

Chapter 731 Flying Cube

Ideally, a good design involved both science and art. Good craftsmanship combined both components into a beautiful product that did the job in the most elegant fashion possible.

Their cubular-shaped shuttle design was anything but elegant. It was as blunt as a brick and flew like one.

That didn't matter much in space because the vacuum environment didn't care for concepts such as aerodynamics.

However, once the shuttle plunged into a terrestrial planet with a breathable atmosphere, this ugly cube shape became an absolute detriment to the shuttle's airworthiness.

"The original stealth shuttle is a lot more capable than what we've drawn because it has the space to incorporate all the necessary elements that make it airworthy." Avanaeon defended himself for choosing the form of a cube for their vehicle. "We have to make do with about half the volume. Just stop and consider how much of a detriment that really is. We need to work with half as much space, but we're unable to shrink down the essential components, of which there are many. So what choice do we have?"

"And that reasoning has led you straight to a cube?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "Why not go for a sphere while you're at it? Our shuttle can hardly look more ridiculous from there."

"The cube is perfect for our purposes. Let me explain." The chief engineer said, and summoned a small side projection to illustrate his train of thought. "So we have a set amount of fragments, but we want to maximize our shuttle's volume, because more volume means more space, right? The shape of a sphere as opposed to the traditional triangular cone allows us to use as little fragments as possible but allows us to stuff the most cargo inside. However,

the curvature of the sphere itself poses lots of problems by itself. You know what I'm talking about, right?"

Ves knew what the man was getting at. "Yeah. A curved surface is a lot harder to hide than a flat surface. Every countermeasure needs to be adjusted by angle, and that requires an extremely powerful processor as well as very sophisticated algorithms. Otherwise you get that phenomenon where you see light bending around an optically camouflaged object."

Such an effect resembled the distortion people experience when they look at a plant that stuck out from the surface of a lake. The angle of the plant abruptly turned crooked at the edge of the water.

While the effect wasn't exactly the same, such kinds of imperfections would take place across the entire surface of a ball-shaped shuttle. While the problem could be remedied with further development, it required far too much expertise, manpower and time to get something like that done.

Rather than wrack their heads over trying to get a stealth ball to work, Avanaeon simply chose to go for a stealth cube instead.

"It's a matter of efficiency." The engineer explained with gusto. "Theoretically, a sphere has close to an infinite amount of sides. Even if we simplify it to, say, a hundred sides or so, that still requires the shuttle to make hundreds of extremely strenuous calculations at a time. While the surface area of each of the sides are rather small, because there are so many sides, it wastes a huge amount of processing power. More processing power demands more space and more energy, both of which we really can't afford to waste."

Ves nodded as he understood the crux of the matter. "On the other hand, a cube has six sides at most. Up down left right forward and back. So in theory, you only need to perform six calculations to account for six larger surface areas."

"Right! While that is still a strenuous demand, it is only a fraction of the amount of calculations the original processors of the stealth shuttle performed. Those stealth shuttles carried enough processing power around to run a basic simulation of the weather of a terrestrial planet!"

That was quite a lot!

"I see. If we cut the shape of the shuttle down to a cube, the savings in processing power will allow us to squeeze in a much smaller processing bank, thereby freeing up valuable space for other cargo, am I right?"

"Yes! And don't forget about the savings in energy consumption as well. Less calculations means our energy cells last longer."

Every argument Avanaeon put forth made logical sense. Ves really couldn't put down any of the engineer's design choice when his rational mind fully agreed with all of their underlying reasoning.

He still found the cube ugly, though.

Ves sighed. "Well, this cube-shaped shuttle isn't going to win any design or beauty awards, that's for sure. I'm glad we're only designing this for ourselves, because if we dared to put this on the market, we'd be laughed out of business!"

Completing this draft design made Ves realize that the role of art played a larger role in designing products than he realized. If a designer stripped away every consideration for beauty and elegance, they would be left with a bot-like approach that aimed to maximize the physical parameters of their designs without a single spark of creativity.

This approach may be adequate to their current situation, but it wouldn't fly in a commercial setting. The market expected better than machines that might as well be designed by AIs.

In any case, Ves reluctantly accepted Avanaeon's chosen shape and worked from there.

Taking the draft design as a starting point, they both began to refine the design. They performed precise calculations on what should go where. They worked away the imprecisions and filled up gaps with something concrete.

Deciding for a cube as their basic shape led to a large divergence from the original stealth shuttle model. The main difference between their homebrew version and the one utilized by the Masters of Combat was that the latter possessed the capability to enter the atmosphere.

Their cube plainly couldn't do so, which severely limited their options in case they needed to take refuge on the surface of a planet as opposed to another starship in space.

However, the silver lining of this design choice was that they could throw out all of the parts out of their design that only saw use when the shuttle flew in an atmospheric environment.

In fact, maximizing space while minimizing waste became the running theme of this escape shuttle. They threw out as much redundant parts as they could get away with, all in an attempt to squeeze in other necessities.

"If this is to be an escape shuttle, it has to be able to last in space for an extended period of time." Avanaeon insisted. "That means it should be completely self-sufficient in terms of air, water, food, energy, heat, vision and propulsion. These are the Basic Seven necessities of independent spacecraft."

The Basic Seven applied to virtually all spacecraft except for machines dependent on a mothership.

This meant that spaceborn mechs actually fell outside the Basic Seven's purview, though in practice they followed the guidelines anyway. The most

obvious outcome was that each cockpit contained a small stash that stored a bunch of water bottles, nutrient packs and maybe oxygen tanks.

"We should also reserve some space for tools, spare parts, medical kits, communication gear, hazard suits, weapons, K-coins and more." Ves couldn't help but add. "There's no point in being left alone without any means to pick ourselves up again."

"That wishlist of yours will take up an awful lot of space, you know."

"It's a good thing we didn't give in to our vanity and chose to go for a cube-shaped shuttle, then." Ves idly joked. "Say, can we fit in an FTL drive as well?"

"What?!" Avanaeon almost spat out blood. "Impossible! Just because the CFA managed to fit an FTL drive into a shuttle doesn't mean that we can do the same! FTL drives are monstrous objects and even the smallest and weakest ones are the size of a full-sized cargo shuttle! Aside from that, FTL drives are gluttons for energy! To power one up and to keep it running long enough to reach another star system requires energy cells that are at least half as large as the FTL drive itself to my estimation!"

Okay, that basically ruled out this possibility.

"Okay, chief. It was just an idle thought."

Several days of intensive design work eventually resulted in a crude, artless design that stripped away everything without purpose and maximized every available scrap of space.

Ves did not feel proud of this collaborative design, but as long as it worked, his feelings shouldn't matter.

As Avanaeon admired the finished design, Ves spoke up at that moment.

"The shuttle design needs a name."

"Hmm.. I haven't thought of that. Normally, manufacturers don't bother naming their shuttles, especially the cheaper and more utilitarian ones. They just come in a string of codes."

"I think this shuttle deserves a proper name. Even if we only ever produce one copy of it, the design and every aspect of its construction is deliberately put together using our best judgement."

They both paused for a moment as they thought of an appropriate name.

"The Cube? The Cubinator? The Cubester? The Failed Sphere? The Six-Sided Dice?"

Ves palmed his face. "What kind of naming sense is that?!"

"Well, I don't see the point in giving the shuttle a fancy name. Since its shape is already blunt, why not give it a straightforward name to reflect its nature?"

After some deliberation, they eventually decided on naming their shuttle the Six-Sided Dice. It sounded a bit more sophisticated than calling it the 'Cube' or something.

Construction of the Six-Sided Dice began immediately after, though properly speaking they skipped a lot of necessary steps. Ves felt bad about hurrying the project along, because they spent way too little time on optimizing the design and inspecting it for potentially fatal flaws.

However, Ves had a feeling that it wouldn't take the Flagrant Swordmaidens too long to reach the much-sought-after coordinates of the Starlight Megalodon. Everyone else in the crew felt it too. The long days of travel would finally end!

In the meantime, though, the Vandals and the Swordmaidens constantly put their guard up whenever they dropped out of FTL. Due to the fact that they

intruded into sandmen space, the allied fleet proceeding along the slowest but most casual route forward.

They navigated to red dwarfs only if there wasn't any viable choice. In their core space, the sandmen mostly ignored these anemic stars, and even if the sandmen settled them, the colony governors usually consisted of the most pathetic examples of their race.

Even if the Flagrant Swordmaidens intruded into such a star system, they didn't suffer much repercussion, though the sandman governor doubtlessly passed on their observations of the human fleet to the other sandmen leaders in their network.

In most cases, though, the fleet preferred to jump to the dimmest or the most uninteresting stellar objects imaginable such as old neutron stars and even black holes if they detected any, though naturally the fleet never came anywhere near the event horizon.

Brown dwarfs, the physically handicapped cousins of red dwarfs, became their favored target destinations. These retarded versions of proper stars were the dwarf versions of dwarf stars, smaller and less physically adept than red dwarfs which at least sustained proper thermonuclear reactions.

If a family of different stars showed up at a wedding, they'd leave out the brown dwarfs out of the group recordings, because that was how much of an embarrassment these stars really were. Some astronomers even called them failed stars because the absence of hydrogen fusion reactions make them really dim.

In navigational terms, many brown dwarfs still live in their parents or sibling's basement despite being adult stars. They formed binary pairs with proper stars and stayed that way forever until the normal star eventually reached the end of its lifespan or something happened to crash them together.

This was the equivalent of a brown dwarf waiting for its parents or siblings to die and inherit the mass they left behind to transform into proper stars. The brown dwarfs never worked properly for their entire lives, and only managed to shape up after cannibalizing the remains of its family.

The ultimate expression of losers among stars were two binary dwarfs spinning together in a single binary star system. The only redeeming factor between such a system was that if the two dwarfs merged together, a normal star might result.

In any case, the traits that made them so unattractive also turned them into the safest locations in sandmen space.

The only problem was that because they massed so light, it became exceedingly difficult to navigate them unless the fleet was already very close to them. In practice, this meant that the Flagrant Swordmaidens crawled their way forward, one agonizingly short jump at a time.

However, they weren't the only ones who utilized this strategy.

Chapter 732 Faded Starligh

On their emergence into a nameless binary brown dwarf system, the long-ranged sensors of the fleet lit up!

"Sir, our sensors have detected artificial mass signatures half an AU from our position!"

"Identify the signatures!"

It took some time for the sensors to resolve what they picked up. The longer it took, the more the Vandals relaxed a bit, because active threats usually radiated more heat and signals and therefore showed up clearer on the sensors than dead objects.

"It's a debris field, sir! Around eight shipwrecks have been identified, of which at least half are light carriers or equivalent. An unknown number of mech wrecks surround the foundered ships."

While the Vandals and the Swordmaidens remained vigilant, they largely failed to pick up any active ships or mechs. Whoever left these wrecks might have already departed the binary star system.

More details poured in as the Flagrant Swordmaidens cautiously approached the debris field in order to investigate its circumstances.

The sensor officer passed on more and more pertinent information. "The residual heat and energy radiating from the shipwrecks indicate that they were set upon less than a week ago, no more than three days from our arrival!"

That was close!

Everyone thought the same thing. Nobody really had a reason to dive into the deep frontier. Those who dared to trespass sandmen space were either extremely daring treasure hunters or sought another goal entirely.

Even then, space was big, so big that treasure hunters could be anywhere. To coincidentally stumble upon a recently created debris field with signs that the victors made it out a couple of days earlier suggested that the Flagrant Swordmaidens stumbled upon their rivals!

"It's not a coincidence." Ketis quietly whispered to Ves through her open helmet. "Only a small number of crazy treasure hunters ever have a reason to explore the deep frontier. Even then, they always go by lone ships instead of a fleet with a train of cargo haulers or transports."

In other words, the true daredevils tried to keep their ventures into the deep frontier as swift as possible and avoided burdens whenever they could.

Bringing along a couple of slow, fat and happy cargo haulers did not make for a sneaky fleet composition that could escape at the drop of a hat. The cheap, inferior FTL drives typically built into the engineering bays of cargo haulers generally took an extremely long time to cycle.

While a combat carrier could finish cycling their FTL drives in four hours or so if their engineers were good, a cargo hauler mostly took at least two hours more. The older and more aged the vessel, the more worn out its FTL drive became and the longer it took to finish a cycling process after transitioning back to realspace.

