Chapter 751 Oppressive Expectations

"Thank you for informing me, but I have to wonder.. why did you call me here?" Ves curiously asked.

He didn't think he'd be summoned here because Major Verle needed a sounding board. The mech officer had his inner circle for that.

"I called you here because this ward is one of the few locations on the ship that is not connected to the monitoring systems. Just to be sure, I'd like you to activate your signal jammer device."

Ves carefully inputted the right settings, putting it at a high power setting at a range that encompassed the entire ward and then some. Once he sent out the remote command to turn it on, the entire room became a little warbled due to all of the interference that suddenly thrummed in the air.

"There is worse news that I haven't told you yet." Major Verle said with a serious expression. He gestured at the silent form of the Fourth Prince. "Prince Hixt-Klaaster is dying. His expensive body enhancements and genetically optimized physique may have saved him from immediate death, but his lack of physical exertion has proven to be his downfall. His brains are irreversibly damaged and are failing at this very moment. The doctor in charge of his care estimates he only has two more hours to live before his brains shuts down forever."

"This!" The bombshell stunned Ves. Even a fugitive Acolyte scurrying around the ship didn't frighten him as much as this! "Sir! If the Fourth Prince dies, the Venerable Xie will go crazy!"

The mech major actually smirked. "Not if we don't tell him of the prince's death."

"That.. you should know Venerable Xie won't fall for that, sir. Experts aren't stupid and possess a keen intuition. Doesn't he use his privileges to talk with the Fourth Prince over his comm every once in awhile? What will happen if the other end of the call falls silent? He'll definitely suspect something!"

"We've recorded enough footage of Prince Hixt-Klaaster to simulate a lifelike fascimile. In the short-term, as long as they don't talk about anything they experienced in the Dark Plasma Star Sector, we should be in the clear. I admit that this is a short-term solution, though. Eventually the imperfections of our simulation of the prince will fall through."

And when that happened, a reckoning may come. An expert pilot could do a lot of damage if he decided to turn on the Flagrant Vandals!

"Then.. why not be honest, sir? While Venerable Xie obviously cares for his former patron, the Fourth Prince is kind of a loser. He doesn't have any redeeming traits as a prince or a leader."

"The profile we have constructed of Venerable Xie suggests that his loyalty to the prince is too deep to expect anything but a backlash." Major Verle replied. "In truth, the Venerable has never once shown an attachment to the Vandals. We hoped to wear down his reticence and worm inside his heart over the span over several years, but that is contingent on keeping our promise of keeping the Fourth Prince saved. Seeing as we have abysmally failed in that task, our old methods of ensuring the Venerable's loyalty are no longer suitable."

This sounded worse and worse to Ves. The major's talk of abandoning gentle methods meant he must be thinking of more drastic solutions. Ones that he might not like.

"Sir, what is the plan, if I may ask?"

"You may. In fact, our new plan hinges on your expertise." Verle emphasized as he turned his back to the unconscious and dying prince. He sighed. "What I am about to ask of you.. I do not wish to resort to this solution, but our awful state leaves us with few alternatives. Not when we are so close to reaching our mission objective."

"What is my involvement in this.. new solution, sir?"

The major sighed, which was something he never did. The man always projected an image of decisiveness. Hesitation never marred his form. "All of our analyses are overwhelmingly pessimistic when it comes to Venerable Xie's attitude to the Flagrant Vandals. The chance of a violent separation increases to near-certain levels after three weeks of time. We have no means of knowing if he will turn his ire towards the Vandals first for failing to protect the prince, but the odds are too high of such an occurrence. As a former bodyguard trained for the job, he will almost certainly blame us for the prince's death, perhaps even thinking that we deliberately let the man die."

"Did we?"

Verle threw a dirty look at Ves. "Of course not. We are not in the habit of risking utter ruin in our relationship with a potentially useful expert pilot, especially at this junction in our mission. Now, onto your involvement. After contemplating a number of methods, both open and clandestine, to insure our new expert pilot's continued loyalty, I have settled on the solution that kicks up the least amount of fuss."

A solution that Venerable Xie wouldn't notice but somehow involve Ves. As his expertise lay in mechs, he could only think of one possible 'solution' that could solve the issue of loyalty.

Ves widened his eyes and took a startled step back. "You can't! This is way over the line! Do you know the gravity of what you intend for me to do! You'll

not only condemn me in the eyes of the MTA, but you'll drag down the rest of your mech regiment with you as well!"

"I see you have guessed my intention." Verle smiled at Ves. This time his smile took on a ghoulish appearance. After taking a good look at the active signal jammer, the major did not hesitate anymore and revealed his plan. "A mech pilot is able to manipulate a mech using a neural interface. While it is often the mech pilot that is manipulating the mech, I am well aware that there are means to reverse this process. According to the logs, did you not receive a crash course in how neural interfaces work?"

"I did, but she only taught me the bare minimum, just enough for me to recognize a compromised neural interface! She has never intended to teach me how to brainwash a mech pilot by manipulating the programming of the neural interface! Even if I can't do it, the MTA will go absolutely bonkers if they find out that we've brainwashed an expert pilot!"

The MTA may seem like a large but invisible power in the Komodo Star Sector, but the severe crime that Major Verle expected of Ves went way over the bottom line of the MTA!

Death was all but assured if they found out, which they would surely will after observing the expert pilot's altered behavior!

Perhaps the experts such as the Dragons of the Void were able to brainwash someone subtle enough to behave just like their old selves, but a rank amateur like Ves who hadn't even taken a single proper course in neural interface technology would surely make a million mistakes!

Ves had heard how tiny mistakes with neural interface settings often led to huge distortions in an expert pilot's behavior!

Even though expert mechs already came with neural interfaces that were carefully tweaked with effects that pushed close to the edge to outright

brainwashing, each change had to be logged with the MTA for their express approval before the changes could go live!

The checks on the altered programming of an expert mech's customized neural interface was one of the strictest and most thorough certification processes performed by the association. The MTA cherished expert pilots like others cherished their sons and daughters!

The Parallax Star still utilized the previous programming optimised for Venerable O'Callahan. Just like any other customized aspect of an expert mech, the more the neural interface specialized to work with one specific mech pilot, its effectiveness when piloted by others suffered a substantial hit.

In fact, this poor fit deserved a lot of the blame for Venerable Xie's abysmal performance with the Parallax Star.

Ves had no way of fixing this problem, though. He completely lacked the qualifications to tweak the core programming of the neural interface. From what he gathered, in the last decade Professor Velten had always been the only mech designer to customize the neural interfaces for the expert mechs of the Vandals.

Even then, the professor only dared to do so after taking extensive scanning and active testing of the expert pilot under controlled lab conditions. The Wolf Mother factory ship hosted all of the advanced lab facilities, but she was currently with the main Vandal fleet that was far away from the frontier now.

All in all, it meant that Ves had no legitimate reason to mess with the neural interfaces. For Major Verle to come out and expect him to commit a major crime that might see his entire family purged was way out of line.

"This is an illegal order, sir." He hissed through his lips.

"Then it is a good thing that I am only making a request." The major replied smoothly as he turned around and bore his gaze straight into Ves. "I am quite

aware of the magnitude of what I expect from you. Therefore, I am leaving the choice up to you. Cooperate or not. Just know that if you refuse, we will likely have to resort to extremely suboptimal alternatives, ones which may very well ruin our chance to benefit from the protection of a much-needed expert pilot."

"You are putting me on the spot, major! You're telling me that I have the benefit of choice, but at the same time you are telling me that the Vandals will suffer if I choose not to get on the MTA's naughty list. Don't you think that's rather unfair?"

Verle pressed into Ves. "I'm not just telling you the Vandals will suffer due to your desire to avoid the hard choice. The opponents we might encounter at the Starlight Megalodon may be fielding their own expert pilots. Without a loyal and dedicated Venerable Xie to hold the line, even a single expert can butcher hundreds of Vandal mech pilots! Such a loss will certainly break our fleet and consign us to defeat and death!"

The major deliberately piled up the pressure onto Ves without any intention of easing in the choice. This was open intrigue! Ves could either acquiesce and accept the request, or he could reject it but very likely be responsible for the deaths of every Vandal and the failure of their mission!

All of this hinged on his decision. Should he or shouldn't he? Ves thought hard and tried to sum up every objection he could think of. "Look, sir, we won't get away with this. We can't! If by some miracle we manage to survive and return to civilized space, the perceptive MTA won't be blind to the signs of brainwashing no matter how subtle the neural interface manages to exert its influence. Our jig is up by then!"

Major Verle grin grew wider at this point. "This problem is easy to circumvent. We merely have to insure that Venerable Xie does not survive the trip back home. If we want to be really thorough, we'll have to arrange for the

Venerable's corpse and mech to be destroyed in action. I'm sure a mech designer like you can arrange some means to accomplish this on command."

Not only did his boss expect Ves to corrupt an expert mech's neural interface, he also suggested him to incorporate a killswitch as well!

"Sir, please give me a moment." Ves pleaded. "I need to go over this option."

"Don't take too long Mr. Larkinson."

How long could he stall? Not that long, Ves thought. The Flagrant Vandals still remained in a pickle. Damn, how come Verle came to Ves with this request? Couldn't the mech major go directly to Miss Lisbeth or something?

Then again, out of every mech designer among the Vandals, only Ves possessed the requisite knowledge and skill to pull something like this off. Just as none of the other mech designers possessed the qualifications to take over the position of head designer, so did none of the dummies possess any expertise in the highly-restricted practice of altering the programming of neural interfaces.

It was times like these that he finally experienced the downsides of assuming responsibility!

Chapter 752 Flashligh

While Ves had recently realized he no longer needed to march in lockstep with the MTA's principles, brainwashing an expert pilot carried same severity as outright murdering an expert pilot under his care!

In fact, if Ves completely gave in, then he would in effect be guilty of committing two capital crimes in the eyes of the mech industry!

Even getting caught by one of them was enough to ruin the career of the Skull Architect and exile him to the frontier!

Ever since the Farund Affair took place, the Mech Trade Association became extremely paranoid about tampered neural interfaces.

"I can see you are concerned at the possibility of getting caught." Major Verle spoke out. "Let me assure you that won't be the case. The only people who will be aware of what you have done are you and me. With your jamming device doing its magic, there is no chance anyone else is listening in. I can promise you that I will tell no one of this nor include it in my formal and informal reports. Neither Colonel Lowenfield, Professor Velten or some pencil pusher at the Mech Corps will ever learn of this plan."

That did not reassure Ves enough. After all, even if Major Verle seemed to be the dependable sort, he was only human. Who knew if he changed his mind someday?

"How can I trust your word then, sir? I need more than just an empty reassurance. This matter is too serious for me to believe in your good intentions. Not when you are willing to plot against an expert pilot at the same time."

Ves may have gone a little too far in his doubts, but he couldn't care less right now. If Major Verle expected him to roll over and commit a grievous crime that could lead the MTA to condemn him to death, then he better get a receive a good answer!"

The major sighed for the second time that Ves had ever seen him do it. "Very well. Let me provide some additional reassurance to you. Let me begin by asking you a question. Do you think the Flagrant Vandals are normal?"

"No, sir." Ves replied without hesitation. "Frankly speaking, there are too many discrepancies between the Vandals and any other mech regiment of the Bright Republic. Even if that is by design as alluded to by the name of the Vandals, I have been harboring serious doubts about the purpose of the

Vandals. Is it really just a place for the Mech Corps to dump their undesirables and unleash them onto missions of dubious legality?"

"You are on the right track. It's good that you have been aware enough to maintain a shred of skepticism. Yet you have fallen short of identifying the critical link that ties us all together. I don't blame you, Mr. Larkinson. We do our best to hide our other connections and make it seem we are truly abandoned by the Mech Corps."

"Wait.. so all of those tales about lack of funding and being saddled with troublemakers is a lie, sir?"

