

Chapter 611 Water Wraith

Once the Flagrant Vandals occupied the shipyard and chased away the stragglers, the place began to come to life. After Ves delegated all of the essential tasks, he basically sat back and watched his underlings do all of the hard work.

"It's good to be the boss." He said with a satisfied smile.

The Vandals happened to have found a couple of heavy-duty transport shuttles in a forced-open hangar structure. While it couldn't match the lifting power and cargo capacity of a proper transport, they were better than nothing.

Unfortunately, the previous occupants of the shipyard broke into them and attempted to fiddle with their hardware and software in order to circumvent its locks. The broken parts and garbage strewn about made it clear that they hadn't been very proficient in their attempts.

"Can they even fly?" Ves asked with skepticism.

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Larkinson." Chief Vasar said. "While I'm not familiar with this transport shuttle model, they're not so different from each other. I can definitely fix up the broken parts. As for the operating system, our hackers should be able to subvert them quickly."

The small collection of transport shuttles became the most important asset of the Vandals stranded on Harkensen I. they were not only capable of conveying mechs over long distances, but they also possessed the ability to climb into space.

However, relying on these transport shuttles alone to bring the Vandals into space wouldn't work. Anyone who flew into orbit would summarily be blown apart by the spaceborn mechs patrolling in orbit. In addition, they would only be able to convey several hundred people per trip.

The Reinaldans didn't even dare to capture any escaping ships, for fear that they had been rigged to blow. They would never grant the Vandals the time to make several round-trips. For better or worse, the Vandals needed to obtain enough space-capable transport capacity to lift up into space in a single escape attempt.

Under the experienced eye of Chief Vasar, the mech technicians and hackers slowly fixed up the shuttles while bringing them under their control. The hackers didn't even have to sweat too much to subvert their programming because their civilian-grade security suite hadn't been updated for years.

"Good! Now that we've got some lifting capacity, it's time to bring in the mechs."

Other Vandals had already been sent out to scout the outskirts of the city for salvageable wrecks. They mostly aimed their sights at the remains of the amphibian mechs.

While the Vandals could have opted to salvage the wrecks of the mechs from the Planetary Guard or the Honored Ones, that would have pissed the Reinaldans off.

Right now, the Reinaldans already had their hands full trying to put up multiple fires. The devastating at the larger cities was especially damaging to their prestige. For now, they channeled most of their resources and attention at providing relief in those regions, leaving medium-sized cities like the one the Vandals resided in on their own.

This outcome suited the Vandals, and they did not wish to attract the attention of the Reinaldans. As long as nobody crossed the red line, the Vandals would remain below everyone's radar.

Still, that didn't mean the Vandals had free reign. Many different outfit members gathered together and fought over strategic resources. While the

Planetary Guard dropped an abundant amount of nutrient packs and packaged water from the air, ensuring that nobody would starve, many visitors desired for more. Tools, weapons, vehicles and more became highly sought-after goods that incited some people to risk their lives to obtain.

The Vandals did not disappoint in this aspect. Their numbers made them one of the largest cohesive groups in the city, and their military training and coordination overwhelmed any opposition in their way. Gang members revelling in the chaos tended to become overconfident, but once they fought twice or thrice the number of Vandals, they quickly learned their lesson or landed in an early grave.

Ves did not have to concern himself with protecting the salvaging parties. The mech officers such as Captain Orfan had the issue well in hand.

A sudden cheer erupted from the edge of the complex.

"We've recovered our first wreck!"

A decently-intact wreck hovered into view from above. Several chains connected the wreck to a formation of shuttles flying in unison. Several heavy-duty lifter bots placed on strategic positions around the mech helped take up some of the burden.

Even then, the amphibian mech that weighed as much as a medium knight mech could barely be brought back to the shipyard complex.

"Well, let's see what big boy we have here."

As Ves and a number of mech designers and mech technicians gathered over to the wreck that had been dumped at a designated area, they got their first clear look at the machine that caused them terror last night.

"Its design is really good!" Ves said with evident admiration in his tone. "Has anyone identified its model yet?"

"It's an unregistered model. There's no record of this exact mech model in the MTA's database." Mercator answered. "However, I've snooped around and found a partial match for Gliesen Systems' Water Wraith WAWA-44AE model. The mech model is designed around the concept of bombarding shore positions from the water. The AE variant sacrifices all close-ranged combat options for stronger ranged abilities. Its dual-purpose cannons are highly effective on land, but not as good underwater."

The Water Wraith looked like a fat humanoid mech with extra bits. Its surface was coated in blue and green, and besides bearing the insignia of the True Sons of Vesia, it exhibited no other noticeable features.

Even without studying amphibian mechs in depth, Ves could tell the Water Wraith's design tried its best to balance out its performance over land and underwater. Its thick, streamlined armor had obviously been designed to keep it watertight and capable of withstanding a fair amount of pressure. Different from true aquatic mechs, the mech model hadn't been designed to withstand the crushing pressure of the deep. Depending on the characteristics of the ocean, diving three or four kilometers deep was probably their limit.

"Where is Gliesen Systems based at?"

"It's... not a company native to the Komodo Star Sector. According to the records, it's a mech manufacturer from the Vicious Mountain Star Sector."

That caused everyone to mutter in surprise. Humanity settled Vicious Mountain earlier than Komodo, so its overall level of development was significantly higher.

"Does Gliesen Systems maintain any branches in our star sector?"

"None as far as I'm aware of. They may have extended their presence here through hidden partnerships, but if there are any, you won't be able to find any proof on the galactic net."

This oddity sounded very strange to Ves. Why would the masterminds behind the terrorist attacks make use of a Vicious Mountain mech design? It was not as if the mech designers from Komodo lazed about. They developed more than enough amphibian mech designs to choose from. Could this be a hint that the scope of the conflict encompassed multiple star sector, or was this just another red herring meant to lead investigators on a false trail?

No matter the truth, the Vandals had to work with the mechs at hand. "Alright, there's no point in speculating. Let's start by fixing up this mech! Mr. Mercator! Since you're so good at investigating stuff on the galactic net, see if you can't dig up some schematics or specifications on the Water Wraith. Even a repair manual will do."

The other mech designer shook his head. "Mr. Larkinson, I'd like to remind you that the wrecks from the battlefield are not exact copies of the Water Wraith. What is the use of digging up those documents?"

"Even if these wrecks are variants, they should still use the same components. Restoring them will be a lot easier if we have something to base our work upon."

"But.. not everything will match. How are we going to deal with the discrepancies."

Ves sighed. "Leave that job to me. Jury rigging is something of a specialty of mine. If we can't make the right parts, we can always fudge something up until it resembles the original. We're not looking to produce a long-lasting mech! It's good as it holds up for a week or so!"

The reminder set their priorities straight. They did not need to work at the highest standard of quality. While that was important when it came for the main mechs of the Vandals, right now they only needed to borrow the strength of the Water Wraiths for a few days.

Once they transported the wreck to a workshop area converted for their use, Ves inspected the

wreck and drew up a preliminary restoration plan.

"The front armor looks trashed, but the internals don't require too much work to fix up." Ves stated his conclusions to the crowd. "Both the engine and the power reactor look like they can hold up, but we should double-check their integrity nonetheless. The cockpit is a total loss, though. Replacing it is going to be the biggest hassle to restoring this mech."

The Vandals opted to recover this particular mech first because it seemed the easiest to repair. Compared with fabricating an entirely new engine or power reactor, duplicating a cockpit was much simpler. The only complication was that they needed to replicate the software as well, which was a significant hassle but not a big one as long as they employed hackers.

"Alright, let's temporary designate this mech as WW-1. Mr. Vedette?"

Loke Vedette stepped forward. "Yes, sir?"

"You're in charge of restoring this mech."

"Me? But this is too big for me!"

"Oh, don't be such a worrywart. I'll take care of the design work. Your only job is to supervise the restoration process and to fix the small incompatibility issues that emerge."

Ves assigned Vedette to WW-1 because the mech was probably the easiest to bring back to life.

His judgement was proven right because in the next couple of hours, the transport shuttled dragged over several wrecks in increasingly more awful conditions. One lost both of its legs as well as a head, while another one exhibited a hole from front to back which swallowed half of its power reactor.

He assigned Mr. Mercator, Chief Keys and Chief Vasar to oversee the restoration of the other mechs. As for the wrecks the Vandals brought afterwards, Ves gave up on them after determining their exact state. The damage they suffered was so extensive that the Vandals likely needed materials they couldn't obtain from the city.

They were only useful for the spare parts that the Vandals could scavenge off their broken frames. In particular, armor plating was hard to come by, so having a ready source available helped speed up the restoration work.

Ves busied himself with solving all manner of technical problems. Despite the number of wrecks they recovered, some broken parts simply didn't have any spares to go around. He felt as if he became an emergency responder who constantly had to go back and forth in order to put out the fires started by his own underlings.

Time passed as the mechs slowly started to get back together. Since their lives and freedom depended on their efforts, the mech technicians required no further encouragement to work hard.

Ves had rarely seen them work at their full potential. It turned out that they became quite capable. The mech overseen by Vedette only needed a couple more hours to return to fighting condition. The other three Water Wraiths required further work to get back online, but would likely be back in working condition on the next day.

The Vandals became fully alert when night fell. They feared a repeat of what happened last night. Vandals on night shift vigilantly kept their eyes and scanners peeled for trouble.

Having learned their lessons this time, the Vandals procured a large batch of scanners from somewhere and pointed them in every direction, including the water.

Anyone approaching from stealth would regret it. Ves had become somewhat paranoid about this issue, so he also implemented some other tricks.

Chapter 612 Hidden Dagger

Ves reflected on the difficulties he faced in the past, and the most recurring threat always seemed to come from nowhere. Use of stealth technology appeared to be much more ubiquitous than he thought.

"I've been screwed way too many times by attackers hiding under stealth."

He knew how powerful stealth technology could be under the right circumstances. He himself made use of the Full Stealth Augment from the System in the past. Its uses had saved his life at several critical moments.

If Ves could make good use of stealth, so could his enemies.

Before, Ves had the misconception that stealth was a rare breed in the galactic rim. Now he knew better.

"It's likely because the use of stealth technology isn't publicised."

No one wanted to draw attention to their successes when it didn't suit them. A stealth operation only succeeded when nobody knew what really happened.

When Ves thought about the applications of stealth technology, he realized that the benefits outweighed the costs. A stealthed commando shuttle at the right place at the right time could easily disable a large and expensive ship.

"The cost of research and development isn't cheap, but it shouldn't cost too much money to raise a spaceborn commando force or a squad of highly-trained infiltrators."

Training and equipping a squad of infiltrators probably cost around ten million bright credits under those conditions. As long as someone spend this much money, they obtained a versatile means of sabotaging a facility worth an

entire fortune or kidnapping an important scientist who could earn back billions in credits.

Ves also didn't forget about Venidse's largely successful attempt at crippling the ships of the task force a few months earlier. Those stealthed commando shuttles only cost tens of millions of credits at most, and they had been capable of crippling large logistics ships worth several billion credits at the very least.

Plenty of methods existed to counteract stealth technology, but the problem was they came with greater costs. In the relatively poor and resource-barren places along the galactic rim, the standard of technology wasn't very high. Good anti-stealth technology required a significant investment in research and funding.

Presumably, the only reason why stealth and anti-stealth technology hadn't become more prevalent was because only the larger players had access to them. While some off-the-shelf stealth and anti-stealth technology could be procured from the open market, their specifications became somewhat of a known factor as a result.

When those products became popular enough to become widespread, developers could easily reverse engineer their inner workings and develop counters for their next product release.

"Perhaps only state-like entities are the only ones in the galaxy that can bear the cost of participating in this rat race."

The reality of the matter was that placing a large number of handheld scanners onto rods and pointing them in every direction likely didn't help that much. The scanner devices could easily be fooled and lacked the power to brute-force their way through the more sophisticated applications of stealth technology.

Fortunately, the Vandals didn't put all of their hopes on these scanners. Every Vandal on patrol carried around a sack or container of sand dug up from the nearby beach. Once in a while, they grabbed a handful of sand and threw it around.

