

Chapter 541 Debilitated

The hidden assailants caught the Flagrant Vandals completely off-guard! Their premeditated attack not only immobilized seven important ships, but they also went a step further and damaged the FTL drives of their logistics ships!

With the Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan unable to flee from this star system, the entire task force turned into a sitting duck! If they couldn't get those FTL drives back online, they faced two very stark choices.

Either give up the logistics ships and force the rest to flee into FTL, or make a stand and attempt to restore their FTL functionality!

A matter of such import would be a bit awkward for Major Verle to decide upon alone. Therefore, he opened a communications channel to the Antecedent in order to connect with their fleet commander.

Ves had met with Captain Argil Rakeshir a couple of times during staff meetings. The man was a typical old salt with distinct spaceborn sentimentalities, though he kept that part of himself locked away when he met with others.

As the captain of the Antecedent, Rakeshir kept a very low profile. Nonetheless, he held the most seniority out of the ship captains and therefore took on the role of the task force's fleet commander. As such, he was usually the ultimate authority when it came to ships and fleet actions. Captain Rakeshir basically translated Major Verle's orders into concrete maneuvers.

"How bad is it, Rakeshir?" Verle asked. This time, he hadn't bothered to summon a privacy screen.

"Really bad." The fleet commander grimaced. "We can work on restoring our propulsion at our leisure once we dive into FTL, but the Beggar's Bounty and

the Linever Swan are dead in the water. Not only that, they've lost at least half of their engineers, so any repair works will face significant delays."

"Give me an estimate. How long will it take to restore their FTL drives?"

"The good news is that we've got spares. The bad news is that they've been calibrated for combat carriers, not logistics ships. We can slap them onto the Beggar's Bounty and Linever Swan in an emergency, but it will take hours to configure the ships and the FTL drives. You may not know this, but the latter comes with an extremely stringent safety lock. There are too many ways for FTL travel to go awry, so unless everything is in tip-top shape, the drives won't engage."

This prevented shenanigans such as capital ships attempting to transition into FTL with a tiny drive meant for corvettes. Any misconfiguration led to catastrophic effects. Therefore, FTL drive designers always erred on the side of caution and incorporated a very extensive safety check.

"How long exactly?"

"I can't give you an exact estimate. At best, eight hours, at worst, sixteen hours. This is already at our most extreme. Installing incompatible FTL drives onto damaged ships requires weeks of configuration if we want to do it properly."

"This is a time for haste, not caution. Sixteen hours is already too long. Venidse may arrive at any hour."

The captain shrugged. "This is the best our engineers can accomplish. It's impossible for them to cut anymore corners. Even now there is a substantial risk that the hasty repairs will turn out to be botched. You don't want to see the result of the aftermath of such an event."

Major Verle and Captain Rakeshir argued about this point for several minutes. No matter what Verle said, Rakeshir couldn't give them a better time frame for the repairs.

"Alright, do what you want, as long as you make it quick." Major Verle replied in an exasperated tone. "Since half of our ships lost their sublight propulsion, is there any way to get our fleet moving? If Venidse has sent a follow-up force after us, they'll be homing in on these coordinates. We won't be able to defend ourselves as well if they drop right on top of us!"

Captain Rakeshir frowned. "There is no practical way to get our ships moving. Our undamaged ships lack the propulsion to tow away our damaged ships. While I've already prioritized the restoration of their propulsion systems, they actually need a lot more time to restore because the material damage is very extensive."

This must have been Venidse's strategy from the start. They focused the bulk of their firepower in penetrating deep into the Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan to anchor the Vandals to this star system. They then swept half-a-dozen combat carriers to paralyze their in-system maneuvers!

If not for their allegiance, Ves would have applauded Venidse! With just a single attack, they set the entire task force in a deepening spiral of doom!

"Can we utilize our mechs to help to tow the ships?" Verle suggested.

"Impossible! A combat carrier is unimaginably heavy! Even with hundreds of mechs, we don't have the cables to support them all. This move is only viable if the ship being towed is as small as a frigate or corvette."

There went that idea.

Major Verle ended the call after determining there was no way they could regain their mobility in the short-term. For better or worse, the task force

continued to drift through space at the exact same pace, allowing any ambushers to calculate their position at any given time.

This level of exposure made the Vandals very uncomfortable. Part of their modus operandi was to stay unseen as they skulked behind enemy lines. They never fought upfront if they had the choice. In fact, unless they stood to gain a lot of wealth, they wouldn't hesitate run with their tails tucked between their legs.

This was their definition characteristic as a raiding unit. They stole what they could and ran whenever they met an opponent.

The only problem right now was that they couldn't run at all. Their legs had sustained damage and it would take approximately eight hours at minimum for it to heal. Until then, any enemy could come up to them and beat them black and blue.

Having listened to the high-level discussion, Ves knew that they had decided to commit to a turtling strategy. Neither Verle nor Rakeshir contemplated the option of abandoning the two logistics ships.

Though they contributed little in actual engagements, their true value lay in their ability to process ores and raw materials. They also formed miniature factories that fabricated and restored batches of mechs by the dozens.

Therefore, even if it seemed that evacuating and scuttling the logistics ships guaranteed a safe retreat, their subsequent situation only became more precarious over time. By the time they crossed into Hafner, all of their combat carriers might have exhausted all of their remaining resource stockpiles.

Times like these reinforced the limited power of a mech designer. Even vaunted Master Mech Designers such as Master Olson or Master Katzenberg had to resign themselves to the inevitable if they faced the same situation.

There might be a possibility that they dabbled in FTL theory. Ordinarily, mech designers never encroached upon starships, while ship engineers never involved themselves with mechs. While ships and mechs shared much in common, they exhibited a lot more differences. Mastering either of them required a lifetime's worth of study and dedication.

Understanding FTL drives was already an extremely high task for ship engineers. Only the most seasoned chief engineers among the Vandals possessed the bare qualifications to work with the drives.

If Ves forcefully tried to help, he would only make things worse as he possessed no foundation in FTL technology at all. "Let alone FTL technology, I don't even have a proper foundation in starship engineering."

He felt awful for being so useless at the moment. Every Vandal felt likewise, and they all prayed that their chief engineers got the newly-installed FTL drives to work again.

In the meantime, Major Verle tasked Ves with helping their mechs with setting up an anti-stealth perimeter. They never caught the stealthed assailants, so the possibility of another attack was very high.

Ves felt that he was lacking yet again in this matter. Venidse's stealth technology was a notch ahead of anything else he had encountered. Whereas other forms of stealth could be broken by throwing dust at them, Venidse had obviously developed specific countermeasures that insured their stealth forces blended in seamlessly in the most chaotic environments.

Breaking their stealth required more than a light puff of dust.

Obviously, Ves couldn't do much on his own, so he drew in Iris, Mercator and Trozin for support.

"Comb over the logs and try to pin down how Venidse ambushed us. Understanding how they snuck up on us is the first step in preventing a repeat of the same attack."

With those words, he left the three to do their own research. In the meantime, he helped the Vandals set up their mech patrols in a way that maximized their stealth detection. Each mech carried different sensor models, and some were more suited for anti-stealth than others.

Compensating for the extreme effectiveness of Venidse's stealth systems, Ves basically fixed the smallest detection ranges for every individual mech model. At those conservative ranges, it mattered little how well the enemy hid their traces.

For the worst mechs, this range did not surpass fifty meters, while the best mechs only boasted an effective detection radius of only two-hundred meters.

In the scale of landbound mech combat, those distances amounted to a couple of footsteps. In the scale of spaceborn mech combat, those distances were equivalent to two humans standing only centimeters away from each other.

The detection ranges was far too short to cover the entire task force!

He contacted Major Verle. "Sir, I have a problem to report."

"I'm busy, Mr. Larkinson, so this better be good."

Ves briefly explained the dilemma with the detection ranges. "Our fleet formation is too dispersed. Every ship is maintaining a distance of several kilometers away from each other. While I can understand the logic for assuming such a large minimum distance, our circumstances have changed. If you want full coverage against stealth infiltration, then we need to contract our formation."

A monumental decision like this directly affected their survival. Verle's frown only grew deeper as Ves burdened him with another concern.

"Have you identified how Venidse got the drop on us?"

"My men are working on it, sir. So far, we haven't turned up any results, which means Venidse has employed some new breakthroughs. It is possible that we won't be able to find any records of their latest advancements."

Verle nodded in understanding. "Even at the frontlines, Venidse never shows their hand too often. They cherish their elite stealth units. The more Venidse makes use of them, the more the Mech Corps is able to understand their underlying principles and develop a counter for them. Since your mech haven't found an immediate match, it is unlikely you'll find anything relevant in the database."

"I was afraid of that, sir. I'll still let my subordinates to continue their research. Who knows if they can figure out a clue. About the issue I brought up, have you made a decision?"

"Not yet. I'll need to bring it up to Captain Rakeshir. If he thinks the risk of collision or getting caught in an area effect is smaller than the risk of suffering another close-ranged stealth attack, then I don't see a major problem in contracting our formation."

Ves could not decide this issue for them. He dared not overrule Captain Rakeshir when it came to controlling ships. He had already done his due diligence by informing them of this vulnerability and providing them with an option to address the holes in their defense.

In the end, their paranoia overruled their common sense. Having failed to detect their initial attackers, Major Verle and Captain Rakeshir feared their enemy would grow bold and go for a reprise.

Several minutes later, every ship received orders to converge into a tighter formation. Ships with working propulsion helped get the immobilized vessels into the right position and heading by towing them one by one.

Slowly, the Vandals adopted the stance of a turtle.

Chapter 542 Bait and Switch

Hours went by as the Flagrant Vandals contracted their defenses and turtled up. Conventionally, starships tried to maintain a distance of at least five kilometers from each other. This rule of thumb varied from state to state and from star sector to star sector, but generally speaking it was unthinkable for ships to stray closer than a kilometer to each other.

There was no reason to do so. If ships needed to transfer passengers or goods to each other, they only needed to let their shuttles or transports do the work. These smaller spacecraft flew fast enough that a distance of one kilometer or ten kilometers didn't matter very much. The launch and docking maneuvers alone took up a lot more time than the brief trips.

Machines always posed a risk to their environment. If anything went wrong, their immediate surroundings came under threat. This didn't matter too much if it concerned an aircar. At best, it would crash against something and kill a couple of people.

When mechs malfunctioned or went rogue, it could do a lot more damage. A critical explosion may even take out half a city block in the process, though such an outcome was very rare these days.

More concerning was when something as large as a combat carrier suffered a disaster. Their power reactors outputted so much energy that they could easily power several mech companies without a sweat. If all of that energy ended up in the wrong destinations, the combat carrier could easily explode with the fury of a miniature nuclear warhead.

This was only one worry fleet commanders had to deal with when they drew up their formations. Many other concerns led to the convention that ships generally avoided sticking too close to each other.

The only reason why Major Verle and Captain Rakeshir went against their screaming instincts was because they genuinely feared a repeat of the attack that crippled the task force's mobility.

Now, they stood a fair chance of detecting any hidden approaches in the immediate vicinity. Inheritors and other light mechs formed the main line of defense against their hidden opponent. All of them entered into a spherical formation that provided overlapping detection coverage in every angle.

Their medium mechs on the other hand patrolled the outer perimeter. Their inferior sensors couldn't be used to sweep up stealthed enemies, but they were mainly there to defend against overt attacks and to catch any stealth units that attempted to flee after another successful attack.

In this way, they posed a certain level of deterrence.

"Boss! We've figured out how Venidse snuck up on us!"

Ves turned around to Iris. "Explain."

She summoned up a projection of a sensor recording. "This is the rear-facing sensor of the Beggar's Bounty immediately before the attack. Visually, there is nothing present. Only after a weapon is launched are we able to detect a minor disturbance. Through hours of painstaking research, we've finally been able to define the silhouette of the stealth unit that attacked us."

"Doesn't this look rather... small?"

Their attacker appeared to be a half-sized mech. It was severely undersized compared to what he expected, especially since their attacker employed an

instant burst of firepower deadly enough to penetrate through several layers of ship armor.

Granted, the stern of a starship was always their most vulnerable facing. The thrusters and other systems that occupied the rear end of the ship couldn't operate if too much armor obstructed their functioning.

Even then, a mech that was substantially smaller than a light mech shouldn't have been able to inflict so much damage.