"Not at all. That is all true both on the surface. We have truly been gotten by with trying to make soldiers out of dysfunctional men and women and to fund our operations by earning our income through our own efforts. Yet this is merely the smokescreen that hides our true nature. I am sure you have noticed that certain individuals among the Vandals, particularly the mech designers who are attached to our units, tend to get transferred out at some point. Now try and think what other service branch of the Bright Republic don't hesitate to recruit troublemakers for their unique talents and their unconventional thinking?"

What other branch of service was out there besides the Mech Corps? The various Auxiliary Corps? A mech designer or a mech pilot played no role among infantry or tank regiments...

A light shone in his mind as soon as he focused on the word unconventional. Rather than think of something like the Mech Corps or the Auxiliary Corps, he should rather be thinking about the intelligence services!

"You guys are fronts for spooks!"

"Crudely put, Mr. Larkinson, and not quite apt. We are not engaged in the act of spying. We are more like the people who are sent after a target after the

spies have done their legwork. Call us unconventional problem solvers if you will, or operatives if you want to use the boring name."

When Ves heard something like that, he recalled the image of Calabast again for some reason. Her role likely fit this job description to a tee.

He didn't know what he was supposed to feel after hearing this revelation. It explained much of the discrepancies about the Vandals, yet... what did that change, really? Soldiers or operatives, they still served the Bright Republic, at least in theory. This simple realization allowed Ves to accept this abrupt piece of news.

He could think about the greater implications later. Right now wasn't the time to commiserate about who he really served.

"Okay. I can accept that you are part of some intelligence service, sir. Which one exactly?"

One of the areas in which the Bright Republic excelled at compared to the Vesia Kingdom was its intelligence services. Each of them focused on different missions, but all of them had proven to be crucial in mitigating the Republic's military disadvantage against the larger and more numerous Vesian Mech Legion.

Major Verle retrieved a strange badge from a slot in his armor. He held it out to Ves, who looked at the extremely lively patterns. This was no mundane badge. The craftsmanship and exotics incorporated within turned this ornament into multifaceted work of art!

A small natural projection emerged from the badge. Ves knew the effect hadn't been generated by any electronics embedded into the object, but came from a precise arrangement of exotics.

The projection formed into fiery letters that laid to rest which intelligence service the Flagrant Vandals truly belonged to. Pretty much every adult

Brighter heard of this name before, which was often associated with daring actions against the Vesians during the war!

'FLASHLIGHT' MILITARY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE

'FIRESTARTERS' UNCONVENTIONAL ACTION DIVISION

"Flashlight!" Ves gasped.

He had never heard of the Firestarters division before, but every Brighters revered Flashlight. The strangely-named organization earned their fame by their ability to fool and lead the Vesian mech legions into traps, cut off their supply lines and causing them to butt heads with each other. Though the details on how they accomplished these feats were scarce, that didn't stop the government from leaking a couple details of their successes to raise morale.

"Right, Flashlight." Major Verle nodded while he carefully put back his precious badge. "Although you Larkinsons have never entered the murky territory of military intelligence, many victories of your relatives couldn't have been achieved without our timely and relevant intelligence gathering. We are the darker brother to the Mech Corps."

"Then.. the Firestarters is some kind of division within Flashflight? A group of operatives?"

"Close enough, but essentially correct. Flashlight illuminates the path, while we Firestarters tread it to set the target on fire. That is the simple meaning of our names, which describes our missions as well."

"So that promotion opportunity that's offered to me if we finished the mission and returned to the Republic. It's a transfer to Flashlight, right?"

Verle grinned. "Flashlight is too boring for an experienced man like you. In truth, the Firestarters have room for unconventional mech designers like you. I won't be able to tell you the exact details of what we have in store for you, but

I can already tell you it will be more impactful than becoming a forgettable cog in the machine if you are assigned to an elite mech regiment."

The revelation along with the badge convinced Ves that the major wasn't talking out of his butt. That still left him with the same dilemma, although he became a little more convinced of Verle's credibility.

"Okay, sir." Ves let out a deep breath and tried to think through the implications. "Military intelligence or not, does that excuse the frankly outrageous request you've pushed onto my shoulders? What you're asking me to do isn't trivial at all! We are talking about a deliberate attempt to brainwash an expert pilot against his will and to dispose of him when his use comes to an end!"

Ves still couldn't quite get over the magnitude of such a crime. It was one thing to brainwash a regular mech pilot. Trillions of mech pilots existed in the galaxy so the MTA didn't care for them at all, as evidenced by the continual existence of the Dragons of the Void despite their penchant for mind control and memory warping.

"I am aware of the risks, Mr. Larkinson. As the mech officer who proposed this course of action in the first place, I cannot escape responsibility either. We are both on the same boat. Does that provide you with sufficient reassurance?"

He shook his head. "You'd have to pay me a hundred billion credits to convince me to betray the principles of the Mech Trade Association. They can be really scary when it comes to punishing errant mech designers!"

Even though he sounded scared, Ves looked at Major Verle with sharp eyes. In fact, while he pretty much accepted that he had to break his principles once again to insure his survival, he didn't want to concede to Major Verle for free!

Ves realized that ever since he entered the recovery ward, he'd been pulled into a negotiation. He only realized this belatedly because of all of the

pressure Major Verle exerted onto him. The mech officer probably wanted to force a quick decision out of Ves before he clued in to the fact that he possessed a lot of negotiating power in this verbal tug-of-war!

The mech officer went directly to Ves because he was the only mech designer in the entire fleet who could pull of the request! Not perfectly, but good enough to secure a decent chance of success!

Since the outcome of the mission hinged on his participation, Ves enjoyed a decent amount of leverage in these negotiations!

This was why he threw out the ridiculous sum of a hundred billion credits in the mix. Ves spoke those words because he wanted to signal to the Major that he wanted real benefits in return to the risks he undertook to meet the request!

"While I cannot make any direct mention about this request in any documents, I can still put a note on your record that we have benefited from your exemplary assistance." Major Verle drawled out. "This is one of the ways we note your contribution while obscuring its illegal nature. Flashlight can infer the risks you undertook in order to be of service and will be most appreciative of your sacrifice and discretion. Along with my personal commendation, I have no doubt Flashlight will treat you with more trust and attention than before. Even after the war is over, you will still benefit from this advantage."

All of that sounded swell, but how did this benefit Ves? Major Verle only listed out some vague promises about how Flashlight would treat him with a bit more care. Ves did not trust anything he claimed that wasn't written down in a contract.

"I think the expectation being set on me deserves a little more recognition, don't you agree, sir? Between Flashlight and the MTA, the former can't protect me from the wrath of the latter. Besides, regardless of whether I accept or not,

how are you so certain my beginner-level knowledge in neural interface technology is sufficient enough to brainwash an expert pilot? I haven't even pulled apart a neural interface or tinkered with its programming even once!"

"I will let you peruse every textbook, blueprint and other related material on neural interfaces in the technical library of our local database without limits." Verle added without hesitation. "While our offline database isn't as extensive as the central library, I have full discretion over who I can grant permission to access the library. I can grant you permission at any time. No red tape will get in the way."

That did sound extremely attractive, if a bit more worrisome for Ves. Perverting a neural interface went against his design philosophy, and studying how to become proficient against it would inflict real damage to his very design DNA!

While his fragile but flexible design philosophy could bend with the wind, he doubted it would survive against a hurricane!

Chapter 753 Smaller Baske

Since he recognized that Major Verle desired for his earnest cooperation and effort, he did not hesitate to leverage his negotiating power. What did it matter to the mech officer and operative of the Firestarters? He only acquiesced to concessions that either cost his organization nothing or became someone else's problem to fulfill.

Besides, for the steep service of scheming to brainwash and subsequently kill an expert pilot, the Firestarters better pay a commensurate price!

"I want full access to the technical library on the local database."

"I can't do that. The local database is hard-locked to only draw out snippets of its contents at any time. I can promise you to open up the library section on one narrowly-defined topic."

"Two." Ves pushed.

"That is rather difficult to arrange, but possible. Two and only two."

"I want the right to wear better gear. This standard-issue suit of light combat armor looks nice, but its plating is predominantly made out of titanium and trace amounts of junk exotics. Surely the Vandals have something better in stock?"

"Most of our higher-quality suits of armor consists of at least medium and heavy combat armor, which require special training to be proficient in their use. Smart or not, the skill is not something you can pick up in a couple of weeks. We don't have any better-quality light armor available because most of our officers and chiefs possess the requisite training to wear at least medium combat armor."

"Then provide me with a good blueprint from the local database and the right to draw out the resources required to fabricate it. In fact, I prefer this option because I get to customize my primary form of protection."

"Fine." Major Verle waved his hand dismissively. "You have access to anything you need from the cargo holds, but don't think about borrowing something from the vault. The higher-quality exotics and materials are too precious to be spent on a single suit of armor."

"I want a better comm as well."

"I'm sure we have a couple of officer-grade comms in the armory."

Ves started to feel that Major Verle's patience and limits came within sight. He decided to drop the most crucial

"I want the LMC, my mech company, to enjoy Flashlight's implicit support, sir. It's rumored that you guys are propping up certain companies, or at least

favoring when it comes to procurement and contracting. I want my company to be associated in Flashlight's orbit, if that is possible."

This caused Major Verle to send Ves and appreciative smile. "Interesting demand. Clever, as well. Are you aware that any company that reaches a certain size has to be intertwined with the government?"

"No, but I can guess."

"Companies are like children. The state fosters their birth and raises them under their protection against unlawful conduct. Once the children become adults, they are expected to pay back the care they received when they were weak. Now, the best I can do is nominate your company into the list of possible associates, but the final decision is out of my hands. Continue to perform merits and you may see your wish come true. I do have to warn you that associating with Flashlight will put you and your company into their camp."

"What does that entail, sir?"

"You'll gain both allies and enemies. Unfortunately, allies within Flashlight's sphere have a tendency to mistrust each other, so don't count on them to lend any actual help. As for your enemies, they fall into two categories. First you will earn the ire of our governmental allies. The Ministry of Economic Development is possessive of the companies and industries it grasps, and they won't be happy with you for pulling your company out of their orbit. They are powerful, Mr. Larkinson, but more importantly they are well-connected."

"If it's a choice between Flashlight or the Ministry of Economic Development, I'd rather go with you guys. There's no connection between the ministry and I, while I've performed huge favors for Flashlight. If you guys aren't completely ungrateful with what I'm about to do, then I hope you remember my contribution and take me under your wing."

Major Verle shook his head. "I can't decide whether you are a fool or a prophet. What you say is true, yet I think you are sorely underestimating consequences if Flashlight decides to pull your company into their orbit. Once you get in, Flashlight expects you to continue to perform some favors if needed."

"That's a given." Ves conceded. "However, it's not as if the Ministry of Economic Development has no pushback either if they are so eager to hog all of the companies for themselves. If there's anything I know about the Bright Republic, they don't want to put all of their eggs in a single basket. Rather than letting my company be forgotten in a huge basket with much larger eggs, I'd rather take my egg to the smaller basket where it will actually gain some appreciation."

Major Verle chuckled. "Interesting analogy. However, you'll have to take into account that the bigger basket is safer. While the smaller basket allows your egg to gain more prominence, it's also expected to pitch in so that the basket stays strong enough to protect its precious cargo."

Even if Ves had to work for Flashlight every now and then even after the war, as long as he continued to remain useful to the military intelligence agency, they would continue to value him and his company. A continuous relationship benefited both sides of the arrangement. The hardest part was getting his foot in the door.

In a way, Ves also paved the way for his Shadow Force to potentially receive official sanction or at least become a tolerated existence if they discovered its ties to him. If Flashlight or the Firestarters adopted the same 'the end justifies the means' mentality as the Flagrant Vandals, then he'd fit right in with their band of misfits!

They finalized their agreement on a handshake and a verbal promise. This sort of agreement could never be put into a contract to be signed and

notarized by others. Ves just had to trust Major Verle and his back organization to uphold their end of the deal.

Still, that reminded him of a potentially awful outcome. "What will happen if you encounter a mishap, sir? Who will know that I've performed this service?"