Some of the hackers and mech technicians even reprogrammed some spare bots into doing the same.

Though these means didn't seem foolproof, it massively increased the difficulty of attempting to infiltrate the shipyard. Their true worth lay in their deterrence value. The Vandals basically made it so that it wasn't worth the trouble to intrude upon their domain.

Perhaps they had gotten their wish.

The night passed uneventfully. With the Reinaldan mechs on high alert, anyone who wanted to sow more death and destruction wouldn't be able to catch them off guard anymore. The True Sons of Vesia evidently hadn't showed up again.

Despite the lack of infiltrators showing up behind his back, Ves still didn't relax his vigilance against stealthed opponents. He developed a thorough loathing for this mode of attack.

As long as threats came openly to him, Ves could always form an appropriate response. The trouble with stealth attacks was that they never left him with sufficient time to respond. As soon as he found out about anything amiss, the worst had already happened.

The more he became entangled with the conflicts taking place at the upper rungs of power, the higher the odds of encountering applications of stealth technology. Ves resolved to guard against its use and develop his own solutions that counteracted any threats hiding under stealth.

"Once I have some free time, it's time to hit the books again."

In the meantime, Ves caught up on what had supposedly happened during the night. The stories circulating on the galactic net reported several suspected battles going on during the night. All of them occurred far away from any city limits and underwater, so most of the inhabitants hadn't seen any signs at night.

When Ves browsed the news articles, he figured that at least seventy-five percent of the reports contained pure fantasy. The events only existed in the imagination of the news portals that wanted to draw more traffic to their premium services.

The only threats the night shift took care of amounted to fending off random groups of rioters and other troublemakers.

Nonetheless, a large portion of the Honored Ones stationed around the city departed to reinforce other positions. This indicated that the fighting hadn't ended yet. For now, the unknown assailants still possessed the strength to contend against the Reinaldians stationed on this planet.

How long this could last, nobody knew.

"The Harkensen System is one of the Reinald Republic's major star systems." A logistics officer explained to Ves the next morning. "They have many mech units in reserve. While they don't dare to strip the defenses of Harkensen II and Harkensen III to reinforce Harkensen I, it's only a matter of time before reinforcements arrive."

"How long do we have?" Ves asked.

"According to the intelligence we've gathered, we need to complete our business within forty-eight hours. Any longer than that and our projections enter into a deeply pessimistic state."

Once the Reinaldians mobilized an overwhelming amount of mechs to dominate the planet and its orbit, the Vandals lost their chance to get away.

Even though many vacationers complained about the forced delays before they could finally depart from the planet, the Reinald Republic was not an affable state at this moment. No matter how much weight the tourists and outfit commanders threw around, they could not contend against the government's determination to sniff out the terrorists and exterminate them to the last man.

"I don't understand why the Reinaldians are so hung up about keeping everyone in their place. They're pissing off billions of tourists by keeping them imprisoned on the surface."

Though the initial outburst of violence had faded at the end of the day, the living conditions were far from ideal. Both native Reinaldians and wealthy foreigners alike suffered from the lack of order under equal measure. Their impressions of the Reinaldan Republic worsened by the hour.

The logistics officer thought about it for a moment. "The Reinald Republic is going for the long game here. To us, it might not seem worth it, but to the Republic, the only way they can really salvage their reputation is by hunting down the majority of the culprits. Finding a couple of scapegoats won't do."

Ves understood this argument, but he really didn't agree with it. The human suffering occurring on the surface could have been relieved to a large extent if many of the visitors left the planet.

"Maybe there's a greater motive involved." Ves put out another guess.

"Redeeming their reputation is a basic goal, but the bigger issue is that certain influences have put Reinald in their crosshairs. So long as the Reinaldians can capture enough enemies, they'll eventually be able to find out the true source of their problems."

"That makes sense. However, the extreme reaction from the Reinaldians may also be for a more basic reason, Mr. Larkinson."

"What's that?"

"The enemy obtained something that the Reinaldans really don't want to let loose from their grasp."

When Ves heard this possibility, a small bomb exploded in his mind. This reason made a lot more sense than any notions about redeeming honor or trying to figure out the mastermind behind this plot.

He still remembered that a week earlier, Harkensen III became engulfed with a spike of violent incidents. Perhaps the things the secret combatants fought over was also present on Harkensen I.

"Well, you've given me a lot to think about, that's for sure."

Once everyone ate nutrient packs for breakfast, they resumed their work. Mech technicians crawled over the disassembled mechs like bees in a hive. Each of them contributed their own efforts into restoring the salvaged mechs to some form of functionality.

Vedette's WW-1 became the first salvaged mech to come to life. The test pilot who turned the mech online put the restored mech to its paces.

A lot of problems popped up due to the overly-hasty work, but Ves didn't mind them too much. The Vandals could deal with them for the time being.

"We've obtained our first mech!"

With a working example at hand, the remaining work crews became much more productive. The importance of WW-1 was that it provided a solid direction for the rest to work towards. They didn't have to come up with their own solutions to overcome difficult problems anymore.

In the afternoon, two more mechs came online. Dubbed WW-2 and WW-3, their overall integrity was worse than WW-1. In a pitched battle, their weak and patched-up armor coverage could easily lead to their downfall.

The Vandals didn't ask for much, luckily. Even a basic mech would do as long as it could move and pose a threat. The true worth of the mech lay in the ability to elevate their group over the heads of others that didn't possess any working mech!

On Harkensen I, almost no private outfit or group possessed a mech! Owning even a shambling mech meant that their battle capabilities instantly multiplied by a thousand. Even the Reinaldan peacekeepers would keep their distance from the Vandals now that their mechs could pick them off from a distance!

If the Vandals possessed a single Water Wraith when they initially approached the shipyard, they never would have bothered to fight the thugs who occupied it first. The shipyard would have already emptied out by the time the mech approached into firing range!

"Now we are talking." Captain Orfan grinned as she stopped by the workshop area. "With these beauties in hand, we can finally step up to the next phase of the plan."

"And what is that?" Ves asked.

"Why, taking them out for a spin! Now that we've become the top dog, it's time to take what is ours!"

Once the last Water Wraith became operational, the Vandals left WW-1 behind to guard the shipyard. They took WW-2, WW-3 and WW-4 and placed them at the head of three large expedition groups.

Their goal? Loot more ships and supplies!

The three mechs wandered off into the city, walking well ahead of a convoy of aircars and other vehicles bringing hundreds of Vandals along.

Whenever the local bullies attempted to repel the Water Wraiths, the Vandal mech pilots ruthlessly retaliated by firing back with their heavy cannons. Even a single kinetic projectile was sufficient to obliterate their strongholds!

Tyrannical! Flagrant! The instant the Vandals regained their power, they didn't hesitate to throw around their weight!

Once the Vandals demonstrated their willingness to use the weapons in their possession, the other outfits instantly became honest. The Vandals extorted their aircars and other supplies at gunpoint, and there was nothing the victims could do about it. Naturally, the Vandals didn't go too far with their robbing spree. Once they obtained sufficient aircars, they let off on the rest.

Chapter 613 Aircar Flee

"They call it The Big Breakout." Captain Orfan said to the crowd of high-ranking Vandals. "Everything is hush-hush for now, so don't spread it around. The only reason why the main players invited us is because we've salvaged some working mechs."

Everyone including Ves looked intrigued. Some of them might have been aware that some of the trapped foreigners attempted to organize a big escape. However, Ves did not expect they valued working mechs so much, but it made sense now that he thought about their scarcity.

Orfan smiled at the way the crowd looked at her. Another reason why they had been contacted was because she had recently shown her strength on Harkensen III. "Mechs are strategic resources on this planet. You all know how stingy the Reinaldians are with possession of mechs. If they aren't so busy chasing after the terrorists, they would have taken them away from our hands by now."

Right now, only the Planetary Guard remained to guard the cities affected by the attacks. The landbound mechs of the Honored Ones all pulled back to reinforce more strategic locations or assist with the ongoing counterattack.

Nobody was clear of the exact details. While Ves could always listen to rumors on the galactic net, the problem was that most of it was nonsense. The Honored Ones likely generated most of the rumors themselves in order to flood the net and make it impossible for anyone to figure out their true movements.

"When will The Big Breakout start?" Someone asked.

"They've only given us sixteen hours to reach the capital city. If we haven't reached Tecev City within sixteen hours, they're starting without us. Even if we join at a later stage, we might not be in time to obtain a transport or a ship by then."

The attendants of the meeting all showed ugly faces.

"Sixteen hours is too little time to bring everything with us!"

"It only takes an afternoon for us to fly everyone of us to the capital, but we don't possess a vehicle capable enough to bring along our mechs."

If Harkensen I's infrastructure had still been working properly, then it only took six hours to fly to Tecev City. However, under the collapse in order, safety couldn't be guaranteed. Who knew how many people would fire missiles at a fleet of aircars and other vehicles in the air?

The question on how to bring their mechs along became the most thorny issue. During their robbing spree, the Vandals prioritized the theft of heavy-duty shuttles. Even then, they barely gathered enough to lift two mechs and bring them to Tecev City at a decent speed.

"Do we really have to leave two mechs behind?" Chief Keys furrowed his brows. The man rarely spoke during the meetings. "I'm afraid we won't have much of a say if we only bring half our mechs."

A mech officer spoke up. "We have all these aircars. Can't we use them to lift up the mechs instead?"

"That's far too risky! Do you know how much a mech weighs? The Water Wraiths weigh more than a medium-sized office building! We need to connect a mech to more than a hundred aircars to generate the lifting power necessary to transport a mech. It only takes a single error for the entire arrangement to collapse. There is no way we can safely transport a mech to Tecev City in this way!"

Ves had thought about this problem ever since he suspected the Vandals intended to relocate to the capital city. With thousands of kilometers of land and ocean to traverse, bringing along the Water Wraiths was by far their greatest challenge.

"The Water Wraiths are amphibian mechs, right?" A logistics officer asked. "Why can't they get to Tecev City on their own power?"

"They're too slow." Ves immediately shook his head.

"But why? I thought that water mechs are supposed to be fast."

"It is indeed true that many aquatic mechs can traverse the waters quickly. They're larger and more powerful than landbound mechs and incorporate a special form of propulsion in their frame to achieve supercavitation. The shape of an amphibian mech of this price tier isn't compatible with this means of propulsion. In short, the Water Wraiths have given up their ability to move quickly over water in order to gain the ability to walk on land."

By definition, amphibian mechs were products of compromise. Their shapes, sizes, weapon loadout and means of propulsion all attempted to accommodate two wildly different environments. Torn between these two extremes, amphibian mechs could never match the performance of an equivalent landbound mech on land or an equivalent aquatic mech in water.

Everyone fell silent for a moment.

Out of all of those present, Captain Orfan appeared the gloomiest of all. "I already promised the big players that we'd show up with four mechs. If we only bring half of what they expect, we'll mess up all of their planning. Do we really have no way of bringing all of our working mechs to Tecev City?"

Since nobody provided any suggestions, Ves did not hesitate any longer. "I still have one suggestion. I'm not in favor of it because the Water Wraiths aren't in good shape, but it seems we have no choice but to consider the option. The problem right now is that it's too much of a burden to lift a couple of extremely hefty mechs. Why not cut them up? Let's disassemble the two Water Wraiths into several pieces. As long as we are careful, our aircars will have a much easier time in lifting a couple of parts."

The technically-inclined Vandals seriously considered the proposal. They did not show immediate enthusiasm for the solution because it came with several caveats.

"There are a number of issues that come with this proposal." Chief Vasar stated. "First, disassembling the mechs takes time. Assembling it back into a working mech takes even more time. Will we be able to do both as well as relocate to Tecev City within sixteen hours?"

"I'm not sure. But there's no harm in trying. It's better than leaving the mechs behind."

"Can the disassembled parts withstand the rigors of travel in this fashion?"

Ves already had an answer to this issue. "We don't need to lift the parts in the open. This shipyard stores many spare containers. We can disassemble the parts into pieces that can fit inside the containers to protect them from exposure and avoid attracting any attention."

A few more issues popped up, but either Ves or some of the other mech designers and mech technicians always managed to come up with a solution.

