

### Chapter 561 Encircled

Relia piloted a special swordsman mech provided by the Quistas training camp. The Neyvar model excelled in fighting against the creatures. It boasted an even armor coverage that strengthened its weak points at the cost of reducing its frontal armor. That was not a problem for her, because she could easily deal with any beast attacks that came from the front.

The mech further distinguished itself with its strong mechanical power. The augmented artificial musculature combined with a strong engine allowed the Neyvar to burst out with a humongous amount of strength.

The only downside to the mech was that it drained a lot of energy when Relia pushed its capabilities. Training Camp Quistas pointed out her lack of care regarding her energy levels.

Most of her engagements up to now consisted of ambushing pirates. The Hostland Warriors only deployed her unit when the carrier she was on had taken an advantageous position against the pirates.

Working with the Neyvar taught Relia a brutal lesson on how to conserve her energy. Attempting to survive more than a day in the monster-filled forests of the Kamwin continent couldn't be done unless she rationed her energy.

Though she made good strides this day, all of her concerns about conserving her energy went out the window as soon as pirates tracked her down. She gritted her teeth in fury as she beheld the surviving scum. The cowardly pirate light mechs backed off after she demonstrated her skill with her sword.

Her Neyvar picked up a score of incoming enemy mechs. She couldn't stay still for long. Between flight or fight, she picked the latter any day.

"We won't be able to shake these pirates off without a fight! Cover me! For Hafner!"

"For Hafner!" Her escorts repeated over the comm channel.

The Neyvar groaned as Relia put the swordsman mech to its paces. It wielded its long and straight blade in wide, sweeping swings, demolishing a couple more light mechs until the Vandal mechs pulled back out of range.

"Forward!"

Relia entered a heightened state as she pushed her Neyvar onwards. She needed all of the power she could get in order to get rid of this nuisance. She released a guttural growl as her mech gained power and speed. All forms of grace disappeared from its movements as Relia focused on gaining maximum efficiency.

With a mental thought, she diverted extra power to the Neyvar's legs. This boosted the swordsman mech's speed, allowing it to spurt forward in a dangerously unbalanced dash. Only her exquisite control allowed the mech to keep its footing.

The Vandals attempted to scatter and wear her down with ranged weapons, but the light ballistic rifles hardly dented the Neyvar's compressed armor. Training Camp Quistas had been conscientious enough to provide her with an excellent mech.

The Vandal mechs that tried to flee from her reach all stumbled a bit due to the uneven terrain. The kilometer-long trees that towered over the entire Kamwin continent all developed extremely extensive root systems that occasionally penetrated above the soil.

These extraordinarily hardy roots provided mechs with an extra challenge. To the trainees who spent months trekking through the forest, they had already gotten used to the uneven footing. Their mechs also utilized specialized feet that made it easier to travel on uneven terrain.

Unfortunately for the pirates, they entirely lacked these preparations. Several mechs stumbled as they fled as their feet inadvertently dug into roots. They were operating on completely foreign soil compared to Relia.

"You can't run!"

The Neyvar's sword pierced the rear armor of the slowest mech. A minute amount of blood dyed the blade as the mech pulled out its sword.

Relia went for the killing move!

"No mercy for pirates!"

The Neyvar expended more and more energy to outspurt the fleeing light mechs. Unlike Relia, the foreign mech pilots couldn't sustain their speed as well due to the strange terrain that limited their sprinting ability. It was as if they were running through mud!

Relia's escort mechs struggled to catch up with her as she ran down the squads of Vandal mechs. Each time she reached an enemy mech, the Neyvar only took a single stab or swing to disable the light mechs. The expert candidate showed off her full prowess by unconsciously utilizing the most effective means to defeat each enemy mech in range.

Her eyes had gone red with blood as she hunted the Vandals with rabid fury.

What she didn't know was that the Vandals had not just run and scattered from her grasp. Instead, covertly lured her into a prepared kill zone where a whole host of Vandal mechs lay in wait.

"Captain Foster! There's an ambush ahead! Cease pursuit!"

Relia barely registered the warning from her escorts. She had already inferred that enemy mechs lay in waiting around her through interpreting the complex sensor data that had been dumped in her mind. Ordinary mech pilots couldn't

handle so much sensor input at once, but the expert candidate willed herself to endure the strain.

"That's enough, Captain Foster!" A medium spearman mech that looked a little fancier stepped out from behind a tree trunk. "You're outnumbered and outmatched! This fight doesn't need to go on any longer!"

The Neyvar slowed and halted into place. Relia faintly realized that she faced a mech captain. Still, she felt no fear despite the threats arrayed against her. To her, every pirate was a pushover.

Her squad of escorts eventually caught up to her. They spotted the enemy mechs as well and took up defensive positions behind some massive tree trunks.

"Captain! More enemy mechs are inbound from the site of the former training camp! According to the sensor data, the Flagrant Vandals are moving to encircle us!"

The pressure piled up on Relia's shoulders. Even though she was an expert candidate, she wouldn't be able to withstand the fury of several mech companies by herself. There was a limit to how much she could defy the odds.

Nonetheless, Relia thought nothing about retreat. "This crisis had already reached a critical point. Running is pointless. I would rather fight and give these pirates a lesson they won't forget! Are you with me, trainees?!"

"We're with you, captain!"

The mech pilots that accompanied her all consisted of young elites. All of them assented to Relia's plan. Surrender was not an option, especially against pirates!

"Attack!"

She uttered no more words than that. Relia could trust her escorts to know what to do. Right now, they were more useful to her alive than dead, so her fellow mech pilots didn't follow her into battle.

The Neyvar endured an onslaught of enemy fire as it charged forth. This time, Relia didn't opt to run in a straight line. Since her opponent believed that they had enough numbers to take her down, they stopped trying to run.

Big mistake.

"Astral Swordwind Starwalker Steps!"

Relia utilized her homemade movement technique. The Neyvar became as domineering as the astral wind, blowing in each direction with purpose. She developed her incomplete Astral Swordwind techniques in order to unify the necessary movement and attack moves on land and in space. Thus, the Neyvar's current movement seemed especially strange.

Most of the Vandals missed their shots. The few hits that impacted the Neyvar came from luck rather than skill. The average Vandal pilot fell far short to Relia in terms of skill. She easily hoodwinked their aim and successfully reached the closest squad of mechs.

This time, she faced a number melee mechs, including a hardly medium knight. Yet Relia didn't slow down her approach.

"Astral Swordwind Swallow Stab!"

The Neyvar bent over at an angle and put its full weight behind its stab. The tip of its sword amazingly went through a gap in the opposing knight's defense and pierced its left chest armor! Relia didn't waste any time and instantly retracted the sword before slashing a light skirmisher that attempted to spring an ambush from the side.

"Redemption Slash!"

"Swallow Stab!"

"Triple Redemption Slash!"

"Execution Chop!"

"Double Redemption Slash!"

Barely twenty seconds after making contact, the Neyvar left a trail of ruined mechs. An entire squad of Vandals was no more! Relia's opponent didn't stand a chance! Even worse, at least half of the mech pilots had been killed before they managed to eject!

"Death to pirates!"

Relia barely took a breath and continued her assault. The Vandals meanwhile didn't expect that one of their squads would last so short against the expert candidate. They fully underestimated the prowess of an advanced pilot with one foot in the realm of experts!

As the Neyvar crashed into another squad of Vandal mechs, Relia put her Astral Swordwind techniques to full display. A violent orchestra of speed and power tore through the foreign-operated mechs. Despite resembling popular Vesian mech models, the enemy mechs appeared completely tainted in her eyes. Only slaughter would cleanse the sins of these mechs!

"Redemption Slash!"

"Starwalker Steps!"

There was barely any obfuscation in her moves. Relia disdained the use of feints and forms of misdirection. However, her seemingly simple movements belied her strong foundations and the inherent grace behind her strength. Her Neyvar danced to her palm as it evaded through volleys of incoming laser beams and projectiles.

With each mech she felled, Relia became more and more aware of the flaws to her piloting skills. She had fought against too many monsters lately and had gotten used to their instinctual fighting style.

Battling against human opponents was much more difficult than she thought!

The Vandals surrounded the Neyvar and her escorts in a horseshoe-like formation. No matter where Relia fought, she always needed to be aware of mechs approaching from behind.

While she was able to resolve most of the attacks from the rear, sometimes she simply couldn't do anything but endure the battering. In this situation, her escorts had no choice but to step in. They diverted over a third of the Vandal mechs sent to deal with her with great difficulty.

Their choice did not come without a price.

"Pritchard!" She yelled in pain as her mech sensed the collapse of a friendly mech.

The other participants of the training camp may have been some of the best that Hafner had to offer, but they all lacked the heaven-defying capability of an expert candidate like Relia.

Two more mechs fell in quick succession, causing Relia to falter in her aggression. "Moseley! Veronique!"

Soon enough, her entire escort squad had been felled. The Vandals had not been merciful to the Hafner mechs, opting to go for the killing blow in revenge against Relia's deliberate cockpit targeting.

Relia did not even think about who was to blame. All she thought was that she lost all of her new friends. They had trained together and fought together for several months. She remembered each and everyone of their faces.

The Vandals thought that Relia had given up once she realized she was the lone Hafner mech pilot standing.

They were wrong.

"You murderers." She wheezed out as she beheld the mechs that surrounded her. Another mech company had caught up and cut off her escape route. "ALL OF YOU MUST DIE!"

An invisible explosion emanated from the Neyvar, causing the Vandals to be taken aback. Relia didn't waste the opportunity and moved her mech into attack. Like a furious tiger, the Neyvar sprang towards the Vandal mechs and slashed them down one by one in quick succession.

As the Vandals spread out from the Neyvar, the Hafner mech pushed against its limits and outright broke its speed limit as it dove into another squad of enemy mechs.

The Vandals didn't stand a chance up close!

Mech pilots started to eject by the dozens as the Neyvar performed far above its nominal performance. Within a span of five minutes, the Neyvar slaughtered over fifty mechs with no signs of rest! The Neyvar radiated a lot of heat, causing the air around the overstressed swordsman mech to distort.

"DEATH!" Relia screamed into an open channel as she chased down the Vandals that desperately wanted to widen the distance.

The hunters had become the hunted!

### Chapter 562 Turnaround

High above the sky, the ships of the Verle Task Force intermittently witnessed the footage of the astounding events that happened deep within the forest. Ves had to rub his eyes as he stared at the sensor data of a specific measuring instrument.

This particular tool measured the resonance strength of a mech pilot. Currently, the readout had spiked to 1.67 laverses! This was far beyond the bounds of 0.00001 laverses that an expert candidate typically exhibited!

"Sir!" Ves called out to Major Verle. "Captain Foster has broken through her bottleneck! The Neyvar mech that she's piloting is currently exhibiting forced resonance!"

No one was able to keep calm when they heard that announcement. Even Major Verle lost his composure for a moment.

Captain Relia Foster was a candidate no longer! The difference between an expert candidate and a bona fide expert pilot was not as simple as an amplification of resonance strength.

A true expert pilot was like a demigod, whose attributes and skills received a large promotion. More importantly, an expert that had recently broken through still enjoyed the baptism of breaking through their shackles!

Their life phase was in flux and the power they commanded could be stretched. What this basically meant was that they could draw on a lot more strength than usual!

The Neyvar glowed as an indistinct energy field surrounded it. The entire mech resonated with Captain Foster despite lacking any resonating elements in its design!

This was an obvious display of forced resonance, where an expert pilot achieved the impossible and resonated with a normal mech!

An ordinary expert pilot wasn't capable of performing such a feat. In fact, forced resonance was one of the signature abilities of an ace pilot. The only reason why Captain Foster could accomplish this feat was because her recent breakthrough left her piloting abilities in flux.

"Sir, Captain Foster is still riding the aftermath of her breakthrough! This is the worst time to be fighting her! I highly suggest you pull back our forces from the chopping board!" Ves advised. "Think through this! Captain Foster may have become an expert, but she doesn't have the right tools to take advantage of her new state! Right now, she's obviously pushing her Neyvar mech beyond its limits. That mech won't be able to take much more abuse, and will certainly be in much worse shape once it cools down! Its energy reserves are rapidly depleting as well!"

Major Verle eventually woke up. "You're right, Mr. Larkinson."

He ordered an immediate retreat. Unfortunately, due to the spotty communication environment on the Kamwin continent, his orders hadn't reached the Vandals on the ground in time.