"You don't have to worry about that." Major Verle assured, content now that he secured Ves' cooperation. "We are still in the possession of at least one working quantum entanglement node. I've been sending sporadic reports to the Mech Corps and the Firestarters. While the details of this agreement can never be committed into a record and be sent through a channel effectively controlled by the Comm Consortium, it's sufficient for me to transmit a few obscure codes associated with your name."

Ves couldn't obtain a better assurance than this, but at least he received a promise that even if the Vandal fleet fell apart, his contribution would still be recognized, if only in an abstract fashion.

After they closed the deal, Ves was just about to turn to the exit when the pod that held the prince's body came into his view.

With his jamming device still active, every electronic device should have been blinded and deafened, but that did not apply to organic bodies and constructs.

"Sir, the prince..."

"I'll take care of it." Major Verle replied.

Ves imagined the prince's body would be dissolved and turned into elementary particles to be thrown out of the airlock during FTL travel. It would be the perfect way to dispose of it without getting traced back to the Vandals.

It was an awful way to treat the deceased. Even the criminals who received a cold burial at least held out hope that his remains would return to the cycle of life.

As he deactivated his signal jammer and got his gear back, he sent out a quick message to Ketis while he contemplated how to go about his job.

If he returned to his office and sat behind his terminal to research neural interface technology and use that knowledge to compromise a neural interface, then he'd definitely leave traces behind. Even with the major's cooperation, they couldn't guarantee complete privacy. Even his military-issued comm came with many hidden functions that Ves couldn't entirely trust.

"I'll have to fabricate a basic comm that leaves no traces."

He stopped walking towards the office and turned around to head towards the workshops at the lower decks. Ideas began to flit in his mind. Verle already promised him a better comm among other concessions, but it suffered the same problem as his current comm.

"I don't need to make anything fancy. In fact, the simpler the better, though I'll have to make sure it's sufficiently secure against remote hacking."

Ves arrived at the workshop and claimed a free precision-oriented 3D printer for himself. He pulled out a basic comm blueprint from the local database.

He opted to go for a basic one because that left the device with fewer openings and backdoors. In order to maximize its security, he upgraded the parameters of some of its processors and other functions, as well as adding high-quality shielding that naturally shielded the device from weaker scans and remote intrusion.

Sadly, it didn't work as effectively as Captain Murtadon's alloy shielding which effectively hid his bioimplants from the strongest mundane scans. Ves just had to make do with an inferior comm built with inferior materials in his haste to complete a secure device upon which he could do his dastardly deeds without getting found out.

In fact, the device wouldn't be secure on its own. Ves intended to rely on his signal jammer to insure complete privacy while he worked.

"I'll only have to make sure this secure comm doesn't frizzle out while my high-powered signal jammer is active."

Perhaps other engineers wouldn't be able to design a comm that resisted the extremely penetrating electrical interference of his signal jammer at the higher strengths, but as the person who adapted the tech in the first place, he knew of a few ways.

Ves incorporated a specific alloy shell that shielded the hardened comm against the exact kind of interference thrown up by the signal jammer. It amounted to taking advantage of the loopholes in his imperfect implementation so that the shielded comm continued to function normally.

Naturally, he left out every type of remote connection. The only way for Ves to transfer data into the comm was through inputting a chip into a special socket that usually remained sealed. He even incorporated a hardware break from the socket and the data chips of the comm in order to prevent advanced remote intrusions from making intermittent connection with the socket and thereby access the comm through this fashion.

He bet that Flashlight and all the other intelligence agencies developed means to stealthily access hardware sockets from a distance in this fashion. Just because a comm lacked a transceiver didn't mean it couldn't be hacked. Any device with connections or interfaces remained vulnerable to the many esoteric means that hackers developed over the ages.

"I hope the precautions I built into this comm is enough." Ves shook his head. He couldn't outsmart every hacker in the galaxy, but the best ones tended to be in the galactic center. "I can't anticipate every intrusion method."

Ves worked quickly to design and fabricate his modifications. Because it consisted of a tiny device, it didn't take all that long to fabricate a working copy. Once he finished it, he grabbed it and stored it in his toolbelt.

He could play with it later. Right now, the Flagrant Swordmaidens still needed to process the current crisis.

When he hopped back into his observer's seat, he turned to Ketis. "What did I miss?"

"A lot. A big fleet arrived."

"Is it the Temple of Haatumak and her pirate escorts?"

"Surprisingly, no. We Swordmaidens aren't too familiar with them, but apparantly the fleet comes from one of your old enemies."

Ves logged into the console of his seat and summoned up a local plot of the star system. A large, intimidating fleet arrived just over two light-hours away from another emergence zone.

The incoming fleet had taken a different route to this star system, and they evidently arrived a few hours later tha the Flagrant Swordmaidens. The delay in detecting the new presence was because the light of their arrival had only just reached their sensors.

Analysis of the faint light reflected from the dim brown dwarf led towards an alarming conclusion. The AIs tentatively identified the incoming ships as military combat carriers from the Mech Legion!

"The Vesians have come!"

Chapter 754 Old Enemies

The only reason why Ves and the others remained calm was because the distance couldn't be closed within a short amount of time. Still, due to the light

that bounced off the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet at an earlier time, the Vesians had already started accelerating towards their foes.

While the Flagrant Swordmaidens could have easily kited the Vesians around, right now their entire fleet suffered a substantial slowdown. Not only did they still haven't taken complete control over their newly conquered light carriers, the Vandals also raced to repair the sublight propulsion and the FTL drives of the Finmoth Regal and the Linever Swan.

With the Flagrant Swordmaidens fleeing at half their maximum acceleration, the Vesian newcomers would eventually be able to catch up!

"When will the Vesians intercept our fleet?" He asked with an increasing amount of worry. "And have we identified their mech regiment?"

"Sixteen hours. And no, the sensor operators and analysts don't have a clue yet. The Vesians who arrived apparently make use of standard Vesian combat carrier classes. At this distance, it's too hard to make out any markings or variations."

If the Vandals brought a reconnaissance corvette or something like that, then they might have been able to resolve more detail. As of now, the ominous Vesian fleet's origins remained a mystery to everyone. Did they hail from Imodris? Venidse? Hafner?

Their exact origins made all of the difference. So far, it didn't seem likely they hailed from Venidse because their fleet moved significantly faster than the sluggish, heavily-armored combat vessels the Venidsans routinely preferred.

The Vesians knew they held an information advantage and actively worked to extend it. Almost immediately upon emergence, they activated a number of countermeasures.

"They're employing a reflective dust field to obscure our long-ranged optical sensors. Their laser-armed mechs are also beaming their weapons in a dispersed angle in the direction fleet."

A cheap and convenient way to hinder optical sensors from resolving details in long range was to throw a lot of junk data at them. The reflective dust bounced light that passed through them back and forth, which caused the images the optical sensors resolved to come out dimmer and distorted.

The dispersed laser emissions only exacerbated the problem. At this distance, a laser beam dispersed most of its energy. However, trying to stare at the fleet while distant lasers shone into the optical sensors was like trying to resolve detail while staring directly into a bright sun!

"Ves? Why is it so important for you to know what unit you're facing?"

Since Ketis hadn't experienced their run throughout Vesian space, Ves briefly filled her in. "Of the three Vesian duchies the Vandals have pissed off in recent times, we're practically reviled by the Imodris and Hafner. The former because we raided two of their planets, and the latter because we captured and ransomed one of their up-and-coming expert pilots."

"I heard some rumors about it, but to think you lived through that is impressive!" Ketis exclaimed. "It also sounds really humiliating for Imodris and Hafner. No wonder you Vandals are shaking in your boots right now. Do you think they're here to hunt you Vandals down?"

Ves thought about it but shook his head. "They wouldn't have entered the frontier or go all the way into the deep frontier just for us. I bet they're likely after the same objective as us. It's rather brave of them to travel all the way up here without allying themselves with a local pirate outfit."

How they managed to get here mattered little at the moment. The point was that the Vesian vessels started catching up to the half-crippled Flagrant

Swordmaidens and would certainly be able to reach them before the engineers replaced the FTL drives!

According to the reports sent by the engineers in charge of the replacement process, the sabotage did not only disable the FTL drive, but also the network of corrections around it. Fixing all of it required an extensive teardown that consumed a lot of time.

Even if the engineers cut as many corners as possible to speed up the work, they still lacked too many chief engineers who knew how to work with the FTL drives! As the most sophisticated component of a ship, a bunch of junior engineers had no business messing with them! It took decades for the average engineer to pass all the certifications that allowed them to handle FTL drives responsibly.

"According to the latest update, the engineers estimate the Finmoth Regal's FTL drive will take at least twenty hours to repair, while the drive for the Linever Swan will take at least thirty-six hours!"

Both repairs took far too long to fix! The Acolytes had really employed their explosive charges with a great degree of skill!

This left the Vandals specifically with an awful dilemma. Would they choose to abandon another combat carrier and a vital logistics ship and transition into FTL without them, or stick around and wait until they completed repairs?

The latter option sounded patently unviable. Although the Vesians hadn't brought a full mech regiment, they brought at least half of its strength. If the Vesian fleet's mech roster consisted of an even mix of spaceborn and landbound mechs, then that meant the Vandals would have to contend against at least five-hundred spaceborn mechs!

The Verle Task Force may have been able to match their strength in their prime, but after all of the battles and casualties the Vandals could only bring

half of their strength to bear. Actually less so now that they lost a couple of mech captains.

"This is not good news at all. Death is creeping onto our backs but we can't run away fast enough to escape its hungry grasp! Not if we cut off our wounded tail!"

Having already lost the Antecedent, it would hurt if they had to discard the Finmoth Regal and the Linever Swan as well. By now, the other independent pirate vessels had run away as far as they could from the Flagrant Swordmaidens, some even transitioning into FTL to depart the star system entirely!

Ves analyzed the plot and made a damning conclusion. "Every neutral and hostile pirate vessel in our range has flown out of the FTL restriction zone for even the cheapest FTL drives. They've traveled far enough from the brown dwarf that they're unaffected by its weak gravity. They can jump into FTL as soon as we send our mechs in their direction."

"So we can't hijack more ships in order to replace the two vesssels that you are about to lose." Ketis figured out.

"Just for the Finmoth Regal. The Linever Swan is almost irreplaceable for us. Both of us are depending on her to give us a continuing edge in terms of supplies once we reach the Aeon Corona System."

If the Swordmaidens captured a few spare ships while they had the chance, they might have been in a better situation as they would at least have some berths for one mech company's worth of mechs. Still, even if they missed the opportunity, the rest of the fleet could still squeeze in the surplus mechs somewhere, though only half at most, perhaps even less.

The decision on whether to dump the Finmoth Regal and the Linever Swan all came down to Major Verle's decision. After he returned from the infirmary, the

man looked to be in a poor mood. Right now, they had less than sixteen hours to see whether they could expedite the repairs or if they needed to abandon their crippled ships to avoid meeting the larger Vesian fleet in combat.

As a raiding regiment, the Vandals generally lost out to most combat-oriented Vesian mechs even if they possessed the advantage in numbers. Right now, they not only dealt with this handicap, but for once the Vesians held the numbers advantage this time!

This double whammy of inferior numbers and inferior quality condemned the Flagrant Vandals to a certain loss! The addition of Lydia's Swordmaidens hardly affected the equation because they possessed even greater handicaps compared to the Vandals. Their strength lay in their formidable landbound mech roster. In space, the Vesians could easily tear apart the individualistic Misty Slashers.

Due to the distance involved, Ves had no data to work with. Whatever patrol mechs the Vesians deployed were even harder to identify than their starships. While he could still ride herd over the mech designers, he still had another, more important task to take care of. Ves looked at Major Verle, who nodded back.

"Here are the files you need on the topics you requested." The commanding officer nonchalantly said, holding out his palm upon which rested a secure data chip. "The chip will fry after use or in two hours. The encrypted data held within can only be accessed with a keycode that I've transmitted to you, which will cause the encryption itself to change after it is used once. You have three hours to study the knowledge relevant to your assignment before the encryption irreversibly scrambles the contents into garbage. As for the other topic, you have a week to digest them before they're scrambled as well."