"Alright! It seems you fellows have this well in hand!" Captain Orfan finally clapped her hands. Many of the mech officers and ship officers looked bored at the discussion. "Since the clock is ticking, let's adjourn this meeting and get ready to move everyone out! We need to bring as many supplies as we need for the upcoming operation!"

The Vandals had already been ready to move out at any moment. With this much manpower, they tidied up the shipyard and packed up all of the supplies they thought they needed.

Preparing the mechs for transport took a lot more time, however. The Vandals spent two hours trying to speed up the partial disassembly of WW-3 and WW-4. Ves had decided upon cutting up the worst two mechs while leaving their better mechs intact in order to preserve their defensive ability.

Even if WW-1 and WW-2 were being towed in the air, they could still go online at any moment and fire at anything that attempted to threaten them. So long as they kept those mechs functional, the Vandals possessed sufficient deterrence to cross over to Tecev City without getting entangled along the way.

More than two hours later, the Flagrant Vandals collectively lifted off. Several hundred aircars moved into the air in waves. Sturdy alloy cables connected a dozen or so aircars to a container. Each group of aircar lifted off a separate container filled with Water Wraith parts along with other supplies.

The aircars formed into a giant but largely vulnerable fleet. In order to provide some measure of security, heavy-duty transport shuttles lifted up WW-1 and WW-2, both of which had entered standby mode. The shuttles positioned the mechs at the front and the rear of the fleet.

The massive swarm finally moved away from the city and started to make their way over to Tecev City. They made for a dramatic sight, and everyone that witnessed their migration became awed at their enterprise.

Seeing two functional mechs being towed in the air made for a profound sight to anyone who witnessed the movement. Every city or settlement in the way fell silent as the intimidating Vandals flew past their vicinity.

Word got out about their movements and the settlements along the way all turned out to witness their passing. Of course, not everyone was willing to see the Vandals make it out.

At another medium-sized city, a volley of missiles suddenly launched towards the fleet. With so many aircars in the sky, the missiles could have their pick of vehicles to blow up!

"Activate anti-missile systems!"

The Water Wraith at the front fired fragmented projectiles from their gun barrels, each aimed at a different incoming missile. Within a second, the deadly missiles had all been swept up, exploding harmlessly in the air.

"Backtrack the trajectory of the missiles and teach them a lesson!"

This time, WW-1 fired off all of its cannons. Instead of fragmented projectiles, the mech fired off solid kinetic slugs this time. Their high velocity quickly delivered them to the city block where the missiles had emerged.

Boom!

The heavy impacts flattened the entire area around the enemy stronghold and certainly wiped out every human in the vicinity!

"That will show them what will happen if they mess with the Vandals!"

WW-1 deliberately went overkill in order to demonstrate their willingness to hit back twice as hard. By killing the chicken to scare the monkeys, every other group along the way who wanted to mess with the Vandals finally lost heart.

The fleet of vehicles reached the outskirts of Tecev City almost half a day later.

Ves peered through the window of the transport shuttle he was riding with and evaluated the state of the city.

The sprawled-out metropolis prohibited high-rise structures, so the capital city featured a gigantic sprawl of different neighborhoods and districts, each of which served a different community. The adobe walls and tropical climate evoked a sense of paradise, and ordinarily average people could only dream of living in this prosperous city.

Now, the paradise had fallen. Just like many other cities affected by the attacks, most districts witnessed a partial or complete collapse of order. Though the Reinaldans sent out a large amount of Planetary Guard mechs to keep the piece, Tecev City was host to many millions citizens and foreigners. It was impossible to pacify the entire city within a week!

The Reinaldans concentrated most of their defenses around government buildings and military bases. This left many gaps which turned into a gigantic no man's land. Every street was under the control of a different thug, some of which possessed the strength to threaten the Vandals.

Flying high above their heads was bound to be regarded as a provocation, so the fleet of aircars quickly descended from the air and landed a fair distance away from Tecev City's spaceport.

As soon as the aircars landed on the ground, Ves and the others quickly left their vehicles. "We've only got less than two hours left to reassemble WW-3 and WW-4! We need to hurry up!"

While Captain Orfan and some of the cadre flew off to meet with the organizers of The Big Breakout, the Vandals who remained needed to get ready to take part in the operation.

Their first priority should be to put the disassembled pieces of the Water Wraiths back together!

Chapter 614 Tecev City

"Mr. Larkinson, what now?"

"We can't put the Water Wraiths back together out in the open." Ves sighed in an exasperated manner. "It's a good thing I've done some research. I've identified a shuttle workshop in the vicinity that reluctantly meets our needs. Go take a Water Wraith and kick out the occupants! I don't care how you manage to do so, just make sure you don't damage the production equipment!"

After spending so much time among the Vandals, Ves inevitably picked up some of their inclinations. Before, Ves would have never thought to outright plunder the possessions of others.

Before the Mech Corps called him up, Ves mainly adopted a commercial mindset. Everything desirable became something of value. Every person and every group provided different goods and services to others for a price. A transaction occurred when two different parties agreed on an exchange of different goods or services.

As a businessman who made his way up from scratch, his perspective became more and more tinged with lenses that only saw society in terms of transactions. A balance of demand and supply dictated his own responses.

The Vandals obviously didn't think that way. Certainly, they made transactions when it suited them. They relied on them to acquire their own funding. Outside of that, their default state was a little lawless. If anything could be taken for

free, then they would certainly make a grab at it! Power dictated how far they could go!

"This isn't a normal way of looking at things, but it has its uses."

It allowed them to skip a lot of troublesome matters. As long as they possessed enough strength, they could take what they wanted without much repercussions. The Vandals didn't particularly care about pissing people off. As long as they were small fry, they didn't lose any sleep over their morally bankrupt behavior.

During times of peace, this pattern of thinking was problematic. In times of turmoil like now, the Vandals adapted to its rules like fish in water.

Upon his suggestion, the Vandals moved out with a single intact mech and a bunch of armored Vandals. Upon approaching the workshop, its occupants had already scrambled out of the structure. They did not wish to be present when the intimidating mech pointed its guns at them!

"Well, that was fast."

This saved the Vandals a lot of trouble. With a quick command, the aircar fleet returned to the air and made a short hop over to the workshop. Container after container entered the workshop premises. Scores of mech technicians guided lifter bots to open them up and place them at an assembly point. After adjusting the workshop's assembly system, the Vandals puzzled the Water Wraiths back together with rapid tempo.

"Too slow!" Chief Vasar exhorted his mech technicians. "Split up the work! I don't need five mech technicians to install the engine! Three will do! As for you two, go help out the fitting process of the legs!"

Assembling the mechs back together required lots of precision but little thought. Aside from some thorny issues arising from improper handling, Ves and the other mech designers did not need to intervene too much.

In truth, with the sheer amount of mech designers and mech technicians among them, working on only a single pair of mechs was overkill. They had more than enough manpower at their disposal to restore WW-3 and WW-4.

As soon as the mech pilots of both mechs successfully booted them up, everyone celebrated their success!

"Yes!"

"They work!"

Ves did not look as happy as the others. Due to the haste involved with this operation, disassembly and reassembly processes proceeded sloppier than normal. Some of the parts sustained minute amounts of damage, and the lack of proper tools meant that some of the parts hadn't been solidly fixed in place.

Considering that WW-3 and WW-4 already came in a very poor state, the extra damage compounded their performance hit.

"I wouldn't trust WW-3 and WW-4 to last in a fight." Ves said to the two chief technicians as they watched the celebration.

Both of the chiefs would have never let the mechs deploy at their current state. They looked tough on the outside but were brittle from within. Their cannons also exhibited a number of problems.

Chief Vasar crossed his hands. "We've got no choice. They're ugly, but we can't always marry the pretty ones."

Ves turned to Vedette and Mercator. "What do you two think? Do you believe it's proper to send these two mechs out for battle?"

"Our needs rank higher than some safety rules, sir." Mercator answered.

"During a crisis, sometimes the best way to solve a problem is if you ignore the problem instead. As long as it's not too big, it won't affect you that much."

Vedette murmured some generic words of no import. For someone who Ves kept his eye out, Vedette's continued timidness became increasingly more intolerable. Still, Ves couldn't do anything about it. The low-ranking mech designer needed to grow his confidence on his own, and the only way for him to do that was to accumulate his strength over time.

Maybe a few years would ripen him up. Ves looked forward to the day he obtained a capable assistant that could assist him in his design work.

After making sure the two mechs wouldn't fall apart in the next couple of days, Ves met with Captain Orfan in private. She recently returned from an important meeting with the organizers of The Big Breakout.

"So what's the news?"

"We're in!" She grinned at Ves. "It's a good thing you fixed up those two mechs. Now that we've brought four intact mechs to the table, our right to speak has become stronger. We're part of the groups that have first dibs to any vessels parked in the spaceport."

"That's good news!"

Tecev City's spaceport saw a lot of traffic, and therefore offered parking space to a lot of vessels capable of reaching orbit. However, there was a division between the space worthiness of different vehicles.

Aircars and shuttles stood out as small, fragile craft that would not last a single second on the battlefield.

Aircars as a rule hadn't been designed with vacuum in mind. They also lacked the power to climb all the way out of the gravity well of a planet.

Shuttles on the other hand possessed a little more robustness, and they possessed enough propulsion to climb up to orbit on most terrestrial planets.

They came in many shapes and sizes, but the general definition of a shuttle meant it was unlikely that they could lift more than a single container at a time.

The larger issue with shuttles was that they were lacking in speed and endurance when it came to deep space travel. They were sufficient enough to bring someone from the surface of a planet to its moon and back. Any further than that, people usually transferred to other vessels.

The truly valuable ships at the spaceport possessed genuine in-system travel capabilities. Transports and passenger ships both formed the staple ship classes in conveying people and goods from one planet to another.

Some even came installed with FTL drives, but in general their limited capacity made it uneconomical to turn them into ships capable of reaching other star systems.

Only true starships possessed the qualifications to enter interstellar space. Many of the larger starships were so big and heavy that they lost the capability to descend onto the surface of a planet. They couldn't handle the stress involved with fighting against the gravity of a planet.

According to some of the information circulating on the galactic net, a number of true starships was currently parked in the spaceport right now! If the Vandals managed to obtain a ship with a decent amount of cargo or passenger space, they would be set for life, even if they technically committed piracy.

"I know what you're thinking, Mr. Larkinson. I hate to spoil your hopes, but the other groups already divvied out the starships. We're left with taking a couple of transports. Enough to bring four-thousand Vandals into space with enough room to spare, but not enough to bring along our mechs."

"At least we've got something." Ves sighed. "A handful of transports is good. However, they're not meant to carry thousands of Vandals. Their life support

systems will break before we can escape the atmosphere. We'll have to obtain some vacsuits or bring in additional oxygen and water."

"I know you can handle it. Just work that clever brain of yours." Orfan patted his shoulder. "I gotta go and brief the other officers. We'll be making our move at dawn. For that, we need to send the Water Wraiths ahead."

The Vandals promised to send the Water Wraiths in advance in order to fit them into the main group of mechs. Nobody was stupid. They only had one shot at The Big Breakout, and in order to maximize their chances of success, the different mechs needed some time to figure out how they could work together and coordinate their actions.

Keeping them separate and under the command of individual outfits was not the way to go. They needed to move as one and act as one.

In truth, this couldn't be done in a couple of hours. However, like anything about this operation, they never had enough time to do things properly. They just had to make do with a hasty effort. It was already good enough if every mech pilot understood the same commands.

Four mech pilots entered the Water Wraiths and disappeared into the streets. The Vandals all felt much less safe now that they lost their most effective protective talisman.

"I hope we don't have to wait long."

Right now, night had fallen, and the Vandals caught up with their sleep whenever possible. The Vandals never loosened up on their vigilance. Tecev City was not their home turf, and even if they possessed four working mechs, other factions and groups might possess more!

"We're not the only ones who have salvaged some mechs."

According to Captain Orfan, four mechs gave them some speaking rights, but not enough to gain the right to appropriate a starship. Ves deduced that other groups must be in the possession of even more mechs.

