

### Chapter 941 Identity Check

Nobody objected to his suggestion, but the question was which ship should they approach and how should they meet them midway?

The troublesome part right now was that the lingering astral winds still caused their sensors to capture hazy readings, especially at longer ranges. Right now, the CFA shuttle's sensors had only been able to track the fleeing ships by the weapon emissions from their escorting mechs.

Now that the fighting subsided, the only way the shuttle could rendez-vous with one of the ships was through extrapolating their possible routes and hoped they picked the right interception route.

This took a lot of judgement and familiarity with both orbital mechanics and navigation. Lieutenant Dise may be a passable shuttle pilot, but she could only fly the shuttle directly from point A to point B. The intricacies concerning space navigation was beyond her as she usually just programmed a destination on the autopilot to determine the most optimal route.

In short, it was up to Ves who possessed the broadest grasp in the sciences to extrapolate and guess the route the fleeing ships followed and hope he selected the right ship to reunite with. Ves had very little data to work with as the long-ranged sensors only captured strong weapon emissions, but for a mech designer that was enough.

"I think I can calculate which fleet and which ships belong to the Flagrant Vandals." He stated as he started to set up the control panel for his calculations. "The weapon emissions that we've been able to capture mostly come from strong explosions and strong laser fire. The Akkara heavy cannons are capable of inflicting both types of damage, and I'm sure I'll be able to identify their distinctive weapon discharges."

Both Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise looked at him as if he was speaking an alien language. Only Ketis understood a bit of what he wanted to do, but she wasn't capable of performing this kind of analysis at all.

She simply gave him a thumbs up. "Good luck, Ves!"

All of this sounded complicated, but Ves knew what he was doing. Sort of. He knew the theory, but once he went to work, he struggled a bit and his calculations came out clumsier than he thought.

Nonetheless, he succeeded in determining an approximate route that should bring the shuttle close enough to a ship to recalibrate their route.

The question now was whether they should go meet up with a ship or continue to wait in high orbit above Aeon Corona IX.

"Major Verle told us to stay put here, remember?" Captain Orfan reminded them all. "What do we do if the Vandals and Swordmaiden ships arrive but we're not here to greet them all?"

Lieutenant Dise shook her head. "The major's orders didn't anticipate the presence of deserters hanging around here. I'm willing to take my chances with another ship instead of staying in the vicinity of a hostile ship and her complement of mechs."

Ves and Ketis both agreed with Dise. Even if the shuttle's ECM systems managed to fool the enemy sensors for now, it wasn't a good idea for them to rely on a single system to keep them safe. Any form of technology could fail, even from the CFA!

Therefore, all of them quickly came to a consensus that it was better to take their chances than to sit here and risk the deserters sniffing them out.

As for any ideas about taking back control of the Finmoth Regal and rescue the loyalists such as Vedette? None of them were delusional enough to support such a crazy plan!

The CFA shuttle quietly slipped away from Aeon Corona IX and headed back in the direction towards Aeon Corona VII along a curve in order to meet with the fleeing ships.

Unfortunately, Ves miscalculated somewhat. He did not anticipate the fleeing ships converging with each other at some point. This caused the shuttle to fly in the wrong direction.

Fortunately, the shuttle's sensors managed to pick up the thruster emissions from the other ships once it came close enough. After readjusting their course, the shuttle flew off to intercept their presumed comrades.

As the shuttle came nearer and nearer, the shuttle's sensors finally managed to make a more precise visual confirmation of which ship they managed to find.

"Yes! We found the Shield of Hispania!"

Since Ves was most familiar with the spaceborn mech contingent of the Shield of Hispania, he aimed to identify their weapon emissions from the start.

Though he had never been quite sure of his guess, it still gratified him to come within sight of the flagship of the Verle Task Force.

"The Jaded Sword is also with the group!" Ketis burst with pleasure.

Overall, two Vandal combat carriers along with the Jaded Sword and two light carriers made it out of the confusing mess that engulfed Aeon Corona VII's orbital space.

Yet even as they managed to flee and congregate again, they also brought unwanted guests. Flying in the wake of the Vandal and Swordmaiden ships, a mix of unknown carriers followed along.

"They must be the Dragons of the Void. Who else but them would flee towards Aeon Corona IX?" Captain Orfan spat.

"The pirate vessels doesn't appear to be able to catch up to the Vandal and Swordmaiden ships. Even if they do, they'll have a tough fight on their hands. They don't have the numbers to overpower our mechs."

Even so, being pursued by an unknown and very likely hostile force did not seem very reassuring!

"There are sandman motherships trailing further ahead as well, but they're falling further behind." Ves observed as the sensors picked up their comparatively weaker energy signatures.

Nonetheless, even if the situation seemed precarious, it was better than floating around in space with just a shuttle!

As the CFA shuttle flew close enough to communicate comfortably, Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise both contacted their respective flagships and exposed their identities. They also explained what went on with the Finmoth Regal.

"What?!" Major Verle shouted over the comm channel. "You better not be pulling my leg, Captain!"

"It's true! I swear! That traitorous cow Bonnet and her deserter buddies completely surrendered to the Dragons of the Void and became their lackeys! I have the comm logs to prove it! Aeon Corona IX is not safe!"

"Damn it, Aeon Corona IX is our planned rendezvous point! If we avoid it and change course, we'll miss reuniting with the other scattered ships of our allied fleet. We'll talk later once you come aboard. Welcome back, captain!"

All four survivors practically broke into tiers when the shuttle came close enough to see the battle-scarred carrier ships and their tired but unflinching mech escorts.

For a moment, Ves couldn't believe their luck was that good! While the others already started to let down their guards, he discreetly pointed the shuttle's scanners at the various vessels and tried to figure out if they'd been compromised in some way.

No matter how many scans he performed, nothing seemed amiss. No strange sandmen agglomerations hid inside the ships, nor did he spot any strange armed personnel keeping the crew in captivity.

"Come on, Ves! We're coming home!" Ketis celebrated with a smile.

His paranoia didn't allow him to accept such a lucky break at face value. He obsessively kept scanning for something suspicious, and by some chance stumbled upon the hidden compartment he found some time ago.

Ves remembered the hidden compartment contained a cell which kept an important Vesian noble from the Detemen System captive.

Lord Javier still lived for some reason. Ves didn't know the significance of this. Shouldn't the Vandals get rid of this fellow now that he had no use? The longer the noble scion stayed aboard the ship, the greater the risk of an accident!

Or did the Vandals make some kind of arrangement with Lord Javier or House Eneqqin?

Could it be that the Vandals turned their coats and betrayed the Bright Republic to work with the Vesians?

"There's no basis to these suspicions!"

Ves shook his head to dismiss the silly thoughts his overactive imagination conjured up inside his stressed and tired mind. What mattered was that Ves and Captain Orfan would finally be able to return to a Vandal ship while Ketis and Lieutenant Dise went back to a Swordmaiden ship.

After dropping the two Swordmaidens off at a shuttle sent from the Jaded Sword that met them halfway, the CFA shuttle finally entered the shuttle bay of the Shield of Hispania.

A team of heavily-armed security officers greeted them upon their arrival. Though they looked menacing, they merely came to secure the strange and foreign CFA shuttle and to be sure that the occupants inside belonged to their own side.

"It's us!" Captain Orfan said as the security officers came to confirm their identities. "What's all this about?!"

"Sorry, ma'am, but who knows if you're a clone sent as a decoy."

"The hell?! You'd know it if I'm a clone! Is a clone able to talk like this?!"

"You make for a convincing argument, but orders are orders."

Despite the rough welcome, Ves did not sense any particular malice from the security officers. As he looked around the shuttle bay, he spotted at least triple as much crew than this section ought to host. He also spotted way more shuttles, many of which were plastered with markings of other ship names!

"Did the Shield of Hispania take on survivors from other ships?" Ves asked while he jerked his head at the others.

"The blasted sandmen ships that have been roaming blind and deaf all converged on Aeon Corona VII as soon as the flow of higher-dimensional particles cut off!" A nearby shuttle technician answered. "I don't know if it's because they regained their vision or if something on the planet drew them there, but the entire space around Seven became engulfed with sand!"

After asking a few questions, the technicians confirmed the fleet cut off their own tails in order to escape the reach of the sandman ships.

"What about the pirate carriers following behind you?"

"Them? I'm just a technician. The brass never tell us anything important, so who knows what we'll do. The pirate ships can't catch up to us anyway, so I don't see how it matters."

Their escorts quickly guided the two survivors to the medbay while posting more guards around the CFA shuttle to keep anyone curious from putting their hands on the advanced vehicle. A separate team also received the lockbox handed over by Captain Orfan and immediately put it into a bigger lockbox, as if they were afraid that the CFA lockbox was too fragile to hold something as important as the mission objective!

"What you're doing is completely redundant." Ves commented from the side as the security officers seemed to treat the bigger lockbox like a holy container. "A high-quality CFA lockbox is worth as much as this combat carrier, I think. The entire ship can plunge into a sun and vaporize into atoms and the lockbox would still be fine, if a little hot to the touch."

The security officers ignored him, of course.

"Oh well. Make sure not to touch my shuttle! It's keyed to my identity and it's my personal property now!"

In the next hour, Ves split up from Captain Orfan as various doctors and other specialists performed a complete checkup on him. The security officers also

compelled the both of them to remove all of their gear and have them undergo a thorough checkup, not that Ves believed that they'd be able to determine anything.

Their CFA gear had all been updated with modern security suites, courtesy of Miss Calabast. There shouldn't be anyway for the Vandal hackers to crack the CFA comm or any of his other gear.

Still, getting out of his armor for the first time in many days made him feel very uncomfortable. He also didn't like getting poked and prodded by the doctors and being stuffed inside various medical devices once they detected an enormous change in his genes and physiological equipment.

"I went through three rounds of CFA gene optimization treatments!" Ves admonished the doctors who couldn't decide whether he was a botched clone or not. They really hadn't faced anything like this before! "

"This clone is really sophisticated." A doctor scratched his chin as he observed Ves with a clinical eye. "CFA technology sure is wondrous. Their clones are so expressive and they even believe they are the originals."

Ves didn't know whether to laugh or cry!

#### **Chapter 942 Mine!**

Returning to the Flagrant Vandals made Ves experience the deplorable level of technology that was the norm in much of the galactic rim.

The Shield of Hispania's medical bay lacked the high technology medical equipment that could make sense of his altered physiology. Their doctors also didn't recognize the effects of gene optimization treatment.

Since their medical examination failed to confirm the identities of Ves and Captain Orfan, the Vandals resorted to an alternative method.

They first put them through various cognitive and emotional tests to see whether their current behavior matched their known behavior.



Then they brought in various Vandal servicemen they were familiar with to have a chat. Usually, a friend who interacted a lot with someone would know if that person got replaced by a clone. While clones were able to emulate the behavior of their originals to a superficial level, they often dropped the ball during longer and deeper conversations.

Since the doctors suspected that Ves and Captain Orfan might be more sophisticated clones cultivated using CFA technology, they went through extremely lengthy sessions with various known associates without rest.

Ves took this disguised interrogation in stride. He readily reported some of the experiences he went through on the surface of the Aeon Corona VII, and he was sure that the people overseeing the interview would try to corroborate his story with the one from Captain Orfan.

Of course, since he was meeting the likes of Chief Haine and Chief Avanaeon, he couldn't tell them anything too sensitive.

"Damn! I've been missing out!" Chief Engineer Avanaeon cursed while he stared at Ves as if the latter won the jackpot. "You not only got away with all that fancy gear, you also went through some of the best treatments in the galaxy!"

"Outdated treatments." Ves reiterated as he tried to downplay the benefits in order to lessen the jealousy emanating from his latest conversation partner. "The gene optimization treatments are three-hundred years out of date. All the other CFA officers are probably running around with version 2.5 while I'm still stuck at version 2.0."

"Pff! Look at you talk! Your crocodile tears don't fool me, Ves! Version 2.1 may be a little underwhelming compared to version 2.5, but it's loads better than the rest of us unevolved cavemen who are stuck at the original version 1.0!"

"Great risks are often associated with great rewards." Ves repeated the adage he increasingly came to believe during his adventures in the frontier. "When the brass initially planned the ground expedition, you probably received the offer to join them, didn't you?"

"I'm a ship engineer! I know FTL drives like the back of my hand! I'm too valuable to be sent down the surface and suffer the travails that most of you went through."

To Ves, it sounded like Avanaeon was merely making excuses for himself. He decided to comfort the engineer.