Perhaps if Ves specialized in hacking or computer science and possessed a specialized comm, he would have been able to halt the time limits. Too bad he

didn't enjoy either of those advantages, so he just had to make do with these limits.

"Three hours is way too little time, sir." He protested. "How can you expect me to become an expert in this extremely delicate field in the time it takes to cycle the FTL drive of a corvette?"

"Deal with it. Venerable Xie needs to become accustomed to the new upgrades as fast as possible, preferably within sixteen hours if we decide to put up a fight."

"What?!"

Damn. Did Major Verle intend to kickstart the brainwashing process by forcing a battle here? That was madness!

"No arguments. A shuttle is waiting for you at the shuttle deck. Get on board the Gorgon's Gaze and perform your upgrades. And don't forget to reflect the upgrades to the Venerable simulator pod as well!"

Ves glowered a bit as he stomped out of the command center. Not only did he have to 'upgrade' the Parallax Star within less than a day, he also had to incorporate the same upgrades into the expert pilot's exclusive simulator pod while keeping them a secret from everyone else.

All of these challenges continued to occupy him as he made his way down the shuttle deck. After undergoing an extensive security check, he boarded his assigned shuttle and strapped himself in. He was tempted to access the data chip immediately, but he had a feeling that activating his signal jammer aboard the shuttle would screw over his own ride.

As the shuttle rumbled and flew out of the shuttle battle bay, something very important popped into his mind. Wasn't there an acolyte at large? Ves received no word that the assassin of Prince Hixt-Klaaster had ever been caught.

He also guessed that this was the first shuttle launching out of the Shield since the lockdown.

Ves started to have a bad feeling about this transit. On a hunch, he summoned up his concentration and directed some of his spiritual energy into his left eyeball. He disengaged the straps that held him secure against his crash seat and rose up as if stretching his limbs.

In truth, he used the motions as an excuse to swivel around his vision. While his right eye spotted nothing except for empty seats, his left eye spotted a very ominous presence.

One that stood right behind his back.

His eye twitched. The Acolyte standing behind him must have caught it! Already, the robed figure raised his arm as if to unleash a strike.

"Damn! Why are you here?!"

Those useless security officers performed so many checks before they let the shuttle go, but they still managed to drop the ball!

Chapter 755 Human or Mech?

x

Even though Ves activated his spiritual vision to watch out for uninvited guests, he hadn't been mentally prepared to respond!

As his arm was about to come down while materializing the Amastendira, his left eye detected a swirl of energy shooting from the acolyte's palm! Ves only noted that it looked weaker than the previous energy waves he witnessed before he got hit!

Both of them paused for a bit. Ves waited for the pain to hit home, while the acolyte likely waited for him to crumble.

Yet.. it was as if his nerves got hit by a pillow! The strange energy that passed through his body barely tickled him as it traveled onwards!

Three seconds passed until Ves opened his mouth. "Was that supposed to hurt?"

Before he waited for an answer, the Ves finished aiming the recently-materialized Amastendira and shot a laser beam straight into the gaping mouth of the acolyte!

Unfortunately, the laser beam continued to bore out hole through the shuttle hull! The entire interior threw into chaos as all of the air sucked out into space. Fortunately, his combat armor's helmet folded up to protect him from the lack of air.

Just as he dematerialized the Amastendira and tried to figure out a way to explain the mess, the hatch to the cockpit shifted open. The shuttle pilot scanned the passenger room with a pistol in hand, staring bewilderingly at the hole burned straight through the hull and the partially headless corpse of the fugitive acolyte.

Strangely enough, the vacsuit the dead acolyte wore automatically folded out a thin helmet to cover up the destroyed head as best it could, thereby unintentionally preserving the body.

If not for the airtight seal, bubbling blood would have literally spurted from the blasted head due to the extreme change in pressure!

A comm channel automatically switched online.

"What happened here, Mr. Larkinson?"

"This invisible bastard popped up behind my back and I shot him before he could attack me. I'm lucky to be alive, honestly. If he got his attack off, I'd either be dead or in a coma."

Of course, this story leaked like a sieve. Ves was pretty sure that the shuttle's monitoring system captured everything, but right now he didn't wish to be dragged into a time-consuming investigation.

"Protocol says we need to land at the closest ship with a functional shuttle bay. We've just departed from the Shield of Hispania, so we'll be back in a jiffy." The pilot stated.

"No! Continue to the Gorgon's Gaze."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Larkinson, but the shuttle is still unsafe. We need to return as fast as possible."

"Let me call Major Verle."

Ves ignored the shuttle pilot's bleating and called Major Verle right away.

One minute later, the shuttle pilot received new orders directly from the big man himself. It basically reaffirmed his old orders.

Grumbling about protocol before he shut off the channel, the pilot reentered the cockpit and resumed the journey, this time with an extra hole in the passenger compartment.

After a short amount of time, the pilot evidently activated a damage control module, because a bot emerged from a hidden slot and flew towards the hole. It sprayed some white slime-like substance that quickly hardened into a hard, dry seal.

Reserve air started pumping back in, causing the interior of the shuttle to regain standard pressure.

"That's convenient." Ves spoke as his helmet folded back into itself again.

Ves contemplated sitting down somewhere far away from the body, which started reeking, but changed his mind when he stared at it. He never received

permission to investigate the corpses of the acolytes caught in the previous ambush.

He should take advantage of this unique opportunity. After all, it took the shuttle at least fifteen to cross the void that separated the starships.

Even after vaporizing the upper head, the most crucial area when it came to spirituality, Ves could still poke around the corpse. He always wondered how the acolytes looked like beneath their obscuring robes.

While the Vandals would probably be annoyed at him for messing around with a corpse, it wasn't as if they already had enough dead acolytes stored in the morgue. With that excuse in hand, he bent down and started to unceremoniously strip the body of the robe.

Due to his armor, he handled the body rougher than he was supposed to. The robe tore under his hamfisted attempt to get it off.

"Oops."

He inspected the black fabric and found it to be nothing but cheap synthetic woven into a thick faux-woolen cloth.

After throwing it aside, Ves inspected the body proper.

"So it turns out they do engage in extreme genetic modification.

The bulky robes hid the dead acolyte's extreme divergences from a baseline human.

First, the acolyte actually possessed a misshapen third arm right underneath the left arm. The creepy limb appeared to be fully functional by all accounts and resembled a small alien's limb more than a human one.

Second, when Ves cut into the vacsuit material with a small multitool he kept in his toolbelt, the acolyte's skin looked completely unlike a human. The rough, grey skin resembled the texture of sandpaper.

More small anomalies popped up. Ves couldn't even count how many alien species his genetic modifications encompassed, but it must have been more than six because of all of the strange stuff he detected.

The acolyte's arms featured vestigial fins.

His reproductive organ looked like abstract art.

His chest cavity hosted an oversized heart that looked like a gnarly monstrosity.

He only possessed three toes per foot and four fingers per limb.

His spinal nerves were vastly oversized and swelled.

Ves focused on this last observation. Though his crude cutting and butchering had already made an awful on the deck, he readily endured the horror in an overriding desire to satisfy his curiosity.

While he may have hesitated at first, he found he could easily flip an invisible switch in his mind that caused him to regard the body as a machine. As a mech designer, the study of the human body formed an important component in his foundational studies. Battle mechatronics forced him to become even more familiar with the variations of the human body.

Humanoid mechs gained their shape from a mech designer's understanding and adaptation of the human body.

"When you think about it, a human body is kind of like an autonomous, miniature-sized organic mech. Beneath its human consciousness is a finely-tuned organic machine that has formed into its current shape after millions of years of evolution. However, like any machine, it's made out of many components that all serve a different purpose."

Leveraging his existing understanding of human mechs while treating the corpse as a mech led to many minor discoveries and insights, though he couldn't quite make sense of them right now.

Treating a human body like a mech was like treating a miniature as a fully-fledged mech. Some things just didn't translate correctly.

More to the point, Ves still hadn't been able to figure out how the acolytes gained the ability to manipulate spirituality and form them into an attack that affected real people! He had a strong suspicion the bloated spinal nerve played a key role in this, but Ves was no doctor or surgeon!

This was one of the many areas where treating the body as a mech failed. A real mech did not possess a real spinal nerve or brains for that matter. Instead, the cockpit and mech pilot took over their jobs.

However, his radical perspective did result in a harvest of sorts. While the many strange alien genes appeared to have resulted in an inhuman monstrosity so monstrous that people might wonder how it managed to function, Ves recognized a focused application of a premeditated design.

Some exobiologist envisioned a certain end product and manipulated the acolyte's genes to achieve this result.

"This body is able to generate and channel a lot of energy."

The overall design of the body echoed laser rifleman mechs such as his Crystal Lord design. Energy management played a central role in the configuration of the acolyte's altered human body.

For some reason, the body possessed some means of minimizing its heat emissions. Even under a high exertion, the acolyte neither radiated heat nor absorbed it from the environment, thereby avoiding tripping any heat-sensitive sensors!

Ves identified a few strange, dense growths in the lower body which may have served as heat sinks.

One of the most extreme changes to the acolyte was that he possessed an extremely altered digestive system. It took up a lot less space, but at the cost of losing the ability to digest most kinds of foods! In fact, if Ves didn't know any better, the only kinds of food the acolyte could digest were nutrient packs!

"What is it with the cultists and their love for nutrient packs?"

Strange food preferences aside, he found out enough clues to reconstruct the overall 'design' of the half-alien acolyte.

"Everything comes down to generating lots of energy and converting them into.. something else."

Had the exobiologist responsible for producing this human monstrosity figured out how to transform energy into spiritual power? It sounded ludicrous, yet the 'autopsy' he performed seemed to suggest that this was very real!

As Ves fell into thought, the shuttle suddenly thumped. It had reached the shuttle bay of the Gorgon's Gaze! A few seconds later, the outer hatch opened up to allow for the entry of a team of armed security officers.

"What the hell?!" The security lieutenant in the lead suddenly uttered as he beheld the macabre butchering that took place in the middle of the passenger compartment. The sight was so gruesome that he automatically drew his rifle onto Ves. "Stand back!"

Ves suddenly pulled out of his thoughts and looked befuddled at the rifles pointed in his direction. Those were some big guns.

"Damnit."

A few minutes later, Ves had been escorted out of the shuttle and endured a rough interrogation from the lieutenant in charge with inspecting the aftermath of the ambush.

He couldn't really provide an excuse for why he spontaneously cut up a dead body except to state that he did it for research. When that didn't fly, Ves merely placed another call to Major Verle, who responded with an exasperated sigh over the comm before he hung up.

Minutes later, Ves exited the shuttle bay as a free man again. Nothing could possibly stop him in his current task. Even if he shot a random Vandal right in the corridor, he'd probably be able to get away with it with a lame excuse.

He navigated the familiar corridors until he came down the special workshop area next to the private hangar bay of Venerable Karol Xie.

Miss Lisbeth Eta-Denmersken nervously wrung her hands as she greeted him. "Head designer! I've received your notification. The Parallax Star and the Pale Dancer have both been moved to the workshop. Do you require anything else?"

"Nothing else but complete privacy." He spoke succinctly. "The modifications I'm about to perform on the Parallax Star involve highly classified technology that you and your crew aren't allowed to witness. Major Verle has lent me the authority to have this workshop vacated of every mech designer and mech technician."

"But sir! The Parallax Star is my baby!"

"The Parallax Star is the property of the Flagrant Vandals! It is emphatically not your baby." Ves rebuked. "I'm aware that you are intricately involved in its construction and servicing, but you've been assigned to a single mech for so long that you've forgotten what it means to be a mech designers. Even Ketis, a mech designer from the frontier, has more sense than you."

"That's preposterous!" Miss Lisbeth looked offended.

"I'm only stating the facts here. Now get out of this workshop and make sure everyone gets the message that they're not allowed to barge inside."

