

Chapter 761 Karma as a Commodity

Did the act of teaching redeem his crimes?

When Ves asked himself that question, he suspected that this may be one of the reasons why certain mech designers pursued the teaching profession. Teaching was a way of giving back to the profession. Since he taught Ketis so earnestly without turning her into his puppet, his own conscience must have decided that it was a valid way of absolving himself of his misdeeds!

What a stroke of luck!

After handling the inquiries of his student before he handed over another virtual textbook for her to flip through in her spare time, Ves leaned back in his chair and smiled.

If teaching turned out to be a good way to undo the damage of my misdeeds, then he could effectively break the rules more often without having to pay a painful price!

"It's like wiping away my debts by performing a couple of good deeds."

Ves developed a small theory about this phenomenon. It resembled the concept of karma. As long as he did more good than bad, then his net balance of karma remained positive.

In his perspective, karma went from a concept of morality to an immeasurable but very real commodity. If Ves wanted to keep his design philosophy in a healthy state while occasionally play fast and loose with his principles, then he needed to make sure he treated karma like he treated his budgets and bank accounts.

The basics of maintaining a good budget was to ensure his income surpassed his expenses.

For example, if his tampering with Venerable Xie's neural interfaces put him 1,000 karma under debt, then he needed to compensate that with at least 1,000 karma worth of good deeds.

Ves sensed that the little lesson just then probably had a value of 0.01 karma at most. That was hardly impactful, but the lesson didn't last very long. If Ves continued to guide Ketis, he could probably ramp up his income and pay off his karma debt a month earlier and restore his design philosophy to normal!

Whatever the case, this was just the start! If Ves ever took in more students, he could easily earn bucketloads of karma, thereby expanding his allowance of misdeeds!

Of course, that was easier said than done, and he hadn't figured out the mechanics behind this phenomenon yet. He idly called it karma, but it probably behaved in a different manner than money.

For example, he wouldn't be able to borrow karma from others, or invest it in some stocks and profit off his dividends and capital gains.

He doubted that he could lend his karma to others, who subsequently used it to perform more good deeds in their own stead, and thereby pay them back after they have succeeded in their ventures.

His design philosophy was something deeply personal to Ves. It encapsulated his hopes and aspirations as well as his core values related to mech design. He formulated his design philosophy long before he joined the Vandals and adopted some of the crooked ways he learned from the pirates and them. In that aspect, his design philosophy reflected the product of a pure, naive mech designer who never once stepped foot out of civilized space.

It was uncomfortably bright and innocent to someone as jaded as Ves, yet he couldn't help but cling to it regardless.

"My design philosophy is my salvation."

All of this bore further investigation, but first the Flagrant Swordmaidens needed to get the hell out of this star system!

When Ves called up a status update on the condition of the fleet, he found out that the engineers aboard the Finmoth Regal finished restoring her FTL drive. Her sublight propulsion took more time to repair, but they could easily perform that work after they transitioned into FTL.

Right now, the chief engineers that had been freed up after finishing their job transferred over to the Linever Swan and accelerated the installation of her own FTL drive. As a large logistics ship, her FTL drive was significantly larger and more complex, and thus took more time to install.

"Just two more hours until we jump."

It actually took a bit longer than that. The two hours the chief engineers provided had just been an estimate, and several snags during the repairs delayed the installation of the new FTL drive long enough to surpass their initial estimates by an hour.

Still, at least they managed to finish their work. After performing a range of brief tests, the chief engineers tentatively declared the Finmoth Regal and the Linever Swan to be shipworthy enough to engage their FTL drives!

With the help of the mysterious key in the possession of the Flagrant Swordmaidens, the engineers programmed both drives with the exact settings that would theoretically allow them to circumvent the raging spacetime storms surrounding the Aeon Corona System.

With not a single mech or spaceship belonging to another force in the vicinity of the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet, they were all prepared to jump into the unknown. Patrol mechs already started following their recall orders and slowly tightened their guard perimeter as they returned to their carriers.

Just before the fleet made the fateful transition, Major Verle solemnly stood from his chair and issued the order they had all been waiting for. Months of bleeding through Vesian space and even more months of traversing the frontier finally culminated in this moment where they needed to take only a single step to reach their destination.

"It's been hard on you all." He spoke as he held a small speech. "We have fought many battles, several of them against the best the Vesian Mech Legion has to offer, and we survived. We have traversed more light-years this past half-year than any mech regiment traverses in a decade! We have despoiled a Vesian star system, humiliated an entire duchy by kidnapping one of their hopes, kicked a lot of pirate butts along the way and impressed the ladies over at the Swordmaidens of our battle prowess! Do you feel proud!?"

A loose rumble escaped from everyone's throats. In the command center, everyone responded with a yes of some sort. Elsewhere, the Vandals uttered their enthusiastic affirmations to the projection of their commanding officer.

Considering all the battles they went through, not a single Vandal felt unworthy of their name!

"Then what are we afraid of? The Aeon Corona System may be uncharted territory for us, but what does that matter when we have reached far beyond civilized space and penetrated the deep frontier without a single moment of hesitation? What lies before us is not a hazard, but an opportunity. It represents a chance to earn riches, fame and glory! Come now! Accept my hand and let me take you into Valhalla itself! Initiate FTL transition sequence!"

The Shield of Hispania hummed and rumbled as the ethereal FTL drive came to life. The huge, complex ship component responsible for propelling every vessel into a range of alternate dimensions that effectively allowed for travel at superluminal speeds took a few moments to spool up.

It actually took a little longer for the entire fleet to spool up. The replacement FTL drives of the Finmoth Regal and Linever Swan needed some time to get going because the chief engineers wanted to make sure they didn't spin out of control.

Three minutes later, the fleet finally winked out. They successfully transitioned into FTL and were on their way to the Aeon Corona System!

Everyone stood down from yellow alert. Neither the Vesians nor the worshippers of Haatumak could extend their reaches into FTL space.

Nobody moved to shed their hazard suits or suits of combat armor, though. The strangeness of their destination compelled every Vandal aboard the Shield of Hispania to play it safe in case the storm decided to burp or something.

With no other emergency to deal with, Ves relaxed and returned to his office to study his latest bounty.

One of the rewards for incurring negative karma rested right inside the data chip embedded into his secure comm. When Ves activated his secure comm and activated the decryption program that allowed him to access the reading material on FTL drive technology, he smiled.

"These engineering textbooks are the crystallization of the Mech Corps' understanding of FTL drives."

The Mech Corps composed these books to educate thousands of senior engineers and chief engineers. The more people became proficient at servicing and repairing an FTL drive, the more ships they could effectively deploy.

"One of the greatest limiters of any spaceborn force is how many capable engineers they possess."

States that neglected their education sector tended to suffer the most from this crunch. This was why pretty much every state with common sense tried to foster as much people as possible into studying the sciences. They didn't need to raise a lot of top-tier academics who pumped out research papers every week. States merely hoped to foster enough engineers to increase the chances that one of them would be smart enough to understand the basics of the science behind FTL drives.

It was an uphill battle.

The Mech Corps obviously spent a lot of care into editing the textbooks as Ves browsed through the pages of one of the starter books. The language used was exceptionally simple and clear, and illustrated examples accompanied each newly introduced concept.

Ves had no problem understanding the first thirty percent of the book. Then he suddenly crashed against a cliff that represented the remaining seventy percent of FTL theory.

"What the heck?!"

The sciences involved abruptly doubled in complexity, and doubled a few pages later, and doubled again after that!

The abrupt jump in difficulty couldn't be blamed on the authors and editors who composed the textbook. The theory was simply that much ridiculous!

Even with his transhuman level of Intelligence and deep foundation in Physics, Ves in fact missed a lot of the prerequisite knowledge that formed the foundation of how FTL drives worked.

Just the explanation of how FTL drives magically whisked away a starship out of material space and into a band of higher dimensions already surpassed his understanding.

The mathematical concepts behind the phenomena that explained how the FTL drives achieved their effects also put a lot of pressure on his mind! Humans simply didn't thought that way!

"Well, I guess this is a natural consequence of stealing the tech from an alien race. Even after thousands of years, we still haven't gotten rid of the fingerprints of those whales."

Humanity actually encountered several different forms of FTL travel during the Age of Conquest. Each of them took advantage of a loophole in a set of natural laws. However, the most predominant form of FTL today was still the same. It had the advantage of speed and cost efficiency.

Other forms of FTL usually cost at least ten times more in energy, fuel or exotics to engage. While they provided some unique advantages such as being able to travel faster than light within the inner system of a star system, the CFA and MTA had pretty much monopolized those technologies for themselves.

According to rumors, the rest of the galaxy pretty much accepted that, because the math and science behind other forms of FTL was reputedly even more complex to learn!

"If this is what engineers have to cram in order to be qualified to work with FTL drives, then it's no wonder there's so few of them in our fleet!"

His respect for Chief Engineer Avanaeon increased remarkably.

"Hey wait a minute..."

Since Ves was pretty much friends with Chief Avanaeon, maybe he could obtain some guidance from him. Perhaps Ves could even beg the chief engineer to tutor him in full before the decryption of his lesson materials expired.

"I'll be back, Ketis! Just stay here and do your homework!"

"Pff, it's always homework homework homework!" She retorted in a cranky manner. "You're just blowing me off again!"

"I'll promise to spend some time with you, but this is really urgent! Take care and don't wander around!"

Ves hardly put her into his mind as his mind was only filled with the desire for knowledge. He walked across the ship until he reached the hangar bay. Curious engineers and ship ratings stepped aside as Ves hastily crossed the engineering bay to Chief Avanaeon who stood behind a control panel that displayed something about fuel efficiency.

"Chief Avanaeon?"

"Ves? What are you doing here?"

"I'd like to ask you for another favor. Can you bring me somewhere private?"

Avanaeon stepped away from the control panel and guided Ves to one of the offices in the next compartment over. "Speak."

"It's like this. I've recently come into possession of some really good books on FTL drive technology. I want you to tutor me on this subject."

The engineer blinked at Ves. "Are you joking? A mech designer who wants to comprehend the secrets of FTL? Are you crazy?"

Reality had turned upside down if a mech designer thought he could learn the science of FTL technology!

Chapter 762 Mental Library

Chief Avanaeon reacted with disbelief when Ves express interest in picking up the fundamentals in understanding FTL drive technology.

"Let me get this straight. You somehow blackmailed Major Verle for a week's access to engineering textbooks on FTL, and you need my help to make

sense of a field that takes the average engineer fifty years of study and practice to get smart enough to understand the very basics?"

"Well... when you put it that way, it sounds a bit unrealistic. However, I didn't blackmail the big boss. I did him a favor and he allowed me to borrow some books from the local database."

"These aren't your average textbooks." Avanaeon said. "In fact, there's more than just the basics included here. I don't know how you got Major Verle to do it, but he even allowed you access to the next step, which includes basic explanations on all the subcomponents included in most basic models of modern FTL drives."

"And that's valuable because...?" Ves trailed off.

"FTL drives aren't like mechs. Any kid can look at a humanoid mech and see it consists of a torso, a pair of arms, a pair of legs and a head. The smarter kids can even say what's inside the torso like doctors can recall all the organs inside a human body. It's actually not that obvious with FTL drives because it can consist of up to a hundred different core subcomponents, each of which tweak the drive's ultimate performance in many different ways."

"A hundred core subcomponents!"

Even a mech only carried around ten to twenty core subcomponents on average, with advanced mechs featuring more systems than frontline mechs which emphasize economy.

Ves could not imagine how a drive that looked to all appearances like one big block to be so complex from within.

"It's not as bad as it sounds, as the first twenty or so are the most vital ones." The chief engineer continued. "They enable the drive to elevate the ship from the material dimensions to the higher dimensions. The other eighty subcomponents have to do with navigating the gravitic currents and maintain

the ship's course under the various conditions that you can encounter during FTL travel. They are still vital, but an FTL drive won't suddenly fail if one of them is configured incorrectly."

"And I suppose that's not the case for the first twenty."

"Correct. If any of them is even a single percent off, it could mean the difference between transitioning out of FTL to a normal destination like the Bentheim System or launching your ship straight into a black hole. If you think black holes are bad enough in realspace, they're orders of magnitude worse in the higher dimensions!"

