

### **Chapter 871 Asteria**

As a Journeyman Mech Designer raised in the frontier, Mayra imparted some unique properties in her mech designs that Ves rarely saw in designs from civilized space.

First and foremost, pirates and pirate designers completely disregarded the existence of licenses. As long as the design or technical specifications of a good component could be found on the galactic net or in other shady circles, they'd be sure possess them. Any decent person could unearth a lot of great mech and component designs from the galactic net, though most tended to be rather outdated.

No component design remained a secret forever. The only practical limitations posed by pirates who pirated other designs was that most of them incorporated difficult to work with or extremely rare materials. This was actually the best form of protection for their intellectual property, though the more restrictions they imposed, the less attractive they became to legitimate customers.

Mech designers operating under the sphere of influence of the MTA deeply respected the current licensing regime. Plagiarism, corporate espionage and outright stealing ran rife before the MTA introduced the licensing regime.

The Mech Trade Association knew that mech designers always sought for shortcuts. Nobody wanted to reinvent the wheel when someone else already developed a good wheel already. The licensing regime basically legitimized the practice of copying someone else's work and made sure the original developers received their fair share in exchange for putting their works on display.

Of course, pirates completely ignored these restrictions.

The felinid beast mechs that marched out from their ranks immediately made a striking impression on Ves. While others saw a lean light leopard-shaped mech that appeared to be excellent for flanking and hit-and-run attacks, Ves saw a collection of bestseller mech components seamlessly merged together into a great design.

Word quickly spread from the Swordmaiden ranks. Mayra named her leopard mech as the Asteria!

"What a great design!" Ves sighed.

He truly meant that. While Mayra also prioritized reliability and endurance in designing the Asteria, she shamelessly made use of historically famed and brilliant mech components, some of which had been developed for internal use by top-tier organizations in the past and had never been licensed out. These excellent, high-performing components all brought out the highest potential of the Asteria beast mechs.

Ves walked over to the ranks of the Swordmaidens and sought out Marya and Ketis.

"Hey Ves! What's up?" Ketis chirped.

"I'm fine. How is your training lately? Have you kept up with your studies."

"Errr.. somewhat." She laughed awkwardly. "Let's not talk about that."

"Ketis has been spending more time on her sword training lately." Mayra said with a disapproving expression. "I thought we went over this. You're a mech designer, not a warrior."

"It's too dangerous here! A fight could break out at any moment! I have to be as ready as possible to defend myself!"

"If any threat comes in our way, our mechs will take care of it, Ketis. What can you do against a mech by yourself and your sword?"

"I can still slice their legs!"

Ves imagined Ketis walking up to an enemy mech and ineffectually hacking her sword at its feet. The outcome wouldn't be much different than the idiotic dwarf warriors who thought they could fell a mech by banging against them with their bone clubs.

"I must say Mayra, I admire your Asteria design. I must say it's a risky choice to discard defense in exchange for offensive."

If Ves limited himself to designing a melee mech instead of a ranged mech, then he would have surrendered to the planet's harsh gravity and designed a defense-oriented mech. He possessed enough familiarity with knight mechs to design a reliable and relatively energy-efficient medium knight mech.

Yet Mayra subverted his expectations and actually went through with designing a mobility-oriented beast mech on a planet that imposed extremely harsh limitations on mobility!

"I understand your puzzlement." Mayra smiled at Ves. "Yet in a battlefield where every mech is as slow as a crawling mech, you only need a slight edge in mobility to gain the initiative. The Asteria has that and more. Its true strength lies in its burst speed. It can leap forward at a speed that surpasses any normal mech under the same conditions."

Ves connected the dots. He swept his eyes back to the Asterias that marched forward until they walked up to the front of the expedition party. Their body structure and limb design seem exceptionally capable of making powerful leaping attacks!

The Asterias couldn't function like knight mechs and form a defensive bulwark against their enemies. However, with Qilanxo covering their defensive needs, the Asterias didn't have to fulfill this role.

Instead, the Asterias served best as flankers, harassers, scouts and ambushers. These offense-oriented mechs could fell any breakdown-proof mech once they pounced upon them with their claws and teeth! As long as they had energy to spare, their burst mobility completely exceeded

Qilanxo, the Asterias and the Enduring Protectors all formed a trinity that covered different needs. Still, the Swordmaidens took on the most dangerous role of all, and the chances of overreaching themselves were too large. Only the best and most disciplined Swordmaiden mech pilot would be able to keep their Asterias intact.

"Let us wish our comrades good luck!"

After sending off the exploration party, the Vandals and Swordmaidens that remained behind shifted into war footing.

While they always prepared themselves for battle, the risks were never greater as now.

Aeon Corona VII was simply too big. As a Super Earth several times the size of Old Earth, Seven's surface area simply gave too much room for isolated forces to hide in. It would have been a coincidence that rival forces bumped into each other. The Caged Tongs only tracked down the Flagrant Swordmaidens after some other party pointed the way, after all.

Yet now that they converged near the Starlight Megalodon, the chances of waging several battles became too acute.

The big problem however was that this close to the source of the astral winds, the breakdown effect had become the killer of mechs. Forget about battling other forces, they first needed to fight against the abnormal environment!

"We should immobilize or shutdown every mech and machine at our disposal when not absolutely needed." Ves said in an emergency meeting shortly after sending off the exploration party. "The mechs on patrol and scouting

assignments are breaking down several times faster than the ones that are sitting still."

Chief Dakkon nodded. "I agree, though it would also make us blind to any machines that have quietly degraded to the point of breaking down completely."

"We still need mechs to patrol and to guard our supply train against surprise attacks. What I'm suggesting is that we calculate the optimal number of active mechs that our mech technicians can cope with. If we make use of too many active mechs, then our mech technicians will be swamped with work. If we put too few mechs to use, we'd be putting spare capacity to waste while decreasing the strength of our first responders."

Captain Byrd grimaced at the difficult consideration. "I understand. Chief Dakkon, Mr. Larkinson, please work out your proposals quickly. On this issue, I prefer to lean towards caution. I'd rather have too many mechs active at any time than to put too many of them on ice. There is an extremely high chance of facing our fellow rivals from the stars, and we cannot afford to be caught flat-footed against them. In addition, there are also unknown native threats about, of which we've only caught traces of so far."

"I'll do the best I can, captain, but the mech technicians won't like it. I think I can kick them into a higher gear for some time, but they'll eventually burn out if they have to deal with excessive work loads day in day out." Ves replied with both caution and determination.

Their commanding officer caught the underlying message. She snorted. "The time for slacking off is over. It's showtime right now. Everyone needs to put a hundred-and-twenty percent of their effort into their duties. Those who want to get away with less are doing their fellow Vandals a disservice."

The Vandals had become too accustomed to their simple routines. It was time to shake them out of their complacency and work them to bone. At this stage, anyone who put less effort in their jobs directly dragged down the rest of the team!

Once the servicemen received their new work schedules, a lot of grumbling and complaints emerged, but what could they do? Even if they tended to be dummies, the Vandals weren't stupid. Deep down, they knew that every little bit of effort would be needed in order to survive the coming challenges.

While Ves became increasingly swamped with work as well, he did his best to delegate all of the lesser tasks to others. Though the low-ranking mech designers and incompetent chief technicians couldn't handle every difficult issue that emerged, they at least learned how to depend on themselves over the past months.

If the same kind of fault happened more than twenty times, the mech technicians had to be absolute morons if they still couldn't resolve the issue by themselves.

The great thing about the breakdown effect was that it gave the mech technicians a lot of practice in resolving faults. The sheer amount of issues they dealt with on a daily basis practically elevated their problem solving capabilities to a higher level.

Ves stared sat on top of a heavy transport and looked out towards the depth of the red zone.

Just a hundred kilometers away, the mythical Starlight Megalodon awaited the arrival of the exploration party.

"I wonder if our boys have reached the battleship. What will they find?"

This close to the source of the anomaly, the terrain started to become a little weird. The surface of the ground grew jagged and uneven, as if a lot of

earthquakes wracked the entire region in the past. No tufts of grass covered the lands, and only strange plant growths stubbornly clung to life here.

Deeper in the red zone, the terrain grew rougher and the hills started growing steeper. Still, the vehicles of the exploration party shouldn't have too much trouble navigating the rough terrain. The Enduring Protector and the Asteria both possessed huge advantages. Quadruped generally handled rough terrain better than bipedal mechs.

Ves turned away from the storm lands and surveyed the temporary camp. This time, the Flagrant Swordmaidens only placed down the minimum amount of prefab structures. This was by necessity, because they might be forced to abandon their camp.

At this time, the Vandals activated one of their god crystal generators. The unholy devices which made use of dwarf brains to control the operation of the god crystals creeped a lot of Vandals out, but they couldn't deny their use.

An energy tornado extended high up in the air, and an abundance of potent higher-dimensional energy poured into the god crystals.

The tornado only lasted for a few seconds, because too much energy streamed down in such a short amount of time. The god crystals couldn't hold much more. This close to the Starlight Megalodon, the concentration of higher-dimensional particles was incredibly high, and it would only be worse at ground zero.

Still, Ves couldn't help but adopt a concerned expression at the brief show. Even though the interference in the air was so bad that it would be difficult to spot the energy tornado from a distance, it still telegraphed their position to any scouts that ranged in their direction.

Energy tornados also signified that the Flagrant Swordmaidens possessed a potent and renewable energy source. Their researchers worked hard to

develop this solution to solve their energy needs, and Ves doubted that anyone else could have come up with it as well.

"When will the wolves come to prey on our sheep?"

Perhaps the true group in peril may not be the exploration party, but the main forces left behind!

### **Chapter 872 Status Updates**

When the Vandals prepared the gear for the exploration party, they put some thought in maintaining contact. The large amount of interference made it impractical to receive wireless signals from more than a few kilometers away, so the only way to remain in contact was to use a physical medium.

Chief Dakkon and a handful of other engineers designed a small spider bot. It was as small as someone's palm and could traverse over very steep angles, though speed was not its forte. Even though they should be somewhat resilient against the breakdown effect, in truth they were just cheap bots designed to be as small and cheap as possible while still capable of navigating through the rough terrain.

No matter. The Vandals produced thousands of them in short notice and packed them up in crates that held hundreds of them at a time. They took up very little space when folded up, so the fast transports could easily carry them all.

Every hour or so, the exploration party released two of them and programmed them to reach specific drop points a fair distance away from the temporary camp.

Most wouldn't be able to make the journey. They'd either be crushed underneath the foot of the errant godlings that roamed the sparse lands inside the red zone, be delayed for weeks, get stuck in a pit or difficult terrain or even get picked off by rival forces who detected the spider bots!



However, each spider bot that made it to the drop points provided a valuable status update to the Vandals and Swordmaidens left behind.

"Seems like the survival rate of bots is around thirty percent so far. Not bad. That's higher than we expected." Chief Dakkon complimented his own work.

"It's only been a day." Ves noted. "The distance the bots have to traverse isn't very far. Once they reach the Starlight Megalodon, who knows if we'll receive any bots at all."

"I have faith in my bots. They're crafty little buggers."

Right now, Captain Byrd called up a small group of mech officers and chiefs to inform them of what the exploration party encountered so far. Everyone looked forward to see and hear what the fabled red zone had to offer.

A projection came to life. Captain Byrd began to summarize the first reports. "As we've expected, the terrain has grown increasingly rougher. This could partially be explained by a large impact happening in the past, such as a battleship the size of a city crash-landing in the region. However, the irregularities in the terrain may also have been affected by strong spikes in spacetime distortion. The worst possibility is that these strong spikes are still ongoing and remain a huge hazard."

Everyone looked serious, including Ves. From the Glowing Planet campaign, he witnessed the horror of spacetime shenanigans. Anyone who became victim of a spacetime wrinkle or whatever might suffer a fate worse than death!

The projection shifted to various alien plants and strange animals being preyed upon by hardy godlings.

Dr. Tillman stepped up this time. "So far, we haven't spotted the presence of any wildlings or wildling tribes, but there are sparse amounts alien creatures and godlings roaming the red zone. The alien exobeasts appear to be the

remnants of the planet's indigenous wildlife that have survived the terraforming process. The likely reason why they are in the red zone is because the environment is unsuitable for Earth-based life."

Basically, the red zone gave the Flagrant Swordmaidens a taste of how Seven looked like before human intervention.

"Are the alien critters dangerous?"

