chief engineer were in cahoots with each other . It made sense to gang up on Ves to them because his mercenary corps was the strongest force by a fair margin . One-on-one, neither of the chiefs could match the strength of his mercenary corps .

The battle ended in a tragedy for Ves . He'd been too eager to seek a final confrontation, and he didn't expect Chief Avenaeon to join the fun so quickly .

"The mantis stalks the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind! Tough luck, Ves, but this time you're the mantis!"

"Good game, but how the hell did your fleet arrive at the battle so quickly? I was certain that I could have finished off the pirates before you arrived . "

"There are lots of tricks you can pull off with certain FTL drive models if you're willing to burn them out . I performed an ultra-long-ranged transition at double their effective range . I can cover twice the distance at the same amount of time . The only downside is that navigation is gone to hell . I lost over thirty percent of my fleet to the tides of the higher dimensions . "

"Damn . Well, at least I've learned something new . "

With Ves out of the way, Haine's badly battered pirates contended evenly against Avenaeron's elite mercenaries . As a last hurrah, Ves had ordered his mercenaries to focus their final moments into crippling the enemy mercenaries . Since Avenaeron already lost thirty percent of his forces from botched FTL transitions, he really didn't have a lot of mechs at his disposal .

Haine managed to retrieve her malfunctioning mechs and kludged a number fixes together that restored their fighting strength . Those extra mechs tipped the scales in her favor, causing her to be the ultimate winner of this session .

"Good game . " Avenaeron said, being gracious enough to concede the win to Haine .

"Yeah! Go team pirates!"

The losers at the table grumbled a bit as they raised their comms and transferred five hundred credits to Chief Haine's account .

"I'll earn that money back next time, so don't spend them yet!"

"Keep on dreaming, Soapstone!"

After wrapping up the game, they retired to the sofas and shared a few drinks . An hour later, Ves departed from the lounge to call it a night .

When Chief Haine initially invited him to these little gaming sessions, he only accepted out of a social obligation . Each session ran for at least an hour, which was precious time that Ves could have spent on furthering the repairs of the task force's mechs .

It was only after he attended the first couple of sessions that Ves realized the value of these informal gatherings . Everyone invited to the games served a vital function aboard the Shield of Hispania .

Everyone had a tendency to loosen their lips during the gaming sessions . Ves learned a wealth of information from key personnel that he would have never gotten wind of in his regular capacity .

Naturally, the others expected him to reciprocate, so he returned the favor with some semi-critical nuggets of information from time to time . He was glad that everyone knew their limits . Nobody leaked a word of classified information unless all four of them possessed the right clearances .

Through these regular off-duty meetings, Ves pieced together Major Verle's plan for Hafner .

The mech officer came up with a bold plan . Instead of letting Hafner come to them, the Vandals would take the fight to Hafner! In other words, they planned to surprise the duchy by launching a surprise attack against one of their worlds!

Chapter 553 Swindlers

The Flagrant Vandals feared Hafner for a very good reason. As a border territory of the Vesia Kingdom, the Hafner Duchy differed a lot from the interior duchies.

First and foremost, their main responsibility was to guard the border. Military priorities came first, everything else came second. Thus, it did not matter too much if the border star systems failed to turn a profit. As long as they maintained a sufficient garrison to deter pirate raids and the like, it was fine if they lost a substantial amount of money over time.

The Vesian propensity for infighting was remarkably subdued in the border territories. It was the same at the Bright Republic's side of the border. With the threat of external enemies so acute, the noble Houses that controlled the border systems had no time to wage pointless rivalries amongst themselves.

Another stabilizing influence was that the Kingdom as a whole subsidized the border territories by funding the military forces that kept the borders safe. This extra income came with many responsibilities, but in turn the noble Houses fielded substantially more mechs than their holdings could support.

Who would want to disturb such a good arrangement? Therefore, most of the star systems in the Hafner Duchy were relatively tranquil, and focused most of their efforts into repelling pirates and foreign invaders.

Furthermore, the differences extended to the regional rebel movements that agitated against the Vesians in Hafner. Iris explained the difference to Ves one day.

"Sir, the rebels in territories like Imodris and Venidse are fighting back against injustice, oppression and inequality. Like my Jupiter family, we are often impacted by these elements, driving us out of the light to seek solace in the dark. Our only goal is to work towards an upheaval in the Kingdom that will lead to the abolishment of the rule of nobles."

Good luck with that, Ves silently thought. Having sampled Vesian culture up close, his impressions of the Kingdom led him to believe that the noble Houses were like inextinguishable roots that had tightly gripped the state they derived their nutrients from. Destroying this pervasive system of governance could only be done if the entire Kingdom fell one day.

That would never happen.

"I'm familiar with this pattern." Ves replied, keeping his opinions about the viability of the rebel cause to himself. "A border territory such as Hafner is run very differently. Rebel movements are more than a nuisance in this kind of place. They can directly threaten their national security. This encourages the Houses here work harder to minimize discontent among the commoners. Receiving all of those subsidies makes this choice a lot easier to pursue."

"That's exactly right, boss. Yet despite these circumstances, rebel movements still exist in the border territories. Do you know how they are able to remain aloft?"

Ves crunched his brow. He gained some familiarity with Hafner, but he mostly studied their mech doctrine and their mech models. He hadn't looked too closely at the local rebels, as the central database didn't contain all that much information about them. The Mech Corps focused mostly on gathering intelligence on the border territories adjacent to the Bright Republic. They couldn't afford to allocate too many resources to study a border region on the opposite side of the Kingdom.

"I can't figure it out at the top of my head."

"Then let me tell you the answer, sir. It's the Reinald Republic. They've directly slipped their tentacles in the rebel movements that are causing quite some grief to the Duke of Hafner!"

"That sounds dangerously like an act of war! The Vesians shouldn't tolerate such a brazen effort at destabilizing their own territories!"

Iris shook her head. "It's much more complicated than that. Even though Hafner is pretty sure where the local rebels are getting their funding and support, there's never any hard proof of such. Testimonies are worthless because people can be brainwashed. Recordings are also worthless because they can be manipulated with ease. With how careful Reinald conducts their business, there is no way for Hafner to put the blame on their neighboring state."

"If these rebels are supported by Reinald on the sly, does that mean they are agitating for Hafner to be annexed by their masters?"

"Correct." She nodded. "There's a large amount of genuine Reinald sympathizers among the lower ranks of these movements. They think that all of their troubles will magically be relieved once they've separated from the Vesians and joined the Reinaldians. The upper management on the other hand are likely plants from Reinald. There's not a single bone of integrity in their bodies."

From the tone of her voice, Ves gathered that Iris didn't hold the Hafner rebels in high regard. "Why does it sound as if you don't respect them very much?"

"Because they're foreign agents in all but name! What they want is very different from what the VRF and the other regional rebel movements want. Though our opinions differ a little among ourselves, it's not our intention to break apart the Kingdom and integrate with another state. We are Vesians, and we will not allow our unique identity to be subsumed by others."

She didn't need to say that this counted for the Bright Republic as well. The Vesians would never accept the rule of Brighters, especially since their animosity against each other had grown over several centuries.

Ves still believed that they had no way of succeeding though, especially if they explicitly refused outside help. Their delusion was on par with the Bentheim Liberation Movement's fantasy of ruling the Bentheim region as a separate state.

"What about their mechs? Since the local rebels are being funded by the Reinald Republic, they must surely have some teeth."

"Oh, it's nothing special. Their mechs aren't any better from what you've seen in Imodris and Venidse. You have to realize that Hafner excels in tracking down pirates. If the rebels attempt to play the same game, they'll be hunted down and exterminated sooner or later. They play a very different role. While their battle capabilities are rather plain, they've infiltrated nearly every layer of Hafner society. There's no better source of insider information than their spies."

This was key information that Iris only revealed in an off-hand manner. Ves thought back on his suspicion that Major Verle planned to conduct an offensive raid on one of Hafner's star systems. If the Vandals wanted to insure this operation went well, they couldn't go without sufficient intelligence.

"Is the VRF involved with negotiating with the local rebels for something?"

"I can't tell you that. Every conversation I have on behalf of Major Verle is confidential, you know. Even if you're my boss, I'm still a guest here."

Ves nodded in understanding. "Is acting as a liaison to foreigners something that happens often?"

"Yes. In the VRF, it's actually considered a way to ascend the hierarchy. There are many people like me who hunger for more. We can apply to various kinds of duties in order to earn more recognition. As long as we do a good job, we'll earn more trust which in turn will translate into more responsibilities."

"Sounds like maintaining relations with foreigners is very important for the VRF."

She sighed. "Waging a war against the Vesian feudal system can't be done by ourselves. We're sober enough to realize that, or else our organization would have been

wiped out by now. I can't tell you how many states we are in contact with, but it's much more than you think."

This means that the VRF likely reached out to states beyond those that bordered the Kingdom! Ves felt as if this was another important detail that he inadvertently learned. Iris wasn't too careful in her speech.

"How are you guys able to remain focused on your goal when you are treating with so many foreigners? I can imagine that the VRF is introducing more and more competing interests."

"It's a challenge, but it's also a necessity, sir." She said. "We won't be able to realize our goals in the short-term, so we just have to build up the conditions that are necessary for an uprising to succeed. Foreign aid allows us to maintain our strength and get to that point faster. As long as we continue to gain benefits, our ultimate goal will be realized some day. We never lose hope."

That sounded a bit too optimistic to Ves. With all the money that changed hands within the VRF, there was doubtlessly a subset of the rebels who profited from these arrangements. They might not necessarily want to stop once they had a taste of wealth.

Still, that had nothing to do with Ves. As a citizen of the Bright Republic, Ves considered the VRF and the other rebel movements as a convenient weapon against their mortal enemy. To them, anything that hindered the Vesians should be lauded.

"Let's get back to Hafner. Whatever the Flagrant Vandals are about to do, it will likely concern the local rebels. I know you can't tell me anything directly, but are the Reinald-backed rebels good to work with?"