In short, Ves needed to gain a decent understanding of the theoretical underpinnings behind the twenty core subcomponents. This gave him the most preliminary level of mastery in FTL drive technology. Although it wouldn't allow him to design and craft an FTL drive from scratch, it at least gave him the most minimum qualifications to repair one if he ever encountered a slightly damaged drive.

"Genius or not, it's impossible for you to understand the basics of all twenty subcomponents within a week!" The chief engineer exclaimed. "It's like studying twenty entirely different fields of science to a fairly deep level, because that's what it comes down to. Those textbooks provided to you by Major Verle are really great, but they are meant to be accessed only when an engineer has completed over a hundred other courses. The contents won't make sense in the same way that a novel won't make sense if you start reading the final pages."

Through his brief tirade, Avanaeon made it more than clear to Ves that he had been a little bit too arrogant for his own good. Ves may have a good depth of knowledge in the fields related to mechs, but he did not even possess the minimum qualifications in astronautics to design and build a basic shuttle on his own.

Ves accepted this argument, because the joint-development of the Six-Sided Dice already showed his complete inability to design a shuttle from the ground up.

"I only have a week to study the contents of my bounty before the encryption scrambles them forever. What do you suggest I do? Go back to the library and borrow some basic engineering textbooks?"

Avanaeon shook his head. "It takes decades for the average engineer to read through all of the prerequisite books. Even a freak like you will take years to go through the materials I bet. With your level of cognitive abilities, there's a better solution available. Just memorize the most essential materials by rote. As long as you are able to store the contents in your mind, you can always get back to them when you are better read. No one can take your memorized data away from you either."

That was an excellent suggestion!

"I think I can do that! It's only that the reading material is too much for me to memorize in its entirety. Can you help me select the parts which I absolutely have to memorize and which ones I can skip?"

"Hmm. I can do that as a favor." The chief acquiesced. "Besides, I'm curious to what these textbooks have to say on some of the issues that I'm puzzled about for a while. These books are completely unredacted! Usually you have to earn a large amount of merit before you can unlock the next parts of the books."

"Knowledge is power. It makes sense for the Mech Corps to ration out its library." Ves nodded. This happened everywhere because it took good experts a lot of their time to compose good textbooks that distilled their knowledge down into a pure and untainted form.

They proceeded to work together to select the best content to memorize. Avanaeon selected a slew of formulas, essential theories, massive tables, informative charts and more, consisting about one-third of the average textbook.

"Why so much?" Ves asked. He expected to make do with only a tenth of the contents of a single book.

"Because you'd be lost if you miss any of it. The complicated math and theories that form the foundation of how FTL work can't be skipped."

Avanaeon browsed through the pages in rapid tempo, selecting each of them by leaving behind a special bookmark in the software. After several hours, he ran through most of the contents, only leaving behind some supplementary materials such as the blueprints.

"These blueprints are extremely valuable. While they're outdated, they outline the design of a fully functional FTL drive that's been in use several thousands of years ago. They are the simplest iteration of an FTL drive that's been stripped with most of the alien idiosyncrasies while not being bogged down with countless minor innovations that make it more complex. They're well worth your time to study and reference as you go through the theory. I suggest you memorize all of them, but if you do, make sure you memorize their exact dimensions and properties."

"I'll do that." Ves nodded. "Thanks for your help!"

"No problem, Ves. Just remember to pay back the favor!"

After saying goodbye to the chief, Ves strode out of the engineering bay and returned to his office. After performing some routine work and checking up with Ketis, Ves began to prepare himself for rote memorization.

Unlike his previous attempts at learning, this time he wouldn't spend any time in trying to decipher anything. Instead, he would attempt to capture and dump all of the selected contents into his brains in a raw and unprocessed format.

It was one of the stupidest ways of learning, but Ves could always go back to it and decipher its contents in his free time.

When Ves began to memorize the selected contents, he expected to only be able to memorize parts of it because of their sheer volume.

The memorization process went a little smoother than he thought. His brains appeared to be wired in a way that easily accepted an influx of raw data. It kind of felt like the time he bought Senior-level Physics from the System!

Back then, an enormous amount of knowledge forcibly bore into his mind!

Compared to that previous painful event, memorizing a few thousands of pages of highly abstruse knowledge felt a little difficult but not as much as he thought.

"It's as if my mind has turned into a mental library. I can store as much content as I want without having to read through them yet!"

This unexpected advantage accelerated his memorization process as Ves experienced no limitations while he crammed pages after pages into his mind!

The more he memorized, the more he became accustomed to the task. He developed various techniques to hasten his memorization, and while they didn't cut down on the time too much, every little bit helped.

By the time a week had gone by and the encryption software finally scrambled the contents of the data chip into pure nonsense, Ves sighed and wearily leaned back against his chair.

He not only managed to memorize all of the contents marked out by Chief Avanaeon, but he also memorized a little bit extra in the form of extra theories

and explanations that would help him understand the basics without having to expend too much time into deducing them himself.

Along with that, he also accessed the local database and downloaded a handful of absolutely essential engineer textbooks that Ves needed to go through first before he could tackle FTL drive theory.

Unlike the restricted textbooks, the simpler knowledge came with fewer restrictions. With his access privileges which was equivalent to a chief engineer's, he did not have to worry about his books expiring on them. Anyone could study something similar from the galactic net, though not as easily.

"Looks like you're finally done." Ketis spoke from the side. "You spazzed out for an entire week. Why are you trying to hard to understand FTL theory?"

"Because I have a small hunch I might need it. Don't you think you want to know how to repair and configure a salvaged FTL drive if you ever became stranded and separated from the fleet?"

"You are way too paranoid, you know. I think if we ever end up in a situation like that, we're screwed anyway."

"We'll see in the future whether my precautions bear fruit." Ves stated carefully. "I've been screwed too many times to count, and many times I ended up in a worse situation than I ought to because of a lack of preparation. This time I've tried hard to make my preparations beforehand. All of my side projects are geared towards expanding my capabilities, and they've already shown their worth several times."

"That's true."

Ketis couldn't argue with that, though she wasn't fully aware of all the times he successfully employed his signal jammer and stealth detector to good effect. She currently held onto the Mark I versions of his gadgets. While they lacked

the raw power of his high-powered devices, they might still be of use to her at some later point.

Ves checked the fleet's progress to the Aeon Corona System. So far, they had already spent a week into FTL, but Chief Engineer Avanaeon as well as a couple of very smart science officers determined that they had only just crested the half-way point of their journey.

The spacetime anomaly surrounding the Aeon Corona System effectively slowed down their advance in the higher dimensions. The best way Avanaeon described it in a report was as if an aircar attempted to fly against hurricane-level winds.

Not only did the aircar face a lot of resistance than normal, it also had to expend more effort into remaining stable and on course.

Replace that aircar with a combat carrier and replace the winds with gravitic spacetime ripples and that described their situation in a nutshell.

With an estimated week to go before the fleet finally arrived at the Aeon Corona System, Ves decided to complete yet another side project in the agenda.

"Hey, Ketis? You know a thing or two about combat armor, right? Would you like to help me design and craft my own suit of combat armor?"

Her eyes instantly shone. "That sounds fun!"

Chapter 763 Customer Service

Ves actually requested two sets of knowledge from the library of the local database. One set consisted of a sampling of textbooks on FTL drive technology.

The other consisted of a set of books on designing and fabrication combat armor.

When Ves initially requested knowledge on this subject, Major Verle actually offered an alternative. "The books we contain on combat armor isn't very elaborate. It's not worth your while to study them. We usually order our suits in large batches from the Mech Corps. According to them, it's more efficient, but I think it's because they don't want us to produce suits of heavy armor or exoskeleton armor in our own production facilities and sell them through the black market."

"Really, sir?" Ves looked puzzled. "They allow mech regiments to fabricate their own mechs, but not their own combat armor?"

"Even the cheapest mechs costs millions of bright credits to produce. They're big and fairly distinctive, so if any mech regiment engages in the practice, they can easily be tracked down. It's different for combat armor because they're far cheaper and humans don't need genetic aptitude to be trained in their use. Producing combat armor is big business, and the best suits are firmly in the hand of the military."

What Major Verle said made sense. They were in such high demand that producing combat armor en masse allowed for real cost savings as economies of scale went into force. A handful of large defense contractors dominated the industry because they produced the most suits of combat armor at much cheaper prices than anyone else in the domestic market.

"I have a suggestion, Mr. Larkinson." The mech officer offered.

"What's that, sir?"

"What you really want is to modify a good suit of light combat armor. Not everything you want has to be done by yourself. We have very good armorers aboard our ship who made it their life's work to understand everything there is to know about the weapons and gear that keep us safe. I can give our chief

armorers an order to help you out as much as possible when you are attempting to build a suit of custom armor."

"Hmm.. I'll take that option, sir."

While Ves would have liked to be able to design his own combat armor, he understood the reality that he couldn't do everything by himself. It wasn't a good idea for him to become like Ketis and become too distracted by side projects. The only reason why he did so against his own advice was because he wanted to gear himself up and couldn't rely on others."

This time was different. Ves planned to pull in both Ketis and the chief armorer in the development of his custom suit of armor. It was high time he did so, as the lacking capabilities of his standard-issue suit of light armor really made him shake his head in disappointment.

Ves pulled Ketis down to the armory compartment, which stored most of the combat carrier's heavy infantry gear and armament. From massive machine guns that required an augmented suit to carry, to expansive arrays of exoskeleton armor in a row, the armory contained enough gear to outfit a full boarding party!

"Chief Mandelsen!"

"Oh, if it isn't the little squirt that's taken care of all of our mechs. So you finally decided to grace the armory again, huh?"

A muscular and fit woman wearing her own custom suit of heavy armor marched over to the younger pair. Chief Kayla Mandelson looked like a veteran soldier in her mid-fifties, which put her roughly in the same generation as the other chiefs.

From what Ves could gather from her brief record, Chief Mandelson used to be a security officer, but eventually discovered a love in tinkering with her own

gear. She cross-trained into her current occupation until she became the head of the armory division aboard the Shield of Hispania.

Much like Ves was nominally in charge of the soundness of all of the mechs in the fleet, Chief Mandelson took charge of all of the weapons and suits in use aboard the ship. Regarding suits, her responsibilities encompassed both all kinds of gear, not just those dedicated to combat such as vacsuits and hazard suits.

"I don't know if Major Verle informed you, but he told me that I could come to you for help in developing a better suit of armor."

"He did." Mandelson said while nodding thoughtfully at Ves. "I can already tell you need it. This suit is way too light on your frame. You lack the training to wear medium combat armor, though."

"I don't need that." Ves responded quickly. "It's rumored that we're heading towards a massive Super Earth where the gravity is five or six times stronger than Old Earth. If I'm assigned to the ground and I end up in an area where there isn't any gravity compensation, I don't want to be crushed and immobilized by my own suit."

"That's a good point." Chief Mandelson nodded sagely. "In fact, that's what I've been working on with at least half of the combat armor in our reserves. While the servos and other motor assistance built into the suits will help their wearers move even if they are exposed to heavy gravity, not all of them are powerful enough to counteract the heavy force. A suit of combat armor optimized for five or six g's is a lot different than combat armor that's optimized for 1 g, which in turn is nothing like a suit meant to be used under zero-g."

Ves understood when he equated the suits to mechs. "I understand. According to the preliminary plans in my hands, there's a high chance I'll be

part of the support staff that will be deployed to the surface. I don't want to be caught naked without protection or burdened with a suit that's too heavy for my own good."

While the pair discussed the particulars of what Ves demanded from his custom armor, Ketis kept measuring staring at Mandelson with an appraising glance. The chief noticed her stare.

"You want to have a tussle with me or something?"

"I don't think I stand a chance." Ketis admitted frankly.

Ves looked at her in surprise. "Aren't you supposed to pretend you do?"

"That's only when we're facing strangers or enemies. There's no shame in recognizing that I can't beat your chief armorer in a fight. If I was as old as her, the story would be different." She stated that last bit confidently, if only to soothe her pride as a Swordmaiden.

"Whatever you say, kid." Chief Mandelson smirked before she turned back to Ves. "As for you, there's no need to design and build a suit from scratch. It takes way too long, requires expertise that none of us have and it's completely unnecessary when we can modify an existing suit."