"Do you think this is a mech?" She asked.

Now that he thought about it, the silhouette didn't match any mech that he could recognize. It kind of looked like unbalanced shuttle married with an oversized weapon mount.

"This isn't a mech. This is a commando shuttle!"

"That's what our consensus has led to as well. Stealth is harder to maintain on bigger vehicles than smaller vehicles. It would make sense to employ a shuttle instead of a mech if the latter isn't needed. The only thing that is strange about this silhouette is that a very large torpedo tube is welded onto its hull. And yes, Venidse employed ultra-short ranged torpedoes against us. Each of them packed enough explosive power to tear through our ships."

Iris calmly explained the traits of the commando shuttle and backed up her inferences with sporadic evidence. Though much of it remained guesswork, Ves believed her assertions.

"I see how this can work for Venidse." Ves nodded. "Instead of endangering their precious mech pilots, they can apply their same superior brand of stealth to disposable shuttles. Slapping a torpedo mount on them is sheer genius. It wouldn't work on a regular shuttle, but a stealth shuttle has no problems getting up close."

The threat level of commando shuttles could not match the threat level of stealth mechs. Unlike shuttles, mechs possessed a lot more flexibility. Who knew what weapons or gadgets they brought if Venidse sent them to this star system.

Once Major Verle received the files, he finally started smiling again for the first time in hours. "Good work, Mr. Larkinson! At least someone scored some results. That's more than I can say for the rest!"

The Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan both required a lot more hours before they regained some of their space worthiness. Every ship engineer aboard the other ships had converged to the two cripples logistics ships in order to lend a hand with restoring their FTL capabilities. This was an extraordinary collaboration that left the engineering departments of the other ships dangerously thin.

Ves politely smiled back at the commanding officer. "We live to serve."

Iris softly bumped her elbow against his ribs. She probably built up some resentment when Ves failed to credit their contribution.

Once Major Verle turned away to adjust their defensive envelope to cope with the commando shuttles, Ves turned back to Iris.

"Right now, Verle only wants to hear results. I'll mention all of your accomplishments in the after-action report."

Of course, Ves planned to do no such thing, because that would be giving more kudos to his deputies. At best, he could push all of the credit to Iris, not that she needed it all that much since she was technically a guest designer.

That made Ves question her continued presence in their midst. Their journey was fraught with peril. Pretty much the entire Kingdom was out to kill them. For Iris to continue to accompany them meant that there must be a profound reason why she stuck around.

One possibility was that she had been assigned to the task force for the same reason Colonel Lowenfield split up the main fleet. They'd been cast out as bait and were never expected to return. Maybe the Vesian Revolutionary Front arranged her demise.

Another possibility was that their mission mattered more than Ves initially thought. For whatever reason the task force needed to reach the Reinald Republic within two months, the outcome of this mission might have far-reaching effects.

Personally, Ves was partial to the second possibility. It conformed to his growing suspicion that the events at Detemen IV only served as the prelude of a greater undertaking.

It could be that Trozin's conspiracy theory was on the right track, only that it swapped the bait.

Rather than assuming that the Verle Task Force served as bait, perhaps it was more accurate to state that the main fleet took on this role!

The logic behind this assumption sounded a little dubious, but Ves couldn't discount this possibility.

"The main fleet brought all the attention-grabbing assets with them. With the Wolf Mother, Professor Velten, the Journeyman Mech Designers, and Colonel Lowenfield herself as high-value assets, she turned the main fleet into a priority target that must be destroyed at all costs."

Taking down even one of them could serve as a massive propaganda victory for the Vesians. Whenever Ves browsed the galactic net in order to keep track of the main fleet's attempts to return to the Republic, the news surrounding their passing outnumbered the interest to the Verle Task Force.

Could it be that Lord Javier was actually imprisoned inside one of their ships, and that for some reason he needed to be brought to the Reinald Republic on a time-sensitive basis?

Ves imagined himself being flung into a deep dark ocean with very little visibility. The more he fumbled around, the more he bumped into shadows of creatures and objects, some of which posed a significant threat to his life.

He faced two different choices in this situation.

One choice would be to remain passive and stop his underwater thrashing. This minimized the risk of bumping into something threatening, but this also left him blind to any incoming threats. The downside to being passive was that Ves had to submit to fate to make it through.

The riskier choice would be to become more active and start to swim about. Whether he would be met with fortune or calamity, Ves didn't know, but it sounded better than leaving his survival to fate.

He made a decision then. If they survived this crisis, he vowed to get to the bottom of this mission. It was way too risky and inexplicable for Ves to believe that this mission was anything routine.

"This is a matter to consider for later."

Right now, they needed to wait for something to change. Either the two logistics ships regained their FTL functionality, or Venidse would finally reveal their fangs.

Unfortunately for him, the latter happened first.

Midway into the restoration process, a squadron of ships emerged out of FTL.

"Detecting eight unknown vessels!"

The new ships consisted of four combat carriers and four inconsequential transports. Everyone ignored the transports and focused on the combat

carriers. Upon emerging from FTL, they regained their bearings quickly and immediately began to approach the stranded Vandals.

It would take only half an hour for the newcomers to come into combat range.

"Identify the ships!"

"We've matched their visual appearances to ships of the 1st Frosty Meteors of the 6th Venidse Mech Legion!"

The majority of the Vandals in the command center reacted strongly after the sensor officer mentioned the Frosty Meteors.

The Frosty Meteors was one of Venidse's premier spaceborn mech regiments! As their moniker alluded to, they didn't tend to play around. Instead, they relied solely on force to crush their opposition!

They favored melee mechs and ranged mechs in equal measure. Their melee mechs acted as cavalry that relied on their powerful charge to smash apart their opposition. Their ranged mechs mostly consisted of gun platforms that unleashed a massive amount of firepower at medium range.

Worse, the Frosty Meteors enjoyed the best funding from Venidse, allowing them to field a substantial amount of heavy mechs. From heavy cannons that could outgun the Akkara, to heavy knights that could endure a mech company's worth of firepower, everything about the Frosty Meteors inspired dread.

Naturally, everything had a cost. The Frosty Meteors was a money pit. It cost Venidse a significant amount of wealth and resources to maintain this prestigious unit.

Their second and more relevant weakness to the Vandals was that all of their mechs were rather slow. Certainly, if their enemies let them build up a charge, then they could be very fast, but their actual acceleration was very sluggish.

If the Flagrant Vandals retained their mobility, then there was no question that they would be able to outrace the lumbering Meteors.

It was a pity that half of their ships lost their sublight propulsion. While a turtle may not be able to catch up to a hare, there was no question that it could catch up to it when it was crippled.

"Damn!" Major Verle slammed his fist against his armrest as he beheld the approaching might of the Frosty Meteors. Even though the four combat carriers could only field four mech companies at most, their quality was more than sufficient to smash their immobile fleet!

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The Frosty Meteors immediately showed their intentions when they emerged from FTL . They approached the stranded Vandal task force at full burn without any hesitation!

Their arrogance knew no bounds! Conservatively, they would be outnumbered at least three-to-one, yet they showed no signs of slowing down!

The most prudent decision to make from Venidse's perspective was to wait for other friendly elements to catch up . After all, taking on the task force with only four spaceborn mech companies left them with very little margin for error .

The unspoken message behind their brazen course of action came as a slap to the faces of the Vandals! The Frosty Meteors obviously thought little of their opponents!

To be honest, Ves couldn't blame them for viewing the Flagrant Vandals with contempt . The two mech regiments differed largely in purpose, funding, tradition and fighting ability .

A raiding regiment such as the Flagrant Vandals mainly relied on their mobility to attack when they were strong and flee when they were weak . This was their main advantage, but also their fatal weak point . The moment when their mobility became hindered, they lost almost all of their advantages .

It was pretty much the opposite for the Frosty Meteors . Almost every fighting attribute reached an extreme . As a medium to heavy cavalry regiment, they leaned more towards the use of hefty armor . Every mech of the Meteors was at least twice as resilient as an equivalent Vandal mech . This difference alone gave the Venidse mech regiment a decisive advantage!

Everyone in the command center could tell how serious a threat they faced . Nobody belittled the Frosty Meteors for their arrogance or their lacking numbers . The Meteors proved their mettle many times in the frontlines of the previous wars . Slow they may be, even the most premier mech regiments of the Mech Corps abhorred getting into a slugging match with the Meteors .

After venting his fury, Major Verle opened a private channel to Ves . "What is your analysis as a mech designer . Will our mechs be able to withstand the Meteors?"

"I don't rate our chances high . " Ves responded despondently . "With half of our fleet unable to move, we are forced to fight on their terms . The Meteors love nothing more than to bash themselves against soft targets like us . Neither the Inheritor or the Hellcat will be able to turn the tide . The only variable that I can't account for is how many heavy mechs they brought . Each heavy mech is an enormously difficult rock to crack . If they brought more than twenty heavy mechs, we basically stand no chance at all unless we adopt a clever tactic . "

Ves knew his mechs, but even his perspective contained holes . The one element that Ves couldn't predict was the effect of different formations and tactics . Depending on how well the Flagrant Vandals and the Frosty Meteors employed their formations, the outcome of the battle might very well swing drastically in one direction or another!

Therefore, even if everything appeared hopeless, Ves did not give in to despair .

"Can we employ our landbound mechs to enhance our strength?"

"It's very difficult . " Ves shook his head . Ves had seen such a drastic desperation move many times in action dramas . What worked in the dramas didn't necessarily work in reality . "Our landbound mechs aren't able to maneuver in space at all . They'll be sitting ducks against the enemy ranged mechs . There's also recoil and heat management to consider . "

Mechs with ballistic weapons especially suffered from recoil . Each time these mechs fired their weapons, they would spin their entire frames like a wheel .

As for heat management, landbound mechs reliant on high-heat weapons such as laser rifles relied a lot on heat convection to shunt away their excess waste energy . Since there wasn't any air or solid ground in space, such mechs wouldn't be able to get rid of their heat fast enough!

"Is there no other option?"

"There is one I can think of, but it's rather silly . Just as how we employ our landbound Akkara heavy cannons as an improvised turret, we can make use of other landbound ranged mechs in a similar fashion by strapping them against the hull of our ships . "

Such a tactic fell in the category of desperation move as well . While it came with a lot of malpractices, it had been used often enough during the Age of Mechs to be regarded as a viable way to leverage a mech force's otherwise useless landbound mech force in space .

Affixing the landbound mechs onto the hulls of their ships neatly solved their heat and recoil problems . The only problem for the Vandals was that it took a lot of time and manpower to set up . With the Frosty Meteors less than thirty minutes away, they wouldn't be able to affix more than a dozen or so mechs onto the hulls of their combat carriers .

Major Verle must have thought the same . "I've already considered this option . It is extremely ruinous for the landbound mechs because they have lost all of their mobility . Besides, if we want to employ all of our ranged mechs into ad-hoc turrets, we need several hours of preparation time . "

Venidse timed their surprise attack fairly well . Only a couple of hours after they immobilized the Vandals, the Frosty Meteors arrived to deliver the coup-de-grace! Though it sounded simple, to plan and time such an outcome required extremely strong prediction capabilities on the part of the enemy!

They certainly faced a formidable opponent right now! Not only did they come with strength, they also showed an excellent level of coordination!

This was bad news for the Vandals because even if they fought back hard against the Meteors, they also had to worry about stealth attacks . This invisible threat constantly hovered over the heads of the Vandals . The moment the Vandals broke up their anti-stealth formation, their invisible opponents would have free reign to deliver another crippling blow to the task force!

Ves and Major Verle swapped a few more ideas, but none of them sounded promising . In the meantime the clock continued to tick . A few minutes into their burn, the enemy combat carriers finally launched their mechs .

A hundred-and-forty mechs launched in quick succession . As expected, the Frosty Meteors employed an even mix of ranged and melee mechs .

Their medium melee mechs carried a substantial amount of armor . Much of them consisted of space knights, which made them even more resilient as a whole .

Their ranged mechs on the other hand consisted entirely of ballistic weaponry . The Frosty Meteors famously eschewed laser weaponry because they preferred the tactile feedback of kinetic and explosive shells . Their rifleman mechs exclusively made use of heavy caliber rifles, while their cannoneers used even heavier barrels for maximum firepower .