Iris pressed her lips into a thin line. Obviously she didn't hold them in very high regard. "Don't conflate us who are genuinely standing up for the commoners to those planted agents who pretend they care. The rebel leadership in Hafner merely want to exchange one group of tyrants with another one."

"That's strange. I haven't heard any bad things about Reinald. Sure, they're a little small and poor, but they're not so different from any other republic in our star sector."

"That's because you don't see what lies underneath. You've learned before that Reinald is secretly encouraging pirate attacks against Hafner, right? You can say that Reinald is a hotbed of illegal activity. It's a state with one foot in the light and one foot firmly in the dark. Their grey markets and black markets make up half of the wealth that flows through their hands."

Ves couldn't believe that the situation was exaggerated to that degree. Wouldn't that make Reinald a pirate state? The MTA would never tolerate such a thing!

"If Reinald is so bad, how come I haven't heard of their bad reputation?"

"Oh, they're very good at hiding their misdeeds behind their proper appearances. They've mastered the art of duplicity I should say. They are master cheaters and master tradesmen. Haggling with a merchant from Reinald is like giving away half your money. Don't ever get pulled into their traps. If you want to trade anything with a Reinaldan, you better hire another Reinaldan to negotiate on your behalf. It's as if their entire state consists of swindlers."

The animosity displayed by Iris truly reached an extreme degree. Ves unconsciously took a step back. He should definitely dive into the galactic net and conduct a more thorough research on the state that the Verle Task Force was desperate to reach.

Still, Ves was careful enough to take her words with a grain of salt. Even in the future, biases and prejudices couldn't be eradicated. Humans always felt the need to categorize different groups into neatly labelled categories.

"Let's get back to work. We still have a lot of repair work left on our plate."

After more than a month without any battles, the task force managed to gain a lot of headway into reducing their backlog. While the persistent shortages of resources, equipment and skilled manpower prevented them from repairing every wreck, the Vandals weren't as pathetic as before. Unlike a month ago, they could actually put up a competent defense against spaceborn assets.

The mood among the surviving Vandals had also lifted somewhat. The earlier period of gloom had mostly faded through the passage of time. The Vandals soldiered on and let the routine of their duties distract them from any dark thoughts.

Ves admired their resilience against depression. Though other units might have managed to regain their spirits faster, the Vandals showed their pedigree as a military mech regiment. Behind their sloppy veneer was a spine of steel.

Chapter 554 Rising Curren

Lately, the Verle Task Force started to meander in Hafner space. Ves believed that the Vandals didn't want Hafner to know where they planned to go. This was why the fleet took a lot of detours that didn't bring them closer to the border.

To an outside observer, it might have appeared that the task force desperately wanted to cross the border, but withheld from taking action because they needed to accumulate more strength. The meandering routes the task force followed didn't take them anywhere special.

Ves believed that was exactly the point. Through various hints and deductions, most of which he picked up from the meetups where he played *Pirate Empires*, he suspected that Major Verle actually aimed for a target that was very near to their current location.

"The Flagrant Vandals are always the ones who take the initiative. It's not in their nature to be passive and react to circumstances that are thrust upon them. The battles against the Calico Dancer Bats and the Frosty Meteors serve as proof of this pattern. I can imagine that all raiding regiments are like this. They are only comfortable when they are the attackers."

The messy but eventual success of the Detemen Operation showed how strong the Vandals could be. As long as they made the right preparations, they were capable of inflicting a devastating amount of damage while making off with an abundant amount of loot.

The only way to break the trap that Hafner prepared for the task force was to do something different, and the only course of action that made sense to him was to conduct a daring raid.

Still, attempting to attack any occupied star system in the Hafner Duchy came with a lot of peril. Most of the star systems in Imodris had lost their wariness against foreign invaders. It wouldn't be strange to see them panic at the sight of the Flagrant Vandals, especially if their defense force was inadequate.

The people who lived under the rule of Hafner didn't suffer from any doubts. Pirates were just like bullies, who kept visiting the same old chumps over and over if they acted like pushovers. Over time, the frequent pirate raids must have hardened them into putting up a ferocious fight no matter how badly the invaders outnumbered them. This was very clear in the documentation about the territory.

"That's not the true danger, though. Any star system can be overwhelmed as long as we pick the right target. It's the follow-up that's a threat."

The willingness of neighboring forces to reinforce a beleaguered star system was very high. Rivalling powers wouldn't hesitate in sending out some of their best, because they expected the same treatment in return.

Worse, the ducal authority also coordinated the defense effort. Under their centralized direction, the reinforcements not only arrived at the star system under attack, but they also gathered the star systems that formed the likely escape routes of the invaders. This vastly increased the chance of attackers tripping on their feet, allowing further Hafner reinforcements to catch up and gang up on the hindered pirates.

Every way the Flagrant Vandals could take advantage of, Hafner had a ready answer prepared. They truly weren't easy to crack.

"Still, this should be old school to the Vandals. They won't be stumped by these challenges."

Before embarking on the daring raid of the Detemen System, the Flagrant Vandals routinely raided the border territories along the border between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom. Though they mostly terrorized the shipping lines, they did have some experience with raiding occupied worlds.

"The Vandal landbound mechs are not for show. It's a significant burden to maintain a landbound contingent if there aren't many opportunities to make use of them. Planetary raids are definitely their cup of tea."

In addition, the interests of the Vandals aligned with the interests of the Reinald-backed rebels. Both sides wanted to make Hafner suffer for different reasons, but what they had in common was enough to forge a temporary understanding with each other.

"Help from the local rebels is vital for the next operation."

He already saw the signs of future action. Some time ago, Ves received orders to pull back the priority of repairing as much spaceborn mechs as possible in favor of fixing up some landbound mechs. Not a lot, but just enough to achieve some progress here.

It was a good thing that the damage sustained by the landbound mechs during the Detemen Operation didn't amount to much compared to the heavy losses sustained by their spaceborn contingent.

Ves didn't hesitate in allocating a couple of low-performing mech designers to fixing up the neglected landbound mechs. These mech designers lacked the knowledge, talent or willingness to learn to service the spaceborn mechs. Forcing them to work with spaceborn mechs was like forcing a gourmet to eat an unprocessed nutrient pack.

Landbound mech pilots also stepped up their training. Their readiness climbed up to a state where they wouldn't be much weaker from the time of the Detemen Operation.

The Vandals prepared various measures and readied various supplies that was relevant to any landbound raid. The next battle surely entailed a lot of risks!

Under these circumstances, the rank-and-file smelled something afoot. Even if they were under the mistaken impression that the fleet would attempt to make a run for the border, no one remained complacent.

A large amount of mechs would soon show the Vesians their mettle. The Flagrant Vandals detested being relegated to a punching bag. They built up a lot of resentment against the Vesians. Even if they couldn't take revenge against Imodris or Venidse, venting their fury upon Hafner was sufficient for their needs.

The servicemen in the corridors and lounges casually spoke how they looked forward to thrashing Hafner mechs. Ves paid a considerable amount of importance to their mood, and it was evident that the people at the top actively encouraged such talk in order to boost everyone's morale.

With every piece of the puzzle falling into place, Ves had his own work to do. While a planetary raid didn't necessarily involve any spaceborn mechs, any mildly important star system hosted a spaceborn garrison. Ves felt that it was important to keep raising their spaceborn strength.

Throughout the last month, some of the mech designers under his supervision achieved great results. Of course, it helped that Ves rewarded them generously by allowing them to borrow valuable textbooks from the central database. Some book-starved idiots even borrowed four or five books on six month terms.

Ves called them idiots because these mech designers didn't possess any remarkable cognitive traits. Their intelligence was firmly within the range of a baseline human, which meant that completely understanding a single Journeyman-level textbook would take a couple of years.

"Six months isn't enough to digest that much theory."

His own rapid ascension was an exception. A normal Apprentice Mech Designer slowly took the time to accumulate Journeyman-level knowledge over many years. Access to good textbooks cost a lot of money, but as long as a mech designer achieved decent results, they wouldn't have much trouble getting their hands on one.

Thus, he understood the viewpoint of those idiots. They couldn't bear the thought of wasting so much value by wasting their lending opportunities.

Still, in his opinion, the right choice would be to borrow a single textbook and use the other reward opportunities to receive his teachings. Ves possessed a broad range of knowledge and mastered most fundamental fields related to mech design to the level of Journeyman. If not for getting bottlenecked by other advancement requirements, Ves could long call himself a true Journeyman.

Exceptions still popped up. Ves was gratified that some low-ranking mech designers possessed sufficient vision to make use of his valuable time.

One of his most dogged fans turned out to be Loke Vedette. The poor chump that barely escaped punishment aboard the Finmoth Regal regarded Ves as his patron.

On the advice of Ves, Vedette borrowed a single comprehensive book on mechanics and spent his limited free hours into delving on the easiest aspects in the book.

"Learning good mechanics cannot be done in a day. To be frank, for someone like you, six months will never be enough. However, if you are dedicated and persistent in your learning, you will likely be able to understand eighty percent of its contents. That's more than good enough at your stage. After that, you should try to round up your other fundamentals to the same level before going back to mechanics to tackle the remaining twenty percent."

Vedette's projection looked confused at Ves. "Why not tell me to study the textbook until I understand all of it? I can work hard to earn the right to extend my borrowing term, sir!"

"That's no good. The last portion of knowledge is often the hardest to comprehend, especially when you talk about a broad and expansive field like mechanics. To truly master this knowledge, you need some tempering with realspace practice. Service more mechs. Help out with the design of one. Apply the knowledge that you have learned from the book and you will find that the twenty percent that is the hardest to understand will fall into place in your mind."

A light went off in Vedette. "I understand! Theory and practice can't be separated from each other!"

This was how most mech designers learned when they didn't possess a cheat like the System that simply crammed the requisite knowledge in his mind.

"Our time is very precious, so let's move on with the tutoring. If I recall, you've reached the chapter where the book begins to explain the interaction between the engine and artificial muscles of a mech. Have you stumbled on any hangups here?"

The other mech designer frowned. "The theory sounds simple enough, but when I try to apply what I've learned in designing my own mech from practice, it all seems to fall apart."