In order to make sure that Miss Lisbeth didn't barge in unexpectedly, Ves borrowed Major Verle's authority again to have some security officers guard the hatches against entry.

"Now, let's get to work." He said as he stared up to the impressive form of the Parallax Star.

Chapter 756 Candle in the Dark

When Iris stayed with the Vandals as a guest for the Vesian Revolutionary Front, she inducted Ves into the barebones essence of how neural interfaces worked.

It served one of the most important roles in a mech because they enabled human thought and machine processing to blend in seamlessly in a combined entity with an extraordinary capacity for information processing and decision making.

Humans by themselves made do with their brains and spine as the central nervous system that operated their bodies and gave them thought.

A mech can include all the raw processing power as its mech designer can manage to stuff inside, but without a good mind to operate the machine, most of its raw power would be wasted.

These days, AIs did a good job at serving as the basic brains of a mech, but skilled pilots were always able to leverage their creativity and intense practice to outsmart these dimwitted bot-like mechs.

Therefore, putting the human mind in the center of a mech's control mechanism proved to be the winning combination. Yet the strain they experienced when they blended their mind with the cold processors of a

machine prompted neural interface developers to refine this component with advanced instructions and algorithms meant to filter and process the input and output of data in a more efficient fashion.

The Church of Haatumak's Redemption Duel taught Ves what would happen if this went wrong. Working with and experiencing the consequences of an improperly configured neural interface hit home how easy it would be to destroy a mech pilot.

Each time a mech pilot interfaced with a mech, they put the integrity of their mind in the hands of the mech designer who developed the mech and the mech technicians who fabricated and serviced the machine.

In essence, it was as if Ves held a gun and the mech pilot voluntarily pressed their head against its muzzle, trusting that Ves wouldn't pull the trigger.

The MTA made sure that mech designers were too afraid of the consequences if they pulled the trigger.

Yet this time, Ves struck a deal with Major Verle that forced him to go against every ethical boundary and pull the trigger.

Even working on Acolyte Gien's Evaporating Spear wasn't this egregious! At least then someone else already pulled the trigger. Ves merely acted as an accessory to the crime. This time he'd be the principal murderer, and bloody his hands with the blood of an authentic expert mech!

Any lesser mech designer would collapse and break at this implacable conundrum.

To Ves, it depended on whether he could bend his principles far enough without breaking them. It posed a severe challenge to him because manipulating the neural interface of a mech in his care went directly against his fundamental principles.

He did not feel entirely comfortable with engaging in this practice.

"Maybe the three-hour time limit is a blessing. If I dive in any further, I'd be liable to break my design philosophy."

Limiting the time spent on this unsavory project could enable Ves to get away with it, if only barely. He still couldn't believe that Major Verle talked him into this insane plan.

Worse yet, Ves actually agreed with the necessity of it all. Venerable Xie regularly talked with the Fourth Prince over the comm whenever they fell out of FTL, and his current absence at this moment must surely be of concern to the former bodyguard.

Right now, the Vandals managed to stall the expert pilot by putting an AI simulation of the prince over the comm channel.

That wouldn't last forever. The expert pilot may even be growing suspicious right at this moment if the pair layered their conversations with hidden codes that the AI may or may not have figured out.

"Time is of the essence. The sooner I get this done, the faster this risk goes away."

He first patrolled the entire mech workshop, inspecting every possible nook and cranny where someone might be hiding. He employed his stealth detector in a high-powered mode and his spiritual vision to be absolutely certain nobody would be able to witness his actions.

Once he reassured himself that the workshop hosted no one else but Ves, he picked out an area stacked with a number of crates and commanded a couple of bots to build a makeshift hut around him that blocked direct vision.

After that, he employed his signal jammer in a fairly high setting to make sure that even the most discerning sensors would capture nothing but static if pointed in his direction.

"This should be enough precautions."

He arrived at the moment he anticipated the most. He retrieved the encrypted data chip from its case and slotted it into his newly-fabricated secure comm. After a few seconds of interfacing and decryption with the supplied codes, the comm gained a new app that temporarily granted him access to two different sets of documents.

One of them granted him a three-hour of access to a limited selection of textbooks, blueprints and even research papers related to neural interface technology. The selection of reading material disappointed him a bit. Evidently, the local database did not store that much books on neural interfaces by default.

"Well, I'll have to make due I guess."

The second set of documents consisted of a haphazard sampling of engineering textbooks related to FTL drives!

Yes, Ves deliberately requested access to high-quality textbooks related to the design and construction of FTL drives, something which a mech designer should ordinarily leave to people like Chief Engineer Avanaeon!

However, all the mishaps the Flagrant Vandals suffered with FTL drives these past few months made Ves concerned about their reliance on very senior engineers to fix any problems relating to their principal means of traversing the stars.

What if the Vandals lost every FTL drive? What then? Ves was unwilling to leave his chance to survive and escape the deep frontier to others. Also, unlike other mech designers, Ves possessed a deep understanding in

Physics, and though he only possessed knowledge related to mechs, he was certain he could leverage his transhuman level of Intelligence to learn enough about FTL technology to fix up a slightly-damaged FTL drive at the very least.

"I don't think I can design and fabricate something as complex as an FTL drive from scratch. You have to be the equivalent of a Journeyman Mech Designer to be able to cobble up the most primitive form that's outdated by a couple of thousands of years."

He may lack a foundation in starship engineering, but Ves did not shy away from the challenge of trying to understand FTL technology. He only held complete trust in the machines he built himself. Having already crafted devices unrelated to mechs such as his gadgets and his new comm, he became more confident in his ability to build up an entire arsenal reserved for his own use!

Even though he could have asked for textbooks on easier topics, Ves remained committed to his choice, especially considering how deep inside sandmen space they intruded.

Still, trying to gain a rudimentary understanding of FTL technology was easier said than done. Many engineers tried and failed. Ves came from a different discipline of engineering, so he couldn't leverage his existing base of knowledge to facilitate his learning.

"Well, let's leave that issue for later. For now, I have a job to do."

He turned back to the folder containing the documents related to neural interface technology. A quick look inside their pages caused Ves to immediately grow cross-eyed.

"Too complex!"

It didn't help that the documents presumed an extremely deep familiarity with human biology and neurology as well. The texts contained numerous

references to mechanical aspects as well as biological aspects, sometimes in the same sentence!

"It's impossible for me to understand the underlying theories at this rate!"

Neural interfaces worked with both man and machine, and while Ves had the latter covered, he lacked a sufficiently detailed understanding of the former.

It was like trying to participate in a footrace with one of his legs sawed off. He may be able to hop forward for a few steps, but eventually he'd fall flat on the ground while barely passing over the starting line!

Of course, with only three hours at his disposal, he wouldn't have been able to achieve an elementary mastery of this field to the same degree he gained a foundation in ultracompact energy storage systems.

He didn't need to be so thorough for this project.

"Thank the heavens that I've received some blueprints and design schematics."

Ves quickly spotted one set of files stored in a separate folder that served as the lynchpin to his project. Major Verle somehow managed to access and copy over the complete design specifications for the Parallax Star's custom neural interface!

"This.. this is annotated! Everything is complete!"

The design specifications not only listed out the properties of the neural interface, but it also broke down its inner workings! Not only did Ves receive a guide towards how its hardware had been designed, but he also had access to detailed commentary to the billions of lines of code that made up the customized programming that effectively altered and manipulated the pilot of the Parallax Star!

"This makes this project a lot easier!"

Instead of groping blind in the dark trying to mess things around in the hopes of reaching a distant destination, Ves now held a small candle that allowed him to navigate the dark and complex maze without getting stuck.

He immediately took a deeper dive into the commentary and annotations of the programming of the neural interface. Due to the sheer abundance of code, many of which pertained to trivial operations, Ves had to make a careful selection of portions that offered him the best hope of manipulating a mech pilot's mentality.

He narrowed down his selection to the sections that dealt with pairing a mental trigger word to activating a specific resonance sequence in the mech.

For example, if an expert pilot wanted to summon up a protective energy field, they would usually convey the word 'shield' or something to their mechs. The neural interface picked up this trigger word and automatically activated a set of instructions that facilitated the activation of the energy field.

The configuration of these settings needed to be tailored to the individual mech pilot to insure a smooth activation of resonance.

The complexity of the code astounded Ves. He could spend months trying to understand their workings and only master twenty percent of it before he bumped against a hard wall that required extreme familiarity with resonatic exotics and their neurological triggers.

Ves did not need to understand that much. In fact, he didn't even need to understand a single percent of what went on. He only needed to change a few parameters and add a few lines of code to distort an innocent function into something more nefarious.

It was like how Ves could take a power reactor and change a dozen little things to transform it into a bomb powerful enough to disintegrate the entire

mech. It actually took a lot less effort than anyone thought to perform such sabotage!

"This is the nature of interconnectedness. One change will ripple into a huge wave that can affect millions of variables."

Of course, this interconnectedness also turned the entire programming structure into a house of cards. If Ves messed something up and inadvertently pulled out a card, the entire neural interface could easily turn into a dangerous disaster akin to the tampered neural interfaces used in the Redemption Duel.

It reinforced the notion that mech pilots entrusted their very lives to the soundness of the neural interfaces each time they deployed.

Ves understood the true value of a neural interface specialist. They weren't just responsible for the smooth functioning of a small cog in the machine. It wouldn't be exaggerated to say that they held the power over the lives and deaths of every mech pilot that made use of their neural interfaces.

A single moment of negligence could lead to a permanent distortion in a mech pilot's personality!

Chapter 757 Plagiarizing a Crime

What Ves needed to do was to find the root programming and sneak in a few extra codes.

However, Ves faced a huge issue at this juncture. He wasn't adept in the special programming language used to instruct a neural interface on how to manage the man-machine connection. He couldn't just write something like 'make the mech pilot unflinchingly loyal to the 6th Flagrant Vandals mech regiment, oh, and also forget about your past loyalty to Prince Hixt-Klaaster'.

The phrase described the desired outcome, but to get there Ves needed to manipulate the machine language into an exact set of code that specifically resulted in such an outcome. To do that from scratch, Ves needed to develop

an extreme amount of expertise in the inner workings of the human mind in order to be able to target the specific brain sections related to loyalty and recognition of specific individuals and groups.

Fortunately, Ves came across a potential shortcut to the problem when he returned to browsing the textbooks. A huge section on ethics of all things provided the solution!

"Of course! Anyone who specializes in neural interfaces can't go around the Farund Affair!"

The Farund Affair that prompted the MTA to impose restrictions on neural interface technology changed the mech industry forever. A mech designer foolishly used to brainwash his customers into becoming devoted fans to his products in order to drive up sales.

"What a fool!"

If a mech designer had the power to brainwash millions of mech pilots, then at least use that power to conquer a state or something! Wasting all of that power to earn more money was one of the stupidest abuses of power in the history of the mech industry.

Ever since then, the MTA cracked down the endless variations in neural interfaces that mech designers had cooked up. The unethical practice of slipping in small subliminal brainwashing tricks make their customers become inexplicably attracted to their own products immediately came to an end.

The MTA even outright executed the worst offenders!

The sordid incident emphasized the huge potential for harm that mech designers wielded. If they completely lost all of their morality, they could corrupt thousands of mech pilots or cause harm at an untold scale.

Ves recognized the purpose behind the MTA's caution towards neural interface technology. It reflected in the sections of the textbooks that discussed the Farund Affair as a cautionary tale.

As Ves read through these sections, he skipped right over the many warnings and proselytizing to do the right thing. "Blablabla, I'm not interested in this irrelevant garbage. Where are the examples?"

Finally, he reached a page which contained an actual snippet of code sampled out of one of Farund Inc.'s tampered mech designs!

Best yet, the rest of the chapter detailed the exact mechanisms behind the code and how they all worked together to impose an unnoticeable mental compulsion upon the mech pilot whenever they interfaced with one of Farund's mechs!

"This is like the blueprint of a crime!"

The goal of these sections was to teach mech designers authorized to study neural interface technology to recognize the signs of altered programming and to identify their effects. It was much like how police detectives learned how other criminals performed their crimes.

