

### Chapter 571 Lively Reinald

The tense negotiation finally came to a conclusion. Although the terms were incredibly detailed and abstruse, the basic layout of the agreement sounded simple enough.

First, the Flagrant Vandals officially handed their custody over Venerable Foster to Peace for Hafner. In return, the Flagrant Vandals received a large amount of wealth and resources as well as undisclosed benefits in the Reinald Republic.

The former two quenched the severe shortages that crippled the Vandals from restoring their battle strength. The Vesian rebel group generously paid the Vandals a fortune in Reinaldan marks. Even though two marks was only worth one bright credit, the Vandals still received a considerable sum, though no one leaked out the exact figure.

As for the latter, no one questioned why Peace for Hafner was able to accomplish this promise. While the Reinald Republic opened its doors to every foreigner, that didn't mean they enjoyed a level playing field.

Native Reinaldans withheld many privileges that foreigners needed to work for in order to enjoy them. These privileges included lower tariffs, less onerous taxes, fewer import and export restrictions, lower waiting times, residency permits and so on.

According to Iris, while Reinald famously levied low tax rates, they were famous for nickeling and diming numerous conceivable charges. If any Reinaldan thought they could charge a fee for something, they would assuredly set a price for it. Most of the more ridiculous charges only applied to foreigners of course. This gave first-time visitors a huge shock once they found their bank accounts empty.

"Still, the Flagrant Vandals still got shafted."

The Vandals needed to repay the generosity provided by Peace for Hafner. Their preparations, intelligence gathering and acts of sabotage all contributed to the capture of Venerable Foster. Even though the Vandals suffered a disproportionate amount of losses, they had been pressured into giving up more meat to the sock puppet rebel group.

Peace for Hafner undoubtedly gained the most out of this trade. Their investment was fairly minimal, all considered. All of the subversive actions they performed during this operation had already been laid out far in advance. It took time to get the right people in the right positions. Besides a handful of highly placed spies, most of their agents were disposable.

Thus, through a minor effort, they reaped a huge reward. An extremely talented expert pilot in the form of Venerable Foster was worth at least twice as a fully mature expert pilot. Her potential and growth rate was astounding, so much so that everyone at the negotiation table regarded her as a potential ace candidate.

Once Peace for Hafner had taken over custody of the expert pilot, they hashed out a second agreement with the Hafner Duchy in turn. Although it would have been better in the long run for them to kill or keep Venerable Foster captive, they couldn't resist the enticement of rich rewards.

They already provided a lot of compensation to the Flagrant Vandals. If they didn't make up for their losses, they wouldn't be able to call themselves proper Reinaldans- ahem, Hafners.

The Vandals didn't get to hear the exact details of their agreement, but Ves could imagine that the Hafner Duchy bled a pretty penny. However, Ves also admired the farsightedness of the Duke of Hafner who currently suffered a lot of reproach from the rest of the Kingdom.

The value of a future ace candidate was immeasurably high, but that was only a faint possibility at best. For Hafner to grit their teeth and submit to naked extortion from a rebel group that had long been a thorn in their side, their foresight was very great!

Fortunately, this didn't concern the Vandals very much. The Hafner Duchy was situated on the wrong side of the Kingdom. If Venerable Foster ever became a scourge, she would definitely vent her fury on Reinald's proxy forces first. As for the Vandals, they were just a bunch of small fries in the greater scheme of things.

The Vandals kept their heads down throughout the final leg of their journey. After making use of the free passage offered by the Hafner Duchy, they met up with ships affiliated with Peace for Hafner and physically transferred over their prize. In return, the Vandal ships loaded up their cargo holds with lots of critical materials.

One more important event took place at that time. The Vesian Revolutionary Front recalled their liaison. An unremarkable corvette arrived in the star system within Reinald's borders and parked next to the Shield of Hispania.

Down at the combat carrier's hangar bay, Iris stood beside a shuttle. A pair of luggage coffers floated behind her, though she still held on to the gift box that contained a miniature mech.

"I can't believe I lived through all of the excitement." She sighed as she recalled what they went through. "It's a wonder the Flagrant Vandals managed to stay alive after surviving all of those battles."

Ves had accompanied her down the hangar bay. He shook his head when he heard her words.

"This is a one-off occasion for the Vandals. I don't think they'll pop up in the news after this. Every serviceman is tired to the bone. I hope Major Verle cuts

his men some slack after we arrive at our final destination. Everyone is looking forward to spending some time on Reinald's famous pleasure planets to recuperate."