"We do not believe so, but it's better if you don't try your luck. Their flesh is almost certainly inedible to baseline humans and they are remarkably adapted to the heavy gravity. Due to their small stature, they shouldn't pose too much of a threat to a properly armed and armored individual on foot."

The rest of the meeting devolved into other miscellaneous observations. For example, the Enduring Protectors that Ves designed held up well, as did Mayra's Asterias. Both mechs marched stably and strongly through the rough terrain and withstood the frequent spacetime distortions with stoic solidity.

In fact, the upgraded fast transports exhibited some malfunctions already, and this was only the first day!

Chief Dakkon's face grew ugly when he noted this awful performance. Although it might have just been a bad day for his fast transport, it still reflected a potential weakness. Without the transports and the supplies they carried, how far could the exploration party go?

"Have there any been signs of our rivals?"

"None yet so far, but it is only a matter of time."

Due to the increasingly strange circumstances, the exploration party slowed their pace to a crawl. They thought they might have been able to reach the Starlight Megalodon in a single day, but as they got deeper and deeper in the red zone, various hazards started to pop up.

"Is that a weapon crater?"

"A powerful explosion caused this crater. Even now, it is throwing up high amounts of radiation. While the danger isn't so acute at a distance, the exploration party already stumbled upon dozens of craters like this. More exotic weapon scars dot the lands as well."

Even several hundred years ago, the CFA made use of a large variety of advanced weaponry. As the Age of Conquest amply demonstrated, their warships could inflict a devastating amount of damage on any planet if they held no scruples.

Fortunately, the battle scars showed that the big guns hadn't been taken out. Even a single antimatter torpedo could have turned the entire red zone into a huge crater!

"From the signs of battle, the survivors of the Starlight Megalodon have likely come to blows with each other." Captain Byrd said. "We don't know the nature of the conflict or which sides emerged as the victor, but we don't stand a chance if any of the remnants brings these devastating weapons to bear on us."

They already knew that some portion of the Starlight Megalodon still remained operational after enduring several millennia of accelerated time.

Who knew how they would react when the exploration party finally arrived at their doorstep. Would they allow the visitors to plunder the Starlight Megalodon at will?

Still, even if their chances didn't look good, the Flagrant Swordmaidens had come too far to go back empty-handed. They at least needed to make an attempt, if only to please their backers.

The meeting ended and everyone returned to their duties. From what the spider bots already relayed, Ves felt as if they only brushed upon the tip of the iceberg.

This was the most dangerous region on the planet. Even the hardy dwarves, who seemed to be practically everywhere, avoided this region like the plague!

Four days from the exploration party's departure, the number of spider bots that reached the drop points reduced drastically. The last spider bot that limped its way back on three legs notified the main forces that they had reached within view of the Starlight Megalodon!

The vague footage they captured and stuffed into the data chips of the spider bots showed the shadow of an enormous beast that left a huge furrow onto the ground!

Though the distance and interference in the air only revealed a glimpse of the mythical battleship, the entire camp erupted in celebration.

"The battleship is still intact!"

"Look at the size of that beast! They weren't kidding when they said that battleships are floating cities!"

"Look at how the Starlight Megalodon hasn't broken up upon landing! Her main armor belt must be thicker than several mechs stacked on top of each other!"

Everyone could see that the Starlight Megalodon survived a rough landing where they skidded over the terrain at an angle. She must have endured an enormous amount of stress, but still managed to hold together under these extreme conditions.

And she managed to accomplish all of this on a Super Earth that increased her already prodigious weight by six times!

Her survival up to now was a testament of pinnacle CFA engineering, and only underscored the formidable nature of the Big Two!

However, even though the battleship seemed to have survived her forced orbital landing on Seven, the immense craft did not look entirely normal. The Flagrant Swordmaidens all received detailed information packages about the Starlight Megalodon's ship class, but her current contours diverged from what she looked like at the start.

It was as if her hull gained a lot of extras.

"What is that?"

"I don't know. Extra armor?"

"You idiot! Do you think a battleship like the Starlight Megalodon needs any extra armor? Their city wall-like armor belts is completely made up of the most advanced varieties of compressed armor!"

Some of the Vandals guessed that the extra construction might be weapon mounts. Others guessed that the survivors built structures along the hull. Nobody knew the answer as of yet as the footage simply couldn't resolve that much detail at this distance.

The exploration party needed to get closer.

The people back at the camp continued to perform their duties while they waited for the next status update.

Only... no other spider bots came back. An entire standard day went by without any spider bots making it to the drop points!

What had happened?!

The uncertainty gnawed at them all. Even Captain Byrd grew irritable. Even if only a single had passed, the lack of spider bots and status updates made everyone fear the worst!

"How can this be? We got the Enduring Protectors and the Asterias escorting the fast transports. We even sent out a friggin' sacred god!"

"Maybe it's just plain bad luck. The terrain did get more hazardous the closer they approached the crash site, right? None of the spider bots can endure the hazards in they get too close."

When two days went by without a word, everyone's worries doubled. Even Ves lost some of his composure. Had his Enduring Protector design failed for some reason? Did the mechs fall short against a superior force?

Captain Byrd called up Ves for a private meeting and asked for his opinion on the matter.

"There are too many unknowns, captain. We don't know what the exploration party has encountered." Ves began. "There may be threats out there, whether from our rivals or from something native to the planet, that can explain the lack of status updates. Still, I have faith in my design. I refuse to believe that any of our rivals could have fielded an overwhelmingly strong mech force."

"What if they fielded wild gods or sacred gods?" Captain Byrd pointed out. "After all, we managed to secure the service of a sacred god, while the Caged Tongs conditions a dozen wild gods into becoming their cannon fodder."

"Even so, the god beasts are extremely slow, ma'am. If the exploration party ever bumps into them, my Enduring Protectors can easily cook them with their laser cannons."

Ves really didn't have much to say except to express his confidence in his own design. Mayra's Asterias weren't half-bad either. They shouldn't have fallen so easily no matter what.

In the end, Captain Byrd passed him an order. "I've discussed this situation with Commander Lydia and we've come to the decision to prepare a follow-up party. This one won't bring any people on foot, but is merely tasked with

following the footsteps of the exploration party in order to ascertain their status. Can you fabricate six Enduring Protectors on short notice?"

Ves frowned, but only mildly. "This request is rather unexpected, but I'm sure I can divert enough resources and manpower to finish the job. However, I don't think I can deliver six new mechs in less than six weeks. Our 3D printers and other equipment are acting up due to the breakdown effect. Even routine jobs takes three times longer to complete. Are you sure you're willing to wait that long, captain?"

"As long as we have the resources to spare, I want you to prepare extra mechs. Even if the exploration party is wiped out, we need to confirm what happened!"

#### Chapter 873 Tyrant Ves

Ves immediately returned to the temporary workshops and ran the mech technicians ragged. The maintenance crews couldn't afford to slack off their continuous repair duties, but they also couldn't take too long to fabricate six extra Enduring Protectors!

In that moment, the mech workshops descended into hell!

With a pushy taskmaster like Ves at the helm, none of the mech technicians had the opportunity slack off! He drove each and everyone of them to the brink.

They needed to complete twice the work in half the time! While it drove everyone crazy, Ves was more than familiar with their temperaments. They may be rather lazy most of the time, but they could accomplish a lot of work for a short amount of time!

Ves knew that he couldn't drive the mech technicians to such a punishing pace for long, but it shouldn't be a problem to run them ragged for a couple of days!

The chief technicians and mech technicians all cursed at him, but what could they do? Ves knew each and every trick in the book, and he cracked down on any attempts at skirting their works.

Some mech technicians even suffered 'workplace accidents' that should have sent them packing to the infirmary.

Instead of doing so, Ves called in the doctors and patched the injured mech technicians up with emergency treatments that put them back intact. Though the short-term treatments only kept them up and running for a week at most before they collapsed, the injured mech technicians regained enough strength to resume their duties!

"Anyone else who suffers a 'workplace accident' will get fed to the critters roaming outside!" Ves declared with a scowl on his face.

All of the mech technicians became intimidated by the force in his words. They didn't know whether Ves would follow through with his threat, but from the sternness radiating from his voice and posture, he seemed completely willing and able to toss the mech technicians to the dogs!

Privately, Ves wouldn't go so far, if only because the Vandals couldn't afford to lose any manpower. Losing a couple of them at once would set back their work schedules a lot! They couldn't afford to fall behind on their repair and maintenance tasks.

Several days passed by as new Enduring Protectors slowly emerged from the workshops. Ves unavoidably went for haste this time, which caused the newly-finished mechs to be a bit less sound than the ones that joined the exploration party.

Ves couldn't help it, as previously he had an entire month to fabricate twelve of them. This time, he needed to complete one mech every day in order to meet Captain Byrd's expectations.



The breakdown effect truly did its best to hinder the mech technicians in every step of the way. The 3D printers underwent continuous inspections and repair while their tools sometimes failed midway or caused serious accidents.

Still, after several marathon sessions and sleepless nights, the exhausted Vandal mech technicians managed to fabricate six mechs in six days, all the while somehow managing to keep up with their regular duties.

This was a miracle in management! Even though many mech technicians collapsed and productivity immediately dropped for the next few days, at the very least they hadn't fallen behind on their work.

They all developed a new hatred for Ves, but he took no notice of their newly invigorated dislike for him. As long as they got the job done, they could say whatever they wanted behind his back.

To Ves, he long stopped paying close attention to mech technicians. Perhaps he inherited some bad habits from the Swordmaidens, as he outright treated them as slaves during this hectic period.

Unwilling to work? Too tired to stay awake? Get back to work!

Although it was terribly unfair for Ves to subject the mech technicians to such a brutal work pace, their entire situation was unfair from the start.

If the situation called for it, he did not hesitate to turn into a tyrant and incur a lot of hatred on himself. Compared to their lives, what did their welfare matter?

As Ves delivered the Enduring Protectors, Captain Byrd already prepped a few Vandals to pilot them.

More and more laser rifleman mechs turned into empty shells as their mech pilots got assigned to the Enduring Protectors. The same applied to the Swordmaidens as precious Devil Razors joined the reserves as their mech pilots boarded the cockpits of the Asteria leopard mechs.

All of these transfers considerably weakened the strength of the main forces. With so many mechs lacking mech pilots, the Flagrant Swordmaidens became less certain that they could win a pitched battle against a rival force.

Fortunately, no enemy approached them as of yet. Whether this status quo would hold for long, nobody knew. Everyone knew that a battle couldn't be avoided.

However, now was not the time. Even after a week since the last status update, no spider bot came back from the center of the red zone.

No matter if it was Ves, Chief Dakkon or the other Vandals, they all started to suspect the worst. Had the exploration party fallen into a trap? Did they fall into a deadly environmental hazard?

The sheer amount of possibilities left the Vandals and Swordmaidens guessing. This was also why Captain Byrd and Commander Lydia anxiously prepared a follow-up party.

This time, not a lot of people gathered to send the small follow-up party off. Six Asterias and six Enduring Protectors both set off with a fast transport carrying loads of spider bots.

This time, Chief Dakkon exerted a considerable amount of effort in improving the design of his spider bot. The Mark II version of the spider bot incorporated more robust and expensive materials. This vastly increased the resource cost of producing them, but none of the Vandals could afford to be stingy on this matter.

With over ten-thousand spider bots loaded into the cargo hold of the fast transports, it would send out up to ten spider bots per hour! Even if six or seven met with various mishaps, there was a good chance that at least one of them would make it to the preprogrammed drop points!

"I've improved upon the design! This time, they won't fail, I swear!" Chief Dakkon boasted.

Ves was a little skeptical about his boast. He briefly studied the design of the old and new versions of the spider bots, and while he acknowledged their reliability and capabilities, they were ultimately disposable messenger bots.

Despite the hyperbole, the bots did pass on their messages with a bit more success than their predecessors. With an overall survival rate of seventy percent in the first day and forty percent in the next two days, an ample amount of spider bots brought back duplicate messages every hour.

The continuous stream of intelligence reassured Captain Byrd and Commander Lydia. Even though the Flagrant Swordmaidens truly paid a considerable price for upgrading the spider bots, nothing was scarier than losing touch!

Due to the perils the exploration party identified, the follow-up party marched slowly and steadily, prioritizing caution over speed. Everything could be undone by a single wrong step, so they made sure not to land themselves in any danger.

Four days into their journey, the spider bot that returned passed on an alarming message.