What caused Ves and the others to despair was that the Frosty Meteors boldly displayed twenty heavy mechs . Half of them consisted of heavy space knights while the other half consisted of heavy weapon platforms akin to a spaceborn variant to the Vandal Akkara model .

Each and every mech model employed by the Frosty Meteors was state of the art . There was no question that the Frosty Meteors brought their best . This was no collection of rank-and-file elements like the previous appearance of the Calico Dancer Bats .

The Frosty Meteors basically believed that this battle was in the bag . No matter how much the Flagrant Vandals flailed, they couldn't change the outcome of the battle . It was a given that they would lose . The only question was by how much .

If the Vandals closed ranks, they risked total annihilation or capture . On the other hand, if the Vandals evacuated the immobilized ships and hurriedly ran away in their few undamaged ships, they might be able to run away before the enemy caught up .

Major Verle immediately shook his head when Ves suggested to cut off their tail and run . "We can't discount the enemy stealth units . Whether its shuttles or mechs that are lurking in the vicinity, both can easily hinder our transition into FTL by throwing out disposable gravitic mines in the surrounding area . This is one of Venidse's favorite tactics . "

Even if they hadn't spotted any signs of enemy stealth units so far, Verle had no choice but to assume the worst . It might be that the Vandals overestimated Venidse's commitment and worked on false assumptions, but they truly couldn't afford to make a misjudgement at this time .

"The transports are emitting water!"

This was another tradition of the Frosty Meteors . The transports didn't carry any goods or supplies . Instead, their cargo holds had been converted into water tanks . Immediately before they entered into battle, the transports expelled their water from the tanks and allowed them to flash freeze in space, creating makeshift ice meteors .

Once the tanks ran out of water, the heavy knights accompanied by a handful of medium mechs maneuvered behind the meteors and began to push them forward using their powerful flight systems . Though this slowed down their overall approach, they also gained a shield of some sorts . If the Vandals wanted to damage the charging Meteors, they first needed to chip away at all of the ice in their way .

Just as Ves wanted to raise the option of splitting up the Vandal ships, Verle suddenly turned his head towards another private channel . For the first time since the Frosty Meteors emerged from FTL, he grinned .

"Mr . Larkinson, it seems we still have a lifeline . Venerable O'Callahan has decided to deploy into battle . "

Major Verle didn't hide his words this time . Everyone in the command center heard his words . Upon mentioning the expert pilot, everyone instantly lifted their gloom! Some even outright laughed as they thought that Venerable O'Callahan would single-handedly be able to turn the tide!

Ves had never witnessed O'Callahan in action . From the archival footage that he perused in his spare time, he had to admit that O'Callahan might do well against the Frosty Meteors . The only problem was that O'Callahan would never be able to finish off all hundred-and-forty mechs on his own before they crashed into the rest of the Vandals .

Battle couldn't be avoided . They just had to go about it in a smart fashion . As long as O'Callahan and the regular Vandals worked together, they might be able to pull off a miracle .

Major Verle didn't need his advice on this matter . He probably knew much more on how to employ his mechs than Ves, so the channel immediately closed .

Several minutes passed by as the Vandals prepared for battle . Not only did they need to guard against any stealth ambushes, they also had to commit enough mechs to support O'Callahan's counterattack . This required a lot of judgement . If they committed too few mechs on either demands, then they risked a fatal flaw .

The wait was agonizing to Ves . Right now, he couldn't do much except to uncover more details about the enemy mech models . He had no illusion that he would be able to find a critical weak point in their excellent designs .

Fifteen minutes until the Frosty Meteors arrived, the Parallax Star finally launched from the Gorgon's Gaze . As he witnessed the resplendent lancer mech take to the stage, Ves withheld his enthusiasm . While others showed

their awe at the presence of their resident expert pilot, Ves felt some contempt at the Venerable .

Iris noticed his disaffection . "Why so glum, boss? We might be saved!"

"Hmph . The only reason why he dragged his corpse out of his hibernation chamber is because the Gorgon's Gaze is one of the ships that lost their sub-light propulsion . If not for that, he would probably be the first person to suggest we split and run . The Venerable is selfish to the bone . "

It was a given that Venerable O'Callahan needed to expend a significant portion of his remaining vitality into the upcoming battle . If not for their hopeless situation, the stingy death-fearing old expert pilot would never use up his precious lifespan .

Even as the rest of the Vandals experienced a lift in morale, Ves crossed his arms and in expectation . The Vandals sacrificed a lot of resources to put O'Callahan on retainer . The expert should better reciprocate this time .

"Show us what you can do . "

Chapter 544: Fallen Glory

Among mech pilots, expert pilots occupied a special place. Often likened as demigods, these experts display inhumanly good skill in piloting mechs.

Every basic parameter concerning piloting received an overall boost. From battle sense, weapon accuracy, resilience, willpower and more, any expert pilot was able to beat ten advanced pilots without any effort if they all piloted the same mechs. In some cases, their best attributes even surpassed the human limit.

Therefore, people considered every expert pilot to be an elite by definition.

However, this was not enough to elevate experts into objects of worship. The true worth of an expert pilot was that their cognition experienced a specific mutation that opened them up to resonance.

This wasn't the fake resonance that mostly relied on passive exotics and a little helping of mental compulsion from a customized neural interface. The resonance that expert pilots could call upon was at least ten times stronger, and each could achieve a much greater variety of effects.

This was what true resonance looked like. It was the power that elevated expert pilots into heroes on the battlefield, and enabled them to fight a hundred enemy mechs by themselves.

"An expert pilot is a one-man killing machine. Where one treads, hundreds of mechs will fall apart. Entire regiments despair when an enemy expert pilot stares at them. Sometimes, a grueling battle has been made irrelevant due to the outcome of a duel between experts."

Of course, such sayings left out a host of factors. Not every expert pilot and expert mech was the same. Nonetheless, even the weakest expert possessed a level of strength that was almost impossible to overcome by any other mech pilot.

Befitting of their status as demigods, the life of an expert pilot was filled with difficulties. No expert pilot came about from greenhouses. Not even the MTA or the first-rate superstates could reliably engender expert pilots among their ranks. They all came about by chance, though good genetics sometimes played a role.

In any case, nobody could predict whether a potentate was destined to advance to the rank of expert pilot. They could come from descendents of a small military dynasty such as the Larkinsons or emerge from the underclass of an overcrowded city.

As long as enough mech pilots received the opportunity to pilot a mech, their hidden talents would inevitably emerge. However, this happened only when the mech pilots received enough stimulation. Heated combat and the threat of death was the simplest and most effective to draw out an expert candidate's potential.

The amount of expert pilots that emerged from the battlefield vastly outnumbered their counterparts from the dueling arenas. This was the strongest proof that to raise an expert pilot, lots of mech pilots needed to be thrown into a conflict.

The more mech pilots entered battle, the higher the odds of uncovering an expert pilot. Some people say this was the principle reason why war was still so prevalent throughout human space. If states didn't wage war against other states, they often tended to wage war against themselves. No matter where anyone turned in human space, there was always a fight to be found.

No one succeeded in fostering a specific mech pilot into a vaunted expert. Many have boasted the ability to do so, but most training programs simply aimed to push their mech pilots to their limits.

It wasn't uncommon for the training programs to turn deadly.

The only way for states to foster expert pilots was to play the lottery enough times. An extremely low probability event almost always delivered no results, but if it was repeated many times, then eventually the jackpot would fall.

Each expert pilot that fought for a state added to their overall strength. Yet even then, the advancement of an expert pilot had only just begun.

Beyond their current rank existed even more powerful existences called ace pilots, and that was not the end.

Beyond ace pilots, a rare crop of mech pilots had attained power unimaginable. So much so that people couldn't help but call them god pilots.

Only several hundred god pilots existed in the galaxy. They were just as rare as Star Designers, and both enjoyed a similar status in human space.

The only difference was that Star Designers generally transcended human division and employed their apex abilities for the betterment of the human race as a whole.

God pilots on the other hand remained more willful for some reason. While some join Star Designers into declaring neutrality, others have decided to remain attached to either the Greater Terran United Federation or the New Rubarth Empire. No other state possessed the appetite to retain a god pilot.

Even if they had been declared as divinity in human form, god pilots still hungered for what lay beyond. None of them had ever advanced to the rank after god pilot, but all of them sensed a vast fog of possibilities. In their pursuit to surpass their god-like existences, these peerless warriors believed that they could only reach a greater height through continued struggle.

Rixt O'Callahan was no god. Right now, he could be called a demigod as best, and a decrepit one as that. With one foot in the grave, his body had long lost the fitness of his sprier years. If nobody knew that he was an expert pilot, they might mistake him as a walking corpse!

Yet no matter how awful his body looked, it still retained a large portion of its inner strength. It was generally known that the mind of an expert pilot had broken the shackles of the human limit. What others might not be aware of was that their physiology also followed suit.

Though expert pilots generally didn't bother training their bodies to a superhuman level, they did sought out treatments and medicines that strengthened their flesh in order to endure the physical demands of piloting a mech.

Thus, even as O'Callahan emerged from his hibernation chamber, he only needed a couple of minutes to return to his peak state. After apprising himself to the current conditions of the Vandals, O'Callahan immediately entered the cockpit of his personal steed, the Parallax Star.

This wasn't his first expert mech. Having lived for over a century, O'Callahan often piloted the best of what a state could offer to their precious experts. A champion without the finest armor and weapons would never live up to their potential.

He still remembered his first mech, so long ago. When he was still an advanced pilot, he was assigned to a mech regiment of the Mech Corps that fielded lancer mechs.

Back then, everything was simple.

"I was so young and stupid back then." The Venerable sighed as he boarded his exquisite mech. "How could I know that I needed to cherish my life?"

In truth, O'Callahan hated the Parallax Star. It did not match the grandeur of the mechs that accompanied him before. Those mechs were true beauties designed by multiple Seniors in collaboration. None of those machines failed to disappoint. Some even approached the quality of mastercrafted mechs.

That was a long time ago, when his skin was still smooth and when his hair still glistened in the light.

As he spoke a silent prayer, he begged whatever higher powers that may exist to spare his life some of his lifespan. Though he used to be an atheist during much of his life, when the onset of death came ever closer, he started to seek refuge in faith.

"How pathetic. I used to be a model citizen from the Bright Republic as well. What will my publicists think when they hear me praying to the heavens?"

That was a thing of the past. Now, his value had fallen to such an extent that he had to resort to joining the Flagrant Vandals to remain relevant. None of the other mech regiments agreed to his demands.

"How short-sighted of them! Even if my resonance strength is far from my peak, I'm still strong enough to be a terror on the battlefield!"

The magnificence of his youth and strongest years invigorated his old bones. His strong sense of confidence asserted itself, and as the Parallax Star finally launched into space, he cast aside all distractions.

"Come, my Parallax Star. Even if you are the weakest steed that I ever had the privilege to pilot, you are still a thoroughbred! Show me your strength!"

The aged expert pilot turned deaf against the mech officers that attempted to pass on instructions to his ears. He blinded himself against the glut of information being displayed on his consoles. The Venerable completely invested himself into melding himself with the Parallax Star.

The custom mech coated in burgundy and black and embellished with gold started to brandish its lance and power up its flight system. In a single instant, the expert mech flung itself away from the Gorgon's Gaze.

Soon, it bypassed the anti-stealth formation. Its exclusive flight systems accelerated the Parallax Star onwards. The two rod-like wings affixed to the rear of the mech glowed as hot as stars. Their radiance blended together, giving the mech the illusion that it was burning like a star.

The rest Vandals scrambled to response to Venerable O'Callahan's unilateral approach. Major Verle originally intended for the Parallax Star to keep pace with the Vandal mechs. Now, all those plans had to be thrown out the window.

A large portion of spaceborn mechs separated from the stranded Vandal fleet and hurried after radiant lancer mech. The Vandals only retained enough Inheritor mechs to maintain a contracted detection envelope.

When the Frosty Meteors initially saw O'Callahan's approach, they laughed. Had the robber regiment gone crazy?

Then, the mechs started picking up peculiar sensor readings. Not only did the mech accelerate faster than any normal mech ought to, they also detected the faint but unmistakable signs of true resonance.

"It's an expert pilot!"

"T-T-Thirty laveres!"

"Who is it! What mech is it!?"

