

Chapter 1021 Missed Potential

Quickly after the darkness fell, their underlayer vacsuits automatically enveloped their bodies in a thin fabric substance that protected them against the event of explosive decompression. It even came with a small emergency supply of oxygen, but it wouldn't last that long.

Ves felt he entered a very precarious situation right now!

The guards escorting Lord Javier stopped standing at the sides and approached their charge. Their heavy combat armor lit up the surroundings that had turned completely dark and silent.

"You're coming with us, Javier."

The noble shrugged apologetically to Ves. "I guess my babysitters won't allow us to remain together. Stay safe, Ves. You're okay for a Brighter."

Four guards surrounded the Vesian noble and marched him off to else, leaving Ves alone in the dining room. The magboots built into their combat armor kept them stuck to the deck despite the lack of gravity.

However, they barely reached the exit hatch before a barrage of ballistic projectiles impacted against the heads of the two guards at the front!

The loud impacts and torrent of firepower bounced off their helmets for a second before penetrating and killing the two guards!

"Hostiles!"

The remaining two guards hauled Javier away and aside from the open hatch so they wouldn't remain in the line of fire of whoever was in the corridor.

As soon as the shooting started, Ves cursed and held on to the table. Without any functioning artificial gravity, he would have to be careful with his

movements as he risked throwing himself in an uncontrolled tumble in the air if he pushed himself off the deck!

In a condition of zero-g, Newton's laws of motion reigned supreme!

As a mech designer well-versed in mechanics, Ves knew that the last thing he should do was to move as if gravity still exerted a downwards force on him! Even walking was impossible under these circumstances!

"Goddamn cheap vacsuit! Why doesn't it come with antigrav modules or magboots?!"

Ves found it ironic that the Tovars splurged on so many luxuries and premium materials when they commissioned the Felicitous Remembrance, but they completely neglected the need to invest in better vacsuits!

"Even if vacsuits aren't as glamorous as fancy chandeliers and sturdy tables, they could have at least spared some attention to their quality!"

He had the impression that some Tovar family member or even Senator Tovar himself picked and chose the features of the Remembrance from an interactive catalog. Such a method of determining the attributes of a new ship was a popular service at many commercial shipyards, but among the millions of decisions a customer could make, they would only specify a couple of hundred choices before they called it a day!

For some reason, the standard underlayer vacsuits provided to every passenger and crew on the ship were basic quality junk that Ves could find on any cheap cargo hauler.

"Senator Tovar and his ilk probably make use of their own vacuum-sealed outfits." Ves surmised. It would explain the discrepancy. "I have to get a better suit before all the air gets sucked out!"

In the meantime, the two remaining guards huddled behind a counter, which bounced off the powerful ballistic rounds as if they consisted of mech armor!

"At least the cover on this ship is good!"

He quickly noticed a very big problem for the guards as they tried to resist the unknown assailants. The dining room had been built into an expansive space designed to impress the guests. While Ves admitted that it did indeed fulfill that role, it came at the expense of defenses!

The alternate explanation was that the dining room did in fact offer some formidable defensive installations, but the lack of power prevented them from deploying!

"What a stupidly vain design!" He cursed.

In fact, the Felicitous Remembrance shouldn't have lost power so suddenly and so completely. Even if pirates jumped right on top of them, it would have taken them a lot of effort to shut down all the different backups and reserves spread across the ship.

At the very least, the backup power sources should have kicked in by now, providing much-needed air circulation and gravity to the impotent ship!

The sudden attack and swiftness and thoroughness of the Remembrance's power affliction caused Ves to develop an awful suspicion.

The only way the Felicitous Remembrance lost power so suddenly and so completely was if their enemy sabotaged her from the start!

"Who the hell is in a position to sabotage a ship of the Tovar Family?!"

A creeping possibility came up to Ves. Could it be... another member of the Tovar Family? Someone who disagreed with Camden Tovar's intentions for peace?

"Is this what Javier meant that a lot of people would be opposed to stopping the war?"

If this attack involved someone powerful within Senator Tovar's own family, then the threat the Tovar Peace Delegation faced would be absolutely dire! How much information did the insider pass on and how many tricks did they pull off to render the Felicitous Remembrance impotent?

"This is too awful!"

Another question was how could the Remembrance be boarded so quickly and without warning? Could stealth shuttles have snuck up to the ship as soon as the fleet transitioned into this star system? It would be the only explanation that fit concerning the timing of the various attacks and setbacks.

Ves came to the conclusion that whoever they faced, they planned their assault meticulously. What he just witnessed might just be the tip of the iceberg.

Right now, the firefight happening close to the hatch of the dining room progressed rapidly. Unknown figures garbed in what looked like barbaric pirate armor poured into the dining room with military precision and began to fan out around the bar counter where Lord Javier and his two guards huddled behind.

They threw various grenades over the counter, but some laser interception system mounted on the shoulders of the guards zapped them out of the air before they could get anywhere near.

The excellent equipment of the guards allowed them to push the incoming hostiles back, but their situation became increasingly perilous!

Over a dozen assailants entered the room and made use of the tables to shield them against the heavy laser rifles wielded by the guards!

A handful of intruders noticed Ves deeper inside the room. Two of them diverted their attention from the guards and fired their ballistic rifles at what they thought must be a bystander!

"Hey! I'm unarmed! I'm no threat to you guys!" Ves yelled and flipped over the heavy dining table.

The lack of gravity made it a lot easier, but the force he inadvertently exerted also caused him to float from the deck! He fumbled a bit with the table, grabbing on to it and taking advantage of its mass to anchor him somewhat in place.

Ballistic rounds kept impacting against the surface of the table. Ves could practically feel and hear the table heroically withstanding the incoming fire without suffering any substantial damage. The extravagant decision to use compressed alloy to construct the tables at least paid off!

Newton's third law of motion still applied, so all of the kinetic energy transferred by the physical impacts slightly pushed Ves and the table backwards towards the bulkhead.

Even so, the heavy dining table only offered protection in one direction. Its huge flat surface might offer good cover from the front, but the top, sides and rear offered no protection unless Ves oriented the table!

That might work against a single assailant, but the two pirates attacking him split up and began to flank his left and right sides!

Ves would be in imminent danger by then, because even if he shifted the surface of the flipped table towards one attacker, the other enemy could easily shoot him in the back!

"Ah hell, what am I hesitating about?!"

He gave up his hope of a timely rescue. Not a single whiff of reinforcements arrived as of yet and the other ten assailants almost finished cornering the two guards keeping Lord Javier pressed to the deck.

Since no help was on the way, Ves decided to take matters in his own hands.

He stretched out his vacsuit-gloved hand where a resplendent weapon materialized in place. His trusty Amastendira phased out of his invisible and intangible Inventory that the System somehow attached to him and took on a physical form in reality.

As a weapon that saved his life time and time again, Ves always admired this resplendent piece of craftsmanship. Even during his travails aboard the Starlight Megalodon, the Amastendira proved more than equal to many of the wondrous if outdated weapons of the mighty Common Fleet Alliance!

However, the more he made use of the Amastendira, the more he felt regretful at what Melkor once described as a replica.

It didn't even have the full complement of features of the original mastercrafted laser pistol that went missing at some point.

While Ves did not care too much about features as the basic functionality of the Amastendira was already powerful enough, he did care about one particular factor.

A materialized copy did not possess any Spirituality. The System formed his copy of this legendary weapon by building it up from atom to atom, molecule by molecule, thereby achieving a close resemblance of the original.

Yet a copy was still a copy. This lovely custom weapon designed and handcrafted by Pierre Femento, a famed Rubarthan gunsmith from the center of the galaxy, held none of the original craftsman's ascribed emotions.

It lacked even the most rudimentary form of X-Factor that Ves saw in many custom mechs designed by other mech designers.

Therefore, as much as Ves admired his trump card, it didn't change the fact that it was a weapon without life or the capacity to bear life. No matter how much Ves used it, the Amastendira would never be able to receive any effects from his formidable Spirituality.

More than once, Ves considered taking the Amastendira apart and reusing much of its amazing components to build his own personal laser pistol.

Only two reasons held him back from such a bold plan.

First, he lacked the knowledge and expertise to handle much of the Amastendira's advanced components. From its dimensional heatsink to its ultra-advanced energy projection system, Ves simply didn't possess the necessary skills to utilize them properly.

Second, he couldn't guarantee that his rework of the weapon would still retain the Amastendira's remarkable property to dematerialize in his Inventory. Ves had no clue how the Inventory worked in the first place and how it seemed to be present on him despite his separation from the System.

Ves quickly brushed aside his regret for the missed potential of his replica of the original weapon. What he wouldn't give to possess the real deal. The Amastendira in his hand served as a subtle reminder that even the System possessed limits.

"Well, let's take care of trash."

Ves did not feel confident that he could nail a shot on one of the two flanking pirates when he popped out of cover. In fact, he didn't dare stick out his head and arm to aim his weapon! By the time he drew a bead, the pirates would have riddled his flimsy vacsuit helmet with holes!

So he simply opted for the most expedient if wasteful option. He hastily configured the Amastendira in a wide angle scatter firing mode before dialing the power setting above average.

After that, he poked out the lengthy muzzle of the Amastendira over the lip of the flipped table and vaguely aimed it in the direction to the flanking pirate to the left.

As soon as he pulled the trigger, the entire dining room flashed in bright red!

The visor filters of his vacsuit was slow to adjust to the flash. It took a second or so for him to regain his vision.

When Ves carefully poked out his head to the left, he saw that the attacker to the left had been turned into a charred mess!

It appeared that these 'pirates' at least fitted themselves out as pirates, as their heavily-adorned combat armor offered no hindrance at all against any serious firepower.

Ves quickly shot his Amastendira again at the direction of the dead pirate's partner who seemed to be having second thoughts.

After that, he quickly adjusted the settings of the Amastendira and fired it towards the ten other pirates. Cutting them in half at the waist with a powerful continuous cutting beam!

After the bright flashes of light, heat and energy subsided, the entire dining room abruptly fell into silence and darkness.

Chapter 1022 Premeditated

Ves pushed off his table and coasted over in the direction of the battered bar counter where the two elite Spiral Shocker guards and Lord Javier huddled behind.

"Don't shoot! It's me!" He said as he floated to their cover position.

Lord Javier gaped at Ves as soon as he came into sight. His guards probably paused in astonishment as well, though their heavy helmets obscured their expressions.

"Did you do all that?" Javier asked with a tremble in his voice.

"No, a unicorn did it." Ves flippantly said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm unharmed."

"That's good to hear."

"Say, can you give me your weapon? I'm a good shot."

"You'll have to ask the unicorn, not me. I'm unarmed."

Lord Javier threw a skeptical eye at Ves. "Yeah right."

Ves would never admit he fired the powerful lasers despite being more than obvious that he was the one who could have done so. The good thing about the total shutdown was that the Felicitous Remembrance's pervasive monitoring system stopped recording everything that happened inside the ship.

Even if some secret record already stated that he possessed a power laser weapon as his trump card by now, the less details it mentioned, the better.

He already used the Amastendira so often that he no longer feared its exposure. If nothing else, he could always chalk it up to a present from Master Olson or an amazing treasure find from the Frontier.

The best way for Ves to brush aside the speculation on his weapon was to forge onwards and leave what just happened behind. It was a lesson that Lord Javier imparted to him just some time ago when he explained how to deal with public embarrassment.

In other words, just be shameless and boldly change the topic, leaving your questioners no time to go back!

"Those 'pirates' aren't pirates." Ves declared. "They're infiltrators, commandos, whatever. They look like pirates and their gear fits their roles. Yet the training they exhibited and the tactics they used are too sophisticated."

One of the elite security guards snorted. "We're aware. We have fought these sorts of disguised pirates before. They did a good job masking their actual origins. We aren't able to determine if they're Brighters or Vesians."

"They might even be dark mercenaries from the frontier or the Nyxian Gap." Ves idly guessed. "Whatever the case, these pirates came here for a very specific purpose. I think they intended to rescue you, Javier."

The attackers didn't put their full effort into fighting back against the two guards. If they truly wanted to kill the guards, they could have been a lot more aggressive and decisive in their attacks. Yet they took a lot of care in their aim in order to avoid hitting the defenseless hostage.