"Show me your progress."

After Vedette showed him his practice designs, Ves had to force his face into an immovable rock. The amount of mistakes he made in every single aspect about designing mechs really made him want to cringe.

"This is... a decent work for someone who isn't experienced with designing an original mech. You're still stuck in the phase where you're only able to design variants, right?"

"That is so, sir. Before the Mech Corps picked me up, I didn't do very well for myself. Opportunities are hard to come by for a fresh graduate."

If Vedette possessed actual talent, then he wouldn't have any trouble making ends meet. In truth, the struggling mech designer hadn't reached the minimum standard for Ves to consider hiring after they finished their stint with the Mech Corps.

Still, his earnestness and his willingness to learn put Vedette into a very short list of hopefuls. He might not amount to much right now, but a couple of years later the situation might be different.

Ves kept his eye on these potential seeds, and worked to increase his relations with them in case their potential blossomed in the future.

No one else among the Flagrant Vandals ever paid as much attention to them as Ves.

He continued to tutor Vedette in earnest. Of course, Ves held a lot of knowledge back for his junior's own good. Near the end of their one-hour session, Ves asked a pertinent question to his potential protege.

"What do you envision yourself as doing when the war is over?"

"Will the war ever end so easily? Sometimes I think that this war will never end."

"In a way, our war against the Vesians have never ended since our state was founded. But that's not important right now. Try and cast your mind to the future. What do you think you'll do?"

"I don't know. My experience with the Mech Corps will account for something, but I don't have the qualifications to get accepted by a prestigious mech manufacturer. I don't have the confidence to start my own business either, not that anyone would lend me the funding needed to purchase equipment and license a design. My future isn't as bright as yours."

Ves leaned forward and stared at his projection. "What if I can make it brighter?"

Chapter 555 Patchwork Mechs

Ves paid a lot of attention to the general mood of the Vandals. The servicemen he walked past and ate next to in the mess hall or the more ornate dining room when Major Verle wanted to hold a social occasion all expressed their opinions without much inhibition.

He thought this was a special feature of the Flagrant Vandals. Every mech regiment carefully constructed their moniker and religiously followed it after establishing one. As their moniker suggested, they embodied the ideal of behaving flagrantly.

"They're crude, but they're also honest."

He admired that about the Vandals. Everyone felt free to express their true opinions, even if they broke some unspoken taboos. This allowed Ves to judge the general undercurrent of the crew of the Shield of Hispania.

"Still, I'm only sampling what the Vandals aboard the Shield of Hispania are talking about. The people serving on the other vessels of the task force might hold different opinions."

Throughout all of these changes, Ves sensed them to be deliberate and directed. He had no doubt that Major Verle manipulated the mood according to the circumstances. From staying aboard the same ship as the mech officer and seeing his leadership style up close, Ves learned that Verle was a deft master at manipulating morale.

Ves found it curious if this was the reason Colonel Lowenfield appointed Major Verle as her second in command. Their different strong points complimented each other nicely.

"By all accounts, Colonel Lowenfield is a number cruncher and a glorified accountant. She's also a norm who lacks the aptitude to pilot a mech. She's earned the respect of the Vandals somehow by cleaning up the mech regiment, but that doesn't mean she's a miracle worker. She still needs a lackey who can represent the mech pilots and command them in battle."

The leadership structure of the Flagrant Vandals roused his interest because he saw that it was something worth emulating. Before entering the service, Ves founded the Avatars of Myth as his personal force. Though Ves initially intended them to be a company-sized force of forty mechs, that wasn't the limit of his ambitions.

"Once I've entered a higher gradation of power and wealth, it's necessary for me to expand my coterie of thugs."

It wasn't out of the question for him to expand the Avatars of Myth from an obscure personal force into a full-blown regiment-sized force. Ves might even register them as a mercenary corps in order to take advantage of the provisions of the Mercenary Association.

"Strength is the foundation of power. Wealth and talent in mech design can't save my life if someone has me at gunpoint. The only way I can secure my safety in these times is if I convert some of my earnings into actual strength. Once I've reached that point, I'll have sufficient power to do what I want."

People excelled in different vocations. The Flagrant Vandals gathered those of different talents and put them at the top in order to run a mech regiment that was capable of putting an entire planet into disarray.

At the moment, Ves recognized all the signs.

For a while now, every Vandal slowly pumped themselves up for a fight. Morale throughout the task force couldn't get much higher from this point. In a couple of days at most, it would reach a peak where everyone entered their highest states.

"This peak morale can't be sustained forever. Someone who's looking for a fight but isn't getting one will crash sooner or later."

With the task force's current position, Ves could extrapolate the potential raiding targets Major Verle had in mind. He didn't do so though because the major would definitely inform him very soon.

"I'll have to get everyone prepped for a battle anyhow."

While the Vandals always prepped their mechs for battle, anticipating an encounter beforehand was very useful. Ves went back to his office and drafted a series of orders that increased the battle readiness of their mechs on a temporary basis.

This amounted to actions such as slightly overcharging energy cells and applying a special coating that helped a little bit with radiating heat but tended to degrade over a week.

All of these measures meant more busywork for the mech technicians, and they didn't even increase the battle power of the mechs by much. "It will only be a one or two percent difference at most."

Still, Ves thought this was a worthwhile tradeoff. It wasn't as if the mech technicians would be able to restore any more mechs up to this point. By now, they completed all of the easy repairs, leaving only the tough cases untouched. Fixing any of those mechs required much more manpower and assets.

"They should really be handed over to the Wolf Mother. Only a base facility or a full-fledged factory ships can restore those badly beaten mechs."

The only other alternative was to recycle the wrecks into their base materials and fabricate a new mech anew. This was something which the Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan could only do on an emergency basis, and was highly inefficient.

"I really miss the Wolf Mother. It's like a mobile version of the Mech Nursery."

Factory ships had their uses, but they tend to be extremely big, slow and delicate. It only took a couple of torpedos to thrash the capital ship-sized monstrosity.

"Well, it's a good thing we've become used to working under scarcity."

The mech technicians and mech designers in the task force slowly mastered some tricks which enabled them to be more frugal with their limited resources. Waste had been cut to a minimum, and Ves had even taught his underlings some methods to substitute rare materials with more common ones with the help of his Jury Rigging Sub-Skill.

"Without Jury Rigging, we would have long become starved with critical resources."

It highlighted the dire state of their material stockpiles. They faced massive shortages in many categories. Repairing some mechs was simply out of the question because they lacked the minimum amount of exotics to restore the functionality of a critical component.

Many other mechs made do with a patchwork of different armor formulas. The Vandals didn't have the right ingredients to reproduce the more expensive armor systems, so they resorted to cheaper ones and hoped the coating applied on top of it successfully obscured their inadequacies.

To Ves, it felt like he was committing fraud. The people in charge of certifying mechs at the MTA would vomit if they ever encountered one of these patchwork mechs.

"They're ugly, but as long as they can fight, they're good enough."

There was a serious downside to transforming regular mechs into patchwork mechs. It deviated a machine from a proscribed design into uncharted territory. The older a mech, the more its imperfections led to unique variations of the standard design. Yet utilizing jury-rigged solutions introduced a lot more changes than usual, to the point where mechs stopped resembling their original model.

In the short-term, creating patchwork mechs helped increase the immediate battle power of the mech regiment. In the long-term, these mechs would slowly become more unusable due to the inability to apply newer updates onto the deviating designs.

The only way to make use of them was to revert all of the changes, which was a lot of work for some mechs. In some cases, it might be better to scrap them entirely or relegate them into a disposable role.

"If we aren't so desperate to increase our strength, I wouldn't have resorted to this measure."

Nonetheless, Ves didn't live in a perfect reality. He often had to resort to desperate choices that came with a price.

Some time later, Ves corresponded with Pierce, who was the highest-ranking mech designer aboard the Beggar's Bounty.

"Has the Beggar's Bounty received any strange orders lately?" He asked at the start.

"Nothing except for one strange order, sir. Some higher-ups ordered us to cobble together a large number of artificial meteorites. Do you remember our previous stop where we've delayed our next transition in order to mine a nearby asteroid belt? That's

because we had to gather as much junk as possible in order to create a bunch of artificial meteorites on the fly."

"Do these artificial asteroids come with any specifications?"

"No. They told us to stick to a standard metal rock. It was more important to create as much of them as possible."

"How many?"

"Over fifty and counting."

Ves widened his eyes a bit. Fifty artificial meteorites was more than enough to pummel a large city into dust and ruin!

In fact, sending all of them onto a planet at once risked drawing the ire of the MTA! Major Verle was really playing with fire at this moment!

"This isn't something regular at all, Pierce. Do you feel uncomfortable being ordered to create so many artificial meteorites on order?"

The other mech designer's projection shrugged. "As mech designers, we aren't culpable for the crimes our customers commit. It's the same thing with the artificial meteorites. If the MTA brings down the hammer on us, it's the brass who will suffer a punishment, not a small figure like me who's only a cog in the machine."

"You may not be culpable by law, but there's also your consciousness that you have to take into account. Will you sleep easily knowing that your creations will likely be responsible for slaughtering hundreds or thousands of people in the next battle?"

"Sir, this isn't something we should concern ourselves with." Pierce replied with a firm voice. "You should see how war is waged in the Friday Coalition. The stakes are higher there, and so are the rewards. The Coalition partners are willing to do anything to get their hands on their prize."

"Did you witness a conflict in person back when you grew up in the Coalition."

"No, but my father frequently became involved. The hotter the conflict, the more mechs his company sold. I think he even helped to fan the flames in some cases."

Ves scratched his head. What a shameless father! "Well, sounds like the Friday Coalition isn't a pleasant place to live in if there's so much fighting going around."

"Ah, don't misunderstand me, Larkinson, this only happens when a region is under contention. Most regions are firmly attached to a Coalition partner, so their stability isn't

in question. Those are safe but expensive places to live. Immigrants from poorer states are outright barred from entering these star systems."

"Say, Pierce, do you ever wish to return to the Coalition?" Ves asked out of the blue.