The follow-up party stumbled upon the remnants of what looked like a battle between mechs!

Ves immediately got called to the mobile headquarters. When he inspected the footage sent back with several spider bots, he immediately identified the bare and worn-out wrecks.

"These are certainly the wrecks of highly advanced but outdated mechs, ma'am. Look at the lack of corrosion. If we can salvage those wrecks and

recycle their materials, we can probably double the toughness of a handful of our mechs!"

"Are they CFA mechs?" Captain Byrd asked.

"No doubt about it." Ves stated. "There are half-a-dozen obvious design quirks that are unique to older CFA mechs. They have their own take on mechs."

Though weathering the environment for several thousand years stripped them bare of their coatings, he still spotted several telltale design characteristics that reminded him of old CFA mechs.

"Do these mechs come from the Starlight Megalodon's original mech contingent, or are they something they fabricated after crash landing on the planet?"

Ves thought about it. "I can't say for certain, but I'm leaning towards the former. The design of these mechs aren't very optimal in heavy gravity environments. Look at those pieces of debris on their backs. Those are the remains of gravitic backpacks."

While he could talk all day about the traits of the mechs, he couldn't tell what happened here. Too much time had passed and most of the marks of the battle had long been wiped from the terrain. Only the wreckages remained, but besides their salvage value, they really didn't offer anything else.

Still, just the presence of ancient mechs told them that the Starlight Megalodon used to field them in the past. Were any of them still intact and in working condition? Ves couldn't imagine that something like that was possible, especially since so many years had passed by on the surface.

"In case we are forced to enter into battle against the CFA mechs, can you tell us how to best defend against them?" The captain asked.

This caused those present to shudder. With all the weirdness that happened up to now, being forced to battle actual CFA mechs became a very real possibility!

Ves didn't exhibit any fear. "There's nothing to be afraid of mechs of this generation. Even if they are top-tier CFA mechs, they are so outdated that our regular mechs stand a good chance at beating them. Our mechs benefit from an enormous amount of advancements, and this is not something that high-quality mechs from the CFA can resist if their designs are still the same."

"Is that true?"

"I'm sure of it. The only thing you need to pay attention to is that their armor systems are extravagant. Even their light skirmishers can be as tough as heavy knights in certain cases! Therefore, it is very hard to overpower an outdated CFA mech unless you apply overwhelming force. There's no other shortcut to defeating them. Just the material value of their mechs alone are worth as much as entire planets of the Bright Republic!"

This did not make it easy for the Vandal mech officers. It would be best if they didn't meet any CFA mechs in battle at all! Even though the warship lovers disdained the use of mechs, they still made serious use of them! The mech designers in the employ of the CFA weren't that much worse from the mech designers working for the MTA!

Over the following days, the follow-up party uncovered other curiosities which the spider bots sent back. They found no other remnants of CFA mechs, but they did find plenty of traces of battle.

It became abundantly clear that the survivors of the CFA engaged in a very frigid conflict at some point in time.

Once the follow-up party came close to the last location of the exploration party, they doubled the amount of spider bots sent back and also slowed down their pace.

They managed to identify the indentations in the ground that the exploration party left behind. They led straight towards the shadow of the Starlight Megalodon that loomed in the distance.

"We have not encountered any of the members of the exploration party as of yet." The mech officer in charge of the follow-up party reported. "After scouting our surroundings for any hazards, we intend to split up and seek out the exploration party. If we haven't encountered any trace of them after a couple of hours of searching, our mechs are instructed to pull back to this location in order to determine our next step. Our fast transport and a couple of mechs will stay behind."

Splitting up the follow-up party put the individual mechs at considerable risk, but it also spread the risk.

If anything dangerous lurked in the vicinity of the Starlight Megalodon, at the very least they could still send back word of the loss!

#### **Chapter 874 Revenge of the Vesians**

Just as every Vandal and Swordmaiden waited for the next status updates of the follow-up party, the scout mechs sent back word of an alarming piece of news.

They encountered enemy scout mechs!

Not only that, they actually tangled against each other!

The scuffle didn't last long, but it allowed both sides to get the measure of each other.

To be frank, the Vandal scout mech almost lost!

Ves got called to an emergency meeting to analyse the battle footage, but the Vandals present already made a judgement on what they encountered.

"It's the Vesians!"

They already knew the Vesians arrived at the Aeon Corona System and landed their ground forces on the planet. However, for so long the immense size of the planet reduced the odds of bumping into each other.

No longer!

The Vesian military mech did not hide its allegiance. It proudly wore its regimental colors.

"It's the 1st Meandering Monkeys of the 3rd Imodris Legion!" Captain Byrd announced with a chilly voice. "They're the landbound reconnaissance forces under the command of Lady Amalia of Imodris."

"The same noblewoman who raided the Bentheim Region!?"

Lady Amalia made a splash early in the war. She brought out the entire 3rd Imodris Legion and successfully raided numerous lightly-defended star systems in the interior of the Bright Republic!

Vesian scions often led their troops into committing bold attacks, but the deep strike that the 3rd Imodris Legion performed practically whacked the Brighters in the face!

The entire state despaired, and even the LMC's Mech Nursery on Cloudy Curtain barely managed to fend off a small raid.

Only until the Flagrant Vandals paid the Vesians back by sneaking all the way into the Imodris Duchy and subsequently thrashed the Detemen System. Their incredible daring shot up their profile and provided an invaluable boost to the Republic when they most needed it! Though most Brighters probably

forgot about the Vandals soon after, they earned more than enough glory to last a lifetime!

Secretly, that operation also set the Verle Task Force on the path to the Starlight Megalodon, but Ves and the others learned about this later.

As far as the Flagrant Vandals were concerned, they more than squared with the Vesians, yet the Imodris Duchy might not think so!

"There's more. Do you see the mech that has run to reinforce the Meandering Monkey scout? I recognize those colors as well. That a mech of the Hostland Warriors!"

"Say what?!"

"Isn't that a mech regiment from the Hafner Duchy?! Why would they work together with Lady Amalia?!"

The Vesian officers and chiefs all grew incredibly grave. While mech regiments from different duchies occasionally fought alongside each other, it only happened during major engagements, such as when they joined forces to conquer well-defended star systems.

Outside of that, mech regiments from rival duchies hated each other's guts. In fact, mech regiments mech legions led by nobles detested working together even if they hailed from the same duchy or noble house.

A noble from a different duchy? Enemy!

A noble from the same duchy but from a different house? Enemy!

An esteemed brother or sister from the same house as yours? Enemy!

The sheer amount of infighting that went on in the noble circles of the Vesian Kingdom completely confused the Brighters. How could they get anything done if they constantly competed against people from their own side? It even



caused them to resist the Vesians harder, because they wanted no part of their madness!

Still, Ves spotted a common thread. "I think it's no coincidence that the Meandering Monkeys and the Hostland Warriors are fighting side by side. Which Vesian duchies did our mech regiment piss off lately? Imodris, Venidse and Hafner! I wouldn't be surprised if a Venidsan detachment has joined the party as well. I think their goals aren't limited to just the Starlight Megalodon. They are after us."

Everyone looked even graver than before. If any other Vesians arrived in the Aeon Corona System, then the Vandals might still have some hopes of avoiding combat. Yet it had to be mechs hailing from the Imodris and Hafner duchies, both of which harbored an undying hatred against the mech regiment that stampeded throughout their territories!

"If the Hostland Warriors are here, do you reckon that..."

"No one in Hafner hates us more than that expert candidate we thrashed!"

"Did you forgot already? She's not an expert candidate anymore. She's a fully-fledged expert pilot now!"

A couple of Vandals connected the dots. Lady Amalia must have paid a huge price to invite the Hostland Warriors. There was no reason for a scion from Imodris to bother with a Hafner mech regiment unless she wanted to hitch Venerable Relia Foster to her wagon!

The Flagrant Vandals captured her on Nova Migolatus I at great cost. They proceeded to ransom her back to the Hafner Duchy for an even greater price to make up their losses.

Back then, the Vandals thought they got the better out of the trade. In exchange for sending back the promising young expert pilot, they received an

abundant amount of funds and resources that prepared them for their journey to the Aeon Corona System.

In hindsight, perhaps it would have been better to keep her in custody, because she'd certainly be out for revenge!

"The odds are huge that Venerable Foster has consented to working together with Lady Amalia, if only to obtain the opportunity for a rematch!"

The Vandals brought this disaster upon themselves. Who told them to accept a mission for the rebels to thrash an up-and-coming expert candidate?

The Vandals retrieved a bunch of archival data from the local database, but it contained too little details about the current disposition of the Vesians arrayed against them. This also prevented them from coming up with any solid strategies.

The meeting adjourned without much result besides relaying the gravity of the situation to everyone.

When the Swordmaidens learned of the threat, their mech pilots reacted with quiet anticipation. They never experienced the dreadfulness of fighting against a military mech force!

Fortunately, Commander Lydia possessed a lot more sense and tempered her Swordmaidens. They always had it easy up to now, as no conventional pirate force could stand in their way.

This time, their luck drew short!

Ves read the mood of the Vandals as they grimly prepared for battle. Having sent a substantial amount of mechs to the red zone, those that remained had to do with less!

"What I wouldn't give to have Qilanxo right now." He sighed.

The clash against the Vesians appeared inevitable. Over the coming days, scout mechs from the Meandering Monkeys emerged out of the woodwork. They aggressively tested the boundaries of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Due to the restrictions imposed by the environment, the skirmishes started and ended within minutes of each other. Neither side committed to a serious battle as of yet, and what fights did erupt between the mechs of each side only left shallow marks.

Nonetheless, the Meandering Monkeys more often than not gained the upper hand in these skirmishes against both Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs.

It couldn't be helped, as the Meandering Monkeys completely specialized in reconnaissance operations! Their tactics and strategies in this area completely blew the Flagrant Swordmaidens away.

Their martial tradition compelled them to be aggressive in every scouting operation. They weren't content to hide in the bushes and observe their enemies from a distance. They were all about getting up close and personal and punching their adversaries in the nose before gleefully running away!

When Ves surveyed the battle damage in person at the workshops, he read the marks on the scout mechs that returned. Overall, their weapons exhibited much less wear and tear than their armor plating.

As a mech designer who knew mechs inside and out, he could instantly read the progression of a battle from the marks left behind on a machine.

Evidently, the Vandals got the shorter end of the stick.

As the mech technicians started to catalogue the accumulated battle damage, Ves approached the exhausted mech pilot sitting on a crate next to the light mech. A serviceman passed him a bottle of nutrient solution, which the mech pilot drank deep gulps of. The skirmish may not have lasted very long, but it drained every bit of his concentration!

"Hello."

"Mr. Larkinson." The mech pilot replied lethargically.

Ves acquired a very intimidating reputation among the mech pilots, though the man before was simply too tired to care about that right now. Compared to a bossy mech designer, the Vesians were the real enemy!

Even though Ves felt like he was about to pick open a bandaged wound, he still needed to know.

"I'll be studying the battle footage in a minute, but is there anything you can tell about the Meandering Monkeys? Their fighting habits, their weaknesses, our chances of winning against them and such?"

The Vandal mech pilot snorted. "We're not cut out to fight the Meandering Monkeys! They're so good at what they do that they are practically schooling us! Showing off our tricks in our light mechs is like showing off in front of a master. What we can do, they can do better. What they can do, we have no hopes of replicating."

"They're that good in skirmishes?"

"Reconnaissance mech regiments don't sound very impressive, and they often get the short end of the stick when it comes to funding them, but the Meandering Monkeys are resourceful buggers. Their mechs aren't all that better than ours and their mech pilots aren't any more talented either, but their training makes a huge difference! Vandals like us are geared for quick raiding operations. We are trained to go in and out, avoiding the enemy's strong points while exploiting their weak points. Our long deployment on this planet forces us to do the exact opposite."

"That's.. surprisingly insightful of you."

"Heh. I'm a light mech pilot. I know what I'm talking about." The mech pilot smirked a bit before frowning. "The Meandering Monkeys are almost the exact opposite to us. They have taken reconnaissance and harassment to a whole other level. They love to play mind games and probe our weaknesses. They aren't afraid of pushing the limits when they see an opportunity. Their regimental name says it all. They meander around, never letting us pin them in place, and they're monkeys in the way they fight and confound our counterattacks."

The Flagrant Vandals had their strong suits, but as the mech pilot said, they didn't excel in frontal battles.

"Their weaknesses?" Ves repeated.