Even corvettes, generally regarded as the fastest proper starship class available on the market, brushed up against a hard limit of around three hours to complete its cycling process.

Therefore, bringing along a supply train of logistics and cargo ships was like shackling a fleet with a ball and chain. It slowed their entire progress down to a ponderous walk forward.

Nonetheless, larger fleets couldn't do without a supply train. Combat-oriented vessels such as combat carriers, light carriers and converted carriers devoted most of their internal volume to stashing mechs. On top of that, they needed to devote more space to essentials such as workshops, tools, spare parts and spare materials. Even then, the carriers couldn't carry a sufficient amount of supplies to keep the mechs in good condition for more than a month or two under normal use.

Therefore, a big force almost always carried along a necessary train of ships dedicated to resource processing, fabrication and storage.

In the worst case scenario, a combat fleet could always cut off their tail and run away by abandoning the slow and useless logistics ships.

However, the peculiar part about the debris field they detected was that it consisted of an even mix of combat and non-combat vessels. If all of the wrecked ships belong to the losing side, this meant that they never had the opportunity to flee.

The attackers ambushed the losing side when they least expected it! The battle occurred far too suddenly for the weaker side to split up!

Eventually, the fleet came close enough to pick up weak signals.

"We're detecting hundreds of faint signals, sir." The sensor officer said. "They are all spread out over the debris field. Many of them have drifted further and further from the center of the field."

"Have you identified the nature of the signals?" Major Verle asked, though from his tone he already suspected what they might be.

"The stronger signals predominately come from escape pods or ejected cockpits, while the weaker ones are likely broadcasted from vacuum-sealed hazard suits, vacsuits or suits of combat armor."

"The emergency broadcast signals always include whether the occupant of their vehicle or suit is dead or alive." Major Verle noted. "How many of those signals still claim that their occupants are alive?"

"No more than a dozen, sir."

"That's not a lot."

"Sir, I cannot explain why that is so. We need to employ our near-range sensors to obtain the necessary amount of resolution to resolve what has happened to the suits and escape pods. Right now, our primary optical sensors are being massively hindered by the fact the binary dwarf stars in this star system are some of the faintest we've ever encountered."

Optical sensors worked best at resolving detail at great distances, but they depended heavily on the amount of light being shone on the objects they observed. In weaker star systems, the effectiveness of their optical sensors degraded to the extent that they were pretty much flying blind in space!

"Have we received any transponder signals? Have we already deduced the identity of this fallen fleet?"

"According to the signals transmitted by the transceivers or transponders from the surviving craft or suits... they claim to be part of Chopra Interstellar Security, a large mercenary corps based out of Bentheim!"

That caused a huge wave of shock among the officers and operators in the command center. Bentheim! If the emergency transmissions weren't lying in order to obtain their sympathy, then they may have stumbled upon foundered citizens from their own state!

"How can there be Brighters all the way out here?!" Someone couldn't help but hiss nearby.

"Idiot! What else is there? These guys have also been tasked with finding the Starlight Megalodon!"

"Then how did they get intercepted right before they reached their goal?"

"Beats me. We'll find out later if there are any survivors left to interrogate."

Once the surprise died down, Major Verle remained silent and pensive as a number of considerations flitted through his mind. Eventually, he came to a decision.

"Please make haste towards the debris field. We Vandals have a duty to safeguard the lives of every citizen of the Bright Republic, no matter where we may appear! Let it not be said that we are callous towards our fellow enlightened brothers and sisters!"

That caused everyone to feel relieved. For a minute, some of them believed that Major Verle would instead choose to prioritize the mission.

Ves knew why Major Verle decided to direct the Vandals to go out of the way to rescue their fellow Brighters. Besides lifting the morale of his own subordinates, he likely wanted to hear the stories of the Choprans in person.

No mercenary corps randomly stumbled all the way out to the deep frontier for a pirate hunting mission or something.

Even with two stars in the same star system, the dim light emitted from both brown dwarfs simply made it hard for everyone to do their jobs. Ves in particular had nothing to work with because with the optical sensors down, he needed to rely on alternative sensors to identify the mech wrecks strewn about along the debris field.

The sharpest sensors he had access to told him nothing more than the approximate mass of each object. That only enabled him to classify the wrecks by weight class, nothing else.

"This is really pointless." He sighed when he stared at his projected control panel and how little details it displayed. "I could have spent hours tinkering on my side project, but because the alert is still active we're forced to stay at our posts."

Ketis on the other hand entertained herself when Ves assigned her to read up the limited amount of intelligence the local database contained about the mercenaries.

"Hey teacher! These Choprans are really good at their job. They started just thirty years ago when a band of discharged veterans from your Mech Corps pooled their savings together to lease a couple of cheap mechs and a ramshackle converted carrier. They immediately started taking small-time contracts, completing them one after another until they slowly spent their

earnings back into expanding their mechs and their roster. This went on for three straight decades until they grew to the point where they fielded a hundred-and-twenty mechs!"

It sounded like a typical rags-to-riches story to Ves, though Mech Corps veterans had a tendency to be successful in their transition to a private sector career as long as they remained physically fit.

"There's two details that stand out from that summary." He said. "First, inspect their mission records. Have they ever failed a contracted?"

Ketis peered through the abbreviated record. "This record isn't very detailed, but it doesn't state anything about outright failures. It did say that the Choprans fell short of fulfilling the terms of their contract, though. The partial failures weren't enough to earn them any red marks from the Mercenary Association."

"That's impossible! There's no way a mercenary corps that has operated longer than I've been alive can maintain a near-perfect mission record! Look at the issuers of the missions. Are the Choprans working for the same employers?"

"Uhhh... I don't see anything except a whole bunch of boring corporate names. There's rarely any duplicates either. They always accept a contract from a different company after they are done with the last one."

"Hmm.." Ves tapped his lips with his finger. "The fact that they have traveled all the way up to this star system in the deep frontier practically screams to me that they owe their success to their backers. Hmm, does it state which bank or financial institution facilitated their initial loans and leases?"

"According to the record, it's some bank based in Bentheim called the Yellow Fox Bank."

"That's probably the arm of their backers, but I'm not too sure. Take note of it anyway."

Yellow Fox Bank. He'd remember that.

It was too bad the local database didn't offer anything more than a stub when he searched for it. He needed to access the galactic net to obtain more information, but in this exceedingly sensitive time with the entire fleet at high alert, Ves would never be able to obtain permission from Major Verle to establish an outside connection for information gathering purposes.

As the Flagrant Swordmaidens drew closer, the lack of any open threats pushed them into a more vigilant stance. What if enemy mechs hid amid the debris? What if they coasted towards them on a ballistic trajectory, pretending to be loosely-spinning chunks of slag? What if some mechs under stealth attempted to creep up to them at this very moment?

Therefore, the Vandals intensified their patrols, not even hesitating to put up half of their available spaceborn assets into orbit around their ships. Inheritors augmented with stealth detection arrays continuously scanned each possible angle of approach.

Nothing turned up. The battlefield seemed eerily quiet and absent of any activate threat. Not even mines or boobytraps made a surprise appearance.

They found nothing but broken ships, broken mechs and maybe broken dreams. The frontier had a way of chewing out everyone who entered it like an endless abyss.

As much as roaming the frontier sounded like a risky prospect where catastrophe lurked in every corner, Ves began to enjoy it actually.

While most of the Vandals aboard the Shield of Hispania started to behave jumpy and apprehensive, Ves acted more like Ketis, who treated this foray into the deep frontier as nothing more than an interesting vacation.

The frontier was exceedingly dangerous. Ves couldn't deny this fact. Yet he felt liberated by the absence of structure and law. He could do almost anything he wanted without repercussions. The only requirement one needed to possess in order to survive out here was to be strong.

Ves couldn't help but be attracted to such a harsh but self-sufficient philosophy.

Chapter 733 Fragile Alliance

Whoever attacked Chopra Interstellar Security fleet did a fairly hasty job at cleaning up the battlefield. As the Flagrant Swordmaidens finally reached close enough to resolve some actual details from the debris field, they quickly obtained more details.

The first observation was that the winner of the battle looted all the easily-accessible valuables. Intact containers, stores of spare materials, semi-complete mechs and more were in very short supply.

In addition, the winners executed every Chopran survivor within easy reach or detection. A large amount of broken escape pods, scraps of frozen biological material free floating in space and more strongly indicated that an indiscriminate massacre took place.

However, the continued existence of more than a hundred escape pods, many of which boosted far away from their ships, indicated that the victors of the battle hadn't been too thorough. They only picked the low-hanging fruit before they decided to move on. Ultimately, finding the Starlight Megalodon was more important than processing the entire debris field.

"There's nothing worth salvaging in the debris field." Ketis opined. As a member of a pirate gang, she had a keen eye for salvage. Picking up free goods from floating debris field was every pirate's specialty. "The easy stuff that's easy to recover and turn into something valuable has already been

taken away. I can immediately tell an old hand in the business is responsible by the way the debris field is cleaned up. Pirates are involved."

Ves trusted her judgement. "We'll know for certain once the rescue teams have picked up the survivors. Really though. Of all the possible outfits we could meet in our journey into the deep frontier, why did we encounter a mercenary corps from my own state? How many possible outfits and influences are actually involved in the search for the Starlight Megalodon?"

The possible answers he came up with unsettled him. He really did not like the implications of their encounter with the remnants of Chopra Interstellar Security.

At the very least, their previous encounter with the remnant survivors of a doomed fleet could be chalked to coincidence. Only the most suspicious Vandals believed the Fourth Prince and Venerable Xie schemed against the Vandals from the start.

They couldn't dismiss the presence of the Choprans with the same excuse, though.

Search and rescue teams deployed from the Swordmaidens and the Vandals.

The Swordmaidens mostly spent their efforts on 'searching' and 'rescuing' any loot and valuables the previous looters hadn't been able to retrieve. All Ves could say about their behavior was that they sure had their priorities straight.

The Vandals on the other hand were in no mood to raid the rotting corpse of what used to be an upstanding Brighter mercenary corps. The personnel rolls of Chopra Interstellar Security numbered in the hundreds, and the overwhelming majority of its people hailed from the Bright Republic.

The fact that Chopra, like many mercenary corps, began as a private venture between a band of veterans from the Mech Corps hit the Vandals fairly hard. Which Vandal didn't dream of starting a second career in the private sector?

Because the tragic fate of Chopra was so relatable, the Vandals all put their full efforts into spreading out their mechs and shuttles towards rescuing as many escape pods and free floating Choprans they could find.

Most could easily be tracked down by their active transponders, but some became so terrified by the thought of being hunted down by whoever defeated them that they disabled the transponders and any other emergency signallers.

The Vandals managed to locate a portion of these paranoid folk, but they probably missed tens of Choprans who hid their signature behind pieces of debris or the like. Their own efforts at minimizing their chances of detection inexplicably doomed them from any chance of rescue, as the Vandals couldn't afford to stick around forever.

The Starlight Megalodon beckoned.

As survivors and frozen corpses trickled in, security officers trained in interrogation and investigation questioned the first coherent Choprans they managed to get their hands on. Through these preliminary talks, they finally found out which outfit was responsible for dooming the mercenary corps to dust and ruin!

"They got shanked by an independent pirate gang called the NIN."

"NIN? What kind of name is that? What does it stand for?"

"Beats me, but get this, the Choprans originally banded up with the NIN!"

"Then how come they came to blows in this star system? Aren't they allies?"

"Well obviously the NIN had a change of heart, because they ambushed the Chopran patrol mechs with precision attacks planned beforehand!"

The gossiping Vandals quickly fell silent after hearing the latest rumors. The gravity of the situation didn't escape the servicemen. If the so-called NIN

could turn their coats and turn their weapons against Chopra, then what if history repeated itself?

A few days ago, the NIN backstabbed the Choprans. Today, Lydia's Swordmaidens may as well turn their swords against the Flagrant Vandals!

Ketis scrunched up her nose when she saw how the Vandals all became vigilant in her presence. She pressed her fists against her hips. "Really now! Do you think we're really the same as the NIN? I've heard of those bunch of losers. They're a bunch of frontier scum! They don't have a single honorable bone in their bodies!"