"The terrorists allocated most of their strengths in attacking the major cities. Tecev City is certainly their highest priority."

All of their strengths gathered together turned them into a force to be reckoned with. Though they would still fall short of contending against the Reinaldans, their goal had never been to come into conflict with them. If the Reinaldans hadn't issued a blockade, the tourists would have never been in opposition to the local authorities.

Everyone sharpened their swords and tidied up their possessions in preparation for The Big Breakout. The main organizers of this operation kept their cards close to their chest. The last thing everyone wanted to see was the Reinaldans receiving advance warning of what they intended to do. Secrecy became paramount at this time.

Ves received a comm call all of a sudden. He frowned at that. "Who's calling me at this hour?"

He normally received messages when someone wanted to get in touch with him. At this hour, most Vandals should be at sleep. He looked around and entered a quiet area in the workshop.

Once he accepted the call, an unexpected face showed up.

"Miss Calibast!" Ves hissed with alarm. "How in hell did you obtain my contact details?"

"That's not important, Ves." The woman smirked at him. "I haven't called you on a whim. Time is short, so let me get to the point. We require your assistance."

Ves looked at Calibast as if she was a dullard. "Why would I ever want to do that? Whoever you are, Vesian, Reinaldan, Roppongan, Lisvian or whatever, you're certainly involved with the initial attacks!"

Her smirk grew wider. "Can't you just take my word that I'm a Vesian?"

"Who would believe you?"

She shook her head. "Whatever floats your boat."

"If that's all, I'll hang up now."

"Don't be too hasty, Ves. If you do, you'll never find out how you can save The Big Breakout from disaster."

That attracted his attention. "You know about that?"

Chapter 615 Veiled Negotiation

It shouldn't have been possible for someone to obtain the contact details of a military-issued comm. By default, they blocked all incoming contacts from unknown sources. This prevented the comm from being influenced by malicious code and annoying ads.

Not even most of the Vandals possessed the privileges to send a message to his comm. The only ones who possessed the necessary qualifications would either have to be a chief technician, a mech designer or a senior officer. As for the rank-and-file, Ves wasn't interested in hearing them out.

For Calabast to obtain his contact details, she either retained the services of an extremely skilled hacker, or she accessed the comm of one of those people mentioned above.

Ves grimaced even further. Calabast not only had the ability to contact him willy-nilly, she also knew about their escape plan. "The thing is, even if there's an issue with The Big Breakout, why are you approaching me of all people?"

"Don't overvalue yourself. You're not the only one who we've approached." Calabast replied with a calm smirk. "Even without your assistance, my goals can still be met. Contacting you is just an afterthought."

Though it was hard to determine Calabast's intentions, his intuition told him she was mixing truth with lies. His business sense told him that Calabast attempted to gain the upper hand in an upcoming negotiation.

A negotiation meant a bargaining process. Each side wanted something from the other side, but neither side was aware of each other's limits. The best negotiations resulted in a win-win situation for both sides. However, if one side bargained too well while the other side let themselves get ripped off, a win-lose situation could easily occur.

An important weapon in any bargaining process was information. If one side possessed more information about the limits and intentions of the other side, they gained an inestimable advantage. They could use their superior information to extract the maximum amount of value out of the other side while minimizing the price they needed to pay in return.

Right now, Ves knew that he possessed a very distinct disadvantage in this area. Even as the temporary head designer of the Vandal task force, Major Verle had never initiated Ves into his inner circle.

The Vandals of the outer circle usually played fast and loose with the rules. However, it was a very different matter when it came to the inner circle. Each member of the inner circle kept their lips sealed on the secrets they learned. If not for being more perceptive than others, Ves would have never been aware of this undercurrent hiding underneath the mech regiment's facade.

"Miss Calabast, let's not be too obtuse here. You contacting me definitely means you're out to get something from me. I'm not too keen on interacting

with a suspected terrorist such as you. The blood on your hands must be enough to fill Harkensen's oceans."

The woman carefully maintained her expression. She did not exhibit a single micro-expression on her face, a sign of extremely diligent training. "There are no permanent enemies, only permanent interests. Whatever you think about me, it won't benefit you at all if you keep up your hostility to me. Let me remind you that The Big Breakout that your allies are brewing in the dark can only succeed in a single shot. Once you fail, the Reinaldians won't let those spacecraft linger at Tecev City's spaceport."

She had a good point. The most important requirement to the plan was to use misdirection to draw the attention of the Reinaldians away from the spaceport. Though they would never let up their patrols around the strategic location, for now they believed that the mechs they had already stationed there possessed enough strength to deter anyone with greedy intentions.

Ves already knew that at this moment, the masterminds incited other groups to stir up trouble at various points in Tecev City. For a short time, the garrison mechs stationed in the city would be drawn away from the spaceport.

"If you're so concerned about the viability of The Big Breakout, you should be talking to Captain Orfan, not me. I don't possess a lot of decision-making power among the Vandals."

Calabast snorted contemptuously at the mention of the mech captain. "I like to engage with someone rational. A neanderthal like Captain Orfan won't be able to get around my identity."

"That's because she's able to recognize you're a snake."

"Why, I take that as a compliment." Calabast grinned at Ves. "Blunt objects such as Captain Orfan are good if you want to employ a hammer at your problems. Yet they aren't so handy when it comes to complex issues. The

Reinaldan blockade is absolutely not so simple. From my perspective, The Big Breakout at its current form is doomed from the start. Without our help, you will not be able to depart from this planet with your freedom intact."

Ves still maintained some skepticism. "The Reinald Republic isn't hostile to the Bright Republic. Even if they throw us in jail, we'll only be stuck for a couple of months at most. Maybe if I'm lucky, I can ride out the rest of the war in a comfortable cell."

"How shortsighted!" Calabast humphed. "You really don't know anything, do you? Perhaps you don't see the harm in being held back in Reinaldan custody, but let me tell you, everything the Flagrant Vandals have been working towards will be in vain! All those battles and all those sacrifices, and for what? To give the Vesians a bloody nose? Ask yourself if those casualties are worth the price for the gains the Vandals have accomplished so far."

Up to now, the Vandals won several battles and skirmishes over the Vesians. However, their impact in the greater war was much less significant. The biggest gain had been to pierce the Vesia Kingdom's belief in their own infallibility. The Vandals had shown them in a brutal fashion that their interior wasn't as safe as they thought.

The victories also affected the morale of both sides. The confidence of the Bright Republic had received a much-needed boost at the right time.

In many ways, determining whether the sacrifices had been worth it was very difficult to judge. To Ves, it seemed the Vandals had suffered a lot on behalf of the Bright Republic, but only obtained some scraps in return.

To the selfish Flagrant Vandals, they would never work to the death for the benefit of others.

"I'm still reserving my judgement, but I'm willing to hear you out." Ves cautiously said. "What is it that you want?"

Calabast paused for a moment. Instead the comm suddenly broke connection.

Ves scratched his head. Why did she cut off the comm call all of a sudden?

A familiar voice suddenly spoke from behind. "That is because I can only discuss this matter in person."

Ves immediately jumped and turned around. "Calabast! How did you manage to sneak all the way here?! We've set up an entire scanning perimeter!"

The smirking intelligence operative jerked her head at the handheld scanners placed on top of poles. "Those toys? We've long cracked their code. To them, we're completely invisible and inaudible. The same goes for your comm right now."

Looking carefully at Calabast, this time she wore a suit that looked very similar to the ones worn by the infiltrators that had infiltrated the hotel previously. While this did not connect her to those infiltrators directly, it was a strong sign that Ves was facing an enemy instead of an ally.

A strange device pulsed on her toolbelt. To Ves, his eyes and ears seemed to buzz as he concentrated on the little gadget. That must have been the device responsible for blocking every means of recording. The power coming out of the object very overbearing for such a small package.

Ves couldn't help but flex his fingers. If anything went wrong, he would instantly call up the Amastendira and blast this woman into ash.

"Don't be so nervous." She spoke. This time, her proximity to Ves made her voice sound much more lifelike than over the comm. "I am not here to hurt you. I come in good faith."

As if Ves believed those words.

"Get to the point. I don't feel comfortable meeting you like this. What is it that you really want?"

"Alright, I can see you don't require any more finessing." Calabast nodded as if she was satisfied with his performance. "We want some spots on your ship when make your escape."

"Absolutely not!"

The Flagrant Vandals would never tolerate any outsiders in their group. It was impossible for Ves to convince Captain Orfan and the rest to bring in a couple of random strangers. If the Vandals found out that the strangers Ves wished to bring along belonged to the terrorists that had engulfed Harkensen I in turmoil, then there would certainly be hell to pay.

"I don't suggest you take it up with the Vandals." Calabast shook her head after seeing his response. "You're a mech designer, are you not? There are many ways you can smuggle people along your group. You Vandals are intending to bring along some loot, are you not? My men can easily hide inside your containers. As long as your ships can break the blockade, my men can quietly leave the containers and step into space without alarming any Vandals."

This... Ves furrowed his brows. Accepting Calabast's trade wouldn't harm the Vandals any further at this point. However, he could not forget the Vandals killed by the infiltrators and the casualties they suffered when their hotel got shelled by the True Sons of Vesia.

Though it sounded contradictory, the Vandals valued brotherhood and loyalty. They hated their enemies and would never stoop to betray their principles in order to obtain more benefits.

This was one of their redeeming factors that distinguished them from pirates. No matter what awful stunt they performed, all the time they fought on behalf of the Bright Republic.

If Ves entertained Calabast's request, then he would be breaking one of the core tenets of the Vandals. It would tarnish his honor if his actions became known.

Still.. what was honor worth? Everything had a price, and while Ves had his bottom lines, he was not beyond taking some advantages as long as nobody got harmed.

He came to a decision. "If you wish me to facilitate this smuggling attempt, you need to show me some sincerity. Solving the disaster of that is facing The Big Breakout is not enough for me. That's basically helping yourself now that we are on the same ship."

Calabast crossed her arms. "We are already doing you a great favor. Let me remind you that you are not the only ones we've approached. If your demands are too outrageous, then I don't mind approaching someone else instead of you."

"I'm not asking for much. I mainly want information this time. That shouldn't cost you anything."

"Information is valuable, you know. I might not answer if you ask the wrong questions. If you want to know our background, then don't bother."

Ves fell silent as he formulated his question. Of all the things he wanted to know, one question constantly nagged him ever since the Vandals left the Detemen System.

"I'm tired of running in the dark. There's so much going on in the background that it's driving me crazy. All I want to know is what is actually going on. All this time, I've been reacting to danger without knowing why I'm involved. My patience has run out. I want to know what is driving all of you to this conflict. This shouldn't be a difficult question to answer."

There, he said it. He spoke his question, and therefore revealed what he wanted to Calabast. He could have traded this opportunity for other favors, but they would never be as valuable as finding out the truth. Considering that so many players were already aware of what was going on, this shouldn't have been a big request.

Chapter 616 Remnant Power

From their conversation so far, Ves knew that Calabast was absolutely a tough customer. Negotiating with her from a disadvantage would never work out well for him if he pushed too far. This was why Ves had carefully sought a worthwhile question to ask.

His request shouldn't have touched Calabast's bottom line. The value of this piece of information was inestimable to Ves, considering that he had no hope of joining Major Verle's inner circle. After all, he was not a careerist mech designer who signed up to the Mech Corps for the long run.

In fact, this information shouldn't be particularly valuable to Calabast, because many players already knew what was going on. Leaking the truth to one more person hardly changed the board.

Considering what Calabast and her organization received in return, she would not lose out at all. Properly speaking, this transaction should have been a win-win opportunity. Though Calabast won a little more than Ves, as long as she spoke the truth, he didn't mind the small disparity.

Perhaps that was the only way for Ves to gain in this negotiation. Someone as sly as Calabast would never consent to a transaction in which she ate more losses compared to Ves.

As predicted, Calabast met his request with welcome surprise. "Looks like you're finally tired of being the frog in the well. You want to jump out, do you? I can help you with that, but be aware that there's no way out at this point. I'd

like to receive some assurances that you will go through with what we ask of you."