"We do that all the time back at the Swordmaidens." Ketis added. "Most combat armor we salvage are fitted for men. It's a lot of trouble to convert them into somethign wearable for girls."

With the advice of Chief Mandelson with a little commentary from Ketis, Ves selected a semi-modular suit of light armor from a model line called the C22 Custom.

Chief Mandelson unlocked one of the lockers and showed them a copy. "The C22 Customs don't offer the best protection nor the best servo-assist out of our stock of light armors, but they're adaptable and score high on reliability.

You need that reliability when the suit is constantly subjected to five times normal gravity."

"Is there anything special besides those qualities?"

"Nope. If you want any bells and whistles added to this armor, then we need to add them ourselves. This is a suit designed for support staff deployed in the rear of the field."

"Alright. Let's draft up a modification scheme then. I'm curious to see how much we can improve a standard suit of combat armor."

Quite a lot, it turned out. The chief armorer knew almost every trick in the book, and plenty more that nobody ever wrote down in a book. They took the schematic of the C22 Custom, stripped down every standard part and replaced them with higher quality ones.

Upon Ketis' suggestion, they bulked up the light armor a bit to make room for extra modules. This was so that Ves could store his vulnerable weapons and gadgets underneath the protective shell of his armor instead of exposing them to all sorts of environmental dangers.

"You'll have to say goodbye to your toolbelt, Ves." Ketis cheekily teased.

Ves laughed at that. "The toolbelt does give me the impression of competence."

Some mech technicians didn't know who he was or why a young man like him got to be in charge. Wearing a toolbelt helped reinforce the impression that he knew what he was talking about.

Still, wearing a toolbelt on a Super Earth risked crushing some of his tools if he ever fell down for some reason. Ves did not want to know the outcome if he inadvertently squashed one of his ultracompact batteries. Even though he

reinforced their casing to withstand a considerable amount of abuse, he did not wish to tempt fate.

Since they added a bit of extra room, they even decided to add in integrated armament such as hidden knife holsters along the torso, arm, leg and boot sections. That made for ten small backup knives in total, each of which incorporated enough exotics to cut through steel like butter!

The best part was that they were so hidden that cheap weapon detectors wouldn't be able to distinguish them in a normal sweep. Ves incorporated some of his insights into stealth tech and stealth detector tech into their implementation.

"Damn, this is a really great way to hide those backup knives." Mandelson commented in awe. "I'm glad we cooperated on this. Do you mind if I copy your tricks?"

"Feel free to do so."

Ves did not mind sharing these tricks because they didn't involve the core insights into stealth tech, which he couldn't disseminate without suffering repercussions.

One of the other areas they looked at was the armor plating. Ves knew a thing or two about armor, but only the ones scaled up for mechs. Infantry-sized armor plating utilized different paradigms and different armor system formulas in order to make the most out of their limited mass and volume allowances.

"One of our biggest concerns is balance. It's already important in normal gravity conditions, but it's ten times more important under heavy gravity conditions." The chief explained. "Keeping the center of mass firmly in the middle is essential. This is why the bulk of the armor is around the torso while the arms and legs are comparatively lighter. We also have to take into

account that the leg armor should be strong enough to support all the other weight when put into a locked position."

Mandelson selected two different armor system formulas. A heavier and sturdier set of plating for the torso and a small part of the legs formed the base. At the projected thickness, it possessed enough defense to withstand a few rifle rounds, which was more than Ves could say about his current armor. A lighter set of plates encompassed the arms and the remainder of the legs to allow him to move his limbs even if the servo-assist failed to work.

The reliability of the servos and the lack thereof became one of their major concerns.

"Are you really concerned about them?"

The chief laughed. "Not everyone is like you. Major Verle granted you the full treatment we reserve to senior officers. The servos and motors built into your suits are a lot more expensive than almost any other suit that passed my hands. I've adjusted all of the servos in the armor reserved for our personnel in the ground, but even then they are several times more fragile than yours."

At least Ves got his money's worth with regards of this concession. The chief armorer accommodated his every wish as best she could. Ves felt as if he got the same treatment as a VIP shopping for a custom mech.

He spent so much time as a provider of services and producer of goods that it was nice to experience the other side of the equation. He had lost touch with what it was like to be a customer for a change.

Chapter 764 C22 Custom

After a bit of tinkering, they completed the modifications done to the basic frame of the C22 Custom reserved for Ves.

It looked nothing like the base model of the C22. Significantly bulkier than a standard suit of light armor and several times as resilient, the customized

version nonetheless weighed only a little more due to the extensive use of high-quality lightweight armor plating.

The contours of the armor had been rounded out as much as possible, changing its profile into a shape that allowed Ves to roll or bend his body a little easier should he ever fall under heavy gravity conditions.

"Sharp edges and completely flat surfaces are bad ideas in 5 g or more." Chief Mandelson explained. "If you happen to fall flat on the ground for some reason, you're going to have to exert several times more force if you want to roll to the side. That can be the difference between life and death if there's a battle going on and cover is only a few steps away."

She even strengthened some of the servos assisting his arms and legs to facilitate this kind of movement.

Besides that, she also added a couple of weak but robust internal antigrav modules that lightened the effect of gravity on his head and his upper body by a few g's.

"One of the biggest dangers you'll face when you are on a heavy gravity planet is that when you are standing or sitting upright, your blood gets pulled down to your legs. That won't do your brains any favors. One of the biggest causes of death to people exposed to heavy gravity doesn't come from breaking their bones and thereby losing their mobility. It's because so little blood circulated through their brains that they quickly black out."

"I've read that in one of the safety instructions Major Verle sent out to the entire crew." Ves nodded. "The manual also states that it helps if you lie down flat against the ground for a time to let your blood access your head without fighting an uphill battle against several g's of crushing gravity."

"That can actually work, and it can save your life if you're stranded outside a protected zone, but it's only a stopgap method at best. Humans don't belong

on heavy gravity planets." She warned. "Just think about it. Someone like me will effectively weigh almost half a ton when I'm on a Super Earth, and that's without taking my armor into account. While the weight is well-distributed, it's still a feat of superhuman effort to walk like a normal person."

"I didn't think it would be that bad." Ketis suddenly frowned and thumped the surface of her own combat armor. "I don't think my heavy armor is quite up to the task. Can you help upgrade my suit as well? I'm not sure if my own servos can handle the load."

Ves waved his hand. "Just put the account out of my allowance. Major Verle has already given me free reign of the inventory, so I doubt he'll mind if we take out something extra."

The chief armor shrugged. "If the bean counters complain, I'm sending them to you."

They worked on two modifying two more components before they finished with the plan. First, the chief strengthened the rear mount for the combat armor's Modular Fitting Standard.

Just as with mechs, combat armor also featured a slot in the rear that could mount standardized backpack modules. While the Vandals adopted the Vesian standard when it came to mechs, they defaulted to the Bright Republic's standard when it came to infantry-sized suits.

In most exoplanet deployments, specialized oxygen tanks occupied the rear slot. Though the suit stored a small amount of emergency oxygen compounds, they only lasted him an hour at most, and that was if he didn't exert himself.

What he really wanted was an air cyclor module that could recycle the spent air in his suit into something breathable again, but that took way too much space at their current level of technology.

"I hear it's possible in the second-rate states, but for us even the smallest air cycler weighs far too much to be realistically be mounted onto your back." Mandelson remarked.

Once they went over the MFS, they finally turned their attention to the foldable helmet.

"One of my biggest problems is that my marksmanship is too rudimentary." Ves said. "I'd like to add an integrated targeting and aim assist system into my suit."

"Just like what my armor offers." Ketis piped up.

"Are you sure, kid? If anyone hacks your C22 Custom, you're liable to shoot your own allies."

"We can just upgrade the security suite of the C22 while we're at it. If there's any room left, I'd also like to upgrade the visor with an integrated scanner system. I'm using a regular handheld scanner right now but it's not powerful enough for my needs. I'd like to add a strengthened transceiver as well to facilitate communications."

"You can't just keep piling extra features onto your armor. All of that takes up valuable space, not to mention drain your suit's batteries even faster."

"Don't worry about the power draw. I already have a solution in store for that." Ves grinned.

They proceeded to incorporate all of the changes Ves requested. They needed to shift a lot of components around in order to make enough space and harden them enough to withstand a high amount of gravity. In the end, they managed to complete a new variant of the C22 Custom that performed almost nowhere near the base model.

Chief Mandelson whistled in appreciation of the design. "It's more bloated than I like, but it's practically the best we can cobble together on short notice. It's a shame you aren't trained for medium combat armor though, we could have added a lot more goodies in that case."

"We can send some of those goodies to Ketis instead." Ves smiled. "In any case, I'll go down to the workshops and fabricate these parts. They don't seem more complex than what I've already fabricated before so I can handle them on my own."

"If you say so, kid. You're going to need my help when you assemble your new C22 Custom though, or you're bound to miss something important. By the way, this suit is so different from a regular C22 Custom that it deserves its own name. What do you want to call your new suit?"

"Hmm. It doesn't have to be any fancy." Ves quickly came up with a few options before he settled on one in particular. "Let's call it the C22 Earth Ant."

The suit had taken on a slightly bulbous appearance that resembled the exoskeleton of ants.

"Not the most flattering name, but it's your suit."

"It's my turn now!" The woman in question bubbled.

As Ketis and Mandelson huddled together to discuss the modifications of her own suit of heavy combat armor, Ves took the details of the plan and brought them down to the workshop where he began to fabricate all of the new parts.

This was familiar to him, and despite the differences, his adeptness and experience in handling the 3D printer enabled him to churn out parts without any apparent flaws.

He encountered the most difficulty when he fabricated the compressed armor plating. While Ves wasn't unfamiliar with the extra treatment they required, he had never produced plates so small and thin.

While he knew how to handle such delicate work in theory, he failed several times before he tentatively got the hang of it at the cost of wasting fifty percent more materials than he thought.

The good news was that he wouldn't be facing so many stumbles next time he fabricated infantry-sized armor plating.

He also put his concentration to use in attempting to imbue his parts with an X-Factor, but despite his considerable Spirituality, he sensed he hadn't managed to affect the parts very much. It was pretty much the same story for when he fabricated his other gear as well.

Evidently, Ves did not grasp the essence of crafting other objects besides mechs.

"Well, it's not as if I need anything more than a faint boost. It's way too soon for me to experiment on this aspect."

Fabricating all of the parts took almost a full day, which was considerable considering how little he produced compared to fabricating the components of a mechs.

Fumbling around with the compressed armor plating ate up far too much time, but he also wanted to take it slow in order to insure every part was as mechanically perfect as possible. Ves would be relying on the C22 Earth Ant to safeguard his life while deployed to the rumored Super Earth where the Starlight Megalodon could be found, and from his previous experiences he always needed to be ready for battle when stepping foot on exoplanets.

"It would be great if nothing serious happens, but with all the pirates and the Vesians converging on the Starlight Megalodon, avoiding conflict is probably a pipedream."

He didn't even want to be deployed to the surface of a Super Earth in the first place, but the planning of the missions called for the best mech designer to be on hand in case their landbound mech force required acute adjustments.

Nobody knew what kind of strange conditions they might encounter on a Super Earth in a star system surrounded by a strange and incomprehensible spacetime storm.

That alone caused many Vandals to shudder in fear. Spacetime storms were no joke, and they had often been responsible for insane feats such as launching a meandering starship in FTL halfway across the galaxy or even several decades in the future!

Of course, the most likely outcome to ships being flung off-course by these storms during FTL travel was to crash into a random stellar object in the vicinity. Black holes often had a tendency to slurp ships thrown off-course.

As Ves returned to the armory with a floater platform of parts trailing behind, he waited for the chief armorer to finish her modification plan for the suit of armor worn by Ketis.

The plan was a lot less extravagant than his own, but then again her heavy combat armor already protected the Swordmaiden well enough. She just wanted some strengthening so her suit could continue to operate under heavy gravity.

"Ves?"

"Yes, Ketis?"

"Can you help me fabricate these parts?" She swung a data pad containing her modification plan to him. "I don't feel confident enough to do it myself like you just did."

"I guess I can show you the ropes." He sighed. He turned to Mandelson. "Chief, here's the parts. I'd love to help with assembling the C22 Earth Ant, but I have to help our guest designer here."

"Go ahead." She waved her hand dismissively. "Your help won't be needed anyway."