"Don't worry. I think you made the best decision. Out of the many thousands that made up the Vandal ground forces, almost all of the mech pilots and support personnel sacrificed their lives for the mission. I do you know Chief Engineer Leslie Dakkon?"

"Dakkon? Yeah, I'm acquainted with him. He doesn't really like mechs, but he's done great work aboard the Beggar's Bounty." Avanaeon sighed. "Too bad she's no more. The sandmen tore her apart and sucked out all of her energy once the crew received orders to abandon ship. She was simply too slow."

"Dakkon and all the other engineer that came down with him are dead. Captured by the Vesians and executed by their hands."

The chief engineer scowled. "I heard of that. The Vesians really outdid us all in their commitment. They even took the risk of sending down a young expert pilot and what sounds like the most expensive mech of the entire Mech Legion!"

"The Vesians gambled big, but the disaster that happened at the end probably equalized us all. There's no way the Vesians would have been able to evacuate all of their ground forces in time."

"Yeah, everything moved pretty quickly once the higher-dimensional particles stopped flowing and the battleship at the surface started getting chomped on by the biggest sandman mothership that we've ever encountered!"

The two continued to chat, with the chief engineer pointedly steering the conversation towards specific topics that he'd been ordered to bring up.

Even though the various conversation partners forced Ves to repeat his answers over and over again, he didn't begrudge them on their persistence. The Vandals truly did a thorough job in trying to confirm their identities and stories. He would have doubted their competence if they'd embrace the two returnees with open arms immediately upon arrival.

Ves just hoped this wouldn't take too long, because he felt really anxious about what was happening in space. No one told him the current status of the fleet and whether the Vandals and Swordmaidens succeeded in reuniting their scattered ships.

Also, while Ves warned them that the Finmoth Regal likely deserted, they only told him they would confirm the news themselves if they ever encountered the lost Vandal combat carrier.

Though Ves hadn't been able to track the time, he guessed that at least three days had passed. The interrogators tried to keep him from falling asleep, only to find out they'd need to wait at least a week before his altered physique finally accumulated enough fatigue to turn his thoughts sluggish.

At that point, Major Verle entered the interrogation room. The man sat down at the opposite side of the plain metal desk and crossed his arms. "Mr. Larkinson, you've been busy."

Ves shrugged, uncaring whether he appeared disrespectful to the senior Vandal mech officer. "I reckon you read through my interviews and checked

the data chips I handed over to you? Even if you think I'm a clone, at least I helped you out! That should count for something!"

"We stopped suspected you were a clone after the first day of interviews." Major Verle admitted unapologetically. "Still, we needed to make sure you aren't compromised by hidden CFA or Vesian bioprogramming or the like. Captain Orfan strongly vouched for you, though. She told me all about how she's never be able to survive her deployment to the surface with your invaluable assistance throughout the journey. Your contributions have been noted."

"Oh? So you cleared your suspicion on Captain Orfan before me, sir?"

The major smirked. "Captain Orfan has a... unique personality. That makes it easy for us to tell whether she's the real deal or not. Besides, we found out that she has somehow ascended into the ranks of expert candidates, through your aid she claims. Can you explain to me why a mech pilot who we long knew did not possess the inclination to advance in rank suddenly broke past a barrier that many mech pilots failed to pass?"

"I can't tell you, sir."

"What?"

"I said I can't tell you with the monitoring system and half the ship listening in on the conversation. This is really too sensitive for anyone else to hear. If you'd give me back my customized CFA combat armor, I'd be able to scramble this compartment so that no one will be able to eavesdrop on us."

"You're quite possessive of your loot, aren't you, Mr. Larkinson? You even went as far as stealing entire crates of nutrient packs from a CFA battleship!"

"Hey, that's mine! Don't touch it! They're my souvineers! In fact, all of my gear is keyed to my identity as a lieutenant commander of the CFA. Even if my identity is forged, my stuff is completely useless to the rest of you."

"We can always donate your shuttle and your gear to the Mech Corps for them to reverse engineer some of the principles."

"Hah! Good luck with that. Even if they're out of date, you're talking about genuine high technology. Even if you understand some of the principles, you can't afford to apply your new knowledge without bankrupting the entire Mech Corps!"

"Even so, their value alone will pay for our mech regiment's reorganization. We lost hundreds of mechs and thousands of valuable personnel. It costs many billions of credits to recoup those losses."

"Don't you dare sell my gear!"

"As a mech designer in the service of the Mech Corps, there is really no concept of owning your own personal gear. Every piece of equipment you make use of belongs to the Mech Corps. This is how the military works."

Ves could accept losing his CFA shuttle. After all, it was just a means to go from one destination to another, though it held a lot of nifty capabilities that made stuff a lot easier.

However, the thought of losing his valuable Squalon with the Cadisis, signal jammer, stealth detector, upgraded transceiver brought a lot of distress to him. All this time, he relied on his gear to survive!

To be rid of all of those goodies while the remnants of the fleet were likely still in great peril brought him back to square one in terms of survival capabilities!

"Hahaha!" Major Verle suddenly laughed. "It's a good thing you're with the Flagrant Vandals. We're not much of a stickler for rules around here. I like you, Ves. Even if your story is a little shaky at the end, you were pivotal in enabling Captain Orfan to complete the mission and return with the prize in hand."

Ves saw a ray of hope. "So will that mean you'll return my gear to me, sir?"

"All the engineers, technicians and armorers who studied your fancy CFA gear tell me that it's impossible for anyone else but you to make use of them.

They're also quite impressed with what they've managed to find out.

Considering the enormous amount of merits you've earned in our books and the uncertainties we might face during our journey back to the Bright Republic, I will allow you to wear your armor. It will just collect dust in the armory anyway if I don't give it back to you."

"Thank you, major!" Ves smiled brightly at him. "Is there anyway for me to keep my gear once we return home and after the war?"

"Let's talk about that later. I reckon the bureaucrats back home won't allow you to keep your possessions."

"I sense a 'but' there."

"You know what kind of company I keep." Major Verle threw a peculiar glance at Ves. "As long as I put in a good word for you to the right people, there may be a possibility that you'll get to bring your armor home. However, that's predicated on whether it will benefit the Bright Republic more if you retain personal use of your gear rather than giving it up for study and reverse-engineering."

Ves nodded reluctantly. He understood what Major Verle was getting at. The mech officer stated that while the Mech Corps would likely be very obstinate regarding this issue, Flashlight and the Firestarters might be more flexible regarding this issue.

The key was that Ves needed to come up with a good reason to explain why he should keep his material gains from the Starlight Megalodon. He might have done the Brighter military intelligence service a huge service with his

performance during the mission, but that didn't mean they'd pass on something as advanced as his Squalon!

Ves doubted he could fend off their greedy hands by telling them it was his property. He could tell that coming up with a good reason to justify his continued use and possession of his CFA gear would be extremely difficult.

Still, he was thankful for Verle for opening up this option to him. "I'll think about. Is there anything else you'd like to ask, major?"

"I have many questions, but as you say, there are too many ears in this room." Verle said and leaned closer. "For now, I want to ask you one thing. Do you feel guilty?"

#### Chapter 943 Tech Envy

Major Verle's question came out of the blue.

What did guilt have to do with Ves?

"I don't understand what you mean." Ves replied while squirming in his seat. "What's this question about, sir?"

His default dark green mech designer uniform made him feel awfully exposed and vulnerable. He badly wanted to get back to wearing the Squalon.

"The psychoanalysis programs analyzing your expressions state that you are shouldering a considerable burden of guilt. Therefore I'm asking you whether you feel guilty."

"I don't." Ves answered simply.

"Truly?"

Ves shrugged. "I have some regrets. I regret not finding a way to save the ground forces. I regret not being able to help the mission more. I regret..."

He regretted having to kill Venerable Karol Xie in the eve of battle. Though it seemed unlikely that Xie could have turned the tides against Venerable Relia

Foster and her ridiculously extravagant Belisarius mech, perhaps Xie might have still been able to mitigate the losses somehow.

Though Ves hadn't pulled the trigger that put a laser beam through the expert pilot's head, it was through his insistence that made Calabast arrange for the expert pilot's death.

He had blood on his hands. The blood of an expert pilot.

"Hahaha!" Ves burst out an unhinged laugh without any regard for his audience.

In the end, no matter what kind of excuses he came up with, he was guilty of the same crime that led the Skull Architect to flee to the frontier!

If the MTA ever learned what Ves did, they'd probably put a bounty on his head as well!

"Got it out of your system yet?" Major Verle asked.

"Ahem. Yeah. Thank you for your patience sir. A lot of awful events happened on the surface. There was no time to stop and take the time for me to go through my experiences."

"There is help for you when you need it Mr. Larkinson. Many mech pilots haven't gone through the trauma you must have undergone."

"No thanks, sir." Ves brushed off the major's concerns. "I'd rather just return to work, if I'm allowed to. Working with mechs is the best therapy for a mech designer."

"You'll have to go through a more thorough debriefing as well as another checkup and observation period, but you are more than welcome to resume your post as head designer. Mr. Mercator who has been filling your seat in your absence has proven... less than capable."



Ves smirked. "I can imagine. It takes a lot more than conceit to fill in such a big pair of shoes."

Due to all the monitoring, Major Verle didn't take too long before he left. After his departure, the Vandals resumed their observation on him. Several days went by as Ves went through a more thorough medical checkup as well as going through various competence tests.

His performance during most of these tests exposed how much all of his cognitive enhancements turned him into a freak in this regard!

In fact, his record already included his abnormal cognitive functions, but all the experiences he went through matured him quite a bit since the start of his draft. All the treatments and operations he received on the Starlight Megalodon also comprehensively boosted all of his cognitive abilities by a small notch.

All of this resulted in complete puzzlement on the part of the doctors and specialists administering the tests. Ves performed so far out of bounds in many physical and mental aspects that they simply couldn't judge whether there was anything wrong with his health or mental state.

In the end, they metaphorically threw their hands up and took Ves at his word that he felt fine.

Doctor Cuscar blew out a tired breath as he held a data pad that contained the results of a thorough brain scan. "Compared to an average baseline human's brains, yours is so far out of the norm that you could be mistaken for an alien species."

"Any problems, doc?"

"Hell, what do I know? I think someone who specializes in studying alien biology can tell you more about yourself than a simple doctor like me! You'll have to undergo a more thorough examination at a military hospital if you

want to have any hopes of deciphering the impact of all your transformations on your health."

"No thanks. I trust in the CFA's work. There's nothing wrong with me, really."

Though Dr. Cuscar seemed skeptical about the quality of medical treatment a crashed battleship could provide, Ves just wanted to get this all over with. There was no way the Bright Republic's standards on medical technology could ever fathom the work of top-tier trans-galactic organizations such as the CFA and the Five Scrolls Compact.

After his examinations finally ended, he finally received his gear again, having been cleared to make use of most of his gear including his CFA comm, though such a decision was strictly against regulations.

According to Chief Armorer Mandelsen who passed Ves back his gear, Major Verle himself overruled the rules concerning the use of foreign devices and technology.

"We've been going from one crisis to another." Mandelsen remarked as she signed off on all the gear being returned to Ves. "We're still gathering a slew of surviving ships and trying to find the best way to jump out of this forsaken star system. There's pirates, Vesians and above all else the sandmen lurking in every corner. If worse comes to worst, you'll be better off in your fancy CFA suit than the crappy goods us space peasants use."

Ves raised his eyebrows at her cynical words. "Oh, come now, chief. I'm still a Brighter, just like you. You should call yourselves space peasants."

"Isn't that what the folks from the CFA call everyone else who isn't a part of the Big Two and the first-rate superstates? In the eyes of the people at the top, most of human space only exists to mine exotics for them and occupy space that they disdain to take for themselves."

This wasn't the first time Ves received this response. For some reason, when people found out that he underwent several CFA gene optimization treatments and received his own customized set of CFA equipment, they somehow believed that he transcended his origins and joined the CFA for real.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The real CFA would never acknowledge his highly unconventional and outright fraudulent means of fooling the Starlight Megalodon to commission him as a lieutenant commander of the service.

Ves would rather they didn't find out entirely.

After he retrieved his Squalon and immediately fitted into it, he finally marched to Major Verle's stateroom and entered it. To Ves, it almost felt like old times.

"Take a seat, Mr. Larkinson."

"Am I allowed to activate my signal jammer here?"

"Go ahead."