Almost a hundred Vandal mechs lay ruined on the ground. All of the Vandal wrecks bore deep and penetrating sword wounds. The only activity left in the vicinity came from the Neyvar, which hunted down the cockpits that had ejected from the Vandal mechs in time.

"No quarter to pirates!"

Ten minutes passed by until Relia gave up on hunting down the elusive pirates. As the battle rage faded from her mind, she fell out of her super mode and slumped down from her cockpit seat.

"Damn it!"

She defeated so many pirate mechs, but had been unable to bring her comrades back to life. For a moment, she felt as if all of this struggle was pointless, but then she stared at the broken Vandal mechs and regained her resolve.

"As long as pirates still run amok, my duty has not yet ended."

She regained her clarity and scanned the environment for threats. Spotting none in the immediate area, she glanced at the status screens of the Neyvar and winced.

"Sorry old partner, I pushed you way too hard."

The Neyvar had been designed to accommodate mortal mech pilots. It couldn't withstand the level of performance that an expert pilot demanded from their machines.

The temporary boost in performance from Relia's display of forced resonance may have turned the Neyvar into a genocide machine, but she was unable to turn water into wine. The material composition of a mech remained the same whether it was piloted by a normal mech pilot or the best expert pilot in the galactic rim.

While the Neyvar definitely needed to be scrapped, Relia tentatively judged that the swordsman mech could still last a couple more days if she didn't put too much strain on its systems.

This was enough. Relia still thirsted for blood.

"I need to replenish the Neyvar's energy cells."

The short burst of hyperactive combat left the mech with a much-diminished energy reserve. Thirty minutes more, and the Neyvar would have collapsed despite her best efforts.

Though it saddened her to do so, Relia forced her damaged mech to trudge over to the wrecks of her escort mechs. She picked a medium mech and turned it over to its belly before prying open its lower back armor plating. Carefully, the Neyvar's delicate movements opened up the fallen mech's back, revealing several banks of energy cells.

Relia activated a special command, causing the Neyvar to open up its back armor on its own accord and eject the fully depleted energy cells. After that, she quickly manipulated her mech with utmost concentration. The Neyvar carefully removed the energy cells from the fallen mech and slowly inserted it into an open slot at the rear of the swordsman mech.

Almost no mech pilot dared to replenish their energy cells by themselves. Lots could go wrong, and mechs generally weren't precise enough to handle energy cells without denting them in some way.

These concerns didn't apply to expert pilots like Relia. Her control over her mech had vastly improved. Precision work like this was child's play to mech pilots at her level.

The biggest threat she faced besides the Vandals came from the Kamwin continent itself. The Vandals had largely been able to mop up the native genetically modified monsters through sheer numbers, but Relia needed to keep her eyes peeled for any ambushes.

Fortunately, the scale of the fighting had scared away all of the monsters in the vicinity. They still possessed some sense of self-preservation despite all of the genetic modification.

As Relia became accustomed to the chore of swapping energy cells, the Neyvar moved faster and faster until it filled its tank. Though the fallen mech's energy cells already expended some of its energy beforehand, the Neyvar's energy levels had risen to seventy percent, enough to sustain it for another big fight.

The Neyvar rose to its feet and powered up its sensors. "Where are you, pirates?!"

Back at the Shield of Hispania's command center, everyone still needed time to register the disaster they provoked on their own accord. Nobody expected

that Relia would break through her shackles so quickly and prove to the Vandals why expert pilots were regarded as demigods.

"I guess we'll have to start calling her Venerable Foster from now on." Ves muttered to himself. "Her performance after her break through is wildly out of bounds from our most pessimistic projections."

Ves had fallen into the expectations of others, and never really considered whether Captain Foster spontaneously broke through during battle. When it came to expert pilots, his understanding still contained a lot of gaps.

"This isn't anyone's fault." Major Verle spoke after a long moment of reflection. "The responsibility for the deaths of our comrades on the ground lies squarely at Venerable Foster's feet. The only way to absolve ourselves from this setback is to finish the mission and subdue our primary objective. Her advancement to expert pilot just turned her into a bigger priority."

Venerable Foster was worth a lot more than Captain Foster, that was for certain. Peace for Hafner would have to cough up a lot more compensation to the Vandals if they managed to take care of the wild and unstable expert pilot. Ves wondered if the rebel group would make up for their losses. The Vandals had already bled a lot of mechs and mech pilots from this battle.

"Sir! Venerable Foster is on the move!"

"In which direction is she escaping towards?"

"She's not moving away from our forces! The Venerable's mech is moving towards our landing site!"

Nobody knew what to think about this decision. Venerable Foster was obviously out for blood. If she knew that the Vandals could only linger in this system for a very short time, she would have been better off running away. By turning around and forcing a fight with the Vandals, she had cut off all hope for escape.

This was good news for the Vandals since they wouldn't have to worry about running out of time. The only downside was that they needed to face fully-fledged expert pilot in battle. Even if Foster lacked a tailored expert mech, she had already shown what she could do with a Neyvar mech.

Another factor that may have encouraged the expert pilot to turn around was that running away meant bumping into other monsters. While Foster would be able to take them out without too much effort, each encounter would inevitably slow her down and deplete her precious energy.

On the other hand, backtracking the path that had recently been trod by over a hundred Vandal mechs meant a smooth journey. The monster mechs in the vicinity had all been cleaned up, and it would take time for other groups of monsters to take over these lands.

"Your analysis, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves cleared his throat against Major Verle's prompt. "If Venerable Foster wishes to force another battle against us, sustaining further casualties is unavoidable. That said, her approach will allow us to make ample preparations."

"I doubt she's stupid enough to approach us head-on." The tactical officer said. "She might have gone berserk after being cornered in the previous fight, but she'll be fighting with a cooler head next time. Don't forget that she's a qualified mech captain."

"Then do you think we don't have what it takes to defeat the Venerable?"

"That is not what I said, Mr. Larkinson. We all have to remember that she is all by herself. In addition, her Neyvar mech isn't able to catch up to her level of performance. These limitations will be vital in defeating her without sustaining too many casualties."

Ves agreed with those points. "According to theory, her previous display of forced resonance is also a one-off phenomenon. Now that her life phase has stabilized, she won't be able to pull more power from nowhere. She is like a knight with no armor. Without the right equipment, her threat is vastly reduced. We won't be facing a monster on the level of Venerable O'Callahan."

The other Venerable piloted a mech worth billions of credits, while Venerable Foster had to make ends meet with a damaged mech worth sixty million sovies at most. This fundamental gap in mech quality couldn't be overcome by a newly ascended demigod.

"She won't be alone either." The tactical officer added. "Don't forget that the Kamwin continent is Hafner's home ground. Training Camp Quistas initially scattered all of their trainees and instructors because they bet that Foster would have been able to stay out of reach. Now that she is turning around, they are bound by duty to assist."

"How many mechs are we talking about?"

"According to the intelligence provided by Peace for Hafner, the training camp hosted over twenty instructors and around a hundred trainees. All of them are highly skilled, but their mechs are optimized against monsters."

The Vandals already defeated a handful of trainees, so the total number of enemy mechs would still be manageable. Still, they couldn't underestimate how much damage an expert pilot could do when backed up by over a hundred mechs.

The Vandal landbound contingent wasn't in the best shape after that disaster of a battle. Ves silently counted how many mechs still retained enough battle capability to resist the enemy and came up with around two-hundred-and-fifty mechs.

"Will this be enough?"

## Chapter 563 Horde

The invasion of Nova Migolatus I by the Flagrant Vandals had taken a very unexpected turn. The Verle Task Force expected to stomp through the jungle and strangle a baby in her crib. They never imagined that the baby would grow up all of a sudden and turn into a dinosaur.

By definition, an expert candidate could always break through to the next rank. Yet most of the times the expert candidate had to accumulate up to that point. This was why Venerable Foster's sudden advancement came as a surprise. She practically leapt through several stages at once!

"This is going to be another hard-fought battle." Ves thought as he watched on as the Vandals prepared for the worst.

Already, the sensors that the Vandals had placed around their beachhead detected the approach of large groups of Hafner mechs.

They had initially spread out in every direction in order to confuse the Vandals, but ever since Venerable Foster revealed herself, they changed gears and grouped up in one massive formation. With veteran instructors rallying promising young mech pilots, even without an expert pilot at the helm the group had become very formidable.

Naturally, the Flagrant Vandals didn't shy away from a fight. They possessed their own pride, and after repeated beatings from the hands of different Vesian mech regiments, the Vandals eagerly wished to redeem themselves in battle.

"How manipulative." Ves remarked as he recognized Major Verle's influence in action. "If I haven't been watching out for his effect, I might have been caught up in this rising tide as well."

He had gained a greater understanding of Major Verle's methodology. The man utilized various channels to promote a standpoint. From broadcasting announcements to spreading rumors from chosen agents among the lower

ranks, the mech officer always managed to succeed in getting the Vandals agree to every major motion.

If Major Verle hadn't intervened at this point, the Vandals would have lost heart against an expert pilot. The strength and dignity of a demigod was not something which mortals could withstand!

Every average mech pilot would blanch at the thought of fighting an expert pilot directly. Even if Venerable Foster lacked an appropriate mech, it would be trivial for her to defeat twenty or so mechs at once with a single mech. Ves found it difficult to estimate the damage the superhuman might of an expert pilot could inflict.

Still, she wouldn't be able to defeat a hundred mechs by herself. The Vandals would have already evacuated Nova Migolatus I if that were the case!

"The Hafner mechs are coming!"

The enemy took their time. Likely, some of the instructors realized that time was on their side. After they converged with each other, they made no moves to attack or retreat until some Vandal scouts harassed them from a distance.

The longer the Hafner mech stayed in place, the more harassment they encountered. The added pressure was meant to move the Hafner mechs into action. They couldn't retreat, because the Vandal mechs would continue to harass them from behind.

Every other option led to a slow defeat. The training camp participants couldn't remain passive in the face of enemy harassment.

Vandals obviously favored long, drawn out fights where their superior numbers and abundant supplies could tide them over. The group of Hafner mechs on the other hand were all alone and lost their base. The only choice remaining for them was to force an immediate confrontation.

The Hafner mechs came into visual range with the Neyvar in the lead. After a tense moment of silence, the lead mech opened up a broadcast.

"Flagrant Vandals. You have one chance. Go back to orbit and leave this star system immediately. If not, I will hunt you down and avenge my fallen comrades!"

None of the Vandals responded. Verle looked tempted to patch into the temporary base's speakers, but refrained from doing so. The prestige of an expert pilot was dreadful, and engaging in a direct conversation with one might ruin his men's morale.

Instead, he issued out a single command. "Open fire!"

Every ranged mech started to fire at the Neyvar. The swordsman mech reacted quickly and pulled back behind a massive tree trunk before it got hit!

The second battle had commenced!

The ample amount of trees provided both sides with an ample amount of cover. Though the Vandals surrounded their base with prefab walls, they mainly relied on the hardy tree trunks to shield their mechs from enemy fire.

Compared to the Hafner training mechs, the Vandals disgorged a lot more firepower at the enemy. Not only did they field more mechs, they also didn't have to worry about running out of energy or ammunition.

Ves observed the happenings from the command center of the Shield of Hispania orbiting high above. Since the battle took place at the oval scar, the beachhead was able to transmit a direct signal to the Vandal fleet.

This was the benefit of a higher position! As head designer, Ves possessed the authority to send out other mech designers on site. So far, Mercator, Trozin and Vedette had done a decent job in servicing the mechs on the ground.

Since their lives were at stake, the three mech designers hadn't slacked off at all. Ves had nothing to complain about their work ethic, though they hadn't been very helpful when it came to identifying the weak points of the enemy mechs.

Ves had to do that for them. After the first battle, he spent an entire hour going through the footage of the Neyvar. He tentatively identified five major weak points that the Vandals could take advantage of in the next battle.

Right now, the Hafner mechs fell into a weak trend. They hadn't managed to fell a single Vandal mech. Conversely, the Vandals failed to inflict more than a couple of scratches on the Hafner mechs.

"They're stalling, sir!" The tactical officer exclaimed. "Compare the firing rates of both sides! The Hafner mechs are conserving their ammunition while dragging out the battle!"

Now that he mentioned it, Ves noticed that the Hafner mechs largely kept themselves behind cover. The massive and highly durable tree trunks absorbed most of the firepower being outputted by the Vandals!