Another clue that backed up Ves' assertion was that all the grenades they threw turned out to be stun or EMP grenades instead of deadlier variants. He studied their fragments scattered on the deck and knew enough about them to recognize they held no lethal payloads.

The Vesian noble wasn't stupid. Neither were the guards.

The only thing they couldn't figure out if rescuing Lord Javier was a priority or a side goal to the attackers.

"We need to get to safety." Ves said. "What are your protocols?"

"The main security department is close by." One of the guards stated. "We can bunker down there. There is also a small armory further ahead that is much more secure against hostile intruders."

"Our orders in this event are to take the prisoner back to the security department." The other guard stated.

While Ves would have preferred to go to the armory in order to equip himself with a good set of armor or something, he shrugged. "Let me come along."

The two guards didn't refuse. Even if Ves was a mech designer who appeared to be completely unarmed, they didn't forget the powerful laser attacks that wiped out the attackers just a few minutes earlier.

This mech designer deserved his combat awards!

The ribbons adorning his service dress uniform took on an entirely different meaning now to Lord Javier and his guards. The latter especially no longer dared to dismiss Ves' presence.

Before they left the room, the two guards sought out an emergency locker that held various tools, medkits and most importantly a set of hazard suits!

Ves and Lord Javier both adorned the bulky hazard suits which to the former's regret also consisted of a basic model. Its semi-flexible synthetic surface didn't offer that much more protection against enemy fire than a thin vacsuit.

Even so, the added protection against heat, fire, corrosion, radiation and other environmental hazards at least protected them if the Felicitous Remembrance began to fall apart or something.

Wearing this basic hazard suit over his ornamental uniform and basic underlayer vacsuit made Ves miss his old CFA gear. He would have been able to walk up to the supposed pirates and wrestle their own ballistic rifles from their grasp without any hindrance!

His XV-99 Squalon armor would have been able to bounce away all of the rounds and grenades thrown in his direction without suffering a single scratch!

Of course, this was only a dream for now. His current assignment left him with no opportunity to bring his own gear so he had to make do with this basic model hazard suit instead.

"Let's move to the security department."

They hustled out of the dining room, leaving the charred and smoking remains of the so-called pirates behind.

This time, the guards shut off their suit lights and switched to the alternative viewing modes offered by their helmet visors. Although the hazard suits worn by Ves and Lord Javier also came with infrared vision and other vision modes, Ves felt as if he was looking through a thin noisy fog that slightly blurred what he saw.

"Urgh."

As they moved out into the corridors, they walked slowly and with care. The two guards kept their weapons peeled in case any more pirates popped out. All of the sensors built into their combat armor also tried their best to detect any threats, whether visible or invisible.

Much of the ship fell into complete and utter silence. The lack of working systems and the strange absence of much of the crew unnerved Ves.

"Where is everyone?" Javier wondered.

"They're either at their stations or huddling down in cover." Ves explained. He noticed that Lord Javier didn't seem to have much experience with space travel. "Right now, you'd be stupid to run off in the corridors like a headless chicken."

"Even so, shouldn't someone come and fix the broken power?"

"I'm sure that people are on their way to the engineering bay to see what is up. I don't know exactly what's going on either. There should at least be

backup power sources that can power individual sections of the ship, but they didn't seem to have kicked in for some reason."

Lord Javier grimaced under his hazard suit. "Senator Tovar should have checked his own ship more thoroughly before he set out."

It was very hard to explain the multiple failings that they witnessed so far. How could the Felicitous Remembrance be so vulnerable to sabotage and attacks? All the money that the Tovars put into her construction seemed to be almost completely useless at this moment as their assailants circumvented most of her defensive measures.

Fortunately, they didn't encounter any assailants on their way to the security department.

The problem was that the security department didn't exist anymore.

Through the broken blast doors, Ves and the others found nothing but dead bodies, broken armor, impact marks, fragments of machines and more, much of which floated in the air due to lack of gravity.

For a moment, the elite guards paused as they struggled to comprehend the mystifying sight before them. The security department should have been able to hold out!

Ves looked down at the ash and debris and pointed his finger at the errant footsteps. "The attackers already left I think."

"What happened here? How could this compartment fall so quickly?" Lord Javier voiced everyone's concerns.

"I think... the security department was attacked from both within and without! Look at how the debris is strewn and what marks the explosions have left behind. I think some of the machinery within this department have been planted with explosive charges beforehand! When the attack on the ship

commenced, they simultaneously blew up, taking out any security officer and crew member in the vicinity!"

Even the blast doors failed for some reason, succumbing to plasma charges from all the melted slag left behind.

As Ves read the battle damage, he saw more and more signs of prior sabotage. How could the security department completely fail to detect the dangerous payloads planted right in the center of their own stronghold aboard the Remembrance!

They were either epically incompetent, or all of their scanning gear meant to sniff these kinds of dangers out all held blind spots against those explosive charges!

Whatever the case, the implications were extremely frightening!

"First, half of the interior of this compartment suffered from the effects of the explosions. Shortly after that, hostiles forced their way through the blast doors and swept over the surviving security officers."

The two guards both kept their silence for a long time. Ves guessed that they were probably deliberating among themselves through a private point-to-point comm channel.

"This entire attack is premeditated." Ves stated the obvious after a few minutes of studying the remains. "Maybe months or weeks before the Tovar Peace Delegation set off, Senator Tovar's enemies already tampered with the Felicitous Remembrance as she was being prepared for this journey."

"How come they didn't plant a massive bomb inside the ship and have it take her out in one go?" Lord Javier wondered.

"Maybe our opponents aren't confident that they could hide their sabotage if they sneaked in something big or tampered with something critical that's

inspected every few hours. Maybe their true goal isn't to kill us all, but to take some people captive."

They did divert some men to retrieve Lord Javier, having pinned down his location at the dining room. However, only sending a single squad of badly-equipped pirates did not impress Ves very much. Retrieving the Vesian noble probably wasn't the main objective of this attack.

He thought for a moment and tried to figure out who was important enough for their attackers to even bother with boarding the Remembrance.

Even though the peace delegation invited a lot of important people worth many billions of credits by virtue of their identity and capabilities, only one person stood out among everyone else.

His eyes widened as he made a bold guess. "I think the attackers are after Senator Tovar! He's by far the most valuable person aboard this ship!"

The value of this great statesman couldn't be overstated. If someone unscrupulous ever kidnapped the son of one of the great founders of the Bright Republic, they could sell the senator to the Vesia Kingdom in exchange for hundreds of billions of nova sovereigns!

And this monetary sum heavily discounted the actual worth of Senator Tovar!

As a leader of the powerful Tovar Family, a sitting member of the Bright Senate and a former bright president who led the state for a number of years a long time ago, Tovar possessed a wealth of knowledge about the Bright Republic. Letting them fall into the hands of the Vesians would be a disaster of epic proportions!

Perhaps it might even be enough to tip the balance of the war!

Ves cursed. Whatever the origins and motives of their current assailants, he knew that they all held an obligation to prevent Senator Tovar from falling into their hands!

If need be, they should at least ensure the senator died and his brains got completely destroyed in case he fell into enemy hands!

Naturally, nobody even voiced such a possibility. Even if it was for the good of Bright Republic, hardly anyone dared to go through with such an extreme action. They could kiss the Bright Republic goodbye if they ever had the blood of a Tovar on their hands!

Chapter 1023 Weight of Expectations

To their credit, the shocked guards quickly regained their composure. As members of the elite Spiral Shockers, they wouldn't let themselves remain vulnerable and directionless for long.

"We should scavenge for gear and fall back to the armory." One of them stated for the benefit of Ves. The guards no longer disregarded him as a burden now. "Mr. Larkinson, rightly speaking, you should return to your cabin or head to the nearest escape pods. What are your intentions?"

"I can't very well sit out this conflict, right? If you'll have me, I'd like to stick with you." Ves smiled sardonically. If anything happened to Senator Tovar while he was a passenger aboard the ship, all his combat awards wouldn't save him from the Tovar Family's reprisal. "That said, I'd prefer it if I can wear something sturdier than this flimsy hazard suit."

They dug around the floating fragments and ruined bodies and ignored the macabre sight as best they could in their search for intact gear.

A few of the equipment lockers survived the carnage. While they contained miscellaneous gear that Ves lacked the training to use, they did scrounge up a decent suit of light combat armor as well as some generic firearms.

"It's better than nothing." Ves shrugged as he quickly shed his hazard suit in favor of more protection.

"Hey! What about me! Give me one as well! I'm much more useful alive than dead!" Lord Javier demanded.

One of the guards instantly denied the request. "No. You'll be staying right as you are, Lord Javier."

As Lord Javier grumbled about his inadequate protection, Ves activated the systems of his commercial-grade light armor. The SSL insignia on the chest made it clear that the gear was only as good as those used by security companies.

It was better than nothing, and certainly better than a hazard suit.

"Alright, I think I'm good to go." Ves stated once he finished syncing up to the systems of his new weapons and armor with the help of the guards. They possessed the authority to unlock the gear for his use.

After that, they moved out of the wrecked security department and moved towards the armory situated not too far away.

Surprisingly, the armory still stood strong, though the large amount of 'pirates' gathered in front of the heavy blast doors made it clear that it was only a matter of time before it fell.

The same time the foursome discovered the milling pirates, the enemy discovered their presence as well.

The pirates didn't shout or chaotically fired a barrage in their direction. Instead, they detached a squad of men to go after the intruders.

Ves and the other three quickly ran around the corner as fast as they could with their magboots and increased the distance.

"Ves?" Lord Javier spoke up.

"What do you want?"

"This would be a good time to whip up that killer laser weapon of yours!"

"Who do you think I am, a unicorn wrangler?! Shut up and keep moving!"

At this time, Ves did not feel he needed to resort to the Amastendira. The two guards wielded heavier weapons this time.

Even as they turned another corner, they ran a short distance ahead before the two guards halted.

One of them deactivated his magboots and flipped over in the air so that he stood on the ceiling. He then deployed a mobile weapon emplacement on the surface, which automatically folded out into a heavy caliber machine gun with protective alloy plating partially shielding the front. Small mag modules built at the base of the contraption kept it fixed onto the ceiling.

The sight momentarily confused Ves. It looked extremely strange, but after a moment's thought he saw the cleverness behind the act!

Their pursuers wouldn't expect a weapon emplacement deployed on the ceiling. The guard manning the machine gun had in effect turned his position into a miniature machine gun turret that held a commanding view over the corridor from above.

The other guard positioned himself at a different angle so that they could catch the incoming pirates in a crossfire.

Meanwhile, Ves covered the rear behind another corner and made sure that Lord Javier didn't run off somewhere.

There was a very real possibility that Lord Javier would run off to the attackers on his own accord!

"Can you please not point your rifle at me?" Lord Javier whined. "Do you even know how to shoot a rifle? Your stance is awful and even a raw recruit has

better handling than you. Why don't you pass on that rifle to me. I'm a much better shot than you'll ever be in a hundred years."

Ves sneered at Lord Javier. Even though they had become somewhat friendlier over the past week, it didn't change the fact that they belonged to hostile states. Ves would always be a Brighter and Lord Javier never hid the fact that he considered himself to be a bona fide Vesian.

During calmer times, Ves had no qualms against attempting to befriend the noble. Yet now that they came under attack, Lord Javier's status as a prisoner and a hostage reasserted itself. It would be highly irresponsible for Ves to hand over a weapon to the Vesian.

Besides, Ves lacked the authority to unlock weapons for Javier's use. The internal security systems wouldn't allow the weapons to fire in the hands of a stranger.

"They're coming!"

Six of them rounded the corner first, upon which the weapon emplacement on the ceiling immediately rattled out a huge volume of kinetic rounds!

The large torrent of firepower angled downwards on the pirates quickly overwhelmed their substandard combat armor and riddled them with holes!

They didn't even have the time to fire back at the weapon emplacement!

"That's only six of them! There's six more!"

"I think they're falling back!"

The other security guard moved up towards the site where the corpses still stood in a macabre fashion due to their magboots keeping them standing. He held a large electrorod weapon which instantly discharged as soon as he rounded the corner.

The entire corridor became awash with crackling flashes as electric current went wild!