Ten more invisible people emerged from stealth. They positioned themselves in a semicircle around Calabast. Though they wore the same modified stealth suits as Calabast, to Ves the differences to the infiltrator suits was cosmetic.

Still, enemy or not, at the moment they had more to gain from cooperating. Ves tried hard not to show any hostility to the new arrivals.

"If you asked me to sneak off five people or less, then it won't take too much effort for me. Ten is much more difficult. The Vandals may not possess the best means to detect stowaways, but they are very vigilant when it comes to guarding their own loot."

Ves sighed in aspiration. When the Vandals first received the working Water Wraiths, they went on a robbing spree in the coastal city. They primarily looted the other gangs and mercenaries of their weapons, armor suits, aircars and anything else that helped in a fight.

However, the Vandals stole much more than all of this boring stuff. They also smashed apart some luxury shops and robbed all kinds of valuables. From quality exotic jewelry to luxury goods, the Vandals sure took advantage of this rare opportunity to clean the city out.

"I am confident in your ability to get it done, Ves. Don't underestimate our stealth abilities. We can circumvent most scanning sweeps. You only need to make sure that the Vandals won't open up the containers and rummage around for no reason."

This sounded difficult, but not impossible. The main challenge was to find a reason to open up a couple of containers and let the invisible men sneak inside.

"I'll try my best, but if the Vandals have become active before I finished the job, I won't be able to help you any further." Ves simply said. "Since our agreement has come to this point, I think I deserve to know the truth."

Calabast looked closely at Ves and seemed to be satisfied at his sincerity. To his credit, Ves truly possessed the intention to go along with this transaction. This was because once Ves smuggled Calabast's men inside the containers, the interests of the Vandals and her organization truly aligned.

Considering the risky nature of The Big Breakout, now that they worked towards the same goal, they would definitely insure the Vandals succeeded in their attempts to depart the planet.

"Well, the secret behind all of the unrest is very profound. First, have you ever heard of the Starlight Megalodon?"

Ves repeated the name in his mind. The name did not ring a bell inside his head, but it sounded very profound. "That sounds like the name of a starship, and not a small one either."

Calabast's eyes grew heated. "How little you truly know. The Starlight Megalodon is not just any ship. If you dive into the galactic net, you can easily trace her origins. Far from the tiny ships we are riding on today, the Starlight Megalodon is one of the most destructive weapons in the hands of humanity. That is because she's not some kind of fleet carrier. She's a queen among capital ships, a battleship commissioned several hundred years ago by the CFA."

His eyes widened at that revelation. "A battleship of the Common Fleet Alliance!"

The CFA was the only human organization that had won the right to field humanity's warships. Countless warships traversed the stars and patrolled the huge stretch of space that humanity had conquered.

A destroyer or two already possessed sufficient firepower to demolish the Verle Task Force at its prime. The weapons mounted on their ships possessed a larger caliber and drew their power directly from the ship instead of from a mech. This increase in scale had no limits. The larger the ship, the more tyrannical their weapons became.

Warships defined the Age of Conquest that came before the Age of Mechs. Their dreadful power and majesty became had been seared in humanity's collective consciousness ever since they first toppled over the alien empires that used to human space.

"What is the Starlight Megalodon? What's the relevance of an old battleship?"

After a few seconds of thought, he grew confused. Just like mechs, warships aged as well. Their core technologies grew irrelevant with the passing of time while certain core components irreversibly wore out. At some point, the cost of upgrading the ship and repairing its inadequacies surpassed the cost of commissioning a brand-new ship.

The average lifecycle of a mech spanned from ten to twenty years with normal use. In comparison, the lifecycle of a ship mostly ranged from sixty years to a hundred years, though this was only a rough guideline.

An organization as powerful and wealthy as the CFA had no reason to hang onto a ship more than a hundred years old. The cost of battleships may be ruinous, but for a force at the helm of a civilization that spanned half the galaxy, obtaining a couple of new battleships was trivial.

"The Starlight Megalodon did not meet a normal end." Calabast said. "During an operation in the frontier beyond this star sector, the Megalodon encountered a freak accident during FTL travel. For a long time, the CFA and everyone else believed she was lost with all hands."

"I take it the Megalodon is not as lost as everyone has thought."

"Correct." She nodded. "A very small number of people obtained clues that the Starlight Megalodon definitely exists up to today. She hasn't been torn apart in the higher dimensions, nor had she been sucked into the gravity well of a black hole or a sun. She's intact, and maybe even alive!"

The repercussions of these revelations impacted Ves a lot. "Are you guys nuts!? Are you out to steal this battleship? The CFA won't tolerate other humans encroaching upon their monopoly on power. This is one of their biggest taboos!"

"Calm down. From what we have gathered, the Megalodon is in a bad state right now. Even if she's in a better shape, none of us dare to swallow the entire ship. We only want to strip her of some valuables that we know she's carrying in her vaults. The CFA stands at the apex of human society, and every single aspect of the Megalodon is made in the standard of a first-rate superstate!"

That alone sounded extremely attractive. In the aftermath of the Groening Mission, Ves had once received the opportunity to board a ship of the CFA. Though Ves had only been able to observe some superficial sights, what he witnessed that time had already impressed him of the height of humanity. A ship constructed according to the standards of the galactic center far surpassed the primitive starships of the galactic rim.

"If the Starlight Megalodon is in bad shape, how come you found out about her in the first place?"

"The short answer is that the Starlight Megalodon has crash-landed on an untamed planet. Over time, the original crew have all died off, but before they croaked, they followed their instincts and gave birth to descendents. Repeat this cycle a couple of times and you have a whole community of humans that have essentially gone native in the frontier. Recently, some of us have gotten

into contact with some of their descendants. We even captured some of them, but keeping them alive proved more difficult than we thought."

This story grew wilder and wilder as Ves listened on. He would have treated the tale as fantasy if not for Calabast's serious retelling.

"These descendants. They just wandered off into the frontier for no reason?"

"No." She shook her head. "There is a reason for that. The Megalodon is in a very bad state, and it has grown worse due to the condition of the planet she has crash-landed upon. The planet she's landed on turns out to be a Super Earth. It's gravity is several times higher than the terran standard."

Now he knew that Calabast wasn't lying to him. This was because Ves recalled the time where he helped the Vandals purchase high-gravity equipment in bulk! The expense of this transaction was very significant, especially since the equipment had to be rated to withstand five g's!

"If you managed to capture a descendant, couldn't you have traced his route back to the Megalodon?"

Calabast grinned again. "Ah, that's the puzzle that we have all been trying to solve. The descendants of the crew might have degenerated a lot compared to their ancestors, but they still possess some common sense. Everyone sent out into the frontier travelled on modified FTL-capable shuttles. In particular, they tweaked their navigation system to wipe out the route they traversed. This isn't something that can be reversed by hacking. All of the logs were permanently scrubbed."

This explained why the Megalodon remained relevant. So long as the prize was still there, people would continue to kill for it. "So if the shuttles erase the route back to the Megalodon, how can the descendants even go back to their homes?"

As large and wondrous as the Megalodon might be, she didn't carry an unlimited fleet of shuttles. Ves didn't know why it took several hundred years for the descendants to show up in the frontier, but they never would have been allowed to take the shuttles if they didn't have any interest in coming back.

"Each descendant that we've met carries an encrypted data chip." Calabast simply explained. "The trouble is that we're not talking about a regular data chip. It's encryption is virtually unbreakable unless you have access to a Terran or Rubarthan supercomputer. Even after such a long time, the standard of technology of the CFA is still ahead of ours by many leagues. Still, for some reason, besides entering the right input, the data chips can also be unlocked in another way. That is to gather several of them and put them all together. The encryption will fade and the coordinates of the Starlight Megalodon will be revealed!"

This part sounded really fishy to Ves. "The descendants have gone through so much length to wipe out the logs and encrypt the data chips that contains the only way back to the Megalodon. How come they offer such a stupid alternative for unlocking the data chips? Isn't that asking for them to get robbed?"

Calabast shrugged her graceful shoulders. "Mind you, the offspring of the original crew are a far cry from modern humans. Their knowledge, values and beliefs are shaped by their environment. Under such extreme conditions, none of them have grown up entirely sane."

No matter the reason for this quirk, Ves finally became enlightened to the truth behind the conflict in the Harkensen System. For some reason, the small club of people who got wind of the Starlight Megalodon decided to gather in the Harkensen System and began to compete over the data chips.

Holding only a single one was useless. The only way to derive value out of them was to gather even more. Besides taking them directly from the descendants wandering in the frontier, the best way to obtain them was to snatch them from their competitors!

Chapter 617 Ultimate Prize

The Starlight Megalodon represented more than just a tool for war. Though classified as capital ships, their majesty and power outshined all other capital ship classes.

The fleet carriers utilized by the militaries of human states paled in comparison to even a single warship. Whether it came to size, technology, materials, firepower, toughness, the combat prowess of a battleship surpassed the combined combat power of a fleet carrier and her full complement of mechs.

A single fleet carrier possessed enough strength to conquer an average medium-populated planet. A battleship possessed enough firepower to destroy the same planet.

Naturally, Ves also came in touch with rumors of even greater weapons of war. The Common Fleet Alliance supposedly developed dreadnoughts capable of snuffing out stars. Even wilder rumors hinted at the existence of gigantic planet-sized constructions capable of wiping out black holes.

That last bit sounded far too mindblowing to Ves. In any case, battleships already formed the culmination of humanity's peak strength. Their dreadful firepower had amply been proven during the Age of Conquest, having broken through countless alien fleets and paving the way for total conquest.

The legacy of that glorious age lived on until today. Much of the traces of alien occupation had been wiped out. Star systems that used to be marked by millennia of alien occupation had been utterly paved over by human

terraforming in order to make the planets more favorable for human habitation.

Billions and trillions of planets that used to host diverse ecosystems and marvels of nature lost their unique brands under the vigorous efforts of human expansion. The ceaseless hunger for human-compatible living space turned the ecosystems of these diverse once-alien planets into carbon copies of Old Earth's ancient environment.

All of this was only possible due to humanity's ceaseless development of battleships. Even at the onset of the Age of Mechs, the constant evolution of battleships and other terrible warship classes had never ceased. The CFA had only put them out of sight of human society. Keeping to themselves, they continued to nurture their strength in the shadows in order to safeguard humanity's accomplishments over the aliens that survived until today.

The conquest of the galaxy by the human race had never ceased. It only entered an intermission period. Once the drums of war began to rumble, the power of battleships would definitely make a return to the battlefield.

Even if the Starlight Megalodon had fallen several hundred years ago, a battleship as large as a city would never degrade so easily. Much of her assets would have likely retained their value, even under the crushing influence of five times standard gravity.

"I've got one more question." Ves said. "The Starlight Megalodon is a treasure trove of advanced technology and high-grade exotics. However, she's so large that it's impossible for any single faction to swallow her whole. The CFA would definitely recognize the signs. What is it about the Megalodon that is driving all of you to such extremes that you're even willing to activate your hidden forces on Harkensen I?"

Ves vaguely guessed that the True Sons of Vesia and the other terrorist groups had taken an awful long time to plant on Harkensen I. It must have taken years or decades to accumulate such strength. The investment involved in building up this strength must have been imaginable, but for the potential wealth of the Megalodon, the hidden power responsible for planting these seeds decisively activated them prematurely.

This decision didn't make any sense if the gains from the Megalodon only amount to a few scraps of advanced technology!

"Hm, since you know this much, it won't do any harm of telling you the next part." Calabast amiably said. Now that Ves had agreed to cooperate with her organization, he became a little more pleasing to her eyes. "It's true that we don't dare to plunder the Megalodon wantonly on account of her former owner. No, the true prize we are after is something very different, and won't touch the bottom line of CFA. Can you guess what it is?"

What could those hidden players be after if not for advanced technology or high-grade exotics? Ves furrowed his brows. He couldn't figure out anything someone could gain from the Megalodon that wouldn't touch the nerves of the CFA somehow.

It was like a bunch of robbers invading the summer of a wealthy individual. Even if the robbers only stole something as trivial as a couple of spoons, the mere fact that the home had been intruded upon would definitely enrage the owner.

A few seconds passed as Ves flitted through countless possibilities.