Reinald profiled itself as a dangerous but alluring state. The people that tended to visit the little Republic longed to experience some excitement in their lives. Through visiting the same planets frequented by pirates, dark mercenaries and gang members, they gained the opportunity to sample a life where someone might get rich overnight, only to receive a laser beam through their heads the next day.

Remarkably, many tourists departed from the little Republic with their hides intact. The same could not be said for their bank accounts, but when it came to personal safety, Reinald was surprisingly strict in performing their due diligence. Income from tourism was one of the legs that supported the scrappy little state.

Iris directed her luggage coffers to float inside the shuttle and secure themselves onto a rack. She then turned back to Ves. "I hope you enjoy your time in Reinald. Remember not to fall into a debt trap. You don't want to know what happens when you run out of money in Reinald space."

"What about you? Where will you be going?"

"I'm heading back to Vesian space, though the corvette I'll be boarding won't be crossing into Hafner. Their troops are still on high alert, you see."

"Understandable. Have a safe journey, then!"

"You too!"

Ves waved her shuttle goodbye as it lifted up from the deck. The stubby vehicle zipped through the energy screen that shielded the ship's interior from the ravages of space.

"I wonder what is next in store for the Vandals."

The next days, Ves busied himself with sorting out the abundant amount of materials provided by the rebels. The mech technicians already started repairing some of their more heavily damaged with the help of newly-fabricated parts.

In the meantime, every serviceman started looking forward to some much-needed shore leave.

Reinald's openness to foreigners allowed the battered and limping Verle Task Force to relax. For the first time in two harrowing months, they didn't have to scurry like rats in the forgotten corners of the galaxy. They could openly navigate towards brighter stars that was easier to reach via FTL. Instead of making multiple short hops, their FTL drives could traverse the same distance in a single larger jump.

"Thank the heavens!" An engineer cried out in relief one day at the mess hall. "Our FTL drives are awfully worn out. Compressing so many hops in a short amount of time will do our drives no good. Every ship needs some time in the yard, but our logistics ships are in an especially critical state."

The Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan both relied on jury-rigged FTL drives specced for a different class of starships. Though the chief engineers managed to keep the logistics ships together, their incompatible FTL drives were endless sources of trouble. Each time the two fat ships emerged out of FTL, the task force was forced to endure several hours of delay on top of the ordinary FTL drive cycle time.

Therefore, Ves had a strong guess that the Vandals should be charting a course towards one of Reinald's major star systems. Only a highly developed star system with plentiful ship and repair yards would be able to satisfy their material demands.

"I wonder what will happen next."

Many of the Vandals didn't think about it, but Ves hadn't forgotten that reaching the Reinald Republic wasn't their end goal. Their true mission began once they reached a particular destination within the Reinald Republic. Ves guessed that whatever was about to happen should take place at their next port of call.

His office appeared much emptier after Iris had left. As Ves quietly allocated different portions of materials, he missed the opportunity to discuss his work with another mech designer.

"A second opinion really helps. Now that my only assistant has left, there's nothing there for me to bounce my ideas."

Ves scratched his head and considered taking on another assistance. If the task force wasn't dissolved after the end of this journey, then he would consider the matter seriously.

"It's too bad I'm not very close to the other mech designers."

Iris provided an ideal foil to him because she was knowledgeable yet also an outsider. She could provide honest advice to him while avoiding any conflicts of interest.

"Mr. Vedette is too junior to provide much help for me. His studies are still too far behind. Pierce is more capable in that regard, but he's the only person I can trust to keep watch over the Beggar's Bounty."

As for everyone else, Ves didn't even consider them. They either lacked the qualifications or didn't engender a lot of trust.

For now, Ves had to make do by himself. It was fortunate that he was already used to working alone, so the solitude hardly impacted his productivity.

He still reminded himself to stop relying on himself all the time when he went back to running his own business. While working with no one else allowed him to maintain his many secrets, once the scope of his business grew bigger, he couldn't shoulder everything by himself any longer.

A few days later, the Verle Task Force finally arrived in a highly-populated star system. The Harkensen System was a prominent trade nexus of the Reinald Republic. It appealed openly to outfits and provided many services useful to them. Anyone with enough money could procure enough starships and mechs to conquer another planet.

The key word here was money.

Without money, you couldn't even buy the cheapest nutrient pack in Reinald! The Republic was never one for charity. The Harkensen System was a little more rowdy than most due to the prevalence of mech pilots that visited its planets.

The Harkensen System wasn't a port system and didn't feature any remarkable mineral deposits. What it had instead was three promising terrestrial planets, all of which had been terraformed for human habitation. Each planet offered something good.