This proved once again that while the Hafner mechs couldn't run away, they weren't too eager to confront the Vandals either. They played it smart and focused on conserving their strength.

Right now, the ball was in the Vandals' court.

"This looks kind of fishy." Major Verle stated. He turned to the sensor officer. "Are there any anomalies on the plot?"

"None detected so far, sir."

"What about the monsters?"

"They are showing no signs of.. no wait, they are massing together into a horde!"

According to the sensor plot, every monster pack began to congregate into a roving horde that was slowly moving towards the beachhead. They had already gathered more than a hundred monsters so far, but their count constantly grew.

The only relief to them was that the monsters moved rather slow!

"At their current pace, the monster horde will arrive in roughly fifty minutes!"

Hafner implemented a backdoor in their genetic programming after all.

"Hackers, get to work."

"Yes, sir!"

Ves did not expect too much from the hackers in the short term. Those monsters would overrun the beachhead long before the hackers managed to figure out a way to override Hafner's controls.

"Our position is untenable if we let the Hafner mechs run out the clock. Begin with the second phase!"

The Vandals gave up on trading potshots at each other. The abundant amount of cover in the forest prevented them from gaining any advantages in a firefight. They needed to take this battle up close and personal.

The Vandals broke up into squads and mech companies and moved out of the base. Taking advantage of their numbers, their mech companies spread out in different directions and unleashed a fusillade against the Hafner mechs from different angles.

The Hafner mechs faced a crossfire if they remained in place! They quickly pulled back from their battered tree trunks and swung around to attack a single flank of the approaching Vandals.

"They're aiming to run through our flank!"

The Vandals outnumbered the Hafners but it wasn't easy to encircle them. The Hafners chose to take the bull by the horns and chose to take the offensive rather than to let the Vandals complete the encirclement. With the Neyvar at the head, the Hafner mechs charged into the Vandal mechs without compunction!

Mechs collided as both sides clashed against each other! The flanking Vandal mechs had quickly adjusted their formation and greeted the incoming Hafner mechs with expectation.

For a moment, Ves found it difficult to distinguish what went on. Throughout the chaos, Ves finally managed to pin down the Neyvar.

A Vandal mech captain and a handful of chosen surrounded the swordsman mech in an attempt to contain it! For now, the Neyvar fell into a passive position as it desperately tried to fend off attacks from every direction.

The only problem was that the Neyvar was weaker than expected! Had the mech sustained more damage than projected?

"Sir the Neyvar is a decoy! Venerable Foster is piloting another mech!"

Damnit! Now that he thought about it, the Neyvar demonstrated none of Venerable Foster's distinctive sword style. Right now, it only performed the basic moves as it defended itself against multiple Vandal mechs.

"Where is she?!"

Just then, another Hafner swordsman mech exploded into action. This bog-standard copy of an average mech model called the Mackey Craic dropped its camouflage and displayed skill akin to a sword demon! It chopped up three nearby melee mechs in quick succession and helped the Hafner mechs punch through the Vandal line!

"That Mackey Craic is piloted by Venerable Foster!" Ves declared with alarm.  
"It's a completely fresh and undamaged mech!"

Though its overall specs fell short compared to the Neyvar, its pristine state meant that Foster didn't have to worry about her machine breaking down mid-battle!

Right now, the Mackey Craic obviously began to strain against the stress that Venerable Foster was forcing upon its frame. The mech moved faster to accommodate her violent Astral Swordwind techniques. Each attack finished off a Vandal mech with a single move at the cost of wearing down the Mackey Craic!

"For Hafner!"

"Death to pirates!"

"Victory to the righteous!"

The Hafner mechs gained inspiration from their Venerable's performance. Their morale surged enormously as the Mackey Craic ran through the Vandal mechs like a hot knife through butter. Its killing spree only came to a halt when two Vandal mech captains confronted it before it could break the Vandals.

In addition, other Vandal elements had caught up by now and pressured the Hafner mechs from their rear. The battle instantly swung in favor of the Vandals. The Hafner mechs hadn't managed to break through in time!

"Curs! Get out of my way!"

The Mackey Craic roundly outplayed the two mech captains and took out their mechs with superior skill! She resumed carving up her opponents, causing the Vandal mech pilots within her sight to shy away. They began to lose heart!

"Sir, our mech pilots at the flank are breaking! The Hafner mechs are breaking through"

"Hold the line, goddammit!" Verle yelled into the command channel. "The Hafner mechs are being hammered from the rear! We can finish them off if we can hold them in place!"

Unfortunately, though the battle went well at the rear of the Hafner formation, the front was a very different matter. The specter of Venerable Foster frightened the nearby Vandals into running away. None of them stood a chance against an expert pilot!

With every Vandal mech at the front trying to widen the distance, the Hafner mechs succeeded in removing themselves from the clash. They lost a lot of mechs during the brief engagement, but they succeeded in bleeding the Vandals as well. Venerable Foster was responsible for downing most of the Vandal mechs!

"The monster horde is approaching the beachhead!"

The Vandals needed to finish the battle quickly!

#### **Chapter 564 Suppressed**

The monster horde threatened the Hafner mechs as well as the Vandals. Ves did not believe that the Hafners had implemented too many controls in the genetically modified monsters. Ordering them to group up and sweep through every mech on the Kamwin continent was a double-edged sword. Short from ordering them to disperse their horde, the Hafner mech pilots might not make it through the monster wave alive unless they possessed another failsafe.

The Vandals couldn't let their opponents pull out another trick. They needed to end this battle quickly or at least take care of their primary objective.

After the Hafner mechs punched through one of the Vandal wings, they attempted to widen the distance.

The other Vandals attempted to catch up to them, but they were being hindered by their own comrades! The Vandals who witnessed Venerable

Foster's prowess in battle completely lost their will to fight, and became nothing more than obstacles to their fellow teammates! The wrecks that littered the ground also served as an impediment to the pursuers.

The Vandals needed time to reorganize their ranks. They had no choice but to let the Hafner mechs go.

However, before the Hafner mechs successfully disengaged, a furious barrage of cannon fire impacted their formation! Dozens of heavy projectiles and powerful laser beams pelted them from the side!

Over twenty Akkara heavy mechs had been transferred to the surface! Ordinarily, they served as makeshift turrets for the Vandal combat carriers. Major Verle had made a judgement call and opted to field the Akkara mechs on the ground at the cost of weakening the defenses of the fleet.

As long as Hafner didn't attack the Vandal ships in orbit, the risk was worth it!

The Flagrant Vandals didn't particularly excel at ranged combat. The only mech model that performed well at range was their Akkara heavy cannoners. These slow and heavy quadruped mechs provided a stable platform for the numerous cannon barrels mounted on its frame. An entire company of Vandal melee mechs guarded the valuable Akkaras.

Gathering over twenty heavy mechs and ordering them to fire in a single direction was a lethal move. The Hafner mechs hastily ran for the nearest cover, but not without losing over twenty mechs!

Along with the losses sustained in the earlier clash, the Hafner mechs only numbered around fifty mechs!

"This is the best way to beat an expert pilot." Ves concluded. "Captain Foster is deadly up close, but even she has to lower her head when it comes to massed firepower."

The heavy caliber of the cannons mounted on the Akkaras meant that her thoroughly average Mackey Craic mech couldn't shrug off the shells and laser beams without concern. Already the swordsman mech had gained several ugly cracks and scorch marks upon its armor!

The Akkara mechs continued to unleash death even after the Hafner mechs dove for cover. The heavy shells and laser beams worked away at the tree trunks. While the massive trees were capable of withstanding regular mech fire, the massed firepower of over twenty Akkara mechs was in an entirely different class!

The Hafner mechs lost too many comrades. Their plan was already a longshot, but to come across an unexpected setback depressed the surviving Hafner mech pilots.

However, they never thought about surrender. A warrior of Hafner never relented against pirates!

"The monster horde we've instigated should be close!" An instructor said. "We only need to endure for ten more minutes until the monster horde arrives!"

Both sides gritted their teeth as they fought with their utmost. By now, the main thrust of the Vandals finished sorting out their battle lines. They pressed on towards the suppressed Hafner mechs. Even after they sustained some losses, they still outnumbered the Hafner mechs by at least three-to-one.

The power of the Akkara mechs was in full display right now! Though Ves often complained in his mind about their cost and troublesome maintenance issues, he couldn't help but celebrate their inspiring performance!

"If Venerable Foster piloted a true expert swordsman mech, then she would have been able to dash up close and slice and dice these clumsy heavy mechs." Iris said besides Ves. "It's tragic that she never got the opportunity to show off her expert abilities in a better machine."

Ves huffed in response. "If she hadn't broken through in a completely spontaneous moment, then we wouldn't have to drag this battle out."

"Sir, the monster horde is five minutes away!"

Major Verle already looked pensive at the worsening situation. Though the Akkara mechs did a good job keeping the Hafner mechs from pulling something off, they weren't able to finish them off.

"Divert the Akkara group and half of our main group to deal with the monster horde."

In any case, the Hafner mechs only numbered a bit more than forty mechs by now. The Vandals didn't need to allocate all of their landbound forces into finishing them off.

The battle lines shifted. Half of the Vandal mechs eagerly split off in order to confront the incoming monster horde without distraction. The Akkara mechs along with their escorts also moved away from the Hafner mechs.

By now, the monsters numbered over five-hundred mech-sized beasts. That was sufficient to trample Training Camp Quistas even if they hadn't suffered from a massive bombardment.

Diverting around a hundred-and-fifty mechs was overkill to Ves, but Major Verle and the mech captains on the ground wanted to finish off the monsters quickly before they attracted more beasts. With the collective firepower of the Akkara mechs, the Vandals wouldn't have any problems with massacring the monsters.

This left just a bit over a hundred Vandal mechs to confront the remnants of Hafner. Though forty mechs still remained standing, none of their mechs had made it out unscathed. Seeing that the Vandals diverted much of their mechs elsewhere, Venerable Foster saw an opportunity to disengage.

"Retreat!"

Without the Akkara mechs suppressing their freedom of movement, the Hafner mechs emerged from behind the trees and retreated at an orderly speed.

The Vandals that remained followed in pursuit. Their ranged mechs fired their weapons as they ran, hoping to chip away at the fleeing Hafner mechs.

The Hafner mechs reciprocated. All of their mechs possessed the capacity to rotate their torsos by at least a hundred-and-sixty degrees. This gave their rifles enough of an angle to fire right behind them, though their mech pilots struggled to keep their mechs on their feet.

Both sides retained some scruples against each other.

If the Vandals split up into different elements again, they would only make themselves more vulnerable against Venerable Foster. This prevented the Vandals from splitting off their light mechs in an attempt to flank or surround the Hafner mechs.

Venerable Foster on the other hand felt constrained by her opponent's stubborn insistence on sticking together. Their close formation and lack of diversions meant that Foster would have to challenge all hundred Vandal mechs at once if she decided to take the offensive.

She calculated the outcome of the battle between the monster horde and the Vandal mechs. Due to the meteorite bombardment, most of the sensors and communication lines buried in the vicinity had been cut off. She found it difficult to estimate how long the monsters could keep the defending Vandal mechs in place.

"With those heavy mechs lending their assistance, those stupid beasts won't last very long. I doubt they can hold out for an hour."

She needed to finish off the pursuing Vandals before that time!

"We need to turn around and attack!"

Her prestige swayed the Hafner mech pilots without much convincing. She didn't even need to provide an explanation for her to direct her fellow comrades.

They turned around abruptly and closed in on the pursuing Vandal mechs. Both sides predominantly retained their melee mechs, so the battle quickly devolved into a confusing melee.

Two different mech captains confronted the Mackey Craic with varying levels of confidence. Though they couldn't match the speed and power displayed Venerable Foster, they possessed enough experience to preserve their mechs and their lives.

The expert pilot quickly grunted in frustration as her opponents stopped her from massacring the rank-and-file.

Although the mech pilots of the Flagrant Vandals were not as competent as proper mech pilots of the Mech Corps, their mech captains represented the best of their best. None of them were slouches when it came to piloting skill! Both mech captains happened to be elevated to their ranks due to their praiseworthy skill. While they weren't able to command all that well, their piloting prowess was enough to suppress their subordinates!

Right now, they utilized every drop of their skill to survive the Mackey Craic's onslaught of techniques! If a human made the same moves as the Mackey Craic, they would have strained their muscles or snapped their bones. Foster's sword style could only be performed by a specific class of flexible swordsman mechs!