Pierce smiled sardonically. "I don't miss it at all. Someone like me who is without talent is a disgrace in the Coalition. It's better if I don't show up to shame my father."

Ves clearly understood that Pierce hid a lot of his pain on the matter. Yet for Ves to nurture Pierce as a trusted lackey, this bandaid needed to be pulled away.

"What if you had some help? You aren't completely without potential in my eyes. As long as you study diligently and benefit from the right supplements, it's not out of the question for you to transform from a caterpillar into a butterfly."

"Hahaha!" Pierce lost control for a moment. "Who would waste his time and money to invest in me? I'm too old to become someone's apprentice, and finding a mentor who doesn't want to take advantage of my father is impossibly hard!"

"Think about it for a while." Ves replied calmly. "For now, I've kept track of your redemptions for exceeding the weekly quotas. I've noticed that you've spent all of your opportunities on borrowing more books. Don't you think you've borrowed enough? Why not take advantage of my tutoring?"

The other mech designer frowned. "Even if I don't have the time to digest all of those books, I'll still be able to broaden my knowledge in the short term."

"As a friend, let me give you some advice. It's better to be really good in one thing than average in everything else. Especially at the early Apprentice stage, you should be focused on developing your specialities."

"And you can help me that, sir?"

"Why the skepticism? Since you're a friend, I don't mind giving you a lesson for free. Pull up the textbook that you've learned the most from so far and I'll see if I can help solve some of your conundrums."

Though Pierce didn't think that Ves would make a very good teacher, he did as asked and pulled up a virtual textbook. Ves proceeded to tutor him in areas which Pierce only understood the most shallow principles.

It didn't take long for Pierce to become engrossed with the knowledge that Ves passed on. Ves discretely grinned as he recognized he hooked another fish.

Besides Vedette, Ves also had his eyes on Pierce. Once he had a genuine citizen from the Coalition in his grasp, Ves would be able to make more inroads in the circles of the

Coalition. Even though he already benefited from his association with the Clifford Society, it never hurt to have more options.

Chapter 556 Candidate

Ves had his eyes on multiple mech designers in the task force. No matter what, the more mech designers he gathered by his side, the better off he would be at the end of the war.

A true mech design project could not be conducted alone. Ves constantly yearned to gather his own design team at the LMC. They would be able to assist him in all manner of minor tasks in the same way the Mech Corps hired massive amounts of mech designers to pad their design teams.

As long as he controlled the main aspects of his design project, the help of others shouldn't be able to contaminate the spiritual nature of his designs.

"My Spirituality is stronger than any other mech designer, or perhaps it's better to say that I'm stronger in the creation and manipulation of imaginary existences."

Ves already proved several times that the mechs that carried his X-Factor wouldn't easily be contaminated by the fingerprints of other mech designers and mech technicians. Their non-existent spiritualities simply couldn't contend with an active one.

Still, Ves suspected that higher ranking mech designers possessed their own abilities that might be tangibly be related to spirituality. "I'll have to advance to Journeyman before I can answer this question."

It might seem strange for him to focus on his plans for the future while his survival in the coming months wasn't guaranteed. He still had to help the task force survive the obstacles that Hafner put in their way.

"It's never too early to lay some ground."

This was a key period in his life in which he would be able to connect with other mech designers without too much suspicion. If Ves attempted to recruit mech designers after the war, he'd face a lot more difficulties, the most important of which was to verify their loyalty.

"There is no better proof of loyalty than to put it to test in the harshest conditions."

The bonds of brotherhood he forged with the mech designers and the Vandals may lead to a lifelong advantage later on. That was something that his Larkinson heritage had taught.

For now though, Ves did not dare spend too much time on future matters. He still had a lot of work in the present to take care of. With a tired sigh, Ves returned to his regular duties.

Two days later, Major Verle finally stopped withholding his plans. He called for another massive conference meeting in which every mech captain and ship captain gathered in the same compartment via projections. The only physical people present were Ves and others assigned to the Shield of Hispania.

"I'm sure you are aware that the Hafner Duchy is alerted to our presence. From the intelligence we've received from the local rebels, Hafner has allocated the bulk of their uncommitted forces to the star systems near the border. Once we enter their perimeter, they'll instantly lock on to us and converge on us with rapid tempo."

Everyone nodded. This was a standard blockade tactic that the Vesians proficiently employed when they really wanted to stop a specific target. Though it was possible for the Flagrant Vandals to escape the net, the risks were unimaginably high. At the very least, some Vandals preferred to fight another round with the Frosty Meteors rather than face the full fury of the Hafner mech legions.

"We've gathered a lot of intelligence on Hafner distributed their forces. Though their core systems remain heavily guarded, the substantial drawback of uncommitted forces has left many smaller star systems bereft of a comfortable buffer against raids. After discussing the possibilities with one of the local rebel groups, we've decided to hit a specific star system. Let me show you."

A new projection appeared above the conference table. It looked like a rather small and unremarkable place. "The Nova Migolatus System centers around a fairly normal main sequence star and has four significant planets. Nova Migolatus IV is a gas giant while Nova Migolatus I is a terraformed terrestrial planet which is also the only occupied satellite in the system. Our target is here."

The details listed next to Nova Migolatus I didn't list anything worth raiding. Its overall development resembled Cloudy Curtain in that it was largely rural. It held a few large cities, but most people lived in towns and villages and kept the vast farms going. The planet did not host any form of heavy industry, which made it a very unattractive target for the Vandals to raid.

"This place is worthless!"

"What is there to steal here? Grains? Dirt? Farmers?"

Major Verle knocked his fist against the table, shutting everyone up. "Our goal here is not to go on another robbing spree. The truth is that we've accepted a commission from an influential rebel group called Peace for Hafner. Helping them in this task is scratching

their back. Once we've given them what they want, the rebels scratch our backs in turn when the time comes for us to cross the border."

Ves narrowed his eyes at that. It left a lot of things to trust. Major Verle must be very confident for this so-called Peace for Hafner to return the favor.

"If we aren't robbing the place dry, what are we after, sir?"

The commanding officer resumed his briefing. "If you didn't know any better, Nova Migolatus I looks like any other rural planet. However, its highly diverse biosphere, vast stretches of mountains and hills and non-existent satellite coverage makes it a perfect place for training mech pilots how to survive in the wild. There's a training camp on this planet, and a very special one at that."

"Our mission is to smash a training camp?"

"Not exactly. Peace for Hafner doesn't care too much about the training camp or most of its trainees. They only care about taking out a specific person. Meet Captain Relia Foster, a mech officer of the Hafner mech legions."

A supplementary projection appeared alongside the projection of Nova Migolatus I. It showed the profile of a very attractive Vesian mech officer.

"She's young, she's talented, and she's a thorn in the side of Peace for Hafner. Though Captain Foster is from common stock, it's already a done deal for her to be elevated to a baron. That's because she's a verified expert candidate."

A faint gasp could be heard throughout the conference room as everyone present looked at the woman with respect. An expert candidate!

"All of you know what an expert candidate represents." Verle stated as he glanced at everyone's expression. "They are peak advanced pilots who have pierced through the threshold that holds them back from becoming a bona fide expert pilot. When measured by precise instruments, they'll be able to measure a resonance value of 0.00001 laveres or something. Even though that is nothing compared to an actual expert, it still represents a near-assurance of advancement."

A newly advanced expert pilot exhibited resonance that measured 1 laveres on average. These values didn't sound very impressive, but the vast majority of mech pilots never registered anything on the laveres scale. They could forget about reaching 0.00001 for the rest of their lives.

Many mech pilots thought that they either possessed the right magic or not. No matter how much the overwhelming majority of mech pilots challenged themselves, they would never be able to scratch the wall that barred their advancement.

Major Verle continued his clarification. "An expert pilot is a strategic weapon to any state. The rise and fall of even one of them is significant enough to affect the national strength of a state. The situation is even more significant here because the duchies that make up the Kingdom never share their expert pilots. An additional expert in the ranks of Hafner will make all of their opponents tremble in fear. They won't be as free to invade the borders and raid a seemingly defenseless star system. It only takes one expert pilot to annihilate a small-sized raiding force. A future Venerable Foster is enough to make Peace for Hafner and many other factions suffer a substantial amount of losses."

A mech captain raised his hand. "If Captain Foster is such a valuable mech pilot, won't she have a lot of guards around her, sir? I can't imagine Hafner would be willing to treat her as anything less than a chunk of high-grade exotic."

"Good question. The reason why I've decided to accept this commission is because Hafner has made some missteps. First, an expert pilot only comes about when facing a lot of stress and the threat of death. If Captain Foster is surrounded by too many guards, why would she feel any dangerous impulses? The training camp and her guards are not as overwhelming as you think. They mainly rely on secrecy to keep themselves safe. Secondly, the Nova Migolatus System used to host a significant garrison fleet. Only, Hafner later decided to split it up and send half of the ships to the border."

This was a response to the arrival of the Flagrant Vandals in this territory. Everyone knew that the Verle Task Force sought a way out of the Kingdom. The mech regiment had no reason to linger in Hafner, therefore boosting the defense of the border was a logical decision to make.

Too bad the Flagrant Vandals didn't always adhere to logic.

Ves raised his own hand. "I have a question. Expert pilots are highly regarded, and young expert candidates are even more important. Captain Foster obviously looks young. This means that if she managed to advance into an expert, she'll likely have decades ahead to serve in Hafner's military. Her value exceeds veteran expert pilots that are getting on in their years."

"What is your question, Mr. Larkinson?" Verle interrupted with an impatient tone.

"Killing Captain Foster is like strangling Hafner's favored child in the crib. They're bound to go mad at us. Won't we be dooming ourselves by provoking their retribution?"

A heavy atmosphere descended in the conference room. Ves did not like to play the spoiler, but no one seemed to have the courage to speak out this important concern.

Major Verle seemed prepared for this question, though. He smiled back at Ves. "Your concerns are legitimate, but we already have plans in place. We believe that the panic

of our sudden invasion of the Nova Migolatus System will mainly provoke a different reaction. If we can attack one of Hafner's star systems once, who says we won't be able to do it again? Hafner will certainly be forced to pull back some of their border patrols. This will outweigh Hafner's desire to exact revenge."