Harkensen I was a tourist destination. The slightly hot planet featured fantastic natural sceneries and splendid beaches. Many mech pilots that have gone through a frigid campaign flocked to Harkensen I to unwind. The planet offered many pleasures and various forms of entertainment to those who brought money.

Harkensen II didn't offer much to foreigners. It was the seat of the local government as well as the primary habitation planet for local citizens. A lot of Reinaldians lived on the planet, and only the most esteemed foreigners received the right to reside on this planet.

Harkensen III lacked most of the fun that could be found on Harkensen I, but it was the planet where the bulk of the trade was being conducted. It featured extensive market places, trading halls and more. Many shipyards orbited the planet, providing many services to various fleets or those who sought to commission a ship.

The Verle Task Force made a beeline towards Harkensen III.

### Chapter 572 Harkensen System

When Ves first received an introduction of the Harkensen System, he felt some deja-vu. In his eyes, the Harkensen System was the poor man's version of the Bright Republic's Bentheim Region.

"Harkensen III is a pale copy of Bentheim. Harkensen II is like Rittersberg but a bit less snobby. Harkensen I is like Moira's Paradise but without the aquatic culture."

Still, copies or not, each of the planets provided something different to the star system. Having them concentrated in a single star system provided enormous conveniences to visitors, especially the bigger ones that brought a whole fleet.

Ves wouldn't be able to see the thousands of ships that flew back and forth from the viewports, but he easily called up a chart that showed how many vessels were present in the Harkensen System.

The chart depicted thousands of dots, each of which represented a fully capable starship. Many of them were in transit. They either transitioned at the edge of the system and burned their way to the interior, or finished their business at one of the planets and burned towards one of the many highly congested Lagrange points.

One indicator of success to a star system was to see whether congestion took place at their Lagrange points. Considering that the ships needed to wait up to

an hour for them to get their turn, Harkensen's success only paled in comparison to Bentheim.

"This is truly a melting pot of different origins."

Ves casually read through the registries of the ships present in the system. Only a portion hailed from Reinald. Many came from other third-rate states such as the Roppo Principality or the Council Stars of Lisz.

He even spotted lots of trade ships bearing the flag of the Bright Republic! They mostly traveled in convoys escorted by foreign mercenary corps.

A significantly greater amount of Vesian trading vessels flew back and forth as well. It couldn't be helped as the Reinald Republic was a direct neighbor of the Vesia Kingdom. Even though relations between the two states were rather frosty, that didn't hinder the pursuit of benefits among their trading conglomerates.

"Earn money first! What? Pirates? Who are you calling pirates?! I'm an honest Reinaldan, I swear to my mother and grandmother! Hey, I've got a great deal for you! This five percent discount is yours!"

Although the Vesians and Brighters waged a very intense war against each other, the ships that hailed from the two wartorn states behaved especially discrete.

Neither side attempted to bump into each other, not that their cargo ships could deal a lot of damage in the first place. Reinald's traffic managers also paid a lot of attention to every ship's origin. They did their best to separate ships from rival states from each other and forced them to adhere to separate routes.

The Verle Task Force received a lot of attention from the Honored Ones, which was Reinald's mech military. Every unit of the Honored Ones bore an emblem that consisted of a silhouette of ancient viking warriors.

Just after the Vandals arrived, a patrol squadron flew alongside the Vandals and transferred over a bunch of inspectors. Every mech aboard every Vandal ship needed to be sealed. Ves had already arranged the mech technicians to seal the mechs beforehand, so the inspectors found very few problems.

Of course, people always slipped up. Some of the seals put on damaged mechs didn't look very proper. These mechs could still inflict a lot of damage at their current state, so the mech technicians worked overtime to fix their mistakes.

"With the problem cases taken care of, I don't see any further problems, Mr. Larkinson." An Honored One bearing the uniform of an inspector spoke. His accent bore the clipped and harsh tones of a typical Reinaldan accent.

"I'm glad our condition finally meets your approval." Ves replied as they both arrived at the airlock in one of the corridors of the Shield of Hispania. "We're all looking forward to entering the Harkensen System."

"You certainly deserve it! I've eagerly followed mech regiment's exploits. You Vandals sure gave the Vesians a good thrashing."

"It wasn't without cost."

"We understand." The inspector nodded with a smile. "The Harkensen System is always open to warriors with honor such as the Flagrant Vandals. Our berths are already reserved for the arrival of your ships. I understand that many deals are in the works. I hope your mech regiment enjoys doing business here!"

Ves scratched his head once he saw the inspector off. From the information he received from men aboard the other ships, the Reinaldians only exerted their efforts on detecting weapons of mass destruction and making sure the mechs bore the proper seals. Their inspectors barely paid attention to anything else, including other threats or contraband.