"Let me save you the trouble. What we are truly after is life-prolonging treatment medicine. And not the basic kind, either. These ones will allow someone to extend their lifespan to three-hundred or four-hundred years!"

All of it made sense now! Ves became fully enlightened why the players didn't hesitate to expend all of their accumulation on obtaining the route to the Starlight Megalodon!

It was all about extending their lives!

In the galactic rim, prolonging a human's natural lifespan by a hundred years was expensive and out of reach to most people. Even by borrowing the power of a state, perhaps only a dozen people might benefit from this at most.

However, more advanced treatments had been developed as well. Extending a human's lives by two-hundred, three-hundred or four-hundred years was very much possible.

The only problem was that the cost was too ruinous to contemplate.

Even the Friday Coalition might not be able to bear the cost of prolonging the lives of all of its leaders.

As for Master Mech Designers, not everyone among their ranks earned enough wealth to fund an extension of their lives. Each gradation of life-prolonging treatments demanded an exponentially greater price!

This was why mech designers worked so hard to conquer the mech market. From their first mech design when they became a Novice, they had stepped in an unimaginably competitive race for income and market share. The winners earned enough wealth to extend their lives, while the losers eventually expired under the passing of years.

To third-rate states like the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom, the most basic life-prolonging treatment was all they could afford. Extending a powerful person's life by more had always been a pipedream to these old coots.

Yet now they gained some hope! The discovery of the Starlight Megalodon shone a light at the end of their paths. As long as they worked hard enough, they would eventually be able to live a hundred or two-hundred years longer!

Of course, such a good thing would never be in much supply. Even the CFA themselves couldn't afford to expend the lives of their officers.

"Do you know how much of those medicines are left? Haven't they expired already over the years or due to the crash?" Ves frowned as more questions popped up in his mind. "Maybe the original crew has already used them up."

"That's impossible." Calabast shook her head. "The vault which stores the key medicines is locked even tighter than those encrypted data chips that we are hunting for. Even if the Starlight Megalodon is torn apart, the vault will definitely survive. This, we know. The CFA is never stingy when it comes to storing the containers of the medicines. You can be certain that the crew haven't been able to access it either. After all, these treatments are reserved for senior admirals and great statesman. None of the crew possesses the original access rights."

"If the vault is so hard to get into, how are you planning to break into it? Even if you borrow the power of a taboo weapon, you still won't be able to make a dent on such a formidable vault."

Calabast smirked at him. "I've been generous so far, but I'm afraid this question and answer session is over. Be careful with the information you've received. There are several influences in this star sector who can be very jealous about knowing these secrets. After all, the Megalodon only carries so many doses."

Ves understood what she meant. The pie was very small. It could only be sliced a couple of times, so the number of winners would certainly be no more than a handful.

"Are you aiming to claim a dose for yourself?" Ves probed.

She sighed at that. "That's impossible. Small fry like us will never be able to benefit from this privilege. Even if I get my hands on a treasured dose, it's useless if it isn't processed in the right way. The thing about life-prolonging treatments is that it is more involved than injecting or ingesting the dose. Your body needs to undergo an elaborate series of steps before the medicine comes into play. Only the most eminent doctors of a state are qualified to perform these treatments."

This was why people generally referred to this process as a treatment. The transformation of someone's life directly went against the natural limits of a human body. Perhaps the process was just as dramatic as breaking through the attribute limit.

All of this talk revealed that only a tiny portion of people would eventually benefit from this grand struggle. Underlings such as Ves or Calabast could only lament their powerlessness as the magnates and statesmen at the top worked them to the bone.

Ves tried to offer a consolation prize. "Miss Calabast, even if we leave out the life-prolonging medicines, there should still be lots of goodies for the taking. Those bosses of ours won't mind if we take some liberties, I guess. Compared to obtaining the chance to extend their lives, everything else is irrelevant."

"True. That is something to be considered for the future. For now, we should focus on our immediate concerns. It won't be easy to escape the Reinaldans. While the vast majority of them aren't aware of the existence of Starlight Megalodon, there's definitely a higher up that does."

"Earlier you mentioned that The Big Breakout is doomed to fail. Can you finally tell me why that is so?"

"It's very simple, Ves." She said. "While the masterminds behind this plot were very thorough in their planning, their understanding of what they face is incomplete."

"Did the Reinaldans got wind of our intentions?"

"Surprisingly, no. Naturally, if we hadn't smashed Tecev City's infrastructure so thoroughly, they might have been able to pick up the clues. For now, our agents among the Planetary Guard and the Honored Ones have detected no reactions against your plot."

"Then what else have we overlooked?"

"It's not very complicated. While the Reinaldans haven't thought to bring the vessels parked at the spaceport away, they didn't leave them lying around as they were. In secret, the Reinaldans drained all of their fuel supply. All of them are completely dry!"

"This!" Ves was shocked yet again.

"Hahaha!" Calabast laughed. "Can you imagine the sight! All of you have worked so hard to overcome the defenses of the spaceport. After accomplishing all of your checkpoints, once you Vandals step inside your ships, your ship officers suddenly realize that they're completely incapable of lifting off!"

Ves cursed the Reinaldans. They certainly had devious intentions in mind when they surreptitiously drained all of those fuel tanks. Just this single detail was enough to ruin their entire breakout attempt.

"Since you know about it but still want to be apart of this escape attempt, the problem doesn't seem to be insurmountable. Do you have a solution at hand?"

"Of course we do. We're on the same ship, after all. With all the things that are going on, the Reinaldans don't have the time to transfer the collected fuel. All of the fuels are stored right at the warehouses next to the spaceport."

Calabast put her hands inside a pocket of her high-tech suit and removed a simple data chip. She tossed it over to Ves, who hastily caught it before it incurred any damage. "Take this chip to the Vandals. They'll know what to do once they've read what's inside."

The critical time soon came upon them. Ves had very little time to uphold his end of the deal to Calabast and introduce this new variable to the Vandals. He immediately started to move.

Chapter 618 Unwitting Pawns

It took a bit of effort, but Ves finished his chores in time. He first introduced the data chip to the Vandals in charge. While Ves couldn't explain where he got the chip, its explosive contents practically frightened the ghost out of Captain Orfan and the rest. They didn't dare to dismiss this revelation, and quickly informed the other participants.

The Big Breakout had to go through no matter the cost. Their window of escape grew smaller and smaller. With continuous Reinaldan reinforcements arriving at Harkensen I, the blockade became increasingly more perfect. Soon enough, it didn't matter what everyone did. They could never resist against the power of an entire state.

Naturally, not everyone forgot about the question why Ves came into possession of this bombshell. Captain Orfan sneaked a heated glance at Ves, but he ignored every probe sent in his way.

To the Vandals, Ves became increasingly inscrutable as they got to know him. As a head designer, he performed his duties as good as any Journeyman Mech Designer. Among the other mech designers, his competence stood out among the other mech designers like a crane among chickens. Even the

revelation that he possessed a monstrously powerful hidden weapon added to his perceived strength.

In other words, Ves had developed his own form of prestige. Even though it was purely intangible, prestige basically allowed him to get away with stunts that ordinarily invited opposition.

"This is like the case with Vesian nobles who always get away when they do something awful."

Part of that was because they held the reigns of power. Another part was because getting away with stuff became something normal to their identities.

Ves simply turned away after that. He couldn't waste any time. In the next hour, he pretended to inspect the cargo containers the Vandals intended to bring along. He even insisted on making a visual inspection, forcing the guards to physically open them up.

Though Ves did not detect the presence of any invisible spooks, he was pretty sure the infiltrators had sneaked into some of the containers.

In any case, Calabast would call him up if anything went wrong.

Despite their initial agreement, Ves did not believe she suddenly became a friend of the Flagrant Vandals. Ultimately, the Vandals and her organization answered to a different player in the know. There was only so much life-prolonging medicines to go around. Each of their bosses aimed to monopolize the spoils for themselves.

"I wonder how many players are taking part in this elaborate game."

Ves guessed it shouldn't be more than ten. Any more, and the risk of exposure became unacceptably large. None of the people in the know wanted to leak the secret. However, the current competition for the Megalodon's encrypted data chips would eventually come to an end.

Once a faction became a winner, the incentive to keep the Megalodon a secret disappeared. If nobody took any precautions, the entire star sector might learn the truth!

He shook his head. "It probably won't come to that. Something explosive as this news is just too impactful to be revealed to the public. I don't believe those powerhouses at the top forgot to take precautions."

The annoying aspect about this situation was that people like Ves became unwitting pawns in this game. If Calabast hadn't approached him for a favor, he might have never gotten an opportunity to become aware of the stakes. The Vandals likely would have kept the secret to themselves until they physically arrived at the Super Earth where the Starlight Megalodon crashed all those years ago.

"I don't even know who I'm working for, really. Is it the president of the Bright Republic? Some marshal of the Mech Corps? A patriarch of an influential family?"

Those rich and powerful fellows hogged most of the meat to themselves without lifting a single finger. Sitting in their mansions at Rittersberg or Bentheim, the only thing they had to do is laze away while the Vandals sustained increasingly more losses.

The most awful fact of all was that this game wasn't even relevant to the ongoing Bright-Vesia War. The cyclical conflict between the two rivaling states was always fought with mechs and mech pilots. Extending the life of a single bigwig hardly impacted the trend of the war.

"It's like the war doesn't matter to them. In the face of extending a new lease on life, it doesn't matter how many Vesians or Brighters get killed."

Ves remained gloomy all the way until dawn soon broke in Tecev City.

Moments earlier, every sleeping Vandal woke up and entered their designated vehicles. As one, the vehicles discreetly lifted off and headed in the direction of the spaceport.

Ves sat inside a transport shuttle. Strapped into his seat, he held a data pad which contained some of the details of The Big Breakout.

The contents surprised him a bit. "This is going a bit too far. The casualties won't be light!"

Even so, nobody flinched from this plan. Compelled by the competition for the Megalodon's data chip, those stuck on Harkensen I needed to break free as soon as they could. Being left behind meant they might never get the opportunity to catch up!

"Are you scared?" Captain Orfan asked. Her expression revealed that she was looking forward to the upcoming battle. "We're going to show those Reinaldians how the rest of the star sector fights!"

"I don't doubt you'll prove yourselves to be the better warriors, captain." Ves quickly replied. "However, this proposal is too cruel. How can we sacrifice so many lives?"

The grin on the mech captain's face faltered a bit. "I won't admit we're saints, but this is something that the other groups have agreed upon. No matter what we think about it, this move is already set in stone."

Ves was relieved that Captain Orfan possessed a conscience, though she easily absolved herself of any guilt by pushing the responsibility to the other groups.

The aircars didn't have to travel very far to reach the meeting site. Once the Vandal aircar fleet arrived at a park, the vehicles halted in the air.

Their fleet wasn't alone. Five other fleets had already arrived. Once the Vandals joined up with them, all of the principal groups had finally been gathered.

Below, an eclectic collection of mechs stood by. Amphibian mechs, landbound mechs and aerial mechs of many shapes and sizes formed up into ranks. In just a couple of hours, the mechs of every participating group had been integrated in a unified chain of command.

All of this looked very impressive to Ves. He quickly counted the number of mechs. "Over seventy mechs... that's a lot, but is it enough to conquer the spaceport?"

As a strategic location and an important channel in and out of the planet, the Reinaldans stationed a fair amount of mechs from the Planetary Guard and the Honored Ones. Since Tecev City was the capital of Harksensen I, the Reinaldans never decreased the strength of its garrison.

"According to the intelligence we've obtained, the spaceport is guarded by at least three mech companies." Captain Orfan informed him. "One landbound regiment of the Planetary Guard and another landbound regiment of the Honored Ones are manning the walls and patrolling the interior. They're backed up by an aerial mech regiment of the Honored Ones that has always been stationed there."

"That's at least a hundred-and-twenty mechs!" Ves exclaimed. "Two-thirds of those will certainly be military-grade mechs, and all of those machines are likely to be in prime condition. There's no way our combined force of scavenged and salvaged mechs can beat those Reinaldan mechs."