"Well, me and my buddies noticed that while the Meandering Monkeys are annoying, they only rarely switch into high gear. Each time they provoke a fight, they try to accomplish the most while expending the least amount of energy. In fact, the main reason why we've been able to hang on is because we are much more willing to perform energy-intensive maneuvers than the Meandering Monkeys."

This was an important clue!

"I see! That might mean their energy supply isn't as great as ours!" Ves exclaimed. The Vandals possessed at least one indisputable advantage.

"What about the Hostland Warriors?"

The Hostland Warriors took on multiple roles. They resembled the Flagrant Vandals in that they engaged in both landbound and spaceborn operations. Overall, they made a name for themselves as a versatile and dependable all-around battle regiment.

"A few of their scouts tagged along in the first few appearances, but they're not as good as the Meandering Monkeys. They never showed up after that."

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. Even if the light mechs of the Hostland Warriors couldn't keep up with the Meandering Monkeys didn't mean they disappeared from the battle theater.

"Since the Meandering Monkeys are continuing to harass our scout mechs, do you think we can fend them off?"

"No." The mech pilot decisively declared. "Even with limitless energy, these skirmishes are taking a toll on us. Each time they come back, they either show off a new trick or they dissect our own. They're taking our measure through these brief clashes while simultaneously wearing us down. You know what I think? They're either going to ramp up the pressure slowly, or go straight in for the knockout punch!"

Considering the energy constraints the Vesians must be facing, both of them guessed that they must certainly be aiming to force a decisive battle!

#### **Chapter 875 Warriors vs Soldiers**

If a random mech pilot came to this conclusion, then so could the rest of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

No one looked forward to a decisive battle against the Vesians. With the Hostland Warriors as the mainstay and the Meandering Monkeys assaulting the flanks, the Flagrant Swordmaidens did not possess any inherent advantages.

Very likely, the Meandering Monkeys probed the Vandals so aggressively not just to play some games. Each time they appeared, they attempted to probe deeper into the defensive envelope of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

The Vesians wanted to gather intelligence on their opponent's strength. More specifically, they sought to obtain a solid count of mechs they had to face.

"The Vesians aren't as stupid as the Caged Tong. There's no way they'll commit to an attack if we outnumber them by a hundred mechs or more." Ves stated during a brief moment of off-time at the mess hall.

Chief Dakkon efficiently shoveled down his chow into his mouth. None of the Vandals wasted any time on their food these days. They had too much work to do!

"Do you reckon the Vesians outnumber us, Ves? We did spot them with a huge fleet in the last star system."

"Yeah, but then they got whacked by the Church of Haatumak. If not for that, the Vesians would have been able to eliminate us in space before we reached the Aeon Corona System."

Yet no matter what happened, the conflict between the two could no longer be postponed. Sooner or later, old hatreds along with some new ones needed to be reconciled.

The Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom may be waging a war many light-years away from the Aeon Corona System, yet no matter how far they traveled, they still couldn't escape the war!

Even if the Vesians lost several starships and incurred a lot of battle damage from the foiled ambush attack by the frontier cultists, they still retained much of their strength.

The Vandals tried to estimate the number of enemy mechs they might face from studying the long-distance sensor readings of the Vesian fleet. The fleet in orbit also caught some more glimpses of the Vesian fleet, but they generally played cat-and-mouse for months.

It was well-known that the Flagrant Vandals placed more emphasis on spaceborn battles. For now, the Vesians prudently placed their hopes on winning the battle on land. No matter if the Vesians gained the upper hand on

land or in space, a victory in either sphere instantly ended any hopes for the Vandals to complete the mission!

The Vesians knew exactly what they were doing. The Flagrant Vandals stood a better chance in space than on land, which they never really excelled in fighting at unless they wanted to perform a quick raiding action.

Still, even if the Flagrant Vandals lacked both expertise and experience in this area, they were not vegetables! Recent landbound operations not only forced them to brush up their playbook, they also disciplined them into a smaller but more efficient fighting force.

The casualties suffered by the Vandals since the war reduced their numbers substantially, but those who survived all grew stronger from the harrowing experiences. Many mech pilots experienced drastic growth as the frequent intensive battles pushed them to exceed their old limits.

If the Flagrant Vandals enjoyed some time to digest their gains and replenish their losses, then they would have emerged at least twenty percent stronger than their old selves.

Yet the lengthy mission and their Vesian rivals didn't allow them to do so!

A decisive battle between a mixed raiding regiment and a combination of professional scouts and versatile warriors should have ended in disaster for the former.

The only saving grace was that the Vandals weren't alone. Lydia's Swordmaidens got caught in their old rivalry, and for better or worse, they needed to overcome this hurdle as well if they wanted to make off with any gains from the Starlight Megalodon.

Ketis paid a visit to the Vandal workshops later in the day. She dropped by Ves' workplace in order to discuss the upcoming battle.



"You Vandals always make the Vesians out as horrible boogeymen." She began. "Are the Vesians truly different from the enemies we've fought before? We beat everyone who stood in the way. Why are you so unconfident all of a sudden?"

Ves glanced at Ketis with a grim expression. "You Swordmaidens are taking the threat of military mech regiments too lightly. They're nothing like the mercenary corps or pirate gangs you mix up with in the frontier. They don't face the same constraints in funding, training, resources and manpower. They are on a completely different level than civilian outfits."

"Yet the briefings say that even if the mech regiments are better funded and trained, they're not all that better than us in those aspects! We can still beat them in a fight!"

"You're forgetting the most crucial difference." Ves shook his head. "Haven't you seen the way the Flagrant Vandals fight? Any mech military is extremely good at training and drilling their mech pilots to fight in a certain fashion. What do they excel at the most? Coordination and formation fighting! The difference isn't that big when it comes to skirmishes between single squads of mechs. However, a major battle involving hundreds of mechs allows the Vesians to play out their immense advantages in this aspect alone!"

Ketis still possessed the same flaw that afflicted the rest of the Swordmaidens. Without seeing a true frontline mech regiment in battle, they wouldn't know how much of a force multiplier those advantages wrought.

Mechs fought best when they fought in unison! Clever formations amplified the inherent advantages of different mech models while covering up their weaknesses.

The female pirate designer frowned. She still possessed some of the typical Swordmaiden conceit, but she also respected Ves too deeply to discount his

opinion. "In an even battle with the same amount of mechs and mech pilots, who would win, the Swordmaidens or these Vesians?"

"There's no contest. The latter will win any day."

"What?! Our Swordmaiden mechs and mech pilots aren't that much worse than the mechs we've seen from your archival footage!"

In order to impress the Swordmaidens of the seriousness of the threat, the Vandals freely handed over as much intelligence about the Meandering Monkeys and the Hostland Warriors. Though the sparse recordings mostly showed actions from the previous wars, it still provided a valuable perspective on their strengths.

Unfortunately, it appeared too many Swordmaidens missed the mark. They drew the wrong lessons from the footage.

"I suggest you go back and review the footage again. Note that every opponent they face are military mech regiments or outfits that are connected to some military mech force. Only by employing the same level of coordination can we withstand their attacks."

This time, Ketis didn't say anything, but used her head for once. Ves always encouraged her to take a break and think through the implications of a contentious argument. It was a lot better than running her mouth without any thought or care.

The gravity of the situation finally dawned upon her. "Damn. Our Swordmaiden mech pilots are never afraid of a brawl... but we never bothered much with all of this fancy formation stuff. All we care about is hacking our opponents with our swords!"

Having observed the operation of the Vandals and the Swordmaidens for so long, Ves knew the reason why the latter failed to elevate their coordination. "It takes a special quality to be able to trust in your fellow mech pilots. Mech

militaries don't pay an excessive amount of importance at a mech pilot's genetic aptitude or their academy performance. Instead, they value mech pilots who score high on traits such as trust, cooperation, obedience and more. It doesn't matter if a mech pilot is a prodigy with a high genetic aptitude, if they are too cocky and rebellious, they can't be trusted."

"Our Swordmaidens aren't short of those qualities! We sisters are extremely close! We trust each other with our lives!"

"Is that truly so?" Ves expressed his doubt. "Certainly, there is a high degree of camaraderie among your sisters. Yet... the focus of your training is in an entirely different direction. Commander Lydia has done a great job at transforming nobodies from the frontier into elite mech pilots, but that is only impressive when compared to the low standards of the Faris Star Region. You Swordmaidens aren't tactically flexible enough and your teamwork is rudimentary. Your cohesion is fairly high compared to other pirate gangs, but any random Vesian mech regiment is able to dwarf it with ease."

"If you're right, what can we do about it? We are already set in our ways, and I doubt my sisters can master formation fighting in a couple of days."

"The Swordmaidens aren't suitable to this style of battle at all. Your mech pilots are champions and warriors more than soldiers. If you want to achieve the best chance of achieving a victory, you have to find a way to force the Vesians into smaller groups. They can't show their full prowess in formations if there aren't enough mechs to showcase their might."

This was easier said than done. If the Vesians already gathered intelligence on Lydia's Swordmaidens, then they would know how to avoid such a situation.

In the end, Ketis left the workshop with a concerned expression. Ves hoped that she'd be able to convince her fellow sisters not to belittle the threat of the

Vesians. If they thought they could beat the Vesians like they did against pirates, then they were sorely mistaken!

Ves privately estimated the chances of victory, but he only came up with vague guesses. The Flagrant Swordmaidens hadn't been able to scout the Vesians at all due to being constrained by the Meandering Monkeys.

The Vandals and Swordmaidens could forget about peeking at the main Vesian forces with experts in reconnaissance on the field!

A light mech regiment not only excelled in gathering intelligence, they also specialized in foiling enemy attempts at doing the same.

In fact, strictly speaking, the battle between the Flagrant Swordmaidens and the Vesians already started from the first sighting!

The battle between the light mechs from both sides already put the Vesians at an overwhelming advantage.

"Truly, when a mech regiment excels at only one area instead of splitting their focus, they are unbeatable in their own specialty!"

This was the power of specialization! The Flagrant Vandals in fact possessed their own specialty as well, which was performing raids and avoiding enemy pursuit, but it encompassed a wide area of expertise.

In battle capabilities alone, the Flagrant Vandals split their training and resources in different areas. They fielded both landbound and spaceborn mechs, ranged mechs and melee mechs, mechs of all three weight classes and more.

All of this split attention led to a very broad and general martial tradition where the Vandals paid more attention to the result rather than the method. While this approach gave the Vandals a lot of freedom to pursue their interests in

their own ways, it also hampered greater coordination as well as strip them of the benefits of uniformity.

Sometimes, a mech regiment grew much stronger by focusing on the method rather than emphasizing results! This was because continued training and specialization in a single area continuously allowed them to refine their strong points while finding ways to mitigate their distinctive weak points.

From this perspective alone, the Swordmaidens possessed an advantage over the Flagrant Vandals. The elite pirates relentlessly trained in one mode of combat and became extremely skilled in their own area of expertise.

This was the biggest saving grace of the Swordmaidens, and provided every member of the Flagrant Swordmaidens some hope that they could still prevail in the coming battle.

"Yet is that merely false hope?" Ves asked himself in a pessimistic tone. "The Swordmaidens are specialized, but their lack of coordination makes it far too easy to outmaneuver them. The Vandals on the other hand can keep up with the Vesians in terms of coordination and formation fighting, but their split focus in training means we don't possess a sharp enough weapon to spearhead our defense."

#### **Chapter 876 Passionless Leader**

The skirmishes heated up as the Meandering Monkeys probed the Flagrant Swordmaidens on all sides. The portend of a battle loomed over everyone's heads, and even the Swordmaidens started to put away some of their arrogance as their own scouting mechs continued to suffer a loss against the Vesians.

The Meandering Monkeys had succeeded in gaining the measure out of the Vandal and Swordmaiden mechs.

The same couldn't be said for the defenders, as the abundant amount of tricky battle tactics of their foes continued to confound the Vandal and Swordmaiden scouts.

Ves already saw that the battle between the scout mechs started to go downhill. Damaged scout mechs continued to pour into the workshops. Mech technicians constantly worked double shifts in order to keep on top of the repairs. With the breakdown effect constantly breaking down mechs without rhyme or reason, the workload started getting out of hand.

The problem was that Ves couldn't do anything to reverse this adverse trend!

Every damaged mech was another mech that they couldn't field in the upcoming battle. If the backlog of damaged mechs continued to grow, the Flagrant Swordmaidens may be forced into a decisive battle with significantly less mechs!