Their conduct carried an implicit message. Any visitors could bring as much shady stuff as they wanted, as long as they made an effort into keeping their contraband out of sight.

Ves had no doubt that at least a quarter of the ships paying a visit to the Harkensen System sought to offload their contraband to the grey or black markets. Frankly speaking, the Harkensen System appealed more upright outfits that largely worked within the boundaries of the law. Their grey market was far more prominent than their black market.

"If you want to see the really bad stuff, you should visit the Mulendrone System instead." Iris once told him. "That place is a cesspool of humanity. There's no greater black market in the neighborhood than the one in Mulendrone. Everyone there is a wolf in sheep's clothing. If the pirates don't make such a good effort to disguise themselves, the MTA would have imploded Mulendrone's star by now."

Fortunately, the Flagrant Vandals carried the official sanction of the Mech Corps. Despite the lukewarm support they received from headquarters, the Vandals didn't have to suffer the ignomies of being branded as outlaws.

Now that the Vandals finally entered neutral space, it was hard for them to shake off the habit to regard everything outside with hostility. Many servicemen had been so inured in war that they found it difficult to adjust to a neutral star system.

At the next conference meeting, Major Verle explained their upcoming plans.

"We will be spending up to four weeks in the Harkensen System. This won't be enough time for us to restore our full strength, but we're down almost five-hundred mech pilots, so it won't help us if we have more mechs than we can make use of. From what the repair yards we've contracted have promised, four weeks is enough to restore the FTL drives of our logistics ships."

Both their landbound and spaceborn contingents endured heavy damage in the previous journey. Though the Vandals finally made it out alive, they permanently lost almost half of their precious mech pilots.

These were Brighters who trained from ten years old to pilot a mech. After graduating, they entered into the Mech Corps and underwent another round of intensive training before they were assigned to their mech regiments.

Although the Flagrant Vandals might not have been very prestigious, their training standards wasn't too far off from the premier mech regiments.

Each mech pilot admitted into the Mech Corps was a treasure. Those with poor skills, insufficient aptitude or attitude problems would be rejected right out of hand during normal times. Everyone who made it through the initial inspection possessed the right qualities to become a soldier.

These people weren't as common as everyone thought. Many potentates failed to live up to their promise and could only find a piloting job in the private sector. Those who had what it took to join the military belonged to a privileged class that wasn't easy replaced.

The shortage of qualified mech pilots pained the Vandals who attended the meeting. It was impossible for them to refresh their ranks in Reinald space. They had to go all the way back to the Bright Republic to receive replenishment from the Mech Corps. Until then, they had to make do with half as much mech pilots.

Ves raised his hand. "Sir, how extensively do you want to restore our mechs? Do you wish to contract out their repair to the workshops on Harkensen III or do you want to keep it in-house?"

"At the end of our downtime, I want to see five-hundred pristine mechs." Major Verle grinned savagely at Ves. "It's very important for us to pair each mech pilot with a mech that is ready for war. Since it's unlikely we can accomplish

this aboard our own ships while they are all under repair, we'll have to resort to outside workshops to do the work."

"Are the Reinaldans principled enough to repair our mechs without fudging them in any way? To be honest, sir, everything I've heard about the Reinaldans makes me think that it's better to keep everything under our control."

"You make a fair point, Mr. Larkinson, but we aren't strangers to doing business with the Reinaldans. As with everything, whenever possible we should trust but verify. The workshops and shipyards that we are working with have already agreed to let Vandals observe their work. This is important as many components integrated within our ships and mechs are rather sensitive. We'll let the Reinaldans take care of the less-important repair work while our own men will perform the critical repairs."

That sounded like a messy arrangement to Ves. "This is going to be difficult to arrange, sir. We'll have to rent a secure workshop on the surface of Harkensen III to do all that work."

"Then it is a good thing you have a lot of experience in this area. Since you've founded a mech business before, setting up a temporary workshop won't be any trouble."

Ves smiled thinly at Major Verle. "I will do my best, sir."

Major Verle turned to a more anticipated matter. "Let's move on to shore leave. We'll be adopting a rotating schedule for every Vandal. No one is excepted from this, not even you, Chief Avanaeon! Go have some fun on Harkensen I. I practically order it. Perhaps you will finally see how much renown we've gained in the greater galaxy."

Some other staffers stepped in to lay out a detailed schedule for shore leave. Everyone pretty much enjoyed a two-week period of downtime where they could do as they pleased.