Unlike Ves, Ketis lacked the skills to fabricate the complicated parts that she planned to introduce in her own armor. Once they returned to the workshop, he carefully demonstrated how to work the 3D printer.

She oohed and awed whenever a new part came into being. Ves put her in charge of scanning and inspecting the products for any deviations and faults. So far, she found nothing to complain about.

"How come you're so good at fabricating this stuff? This nonexistent failure rate of yours is inhuman!"

"I studied a lot." He fibbed, avoiding any mention of the System. "I also care a lot about craftsmanship. Now that you've found your design philosophy and gained a direction, there will come a time where you are tempted to keep designing new mechs without end. That's not a good approach because you risk distancing yourself too much from the nitty gritty of mechs."

"That's something you care a lot as well. Not even Mayra pays that much attention to this kind of manual labor. She always leaves the production to others."

"Mayra is at a stage where she doesn't need to touch a copy of her own design to be able to judge how good it is. Still, even if I become a

Journeyman, I won't ever give up on crafting my own mechs. Sometimes, you need to remind yourself of why you entered the profession in the first place."

Chapter 765 Overprepared

The completion of the C22 Earth Ant along with the upgrades to the armor worn by Ketis marked the end of his preparations.

After thanking Chief Mandelson for her generous assistance, Ves left the armory wearing his new and lightweight Earth Ant along with a replacement for his standard-issue comm.

Major Verle promised him a better comm, so Ves drew out an officer-grade comm that integrated neatly in the systems of his C22 Earth Ant. While it came with some extra features, Ves chose to go for a high-quality comm model with the most extensive security suite and remote signal hardening.

Having been burned by an unsecure comm before, Ves wanted to make sure he didn't repeat his mistakes.

The officer-grade comm he received complimented his secure comm pretty well.

The officer-grade comm became his primary comm which he could use to connect to other Vandals remotely at a very long range.

Ves repurposed his secure comm as his 'offline' backup device which he could use to access the contents of encrypted data chips which he couldn't afford to leak. It had the ability to operate under intense jamming and other forms of electromagnetic interference, though its lack of remote connectivity wouldn't allow him to call for help.

Not that the jamming and interference would let him in the first place.

In any case, Ves tentatively judged that he made adequate preparations to survive whatever hell the Aeon Corona System threw at him. He mentally listed out his full complement of gear.

The C22 Earth Ant needed no introduction, as his new suit of light armor surpassed any suit he had ever worn before. The greatly strengthened armor plating, the added integrated modules and the many dedicated storage slots for his weapons and his gadgets turned it into a veritable

For his weapons, he could rely on his Amastendira as his trump card and a backup laser pistol as his official weapon. While he was at the armory, he exchanged his barely-used ballistic pistol for a handy laser pistol compatible with his Earth Ant's new targeting and aim assist modules.

"On a planet where everything weighs at least five times heavier, ballistic weapons are going to have a hard time."

Compared to a ballistic round that quickly sunk into the ground due to gravity, a laser beam would still travel straight ahead at shorter distances.

All of his remaining gadgets and equipment completed his loadout.

His signal jammer granted him some moments of privacy from the ubiquitous monitoring system.

His stealth detector enabled him to expose invisible bastards hiding under electronic stealth systems.

His military-issue multiscanner allowed him to scan all kinds of unknown objects and substances.

And finally, he possessed a spare ultracompact battery. He wanted to reserve its use for a third gadget, but Ves figured he wouldn't have the time to design and fabricate an entirely new device.

"Oh well, I can use it to supplement the power supply of my Earth Ant."

One of the features he included in the design of the Earth Ant was a robust slot that could handle the power output of an ultracompact battery. Ves did not intend to direct an excess amount of power to any of the integrated systems in

his suit. Instead, he reserved the battery as an emergency long-term source of energy if he ever got stranded and cut off from the Vandals.

Together with the completion of the Six-Sided Dice, Ves hoped that his preparations left him with enough tools to secure his life in the coming storm.

"You're so obsessed with gearing yourself up." Ketis remarked as she witnessed Ves treating his gadgets and his new armor like precious treasures. "It's like you're one-hundred percent certain that we'll lose all our ships and that we're going to be stranded by ourselves with no mechs or allies to protect us from whatever you expect to find in the Aeon Corona System."

Ves pressed his lips. "If you've lived through all the battles the Flagrant Vandals have gone through ever since we entered Vesian space, you'll grow as insecure as I. The fact of the matter is that the Flagrant Vandals is set up like a raiding regiment, and not a particularly good one either. They lack funding, skilled personnel, a good cadre of capable leaders, a martial tradition that has been tested over centuries and ample preparation. It's that last one that's really the cause of all of my brushes with death."

"Preparation?"

"Yes, preparation." Ves reiterated. "All of those earlier faults can be compensated to some level if the Flagrant Vandals had months or years to prepare for this mission. It's obvious though that some higher-ups dropped this mission on their lap without giving them the time to prepare. Just look at the Vesian fleet. Even if we could only peek at them through long-ranged sensors, what we've already seen is that they're superior in all the fronts I've mentioned even after the Church of Haatumak stabbed them in the back."

"Yet the spooky Vesians got stabbed in the back and not us. We took care of our ambush early." She pointed out. "Unlike those Vesians you Vandals are all so scared of, you've got us Swordmaidens to cover your back!"

He chuckled a bit. They hadn't been very useful up to now. Their real strength lay in their landbound mechs and this advantage hadn't come into play yet.

"However much you believe in our combined strength, it is not comprehensive enough to protect us individually against every threat. The Vandals don't care about me in particular. They care about themselves and their mission. I don't blame them for their priorities, but this does leave me at an awkward position. The only person who cares about my life is myself."

"That's not true. I care about you, Ves." She said.

"Ah, thank you for correcting me. I care about you too, perhaps more than any other Vandal that's supposed to be on my own side." Ves smiled sardonically.

"I guess I don't quite fit in with the Vandals in the first place."

In his perspective, the Vandals exhibited a certain amount of cockiness to keep up morale. From what he could guess, Major Verle decided to maintain everyone's level of morale in order to prevent them from questioning the purpose of their mission or start to realize how deep in alien space they had ventured.

Such a policy paid dividends. The levels of anxiety among the crew hadn't boiled over yet, at least aboard the Shield of Hispania. This was despite the occasional turbulence that wracked the ship as she attempted to bore straight through a narrow channel of relative calm in the middle of a horrible spacetime storm.

The shaking and creaking of the combat carrier along with general wave of nausea and unpleasantness that did their best to unsettle the crew. If not for all the constant drilling and the frequent pep talk sessions, who knew if someone snapped.

Ves did not have much work in store. With the Shield of Hispania isolated in FTL, he couldn't issue orders nor keep tabs on the mechs aboard the other Vandal ships.

He felt a burning curiosity how his modifications affected Venerable Xie. The foreign expert pilot often practiced with the virtual version of the Parallax Star in order to grasp some of its nuances.

If the changes Ves had made to his simulator pod came through, then the expert pilot should slowly become more loyal to the Flagrant Vandals.

Other changes should also bring out more of his strength in the coming months at the cost of burning out. Ves felt the most guilty about this particular change because it condemned the expert pilot to a slow and irreversible death.

At least humanity developed means to remedy or reverse the effects of brainwashing.

Though Ves attended daily briefings, Ves felt as if the planners spun off increasingly more unlikely contingency plans. Every major detail had already been discussed to death, so they started running on fantasies to foster discussion and make sure that everyone knew what to do in the event of an unlikely occurrence.

A couple of days quietly passed until their emergency out of FTL came abruptly at an unexpected time.

Ves slept quietly in his bunk when the ship suddenly jerked out of FTL. He almost fell out of his bunk, his sheets tangling his legs, as the red alert immediately flashed.

"UNEXPECTED FTL EMERGENCE! RED ALERT! ALL HANDS TO ACTION STATIONS!"

"What the hell is going?!" He slapped himself awake. "I thought we are two days away from reaching the Aeon Corona System?"

Had the Shield of Hispania encountered an interdiction? Did the spacetime storm throw them off course? All kinds of awful disasters sprung into his mind. The only good thing was that the Vandals developed contingency plans in these kinds of cases, so Ves and the rest knew what to do.

In any case, the first step they needed to do was to hop inside their suits and get to their stations!

Ves kept his C22 Earth Ant on a rack mounted against the bulkhead of his cabin. He shed his pajama's and wore a thin underlayer skintight vacsuit before inserting his body into the open armor. The C22 Earth Ant had been constructed in such a way that it could fold itself open like a beetle spreading its wings.

Once he positioning himself in place, the armor plating folded around his body, enclosing him in a tight fit that felt a little bit too snug. He experimentally moved his limbs around, first with servo-assist and then without mechanical assistance, and nodded in satisfaction.

As a newly modified suit of armor, Ves frequently encountered minor issues in the first couple of days. Every day, he returned to the armory so that Chief Mandelson could perform minute adjustments.

"Well, let's head to the command center now."

He marched into the corridors and followed the route to the center of the combat carrier.

Groups of Vandals in hazard suits and various forms of armor briskly walked towards their stations. Each of them exhibited panic in their expression, but none of them broke out into a run.

Running while potentially wearing suits of various sizes and mass could be a real hazard if they crashed against someone. No matter what kind of emergency the Shield of Hispania had landed themselves into, it did not absolve them from the safety rules!

As Ves went through a fast but thorough security check, he passed through the hatch and jumped into his observer's seat.

A minute later, Ketis arrived decked out in her heavier suit of armor. Among the officers and operators manning their stations in the command center, she looked larger and more menacing than most.

Naturally, she couldn't beat the exoskeleton-suited security officers standing guard inside and outside the compartment.

"What's all the fuss about? Why did we get thrown off FTL?" She asked in a sleepy and befuddled manner. Being forcibly awoken from her beauty sleep had made her crankier than usual.

"From what I can gather, we've arrived in the Aeon Corona System ahead of schedule, but we don't know why! Also, we can't get in touch with the other ships of our combined fleet! There's some sort of interference that's hampering our communication and sensor arrays."

They had entered the Aeon Corona System blind, deaf and mute and that frightened the Vandals most of all!

When they switched their view to a normal optical camera, they began to see a warped storm of yellow and orange particles flowing through space. These particles didn't appear to be solid or dangerous, but they effectively blocked all of their sensors starting from a range of just a hundred kilometers away!

In stellar navigation terms, this was practically point-blank range!

Throughout the haze of yellow-orange streams that played havoc with optical and gravitic sensors, somehow the planets and the trinary stars shone like beacons in the light.

The Aeon Corona System turned out to be a massive star system! With over nineteen planets and hundreds of moons of varying shapes and sizes, this star system contained enough real estate to make it an ideal capital system for a second-rate state!

Even deep within the frontier, a rich star system like this shouldn't have been hidden away from everyone!

"Sir! We've detected an incoming patrol of mechs. They're from the Swordmaidens! They report that their ship is just out of our sensor range!"

Everyone sighed in relief. The presence of the Swordmaiden patrol indicated that while the fleet might have been scrambled a bit when they transitioned out of FTL, they should at least be able to gather back together.

"Deploy our full complement of spaceborn mechs. Spread out in a spherical search pattern and track down the rest of our fleet!"

Chapter 766 Out of Phase

Nobody knew where the shimmering yellow-orange particles came from and how they managed to scramble their communications and sensors. Some of the geeky science officers posited that the particles consisted of a form of higher-dimensional energy that somehow spilled over into realspace.

While the particles blocked their sight and interrupted their transmissions, they didn't do any further damage. They actually looped around solid objects as if they followed some kind of astral wind.

One good consequence of holding all of those meetings to discuss all kinds of contingency plans was that they already formed a plan for this sort of eventuality.

Each Vandal ship should be deploying all of their spaceborn mechs. They kept their heavier mechs on perimeter guard should any threats emergence from the astral winds. More importantly, they should be deploying their lighter mechs into expanding circles and spheres in order to reconnect with the rest of the fleet, should they be near.

Half an hour went by as the expanding chain of light mechs encountered their counterparts from a random selection of Vandal and Swordmaiden combat carriers and supply ships. It quickly became evident that the Flagrant Swordmaidens emerged out of FTL in a muddled soup that bore no resemblance to their previous formation.

What they feared the most right now was missing out on a couple of ships because they fell just outside the detection envelope of their search parties.