"No idea, sir! The mech isn't on our records! All we know is that it's a lancer mech!"

The Frosty Meteors ran a search on all Brighter lancer mech pilots with a projected strength of thirty laveres. They quickly came across a fossil in their search results.

"Venerable O'Callahan? Hasn't that sack of bones bit the dust yet? I can't imagine he's still alive!"

"Even if he clings to his life up to now, it won't take more than a bump to push him into his grave. Let us help him give him the rest that he deserves!"

Lesser mech pilots despaired when an enemy expert pilot showed up. Not so for the Frosty Meteors. As elites, they have encountered many crises in battle. The appearance of an unexpected Venerable failed to impact their morale.

It was unfortunate that they hadn't brought an expert pilot of their own. They didn't even know the enemy task force carried one, since Venerable O'Callahan hardly deployed into battle since he signed up with the Vandals.

To the Frosty Meteors, the entry of an enemy expert pilot only formed a minor hiccup. At most, they had to scrap their initial battle plan in order to accommodate the unusual abilities of the incoming expert.

Despite the vast distance separating the Frosty Meteors from Venerable O'Callahan, the latter seemed to sense the contempt directed against him. "Bastards! Don't ignore me!"

His mech glowed even brighter as he started to push beyond the limits of what his mind, body and mech could withstand. The resonance that accelerated his mech beyond its regular limit grew stronger, and the glow surrounding the Parallax Star started to extend towards the lance, enveloping it in a strange energy field.

The Parallax Star expended a massive amount of power just from its initial approach. It was an extravagant waste of energy that no clear-minded mech pilot wished to throw away.

O'Callahan wasn't in his right mind at the moment. The naked contempt of the Vesian mechs in front of him engulfed his mind with fury. Nobody affronted his pride as an expert pilot and got away with it! Frosty Meteors or not, everything fell before his lance!

"Come, Parallax Star! Charge as hard as you can!"

The distance between the two closed within minutes. The Frosty Meteors long adjusted their formation into a half-sphere. They might not be able to stop the initial charge, but they believed that they could easily strike down the expert mech after it lost its momentum.

"Brace yourselves! Here it comes!"

Chapter 545

The Frosty Meteors employed a number of iconic mech designs . Famed for their durable medium and heavy mechs, each of their designs served as a fine example of their types .

Their prestige mech was undoubtedly the Kenas Oliphant, their heavy space knight . Clad with thick and heavy layers of armor, it had also been paired with fairly powerful flight systems, which gave it a respectable amount of acceleration .

Armed with a sword and tower shield that was even thicker than its chest armor, a single Kenas Oliphant represented a pinnacle in defense . With the help of its flight system, the Kenas Oliphant was also able to keep up with a charging formation .

If the Kenas Oliphant charged into the Flagrant Vandals with its shield held in front, there was no question that the latter would buckle . The impact might even be strong enough to disintegrate a Hellcat!

That wasn't bad enough . The Frosty Meteors brought more . With ten Oliphants charging forth with a disposable ice mass serving as their first line of defense, there was no question that the heavy mechs could smash through even the sturdiest Vandal lines .

There was too much disparity between the two forces . Heavy mechs might be expensive and not very cost-effective compared to the lighter weight classes . Some even argued that they were wasteful toys . In general, to build a single heavy mech ate up the resources of at least three to five medium mechs .

This wouldn't be bad if heavy mechs performed three to five times better than lighter mechs, but the truth was that their specs hardly doubled . Several parameters remained the same, while others such as agility and speed suffered a severe slide . These weaknesses sometimes enabled agile light mechs to dismantle heavy mechs that cost ten times as much with ease .

Nonetheless, heavy mechs served as a powerful singular package on the battlefield . Whether a mech contributed to victory or defeat was the only criterium that mattered .

Against the charge of the Parallax Star, none of the mech pilots of the Kenas Oliphant panicked . Not only did their mechs benefit from an improvised ice shield, their mechs also boasted over alternating alloy formulas .

Their armor system consisted of a sandwich of different alloys . The main protective alloys came in the form of compressed armor while the other alloys only served to absorb shock and thermal energy, thereby eschewing expensive compression treatment .

It was a wonderfully effective and intricate armor system that required weeks of fabrication work just to produce a complete set . It was also fairly affordable for the level of protection it afforded . If not for its propensity for faults, it would have been more widespread .

This armor system was perfect for the Kenas Oliphant because the Frosty Meteors possessed an ample amount of funding, more than enough to cope with the low success rate . Every Kenas Oliphant was a product of hard work and excellent craftsmanship . None of these heavy space knights ever left the production lines in a less than perfect state .

"Give me an Oliphant, and I will tear through the Republic!"

As the standard bearer of the Frosty Meteors, the Kenas Oliphant model carried the hopes and dreams of the Frosty Meteors . Rarely did they falter . Only their best knight pilots received the privilege of piloting a prestige mech, and they knew the parameters of the Oliphant like the back of their hand .

Every pilot of the Oliphant fought with courage, but more importantly they fought with clarity . They had been trained to recognize the signs that the Oliphant neared its breaking point, upon which they would pull back before the mech pulled back before it could break .

This led to an excellent track record over the years since it had been adopted by the Frosty Meteors for this current war . Everyone expected it to emulate its predecessors in the mech regiment .

It should never fall in battle . The only acceptable reason for it to face defeat was if the Frosty Meteors encountered a vastly superior enemy force and needed to retreat in a hurry . They could forgive the Oliphant for being too slow to keep up with a retreat . It was a mech that had been designed to be an unbreakable bulwark or an unstoppable forward vanguard after all . Stepping back was not in its job description .

Yet of all the enemies the Oliphant had been built to withstand, its designers could never account for the myriad of wonders that expert pilots embodied .

"The instant the glowing Parallax Star hit the ice shield, it immediately broke apart before the energy field . The expert mech encountered virtually no obstruction until the tip of its energy field along the lance touched upon the Kenas Oliphant's tower shield .

"Parallax Star! PIERCE FOR ME!"

Propelled by fury and the glory of old, Venerable O'Callahan dauntlessly charged into the heavy knight without any hesitation . He deliberately picked

the staunchest and most durable mech of the Frosty Meteors as the beginning of this baptism of fire .

The tower shield, which could withstand the firepower of an entire company of ranged mechs for a significant amount of time, melted before the energy field and broke upon impacting with the tip of the lance . The hole in the shield expanded from a pinprick into a giant cavity that bisected the durable object!

That wasn't all! Just a split-second had passed while the shield gave way before the invincible lance . The Parallax Star hardly lost its momentum and continued to drive its weapon forward!

The lance drove onwards until the energy field and the the physical lance point dug into the chest of the Kenas Oliphant and brute-forced its way through the alternating layers of armor . No matter how many plates was in the way, all yielded before the incredible momentum and unyielding supernatural force of the Parallax Star!

"Charge! Charge without fear! Charge until the ends of the galaxy!"

The lance dug through the most durable mech in the lineup of the Meteors as if it was made out of cloth . An incredibly expensive and incredibly powerful mech lost twenty percent of its torso mass right then and there . Even worse, the incredible kinetic impact and the corrosively hot energy field burned through the heavy space knight's more vulnerable internals . No matter how hardened the internals had been built, all of it had been friend, including its heavily fortified cockpit!

Its highly-trained mech pilot never had the chance to eject! Even before she recognized the imminent crisis, the lance's energy field already burned through the cockpit's protective cover and seared the pilot's body into carbon and ash!

The entire miracle seemed to take forever, but in actuality the Parallax Star had punched through the Kenas Oliphant without any halt . While the impact slowed its momentum, it only lost twenty percent of its peak! Venerale O'Callahan still had enough juice to continue the charge!

"No matter how many mechs I have to knock down, my mech will never falter!"

The Parallax Star might have slowed down a bit, but the glowing lancer mech was still a blur to others . Even Ves couldn't distinguish between the Parallax Star and an asteroid dropping from orbit .

Only the most highly-trained mech pilots among them possessed the cognitive perception to follow the Parallax Star's incredible progress . This was why the second mech in the line fired its rifle straight at the approaching expert mech .

The rifleman mech was a copy of the Caca Similas, an important ballistic rifleman mech of the Frosty Meteors . It wielded a heavy ballistic rifle which could fire both shells and kinetic projectiles of incredible force . The rifleman mech opted for a solid kinetic projectile, as the Parallax Star's incredibly fast approach would only make the impact worse .

It was the right choice to make, but it didn't make any difference this time . Just as the projectile spun into the Parallax Star's chest, the projectile made out of sharp and dense alloys splintered apart like fragile wood before the energy field!

The pilot of the Caca Similas barely had enough time to panic, let alone command his mech to dodge . Even with his brain revolving faster than ever before in his life, his mech simply didn't possess enough reaction speed to make any further moves! Even though the Vesian pilot mentally commanded his mech to eject, it still took at least five-hundred milliseconds for the cockpit to begin its blastoff!

That delay might as well be an eternity in this situation! The force of nature that was the Parallax Star eventually punched through the Caca Similas with even greater ease than before! After all, a rifleman mech could never match the toughness of a heavy space knight!

Even if the Frosty Meteors prioritized the durability of the Caca Similas, which was unusual for rifleman mech, it didn't make any difference before the Parallax Star!

O'Callahan's mech lost a further five percent of its forward momentum, which was fairly negligible to him . Sadly for him, no other mech floated in its way!

The Frosty Meteors utilized a broad and shallow half-sphere formation that held very little depth . Their original intention was to trap and contain the Parallax Star after it ran out of steam . However, they miscalculated the charging power of the Parallax Star!

While the expert mech inevitably lost some momentum, it was still substantial enough to make it difficult for O'Callahan to steer . It couldn't make any sharp turns to charge down the enemy mechs positioned at the sides . Like a meteor descending upon an innocent planet, nothing could alter its path that was destined to wipe out all forms of life on the globe!

However, O'Callahan didn't feel to disappointed about the lack of targets . The Venerable deliberately chose this angle to charge because there was one more enemy asset in the way .

"The Parallax Star is charging towards an enemy combat carrier!"

What guts! Before the Frosty Meteors could turn around and pelt the enemy expert mechs with their ranged weapons, the Parallax Star already left the sluggish Frosty Meteors in the dust! Instead, it continued to aim its lance point at the closest combat carrier in alignment!

In their initial decision to charge the stranded Vandal task force, the Frosty Meteors decided to keep their ships close . Besides the water-carrying transports that had already departed via FTL, the combat carriers were still needed for command and control as well as to retrieve their mechs if they needed to escape into FTL for whatever reason .

The Meteors gathered a substantial amount of intelligence on the Flagrant Vandals, so they knew that they faced a slippery opponent . If the mechs of the Meteors separated from the combat carriers, then Major Verle would certainly order his light mechs to circle around and sabotage the combat carriers .

The only way to prevent a sneak attack on their carriers was to leave behind some guards or to bring them alone . The Meteors couldn't afford to take too many mechs out of their battle lines so they opted to keep their combat carriers close with their main force of mechs .

This kept the combat carriers safe from harassment, but also exposed them to the ravages of battle . This time, the Frosty Meteors had made a grave miscalculation as the Parallax Star only shifted a few degrees to bring it on a direct collision course against the enemy combat carrier .

"I-Impossible! How can a lancer mech be reckless enough to charge a heavily armored combat carrier!"

The proper way to fight combat carriers was to bombard them from range or to sneak inside their hangar bays and wreak havoc from within .

Venerable O'Callahan directly ignored those roles and brought his Parallax Star into an inexorable collision against the hapless enemy ship! Everyone who thought fast enough to keep up with the action cried madness in their hearts! A lancer mech charging straight against the armored bow of a combat carrier was sheer madness!

Yet the expert pilot would hear nothing of it . His maddened fury drove him to utter hatred against these arrogant Venidse mechs! They probably called him a fossil or the like! Before his charge arrived, none of the mechs of the Frosty Meteors showed any caution to him . No way could O'Callahan tolerate such callous disregard!

"Combat carrier? It's all the same to me!" O'Callahan laughed . "Yield to me!"

Chapter 546

When the Parallax Star's lance hit the forward prow of the combat carrier, common sense went out the window .

In any other situation, the mech should have yielded . Yet this was an expert mech driven forward by an expert pilot . Advanced in age he might be, but every expert pilot possessed the power to defy logic .