It also had the unintended effect of teaching a crooked detective how to perform their crimes more efficiently and how to get away with it. The step-by-step outlining and deconstruction of key code sections taught Ves exactly how Farund Inc. and some of the other unethical mech designers managed to target the specific brain sections to achieve the desired response.

Of course, at some point, Ves felt a faint pressure building up in the back of his mind, and it didn't originate from the nauseating effects of his signal jammer. The pressure built up to such an extent that he had to forcibly jerk away his sight.

"I've finally come to this point." He frowned as he nursed his forehead. His obsessive state caught up to him, and he recklessly consumed the contents of the textbooks without regard to how his design philosophy might object to his current area of interest.

Even if he flipped the mental switch in his mind that allowed him to put his ethics and his principles inside a box and put it in the closet, he still couldn't escape the fundamental discordance that came with his actions.

"I can lie to everyone else, but I can't lie to myself."

His design philosophy centered around recognizing the intrinsic value of life of mechs. Implicit in this assumption that mechs shared the same right to recognition as the mech pilots that piloted them. If Ves purposely engaged in an act that impacted the life of a mech pilot, then that would automatically degrade the status of the mech as well.

It sounded a bit convoluted, but it essentially boiled down to that he should treat his mech pilots like he treated his mechs. With respect.

Any violation of this maxim threatened to collapse the entire theoretical underpinning of his design philosophy!

"It boils down to respecting the dignity of human life."

Ves became stuck at this juncture. If he really wanted to, he could force the issue and cause his design philosophy to stop harping so much about this demand. Yet he didn't wish to do so.

Just like how Ketis formulated her design philosophy in a deeply personal moment where she drew upon her most cherished memories and values, so did Ves share the same attachment for his own design philosophy.

How could he tarnish the guiding star he always dreamt of reaching in his career? That would be like a champion mech athlete suddenly retiring from the dueling scene in order to become a farmer!

In the end, Ves hadn't been able to come up with a better solution that to take bite-sized pieces out of his reading material and hoped he learned enough to apply them to his situation.

Fortunately, with the examples related to the Farund Affair to provide the starting point, Ves crudely copied entire sections of code and pasted them wherever they fit in the custom programming for the Parallax Star's neural interface.

Of course, it wouldn't be so easy to complete this job. It was like Ves modified an existing mech by stuffing it with parts from an entirely different design. Ves needed to seamlessly blend in the new code, adjust its parameters to redirect its loyalty-reinforcing mechanisms from Farund Inc. to the Flagrant Vandals, and make sure that the effects were inconspicuous enough that nobody sensed anything wrong.

The last part had the potential to expose his crimes. One uncontrolled outburst from the mech pilot or severe neurological damage could lead to an investigation that eventually narrowed down the source of the expert pilot's affliction to the altered neural interface!

And since Ves was currently working on the Parallax Star without allowing any recordings or maintaining any logs, he'd be the prime suspect!

Therefore, despite his desire not to, Ves returned to the textbooks and tried to study as much as possible before his access expired.

His design philosophy creaked and groaned under the strain. Ves gritted his teeth and pushed through by studying less important aspects about the programming of a neural interface. Ves inferred the use, application and

functionality of a core function or code by trying to understand the workings of a smaller and less important functions related to the greater one.

It was like testing the lethality of a mech-sized weapon by letting himself be shot by a scale model a thousand times less powerful than the real thing. It still hurt an awful lot if he got hit by the toy, but at least it wouldn't outright turn his body into a smear of flesh and blood!

His clever learning method worked to a degree. Ves basically fooled his own design philosophy with this method, but the downside was that his learning efficiency dropped by eighty percent.

By the time the three-hour time limit finally passed, Ves barely managed to increase his understanding of the code, much of it built on spurious logic.

"I'm not cut out to customize a neural interface." He muttered. His design philosophy fundamentally objected to the entire practice, even if he used it for benign purposes.

It basically meant he had to resign himself to the fact that he'd be missing a vital tool in his toolbox when he finally started designing custom mechs and expert mechs. Either he could leave the custom programming to another mech designer, or just make use of one of the many off-the-shelf packages from the MTA.

That was a problem for later. Right now, he had less than twelve hours to figure out his configuration and apply it to both the mech and the simulator pod.

Ves actually completed his work in eight hours.

Not because he was so good that he finished his work early, but because he lacked sufficient understanding to do very much. In the end, Ves became highly unsatisfied with the improvised cobbled-together code that crudely

replaced the subject to plead loyalty to from Farund Inc. to the Flagrant Vandals.

In fact, he did more than that. He added other pieces of code that temporarily boosted a mech pilot's compatibility with a mech in exchange for slowly wearing out their potential.

Over a few months of constant use, the implications of this short-term boost would become evident as the mech pilot's brains and nerves started to exhibit signs of breaking down.

"Since this guy is supposed to die anyway, there's no harm in milking him for all he's worth."

His design philosophy screamed when he adapted this portion of code. Ves had the feeling that if he forcibly increased the performance boost at the cost of degrading the mech pilot's mind faster, he wouldn't have come away as a different mech designer.

"That was close." He sighed in relief. He only got away with it because the changes only happened gradually over time. If the mech pilot stopped piloting the mech, then he had a chance to recover.

"Not that this is going to happen anytime soon."

Ves used the extra time that remained by adapting the same set of tampered code to the custom programming of the Pale Dancer, which was Venerable Xie's personal landbound rifleman mech.

It only took him two more hours to complete the transplant. Neural interface programming followed certain industry-wide rules, so Ves didn't have to reinvent the wheel. He just needed to connect the code to the right functions and make sure that the altered parameters didn't cause a problem down the line.

It was as easy as ripping out a power reactor of one mech and putting it inside a mech of a different model but with similar parameters. Ves only needed to adjust a small amount of connections and tweak the programming to make the new combination compatible with each other.

Once he finalized the programming for the two mechs along with their simulator versions, he only spent a half hour in updating their firmware. It took seconds to actually replace the old version with the newly tampered version, but it took a lot more time to verify the changes had stuck and that it wouldn't be reverted by the many backups stored in other parts of the system.

Due to the demands of the MTA, mech designers were compelled to include many safety features that protected against the corruption of the programming. After all, battles in space and barren planets often exposed mechs to cosmic radiation, which in rare cases corrupted data banks or transmissions of sensitive data.

This problem usually happened to cheap mechs that cut a lot of corners in terms of safety features. However, it could also happen to normal mechs or even expert mechs if the radiation shielding built around the cockpit sustained a breach and incurred substantial battle damage.

Still, the textbooks already listed out all the possible countermeasures against corruption, so he corrupted them as well.

By the time he was finished with updating the neural interfaces and the simulator pod, Ves mentally padded himself on the back and finally disengaged his signal jammer.

A slew of high-priority messages immediately arrived at his comm. Ves took one look at the oldest message and cursed.

"The Temple of Haatumak has arrived!"

The Flagrant Vandals already deduced that the Temple of Haatumak and her accompanying swarm of independent pirate vessels intended to arrive in this star system.

The invisible Acolytes stationed aboard almost every vessel of the Flagrant Swordmaidens hadn't been placed there for sightseeing. The only conclusion the Vandals and the Swordmaidens could make was that they'd been placed as a fifth column placed ahead among their ranks.

As long as they utilized their strange form of stealth to remain completely unnoticed, they would be in a prime position to facilitate a two-pronged attack once the main force of the Church of Haatumak arrived and commenced their attack!

With the key to enter the Aeon Corona System in the hands of the Flagrant Swordmaidens, the cultists who plotted against them from the start needed to make their move very soon if they wanted to obtain the key.

Dealing with the Church of Haatumak already posed a significant challenge. Not only was their Temple almost as huge as a fleet carrier, they also enjoyed the devotion of many independent pirates who would gladly throw hundreds of mechs at the Flagrant Swordmaidens to please their god!

Fending off a swarm of low-quality mechs would take every bit of strength the Flagrant Swordmaidens could summon. If the invisible Acolytes suddenly assassinated the majority of their upper hierarchy, then the loss of command and coordination would certainly spell their end at the hands of cultists and fanatical pirates!

Even if the Vandals and the Swordmaidens confronted the Acolytes earlier than scheduled, they still had to deal with the other prong of attack. That was why Ves became confused why he only received a delayed notification of the threat.

Shouldn't they be fighting for their lives since the first message arrived? Ves looked up its timestamp and noticed that it had been sent just after he activated his signal jammer!

"What?! An hostile force transitioned into the star system and nobody warned me?!"

Ves emerged out of his hut of crates and marched towards the exit. He unlocked the hatch and slipped out before confronting the nearest security officer. "What's the state of the battle?!"

"Uhh.. battle, sir?"

"The Temple of Haatumak arrived in this system some time ago, isn't that right?"

"That is correct."

Something strange was going on. "Did a battle erupt between cultists and our forces?"

"No, sir."

Ves blinked. "Then what did the forces aligned to the Church actually do?"

"They went on the attack, Mr. Larkinson. It's just that they didn't aim for us, but rather the Vesians!"

"What!?"

This sounded extremely preposterous at first. Ves raised his comm and read through the subsequent messages. He had a feeling he missed some details.

The messages indeed stated that the cultist fleet emerged close to the entry zone where the Vesian fleet had arrived. All of this had actually happened a few hours before, but the light of their emergence only just started arriving to the Vandals.

To sum up the observations made by the Vandal long-ranged sensors, they detected a significant amount of disarray among the Vesian fleet. Their countermeasures against long-ranged observation abruply ceased while several valuable combat carriers flew out of poisition or slowly began to blow up!

"The Vesians paid a visit to the Temple of Haatumak as well!"

Evidently, the Vesians sought out massive Temple in order to pay their respects and requested their ships to be blessed by their Priests so their powerful and energetic fleet wouldn't have to skirmish against the sandmen every step of the way.

It made sense for the Vesians to do so, yet it allowed their ship to be infiltrated by the creepy invisible Acolytes who had a tendency of stalking important people at close proximity from behind.

The Acolytes must have initiated a decapitation attack as soon as the Temple of Haatumak and her sycophants jumped into the system and closed in on the disarrayed Vesian force!

Presumably, with many officers assassinated or taken out of action and with sabotage wracking several of their vessels, the Vesians shouldn't have been in a good shape to repel the swarm of pirate mechs that deployed from the pirates.

The first minutes of the battle proceeded chaotically as the Vandal long-ranged sensors worked hard to figure out what was going on, something which the battle didn't help with all of the lasers and explosions scattering light in every direction.

When the battle between the Vesians and the worshippers initially began, the Vandals expected to witness a difficult battle for both sides. Which side won

depended whether the numerically-inferior Vesians regained enough wits to form a coordinated defense.

Something like this should be hard to achieve if the Acolytes had free reign aboard their combat carriers. Unlike the Vandals, the Vesians couldn't rely on a tip-off from Ves to be prepared to root out an invisible intruder among their ranks.

The subsequent messages that arrived at his comm reflected this prediction as the Vandals expected the pirates to vanquish the Vesians, though at heavy cost as the Vesian mech pilots didn't go down without a fight.

Yet the battle did not proceed along this fashion, because at some point the Vesians deployed an expert mech.

How did the Vandals know? Because of the mech's subsequent performance and the resonance emanations their sensors picked up. The mech was like a beacon in the dark!

This expert mech first proceeded to crash in the middle of the pirate ranks. Having entered the chicken coop, the wolf proceeded to demolish them in rapid tempo!

In the first minute, it slew twenty pirate mechs!

In the second minute, it destroyed fifteen pirate mechs!

In the third minute, it slashed apart twenty-seven pirate mechs!

The pirates fell into complete panic where the expert mech went. Not a single pirate mech dared to confront the insanely lethal expert pilot in close combat! This caused the expert mech to single-handedly disrupt and push back the pirate mech swarm until the Vesians finally gained sufficient room to regain some of their organization!

After that, the Vesians counter-attacked! They charged into the uncoordinated pirate swarm and used superior formations and tactics to mow down the pirate mechs with the expert mech in the lead!