"For what it's worth, I believe in the Swordmaidens." Ves backed her up, though whether he actually believed in his own words was another matter. He cared more about keeping himself in her good books right now. "From the early accounts we've received, the NIN predominantly took the Choprans by surprise by a massed ranged attack. The Swordmaidens won't be able to take us by surprise that way because most of their spaceborn mechs are sword wielders! If they ever have any evil intentions, we'd at least see them coming."

Ketis frantically nodded her head. "Yeah! Even though we have a couple of ranged mechs in our lineup, what can we do with them? They're not even enough to take down a single combat carrier! You Vandals already outnumber and outgun us from the start. There's no way we can win against you even if we launch a surprise attack."

This still didn't preclude other forms of betrayal, such as leaving the side of the Vandals just as they engaged against a formidable opponent. However, Ves didn't mention all of those possibilities because this line of questioning only led to excessive paranoia.

He already had enough potential threats on his plate. He didn't need to add one more. For some reason, the Swordmaidens gave Ves a good feeling.

They were remarkably plain and honest about their intentions. None of them except Commander Lydia seemed to be the type who looked capable of performing subterfuge.

The Vandals picked up two notable Chopran cadres from the debris field. They found one ejected cockpit that preserved the life of Captain Fez Murtadon, one of the senior leaders of Chopra Interstellar Security!

His rescue presented Chopra with the hope for rebirth, because Captain Murtadon could take charge over all of the remaining assets of the mercenary corps left behind in the Bright Republic.

The search and rescue teams found another notable survivor from an escape pod ejected early in the battle, and therefore strayed a lot further away from the debris field than the other pods.

This didn't say anything good about the occupant, but when the Vandals interrogated the flighty Chopran, they found out that he was a mech designer!

The man didn't know much about the actual attack, though he had been a helpful source about the military might of the NIN. After several hours of interrogation, Ves had been invited to have a chat with the fellow.

"Why me?"

"Because you're a mech designer." A security officer garbed in heavy combat armor gruffly replied. "You mech designers are a species in itself. Sometimes we miss stuff that other mech designers find important. Just talk with the fellow and see if you can fish for any information. It doesn't matter if all we hear is duplicate of what he has already told us, but keep his mouth moving so that we can get a more precise read on his bearing. That will help us figure out which parts he's been a bit hazy with the truth."

"Alright. What will happen with the mech designer after we finish the interrogations?"

The security officer sighed. "He'll have to stay in custody with the rest of the Choprans. Even with our shared background, the Mech Corps has already taken them off their rolls. Brighter or not, they'll have to remain in the brig for the foreseeable future."

Ves couldn't blame the Vandals for doing so despite the disservice it represented to the surviving Choprans. The Vandals had their own mission to pursue, and it was probably very likely that the Choprans and the Vandals possessed different backers. Of course the Vandals would never allow the Choprans to succeed in whatever they came out here to accomplish.

After entering into a small, plain compartment configured into an interrogation room, Ves sat himself down on the only available seat. On the other side of the table sat the surviving mech designer of the Choprans.

He was older than Ves expected. The mech designer appeared a little haggard in his Chopran brown uniform, as if the Vandals hadn't bothered to clean him up after pulling him out of his escape pod. The man looked to be someone in his mid-fifties and his face betrayed a tinge of Asiatic heritage.

The mech designer completely ignored Ves when he entered. Instead, he desperately munched on the raw semi-solid contents of a nutrient pack. The man occasionally stopped his frantic eating by sipping his glass of water.

Ves looked at the man in bemusement. He had never seen someone so eager to eat the contents of a stale, decades-old nutrient pack.

He decided to push this conversation along.

"My name is Ves Larkinson. I am the temporary head designer of this task force. Would you like to introduce yourself?"

The man wearily diverted his attention from his meal. "Eric Kichiro, Novice Mech Designer. I used to serve in the Mech Corps as well, you know. I

survived the last Bright-Vesia War against all accounts. Horrible time. Horrible. Horrible."

"Okay, Eric." Ves respect for the man had gone up a bit. Any low-level mech designer who survived the war possessed a decent head on their shoulders at the very least. "Before we begin, can I ask why you're so eager to eat right now? Shouldn't you have access to enough nutrient packs in your escape pod?"

Eric violently shook his head. "No! I mean Yes! My pod did have a stash, but I never expected to be rescued so soon. This binary brown dwarf star system is so far away from any human presence that the odds of being rescued by another human force is small! I tallied the available supplies and drew up a rationing scheme that stretches them out for a month! Unfortunately.. The Choprans never invested much in their escape pods. It lacks the ability to recycle oxygen and water. I run out of oxygen first before I run out of food and water."

It sounded like Eric suffered from a severe case of cabin fever. The poor mech designer must have obsessed about his supplies for hours on end ever since his pod ejected from its doomed ship.

"Look, you're safe now. You're among the Flagrant Vandals, and while we might not be the famed Volari Starhawks or the Infernal Hellhounds, we're not pushovers either. Tell me, what was your position at Chopra Interstellar Security?"

"Hng.. I needed a job and the Choprans offered to hire me. Even though they paid less than some of the other gigs I used to hold, they don't expect me to do much either. The Choprans all rely on commercial mechs bought from reputable sellers on the market. As the only real mech designer in the mercenary corps, I've been tasked with ensuring their quality and designing minor tweaks and modifications at the mech pilot's requests. The most

involved I've ever been in my job is when we needed to repair a heavily-damaged mech."

In other words, it didn't sound any different from what low-ranking mech designers already did in the Mech Corps.

"You're the most senior mech designer in the mercenary corps?"

"Yes. The Choprans can't afford anyone better, and they don't really need one either. It's not economical for them to develop their own mechs when a lot of good mech models are already available on the market."

"I see."

Ves found it rather regretful that Eric decided to coast along in the latter part of his career. If he showed some more drive and initiative, he could have leveraged his previous service into applying for a more challenging job that allowed him to develop his mech design skills.

As it was, the man would likely remain a Novice for the rest of his life.

"Alright, enough about yourself. Tell me about the NIN. How did they overwhelm you Choprans so fast?"

Chapter 734 Cowardice is a Virtue!

Eric Kichiro's eyes visibly contracted when Ves mentioned the NIN.

A haunted man always became frightened when their ghosts came back to torment them. While Ves didn't wish to open up old wounds, he needed to hear the whole story from the mech designer.

"The NIN, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Call me Ves."

"You are kind of young, now that I think about it. How come you're the head designer? Did the other guy lost his head or something?"

"...Something like that." Ves grimaced. "Please answer the question. This isn't about me right now."

"Ah, my apologies Ves.." Eric looked a little uncertain towards Ves. A head designer should at least be a Journeyman, but the older man sensed the vibe of an Apprentice instead. It confused him a bit. "Well, you'd probably hear this from every Chopran you pick up from the battlefield, but the NIN are extremely unpleasant to be around."

"How so?"

"The NIN.. well.. they fulfill almost every stereotype of a pirate you can imagine. They're almost universally poorly educated and exhibit bad hygiene, no forethought and a violent disposition. Chopra should have never gone to bed with these ill-kempt brutes and thugs!"

"Then why did you Choprans ally yourself with these pirates in the first place?"

"..I don't know." Eric shrugged. "The bosses of the corps all announced their decision one day. It's not like the rank-and-file or someone from support like me have a say in the decision making."

"There must have been rumors. Suspicions. Whispers. Did someone else put the Choprans up to this marriage?"

Eric's eyes suddenly grew sharper. He kept his mouth shut, as if he was aware that he faced an interrogation.

After Ves stared back for a while, he understood that Eric didn't wish to snitch on his employers. Ves would leave this line of questioning to professionals, though they likely already pulled the answers from someone else's mouth.

"Okay, let me ask something different, then. From what I've gathered, the NIN is an independent pirate gang. Are you sure they aren't a part of one of the two major pirate blocs in this region?"

"I don't think so." Eric shook his head. "I don't hear a lot of things, but I never heard of the NIN cooperating with anybody. If you see them for yourselves, you'll know why. I think they're the cockroaches of among the pirates. They're numerous but filthy and individually weak."

"Does the Dragon Alliance or the Ravienne Alliance ring a bell to you?"

"No."

"Tell me about the attack itself. How have the NIN been able to jump on your forces?"

"We were careless." Eric let out a deep breath. "When we initially banded together with the NIN, we didn't get along at all. They're thugs more than anything. We Choprans pride ourselves on our professionalism, so a lot of the rank-and-file immediately began to protest to the brass. We hated the NIN and didn't want to do anything with them. I think many of us had their fingers on the triggers."

"And then?" Ves prodded.

"Well, nothing happened. The brass insisted that we give the NIN a chance. We did. The friction hadn't gone down at all. Fights would break out whenever we gathered in the same place. Their joyriding mech pilots aggressively plunge their mechs close to ours when we are on patrols. All these incidents hammered home the fact that the NIN are a bunch of highly impulsive hooligans. Perhaps the only merit to them is that they know the lay of the land of the frontier really well. We never jumped to any dangerous star systems until we arrived here."

"If you Choprans continued to get along poorly with the NIN, how come you managed to restrain yourselves?"

"The mercenary corps is owned by the bosses." Eric declared. "They tell us what to do and we have no choice but to follow orders. They're not exactly

keen on fostering initiative from the lower ranks. We had all been accustomed to gritting our teeth and following orders we don't like. Trying to make peace with the NIN is just another bad order to add to the pile."

"Seems like this bad order should have received a lot more scrutiny."

"Oh, many of us did in fact continue to put up our guard against the NIN. We've traveled together for months without a major incident blowing up in our faces, and while some of us started to let them their guard, a large minority never really became convinced of their docility."

"If a large part of you Choprans remained suspicious, how come you lost the battle so totally and completely?"

"The NIN outnumber us. It's as simple as that. None of their mechs and ships are worth a damn. The best of their machines are at least second-hand castoffs, and the worst are third-hand junk scavengers have salvaged, patched up and sold to the NIN for a pittance. The only advantage that they have is that they outnumbered us more than three-to-one. None of us thought that was a huge issue, though. They may have the numbers, but we have the quality. I should know since I inspected each and every mech in our lineup."

Ves requested some of the details on the mechs. According to Eric, the Choprans mostly fielded mechs in the 20 million bright credit range, while the NIN overwhelmingly fielded mechs in the 4 million credit range.

Therefore, the total worth of the Chopra fleet should have surpassed the total worth of the NIN fleet.

Yet the force that fielded vastly more mechs won the battle in a landslide.

"A large reason why we fell so early is because the NIN ambushed us out of the blue. While we kept our fleets separated at what we thought was a healthy distance, the NIN mostly fielded spaceborn frontline mechs armed with laser barrels. Laser weapons are a lot more forgiving at longer ranges than

weapons that employ physical projectiles. Even though our mechs followed a routine evasion pattern when on patrol, the NIN must have spent hours deciphering their movements and predicting where they should aim. Halfway through the cycling processes of our FTL drives, the pirates struck."

The initial volley hit over half of the Chopran mechs on the field. Most of them got hit so many times by laser beams that they all suffered some debilitating damage. Subsequent hits quickly finished them off.

Upon this sudden ambush, the Choprans failed to respond fast enough to defend themselves. With half of their patrol mechs going down in quick succession, the other half belatedly tried to organize themselves.

It didn't help that the NIN deliberately aimed most of their laser weapons at the officers of the mercenary corps!

"Mechs in reserve on our carriers sortied out as fast as they could, but the NIN mechs quickly turned their firepower towards our ships. They're light carriers. They're large and purpose-built to transport mechs, but they were never meant to withstand the combined firepower of over a hundred frontline mechs! Our ships succumbed one by one before we could push out the rest of our reserves from the hangar bays!"

Ves sympathized with their fate. Despite the vigilance of their rank-and-file, much of the Choprans simply became used to the antics of the NIN. They became used to traveling alongside the ill-behaved pirates and therefore became less psychologically prepared to respond to a possible betrayal.

None of the lower ranks deserved any blame. Whether they eyed the NIN with caution or not, they had to follow the instructions from the top. The only thing Ves couldn't figure out was why the leaders were so blind to the possible dangers.

"Who leads Chopra?"

"The mech officers, mostly." Eric replied. "Chopra is run by a council of them that included descendants of the original founders as well. The council takes a long time to agree on anything, and what they do decide is usually the most careful decision out of their range of choices."