Utilizing the inhuman range of motion of mechs and combining it with the weight of a mech, Venerable Foster attacks came fast and heavy. If not for

wielding a highly reinforced mech-sized sword meant for slaying hardy monsters, the Mackey Craic would have long cracked its only weapon!

Each sword strike pushed the defending Vandal mechs back. One of the mech captains piloted a knight mech. Its shield began to split from all of the abuse. The other mech captain piloted a spearman mech, which tried and largely failed to keep the Mackey Craic out of reach.

Under the control of Venerable Foster, the Mackey Craic moved with precision. The mech always managed to avoid a stab and spin close in order to sweep the spearman mech. After several failed attempts at stabbing the Mackey Craic, the mech captain finally made a misstep!

The Mackey Craic battered the spear to the side with an arm and hacked its sword with the other arm! Though the hasty move didn't have too much power behind it, the sword somehow managed to hit a critical junction in the spearman mech's arm!

"No!"

The Vandal knight mech moved to shield its comrade, but the Mackey Craic already recovered from its first attack and launched a second attack. Its sword stabbed straight at the chest of the spearman mech!

Just moments before the sword touched against the battered chest armor of the Vandal mech, its cockpit suddenly ejected from the rear! A scattering of rear armor plating bloomed out of the spearman mech's back as the cockpit safely flew out of sight while barely managing to dodge the trees in its way.

The survival rate of a season mech officer was much higher than a rookie because they could always judge the right time to eject!

However, the loss of the spearman mech meant that the remaining mech captain lost a vital pillar of support. Venerable Foster growled in anger as the opportunity to kill a pirate captain slipped.

She quickly turned to vent her fury against the other mech captain. With her skills, it didn't take more than five seconds to finish off the knight mech. The mech captain didn't hesitate to eject once he fell in a hopeless situation.

She won!

However, once she glanced at the state of her comrades, she discovered that they quickly fell in numbers! Only twenty Hafner mechs remained standing, and their numbers diminished in rapid tempo!

"Foul Vandals!"

The Vandals succeeded in diverting the main threat. Once Venerable Foster became constrained, the Vandals shamelessly took advantage of their numbers to crush the diminished and worn out Hafner mechs. A disparity of two-to-one quickly grew wider and wider until the disparity surpassed a ratio of four-to-one!

No matter how well the Hafner mech pilots fought, defeat was inevitable!

"Venerable! Please run! We'll hold them back as long as possible!" An instructor yelled. "I've already passed over the commands to incite the native monsters to your mech! Use them to finish off the invaders!"

Venerable Foster couldn't afford to linger on the battlefield. She quickly came to a ruthless conclusion and turned the Mackey Craic around to run.

"Hold the Vandal scum in place! Don't let them catch our future hope!"

Tears fell down from Foster's cheeks as she overloaded the Mackey Craic in order to hasten her flight.

### **Chapter 565 To The Brink**

The beachhead repelled the monster horde with great difficulty. The genetically modified beasts moved in an uncoordinated mob and attacked the temporary base with mindless frenzy.

"Hold the line! Hold the line, lads!"

Though the weight of the charge almost buckled the Vandal lines, their tight grouping also became their undoing.

"Akkara mechs, open fire!"

The twenty Akkara heavy cannons positioned themselves at the left and right wings of the frontlines. Guarded by an ample amount of melee mechs, they unleashed a torrent of firepower at the dumb beasts whose cunning and instincts had been overridden by a genetic backdoor.

It was like shooting fish in a barrel!

The monsters pressed themselves against each other in an effort to push forward. There was not a single chance the skilled mech pilots of the Akkara heavy mechs could miss a single shot when faced with a huge wall of flesh!

Incredibly violent noises emanated from their gun barrels as they mowed down the monsters. The frenzied beasts may have been large, but they weren't too resilient as their flesh lacked any special qualities compared to certain kinds of exobeasts.

Hafner wasn't extravagant enough to lace the Kamwin continent with valuable exotics!

The lack of any metaphysical qualities from the beasts meant that they were basically giant bags of flesh. While their offensive strength was enough to threaten a mech, their lack of defense enabled ranged mechs like the Akkaras to play out their full strength.

Thus, even if the monster horde outnumbered the defending Vandal mechs by three-to-one, the battle slanted heavily towards the latter's favor.

It was at this time that an alert sounded out in the command center of the Shield of Hispania.

"Sir, our sensors are detecting unusual movements from the capital city! The garrison mechs are on the move! Transports are already departing from the spaceport!"

"Where are heading?!"

"The Hafner transports are heading directly towards the beachhead!"

Some of the Vandals cursed a bit. The garrison troops finally made a move. Throughout the invasion, they had kept themselves holed up in their bunkers. Now, they finally moved out their mechs.

"Hafner must have ordered them to abandon their positions in order to reinforce Venerable Foster, sir. A newly advanced expert pilot is worth risking everything on Nova Migolatus I."

The garrison mechs didn't bring too many mechs, and their mech pilots were a far cry from those who served in proper mech regiments. According to the intelligence provided by Peace for Hafner, the rebel group had infiltrated their ranks a lot more extensively compared to Training Camp Quistas. Their inaction up to this point could be directly attributed to rebel interference.

It was likely that the garrison troops wouldn't fight all that hard. As long as they did the motions, their superiors wouldn't be able to fault them that much.

However, their entry into the battlefield was enough to inconvenience the Vandals. The base defenders expended a lot of energy in trying to repel the beast horde. Many melee mechs at the frontline incurred heavy damage, while the Akkara mechs shot themselves dry.

"Make sure to service the Akkara mechs before the garrison troops arrive!"

"Yes, sir!"

Ves conveyed Major Verle's priorities to his mech designers, leaving the matter in their hands.

The entry of the garrison troops and the unusual movements of the beasts on the Kamwin continent complicated this operation even further. What the Flagrant Vandals initially conceived as a lightning raid and assassination commission had transformed into a difficult hunt and base defense operation.

A significant amount of mech pilots lost their lives, and an even greater amount of mechs had been trashed. The Vandals lacked the time and manpower to retrieve the latter. Their losses already surpassed their expectations!

And the worst part of it was that none of their actions turned a profit!

"There's nothing about the carcasses of those genetically modified monsters that's worth harvesting." Ves quietly summed up. "The wrecks originating from the mechs of the training camp also isn't enough to make up for our losses."

The more they fought, the more they lost! Scarce and precious mech pilots lost their lives while their machines were too far for the Vandals to salvage. This entire venture was an asset-draining operation. To someone sensitive to money as Ves, this was a nightmare!

"The only way to redeem ourselves is to capture Venerable Foster."

Killing her would earn the Vandals a lot of kudos from Peace for Hafner, but how much was their appreciation worth? Not very much, especially if the group insisted on sticking to the original agreement.

No, the only way for the Vandals to recoup their losses was to capture Venerable Foster alive and treat her as a valuable bargaining chip. It was impossible to convert her to the Bright Republic, but the Vandals could still hold on to her while they renegotiated their agreement with the rebel group.

If Peace for Hafner remained obstinate, then the Vandals might even be able to trade their hostage back to the Hafner Duchy!

Of course, it would be a bad idea for the Vandals to free an expert pilot with a massive grudge against them. Ves figured that the Vandals would likely pretend to entertain the Hafner Duchy's offers in an effort to pressure Peace for Hafner into coughing up more concessions.

However, all of this depended on whether the Vandals could capture the expert pilot successfully. Capturing the ferocious Venerable was easier said than done!

Down on the surface, Venerable Foster managed to hold out for over an hour. With her comrades holding the bulk of the Vandals back, the Mackey Craic managed to disengage from the battle.

However, the Hafner mechs couldn't hold back all of the Vandals, causing around twenty light mechs to go on pursuit.

The Vandals were wary of another counterattack, so the light mechs on her heels did not come too close. They instead pelted the Mackey Craic with the handful of ranged weapons in their possession. Though their accuracy was poor and the damage wasn't all that much per shot, the Mackey Craic's rear armor was much less durable than the Neyvar's rear armor.

One of the complicating factors of the chase was that they occasionally bumped into monster groups. These beasts hadn't made it in time to join the first horde, so they congregated into a second one. Before they joined the main group of monsters, they refrained from attacking any mechs.

However, defending themselves was another matter!

Venerable Foster cleverly dashed towards any grouping of monsters with her mech. The Mackey Craic would then tap them with its sword, causing them to grow angry and defensive. Since the beasts weren't smart enough to distinguish which mech belonged to which side, they indiscriminately attacked every mech in the vicinity even if it belonged to her opponents!

Several times, she successfully incited the beasts and sneaked away at a critical junction. Though it didn't take much effort for her pursuers to put down the dumb beasts, they inevitably lost a lot of time!

One time, the Vandals decided to split up into two. One group held up the beasts while the other group continued the chase.

"A chance!"

Venerable Foster impatiently drew them away from the other group before pouncing on them! Before the Vandals could adjust their defense, the Mackey Craic already ran through six mechs in quick succession!

"Scatter! Don't engage Foster directly!"

Only after a mech captain caught up and held her back did Foster turn around and continue her flight. Venerable Foster knew very well that her mech wasn't strong enough to finish them off.

Her counterattack served as a deterrent! If the Vandals thought they could split up and cut off her escape route, then they were badly mistaken! The Mackey Craic still possessed sufficient reserves to finish off her pursuers if they dared to split!

"Come on, you pirates! Kill me if you dare!"

She wasn't entirely in her right mind. She recently experienced a breakthrough and witnessed a traumatic event. The recent transformation of her mind and life phase had left her in an exhausted state. She desperately needed to rest, but the constant fighting forced her push against her limits!

"I can't rest until these pirates are taken care of!"

Through her familiarity of the terrain and the occasional interference from the beasts, Venerable Foster managed to bleed her pursuers. She picked off a couple of mechs each time they made a mistake.

However, an hour in her flight, the Mackey Craic rapidly reached its limit. No matter how well she dodged, the shots coming from the rear occasionally landed a hit. Some of the shots even started to damage her mech's internals, which directly impacted its performance!

In addition, the stresses she exerted on her mech slowly broke down its frame. Cracks already started seeping in, which Venerable Foster compounded each time she forced the Mackey Craic to move past its limits!

"It's getting hot in here." She panted as she checked her heat and energy levels.

Typical to melee mechs, the Mackey Craic did not incorporate an extensive heat management system. While her mech didn't accumulate as much heat as a laser rifleman mech, it didn't hold as much reserves or possess any means of dumping the heat in an expedient manner.

As for the Mackey Craic's energy reserves, the mech performed numerous extreme movements that expended large amounts of power. This mode of operation was extremely inefficient, but Venerable Foster had no choice if she wished to maintain her superiority over the Vandals. Each extreme technique wasted at least twice or thrice as much energy!

The Mackey Craic's energy reserves dipped below twenty percent. This gave Venerable Foster very little leeway. She realized that she wouldn't be able to shake off all of her pursuers during this time.

The only way for her to contest her fate was to fight upfront!

No matter how much she wore out her mech and her own self, she was willing to risk it all!

The Mackey Craic instantly turned around without warning and dove at the pursuing Vandal mechs with a vengeance.

"Starwalker Steps!"

Her mech moved with great momentum as it weaved through most incoming fire. Once her mech reached the closest enemy, its sword instantly flashed through a seam within the armor plating, cutting through a vital component related to the power management system!

"Redemption Slash!"

While she wasn't a mech designer, her studies had given her an extensive understanding of the anatomy of a mech! Redemption Slash coordinated with the momentum of the mech to deliver a powerful vertical slash that could part through frontal armor with ease.

The only problem with this move was that it consumed way too much energy!

The Mackey Craic moved to the next Vandal and utilized a fast and powerful stab that poked through another universal weak point of her opponent's mech. The sword punched through the armor with ease and penetrated a section of its engage, causing the mech to lose all of its mobility.

"Swallow Stab!"

Venerable Foster piloted her mech with great effort, trying to spare as much energy as possible. Vandal mechs pressed against the Mackey Craic on all sides. If they managed encircle her and press against her from every direction, her mech would definitely lose all of its mobility!

"Get out of my way! Double Redemption Slash!"

Slashing twice in quick succession while making both blows count was extraordinarily difficult for Foster. If she wasn't an expert pilot, this move would have remained a possible dream for her. Right now, she managed to fell two mechs at once with this move, providing her Mackey Craic some breathing room.