Against an enemy as formidable and prepared as the Vesians, every mech counted!

Ves pretty much already pushed the mech technicians to the brink. Under his tyrannical leadership, he managed to push their productivity to the highest sustainable state he had ever seen. The fact that their work directly affected the odds of winning also motivated them to work honestly and diligently for once.

Yet even then, the backlog of damaged mechs continued to accumulate. Perhaps one day the backlog consisted of 2 damaged mechs. The next day 2 more damaged mechs joined the list.

Before they knew it, the Vandals might have as much as thirty damaged mechs waiting in queue to be repaired!

Obviously, Ves needed to nip that problem in the bud right at the start. Even the smallest wound could bleed a person dry if left unattended!

Ves pulled up his metaphorical sleeves and spent almost every waking morning in the trenches with the other mech technicians. He knew mechs better than all the other mech technicians, and only the most experienced chief technicians among the Vandals could still teach him a trick or two. His speed in fixing up mechs sometimes surpassed the effort of an entire crew!

Through this humble sacrifice, Ves managed to stay on top of the bleeding for now. Yet the backlog quickly threatened to grow out of control as the Meandering Monkeys continued to invade the perimeter of the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

"They don't know when to stop!"

"They are popping up more frequently every day! It's like they're determined to wear us all down!"

The lifespans of the Vandal light mechs shortened by months or even a year every time they rolled up the workshops in a beaten and damaged state. Ves intimately felt that the light mechs couldn't take this kind of abuse forever.

"Is that the goal of the Meandering Monkeys?"

If the Meandering Monkeys succeeded in wearing down or outright breaking their light mechs through these frequent skirmishes, then the Flagrant Swordmaidens missed a vital element in their lineup for the decisive battle.

Though the medium mechs took the leading role in any frontal clashes, the role of light mechs couldn't be ignored!

It would be too easy for the Meandering Monkeys to become unrestrained in their attempts to flank the positions of the Flagrant Swordmaidens or to sabotage their supply train. A stab in the back could unsettle the entire arrangements of the allied forces.

In the backdrop, the status updates of the exploration party and the follow-up party fell out of everyone's radar. The brass deliberately let the matter fade away from everyone's consciousness because at this point, nobody knew whether the Vesians slipped in any listening devices.

Though the extreme environment and high levels of interference in the air made it extremely difficult to implant bugs among the Flagrant Swordmaidens, even Ves could come up with a dozen or so tricks to bypass these restrictions.

"The easiest way is to turn someone traitor and have that person feed intelligence."

As much as Ves didn't want to believe that the Vandals and Swordmaidens would turn their backs on their comrades, he was too paranoid to dismiss the possibility.

The Vandals possessed a wide variety of personalities. Cowards and weak-willed servicemen also counted among their number, unfortunately. If the Vesians promised safe harbor in exchange for turning their coats, then a number of Vandals might actually take up the offer!

The Swordmaidens on the other hand possessed a lot more internal cohesion. Every Swordmaiden shared a strong bond with each other, and it would be unimaginable for any of them to stab their comrades in their backs. They would rather die than do something so egregiously dishonorable!

Yet the Swordmaidens didn't only consist of indoctrinated warrior women. They also brought along thousands of overwhelmingly male slaves that performed all the grunt work the Swordmaidens found unworthy to do themselves. Though the slaves underwent thorough brainwashing that locked them into perpetual service to the Swordmaidens, who knew if the Vesians could exploit or circumvent these conditions to their own ends?



For example, one of the simplest ways to get a brainwashed slave to spill was to impersonate their masters and order them around! The mentally-programmed slaves didn't possess the discernment and critical thinking necessary to distinguish between real and fake. Any decent spy that dressed up as a Swordmaiden could easily extract loads of intelligence from an absent-minded slave.

"Well, it's not going to be as easy as it sounds. I doubt the Vandals and the Swordmaidens are blind to these possibilities."

Ves already noticed changes in the camp. Both forces began to institute stricter patrols and inspections. Teams of security officers and armed warriors patrolled every corner of the camp and the nearby perimeter. Bots and high-tech scanners scoured every area for the presence of microscopic bugs or listening devices.

The number of people who received the privilege of accessing the status updates dwindled to a small number of core confidants. Ves surprisingly found himself among this gathering. He contributed too much to the Vandals and more than proved his loyalty.

There was no way that Ves could turn to the Vesians for asylum. Just his Larkinson pedigree alone precluded a warm welcome.

"As you know, the follow-up party split up and sent some of the mechs over the invisible boundary which cut us off from the first exploration party. It took days for one of them to come back. We have just received the first spider bots that brought back their findings." Captain Byrd began the meeting in the much emptier meeting room.

Right now, all kinds of shielding and precautions blocked any bugs from eavesdropping on the meeting. Ves even activated his signal jammer to boot,

though this had the unfortunate effect of shutting down most electronic devices including the projectors.

"Why did they take so long to return?" Someone asked.

"The short answer? They entered a territory under the complete control of the Starlight Megalodon. To be more precise, they fell under the control of whoever is currently controlling the Starlight Megalodon's systems. What happened was that any mech that came close enough lost control! Even Qilanxo is rendered helpless by a targeted constricting effect."

"What?!"

The small number of Vandals became gobsmacked. It didn't surprise them that the Starlight Megalodon possessed a means to put any approaching mech under a stasis effect.

What surprised them was that it still worked after so many years, and that someone still possessed the expertise to control such a system!

"Do we know who is in control of the battleship, ma'am?"

"The sole Enduring Protector who returned hasn't managed to come close enough to discern any details from the Starlight Megalodon. All the footage we've obtained still show the battleship as a distant, hazy shape. However, the surviving mech still managed to capture the process where our other mechs crossed the line and succumbed to the stasis effect. Tractor beams subsequently picked up the immobilized mechs and dragged them in the direction to the battleship. Their current status is unknown."

A very depressed mood spread throughout the meeting room. How many breakdown-proof mechs fell for this trap? Who exactly captured them, and why would they do so?

Ves hoped that whoever controlled the Starlight Megalodon's systems would be merciful to the captives. The fact that the Starlight Megalodon opted to capture the intruders rather than to wipe them out with a warship-grade cannon or something gave the Vandals a lot of hope for their continued existence.

The success of the mission depended on their conduct! Even if they'd been captured for some reason, at least they had a chance of negotiating with their captors!

"Captain, what do we do now with this information?" Ves asked.

"There's nothing we can do." Byrd answered unwillingly. "Fabricating more breakdown-proof mechs will only weaken our forces further. This is extremely foolish considering we are facing the prospect of a decisive battle against the Vesians. Anything else we send inside the capture envelope of the Starlight Megalodon will just be put to stasis and dragged towards the battleship without any way of transmitting any news. I'm not willing to throw anymore assets into this proverbial black hole. Let's repel the Vesian attack before we plan our next steps."

This was the most prudent course of action. They first needed to address the more acute crisis before they had the luxury of solving this thorny problem.

Getting cut off from the exploration party and most of the mechs of the follow-up party worried the Vandals immensely. So much time had already passed. Had the people they sent in suffered a mishap? Were they being tortured?

Perhaps they already died, with those outside the red zone none the wiser.

All of these possibilities depressed the Vandals, and Captain Byrd couldn't do anything to lift them up. She wasn't Major Verle, who always knew how to manage everyone's morale.

Ves hadn't noticed this flaw in Captain Byrd before, but now that bad news poured in from every direction, the differences in leadership style became especially notable.

Captain Byrd exhibited a detail-oriented leadership style. She prized data and facts over feelings and hunches. This made her a very thorough commanding officer who paid attention to every detail no matter how boring it may be.

Yet such an objective approach failed to stoke the passion of her subordinates. She had no charismatic bone in her body, and while she was capable of expressing emotions just like any other human, she wasn't adept at manipulating the feelings of others.

To Ves, Captain Byrd seemed like the middle manager type. Ves vastly preferred Major Verle over Captain Byrd.

Because to Ves, it seemed that Major Verle didn't bother to dig too deep into every detail. He merely needed to receive an overview of pertinent facts and set the broad strokes every policy.

As for the details? Major Verle could let his deputies take care of that stuff. A commanding officer never let themselves be bogged down by facts.

As the meeting turned to planning against a Vesian attack, Ves continued to observe Captain Byrd's handling of the situation. She was doing the best she could, but she handled matters like a bot. No matter how dismayed the other mech officers and chiefs became, Captain Byrd paid no notice to their own feelings.

What was she thinking? How could she pay so little attention to morale?

Ves wanted to speak up and provide some words of encouragement to the Vandals, but he didn't. Not only would it be unbecoming for a mech designer like him to broach this matter, it also risked putting him at odds with Captain Byrd.

For better or worse, Captain Byrd was in charge, and no matter how much Ves disagreed with her methods, they couldn't afford to let dissent run rife among the Vandals.

### Chapter 877 Prelude to Battle

The Vesians ramped up the pressure against the Flagrant Swordmaidens. The Meandering Monkey mechs not only risked greater injury in an attempt to seriously harm the scouts of the Flagrant Swordmaidens, the light mechs of the Hostland Warriors also started showing up again.

"The Vesians are gearing up for battle!"

"The Meandering Monkeys stopped pussy-footing around. They're trying to fell our mechs!"

The exhausted light mechs of the Flagrant Swordmaidens suffered quite a lot in the preceding days. Not only did Ves have to send the light mechs back into the field with hasty patch-up repairs, the mech pilots themselves underwent a huge amount of pressure.

Casualties started to mount. Mechs not only sustained serious damage, but also got wrecked!

Fortunately, the mech pilots ejected in time, causing no lives to be lost, but the Vesian light mechs always pounded the downed wrecks into scrap before they left.

This meant that even if Vandal or Swordmaiden reinforcements arrived to save the beleaguered squads, the wrecks became completely unrecoverable. Every time they dumped their wrecks in front of Ves, he could only shake his head in helplessness and relegate the remains for recycling.

The visible decline of the Vandal and Swordmaiden light mechs ratcheted up the tension inside the camp. As the prelude of the decisive battle, the frequent

skirmishes between the scout mechs sort of served the same purpose as a duel between champions before a major set piece battle.

Even though the victory or loss of a single champion didn't substantially affect the combat effectiveness of either side, in fact it carried huge implications in terms of morale!

Right now, the 'duel' between the Vesian and Flagrant Swordmaiden light mechs stretched out over days, prolonging the hurt for the losing side. Bad news constantly poured in while good news made itself scarce.

Since the camp wasn't very large and everyone could see the damaged light mechs returning from their patrols, the outcome of the skirmishes became obvious to everyone with a pair of eyes.

Ves figured that the opposite must be taking place at the Vesian camp. Each time the Meandering Monkeys and the Hostland Warriors returned from their harassment missions, they'd probably show off their exploits with the full blessing of their superiors.

Such actions built up morale and pumped the other Vesian mech pilots up for battle.

Therefore, the change in morale from one side may not be alarming, but when the differences compounded on each other, the total effect was alarming!

"The Vesians are systematically dismantling us, starting with our confidence. Trashing our light mechs is only a means to an end to them! Devious bastards!"

The worst part about all of this was that even if the Vandals and Swordmaidens knew what the Vesians intended, what could they do? If they pulled back their light mech patrols and turtled close to the camp, wouldn't that let the Vesians obtain a detailed view of their combat assets?

Not only that, the Vesians could easily pepper the camp with long-ranged laser fire, damaging the workshops and other critical facilities.

Therefore, even if the Flagrant Swordmaidens knew they were getting screwed, they were forced to play along, because every alternative at their disposal led to even worse outcomes!

"The Vesians are prepping us for the chopping block."

"Damn it, why don't they attack already?! Put an end to our suffering!"

"I don't know why we're turtling up. Why don't we go on the attack?"

"Idiot! Who would go on the attack while we're completely blind? We'll only fall into their trap if we rush out with haste!"

Even if Captain Byrd made the rational and most cautious decision by maintaining the status quo, she unintentionally gave the impression that she lack a spine.

The Vandals never let their enemies treat them as a punching bag! It was usually the opposite way around!

The instinct to attack was engraved into their martial tradition. Maintaining a static position and going on the defensive directly contradicted their usual conduct on the battlefield.

Usually, the Flagrant Vandals possessed the initiative to attack or retreat at will. This time, the mission forced them on a Super Earth where everyone's mobility faced extreme constraints. The entire environment fought them from the start, causing them to fall into this helpless position where their strengths never came into play while their weaknesses became exposed to their enemies.