Basically, while the top officers wielded a lot of power, their subordinates had no say in the running of the mercenary corps. Such a top-down management style echoed the way the military liked to run their units.

The difference was that each military unit was part of a larger unit. They also benefited from a range of advisory and support services.

A private sector outfit on the other hand mostly had to make do with their own strength and capabilities. Perhaps they deserved to be proud of their military strength, but what about vital services such as intelligence gathering or technical support?

It was obvious that Chopra Interstellar Security devoted insufficient resources into a proper intelligence gathering network that could have sniffed out the NIN's impending betrayal.

Ves knew that a mercenary corps often compensated for the lack of these services by relying on the varied talents of their lower ranks. Each of them were intelligent beings in their own right. Granting them a bit of autonomy and say in the mercenary corps allowed them to contribute their other talents to their cause.

Though running a mercenary corps with a bottom-up or grassroots approach risked a lot of chaos or indecision, most independent corps actually ran in this matter. Every upstanding mercenary felt appreciated because their opinions mattered.

It sounded like Chopra could have dearly benefited from listening to their lower ranks instead of the higher officers who isolated themselves in their ivory towers.

"Have the NIN ever hinted or revealed why they might set upon you Choprans?" Ves asked. "It's rather incomprehensible for your erstwhile allies to turn against you before you reached your destination. I mean, the only reason for a mercenary corps and a pirate gang to band together would be to pool your strengths."

In the case of the Flagrant Swordmaidens, the Vandals provided the muscle while the Swordmaidens lent their familiarity to the frontier. Both of them couldn't do without the other, so they had a comfortable basis of cooperation that neither side wanted to ruin.

Ves surmised that the partnership between Chopra and the NIN lacked such a mutual recognition. Obviously, the NIN decided they wouldn't be much worse off if they dumped the Choprans.

"The NIN never really liked us. Each time we gather together, they make their disdain for us very clear. They all think we're too stuck-up and rigid for their tastes." Eric answered, thereby confirming some of what Ves had come up with. "Our bosses kept insisting to give the NIN a break, that they can't help their own boorishness. We.. never managed to do so. As mercenaries, we've gone on a lot of missions that compel us to fight against pirates. None of us have ever met a decent pirate in our lives, so you can imagine how awful it was for us to try to get along with some of the worst examples of pirates in the galaxy."

The two chatted a bit more about the pirates. Eric helpfully supplied Ves with an analysis of the frontline mechs utilized by the NIN in their devastating surprise attack.

The information wasn't very helpful, though. The mechs the NIN employed were so cheap and simple that they contained no depth at all. Their designs possessed little ingenuity and even less imagination, and they carried no other special features than the bare minimum of what a mech ought to possess.

"That's frontline mechs for you." Eric muttered with the sage of a mech designer who managed to survive the previous war. "The NIN may be bastards, but they're very cunning and effective when it matters. They unleashed their ambush in almost perfect coordination with no inherent confusion or hesitation at all. That tells me that they're being led by a strong leader. It takes a lot of leadership ability to wrangle this horde of wild animals."

Besides this detail, Eric didn't have a lot to say about the NIN. At some point, Ves decided he heard enough. Even as a mech designer, his status with the mercenary corps was equivalent to a chief technician. The real decision makers at Chopra never pulled him into any of their discussions.

As Ves was about to leave, he asked one more question. "Do you wish to pass along anything else to us?"

The Chopran mech designer sat up straighter in his chair. Yeah. I've got some advice for you, Ves. Take it as a friendly tip from one fellow mech designer to another."

"Let me hear it, then."

"If you ever find yourself in a situation like mine, don't trust anybody. Just run. The earlier you bail out, the greater the chance you escape the net that is closing in on your allies. It is a mech pilot's duty to fight to the death, but it is a mech designer's duty to save their own hide! Cowardice is a virtue for our profession! As non-combatants, we have no role on the battlefield!"

Ves almost gaped. He didn't know what to say about that.

"Okay. I'll take that into account. Good day, sir."

Chapter 735 Will it Fly?

Once the Flagrant Swordmaidens finished sweeping the debris field of survivors and incidental loot, they traveled to the outer edge of the system and immediately transitioned into FTL.

The longer they stayed in realspace, the more they became susceptible to attacks.

Even though FTL travel introduced a slight, unsettling feeling in the back of everyone's minds, they vastly preferred it to being out in open space for anyone and anything to jump at their fleet.

As more stories from the bedraggled and recovering survivors of Chopra Interstellar Security proliferated among the crew, everyone grew more conscious of the dangers that could befall them. Who knew if the Swordmaidens suddenly changed their mind? The idea that they might turn their coats rarely crossed their minds after a few weeks of perfect cooperation, but now the Vandals received an awful shock that woke them up.

What stopped their allies from turning into their enemies?

Paranoia rang rife throughout the ship, and it only subsided after the shock wore off. Still, the Vandals never regained their prior confidence.

Seeing the effects on the crew made Ves think that Major Verle deliberately leaked the contents of the discussions. The Vandals had indeed been a little too comfortable in their skin lately. While they exhibited the right amount of caution against outside threats, they developed a blind spot against the Swordmaidens, who didn't really act like the stereotypical pirates.

Properly speaking, Ves would rather call the Swordmaidens outlaws. While they engaged in piracy here and there, they weren't as feral and undisciplined as the NIN. In fact, they were actually the opposite.

The MTA and CFA mainly drove the use and popularization of the word 'pirates' in order to paint every deviant force not under their purview under a single brush. 'Pirates' became a lot scarier to normal folk whether they raided and pillaged every second day or only wandered in uncontrolled space because they hid from powerful enemies.

"Everyone learns that it's a bad idea to engage in any business with pirates. Hell, it's even dangerous to be in the same room as them! All of this demonization is artificially creating a division between lawful and unlawful people."

Ves found it funny because outlaws existed in civilized space as well. Gangs, rebel movements, dark mercenaries and more ruled the underbelly of civilized space. Some of them committed many more crimes than pirates, but they usually escaped the notice of the authorities.

Instead, only pirates specifically received the distinction of becoming everyone's bogeymen.

"Granted, it's probably a good idea to remain prudent against anyone calling themselves pirates. They're still capable of killing you or robbing you blind."

Perhaps the most fault that could be laid at the feet of the Swordmaidens was that they practiced slavery to an extent. They had no qualms in kidnapping technically adept men and send them off to a processing facility to brainwash them into permanent obedience.

The CFA used to send out warfleets to squash these egregious violations of one of humanity's core values. The spread and normalization of slavery among humans shouldn't be tolerated because aliens might pick up the habit as well.

In any case, the Vandals quickly turned to normal after a few days. As Ketis had mentioned earlier in her outburst, the Swordmaidens primarily utilized

sword-wielding mechs. In addition, their spaceborn mech contingent paled in comparison to their landbound roster. The power disparity between the two forces tilted heavily towards the Vandals, at least when it came to spaceborn combat.

The Vandals realized they possessed sufficient strength to disregard many threats. This was the benefit of fielding a strong force!

"Besides, Commander Lydia would never double-cross you all." Ketis explained in the office after Ves conducted another lecture on designing mechs for the market. "We built up a reputation for making friends and sticking to our deals. We'd ruin our reputation if we turn against you all of a sudden. All of our friends will no longer be friends and no one will dare to do business with us. We'll be grouped in the same category of scum as the NIN!"

"Keeping up a good diplomatic front must be exhausting for your Swordmaidens. I would have thought there is a lot of infighting among pirates." Ves remarked as he leaned back in his chair.

"There is! We get into fights all the time! But there's a difference between annihilating a rival gang and having a tussle or two. A lot of fights between pirates begin with a lot of smack talk and boasting. Then we come to blows and someone gets knocked out or some mechs become crippled. After that the losers acknowledge that the others are better and get to leave."

Ves furrowed his brows. "That doesn't really sound like a battle. That's more akin to posturing. The only thing at stake is reputation, right?"

"Reputation is our lifeline. Crowds part when we approach. Random pirates will choose to go elsewhere rather than provoke us. We've built quite a rep among the independent pirates! It's not very helpful when we go against pirates from the pirate blocs, but that's the frontier for you!"

Ves eagerly listened to her tales on how Lydia's Swordmaidens managed to survive and thrive in the dangerous frontier. The more he heard about their conduct, the more he realized that Commander Lydia may be one of the shrewdest leaders in the Faris Star Region.

Her decisions and her strategies became food for his thoughts as Ves contemplated his own future plans.

The more he became familiar with the frontier, the more he became enamored by it. If he ever came back home, he wanted to set up his Shadow Force as an element that swam in the currents of the frontier like a shark that belonged.

He wasn't content with setting up the Shadow Force as a hidden knife only to be employed when Ves needed to get rid of someone. He wanted them to be a force to be reckoned with, and become so rooted in the web of connections of the frontier that no one would tie their existence back to him. Going for the diplomatic route beat acting like a hooligan in his books.

Once he finished his usual routine of rushing through his duties and spending some time to guide Ketis on formulating her design philosophy, he devoted most of his efforts to completing the abomination that was the Six-Sided Dice.

Chief Avanaeon knew ships like the back of his hand, so he did most of the hard lifting in terms of fabricating and assembling the internal ship components.

The cube-shaped shuttle called for custom designs of every essential shuttle part such as the power reactor or sub-light propulsion. Avanaeon took standard shuttle designs but heavily tweaked them in order to take up the least amount of space even if it cost them in terms of performance.

The chief engineer also became responsible for reproducing some of the internal stealth components that blocked indirect means of detection such as detecting their mass.

Ves on the other hand became responsible for only one important task, by far the most important one. His duty was to take the salvaged stealth plating fragments, cut off the non-working bits and restore the portions that did work but only partially.

It was difficult, tedious and incredibly time-consuming work. The job needed to be done by someone with a good grip on precision machinery and so couldn't be done by anyone else but Ves.

The first day of performing this task made Ves wanted to tear his hair out!

"This is so frustratingly finicky!" He shouted. "It's like trying to find a needle in a haystack, but once I found one, I have to find ninety-nine more needles before I'm done for the day!"

Restoring the functioning of the stealth plating pretty much entailed restoring the functioning of the alloys and systems integrated within and between the individual layers. Stealth plating differed from regular alloy plating in that the latter usually consisted of sandwiches of solid alloy while the former consisted of a mosaic of geometric materials.

Kind of like a chameleon's skin, but shrunken down to an extremely small scale.

Nonetheless, while Ves felt bored to tears at performing such repetitive work, doing the same thing over and over enabled him to learn some tricks to speed up his progress. He became increasingly proficient in the procedure to the point he completed one 'side' of the cube in two days.

It took a bit less time to complete the second side. Even less for the third side. By the time he completed the last side, he managed to become so productive he only needed a little more than a single day to complete the last side.

After restoring and reshaping the long-neglected fragments six vaguely-uniform sheets stealth plating in the form of nearly identical squares, Ves

began to test and adjust their workings while he waited for Avanaeon to finish his part of the construction.

"Why are you taking so long, chief?"

"Hah! You don't know anything, Ves! A regular shuttle might be as simple to make as a chair to us, but when it comes to our Six-Sided Dice, almost every aspect of it is custom-designed! We're practically building the equivalent of a custom mech!"

Ves understood the analogy. "You have a point. I keep thinking that this is a rather simple shuttle aside from the inclusion of the stealth systems, but it's really more than that. The Six-Sided Dice is a unique creation!"

It was something lesser than an assault shuttle but greater than an aircar. Its spec sheet looked rather dismal, but the fact that it stuffed enough systems to activate a pretty good form of stealth immediately redeemed all of its inadequacies.

As the Flagrant Swordmaidens slowly progressed deeper into sandmen space, Ves and Avanaeon rushed to complete the Six-Sided Cube. The project had become something of a labor of love for them, as this unique creation definitely boggled the mind in a fashion.

If they possessed the proper licenses for all the parts they utilized, then they could have made a fortune by selling it! Yet the design was destined to remain obscure. Ves didn't even dare to sell the design or an actual copy of the cube-shaped stealth shuttle because of how many feathers it ruffled.