The electrorod weapon quickly fizzled out as it drained its entire battery with a single discharge. Although wasteful, the weapon served its purpose.

"Clear!"

Once the other guard folded the machine gun emplacement back onto the rear of his armor like a bulky backpack module, they all turned around the corner and saw the aftermath of the electrical attack.

"What a way to go." Lord Javier whistled under his hazard suit as he admired the sight of pirates friend in their own armor. "I thought combat armor was insulated against electrical attacks."

"That only works up to an extent." Ves commented. "That electrorod weapon is meant to be fed into a generator or other power source. It's a crew-served weapon that's meant to defend a fixed position. How can it be so weak? It's too bad it ran out of juice so quickly though."

The two guards still had more surprises in store, but they definitely used up their most formidable weapons. That bode ill for their next steps.

"There are at least thirty or so pirates remaining outside the armory." One of the guards said. "In our current condition, we can't rescue the armory without getting overwhelmed. That is..."

The man trailed off, but Ves knew what he insinuated. He was asking if that wondrous laser weapon would make an appearance again.

Ves weight the benefits and drawbacks and made a judgement that it would not help his interests if he kept hiding his capabilities. He should never hold back against a very real threat, even if they seemed to be aiming at Senator

Tovar rather than him. If something happened to the great statesman, Ves could say goodbye to the Bright Republic!

"Let me think." He said, stalling for a moment.

Lord Javier snorted. "We're waiting."

"What's it to you? I thought you'd be pleased if we suffered a mishap."

"Not at this time. I think I got our enemies figured out. This doesn't involve any Vesians I think. It's purely an internal conflict between you Brighters. All the sabotage and timing points that out. As for rescue from my state, that's unlikely. Even if my fellow Vesians did come to rescue me, I'm not sure if I'll be any better off in their care."

"How so?" Ves asked.

"These sneaky tactics are more to the Venidse Duchy's liking. They like to conduct commando raids from stealth. I think your Vandals got a taste of that already, right? The Imodris Duchy doesn't believe in sneaky nonsense. In fact, we hate it because Venidse always uses those tactics against our own forces!"

"Does Imodris really don't make use of stealth technology?"

"Oh, they probably do, but this doesn't seem like their style either."

"For what is worth, I concur." Ved nodded.

There was one other possibility, though. Conspirators from both the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom banded together to organize this attack. That would be the worst-case scenario because that implied that warmongers from both states set aside their animosity to hinder Senator Tovar's quest to negotiate an early peace!

That would be absolutely unheard of in normal circumstances, but Ves could very well see that such an unholy alliance might be possible in this case!

The more Ves thought about this awful possibility, the more he felt the urgency to help resolve the crisis aboard this ship. While he could have run for the escape pods and wash his hands off this entire incident, where would that leave him? To abandon the ship at a time where Senator Tovar and most of the other high-ranking members of the peace delegation remained at threat would be a dereliction of his duty.

Ordinarily, the Bright Republic and the Mech Corps might forgive him for running like a frightened kitten if he was just an average cowardly mech designer.

Yet Ves gained a reputation for bravery in the face of danger! His prestigious combat awards demonstrated that he achieved a lot of merit in direct combat situations where his life and the lives of his comrades were at risk!

For someone with all of those awards to turn tail and run would negate everything he achieved and ruin his reputation at a time his career and the LMC could ill afford such a setback.

Who from the Bright Republic would ever continue to purchase mechs from a company led by a despicable hypocritical coward?

Ves experienced the full burden of his accumulated merit and reputation. Previously, he basked in the glory of his accomplishments. He even took advantage of his new status as a war hero among mech designers.

Now, he felt the weight of expectations pushing him into action.

"We should make sure that Senator Tovar remains out of the hands of these pirates." Ves finally declared. "I have a weapon that might be able to take care of a large number of pirates at once."

"You so-called 'unicorn'?" Lord Javier sneered. "About time you admitted it. So what are you going to do with that big gun? Where did you get it anyway?"

"It's an unexpected present." Ves claimed, saying no more and letting their imagination fill up the gaps. "It can fire powerful laser beams, but it doesn't have that much of a capacity. If we want to make the best use of it, I'll have to get into a position to catch the most pirates at once."

This required some planning and preparation since the pirates would ordinarily be able to detect their approach and form a response before Ves was ready to fire his Amastendira.

In no way did Ves ever entertain any notion of handing over the Amastendira to someone else such as the guards who were much better shots. They probably assumed that such a powerful weapon was locked to a single person anyway.

After a brief round of planning, they finally moved into action.

Just as they made it halfway, the ship suddenly rumbled violently.

A big whoosh sounded out while pressure buffeted all of their armored forms. A drastic change had occurred!

"We're in a vacuum now! All the air has gone out! Maybe the ship has been breached!"

Chapter 1024 Cutting Power

The decompression of the corridors bode very ill for the Felicitous Remembrance. Either the pirates subverted the system meant to regular the air within the passenger ship, or they blew a big hole in her hull that the automated damage control systems couldn't patch up. Modern starships activated at least five different emergency countermeasures against a hole being punched through their hull, especially ones as well-built as the Remembrance.

"Well, most of those handy features probably failed to kick in considering the complete power blackout." Ves muttered.

If the lack of gravity, oxygen cycling, temperature regulation didn't worry them enough, now they also had to deal with the consequences of moving in vacuum.

Rationing their oxygen became one of their most critical priorities. Their protective suits only possessed a finite oxygen capacity. If their oxygen packs or their suits gained a big enough hole, then they would quickly suffocate and die!

There was a way to change depleted oxygen packs for spare ones stored in various emergency lockers spread all over the interior of the ship. However, that took time and was also rather difficult to do alone.

With the surrounding vacuum no longer able to convey any sounds, they all patched into the same short-range communication channel.

"Will we need to change anything?" Ves asked.

"No. We just need to move into action faster." One of the Spiral Shocker guards stated. "Spacing the interior of the Remembrance suggests that the plans of our foes has progressed to an extent. We must take action to interrupt their next actions."

They hustled back to the armory with haste. Unlike last time, Ves didn't travel together with both guards and Lord Javier. He split off with one of the guards, leaving the other to keep an eye on Lord Javier.

Frankly speaking, bringing Lord Javier was a huge burden. Not only did the guards have to keep him alive, they also couldn't allow him to get out of their sight.

While they could have tied Lord Javier to a solid fixture and lock him in a spare compartment, the risk was too great that the enemy might come and free him without any issue. This very real possibility forced them to keep Lord Javier close, which was very risky in this upcoming battle action.

Garbed in his flimsy hazard suit, Lord Javier made his dissatisfaction abundantly clear.

"This is murder! Why are you bringing me closer to the fight! I'm unarmed and practically unarmored! You Brighters are the worst guards ever!"

He at least had enough sense to keep his grumbling in the private channel. Once they came close enough to the armory, he obediently shut up in order to avoid disturbing the proceedings.

While the guard with the heavy machine gun emplacement set up his contraption close around the corner to the corridor leading to the armory, the other guard forced open a hatch through a mechanical workaround.

Not every hatch could be opened up this way, and generally only unimportant storage lockers and the like could be opened as easily with this method.

Ves and the guard entered into a large and spacious gym compartment. Various exercise equipment lay unpowered and forgotten during this time of crisis.

The large amount of space offered the nearby security officers and other soldiers stationed at the security department and the armory a lot of training space.

Right now, neither Ves nor the guard required all of the space. They simply approached the bulkhead facing the armory and waited.

The guard brandished a grenade launcher while Ves configured his Amastendira in a short-duration cutting beam.

In ordinary cases, a wide angle scatter beam served him better as it would instantly kill or debilitate those he targeted, leaving them no opportunity to retaliate. However, its potency decreased rapidly over a distance and carried no penetration power.

Ves knew that the Amastendira attracted an uncomfortably large amount of attention, especially since he whipped it out of nowhere.

Nonetheless, his actions already earned the respect of the guards. During this time of crisis, the last thing on their mind was to figure out the origins of the weapon. It was much more important to make use of every scrap of power they could muster!

The deck rumbled a little bit.

"That's it!" The guard yelled. "The pirates breached the armory compartment! Attack!"

They fell upon the earlier contingent of pirates so fast that they couldn't have transmitted a warning back to their comrades. Therefore, as Ves fired the Amastendira yet again, they had no idea what they were up against!

The Amastendira only burned for two seconds this time, but at maximum power the powerfully bright laser shone bright golden white as it attempted to pummel through the bulkhead!

Even at full power, the Amastendira barely breached the bulkhead surrounding the gym and training compartment. Due to the low strategic importance of this compartment during a battle, the shipwrights cut some corners regarding the durability of the surrounding bulkheads.

Unfortunately, even when they tried to save costs, the shipwrights didn't dare go too far, thereby giving the Amastendira a lot of difficulty piercing through!

The first beam only managed to burn through halfway. Ves expected this, so he immediately fired the weapon again, trusting its dimensional heatsink to shunt away all of the dangerous build-up of heat into another dimension.

This time, the second beam built up on the progress of the first beam and managed to pierce through!

"Third time!"

Ves rapidly extended the duration of the beam and fired the Amastendira once more, unleashing its power to the group of pirates attempting to push through ruined blast doors of the armory!

Half of their ranks got cut apart or burned in an instant! Even if they wore better quality combat armor, it wouldn't have availed them at all. With the Amastendira at maximum power, let alone infantry, even light mechs would feel threatened!

The remarkably well-trained pirates instantly abandoned their intention to break into the armory. Around half of the survivors rallied around a leader and instantly turned into the direction of the gym compartment.

However, two things happened that forestalled their next response. The thick fat muzzle of a grenade launcher barely squeezed through the narrow gap that Ves burned through the bulkhead. The residual heat already started to affect the integrity of the grenade launcher's barrel, but the guard quickly unloaded a full drum of grenades without worrying about anything else!

The badly-aimed grenades sprayed over a very wide area, some of them landing nowhere close to an enemy.

However, plenty of grenades landed close enough that when they detonated, they severely battered or outright killed the nearby pirates!

Unfortunately, the grenade launcher's drum only held so many grenades, and the Spiral Shocker guards only managed to scavenge a single drum from the security department.

Still, the effect of this attack more than satisfied Ves and the guards.

Before the survivors could get their wits back together, the other guard that set up the machine gun emplacement suddenly reversed the polarity of its mag modules.

This caused it to change the way it interacted with the deck. Instead of sticking to it, it abruptly floated above of it! Although the emplacement was rather heavy, it didn't prevent the guard and his servo-assisted armor from turning around a corner pushing it towards the entrance of the armory.

After that, he switched the polarity back to its original settings, causing it to slam back down to the deck.

The guard laid down behind the emplacement and instantly fired its entire remaining magazine of rounds!

The vast majority of pirates never stood a chance. When they were still focusing their attention towards the entrance of the armory and the newly opened gap from the gym compartment, they were completely exposed to an attack from a third direction!

While some of the pirates reacted quickly enough to fire back at the third assailant, the armor plating surrounding the machine gun emplacement held out long enough to tear down every pirate bar one!

The highest-ranking pirate somehow managed to survive! By dropping to the deck and using the corpses of his subordinates as extra cover, he managed to survive with only scratches to his armor!

It didn't save him from getting disarmed and captured by the remnants of the security officers holing up in the armory. A handful of armored soldiers stormed out of the ruined blast doors and quickly policed the site of the dead and wounded.

A handful of pirates survived alongside the leader. Most received heavy injuries which the security officers temporarily patched up with the supplies from their emergency med kits.

They hardly helped. The injured pirates needed better treatment than that, but none of them could afford to divert to the Remembrance's medical bay.

As the four reunited outside the armory, Lord Javier's guard escorts reported to the exoskeleton-armored security captain that emerged out of the armory compartment.

They reported through a private comm channel, so Ves didn't get to hear what they said. They did gesture towards him a few times, so he had no doubt they reported both his contributions and his possession of an amazingly potent weapon.

"Mr. Larkinson. I see it was wrong for me to dismiss the rumors swirling about the galactic net." The security captain complimented him. "I am Captain Yemona Hoskie of the Spiral Shockers. I'll be taking charge from now on, is that clear?"