Lydia's Swordmaidens shared the same characteristics as the Vandals. While they were a bit more used to trekking across untamed planets, even they underestimated the amount of rigors they needed to endure on Seven.

All of these deprivations severely impacted their morale and sapped their confidence in themselves. The Swordmaidens at least endured many crises before, and their training increased their willpower to insane heights, so they still held faith in themselves.

The Vandals on the other hand tumbled down as if they lost control of their legs. Ves really couldn't stand it. They were so confident and conceited when they faced a weak opponent, but once they faced a serious Vesian threat they immediately turned into scaredy cats.

This was a typical mindset of bullying the weak and fearing the strong!

Captain Byrd belatedly became aware of the problem impacting the men, but what could she do? Raising morale had never been much of a concern to her, and her stilted, awkward speeches increased their doubt rather than assuaging it.

More critically, the Vandals lacked the only competent mech officer who could prop up everyone's morale. The absence of Captain Orfan as a mental cornerstone to their confidence couldn't come at a worse time.

They shouldn't have been so eager to send away the exploration and follow-up parties without securing the main camp!

Now, due to the mishaps that Captain Orfan, Qilanxo, the fast transports, the Enduring Protectors and the Asterias suffered when they came too close to Starlight Megalodon, the Flagrant Swordmaidens faced the prospect of entering into battle without their help!



Even though the Vesian mechs abandoned their previous efforts to conserve their energy in order to pressure the Flagrant Swordmaidens, they couldn't keep up their wasteful actions forever.

At some point, the Vesians needed to pull the trigger. And that time almost dawned upon the Flagrant Swordmaidens.

Some of the more perceptive mech officers smelled the critical moment arriving, and they all summed up what courage they had left in preparation for the most critical battle in their careers.

Ves worked hard to prep the mechs for an imminent battle. He didn't even have to whip the mech technicians into shape anymore, because they knew as well as anyone how their work might tip the balance of the upcoming clash!

During one of his rare breaks, Ves suddenly received an unexpected visitor. He immediately decided to meet him in a closed office with his signal jammer encompassing the entire space.

"From the looks of your face, Jimmy, it looks as if you have something urgent to say."

Ves didn't have the time to concern himself with other matters lately, so he stopped meeting with Talkative Jimmy. Nonetheless, the urgency in which Jimmy sought a meeting alarmed Ves a bit.

"My boys and I kept tabs on a couple of shifty fellows. While we haven't caught them doing anything that crosses the line, some of them are making suspicious movements."

"Does that include our resident expert pilot?"

"Venerable Xie is preoccupied with the repair efforts on his mech. He hasn't been doing anything lately, but his sycophants are keeping close."

That didn't mean the foreign expert pilot sat still. Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "What does your intuition tell you?"

While Talkative Jimmy may be a good-for-nothing when it came to performing his regular duties, Ves couldn't fault his people skills. Everyone excelled at something, and a person like Jimmy was a good judge of character.

Ves even believed that Talkative Jimmy may be an agent of Flashlight, though the man was far too incompetent in other areas. Either he played up his role extremely well or he was simply who he appeared to be. Ves couldn't judge either way.

"My gut tells me his abrupt change in pattern is due to something new." Talkative Jimmy said with a grave voice. If not for the signal jammer, he wouldn't have dared to voice any doubt about the expert pilot. "You know what I reckon? I bet some Vesian spy managed to infiltrate our camp and somehow turned our own expert pilot! He was never fully into the Vandals anyway, and his behavior during our march across the planet has always been rather shifty. There's something wrong about him, I'm absolutely certain!"

"That's a grave accusation to make. Do you have any proof?" Ves asked.

"No. It's just my gut feeling, but I'm not the only one who feels that way. Every buddy of mine who kept an eye on Venerable feels the same way. The man just keeps to himself all this time and isn't taking any action so far. Don't you feel that's weird?"

Ves paused for a bit. Now that he thought about it, even Venerable O'Callahan wouldn't have ignored the perilous drop in morale. While expert pilots generally tended to be aloof and difficult to reach in order to prevent being swamped by rabid fans,

"In situations like this, a hero like Venerable Xie should have propped us up. Instead of holing up in his Pale Dancer, he should have been out and among

the men." Ves surmised. "His inaction runs counter against the interests of the Vandals."

That didn't mean Venerable Xie intended to stab the Vandals in the back, but it showed a disconcerting lack of effort on his part to reverse the declining trend. Expert pilots served as the trump cards of a powerful mech regiments. Besides their roles as supreme battle operators, they also served as symbols.

Perhaps the Vandals merely chalked up his inaction to his foreignness or his lack of adaptation to working with a mech regiment, but Jimmy thought otherwise.

Ves trusted his intuition a lot, and right now it indicated that Jimmy believed in his words. Yet could Ves rely on Jimmy's intuition to be accurate as well?

The entire crux of the situation rested on whether Jimmy's guesses and hearsay possessed any merit. Could Ves really take Jimmy's word that Venerable Xie may be plotting something detrimental?

"Do you have a man on the inside?" Ves asked.

"No way." Jimmy shook his head. "I tried sending some of my buddies, but that foreigner is really strict about accepting people in his circle. We tried for months but none of us managed to earn his trust."

That limited their options enormously. At this point, Ves wanted to access the neural interfaces of the Pale Dancer and the customized simulator pod in order to wipe away the evidence of his misdeeds. No matter what happened in the upcoming battle, Ves truly couldn't leave behind any trace of the work he did at Major Verle's request.

"I need access to his mech." Ves said simply. "Can you get me there?"

Jimmy frowned. "Aren't you the head designer? Why don't you just walk up there?"

Ves couldn't explain how Venerable Xie likely regarded Ves with distrust. Perhaps his actions directly led to Venerable Xie deciding to turn his coat!

After a few more minutes of hushed discussion, Jimmy left the office without any resolution. Neither Ves nor Jimmy came up with any response against the possibility of betrayal by their own expert pilot.

While Jimmy already told Ves that he and his 'buddies' already had something in store for the other shifty fellows, there was no way they could touch an expert pilot.

It also didn't help that Venerable Xie practically ate and slept inside the cockpit of the Pale Dancer. The man acted with the utmost caution and never left his mech with the excuse that he would be able to jump into battle at any time.

To Ves, the expert pilot may be on guard against any attempts at further perverting the Pale Dancer's neural interface. As long as Venerable Xie practically slept on top of it, there was no way Ves could sneak in and adulterate the neural interface any further!

The visit from Jimmy warned Ves that the time for indecision was over. He needed to pull the trigger before the matter blew up in his face.

### Chapter 878 Enigmatic

Stewing in his paranoia, Ves imagined the worst about Venerable Xie. Although they rarely came into touch with each other, Ves grew increasingly more unsettled at the thought of Venerable Xie developing some kind of revenge fantasy against the Flagrant Vandals.

They did screw over the Fourth Prince, the fallen noble who Venerable Xie trained all his life to protect.

Ves cursed Prince Hixt-Klaaster and his untimely death while under the protection of the Vandals. Why couldn't he cling to his life? The entire basis of

the agreement with the Vandals and Venerable Xie rested on the premise that the Fourth Prince was in safe hands.

The Prince's death sent the Vandals down into a tailspin. Ves shouldn't have succumbed to Major Verle's coercion and agreed to mess with Venerable Xie's neural interfaces.

"I can't leave this situation hanging." He muttered.

Three tampered neural interfaces existed. Ves didn't have to worry too much about the Parallax Star's neural interface. As a spaceborn lancer mech, it had been left with the fleet that was still under the command of Major Verle.

As the only other Vandal in the know, Ves already hinted at him beforehand to take good 'care' of the Parallax Star's neural interface.

Therefore, Ves only had to worry about the neural interfaces of the Pale Dancer and the expert pilot's personal simulator pod. If the Vesians ever got their hands on them and dug out their programming, they could instantly tarnish names of Ves, the Larkinsons, the Flagrant Vandals, the Mech Corps and even the entire Bright Republic with his crimes!

Sometimes as serious as being accused of brainwashing an expert pilot was just as bad as plotting to murder them! The MTA wouldn't tolerate such a matter. The entire Bright Republic might be sanctioned for this incident alone!

Therefore, this matter affected more than his personal reputation! He needed to take action for the good of the Bright Republic!

"Nevermind that it's my own fault for provoking this crisis in the first place."

Yet no matter how much he tried to justify his intentions, he wasn't a spy. How could he possibly sneak to the neural interfaces and access them long enough to wipe away the evidence?

There was no way the vigilant expert pilot and his band of confidants allowed outsiders access to his personal territory.

This problem continued confound Ves as time went by. He resumed his duties and continued to prepare the Vandals for mechs, but his heart wasn't in his work anymore. His productivity dropped as more than half of mind fantasized about cooking up some wild schemes that allowed him access to the neural interfaces.

Yet what could a mech designer do? Nothing.

He may wield a wide amount of influence among the Vandals, but he had no effective control over an expert pilot. Even if he advanced to Journeyman, he could never surpass the prestige enjoyed by an expert pilot among mech pilots.

"Even prestige has its limits." Ves grimaced.

Even though Ves made up his mind to take action, he simply couldn't come up with something that wouldn't backfire on him. The same limitations that prevented him from doing something earlier still existed.

Ves felt as if he was playing a game of chess where he already foresaw that he'd be put in checkmate in a couple of moves. No matter what decisions he came up with, none of them forestalled the disaster that he saw coming.

"It's like I have no other option but to concede."

Yet that was unacceptable to Ves. Even if he only possessed spurious proof for his fears, just the possibility of it was enough to dominate his imagination.

His thoughts became very dark as a consequence. When Ves finally put down his work and entered his office to clear his mind, the mech technicians around him sighed in relief.

His Earth Ant creaked as he sat down on the reinforced chair. He activated the desk terminal and called up a basic blueprint of the camp.

Due to Venerable Xie's esteemed position, the Pale Dancer and him resided close to the center of the temporary camp where security was highest. There was no way anyone could realistically sneak inside even if they wore an infiltrator suit.

The security officers all made use of the stealth detectors adapted from an earlier version developed by Ves. The Vandals all grew concerned that the Vesians might employ cloaked saboteurs, even though neither Imodris nor Hafner matched Venidse's dependency on stealth tech.

"It's not like I have a stealth suit anyway."

Ves turned his imagination to more extreme possibilities. If he couldn't forestall a checkmate through legitimate moves, then what about cheating?

He could either cheat or flip the chessboard entirely! After all, why should he lie down and consign himself to condemnation?

Just as Ves started to explore more extreme solutions, the office suddenly became engulfed in a jamming field. That caused Ves to jump from his reverie and frown.

"That's strange. Is my signal jammer acting up?"

His high-powered signal jammer gadget never showed signs of malfunctioning. In fact, even though Ves pretended to tinker with his personal gear on a daily basis, none of his advanced technological devices showed any signs of degradation. He long abandoned any speculation about the inexplicable reason for their immunity against the breakdown effect.

When he checked the signal jammer gadget embedded into his Earth Ant, he found to his surprise that it still remained dormant. It never turned on without

his permission. So why did he became engulfed in the jarring signal jammer effect?

"Mr. Larkinson."

"WHO!?"

Ves immediately jumped out of his chair and drew out his backup laser pistol in the direction of the voice.

Standing in the middle of an office stood a very familiar woman garbed in a reinforcement infiltrator suit. Compared to the last time he saw her, the woman obviously beefed up her gear, as her infiltrator suit now encompassed the slimmest gravitic backpack he had ever seen.

"Miss Calabast!"

Even though Ves only met Calabast a couple of times, he had a deep impression of the gorgeous, dark-haired lady. She posed herself as an intelligence operative of the Vesians, but Ves would be stupid to believe the image she presented on the surface.

Her sudden emergence in his office despite the base's precautions against infiltrators put Ves into an intense feeling of crisis.

How did she manage to sneak inside the camp?!

"Come now, Mr. Larkinson, if I was out to harm you, I wouldn't have revealed myself to you like this." Miss Calabast grinned. "Let us dispense with the threats, shall we? I've come to talk. May I take a seat?"

Ves quickly weighed her words and knew she had a point. This was a woman who behaved as if she was fully in control. Even in the middle of the Flagrant Swordmaidens, the raven-haired femme fatale radiated a confident demeanor.