As Ves assisted Avanaeon in the fabrication and assembly of the less complicated shuttle parts, they quickly managed to complete the rest of the fabrication jobs within a few days. After inspecting each part for their soundness, they carefully assembled them together. Starting with the basic

frame, they filled up the skeleton with parts such as the power reactor, the processing bank, the control modules and more.

Then came the time where they needed to affix the stealth plating on their naked shuttle. This demanded a bit more delicacy on their part because misaligning the plates by even a tiny bit could result in opening up a gap from which emissions could escape!

They could not afford such a mistake! A stealth effect was only as strong as its weakest link. Even if ninety-nine percent of a stealthed object's surface enjoyed total coverage, a small gap which leaked tiny amounts of heat or reflected a little bit of light became an instant curiosity in the eyes of electronic sensors.

They might as well be lighthouses in the dark!

Fortunately, neither Ves nor Avanaeon were rookies in their craft. Their steady experience and expert handling of the tools enabled them to affix the stealth plating in a calm, steady and stable fashion.

Before they knew it, the ugly cube-shaped stealth shuttle came into being.

"It's assembled!"

Though it still required a lot of testing and debugging in order to verify they hadn't screwed anything up, the pair had had finished the culmination of their work!

The Six-Sided Dice rested on the flight deck like a stubby container someone left strewn around. A system of retractable plates that Ves had adapted to the shuttle's use covered up the sensors, the hatch and the thruster nacelles. In its fully retracted form, nothing about its appearance hinted at a shuttle.

Two questions lingered in Ves and Avanaeon's minds.

"Will it fly?"

"Does its stealth system work?"

Chapter 736 The Fate of Cowards

The Six-Sided Dice's stealth plating gave the cubular shuttle a pitch-black surface that hardly reflected any light even in its unpowered state. After all, if the stealth systems suffered a malfunction of some sort, it wouldn't do to reveal a bright pink cube in space that anyone could pick up with their naked eyes.

Though coating the Dice with black didn't actually help too much since most detection systems didn't solely rely on optical sensors, you never knew if it might save the lives of its occupants some day.

Besides, it became a custom in every industry to coat every stealth vehicle with black. Consumers expected it due to all of the action dramas they've seen.

While neither Ves nor Avanaeon ever intended to put the Six-Sided Dice up for sale, it beat coating it in any other color or pattern.

"All that work, just to build a shuttle that only has enough room to squeeze in four passengers. That's the same capacity as a small aircar!"

"If you hadn't insisted on including the air cycler module, then we could have added enough room for two more passengers." Avanaeon said. He never really agreed with that decision.

"Look, we've already gone over this discussion. The air cycler allows us to recycle the oxygen in the air which will not only work as long as we can power it, but it will also spare us from filling up our shuttle with oxygen tanks."

"That only benefits us if we are lingering in space for more than a month, Ves. I don't think we'd be able to survive if we are still roaming around in space for that long. Most statistics on rescue incidents point out that ninety-five percent of the time, someone that is stranded will be rescued within the week."

"That study is outdated and no entirely applicable to our situation." Ves immediately replied. "A newer study refuted that result. The sample of rescue incidents the researchers took applies to all of human-occupied space. Everyone knows that there are a lot more ships and a lot less space the closer you get to the center of the galaxy. Out here on the galactic rim, it can take months or years before a human vessel drops by at a desolate star system. That doesn't even count in the complication that we're currently knee-deep inside the deep frontier. Therefore, expecting us to be rescued within the week is extremely optimistic."

"If someone picks us up, it may not be for rescue, you know that?" Avanaeon pointed out. "With all the pirates roaming around here, it's much more likely that they'll capture us."

"I'll take my chances with the pirates rather than accept death by suffocation or starvation."

The conversation turned a bit too morbid to his tastes. Ves quickly changed the topic.

"Even if this shuttle looks complete, it's not finished yet by far. Everything we've designed is pure theory so far. We still need to see whether its stealth will hold up in reality."

The two eager engineers eagerly put the cube into action. They first moved it down to a special section of the mech workshop. Vandals eyed the bizarre black cube with a mixture of doubt and confusion.

"What's this machine? Is it a new 3D printer?"

"Maybe it's one of those battle drones that fold up in a cube when inactive."

"Why is it black?"

Ves had no doubt that a couple of people among the Vandals knew exactly what they built, but as long as Ves didn't neglect his duties too much they probably turned a blind eye to it. In any case, adding a stealth shuttle to their arsenal added a bit of extra versatility to the Vandals, not that Ves actually planned to let anyone else use his creation.

This was one machine that he intended to reserve for his own use.

He felt rather strange about that. He felt the same way when he crafted his high-powered gadgets. He spent so much time and effort into becoming good at designing products for others that he hardly thought about using his abilities for his own needs.

He designed mechs for a living. He felt passionate about his craft. Yet despite his love for mechs, he would never have the opportunity to pilot them in person. Such a tragedy was as horrible as a musician who composed a song he would never be able to hear.

Ves hadn't realized it, but he constantly bore the suffering of this unfulfilled need. He wanted so badly to make use of his products, to be able to play with his own creations, yet his insufficient aptitude prevented him from satisfying one of his greatest desires.

"I thought I got over this." He shook his head.

He did, actually. He found a way to cope with his loss. The career of a mech pilot didn't necessarily outshine the career of a mech designer. After several years of study, progress and experience, advancing to Journeyman came within his sight!

Journeyman Mech Designers emerged as infrequently as expert pilots, and enjoyed roughly the same status. Even the worst Journeymen enjoyed better careers than the most hard-working Apprentices.

Ves looked forward at the moment where his design philosophy became something substantial instead of ephemeral. While the process was irreversible, Ves held an untold amount of confidence in the correctness of his path!

"We're here. Let's put the Dice in its place."

They hitched the cube on a specialized cradle that allowed them to rotate the cube and subject it under a variety of signals while under the full observation of scanners and sensors. It served as the perfect testbed to perform live testing on their new invention without sending it out into space.

As they prepared to test its optical stealth capabilities, Ves suddenly received an alert from his comm.

"Ah, sorry chief, I have to answer this call."

"Go ahead, Ves. I can manage the testing process without you."

"Be sure to save some bugs for me!"

Ves walked over to a quiet corner of the workshop and activated the comm. The device immediately projected the familiar visage of Major Verle.

"Mr. Larkinson, a serious incident has occurred. Meet me at the brig."

The projection winked out before Ves could even acknowledge the order.

"What the?"

Whatever happened down the brig must have been extremely serious if the commanding officer couldn't even maintain his veneer of civility.

"Did something happen to our guests?"

He did not refer to their uninvited guests, of which one of them continued to stalk behind his back. Ves hadn't forgotten about the invisible presence of

Acolyte Villis, but he couldn't do anything to her without tipping off her fellow cultists.

The Vandals picked up two different groups of guests.

The prince and expert pilot hailing from the Royal House of Talk became major boons and headaches for the Vandals.

As for the handful of survivors from Chopra Interstellar Security, they didn't have anywhere to stash them except for the brig.

The latter group should have been safe and secure. Who could sneak into the brig and stir up trouble?

A few minutes later, Ves arrived at the bridge. Four security officers garbed in combat armor of the heavier variety stood guard next to the reinforced hatch with their rifles in easy reach.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen." He nodded at the security officers. "Major Verle is expecting me. Can I enter?"

"Please allow us to search you."

Ves went through a fairly thorough search. To his dismay, he had to leave behind his comm as well as his entire toolbelt and his gadgets.

"Hey, treat them carefully! They're expensive! I better get them back when I come out!"

After he finished his grumbling, Ves stepped inside the brig. The white paneling and the bright interior made his eyes feel as if someone directly pointed a laser at them. Ves blearily adjusted his eyes before he walked over to some kind of desk where a bunch of security officers stood behind a console. They appeared to be reviewing footage.

"Mr. Larkinson." One of them turned around. "Major Verle is expecting you at the cell down the corridor to the left. Go straight ahead."

Ves walked down the corridor. Cells surrounded him from both sides. Most of them appeared empty, with the bed, toilet and other furniture completely retracted into the bulkheads. A couple of other cells held occupants. Besides a few drunkard Vandals, they mostly held Choprans who have settled into their accommodations.

When he arrived at the end of the corridor, he finally met up with Major Verle along with a security officer.

"Major Verle. You called?"

"It's about time you showed up." The mech officer replied with a clipped tone. "Even if you are content with spending your time and effort on toys, I still expect you to show up promptly when called."

"Ah, my sincere apologies, sir. I shall endeavor to respond more promptly."

"Can it. Go look inside that cell. Tell me what you see."

Ves finally turned around and looked through the clear composite material that separated the cell from the corridor.

What he saw was very gruesome.

Splotches of blood adorned the pristine white surfaces of the cell. A pool of it gathered in the center where a gap automatically closed up in order to prevent the evidence from going down the drain.

The source of all the blood came from a body lying dead against the thin bed construction. The man lay across it with his blasted, cratered head hanging in the open like a macabre flower about to wilt.

Ves immediately recognized the individual from his uniform, body structure and whatever intact facial features he could still observe. "This.. isn't this the mech designer that I had a talk with more than a week ago?!"

Major Verle stepped forward until he reached Ves' side. "This is indeed Eric Kichiro, the only mech designer employed by the Choprans. It's curious, is it not? This individual died in his cell from what our security officers can gather is a ballistic round."

"Have you caught the culprit?"

"You wouldn't be here if we managed to snag the bastard that did this." Major Verle scowled. "This cell is supposed to be capable of withstanding an entire mob. However, according to the logs, no one has entered or exited this cell in the last eight hours, when we let him out for socialization. The monitoring system hadn't been able to catch anything either. All the footage is doctored to show nothing has happened. The culprit.. the murderer, whoever he is, managed to hack our best security system and made a fool out of mastery of our own ship!"

The Major sounded really furious, and he had a right to be. If anyone could hack the monitoring system of the brig, who could say if more sensitive compartments wouldn't be next?

If someone decides to sabotage the engineering bay, the command center or the bridge, the consequences for everyone aboard the Shield of Hispania became extremely dire!

"Have we found any clues who might be responsible for this?"

"No." Verle shook his head. "According to our monitoring system, all of our crew is accounted for, and so are the prisoners. Of course, we just learned we can't trust our monitoring system, so we're forced to do things the old fashioned way. I've called you here to see if you have anything to do with it and get your insight on what has happened here if you're not."

"Am I a possible suspect to you?" Ves frowned. "I've been down at the workshop all day! All the mech technicians have seen me at work there, and

I've been working side-by-side with Avanaeon on an extremely technical project."

"We know. And from what we've observed from you so far, we're fairly certain you're not involved." Major Verle softened up his expression. "Look, we have a murderer on our ship and they might not even be alone. We have no idea who they are or what their motives might be. Can you tell us anything about who or why someone might kill Mr. Kichiro?"

Ves recalled the end of his little talk with the mech designer. For some reason, that moment always returned at the forefront of his mind, particularly when he was thinking about the possible uses involving his stealth shuttle.

"I think I have an idea or two, yeah." He slowly said as he tried hard not to channel his spirituality into his eyes. He knew that the most likely culprits were standing right behind their backs!

Chapter 737 Exemplary Conduc

Ves immediately suspected their uninvited guests as the ones responsible, but ruled them out just as quickly.

Though the worshippers of Haatumak exhibited freaky abilities, they had kept themselves quiet over the weeks, never making any moves that suggested that something invisible lurked amid the Vandals.

Going out of their way to kill a random mech designer that the Vandals picked up along the way didn't benefit them at all. Not only would they alert the Vandals that a presence had boarded the ship that could elude every means of detection, they also plainly lacked a motive to kill this specific individual.

Why kill someone as irrelevant as Mr. Kichiro when they could easily assassinate Major Verle or even Ves?

Of course, cultists being what they were, they hardly adhered to logic in the first place. They might have decided to kill Kichiro on a whim because they could or because they wanted to frighten the Vandals.

Still, Ves might be reaching there with this theory. He much preferred to consider the murder a deliberate act, because the killer risked an awful lot to do the deed.

"Why kill Mr. Kichiro?" He asked out loud. "This chump doesn't know anything. He's only useful as a source of intelligence on the technical specifications of the mechs used by Chopra, but that's no use as most of their machines are dead and broken."

Ves turned back to what Eric Kichiro said to him back then. Those controversial words.