Once he did so, the entire compartment became engulfed in a strong interference field. Compared to his self-developed signal jammer, the one he received from Virtual Chief Armorer Levitt not only blocked more esoteric means of observation, it also possessed a much higher strength, so much so that Major Verle looked a lot more uncomfortable due to the unstable waves passing through his body.

"So this is CFA tech."

"Yup." Ves nodded. "This little gadget only scratches the surface of what wonders the Starlight Megalodon truly held, sir. She's truly a treasure chest of wonders."

"Now that we're amongst ourselves, please relate to me the details that you were hesitant about telling me in the interrogation room."

"At least I can get some things off my chest."

In the next couple of hours, Ves related more stories and details on some of the more unsavory events during their trek to the surface. He mentioned the unethical experiments, Project Icarus and the deliberate transformation of life on Aeon Corona VII and briefly touched on his partnership with Miss Calabast.

Ves held back on that latter topic. Luckily, Major Verle seemed much more taken by one of the other revelations to care about his temporary cooperation with a third party that came out of the blue.

"Is Project Icarus truly this ambitious? I have never heard of a means where mech pilots can be artificially elevated to expert candidates. Do you know how much the galaxy will shake once news of this get out?"

"I think it's a lot harder to replicate this process than you think, sir." Ves shrugged. "The conditions that made it possible for Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise to be turned into expert candidates should be almost impossible to replicate without so many prerequisites. Somehow, the higher-dimensional particles and energy leaking from the Starlight Megalodon is necessary to foster a unique ecosystem that can support the growth of the god species, who themselves have many unfathomable aspects."

"So only the big boys can make use of this development?"

"I'm not sure if that's even possible, sir. Right now, the laboratory and mainframe holding all of the files on Project Icarus has self-destructed due to the triggering of a trap and perhaps the sandmen will scour the entire planet of life. If the CFA ever comes, there won't be much left for them to reconstruct the conditions that made Project Icarus succeed."

If the Bright Republic ever held the means to foster expert candidates, then they would certainly have to relinquish the method to the Big Two. Major Verle wasn't truly serious about pining after Project Icarus' research data.

Still, the thought that something like this went on underneath everyone's noses in the deep frontier still astounded him. It made Major Verle question what other profound innovations the Big Two kept under wraps.

"Much of the wealth and technology in the hands of the CFA is out of reach to the Bright Republic. There's no point in envying their power." Ves responded.

They had a word for this phenomenon. Tech envy. Much of the galaxy lived in inferior conditions compared to what the citizens of the first-rate superstates and the people privileged to be part of the Big Two all took for granted.

The galactic center was where all the magic happened. The extreme density stars and all the energetic reactions and collisions that took place there constantly generated an abundance of remarkable exotics and anomalies that could easily be leveraged to produce wondrous applications of high technology.

Yet there were far too many hindrances involved with spreading the wealth. The less well-off galactic heartland and the deplorably underdeveloped galactic rim could only stare with envy as the so-called 'first-class citizens' of the galaxy kept the best for themselves and only threw some scraps to the beggars outside their porch as charity.

"You're right." Major Verle smiled deprecatingly at himself. "Chasing after the greater wonders of the Starlight Megalodon has always been a bit of a stretch for us. We should be glad that we obtained a lockbox from one of the battleship's vaults."

The confidential discussion proceeded to move on to other areas. Even though Ves tried hard not to draw attention to his interactions with Calabast, Major Verle wasn't so easily fooled.

"Now, I've already heard from Captain Orfan that the only reason you managed to gain entry to the Starlight Megalodon with the help of an alleged

intelligence agent you encountered once before on Harkensen I, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir. At least this time she didn't make herself out to be a Vesian intelligence officer. I think. She's certainly not on the side of the Vesians, that's for sure."

Major Verle grimaced at Ves. "It's obvious you're reluctant to explain your dealings with her to me. As someone who has a foot in the dark, I know very well how murky it can be to deal with these types of people. Nothing ever good comes out of collaborating with foreign intelligence agents."

No matter how much the major poked and prodded him, Ves kept his mouth shut regarding Miss Calabast. "I'm sorry sir, but I really don't want to talk about her. Could you leave this portion out of your report?"

"I'll consider it. In truth, there are many aspects about the mission that the Bright Republic rather not wish to follow up on. Technically, we did steal CFA property though. Even though they'll probably dismiss us as beggars digging for their trash, it's better if we don't attract their attention at all by leaving behind a detailed record. Besides, we have other concerns to deal with at the moment."

Ves voiced a nagging concern of his. "If I may ask, why haven't we jumped out of the Aeon Corona System yet?"

He would notice something as obvious as an FTL transition. Yet over the course of his checkups and interrogation, he never felt the discomfiting sensation of FTL travel even once.

#### **Chapter 944 Extending Trus**

Through his many interactions with Major Verle, Ves noticed that they gradually grew closer and more amiable in each other's presence.

Ves realized that Major Verle trusted him more and more. Especially after the conclusion of his ground deployment, Ves seemed to have inadvertently entered the commanding officer's inner circle.

Not only did Major Verle indulge Ves whenever he made an unconventional request, the mech officer also talked more freely about the major decisions meant to steer the scattered and diminished fleet to safety.

"The Aeon Corona System is a frighteningly large star system. The edge of the star system is much more distant than usual due to all of the planets and stars it holds. There are pirate ships following behind our wake and there is the Finmoth Regal taking position in front of our route. They are cutting us off."

Ves widened his eyes when Verle mentioned the Finmoth Regal!

"So let me get this straight, sir. Not only have the Vandals assigned to the Finmoth Regal betrayed us, they're also coordinating with the pirate ships to corner us?"

"That's the gist of it." Major Verle shrugged in seeming helplessness. "We've been playing the maneuvering game with them in the vicinity of Aeon Corona IX while we wait for more allied ships to arrive. Yet so far, no other ship has showed up. Right now, it's highly unlikely that any of the other carrier vessels of the Flagrant Vandals or Lydia's Swordmaidens will show up any time soon."

To Ves, it sounded as if Major Verle already wrote off the missing carriers! This was a massive loss in combat capability!

"I take it our spaceborn combat strength isn't looking to good right now." Ves probed.

"It's deplorable." Verle sighed as he let down his guard and revealed his weakness in the face of the events that caught the fleet off-guard. "Our two carriers can only muster up fifty or so spaceborn mechs for battle. All the desperate fighting against the sandmen ships caused a lot of our mechs to

suffer the fate of being crushed by sand. While we've supplemented our numbers somewhat by taking in mechs abandoning the slower combat carriers, our two ships are well below capacity in this regard."

"How are the Swordmaidens faring?"

"Our contact with them is spotty. Right now, the sudden loss of Commander Lydia has come as a near-fatal blow to their morale. From what we heard, Lieutenant Dise who you brought from the surface of Aeon Corona VII is currently making a power play over the established mech captains for control of the gang. I don't know why she bothers. The Swordmaidens are nearly completely annihilated."

"What?" Ves frowned. "Shouldn't there be mech captains among the Swordmaidens who are closer to the line of succession?"

"There are, but the Lieutenant Dise has one advantage over the older and more experienced Swordmaidens. She's an expert candidate."

"Ah."

With how much mech pilots idolized expert pilots, the revelation that one of their own might possibly be able to reach such a height gave Dise an invincible position among the Swordmaidens.

Unless she was a complete idiot, Lieutenant Dise should easily be able to take over the position vacated by Commander Lydia's untimely demise.

Why she wanted to take control, Ves didn't know. Right now, the Swordmaidens were only left with the Jaded Sword and two low-quality light carriers. This was a far cry from their peak!

"To be honest, our relationship with the Swordmaidens have cooled down a bit." Verle explained. "If not for the presence of mutual enemies in each



direction, they would have split off from us and make their own way back to their old haunts in the frontier."

Ves understood that now that both forces retrieved the mission objects, they didn't have much of a reason to stick together besides depending on each other's strength. Even then, the two would always eye each other's spoils. Wouldn't it be great if they could grab another lockbox from their erstwhile allies?

This was also why the remnant of the Flagrant Swordmaidens avoided going into battle and tried to outmaneuver the Finmoth Regal and the ships of the Dragons of the Void trying to confront them. If a battle ever occurred and if one side suffered too many losses, then they couldn't rule out the possibility that their ally would finish the job and stab them in the back!

Hearing these concerns directly from Major Verle in the flesh placed Ves in a position to provide his own take to the challenges. This was because the commanding officer not only enlightened him to the full challenges facing what was left of the Vandal forces in this star system, but also asked him what he thought and how he would respond.

"Why ask me, sir? I'm not a mech officer. I'm not versed in matters of strategy and tactics."

"If I wanted to ask a mech officer, I could have asked myself." The major retorted. "A good leader facing a difficult problem should always be exposed to a diversity of perspectives when they can afford to do so. As a mech officer, I believe our best course of action is to punch through the Finmoth Regal's blockade. However, it is one thing to attack pirates. It's another thing entirely to attack our former comrades."

"I can't speak about the skill of Finmoth Regal's mech pilots, sir, but their mechs are just as formidable as ours, even if they aren't in a great condition

due to their own battles against the sandmen. Nevertheless, the Finmoth Regal has their own complement of Akkara heavy cannons. Their prodigious firepower alone can chew up half of our mechs before we are even able to get close!"

"The deserters of the Finmoth Regal are well-versed with standard Vandal tactics and formations. Part of the reason why we've always gained the upper hand against the pirates is by making use of our superior coordination. Against an equal opponent who knows every trick in our book, we lose this critical advantage."

"So in the end, it's not such a good idea to attack the Finmoth Regal."

"Correct. This is why we are in a stalemate right now."

Ves couldn't provide any useful suggestions to get the Flagrant Swordmaidens out of this awful fix. They were practically trapped in a jar with no easy ways to get out. He figured that Major Verle mainly brought up their circumstances in order to solicit a viable solution.

"I'm sorry, major, but I can't think of anything that can help you out."

"What about a technological solution?"

"Sorry, sir. There are no backdoors or weaknesses for me to exploit. Aside from their battle damage and recent wear and tear, the Finmoth Regal's mechs are just as deadly as our own."

The confidential meeting between them ended in disappointment. Even though Ves hadn't been able to conjure up a magical solution to Major Verle, he nonetheless felt appreciated for being given the opportunity to provide his input on such an important matter.

As Ves stood up, he received his next orders. "You're reinstated to your old post as temporary head designer. Right now, the workshops urgently need

your help restoring as many of our mechs as possible. The more mechs we can field in upcoming battles, the higher the chance we can all make it back to the Bright Republic alive."

"Understood. I'll do my best to get our mechs back in fighting condition!"

Ves left the stateroom and stopped by at the shuttle bay. His CFA shuttle had been secured to the deck by temporary restraints, but overall the shuttle technicians stopped gawking and poking at it once they learned that all of its systems only responded to authorized personnel.

Right now, Ves was the only person who could unlock the shuttle and enable it to fly. There wasn't any use trying to authorize someone else to fly the shuttle without his presence because it only responded to the commands of a genuine CFA officer in possession of a properly-configured CFA comm.

If Ves ever lost his CFA comm, he'd lose the ability to unlock and command the shuttle. This was also why the Flagrant Vandals stopped casting greedy eyes at his gear and his shuttle.

Once he unlocked the hatch and slipped into the shuttle, he checked all of the cargo stowed in the cargo compartment. "Good. All of my nutrient packs are still in one piece!"

Evidently, the security officers hadn't bothered to perform more than a cursory sweep on them, dismissing them expired survival rations. Obviously, none of them even attempted a taste, thereby never finding out how sublime they tasted.

Ves grinned. "Hehe. These vintage nutrient packs are all mine."

While he didn't value the crates of vintage nutrient packs over the shuttle or the Squalon, he did regard them as genuine treasures. There was no way he would relinquish them to the military!

"All mine!" He huffed with greedy breaths as he took in his haul. "I don't care what everyone else says. These nutrient packs are all mine!"

After indulging in his fancies, Ves slowly sobered up and checked the contents of one particular crate. Hidden right in the middle among the nutrient packs was a small and nearly undetectable container that held Adeseus Longhorn's bioimplant.

"Looks like the security officers didn't search these crates closely."

Who could blame them? They only contained some worthless nutrient packs in their eyes. Besides, the container as well as the bioimplant itself didn't trip up many alarms unlike a pistol for example.

Ves did not report this treasure to anyone else. A bioimplant, even an old one, wasn't common goods in the Bright Republic.