Though the Vandals constantly lost mechs in their attempt to subdue Venerable Foster, they didn't hesitate to throw in more mechs! These wave tactics forced the expert pilot to the brink. Just as she finished off the latest mech that suicided into the Mackey Craic, her mech beeped out a dangerous alarm.

"What?! How can this be?!"

The Mackey Craic's energy reserves had dipped below five percent and was diminishing towards zero at a rapid pace!

The console that projected her mech's current status provided her with the answer. The Vandals had directly attacked the Mackey Craic's energy cells! Though most of them had run dry, the few remaining cells that still supplied energy to her mech had been punctured!

Before she could figure out how to escape, the Mackey Craic finally locked up! Its energy reserves completely ran dry!

#### **Chapter 566 Intimidation**

"Reporting, sir, Venerable Relia Foster has been captured alive!"

"Good! Make sure to keep her sedated, and don't give her the opportunity to commit suicide!"

Everyone on the command center cheered or sighed in relief. Ves was one of the latter, since this entire ordeal had far surpassed everyone's limits!

"Sir, the garrison troops that landed at the other edge of the oval scar is diverting away from the beachhead! They are moving to intercept our pursuit group!"

"They are moving to rescue Venerable Foster! Don't let them intercept our pursuit force!"

The plot depicting the positions of the mechs on the ground shifted in response. Dots representing Vandal mechs moved away from the beach head in order to cut off the approach of the Hafner garrison mechs.

This caused the Hafner mechs to adjust their course, which led to another shift from the Vandal mechs. This dance went on and on, with neither side willing to get close enough to fight it out.

The only reason why the Vandals didn't allocate more mechs to take care of the garrison force was because they needed to fend off another wave of monsters. Now that they slaughtered hundreds of beasts, the Vandals gained a great understanding of their weaknesses. They didn't need as much mechs to ward them off in the next attacks. It was sufficient to leave behind a single line of melee mechs while entrusting the duty of slaughtering most of the monsters to the Akkaras.

"It's getting more chaotic here! Prepare for extraction! Make sure to chase the garrison troops away from our beachhead!"

Now that the Vandals managed to capture their prize, they had no reason to linger on the Kamwin continent. The sooner they departed they departed this star system, the better!

Ves glanced towards another plot that showed the state of the Nova Migolatus System. Two separate fleets of combat carriers had crossed into the star system and would take less than twelve hours to reach the Vandals!

They were running out of time!

Both fleets represented entire mech regiments. One of them was a spaceborn regiment called the 3rd Silent Starpiercers. Their mech composition was made up almost entirely of cavalry mechs, more specifically lancer mechs. One or two lancer mechs might not seem so scary, but when they numbered more

than eighteen-hundred mechs, a single charge could easily demolish the Flagrant Vandals even if they hadn't split up the main fleet!

Of particular alarm to the Vandals was that the intelligence on the 3rd Silent Starpiercers mentioned that they had an expert pilot among their ranks! Venerable Cordoba Hunt piloted the same kind of lancer mech as Venerable O'Callahan, but unlike the latter Hunt was in the prime of his life.

In a contest between the two, the best result the Vandals could expect was mutual self-destruction.

"And that's not all."

The other fleet that headed towards Nova Migolatus was made up entirely of the 7th Hostland Warriors! This was Venerable Foster's mech regiment, and fielded both landbound and spaceborn mechs. Though their strength was nothing special, the fact that Venerable Foster hailed among their ranks meant that the Warriors wouldn't hold anything back!

The bonds between mech pilots of the same mech regiment could rival the bonds between siblings. Everyone treated each other like family and would never hesitate to rise up and rescue a beleaguered comrade. As the villains of this story, the Flagrant Vandals would not enjoy a good end at their hands!

In short, the Vandals on the ground needed to wrap up this operation quickly to escape the calamity heading in their direction. Once the Silent Starpiercers or the Hostland Warriors caught up with the Vandal fleet in orbit, they would never be able to escape this star system!

"Come on, hurry up!"

Fortunately, in the time it took for the pursuit to return to the beachhead, the garrison troops failed to sum up the courage to attack. This allowed the pursuit force to smoothly enter the temporary base. A handful of doctors escorted by lots of armed security officers placed the unconscious expert pilot

on a floating stretcher and transferred her to the heaviest transport the Vandals had on site.

"Drive the Hafner garrison mechs away from the oval scar! Don't let them take potshots at our transports!"

Support personnel already began to dismantle the base. The pursuit force that succeeded in capturing Venerable Foster quickly paused to replenish their supplies. Every mech technician worked hard to replace their energy cells and supplement their ammunition with rapid tempo. Time was short and each mech technician needed to pull their weight.

When Ves patched into the observation systems, he watched on as his mech designers each took up responsibility over important tasks.

Vedette had the unenviable task of supervising the replenishment process. A lot of mechs from the pursuit force had sustained some damage. The impact marks from the native beasts often dented the armor of the lighter mechs. This caused certain functions to cease functioning, such as opening up the rear of the mech to allow the mech technicians to replace the energy cells.

All of this required a quick resolution. Ves saw that Vedette utilized his recent gains in his studies on mechanics to propose expedient solutions. Though they weren't always the best, at least the man had the sense to prioritize speed over minimizing damage. Right now, they couldn't care too much if they sent out a mech with half of its rear armor plating missing!

"He's the most capable mech designer, but he's the most grounded of the bunch."

Trozin on the other hand liaised with the mech pilots. Ever since the start of the Vandal ground operation, she acted as a mediator between the mech pilots and the mech technicians. Ves faintly thought she was slacking off a little too much because she didn't do anything else besides talking.

"She hasn't showcased her technical skills all that much, but she's great when it comes to communicating with mech pilots."

Ves remembered that Trozin was related to a mech captain of the Vandals. Ves already looked up the connection before and found out she was the uncle of Captain Branser, who was stationed aboard the Wolf Mother.

"Right now, the Wolf Mother is part of the other fleet commanded by Colonel Lowenfield, so Trozin can't stir up too much trouble at the moment."

As for Mercator, the other high-ranking mech designer on the ground mainly bossed around the remaining mech technicians. Though the man's behavior was rather loathsome to Ves, the ambitious mech designer made sure that none of the mech technicians slacked off. Under his strict supervision, every technical personnel working on site exerted their utmost into keeping everyone's mechs running.

"He's way too abusive, but maybe that's the only way to keep everyone's productivity high. There's no room for soft-heartedness in the middle of a risky operation."

All in all, the mech designers all fulfilled their roles and prevented any major jams. Transports and shuttles landed and departed from the landing site with hardly any delays. It wouldn't take too long for the Vandals evacuate from the planet.

His only regret was that the Vandals weren't able to retrieve all of their fallen mechs. Many of their wrecks were strewn at least an hour away from the oval scar. The roaming monsters and dense trees made it far too dangerous for them to send out transports to pick up the valuable wrecks.

While the Vandals gained a tiny bit of earnings by salvaging the mechs from the training camp, it far outweighed the losses they sustained so far. Ves

roughly estimated their casualties to reach up to half of their landbound contingent!

"Leaving so many mechs behind will hurt our finances a lot." Ves murmured. "Venerable Foster hasn't been merciful to our mech pilots either. She deliberately targeted the cockpit whenever she saw an opportunity."

The latter led to a lot of nasty glared towards the unconscious body of Venerable Foster. Still, most of the mech pilots would never condone any mistreatment of an expert pilot. Even if they ended up in captivity, they still retained their dignity!

More importantly, the Mech Trade Association paid close attention to the treatment of any expert pilot in enemy hands. The organization cared little if someone executed any captives on the battlefield or in a cell. Honestly speaking, the population of humanity had reached a mind-boggling figure. Even if only three-and-a-half percent of them could call themselves a potentate, that left way too many people left.

"An individual mech pilot is worth nothing. An expert pilot is worth an entire mech division."

This was only a figure of speech, but it highlighted the extreme valuation of expert pilots at the state level. The worth of a young and promising expert pilot such as Venerable Foster might reach as high as ten-thousand mechs!

Of course, this reference value could only be taken loosely, as states rarely paid so much in ransom for a captive mech pilot. The actual ransom payments were much more modest as states only paid a ransom up to a certain point.

Nonetheless, their captive was a real prize for which both the rebels and the Hafner Duchy would fight hard to gain. The Vandals directly gained the power to affect the balance of power over this territory.

Right now, the ground forces hurried up to evacuate their beachhead at the oval scar. They successfully managed to evacuate over half of their mechs so far. After driving away the timid garrison mechs, the Vandals bought enough time to evacuate the other half of their mech force.

The ground force left a lot of supplies and other goods in their hasty evacuation. They simply didn't have the time to attend to these matters as the Silent Starpiercers and the Hostland Warriors

"We've retrieved all of our essentials from the surface, sir!"

"Begin our departure from the system!"

The Verle Task Force moved towards the nearest Lagrange point. However, just like on the surface, the Vandals also needed to be wary of the garrison fleet that miraculously kept themselves alive during this operation. Their fast and nimble combat carriers continuously played hide and seek against the spaceborn mechs the Vandals sent in pursuit.

Right now, they formed the largest threat to their escape. As long as they continued to pester the Vandals, they could easily prevent any transitions.

"These cowardly garrison combat carriers are a thorn in our sides." Major Verle stated. "It's a good thing we've come up with a plan."

The only way the Vandals could halt the pestering was if they made some sacrifices. At first, they retracted all of their spaceborn mechs as the fleet moved towards a Lagrange point.

This lured the garrison fleet closer to the Vandals. It didn't take too much time for them to enter into range. Some of their mechs already started firing at the Vandal combat carriers.

"Begin!"

However, just as the Hafner spaceborn mechs began to get comfortable, all of the Inheritors and Hellcats boosted from the fleet and overloaded their flight systems! Their rapid acceleration towards the garrison fleet alarmed the Hafner mechs. They quickly boarded their high-speed carriers in an attempt to dance out of reach.

Due to the modest head-start of the Vandal mechs, the garrison fleet risked getting caught. This only prompted the stripped-down Hafner combat carriers to accelerate even faster.

This chase lingered on for half an hour. The Vandal mechs had ceased to overload their flight system, but they still posed a large threat to the Hafner mechs.

Just then, the Vandal mechs collectively turned around and burned back to the task force. They never intended to catch up to the garrison fleet!

As the Inheritors and Hellcats burned their way back to their motherships, the garrison fleet halted their acceleration in confusion. Eventually, they realized what the Vandals were up to and frantically turned around their ships to return to the vicinity of the Vandal fleet!

"Hah! I knew they were scared!" Major Verle exclaimed. "Just like their landbound force, the spaceborn garrison fleet is full of rot. They clearly treasure their lives over the mission."

The Vandals gained a decisive delta-v advantage through their maneuvers. Simply said, the garrison fleet had run away so eagerly that it took a lot of time for their ships to turn around and catch up to their targets. It would take at least fifteen to twenty minutes for their mechs to be in range to disrupt their enemy's attempt to transition into FTL.

"Too late!"

The entire task force successfully entered into FTL with more than enough time to spare. The impotent garrison fleet could only watch on as their cowardice allowed their prey to slip away untouched.

### Chapter 567 Unsettling Change

The Flagrant Vandals made it out!

Those who fought on the surface almost couldn't believe they made it out of hell. Pretty much all of the mech pilots came out of their mechs in a broken state. Though they admirably held themselves together on the field due to their training, once they returned to safety the trauma seeped through the cracks.

Ves and Chief Haine stood on a ramp overlooking one of the hangar bays of the Shield of Hispania. They watched on as mech technicians carefully peeled open the cockpits of heavily damaged landbound mechs to reach the mech pilots trapped inside.

Throughout it all, the overall mood in the hangar bay was depressing. While the inherent resilience of the Flagrant Vandals prevented them from lashing out or doing anything drastic, Ves sensed nothing good from the men.

"Have the Vandals always sustained so many losses in a single campaign?" Ves asked.

"Plenty." The chief technician replied. "Just not in big battles like this. Ordinarily, we don't like to move in huge formations and pit our mechs against anything tough. Normally, we split up in smaller squadrons and spent most of our time raiding Vesian shipping lines. Sometimes, we're able to catch a juicy convoy, and in other times, we end up bumping our noses into a patrol. All of those skirmishes takes a toll on our numbers."

"I see. So the Vandals are used to losses, but only in bite-sized packages."