"Cowardice is a virtue."

"What did you just say?" Major Verle said from the side.

"Cowardice is a virtue. That's what Mr. Kichiro said to me at the end of the interview. You can pull up the footage of my interview with the man if you want to verify it, sir. In any case, did you know what I felt when he said this phrase?"

"No. Tell me, then."

"I felt like I wanted to punch his face, sir." Ves revealed without compunction.

"Sure, a mech designer is a no combatant, but you can say the same thing about the ship ratings and the mech technicians and the doctors. Just because we aren't the ones who are armed with guns or sitting in a cockpit piloting a multi-ton machine into killing our opponents, doesn't mean we are any less of a soldier. Mech designers.. even in the middle of a conflict, we can still be useful in many ways, if only to hurry along emergency repairs."

In fact, Ves felt torn between two different impulses. The Larkinson blood within him screamed for him to reject this cowardly principle, to prove that mech designers ought to be brave in the face of danger.

Yet his rational mind warred against his hot-blooded impulses and cautioned him that no matter how eager he might be to contribute to a battle, he really had no place in the thick of the battle.

His contributions and influence outside of any battle was enormous, but once the rifles started barking and the cannons began to boom, his immediate ability to influence the battle became incredibly minimal.

A large reason why a mech designer became irrelevant was because anything he could do to affect the ongoing battle took far too much time to effect. It wasn't as if a mech designer could instantly whip up fifty spare mechs over the course of a few hours. Most battles didn't even last that long.

So the phrase uttered by Eric Kichiro was in fact an expression of common sense. A mech designer was an important part of any outfit's support services, and thus required a lot of protection. Killing them crippled an outfit's ability to recover after a battle and to maintain and tweak their mechs.

It was in everyone's best interests to safeguard the lives of the mech designers if they had any in their outfit.

Yet this logical consideration clashed with the cultural norm that fellow comrades in arms had to stick together. It would be the height of selfishness to bail out of a ship in the middle of a battle when the outcome was still in doubt.

"I remember that the rescue teams picked up Mr. Kichiro from the periphery of the debris field, sir." Ves added as he recalled this detail. "His escape pod actually strayed the farthest from every other pod. Do you know what that means? He ejected not long after the NIN initiated their ambush!"

This did not mean that Kichiro had anything to do with the ambush, but it definitely didn't do him any favors by abandoning his comrades so soon.

Verle caught on to the implications. "Hm. I see. He's not the most courageous or loyal member of the Choprans, then. His early escape might have even incited other Choprans into bailing out as well. What was his position in the mercenary corps?"

"From what I gather, the Choprans treated Mr. Kichiro as a glorified chief technician. He's not particularly skilled as a mech designer and he's been out of practice for so long that he's only capable of performing minor tweaks and modifications to commercial designs."

Overall, the mech designer earned no appreciation from his employer. He didn't enjoy a leadership position like Mayra at the Swordmaidens either. All in all, Ves pegged Kichiro as the typical unambitious mech designers who only cared about themselves and predominantly followed the path of least resistance.

"I think I have this pretty much figure out, major." Ves said after he combined all of his observations and made a few predictions. "I think one of the Choprans here shot Mr. Kichiro in the head. Not a single incident like this has happened in our fleet for months, but the moment we pick up the survivors, Mr. Kichiro is suddenly dead. Nobody among the Vandals really knew him, but his fellow survivors must have all known him for a pretty long time. They're the prime suspects."

"And the suggested motive that you put forward is Mr. Kichiro's early escape?"

"That, or any other offense the mech designer is responsible for. It would help if we can reconstruct the NIN's ambush on the Chopran fleet. If we can determine if Kichiro's early escape triggered some sort of panic, sir, then we

have established a pretty clear motive of doing him in. The Choprans might have already been doomed from the start, but Mr. Kichiro's cowardly actions hastened their defeat!"

Even though Ves spun out this tale from a small number of observations and a lot of conjecture, he felt pretty confident about his prediction. Spending months harboring all sorts of suspicions did that to a person.

"While your claims are merely guesswork so far, you make for a compelling case, Mr. Larkinson. I'll task some security officers into studying the archival footage that we've pulled out of the data banks of the Choprans."

Ves felt a bit embarrassed that Major Verle actually supported his wild conjecture to this extent. Then he realized that the mech officer faced an enormous amount of pressure to catch the culprit before they could do anymore damage.

Since they lacked any clues to begin with, the line of reasoning provided by Ves provided a clear direction to investigate.

Moments later, they joined the crowd of security officers running through some old footage they dug out of a backup data bank of a shipwreck.

"Mark this timestamp. According to the logs of his escape pod, this is the moment where Mr. Kichiro's escape pod emerged into space."

The ambush barely started three minutes ago. While the NIN performed a devastating alpha strike that took out a lot of Chopran mechs, the mercenary corps still fought as hard as they could still do so, though their lack of coordination hindered their response.

Major Verle immediately tutted in disapproval.

"You can see and hear from the logs in this data bank that most mech pilots are calling for orders from their mech lieutenants. The mech lieutenants have

no clue what to do, so they defer to their mech captains. The mech captains don't have time to deliberate with each other and give out the first orders that come to their mind. One order their men to close in to melee range. Another captain orders them to pull back to their ships and consolidate their defensive perimeter. It's an awful mess that only further divided the Chopran mechs on the field."

"It's like they have the worst of both worlds in terms of management style." Ves remarked. "Their mech captains and other leaders concentrate all of the decision-making power among themselves, but when they finally need to exercise decisive leadership, they are never unified enough to be in sync. If they decided to go for a top-down approach to running their mercenary corps, they should have gone all the way and appoint a single commander among their leadership committee."

Something that looked so irrelevant at first glance in fact became the nail in the coffin that doomed the Choprans from reserving this ambush. Though the NIN vastly outnumbered them with a swarm of spaceborn frontline mechs, the Choprans could have leveraged their superior mechs if they all chose to go on the attack.

Sure, the rush might have failed, but it gave the Choprans a viable chance to turn the battle around. Every Chopran mech pilot trying to survive the battlefield out there still held out hope.

That was until that lone escape pod emerged on everyone's sensors.

Ves counted the number of escape pods that followed suit after a minute.

"One becomes two. Two becomes four. Four becomes eight. Eight becomes sixteen. The more escape pods in the air, the less essential crew that's left behind. That doesn't immediately affect the fighting strength of the mechs in the air, but it will definitely slow down the deployment of the reserves."

"The abundance of escape pods launching into space does in fact affect the mechs that are fighting for Chopra's survival." Major Verle corrected Ves. "How would the mech pilots who are piloting those mechs feel if your side begins to launch escape pods en masse? They'll think their own comrades have no faith in their ability to fight and win the battle!"

The overall picture became clear. Kichiro may have been the first of many who decided they needed to be elsewhere while their ship and mechs came down, or he may have triggered an irreversible stampede to the escape pods.

No matter how culpable he may be in kicking the Choprans while they were already down on their luck, his conduct reflected extremely poorly on him. The man perpetuated every stereotype of mech designers as cowardly wimps who gladly push mech pilots to fight to the death while they themselves ran at the first sign of trouble!

Even if Ves quietly applauded Kichiro on his decisiveness to save his own hide, the man shouldn't have been so brazen about his flight!

Ves mentally took notes of his fellow mech designer's example. If he ever befell in a similar situation in the future, he would wait until others bailed out first before he followed suit! Ideally, he'd be in the middle of the pack, inconspicuous and unexceptional in terms of courage!

Kichiro's murder also taught him that he needed to think beyond the immediate escape. If Ves ever met up with his comrades, he needed to make sure that his conduct didn't give them any reasons to shank him. There was nothing worse than to meet the victims of your bad conduct in the flesh!

"What I don't understand is why Kichiro needed to die this instant." Ves mused. "I mean, whoever did it has to know this has riled us up. Why can't the killer wait until this mission is over and everyone is released?"

A security captain offered a suggestion. "It may be that the murderer doesn't believe we will make it out alive. If they're all doomed to die, he might want to kill Kichiro with his own two hands as a form of catharsis."

That sounded rather bad.

Chapter 738 Strange Fellow

Now that they established a possible motive to whack Eric Kishiro, they could turn their attention to the possible culprits.

"How many survivors do we have in custody?" Verle asked a security officer.

"Twenty-five, sir. Twenty-four now that the mech designer is dead."

That left them with a manageable amount of suspects, though the true murderer might not be among them. Still, Ves had a feeling this investigation might be over soon.

"Ready your men, captain. Since someone among them has likely managed to fool our monitoring system and our searches, we will need to be more thorough in our inspections. Our priority is to find the device that has fooled our monitoring system and to secure the weapon that killed Mr. Kichiro!"

"Hold up, major!"

"What is it, Mr. Larkinson?"

"If you're about to inspect the Chopran survivors, I doubt you'll find anything. The security officers already performed a thorough search, right?"

The security captain nodded beneath his thick helmet. "Correct. We've stripped them of all their gear and clothes and issued them a blank outfit with no further accessories. We even took away their comms."

"I'm guessing that at least one of the Choprans have a trick up their sleeve."

"We are aware of that possibility."

"Then let me help you out. I haven't been spending my free time on nothing."

It took a bit of convincing on his part, but Ves managed to get his proposal a serious try. One of the security officers exited the brig and reentered a moment later with a toolbelt in hand. Ves nabbed it off the armored security officer's gauntlet and picked out two of his most precious inventions to date.

He flicked one of the cylindrical gadgets online. "One of these devices is a miniaturized stealth detector that I've adapted from the central database. The internal sensor array is very fragile and susceptible to shock, but I've built in some dampeners so as long as you don't shake it around it will function well enough."

"How effective are its stealth detection capabilities?" The security captain asked.

"Very. Extremely." Ves emphasized. "It's like having the full-sized thing but with a lot less range. The power is still considerate, though, so even if it can't circumvent a particular stealth system, it can still overload them through brute force."

He passed the device over to a lighter-armored security officer. This one looked much less threatening in a suit of medium combat armor. This was the regular service equipment for the Vandals who interacted with the Chopran survivors.

"Do I need to input the right settings?"

"No, I already did that for you. Its effective range is set at ten meters. Anymore than that and the signals might unduly affect the functioning of every nearby section of the ship."

"And the other device?"

"That's a more interesting one." Ves grinned. He picked it up, turned it on and began to configure the settings in the same way he did with the other gadget. "This is a jamming device. It's very strong and will likely be potent enough to interfere with any device that relies on sensors or communications. Turn this beast on, and no sensor or communication device within a given range will work! Unfortunately, its effects encompass everything within range, including your suit systems and the monitoring system built within the cells."

He never developed an answer against his jamming device's friendly fire. The only way to truly counteract its effects was if he made use of hardened gear, which was a pain in the butt to create. Either he had to increase the volume of his gear by twenty to fifty percent, or he needed to make use of expensive exotics that naturally resisted jamming effects.

Everything came with a price. Ves couldn't afford some of them yet.

After explaining the nature of his high-powered devices and emphasizing the advantages and danger behind the phrase 'high-powered', the security officer grabbed them and affixed them to his own armor before grabbing an electrorod pistol from a secure locker.

"Alright, let's see if the Choprans have brought any surprises along."

As Ves waited for the security officers to prepare their inspection, he ruminated over how easy it was to circumvent monitoring and tracking. It seemed that even as monitoring networks became more ubiquitous in daily life, the methods to fool them grew incessantly due to a need for privacy.

It seemed like any Dick, Joe and Margaret had the opportunity to obtain a means to fool even high-quality monitoring systems like the ones utilized by the Flagrant Vandals.

Even though the Vandals cheaped out on many procurements, they emphatically did not skimp out when it came to maintaining internal security.

The thought that a bunch of random survivors of a fallen mercenary corps from the Bright Republic possessed the means to fool such fantastic systems indicated something rotten might be going on. Perhaps it may even be something that posed an actual threat to the Vandals!

Certainly, it showed that these Choprans hadn't been entirely forthcoming when they surrendered themselves to the care of the Vandals!

It didn't matter that Ves would do the very same thing if he was in their place. He understood the need to hold back some capabilities if he came under the custody of another force. Even if they came from the same state, currently they competed against each other for the same objectives.

As rivals, their missions trumped their shared origins. Ves half-thought that Major Verle would have sought a means to dispose of the Choprans, but that may have been a delusion of his ruthless pragmatism.