Even as the thick layers of the combat carrier's hull plating began to buckle, the Parallax Star's energy field rapidly began to dim as it struggled to protect the expert mech it enveloped against crushing itself apart . Yet no matter how dim it grew, it never winked out .

Like an everlasting sun, the Parallax Star shredded through the prow of the ship and punched into the much less durable interior of the ship!

Compartment after compartment parted into as the mech and its indomitable charge brought it deeper into the heart of the vessel!

However, everything came to an end . The ship's interior might not have been as durable as the outer hull, it still formed a substantial obstacle to the Parallax Star because there was so much of it the mech had to bore through . Its momentum rapidly bled off until it barely reached the inner half of the combat carrier .

Secondary explosions quickly started to rattle the combat carrier as the sudden cavity set off a chain reaction of catastrophic effects!

Over a hundred crew members lost their lives instantly as the mech bore through their compartments, and a hundred more became at risk as their bodies floated away into vacuum! If they didn't wear their hazard suits as a precaution, they would have suffocated in an instant!

The combat carrier was as good as crippled . The Parallax Star punched its lance into the compartments beyond . From his extensive experience, O'Callahan knew that he had reached deep enough inside the combat carrier to approach its highly fortified bridge, command center or combat information

center . No matter which lay beyond, all of them served a key purpose for the Frosty Meteors .

Though the Venerable's instincts screamed at him to depart from this ship, he persevered and forced his mech through one more compartment! He ignored the flailing figures his lance had breached and mercilessly raked the tip back and forth until he blended every human into unrecognizable meat .

No human could withstand the force of a mech weapon!

"Serves you right for belittling me!"

Though O'Callahan's fury abated a little after finishing his first charge in years, he still needed to teach the rest a lesson they would never forget!

The Parallax Star quickly climbed out of the hole it had made and left the crippled combat carrier behind . With a flaring of its powerful flight system, the expert mech propelled itself to the sides, away from any enemy ships or mechs .

The expert mech wasn't fleeing . It was arcing around for another charging pass!

The impact of the charge and its devastating result against a Kenas Oliphant, Caca Similas and a combat carrier knocked the Frosty Meteors out of their sense of complacency . This was no aged fossil they faced! The threat of death and the excitement of facing a formidable challenge invigorated the Meteors into taking this battle seriously .

A highly regarded mech regiment such as the Frosty Meteors never lost heart after suffering a setback! If the Vandals suffered something similar, then they would have immediately fallen apart as a cohesive unit .

The smarter Meteors also knew that their opponent wouldn't be able to replicate that devastating charge . All kinds of factors fell into place to make that initial charge so destructive .

First, the Meteors didn't think much of Venerable O'Callahan . The thirty laverses that measured from his resonance during the approach hadn't reached a level that would be a cause for concern .

However, in the final seconds before the Parallax Star crashed through the Kenas Oliphant, the Parallax Star's resonance readings spiked in the forties all of a sudden! Such a significant boost in resonance strength had qualitatively transformed the strength of the expert mech's charge!

The second factor that played a role was that both sides had been approaching each other . A shuttle crashing against an immobile wall unleashed a lot less energy than two shuttles flying straight against each other . The impact of two converging forces resulted in much more damage than anticipated when combined with the spike in resonance .

Now that the Parallax Star matched velocities with the Frosty Meteor formation, it would take at least thirty minutes of circling in order to build up an equivalent amount of momentum . The Frosty Meteors would never give the Parallax Star that much time! Even if the Venidse didn't bother chasing after the much-faster Parallax Star, they could still vent their aggression on the immobilized ships of the Vandals!

Though Venerable O'Callahan didn't particularly care about the Flagrant Vandals, they were his only ticket out of here . For better or worse, he needed to attack immediately . It wasn't enough to apply some pressure . The Flagrant Vandals would only prevail if the Frost Meteors was beaten back!

Back inside the Shield of Hispania's command center, Ves still had to catch up with what had happened . Others didn't think so much and cheered as if their favorite mech athlete downed an enemy mech within the opening minute of the duel . Though the Vandals quickly got back to work, the joy and faith engendered by Venerable O'Callahan's fantastic performance still lifted their moods .

Ves rewinded the moment where the Parallax Star bore straight through a heavy mech, a medium mech and the front half of a combat carrier of all things . He didn't pay attention to the flashy energy field or the unwaveringly straight lance . Instead, he drew his eyes to the telemetry .

Much of the Parallax Star's parameters spiked to unheard of levels .

"Is this the power of resonance?"

He noted with great interest that the Venerable's resonance spiked in proportion with the rise in parameters . There was a definite relation between the two . "Still, forty-four laves at its height? Isn't that O'Callahan's record when he was at his best?"

Iris leaned over to take a peek at the parameters . "That's pretty impressive, but it's costly as well . I don't think the Venerable can withstand the consumption that is required to pull off such a performance . That single charge must have burned through at least a month of his lifespan . There's always a price for power . Especially at his age, the more he pushes beyond his limits, the more he exhausts what remains of his potential . "

It was a fair statement to make . Ves didn't completely understand all of the mechanics behind resonance and how expert pilots evoked resonance, but he certainly believed it couldn't be replicated so easily .

"You're right . Everything has a price . I hope that Venerable O'Callahan can pay enough to redeem our lives . "

No matter how little he thought of the expert pilot, the man fought to preserve their lives . Even if his intentions were selfish, Ves still couldn't help but root for the Venerable .

"Come on! You can do this!"

The Parallax Star might not have the time to build up its former earthshaking charge, but it could still accumulate sufficient momentum to threaten the Frosty Meteors . After several rounds of circling, the expert mech dove in yet again . Against the heavy mechs arrayed against the Vandals, the Parallax Star hardly required any effort to land the perfect hit! The heavy mechs couldn't dodge to save their lives!

Just as O'Callahan was about to initiate his charge, the haze of fury that engulfed his mind had begun to fade a little bit . He regained enough of his senses to listen to his military advisor screaming over the comm channel .

"Don't focus on the heavy space knights! It takes too much time to dismantle them! Aim your charges at their medium mechs! You can run them down a lot more often than the heavy mechs!"

Right now, the Flagrant Vandals wanted O'Callahan to prioritize on diminishing the numbers of the Frosty Meteors . Though the heavy mechs posed the highest threat to the Vandal fleet, the only way to accomplish a victory was to exact a heavy toll on the Frosty Meteors and entice them to abandon their attack run .

Though O'Callahan dearly wished to pound the heavy space knights into a pulp, his better sense took over and he obediently shifted his target towards the softer mechs .

"I can still run you down two at a time!"

The Frosty Meteors adjusted their formation in a way that put the medium and heavy knights in front of their more vulnerable mechs, but there was a limit to their maneuvering . Their deficient mobility worked against them as O'Callahan easily maneuvered his faster and nimbler mech around their formation and plunged into a neatly chosen angle that enabled the Parallax Star to graze its lance against two rifleman mechs at a time!

"Two more down! A hundred more to go!"

The Parallax Star turned from an unstoppable bull into a stubborn wasp that circled around the lumbering Frosty Meteors . No matter how many guns fired at the Parallax Star, its energy field never reached its limit, though it had grown dangerously dim at various times .

O'Callahan didn't attempt to charge the center of the enemy formation . Instead, he directed his mech to nibble at the edges, taking one or two mechs out at a time . He never chew off more than he could bite, so after each charge the Parallax Star hadn't lost too much momentum .

Every time the Parallax Star charged, it always managed to preserve a large proportion of its forward momentum . It circled gracefully after each charge and dove back in with renewed enthusiasm .

Mechs continued to drop out of formation after each charge . The wary combat carriers that trailed behind tried to pick up every wreck as best as possible, but the crippling of one of their combat carriers had put a serious dent in their cohesion . They didn't have the time to retrieve every wreck, and due to the Parallax Star's exceptional lethality, hardly any Vesian mech pilot survived the aftermath of the enemy charge!

"Vandals! Assist the Venerable! Encircle the Meteors! Take what is ours!"

"Take what is ours!"

The Vandal spaceborn mechs finally caught up with their expert pilot . Around half of their Inheritor light skirmishers dove around the Frosty Meteors, not daring to come any closer . The Hellcats hung back with the rest of the Vandal medium mechs, holding back for now as they knew their shock attacks wouldn't be able to put a dent in the Frosty Meteors despite their deteriorating state .

"Don't get pulled into a pitched battle! Harass them from the flanks and distract them from focusing their firepower on our expert!"

The Vandal mechs showed what they were best at and employed a number of harassment tactics . For example, the Inheritors constantly moved to threaten the heavy cannons and medium rifleman mechs . Both ranged mechs might pose a threat to them at range, but once the Inheritor came into melee range, they could easily tear them apart .

This forced the Frosty Meteors to position most of their knights to cover their ranged mechs .

The Frosty Meteors were known for their awesome shock attacks and their ability to endure . Their defensive formation left few holes for the regular Vandal mechs to exploit .

Nonetheless, they succeeded in distracting the Meteors, opening up more opportunities Venerable O'Callahan to charge down several mechs at once . The battle increasingly swung in their favor as the combination achieved a lot of results!

Yet no matter how fast the Venerable broke down the Meteor mechs, it simply wasn't fast enough! With five minutes to go until the Frosty Meteors crashed into the propulsion-less Vandal ships, something needed to change in order to swing the battle even further in their favor!

"Can we threaten their combat carriers?" Ves asked all of a sudden . "If we can threaten their mech berths, they might decide to draw back more strength . "

"It's too late for that . " Major Verle mused . "It's highly unlikely they will decide to yield . Don't forget that we are in Vesian space . Even if we destroy their rides out of this star system, they can still float in space for a week and wait for reinforcement ships to pick them up . "

The Frosty Meteors already suffered a substantial amount of losses . Only victory could redeem their shame!

Chapter 547

The Vesians lost over forty mechs, which was more than enough to cause any commander to disengage their attack run . Not so for the commanding officer of the Frosty Meteors . Their mech doctrine emphasized an attitude of committing to an attack . No matter how many mechs they lost, they wouldn't break and scatter .

Why?

Because they were the Frosty Meteors . Billions of Vesian citizens looked up to them . They upheld their creed of getting hit but hitting back harder . In no way should any mech pilot of the Meteors falter before they reached their targets . Their myths said nothing about abortive attacks .

Still, the Flagrant Vandals made it harder for them to reach the stranded enemy vessels intact . Venerable O'Callahan picked off several mechs of the Frosty Meteors with disturbing regularity .

In front of the Parallax Star, no amount of armor could save a mech from doom . The famed heavy armor of the Frosty Meteors turned from asset into a liability .

The Caca Similas, their rifleman mechs, their Rwindo Secundus, their medium space knight, and their Charix Magansus, their medium lancer mech, all benefited from some of the finest mass-produced compressed armor from Venidse .

The benefits all of this armor brought to the Frosty Meteors enabled them to excel in frontal clashes .

However, getting pelted from all sides by the Flagrant Vandals was a whole different beast . Besides the unstoppable attack runs from the Parallax Star, the rest of the Vandals proved their mettle as well . The copies of the Caca Similas barely endured the focus fire from the harassing Vandal mechs . Due to the low firing rate of their heavy ballistic rifles, the Caca Similas mechs barely managed to land a hit on the agile Vandal mechs .

However, any Vandal mech that did managed to get hit often went down for the count . Even a single hit was sufficient to disrupt them, leaving them open to follow-up attacks that instantly wrecked the disoriented mechs .

Vesians and Brighters screamed in fury as they let the battle consume their fears . None of them held back from doing their best in the battle . Every now and then a mech of the Frosty Meteors or the Flagrant Vandals spun out of formation with debris expanding from the wreckage like a cloud .

Sometimes, cockpits ejected in time, and these would navigate back to the safety of the combat carriers . Other times, the cockpits hadn't escaped in time, and their occupants suffered the fate of those who died in space, with their piloting suits breached and their bodies broken, frozen and decompressed .

The entire battle showcased the determination of both sides . Two different mech doctrines clashed against each other in a brutal confrontation . While it appeared the Flagrant Vandals held a decisive advantage with the help of their expert pilot, in fact they were running out of time!

They couldn't pick off the mechs of the Meteors fast enough!