Even though he didn't dare to have the Archimedes Rubal implanted in his head right now, he hadn't given up on it yet. So long as he found a reliable biohacker or other relevant specialist to update its bioprogramming, Ves would be able to augment his memorization capabilities to an enormous degree.

The more he came in touch with a variety of alien, classified and high technology that even the System didn't include in its Skill Tree, the more the ability to instantly store a vast amount of information would be of enormous use to him. Aside from that, the bioimplant also offered a number of other useful functions.

"People ask too much of a mech designer." He sighed to himself. "No wonder why there aren't many Seniors and Masters."

As Ves took on the role of the deceased Mr. Longhorn aboard the Starlight Megalodon, he put on the shoes of a Senior Mech Designer for a few weeks.

It turned out they were very big shoes to fill.

If there was anything Ves found out about Senior Mech Designers, it was that they depended on accumulating an enormous amount of knowledge.

"Seniors are always pushing the envelope of what is already known. From a broad and deep base of knowledge, they jump off the beaten path and try to pierce what is beyond the fog of the unknown."

In the perspective of Ves, a Journeyman Mech Designer mainly concerned themselves with designing the best mechs as their abilities allowed. Their design philosophies aided them in distinguishing and empowering their designs with their unique touches.

However, once someone advanced to Senior, the act of designing mechs turned from a pivotal means to earn money and fame into a vehicle to pursue a near-impossible goal.

"Senior Mech Designers aren't that interested in designing today's mechs, but only cast their eyes towards tomorrow's mechs."

Original research became a vital component to their development as an advanced mech designer. Performing research was also crucial in their pursuit to bring their design philosophies to fruition.

"It's too bad that it's extremely expensive and difficult for Senior Mech Designers to attain their goals."

The transition from Apprentice to Journeyman was the first watershed of a mech designer. Yet the amount of Seniors who successfully advanced to Master was even less!

Two main reasons lay behind their inability to pioneer a new path in the field of mech design. One was the lack of funding and resources. The other was the lack of knowledge and research ability!

For now, Ves couldn't do anything about the former, but he always considered the latter to be his strong suit. The earlier he strengthened this aspect, the more distinct this advantage played out throughout his career!

"I am practically made to be a research-oriented mech designer! Kind of like... the Skull Architect."

Ves suddenly felt less jubilant about this declaration.

### Chapter 945 Remnant Flee

Once Ves left the shuttle bay and entered his office for the first time in a very long time, he noticed some changes since the last time he visited.

It was as if someone else took over his home.

"Well, it's not like this office is my personal home." Ves shrugged.

Soon enough, Ves keyed himself to the office and logged into the terminal. The first thing he wanted to find out was the disposition of the mechs at the disposal of what was left of the Flagrant Vandals.

The second thing he wanted to find out was their actual condition in space. Besides some short descriptions from Major Verle, Ves hardly knew where the remnant allied fleet still stood in the Aeon Corona System.

As Ves summoned up a plot of the star system, he studied the known and estimated positions of all the human and sandman ships in local space.

"Seems like Aeon Corona VII turned into a hive of sandman motherships."

He had no idea what really went on there, but for some reason a large majority of sandman ships in the system continued to converge in orbit of Seven. They didn't descend to the surface nor did they chase after human ships. Instead, they just orbited the planet as if they turned into satellites for some reason.

"Hmph. I bet that dwarf lover has something to do with it." Ves threw out a guess.

Ves only recently freed the sentient AI from its prison. Sigrund wasn't completely free of all of his shackles, and probably still needed some time to adjust his state.

Then, he would probably leave and go as far away as possible. Sigrund wouldn't possibly be stupid enough to stay here considering that a CFA warfleet would definitely arrive in the system sooner or later.

If there was one thing that could get the CFA's rocks off, it was the existence of an actual sentient AI! Such a development was the culmination of one of their greatest dreams!

The intense concentration of sandman ships orbiting over Seven practically ruled out any continued human presence in the vicinity of the planet.

As the Shield of Hispania beat a desperate retreat, they observed many distant battles as other fleets fell from the onslaught of sandman motherships. Vandals, Swordmaidens, Vesians and pirate vessels all succumbed to the overwhelming number of alien aggressors.

It didn't look good to the remaining cohesive force of Vandals and Swordmaidens. The two flagships survived as well as an additional Vandal combat carrier and two Swordmaiden light carriers.

"Five carriers in total. No transports, no cargo haulers, no logistics ships. Damn."

In the short term, the absence of their supply train wouldn't affect them that much. Yet in his position as head designer, Ves knew how vital it was to bring along an abundant amount of supplies.

This went double or triple for any operations in the frontier, where there was a dearth of space stations where the fleet could resupply!

Ves already started to develop a headache at the thought of trying to keep the Vandal mechs in fighting conditions as fuel, energy, materials and replacement parts began to dwindle quickly.

Worse, each battle the Vandals fought accelerated the consumption of supplies. The Akkara heavy cannons especially spewed bucket loads of laser beams and ballistic shells in rapid succession!

Though the loss of so many carriers meant that the remnant fleet didn't have to support so many heavy mechs anymore, what little they still possessed was more than enough to empty their reserves in a couple of intensive battles!

He came to an important conclusion after making this observation. "We need to avoid battle whenever we can! The more we fight, the faster we run out of supplies. It would be best if we didn't have to fight at all!"

Sadly, pirates and the deserters gunning for the remnants of the Flagrant Swordmaidens did their best to force the opposite.

As Ves played out the maneuvers the fleet and its pursuers performed in the last couple of days, it became clear to him that no matter where they turned, the ships aligned to the Dragons of the Void always moved in a way to intercept their prey.

This dogged determination led Ves to believe the pirates strongly suspected or outright knew what the Flagrant Swordmaidens managed to retrieve from the surface.

"They'll never give up pursuit if that's the case."

Even if the remnant fleet managed to transition into FTL, the pirates would sure be following right behind.



It was no wonder that Major Verle expressed an intent to battle. It was best to get rid of these jackals sooner than later!

Despite what was best for the fleet, Ves couldn't see any way that Major Verle would be able to get out without a fight. The pirates at the rear and the Finmoth Regal blocking the direction ahead became necessary obstacles for them to overcome.

"At least the pirates shouldn't outnumber us as much."

The Dragons of the Void suffered just as much as any force when calamity struck. Even so, losing most of their ships didn't deter the remaining pirate vessels from giving up the spoils Vandals and Swordmaidens obtained at great cost.

Ves considered all of the information he gathered and tried to figure out a way out of this hole they stumbled into. Yet no matter how hard he thought, he failed to come up with a viable idea.

"Even if we know everything about the Finmoth Regal, so what? We can't hack their mechs or sabotage the combat carrier from remote."

Mutiny, desertion and rebellion was one of the worst things that could happen to a mech regiment! All of the investment put into building up the Finmoth Regal and her mech roster not only became moot, but was even being turned against the original owners!

The thought of Inheritors, Hellcats and Akkara mechs slugging it out against each other in a mirror match sat very poorly with Ves. No matter how much he thought about it, the fleet would definitely suffer substantial casualties despite their local advantage in numbers.

"Should we negotiate?"

Perhaps something like that already happened. There wouldn't be any result. Desertion was hard to foment but even harder to reverse. Once someone forsook their oaths and loyalties, they would always bear the stigma of treachery. There was no way Major Verle would believe the Finmoth Regal rejoined the light.

"No. A battle is inevitable."

After staring at the plot some more, Ves simply couldn't figure out a way to get the fleet out of this closing trap. Sooner or later, the Dragons of the void would come close enough to force an engagement.

"Well, there's no other choice than to prepare the mechs for battle."

With great reluctance, Ves dropped his focus on the outside and began to focus inward. As he studied the condition of each mech, he noted many deficiencies that slowed down repairs.

"I guess I'll have to clean up after other people's messes again." He sighed.

Ves resumed his old routine as head designer. Back on Aeon Corona VII, Ves formed countless repair plans in order to cope with the breakdown effect. All of that practice made him extremely proficient in spotting faults and coming up with the most efficient way to address those problems.

Roughly speaking, his repair plans were up to fifty percent less wasteful and time-consuming than before! This was an enormous boost in efficiency that only seasoned mech designers specialized in repair services could accomplish!

As soon as he finished the plans, he distributed them to the maintenance crews of the two ships. After that, he considered his next steps.

"Making plans from my office isn't enough. I should drop by at the workshops."

Ves left his office and went down to the lower decks until he sought out Chief Technician Haine supervising the frantic repairs.

What struck Ves immediately as he walked through the corridors and entered the workshop was that the Shield of Hispania faced a serious congestion problem!

"We took on too much crew from other ships!"

The life support systems of the ship must be straining right now to accomodate all of the extra people the combat carrier currently supported.

More mech technicians also didn't necessarily mean the repair work finished faster. All the people in the way and the differences in methods, priorities and opinions that emerged caused many mech technicians to spend more time in arguing with each other than actually performing their assigned work!

"Chief Haine!" Ves yelled through the hustle and bustle of the busy workshop.

"Ves! You again!"

The familiar chief technician already chatted with Ves once earlier during the interrogation and interview sessions. Right now, Chief Haine appeared a lot more frazzled and even started to show her age.

Evidently, herding all of these mech technicians exhausted her enormously!

"What brings you down to this pig sty, Ves?"

"I came down to observe the condition of our mechs. I didn't expect the mech workshops to be this... lively."

Chief Haine scoffed at his description. "It's a dump right now. I don't like this anymore than you do, but Major Verle doesn't want the refugees we picked up from the other ships to be idling by themselves. Bad things happen when you leave a huge number of defeated and unruly Vandals by themselves."

"It will be a repeat of the Finmoth Regal. Gotcha." Ves nodded in understanding. "Even so, these mechs need to be repaired so that they can get back into action quickly. I don't know how much time it will take for the battle to arrive, but by my reckoning we don't have much longer than two or three days."

"That's a very tough time frame to accomplish anything, Ves." The chief technician furrowed her brows as she contemplated how many mechs they could bring back to fighting condition. "The awful thing about fighting the sandmen is that most mechs get outright crushed if they get caught by the sandman ships. However, that's not the only arsenal of the aliens. Most of their motherships are capable of firing a penetrating beam that can blast a mech to pieces or at least wipe out a significant chunk of their frame when hit."

"I'm aware." Ves nodded. "When I composed the repair plans, I noticed that we need to fabricate a lot of replacement parts to fill in the missing chunks. For expediency's sake, I mostly aimed to replace the missing portions with cheaper components that can be fabricated very quickly."

"In other words, you cut corners."

"I did, but at least I'm doing it smartly rather than opportunistically. The quality of the repaired mechs will slide, but they won't collapse at any moment due to developing a crippling weakness from sloppy repairs."

The chief grunted. "That will have to do, I guess. Even so, if we have five or six days or so, we can restore thrice as many mechs than if we only have two days. Many of our damaged mechs are really in such a horrible shape that it's impossible to fix them up within a day no matter how many mech technicians work on them. In fact, they're already slowing everything as you can see for yourself!"

Ves didn't pay attention to her complaint but instead focused on an earlier detail. "We need time. The more time we buy for ourselves, the more mechs we can field in the inevitable battle against the pirates. Our odds of winning are much greater if we can field ten or fifteen extra mechs!"

He knew what the Flagrant Swordmaidens needed to accomplish in order to improve their chances. Though he hadn't been able to come up with a way to avoid a battle, he could nonetheless come up with a way to stack the odds in their favor!

"Still, how can we stall our opponents?"

For some reason, Ves was reminded of Miss Calabast. This seemed to be more up her alley.

#### Chapter 946 Information Advantage

Once Ves ascertained the state of the workshops and saw the conditions of the damaged mechs for himself, he mulled over the idea that developed in his mind.

"If a battle starts in two days, we can rush five or so additional mechs back into the field. If we have double the amount of time, then it's not impossible to get ten or more additional mechs ready to deploy!"

Even if the condition of these hastily-repaired and jury-rigged mechs would likely be awful, every mech frame counted in a battle against a tricky opponent.

The Dragons of the Void deserved their reputation as the most skilled and organized pirates in the frontier. Paired with the deserters from the Finmoth Regal who knew every trick in the Vandal playbook, the Vandal and Swordmaiden survivors did not possess an overwhelming advantage in the upcoming battle.

Therefore, Ves long thought about a means to tilt the advantage to his own side in an unconventional manner.

"It's not about courage. It's about survival."