Right now, the Vandals prioritized the search for the Gorgon's Gaze, the Beggar's Bounty and the Linnever Swan.

It would hurt if they lost their other ships, but they couldn't lose their expert pilot and their logistics ships!

Fortunately, it didn't appear they landed in the vicinity of an enemy force that had arrived beforehand. The engineers and science officers slowly figured out what happened as the Flagrant Swordmaidens slowly converged together after coming across a friendly patrol.

"As best as we can tell, sir, is that we should have arrived in the Aeon Corona System sooner, but due to entering a field of distorted gravity, time and space appeared to have stretched out for a few days. This caused us to experience more time inside the region of affected than outside, essentially speeding up our perspective. This stretch in spacetime suddenly sprang back to normal, causing us to be gently thrown forward and into the Aeon Corona System ahead of schedule."

"What are the consequences?"

"Our transition coordinates may deviate depending on the strength of the push. Heavier ships are less affected than lighter vessels, so our lighter transports should be the farthest flung away while the heaviest logistics ships shouldn't be too far away from our original formation. Once we find the logistics ships, we should be able to figure out the center of our spread-out emergency pattern, sir."

Major Verle furrowed his brows. He understood the implications. Find the logistics ships and they had the potential to gather everyone back together again. The problem was that half an hour had gone by and they still hadn't found the big and lumbering vessels. It meant that their spread was wide enough that they stood a real chance of getting cut off from the rest.

"What can you tell about our emergence zone."

The science officer consulted a data pad. "According to Chief Avanaeon, we have emerged at a different angle than anticipated. The spacetime storm has flung us minutely off-course, but not to the extent of missing the Aeon Corona System entirely. He did state that any other fleet who jumped to the Aeon Corona System from the same dwarf system we departed earlier will likely be flung in an entirely different angle relative to the trinary stars. Chances are low that we will encounter ships that have jumped to the same System due to the constantly changing ripple effects of the spacetime storm."

"So in short, our own fleet may be scrambled across tens of thousands of kilometers while enemy fleets may have been flung several light-hours away, is that right?"

"Correct, but there's more, sir. We have modeled the streams of particles and have discovered that they are being funneled into space from a central

location in the star system. The source is situated at a large terrestrial planet that we have tentatively identified as Aeon Corona VII."

Aeon Corona VII! The source of all of these astral winds came from a single planet instead of one of the stars! What's more, the science officer mentioned that the seventh planet from the trinary stars consisted of a terrestrial, rock-like planet!

"Does Aeon Corona VII match our expected parameters?"

"We are still unsure, sir. Several terrestrial planets that are distinguishable on our gravitic sensors may also be the Super Earth we are looking for. Due to the pervasive astral winds, every observation we make is distorted."

Their priorities were clear. Before they moved to investigate Aeon Corona VII, they first needed to gather their forces and regroup into a cohesive force.

"Please send a coded message the Jaded Sword via our quantum entanglement node. Tell them we have reached the system and seek to rendez-vous."

"Uhm, sir, that won't be possible." The communications officer replied.

"Explain."

"Our quantum entanglement node is permanently rendered inoperative. The entangled particles have lost their entanglement! All of them are decoupled!"

"Are you joking?!"

Upon further questioning, the communications officer and the specialists in charge of the quantum entanglement node concluded that the spacetime storm essentially isolated them from the rest of the galaxy at some fundamental level.

After a brief consultation with the science officer, they developed a theory. The head geek explained the situation to Major Verle in simple terms.

"Sir, imagine that before we jumped into the Aeon Corona System, our ships were located anchored in space and time. When we transitioned into FTL, our ships were lifted up in the higher dimensions where the laws of nature operate among slightly different principles. When we emerged into this star system, we haven't actually returned to the familiar confines of realspace. Instead, this entire star system is enveloped in a bubble of spacetime that is neither realspace or higher dimensional space."

Major Verle's expression grew difficult. As a mech officer who rose up from the ranks through excelling in combat, administration and command, his literacy in the sciences fell far behind. "How does that impact our quantum entanglement node."

"Well, it shouldn't, really." The science officer expressed his doubts. "The particles at the heart of our nodes should have remained entangled with their counterparts at the Comm Consortium. However, we hypothesize the Aeon Corona System is situated in an anomalous phase of existence that is anchored at the edge of realspace and some of the higher dimensional spaces. You can consider it to be in an alternate phase of existence where distances and the passage of time may be warped. This distortion is strong enough that the entanglement of our particles can't endure the deviances. Simply put, they got angry and quit their jobs."

The lengthy explanation implied more than just a snapped communication line with the outside galaxy. It implied that the star system and everyone inside of it may be experiencing vastly accelerated or decelerated time! Perhaps a single day inside the Aeon Corona System corresponded to ten days outside! Nobody knew, because they were all trapped in the bubble. Trying to observe the condition of the rest of the galaxy was impossible because of all the astral winds blocking their long-ranged sensors.

Right now, the complicated explanation hammered home the fact that they couldn't come crying for mommy in this screwed up star system. Not that anyone would send help anyway, but it was the thought that counted.

In the end, they needed to wait. A tense couple of hours went by as the newly formed fleet centered around the Shield of Hispania gathered an increasing amount of stray vessels.

Four hours after entering the Aeon Corona System, they finally met up with their missing logistics ships. The Jaded Sword found them first and took charge of their own growing fleet.

Once the two collections of ships found each other, they immediately converged and merged into a single whole.

After twelve hours since their unexpected emergence, almost every vessel had been accounted for. They even tracked down the Gorgon's Gaze after homing in on the faint resonance emissions transmitted by the Parallax Star.

The return of their expert pilot led to a small celebration among the Vandals and even the Swordmaidens. Venerable Xie's prestige had only grown in his brief absence as the Vandals and Swordmaidens lacked an anchor that could put them at ease.

Just as they accounted for every ship, including the smallest and most far-flung transports, they failed to discover the whereabouts of two different vessels.

"Where is the Finmoth Regal?" Major Verle asked with an increasingly dour face.

After twenty hours of reconstituting their combined fleet, both the Vandals and the Swordmaidens still missed one ship each. The Vandals sent out mechs on increasingly wider spiral orbits in an attempt to track down their errant combat

carrier, while the Swordmaidens did the same for the Goombal Chelsea, one of their recently-captured light carriers!

Both ships carried a considerable amount of mechs, and losing them at this juncture weakened their forces considerably!

As best their engineers and science officers could tell, the spacetime undulations that threw them into the Aeon Corona System ahead of schedule affected the missing ships a little more differently!

"They can be anywhere, sir." The science officer explained after an exhausting period of performing calculations and making educated guesses. "There is a small probability that the Finmoth Regal and the Goombal Chelsea have missed the Aeon Corona System entirely. A more likely possibility is that they are flung to a different emergence zone that is up to several light-hours away from our position."

At some point, their chances of finding their missing ships became increasingly less likely. Their light mechs ranged so far ahead of the reorganized fleet that they risked straying off course.

Apparently, space didn't exactly remain stable.

The ripples in the astral winds induced a small but fairly noticeable amount of distortion that made it far too risky to split up. A mech that flew straight ahead for a while and then turned a hundred-and-eighty degrees and went back might miss the fleet by several hundred kilometers!

These oddities forced Major Verle to implement a policy stating that mechs on patrols should never stray fifty kilometers away from each other. This severely shrank their scouting and patrol range. If they bumped into something dangerous, they only had a brief period of time to come up with a response!

"It's been thirty hours. Stop the search and set course to Aeon Corona VII." Major Verle finally ordered after consultation with Commander Lydia. Neither

of them could afford to be delayed while other pirates might have already reached the seventh planet and perhaps the source of the spacetime anomaly.

The fleet moved in unison, falling into an altered formation that left them closer and tighter than they were comfortable with. Their condensed formation flew against the currents of the astral winds blasting the entire star system.

The bright and blinding particles that changed from yellow to orange in a random pattern parted neatly in front of their ships and mechs, only to converge again after their passing.

Besides their visibility, the Flagrant Swordmaidens failed to figure out the nature of the moving particles. The most predominant theory they came up with was that it consisted of matter or energy native to the higher dimensions.

Such particles had been observed before, but most of the research had been conducted in the galactic heartland and the galactic center. A backwater state like the Bright Republic shouldn't even be messing with these kind of exotic particles in the first place. Therefore, every science-minded Vandal in the fleet were basically starting from scratch.

One thing was for sure, though. Something extremely drastic must have happened on Aeon Corona VII to flood the surrounding space with so much astral wind!

The only way the Flagrant Swordmaidens could obtain answers was to travel to the eye of the storm.

Hopefully, they might meet the missing Finmoth Regal and the Goombal Chelsea along the way. In the event a ship became isolated from the fleet, they received orders to converge at the mission site.

Chapter 767 Squeezed Dimensions

As the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet made their way to Aeon Corona VII, it became clear that they were moving far slower than they ought to. After continuous calculations and estimations, they figured out that it might take thirty percent longer to reach orbit.

Worse, the time and space distortion only grew stronger the more they approached the deviant planet!

According to some calculations, time in the vicinity of the Super Earth-like planet may run several times slower than normal, perhaps by as much as ten times on the very surface of the planet.

Despite the alarming phenomena surrounding Aeon Corona VII, neither Major Verle nor Commander Lydia showed any hesitation. They expected the Flagrant Swordmaidens to charge straight ahead regardless of what the abnormal planet threw at them. They were finally about to commence their mission!

Due to the extra time needed to reach the Super Earth, Ves figured Ketis and him wouldn't be needed at the command center. The Vandals maintained a yellow alert condition, but other than that they didn't expect to bump into anyone. The odds of meeting a rival force during transit under these blinding conditions was almost nil.

The astral winds both hindered them as well as shielded them from encountering other forces.

Ves tallied their current conditions from the records he had access to and made a log. "Fuel supply has been dipping, but we have a healthy reserve remaining. We have enough supplies to sustain a months-long campaign on the ground, though if our conditions are difficult we'll need to supplement them with supplies produced on site."

The Vandals prepared plenty of production equipment that enabled them to produce ammunition and recharge energy cells from locally-sourced resources.

"Crew morale is somewhat shaken due to the strange phenomena caused by the spacetime anomaly originating from Aeon Corona VII. However, now that we are finally nearing our mission site, all of the Vandals are fired up and ready to fight. So long as the Vandals are focused on what is straight ahead of them, they won't think too hard on the myriad of dangers involved with approaching such a dangerous planet."

The science officers issued various reports that indicated that the strange astral winds and all of the spacetime distortions wouldn't have any effect on their health other than to accelerate their aging relative the rest of the galaxy. Nonetheless, not everyone trusted their judgement.

It was hard to trust anyone when it came to this strange and mystical planet. What few details they gathered of the seventh planet already drove the exogeology specialists nuts.

"Some of our starships are still recovering from the sabotage attempts by the cultists, and the absence of the Finmoth Regal and the Goombal Chelsea isn't helping matters. Both of our spaceborn and landbound mechs are in their best state yet if the mech complement of the aforementioned ships are taken out of the equation. Even Venerable Xie has shown he feels more at ease when piloting the Parallax Star."

Ves had no doubt that some of the addictive qualities started to make their mark on the expert pilot's psyche. Addiction played a key role in the cocktail of positive reinforcement mechanisms that slowly associated contentment, safety, fulfillment and other positive emotions to serving the Vandals.

The expert pilot regularly deployed into space in order to gain some valuable experience in piloting the actual Parallax Star.

Early indications already showed that the brainwashing tentatively started to shift the expert pilot's mentality. The Venerable still insisted on calling Prince Hixt-Klaaster, but paid less and less attention to the conversations. It became easier for the AI pretending to be the Fourth Prince to maintain the facade.

"As for the cooperation between the Vandals and the Swordmaidens, our relations have grown back to normal since before we've picked up the survivors of Chopra Interstellar Security. A healthy separation still exists to guard against contingencies, but it's hard not to grow on the women since they are rather adept at diplomacy."

Every Vandal spoke positively when they organized joint patrols or collaborated in other matters. Ves was no exception to this phenomenon as he found Ketis quite adorable under her tough girl exterior.

All-in-all, after crossing through Vesian space, mucking about in Harkensen and Mancroft, crossing from one end of the Faris Star Region to the other end, most Vandals expressed relief at finally coming within a stone's throw of their mission.