Back at the command center, everyone who hadn't changed into their hazard suits had already done so . With the Frosty Meteors reaching the ships of the Vandals in just a couple more minutes, the odds of sustaining heavy damage was high .

Nobody could be sure how many ships would be left after this battle .

Ves worked frantically to discover any weak points in the Meteor mechs, yet nothing stood out that was worth focusing on except for their flight systems, and even those had been clad with armor .

"We're all out of cards . " He sighed . "Even though we're downing the Meteor mechs by the dozens, we don't have much time left . "

Iris placed her armored gauntlet over his own . Their suit armor clanked as they collided against each other . "You're wrong . We haven't put in everything in the battle . There is still one more decision that the Vandals can make . "

She looked onwards to Major Verle, who seemed to struggle with an invisible dilemma behind his helmet's faceplate .

Eventually, the commanding officer gave the fateful orders . "Go all in . No holding back . "

Those words set off a chain reaction as the captains of the different mech companies in the field received orders to switch up their tactics . Instead of using their superior mobility to peck at the edges of the Frosty Meteor formation, they had been ordered to commit to a charge!

The Inheritors took the lead . As the lightest, fastest and most expendable mechs of the Vandals, their pilots had become accustomed to their role as cannon fodder . They all spiralled towards the hedgehog-like formation of the Frosty Meteors .

In this, their excellent acceleration and agility preserved most of their mechs . The heavy ballistic rifles of the Caca Similas mechs fared poorly against such agile targets . It was as if they attempted to shoot a cannon against an annoying fly that flitted around them with zippy wings .

Once or twice, the rifleman mechs took out an Inheritor, but the Vandal mechs came as a swarm . It didn't take long for the Vandal mechs to reach their formation, and that was when hell broke loose .

"Inheritors, decoys!"

The Inheritors couldn't penetrate the Meteor's formation . All the melee mechs formed into a ball with their weapons and shields directed outwards . The ranged mechs hid safely inside as they shot their weapons through the gaps of the formations .

The light skirmishers instead turned into a nuisance . They harassed the melee mechs and baited them into making a fruitless attack . Very few

Inheritors sustained any damage because they always managed to dodge long before the sluggish mechs finished swinging their weapons .

A short time later, the real attack arrived .

"Hellcats, impact!"

The Inheritor mechs at the rear of the charging Meteor formation dispersed just in time for a substantial volleys of missiles to crash against the hefty mechs . Their defensive formation held up against the explosions, but solid spikes of giant nails followed soon after . The kinetic energy behind the nails further unbalanced their defensive posture .

The Hellcats themselves arrived soon after . The hybrid mechs had been designed for shock attacks, and right now they attempted to pull one off against mechs that could arguably do much better!

The results turned out to be rather mixed . The Vandals had taken the initiative, and they somewhat succeeded in unbalancing some of the Meteor mechs .

Unfortunately, the Meteor mechs had been built to withstand much worse . Virtually none of their mechs suffered any damage from the collision . Instead, the Hellcats arguably suffered substantially worse . The hybrid knight design fell short compared to the Kenas Oliphant and the Rwindo Secundus .

Both models of pure knight mechs viciously counterattacked against the Hellcats . Several precious Hellcat mechs went down from the combined attacks of the enemy knights and other mechs .

"Vandals! Fight until there is nobody left!"

Salvation arrived when the rest of the Vandal mechs came close . The ranged mechs kept a fair distance from the melee and pressured the Meteors from the flanks, well away from any angle that increased the odds of friendly fire .

The ranged mechs only served to pin some of the Meteors down, particularly their ranged mechs . The true threat to the Meteors consisted of the Hellcat and the other melee mechs of the Vandals!

With numbers on their side, the Vandal mechs attempted to gang up on the Meteor mechs and attempted to drown them in mechs! Any knight mech could ignore a single enemy mech in its face, but two would be stretching its defensive capabilities .

Three mechs at a time posed a substantial threat to its continued operation . Right now, this happened on a large scale as the Vandal melee mechs attempted to pry open their hardy shells with countless hands!

The mobbing tactic lacked the grace and forethought of the other tactics and formations that the Vandals demonstrated so far . Ves winced as he saw the casualty numbers pile up . Fighting the Frosty Meteors in formation was almost as futile as barbarians storming a Roman shield wall .

It was a good thing that the Vandals made a lot of progress . Many Meteor mechs fell out of formation as the flood of Vandal mechs overwhelmed their capacity to defend!

Employing huge crowds of mechs against a disciplined enemy was usually folly, but Major Verle proceeded anyway because they didn't have any choice! The Vandals could only trust in their numbers!

The dense collection of mechs made it difficult for anyone to judge how the battle progressed . However, Ves started to notice an encouraging pattern . The Vandal mob succeeded in destabilizing the defensive formation of their opponents . With so many enemy mechs crowding against them, they started to suffer unnecessary losses .

Each mech that fell diminished their numbers . They went from a hundred mechs to eighty mechs in quick succession, and their numbers declined even more now that the Vandals exploited the openings .

The only problem was that the Meteors retained much of their heavy mechs! If necessary, the Meteors wouldn't hesitate to abandon their medium mechs as long as their heavy mechs pushed through!

"We're making progress!"

The Parallax Star dove in for another attack run . Any Vandal mech in the way quickly disengaged from the brawl and and an opening for the Venerable to feast!

The energy field around the Parallax Star might have become a bit more frayed, but the Venerable still held on as if he bore the weight of the galaxy!

Surprisingly, he refocused his attack towards the heavy mechs! His spent a little more time circling around for this attack run, and it showed as his glowing mech plowed through a Kenas Oliphant, a Caca Similas and heavy cannoneer!

"Two enemy heavy mechs are incapacitated!"

Still, seven more heavy mechs remained! This time, the Parallax Star couldn't afford to dilly-dally with building up its momentum any longer . By the time it had readied its next attack run, the Frosty Meteors would have annihilated the vulnerable Vandal combat carriers .

The only choice was to join the mob!

"The Parallax Star has discarded its lance for its shortspear!"

Ves winced again . That lance was made out of an expensive mix of medium-grade exotics laced with trace amounts of high-grade exotics . Venerable O'Callahan just threw away a lance worth more than a billion credits!

He couldn't help but pass on a low-priority order to the queue . "Someone retrieve the Parallax Star's lance! Don't let it drift away in space!"

To his vast relief, a heavily damaged Inheritor mech that lost its entire right shoulder and arm had disengaged from the melee and chased after the lance .

O'Callahan deliberately halted his most effective attack in favor of helping the Vandals tear apart the remaining heavy mechs . The Kenas Oliphants remained the most acute threat to the Vandals . Once those heavy space knights fell out of the picture, the rest of the Frosty Meteors should be easy pickings .

With a guttural war cry the old man dove into the fray . Vandal mechs willingly made way for the expert mech as it charged towards the nearest heavy space knight . The Oliphant mech held up its tattered tower shield in an attempt to block the Parallax Star's diminished charge .

"Just because I like to charge doesn't mean I only know how to attack from one direction!"

The Parallax Star may have been designed for its powerful charges, but it possessed enough agility to slide around the Oliphant, dodge its slow but powerful sword slash, and stab the heavy mech in its rear .

Though the spear stab didn't have much power behind it, a casual blow from an expert mech couldn't be underestimated! With a light whiff of resonance, the spear successfully punched through the Oliphant's rear armor and damaged something vital!

The Oliphant wasn't down for the count yet due to its high redundancy factor, but other Vandals already started to kick the weakened mech now that it was down .

Venerable O'Callahan already shifted his attention to another Oliphant . Time was running out and all of the heavy mechs needed to be taken down!

"Heavy mechs or not, none of you can stand against my spear!"

Chapter 548

The Frosty Meteors broke . There was no way around it . With the Parallax Star fighting alongside the rank-and-file Vandal mech pilots, the entire mob fought harder than they had ever done so before .

The Flagrant Vandals knew they had to stop the Frosty Meteors from completing their doom charge against the Vandal ships . Several hours had gone by since Venidse's commando shuttles crippled their propulsion . It would take days for these ships to regain their mobility, time which they couldn't buy unless they could transition into FTL .

Fleeing into FTL meant abandoning their vitally important logistics ships . Every chief engineer in the task force gathered at the Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan to get their replacement FTL drives operational as fast as possible . The battle raging out in space seemed to have fired up their motivation to get them fixed, even managing to find a way to cut even more corners that shortened the repairs by two hours!

Still, the FTL drives couldn't be brought online immediately, so the Frosty Meteors had to be stopped at all costs .

The final tally was fairly gruesome . Ves glanced at the panel showing a summary of the mechs the Vandals deployed . "

"Two-hundred casualties . More than a hundred mechs are wrecked while the rest have suffered heavy damage . Over seventy pilots have been killed . "

The death toll for this battle was particularly brutal . Even with Venerable O'Callahan doing all of the heavy lifting, the mobbing tactic at the end resulted in a huge amount of casualties in just ten minutes of time .

The Flagrant Vandals succeeded, though, and that ultimately mattered more . After Venerable O'Callahan slaughtered the heavy mechs, the remaining Meteors had been torn down in quick succession . When their numbers diminished to only fifty mechs, it became clear that the Meteors wouldn't be able to inflict any fatal damage to the Vandals .

The Frosty Meteors called for a truce .

"Enough have suffered for today . " A tired voice began from the other side of the line .

Though the Vandals ate through the four mech companies of the Frosty Meteors until they were only a shadow of their former selves, the remnants could still take a ship or two down in their death throes while the aggravated Vandals extinguished them . Nobody wanted this tragic battle to escalate up to that point .

Major Verle quickly assented to the cease-fire .

"We'll stop killing you if you stop killing us . However, make no mistake, your survivors are only alive due to our benevolence . From the way I see it, we've won this battle . Salvage priority should go to us . "

According to the terms, the Frosty Meteors would halt any offensive actions for the rest of the day . They had thirty minutes of time to retrieve their dead and wounded mech pilots from their wrecks or escape pods . They had also been allowed to retrieve as many wrecks as they could, but only their medium mechs .

In the meantime, the Vandals did the same . They suffered a lot more casualties so buying this reprieve was much more important to them . A myriad of shuttles emerged from the combat carriers and headed towards the expanding debris field that was on a ballistic trajectory towards the local star .

Rescuing the wounded took priority over the dead and healthy . The faster they retrieved the wounded Vandals, the more they would be able to save at the end . Other mechs joined in the rescue effort as well, though they kept their guard around the remnants of the Frosty Meteors .

An awkward situation ensued as both sides tried their best not to pick up the fight again . The Vandals also kept their guard around their vulnerable ships for any stealth attacks . Just because Venidse's commando shuttles hadn't shown up again didn't mean they already left .

Complacency at this stage might doom them all, so the Vandals didn't dare to let down their guard .

Truly, this battle was an enormous shame for the Frosty Meteors . Only rarely had they ever admitted defeat, and they certainly never expected a lighter regiment such as the Flagrant Vandals to get the upper hand .

In the end, they had been too arrogant . They never accounted for the presence of Venerable O'Callahan . If not for the drastic intervention of the expert mech pilot, then they should have been able to defeat the Vandals by a very wide margin .

Venerable O'Callahan regained his cool after the battle . Once the heat and adrenaline of the battle against the Meteors faded into the background, his body became wracked with aches . His old body caught up to tiredness with a vengeance, and he slowly realized that the battle took a greater toll on his lifespan than he thought .

"I lost an entire year! Maybe more!"

Whatever the case, the hysterical O'Callahan immediately returned to the Gorgon's Gaze and hopped into his hibernation chamber as fast as possible . Every second counted in his view .

As the nominal winner of the battle, the Flagrant Vandals abused their privileges as much as they could . Ves hadn't been very useful during the actual battle, but at this moment he and every other mech designer became relevant as they picked and choosed which wrecks to retrieve .

"Should we salvage their heavy mechs?" Pierce asked over the comm .
"They're extremely powerful if we can get them up, and we can also earn a lot of money if we simply sell the wrecks as is . "

There wasn't an easy answer to this question . Pierce was correct that the mechs could be powerful in their hands, but they didn't fit in with the Vandal mech doctrine . They also lacked the design specifications of the Kenas Oliphant so it would be impossible to repair the heavily damaged mechs up to their previous standards .

In addition, the Vandals probably didn't have any mech pilot with the right training to pilot a heavy mech .