Ves did not wish to submit unconditionally to Captain Hoskie, so he did not reply as usual. Following Lord Javier's advice, he gave an indirect response. "I will be glad to assist your endeavors, though mind you, I'm not trained for combat."

"Uh huh. Whatever you say." Hoskie replied skeptically. Her exoskeleton helmet prevented Ves from seeing her face, but he had no doubt that she stared at his empty hands, wondering where he hid his super laser pistol. Seeing that she faced a tough customer, she immediately moved on. "Right now, we need to take back control of the ship, or barring that bring Senator Tovar to safety."

"What about the other VIPs?"

"We'll rescue the likes of Colonel Xelven and Professor Ventag if possible, but Senator Tovar's safety takes priority."

Ves figured that his name was way down in her priority list. He didn't mind it too much though.

"What's your next step?" He asked, deliberating phrasing his question in a way that put a little distance between him and the surviving security officers.

Captain Hoskie stared at the two guards surviving guards out of the four assigned to keep Lord Javier safe. "Damn. We don't have sufficient manpower at our disposal. Half of the armory got blown up and the rest of my subordinates are trapped or stranded at their bunks or at their assigned posts. We can only muster up a single squad."

Ves looked beyond the handful of security guards that had armed themselves to the teeth and saw devastation within the armory. It was a bit better off than the security department, likely due to the increased difficulty of planting explosive charges in this tightly-guarded compartment.

Still, a single guard captain leading a squad of men wouldn't be enough to push back the hundred or more pirates that likely boarded the Felicitous Remembrance!

After weighing her decision, Captain Hoskie decided to forgo heading down the the lower decks to ascertain the state of the engineering bay. Instead, she decided to secure Senator Tovar first.

"We head to the bridge. Right now, it must be under heavy assault by the bulk of the pirates. We can't allow them to gain entry."

"I think that's the best course of action." Ves concurred.

"I wasn't asking you."

Everyone moved out on her orders, though some of them took the time to gear up properly for an assault. Due to the likelihood of follow up attacks on the armory, Captain Hoskie did not feel reassured leaving Lord Javier behind with a single guard. She decided to continue stringing the Vesian noble along regardless of his complaints.

"At least give me something better than a hazard suit!"

Chapter 1025 Four Pods

Captain Yemona Hoskie led her men to the bridge situated at the upper decks. They moved through empty corridors and ignored the handful of bodies and marks of damage. The pirates had swept through the corridors, killing those moving in the open.

Everyone puzzled over the identity of their captives. Earlier, they attempted to interrogate the wounded pirates along with their remarkably well-equipped leader, but they all committed suicide at the same time.

"Suicide implants." Lord Javier huffed over his private comm channel with Ves as he paced alongside his guards. No one else appeared interested in what he had to say, least of all Captain Hoskie. "No ordinary pirates would let someone implant them with those. If that isn't proof that they're not actually pirates, then you might as well cut me in half with that ridiculous laser weapon of yours."

"Do you recognize them perhaps?" Ves asked.

"No. I don't feel they're Vesian. Although they didn't live long enough for me to observe much at all, the pirates have this rough and ruthless quality to them that's far from the attitude ingrained in the Vesian underclasses."

Ves concurred with Javier. "They're far too disciplined and stoic to resemble the pirates from the frontier. There's little chance that they're elites from the Ravienne Alliance, though there's a small possibility that they are dispatched

by the Dragon Alliance. It wouldn't make much sense, though. We are quite a distance away from the frontier and as far as I know, the pirates don't have much interest in meddling with our two states."

That only left one probably possibility.

"Dark mercenaries." Lord Javier said.

Killers for hire, the famed dark mercenaries who mainly based themselves in the Nyxian Gap earned their living through dishonorable means. Different from pirates who mainly relied on opportunistic preying of trade ships, dark mercenaries hired themselves out from the deepest depths of the underground.

They didn't work for everyone. Through intermediaries and trusted agents, they matched up with upstanding companies that sought to take care of something violently without the risk of tying the crimes back to their names.

Certain companies paid extremely well for these services. In general, a well-established dark mercenary corps not only lasted longer, they received better and much more regular earnings.

However, it wasn't so easy to establish a dark mercenary corps that companies would be willing to employ. Betrayals happened so often in this murky service industry that reputation and a track record of following through on agreements mattered a lot to both the clients and the service providers.

The high barrier of entry meant that only a relatively small number of long-standing dark mercenary corps ever endured for more than a decade.

However, those who managed to survive the initial period would always be able to gain enough reputation to keep the repeat clients coming.

Dark mercenaries earned huge amounts of money. They faced less risks than most pirates but got to earn just as much if not more than even the more successful pirate gangs.

The difference between pirates and dark mercenaries also extended to their training. The latter mostly consisted of military mech pilots or veteran mercenaries with serious behavioral problems or gone afoul with the law.

Unlike the barely trained scum that made up most of the pirate mech pilots, dark mercenaries held themselves to a higher standard.

The discipline and training displayed by the so-called 'pirates' pointed strongly towards dark mercenaries. Still, Ves did not entirely know if they made use of suicide implants wired to a remote signal or some sort of trigger.

"Maybe they're commandos or intelligence operatives." Ves guessed.

Javier shrugged under his hazard suit. "Who knows. There are too many possibilities to guess, but personally I'm leaning towards dark mercenaries."

This speculation didn't help them all that much, but it did give Ves an idea on who they faced. Not everyone made use of well-trained soldiers and stealth shuttles, but some of the better and more renowned dark mercenaries were every bit as good as the commando forces employed by states.

Soon enough, they reached the deck which hosted the bridge compartment. They encountered a pair of pirates stationed at the main stairway, who instantly panicked and tried to run and warn their comrades.

Hoskie's men managed to gun them both down, but they weren't pleased.

"The pirates are probably warned of our presence." The captain predicted.

"We've lost the element of surprise."

Even so, they still forged onwards, duty-bound to assist Senator Tovar. As they got nearer to the bridge, they encountered a security checkpoint that had been overwhelmed and taken over by pirates.

Even though the defensive fixtures received a lot of damage, they still offered much more cover than the completely open corridor leading up to the checkpoint.

"This is not advantageous to us." Captain Hoskie observed. "Even with our superior equipment, the pirates stationed twice as many men as ours. With the advantage of cover, they'll hold out long enough that they could easily bleed us dry if they're determined to fight."

Regular pirates folded easily when faced with stiff opposition. Ves did not have any illusion that these fake pirates followed such behavior.

"What do we do?" He asked. There was a reason why Captain Hoskie said those words in the common communication channel instead of keeping her doubts to herself. "Some of those pirates are carrying heavy weapons."

"I heard that you have a very nasty surprise."

In the end, the security checkpoint offered no hindrance to the two consecutive cutting beams that cut apart most of the cover and the pirates hiding behind. The pirates somehow hadn't been in touch with their comrades assaulting the armory, so they did not expect the attack at all. As Captain Hoskie and her men cleaned up the rest, Ves found that discrepancy to be very useful.

"The pirates jammed all long-ranged comms, preventing us from linking up but crippling their own means of contacting each other as well." He observed with a grin. "Usually, that works in their favor, but not this time."

Even so, the jamming prevented the scattered security officers from linking up and coordinating with each other which helped the intruders a lot so far. The defenders of the ship might be elites, but they expected a lot more help from the Remembrance's internal defenses.

If not for the complete loss of power, these pirates wouldn't have stood a chance as the artificial gravity slammed them up and down between the ceiling while turrets deployed from above and from the sides to pepper them with lasers and projectiles.

There was no use crying over the extent of the sabotage. They moved on past the fallen security checkpoint and moved on to the bridge.

Upon their arrival, they saw that they arrived too late. "The pirates forced through the blast doors!"

The bridge of the Remembrance should have been the thickest and most well-armored compartment of the ship. Yet a huge hole rested at the site where Ves attempted to enter only to be denied by the guards.

"How can this be?" Ves wondered. "If there's anything I know about the bridge, it's that those blast doors are much thicker and tougher than the blast doors protecting the armory!"

As the center of the operation of the ship and the principal station for the captain and Senator Tovar, the bridge was exceedingly well-protected. Yet somehow the pirates broke through anyway, and with explosive ordnance far more potent than anything they used before. The site of the ruined blast doors was so ruined that a huge chunk of the ceiling, deck and surrounding bulkheads had been blasted apart as well!

Captain Hoskie hastily led her men into the vulnerable bridge, only to encounter more than thirty bodies.

"All of the dead are bridge officers and security officers!" Ves stated with alarm.

The guards quickly scoured over the bodies, seeing no dead pirates among them. Instead, suspicious piles of ash and melted puddles suggested that the pirates cremated their dead and all of their gear with incendiary charges.

"Senator Tovar isn't among the dead. Neither can we find the bodies Colonel Xelven and Professor Ventag."

The chances were low that the pirates bothered to cremate them. It was much more likely that they'd been kidnapped!

Ves quickly observed something important. "The heat from these marks are still hot. They might not have gotten away from the ship yet! We can still catch up to them and their captives!"

"Let's move!" Hoskie immediately called.

They moved out and through the help of some advanced tracking software that followed residual footsteps taken by the pirates as they made their way out. They hurried down several stairways that led to the middle decks.

No hangar bay resided on the deck the pirates had reached, which meant they were trying to extract through a hole in the hull!

"Hurry up, we're getting close!"

The lack of artificial gravity hindered their movements as they always needed to fully place their magboots against the deck to gain traction. Ves and Lord Javier both moved the slowest by far, but the exoskeleton soldiers simply picked them up and easily carried them forward.

It was a bit undignified to be carried this way, but it saved them precious seconds.

"We've almost reached the exterior of the Remembrance!"

Soon enough, they rounded another corner and came within sight of a large group of pirates with much better gear. They carried four pods that looked as if they held prisoners to the breached entrance to a large stealth shuttle that had opened its hatch to receive the returning pirates.

"Stop them immediately!" Captain Hoskie ordered and fired her heavy caliber rifle. "Ves, sweep up the pirates in the periphery. In no instance should you fire anywhere close to those pods!"

Ves inwardly grumbled about being ordered around, but he knew better than to make a fuss about it. Right now, rescuing Senator Tovar and the other prisoners took priority! If Ves slipped up his aim and hit one of those pods, he might as well give up his citizenship at the spot!

The heavily-armed exoskeleton soldiers ran to the front, confronting the fifty pirates head-on. The enemy enjoyed a heavy numerical advantage, and unlike the previous pirates they met these ones shed the pretence of dressing up as pirates in favor of better gear!

Even so, no matter how well their combat armor stood up against the firepower of the Spiral Shocker security guards, when Ves swept up the left and right sides with the high-powered cutting beams from his Amastendira, a multitude of invaders fell or lost composure!

Even as Ves threw the Amastendira back into his Inventory after it entered a forced cooldown cycle, Captain Hoskie's men instantly finished off the remainder with well-aimed shots before they could harm their prisoners!

Unfortunately, one of them managed to unload a volley of rounds right through one of the thinly-armored pods, while another threw a grenade at another pod which heavily damaged its exterior!

"NO!"

Captain Hoskie cursed and ran forward without any regard for her safety. While her men repelled the waiting stealth shuttle and executed the pirates somehow clinging onto their lives, she approached the two damaged pods. Ves and Lord Javier followed suit when it seemed the coast was clear.

She first studied the worst pod that was riddled with holes. Its interior was exposed to vacuum, which quickly distorted the appearance of the dead body inside. She quickly sighed in relief. "It's the captain of the Remembrance."

Although it was callous of her to show relief, everyone was glad the dead body wasn't Camden Tovar.

She then checked the other pod which held another prisoner. The fragmentation grenade that landed on top of it not only dented the pod but breached it in several places.

This time, she looked down in alarm. "It's Senator Tovar!"

As soon as she pried open the damaged cover of the pod, the old man calmly climbed out of the pod. He showed no injury at all despite the fragmentation grenade!

"No need to worry, good captain. My shield generator protected me from harm." The senator calmly stated in his intact high-quality vacsuit and looked around. "My compliments to you, captain."

"Thanks, but we mostly managed to rescue you because of Mr. Larkinson." Captain Hoskie admitted honestly.

That caused the powerful senator to look towards Ves, who was in the middle of prying open the cover to the pod that held Professor Ventag.