Once they reached the Starlight Megalodon and looted it with whatever their bosses wanted to retrieve, they could make a straight shot towards home!

Ves snorted at the thought. How naive. "Treasure attracts danger. Besides, I don't think Aeon Corona VII will relinquish its bounty without a fight."

He could feel it in his restless gut. A deep sense of anxiety mixed with anticipation ran across his body whenever he studied the increasingly more detailed model of the seventh planet.

"One giant Super Earth. Five medium-sized moons. Extremely likely to possess a thin atmosphere with a sufficient amount of oxygen to allow baseline humans to breathe, though with great difficulty."

In fact, besides estimating the planet's gravity at six times the gravity of Old Earth, the planet seemed suspiciously livable to humans.

The exobiologists all concluded that the planet likely used to be a lot more hostile to human life, but that centuries of faint but focused terraforming changed all of that. Due to the time acceleration on the surface of the planet, the change may have only taken a couple of decades in the perspective of the outside galaxy.

Aeon Corona VII tentatively hit all the boxes when it came to the requirements to sustain human life. Water, air and temperature all fell within a moderate range, while its strong magnetic field protected it against the harmful radiation against the combined output of three stars in the center of the system.

The biggest question of all was whether any humans actually lived down there. So far, clones piloting FTL-capable shuttles managed to escape the planet and star system and leak out word of the Starlight Megalodon's existence.

Yet who grew those clones? It didn't have to be other humans. It could be aliens or some automated cloning system at work.

The journey to the planet progressed quietly. The Vandals kept up constant patrols and tried to study the glowing particles as best they could, but none of their attempts at capturing them succeeded. It was like they truly existed out of phase, yet somehow cast their reflection into a few dimensions down.

All of the science talk went over Ves' head. He recognized a few terms related to FTL drive technology, but he lacked the foundation to understand or participate in a discussion of that level.

"The best way to put it is like this." Chief Avanaeon said when Ves paid a visit to engineering. "Imagine you take some clothes out of your closet and place them neatly on top of each other. You'll end up with a mostly-flat pile of clothes consisting of multiple layers of fabric, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then one day you take your palm and press down right into the middle of the pile of clothes. Your arm sinks down and the layers of clothes get squeezed. Right now, Aeon Corona VII is kind of in such a situation. Imagine the pile of clothes as a stack of dimensions. Normally, there's plenty of space and separation between the layers. Pressing down our palm on them has changed the equilibrium and caused them to press against each other. As far as we can tell, the dimensions are so compressed that they are partially overlapping into each other."

"What the hell does that mean?" Ves frowned.

"It means we start to see things but we can't touch them. It isn't correct to say that interaction between matter and energy in different dimensions is impossible, but we don't have the knowledge nor the theory to do something like that. However, we did manage to develop some hypotheses on what is going on. We haven't been sitting on our butts all this time."

"Can you tell me what is going on?"

"Our first guess is that the Starlight Megalodon's FTL drives are most likely responsible or at least involved in this persistent spacetime anomaly. I won't bore you with the specifics but when highly advanced FTL drives fail in a certain way, they essentially cause an effect on the dimensions similar to how you press down your arm on the pile of clothes. From what little we can manage to extrapolate from our long-ranged sensors pointed to Aeon Corona VII, the origin point of all of the astral wind is very likely to be her crash site!"

This was a bold and frankly ridiculous-sounding revelation! Even if battleships possessed enough firepower to destroy a planet, to flood an entire star system with all of this spacetime distortion for decades or centuries sounded far too ludicrous!

"How can that be possible?" Ves expressed his disbelief. "Pressing down on the layer of dimensions and keeping them compressed requires you to expend an enormous amount of energy to maintain this state! Battleship or not, the Starlight Megalodon's energy reserves shouldn't have lasted that long!"

Chief Avanaeon shook his head. "Are you certain about that? We know that humanity has mastered the means to create endlessly renewable energy sources, and CFA battleships are known to incorporate the best and greatest technology of humanity. As long as the battleship hasn't incurred too much damage, it is not out of the realm of probability that her malfunctioning FTL drives are perpetually sustaining an abnormal dimension compression effect."

"You have no proof that this is going on, right?"

"It is the simplest answer we can think of right now. Occam's Razor, Ves. If your understanding of FTL drives has reached my level, then you wouldn't be so dismissive of my words. The greater the capabilities of an FTL drive, the more we are tangling with dangers we don't fully understand. An active FTL drive is a wild beast that seeks to tear a hole through the dimensions and subject everything around it to chaos if left to its own devices."

"Will it be dangerous for us to get close to such an anomaly? I used to be part of the Glowing Planet campaign, and the forces there borrowed dimensional smoother devices that could forcibly suppress wrinkles in spacetime."

"We're not talking about a couple of wrinkles here, Ves." Avanaeon shook his head again. "Whatever is at the center of the Starlight Megalodon is at least a

hundred times worse. It's a massive pit. However, it is a remarkably smooth and stable one as well. The danger with dimensional wrinkles is that ships tend to get crumpled into the folds of spacetime when they come across a wrinkle. That problem won't happen here because the distortions are smooth and gradual enough that we won't get folded in ourself or something."

That sounded reassuring. Not.

"What if we slip and slide all the way to the bottom of the pit?"

"Nobody knows. We might get pulled into a singularity for all I know, but as long as we maintain some distance we won't be at risk. Considering that the battleship is very likely to be intact enough to sustain a perpetually active FTL drive, we don't believe it's all that bad down there."

Ves couldn't comprehend the chief's dismissive attitude towards the potential dangers. It was like the chief telling everybody that taking a dip into the corona of the sun would just leave them with a bit of sunburn on their skin!

Just as Ves was about to express his skepticism, the yellow alert suddenly turned to red alert!

"OUR PATROLS HAVE MADE CONTACT WITH SANDMEN ESCORT VESSELS! ALL HANDS TO ACTION STATIONS!"

Both Ves and Avanaeon cursed.

"Go!"

Ves hustled to the command center as best he could with the Earth Ant. After a long period of avoiding the aliens, they suddenly bumped into the silicate life forms all of a sudden in the middle of interplanetary space. How did they even manage to enter the Aeon Corona System?

Chapter 768 Blind Scuffle

When the Flagrant Swordmaidens understood how difficult it would be to penetrate the astral wind, they treated it as both a benefit and a detriment to their survival.

The higher-dimensional particles never physically touched anything material, but they blocked any form of scans or signals from penetrating past a hundred kilometers. On land this distance spanned a small province, but in space it might as well be a couple of footsteps away.

This condition benefited the Flagrant Swordmaidens because it would be exceptionally difficult for the other forces that entered the Aeon Corona System to band up and track them down.

The disadvantage was that if an enemy force ever succeeded in bumping into the Flagrant Swordmaidens, the fight started right off the bat at close range in spaceborn combat terms!

Certain types of enemies fared better or worse in close-ranged combat.

The Flagrant Vandals for example fielded a relatively balanced spaceborn mech roster, though they slightly put more emphasis melee mechs.

Lydia's Swordmaidens on the other hand leaned heavily on melee mechs. Though each swordsman mech had the ability to sheathe their swords and wield spare ballistic rifles when they encountered sandmen, they usually chose to flee if they ever encountered a whiff of the aliens.

Unfortunately, the sandmen almost literally bumping into their patrols had left that choice off the table! Their forces approached far too close to each other to contemplate a withdrawal!

"The sandman escort vessel has entangled two of our Inheritors! One pilot has ejected in time but the other cockpit has been caught!"

Anyone caught by the sandmen would get crushed by the sentient sand particles as they sought to absorb as much energy as possible. Getting into melee range against any sandmen conglomeration was a recipe for disaster!

"Inform Captain Rakeshir to shift our formation away from the trajectory of the sandmen!"

The fleet turned around a moment later, every ship trying to curve to starboard in order to evade the lone sandmen escort that had very likely informed the rest of its buddies that it had encountered human machines to snack upon!

Major Verle quickly issued a set of orders that basically amounted to following a modified contingency plan in the event a sandmen force ambushed the fleet. All melee mechs had to withdraw and if possible exchange their melee weapons for simplified ballistic and kinetic rifles!

In the meantime, half of the Akkara heavy cannoneers started readying their physical cannons while shutting off power to their laser cannons.

Laser weapons generally inflicted limited damage against the sandmen due to their excellent heat conductivity. Dealing localized spot damage was nearly impossible as the individual sandmen constantly shifted around and diverted heat away!

Even the Parallax Star gave up its lance in exchange for a customized railgun that Miss Lisbeth once fabricated as an emergency option.

Ves didn't want to admit it, but for once, Miss Lisbeth's insane drive towards fabricating as many spare parts and options as possible actually turned out to be useful. The railgun packed a lot of punch, though the energy it expended and the high degree of wear and tear incurred in its use made it a very expensive weapon to deploy.

Right now, every single credit put into its construction and payment would be worth it if it gave Venerable Xie a powerful means of fighting back against the sandmen.

Sandmen vessels fared poorly against single powerful physical attacks. Though their fluid amalgamations were capable of absorbing a lot of shock, the energy constructs that animated them could only sustain so much shock before they fractured, essentially killing the consciousness that animated the sandmen.

"The Parallax Star will be ready to deploy in three minutes!"

"Clear the firing lines for our Akkara mechs! Tell the laggards to move their metal butts out of the way!"

The sandman escort ship had moved quickly in chasing after the fleeing Inheritor mechs. Armed with double knives or daggers, the light skirmishers fared exceptionally poorly against a sandmen vessel that engulfed anything that strayed close enough as their main means of attack!

Although the Inheritors moved fast, the sandman ship somehow managed to move even faster through their reactionless sublight propulsion! Two more mechs almost got caught, but managed to confuse the sandman ship by splitting up in diametrically opposite directions, causing its reigning intelligence to pause in indecision.

"Detecting several new sandmen signatures! Sir, we have made positive identification of their fleet type! It's a low-intelligence sandmen fleet based around a single cruiser-sized mothership and twelve frigate-sized escort vessels!"

The sandmen for some reason loved the number six, and their more basic fleets often deployed escort vessels in multiples of six. A twelve escort fleet posed a significant threat to the Flagrant Swordmaidens, especially if all

twelve ships as well as the massive mothership managed to get into point-blank range!

Whatever Flagrant Swordmaidens did, they had to stop the sandmen ships from going any closer!

"Order the Akkara mechs to lay down suppressive fire. I want all of the sandmen frigates facing a storm of firepower!"

Half of the Akkara mechs immediately received new targeting orders, prompting their mech pilots to unleash their ballistic and kinetic cannons. Around a quarter of the rounds hit their mark, causing the sandmen frigates to encounter difficulties in closing in on the fleet that desperately tried to turn aside.

An increasing amount of Akkara mechs came online and started to add to the soundless barrage. Half of the mech pilots had remained on standby in their cockpits so could immediately jump into action, but the other half had to be roused from their sleep, causing them to be delayed for a critical moment!

A few other ranged mechs already deployed on patrol added their firepower, with mixed success. The fast and agile sandmen frigates moved as nimbly as a light mech despite massing much more than them. They zigged and zagged towards the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet in an inexorable advance even as the frequent hits chipped away globs of lifeless sand.

The sandmen ships were undeterred!

One of the most annoying things about the sandmen was that they knew no fear, at least not the way other sentients experienced. Damaging them caused their amalgamations to grow smaller, but that only made them faster and more agile. They were like mechs outfitted with modular armor in that sense. Only by crushing them down until they reached the size of a melon did they finally become inert.

By now, the Misty Slashers, the Inheritors, the Hellcats and many other mechs launched out of the combat carriers as fast as possible armed with cheap backup rifles. While they packed less of a punch than anyone would want, they were cheap to procure and did not require too much complexity to operate.

Any humanoid mech could make use of them, even melee mechs. Their accuracy left a lot to be desired, but the large sandmen ships were easy to hit at medium range.

"Sir, the sandmen escort ships are forced to slow down under the weight of fire." The tactical officer said. "However, their mothership is advancing unopposed!"

"Assign Venerable Xie to the task of halting the mothership." Major Verle instructed. "Maintain our current targeting priorities. Right now, we need to whittle down the sandmen frigates."