Ves did not think it would be that simple, but Major Verle left no other opening for him to follow up. Obviously, the mech officer did not wish to entertain too many questions at this time.

"There is more to the Nova Migolatus System than their training camp. There are secondary objectives which we can attempt to complete while we are hunting for Captain Foster. Our preliminary timeframe for this mission is three days."

"That's too short, sir!"

"It's tight, but I am confident that we can complete this mission. We really can't afford to stick around longer than seventy-two hours. Any longer than that, and the nearest reinforcements will be bound to corner us. Don't think that these reinforcements will be as reluctant as those sent to help out the Detemen System. Time is our most precious resource and our most important constraint."

Three days sounded short because it would take a long time for the fleet to travel all the way from the outer reaches of the star system to the closest planet from the sun. Depending on how hard the Vandals pushed their ships, they could reach it within two days at a minimum. That meant that the Vandals only had less than a single day to hunt down this expert candidate.

Ves looked back at the profile of Captain Foster and shook his head. "What a shame."

Chapter 557 Devious Garrison

The Nova Migolatus System brought little to the Hafner System. Colonized and terraformed rather late, the first planet from the star had only been settled by Hafner because it made economic sense. A whole host of AIs calculated that adding an extra farming planet was cheaper than importing more food elsewhere in the long term.

Some time after Nova Migolatus I shaped into a planet fit for human habitation, Hafner latched on an additional purpose. One continent would remain unsettled. Instead, Hafner would import a variety of dangerous genetically modified alien creatures to run a preserve of some sorts. The propagation and mutation of these creatures would be strictly regulated to provide a sufficient and plentiful challenge to mechs.

In other words, Hafner constructed an entire continent-wide ecosystem for the sole purpose of breeding something to kill for the participants of an elite training camp. And they also did it covertly, covering the continent with expansive trees that reached up to a kilometer in height.

Normally, mechs threw enough weight around that they could flatten an entire forest with ease. However, if a mech charged straight at one of Nova Migolatus I's massive trees, the one who would lose would be the mech, not the tree.

The expansive tree cover also served as ways to shield the surface of the wild continent from prying eyes. The tree leaves had been genetically modified with various publically available biomods that blocked long-distance communications while interfering with any wide-area scans.

Of course, to prevent themselves from losing all contact, Hafner dug an extensive network of underground cables and communication nodes keyed to their own forces. It would be extremely difficult for an outside force to tap into this well-hidden network. This gave the forces of Hafner the homeground advantage.

Overall, hunting an expert candidate that tried their best to hide on this continent would not be easy. Without any additional intelligence, tracking Captain Relia Foster down in this megajungle was as difficult as finding a needle in a haystack.

The problem was compounded by the fact that aerial mechs wouldn't be able to do much on the Kamwin continent. The trees were too impenetrable for mechs flying above the forest. With leaves, tree branches and tree trunks interfering with everything, it was impossible for aerial mechs to provide support for their landbound counterparts.

As for letting the aerial mechs fly through the forest, well, that was a very quick way to wreck a lot of expensive machines.

The Flagrant Vandals moved quickly after Verle announced their next assignment.

As the Verle Task Force emerged out of FTL, the entire star system must have hit the panic button. Agents loyal to Peace for Hafner relayed the broad movements around Nova Migolatus I via their own quantum entanglement node. If not for that, they would have to depend on lightspeed observations to determine the decisions the defenders had made, which would certainly be hours out of date.

"The local defenders are making a stand."

Only half of the stations in the command center was manned right now, as nobody expected a fight in the immediate moment. It would take almost two days of solid burning to reach Nova Migolatus I. Only then would the prospect of a battle come into fruition.

"The orbital garrison fleet is going on alert, sir. Transports are lifting up from the planet's main spaceport. They are loading battle supplies and recalling every crew member on leave!"

"The landbound garrison force is buttoning up as well. Old mechs are being pulled out of storage while their bases are going on full alert. Their capital city is becoming increasingly fortified."

Major Verle took on a pensive expression. "Keep an eye on what is happening at the capital city, but put it on a low priority. Only notify me if they are shuffling supplies or war materiel to the continent of Kamwin."

The Vandals didn't think much of the garrison forces. Their spaceborn contingent had been neutered when Hafner took half of them to the border. As for their landbound contingent, they prioritized the defense of their capital city.

Even if the landbound garrison mechs shifted over to the Kamwin continent, they would still be outnumbered by the Vandals.

While the Vandals had some targets of opportunity in mind, their main purpose in making landfall on Nova Migolatus I was to strangle an expert baby in her cradle.

Every expert was a valuable asset, especially one that had been indoctrinated from birth in your own culture. Though mercenary expert pilots existed, their loyalty always remained in question, and it was not a good idea for a state to rely too much on human-form weapons of mass destruction that could turn on them in a dime.

Thus, to Hafner, a young and promising expert candidate was much more valuable than ten old expert pilots such as Venerable O'Callahan. There was simply no comparison between the two. Even if O'Callahan was ten years younger, his potential had already been tapped, and there was no prospect for improvement.

As for an expert candidate like Captain Foster, as long as she received the right nurturing, she would be able to experience a period of rapid growth. There was even hope for advancing into an ace pilot, though realistically that almost never happened.

All in all, an expert candidate from your own ranks was like a blank slate which you could fill with whatever you wanted. Any state would salivate at the opportunity to shape their skills and beliefs. It was like designing your own personal superhero.

"And now we've arrived to spoil their plans." Ves muttered as he directed a major undertaking.

Ves was surprised as almost everyone else when Verle announced their commission. If no one knew about Training Camp Quistas at Nova Migolatus I, they would have guessed that the Vandals aimed to raid a more important star system.

As it was, Major Verle had not given Ves the courtesy of giving him a heads up. Ves expected the Vandals to raid an industrial system like the Hachew System back in

Venidse. Urban combat was a very different beast from jungle warfare, and Ves had been forced to issue new orders to modify their landbound mechs for a safari.

Considering the nature of their commission and the difficulty of finding a lone mech on an entire continent, Ves prioritized the enhancement of as much sensor systems as possible. Improving the eyes and ears of at least five mechs in every mech company would vastly improve the odds of tracking Captain Foster down.

Below this top priority, Ves also recommended the Vandals to pay attention to maintaining communication lines. At least one mech in every mech squad should carry a communications backpack module instead of extra supplies.

"It's a good thing the Vandals employ the same Modular Fitting Standard for their backpack modules, though it's a pain in the butt as well."

The Vandals didn't build the majority of their landbound mechs. Instead, they stole them from the Vesians. This meant that they needed to adhere to Vesian technology standards, which included adopting a foreign MFS as well. Backpack modules produced according to the Bright Republic's MFS simply didn't fit on a Vesian mech. It was like trying to squeeze a square plug into a round socket.

Fortunately, the landbound contingent didn't need to bring too much spare supplies. They needed to complete the hunt in less than a day, so there wouldn't be any need to bring extra ammunition and energy cells.

"Still, there's also the local fauna to consider. Those genetically modified monsters are meant to provide a decent challenge against intruding mechs."

This might be a problem, because certain genetic modifications or cybernetic implants could make these creatures more susceptible to outside signals. The worst case scenario would be for the training camp to gather every monster and order them to attack any Vandal mech in a massive horde.

However, these safeguards could easily be subverted by anyone else. If certain spies grasped the right codes, they could turn the creatures against the training camp.

Therefore, Ves mentally ruled out such a possibility being true. "Training Camp Quistas won't be stupid enough to leave a backdoor for their enemies to exploit. The safest way to rule out subversion is to skip the backdoor entirely."

This was the rule for most critical electronics in this age. That was also why mech pilots controlled their mechs from their cockpits rather than through remote control.

"If the training camp is stupid enough to employ controllable monsters, then the hackers in our task force will have a field day."

With that worry subsided, Ves began to ready the Vandal mechs for period but not too intensive or frequent combat. According to the intelligence packages that Peace for Hafner passed on to the Vandals, the monsters generally gathered in squad-sized groups. This was hard-coded in their DNA. This allowed trainees to experience an even challenge when they grouped up into squads, but also enabled mech companies to bail them out if they fell into a spot of trouble.

For a moment, Ves wanted to laugh to himself. This game preserve came into being on the behest of Hafner, but now it seemed that the Vandals might become the main customers.

Then he remembered something. "Training Camp Quistas is an incubator for elites. It's meant to push the very best out of peak advanced pilots. With pilots of such skill, regular monsters won't be able to cut it. Only deadly monsters will do."

Despite this caveat, Ves was confident the Vandals could deal with the situation as long as they traveled in double squads or larger groups. Numbers trumped anything as long as the difference was big enough.

Having sent the necessary orders, Ves sat back and waited for the fleet to arrive in orbit.

Two days passed by without much incident. Vigilant against mines or stealth attacks, the task force constantly maintained a rotation of spaceborn mechs around their ships. Though Hafner did not have a track record of using either means, exceptions always existed, so the Vandals did not let their guard down.

Once the Vandals neared Nova Migolatus I, everyone tensed up for a battle. The big question was what the garrison mechs decided to do. For now, their landbound contingent hunkered down at the capital city, while their spaceborn counterparts seemed to adopt a looser pattern.

The Vandals wanted to mop up the spaceborn garrison quickly, so they didn't hesitate to approach their outnumbered enemy. The defenders on the other hand clearly didn't wish to tangle with the Vandals, and boosted away from orbit.

"The enemy garrison fleet is adopting a harassment strategy." The tactical officer stated calmly. "Any defense force that is largely outclassed by the invaders will not be eager to fight a conclusive battle. Instead, they've likely received orders to stall and disrupt our operations as best as they can without losing their mechs too quickly."

"They won't succeed." Verle announced. "We've restored a sufficient amount of spaceborn mechs to handle their garrison. A harassment strategy only works if your mechs are faster than the enemy's. As long as we allocate the bulk of our Inheritors and other light mechs into chasing them down, they won't be able to escape."