Certainly, the Vandal mech pilots aboard the Shield of Hispania all wanted the whoop the butts of the deserters. Mech Captain Bonnet and her ilk not only forsook their oaths, but more importantly turned their daggers against their former comrades!

A stab in the back was a lot more painful than a stab in the front!

When Ves thought about what delaying actions the Flagrant Swordmaidens could employ, he honed in on the Finmoth Regal. Didn't he scan the battered combat carrier thoroughly to the point of mapping out all of her exterior damage as well as the structural integrity of at least half the ship with his CFA shuttle?

Not only that, he also obtained detailed scans about the condition of all of their spaceborn mechs!

"We have an information advantage!"

While Ves did not know enough about starships to pinpoint their weaknesses, he knew at least one person aboard the Shield of Hispania who could easily school him in this field.

After bidding farewell to a frazzled Chief Haine, Ves zipped out of the mech workshops and navigated the congested corridors all the way to the engineering bay where an abundance of engineers and technicians milled about core ship components. He sought out Chief Engineer Avanaeon among the crowd and drew him to his office.

"What's this about, Ves?" He asked. "I'm busy supervising this rabble of stubborn engineers! Everyone of them wants to do things the way they did back on their old ships!"

"I need your help with a plan to deal with the Finmoth Regal. As long as we can hinder or disable that ship, we might not have to fight an arduous battle against the Dragons of the Void."

This caused Chief Avanaeon to look up. "What do you have in mind?"

"We have detailed files and schematics as well as status updates on the deserter vessel, right?"

"Yeah, but that won't help as much as you think. A combat carrier is military-grade starship built for surviving the rigors of war. Combat carriers are next thing to a fleet carriers in taking a beating!"

Ves activated his Squalon's built-in comm and projected the detailed scan results of the Finmoth Regal.

Chief Avanaeon widened his eyes. He immediately recognized the Finmoth Regal. "This resolution. This scan penetration! Where did you get all of this?! The quality and quantity of all of this scan data is extremely luxurious! In fact, it's even better than standing right next to ship!"

"CFA tech has its perks." Ves grinned. "I think the shuttle I lifted off the Starlight Megalodon probably did double duty as a vehicle for customs inspections and peacekeeping. Its scanners are remarkably good at scanning ships, mechs and other vehicles of every kind."

"Makes sense. Damn, the CFA has some really good stuff!"

After Chief Avanaeon went over his tech envy, he demanded Ves to transfer all of the files over to his terminal. Once he obtained the files, the chief

engineer performed some quick data aggregation and analysis on the scan data.

The older man became so engulfed in his work that Ves practically didn't exist anymore in his eyes!

Knowing the importance of a focused state of mind, Ves stood quietly and let the engineer engross himself in the sheer quantity of high-quality scanning data.

After half an hour, the chief engineer finally closed his eyes and leaned back against his chair. His hazard suit creaked as he did so.

"If you told me to come up with a plan to exploit the weaknesses of the Finmoth Regal with archival data, I would have packed you off. Yet now that you brought me all of these up-to-date scan data, there's no way I can miss out on an easy opportunity to cripple their ship!"

"What a confident boast!" Ves raised his eyebrow. "That sounds ambitious. Are you certain you can cripple the Finmoth Regal?"

"Ves, to a seasoned engineer like me, the Finmoth Regal is a ramshackle combat carrier which depleted most of their supplies. Look at the scans of their cargo bay and material stockpiles to see what I mean. While her crew patched up the most egregious holes, their repairs aren't very thorough and with the right application of force we can easily punch through them and damage the delicate components and compartments underneath!"

"Even so, most of the surface components and compartments aren't very vital to the functioning of a combat carrier. Their core systems are always buried in the center with loads of compartments, hull structure and redundant armor layers in between."

"That's generally the case." Chief Avanaeon nodded, but then spun around the projection so that it showed the Finmoth Regal's stern. "However, the



engineering bay is always placed close to the rear of the vessel and so isn't as well-protected. The sublight propulsion system is especially exposed. This is where we should strike!"

In the next couple of hours, Ves and Avanaeon hammered out of a plan of approach to cripple the Finmoth Regal's sublight propulsion system. This encompassed trying to find ways to deal with its various subsystems, from the main thrusters to the engines to the fuel supply.

Under the detailed scans obtained by Ves, they found several ways to affect these subsystems through expedient means!

Even though they spent a significant amount of their limited time on this harebrained scheme to sabotage the Finmoth Regal, at the end of the session they both smiled at each other for a job well done.

"Let's bring it up to Major Verle. Even if the plan is a little risky, it's better than facing our opponents upfront!"

When the both of them requested an urgent meeting with their commanding officer, Major Verle regarded as if they were a pair of boys trying to show off something cool to their parents.

"This must be important if it involves my best engineer and mech designer. Spit it out. What did the two of you cook up?"

"It's like this, sir." Avanaeon began. "Ves brought over a large amount of recent, high-quality scans of the Finmoth Regal. After pouring over the combat carrier's actual state, we've found several ways in which we can impair her mobility for weeks with minimal effort, essentially taking her out of action for the foreseeable time."

"Oh? How does this minimal effort look like?"

Avanaeon activated a projector that showed the Finmoth Regal's actual, damaged and partially-repaired state and highlighted several sections of her stern.

"The battle damage that the Finmoth Regal incurred against the sandman can't be fixed in a short time in the field, sir. What her crew has done is to patch over the holes and more vulnerable areas with easily-workable but inferior armor plating. The repair job is very hasty and patchy as well. Look at this section of plating that covers a major fuel line. As long as we can affect these stress points along the fused areas, we can blow this entire patched section into pieces and wreck the fuel line!"

The chief engineer proceeded to highlight several more vulnerable areas. Ves actually did most of the work in identifying these weak points as he possessed a lot more familiarity with working with armor plating, though some of the intricacies of ship-grade armor plating still escaped him. Nonetheless, his broad foundation in the relevant fields pulled him through.

"I see." Major Verle nodded thoughtfully. "Yet even if we know exactly where to apply force on the Finmoth Regal, getting in a position to strike these vulnerabilities is easier said than done."

"Ah, but this is where an invention of ours comes in, sir." Ves stepped in and progressed the projection to a depiction of a small stealth shuttle passing between the Finmoth Regal's mech patrols only to come up right next to the desert ship's stern! "If you may recall, the chief engineer and I developed a small stealth shuttle some time ago. Although there are many deficiencies about the shuttle, its stealth systems are just as good as the ones employed by the Venidsans so long ago!"

Ves and Avanaeon may have developed the Six-Sided Dice as a potential escape vehicle, but the main use of stealth shuttles had always been to sneak up to an enemy and hit them where it hurt!

That was also how the Venidsans initially dealt a near-fatal blow against the Flagrant Vandals back when they confronted the Frosty Meteors!

It took some time for Major Verle to recall the strange-looking shuttle collecting dust in a forgotten corner of the shuttle bay.

"That little thing? That's the smallest and shabbiest shuttle that I've ever seen. Is it truly capable of sneaking all the way inside the Finmoth Regal's security envelope?"

Ves grinned with confidence. "If we're talking about any other enemy, we wouldn't be so certain, sir. Right now, however, we are talking about the Finmoth Regal, a ship that used to be ours. We know exactly how their sensors and scanners are configured. With some additional tweaks, our stealth shuttle wouldn't even be a blip on their most sensitive sensors!"

"I recall that some of the Inheritor mechs are upgraded with stealth detector arrays. This is an addition which you yourself advocated to be put to use."

"It's exactly because I helped develop it that I'm most aware of its shortcomings and blind spots. Stealth and anti-stealth systems are constantly in competition with each other. It's not that difficult for me to modify the stealth shuttle to counter the characteristics of our own stealth detectors."

"Is there a risk that the Finmoth Regal's crew have adjusted their sensors to guard against this situation?"

"I don't think they're aware that we possess a stealth shuttle, sir." Ves replied. "Besides, it takes a very high foundation in sensor and signals tech to be able to know what you're doing. I am not aware that there are any notable experts in this field aboard the Finmoth Regal. The typical sensor officer may be adept in using all of the capabilities of a sensor system, but they can forget about tinkering on them. It takes an actual expert to do something so advanced!"

Overall, while Ves couldn't rule out that the Dragons of the Void stationed some experts on the Finmoth Regal to do something like that, nobody thought they would do such a thing.

As Major Verle weighed the various risks, he concluded that this scheme was actually very plausible!

"I like it, but time is short. If we want to affect the Finmoth Regal in time, we'll have to deploy your stealth shuttle very soon. I'll take care of the staffing and the planning. Besides deploying the stealth shuttle, I also want you to go out and observe the proceedings from a distance with your CFA shuttle."

"Why?"

"In order to provide up-to-date support. Are you up for it, Mr. Larkinson?"

The way the commanding officer stared at Ves subjected the latter to a peculiar kind of pressure. It wasn't the spiritual pressure that Ves once felt from attracting Venerable Foster's ire, but it was the kind of pressure that only existed within his imagination.

This was the kind of pressure every leader was capable of subjecting to their subordinates!

It didn't seem as if Major Verle took no for an answer, so Ves graciously 'volunteered' for the duty.

"I will do my part for the Bright Republic, sir!"

"Knock off that facetious display. You're far too sketchy to come across as authentic. Now get out of my office and prepare the two shuttles for deployment!"

## Chapter 947 Calculated Sabotage

As soon as Major Verle approved the plan concocted by Ves and Avanaeon, he took it to some strategists and fleshed it out. Not only that, he also selected the best shuttle pilot and a specialist in explosives.

The Six-Sided Dice was fairly small for a shuttle and possessed even less internal volume. It only fit four passengers in ordinary circumstances, and even after taking out all the emergency nutrient packs, oxygen tanks and water filtration system, they still couldn't stuff too much explosives inside the stealth vehicle.

Nonetheless, if the calculations performed by Ves and Avanaeon panned out, they didn't need to plant too much explosives on the Finmoth Regal to cripple her sublight propulsion system!

Of course, a key part of the plan entailed the use of compact but extremely potent directional explosive charges.

Much like any other weapon system, they came in various shapes and sizes. For this mission, the Vandals pulled out all the stops. All of the best armorers and bomb experts gathered together to custom fabricate a special batch of shaped charges.

While Ves didn't verse himself too deeply in bombs and explosives, a shortcoming that he definitely planned to fix in the future, he knew that the shaped charges would do the job of penetrating through the weak points of the Finmoth Regal's patchy armor.

With all the data at their disposal, the bomb experts calculated the force needed to breach the armor and have enough force left over to damage the vulnerable components and compartments underneath.

Naturally, in order to damage portions of the core systems buried underneath, the shaped charges needed to be made of potent, high-quality materials. The

Shield of Hispania used up several rare and volatile exotics to form these potent but very compact charges, but no one begrudged the expenditure.

If these rare exotics allowed the remnants of the Vandals and Swordmaidens to slip through the net and avoid a destructive battle, then the investment already paid off in spades!

"It's done." Chief Avanaeon said as he accompanied Ves to the CFA shuttle. "I thought my days of entering the fray were over. I feel kind of nervous depending on the ECM systems of this shuttle to keep us under their notice."

"Don't worry, chief. I already flew this shuttle fairly close to the Finmoth Regal and they didn't have a clue. As long as we don't come close enough to be caught on their optical sensors or plain human eyeballs, we'll be fine."

Due to various reasons, the two would be riding aboard the shuttle that would follow the stealth shuttle from behind and coordinate the upcoming stealth operation with the help of its pinpoint comm buoys and advanced sensors and scanners.

Much of these systems couldn't be accessed without the availability of authorized personnel. For now, only Ves himself could unlock the full capabilities of the shuttle.

A handful of other Vandals entered the shuttle and took the helm or set up various makeshift control panels in the passenger compartment. Each of the people chosen to ride the shuttles were abundantly competent in their respective fields.

After a quick greeting and introduction, everyone turned back to their own preparations without further word. As professionals, they'd rather focus on doing their best to increase the success rate of the coming operation.

Everyone knew what was at stake. If they succeeded in crippling the mobility of the Finmoth Regal, the Flagrant Swordmaidens would be able to take instant advantage of the deserter ship's inability to maneuver!

Shortly after, both shuttles launched out of the Shield of Hispania's shuttle bay and quickly flew off into the void of space.

The distance between the Flagrant Swordmaidens and the Finmoth Regal wasn't too large. It only took a couple of hours for the shuttles to reach the vicinity of the latter, and this was in a state where they pulled back the throttle in order to minimize their emissions.