Chapter 1026 Peculiar Source

Senator Tovar didn't linger his gaze towards Ves for long. No matter what happened just before, he could hear it all later. Right now, they still needed to get through this crisis.

Once Captain Hoskie issued some orders to her men, she turned back to the most critical person in their midst. "Senator, the Felicitous Remembrance is highly compromised. The odds are high that the ship will either blow up from within or becomes a target to the enemy mechs outside. Word will come at

any time of their failure to capture you. Once they realize it's not feasible to capture you, there is a great chance that they'll settle for killing you and everyone on this ship instead! You need to make a decision. I highly suggest we evacuate the Remembrance."

"I will defer to your judgement." The old man spoke.

The senator's gracefully admitted that he was no good in combat situations. Despite his authority, his expertise laid in statecraft, policy-making and diplomacy. Military matters were far outside his ballpark.

Fortunately, aside from Professor Ventag, they also managed to rescue Lieutenant Colonel Xelven. Although the high-ranking military official served behind a desk for most of his career, he was competent enough to take charge this time.

"I concur with Captain Hoskie." Xelven said as he emerged out of the pod.

"The Felicitous Remembrance is rotten from the inside. We should go down to the lower decks and head to the shuttle bay in order to evacuate to the Lormant Carnival as expediently as possible. If the flagship of the escort fleet isn't a convenient destination, then any other light carrier that is escorting the peace delegation will do!"

"Why not take the escape pods? They're much closer." Lord Javier asked.

Xelven ignored the question. Escape pods may offer a faster exit, but they lacked the speed and maneuvering power of a shuttle. They also only held one or two passengers at most and it would be difficult to keep everyone together.

They abandoned the breached site and moved towards the nearest stairway leading downwards.

Ves walked alongside Professor Ventag, who seemed awfully shaken at what happened to them all. The assault on the bridge had been a particularly

traumatic experience to him, though Colonel Xelven and Senator Tovar brushed managed to brush it off or hide their discomfort.

The vacsuited professor turned to Ves with admiration. "I've just heard you've been pivotal in rescuing the stranded survivors at the armory and freeing us from captivity. Captain Hoskie reports that you are in a possession of a very powerful weapon."

"I'm the only one who can use it." Ves replied defensively. "Besides, a weapon like that has a cost. It's out of power."

The professor smiled sardonically. "I won't quibble with how you could possibly manage to smuggle such a deadly weapon through all of the security checks. I must admit that I am a little out of my depth here. Your actions so far on the other hand stood out enormously. I regret not letting you into the bridge when you arrived at the entrance earlier. When someone informed me you wished to enter, I declined to consider it as your presence wasn't needed."

The regret in the professor's voice was palpable. If he knew that the Felicitous Remembrance was compromised and that the pirates were so determined to attack the bridge, he would have made a lot of other choices than that!

To Ves, the earlier issue didn't bother him anymore. With the determination shown by the pirates in their successful attempt at breaching the bridge, he might have been one of the bodies there by now.

"Do you know what's going on outside? I'm not patched to any important comm channels or networks. Why hasn't our escort fleet sent any assistance?"

"As far as I am aware of before the pirates overtook the bridge, the pirate vessels that emerged out of FTL entered into fighting range within minutes." The Senior Mech Designer explained. "The carriers disgorged a large number of mechs, outnumbering our forces by at least one-and-a-half times. It is

taking every bit of effort for the Spiral Shockers to hold such a large number of mechs back. It doesn't help that the Remembrance has lost all power and propulsion. Her predictable ballistic course through space makes it exceptionally easy for the enemy to concentrate their fire on this ship!"

This added a bit more urgency to their evacuation as those mechs could turn their weapons on the Remembrance at any moment once they gave up on capturing Senator Tovar alive!

"Did you figure anything out from their mechs?" Ves asked.

"I've observed much." Professor Ventag nodded. "The enemy makes use of genuine pirate mechs. Some of them are low-quality products designed by unworthy Novices. However, at least half of them are high-quality mechs designed by an infamous mech designer from the frontier."

"Oh?" Ves looked up. "Which infamous mech designer are you talking about?"

"The main mech models utilized by our attackers are on par with the mech models employed by the Spiral Shockers. I recognize their make. They carry the uncharacteristic pursuit for perfection exhibited by the Skull Architect!"

Ves suddenly stumbled in his steps. He quickly recovered. "What?! Are you certain?"

"Oh yes." Professor Ventag said seriously, not even realizing that Ves once talked to the Skull Architect in person! "He is one of the few Senior Mech Designers that somehow managed to base himself in the frontier. His continued existence is an affront to the MTA."

"I see." Ves said flatly, trying to keep himself calm. "So what does that mean for our defenses?"

The professor chuckled. "The quality of the Skull Architect's mech models are truly praiseworthy. Even if the fabricated copies are a little inconsistent

compared to the design specifications, they are all high-performing machines and deadly in the right hands."

This was a familiar-sounding flaw to Ves. After all, he once worked with the Skull Architect's mech designs! "Are the pirate mech pilots good enough to take advantage of the full capabilities of their machines?"

"It is to our luck that the skill requirements are very stringent. While the pirate mech pilots are better than you'd expect from pirates, even the best of them can only utilize eighty percent of the capacity of their quality mechs at most. This skill mismatch is the only reason why the Spiral Shockers have managed to hold back the pirates while outnumbered."

Ves was very glad that he hadn't been able to help the Skull Architect solve this fatal flaw of his! He made a deal with the infamous criminal and fugitive mech designer to design variants that offered a much easier and comfortable piloting experience than the Senior's usual mech designs.

It was a good thing that the deal would only commence after the war!

"Is it safe to cross over to the Lormant Carnival, sir?"

"It depends on how close they've managed to push. I am not up to date with the battle taking place in space, so I'll have to disappoint you there, Mr. Larkison."

The group of surviving security officers and delegation members soon reached the lower decks. They'd be able to reach the entrance to the shuttle bay within a few minutes at this pace.

They encountered little resistance here. The pirates allocated most of their men elsewhere, and many of them had already died. The scattered crew and security officers managed to strike back as well, hindering the pirates from taking complete control.

The shuttle bay hadn't been a priority for the invading pirates. They just stationed enough men to prevent the technicians and other workers from breaking out. Captain Hoskie's men quickly wiped them out and convinced the crew inside to allow them entry.

"Let us evacuate!" Senator Tovar commanded. "My personal shuttle has enough space for most of us. Come!"

The shuttle in question was a souped-up shuttle that looked sleek and elegant. Although it didn't offer too much seating, it offered more than enough space to fit Captain Hoskie's men with a couple more people to spare.

Ves came along as well, though he privately expressed some doubts whether Camden Tovar's personal shuttle had been compromised as well. If the Felicitous Remembrance already contained so many planted explosives, how could the shuttle be any different?

"I make use of my personal shuttle for several years now." The senator explained as he sat on the most luxurious seat in the passenger compartment. The open space around it became a little crowded with all the extra soldiers trying to squeeze inside. "My personal pilot and shuttle technicians frequently inspect it on the surface and perform a more thorough inspection every week. Their loyalty isn't in question, and even if there is something amiss there, my people always work alongside other technicians when performing their thorough inspections."

Even so, some of the security guards insisted on scanning the shuttle from top to bottom in case they found any explosives.

They already analyzed the composition of the explosives that took out the security department and the armory, so they knew which substances to look out for. As they searched, everyone else waited until they determined that the

shuttle likely hadn't been planted with those specific types of explosive charges.

That might not mean much considering there were so many other substances their enemies could have planted on the shuttle. However, it wasn't very easy to obtain them in the first place.

"Exhibiting an obsessive amount of concern is not helpful." Senator Tovar calmly shook his head. "If we are constantly double-checking our actions, we are playing into the hands of our enemies. Trust in my arrangements."

Ves wanted to snort at those words. Everyone trusted that the Felicitous Remembrance that had been personally prepared by the Tovar Family would be safe. She turned out to be the opposite.

Even so, he trusted the other shuttles even less than this one. Even if Senator Tovar made a major miscalculation, Ves did not underestimate him for that. Their enemies may be powerful but Senator Tovar was no vegetable either!

As the shuttle launched into space, Ves managed to look over to Senator Tovar's seat projection. It displayed a plot of the local space. Amidst the symbols representing friendly ships and mechs, a large number of enemy mechs assailed them from all sides!

"The battle is still ongoing!"

Ves tried to count the number of friendly mechs in in space and came up substantially short. The Spiral Shockers brought five companies worth of mechs, but only a hundred-and-forty or less still remained.

The survivors fought as hard as they could, and the enemy suffered a higher rate of attrition than the elite Spiral Shockers.

However, the disparity in numbers made it very difficult for the Spiral Shockers to utilize their advanced tactics. They were also burdened by the need to keep

the enemy mechs busy in case they wanted to take a shot at the Felicitous Remembrance!

In fact, many pirate mechs already took potshots at the coasting passenger ship. The only saving grace was that her excellent armor plating allowed her to withstand most of the incoming fire.

Even so, many holes still marred her surface. The artfully-designed passenger ship would quickly reach the point of no return.

Escape pods already started to fire out of various points of the doomed vessel!

Ves found the Felicitous Remembrance's fall to be a tragic event. It was such a waste to trash such an expensive vessel! Anyone who managed to salvage the ship or scavenge the debris would make a killing! They'd earn as much as most mech companies earned in a year!

If Ves still possessed a working comm connection to the galactic net, then he was half-tempted to order the LMC to commence a salvage operation of this site.

Of course, he would never go through with it. A precious battlefield such as this would attract all kinds of scum.

As Senator Tovar's personal shuttle crossed over in open space, it managed to attract the attention of the enemy pirate mechs.

While it wasn't the only shuttle flying through space right now, it differed from the others by its ostentatious design and appearance! Most of all, its exterior also carried Senator Tovar's personal mark!

Alarms began to ring inside the shuttle. "We're being targeted!"

Chapter 1027 Nepotism

Senator Tovar's personal shuttle might look good, but it also came with a raft of defensive features! How could the shuttle of a high dignitary be so simple?

"Deploy anti-targeting countermeasures!"

While the shuttle pilot juked the shuttle in a random pattern, the co-pilot activated a raft of features, the most dramatic of which was to unleash a canister's worth of sensor-blocking particles!

The immediate space around Senator Tovar's personal shuttle became obscured in reflective fog. The tiny particles immediately denied most sensors and targeting systems the ability to peer into the cloud and fixate the shuttle's current position!

Ves knew that the sensor-blocking particle cloud wouldn't shield the shuttle for long. It constantly dispersed and the more it did, the less dense the fog became over time.

However, a minute after its flight, the shuttle released another canister of particles, denying the enemy pirate mechs from targeting the shuttle!

Oh, they tried. However, the Spiral Shockers piloting their disguised commercial mechs did their best to hinder the pirates from taking potshots at the shuttle. The elite mech pilots used teamwork, coordination and timing to hinder the melee pirate mechs from going forward and harassed the ranged pirate mechs with strafing fire in order to interrupt their aim.

The defenders wouldn't be able to defeat the pirates very quickly at all due to the burden of having to shield a shuttle in open space from destruction.

However, as long as Senator Tovar and his ride remained intact, they didn't fail their mission!

The pirates were not resigned to being hindered like this, so they kept firing lasers and projectiles into the expanding clouds in the hopes of striking it lucky.

Yet the large clouds quickly spread over kilometers, making it incredibly chancy for them to hit anywhere close to the shuttle. The huge distance between the pirate mechs and the escaping shuttle didn't help much at all! They had a better chance winning the lottery or finding a needle in a haystack than to land a hit on the shuttle in such a huge area of uncertainty!

Even so, Ves and the rest spent a nerve-wracking moment hoping that the shuttle possessed more canisters and if the Spiral Shockers would be able to keep the enemy pirate mechs busy.

"We're running out of canisters!" The co-pilot reported.

"Friendly mechs are on the way!" Colonel Xelven exclaimed as he intermittently exchanged messages with the Lormant Carnival, the flagship of the escort force. "They'll be with us in a moment! For now, hang on as long as you can! The pirate mechs are slowly being pushed back!"