As long as the enemy didn't throw in other surprises, the Vandals likely didn't have to worry about anything from space.

The next hours proved this prediction as the attempted harassment fell short of what the defenders expected. The Hafner mechs mostly consisted of medium mechs. They were good in a brawl, but could not be expected to outrace an Inheritor mech.

The only snag in the plan was that the garrison employed second-hand combat carriers with peculiar modifications. Shipwrights stripped a large portion of armor from large and heavy ships and boosted their sublight propulsion. This gave the garrison carriers a hefty boost in speed.

Thus, while the defending mechs weren't able to outrun pursuit, they could still remain out of reach of the Vandals by hopping in and out of their nimble carriers!

Chapter 558 Oval Scar

"These stripped-down combat carriers are pissing me off!" Major Verle barked with obvious irritation. "They should have been reclassified as light carriers instead!"

A true light carrier was a civilian-grade starship that was built for capacity rather than protection. In that sense, a combat carrier with most of her armor peeled off could justifiably be called a more durable light carrier, as her structure was still stronger than anything available in the private market.

Ships built for speed and acceleration would always be able to outrun a light mech as long as they received a head-start. Since the defenders already saw the Vandals coming, they had been able to time their optimal starting run down to the exact second.

The Vandal spaceborn contingent never stood a chance of catching up. Unless they resorted to a drastic measure such as overloading their mechs, the chase would never bear any fruit.

The tactical officer tried to console his superior. "Sir, the garrison fleet may be able to dance out of our reach, but destroying them is a secondary objective at best. It's sufficient for us to drive them away from orbit and turn them into a non-factor to the proceedings on the surface."

Basically, both the garrison fleet and the Vandal mechs chasing after them had been put out of play. This wasn't necessarily a good thing because an outside variable could overturn the situation in space at any moment, yet the odds of something like that happening was low.

The biggest threat they needed to worry about was reinforcements sent by Hafner from the surrounding star systems. Even if they raced towards the Nova Migolatus System at

their earliest, they still needed to spend around two days to traverse from the outer edge of the system to Nova Migolatus I's orbit.

Even if Hafner sent out the biggest armada of mechs and ships, the Vandals would still be able to take action with two days of lead time.

"The situation in space can basically be ignored by us." Ves explained to Iris. Both of them had taken their customary seats in the command center. "Have we detected any hidden turrets or weapon emplacements?"

Iris had kept an eye on the situation on the surface. "None so far, boss. Hafner hasn't invested too much in fortifying Nova Migolatus I. The only turrets that our sensors picked up so far are located in and around the capital. As for the Kamwin continent, we can't say anything for certain. We've trained out most powerful orbit-to-surface sensors at the suspected coordinates of Training Camp Quistas, but it's completely covered in the same tree foliage that obscures the entire continent!"

"What does Peace for Hafner has to say? They still have agents on the inside, right?"

"That's correct, boss, though the rebel group isn't willing to expose anything to us. All they are willing to tell us is that they have multiple agents in the training camp, and at least one of them is highly placed. If it isn't absolutely necessary, this agent won't expose his true colors."

"The value of this spy must be very significant to Peace for Hafner. Ordinarily, organizations wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice their pawns if it meant they could take down the enemy queen."

The value of a young expert candidate couldn't be measured with money! Weighing her value at one-hundred billion sovies or something wasn't possible because the utility of an expert pilot was inestimably profound.

While expert pilots were capable of inflicting a massive amount of damage to an enemy force, their true value lay in using them as a deterrence. The mere existence or presence of an expert pilot would already be able to snuff out most tricks directed against Hafner.

"It's time for the next step of the plan. Begin bombardment!"

Ves already developed an inkling of why the Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan had been tasked with mass producing a lot of artificial meteorites. Now that they orbited over rural planet, these meteorites would finally meet their purpose.

Mechs began to emerge from the hangar bays of the combat carriers. Each of them teamed up to push forth the heavy artificial meteorites. Slowly, over fifty of the massive chunks of randomly-fused alloys emerged from the bowels of the ships.

"Drop them!"

The artificial meteorites received precise pushes that sent it into a precise trajectory. Miniature boosters embedded in the meteorites corrected their paths and kept them on track as their orbit slowly decayed. Each of the meteorites slowly plunged into the atmosphere of Nova Migolatus I.

The main projector displayed a wireframe model of their expected pathing. All of them had been aimed to land at a precise coordinate in the middle of the Kamwin continent!

It was the leaked location of Training Camp Quistas!

The reason why the Vandals dropped so many meteorites was because they needed to go through a lot of sturdy trees. Once they felled enough trees, the meteorites also needed to pound the ground, because the core of the training camp was at least a hundred meters underground!

The artificial meteorites were huge chunks of alloys that heated up enormously while they descended due to friction. Unless they were as blind as a bat, the Vesians on the ground would definitely be able to pick up the incoming meteorites.

"We've dropped more than enough meteorites to collapse tunnels deep underground." Major Verle remarked. "Faced with the threat of being buried underground, the camp commander will immediately choose to evacuate the camp he's responsible for. Even if they have bunkers deep and strong enough to withstand the successive kinetic impacts of over fifty meteorites, they won't be stupid enough to hole up in a single exposed location."

Because after the apocalyptic bombardment came to an end, the Vandals would immediately make landfall on the site of the annihilated training camp! If some Vesians chose to hold up in a nearby doomsday shelter, then they would certainly be killed or taken captive by the eager Vandals.

The events that played out in front of Ves followed everyone's predictions. By the time the meteorites crashed through the skyscraper trees, opening a path for the subsequent meteorites to bombard the training camp, there didn't appear to be anything valuable among the wreckage that Ves could detect from the long-ranged sensors.

A long, oval scar had been dug through the expansive foliage. This opening provided the Vandals that had been sent out immediately after the bombardment a sufficient gap to squeeze in transports.

This time, Major Verle and Captain Rakeshir decided against landing half their combat carriers to the surface. Not only was the highly-disturbed soil a poor landing spot for hefty ships, the surrounding trees made it very difficult for them to lift off in an emergency if the enemy decided to launch an all-out attack on them. It was a better

choice to make landfall with more expendable transports, even if these vessels needed to make several trips up and down in order to land all of their available landbound mechs.

The Vandals also sent down some supplies and disposable fortifications to secure their temporary beachhead. The main purpose of the beachhead was to secure their line of retreat and to establish a firm line of communication.

The latter was especially important. The Vandal fleet in orbit needed to stay in touch with the beachhead on the ground. The temporary comm center at the heart of their fortifications would in turn serve as a powerful signal beacon to facilitate communications with group of mechs sent out to hunt their primary objective.

One of the upsides to this operation was that the beachhead needed the presence of several mech designers in case the landbound mechs needed servicing. Besides sending down some random low-ranking mech designers, Ves also sent out Vedette, Mercator and Trozin.

He decided to send down the latter two because he didn't like them very much. If anything tragic happened down at the surface, at least Ves wouldn't miss their presence.

As for the choice of sending down a potential protege, Vedette didn't register too much on his radar yet. Unless his potential bloomed later on, he was strictly expendable. If Vedette happened to meet an unfortunate end, Ves could simply direct his attention to one of his colleagues instead.

Predictably, Vedette immediately demanded a private conversation with Ves. "Sir, why am I assigned to the surface?! That is no place for a mech designer!"

"On the contrary. Being close to the action means you can respond much faster than us. Mech designers shouldn't be strangers to a little excitement. I don't hate you, Vedette. In fact, I'm doing you a favor. I hope you can use this opportunity to widen your perspective enrich your ability to design mechs."

No matter how many excuses Vedette weaseled out of his cowardly mouth, Ves resolutely rejected them all. The man had been ordered to shuttle down to the surface and nothing could change his mind.

After packing off the young and inexperienced mech pilot, Ves turned to other matters.

"Has Captain Foster's whereabouts been confirmed yet?"

"Sir, according to the rebel spies, Captain Foster had already set off into the wildlands a day ago." Iris explained to Ves. "She has a significant head start over our landed forces."

"The good captain will be looking to hide her tracks, though. Fleeing at full speed won't be an option because she also needs to ration her energy. In addition, a valuable expert candidate won't travel alone, though she won't be surrounded by too many mechs. Even a child would be able to follow the tracks in that case."

Everything appeared to go to plan for the Vandals, but Ves suspected that it would not be so simple. They already met some difficulties trying to clean up the spaceborn garrison. As for hunting down an expert candidate, well, the troops on the ground wasn't chasing after a herbivore.

"A peak advanced mech pilot with a resonance strength of 0.00001 lavers is vastly more dangerous than any other advanced mech pilot. It's not out of the question for them to defeat five or ten mech pilots by themselves."

Ves read up on expert candidates in the central database after Major Verle first announced the commission. A wealth of documentation described their exact abilities. While none of their attributes exceeded the human norm, some have experienced a rapid growth akin to injecting a handful of gene boost elixirs.

In addition to that, their skills developed in rapid tempo as well, as if the candidates had found themselves in a transition point between an advanced pilot and an expert pilot.

Some mech pilots believed that if some of their skills had improved up to an invisible standard, their minds and bodies would break through the cocoon of their mundane forms and sublimate into an entirely new life phase.

Ves scratched his head when the descriptions become too opaque. Much of the documentation became filled with jargon and incomprehensible theories that only biomedical researchers understood. He didn't necessarily believe in what little he understood either.

From his own understanding, he guessed that spirituality was actually the central factor in determining whether a mech pilot could reach the expert level.

It would be nice if the Vandals managed to capture Captain Foster alive. Ves would definitely have the opportunity to get close to the captive and probe her with his abnormally strong Spirituality.

"Sir!" Ves raised his hand and gestured to Major Verle. "Are we out to capture our target, or are we only interested in killing her?"

"Ideally, I'm not opposed to capturing her. An expert candidate is prime research material. Her corpse won't be able to tell us much. If we can apprehend her alive, we can do much to alleviate our difficulties. Though we can't hope to turn her against us, we can still trade her to the Mech Corps."