The Flagrant Swordmaidens expended a large amount of ammunition by having hundreds of mechs fire their rifles and cannons at the twelve ominously agile sandmen escorts. Over three-fourths of the projectiles missed their mark, but enough hit their mark to physically hinder their forward momentum, buying precious time for more mechs to take up rifles.

"Sir, the Parallax Star has deployed! It's firing its railgun!"

The Parallax Star armed itself with a large railgun that outgunned the cannons of the Akkara mechs by a significant margin. Just the length of the weapon alone surpassed the height of the mech that wielded it! Its mass and size already made it clear that this was a weapon meant to be deployed in space. A mech on the ground wouldn't be able to hold this weapon properly under standard gravity!

The expert pilot already received permission to fire at will, so as soon as Venerable Xie drew a bead on the large sandman mothership, he pulled the trigger.

The firing sequence almost passed without any notice. If Ves hadn't glued his eyes to the stream depicting the Parallax Star, he wouldn't have noticed much. The mech's flight system and the railgun's inertial dampeners did an excellent job in compensating for the recoil upon firing.

The slug the formidable weapon fired impacted the mothership fairly hard! A small crater marred its smooth sphere-like surface. What must have been several tons worth of individual sandmen separated from the greater mass, the kinetic impact causing their energy constructs to be overwhelmed!

"The sandman mothership has sustained significant damage!"

The only downside to the artillery-scale railgun was that it required a significant amount of time to safely fire it again. An agonizing amount of seconds passed as the railgun finally shifted enough heat and energy as well as load in a new slug to fire again.

"The second railgun impact dealt less damage! The mothership is adjusting its structure into a hollow cage structure! It's adjusting its composition in response to the heavy impacts!"

Major Verle cursed. "It appears the sandman admiral isn't a total rookie. Divert ten percent of our Akkara mechs to suppressing the mothership. Don't let it get away with its latest shapechange!"

A small amount of high-volume firepower assisted Venerable Xie as his railgun accurately hit the hollowed-out mothership that had changed its structure into a multitude of hexagonal-shaped cages. Its overall volume ballooned in size but most of it consisted of empty space.

Each time a railgun hit the hexagonal cages, the constructions broke easily, but the lack of interconnectedness also limited the spread of damage. The mothership could last four times longer when it adopted this hollow structure!

This was why Major Verle insisted on adding some of the Akkara mechs to the equation. The thinner hexagonal structures didn't need a railgun to shatter apart, so adding the high-volume firepower of the heavy cannons on top of the railgun fire put the mothership under a lot of pressure.

The sandmen admiral decided to respond.

"Sir, the sandman mothership is accumulating energy for an attack!"

"What is it targeting?!"

"Seventy percent certainty the mothership is targeting the Parallax Star, sir! There's a seventeen percent chance that it's targeting the Gorgon's Gaze behind the expert mech!"

"Order Venerable Xie to evade!"

A few seconds later, the communications officer reporting something alarming.

"Sir, the Venerable has refused to follow your last order! He believes the Parallax Star can take the energy attack!"

"Damn it! Who does he think he is?! Tell him to pull back now!"

Too late! Just as the Parallax Star tossed aside its railgun to get it out of the way, an energy field formed around the unarmed lancer mech.

A bright yellow beam struck the Parallax Star with unerring machine-like accuracy! The sandman mothership only sustained the beam for 0.026 seconds, but it had transferred enough energy to bore through the armor belt of a combat carrier!

"The mothership has exhausted its attack. It is accumulating energy for a second energy attack!"

"What is the status of the Parallax Star!?" Major Verle demanded.

"The Parallax Star sustained light damage. Its energy field has largely negated the damage to its frame." Ves responded. He had kept an eye on its telemetry throughout the entire event. "Some of its energy field emitters have overstressed themselves. They won't stand up to repeated punishments."

"How many more attacks can it take?"

"If Venerable Xie is able to maintain the same strength of energy fields, then at around four to six full-powered blasts."

"Reckless!"

It was indeed a reckless move to tank the sandman energy beam without any attempts at dodging. The Parallax Star may not be the most agile mechs, but turning a head-on attack into a glancing attack would have saved it and its maintenance crew a lot of grief!

Venerable Xie, evidently satisfied with this test of his capabilities with his new mech, flew out to grab the spinning railgun and fired at the mothership yet again.

The battle was far from over, but the Flagrant Swordmaidens at least managed to stem the tide!

Chapter 769 Charging Bull

"We need a victory here, not a stalemate! I need options!" Major Verle called.

The tactical officer regretfully shook his head. "Sir, we can't afford to divert more firepower to focus down the sandmen escorts one by one. All twelve escort vessels won't hesitate to accelerate and catch up to our slower supply

train if we reduce the pressure on any of them! With the absence of the Finmoth Regal's complement of mechs, we don't have the mechs to spare!"

A twelve-escort sandmen fleet was a significant force to be reckoned with to any force. The Flagrant Swordmaidens only managed to hold on due to arming their melee mechs with spare ranged rifles, but those mechs quickly started to run out of ammunition.

"Sir, the average ammunition levels of the mechs has dipped below thirty percent." Ves reported. This was an urgent matter that needed to come to the attention of Major Verle. "Some of the more trigger-happy mech pilots are already turning back to their carriers to pick up their next batch of ammunition."

"Our total output of fire is declining! The sandmen escorts are inching forward again!"

"Instruct the mech pilots to bring their fire rate under control! I don't want all of our mechs to run out of rounds at the same time!" Major Verle thundered.

"Initiate an immediate rotation of our mechs regardless of their ammunition reserves. Plan out a continuous rotation so that our weigh of fire never dips below the amount that is necessary to keep pushing back the sandmen!"

The voracious and relentless sandmen loved nothing more than to gulp down human mechs and ships. They never stopped pursuit once they obtained the whereabouts of a human fleet.

Even if they were losing a battle, most of the sandmen admirals were too inflexible to consider retreat!

Therefore, fighting back against the sandmen required a concerted effort over a long period of time. Sandmen had no concept of morale as the vast majority of their race exhibited too little cognition to even understand such a concept.

The sandman admiral at the heart of the mothership ruled over every aspect of the sandmen fleet with an iron fist. This was an advantage when it wasn't too old and hadn't experienced too much to develop countermeasures against prior attacks.

However, the sandman admiral the Flagrant Swordmaidens were facing right now was young enough to fight to the death but old enough to form various countermeasures.

"The sandmen escorts are breaking apart, sir! They're forming into fluid sandstorm formations!"

For example, at some point, the sandman escort vessels stopped maintaining their solid shapes. Instead, they exploded into sandstorms that spread out their structure over a huge stretch of space. The sandstorms swept forward, slower but more all-encompassing, and no matter how much firepower the Flagrant Swordmaidens threw at them, they ceased to be able to push them back!

This was one of the responses the Vandals dreaded the most! It was easier to stop a ship than a storm! Through the sandstorm formation exposed the escorts to an increasing amount of damage, the lack of rigidity in its structure meant that nothing could stop it from employing its superior acceleration to advance!

Major Verle paused for a few seconds before issuing new orders. "Pull back our mechs! Instruct Captain Rakeshir to scatter the fleet."

The battle turned against the Flagrant Swordmaidens. Even though the mechs steadily gave ground, some of their starships couldn't run away fast enough to escape the incoming sandstorms!

Ves looked at the plot that automatically calculated how much time it took for the living sandstorms to catch up to the slowest cargo haulers. Six minutes.

That was way too little time!

However, unlike the sandmen who let a single entity do all of the thinking for them, the Flagrant Swordmaidens relied on an extensive staff to come up with solutions. The tactical officer presented a new plan that sounded very viable.

"Sir, now that the sandmen escorts have formed into sandstorms, there's no use in spreading our firepower. I suggest we deploy at least half of our mechs into focusing their fire on one sandstorm at a time. Their sandstorm shapes makes them more susceptible to massed light attacks!"

"Agreed." Major Verle issued his approval. "Implement the plan!"

Half of the mechs kept up their barrage of firepower to discourage the sandmen from pulling off anything else, while the other half chose to whittle down the sandstorm furthest to their starboard side.

The dispersed sandstorm sustained massive damage over time. All the explosive shells disrupting and kinetic rounds disrupting the sand flows took their toll on the fluid amalgamation. Around sixty seconds later, the sandstorm lost integrity and turned into lifeless grains of sand!

"Target the second sandstorm in the list."

By concentrating half of their firepower one sandstorm at a time, the Flagrant Swordmaidens managed to really dish out the hurt to the sandmen. The second sandstorm fell a little bit faster, and the third one already came under fire!

Each time a sandstorm got killed, the mechs assigned to put them under pressure suddenly became free. They immediately received new assignments to add their fire to the mechs assigned to focus the sandstorm down.

It was like a snowball rolling down a snowy mountain. Each sandstorm lost integrity a little faster, and with each takedown the next sandstorm being targeted endured even heavier fire!

While the regular mechs tentatively handled the sandstorms, the mothership appeared to grow agitated and shifted its structure to one that optimized its speed.

The sandmen admiral grew frustrated and wanted to reverse the battle by going into action itself!

"Sir, the sandman mothership is accelerating! It is attempting to overtake the Gorgon's Gaze! It will be able to catch up in four minutes!"

"What is Venerable Xie doing?!"

"He's.. he's returning to the Gorgon's Gaze to exchange the Parallax Star's railgun for its lance. He says he intends to charge the mothership!"

"Call him back!"

"He refuses to comply, sir! He has shut down all of his active communication channels!"

Major Verle very pointedly threw a gaze at Ves. Even without uttering any words, the mech designer understood the mech officer's dissatisfaction.

For someone who had undergone a fair amount of brainwashing, the expert pilot did not appear to behave in an obedient manner!

Ves rapidly analyzed the expert pilot's behavior pattern. According to his judgement, with the amount of practice hours the Venerable put into the Parallax Star, its tampered neural interface had plenty of time to build up associations in the expert pilot's brains.

Why then would Xie refuse direct orders from the highest-ranking Vandal on the field not once, but several times now?

He remembered that Venerable Xie had been trained as a bodyguard, and not as a serviceman in some kind of mech military. Prince Hixt-Klaaster did not struck Ves as an imaginative and capable leader, so he must have depended heavily on his pet expert pilot to pull him out of trouble.

"Major, Venerable Xie is trained as a bodyguard first and foremost. His primary duty is to protect whatever he is assigned to cover, and as the Fourth Prince of the Royal House of Talk is rather.. prone to hysteria, Xie likely developed a habit of taking the initiative whenever there is a crisis."

"Why then must he exchange his perfectly functioning railgun for a lance that he has hated from the start?"

Ves didn't immediately understand why Xie opted for a lance either, until he recalled footage of Venerable O'Callahan's amazing charges. It was possible that Xie wished to emulate his predecessor.

"A charging attack in the vein of what Venerable O'Callahan used to accomplish is a much more deadlier attack to the mothership." He explained.

"A melee mech that is statically attacking the sandman mothership will no doubt become engulfed, expert mech or not, so Xie won't be able to employ his spear. Employing a charging attack with a lance however allows him to make repeated attacks that may hurt just as much if not more than a railgun discharge!"

The Parallax Star was in essence a melee mech and featured no enhancements that empowered its ranged attacks. Venerable Xie's personal landbound Pale Dancer mech could have inflicted a lot more ranged damage, but it couldn't be deployed in space at all.

It took a precious minute for the Parallax Star to reenter its private hangar bay and quickly put aside its railgun to pick up its lance. It took another minute for the mech to return to its old position in front of the lumbering Gorgon's Gaze.

"The Parallax Star is initiating a charge!" Ves immediately called as he saw several resonance indicators light up. "Its target is the sandman mothership!"

The Parallax Star's powerful custom flight system visibly lit up as it pushed the lancer mech forward in a straight and stable charge. Though its acceleration paled in comparison to what Venerable O'Callahan used to accomplish, Venerable Xie nonetheless was no slouch!

"His performance with the Parallax Star is at least twenty percent better than expected. His charge is actually gaining momentum!"

Ves was pleasantly surprised by this development. The change he made to expend Xie's potential in exchange for a temporary boost in performance turned out to be a prudent change. His resonance strength even surpassed twelve laverses for a brief moment of time as the expert pilot summoned up more strength.