If Ves was in charge, he would have quietly spaced them out of the airlock during FTL travel by now!

Kicking people out of a ship during FTL travel slightly destabilized the ship, but it was one of the cleanest ways to get rid of inconvenient individuals. Who knew what would happen to their material bodies if they became exposed to the raw higher dimensions. Most theorized that their bodies broke down as their atoms and fundamental particles stretched out and transformed from matter to energy, which quickly dispersed into the seas and oceans of energy.

In short, it was not a very pleasant way to die, but it conveniently removed all traces of someone's existence.

"Preparations are done. They are about to start."

The security officer in medium armor entered the cell of the one most likely to have committed the crime. Mech captain Fez Murtadon looked up from a projection of some old drama show that used to be popular a few years ago.

"If I recall, it's not time yet for our daily airing."

"Captain Murtadon, please stay in place."

The security officer first pressed a button on the stealth detector gadget. The device had been put on standby for a while now, so when it became active it instantly emitted an invisible but energetic wave that even the captain could feel, even if he didn't know what it had done.

Nothing invisible scrambled into the open.

That wasn't how the stealth detector worked. It detected and exposed objects hiding through certain technological means, but it did not deactivate the stealth systems at all.

However, it did appear the stealth detector picked up something untowards.

Through the visor of the security officer and the security feed of the monitoring system, they hadn't picked up any invisible weapons or bots or anything like that. What they did find was that certain shielding mechanisms inside the mech captain's body became ineffective. Certain parts of his brains, his torso and his arms lit up as the stealth detector exposed anomalous systems integrated in Murtadon's body!

"Implants! Captain Murtadon carries hidden implants within his body!"

Evidently, the Chopran mech captain knew that he'd just been exposed, because his face adopted a very ugly expression. "You aren't supposed to see that."

Then, before the security officer replied, Captain Murtadon immediately pointed his arm at the Vandal. A section of the forearm abruptly parted like a hinge, revealing a bone-like gun barrel integrated in the flesh!

BANG!

The bone barrel fired a powerful shot that caused the security officer to jerk backwards a bit as the round exploded!

Yet while the explosive round released a powerful impact, it only managed to dent the armor a little bit!

The well-trained security officer snapped up his electrorod pistol even before he completely recovered and zapped Captain Murtadon with a powerful shock!

"AAhh!!"

The current running through the Chorpan's modified body paralyzed the man for a little bit, but then he slowly jerked his arm-gun up again.

The cell didn't wait for him to finish his move. Some of the panels in the bulkheads retracted, revealing net launchers that launched a composite net on top of his body. The ends of the nets connected to the launchers, causing them to grow taut when pulled.

This hindered the good captain long enough for him to be restrained by a team of heavy-armored security officers that served as backup.

Just as everyone thought the captain was secured, he uttered out a strange cry.

"You'll... never.. survive.. You.. are.. all.. marked for death!"

The captain's body abruptly shook and ceased to move. Smoke began to pour out of the body's ear sockets.

"He's fried himself! Get the doctors here! We need to preserve his body and his implants!"

They botched the entire encounter. They never expected the man to be crazy enough to implant his body with organic machinery! That was something the

citizens of the Comen Federation or other deviant states did, but never someone from the Bright Republic!

As the Vandal security officers and incoming doctors tried to preserve as much as they could out of Murtadon's ruined body, Major Verle, Ves, and a couple of others began to analyze what they saw.

Ves inspected the brief scans of Captain Murtadon's corpse. "I don't know exactly what this alloy shell consists of, but it's remarkably effective at shielding the organic implants from detection. I'm rather interested in this material. Can I have a sample, sir?"

"No." Major Verle denied his request. "His corpse isn't a toy for you to salvage for parts. We need to determine who Murtadon is, why he is jacked up with implants, and what possible intentions he harbored."

"He may not be the only one who bears the implants, major." A security captain warned. "We've isolated the other cells from what has happened at Murtadon's cell, but we don't know what effects his death may cause. For all we know, one of his implants has transmitted a secret signal that can go through our isolating bulkheads."

"Search them thoroughly, and be prepared to halt any attempts at halting their suicides." Verle commanded. "From Murtadon's behavior, he may have activated a suicide trigger implanted in his body, but it could have also activated by itself in response to detection."

"We can put them to sleep before inspecting them discreetly. Any automated suicide triggers can be fooled as long as we avoid making any moves that ticks the boxes."

The cells came equipped with many means of subduing their occupants. The security officers decided upon gradually introducing an airborne intoxicating

agent in the air circulation system. This invisible, odor-less and slow-working gas gradually increased the sleepiness of the affected Choprans.

One by one, they turned off their projections depicting some kind of show or drama and started to take a nap in their beds.

Thus, without any fuss, every Chopran fell to sleep.

Security officers remained outside the cell but activated the gadgets loaned by Ves at a slightly more powerful setting. The frontal cell cover that used to be transparent but now turned opaque only partially blocked their effects, allowing them to affect the occupants without being too close or in visual range.

The inspections turned up nothing. After inspections from afar hadn't revealed anything amiss, doctors and security officers entered the cells and thoroughly investigated their bodies. None of the Choprans carried a hint of machinery or strange organs in their bodies.

"Looks like Captain Murtadon is the only person here who's fishy." Ves noted as he finally received his toolbelt precious gadgets from the security captain.

He was half afraid the Vandals would appropriate them for their own uses, but it seemed they didn't particularly care, or maybe Major Verle threw him a bone.

A mech regiment had to adhere to regulations on the kind of weapons and equipment they were allowed to use. For example, they weren't allowed to utilize any stealth devices in the first place, nor would it be a good idea for them to make use of gamma laser rifles or nuclear weapons!

Thus, Ves got the sense that Major Verle tolerated his side projects by pretending that they had nothing to do with the Vandals. In any case, if the Vandals had need of them, Ves could only let them borrow his inventions like now, and return them to him when finished.

"Let's see what the autopsy has discovered."

Chapter 739 Outward Prey

The autopsy of Captain Murtadon revealed fairly little of importance. The man carried an extensive amount of organic implants capable of many different functions in his body. A special alloy shell surrounded the implants, hiding them from regular scans and making it appear that only normal organs took their place.

Ves wanted the alloy material. He had a strong suspicion that they were another application of stealth technology, one that worked with almost minimal power consumption. Despite his begging, the Vandals removed the alloy shells and chucked them into the vault. Ves felt like a little kid whose parents just locked his favorite toy in the closet!

He wanted to cry!

In any case, the doctors found out that Murtadon made use of several clever implants. Some boosted his physical performance. Others enhanced his piloting ability, if only slightly. The implants on his arms consisted of guns which utilized projectiles metabolized from the mech captain's own body!

However, by far the most important implant consisted of the biocomputer integrated within Murtadon's mind. It was like a comm, processor, hacking device, transceiver and scanner all rolled up in a dense piece of flesh the size of a chicken egg. What impressed everyone even more was that the doctors found that its growth had been induced from outside manipulation.

In other words, Murtadon's body grew the biocomputer like a tumor inside his brains! This was by far the most effective way of installing an implant in one's body because it minimized the risk of rejection and complications.

It took a while for the implant to grow to its current size and capabilities. Captain Murtadon constantly had to ingest or be injected with trace amounts of exotics that eventually made up the core components of the biocomputer.

Once the biocomputer grew to its mature state, Murtadon underwent an operation that covered up the biocomputer in the alloy shell that hid it from every means of detection.

"This is an expensive procedure." Ves remarked as he picked up a data pad and read through its contents. "I'm no expert in implants, but even I know how risky it is to hook up your brains to a processor. No matter if its biological, electronic or mechanical in nature, any processor or computer can be hacked. Their programming can easily be subverted once you know it's there."

This was also one of the major reasons why hooking people up with processors, biocomputers, AI chips and the like fell out of vogue.

At some points during the Age of Space and Age of Conquest, implants rose into popularity as their functions substantially augmented a baseline human's capability.

Implanted weapons integrated in an assassin's body allowed them to take out their targets despite being searched for weapons.

A cyborg body thrown out into space due to an accident could survive in hard vacuum for hours as their entire body subsided on energy cells instead of oxygen.

AI chips integrated in the brains of children enabled them to learn faster and store the entire contents of a library for their perusal. Their processing power grew monstrous enough to the point where they could mentally plot an FTL transition by themselves!

Yet as quickly as these products rose, they quickly crashed and burned in a matter of years or months. No matter how ingenious their security measures

safeguarded the integrity of the programming of the implants, hackers always manage to circumvent these means and gain malicious control over the integrated systems.

That assassin with implanted weapons? His body tore itself apart when its weapons discharged without prompting from the user itself!

The cyborg taking a casual spacewalk out in space? His artificial body's energy cells abruptly discharged itself at once, frying the entire body and its protected organic organs!

The children implanted with AI chips? Their AIs experienced a gradual change in personality and guided the children into immoral psychopaths who utilized their substantial advantages over their unaugmented peers to attain positions of leadership before abusing them sow death and destruction on a sector-wide scale!

These days, everyone knew that installing an implant in someone's body was like building a door into a stone wall. Made from wood, stone or metal, no matter how sturdy the door turned out to be, someone with the right key or lockpicking ability would eventually be able to open it and enter into the area behind the wall.

"That's why the late captain's implants are coated with this stealth alloy." The security captain pointed out. "I doubt he's aware of the vulnerabilities they pose to his implants and his own mind, so the stealth shielding is necessary to prevent hackers from making their intrusion attempts in the first place."

This was like covering up the door with a fake layer of stone in order to camouflage it against the rest of the wall. It didn't close the vulnerability, but it prevented others from detecting it through regular observations and scans.

"Are the implants retrievable? Can we pull out data from its organic data banks?"

The security captain shook his head. "Sadly not, major. The suicide trigger melted and burned the implants from top to bottom. The implants were designed from the start with the capability to wipe out every piece of data."

"Then what does that mean?" Ves grew confused. "Is Captain Murtadon some kind of spy working for the Coman Federation?"

"Unlikely. Even the Coman know better than to dabble with biocomputers and implants. If they dare to utilize it to a wide degree, their entire society becomes vulnerable to an organized hacking effort. They'd be conquered without being able to fire a single shot."

"Then who else might do this?"

"It doesn't appear to be the style of any of the states and influences from the Komodo Star Sector." Major Verle declared. "I'm much more inclined to believe that Captain Murtadon may have been employed by an influence foreign to the Komodo Star Sector."

That left them with a dead end. Without a way to retrieve any data from the fried biocomputer, the Vandals were left with nothing but reasonable guesses and an open-ended suspicion towards foreign interference.

This wasn't actually the first time Ves or the Vandals saw hints of foreign interference in the affairs of the Komodo Star Sector. A strange undercurrent ran under their local area of space for several years now.

Ves couldn't figure out Captain Murtadon's role. His position as a captain of a large mercenary corps afforded him considerable power, but not enough to penetrate the true annals of power within the Bright Republic. So obviously the mech captain likely served some sort of other purpose than spying on their state.

With no further leads to follow up, the matter came to an end. The security officers would continue their digging, but nobody expected to find any clues.

As Ves exited the brig along with Major Verle, he spoke up to ask a question.

"What will happen to the rest of the Chopran survivors, sir?"

"They're clean, but there's no telling if they are involved with Captain Murtadon's secrets. We'll have to interrogate them more thoroughly and try to find out the reason why Kichiro had to die. It may be that your guess is right and Murtadon killed the mech designer out of an emotional need for revenge. Yet this decision sounds too impulsive. The fact that we managed to uncover the mech captain's implants only underlines how poor of a decision it was to take action."

As Ves walked back to the workshop, he felt considerably less secure. He didn't feel safe aboard the Shield of Hispania. Not only did he have to worry about his stalker and the uninvited guests, he also had to take into account that anyone, including the Vandals, might be sleeper agents working for a foreign influence.

This style of operating vaguely reminded him of Calabast. Ostensibly, she posed as an agent of the Vesian intelligence agency. Yet Ves never believed that. The tragedies that happened on Harkensen I may have seemed like an attack intended to weaken the Reinald Republic, but Ves developed an alternate motivation.

The attack and all the other shenanigans may have been designed to destabilize the entire Komodo Star Sector!