The fate of a captive expert pilot was not very pleasant. Brainwashing them was possible, but that was also very much taboo. Once word got out that a state brainwashed a captive expert pilot, their own experts would immediately revolt. The MTA would also send out a rebuke.

All in all, a captive expert was like a poisoned chalice.

Chapter 559 Genetic Aptitude

Relia Foster grew up in a small town on Carpenter II, a rural planet in an unremarkable corner of the Hafner Duchy. The Carpenter System was nothing special. It lacked the industries that encouraged development.

Everyone who lived on Carpenter II knew their place. They worked in mundane jobs and paid their taxes to a noble House that they never had any hope of approaching.

When she was young, her parents taught her an important lesson.

"Little Relia. Whenever you meet a noble, never look at them in the eyes. Their might and wealth aren't something you can withstand."

"Because we are commoners?" The little girl asked.

"Because we are weak."

Over time, when Relia entered school, she learned what commoners truly represented. They owed their lives to the nobles and royals that ruled over them. It was not their place to question. They merely needed to obey.

"You are Hafners first, and Vesians second, never forget that!"

Her classes taught her that the Hafner Duchy shouldered the important duty of shielding the Vesia Kingdom against thieves and other bad men across the border. Even though the enemies dressed up in other identities, their true origin was the wicked Reinald Republic.

It was a state without morals. Their rejection of nobles had caused them to descend into anarchy and misery. Billions of people starved while the people at the top feasted with food that could have fed the entire state for a day.

"The depravity of the Reinaldians are only matched by the cruelty of the Roppongans and the zealotry of the Lisvians. Even our mortal enemies on the other side of the Kingdom cannot match the sheer evil that pours out of the Frozen Leaf Alliance."

Her teachers frequently emphasized the evilness of the trio of states across the border by showing the aftermath of their raids. Broken homes, fallen mechs, families torn apart, the Reinaldan pirates did not even let off children like Relia and her classmates!

"Sic semper pirata!"

Relia didn't know what that meant, but everyone repeated it for some reason, so she mindlessly yelled out the words in unison.

Most of the time, Relia was a precocious child who played whenever her classes ended. Her idyllic days in that small town came to an end when she reached her tenth birthday. Some Hafner men brought her family to a hospital at a nearby city and put her in some big machine.

Having heard about it from others, she knew that the machine tested something funny called genes. It was said that genes were long strips of strings, and if they wound up just the right way, you became a bigshot that other people called a potentate!

Occasionally, some boy or girl from her town would test positive for the right genes. Their entire family had cause to celebrate because Hafner bestowed them lots of money so that the newly-discovered potentate could attend a distant academy, which was like a school for fighting!

Still, this almost never happened, so Relia didn't think she was anything special.

She was so wrong.

The console in front of the doctor beeped in alarm. After a short analysis, the doctor grinned and whooped.

"What is wrong? Is there something wrong with our child?" Her mother asked with concern.

"Nothing of the sort! Your child is very likely to be a potentate, and not a weak one at that! Further testing is required!"

The excitement uprooted the entire hospital. Doctors and nurses kept prodding at her, taking out samples of blood and saliva. They even cut her brown locks of hair!

For some reason, the hospital couldn't come to a definite conclusion about the specialness of her genes. Only half a day later, a big and menacing shuttle arrived before the hospital and took away Relia and her parents. Little Relia thought that they would be taken to the capital city of Carpenter System.

She was wrong.

Despite the harsh military lines of the shuttle's interior, the journey went absolutely smooth, so much so that Relia only found out later that they had been brought into space!

"Wow! I'm actually in space! My friends will be so jealous of me!"

She didn't know that she would never return to Carpenter II at that time.

As Relia stared out of the porthole of the shuttle, admiring the globe that was her home, the vehicle slowly docked with a larger vessel that turned out to be a corvette. While the Fosters made themselves comfortable in the cramped ship, the corvette zipped to an entirely different star system!

"Wow! We're actually travelling faster than light! Mom, is light really fast?"

Her mother laughed awkwardly before trying to distract her daughter with some toys.

A few days later, the corvette arrived at a star system that Relia only heard from her teachers. "We're in the Beicham System!"

The Beicham System was the capital system of the Hafner Duchy! The Duke of Hafner himself resided in a massive palace on Beicham III! When the big men told Relia that she would be brought to a special facility on that same planet, Relia's eyes began to grow stars! What wonders would she see?

Once the corvette went through a number of security checks, another shuttle brought the Fosters to the surface of Beicham III. The shuttle touched down in an enclosed parking space, whereupon men armed with weapons that Relia had only seen in dramas firmly guided her family inside a massive research facility of some sorts.

The little girl oohed and aahed at every fancy machine in her sights, even though she recognized none of her functions. Their high-tech appearances alone served to ignite her curiosity.

Once deep inside the facility, Relia underwent a more expansive round of testing. The frequent prodding made her feel scared, but her parents were always by her side, so she managed to withheld her cries.

Fortunately, the Hafner doctors didn't disturb her for too long. They ended their testing after three days of testing and informed their family of some of the results.

"Congratulations Mr. and Mrs. Foster, your daughter is a promising individual!" The senior doctor announced with a smile.

"Is she sick or anything!?"

"Oh, she is as healthy as she could be. Genetically, she's remarkably perfect! There are Fridaymen who would be envious of her genetics!"

"Then... what is all this about? Why isn't Relia like the other potentates from our town?"

The doctor took on a serious expression. "Potentates are rare among our population, but they emerge frequently enough for Hafner to treat them according to long-standing policies. However, there are some cases which merit a closer look. Young Relia is exactly such a special case. The preliminary results from the clinic from your rural planet were so astounding that we didn't hesitate to bring you to the capital of the Hafner Duchy. What our state-of-the-art machines have determined has only verified those amazing results!"

"So is this something good for little Relia?"

"It is more than good!" The senior doctor proclaimed, then turned to Relia with a gentle smile. "Relia Foster, your potential has been tested, and not found wanting at all. From this day onward, you may now bear the status of potentate with pride!"

Relia already thought about the extra allowance the Hafners would pay to the family members of a potentate, but the doctor wasn't finished.

"It is our pleasure to announce to you an additional blessing! Through rigorous investigation, we have determined that your genetic aptitude has reached one of the most uppermost percentiles of all potentates! In normal parlance, your genetic aptitude falls squarely into A grade!"

A grade genetic aptitude!

Even though the Foster parents didn't know the full weight of that grade, they knew that little Relia was much more special than they thought!

"Then... will she be attending an academy at Carpenter II?"

"No! Absolutely not! Why would Hafner want to waste uncut gem like Relia? Those hillbilly teachers at your podunk academy won't be able to bring out more than a tenth of her potential! Ah, forgive my excitement. This is good news for you! Though the paperwork will come later, I can already tell you that Hafner will sponsor your new lives on Beicham III! Your daughter will enter one of the most prestigious mech academies on our capital planet and receive the highest level of tutoring! Come twenty years later, your daughter will definitely become one of Hafner's heroes!"

From that day onwards, Relia said goodbye to her pleasant and tranquil life on Carpenter II. The Hafner administration whisked the Fosters away to a villa ten times larger than their old home. While her father and mother received easy jobs on the capital planet, Relia was pushed into attending a fancy academy.

All of the changes scared her if she was being honest. She was scared out of her wits when she found out that a lot of noble sons and daughters attended their elite academy!

Fortunately, the Hafner people did their best to welcome her in their midst. After her much more wealthy cadets found out that she possessed an A grade aptitude, her noble cadets bumped away her fellow commoners in the academy and tried to befriend her as much as possible.

It was a wild ride for Relia, though she could always depend on her tutors to set her straight. She only found out later that the Hafners paid a lot of attention to the nurturing of each A grade potentate. In the circle of mech pilots, everyone else were commoners while an A grade potentate like her received treatment akin to a noble!

It was like the galaxy had been turned upside down!

Her time at the academy quickly proved her talent. She breezed through the classes to the point where she mastered the lessons two to four times faster than her fellow cadets! Each time she learned something new, she absorbed the knowledge and skills like a sponge and displayed them with perfect accuracy when she hopped into a training mech!

She quickly distinguished herself at the academy. Besides a handful of other A grade potentates in other year groups, nobody could best her in a fair duel. Relia quickly became accustomed to fighting under handicaps whenever she needed to duel her fellow cadets.

"Your progress is excellent, Cadet Foster."

"I aim to please." She nodded demurely.

Besides learning how to fight, she also learned a lot of etiquette and how to speak words without offending someone important. Just because she was an A grade potentate didn't mean the Duke of Hafner would stay his hand if she called him a bastard.

"Since you require less time to master your lessons, your supervisor has decided to supplement your lesson plan with officer training."

"Officer training, sir?"

"The moment you graduate, you will immediately become a commissioned officer in the Hafner mech legions. This is a rare privilege that will kickstart your career, so don't treat this opportunity lightly!"

From then on, Relia not only trained to become a mech pilot, she was also being groomed into a mech officer. Though the former came naturally to her, the latter

provided her with much more challenges. Leadership had nothing to do with genetic aptitude, so she needed to learn the ropes the old fashioned way.

If not for the help of her tutors, Relia would have never made it through officer training. As part of her training to become a mech officer, she found herself being challenged to lead her fellow cadets during classes. Since everyone was still young, it was exceptionally hard to get them to adhere to her orders.

The young but growing woman managed somehow. Though some people envied her genetic aptitude and despised her commoner status, the academy teachers made it clear that she was destined for greater things! Knighthood was within her grasp!

Once most cadets knew that she was a knight in the making, they stopped regarding her as a lucky commoner and treated her as if she was already part of the lowest peerage. After passing through this hurdle, Relia smoothly graduated from the junior academy and effortlessly graduated from the advanced academy as well.

The Mech Legion commissioned her as a mech lieutenant when she was fresh out of training.

Though she wanted to spend more time with her parents, the newly christened Lieutenant Foster knew that her family's privileges could only be sustained by fulfilling her obligations. She followed the arrangements of the Mech Legion and joined a Hafner mech regiment called the Hostland Warriors.