The CFA shuttle stopped well outside the range where it might risk being detected by the deserter mechs. In the plan refined by the strategists, the CFA shuttle would never be employed as a vehicle to conduct the sabotage.

The Six-Sided Dice took on the starring role instead. As Ves and Avanaeon sat side-by-side in front of their own control panels, they carefully observed as the stealth shuttle threaded its way through the various mech patrols orbiting the Finmoth Regal.

"Did you ever reckon we would put our stealth shuttle to offensive use?" Avanaeon asked.

"Nope." Ves shook his head. "Then again, I never expected to be plotting against one of our own ships. If we targeted any other pirate ship, I wouldn't have risked it. The only reason why I proposed this action is because we are probably more familiar with the Finmoth Regal's hull structure than her entire crew."

He couldn't overstate the advantage in information. Combining detailed scans with archival data stored within the Shield of Hispania's local database allowed them to plan ahead and account for almost every variable.

With all of these preparations, the stealth shuttle should easily be able to sneak close, which it did as time went by.

Although Ves grew a little more apprehensive as the shuttle got dangerously close to the ship and her powerful sensors, he also felt confident enough about the effectiveness of its stealth systems to stay calm.

As the stealth shuttle came closer, the CFA shuttle began to employ some subtle scans to confirm the condition of the Finmoth Regal.

"So far, the Finmoth Regal received a small amount of patchwork repairs." Chief Avanaeon stated as he poured over the incoming scan data. "It's not much, though. I think their engineers and technicians hate the thought of performing EVA work out here."

"They might not be loyal to the cause either." Ves added. "From what I've gathered of the mutiny, those who readily turned pirates are usually those with the most grievances. The more skilled and competent Vandals shouldn't be as enthusiastic as the bottom ranks."

"That theory doesn't apply to the ringleaders such as Mech Captain Bonnet. They made the decision to desert for more reasons than poor treatment."

They both fell silent upon that. This wasn't the time to talk about why the Finmoth Regal deserted in the first place. Certainly, desperation at being hunted down by the sandmen and gratefulness towards the Dragons of the Void for rescuing them certainly played a role. Yet the leaders of the Finmoth Regal must have had their own ideas to embrace this grave act of betrayal.

As the Six-Sided Dice exerted its stealth systems to the utmost, it deftly slid around the detection radii of the increasing number of mech patrols as it neared the ship.

The closer the stealth shuttle got, the more it risked brushing within a couple of kilometers past the orbiting mechs on patrol!



Although this sounded like a huge distance, in space it was practically close enough to spit in each other's faces. Due to the sheer emptiness of space, any signal of heat emission, no matter how minor, would immediately stand out like a candle in the dark, especially at such a close range.

Therefore, both Ves and Avanaeon hoped that they did a thorough job in the initial development and design of the shuttle. The most precarious part about their use was that even a single leak or gap in its stealth cover would be able to expose its existence!

So far, though, everything went as planned. The Finmoth Regal hadn't put up their guard up at all against possible stealth incursions. The Inheritors upgraded with stealth detector arrays kept the fragile and energy-hungry sensors dormant.

For once, their plan proceeded without a hitch. Though Ves tensed his body in case a complication arose, the stealth shuttle never risked exposure even after it reached the Finmoth Regal's stern section!

The various Vandal specialists poured over the scans and relayed various bits of information to the stealth shuttle with the help of the pinpoint comm system. The CFA shuttle already deployed its small and stealthy comm buoys beforehand which currently surrounded the Finmoth Regal in a triangle formation.

"The Finmoth Regal isn't on high alert. Her crew is operating under yellow alert. No deserter crewmembers are near the target sections."

"The deserter mechs are continuing to maintain their routine patrols at half-strength. Scans of the mech stables and workshops suggest that no additional mechs will be able to deploy from the Finmoth Regal within three minutes."

The lack of vigilance on the part of the deserters enabled the stealth shuttle to open up a tiny gap and affix the shaped charges at the exact points along the Finmoth Regal's hull where they could do the most damage.

This was the most delicate portion of the operation. It was impossible for the Six-Sided Dice to perform their sabotage without exposing itself, it only a fraction.

If the sensor operators of the Finmoth Regal were a little more alert or if its system was watching out for stealth shuttles from the start, then the Six-Sided Dice risked immediate exposure!

Fortunately, none of these possibilities came through. The Finmoth Regal maintained a steady course at low burn in order to maintain position in front of the path that the Flagrant Swordmaidens dearly wanted to pass in order to exit the star system.

"The bomb expert has finished planting half of the charges! The stealth shuttle is proceeding from the starboard side to the port side of the Finmoth Regal to emplace the remaining charges."

Like most combat carriers, the Finmoth Regal possessed a lot of redundancy. In the case of her particular ship model, she possessed twin mirrored propulsion systems that mostly operated as a single entity but could be used separately if needed.

That meant if one of them got knocked down, the Finmoth Regal would still be able to maneuver at half propulsion!

While knocking out one half of its sublight mobility would severely constrain the Finmoth Regal's ability to cut off the Flagrant Swordmaidens, it was best to be thorough!

At this point, a complication finally occurred.

"Detecting a long-ranged signal from the direction of the pirate ships! The encrypted signal has reached the Finmoth Regal!"

"Do we know what the pirates said to the deserters?!"

"We can't crack the encryption in a short time! However, the data transmission isn't large. I think.. I think the pirates just transmitted movement orders to the Finmoth Regal!"

Half of the Vandals in the CFA shuttle widened their eyes. "Tell the stealth shuttle to cut short and pull back! The Finmoth Regal is about to turn!"

Too late! The huge combat carrier began to heat up as her main thrusters and maneuvering thrusters came to life. The Finmoth Regal began to rotate on her axis!

Unfortunately, she changed her course in such a way that caused the stern port section to abruptly slam against the stealth shuttle.

"The Six-Sided Dice has collided against the hull of the Finmoth Regal!"

The sheer difference in size and mass caused the cube-shaped stealth shuttle to be flicked off into space in a high-uncontrollable spin! The Six-Sided Dice had never been a very tough and robust vessel, and its stealth systems couldn't handle such a powerful impact and shock.

"Stealth systems have shut down! It's exposed!"

The Finmoth Regal immediately entered red alert as her sensors detected a small objects flinging away from the combat carrier!

"The mech patrols are alerted to the threat! A squad of mechs are beelining towards the Six-Sided Dice!"

"Tell the crew to re-enter stealth! The entire shuttle is exposed!"

"They can't. The collision has broken its active stealth coverage." Ves declared as he pointed the shuttle's scanners towards his own creation.

The outcome was already set in stone as soon as the butt of the Finmoth Regal bumped against the Six-Sided Dice.

No matter how much Ves, Avanaeon, Major Verle and the rest planned this operation, in the end a simple set of maneuvering orders transmitted by the pirates at an inopportune time jeopardized the safety of the stealth shuttle!

"The stealth shuttle won't have the opportunity to plant more charges. Detonate the existing ones now before they detect our sabotage!"

A Vandal officer aboard the CFA shuttle activated the detonation command.

As a number of deserter mechs approached the stealth shuttle, the shaped charges abruptly exploded, directing most of its potent power towards the weak points, piercing right through them and affecting numerous delicate and important components and compartments!

Because the Finmoth Regal had just completed a course adjustment, her main thrusters were more active than usual. This also caused the ship to suffer significantly more damage as all of those active systems suffered catastrophic damage!

#### **Chapter 948 Pain in the Rear**

Even though the stealth shuttle never managed to place all of the shaped charges it carried, over eighty percent had already been placed before the sudden accident.

Even as the Six-Sided Dice rolled away in space in an uncontrollable spin, Ves imagined a giant dice thrown across the galaxy in the largest casino game in the history of reality.

He quickly shook his head to rid himself of that inappropriate image. This wasn't the time to indulge in his fantasies!

"Mr. Larkinson, Chief Avanaeon, is there anything you can do to help the Six-Sided Dice to resume its stealth mode?!" The Vandal officer asked.

Both of them shook their heads. "No, sir. There is simply no way. The Six-Sided Dice needs days of repair work before it has any hope of recovering her ability to enter stealth!"

Let alone days, the stealth shuttle didn't even have seconds as a handful of deserter mechs immediately arrived next to the spinning stealth shuttle.

A Hellcat hybrid knight mech piloted by Mech Captain Bonnet herself came closer in order to make sense of the strange metal cube. Seconds later, realization came through as she connected the cube's appearance to the damage the Finmoth Regal suffered.

She opened up a channel to the shuttle. The CFA shuttle following in the distance listened in as well.

"Vandals." Bonnet spat acidly. "No one else wants to take us down as much as my old pals. I know it's you!"

"Heh." The stealth shuttle's pilot chuckled. "Friggin' traitors. What now, traitor? Your ship is dead in the water! You're going to have to be towed to get anywhere! Good luck asking the pirates for a tow when sandmen ships are continuing to scour this system of human ships!"

"Oh yeah? Too bad you won't live to see it, Vandal!"

Captain Bonnet's Hellcat lifted up its wrist and fired the nail driver mounted to it. A large, thick and sharpened alloy rod immediately launched from the wrist and punched a hole straight through the Six-Sided Dice!

The stealth shuttle immediately shattered afterwards, destroying it utterly without giving its occupants any way to survive!

"The Six-Sided Dice is destroyed at the hands of Mech Captain Bonnet." The Vandal officer noted with regret. "No life signals detected from the wreckage of the stealth shuttle."

Every other Vandals closed their eyes at the loss of two loyal Vandals.

As for Ves and Avanaeon, as the creators of the Six-Sided Dice they regretted its loss over the loss of the two Vandals. That was their escape vehicle!

While Ves didn't know how much Avanaeon cared about the shuttle, personally he deeply felt pained by its loss. He lost a valuable escape method!

While his recent stint as a Senior Mech Designer aboard the Starlight Megalodon allowed him to supplement his understanding of stealth systems by a little bit, he lacked the resources and industrial capacity to fabricate a second Six-Sided Dice.

He only managed to construct the one that just got driven a nail through by repurposing the salvaged remains of Venidsan stealth shuttles.

Perhaps if the Vandals still retained their logistics systems, he would still be able to cobble up an inferior copy, but for the moment the only shuttle that Ves could rely on was his CFA shuttle.

Thinking about the many capabilities of his CFA shuttle calmed him down a bit. Almost all of its parameters vastly exceeded the parameters of that sad excuse of a stealth shuttle. The CFA's standard ECM systems already approximated the functionality of an active stealth system. If not for its inability to hide itself from plain view, the CFA shuttle was already a nearly undetectable vessel in space!

Ves sighed and refocused himself before he decided to move away from the loss of the Six-Sided Dice.

Although the loss of the stealth shuttle pained the Vandals, they quickly whooped in joy as they saw the Finmoth Regal being wracked by various explosions!

Her recently-active propulsion systems suffered modest but incredibly focused and deliberately-aimed damage. The shapes charges damaged critical sections that not only disabled their functionality, but also caused certain active and volatile elements to explode as well!

This meant that immediately after the short and underwhelming series of detonations, more than a dozen more significant and more destructive secondary explosions wracked the stern of the Finmoth Regal!

"Half of her main thrusters are inoperable!"

"She is leaking fuel and propellant!"

"The Regal's engineering bay has been breached! Secondary explosions have inflicted moderate damage to the core engineering compartments before emergency seals have set in! One of her power reactors has been affected and is currently undergoing emergency shutdown!"

A raft of damage reports streamed in as the CFA shuttle easily peered through the mess of signals and mapped out the effects of their sabotage. After the secondary and tertiary explosions subsided, it became clear to everyone that they succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

Even if the Vandals suffered painful accident, this same coincidence also magnified the damage suffered by the combat carrier!

"Chief Avanaeon, what's your verdict? Can she move or resume operation within a short period of time?"

"She's dead in the water." Avanaeon declared with confidence. "No matter how good their engineers and repair crews are, the Finmoth Regal needs a

drydock or the assistance of a well-equipped logistics ship if she wants any hope of regaining her mobility. All the secondary explosions have not only damaged the sublight propulsion systems directly, they also affected the structural integrity of the hull sections around them. Her entire rear is shredded!"

This was all they needed to hear, because the Vandal officer quickly ordered the CFA shuttle to retrieve its comm buoys and discreetly slink back to the Shield of Hispania.