Could the neighboring star sectors be staring at the Komodo Star Sector? The Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal Star Sectors directly neighbored them and controlled their flow of shipping and access.

At first glance, it looked as if the two neighboring star sectors enjoyed a good position. However, the Komodo Star Sector in fact blocked their states and influences from expanding their tentacles to the frontier.

If the established states of the older star sectors possessed any ambitions of external expansion, they couldn't turn their firepower towards the center of the galaxy. Each star sector away from the rim and closer to the center became older and more powerful. They were bones that Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal couldn't chew through.

So instead of eyeing the older star sectors as their prey, it made more sense to turn their gaze outwards. The Komodo Star Sector came into being during the last CFA and MTA-mandated colonial expansion wave, and so were considered backwards in nearly every criteria, from institutional age to military strength.

The old bullied the young. This adage applied throughout the entire galaxy. When humanity initially rose to the stars during the Age of Space, much older and powerful alien races bullied the humans relentlessly, treating them like uplifted insects intruding upon a playground that they had long carved out for themselves.

Still, through luck, grit and ingenuity, humanity eventually managed to outwit and overpower all of those stuffy alien races in the latter half of the Age of Space and the first half of the Age of Conquest.

Still, as great as this lurking threat may be, what could a small mech designer like Ves even do? He should be focusing on doing his job and trying to stay alive. The geopolitical ambitions of foreign star sectors hardly mattered to a true mech designer, because they regarded them as markets instead of political entities.

Ves still had a way to go in that regard.

"What happened?" Chief Avanaeon grunted as Ves returned to the workshop area where their Six-Sided Cube currently rested at. The shuttle's surface shimmered as Avanaeon tested out its optical camouflage abilities.

Ves knew that Avanaeon possessed a higher security clearance than Ves, so he'd be hearing about the incident soon enough. He figured the details would leak to the rest of the Vandals anyway since it didn't do much harm like the last leaks.

"The mech designer employed by Chopra got his head blown up by a mech captain from the same outfit."

"How did the mech captain managed to do that?"

"He possessed hidden implants in his body. His biocomputer was good enough to fool our monitoring system and the lock to his cell, while a gun made out of flesh and bone hid inside his forearm. We never detected any of them because some special stealth coating blocked all of our regular scans."

"..Impressive. People still make use of implants? How stupid can they be?"

Ves shrugged. "The mech captain is probably a patsy for another influence. We don't know who he works for, but he's been made in a sacrificial pawn from the start."

That was the extent of their conversation about what happened at the brig. The chief engineer showed a complete lack of interest in the background of the mech captain or the story behind the killing. Instead, they both turned their attention back to finishing the configuration of their cube-shaped shuttle.

"It doesn't matter how many hidden agents or shady allies are walking among us." Avanaeon said. "As long as we have this baby here, we can get out any time we want."

"Yeah. You're right. But if we decide to make it out, we better wait until others have gone first. We don't want to lead the pack."

The chief engineer paused his work and turned to Ves. "How would anyone know we got out first if we put our shuttle under stealth before we split?"

"..That's a good question."

Chapter 740 Graduation

Avanaeon's attitude and active participation in this side project suggested something unsettling to Ves. The chief engineer never said anything concrete, but his actions betrayed a considerable lack of confidence in their survival odds.

What kind of swamp did the Starlight Megalodon lead them all into? Ves got the sense that it drew in moths to the flame. Any bug that approached only risked getting burnt to a crisp.

"It won't be long now before we arrive."

The Vandals all made preparations. Drills intensified while the Vandals started shedding their uniforms for hazard suits and combat suits for an increasing amount of time. Though the bulky outfits hindered their work, nobody wanted to get caught flat footed without protection!

The longer they wore the suits, the more they got used to moving and working with them. Once the critical moment arrived, they'd be able to stay on the ball without encountering any hindrance in their work.

Each Vandal kept themselves busy to an extent. The mech pilots all poured into the simulator pods while the mech technicians all put the finishing touches on the recently-modified mechs. Some crews who already finished their essential tasks early began to tune up some of the mechs, temporarily allowing them to run smoother and better for a couple of deployments.

Due to these final preparations, Chief Avanaeon needed to spend more time in his own department at the engineering bay. Ves pretty much took over the end phase of his side project. After meticulously testing and tweaking the different stealth mechanisms, Ves finally declared the shuttle to be cleared for use, at least without putting it to a live test.

Ves put a hand on the surface of the shuttle. His skin brushed over the fine patterned surface of the stealth plating in appreciation. "Ugly brick you may be, you're still the best invention I've ever made to date."

The value of the stealth shuttle surpassed his high-powered gadgets. Certainly, from a technological perspective, his ultracompact batteries won the prize in terms of sophistication. However, the utility of the stealth shuttle far surpassed a handheld gadget for its ability to hide its occupant from regular scanners and sensors.

Certainly, it lacked the power reserves to maintain its active stealth for a very long time, but that was plenty enough to slowly make a getaway and find somewhere safe and quiet to turn off the energy-hungry systems.

"It doesn't even have to be exclusively employed as a means of escape. I can also use it to infiltrate an enemy ship or space station, or to get close to a restricted area."

The only regret he had was that the Six-Sided Dice lacked the capability to enter a terrestrial planet's atmosphere. Its underpowered antigrav modules and sublight propulsion lacked the power to keep the shuttle aloft under standard gravity conditions for longer than a minute.

Even landing or lifting off from a shuttle bay subjected under standard artificial gravity became problematic for that reason!

To lift off under those circumstances either required dialing down the artificial gravity or a willingness to overload the antigrav modules embedded into the cube.

Naturally, each time they overloaded the antigrav modules, their effective lifespan decreased. They couldn't keep that up for very long.

It might still be able to land safely on a moon with a weak gravity, but it definitely couldn't land on a massive terrestrial planet with up to five times the gravity of Old Earth!

"For better or worse, this shuttle is a space hopper."

That severely limited its utility, but what choice did he have?

Now that the project came to an end and delivered a result, Ves moved the Six-Sided Dice out of the workshop and back to the shuttle bay. He made sure to secure it in an out-of-the-way spot where the mech technicians and flight technicians wouldn't be able to stumble upon it and mess around with the cube.

As he returned to his office, he greeted Ketis as she stood behind her terminal with her eyes narrowed in thought. Ves had never seen her think so deep as now. It showed that she took her last and most difficult assignment with unprecedented gravity.

"How are you so far with formulating your design philosophy?" He asked as he approached her seated form and patted her shoulder pauldron.

Both of them wore their suits of combat armor right now. The contrast between light and heavy combat armor made him appear a little shorter and leaner than Ketis.

"I can't make up my mind. I've pretty much made up my mind on devoting my attention to swordsman mechs, but that's not narrow enough for me to specialize in. I still feel as if I'm missing something unique, something that's exclusively mine. Do you understand?"

Ves nodded. "I do. My own design philosophy and specialty are like that. It's so rare and outlandish that nobody has ever thought of treading my path. That's exactly the way I like it, because retreading other people's paths won't contribute to the industry at all. Our design philosophies represent our

legacies, Ketis. What we are working towards may not be achievable to anyone, but they will leave behind a record that will be part of your fundamental design makeup for the rest of your life."

To his knowledge, a design philosophy could change over time. Sometimes, a mech designer gained an epiphany or breakthrough in their work that allowed them to shape and direct their design philosophy to a different direction.

A mech designer could also become unduly affected by outside influences. To an Apprentice, a strong exposure to mental contamination almost always ruined their originality. To Journeymen and higher, their design philosophies possessed enough strength to withstand outside coercion. The only way they changed their form was if a mech designer allowed themselves to be affected by external stimuli.

As a design philosophy stood for a mech designer's belief in pursuing an ideal or turning something impossible into reality, they needed to be broad enough to clear a way to the top but narrow enough to keep them focused on a single path.

From what Ves had gathered from Ketis, she already set out a broad direction for her design philosophy. She wanted to work with swordsman mechs. Yet merely wishing that she could design the best swordsman mechs wasn't precise enough to serve as her goal.

What made a mech good or bad?

The best performance? What would be the criteria for the 'best' mechs? Best armor? Mechs with the best armor always turned out to be the slowest. That didn't sound like the best mechs at all. Mechs that focused on offense mostly sacrificed defense or speed, but balancing between all three of them meant that the mech excelled in none of those areas.

Mech designers who aimed to design the 'best' mechs almost never achieved anything substantial in their careers. The problem originated from a broad and inexact definition of what constituted the best mechs.

What may possibly be the best mechs in the galactic center may not fit the needs of those in the galactic rim. Even if someone designed the most high-performing mech in history, cost and resource considerations may make it impossible for such a machine to be built at all!

What was the use of a fantasy design if nobody in the galaxy could gather the resources necessary to produce a single copy of it? If mech designers could advance to the rank of Master by designing fantasy designs that had no basis in reality, then there would have been a lot more of them around by now.

Anyone who set their design philosophy to design the 'best' mechs always fell flat from the start. Ves specifically instructed Ketis not to go for this route.

"Ambition needs to be tempered by a small consideration of practicality." He said. "When mech designers initially compose their design philosophy, there's a tendency for them to become greedy and aim to design the best mechs, ones that are perfect in terms of offense, defense, speed and more. Yet such an ambition is impossibly large. It would be like trying to eat an elephant in a single bite. Rather than take on the whole animal, it's best you narrow down your ambitions and cut out a specific piece of flesh from the animal before you begin to eat."

"I already know that, teacher. It's just.. I can't decide what I want to pursue. I'm not as crazy enough as you for wanting to make my mechs come alive or whatever it is you're after. Yet I don't really feel for trying to pursue a single extreme such as designing the most agile or the most resilient swordsman mechs."

Creativity played a huge role in the formulation of a design philosophy. Ves actually didn't have enough experience in this aspect since his design philosophy gradually came into being after he became fascinated by the X-Factor due to the System's interference.

If Ves really wanted to, he could do the same thing to Ketis as the System did to him. He could manipulate her research interest and encourage her to aim for a specific ideal of his own choosing.

Yet as he looked at this dangerous, armored, hybrid human Swordmaiden, he couldn't bring himself to do so. Even if he compromised his morals to his personal advantage every now and then, he wasn't as rotten as to ruin this deeply personal choice to his very first successful student.

He may not be the most responsible teacher in the galaxy, but he still wished to discharge his responsibilities in good faith when it concerned a student he cared about.

He also wanted to see whether he had the chops to be a legitimate teacher. As his first student, Ves wanted to see whether his instruction put Ketis on the right track to a bright future in her mech design career.

Cheating at this stage only invalidated this experiment and ruined a potentially useful observation. It would be like participating in a foot race, only to hop inside an aircar at the final stretch and race through the finish line with the power of his vehicle instead of his own two feet.

As Ves waited for Ketis to come up with a personal ambition that uniquely suited her interests, a lot of minutes passed by without any results. She hadn't even managed to narrow down her range of interests to a specific field!

He started to get the idea that Ketis may not be suited to this kind of method of formulating her design philosophy. She was never particularly a deep thinker.

"Okay, let's try something different." He declared as he clapped his gauntlets. Ketis jumped out of her fugue and stared at Ves with an expression of doubt. "What do you mean?"

"Each person and each mech designer is different. Some have very active imaginations, others think in logical patterns. Those kinds of mech designers are most suited to formulate their design philosophies into words from their desk. You're very different from those bookworm types."

"Are you calling me stupid?" She growled.

"No. Not at all. You can study and you can think if you really have to, but it's obvious you are forcing yourself. When it comes to finding a design philosophy that uniquely suits your upbringing, your skills and your interests, it's better to rely on your feelings rather than your thoughts."

"How do I do that?"

"Listen to your heart instead of your mind."

That caused her to pause. She contemplated the suggestion, but couldn't easily get into the right mood. Still, this method felt more promising to her than the last one.

"I think I need to have a mech in front of me to come up with a good feeling." She declared.

"Alright. Let me bring you down to the mech stables. I suppose we have a few swordsman mechs stashed aboard our ship, though they're predominantly spaceborn machines."

The pair exited the office and headed down to the mech stables at the lower decks. Once they finally arrived in front of a dormant swordsman mech, drawing the attention and curiosity of the mech technicians around them, Ketis entered into a peculiar mental state without warning.