Chapter 560 Sic Semper Pirata

The 7th Hostland Warriors of the 4th Hafner Mech Legion became her new home. After ten years of study, Relia Foster finally found her true calling.

Relia fit particularly well with the Hostland Warriors. While they weren't particularly elite, their main strength lay in their versatility.

The Warriors adhered to a balanced lineup of spaceborn, aerial and landbound medium mechs. They utilized a dizzying amount of mech models, only some of which had been developed in-house. The responsibility of developing the less important designs had been outsourced to loyal Hafner mech designers operating in the private market.

None of that was important to Relia. The best trait about the Warriors was that they mixed up their mech pilots between different roles and mech types, allowing them to slowly explore their best roles.

Her first few years as a lieutenant served as a honeymoon of sorts. She refined the lessons she learned in real deployments against real enemies. Though her first battle frightened her a bit, her training bit in and she managed to deal through the reality of serving in the armed forces of the Hafner Duchy.

"Mech pilots are trained to kill."

No matter who they fought, the Hostland Warriors always fought on behalf of their homes! To Relia, she fought for the welfare of her family. No matter what, as a dutiful daughter who has received the nurturing of all of Hafner, Relia eagerly wished to repay her debts.

So began her first tour of duty, where she rotated between the vastly different mech companies of the Hostland Warriors. Each mech company possessed their own unique quirks and worked with a different mix of mech models. This allowed Relia to sample different types of mechs and employ them in vastly different circumstances.

From piloting a landbound cannoneer, to intercepting a fleeing pirate in a spaceborn light skirmisher, Relia tried them all. In the end, she returned to her initial choice, and settled on her primary specialty.

"There is nothing better than to wield the sword."

There was a sense of purity in piloting a swordsman mech. Though the lack of shield hampered its defensive capability, from a different perspective it liberated the mech type from getting bogged down. The balance of speed, armor and agility of a medium swordsman mech turned them into exquisite warriors that required a lot of thought and finesse to draw out their potential.

Other mech archetypes did not require too much thinking to put them into use. A knight mech mainly put up their shields to guard their comrades from incoming fire, while a rifleman mech only needed to point the barrel of their guns in the right direction.

Not that Relia still had much to learn when it came to piloting those mech types, but many of her fellow Warriors already had them covered. What she truly craved was a challenge. Piloting a mech came easy to her, perhaps a little too easy for her tastes.

The lack of challenges unsettled her. What she needed was to find the perfect mech type that would slow her down and force her to learn the lessons that she hadn't been able to receive when she piloted a simpler mech.

The sword looked simple, but it allowed any mech to outplay their opponents. The effectiveness of swordsman mechs against ranged opponents depended on whether they could catch up to them. As for slower mechs and other melee mechs, it was fair game to Relia.

With the right techniques and a deep understanding of her mechs, Relia became a whirlwind of violence against the opponents of the Hostland Warriors. This predominantly meant fighting against Reinaldan pirates.

"Greedy and cowardly scum!"

No matter how hard the Hafner mech legions tried to guard their borders, the Reinaldians always managed to invade their stars! Often times, the Hostland Warriors arrived too late to save a vulnerable shipping convoy or an isolated planet. Each time she witnessed the aftermath of a pirate attack, she became more and more angry.

She stepped up her sword training, learning various styles and techniques from her fellow Warriors. Her mech regiment patrolled a vast stretch of stars and formed roving patrols that allowed their mech pilots to witness different sights. Each new star system opened Relia's eyes to what Hafner truly consisted of. These were the stars she was duty bound to protect!

Her sense of purpose strengthened with each new sight. She fit in well with the Hostland Warriors too, as her competence won over the skeptics who thought she was a bit too young to be an officer.

Still, nothing was ever certain when piloting mechs. Most of the times, the units Relia was a part of achieved some measure of success. Whether it was smashing apart pirate mechs or chasing them away, the Hostland Warriors always caused the pirates to scatter in fear.

That was until her patrol unit met a large pirate gathering composed of over four spaceborn mech companies.

Compared to the two mech companies that the Hostland Warriors sent out to their location, they were woefully outnumbered!

The pirates smelled blood and immediately moved to gang up on them! Relia fought with vim and fury in her spaceborn swordsman mech. Even as her fellow Warriors fell under the onslaught, she found a fire within herself that allowed her mech to move a little faster and hit a little harder.

"Sic semper pirata!"

This tiny difference meant everything to her, and she started to chop a succession of pirate mechs in rapid tempo. She felled so many pirates that day that she single-handedly drove them off from continuing the fight!

The loss of so many mech pilots devastated the Hostland Warriors, though. Relia didn't feel as if she achieved a victory. Nevertheless, the Warriors celebrated her prowess, and due to an opportune vacancy, even managed to push her into becoming a captain.

Ever since then, Relia sometimes called back to her amazing back then. Whenever she found herself in a challenging situation, she drew upon some hidden strength and burst out with an amazing level of performance.

For a long time, Relia thought that she was drawing upon feelings of vengeance and righteous retribution.

Yet the Hostland Warriors began to grow suspicious. When they activated all of their sensors in the next big fight, the truth astounded every Warrior, including Relia!

It turned out that she had poked a tiny hole into the barrier that barred her way from becoming something greater!

"Captain Foster, you're an expert candidate!"

Even though Relia was blessed with A grade genetic aptitude, she had never dared to dream that she would be able to advance into an expert pilot. Every expert was a transcendent figure among them. They were more than human and could even be said to have stepped on the path of godhood!

For all of those scientists to claim that Relia had the potential to join their ranks simply made her silly. How could she be so blessed? Had she saved an entire planet from annihilation in her past life?

When the Warriors offered to sponsor her entry into an elite training camp meant to push promising mech pilots into breaking through the barrier, Relia tentatively accepted this opportunity.

"At my current state, I won't be able to take revenge against every pirate. Once I become a genuine expert, it will be a different story."

As for her automatic elevation to the noble rank of baron, Relia didn't care. Mundane trappings ceased to spark her interest, though she faintly thought that she would be able to give her family an even better life.

Training Camp Quistas brought her away from the war against pirates, which she initially hated. What was the use of battling a bunch of giant tigers and other animals when there were pirates out there that needed to be stopped?

Relia quickly learned that the training camp was not as easy as she thought. They developed a rigorous training program that could push the limits of everyone who participated. Even expert candidates like her couldn't breeze through the program without effort!

"There are so many monsters on this planet!"

From reptiles to mammals to bizarre alien creatures that resembled crystals and living oozes, Relia fought against numerous mech-sized beasts every day. Sometimes she travelled in a squad, but most of the time the training camp had sent her out alone.

Only when she was alone would she face a sufficient challenge.

Due to genetic programming, adult monsters possessed a grouping instinct where they often gathered together in small gatherings. Against a standard mech squad, such a group of monsters could be deadly in the wrong circumstances.

Against a single expert candidate, this group of monsters pressured her like nothing she had experienced before. Even the fight that formed the catalyst to the transformation of her life phase, withstanding an onslaught of monster attacks was supremely challenging for her. These creatures weren't stupid and utilized rudimentary pack tactics against a lone mech.

Each battle seemed to be a struggle between life and death. She drew out her potential in each and every hard fought battle, of which there was many in her time on the Kamwin continent.

"What does not kill me makes me stronger."

Though she believed that the training camp wouldn't let her die against a bunch of overgrown beasts, she still experienced a lot of stimulation during her fights. Each time she survived another fight, it became a little easier to enter into that particular state of mind where all of her capabilities received a comprehensive boost.

"It's taking less and less effort to enter my super mode!"

Relia guessed that once she reached the point where she could sustain her so-called super mode indefinitely, she had successfully advanced to expert pilot!

According to her own judgement, she was five or six months away from that point. Though the threat from the monsters had diminished a little, she still experienced enough harvests to continue this pattern of training.

That was until foreigners invaded the Nova Migolatus System!

"Brighters are coming! The Flagrant Vandals have come to burn down the entire system!"

The Flagrant Vandals had become the entire kingdom's latest bogeymen. Their daring assault on the Detemen System and their successes in beating back the Calico Dancer Bats and Frosty Meteors had given them a formidable reputation! Vile, greedy and unprincipled, this raiding regiment was nothing different from a pirate gang!

Even as everyone in the training camp panicked, Relia instead relished an opportunity to fight against the famed Vandals.

"You're in danger, Captain Foster! Word has come that they are specifically here to deal with you!"

The camp commander prioritized the safety of their most promising seed over everything else. Against her judgement, Relia had been ordered to board her mech and run as far away as possible!

It was humiliating, yet orders were orders!

She had witnessed the events that followed after. From the unscrupulous use of artificial meteorites, to the landing of the Vandal landbound forces, Relia witnessed it all through her connection with the underground communication network.

The Vandals proved more competent than Hafner had thought. They somehow sniffed out the right direction of Relia's retreat, and sent out their fastest in pursuit.

Since Relia piloted a medium swordsman mech, she would never be able to outrun the hounds. In addition, her flight had also been severely hampered by the need to erase all of their traces. If not for that, then her head start would have been more substantial!

Still, the way the Vandals honed in the right direction was suspiciously uncanny. Was there a spy among her escorts?

It didn't matter. Spy or not, she would use her strength to smash their ambitions!

"Get ready to fight! Sic semper pirata!"

"Sic semper pirata!"

The first skirmish unfolded in a fury. The overeager mech pilots of the scout mechs that hounded her squad couldn't help but take their first bite. Their skirmishers employed hit-and-run attacks, relying on their excellent mobility to remain out of reach.

"You're not the only one who can sprint!"

Unfortunately, Relia's swordsman mech was capable of exerting a large amount of power in very short bursts! The legs of her mechs exploded into action, enabling her to close the distance in rapid tempo. Her mech instantly performed three slashes in succession as it dashed through the ranks of the Vandal mechs.

Three of their mechs instantly collapsed to the ground, each of them bearing fatal sword wounds!

"My sword will run red with Brighter blood! Sic semper pirata!"