Those who wanted to enjoy a pure vacation would doubtlessly flock to the entertainment paradise of Harkensen I. Every Vandal received a fixed salary in bright credits which they could easily convert into Reinaldan marks. With the bump in payments due to serving during wartime, no one should be short on money.

Those who couldn't divorce themselves from mechs could hang around at the endless amount of mech pilot establishments on Harkensen III. The third planet from the sun also featured a robust mech duelling scene. Though only specialized and registered mech athletes were allowed to compete in the major mech arenas, the planet was notorious for hosting many underground fighting venues.

A Vandal mech pilot with a bone to itch would surely pay a visit there. Major Verle didn't approve of these fights, but he could hardly control his own men. A couple of Vandals would doubtlessly chew off more than they could bite and lose their lives in the process.

"As far as possible, make sure that your men won't get in trouble with the law. They can drink until their liver needs a regeneration treatment, they can pump their veins full of stimulants for all I care, but whatever they do, I better not hear any stories of a Vandal getting into a fight with Reinaldans!"

As guests of the Reinald Republic, the Flagrant Vandals needed to retain some scruples to their hosts. The tolerance of the Reinald Republic was fairly high when it came to scuffles between different groups of foreigners, but once a proper Reinaldan got hurt, the Honored Ones cracked down hard on the offenders.

## Chapter 573 Hidden Plans

One of the major concerns for letting the Vandals loose for some shore leave was that anything could happen to them. For example, someone might attempt to kidnap in order to beat some intelligence out of their mouths. Some drunk Vesians might bump into some drunk Vandals and come to blows with each other. Some Vandals might even be bribed into becoming a spy or a turncoat.

All manner of dangerous outcomes may become possible if the Vandals enjoyed free reign in the Harkensen System.

This wasn't the first time they were being let loose in a neutral star system. They also knew how to be discreet during times of war. However, the combination of both resulted in a potentially calamitous situation.

Major Verle announced some precautions to mitigate the danger. "To prevent any untoward incidents, everyone will form groups of ten. Nobody is allowed to wander off by themselves. Even if you go to the restroom, at least one other Vandal should be close at hand. Their comms will make sure that everyone abides by these restrictions. The moment someone goes missing or wanders out of range, every comm will send out an alert to the men and our internal network."

This placated those who looked as if they objected to exposing their men to various risks. While these measures didn't plug all the loopholes, they at least made it a lot harder for anyone with nefarious intentions to project designs on the Vandals. They not only need to take care of ten Vandals in unison, but they also needed to hack or jam the comms at the same time, all the while preventing bystanders from getting the word out.

As long as the groups of Vandals lingered in public areas, they wouldn't be exposed to too much risk. Ves knew that much of their confidence lay in their military-issued comms, which contained a lot of strong capabilities.

Usually, the servicemen could only access a couple of core functions on their comm. Features such as browsing the galactic net, taking notes, sending messages to someone or even playing some games would be locked behind a stringent set of rules. Unless someone reached a higher rank or received permission from a senior officer, they wouldn't be able to get up to mischief with their comms.

This mistakenly gave the Vandals the impression that they wore the cheapest and most basic model of comms.

The truth was very different. Ves estimated the cost of the comms to be at least five-hundred times more expensive than a standard civilian comm model. The Vandals fabricated the comms in-house, so Ves based this valuation from the expensive materials and trace amounts of exotics incorporated in the wrist devices.

Paired with exclusive software, these comms resisted jamming and intrusion much more effectively than any civilian comm model. In addition, their networking range reached across an entire city as long as they received a little assistance. Any attempts to pervert them would require a supreme hacker or a large-scale effort that couldn't be hidden.

The military comms doubtlessly possessed a lot more functions than that, but Ves didn't have the qualifications to know anything more. Information about the comms and any other restricted technology used by the Vandals was only available on a need-to-know basis.

"There will be Vandals who will wish to wander off regardless." A mech officer said. "I know the lads. Some will want to sneak off to the underground arenas. Others crave more extreme pleasures."

"They can do what they want, but only if all ten of them go. If someone wants to take a risk, either they rope their entire group, or nobody goes. As soon as

someone separates from the group, the rest of the group will be penalized and have their shore leave cancelled immediately. As for the wayward Vandal, we'll send out a batch of security officers to haul him back and throw him into the brig."

Very practically, Major Verle mentioned nothing about visiting the less-than-legal establishments in the Harkensen System. Considering that most tourists visited the Harkensen System to enter these shady joints, the commanding officer could hardly prevent his men from following suit.

It was a good thing that the Reinaldans in the Harkensen System developed a reputation for safety. The honored ones maintained law and order in the light, while various Reinaldan cartels did the same in the dark. No Reinaldan wanted to upset the apple cart.