Someone as devious as Miss Calabast wouldn't have presented herself to Ves without taking precautions. It felt as if she already put Ves on checkmate even before beginning the match.

It grated on Ves that he was compelled into a specific direction by someone else. Yet he also knew his limits. Therefore, Ves holstered his useless laser pistol and calmly sat down behind his desk without another word.

Miss Calabast took his actions as an assent, and casually plopped herself down on the opposite chair reserved for visitors.

"Why are you here?" Ves asked grumpily.

"Would you believe it if I wanted to see how my favorite mech designer is doing?"

Ves snorted. "Yeah right. Are you spying on us on behalf of the Vesians? You did claim to be an agent of the Seven Stars Intelligence Agency back on Harkensen I."

Calabast teasingly smirked at Ves. "Wouldn't you like to know? I do have to applaud you, though. You didn't take me at my word."

"You don't exactly do your best to come off as trustworthy."

"I believe the galaxy is a more interesting place if everyone isn't so honest with each other. Now that you've spent a lot of time away from civilized space, do you realize how liberating it is to escape the influence of the MTA and CFA? Out here in the frontier, everything humanity tries to cover up is exposed. Don't you feel that it's liberating to be out here and be able to do whatever you want?"

While Ves didn't want to listen to Miss Calabast, he actually agreed with her sentiment. Yet what did that have to do with this conversation?

"Stop screwing around and get to the point."

"So grumpy! Relax, Mr. Larkinson. No one will come and disturb us. We have all the time in the galaxy."

Ves didn't know why she was confident in her claim, but she was right. He never allowed visitors to come into his office uninvited, as he preferred to work without anyone disturbing his concentration.

Even if the mech technicians came up with a problem, they already learned to hold themselves back until Ves emerged from his office.

"You're no friend of mine or the Vandals, Miss Calabast. I doubt you're here for a friendly visit either, so don't waste my time and get to the point."

She still maintained her smirk, as if everything was still under her control.

"Very well. I'm sure you have your thoughts about the Starlight Megalodon. This planet, Aeon Corona VII, experienced a lot of changes ever since the battleship crash landed on this planet a hundred kilometers away from here. Tell me, from what you've witnessed so far, do you truly believe that the Starlight Megalodon suffered an accident?"

"You're driving me to conclude that someone deliberately induced the Starlight Megalodon to crash on Aeon Corona VII." Ves responded calmly. "While I have my thoughts on the matter, I don't have any solid proof of what really happened."

Someone like Calabast had a way with words, and if Ves wasn't careful, he'd fall into her word traps without even realizing it. The scariest form of indoctrination was one where the victim voluntarily believed in something out of their own accord!

"Ugh." Miss Calabast palmed her face, pretending to be frustrated at his obstinance. "You blockhead. Okay, I'll be more direct. As a capital ship and the flagship of a formidable warfleet, the Starlight Megalodon is more than a battle wagon. She's a floating city and houses thousands of different research

projects. The CFA may be one of the foremost organizations of human civilization, but it is constantly fighting to maintain its edge over the MTA and any other rival organizations."

"The CFA has access to huge amounts of funding and the best researchers in the galaxy. It's no surprise they're engaged in the forefront of research."

"There's more to it than that." Miss Calabast replied. "While the CFA has erected many starbases and strongholds, they are true spaceborn at heart. The admirals who wield the highest power keep their most valuable research projects close to their chest, and there is nothing closer than conducting them right on their own flagships."

"All you're telling me is that the Starlight Megalodon used to host a lot of highly advanced research projects. Is there something special going on there?"

"You got me." Miss Calabast teasingly admitted while playfully putting up her palms. "There are plenty of valuables aboard the Starlight Megalodon. Her vault alone likely contains valuable life-prolonging serum that is of considerable interest to the power brokers that pull on everybody's strings."

Ves sat up straighter in his chair. "Don't try to jerk me around. If this mission is just about the life-prolonging serum, then I might as well put a laser beam through my own head!"

Miss Calabast looked taken aback, though Ves believed she was still putting up an act. Her misdirection so far wore his patience thin. That may have even been her purpose from the start. If Ves became unbalanced by her antics, he'd be more susceptible to her manipulations.

Ves took a deep breath and forcefully calmed himself down. He even concentrated his mind in order to center himself. Right now, it wouldn't do any good to get caught up in his emotions.

Evidently, Calabast caught his actions. She shook her head in disapproval. "So boring."

He'd rather be boring and retain his rationality than to lose control and fall into whatever schemes she had in mind.

#### Chapter 879 Please Take Your Order

Miss Calabast kept smirking as she sat across the desk.

A gadget strapped to her bulked-up infiltrator suit radiated an incredible amount of interference in the office, to the point of distorting the air and bombarding their ears with noise. It was in fact the original signal jammer that inspired Ves to develop a knock-off version.

So far, Ves vaguely judged that Calabast's signal jammer was a lot more refined than his own version. This was a piece of extremely advanced technology and worked on principles that he didn't entirely understand.

It signified another area where Calabast enjoyed an advantage. Whoever she worked for must be an extremely powerful and well-funded organization. None of her gear looked cheap, including her armored infiltrator suit.

As someone who recently became enlightened in stealth tech, he recognized the masterpiece of her infiltrator suit. Developing something like that was absolutely not simple, and even if Ves studied this field for ten straight years, he still wouldn't be able to design something as potent without taking up a huge amount of space.

"Are you finally willing to get to the point?" Ves asked after he centered himself again.

Now that he put his mind into a state of moderate concentration, he shouldn't be as emotionally affected to her taunts as before.

Miss Calabast crossed her arms and tapped the ground with her foot. "You possess an interesting mind, Mr. Larkinson. No wonder you've shot up ever

since you became a mech designer. That makes me glad I've approached you out of all the alternatives."

"What are you up to?"

"Nothing much." She casually shrugged. "I merely wish to extend an invitation to you to visit the Starlight Megalodon with me. There is something I need to retrieve from the battleship, but I need your help to get past the hurdles."

Ves stared at Calabast as if she was crazy. "Are you kidding? Me? Enter the Starlight Megalodon? For heaven's sake, I'm not some kind of super spy like you! Besides, there's no reason for me to abandon the Vandals and join you in your wild trip to a place which immobilizes everything that gets close and drags them straight to who-knows-where."

"The Starlight Megalodon hasn't harmed your precious Vandals and Swordmaidens, if that's what you're asking. The immediate area around the crashed capital ship has been turned into a safe zone. Those who enter won't be able to exit at will, but at the very least they are treated as guests."

"And I'm supposed to take your word for it?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"This is critical information, especially in light of what I have to say next." She spoke, adopting a seemingly sincere expression. "The Flagrant Swordmaidens on the ground stand no chance in the coming battle against Lady Amalia's forces. Your defeat is set in stone."

"Forgive me, Miss Calabast, but I'm not gullible enough to take the word of a foreign intelligence operative at her word. Even if the Flagrant Swordmaidens is disadvantaged, I still have faith they'll pull through somehow. I've survived too many crises with the Vandals. I can survive one more."

Miss Calabast shook her head. "If you are aware of what I know, you wouldn't be so confident. I can say with a hundred percent certainty that the Flagrant Swordmaidens will face defeat. It's only a matter of when. The only hope you

have left of surviving the coming massacre is to come with me to the Starlight Megalodon. As soon as you enter the safe zone, even ten-thousand Vesians won't be able to lay a hand on you. Perhaps you'll even have the opportunity to be reunited with the only surviving Vandals and Swordmaidens on the surface of this planet."

The devious woman expressed so much confidence and sincerity in her claims that Ves felt inclined to believe her words. As much as Ves wanted to resist her pessimistic prediction, in his heart he strongly agreed with her sentiment.

Her poison was spreading!

"Do you have any proof?" Ves gritted his teeth as he tried to resist being swayed by her argument. "I'm not going to abandon my comrades on hearsay alone. Not when it comes from a snake like you."

At least with Talkative Jimmy, they shared some common ground. Miss Calabast on the other hand constantly shrouded herself in smoke. Ves still hadn't pinned down her loyalties. Did she work for the Vesian royals? Did she work for a foreign state from a neighboring star sector? Who knew.

"Even if I tell you the reasons and serve you up with proof, you'll only cast doubt on them." Miss Calabast accurately pointed out. "Let me just state that whether you believe it or not, you'll come running to me the moment the Vandals and Swordmaidens are defeated on the battlefield. I'm gracious enough to forgive your current skepticism. When the time comes, run towards these coordinates near your camp."

Miss Calabast passed him a composite print etched with a set of very specific coordinates that he could feed in his comm.

While Ves didn't want anything to do with Miss Calabast, her words planted a seed of doubt in his mind. If her prediction came true, wouldn't it be prudent to

prepare an escape route? Since she was generous enough to provide him one, he might as well keep the option on hand. He could always choose to disregard the coordinates if the Flagrant Swordmaidens won the battle.

"No matter what you're going to say, I'm sticking to my comrades." He declared.

"Men." She sighed. "Very well. I respect your determination, childish it may be. In any case, I suggest you prepare to bug out sometime within the next twenty-four hours. While I'm not completely certain when the Vesians will launch their attack, they have already begun their final preparations."

As much as Ves wanted to believe the Flagrant Swordmaidens would prevail, Miss Calabast made a lot of sense. If nothing happened, then Ves only wasted some time. If disaster truly struck, then he'd be instantly ready to leave without any delay.

"I'll take your advice into consideration." He replied neutrally. "You sure seem well-informed of the Vesians. Are you spying on both our forces?"

"Our eyes have never left sight of your ground expeditions the moment you landed."

That sounded ominous. It sounded like a bluff, but Ves could very well imagine that someone as devious as Calabast planted spies among the Vandals and Vesians.

Perhaps he could take advantage of her spying operations.

"If you're so well-informed, do you know what's going on with Venerable Karol Xie? He's the expert pilot we've picked up in the frontier. He originally hailed from the Dark Plasma Star Sector and claims to have turned a new leaf. I have reason to believe he is not as committed to the Vandals as he appears."

"Ah, your stray expert pilot. He's an interesting man." Calabast smirked in amusement. "I'll give you a freebie. We've observed your esteemed expert pilot entering into a clandestine meeting with a Vesian spy. While I'm not privy to their conversation, the fact that this meeting took place at all should be enough to know his intentions."

If either Talkative Jimmy or Miss Calabast claimed that Venerable Xie turned his coat, then Ves would still hold his doubts. Yet if both of them separately came up to him with this claim, then Ves couldn't cling to his skepticism any longer.

The odds that Venerable Xie might truly be colluding with the Vesians became a very real possibility!

It would be one thing if the Flagrant Swordmaidens lost their only expert pilot. It would be another thing if Venerable Xie turned the Pale Dancer against them! The expert pilot probably wouldn't spare Ves either if that was the case!

Ves believed the Vesians would certainly field at least one expert pilot in the coming battle. If the Flagrant Swordmaidens couldn't constrain the enemy expert pilot, the battle might certainly be lost before they knew it! This might be the main reason why Miss Calabast expressed absolute confidence in their defeat!

"Obviously, you want something from me." Ves spoke, sure of his guess.

"Since you approached me in such a friendly manner, I bet that you won't be able to get what you want from me through force. Whatever you need me for at the Starlight Megalodon, is it because of my mech design expertise?"

Miss Calabast smiled at Ves but declined to respond. Perhaps Ves was on the track, or perhaps made a completely wrong guess and she wanted him to stick to his wrong assumptions.



"Whatever the case, I bet you'd rather have my willing cooperation. Maybe it has something to do with the so-called safe zone you just talked about. After all, you can't force me to do anything if you aren't able to make good on your threats."

"What a clever boy." She chuckled, as if she was praising a precocious little kid who attempted to impress her. Ves really wanted to smack her incessant smirk off her face. "I believe in win-win situations. In exchange for saving your life and arranging a way back to your fleet, I merely want you to lend your services to me at the Starlight Megalodon. I get what I want out of the battleship while you won't get captured and tortured to death by the Vesians. Sounds like a good deal, no?"

Ah. Ves and Miss Calabast entered into another negotiation. The entire reason for her friendly approach and her seemingly generous terms was because she really wanted something that only Ves could provide.

While Ves possessed plenty of special qualities, he struggled to come up with a reason why Miss Calabast wanted his help. If she needed a mech designer, she could have approached someone else.

"Why aren't you approaching one of the many Vesian mech designers with your offer? What I can do, they can probably do as well. If they are fully equipped for this mission, then they doubtlessly sent down a genuine Journeyman Mech Designer to accompany their ground forces."