During the journey back, Ves took note of the mood of the other Vandals. While they felt pained by the loss of the crew of the Six-Sided Dice, compared to the thousands of comrades that never returned from the surface of Aeon Corona VII, the deaths of two measly servicemen hardly weighed on their minds for more than a couple of minutes.

As soldiers, losing comrades and suffering casualties was a fact of life. The important point was that the two deceased Vandals didn't die in vain. They succeeded in their mission to cripple the Finmoth Regal, and did so to such an extent that the deserter ship and her traitorous crew could forget about participating in any hostile actions against the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

This opened a lot of options for the remnant fleet. Not only would they be able to escape through the hole in the net cast by the pirates, they also had the possibility to attack the Finmoth Regal!

Avanaeon didn't think Major Verle would go for such a satisfying but needlessly pointless course of action.

"The most important priority is to complete the mission. Hunting down pirates and deserters will only set us back on that front. While the Finmoth Regal has lost her legs, she still possesses a full set of teeth."



Ves nodded in agreement. "Captain Bonnet is a capable spaceborn mech pilot and leader and her subordinates are as trained and disciplined as our own mech pilots. We'll lose mechs regardless how much of a local number advantage we are able to bring to bear."

Certainly, if their foes stood in the way of making it back to the Bright Republic, then the Vandals wouldn't shy away from a fight. However, the entire point of this sabotage was to push the weakest link of their enemies out of the way.

Now that they succeeded, Major Verle would definitely opt for the rational choice and escape!

As the CFA shuttle finally made its way back to the Shield of Hispania's shuttle bay, a small gathering of mech technicians and other folk to congratulate them for their success!

Every Vandal already heard about the Finmoth Regal's painful injury!

"Can you pass me the footage of the moment the Regal's rear blew up?"

"Hahaha! We sure went to town on the Finmoth Regal's butt!"

"The traitors are sitting ducks! Let's go recapture the ship and execute those lowlives!"

Crude jokes about doing unsavory things to the Finmoth Regal's rear end seemed to be especially popular among the rank-and-file. Ves smiled ruefully and shook his head at the banter.

At least everyone regained some of their cheer. After all of the losses the Vandals suffered and after running across half the star system while being hunted like dogs, it felt good to hit back for once.

Once Ves and the others came out of the CFA shuttle, they went through a round of debriefing. After reporting the events from his perspective and

answering some routine questions, the man in charge summoned him up to his stateroom for another private meeting.

"It's unfortunate we lost your stealth shuttle, Mr. Larkinson. I've underestimated its capabilities. We could have performed many sabotage missions with such a useful shuttle in our hands."

Ves shook his head in regret. Though he already got over its loss, he would rather not lose it in the first place. "Sir, I won't be able to build anything like it considering our resource shortages. The loss of the stealth shuttle and the two crewmembers is a painful price to pay in exchange for crippling the Finmoth Regal."

Verle smiled grimly at Ves. "The lives of every Vandal under my charge is precious. They are my responsibility. The mutiny that occurred aboard the Finmoth Regal is my responsibility as well, and I'll be sure to face an inquiry once we return home."

"Home is very far away from here, sir." Ves said before he asked a question he wasn't comfortable with asking before. "Will we truly be able to cross the frontier and return to civilized space in one piece? Unlike last time, we don't have that inexplicable voodoo from the Church of Haatumak to shield us from sandman detection. Also, our diminished numbers will make us a lot more vulnerable to the opportunistic pirates that roam the frontier."

"It's a challenge, I admit, but we are more than the cowards of the Finmoth Regal who blinked in the face of despair. We will make it home, of that I am assured."

The major sounded very confident about his claims. Personally, Ves knew that more than courage would be required to cross the perilous frontier all by themselves.

"Could you tell me what our next steps will be?"

"I intend to take us through the gap opened up by the Finmoth Regal's loss of propulsion and take us all to the edge of the star system where we can finally leave the Aeon Corona System behind. After that... we shall have to retrace much of our old route as we make our way back to the border of civilized space."

"And?"

"That's all I can tell you for now."

He already figured out what little Major Verle revealed. In fact, Ves learned almost nothing of substance!

"Okay, sir." Ves said simply. What else could he say to such a limited response? He turned his attention to another matter. "Can I ask you what your stance is on the Swordmaidens? How is Lieutenant Dise doing by the way?"

"Last I heard, the leadership struggle ended after Lieutenant Dise soundly defeated the Swordmaiden mech captains and other challengers in the sparring ring. It seems like she's become an exceptionally formidable warrior after experiencing some changes during her deployment on the ground."

The uncomplicated Swordmaidens disdained backstabbing and secret plots. If someone wanted a promotion, they usually challenged the Swordmaiden occupying the position above them. The ones who won the sparring duel usually got what they wanted.

Ves partially envied the simplicity of their governing system! Although there were a lot of flaws associated with letting the person with the biggest fist be in charge, he had to admit that during times of crisis it was a quick way to settle a contentious leadership struggle after the death of a charismatic leader and founder.

"I'm acquainted with Lieutenant Dise, and Captain Orfan is practically her bosom buddy. Now that Dise has taken the reins, why not propose a deeper cooperation?"

"Oh?" Verle picked up something interesting from Ves' demeanor. "What's on your mind? Do tell, Mr. Larkinson."

### Chapter 949 Fraying Bonds

Since the time Ves returned to the fleet, he often thought about the relationship between the two allied forces.

At first glance, they didn't appear to be a good fit. The Flagrant Vandals may be scoundrels among mech regiments, but they still stayed true to their military roots.

As for Lydia's Swordmaidens, though their founder attempted to train elites among pirates, they still couldn't shed their unsavory background no matter how much they adopted their unique mindsets.

A mech regiment and a pirate outfit should have been hostile to each other from the start. The only reason why the two forces banded together was because they saw the need to rely on each other's strength to fulfill their missions.

Yet now that they managed to retrieve the lockboxes, what next?

Ves thought about their current relationship and believed the only reason the Swordmaidens hadn't split up yet was because they lost too much to be able to protect themselves in the cutthroat frontier.

The Flagrant Vandals on the other hand were completely out of depth in the frontier. They didn't know the lay of the land nor did they benefit from any connections to the local powers. They didn't know the best star systems to lay low and which star systems posed extreme hazards to anyone who jumped to them. All the while, the ever-present sandmen loomed behind their backs.

Right now, the Flagrant Vandals were only left with the Shield of Hispania, their flagship, and the Gorgon's Gaze, which still hosted Parallax Star and the half-dead Venerable O'Callahan. This offered them a respectable amount of fighting power, but not enough to deter most opportunistic enemies from taking a stab at them if they thought they could actually win.

Combining their numbers with the Swordmaidens brought their collective threat level just enough to scare away most bottom feeders. Yet how long would they stick together? The Swordmaidens could leave at any moment once they reached some form of safe harbor. The frontier was their stomping grounds, after all, so they didn't have to travel as far to reach safety compared to the Vandals who needed to go all the way back to civilized space.

"What's on your mind, Mr. Larkinson?" Major Verle asked as his curiosity increased at Ves' mention of the Swordmaidens.

"I've spent some time among the Swordmaidens. Enough to get a good sense of their values and priorities." Ves began, thinking back on the times he chatted with Ketis or visited the Swordmaiden camp. "We should consider becoming their 'friends'."

"Aren't we already friendly with the Swordmaidens?"

"Our arrangement up to now is an alliance of convenience, sir. Something which has mostly served its purpose. You have to know that the Swordmaidens makes a strong distinction between business partners and 'friends'. They don't have any hesitation to kick the former dead when they are down on their luck. However, if we are worthy to become their friends, they would instead extend a hand to them to pull them back on our feet."

A frown etched on Major Verle's face. He failed to understand the Swordmaiden concept of 'friends'. "What is it you are proposing, exactly?"

"I propose we endeavor to make a new and more permanent connection with them. Call it a long-term alliance if you will. Unlike most pirate outfits in the frontier, the Swordmaidens are known for keeping their word and for their relatively honorable conduct. They are probably one of the best pirate outfits we can partner with on an ongoing basis."

Major Verle looked dubious at Ves. "Honorable pirates? I know the Swordmaidens are rather distinct, but you make a bold claim. Suppose we accept your premise. Why should we forge a deeper alliance and how will that benefit us in our current state?"

"Lydia's Swordmaidens is founded upon an ideal, sir. They aim to lift the status of women in the frontier and attempted to create a strong, all-women mech force to protect their sisterhood. With the death of Commander Lydia and the loss of over eighty percent of their ships, mechs and sisters, they are probably unmoored and demoralized right now. That makes them vulnerable. Vulnerable to degeneration but also vulnerable to suggestion."

"Go on." Verle waved his hand for Ves to continue.

"Sir, it's like this. While our current forces are extremely meager, we are still part of a greater organization. If we can appeal to their ideals and offer them medium and long-term assistance in rebuilding and revitalizing the Swordmaidens, they'll surely accept such an arrangement because they won't have to give up and abandon the ideals they worked for all their lives."

"Let me guess this straight. In exchange for providing material support in the future, we are asking the Swordmaidens to stick with us and protect us through thick and thin?"

"Yes, sir."

"There are many problems with your proposal. First, the Flagrant Vandals already crossed a line when we partnered up with a pirate gang for this

mission. A single slip-up can be forgiven and swept up under the rug, but it's a different matter entirely if we continue to break the rules over and over again. The Mech Corps will certainly never approve of an ongoing relationship with pirates."

"Major, the Mech Corps might not approve, but other... more clandestine organizations might be interested in forging ties with a reliable partner in the frontier."

For a moment, Verle just stared at Ves. They both knew that Ves referred to Flashlight. Right now, Ves hadn't activated his signal jammer yet, so he didn't dare say the name of the military intelligence agency out loud.

"What you say is... possible." The major eventually conceded. "However, such decisions need to be made in coordination with more senior authorities in the Bright Republic. Without a working quantum entanglement node anywhere on our ships, I can't make binding agreements."

"Why not just do it and ask for permission later? Isn't that the Vandal way of doing things, sir?"

Verle smirked at Ves, before going back to frowning. "You've been learning. Sadly, even if certain other organizations are amenable to the idea, it won't change the fact that I will be severely crossing my boundaries."

"I think the relevant institutions of the Bright Republic will understand considering what we've done for them. Right now, sir, we are in a precarious situation. Not only are we deep in the frontier, but we are also surrounded by threats on all sides with no friendlies in sight. What's the harm of making a deal with pirates when it will help us complete our mission and enables us to forge a solid connection to a minor but trustworthy and grateful power in the Faris Star Region?"

"You make a good point. Good enough that I can use the same argument when I'll inevitably be called up by my superiors to account for such a daring initiative."

"Remember, sir, not only will we gain an immediate benefit by having the backing of a local power, but we can also continue to exploit this ongoing relationship."

"The Bright Republic isn't completely blind and deaf when it comes to the frontier."

"Then why haven't I ever noticed any form of aid other than from the Swordmaidens, sir?" Ves pressed. "Are there pirate outfits or other local groups along the way that are ready and willing to help us bring us out of the frontier?"

The major didn't answer his probe, which pretty much answered the question. Either the so-called existing connections to the frontier didn't amount to much, or the Bright Republic was restricted from drawing upon them at will.

While Major Verle still seemed reluctant to make permanent commitments to an alliance with the Swordmaidens, the dire situation of the Vandals made it so that they couldn't afford to be separated with the pirate outfit.

So far, they worked well together and covered each other's backs! It would be best for all of them if such an arrangement continued until the Vandals succeeded in making it out of the frontier.

"There is still another problem to consider, Mr. Larkinson." The mech officer opened up a new tack. "Even if I am willing to take the shot and fight to make sure the relevant organizations will back any agreements I make, why would the Swordmaidens believe in our sincerity?"



Ves smiled at the man. "Sir, Let me go over to the Jaded Sword and discuss the matter with Dise. As I stated earlier, I am already familiar with them. My strong connection with Ketis should also count for something."

"Why not send Captain Orfan instead?"

"Do you think she's any good at negotiations? Besides, while the good captain is very close to Dise, I don't think Orfan has a feel for the Swordmaidens as a whole."

In fact, Ves something back. If Captain Orfan paid a visit to the Jaded Sword, she'd be sure to secure an easy agreement on account of her intimate emotional connection with Lieutenant Dise, or was it Commander Dise now?

In any case, one of the reasons why Ves proposed this course of action in the first place was not just because he wanted to secure his safety, but also to pursue an ulterior motive.