Ves glanced at Senator Tovar's projection and saw that Xelven may be exaggerating a little. The pirates, leveraging their advantage in numbers, concentrated more of their mechs at the flanks, lessening the pressure at the front but forcing the Spiral Shockers to spread their defenses thin. This gave their ranged mechs a lot more opportunities to target the fleeing shuttle!

In the meantime, a huge explosion just wracked the Felicitous Remembrance's engineering bay. Half the ship instantly ruptured from the blast, though her unusually resilient structure left her bow section largely intact.

Even so, the luxurious passenger ship met an ignoble end without even reaching her destination! The unimaginable amount of waste pained Ves deeply, though he felt thankful enough that he made it out in time.

A lot of shuttles and escape pods departed from the starship beforehand, so not as many crew and passengers lost their lives. However, the supplies, gifts, databases and more all got lost, hurting the peace delegation's ability to negotiate with their Vesian counterparts even further.

Though Ves felt very nervous, this wasn't his first rodeo so he maintained his composure. Colonel Xelven and Senator Tovar likewise kept up a steely appearance.

Professor Ventag on the other hand nervously shifted around his seat, aware that his custom vacsuit offered no protection at all should a laser or a huge ballistic round strike right into the shuttle!

His lack of combat experience among the VIPs appeared exceptionally eye-catching. Even though he was a Senior Mech Designer, his actual combat experience was actually close to zero! Even Camden Tovar experienced a few close calls throughout his long life, but Professor Ventag seemed to have too little experience in this regard?

Ves didn't mean to be rude, but the professor's behavior started to discomfort the others. "Didn't you serve during a previous war?"

"I did. But that was two generations ago in another time and place. However, the DCTI ensured I served well away from the frontlines." Ventag plainly admitted his lack of exposure to direct combat. "I apologise for my lack of composure. I am constantly running the numbers on the probability of our shuttle getting hit. I am not getting any encouraging results once it runs out of canisters."

"Sometimes, professor, it's better to leave what might happen in the future up to fate."

"We are mech designers. We do not leave things to chance."

"When it comes to designing mechs or other engineering-related tasks, that's the most appropriate approach. Yet there are so many variables involved in battles that you have to pick and choose where you put your mind into. Calculating the probability of getting hit won't do us any good."

"You may have a point, Mr. Larkinson. I will try my best to keep my mind on more productive trains of thoughts."

Ves found it rather peculiar that while leaders such as Senator Tovar adhered to the Societal Vitality Theory, they never applied its tenets quite completely among themselves.

The lower classes needed to experience struggle. Leaders did their best to bloody them and make them grow stronger through hardship.

Yet the offspring of those highly-placed leaders as well as elite mech designers who graduated from the AUMD or the DCTI all received a free pass by virtue of their higher starting point and the support given by their parents or backers.

Even though Professor Ventag might be a great mech designer, his relative lack of hardening made him an odd choice for Senator Tovar to associate himself with. Then again, leaders mainly applied the Societal Vitality Theory to a society as a whole. They probably figured that exempting their own class wouldn't hurt the state very much.

Maybe Lord Javier had a point. The Bright Republic's hypocrisy made it weaker than the Vesia Kingdom, whose rulers struggled just as much if not more than their commoners. While it might not be the best way for a state to

determine their leaders, it at least made sure that those who took charge knew the hardships of battle.

Ves may not enjoy combat but he survived so many battles that it left an indelible mark on his mech design style. He was familiar with its intricacies as well as the features that mech pilots appreciated but never drew much attention.

How could a mech designer even design a good mech if they only witnessed combat from a distance?

This was the supposed rationale for drafting the Bright Republic's mech designers during the wars. Bloody them and reduce their numbers until the survivors shaped up from their experiences.

While Ves did not entirely agree with such a wasteful method of drawing out the potential of an entire generation's worth of mech designers, it did have some good effects.

Yet the nepotism at work in the Bright Republic exempted the most promising, privileged and talented mech designers from this risky process.

Ves shook his head as a new development happened. The shuttle ran out of canisters, but mechs dispatched from the flagship arrived in time to shield it from further damage!

A pair of space knights surrounded the shuttle and held out their shields to absorb any incoming fire targeting the vehicle and the occupants within. Other mechs covered the other angles. Even if they got hit head-on, their armor plating could take it! If need be, they would continue to shield the shuttle until their mechs broke apart!

Because that was their mission! The lives of Senator Tovar, Professor Ventag and Colonel Xelven was worth much more than their mechs!

Through this sacrificial method, the Spiral Shockers managed to shepherd the vulnerable shuttle all the way to the Lormant Carnival, a well-equipped light carrier camouflaged as the flagship of Special Security Limited.

Perhaps they shouldn't have bothered with the pretence and brought their military ships and mechs from the start. Obviously, the Tovar Peace Delegation failed to maintain secrecy.

"We've arrived!" The shuttle pilot announced as the vehicle touched down onto the shuttle bay deck with a hasty clang.

As soon as the hatch slid open, Captain Hoskie led her men outside to secure the immediate surroundings. Another squad of the Spiral Shocker soldiers greeted them with wariness, and it wasn't until Senator Tovar and the others verified their identities that they let down their guard.

"The shuttle bay is too open and vulnerable to attacks!" Colonel Xelven stated as he stepped onto the deck. "Captain Hoskie, bring Senator Tovar to safety! The Lomrant Carnival has a highly-reinforced citadel compartment for just this purpose!"

"Yes, sir!" Captain Hoskie saluted before ordering her men to surround and usher Senator Tovar deeper into the light carrier.

Colonel Xelven then turned to Professor Ventag. "The Spiral Shockers may have need of your insights. Some men will take you to the command center where you can assist in our defense."

The professor nodded without taking up any airs. "Understood. I will put my full effort into helping the Spiral Shockers repel the attackers."

The military official finally turned to Ves and Lord Javier. "Mr. Larkinson, though I would like for you to accompany and assist Professor Ventag, the Spiral Shockers are very particular about who is allowed to enter the Lormant Carnival's command center. I hope you understand."

In other words, the Spiral Shockers didn't trust him enough to allow him inside the heart of their command. Ves did not blame them as unlike the Vandals the Shockers followed protocol a lot more strictly. He wouldn't be able to casually enter into any sensitive areas unless he received the requisite permissions.

In the middle of an ongoing battle, the Shockers had better things to do than to pay attention to a lowly mech designer like him! Even though he proved pivotal in saving Senator Tovar from captivity, word hadn't spread yet either.

Ves did not quibble on this issue. Professor Ventag may be no good in a combat situation, but in the safety of the command center, he should be able to put his mech design abilities to good use.

"Where will you have me, colonel?" He asked, expressing his willingness to help in any way he could.

The man thought for a moment. "For now, please keep an eye on Lord Javier. As we have not prepared any adequate quarters for a man of his station, he'll have to spend some time in the brig."

"Hey! I'm not some lowly criminal or drunkard rating to be put behind bars!" The noble immediately protested.

However, Colonel Xelven took little notice of his protestations. He turned around and left for else, issuing orders as he marched.

Four guards arrived to usher Lord Javier to the brig. Perhaps the only reason why the noble didn't complain about his treatment was because Ves walked alongside him as if he was a fellow prisoner.

"Are you glad you're still with us?" Ves asked idly for lack of a better topic to talk about.

"No."

"No?"

Lord Javier sneered in the open. Now that they have returned to a ship with working power and life support, everyone's helmets folded back into their collars.

"Unlike what you might think, I'm not short-sighted. I believe Senator Tovar is right about the reason why we need to cut our war short. Whoever he's afraid of, they're likely to offer a much better fight for us than your punching bag of a state!"

Ves resisted the urge to smack Lord Javier's face. Who was the punching bag here?!

Chapter 1028 Swirling Questions

While Lord Javier spent some time locked in an enclosed cell in the brig, Ves sat on a chair placed on the other side of the cell. They kept each other company through a communication channel.

"So is the battle over?" Javier asked with a bored tone as he laid down on his cot.

"From what little I've heard, the pirates retreated on their own accord. After the Felicitous Remembrance blew up and our shuttle made it to safety, the Spiral Shockers are no longer weighed down with the need to protect us so much. They began to take the offensive and employed aggressive formations to turn the tide against the pirates. Even if they are skilled and pilot some good mechs, they're no match against the Spiral Shockers once they unleash their potential."

"The pirates, or rather the dark mercenaries gave up rather easily. It's strange they didn't bring enough forces to overwhelm Senator Tovar's escort force."

"It's not so easy to muster up so many mechs and ships on short notice." Ves spoke, using his experience in logistics to make this judgement. "This attack is well-planned but the uncertain timing and route must have imposed

limitations on the conspirators. Also, it's very precarious for forces to adopt the identity of pirates in civilized space. The larger the pirate force, the more attention it attracts from the surrounding states. In the worst case, the MTA's Compliance Department might send out one of their dreaded fleets! Our attackers won't be returning anytime soon, I think."

They both knew that their attackers were anything but 'pirates'. Even so, trying to figure out their true identities was impossible with the amount of effort they put into their ruse.

Ves felt as if everyone played by a common set rules again. Previously, the players involved in the competition to unearth the treasures of the Starlight Megalodon all maintained a code of silence. Even if word of such an event did spill out on the galactic net, the complete lack of media attention meant that nobody actually found out about the truth!

Right now, something similar seemed to take place. Senator Tovar and the Spiral Shockers did their best to hide their actual identities and allegiances while their attackers adopted a disguise as well!

They took their roles so seriously that they even downgraded the quality of their gear and assets to match what security forces and pirates usually made use of! Such a willingness to weaken their own forces in order to sell the idea that they were someone else went too far!

These strange rituals made Ves suspect that the powers-that-be who ruled the Komodo Star Sector all adhered to a secret set of rules. It might be some exclusive assembly, a secret society, an informal gathering or even just a communal comm channel group where leaders could exchange ideas more openly than in a formal setting.

Ves still had much to learn about the galaxy, it seemed.

"You said earlier to me that you believe in Senator Tovar's warning." He spoke. "How come you're so..."

Sane? Rational? Not crazy? It would be insulting for him to voice those words out loud, but Lord Javier read the unspoken meaning regardless. He smiled sardonically at the ceiling.

"The war between our two states has gone too stale. It's a ritual more than anything by this point. A bloody one, but a predictable one. Nothing truly new happens anymore. We know each other so well that neither side can do anything to gain a decisive advantage in our wars. Don't you think that somewhat defeats the point of a war?"

"They say that war is the continuation of politics by other means."

"You're right, Ves. For so long, our two states used the Bright-Vesia Wars as a way to hone their state and population into a more efficient fighting machine. The mutual competition did us both good, but let's face it. We've reached a plateau where we aren't able to gain any further improvement. The only point to the war by now is to maintain the edge we've sharpened. It doesn't even feel like we're fighting all that hard against you Brighters to be honest. What's the point of sharpening a weapon when you never put it to its intended use?"

Ves was familiar with Lord Javier's perspective on the Bright Republic at this point. He regarded the Republic as a punching bag and a sharpening stone for the Kingdom.

While Ves did not like how Lord Javier dismissed the Bright Republic so casually, he could excuse it since the Vesians always held the upper hand in military strength.

"So what are you thinking about? Would you rather see the Vesia Kingdom invade another state instead?"

Lord Javier grinned. "Wouldn't that be a great sight? Most of the states that surround our two states haven't fought so frigidly and frequently as us. Since we aren't making any progress against each other, why not turn attention elsewhere?"

"That sounds quite logical, though I don't think there's any appetite in the Bright Republic to conquer another state."

"You'll have to. If we Vesians expand our territory, manpower, industry and prestige by conquering our neighboring states, we'll return to our original foes at some point and hit twice as hard. You Brighters may sometimes profess peace and prosperity, but the likes of Senator Tovar won't allow your Republic to become a fish for the chopping block to us. My sovies are on the Coman Federation. Those transhuman freaks don't have any friends and allies so there's little chance you'll draw more enemies once you turn on their augmented butts."

"It's not that simple." Ves retorted. The Bright Republic dreamt of expanding their territory in other directions many times if they somehow didn't have to worry about the Vesians. "The Coman Federation is no slouch when it comes to their military. Anyone who conquers their star systems will have to deal with a bunch of fanatics who are impossible to pacify unless you take extreme measures that the MTA will surely disapprove of. They're more trouble than they're worth."