The rest of the meeting devolved into assigning different tasks to everyone. Even though every serviceman enjoyed a two-week vacation, the entire personnel roll would only get to enjoy it on a rotating basis. This meant that at least half of the Vandals remained at their disposal.

"Captain Rakeshir, I'd like you to do the usual and supervise the repair and refit process of our ships."

"Consider it done, major." The ship captain saluted. "However, four weeks isn't enough time to complete all the repairs. We need to set some priorities."

"Focus on the basics first, captain. Increase the reliability of our ships. They need to be ready to keep going for at least a year without requiring another stint in the drydocks."

"Understood, sir."

The current duty of the ship officers was to babysit the ships while they underwent repairs. Many of the combat carriers sustained an extensive

amount of surface damage, so their entire shells needed renewing. The two logistics ships urgently required new FTL drives as well.

All of this work needed to be done in conjunction with the repair yards orbiting Harkensen III that offered their services to anyone that paid. Of course, the Vandals could just hand over the ships to the repair yards and call it a day, but letting Reinaldans crawl over their ships without supervision was a recipe for disaster.

Even if the shipwrights behaved honestly, someone might still attempt to sabotage the ship or cut some corners. The worst outcomes would be to derive the exact blueprint or embed spying devices deep within the structure of the ships.

A Vandal needed to be present every step of the way. They also had to undertake the tasks that outsiders shouldn't meddle with. This required lots of manpower, so even if half of the personnel roll didn't get to enjoy their vacations, they shouldn't be short of work.

Ves already received his own duties earlier. He would be responsible for managing the mechs, much of which required extensive repairs and refit as well. He couldn't do this alone, so he received permission to call up as much mech technicians as he required.

As for the mech officers, they would be responsible for supervising the mech pilots as they underwent a special training. Harkensen III offered many different training programs that focused on developing very specific combat skills. These training programs mostly accommodated private outfits, but the more prestigious training institutes also offered various regimental training programs.

Peace for Hafner provided a free pass to these training programs for the entire mech regiment as a concession to the Vandals.

All in all, despite handing over their ships and mechs to the Reinaldians, the Vandals wouldn't go idle. Too much work needed to be done, but for what?

As the meeting ended and everyone went their separate ways, Ves mulled over why the Vandals chose to undertake such an extensive refit in the Harkensen System.

"Four weeks is too short to restore everything up to full strength, but it's way too long for critical repairs."

If the Vandals wanted to fix up their ships in a jiffy, two weeks would be enough to make the Beggar's Bounty and the Linever Swan space worthy again. As long as the pair of logistics ships became safe enough to undergo a long journey, the Vandal fleet could easily travel back home by following a huge detour around Vesian space.

Yet for some reason the Vandals planned something else. Ves started to guess that the Vandals might not be going home anytime soon.

Four weeks devoted to restoring the combat capability of the task force meant that they would be ready for another operation immediately after. While there was no way the Vandals could supplement five-hundred mech pilots all of a sudden, their current strength was still sufficient to perform some missions that required less mechs.

Ves strongly believed the Vandals ran other plans. He hadn't forgotten about Lord Javier and his unannounced captivity on the Shield of Hispania. There was no way that Javier would stay aboard the combat carrier when she entered a repair yard.

"Perhaps bringing him to the Harkensen System is the entire point of the journey."

The Harkensen System provided lots of services. All sorts of influences congregated here as well. While the Reinaldan cartels held sway over

Harkensen's underground, many other gangs maintained a small presence in their markets.

He could guess all day for the reasons why Lord Javier needed to be brought to the Harkensen System. Ves obviously wasn't included among the innermost circle. He didn't even know who was privy to the truth, though Major Verle and Captain Rakeshir would definitely be among their ranks.

Perhaps their stay in the Harkensen System might not go quietly at all. Lord Javier was not a regular noble and obviously knew some very important secrets.

"I'll have to take precautions."

First, he returned to lonely office. Right now, he needed to plan for the repair and refit of around five-hundred mechs. Ideally, Ves wanted to squeeze in at least a hundred more mechs in order to increase their stockpile of spares.

"Not all mech pilots die on the battlefield. Many of them are able to eject in time. If we don't have any spares at hand, those mech pilots won't be able to reenter the battle."

During longer engagements, extra spares increased the staying power of the Vandals. In addition, spares enabled the Vandals to maintain their combat strength even after suffering a substantial amount of damage. The Vandals would be able to rotate their mechs as they got damaged and repair them while the mech pilots made do with spares.