Still, salvaging the wrecks for their material worth alone was very worthwhile . The mechs was made out of highly valuable alloys that still held their value in pieces . Retrieving them now and selling them down the road would allow the Vandals to trade for lots of essential supplies .

"Let's retrieve them, but only for resale . You don't have to be gentle with them and it's fine if you only retrieve portions of the heavy mechs . In any case, we don't want to leave the wrecks to the Frosty Meteors who will be able to piece them back together in no time . "

The Vandals on the field followed his instructions . The greedy Vandals had an eye for value, and they instinctively knew that the wrecks of the heavy mechs could be sold for a decent fortune . They didn't need much convincing to nab all of the valuable pieces, though finding some place to store the more intact wrecks turned out to be a challenge as well .

Slowly, half an hour went by as the Meteors finished rushing to retrieve all of their men . As previously agreed, the Meteor mechs returned to their combat carriers, which promptly transitioned into FTL immediately after . Since FTL travel couldn't be interrupted through regular means, this insured that they would no longer be able to play a role in this star system .

Of course, the truce only applied to the Frosty Meteors . If any other mech force from Venidse happened to drop by, they would start all over again .

Nobody wanted to see that . During the negotiations of the truce, the Frosty Meteors had been tight-lipped on the subject of reinforcements . They might arrive in a couple of hours, or they might only arrive a day later . It was imperative for the Flagrant Vandals to leave this star system as soon as possible .

"We're completely exposed here . Venidse not only knows we are in this star system, they also know our exact coordinates . Maybe the next batch of Venidse mechs will transitioned out of FTL right next to us instead of half an hour's flight away!"

The Flagrant Vandals continued to rush through their repair and cleanup efforts . They policed the battlefield as best they could and salvaged the most valuable wrecks in record time .

Two-and-a-half hours after the end of the battle, the Beggar's Bounty and Linever Swan finally regained their FTL functionality . Sort of . Maybe . Tentatively .

The chief engineers hadn't been too certain about their work . If they had an extra hour or two, they could provide more assurances, but Major Verle wasn't willing to stick around any longer and let another wave of Vesian reinforcements catch them at their weakest .

"We leave immediately!"

They let the two logistics ships transition into FTL first, if only to make certain that they could make the jump . With a hazy flicker, the two ships transitioned into FTL with obvious difficulty . Still, the chief engineers declared their work a success .

"The FTL drives require a lot of servicing after the ships come out of FTL, but we are confident that the FTL drives are working as intended, sir . "

"What are the odds of failure?" Major Verle asked .

"That is difficult to pin down . Our rough guess would be five percent . "

Any chief engineer would be horrified to hear such words . Twenty percent of failure meant that one out of twenty FTL transitions led to horrific disasters . If such odds became the norm throughout the entire galaxy, all FTL travel might collapse after a couple of years .

Right now, their dire situation didn't give them the luxury to lower this error rate . If the task force still remained in this star system by the time the next wave of reinforcements arrived, their odds of failure would reach a hundred percent!

"Let us leave this bloodied star . Begin transition!"

The rest of the task force followed suit and disappeared into FTL .

The battle had finally come to an end .

Some people cheered . Others cried . More simply turned numb . This was because the battle truly hadn't been good for the Vandals . Sure, they fought and beat the mechs from one of the most formidable Vesian mech regiments . This certainly brought a lot of glory to the Vandals once they sent word of it back home . But did that bring the dead back to life?

"At least seventy dead so far . More may follow suit in the coming days as some of the wounded might not make it through . "

Any mech pilot that suffered injuries would certainly be in a very bad state . This was their fate should a cockpit be breached . A human body could not withstand the the level of damage inflicted by a mech .

Most of the Vandals couldn't sit still yet in order to mourn the fallen . They still needed to process the aftermath of the battle . Of acute importance was to repair the sublight propulsion systems of every combat carrier that suffered from the previous stealth attack . This would take days as the damage required both interior and exterior repairs .

Fixing up the engineering bay and the interior systems didn't require any special circumstances . Engineers had already begun the repairs .

The exterior repairs on the other hand could only be done when the ships transitioned out of FTL . It wasn't safe for humans to crawl over the hull of a starship in FTL . Very weird things tend to happen to humans that find themselves exposed to the higher dimensions in a direct fashion .

Most tend to... disappear . Where they went, nobody knew .

This meant that once they arrived at their next star system, the task force required at least several days to finish the repairs to the thrusters and other exterior elements .

Combined with the need to service the newly-installed FTL drives on the logistics ships, this basically meant they would be stranded yet again .

Everyone hoped that Venidse wouldn't be able to catch up to them before they finished repairs at the other end .

"Our engineers have their work cut out for them . Mech designers like us have our own duties to fulfill . " Ves said as he read through his increasingly large to-do list . "We're short on at least a hundred spaceborn mechs, and hundreds more require essential repairs . Let's get to work . "

Chapter 549

As far as Ves was concerned, no one won the battle against the Frosty Meteors .

The Meteors lost ten heavy mechs and around a hundred other mechs . Such losses only amounted to five percent of the Venidse mech regiment's total strength, so they haven't suffered very much at all . Certainly, replacing the expensive mechs and highly-trained mech pilots lost in the battle was going to be a pain, but their abundant funding easily allowed them to recoup their losses .

The Flagrant Vandals on the other hand might have won the battle, but they also lost the war . They outright lost over a hundred spaceborn mechs and many more required urgent servicing before they could be put back onto the field .

The task force's ability to defend itself against spaceborn threats had reached its lowest point since their departure from the Detemen System . According to the latest data accessible to Ves, the Vandals could barely launch more than two-hundred space-capable mechs, most of which disproportionately slanted towards ranged mechs .

During the final phase of the previous battle where Major Verle basically threw his hands in the air and gave permission for the Vandals to discard all tactics, a lot of melee mechs got thrashed . It was the logical outcome when lighter melee mechs clashed against a tight, disciplined formation of heavier mechs .

"Fighting the Frosty Meteors on their terms is a road to defeat . "

The Vandals only resorted to such a wasteful attack because they had no other choice . They needed to take out the incoming Frosty Meteors before

they reached their vulnerable starships, and the mobbing tactic was the only one in which they could tear down the Frosty Meteors quickly .

Right now, every Vandal had become numb . While the task force might have succeeded in saving their logistics ships and escaped into FTL, the hefty losses certainly felt like a massive loss . Every serviceman Ves walked by in the corridors appeared to be torn with grief or resigned to a grim outcome .

Their confidence in the Flagrant Vandals had evaporated . No one could take such a massive loss and remain upbeat . The usually air of casualness and nonchalance that Ves found so charming about the Vandals couldn't be maintained in the aftermath of the battle .

"Too many mech pilots have lost their lives . "

Another burial ceremony was on the agenda . Despite the urgent need to conduct repairs, some of the 3D printers stopped their current fabrication jobs in order to churn out coffins that would either hold bodies or mementos of the dead .

Ves did not like this diversion of vital production capacity, but he understood why it needed to be done . The Flagrant Vandals completely lost heart . In between the mourning of the dead, Ves heard an increasing amount of whispers of discontent from the rank-and-file .

"Why are we heading to the Reinald Republic? Can't our bosses send a message over the galactic net? This journey is pointless!"

"Jerry is gone . Akness is gone . Moezi has lost both his legs . How many mech pilots need to die? It's too much!"

"I don't know what we are fighting for . Aren't we supposed to defend the Republic? Why are we moving further and further away from our homes?"

"You know, the Bright Republic hasn't done anything to help us out . I say it's time we cut ourselves off from the Mech Corps . We've done our duty and more . Let the rest sort out the mess . "

Calls for abandoning the mission and changing course grew ever-louder . Ves merely shook his head when he heard talk like this . It wasn't as if they could turn around and leave the Kingdom from any other angle .

Back in his office, Ves had his hands full trying to organize a coordinated repair effort . It was safe to say that his original timetable completely became untenable . Though it still served its use as a guide on what to focus on in future missions, they couldn't adhere to the schedule anymore . Their backlog of repairs threatened to overwhelm their logistical capacity .

Rather than sit back and give up, Ves decided to work with what he had . In his next conference call with the mech designers, he laid out their priorities . "The mission isn't over . We aren't out of the woods yet . I've prepared new assignments for you to fulfill . Right now, Major Verle has confided into me that we will be attempting to stay out of trouble when we are crossing through the Klein Duchy . Nonetheless, that doesn't preclude another ambush, so our highest priority is to get as much spaceborn mechs back online as possible . "

Mercator's projection raised his hand . "What about our landbound mechs?"

"Frankly, they're irrelevant for the duration of this trip . " Ves answered . "While I can't state whether we have any landbound operations on the horizon, they're in pretty good shape since the Detemen Operation . I don't see the need in allocating precious manpower and resources into polishing them into a shine . Our spaceborn combat capability is the foundation of our survival, so I want all hands on deck into lifting it to a smidgeon of its former self . "

"How many mechs do you expect us to repair?"

"We've retrieved enough damaged and mostly-intact wrecks to restore about a hundred mechs, more or less . Any more and we'll need to dip into our stock of heavily damaged wrecks, which are a real pain to restore with the limited equipment at our disposal . It's safe to say that we'll be having our hands full with the easiest repairs for now . I expect this to be done within a single month . "

"A month?! Sir, that's asking too much of us!"

"I'm not . I know we can do it . Some of you will need to work harder than before, but I'm certain you are up to the task . Make no mistake . Our survival is at stake . The more mechs you can fix, the more mechs the Vandals will have at their disposal when the next batch of Vesians come knocking at our door . "

The mech designers swamped Ves with questions, some of which he replied with the same generic answers .

One question resonated a lot among the mech designers . It was the same issue that plagued the regular Vandals as well . Mercator stood up and asked the question that Ves expected to be asked .

"Why are we fighting? What is our true mission? Don't tell us that we have to reach the Reinald Republic! This ordeal is too unusual for it to be so simple!"

Ves wagged his finger, causing Iris to press something on her control panel . Mercator's projection instantly became muted .

"I would like to remind you who you are speaking to, Deputy Mercator . " After giving the offending mech designer the stink eye, Ves turned his gaze upon the other projections . "I just met with Major Verle in private this morning . I asked the same question that you have . Did you know how he answered?"

The silence in the conference room became palpable .

"It is not our place to ask these kind of questions! I know this isn't what you want to hear, but you can bet that most of the Vandals in the fleet are similarly left in the dark . Letting our curiosity get the better of us is not in our job description . Just as how the mech pilots are expected to pilot their mechs, we are expected to service those machines . Nothing more is required from us, and continued inquiries will only land you in trouble with the Vandals . "

Ves had made his stance clear, even if he didn't entirely agree with it himself . He hadn't spoken the truth just now .

Although it was true that Ves stormed into Major Verle's office to demand an explanation, he also conducted his own investigation beforehand .

It wasn't easy trying to peer into a secret that the brass wanted to remain hidden . Ves first started off by revisiting his earlier speculations .

His first assumption was that the Verle Task Force was required to head over to the Reinald Republic was because they carried something very sensitive .

His second assumption was that the object of value that required an immediate extraction from Vesian space was something utterly unique and irreplaceable . This ruled out important data, which could have easily been conveyed over the galactic net .

The only thing that stood out to Ves was Lord Javier . He had to admit that the conspiracy theories the Vandals spouted to each other when they were bored made the most sense . Having witnessed Lord Javier's arrest on the ground at Detemen IV, Ves became aware that the noble heir was in possession of something vitally important to the Detemen League and the Flagrant Vandals .

Like the brat he was, Lord Javier refused to hand over the so-called 'things' . Whatever they were talking about, Ves suspected that these things might have been important enough to justify a long-distance raid on the Detemen System in the first place .

Therefore, sending the Verle Task Force off into a crazy journey off to the Reinald Republic from the heart of the Vesia Kingdom sounded a bit more plausible if their objectives concerned these things .

Through logic, Ves tried to deduce where Lord Javier might be held among their fleet . He quickly ruled out every ship except two .

The Gorgon's Gaze was the most strategically important ship because she was the mothership of Venerable O'Callahan and the Parallax Star . Though the Venerable stated that he would only be able to deploy for battle one last time, he still posed a huge deterrent to anyone aiming to rescue Lord Javier .