The chief glanced at Ves with a cool expression. "Mr. Larkinson, we are soldiers above else. We aren't cowards who value our lives above anything else. Even if the Mech Corps doesn't regard us very highly, within ourselves lies the hope that we can prove ourselves to be equal to those shining mech regiments that have become household names in the Republic."

Mech regiments such as the Stellar Lancers, the Infernal Hellhounds and the Volari Starhawks all enjoyed significant renown back home. Their funding and support was incomparable to the Flagrant Vandals.

Ves could see how the pride of those who had been forced onto the Vandals had been impugned. If Ves was a mech pilot who had been thrown into this garbage bin of a mech regiment, he too would have wished to prove himself in battle.

"I mean no disrespect, Chief Haine. It's just that the civilian in me can't get used to seeing so many comrades fall. How can the Vandals push on and keep their heads high?"

"Everyone deals with loss in a different way. The survivors are taken care of. We're not clueless in that regard. Soldier or not, humans are fragile. From the moment our civilization has ascended to the stars, we've become very good at handling trauma."

Ves nodded. He could see that a number of mental health specialists already started receiving the mech pilots who emerged from the cockpits. Ves ordinarily ignored the specialists since they hardly did anything but take up space, but right now they were worth their weight in gold.

"A lot of our landbound mechs got trashed. You've got a lot of work ahead of yourself if you want to salvage something out of this mess."

"I know." Ves laughed sardonically at himself. "I don't even look at the latest figures anymore. I'm scared I'll get a heart attack once I see how many mechs

we've lost and how many wrecks we need to restore. Those giant monsters on the Kamwin continent aren't gentle at all."

A large proportion of mechs that got trashed consisted of melee mechs that received an awful battering from the monster hordes. The monsters attacked with a combination of blunt and cutting forces that combined resulted in some of the most awful sort of damage to the mechs.

"The damage to the melee mechs that got smacked around by the monsters is incredibly arduous to fix. It's different from the mechs that Venerable Foster managed to down. That feisty girl always tried to finish off her opponents as expediently as possible, so most of the damage we've incurred from her is concentrated on a small set of critically damaged components."

Ves understood her point. "On the other hand, the mechs that incurred damage from the monsters require a complete overhaul. All of that blunt force has penetrated through the surface armor of our mechs. The damage to their internals is extensive, and it will take lots of time to pin down which component needs to be replaced."

Leaving out the wrecks that the Vandals had been forced to leave behind, the Vandals hadn't sustained too much material damage. Any damaged mech they managed to retrieve could be fixed up over time as the mech technicians could easily take out a damaged parts and recycle them in order fabricate replacement parts.

The only problem was that this would take way too much time with their current equipment and manpower.

Without the industrial capacity of the Wolf Mother, the Verle Task Force needed years to make up all of the losses they sustained. Their landbound contingent was in shambles while their spaceborn contingent never regained their prime.

"Our spaceborn battle efficiency isn't too bad, so it is not the end of the galaxy." The chief patted his back in an attempt to console him. "Repairing the landbound mechs is a megaproject. No one expects you to fix everything up. Right now, it's more important to finish our mission and return home before we can consider rebuilding our forces."

She was right. The Vandals went through hell and almost reached the gates that led to heaven. Once they crossed the borders of the Hafner Duchy, they would finally be able to breathe easily as they didn't have to worry about constant ambushes from the reigning power in the region.

Though the Reinald Republic wasn't exactly an ally of the Bright Republic, their shared enemy kept their relations fairly cordial. It wasn't uncommon to see Brighter ships trawling about in Reinald space and vica versa.

Many of the larger Brighter companies established subsidiaries in the Reinald Republic. The Flagrant Vandals would be able to gain preferential treatment from them. The Vandals counted on this to be their deliverance after this ordeal was over.

"What happens next?"

"That depends, Mr. Larkinson. We've captured an expert pilot at a very great cost. If I was the Major, I would be very eager to trade her away for some much-needed concessions."

"Major Verle is going to try to play the rebels against Hafner, I bet."

"He'll be playing a very dangerous game. The thing about negotiating is that it works best if nobody is aware of what others want. Right now, it's plain to see that every side wants."

The Flagrant Vandals wanted to cross the borders.

The Hafner Duchy wanted their precious expert pilot back.

The rebels wanted to weaken the Hafner Duchy.

"The negotiation is going to be a dance." Ves guessed. "Each side will go through the motions, but I think everyone has already settled on an outcome."

"The process is still important. It can decide whether we'll enjoy the bulk of the rewards or if our rebel partners will lay claim to the lion's share of the spoils."

From what Ves could see, the only way to please all three sides was to involve everyone in the same transaction. Venerable Foster was the main prize. While it would have been better for the Bright Republic to deny her release, she wasn't very useful to the Vandals.

It was like having access to a huge bank account. Would the impressive figure be able to save his life if someone pointed a gun at Ves?

No!

Right now, the Vandals desperately needed to raise their strength. Trading away an expert pilot despite the huge threat she posed to her enemies in the future was more attractive than squirreling her away like a lump of precious ore.

Considering the sheer value of a young and healthy expert pilot, the Hafner Duchy would likely be willing to bleed really hard to get her back.

Of course, the Vandals hadn't been able to capture her by themselves. Peace for Hafner helped a lot in the background, from providing actionable intelligence to sabotaging the Hafner forces from within.

Their help was especially valuable at the end where their double agents caused the garrison fleet to waver at critical moments! Therefore, the interests of Peace for Hafner shouldn't be neglected.

Besides, considering that the Verle Task Force was about to enter the Reinald Republic, making the rebel group happy was an important concern. Though

no Reinald official ever confirmed the rumors, it was pretty much an open secret that the rebel groups operating in Hafner space were Reinald's sock puppets.

"I hope that we've got some competent negotiators among our ranks, then." Ves muttered. "In any case, these mechs won't get serviced by themselves. Let's get to work, shall we?"

Ves took stock of the damage together with Chief Haine. He studied the abuse the landbound mechs had suffered from the blunt force impacts from the rampaging monsters. Though he only inspected a small sample, the damage looked worse than he thought.

The beasts possessed a weak defense, but a powerful offense! Any mech that tussled with the monsters of the Kamwin continent up close required a complete disassembly. The main reason for this was that in some cases, the internal frame had been affected!

"It's going to take multiple days of work from an entire group of mech technicians to fix one of these damaged landbound mechs." Ves concluded morosely. "That doesn't sound so bad if only a handful of mechs require such treatment, but we're talking about close to two-hundred machines here."

Chief Haine had been right that the Vandals didn't plan on fighting anymore landbound battles for the foreseeable time. However, Ves did not believe that everything would end once they reached the Reinald Republic. He already started casting his gaze on what the task force would be doing next.

"Will we really be returning to the Bright Republic for a lengthy downtime?"

Somehow, Ves did not believe this odyssey would end so soon. At the very least, the matter with Lord Javier and his secret presence aboard the Shield of Hispania foreshadowed a continuation of their secret movements.

"What's so important about Lord Javier and why is it so important to reach the Reinald Republic within a certain time?"

Ves still couldn't connect the dots despite the vast amount of data at his fingertips. In fact, the awful state of the Vandals made it clear that they weren't ready for another major operation at all. He dearly hoped that bigwigs didn't have another difficult mission in store for them once they reached the end of the journey.

After taking stock of the situation at the hangar bays, Ves returned to his office to draw up a new schedule. The original one he composed more than a month ago was plainly unworkable considering how much the Vandals had been set back.

When he entered his office, Ves saw that Iris wasn't present at her desk.

"She's probably helping with the negotiations."

Ves wondered if he would soon be saying goodbye to Iris. Now that the Vandals were about to reach their destination, they had no need to trade for favors from the rebel movements that made themselves home in the Vesia Kingdom.

Realizing that she would soon be out of his life, Ves realized that he would miss her presence. She had been of great assistance to Ves. Not only did she introduce him to neural interface technology, she also deepened his understanding of Vesian culture and military.

"I'll have to prepare a farewell gift to her." He affirmed to himself. "Perhaps once the war is over, she'll finally smarten up and give up on her unrealistic dream to turn the Kingdom away from feudalism."

Ves chuckled to himself. Sometimes he had the feeling that nothing would ever change. The Bright Republic and Vesia Kingdom would likely look the same a hundred years from now.

He wouldn't know what to do if something changed.

### Chapter 568 Human Blessing

"So that's an expert pilot."

Later in the day, Ves had been invited by Major Verle to the medical bay. They walked past numerous pods where the bodies of heavily-injured mech pilots bathed in strange solutions that slowly restored their bodies.

These days, machines performed most medical treatments. They worked much more precise and extensively than humans. Though the risk of tampering remained, the medical machines were subjected to strict and frequent inspections. A modern-day doctor was both a medical specialist and a machine operator.

To Ves, doctors were like mech technicians. The only differences were that they possessed better degrees and worked with living bodies instead of cold, mechanical machines.

Doctor Eric Cuscar greeted the two at the end of the medical bay. As the chief medical officer, Cuscar was the most senior and knowledgeable doctor in the entire task force. He was also responsible for keeping tabs on Ves' abnormal body.

"Doctor." Major Verle greeted the old man with a nod. "How's the little girl?"

Cuscar deliberately coughed in his hand. "I suggest you mind your manners, major. The 'little girl' you are referring to is a superhuman mech pilot! She's a genuine marvel of the human potential! I'm gathering bucketloads of data right at this moment!"

"You didn't answer my question, doc. How is she doing?"

"Ah, ahem, Venerable Foster is not in a good state. She broke through under great stress and in less than ideal circumstances. That she advanced to expert when she was several steps away is a testament to her talent. I've

treated several expert pilots in my life, and each one is a unique work of art shaped by a combination of nature and human influence. The potential of my latest patient is hands down the best I've ever laid my eyes on!"

The doctor's excitement was palpable from the amount of spittle that escaped his mouth. Both Ves and Major Verle inched away in order to avoid getting hit by friendly fire.

"What makes her special compared to the other expert pilots you've treated?" Ves asked.

"As I've already mentioned, her genes are exquisitely perfect! In addition to that, she contains more activated genes that are known to be beneficial to mech pilots than every other expert pilot that I've laid my eyes on. The simplest way to put it is that her body has a lot of good switches, and most of them are flicked in the right way."

Ves wasn't a complete novice on expert pilots. It was everyone's dream to advance into an expert pilot, so the general population knew what a mech pilot required in order to reach this height.

First, they needed the right genetics! Just as humans could be divided into norms and potentates, the latter group in turn fit into different subcategories.

The most expedient way to categorize potentates was to measure their genetic aptitude. Biomedical experts who specialized in studying the physiology of mech pilots utilized many different measures to classify their strengths. However, laypeople mainly referred to a single summarized grade that ranged from A to F.

Genetic aptitude was a complex concept in itself. All Ves knew about it was that it signified how strong a potentate's gene expressions would facilitate the act of interfacing with a mech.

Ves possessed a genetic aptitude of F. This meant that his brain might as well be a rock when he tried to interface with a mech. No matter how hard he tried, his mind and body firmly rejected any attempts at engaging with the interface. In fact, if Ves tried to force a connection, his brains would likely suffer permanent brain damage.

Potentates with a genetic aptitude of E could barely be called mech pilots at all even when trained. They comprise a fairly small chunk of potentates, so most people who fell into this category resigned themselves into becoming the reserves of the reserves. A state wouldn't put them into a mech unless they started to scrape the bottom of the barrel in terms of manpower.

Ves remembered witnessing one mech pilot with a probable genetic aptitude of E or E-. Only with such a low blessing would Leviticus have trouble making basic movements as he competed against other mech duelists in one of Bentheim's many mech arenas.

Aptitudes ranging from D to B comprise the vast majority of mech pilots.

Mech pilots whose aptitudes fell into the D-range mostly ended up piloting frontline mechs when they served or industrial mechs if they remained civilians. Though they weren't particularly valuable, there was a lot of them, so states rarely let them go to waste.

Potentates with aptitudes in the C-range mainly consisted of the rank and file of every mech force. They possessed enough talent to pilot a humanoid or bestial mech proficiently. However, for every mech pilot with a C-range aptitude, there were at least two mech pilots with a D-range aptitude. Their relative scarcity meant that states cherished them pretty deeply.

Those with aptitudes that reached up to the B-range could be called winners in life. Their piloting careers were bound to be smooth, and they could easily pilot advanced mechs as extensions of their own limbs.