"Nice attempt at fishing for information." She smirked, instantly seeing through his ploy. "It is true that the Vesians sent down mech designers that have entered my shortlist. You are simply at the top. However, don't misunderstand your value. If you aren't willing to play along, I still have plenty of alternatives. They are just a bit more troublesome to convince. After all, it's not every day a mech designer is about to go down with the crashing ship that is the ground forces of the Flagrant Swordmaidens."

"Even so, I'd like to obtain some more sincerity from you. As long as you agree to lend me some favors, I'll be much more inclined to cooperate with any schemes you have in mind."

"Oh? Tell me what you have in mind."

"First, if the Flagrant Swordmaidens are truly fated to suffer a defeat on the ground, I want to bring someone along with me. Maybe two."

Miss Calabast immediately shook her head. "It's already a strain to sneak you away from Vesian pursuit. As soon as they win the battle, they'll be scouring the camp and the surroundings for any fleeing Vandals and Swordmaidens. I may have a lot of tricks up my sleeve, but even I'm not capable of hiding more than you and I from their carpet search."

"I really need this. I trust in your capabilities. Either you promise me this, or I'll rather take my chances with the Vesians."

In fact, Ves was bluffing. He tried his best to compose his face and give nothing away, but so long as Miss Calabast rejected his request, he was willing to continue to play along.

If Miss Calabast knew his lack of determination, she didn't show any sign of it. Instead, she contemplated the demand and seemingly reluctantly nodded.

"I think I can make some adjustments to our means of escape. As long as you don't bring too much gear, I think I can squeeze an extra person."

Ves smiled for the first time in their talk. "Good. You don't know how much this means to me. Even if I can let go of everyone else, I can't abandon the only person I care about in this expedition."

Even if Miss Calabast rejected him, he planned to bring along Ketis to the coordinates anyway. If the vixen still rejected bringing Ketis along, then Ves was willing to take his chances with using force to save them both.

"Is there anything else you'd like with your order?" Calabast asked with a somewhat irritated voice.

"Yes. For my second request, I hope you can do something specific for me." He said. "Since Venerable Xie is committed to betray the Vandals, then we might as well stab his back first. Can you assassinate Venerable Xie for me?"

### Chapter 880 Depths of Despair

Security officers surrounded the entire section of the camp, cordoning it off from curious Vandal onlookers.

Something serious happened here. Something so serious, it forced Captain Byrd and a handful of mech officers and senior staff to visit the site of the incident in question.

The Pale Dancer stood in the middle of an extremely well-equipped workshop. Miss Lisbeth Eta-Denmersken bawled out her eyes on Chief Keys' shoulder. The other mech technicians assigned under their leadership looked distraught as well.

A security officer specialised in investigation exited the cockpit of the dormant Pale Dancer with a serious expression. He put away his forensic tools and shook his head towards Captain Byrd.

"What did you find?" Captain Byrd asked with a stony face.

"Nothing, ma'am. The perpetrator left no trace behind. The logs of the mech are wiped clean so we don't know how they managed to enter the Pale Dancer in the first place."

"The body?"

"Venerable Xie died instantly from a sneak attack. A laser beam bore through his skull from behind at close range. There is no way for anyone to miss such a shot. The only question is how the infiltrator managed to get into that position in the first place. Further investigation is required."

Captain Byrd sighed in resignation. "Someone as professional as this won't leave any traces behind for us to find. Prioritize your men on guarding our officers and deterring further assassinations. As for Venerable Xie... the man died an unworthy death."

The gravity of the situation fell on everyone's shoulders. Ves stood absolutely frozen as he stared up to the open cockpit of the expert mech.

An expert pilot fell so easily.

This was someone who became an absolute terror on the battlefield once they piloted an expert mech. The general rule of thumb stated that expert mechs could easily defeat a hundred mechs by themselves.

Venerable Xie easily exceeded that standard despite his low resonance strength and unfocused training. His unparalleled accuracy combined with his powerful laser rifle could have annihilated the Meandering Monkeys no matter how well they dodged and weaved around.

Not only that, he could easily entangle an enemy expert pilot and protect the rank-and-file.

Yet he died so easily. Ves couldn't even fathom how the assassin managed to enter the Pale Dancer's cockpit. Even if the mech remained inactive during the assassination, it still should have been impossible to sneak inside of it without alarming its occupant.

Whoever killed Venerable Xie could easily assassinate every other person in the camp!

"Those sneaky Vesians!"

"The Vesians killed the one person who matters the most!"

The value of Venerable Xie exceeded the value of Captain Byrd. Everyone present believed the Vesians did the deed. While everyone expressed varying

amounts of anger, despair and helplessness, Ves pretended to be grim as well.

"It's a shame." Ves lamented in a stilted manner, though no one paid much attention to his awkward demeanor. "The Vesians... they robbed us of our only hope. Venerable Xie didn't deserve to die a dog's death."

Now that they lost this crucial figure, the Flagrant Swordmaidens became completely vulnerable to the deprivations of an expert pilot!

When Ves took posed the request to Miss Calabast earlier, she didn't accept immediately. In fact, she looked like she adamantly wanted to refuse the request.

"Assassinating an expert pilot is no joke." She responded, even dropping her smirk. "They're highly trained soldiers and possess superhuman reflexes. Their danger sense is off the charts. Do you think it's easy to assassinate an expert pilot? Even if the MTA prohibited the practice, we still won't do it. One slip-up and the one who kills won't be us, but him. An expert pilot is a monster in battle even without a mech."

This was the first time that Calabast revealed that she came with accomplices. Ves figured that they were probably covering the entire perimeter right now in order to guard against any attacks against Calabast.

Ves did not accept her refusal. "This is non-negotiable, I'm afraid. Due to reasons that are none of your business, I've built up a bit of a beef with Venerable Xie. If he is truly set out to betray the Vandals, then I'm the first person on his kill list. I'm sure of it. So if you still want me alive to help you out at the Starlight Megalodon, then you better address this threat."

If Venerable Xie really set up his mind to stab the Flagrant Vandals in the back, then Ves expected the first action the Pale Dancer would perform was to shoot his mech-sized laser rifle straight at Ves!

With the expert pilot's impeccable accuracy and marksmanship, Ves wouldn't even have time to scream before the immense power behind the laser rifle vaporized his body and everything he carried. Even his Earth Ant light combat armor wouldn't last a millisecond against the awesome power meant to pierce through mech armor.

"And why should we do your dirty work?" Miss Calabast crossed her arms. "Right now, I'm reconsidering if it's less troublesome to kidnap you outright and whisk you away from this camp."

Ves paused a bit before he came up with another argument. "No matter if Venerable Xie is colluding with the Vesians, there's a chance he's merely pretending. Killing him will weaken the Flagrant Vandals and impact their morale. It could be said that our defeat is pretty much set in stone if he dies. Won't our quick defeat benefit you more?"

Calabast smirked again. "You make a good point, though you are basically condemning one of the only potential hopes of your mech regiments to death. How callous of you. Do the lives of the Flagrant Vandals and Lydia's Swordmaidens truly mean nothing to you?"

"I'm pretty confident that this is the best course of action for us. Better take an unstable factor off the board than to hope it plays out for us."

Miss Calabast eventually acquiesced to his request and left shortly after. It didn't take more than an hour after the initial alarm sounded out throughout the camp.

Only after Ves saw the aggrieved and hopeless expressions of the other Vandals did Ves realize the immense amount of harm his request had wrought.

His actions led to the death of one of the biggest pillars of the Flagrant Vandals!

The news leaked out to the rest of the Flagrant Swordmaidens just minutes later. A news as explosive as this couldn't be hidden for long, and Captain Byrd figured it was better to release the news right away rather than to have it explode at a more inopportune time.

All the mech officers went out in force to rally the men and prevent them from acting out, but there was no question that their morale plummeted like a rock sinking into an ocean!

Surprisingly enough, hatred against the Vesians intensified. The assassination of an expert pilot crossed all the lines, and the Vandal mech pilots each vowed to take revenge for their fallen champion.

They would not rest until they killed as much Vesians as they could on the battlefield!

In the meantime, Ves suggested he do something about the Pale Dancer to Captain Byrd.

"Captain, none of our mech pilots can pilot the Pale Dancer anymore. Even an expert candidate like Captain Orfan is unable to do anything with it. I suggest we process the expert mech and render it useless."

Captain Orfan looked incredibly haggard as she tried to prevent the collapse of the Flagrant Vandals. "You want to spoil the Pale Dancer before the Vesians get their hands on it? Is there truly no way of making use of the mech?"

Ves shook his head. "You know as well as I do that it takes an exceptional mech pilot to be able to pilot an expert mech. Advanced pilots can just forget about it. The strain will fry their nerves before they can even make the Pale Dancer take a single step."

The mech captain paused in indecision. The Pale Dancer was Venerable Xie's personal expert mech, and originated from the Dark Plasma Star Sector.

Its presence served as a symbol, even with the death of its original owner and mech pilot. To dismantle it meant that the Vandals admitted that they didn't believe themselves to be capable enough to protect Venerable Xie's legacy.

The expert mech of any fallen expert pilot would never be discarded like a piece of trash! The highest honor an orphaned expert mech could enjoy was to assign it to another compatible expert pilot so that its mission upon inception continued.

This was the respect that expert mechs deserved!

While Ves respected mechs like any other, he prioritized his safety even more. Even if Ves wrecked the neural interface or replaced it with a fresh dummy, a good mech designer would still be able to notice the discrepancies. Expert mechs came with so many advanced systems that Ves couldn't insure that any one of them left some clues behind that hinted at his misdeeds.

Therefore, Ves wanted to be extra certain and destroy the mech, just in case.

As for Captain Byrd, seeing as defeat loomed over their heads, she eventually nodded. "Do it. Don't leave any useful scraps behind for the Vesians."

With her permission, Ves brought over a couple of mech technicians and depressingly began to dismantle it piece by piece. Using other mechs and heavy tools, they practically vandalized the Pale Dancer. Delicate parts got smashed or stepped upon, hardy armor plating became deformed or melted into a puddle of slag under the application of extreme heat.

Such a crude way of destroying the components of an expert mech partially ruined the special traits of the highly valuable exotics laced in their structure. Exotics with their myriad of effects and remarkable properties served as the core of the functioning of any expert mech, and all of them possessed some energetic activity.



Due to their active states, exotics needed to be handled carefully. The moment their energetic activity leaked or ran out of control, the exotics degraded into mundane minerals.

What Ves directed over the course of three hours was the systematic spoiling of tens billions of credits worth of exotics. Each second that passed, millions of credits worth of exotics got ruined due to their incredibly rough treatment. This was pouring money down the drain!

At the end of the spoiling process, nothing remained of the pristine white mech. The fast, accurate and agile rifleman mech suffered an ignoble death off the battlefield, just like its former master. Neither Venerable Xie or the Pale Dancer deserved to meet their ends behind enemy lines.

Yet they both fell at the hands of Ves because they posed a threat to his freedom and safety.

"I'm not sorry." He whispered to himself as he watched the pile of slag and crushed components being carted onto a fast transport to be scattered over a wide area.

Why should he feel sorry? He was merely defending his interests. Even the prestige of an expert pilot didn't stop him from requesting Miss Calabast from arranging an expert pilot's death.

Ves was merely surprised she acted so decisively and with such overwhelming success. She even managed to leave no trace behind, allowing the dastardly Vesians to take the blame instead.

He admired her capable and elegant handling of this problem. Ves could learn a thing or two about her methods.

"Still, she's extremely well-equipped and has a lot of capable subordinates under the wing. I'll have to build up my own capabilities before I can replicate such a feat."

His fear and apprehension towards the inscrutable Miss Calabast increased, but his admiration rose as well. If Ves possessed the same capabilities, he would have a lot more options available to him. At the very least, he wouldn't be forced into a helpless state when confronted with the hostility of an expert pilot.

The thrashing of the Pale Dancer inspired the rest of the Vandals and Swordmaidens. Though they didn't wish to contemplate defeat, they began to make arrangements in the event the Vesians overrun the camp.

The engineers rigged the power reactors to overload on command, while Chief Dakkon prepared to spoil the god crystal generators by infecting them with a murky crystal. Others began to tidy up the databanks and rigged them up to blow.

If the enemy managed to obtain a victory, then they could forget about taking over their valuables!