The other possibility was that Lord Javier imprisoned aboard the Shield of Hispania . From what Ves had understood of Major Verle, the mech officer appeared to be the type that prepared for the worst . He wouldn't want their VIP to be out of reach . Thus it made a lot of sense for Lord Javier to be stuck on their flagship .

Ves took some time off his busy schedule to wander around . Despite the massive pile of work that demanded his attention, he made up an excuse of performing a personal inspection in order to get an impression of the mood among the crew to explore the entire ship .

He went from bow to stern, port to starboard, upper decks to the lower decks, and on so on . His keen cognitive functions constructed a mental map of the layout of the Shield of Hispania . While Ves never obtained a full map of the combat carrier, he still spotted several deviations from the schematics that Ves had gotten his hands on through various channels .

Certain compartments turned out to be a little more compact than usual . In other areas, the decks weren't quite even, though the standard artificial gravity made it hard for anyone to notice the discrepancy .

All in all, through various tricks, the original ship designer of the Shield of Hispania managed to incorporate several hidden compartments within the massive ship . They might not be very large, but they very much existed according to the mental map that Ves drew up in his mind .

The only problem was that Ves couldn't stick around long enough to investigate these cavities, let alone force an entry in them . He decided to resort to the one method that the Vandals certainly hadn't anticipated .

Ves attempted to employ his Spirituality . What he used to call his sixth sense was in fact a new and practically unheard-of way for him to interact with the spiritual side of reality .

Though he mostly employed this sense to design mechs or detect danger, he sometimes flexed it in other ways . Though he hadn't figured out how to turn his body into a semi-corporeal state like Lucky, he did sometimes succeed in brushing against the minds of other humans .

Every human possessed a unique mind . Like fingerprints, they were never the same . One remarkable feature about sensing minds was that stronger or more eccentric individuals stood out from the crowd .

Having seen Lord Javier in person, he instinctively memorized the noble's unique flavor . Ves scoured throughout the entire trip, making himself as circumspect as possible in an attempt to probe his spirituality through the bulkheads into the hidden compartments .

Most didn't contain anything alive . Ves had the sense that they only held a lot of important machinery .

One hidden compartment was different . Unlike the others, Ves faintly sensed a mind that matched the flavor that Ves remembered .

He was right! Lord Javier was truly aboard the Shield of Hispania!



Chapter 550

After his discovery, Ves acted out a play . He pretended as if he was as frustrated as the other Vandals, not even hesitating to demand a meeting with Major Verle to obtain some answers .

The rigid mech officer refused to spill the beans, just as Ves expected . The man had a point that a secret as momentous as this should only be known by those who needed to know . Ves did not actually require an answer to perform his duties, so he was firmly on the very large list that definitely didn't need to learn the truth .

Ves couldn't blame them from withholding the fact that they imprisoned Lord Javier and was attempting to bring him out of the Kingdom . Though their greater motivations escaped him, the Vandals would surely be doing it for a reason .

That reason may be a great cause, or a selfish cause . Whatever the case, Ves had no further leads to pursue . Walking close to the hidden

compartments already raised some flags, so Ves planned to keep his head down for the time being and pretend that he knew nothing more than the rest .

After the conference call, the mech designers all tackled their work with urgent effort . Ves was glad to see that nobody slacked off time, and many had in fact exceeded their former standards .

"When other people's lives are on the line, there's no sense of urgency . Now that there's a substantial chance that we might all go down, it's no wonder that they are working so hard . "

With a deficit of more than two-hundred mechs, the Flagrant Vandals would be hard-pressed to regain their former strength . Ves deliberately set their goal post to restoring a hundred mechs within a month as an aspiration . He didn't expect the mech technicians and mech designers to reach this target, but getting close enough already helped out a lot .

As the task force finally left the accursed territory of Venidse, the Vandals kept themselves while they crossed through the space claimed by the Klein Duchy .

During this time, they managed to drop their work to hold another solemn space burial .

Over a hundred coffins had been laid out in the hangar bay of the Shield of Hispania . The sheer amount of coffins weighed down upon the survivors like a boulder . Pretty much every Vandal knew someone who rested in those coffins .

Seeing the coffins placed on the decks with the banners of the Vandals draped on top of them emphasized the peril they still hadn't gotten away from yet . How many more Vandals would lose their lives in the coming days and weeks? A hundred? Two-hundred? Maybe all of them? Nobody knew, but all of them feared the answer .

The Vandals plainly weren't in a fighting condition at that time .

Fortunately, Klein appeared to be as equally fearful of the Vandals as the Vandals feared getting entangled with their mech legions . From the intelligence the local rebels passed on to the Vandals, Klein wanted nothing to do with the scrappy enemy force that thrashed the Frosty Meteors .

Pyrrhic it may be, word of the victory had already spread throughout the Kingdom and the Republic . The victory cemented the reputation of the Flagrant Vandals as devious but capable warriors .

While Venidse had a lot more mechs to spare, Klein faced the opposite situation . As a peripheral territory in the Kingdom, they could afford to be lavish with their mech legions . They hoarded their mechs as if they were their own children, and rarely deployed them against formidable enemies .

Though the Vandals had lost over half of their spaceborn combat capability, Klein didn't know that . As long as the Vandals kept their true condition silent, the Vesians wouldn't have any reason to hunt them down .

This was why the Vandals acted very circumspect around the VRF and the local rebels . Ves even received orders directly from Major Verle to limit the amount of information Iris could access .

Telling their guest designer to fob off was not a pleasant conversation for Ves .

"Our mechs are in a bad shape, Iris . I think it's best if you lend your skills to the mech technicians . They're awfully short-handed . "

Iris glowered at him . "Don't you need me anymore, boss?"

"Ah, eh, you're not the only one who needs to get their hands dirty . Some of the most complex repairs can't be performed by anyone in the fleet except me

. That should give you an idea how urgently we require more technical expertise . "

With that quick excuse, Ves packed Iris off . Naturally, he wasn't wrong either . He did plan to allocate some of his time to restore the more difficult cases . He even took the time to select some promising wrecks and requested the Vandals to transfer them to the Shield of Hispania .

Thus far, the Vandals managed to keep Klein guessing and their rebel partners mostly in the dark . The only time where Ves thought the gig may have been up was when they converged in a desolate star system to trade away a substantial amount of loot and salvaged mechs for much-needed resources . If the rebels had someone smart on their payroll, then they would have recognized the significance of the materials that the Vandals had requested .

They couldn't do anything about it . During staff meetings and private talks with Lieutenant Commander Soapstone, Ves reiterated the importance of replenishing their stockpiles .

"You either get me the supplies on this list, or you'll have to accept the fact that we're going to be short of at least fifty mechs . "

Presented with that argument, Verle and Soapstone couldn't resume their penny-pinching ways and continue to hoard their useless riches . What they needed the most right now was to supplement their battle strength . The odds of making it out of the Hafner Duchy at their current strength was small .

It would already be hopefully optimistic that the Vandals would be able to field around three-hundred mechs . That was the number of spaceborn mech pilots the task force had left that could still go into battle . The rest had died or suffered grievous injuries that their onboard medical bays couldn't treat .

A small number of mech pilots even suffered neural damage that permanently disabled their ability to interface with a mech .

Ves knew there was no going back from such an injury . Even his grandfather suffered from the same affliction, and despite his prestige as a former expert pilot, he had no choice but to resign his commission .

All the suffering throughout the entire fleet affected Ves on a spiritual level . His heightened spiritual sense picked up the waves of grief, apathy, and other unpleasant emotions . The mech pilots in particular acted as beacons of despair, whose negative emotions propagated stronger and further than any other human .

Ves even suspected that they were responsible for exacerbating the negative mood that descended upon the task force .

"It's as if the mech pilots are infecting everyone's moods with theirs . "

That wasn't good news, because all of the casualties of the previous battles happened to be mech pilots .

Mech pilots interacted the most with their fellow kind . They developed very strong bonds of brotherhood with the people that fought by their sides, so their deaths impacted the surviving mech pilots most of all .

Ves sometimes wondered if this dark cloud of emotions would doom the Vandals to defeat . If Klein ever summed up the courage to track down the task force and force a battle, the outcome wouldn't be in question as long as the Vesians brought enough mechs .

"This can't go on, but I don't know what to do . "

It was hard to cheer up the Vandals . While they were professional enough not to let their emotions get in the way of their duties, it was easy to see that they couldn't match the steel of their recent opponents .

Premier mech regiments such as the Calico Dancer Bats or the Frosty Meteors wouldn't enter a spiral of doubt and self-blame . Their grit was legendary . Even if they lost over ninety percent of their fighting force, the remaining ten percent would still cling onto their tradition and rebuild what they lost .

"It's all about belief and willpower . "

These traits couldn't be measured on an objective scale . Yet their importance ranked at the top . Even if the Vandals fielded better mechs, they would still be considered trash if they couldn't bounce back from a modest defeat .

Though Ves mourned alongside the Vandals, he plainly didn't feel as much grief . "In the end, I'm not a Vandal after all . "

As the head designer, Ves needed to keep the bigger picture into account . He couldn't afford to get hung up on the past while the future still seemed turbulent .

The hierarchy also reinforced this detachment . Mech designers didn't directly integrate with the mech regiments . Instead, they stood apart and formed their own self-contained group . They answered only to the highest ranking mech officer on-site .

This separation came in handy as the other mech designers also appeared to be less affected by the doom and gloom that had overtaken the Vandals . Ves ordered them to push the mech technicians to get over their grief and work hard .

Though the mech designers only partially succeeded into kicking the mech technicians back into gear, any increase of productivity was welcome .

Thus, a long period of tranquility ensued . The task force continued their silent trek to the border of the Kingdom, meeting very little setbacks along the way .

The Vandals even managed to slip into the Hafner Duchy without encountering any hostile forces at all . Klein hadn't managed to sum up the courage to go after them in the end .

"Thank the heavens that the Duke of Klein is a scaredy-cat!"

"It's as if angels are watching over our shoulders!"

"Well, you better brace yourselves, because the Duke of Hafner is nothing like his neighboring peer . That man is responsible for guarding the border . The big ponce won't tolerate any incursions from Reinald . He'll be even more determined to stop us from making a getaway . "

Ves agreed with that sentiment . Although the Hafner territory was situated on the other side of the border to the Bright Republic, they nonetheless heard some stories about how seriously they guarded their space .

The main threat did not come from the Reinald Republic . In fact, the neighboring state was actually only a third the size of the Bright Republic .

Ordinarily, the aggressive Vesia Kingdom should have invaded Reinald as intensely as they attempted to invade the Bright Republic .

The only reason the Vesians curbed their aggression towards Reinald was that the latter forged a defensive alliance with two other minor republics . Both the Roppo Principality and the Council Stars of Lisv banded together with the Reinald Republic to present a united front against the Vesia Kingdom .

Everyone referred to their defensive pact as the Frozen Leaf Alliance .

Though each individual alliance member was weak enough to be crushed by the Vesians, together they formed a formidable line of defence .

The Vesians had tested them over and over, but their bonds to each other turned out to be stronger than the relations of competing Vesian duchies .

This could still be overcome, if not for the possibility that other neighboring states might decide to join the Frozen Leaf Alliance . If Reinald, Roppo and Lisv fell to the Vesians, the states beyond that might be next .

This effectively curbed the desire of the Vesians to aggressively expand in this direction . As long as they didn't make any threatening moves, the Frozen Leaf Alliance wouldn't grow to the point of becoming a threat to the Kingdom .

"Still, even without a war, their citizens still need somewhere to vent . "

The mech pilots of the three alliance states didn't face the threat of war like their counterparts in the Bright Republic . Too much complacency bred weakness, so officially the Frozen Leaf Alliance encouraged the establishment of mercenary corps and treasure hunting outfits as a way for adventurous mech pilots to get their fighting urges out of their system .

Unofficially, they encouraged the establishment of less-than-legal outfits, and often turned a blind eye when these shady outfits decided to do their business across the border .

The Vesia Kingdom suffered a lot of damage from pirates that originated from the Alliance . Though the evidence was never there, both sides knew the score .

The Hafner Duchy took on the important task of curbing every pirate incursion that crossed border from the Reinald Republic . Over the centuries, they became very adept at hunting pirate outfits .

Unfortunately, the Flagrant Vandals happened to share a lot in common with pirates .