Ves wanted to pave his own connection to the frontier, separate from the Mech Corps or Flashlight or whatever. He wanted to use this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Vandals to make a parallel agreement or at least open up the possibility for greater ties between his business interests and the Swordmaidens.

Even in the middle of a crisis, he didn't forget to seek for long-term opportunities as long as the situation allowed him the luxury of doing so!

Ves faintly suspected that his business would be in an awful slump when he returned from the war, so opening up new ground beforehand would save him a lot of effort in the future.

After some reluctance, Major Verle allowed Ves to take the lead on the negotiations. Perhaps the mech officer already possessed an inkling of Ves' ulterior motives because his eyes narrowed a bit in suspicion for a moment.

Nonetheless, since there wasn't any fundamental conflict of interest, Ves didn't feel guilty about taking advantage of this opportunity.

After receiving a raft of instructions and limitations on what Ves could offer on behalf of the Vandals, Verle packed him off to the Jaded Sword.

"Take a regular shuttle to the Swordmaiden flagship and go do whatever you need to do. Remember that I will reserve final judgement on any deal you forge with the Swordmaidens, so don't think you have an unlimited licence to do whatever you want."

"I will make sure you'll be pleased with the new agreement I'm about to forgive, sir." Ves bowed.

"Don't take too long. I want you back in half a day at most. Once you return, we can make our preparations to transition out of the Aeon Corona System."

"Got it, sir."

After receiving a data pad that listed all the possible demands and concessions that he could include in the agreement, Ves did as ordered and boarded a shuttle already scheduled to fly to the Jaded Sword.

A healthy distance already separated the two Vandal combat carriers from the three Swordmaiden vessels. This distance was a little wider than before, and showed that the two forces already started to guard against each other for possible betrayals.

Mutual trust between the Vandals and Swordmaidens already started to fray. If this went on any longer, the possibility of betrayal in order to steal their former ally's lockbox became increasingly more likely.

When Ves initially came up with his suggestion, he initially wanted to find a way to integrate the Swordmaidens into the Vandals or at least bind them closer to the Bright Republic.

He even dreamt of convincing the Swordmaidens to forsake their current backers. Still, his own understanding of the pirate outfit made him take a step back from such an ambitious goal. They would never abandon their ideals and their frontier roots.

"Even if they don't show it very often, they are very sentimental people."

#### Chapter 950 Private Interests

To the Swordmaidens, friendship mattered more than pure benefits.

Nonetheless, that didn't mean they ignored benefits entirely. As pirates who roamed the frontier for decades, it was impossible for them to be duped and taken advantage of so easily.

Even if their outward behavior painted them as battle-crazed boors, the officers among the Swordmaidens generally distinguished themselves by keeping a certain amount of cool. They took their responsibilities of leading and guiding the younger and more junior Swordmaidens very seriously.

It was kind of like how Mayra treated Ketis as her own daughter. This kind of motherly instinct tempered their recklessness and made them pay more attention to their long-term interests.

"Just like us, the Swordmaidens are in a bad shape right now."

As Ves stepped out of the shuttle, he immediately encountered similar conditions from the Shield of Hispania. The Jaded Sword was a rare combat carrier that must have cost a pretty penny for the Swordmaidens to obtain.

To Ves, the worn bulkheads, spots of rust and lackluster cleaning showed that they likely obtained this combat carrier second-hand.

"Maybe they even took the Jaded Sword off the hands of their former owners by force."

In any case, the Swordmaidens took in a lot of survivors who escaped from the other, slower Swordmaiden vessels eaten by the sandmen.

The major difference between the Vandals and the Swordmaidens was that the latter employed a lot of brainwashed slaves.

When it came to evacuating their crew from the doomed ships, the Swordmaidens only really cared about their own sisters. The predominantly male slaves likely all went down with their ships as they hadn't received the order to evacuate!

The outcome of this decision was that the Jaded Sword became stuffed with warrior women who all carried swords in some form or another. The lack of men in the shuttle bay made Ves feel as if he entered the territory of an ancient Amazon tribe.

It made sense from their perspective. Genuine Swordmaidens who all passed their graduation ceremonies were all core members who were too difficult to replace.

As for the slaves, the Swordmaidens treated them as commodities as best. Even if they lost a couple of thousand slaves, they could easily capture more chumps in the frontier and send them off for 'processing' to turn them into obedient, brainwashed servants.

Ves still believed it was an awful idea to rely on slaves to such a great extent. Yet as long as the frontier lacked enough people with technical backgrounds, such practises would never end.

"Commander Dise is expecting you. Please follow me and don't wander off. We'll chop you if you do so." A bored-looking Swordmaiden warrior said as she greeted him off the shuttle.

Charming. Well, at least he knew that Dise gained enough clout to gain the title of pirate commander among the Swordmaidens.

"Please lead the way."

Ves followed after a stoic Swordmaiden guide who led him all the way to the upper decks, where the fancier compartments resided.

They eventually passed through a hatch that led into a conference room, or at least what passed as a conference room among their ilk. The trophies, battle banners of defeated pirate gangs and deadly exobeasts decorating the compartment made it seem that the Swordmaidens usually used this area to impress their might and power upon their visitors.

Once his escort left, two familiar Swordmaidens entered shortly afterwards. Both of them still wore their CFA armor, just like Ves, but this time they added their barbaric Swordmaiden touches to their exterior.

Both of them painted over the original CFA coating and affixed all kinds of symbols, exobeast bones and other outwardly impressively trinkets to their armor. This made them fit right in with the rest of the armored Swordmaidens. Savage capes fashioned out of beast hides completed the ensemble.

"You two are looking good!" Ves complimented them without exaggeration. They truly looked larger than life in their new looks! "I like how authoritative you look now, Commander Dise. As for you, Ketis, you look much more mature than you act."

Ves found it funny that while Ketis tried her best to 'piratize' her CFA armor, she still showed her original rank insignia as well as her large CFA medal. The contrast between the two styles would certainly trip up anyone familiar with the CFA!

"I'm the only mech designer left among the Swordmaidens." She said a little morosely, belying her strong appearance. "With Mayra gone, I can't take it easy anymore. I have responsibilities now."

Ves nodded in understanding. Though the reason might be depressing, he was nonetheless glad to see her taking her profession seriously this time.

"I think you can do some good for the Swordmaidens, but do you still remember Mayra's last wish for you? Even if you are more competent than the average mech designer in the frontier, a Novice Mech Designer like you will hardly be able to change the fortunes of Lydia's Swordmaidens. Err, are you still called this way?"

Commander Dise shook her head. "Commander Lydia is no more, but calling ourselves Dise's Swordmaidens doesn't quite roll of the tongue. We're still thinking about what to call ourselves from now on. It's a good opportunity for me to steer our course in a different direction, so I'm holding off on the decision until I make up my mind where to take the Swordmaidens next."

"I have some ideas and suggestions for that." Ves said, already entering into his negotiating form. "The Vandals can't help but see that you Swordmaidens are in a much-diminished state. You used to be able to field hundreds of mechs and were a force to be reckoned with. Among the pirate gangs that roam the Faris Star Region, you were definitely one of the larger and more successful gangs. Now, though, you are barely counted among the mid-sized pirate gangs."

"We are still able to field enough mechs to protect ourselves." Commander Dise smiled thinly. "Besides, our prior reputation still accounts for something."

"Your prior reputation and conduct has also earned you a lot of enemies. Previously, they held off on attacking you on account of your strength, but now that you only have three carriers left, I bet they won't give you the time to rebuild your mech force."

"We have many friends we can count on such as the Omen of Misfortune."

"I am certainly aware of how much faith you Swordmaidens put into your friendships with the other independent pirate outfits, but would every so-called 'friends' of yours be as sincere at your current strength level? Don't tell me that all of the pirates you are acquainted with will keep their word to those they perceive as weak."

"We aren't weak!" Ketis burst out in her typical fashion. "We are Swordmaidens! We still have three carriers worth of mechs we can field!"

"There are other pirate gangs in the frontier who can field twice as much if not more. Will they still be apprehensive about coming to blows with you now that you are battered and bruised from this mission?"

The two women couldn't entirely ignore his argument. After all, he only spoke the truth. Pirates weren't known to be generous to those they could easily rob and kill.

"I doubt you've come here to disparage us at our weakest state, Ves." Commander Dise dryly remarked. "Please tell us why you have come."

"I have come on behalf of Major Verle and the Flagrant Vandals to forge a deeper partnership with the Swordmaidens..."

Ves proceeded to lay out the broad strokes of the partnership that he and Major Verle envisioned. The proposed agreement mainly boiled around the following points.

First, the Swordmaidens would help the Flagrant Vandals cross the frontier and return to civilized space with every means possible.

For this service, the Flagrant Vandals or another organization of the Bright Republic would remunerate the Swordmaidens with an immediate repayment in the form of hard currency or valuable resources.

Second, the Bright Republic and the Swordmaidens would continue to maintain their ties to each other. If the Vandals or any other organization from the Bright Republic wanted something done in the frontier, the Swordmaidens would offer help if it was convenient and in their power to assist.

In exchange for this voluntary assistance, the Bright Republic would continue to pay back the Swordmaidens in various matters, such as providing them with funds and resources to attempting to fix up their faulty gene mod templates.

Both of them grimaced when Ves touched upon this sensitive point. Ketis would have definitely passed on what she learned about that to Commander Dise.

The tragic fact about the Swordmaidens was that they depended on genetic modification to strengthen the often weak and malnourished new recruits. Every other alternative wouldn't work as well or fast.

Yet it was also a fact that the Swordmaidens rarely lived to old age. Their aggressive behavior accounted for much of the deaths, but they couldn't discount the deaths that came from genetic breakdown.

All of these services sounded very attractive to the two Swordmaidens. Ves observed from their interest in his proposal that whatever backing the Swormaidens enjoyed, they didn't actually receive much help. Not to the point of eclipsing anything that Ves put on the table!

He saw an opportunity there!

Of course, Commander Dise possessed enough sense not to take such bold promises at face value. "Ves. All of this sounds attractive, but deals between pirates and legitimate states never tend to last very long. Words alone are just empty, especially coming from a state where every bureaucrat holds different opinions about such an arrangement."



"I may not be able to bring a lot of guarantees now, but we have fought alongside each other for many months if not a year. The Vandals are absolutely committed to a partnership. As part of forging closer ties with the Swordmaidens, I'm also willing to take part in my private capacity."

"Oh?" That caught their interest. "What do you mean by private capacity?"

"This won't exactly be on the books, but I'd like to partner up with you as well in matters of business. I might not look like it, but just a few years ago I founded a very successful mech manufacturing company. The Living Mech Corporation owns assets in the billions of bright credits, ah that's tens of millions of K-coins."

"It's true, commander. Ves is a very good mech designer and he'll certainly be a bigshot in the mech industry in his home state." Ketis vouched for his claims. "You're not too far from advancing to Journeyman, right?"

"Correct. It will be a couple of years at most. I'm very close. Once I publish a couple more original mech designs, I will definitely be rise to the heights that Mayra once reached. In the future, it isn't out of the question for me to surpass these heights as well."

"Bold claims. Very bold. I've seen many mech pilots boasting that they'll advance to expert pilots some day. None of them actually did so. You remind me of those boasting pilots, Ves."

Ketis stood up for him. "Ves is good enough to back up his claims, commander! Even the Skull Architect respects him! In my eyes, Ves definitely won't stop advancing anytime soon. We're talking to a future Senior Mech Designer!"

What a nice boost! Ketis basically hinted at Dise that Ves would only become more powerful and influential in the future! Forging ties with a Journeyman

Mech Designer was already valuable, but being able to enter into a close working relationship with a Senior Mech Designer was nearly priceless!

Even if Ves was nowhere close to matching the capabilities of a true Senior like the Skull Architect as of yet, it was a lot easier to make a deal with him now when he was still an Apprentice!

The hesitation in Commander Dise began to recede a little. "I take it this side deal isn't a part of the agreement with your state, correct?"

"No, but they compliment each other. As a mech designer who hails from the Bright Republic, it isn't out of the question that I will be acting on the interests of my state. So these two deals aren't really separate."

"Okay. But I still don't understand what you want from the Swordmaidens. Please explain what kind of arrangement you would like to make with us." Dise said, giving Ves a chance to lay out what he wanted to obtain.

"Thank you, commander." He smiled with genuine pleasure. "It's like this..."

He knew he had already passed the most difficult hurdle! Now that Commander Dise opened herself up to the possibility of working together with Ves in a business and private capacity, he just needed to throw out just enough concessions to clinch a deal!