A lull in the conversation followed. After some time, Lord Javier asked another question.

"Do you think we'll ever see a time where Brighters and Vesians fight alongside each other against a common foe?"

"It will have to be a very serious threat for us to band together. Anything short of an apocalyptic threat to our states won't be enough to force our people to set aside the hatred and animosity built up over centuries of intermittent war."

"Why not? We managed to become friends, right, Ves?"

Ves snorted. "I wouldn't exactly call us friends. We're just familiar with each other that we no longer repel each other."

"By my definition, that's friendship in a nutshell."

During their time together, they did grow closer despite their differences. Ves did not know whether this was a blessing or a curse. He also didn't think he could repeat this feat when he came in touch with the other members of the Vesian peace delegation.

Would the peace talks still go through now that they suffered such a heavy attack? Ves doubted it, but they already came so close to the Reinald Republic that it would be a waste to turn away at this point.

After some time, Ves and Lord Javier experienced the disorienting and nauseating feeling of transitioning into FTL.

"Seems like we've finally left the battle site." Ves commented. "We're safe now for the moment."

Shortly afterwards, a security officer walked up to Ves. "Mr. Larkinson, Senator Tovar would like to see you now."

"Very well. Lead the way." Ves stood up and waved Lord Javier goodbye, not that he could see it from his enclosed cell.

Ves followed the guard out of the brig and to the upper decks where a stateroom had been set aside for Senator Tovar. The guards there forced him to relinquish the light combat armor and most of his other gear before he entered.

The latest abode for the senator lacked the luxuries and artwork from his previous stateroom on the Felicitous Remembrance. Even so, the Tovar patriarch made the best of the situation and already reconfigured the projectors into displaying some flowing art.

The senator caught his glances. "Do you appreciate my taste of art?"

To be honest, Ves did not see the merit in the artwork on display. The visual art looked pretty in the way the gradients of colors formed into various patterns on a canvas. Yet Ves also felt that for all of their soothing visual flair, they carried no greater meaning.

"They are very aesthetically pleasing, senator." Ves replied simply, opting for a neutral answer.

"Your record states that your mother was an artist. A mech designer is an artist as well as an engineer, no? Your best mechs certainly showcase your artistic prowess. By the way, the record on your mother is remarkably slim and lacking in detail. My investigators have also found some discrepancies in her record. Minor ones, but improper nonetheless. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, Ves?"

Ves suddenly shook. He had some guesses. Dangerous guesses. "My mother.. I hardly knew her. She left me far too soon."

He hoped to forestall any further questioning with this emotional response. It was a fact that she died. That hadn't been faked, and Senator Tovar should know it as well.

"My apologies for prying into old wounds." Tovar said in a seemingly contrite manner. "Let's move on. I won't bore you with a debriefing. I have heard quite enough from Captain Hoskie and Lord Javier's surviving guards. It seems that you are in the possession of a very dangerous tool. Did you know that the scanners and sensors in this stateroom has been scouring your entire body

from top to bottom for any items? According to the results, aside from your uniform and your comm, you carry nothing else, but we both know that's not true. Even now, you are capable of killing me if you so wish."

Ves doubted it. Senator Tovar definitely possessed a shield generator, and who knew what other toys he relied on to stay alive. This great statesman didn't live to almost three-hundred years old without learning how to survive a couple of thousand assassination attempts!

Right now, Senator Tovar adopted a light and casual tone. Ves took that to mean that he wasn't hungering for the Amastendira for the moment.

It wouldn't end well for Tovar if he insisted on Ves to give up his prized weapon. The Amastendira saved his life over and over again and he developed a strong degree of possessiveness towards it. In some matters, Ves could be quite irrational!

Fortunately, Senator Tovar himself would not be unaware of this, having manipulated people all his life. Besides, as a man near the height of his power in his own state, he did not lack for toys.

"Everyone needs a way to bail themselves out." Ves replied simply, having become adept at answering nosy questions with a vague and indirect response. "It's good to be taken care of by others, but in my time in the frontier I've learned that sometimes you need to take matters in your own hands."

Camden Tovar smiled in a patronizing manner. "What a youthful expression. That isn't the first time I heard such a remark. Very well. Let's leave aside the many swirling around you. Despite your.. complications, I am not blind to your service to the Republic and myself. I will make sure you are adequately remunerated once we return to the Bright Republic. For now, we need to deal with what is immediately ahead of us. If we experience no further attacks, we

will reach the Harkensen System within a week. You've visited this star system some time ago, correct? Please give me your impressions."

Ves was glad that Tovar changed the topic. Even though he doubted if his impressions of the Harkensen System would be of use, he did what he was asked to do and began to ramble about his experiences in the Harkensen System.

He had the feeling that Senator Tovar specifically scheduled some time to indulge him. Ves didn't know whether that was good or bad for him, especially since he likely made enemies with some of his own family members!

Chapter 1029 Devoid of Character

The loss of the Felicitous Remembrance severely damaged Senator Tovar's prestige. The 'pirate' attack also unleashed a wave of suspicion and everyone came under greater scrutiny. Even the Spiral Shockers dared not to exempt themselves for suspicion!

Morale on the Lormant Carnival dipped quite a bit after the battle. While the Spiral Shockers gave a good account for themselves, their failure to uncover all the sabotage planted throughout the luxurious ship as well as their near-failure to rescue Senator Tovar from being taken away in a stealth shuttle severely damaged their self-esteem.

The Spiral Shockers didn't spend their time wallowing in their pity, though. They took their failures to heart and strove to increase their training and inspections to prevent a repeat of the attack.

Not that Ves thought such a blatant incident likely. The Reinald Republic's Honored Ones responded really poorly at pirate attacks happening in their own territory. Anyone wanting to make a move on the Tovar Peace Delegation needed to use other means than siccing 'pirates' on them now that they entered the borders of this murky state.

Back when Ves described the Reinald Republic to Senator Tovar, he did not cast them in a good light. They were so money-mad that they let certain sectors become rife with corruption. The Honored Ones were also largely untested in an actual conflict, having spent most of their existence in peacekeeping efforts instead.

Even so, the recent large-scale attack on Harkensen I certainly woke them up. The earlier fiascos that took place on that resort planet shouldn't be happening again unless the Reinaldians were complete fools.

"Setting the site of the peace talks in the Harkensen System is a stupid decision."

Certainly, more was at play to hold the talks in the Reinald Republic, but Ves really didn't trust them to be competent in protecting them against sneak attacks.

He felt that this earlier incident would not be the end of the attacks on the peace delegation. Too many people from the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom wanted the war to continue. Other states including the Reinald Republic might also be glad to see the two at odds for a time.

However, Ves also felt that the upcoming negotiation might involve more than just a cessation of the war. Senator Tovar put a lot of effort into this plan and he did not shy away despite barely avoiding captivity.

During the remainder of the journey to the Harkensen System, Ves did not quite fit in with the crew. As a member of the peace delegation, the Spiral Shockers did not allow him to assume any duties, let alone giving him access to their mechs. Even if some of them heard of his surprising performance that proved pivotal in saving Senator Tovar's hide, they were unlike the Vandals in that they did not bend the rules just because they appreciated some of his exploits.

While Ves admired the Spiral Shockers for their confidence, skill, discipline and dedication to their duty, he also felt that they lacked something essential.

He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but somehow he liked the Swordmaidens and the Vandals over the Shockers despite the latter's obvious superior combat strength.

The answer came to him suddenly. "The other two both fight for something. The Swordmaidens value their sisterhood and their dream to elevate the status of women in the frontier. The Vandals fight for their comrades who have been forgotten by most of the Mech Corps."

As for the Spiral Shockers? What little he experienced so far showed him that they'd been trained to serve the Republic to a fault. They were also loyal to their fellow comrades, but there wasn't any special quality there. The ideals and beliefs of the Spiral Shockers seem remarkable bland and tame to Ves. It was as if they were all fighting for an abstract ideal instead of something more grounded and closer to their hearts.

"They're tools. Assets to be used at will."

Every mech regiment and outfit served a purpose. Anyone who bothered to invest in building them up always expected a return on their investment. However, that didn't necessarily mean that those who became part of these forces ignored their own pursuits.

Even though the Swordmaidens and Vandals suffered the fate of tools being put to heavy use, Ves admired their martial tradition. Their values, beliefs, cultures and customs all colored the way they fought and the way they organized themselves.

"They have personality. They have character. They developed their own distinct identities."

As for the Spiral Shockers, its proximity to the headquarters of the Mech Corps put it in extremely tight control. Headquarters determined almost every aspect about the elite mech regiment, optimizing them for great performance yet stifling any attempts at developing their own idiosyncrasies.

It was like designing an artificial baby. You got exactly what you wanted, but nothing more.

However, could truly great mech regiments be manufactured artificially?

"Their huge blunder from before proves that they have major blindspots in their routines."

Everything they did was by the book. This wasn't a problem because the existing book already covered a very wide range of decisions. However, this also made their behavior painfully transparent and predictable to people with access to the very same book.

The conspirators on the side of the Bright Republic must have taken advantage of this vulnerability in order to blindside the Spiral Shockers!

Neither the Swordmaidens or Vandals could have done any better in the same place, but it was the thought that counted. Even if Ves observed some deficiencies, the Spiral Shockers could still kick the former two's butts.

"Sometimes, a mech regiment only has to fight well."

Regardless, the contrast gave him a lot of food for thought. It made him reflect back to his Avatars of Myth which shaped up into a cohesive force under Melkor's direction. How would he shape their martial tradition? What values would he attempt to instill in the mech pilots who signed a contract to serve Ves for a number of years?

Every choice led to different outcomes and came with different implications. Creating a mech force was akin to designing a mech. While humans couldn't

entirely be controlled like the components of a mech, they could still be shaped and directed in a way that fell in line to a greater design.

Same with a mech, a mech force could also possess a personality if their designer willed it so. In fact, it was much easier to do so with the latter. Therefore, Ves thought it was a missed opportunity for the Spiral Shockers to developed their own distinct character.

It was like the Mech Corps wanted to train an elite mech regiment while stamping out any uncontrollable factors. To Ves, it was as if the military killed the spark of life of the mech regiment before it could mature into a living identity.

He pushed aside his thoughts on this issue when he met with Lord Javier in the Carnival's much less luxurious lounge.

The Vesian noble only spent a day in the brig before the crew of the Carnival prepared his accommodations. Ever since then, he was allowed to go out for a walk, though he could hardly go anywhere. Lord Javier was still a Vesian, after all.

"I miss the Felicitous Remembrance." Lord Javier sighed as he reminisced about his time on that comfortable ship. "I felt like traveling on a cruise ship. Senator Tovar sure knew how to enjoy himself. The Lormant Carnival on the other hand is a huge bore. There's hardly anything to do around here for me without drawing a thousand stares from the Shockers."

"Please excuse the Shockers. They are having a hard time trying to protect Senator Tovar and us now that they know that someone is definitely gunning for us. Their time is better spent on evading the next traps than accommodating their guests."

"I know, I know. I'm just venting right now. What we experienced a few days ago made me think."

"About what?"

"The war, and our animosity towards each other."

"Did you develop any new insights, Javier?"

"Yeah. The war has warped both of our societies to such an extent that we turned into morons."

That was a very extreme expression! Even Lord Javier should have known better to utter such a blanket insult!

"Why would you say something like that?" Ves frowned, puzzled over the Vesian's uncharacteristic bout of introspection.

"Well, it's not like I have anything else to do aside from thinking, right?" Lord Javier smiled with a helpless expression. "So I was thinking about the depths we have to go through just to attend the blasted peace talks. Have you ever heard of anything as ridiculous as trying to evade your own people in order to do something sane?"

"I think something like that happens every day in the galaxy."

"Urhg. You get my point, right, Ves?"

"Oh, I understand your meaning, alright. I've long held the opinion that the wars between our states are pointless. What you taught me may have caused me to revise my opinion a little, but I still think we'd be better off if we aren't stuck in this eternal vendetta."