Before, the Vandals hadn't been able to build up any spares. Mechs constantly got damaged and mech pilots would inevitably be benched when there weren't enough mechs to go around. Ves didn't want to see such kinds of waste, so he planned on restoring at least six-hundred mechs within four weeks.

"This is an ambitious plan, but with so much power at my disposal, I don't believe I can't meet my target."

The important point about this task was that Major Verle gave Ves a lot of leeway on how to go about it. He could partner up with the same mech companies that the Vandals had contracted before, or he could shop around and find better alternatives.

Ves grinned at the thought. He had founded his own mech business and grew it from a one-man operation into a multi-billion credit corporation. Although he passed over much of the administrative burden to the retainers sent by the Larkinson Family, that didn't mean he remained blind to the vagaries of the mech industry.

"There won't be any rip-offs on my watch."

He knew the business from inside-out and could tell the scammers from the real deal. Having been warned by Iris on how unscrupulous Reinaldians could be when it came to business, Ves dug in deep in the list of mech companies they could partner with for this massive repair effort.

Red flags immediately showed up.

"Ugh. The original partners are no good."

The Flagrant Vandals evidently visited the Harkensen System a few times, though none of the visits happened recently. In fact, the last time a Vandal detachment entered this system was more than a decade ago.

They entrusted their mechs and ships to various companies with ties to the Bright Republic. This was a prudent choice, all considered, but the companies took advantage of this and charged a steep premium without delivering any material benefits.

They basically ripped off the Vandals in the open.

"This is no good." Ves shook his head. He had a lot of work in store if he wanted to make this awful situation right. "We shouldn't have to pay a premium for reliable service."

### Chapter 574 Scam Industry

If Ves had to describe the mech industry, he would equate it to a pyramid.

The massive trans-galactic corporations sat at the top. Their businesses spanned entire star sectors and copies of their supremely optimised mechs got sold by the trillions every day.

The next tier of companies consisted of trans-sector corporations. Their activities transcended the borders between star sectors, and they always took advantage of the different conditions of each star sector.

Further down the pyramid, there were the sector-wide, state-wide, system-wide and planet-based corporations. The lower their tiers, the more of them existed. Technically, the Living Mech Corporation could be counted as a sector-wide corporation, which gave his company a lot of prestige.

At the bottom-most tier, the MTA couldn't even count how many independent mech workshops operated within all of human space. The base of the pyramid was doubtlessly incredibly wide.

Yet the top of the pyramid was rather fat as well. A lot of competition existed in each tier, and no single mech corporation held absolute sway over their markets unless a state had conferred a monopoly to them. All of this activity led to a very high level of friction.

Even with the MTA taking an active hand in regulating all of the mech businesses, their energy could only be spent on so many concerns. They shouldered a lot of responsibilities and generally didn't bother with petty offenses. The association basically handed over responsibility of policing such matters to the local states.

Some states proved to be less diligent than others. Particularly in third-rate states, enforcement of all kinds of rules could be spotty or lax. This opened the door to all sorts of scummy business practices.

A basic way for a company to stiff a customer was to do a sub-par job. For example, instead of delivering a mech worth 40 million Reinaldan marks, they secretly cut some corners and delivered a mech that should actually be valued at 30 million marks instead.

Of course, any mech business that wanted to sell a first-hand mech that was fresh off the production line needed to send it to the MTA for certification. This provided some protection to consumers, but this limited activity didn't cover the entire scope of the mech industry.

"Buying a first-hand mech is safe. Everything else is fraught with scams or rip offs."

If someone wanted to sell a second-hand mech, they could send it back to the MTA to certify it again for a fee.

Most didn't want to pay for the fee or lacked the funds to cover the cost.

Cheapskates that wanted to have it all therefore tended to sell their second-hand mechs directly to buyers through various ways. Of course, without a stamp of approval from the MTA, buyers needed to rely on their own judgement to determine whether they bought the product they expected to receive.

Whiny stories about customers who thought they bought a thoroughbred only to receive mule was widespread on the galactic net. If Ves wanted to have a laugh, he could always visit the forums where scam victims vented their frustrations.

"The second-hand mech market is fraught with both risk and opportunity."

Sometimes, the seller screwed up. Either they needed to get rid of their mechs in a hurry, or they didn't fully understand the value of the mechs they wanted to sell. Keen buyers could easily pick up a bargain if they watched the market closely. Some fallen mech designers even shifted their careers into full-time mech appraisers to speculate on second-hand mechs or advise other buyers into making a prudent purchase.

"The repair market is also surrounded with pitfalls."