The Reinaldan defenders didn't even need to take any risks. As long as they nailed themselves down and withstood the assault, they could easily buy time for reinforcements to arrive.

"It's even worse. The spaceport also hides a deep array of anti-air batteries. They're virtually impossible to reach in their retracted state. With how sneaky the Reinaldans have already showed themselves to be, they'll certainly pop them out once most of the ships are in the air."

The amount of obstacles they had to deal with almost overwhelmed him. Luckily, others have already thought about these issues.

Their transport shuttle departed from the hovering aircar fleet. Once they landed, Captain Orfan and a number of other Vandals exited the shuttle and walked over the grass towards a circle of people. Ves tagged along as well.

"Ah, Captain Orfan, how good of you Vandals to arrive." A friendly-looking mech officer said. "We were just about to finalize the details."

As Captain Orfan hobnobbed with the other commanders, Ves briefly glanced at the other groups.

The Masters of Combat, a mercenary corps from the Vesia Kingdom. Specifically, they hailed from Venidse.

Lydia's Swordmaidens, a pirate gang from the Reinald Republic.

Glorious Space Knights, a mercenary corps from the Council Stars of Lisv.

The Caged, a criminal gang from the Roppo Principality.

Bloodriven Sky, a mercenary corps from the Star Faith Collective of all places.

Along with the Flagrant Vandals, each of them represented a different state. This had been a deliberate choice, the necessity of which became evident soon enough.

Each of the outfits mentioned were strong and numerous. While their combat strength could never match a military mech regiment under regular circumstances, none of them had access to their own mechs right now.

"It doesn't matter how strong everyone is outside this planet."

Right now, the only strength that mattered was the mechs they possessed right now. In this, the disparity between the Vandals and the other groups became lopsided.

The city where the Vandals stayed hadn't been attacked by too many mechs. In contrast, the other outfits that had gathered here obtained their spoils in the major cities. The fighting had been much more intense there, so the outfits succeeded in scavenging much more wrecks.

This meant that despite their formidable outside strength, the Flagrant Vandals had to settle for being the junior partner in this venture.

That said, a mech was a mech. Four extra mechs increased the odds of success.

"Alright, now that we've come to an agreement, let's set off!"

The commanders of the different outfits returned to their shuttles and aircars. Meanwhile, their mechs began to move in the direction of the spaceport.

The mechs slowed down once they reached the other side of the park. Hidden in the trees, a large mob of tourists had gathered at this location. Ordinarily, they hid across the partially ruined city. However, they somehow managed to obtain news that they would be saved if they managed to gather at this point.

Once the strange mix of mechs came into view, the crowd of foreigners grew scared.

"That's not the Planetary Guard! The terrorist mechs have returned!"

"No wait, those mechs look strange! Each of them are different! They all looked patched up!"

A couple of mechs from each outfit stepped forward. "CALM DOWN! We are not terrorists, nor are we related to the Reinaldans. We're foreigners who are

stuck on this planet just like you. Now, we haven't lied to you all. We indeed found a way to leave this planet immediately."

Each of the spokespersons engaged the citizens from their own country.

"Citizens of the Bright Republic, please gather in front of my mech!" A Vandal mech announced.

"Citizens of the Vesia Kingdom, step closer please!"

"Citizens of..."

It took some time for the mob to segregate into separate crowds. Perhaps Reinaldans or citizens from other states had mixed in the crowds as well, but the outfits didn't care. The most important fact was that each outfit effectively gained control over thousands of civilians.

The difference between an uncontrolled mob and a partially controlled group of civilians was extremely vital for the next step of the plan.

"If you want to get home, you have to take the opportunity yourselves! Are you resigned to remain stuck on Harkensen I? The Reinaldans have no right to keep us detained! We have families to get home to and work to return to! Don't you wish you can go back to your normal lives?!"

The spokespersons all engaged their own crowd of people. After several minutes of inciting the crowds, they finally got to the crux of their speech.

"Let's head to the spaceport and storm the premises! Our ships are waiting for us to get out of here! Go! The Reinaldans will never kill us all! They won't dare to provoke our states!"

The truth of the matter had finally come to light. The conspirators intended to drive these crowds to storm the spaceport and put the defenders on the spot!

Chapter 619 Devil Mechs

Mechs piloted by members from six different outfits moved in unison. Though they came in different shapes and sizes, their evident coordination made them appear as if they came from the same unit.

The mechs on land drove the crowds of people to the front of the spaceport, while the mechs in the air cautiously covered them from aerial threats. Though many in the crowd seemed to develop misgivings about this sudden venture, the more desperate foreigners eagerly bought into the nonsense spun by the representatives of the outfits.

It helped that each of the outfits present enjoyed some fame. The Flagrant Vandals earned several mentions in the news recently. Their valor and courage made them larger than life, and any citizen of the Bright Republic in the crowd regarded them as champions.

The other outfits enjoyed no less of a reputation.

For example, the Masters of Combat inherited Venidse's brutal style of attrition warfare and became kings of landbound warfare. Their open and above-board fighting style gave many enemy outfits headaches. Anyone who dared to fight the Masters of Combat on their terms would inevitably suffer a loss or a pyrrhic victory.

"Many veterans from Venidse's mech legions have signed up to the Masters of Combat. Their martial tradition is colored by their military roots."

Lydia's Swordmaidens was nominally a pirate gang, but it was pretty much a known fact that they possessed some ties to Reinald. This connection wasn't very tight, or else they wouldn't have been a part of the plan. As a rare all-female pirate outfit, the Swordmaidens acquired a reputation for ferocity and sisterhood.

"Those witches are far more cunning than they appear. Nobody truly knows where they came from and whether they are closely tied to Reinald."

The Council Stars of Lisv was a small third-rate state of the same caliber as the Reinald Republic. Their peculiar culture had bred the formation of the Glorious Space Knights, a foolhardy mercenary corps largely made up of spoiled brats and wealthy potentate scions. Fortunately, they invested a lot of money into shoring up their ranks with highly competent professional mech pilots, so their overall strength was very overbearing.

"The Glorious Space Knights worship mech duels and always favor melee mechs for some reason. The notion of chivalry has gone through their heads."

The Caged was one of the weirdest criminal gangs from the Roppo Principality. In a culture obsessed with hierarchy and order, the Caged rose up in defiance against the established order. They called themselves the Caged because their members regarded themselves as prisoners of Roppo's social order. Many of them desired to escape from this invisible cage and elevate their social status to a higher rank.

"The Caged makes it seem like they're a bunch of lunatics in constraints. That's pretty much right. They're a bunch of savages camouflaging behind a civilized veneer."

The only outfit which didn't enjoy as much fame was Bloodriven Sky. The distance from the Harkensen System to the Star Faith Collective meant that not many tourists came to enjoy the sights. Like many Starrers, the members of Bloodriven Sky devoted themselves to their faith. The only problem was that nobody truly knew what they believed in. Understanding the byzantine religion of the Collective was already hard enough.

"Never ask a Starrer to explain their beliefs. That goes double for Bloodriven Sky. Mercenary work is their secondary occupation. Their true job is to export their incomprehensible beliefs."

Citizens who didn't share the same nationality of the other outfits had been pushed towards Bloodriven Sky. The fanatical mercenaries proved to be the best at motivating the crowd, so their mixed composition didn't impact their forward momentum.

Behind the crowds and behind the mechs exhorting them forward, a large fleet of aircars hovered from behind. There had been a lot of discussion about whether to remain in the aircars or let the men go on foot. They eventually decided to stay in their aircars as long as possible despite the risk of attracting anti-air fire because the advantage in mobility was too great.

The timely intelligence from Miss Calabast forced the outfits to divert some troops to the warehouses adjacent to the spaceport. The ships weren't going to refuel by themselves.

As customary, Ves was seated in the same transport shuttle as before. Compared to the flimsy civilian aircars, a transport shuttle was much more robust.

Ves turned to Captain Orfan. "If I may ask, captain, why aren't you piloting one of our Water Wraiths?"

"Just because I'm a mech captain doesn't mean I'm a multitool." She replied as she checked up and issued silent commands to the Vandals via her data pad. "I'm great with a spearman mech, decent with any other melee mech, but marksmanship is my one big failing. The other mech officers who won the right to pilot the Water Wraiths won't do them a disservice."

He nodded. Even if she was eager to pilot a mech, the amphibian artillery mechs truly didn't fit her style. She favored landbound spearman mechs with

an emphasis on mobility. The sluggish Water Wraiths moved slowly on land and its immense bulk hindered its agility by a massive truncation.

After several minutes, they moved past the park and reached a major transit platform. Ordinarily, the platform hosted thousands of vehicles that conveyed countless tourists to the prime tourist locations of Harkensen I.

Now, it had largely been emptied ever since the blockade had commenced. Many of the vehicles had been recalled to their depots, leaving the spaceport with an unobstructed stretch of ground.

The mobs of men, women and children emerged from the park and moved towards the front entrance of the spaceport like an inexorable tide. The Reinaldan mechs on patrol had already sensed their presence minutes earlier, and had sounded the alarm.

A mech of the Planetary Guard stepped forward. "Halt! This spaceport is closed for business! Entry is forbidden! Turn back now and go back to your shelters."

Ranks of Planetary Guard mechs brandished their fluid projectors. Behind, another rank of mechs from the Honored Ones readied their lethal weapons. Already, aerial mechs started to appear in the air on the other side of the wall.

"Step forward at your own risk!" The Planetary Guard mech continued. "You'll be regarded as hostiles if you proceed within two-hundred meters of the spaceport!"

"Ignore those Reinaldan fools!" A decorated mech of the Glorious Space Knights commanded to the crowd composed of fellow Lisvians. "The Reinald Republic won't dare to massacre their guests. It's all a bluff! Keep running forward!"

When the vanguard of the crowd of civilians reach the two-hundred meter mark, the Planetary Guard mechs prepared to fire their fluid projectors.

Then they started spraying.

Disgusting slime spurted out of their projectors like waterspouts. Upon landing, thousands of desperate humans became engulfed with quickly-solidifying slime. It was as if their entire bodies became engulfed with glue!

If the Planetary Guard mechs continued to use up their fluid projectors, the terrain would certainly become impassable humans.

This was not the outcome the organizers of this operation had in mind.

"Sure enough." Captain Orfan nodded. "When it comes to line combat, the Planetary Guard can't catch up to the military. However, when it comes to subduing riots, their non-lethal weaponry has no equal."

The outfits deliberately let the fluid projectors douse the people on foot with the residue. In order to gain something, they needed to lose something as well. The crowds of civilians needed to learn that the Reinaldan mechs were not their friends!

Captain Orfan ignored the screams of stuck civilians encased in rapidly-hardening slime.. "Alright, this has gone on long enough. Open fire already!"

Several seconds later, most of their ranged landbound mechs opened fire directly towards the Reinaldans.

The guard mechs hadn't expected such an extreme response! Who would open fire above the heads of so civilians?!

The opening salvo disrupted the Planetary Guard mechs, though it hadn't been enough to inflict serious damage. Nevertheless, the combined mech force's subsequent salvos continuously hammered the peacekeeping mechs. Some of them even lost their fluid projectors!

The Honored Ones hesitated for a moment. None of them were eager to start a mech battle with so many civilians in the vicinity. The collateral damage that

ensued from a battle of this scale could easily wipe out tens of thousands of lives in a single minute!

Compared to the hesitation exhibited by the Reinaldans, the mechs of the foreigners displayed no such care. The unending stream of laser beams, projectiles and missiles absolutely hammered the Planetary Guard mechs into retreat!

"How devious." Ves muttered as he witnessed the battle with his own two eyes.

According to the plan, the first priority of every mech taking part was to focus their fire on the Planetary Guard mechs. More specifically, they had to break their fluid projectors and other means of non-lethal weaponry!

This was driving the Reinaldans into a corner. Under the suppression and focused fire of the attackers, the Planetary Guard mechs were rendered completely impotent at this moment!

The civilians screamed and panicked underneath the one-sided exchange of fire. Shockwaves and thunderous projectiles along with thick bright laser beams bombarded their sensory organs! Underneath the might of mechs, humans were as fragile as ants!