Lord Javier's eyes lit up. "So you understand! Frankly, it's all well and good to beat you Brighters up every generation, but the way both of our people have such a one-track mind about the war is dumb. Our states became so obsessed in waging this damn war that we've forgotten all about the threat from other states and alien races. Even if the sandmen have all gone mad and crossed over the border en masse, I think at least half of all the Vesians in my

state would still insist on crushing the Brighters first before turning their attention to the sandmen."

That was a very bleak remark, but what Ves witnessed so far, that might be exactly what the conspirators against the peace talks were doing right now! "Although I can't speak for the Bright Republic, for what it's worth I agree with you. There are good reasons for us Brighters to hate you Vesians and vice versa, but is this the defining trait of our states? Our hatred against each other?"

The Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom often got referred to each other in pairs in the rest of the Komodo Star Sector.

The squabbling siblings fighting over the possession of the toy that was the Bentheim System.

The married couple that should have learned to live in peace but would rather fight every night.

How many ways had the Komodo Star Sector described their perplexingly persistent conflict?

It was as if the Bright Republic began to bleed their society of all of their states in order to fuel their burning hatred against the Vesia Kingdom. The same could be said for the Vesians as well as their nobles used the war as a perpetual pretext to fire up their commoners and use up their lives for political gains in their courts.

Still, Ves found it rather surprising that Lord Javier of all people would make such an insightful if highly controversial remark.

"You know, we'd be unstoppable in the surrounding region if we ever allied with each other. It would be even better if he came together in a union like the Friday Coalition!"

Ves snorted at such a fanciful notion. "That would never happen and you know it. Although it sounds intriguing, people have long memories and it will take at least a couple of generations to wash away the memories."

"So it's still possible. It will just have to take a while."

They kept up this outlandish talk for a while at the lounge. It wasn't until Ves received an alert from his comm that he interrupted his conversation.

"What's this?"

Ves activated his comm and read the message.

"Who's calling, Ves?"

"I've been summoned by Professor Ventag."

Ever since they survived the attack on the Felicitous Remembrance, the Senator holed up deep inside the Lormant Carnival and never came out. Ves had no clue what he was working on or if he was merely trying to bury his earlier shameless appearance.

Still, Professor Ventag was not a person who would waste his time on frivolous pleasantries. Whatever this meeting was about should be important.

Chapter 1030 Tempting Offer

Ves strolled down the corridors and rode the elevators to the lower decks of the Lormant Carnival. Having taken passage on many different ships in the past few years, he evaluated the commercial light carrier against the other ships.

"The Lormant Carnival is a decent light carrier."

Decent. Not exceptional nor terrible. All Ves could really say about the Carnival was that she served her intended role and nothing more.

The Carnival featured a standard capacity of forty mechs, a full mech company, and offered some room for additional cargo and spare mechs.

However, compared to a combat carrier like the Shield of Hispania or the monstrous Princely Jackal of the Flagrant Vandals, the Carnival lacked the armor and durability of those military carriers.

Armoring starships could get incredibly expensive. Their huge volume and surface area meant that a ten percent increase in size could practically double the final cost of building such a vessel because of the additional armor plating needed to provide good coverage!

Military mech regiments used combat carriers for a good reason despite their higher expense. They simply lasted longer in combat. In larger battles, the chances of carriers getting targeted increased as a large number of enemy ranged mechs might decide to pummel on a ship at long range if they could get away with it. A hundred or more laser rifleman mechs targeting any single ship in unison could quickly deal billions of credits worth of damage!

This especially happened a lot in space battles where ships couldn't hide behind a convenient mountain or terrain feature.

Combat carriers stacked large amounts of relatively cheap armor plating. While ship armor was actually worse than mech armor when compared by volume or mass, a ship possessed much more powerful propulsion so could bear being burdened by lots of cost-efficient bulk armor plating.

This allowed them to perform their core functions. In space, they offered valuable shelter and cover for their vulnerable mechs and logistics ships. On land, they possessed the confidence to make landfall while withstanding a decent amount of anti-air fire.

Light carriers lacked those two vital capabilities. Instead of acting like a movable miniature fortress on the battlefield, they were more like sturdy houses that nonetheless needed the protection of their mechs.

Ves noted that this vulnerability annoyed the Spiral Shockers. They weren't too used to missions that tasked them with taking on another identity. The downgrades to the mechs and ships at their disposal rendered half of their advanced tactics and formations useless because their assets would fall apart or get shot to pieces before they finished their maneuvers.

"The strength that mech pilots can bring to bear is limited by their gear."

Ves found it to be a substantial waste of potential. The Spiral Shockers could do better, yet their budget and mid-range mechs only allowed them to go so far. The few premium mechs piloted by their mech officers only offered a minimal amount of respite from these limitations.

Even so, the skilled mech pilots of the Spiral Shockers still performed leagues above the Flagrant Vandals if they both piloted the same mechs. No matter how many hindrances the Shockers endured, they could still rely on their excellent combat strength to pull them through to an extent.

Pairing the elite Spiral Shockers with mediocre mechs therefore still paid off, though it was very wasteful and not very cost-effective.

"Wasteful spending is par for the course for Senator Tovar."

That old man had way too much money to spend. Ves could have come up with a thousand better ideas on how to allocate the budget for this peace delegation. A huge amount of money had already been sunk due to the premature fall of the Felicitous Remembrance.

Ves estimated that this single luxury passenger ship cost as much if not more than a perfectly serviceable combat carrier!

After a while, he finally reached a small mech workshop where Professor Ventag requested to meet with him. Ves quickly became impressed with the mech technicians at work. Even with the substandard facilities of a light

carriers, the mech technicians of the Spiral Shockers all performed their duties diligently.

The prior battle where the Spiral Shockers repelled a pirate ambush did not lead to many wrecked mechs. However, the Shockers still suffered from a large spread of moderate damage. All of those heavily-chipped and damaged armor plating needed to be replaced if the Shockers did not wish to look pathetic upon their entry into the Harkensen System.

And yes, that was the main reason why the mech technicians worked so hard and hurriedly. Apparently, Senator Tovar passed on the orders personally!

Ves just wanted to shake his head at this sight.

"Mr. Larkinson." A ship rating greeted him with respect. "The professor is awaiting your presence in the office. Please come this way, sir."

"Very well, lead the way."

They passed by the mech technicians who mostly ignored Ves even if they heard he did something amazing a few days ago. The Shockers possessed their own pride and wouldn't easily show their admiration to someone else, unlike the Vandals.

"Come in, Ves." Professor Ventag said in a warmer tone. Ves entered an office configured into a small design studio. The professor sat in the center of a small bank of terminals.

"Why have you called me here, professor?" Ves asked boldly.

"I have been thinking about how to reward you for your aid. Strictly speaking, Senator Tovar must have already arranged a suitable bonus for you once the peace talks are over and return home. However, that only covers his gratitude, not mine. I wanted to show my appreciation to you for saving me from captivity. You may not be fully aware of this, but there are many uses for

Senior Mech Designers as long as you can get one under your thumb. If I am fortunate, I would be able to buy my freedom with an enormous sum of money. If I am less fortunate, I'd be treated as a slave for the rest of my life."

Ves already witnessed a taste for that in the frontier. Even Lydia's Swordmaidens relied on slaves to fulfill their shortage in technical personnel!

An enslaved mech technician already held a decent amount of value, but an enslaved mech designer, especially a high-ranked one, was easily worth hundreds of billions of credits if not more!

"I was merely doing my duty." Ves replied modestly, unsure whether he even wanted to accept Professor Ventag's gratitude. "No matter my current role in the peace delegation, I am still a serving mech designer of the Mech Corps."

"You don't have to be so modest, young man. You possess a lot of depth, far more than any normal mech designer ought to have. Yet both Senator Tovar and I have only received pleasant surprises from you for that reason. I took the liberty of asking the senator to access your complete classified record. When I read the accounts of your mission to the frontier, I admit my opinion of you has completely changed! You are even more exceptional than I thought! You deserve every medal awarded to you by the Mech Corps!"

While Ves felt the urge to pat himself on the chest, he restrained the urge to boast about himself. Even though he felt fantastic for being praised by Professor Ventag, his general experience at being praised by senior figures was that they usually wanted something else from him. Showering him with compliments only served as a prelude for a request or a demand.

"Tell me, did you really enjoy the CFA's renowned gene optimization treatments?" Ventag asked with hungry eyes.

"Yes."

"How extremely fortunate of you! This is much better than the life-prolonging treatment I've secured after decades of hard work!"

Did Professor Ventag become a fan of him now? Ves did not feel comfortable that Tovar just gave another mech designer access to everything the Bright Republic knew about him. Shouldn't there be laws against disseminating private and classified information?

Heh. Senator Tovar either drafted the laws or executed them. How could they ever restrain someone who partially ruled the Bright Republic?

Perhaps aware that he was acting inappropriately, the professor quickly regained his calm. "Ahem, let us get back to the topic I wish to address. I studied your record and your exploits because I wished to grant you a reward that is in my power to give you. We are both mech designers. We are both businessmen. Having studied your business exploits, I've learned you are doing quite well for an independent entrepreneur. However, I have noticed that you have not been involved in any collaborative projects as of yet. Would you be interested in starting one with my company?"

"Pardon?"

"A joint design project between you and me, or the LMC and NORA Consolidated if you wish to be precise." Professor Ventag described with a benevolent smile. "When I studied your circumstances, I made two important observations. First, you appear to be very close to advancing to Journeyman. However, you are stalled at the threshold for the moment because you have very few opportunities to practice your craft during the war. I want to express my gratitude to you by helping you advance. While there are no guarantees that you will be able to advance after completing a joint project, it will at least offer some very valuable design experience that will be fruitful for your career."

"That.. that's very generous of you, sir." Ves said lamely, not having gone over his shock as of yet. This was an amazing chance!

Many mech designers fantasized about working together with Seniors, but usually they were so busy and had their noses stuck so high up in the air that they didn't even acknowledge the existence of Apprentices!

"The joint project I have in mind will take the form of a mech designed for the market." The professor continued. "That is what you have the most experience in and where you ought to spend your attention on. This will by necessity involve both our mech companies. My company, NORA Consolidated, possesses a very strong brand presence in the Bright Republic and is prominent in several other markets in the rest of the Komodo Star Sector. If it becomes known that our two companies have jointly developed a new mech, the brand and reputation of your LMC will be able to ride on the coattails of NORA Consolidated. While your company may incur some negative repercussions with this association, in general I believe the positives far outweigh the negatives."

Ves nodded in agreement. "I believe so as well."

Simply put, NORA Consolidated was a household name in the Bright Republic. It was one of the premier mech companies in the state simply due to the fact that a renowned Senior led the company! The company's decades-long history and its relentless growth in market share and brand recognition made it into one of the biggest names in the mech industry!

Despite the recent publicity, the LMC always remained somewhat obscure. It simply hadn't existed long enough to be on top of people's minds whenever they recalled a list of mech companies. It didn't help that it only offered two product lines in its mech catalog.

Therefore, connecting the LMC and NORA through a single collaborative project came with major implications! The simple fact that NORA was willing to collaborate with the LMC on a design project showcased Ventag and his company's confidence in Ves and the LMC.

Such an important boost was already incredibly useful!

However, the flipside to this association was that the LMC also drew the attention of NORA's rivals and enemies. In this case, most of those rivals consisted Ansel-aligned companies.

Ves sobered up a little once he made that realization. The Ansel University of Mech Design wielded a huge amount of influence in Bentheim's mech industry. No mech designer would enjoy entering into their crosshairs!

Even if he subsequently enjoyed the backing of the rivalling Dorum Center of Technology and Innovation, was that worth giving up his neutrality in their dominance games?

This seemingly generous offer by Professor Ventag to give Ves a hand in helping him on his way to advance to Journeyman and give the LMC a reputational boost was not a purely altruistic offer. It was actually a ploy to draw him closer to Professor Ventag and the DCTI's camp!

Even when Professor Ventag wanted to be generous, he couldn't help but weave his own political ambitions in his offered reward!

Professor Ventag patiently waited for Ves to make up his mind. "Well, Ves? What is your response? Are you willing to work together to design a great mech with my help? As this project is meant to assist your development, I'll let you be the lead designer and be the final arbiter of what should be included in our collaborative design. I'll even allow you full access to NORA's extensive library of component licenses."

What an incredibly tempting offer! Ves struggled intensively within his mind.
Should he accept or not?