Due to focused genetic breeding and all kinds of other medical voodoo kept out of sight, the offspring of the Larkinsons mainly fell under this enviable category. The Larkinsons wouldn't be much of a military dynasty if their genes weren't so fortuitous, which they inherited from the Larkinson Ancestor.

Ves in fact possessed many of those genes as well, but there was more to genetic aptitude than having the right materials in place. The problem in his case was that his body refused to make use of those materials. Instead, it pretty much left them into the dust, treating them as nothing more than junk.

This was the special part about Venerable Foster. Not only did she possess the right materials, her body also utilized most of them to construct a beautiful palace that allowed her to advance higher than anybody else.

"A genetic aptitude of A is extremely rare." Doctor Cuscar lamented. "It's such a shame that the Mech Corps never assigns their prodigies to the Flagrant Vandals. My understanding of these blessed mech pilots is far too lacking!"

"What about Venerable O'Callahan? Doesn't he have an A-grade genetic aptitude as well?" Ves asked.

The doctor snorted. "That old man's body is only useful for studying how long a human can cling to life in their final moments. Besides, Venerable O'Callahan only works with his own medical team. He's keeping his cards close to himself. I think his actual genetic aptitude is closer to B rather than A, if you ask me."

Both Ves and Major Verle nodded in understanding. Genetic aptitude didn't signify whether a mech pilot halted at advanced pilot or not. There had even been cases where losers with D-grade aptitudes had somehow lucked out and advanced to experts!

Naturally, this almost never happened in reality. There was a direct correlation between the probability of advancing into an expert and genetic aptitude. The

higher the grade, the more likely someone would be able to break through. However, even for a blessed potentate with A-grade aptitude, their odds of advancing at all was smaller than a percent!

"I can't help but marvel at the sight of Venerable Foster's aptitude." Doctor Cuscar praised as he approached a control panel that operated the complex medical machinery in the chamber beyond. "If you look at her brain scans, you can see that they are much more divergent than a more average mech pilot. The high plasticity of her brain cells essentially allows her subconsciousness to rewire their brains to better facilitate a neural connection! This is also a benefit of her youth. If she was as old as Venerable O'Callahan, she would never have been able to present such a remarkable nervous system!"

Ves and Major Verle could barely follow Doctor Cuscar's commentary. They simply watched through the transparent viewscreen as Venerable Foster's sedated body covered in a thin wrap received various proddings and injections.

"She isn't getting worse, is she?"

"The Venerable is stronger than she looks. Don't you worry Mr. Larkinson, she'll be as right as rain once I fix her up. Right now, her body needs lots of rest to stabilize her life phase as well as lots of nutrients to allow her body to finish its transformation. The transition from mortal to superhuman is truly a wonder to behold!"

It was obvious that Venerable Foster wouldn't be waking up anytime soon. This disappointed Ves for a bit, but it also provided him with an extra cushion of safety for what he was about to do. He had always wanted to flex his Spirituality with others. He wanted to do more with this Attribute than using it to bestow his works with the X-Factor.

Thus, as Major Verle discussed some matters with Doctor Cuscar, Ves quietly stared at the prone body of the expert pilot while extending out an invisible tendril of thought.

Ves never really managed to accomplish anything when he reached out to a baseline human. Neither norms or mech pilots showed any signs of being affected by his Spirituality. It was as if they consisted of nothing but air!

He theorized that most of the shenanigans that revolved around his Spirituality actually happened in a parallel dimension that Ves loosely referred to as the imaginary realm. Any human being with a deficient Spirituality didn't have the qualifications to enter this realm. This worked both ways, so entities in the imaginary realm wouldn't be able to affect that vast majority of humanity.

His current experiment was important to him, because Ves hypothesized that expert pilots partially derived their special powers from expressing their own brand of spirituality. It was the only variable that Ves could think of that could conceivably explain the magic that they performed.

He tuned out everything else and urged his mind probe to reach the unconscious woman. Just as it reached Venerable Foster's body, Ves faintly felt a small amount of feedback from his tendril!

It worked!"

Half a minute went by as Ves carefully brushed against something that felt like cotton. Whatever spirituality Venerable Foster possessed, it was extremely weak and porous. If Ves didn't specifically look out for it, he might never have noticed its presence in the first place!

Ves was very glad right now that once of his assumptions had been proven right. Spirituality may be one of the keys that allowed a mech pilot to advance to an expert pilot! Though this was just a preliminary result, if proven to be correct, this insight could change the galaxy forever!

Most humans stumbled blindly in their attempts to find a way for mech pilots to break through the bottleneck. If Ves casually leaked out his findings, he would doubtlessly unleash a storm of epic proportions in human space!

Once he realized the immensity of his experiment, he quickly dissipated the mental probe and kept his mouth firmly pressed together. He walked away from the transparent screen and turned around as if he grew bored from watching an unconscious mech pilot.

Major Verle paused his discussion with Doctor Cuscar and turned to Ves.

"Have you taken a good glimpse at her? How does she measure up compared to the expert pilots in your family?"

"We only have three expert pilots in our family. Two of them lost their strength and were forced to retire. Our only active expert is holed up in Citadel Havensworth for much of my life. I hardly ever saw the hero."

"Colonel Ark Larkinson. A good man. He is truly a shining example for the Mech Corps." Major Verle complimented without any sarcasm. "So is Venerable Foster worse than Venerable Larkinson?"

Ves shrugged. "How could I tell? Uncle Ark is strong, but he isn't young anymore. Venerable Foster could potentially reach a greater height than him. What do you think, doctor?"

"Her potential is frightfully high." Doctor Cuscar slowly said. "I don't think you realize the import of my statement. She's a mech pilot who won the jackpot multiple times she played the slot machine. I would dare say that we're not keeping an expert pilot in our custody. Instead, we're looking at a future ace candidate!"

Ace candidate! Ves widened his eyes, and so did the mech officer standing next to him. An expert pilot that had the potential to advance to the next step in the road to godhood was practically extinct in much of the Komodo Star

Sector! The only aces that have ever emerged in this part of space all came from the second-rate states.

For Hafner to have been blessed with an ace candidate was of enormous significance to the balance of power between the Vesia Kingdom and its neighbors!

### Chapter 569 Last Meeting

After visiting Venerable Foster, Ves gained a wholly new understanding of the higher ranks of mech pilots. He now understood a little better why humanity worshipped them. Their strength and force of will transcended the boundaries of mortal men.

"They may even be the vanguard of the future evolution of humanity."

In the Age of Mechs, no human enjoyed more renown than mech pilots. There was a very strong desire for parents to give birth to potentates. Though mech pilots often risked their lives, there was no greater glory for a human to pilot a mech.

This had led to a very strong desire to breed for genetic aptitude. Though the proportion of potentates to norms hadn't changed all that much in the last four-hundred years, researchers understood more about genetic aptitude than ever before. Certain families and organizations such as the Larkinsons grasped some profound means to vastly increase the odds of birthing a potentate.

Of course, the Larkinsons paid a heavy price to fund these special treatments. Without money and the right genetics, it was impossible for the vast majority of humanity to enjoy the same opportunity. Even then, there were limits to human intervention. The occurrence of A-grade genetic aptitude was completely up to chance.

Venerable Foster was truly a unique specimen in the Hafner Duchy.

Almost a week had passed since they departed from the Nova Migolatus System. The entire task force fell into a depressingly familiar routine. The Vandals mourned their losses but also pulled up their sleeves and went to work. Countless mech technicians scoured over the damaged mechs and prioritized the repair of the least-damaged ones.

Once they emerged from FTL, the fleet conducted the biggest space burial ceremony as of yet. Every Vandal shared the pain of losing a close brother or sister, and Major Verle had done his best to get them to look forward to the future.

After that, the Vandals mostly turned back to normal, though there was a rising undercurrent of discontent among the rank-and-file. Ves heard the usual talk of deserting the Mech Corps, but this time a lot more people shared the same opinions.

Ves didn't think this was a good sign. The Vandals always had a tendency to speak their minds. It was a way of venting their frustrations whenever they got dealt a bad hand. The battle on the Kamwin continent had been a lot more deadly than everyone initially expected.

People started asking again why they fought these battles in the first place.

"We're not a battlefield regiment! This high-risk journey through half of the Kingdom is insane!"

"If I was Colonel Lowenfield, I would have taken the entire fleet away from this depressing corner of the galaxy. With a full mech regiment at her back, she can mix with lots of different outfits."

"I should have joined a mercenary corps instead of the Mech Corps. Pah, what does all of this talk of pride and glory have to do with us? It's the big wigs who are earning all of the glory! They don't even have the guts to step on the

battlefield in person, but they're the first ones to step forward when it comes to taking credit!"

No matter where he went, Ves continued to pick up borderline treasonous talk. It made him profoundly uncomfortable when he visited the mess hall to eat his meals or went down to the hangar bays to inspect the repair work.

It had even birthed a faint suspicion in his paranoid mind. Was their trip to the Reinald Republic a one-way journey?

"Whatever is happening, it shouldn't take too long for some of the truth to come out."

During their time of recuperation, the task force continued to approach Hafner's borders. It wouldn't take too long before they finally arrived at the barrier of heavily-patrolled star systems.

Ships that made use of standard FTL drives had no way to surmount this barrier. The stars on both sides tended to be dim and small, which meant they were far from energetic enough for ships to dial into their coordinates from afar. There weren't any port systems in the vicinity either.

This basically meant that ships crossing the border needed to take multiple stops in order to avoid any accidents. This was akin to walking through a forest in the dark. People needed to take one step at a time in order to prevent anyone from smacking into a wall.

Throughout this buffer time, rumors continued to disseminate about the negotiations. Some of them had a lot of basis in fact, but it was difficult for Ves to take them for granted.

Ves wanted to cut through the falsehoods, so he went straight to one of the sources. He invited Iris to come up to one of the Shield of Hispania's lounges after their shift had ended.

"Mr. Larkinson! Why did you invite me up here?"

The lounge that Ves had picked out was a prime relaxation area for the ship's warrant officers and more junior commissioned officers. The Vandal mech pilots and mech officers tended to favor their own watering holes in the lower decks.

The luxuriously-furnished lounge was situated at the upper deck and ordinarily featured an observatory that allowed everyone to look up at the stars.

Right now, the task force was submerged in FTL travel, so thick plates of armor shielded up the transparent dome. Looking out at the higher dimensions had a tendency to make some people nauseous or worse.

Ves waved at Iris and beckoned her to join him at a corner. A discrete privacy screen surrounded the corner, which prevented others from eavesdropping on them. This was very helpful for off-duty officers who wanted to discuss sensitive matters outside of their work environment. Naturally, the ship's monitoring system still recorded every word that was being said.

Once Iris sat down, Ves invited her to order a drink. "Come. It's my treat."

Seconds after they ordered their drinks, a small floating serving bot arrived to deliver their chosen poison.

Ves took a swig of his mug of heavy stout. He almost spat it out right after. "Damn it! How can the Vandals be so cheap?! This is synthesized from nutrient packs!"

The woman sitting opposite to him smiled amusedly at him. "What do you expect? They spend the vast majority of their funds on keeping their mechs and ships together. They have no energy to waste on procuring authentic food and drinks."

He had already become used to meals derived from nutrient packs. The only times he got to enjoy authentic food these days was when Major Verle held an elaborate dinner occasion. At least the big boss knew how to enjoy himself. Ves couldn't imagine what kind of foodstuffs the mech officer squirreled away.

"You must be wondering why I asked to meet with you here."

"The thought did cross my mind."

Both of them shed the veneer of formality they normally wore while on duty. This would have been a lot less common in Vesian circles. Even the rebels that advocated for the overthrow of the nobility still couldn't shake off the class system that had been imposed on them for all their lives.

However, Iris had mingled with the Vandals for almost two months now. Her continued exposure to how the Vandals treated each other had opened her eyes.

"Our journey is almost at an end. From what I can see, we'll be crossing the border one way or another within the week. This might be the last time our lives intersect with each other."

The female mech designer smiled. "It's been a wild ride, hasn't it?"

"It's not what I expected when the Mech Corps drafted me. I originally thought I would spend the entire war stuffed inside a hidden research base buried somewhere covert deep in Republic space. Did you know that I worked hard to advance my career in order to avoid getting sent to the frontlines? Hah! Look where that got me."

"Well, it doesn't appear you've suffered loss, Ves. Look at you now. You're the temporary head designer of this fleet. Although you aren't as capable as Professor Velten, you're gaining valuable experience in a role that is hard to come by."