The Parallax Star was built for speed, and Venerable Xie activated the resonance patterns embedded in the flight system to boost his mech's acceleration by a considerable amount.

Just a brief period of time had already caused the Parallax Star to turn into a comet with all of the light being dispersed by its energy field! A second energy field formed around its lance, one that looked sharper and more destructive than the field protecting the mech itself. The two fields overlapped a bit causing a few glitches to occur, but the Venerable quickly compensated for them on the spot.

"The Parallax Star will impact the mothership in twenty seconds!"

Both the expert mech and the mothership flew in a collision course against each other. That meant that any impact would hurt far more for each side.

"Ten seconds until impact!"

The mothership fired off another energy beam, but this time the Parallax Star rolled out of the path of energy and light, enabling it to escape at least two-thirds of the damage!

With that last hurrah, the Parallax Star charged into the partially hollow mothership with its lance held forward in an impeccably sharp intrusion!

Gouts of sand flew apart as the Parallax Star pierced through multiple sand structures until it came out from the other side. The mech performed a short loop before it initiated its charge again, the energy fields in front of the mech and lance battering aside all of the sand in its way!

The expert mech repeated this feat several times as Venerable Xie was unwilling to let the mothership advance towards the Gorgon's Gaze unimpeded. However, these repeated attacks took their toll on the expert mech as its energy field emitters kept sustaining more damage and its momentum continued to bleed away!

"Sir, the Parallax Star is losing speed with every successful charging pass." Ves alerted Major Verle. "After two more charges the expert mech has lost so much relative velocity that the mothership may succeed in its attempt to trap the mech!"

The mothership already caught on to the expert mech's tactics and attempted to throw gouts of sand in its way to halt the Parallax Star and captured it in its grasp! However, each time it did so, the mech's forward momentum and its increasingly ragged energy field saved it from getting munched.

Yet how long would the expert mech be able to persist?

Good news arrived by then. "Sir, we have focused down all of the sandmen escort vessels! We direct our firepower to the mothership, but we risk inflicting friendly fire!"

"Dammit!" Major Verle slammed his fist against his seatrest. His command chair had endured a lot of abuse over the months. "Keep ringing Venerable Xie and tell him to abort his reckless attack! We don't need him to occupy the mothership anymore!"

Sadly, the expert pilot appeared to be deaf and blind to the tactical situation. The expert pilot had developed a severe case of tunnel vision as he kept charging at the mothership like a bull that only saw red!

Chapter 770 Broken Authority

With only seconds left to make a decision, Major Verle made the right if difficult choice.

"All mechs, fire upon the mothership!"

"B-But sir! Venerable Xie is still in the line of fire!"

"The Parallax Star can take care of itself!" Major Verle immediately bulled over everyone's objections. "Target the bottom port side of the mothership! If Venerable Xie has any sense, he will move his mech to the upper starboard side."

A direct command from Major Verle should have been obeyed at all costs. However, neither the Swordmaidens nor the Vandals followed their latest order with much enthusiasm.

In fact, some of them dithered and didn't do anything at all!

Just a fourth of the Swordmaidens and a third of the Vandal mech pilots opened fire on the sandman mothership! While the vessel incurred significant damage from the weight of fire, the incoming rounds hadn't been enough to deter the sandman vessel from focusing all of its efforts into trapping the charging Parallax Star!

"What are the slackers doing?! Open fire, damnit!"

The other mechs that refrained from shooting only reluctantly added their rifle and cannon shots to the ongoing barrage. Their aim wasn't even that accurate, as they missed far beyond what should have been possible against a large and fairly preoccupied sandman mothership.

No one wanted to be responsible for harming an expert pilot!

The Swordmaidens revered strength, and their regard for Venerable Xie far surpassed that of any other Vandal including Major Verle and any of their mech captains.

As for the Vandals, their hero worship for an authentic expert pilot and the pervasive cultural norm of respecting expert pilot vastly overpowered their ingrained sense of duty of following orders.

The martial tradition of the Flagrant Vandals placed more emphasis on initiative and free expression than discipline and an absolute compulsion to follow orders. This enabled them to integrate a wide variety of misfit mech pilots relatively smoothly without causing any of them to feel caged or oppressed.

The downside to this loose and casual regimental culture was that at important junctures, the Vandals may outright decide to ignore their orders!

Managing a rowdy bunch like the Vandals required a rare human touch. One of the reasons why Major Verle had been promoted ahead of the other mech captains was because he possessed this touch! His ability to read and manipulate the general mood among the Vandals impressed Ves the most.

Yet at this critical moment, even the major's vaunted command abilities fell short against the men and women's sheer regard for the prestige of an expert pilot!

Despite his origins as a foreigner formerly in the service of a royal prince of a far-away kingdom that vaguely resembled the Vesians, Karol Xie already commanded everyone's respect by sheer dint of ability.

Each and every mech pilot, whether they were pirates or servicemen, both dreamt of becoming expert pilots, and therefore worshipped those that have already reached this exalted rank as mech pilots elevated to the first steps of becoming a god!

No mortal was allowed to sully a demigod! Especially if that demigod fought on the same side!

Ves saw that Major Verle's face grew increasingly ugly. Although enough mech pilots managed to gain enough sense to fire their weapons earnestly against the sandmen mothership, the delay had been long enough to cause their tunnel-visioned expert pilot to get caught by a net of sandmen tendrils!

Strong streams of sand-like material continued to flow around the slowed and hindered energy field surrounding the Parallax Star! Ves studied the telemetry in detail and found out that the protective energy field could only last a short time before the emitters reached their limits and cracked!

"Sir! The Parallax Star's energy field can only last less than thirty seconds at this rate!" He reported.

"How soon until the mothership loses integrity?"

"Two to three minutes, sir!"

In other words, the status quo didn't favor them at all. With the lackluster performance of their mechs, they would never be able to rescue their trapped expert pilot in time!

Major Verle could order the mech pilots to reinvigorate their attack and put some actual effort in their marksmanship. Yet would the outcome be any

different? They already showed a disregard against his orders despite their necessity, because from their perspective the accusation of inflicting friendly fire on an expert pilot on their own side was enough to tarnish their honor and career!

"What are our options?"

No one responded. Mechs weren't bots that could be taken over or shut off from remote. Each of them carried a mech pilot that functioned as the true intelligence behind their actions. When a mech pilot didn't want to do something or did so half-heartedly, then those behind the scenes had little recourse in affecting any change.

Ves learned another important lesson here. Sometimes, official authority broke down when they clashed with the fundamental values ingrained within their subordinates. Mech pilots especially belonged to a class on their own, enjoying a sufficient amount of reverence and respect from others that they felt less compelled to follow every order to the letter.

In the end, even a mech major who served with the Flagrant Vandals for decades earned less respect than a foreign expert pilot!

No matter how much merit Major Verle had earned or how much he reinforced his authority, when the mech pilots had to choose between the two of them, they respected godly authority over mortal authority!

Ves discreetly shook his head in disappointment. "Expert pilots are both an asset and a liability to a force. Those who hire them have to make sure they command enough respect, or else they may find the expert pilot taking over the hearts and minds of their own subordinates!

Even the expert pilot's actions unconsciously increased everyone's respect for his martial prowess!

Instead of dodging the sandman mothership's powerful energy beam that possessed enough strength to bore through a combat carrier, Venerable Xie opted to resist it head-on at first!

Instead of continuing to bombard the frightening sandman mothership with a slow but powerful railgun from a safe and healthy distance, the expert pilot instead abandoned his gun for the lance, a weapon that he never excelled in unlike the previous pilot of his mech!

Instead of making a few half-hearted charging passes, Venerable Xie fought with all his might, not even considering his own safety in his efforts to destroy the mothership from up close!

All of his actions exemplified the courage, honor and valiance of an ideal mech pilot! While the expert pilot may be fighting hard on behalf of the Flagrant Vandals, in actual fact each of his reckless heroics undermined Major Verle's authority and threatened to undermine the Vandals' original command structure!

If Ves didn't know any better, he would have suspected that Venerable Xie intended to plot against the existing leadership!

"That's not possible, however."

He recognized that the tampering he performed on the neural interfaces may have affected the expert pilot's judgement. Ultimately, Karol Xie should have remained loyal to the Flagrant Vandals. The only flaw that Ves had overlooked was that loyalty to the Flagrant Vandals was an open-ended question that could be answered in many different ways!

For example, if Venerable Xie thought that Major Verle was no longer qualified to lead the task force, then he may feel just in attempting to take it over!

Ves knew he'd be getting a lot of flack from their commanding officer after this battle.. but first, they had to win it! Right now, the Parallax Star had less than fifteen seconds left before its emitters reached their limits!

Fortunately, salvation came from an unexpected angle. The sensor officer immediately stood up! "Sir! My men and I have identified the probable location of the sandman admiral on the mothership's structure! It's oriented near the top of the hollow structure!"

Major Verle didn't even glance at it when he issued his next order. "All mechs, fire at the sandman admiral!"

The mech pilots started to become clued in to the fact that their expert pilot had landed in a lot of trouble. Thus, when the order came to fire upon the sandman admiral's suspected location, not a lot of Vandal and Swordmaiden mech pilots showed any reluctance this time.

Over eighty percent of all available guns fired at the top of the sandman mothership. Though the vessel adjusted its structure quickly after being targeted by so much mech, it reacted far too late! Huge gouts of sand the size of mechs chunked away from the main amalgamation.

The mothership visibly shrank and became filled with holes as the rounds kept impacting the vessel. A volley of missiles impacted the mothership from the top, causing a rumble of explosions that cut off an extremely hard portion of the mothership from the rest of the structure.

The mothership immediately lost cohesion!

"Sir, we've separated the sandman admiral from the mothership's structure! It's currently attempting to flee!"

"Send in the Inheritors and finish off the admiral!" Major Verle immediately ordered with a swipe of his palm. "Don't let it hide within the astral winds! Once it has been rendered inert, send in a specialist retrieval party to recover

the crystallized remains of the sandman admiral. What is the status of the Parallax Star?"

"It's in a bad shape." Ves reported. "When the sandman admiral became separated from the main mothership, it turned into an independent entity without strong control. While Venerable Xie has managed to extract the Parallax Star from the belly of the ship, its energy field failed at the end. Some of the sand has managed to inflict material damage on the exterior of the expert mech, but its armor held up long enough for the machine to escape intact."

Some expressed relief at the expert pilot's successful escape, but neither Ves nor Major Verle smiled. Ves already estimated the repair bill and it wasn't cheap, while Major Verle still glowered over his inability to control the expert pilot.

Both of them needed to reflect after the battle, but right now they still needed to take care of the aftermath.

Verle maintained a confident expression as he issued a series of orders. "Order our mechs to continue to pound on the leaderless mothership until it's completely rendered inert. Tell our near-perimeter patrols to be vigilant against any approaching streams of sand. Dead or not, fire upon them and force them to disperse. I don't want to risk any surviving sandmen slipping into our vessels."

Small detachments of sandmen had a tendency to burrow into ships or mechs unnoticed. They could do a lot of damage if left unattended. This was why the Vandals and the Swordmaidens inspected every mech returning to their berths.

Fortunately, not a lot of mechs came into close proximity to the sandmen escorts or motherships. None of the mechs came back with a hitchhiker so far, though checking out the Parallax Star was a very different matter.

The damaged mech looked as if it withstood a lot of sanding. Streams of sand had rubbed away the original coating to reveal a silvery metallic tint intrinsic to the top layer of its armor. While the sand lacked the punching power to burrow through the extremely resilient compressed armor, they achieved a little more success when they attempted to bore through the softer joint sections.

All of that damage took both time and resources to repair, something which the Vandals were in short supply. Ves already planned to board a shuttle to the Gorgon's Gaze in order to assist in the repairs!

"Sir, our retrieval party has secured the crystallization of the sandman admiral. They are on their way back to the Shield of Hispania."

"I will meet them personally at the shuttle bay. Don't let the remains out of their sights until I arrive." Their commanding officer said before turning to Ves.

"Mr. Larkinson, please join me at the shuttle bay. We have matters to discuss."

"Yes, sir." Ves almost sighed and stood up from the observer's seat.

After instructing Ketis to stay put, he followed after the armored form of the overburdened mech officer as they made their way out of the command center.

The battle against the sandmen fleet revealed a lot of deficiencies, ones they needed to address before they bumped into larger threats.