Eventually, the Temple of Haatumak and her pirate escorts ordered a full retreat, pulling back their mechs and burning away from the Vesian fleet as fast as possible!

The Vesians didn't pursue, likely because they already broke the pirates and gained nothing from stomping the overconfident pirates and cultists further into the ground. Besides, they still needed to deal with the aftermath of the assassination attempts and the sabotage wracking their vessels.

Ves looked up from his comm. "Have heard some rumors about how the Vesian fleet is doing right now?"

The man in front of him shrugged. "I'm just a security officer, sir. All that mech and spaceship stuff is out of my purview. However, I did hear rumors of how the Vesian evacuated a couple of combat carriers and ships from their supply train. Over two-thirds of their surviving mech force along with the expert mech resumed chasing after the attackers, up until the pirates voluntarily gave up ten random pirate ships."

The Vesians suffered the same problem as the Vandals, but to a much more serious degree. Not only did they lose more ships and officers, but they also needed to obtain replacement ship to provide new homes to mechs that have lost their motherships.

The grit and discipline shown by the Vesian mechs on the field and the stellar performance of the expert mech frightened the wits out of the Vandal analysts. Even in their damaged state, they likely still outnumbered the Flagrant Swordmaidens and their expert pilot alone already exhibited a much stronger resonance than Venerable Xie ever demonstrated!

"I need to return." He said. "Please inform the captain of the Gorgon's Gaze to prepare a shuttle ride back."

He then turned around and sought out Miss Lisbeth. The deranged mech designer still wore a hazard suit as she sat behind a console. As best as Ves could tell, stared listlessly at past combat footage of the Parallax Star in action.

She acted like an addict who had her supply of stimulants taken away. Ves shook his head. She made for a pathetic sight.

"Miss Lisbeth."

"Yes head designer!" The woman immediately turned around and gazed at Ves with pleading eyes. "Please tell me you are finished with modifying the expert mechs! I need them back! It's been more than twelve straight hours! I can't sleep as long as they're separated from me!"

Ves wanted to palm his face and give her another rebuke. Eventually he held off because it wouldn't change anything. Witnessing her appalled reaction made him feel rather sorry for Miss Lisbeth. She had come into touch with knowledge and design concepts beyond her means to understand and became irrevocably warped by those experiences.

That made her a useful mech designer to help keep the expert mechs in tip-top shape, but the continued exposure only deepened the damage.

Ves could have ended up like that if he strained his design philosophy a little more. It was a good thing he respected his limits and took a detour to achieve his results.

"Miss Lisbeth, I've finished implementing the classified changes. I suggest that Venerable Xie should first test out the adjustments in the simulator pod before taking the Parallax Star out into space for a spin. I'm sure I can get Major Verle to approve a live test when I return to the Shield of Hispania."

Her eyes immediately began to glow as all signs of glumness disappeared from her face. "You're finished? Great! I will prepare the Parallax Star for deployment immediately! Don't you worry, head designer, with me in charge nothing will go wrong!"

"Make sure to log the telemetry of the simulator pod and the actual mech and all the other relevant data you can gather. Put that all into an encrypted data chip and send them over to me via shuttle. Don't transmit the data remotely."

Once he issued his orders, he turned around and headed down to the shuttle bay. He entered a prepared shuttle and carefully swept its passenger compartment for any uninvited guests before he took a seat.

Even though he didn't expect to meet an Acolyte this time, he could never be too sure.

As the shuttle calmly exited the Gorgon's Gaze and brought him back to his assigned ship, Ves reflected on what he had just done.

To say that he felt conflicted was an understatement.

While he eroded his conscience to such an extent these days that he shouldn't be disturbed at plotting to harm an expert pilot indirectly under his care, his design philosophy disagreed.

"My mind reluctantly accepts the necessity, but my heart is disgusted at my actions."

He hadn't just turned his back on his principles. He ran them over with a battleship and threw down a few nukes for good measure!

Yet despite treating them so rottenly, Ves felt as if he could bounce right back to normal after his sordid actions faded from his mind!

The more he deceived, the easier he could maintain his doublethink. Even though he performed a heinous crime, he still thought of himself as a good

mech designer. The mental gymnastics he performed in his mind became so sophisticated that he felt his conscience should go back to normal after it stopped making a fuss.

However, his design philosophy was another matter entirely. Even if he could lie to his mind, he couldn't lie to his heart.

It had suffered a lot of stress from being bent in every direction. Restoring it to its normal, pure, bright and aspirational form wouldn't be easy. He had a suspicion that it took more than time to straighten it out into its original shape.

"Well, if my design philosophy is a little bent, then I'll just have to hammer it back into shape."

Chapter 759 Sacrificial Lambs

Once Ves finally returned to the Shield of Hispania, received an immediate summons to Major Verle's stateroom. After activating his signal jammer, he provided a brief report of his work using allusions, indirect words and code words.

Just because Ves trusted his signal jammer to disable most types of recording devices did not mean it could defeat everything. The Privacy Shield from the System worked a lot better than his cobbled up device, and worked on scientific principles far beyond his depth.

"So you don't have a high degree of confidence that your modifications have worked?" Major Verle pressed with a frown.

"No, sir." Ves replied. He really wanted to scratch his head right now, but his armored fingers wouldn't make that a pleasant experience. Due to the continued state of heightened alert, nobody had shed their bulky suits as of yet. "Look, the best way I can put it is like putting a third-year mech design student in charge of designing a mech. There's a fifty percent chance the

mech works and there's a fifty percent chance the mech will suffer a catastrophic error such as blowing up or cooking the mech pilot alive."

"Fifty-fifty?"

"Maybe sixty-forty. I have a bit more confidence in my success than failure, sir. Even then, there are different gradations of success and failure. A partial success would be that the.. intended effect is working, but the intrusion is too blunt and noticeable. A partial failure may be that my modifications are working, but it is achieving the wrong effect."

"How do we know whether which one is the case?"

"We don't, not at first. I had to make a choice how strong I wanted to push the modifications. If it's shaped like a hammer, we risk incurring immediate damage. If it's as soft as a pillow, then the effect won't be as obvious, but it will take a lot of pillow hits in order to achieve the same effect as a simple hammer strike."

"What's the timeframe until we are able to perceive a difference?"

"I truly don't know, sir. According to historical examples, it may take up to a week of piloting time to achieve a lasting change. The effect is more telling with the real thing rather than with a simulation. I highly advise conducting at least one simulation session and one live exercise before we depart this star system. I can compare the telemetry of both situations. While it doesn't allow me to determine whether the effect has the desired outcome, I can at least identify if anything has gone wrong or if there are unintended consequences."

A simulator pod contained a lot of safeties and hardware limitations for Ves to circumvent. Although it couldn't prevent the brainwashing effect entirely, it severely curtailed its effect.

A neural interface faced fewer limits, especially when it came to versions geared towards expert pilots. They needed to be capable of channeling a lot

more data as expert pilots exhibited a massively increased capacity towards processing data. Ves possessed a lot more flexibility in abusing its expanded capabilities to his will.

"Alright. I will immediately schedule some tests. It will take at least four to five hours before the Finmoth Regal and the Linever Swan regain FTL functionality. Once that is done, we will key in the right settings into our fleet's FTL drives so that we can punch through the spacetime anomaly of the Aeon Corona System and finally reach the other side. The chief engineers have estimated that the journey will take about five to twelve days, depending on how much spacetime turbulence we will finally encounter. That will give us plenty of time to see whether your modifications have achieved the desired effect."

"Sir, if I may ask.. Do we know what's out there on the other side?"

The mech officer gazed at Ves with a sharp glance. "We have.. clues. Snippets of information. If you are asking me if we know why the Aeon Corona System is surrounded by a spacetime anomaly, I can't explain that. We don't know how many planets orbit the trinary stars nor do we know what opposition we will meet beside our competitors."

"And the Starlight Megalodon, sir? How are you so sure she's there and crash landed onto a Super Earth?"

"We don't. We only have third-hand information at best. What information we have gathered on the long-lost CFA battleship is obtained from interrogation and torture conducted by others. I've been told the interrogations hasn't achieved a lot of results. The shuttle pilots that have escaped the Aeon Corona System for the first time in three-hundred years actually turned out to be clones. They only provided the answers they intended to disseminate."

Clones!

"That makes this entire venture even more suspicious!"

"Don't you think we don't know that?!" Major Verle slammed his fist against his desk. His suit's servos enhanced the impact force, causing the desk to rattle. "Even if the Aeon Corona System is a trap, someone has to take the bait, because the news we've learned is too great for us to ignore. Why do you think we've been sent? Because we are expendable! No matter what dangers we meet, all of the risks are worth it if even a fraction of what the clones have spilled are true!"

"This.." Ves knew in his heart that this had always been the case. He just hadn't expected Verle to be so upfront about it. "What are we really after, sir? What is so valuable about the outdated remains of a CFA battleship that's so attractive that the Bright Republic readily sends us out as sacrificial lambs?"

Major Verle didn't sigh, but his face took on a weary expression. The pressure of shouldering a monumentally dangerous mission deep inside the frontier had taken on him as well. As the highest-ranking Vandal in the fleet, his decisions could either save or doom the thousands of Vandal servicemen under his care.

"Everyone is a pawn for someone else. It is not my role to question the orders handed down to us from above. Even if we are acting on dubious intelligence, someone has to go, because the consequences of missing an amazing opportunity is too dear to miss. Might I remind you that the Vesians have sent out their own expedition here, one that is both stronger and more costly than ours."

That reminded him of the strange battle that took place after he isolated himself in his work. It had been a stroke of luck to the Vandals that the Vesians fell prey to the vagaries of the frontier.

Major Verle quickly lost his patience and shooed Ves away. After orienting himself in the corridor, he decided to return to his office. It appeared that due to the sudden ambush by the forces aligned to the Church of Haatumak, the Vesian fleet decisively halted their pursuit to the half-crippled Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Both of them suffered from the aftermath of the Church of Haatumak's aggression. Neither the Flagrant Swordmaidens nor the Vesians ever expected the low-key cultists to abandon their centuries-long neutrality to plan a surprise attack on both forces. They must have thought that the price must be worth it. Ves keenly noticed that Major Verle deftly skirted around the question of what drove them to such lengths to reach the fabled Starlight Megalodon.

"So many forces have gone through so many extremes. What is driving them so mad?"

Life-prolonging treatment serum? Advanced technological data banks? Tons of high-grade exotics? All of them sounded attractive, to be sure, but Ves had an inkling it might be more than that. Whatever drove the big players so mad, it must have been something truly substantial.

"Well, in a few hours, we'll finally be on our way."

Ves returned to his office. Right now, Ketis was off-duty and asleep so Ves had some time to himself. He nursed his head and thought about the problem with his bent design philosophy. As he came out of his most reject assignment, he had some time to rest his mind and take stock of his current mentality.

It didn't look good. It appeared when Ves kept playing with fire, eventually his fingers might sustain some burn damage even if he thought he'd been careful.

His design philosophy lost some of its luster, and it had suffered quite a bit from all the abuse Ves subjected it too. He felt a little guilty at his recent appalling behavior. Even if he did some of them out of necessity, those were merely rationalizations that could only convince his mind, but not his heart.

"I can lie to my mind but not my heart."

He'd have to brainwash himself to achieve such an effect, kind of like what he attempted to do to Venerable Xie.

"Well, I could give it a try if only my genetic aptitude isn't so abysmal."

He chuckled to himself. He seriously contemplated putting himself under the same circumstances as his latest guinea pig. If not for the impediment of being unable to interface with a mech, then it might have worked!

He couldn't cheat his way out of undying the damage he inflicted upon himself. He acted like a crook, and now he had to pay for it. "I still don't regret what I've done."

Perhaps being unrepentant may not be the best course of action towards recovery, but starting with honesty was a necessary step. The fact of the matter was that he willfully schemed against an expert pilot who piloted the expert mechs the Venerable had entrusted to the Flagrant Vandals.