The menacing firepower unleashed by the Vandals and the other outfits motivated the foreign tourists even harder! None of them ever contemplated turning around! With so many mechs following behind them, their only fate was to be trampled by multi-ton machines!

The formation adopted by the outfits also ensured the civilians couldn't run to the left or right. Additional mechs had been stationed at the flanks in order to ensure the crowds could only run straight ahead.

"Save us! Guard mechs, please get rid of these devil mechs on my heels!"

"No! My wife! My wife has been trampled!"

"Where is my son! I lost my baby son!"

"You cursed Vandals! I looked up to you! There's going to be hell to pay once I get back to Rittersberg!"

The awe and respect commanded by the outfits turned into fear once the civilians realized they'd been used. Driven to survive, the tourists and visitors of Harkensen I could only run forward and seek asylum with the Reinaldans!

The Honored Ones continued to warn the hysterical mob to halt. After all, once those civilians ran through their lines, it became impossible to maneuver their mechs without crushing innocent lives beneath their feet!

"This is your final warning! If you do not stop and turn around this instant, we will open fire!"

Bluff or not, the civilians predominantly preferred to face the Reinaldans at the front than the devils to the rear!

After several seconds of confusion, a couple of mechs of the Honored Ones appeared to find their resolve. "So be it! You only have yourselves to blame for meeting your deaths!"

The Honored Ones from the ground and in the air opened fire towards the salvaged mechs of the foreign outfits! Their superior firepower inflicted heavy damage among the attacking mechs because their armor coverage had never been fixed!

Nonetheless, the destructive exchange of fire led to plenty of accidents! One of the Vandal-appropriated Water Wraiths attempted to fire its cannons at the Honored Ones, but a heavy kinetic impact disrupted its balance, causing all of its guns to fire towards the ground!

BOOM!

Hundreds of Brighter tourists splashed away from the impact zones! Up until the moment their bodies broke, they never learned their own side was responsible for their deaths!

Thousands of civilians lost their lives to these kinds of accidents. While the scavenged mechs fell into an immediate disadvantage, they tenaciously held on and fought back with no restraints even as the collateral damage continued to pile up!

From the start, The Big Breakout had never been about achieving a victory through military means. The Vandals and the rest held no illusions about their chances of winning against the Honored Ones.

The only way the attackers could defeat the Reinaldians was to test their scruples!

Chapter 620 Bloody Dilemma

The attacking force had already been psychologically prepared to drive some of their fellow citizens to death. Each outfit not only selected among their best mech pilots to helm their limited number of salvaged mechs, they also chose their most ruthless ones.

None of the mech pilots firing back at the Reinaldians possessed any morals worth noting! Even if they felt someone should be held responsible, they would no doubt push the blame entirely on the Reinaldians!

It was their fault for fighting back!

Laser beams hummed and various projectiles thumped and screamed in the air above the heads of helpless civilians. None of them had any clue what to do other than to keep running towards the spaceport! Right now, they could only rely on the righteousness of the Reinaldians to save them from this hellish massacre!

Ves had seen a lot of cruelty from the hands of the Vandals. Their callous disregard for collateral damage and their willingness to leverage the lives of innocent civilians in this manner rankled Ves a lot. After all, one of those people running for their lives right now could be him or someone he knew!

"It's useless to sympathise for those civilians." Captain Orfan remarked as she glanced up from her data pad and noted his disturbed expression. "It's not like they were compelled to gather at the park earlier."

He shook his head, though he didn't go in on who was truly at fault here. "I'm afraid that all of these sacrifices might prove futile. How many people have already died due to collateral damage? Two-thousand? Five-thousand? Maybe the figure has already surpassed ten-thousand. I don't know. Yet even with so many dead, the Honored Ones aren't backing down."

They obviously hesitated for a lengthy period of time. Ves figured that they struggled to decide between repelling the attackers and protecting the lives of foreign visitors. Something must have pushed them into action despite the repercussions.

"Look at those Reinaldan mechs. Ignore the Planetary Guard mechs, they're pretty much useless now. Instead, look at each of the mechs from the Honored Ones."

Ves immediately picked up an important detail. Many of the mechs of the Honored Ones to utilize their weapons to their full potential. One rifleman mech wielded a laser rifle capable of firing once every two seconds. Instead of aiming to achieve the highest possible firing rate, the mech pilot dithered and only fired once every seven seconds or so.

This was far from the only mech that held back their killing potential. The aerial mechs of the Honored Ones basically danced in front of the aerial mechs of the attackers. Despite their overwhelming numerical superiority, they

did not dare to engage their outnumbered opponent! As soon as one of them suffered fatal damage, their frames would drop from the air and splat all over the teeming waves of civilians!

A single drop had the potential to reap over five-hundred lives at once! If they fell on top of a particularly high concentration of people, perhaps thousands might get crushed from the enormous impact and the debris flinging in every direction.

Of course, to achieve this deterrence, the aerial mechs in the hands of the outfits deliberately hovered over the densest parts of the mob!

Some of the participants of this scheme earned a reputation for honorable and valorous behavior on the battlefield. None of that was on display right now. The Masters of Combat basically turned their core tenets upside down, while the Glorious Space Knights who fancied themselves as saviors became indirectly responsible for the deaths of thousands of fellow Lisvians!

If everything went as predicted, none of them would be able to retain an unblemished record. Their behavior was simply too despicable to remain clean!

Of course, to scum like the Flagrant Vandals or Lydia's Swordmaidens, the loss of reputation didn't bother them that much. It was nice to be so highly regarded, but it wasn't essential to their functioning.

They would rather pursue their own goals over listening to their conscience.

As for the Reinaldans, they highly favored the opposite!

Their orders compelled them to fight, but their heart wants to let the civilians go. Stuck between their duty and their moral fiber, many Reinaldan mech pilots endured the greatest dilemma in their lives.

Did they enjoy the feeling of blood dripping from their hands? Should they continue to follow the orders of a superior who was probably several light-hours away from the battlefield?

A ripple went through the mechs of the honored ones. By now, every mech of the Planetary Guard had either been disabled or retreated from the battlefield. As long as any mech of the Planetary Guard popped up, the attackers immediately shifted their firepower towards the unlucky mech!

This was all in the name of depriving the Reinaldians with the means to subdue the crowd with half-hearted warnings and idle threats!

"Whoever is ordering the Reinaldians to persist in the fight is an even greater heartless bastard than us." Captain Orfan noted with a smirk, as if the deaths of thousands of Brighters had nothing to do with her at all. "Yet the mech pilots aren't bots who follow orders without question. The Honored Ones are famous for thinking on their feet."

The Vesian Mech Legion trained their mech pilots to obey their orders and pursue their mission at all cost. While their rearguard units may not be very diligent, their frontline units rigidly adhered to the expectations of their superiors. In a society ruled by nobles, these privileged sons and daughters did not wish for their subordinates to develop any initiative.

It was different for the Reinaldan Honored Ones. Their name betrayed their past as a band of honored fighters. Codes of brotherhood as well as a martial tradition that venerated the ideal of a warrior allowed for a high degree of personalisation. While each mech pilot still received the same training in every mech regiment, they didn't necessarily have to follow the orders of their superiors if they were objectively bad.

In comparison, the Bright Republic's Mech Corps fell into the middle ground somewhat. It differed from mech regiment to mech regiment, but overall bad

orders didn't happen as much because the Mech Corps prized promoting officers for their competence. Very rarely did bad apples get to reach a higher rank.

"They've finally had enough!"

Around twenty percent of the defenders spontaneously ceased to fight. They rebelled against their orders and attempted to step back from the battle.

This was made more difficult due to the sheer amount of people running between their legs. The civilians had no choice in the matter because the people pressing behind their bodies didn't allow them to turn around or change their course!

Inevitably, dozens of people got crushed beneath the feet of the Reinaldan mechs as they attempted to move. This incited the crowd into a greater panic, yet the rush to storm the spaceport never abated.

"Hahahaha! Keep running!" Captain Orfan laughed. Whether she referred to the mechs or civilians, Ves didn't know. "The rest are following suit!"

The Honored Ones possessed a marked advantage against the opposition. Their numbers were greater, their units were uniform, the quality of their mechs was high and all of their machines were in tip-top shape.

In a frontal engagement, the attacking force would lose ninety-nine times out of a hundred! There was no way the Reinaldians could lose unless they made a massive blunder.

The Vandals knew this. The Masters of Combat knew this. Lydia's Swordmaidens knew this. Everyone else could perform the same arithmetic.

So in order to achieve victory despite facing such an overwhelming disparity, they lured these civilians over and basically took them hostage.

What could the Reinaldians do? Killing foreigners in a star system meant to attract tourists was extremely bad for business. The diplomatic repercussions of this fight might lead the Reinaldians to face heavy retaliation from almost every nearby state in the star sector!

In addition, the honor espoused by the Honored Ones rejected wanton massacre. Not every military mech regiment was as callous as the Flagrant Vandals. Though the Reinald Republic involved themselves in many shady affairs related to pirates, their military had been molded as a counterpoint to their activities in the dark.

The Honored Ones were supposed to be heroes, not butchers!

Ves believed an additional element was at play here. He believed some Reinaldian influence was definitely competing for the encrypted data chips that contained the route that led to the Starlight Megalodon. From the heavy-handed blockade that the Reinaldians had instituted so far, this influence must have been helmed by a very senior government or military official.

This influence had likely ordered the Reinaldian defenders to open fire despite the sheer amount of innocents at risk.

Too bad humans piloted the mechs of the Honored Ones. These people didn't follow orders without question, especially when they led to an enormous amount of blood being spilled.

Already, the collateral damage had taken its toll on the mob. Craters and molten puddles sprinkled the open field, each of them surrounded by broken bodies and enough blood to fill up a cargo hauler.

The frantic mob, the unrestrained attackers, the inappropriate orders from a distant superior, all of this pushed the Honored Ones in the field to their breaking point.

"The Honored Ones have given up! They're pulling back!"

The Reinaldan mechs simply had enough. Fed up and tired of spilling so much blood, they collectively pulled back, moving slowly enough to give the innocent people underneath their feet some time to avoid their footsteps.

For their part, the attacking force let them go. They never intended to drive the Reinaldans into a corner. Forcing them to continue the fight was detrimental to them for many reasons. As long as the Reinaldans ceded the spaceport and its immediate surroundings, the outfits were content to let them retreat.

While the Reinaldans decisively pulled back from the spaceport, the Vandals and the other outfits started to go forward to claim their own ships. Of course, they didn't forget to drive the hysterical mob to the field where thousands of parked vessels lay dormant. Without their presence, the outfits lost their protective talisman.

By now, the Reinaldans certainly hated their guts!

Naturally, the triumphant attackers didn't forget about the fuel supply. A third of the mechs diverted from the spaceport and moved to secure the nearby warehouses.

"The first step is over, thankfully." Ves sighed. "If this engagement went on any longer, then I can't even imagine how many people perished here."

The outfits did a very good job in gathering all of those foreigners to the spaceport. Attracting all of these people had been essential in pressuring the Reinaldans.

"All that's left is to lift off and run through the blockade in space." Orfan noted with a satisfied smile. "That's going to be trickier now that the Reinaldans know what to expect."

The crazed and frightened civilians had reached the dormant vessels by now. All of them attempted to break into the locked ships and get inside. Aircars

landed near the vessels. Hackers went to work in breaking through their security systems.

On the other side of the spaceport, hovering fueling vehicles flew towards the ships in order to inject their empty fuel tanks with some juice. The fueling vehicles didn't need to fill the fuel tanks to the brim. The ships needed just enough to escape the planet's gravity well and fly in space for a couple of hours.

Through fear and authority, the outfits imposed some measure of order to the mob. Though many of them had quietly turned around and started to run from this hellscape, a sufficient number of mechs had forced the people to stay.

They still needed these hostages to act as their shield!

The Flagrant Vandals may not have been the main drivers of this plan, but they had definitely been complicit in its execution. "Our reputation will end up in the toilet by the time this day is over."

The worst thing about it was that his personal reputation might be tainted by association. Though he wasn't in the chain of command, the mere fact that he'd been attached to the Flagrant Vandals may be enough to affect his future business career.