"My job isn't as comfy as it sounds. I've been working very hard each day and it demands the utmost of my capability. Everything would be twice as easy if I was a Journeyman Mech Designer. My own subordinates wouldn't doubt me all the time."

"Are Trozin and Mercator stirring up some trouble again?"

"Not particularly." He shook his head. "They used to deviate from my orders or interpret them in an unusual manner. They've quieted down ever since we've departed from the Nova Migolatus System. Maybe their time on the field has done them some good."

"Didn't you send that other guy down there as well?"

"That's Vedette." Ves palmed his face when he thought of the low-ranking mech designer. "All I wanted was to stiffen him up. He hadn't even been exposed to any threats to his life, yet once he came back from his deployment it's like he turned into a mouse. According to the mental health professionals who examined him, he's actually suffering from PTSD!"

Of course, this condition wasn't hard to treat these days. The doctors injected Vedette with some drugs and put him through some kind of program that unscrambled his brains. The only problem was that it took some time for the treatment program to bear results.

"Not everyone can be like you, who survived all alone for a while on Detemen IV. You're a lot more dangerous than you look."

Ves laughed. "That's because I bump into danger far too often. It's partially my fault. The galaxy is a wondrous place. There's so much treasure to be unearthed from the frontier. Sometimes I yearn to follow in the footsteps of the treasure hunters that ply the untamed stars."

"I can't imagine living an uncertain life like that. For me, I have only the VRF in mind. The rebel cause is my cause. As long as my people remain under the oppression of the nobles and royals, my duty still remains."

"That sounds... admirable."

"I know what you are thinking." She shook her head. "You don't need to hide your true thoughts. We know each other well enough to see the truth in our eyes. You don't believe we have a chance of success, do you?"

"I can't understand why you are committed to your state."

"That's because it's my home. Even if I hate it, I can never let my fellow Vesians wallow in their misery."

Ves truly couldn't see the point. No matter how many times Iris explained her conviction, he would never understand her stubborn commitment to an ugly state.

They tactfully shifted to another topic.

"Anyway, the reason why I wanted to meet with you here is because I wanted to give you a gift before we say our farewells."

Iris nodded. "I can't say much about the three-way negotiations that is going on between the Flagrant Vandals, the Hafner Duchy and Peace for Hafner, but we're already in the process of finalizing an agreement. Hafner values Venerable Foster's potential a lot. That has given us a lot of chips to bargain with. You can bet that safe passage is highly possible for the task force."

"I don't believe that the rest of the Kingdom will be happy at Hafner if they grant us safe passage out of their territory." Ves frowned.

"Although the chance is minute, Venerable Foster has a small chance of advancing to ace pilot. Compared to the possibility of obtaining their own ace

pilot, Hafner is willing to endure all sorts of recrimination from the other duchies."

Ves frowned a little deeper. He already knew her potential to be high, but it seemed he underestimated her value. "A part of me wishes that she'll never be let go. The prospect of freeing a potential ace pilot is giving me the chills."

There was no doubt that Venerable Foster had developed an undying hatred for the Flagrant Vandals and the Bright Republic. Letting her loose might lead to a calamity in the future. It was too bad that the Vandals really couldn't afford to hold on to her. If they didn't ransom her back to the duchy, the Hafners would likely hound them to the ends of the galaxy!

#### Chapter 570 Eccentric Gif

Ves and Iris chatted about their lives for the rest of the evening. The Vesian guest designer got to hear how he won the Leemar Open Competition and became an apprentice to Master Olson. Ves got to learn that the MTA offered a staff position to Iris.

"That's an incredible opportunity!" Ves remarked. "Anyone who receives an invitation from the MTA will surely experience the best of what humanity has to offer! Why did you turn it down?"

"The MTA is a neutral organization. It's not a place for old loyalties. The MTA has made it abundantly clear that once you join their ranks, you'll never be able to return to your state. Anyone who accepts their offers has to sign a lifetime contract with them. Every bond has to be severed. This not only includes your sentiments for your state, but also entails a clean break from your friends and family."

To a person who cherishes her bonds, such a condition was unacceptable. Though no organization was truly neutral, the MTA came darned close, but it was not without a price.

"I heard that the MTA often assigns its staff members all over human space. Those who are serving in the rim are transferred to the galactic heartland and galactic center. Those who originate from the galactic center are shuffled far away from their prosperous stars."

"That's because it's too easy for an official from the MTA to act on their biases. If one day you happen to be promoted to a position overlooking the entire Komodo Star Sector, can you resist the temptation to make things easier for the Bright Republic?"

Ves was no saint. "I don't think anyone can remain neutral in that case."

"That's why the best way to sort out this problem is to send every association member at least fifty-thousand light years away from their home state. This is more than enough distance for their people to become estranged to their former states. Even if you can remain in contact with your family through the galactic net, the distance is so vast that even your closest family members will become distance concerns after a few decades."

It was certainly a drastic measure in his eyes. If Ves received the same offer on day, he too wouldn't be so eager to join their ranks. Although every member of the MTA had access to the best technologies, all of their work would one day become property of the MTA. There was no room for any individuality in their ranks.

"The Mech Trade Association is a great organization. They're the only bunch in the galaxy besides the CFA who have managed to impose some sensible rules across all of human space. It's just too bad that the Big Two haven't been able to take the next step."

Iris chuckled at his words. "It's been done before. The galaxy is way too big to be ruled by a single nation. It's pure fantasy at this point."

"Well, the future is still in flux. There's always a chance that humanity will one day unite under a single banner."

No state called themselves a country or a nation. This was because they lacked the confidence to proclaim their sovereignty over the territories they ruled.

It used to be different in the Age of Conquest. Various star nations all claimed to be the blessed stars of humanity and started to become conceited against other sovereign nations. The animosity that grew between the star nations eventually escalated from minor border conflicts into full-fledged wars, and from there these conflicts escalated into a race to extinction.

It was a good thing the MTA and CFA showed up at the end to smack some sense into the so-called star nations. Ever since then, the Big Two imposed a number of rules and taboos. Taking away the warships was especially fatal to the star nations. They could no longer hold themselves with their heads held high because without any warfleets to defend themselves against other warships, there were no longer capable of safeguarding their borders by themselves.

It was no wonder that people started referring to the emasculated nations as states.

"By the way, what was that about a gift earlier?"

"Ah, it almost slipped through my mind. I wanted to pass on a gift to you before you left. It's just something to commemorate your time as a guest designer among our ranks."

Ves pulled up a small square gift box and passed it over to Iris across the table.

"What's this?"

"Open it up." Ves encouraged her with a smile.

Iris eagerly opened up the box to reveal a strange gift. "What is this?"

"It's a miniature mech."

Ves spent a couple of hours fabricating a miniaturized mech that resembled the Hellcat hybrid knight. He could have fabricated it within seconds if he wanted to produce a toy, but Ves went the extra mile and created a partially functional mech that was scaled down to the size of a hand.

It was an excellent example of craftsmanship to Ves. He not only infused the model with his understanding of the Hellcat model, he also spent a lot of thought in shrinking down the different components and finding substitutes for unworkable materials. While there wouldn't be any human small enough to pilot the mech through the tiny cockpit, he did manage to incorporate a remote control feature into the tiny machine.

For some reason, Iris threw him a weird glance and shook her head. "It's an amusing curiosity. I can see that's it's pretty functional."

"If you supply its miniaturized nail drivers and missile launchers with appropriately-sized ordnance, the mini Hellcat can actually fire them out. And you best be careful of its sword. It's sharp enough to stab someone in the chest."

Though she initially treated the model casually, her eyebrows began to furrow as she studied it further. She rotated it carefully around her delicate fingers. "I recognize these materials. This is compressed armor! Did you waste exotics on this toy!?"

"How else will it be so authentic?"

She frowned a bit at that. "Won't you get in trouble with the Flagrant Vandals for reproducing one of their signature designs?"

"Oh, It's fine. The mini model isn't a replica of the Hellcat. I don't even have complete access to its design specifications. You can say it's my own spin on its concept. The miniature is cosmetically similar to the Hellcat, but its internals looks completely differently. If it is scaled up to full size, its specs won't be as good as the real deal."

The woman traced the surface of the tiny mech with her fingers. "There's something strange about this gift of yours. It's like the model is warm to the touch without actually feeling my hands getting hotter. It's like you've added in its air of pride and aggression! Why do I feel it's not just a toy?"

"That's because the model is a carrier of my own design philosophy." Ves sent her an enigmatic smile. "If you can study it, you might be able to glimpse what makes it so special."

Ves had struggled hard to come up with a gift that Iris would appreciate. He settled on handcrafting his own miniature mech according to his own style. This wouldn't be just a normal miniature, but one which exhibited a trace of X-Factor. Accomplishing that wasn't difficult for Ves, especially with his level of Spirituality.

As for choosing which design he wanted to adapt, he considered choosing his own designs such as the Blackbeak or the Crystal Lord, but eventually rejected those choices because they weren't associated with the Flagrant Vandals.

Only the Inheritor light skirmisher and the Hellcat hybrid knight deserved to be used. Of the two, Ves was heavily partial towards the Inheritor, but its status as a cheap, disposable mech to the Vandals could be seen as disrespectful to the recipient. He didn't want to give Iris the wrong impression.

The Hellcat was much more appropriate to be adapted because the spaceborn design enjoyed a very high status with the Vandals. The mech's

archetype also allowed Ves to incorporate the lessons he learned from working with other hybrid knights designs such as the Caesar Augustus and the Marc Antony.

The only complication he faced was when he tried to create a miniature flight system. Ves had been forced to fudge a lot of things in order to get it to work without shooting the miniature into the ceiling.

"If you connect the miniature with your comm, you can control it from there. Try out its flight system."

Iris followed his instructions and keyed the miniature Hellcat to her comm. Like operating a toy, she activated the mech and made it over their table. She laughed as she played with the little mech.

"I haven't played with dolls since I was a kid!"

Several minutes later, Iris had her fill and switched the little mech off. She carefully put the machine back into the gift box it came with before setting it aside.

"So how is my gift?"

"It's more than I expected, Ves. It's surprisingly symbolic, in a way. I'm sorry to say that I haven't prepared a gift of my own for you."

"That's okay."

"No, I insist. Since you've given me such a personal gift, I won't feel easy until I pass you something of my own."

"Take your time with it, Iris. There's still time before we enter the Reinald Republic."

She nodded at that. "It's true that I'll have to say goodbye to you and the Vandals when we get there. The VRF still needs me back home, and I can't forsake my family. Don't worry though, I'm pretty sure we'll meet again."

"Why is that?"

"It's. A. Seeecret." She replied with a wink.

At first, Ves thought she only said that in a perfunctory manner, but evidently she knew something that he didn't. Would they truly see each other again someday?

Perhaps after a couple of decades or so. Ves threw his speculation to the back of his mind.

"It's getting late. Let's retire for the night."

The pair wished each other goodnight and returned to their separate cabins. Ves sighed as he changed his clothes and slipped into his bunk. He almost couldn't believe their escape from Vesian space had reached the endpoint. The border to the Reinald Republic was only a stellar stone's throw away.

He wondered what would happen next once they reached another foreign state. Reinald was a very different locale from the Bright Republic. Whereas his home state was a little boring, the Reinald Republic was full of life and excitement.

"At least, that's what all the promotions are saying."

The Reinald Republic was known as one of the liveliest states in the Frozen Leaf Alliance. Though the state wasn't very large or endowed with an abundant amount of exotics, it had become a nexus of sorts of different foreign influences.

As a small state, the Reinald Republic actively courted other states. Besides the neighboring Vesia Kingdom, Reinald managed to forge diplomatic and commercial bonds with almost every other third-rate state in the star sector.

Their location wasn't very central. In fact, it was actually a little troublesome to reach Reinald because there weren't any port systems in the vicinity.

To some people, this was an advantage. The Reinald Republic played host to many ventures of dubious legality. Thieves and gangs mingled with suspected pirates in Reinald's extensive grey and black markets. Whenever someone needed to get their hands on something dirty, they took a trip to Reinald.

For some reason, the MTA hadn't cracked down on all of the shady dealings that took place there. Some believed that the MTA tacitly contented to such trades as long as it wasn't too excessive. If the MTA decided to stomp on Reinald's illegal markets, the problem would only go somewhere else. In the thousands of years since humanity expanded into space, crime and piracy always accompanied their rise.

"Even the MTA can't do everything."