As the head designer, Ves bore the responsibility of ensuring that they functioned safe and well. It was one thing to neglect his duties and let them rot due to lack of maintenance, but it was another thing entirely to deliberately turn them into a brainwashing machine that slowly sapped their mech pilot to death!

The only reason why his design philosophy hadn't cracked was because Ves performed these modifications for a client who became a danger to himself and the Vandals.

Treating his latest customer like an enemy instead of a valid client helped soothe some of his ethical conflicts, though strictly speaking the MTA wouldn't think of it that way. They always took the side of the expert pilots over the mech designers.

"A true mech designer doesn't care whether his customers are friendly, neutral or hostile. Their only job is to design mechs. How they are distributed or sold shouldn't matter to them. Even if he ends up arming his own enemies, the mech designer ought to celebrate because his mechs are so good even his foes can't help but favor his machines!"

This kind of example expressed the dominant viewpoint the MTA liked to espouse. Mech pilots fought for power, politics, ideals and more. They were the stars of the show that decided how the galaxy should be run.

Mech designers acted as their support crew. They provided the most important tool for the mech pilots to exert their power. A mech designer was not meant to wield power for themselves. The mech industry tolerated a certain amount of influence gathering as long as their ambitions remained within the scope of the mech industry.

A mech designer ought to be detached from politics. If the Vesia Kingdom by some miracle successfully conquered the Bright Republic, Ves should feel no compulsions about working under the Vesians.

The MTA was delusional if they believed that would happen. Mech designers loyal to the Bright Republic wouldn't accept their new rulers, and the Vesians would certainly favor their native mech designers over their newly-conquered subjects.

In essence, they key to solving his wounded design philosophy was to recognize that Ves did not harm his own client. Rather, he needed to convince his heart that he instead followed orders to sabotage a potential enemy,

thereby neutralizing a ticking time bomb that could have exploded in everyone's faces.

While he had a fiduciary duty to deliver a safe product to his clients, he had no such obligations to do so to an acute threat to his life!

Ves felt out his heart and found that his design philosophy had grown a tiny bit less agitated. "Maybe I'm onto something here."

Chapter 760 Customer Needs

After an hour of introspection, he imagined he achieved a tiny bit of progress in straightening out his crooked design philosophy. It wasn't easy by any means, and it might take months to restore it to a pure state, but at least Ves saw some hope in his current approach.

"I only need a couple of minutes to put my design philosophy to the brink, but I need months to undo all of the damage I've done."

Creation was harder than destruction. That applied to pretty much anything, so Ves did not expect an easy road to recovery.

In the meantime, Ves sensed that he really shouldn't put his design philosophy under stress during his recovery period. Putting more stress on a broken limb for example only exacerbated the damage and prolonged his recovery period.

Even though he should take it easy for the next couple of months, Ves feared he may need to compromise his much-abused principles yet again if the Aeon Corona System turned out to be a cesspool of danger.

"I feel like an abusive husband who can't help but make excuses for hitting my wife." He grimaced.

His design philosophy was his 'wife' in this analogy. The danger here was that he might hit her too often or too hard one day that his design philosophy decided to give up on him and file for divorce.

With all that he put his design philosophy through lately, Ves certainly deserved it, but he did not want this to happen.

"Can you forgive me, please? I swear I won't hit you again!"

Ves suddenly shook his head. What was he thinking about? Why did he suddenly imagine his design philosophy as his wife?

"I think I have to call this a day."

He felt reluctant to go to sleep. While the Vandals stood down from red alert, the current condition or yellow alert meant that they still anticipated possible threats. Yellow alert merely allowed for a rotation of shifts so that all of the stations would continue to be manned while off-duty personnel had a chance to eat and sleep.

"Still, my mind really needs a break."

Ves figured that someone would wake him up again if anything drastic happened, which admittedly didn't seem very likely.

The Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet had limped their way out their initial emergence zone. The ominous Vesian fleet that initially burned in pursuit had sustained heavy damage from the pirates, while the forces aligned to the Church of Haatumak learned the hard way why they shouldn't challenge a detachment of a battle-hardened military mech regiment.

He rested for four hours before an alert woke him up. Ves blearily emerged from his bed and took one look at the message from his comm before he jumped out and dressed himself up at his best speed.

He raced towards his office where a security officer handed over an important package to him. As soon as he received it, he thanks the officer, entered his office, threw a sloppy greeting to Ketis and jumped behind his desk, activated

his signal jammer before finally inserting the encrypted data chip inside the package into his secure comm.

The contents inside the data chip contained all of the logs, readings and telemetry out of the simulations and live deployment of the Parallax Star!

While Ves grumbled a bit about missing out on the tests as they happened, at least it appeared that nothing drastic had gone wrong. Venerable Xie hadn't gone insane or went onto a random murder spree. According to the biometric logs, the expert pilot exhibited an increased amount of exertion, but that could have been attributed to the man's slightly increased performance with the Parallax Star from before.

"It's good to see at least one of my changes went as planned."

The slight increase in performance helped justify his changes and mask all of his shenanigans behind the scenes. To the rest of the Vandals, it appeared that Ves managed to successfully tweak the Parallax Star in favor of Venerable Xie.

Only Ves and Major Verle knew the truth, and if it was up to him, that would remain so forever.

He still found it a waste to set a fatal trap for an expert pilot. If the expert pilot hadn't been so slavishly devoted to the failure of a Fourth Prince, then the Vandals could have forged a tighter bond with the versatile fugitive from the Dark Plasma Star Sector.

Incidents like these illustrate the difficulty of converting a foreign expert pilot to another cause. No one wanted to let go of their trump cards, especially to those with power and ambition, so they did everything in their power to indoctrinate their expert pilots into becoming their loyal servants.

The MTA's emphasis on protecting the rights and privileges of expert pilots emerged out of necessity. If expert pilots enjoyed no such protection, that left

them vulnerable to all kinds of brainwashing and coercion by unscrupulous states and power players.

The fact that practically any expert pilot that experienced forceful persuasion often stagnated or regressed didn't stop them at all, though it would be bad for the MTA as a whole. In order to make the advancement towards expert pilot as attractive as possible and to leave the path open towards ace pilot and god pilots, elite mech pilots of all stripes needed to be treated with respect.

This policy sounded good to Ves until he ended up in the position of one of those people who needed an expert pilot under their thumb. Then it became a hindrance that Ves had willfully violated.

Ves dove into the logs and the telemetry, trying to find any signs his intervention had any side effects. He found plenty of abnormal indicators, but they shouldn't come to anyone's attention as long as they remained small.

The amount of abnormalities did concern him, however. It told him that his changes resulted in a spillover effect that cascaded many other parameters.

The man-machine connection was one of the most complex and mystifying fields in mech design. It occupied the same status as FTL drive mechanics to starship engineers.

Ves merely dipped his toes in the field himself, so while he expected his changes to have missed the mark somewhat, he did not feel pleased that it had grown to this extent.

This was like ordering an artillery mech to perform a precision bombing but instead the mech decided to go wild and carpet bomb the entire surroundings around the target region!

"I've been fudging all of my projects lately."

The batteries, his gadgets, the Six-Sided Dice, the Evaporating Spear and now the tampered neural interface were all rush jobs that Ves had hastily completed due to a perpetual lack of time and capability. This left way too many shortcomings into his final products.

"I have no choice in the matter." He sighed.

Ves recognized that the situation compelled him to these dire straits. His current woes reiterated his desire to gain more autonomy over his own life. Even if Major Verle was correct in that everyone was someone else's pawn, working under someone's thumb really grated on him. The sooner he jumped off the chessboard, the sooner he stopped ending up in situations beyond his control.

Ves spent a half-hour in total to skim through all of the data. Most of it consisted of irrelevant or incomprehensible observations, and he couldn't figure out if his changes had actually stuck or not. At the very least, he concluded that no major problems had occurred despite his inexpert handling of the code.

"Ketis?"

"Good morning to you too, Ves." She grumbled.

"Sorry, I became preoccupied with an important task."

"It's fine. I know what you're like."

After a bit of chit-chat, Ves turned towards her own development. "Did you do as I suggested earlier?"

"You mean to talk with the mech pilot of that swordsman mech we visited before? I did, but the Vandal didn't want to tell me much. I think it's because I'm a Swordmaiden, so he didn't want to give away his secrets."

He had overlooked that possibility. The Vandal mech pilot did nothing wrong, and Ves should have passed on some instructions or the like. Well, it may have been an irresponsible suggestion from the start.

"You'll get the opportunity to interview your fellow Swordmaidens when you return to their midst. Just remember to do it. You really need to understand their quirks and their idiosyncrasies to design your own mechs in the future that fit with your intended clients."

"Isn't that part of marketing?" She asked.

"Yup. What I've just described is marketing research in a nutshell. I can't just design a random mech and dump it onto the market. Well, I can do that if I really want to, but I shouldn't expect it to pay for itself because it won't sell that much. The mech market is immense. Even in the Komodo Star Sector, a lot of mechs change hands all the time. The competition is so big that you simply can't afford to go your own way. Mech designers have to adopt the mentality of putting their customers at the center of their vision. Without an existing base of customers to appeal to, who is going to buy your mechs?"

"I don't see how that matters to me. I'm just a pirate designer and I don't care at all about the mech market in the frontier. Can't I just do my own thing?"

Ves shook his head. "Just because you've read it in a marketing textbook doesn't mean the theories can't be applied in non-commercial settings. Every form of labor a mech designer performs is intertwined with a transaction of some sorts. Would Mayra be so highly valued by Lydia's Swordmaidens if she only designs and fabricates spearman mechs?"

"Of course not! That's stupid!"

"That's because she knows her customers, which in this case is the outfit she is a part of. Just because she is a member of the outfit doesn't mean that all of the marketing theories are invalid. In fact, they matter even more so, because

designing mechs that are a poor fit to the Swordmaidens directly affects her safety."

"Okay.. I get what you're telling me. You don't want me to design the mechs I've imagined in my mind?"

"Not exactly. If you have a strong belief that a mech you formed from your own insights and experience, then you can go ahead and design it. Just make sure that it's attractive enough that someone wants to pilot it. It sounds stupid, but many mech designers who just started business actually neglect finding out if the market has any appetite for their products!"

Not every mech designer was cut out to be an entrepreneur. Mech designers cared about designing great mechs, while businessmen wanted to earn as much profit as possible. These priorities differed from each other, but an independent mech designer constantly needed to pay equal attention to both.

"The biggest mech manufacturers won't hesitate to spend millions of K-coins just to understand their target segment a little better."

"Really? It costs that much to interview a couple of mech pilots?"

"They do more than a simple interview." Ves replied dryly. "There's a whole science behind it, but you don't need to know the details. Once you get to my level and own your own business, you can ask for a report and have your underlings or an external marketing agency do the heavy lifting."

"Here you go again." She rolled her eyes. "You always state that I'm destined to start my own mech company or something."

"That's because I believe you are meant for greater things. I have the utmost amount of confidence in your abilities."

She didn't know how to reply to that. What Ves said was so ludicrous she didn't even consider it a realistic possibility.

Ves did not mind. As long as she remained confident, she had the potential to outgrow the Swordmaidens. However, if she ever took that step, then she sorely needed to become familiar with the fundamentals of running a business.

If Ves did not bring up the necessity to design her mechs with an eye to her customers, she might make a misstep at some point.

Ketis eventually showed signs that she comprehended his point.

"I guess if you think about it, even if designing the mech of your dreams is fun, it's not a game. Sometimes you have to design mechs you don't like to pay the bills." She remarked in an uncharacteristic display of wisdom. "Mayra often receives commissions to design mechs for our friends, and she sometimes comes back complaining about how she hates the way they fight and how she needed to adapt that into her commissioned designs. Some of them are real scumbags who..."

As Ves listened to her rambling, he felt a bit more at ease. The unsettling sensation in the depth of his heart had subsided by a tiny bit. Surprised, Ves turned his concentration inward and found to his surprise that his design philosophy actually regained a small amount of brightness!