Mechs suffered damage all the time. They were primarily built for battle, so it shouldn't be any surprise for them to return in a less-than-pristine state. Mech technicians in the employ of smaller outfits only possessed the capacity to perform surface repairs. Anything deeper and more extensive required a full-fledged maintenance department or help from others.

Lots of mech repair businesses set up shop on each planet with a large concentration of mechs and mech pilots. One of the hallmarks of the repair industry was that it suffered from a rock-bottom reputation. Not only were they widely-known as scammers, the sector was also plagued by a lack of capability.

Those in charge of the repair work in these businesses mostly turned out to be retired chief technicians or failed mech designers. Neither of these two types of people possessed any remarkable capabilities compared to a successful mech designer such as Ves. Their prestige was low and their profit margins were even lower due to all of the competition.

The only reliable repair businesses only accepted fixed contracts from long-standing customers. Since the Vandals only visited the Harkensen System sporadically, they fell outside of their ideal customer base.

Ves shook his head and readied himself for a long research slog. "I'll have to go dumpster diving."

He cast his sight on the larger businesses at first. Though they always charged more than their smaller counterparts, they at least had a reputation to uphold since their revenue was substantial and were responsible for employing thousands of mech technicians.

"The only problem is that their premium is too much."

Picking a larger company wasn't necessarily a good deed. These companies ripped their customers off in more sophisticated ways. If a customer brought up any wrongdoing, the company could basically shrug them off without suffering any loss of business as long as it didn't happen too often.

Many of these repair businesses also had deep ties to various organizations and influences, chief among them was the Reinaldan government. The risk of bumping into a spy or informer was too high for Ves to entrust them with fixing up the Vandal mechs. Even under supervision, there were too many ways for mech technicians to fudge a component or two.

"The smaller businesses aren't any better either."

Two problems resulted from contracting the smaller companies.

First, they only possessed a limited capacity. As Ves wanted to completely restore at least six-hundred mechs, he would need to contract over a hundred workshops. This kind of sprawl was too burdensome to deal with, as each workshop only employed a few mech technicians each that could only do so much work at a time.

The second and more serious problem was that the smaller workshops largely remained small due to their lack of competitiveness. This mostly translated into lack of capability or incompetence.

None of the mech models that the Vandals worked with were simple. The designs of military-grade mechs incorporated lots of sophisticated components and systems that washed out novice mech designers shouldn't

be allowed to get in touch with. Although the smaller businesses often charged the lowest rates, in this case you really got what you paid for. Ves could likely get a better result if he entrusted the work to a monkey with a multitool.

In addition, their lack of business made them highly susceptible to bribes. Anyone that wanted to fudge the Vandal mechs could easily throw a bag of Reinaldan marks at these money-starved beggars. The bag didn't even have to be too big to get a good result.

"This leaves me with the midrange repair businesses."

Overall, the mid-sized companies fell between the two extremes in terms of pricing and other criteria. Ves judged that most employed sufficiently competent mech technicians to perform competent repairs. Yet he also needed to maintain his vigilance around them. They might not be as shrewd as their larger counterparts, but having grown to such a scale gave them a good instinct of how far they could push the boundaries.

Picking the right companies involved a careful selection process where Ves had to dig through the details of each company within the right range. Harkensen III possessed quite a lively mech scene that wasn't too worse off compared to Bentheim, so he had about a hundred companies to consider.

Rick's Repairs, Lovo-Opto Mech Restoration, the Mech Fixers, Argulant Workshop, the names went on and on. Most of the official data only told an incomplete story to Ves. He had to dig deep in the galactic net to get a better picture of their business practices. He ruled out any company with a mountain of recent complaints, which happened to cut his list in half.

Ves then looked at the price quotes, and he cut off those who charged too much of a premium or those who had a habit of adding too many surcharges on their work. This cut his list in half yet again.

He then picked out five companies that delivered decent work while adhering to fairly competitive prices.

"This may not be the most optimal selection, but it will do."

The only thing he couldn't investigate was their discretion. Perhaps one company was secretly a front for the Vesians, while another opened up their database to a Reinaldan intelligence agency. It was impossible for Ves to uncover these kinds of secrets from the galactic net.

"Paying a visit to each of the five repair businesses will take up too much time."

Considering that relatively few customers complained about the businesses he selected, Ves thought it would be sufficient if the Vandals supervised and participated in the repairs.

Ves straightened out the details in the next hours. He sorted out the mechs according to their type, their damage and the ease of repair. He then contacted each business and sounded them out. Some companies preferred to work with light mechs, while other companies didn't allow any outsiders to interfere with their work.

"What a mess."

All of these complications made him want to tear his hair out. Ves had to go back to his list and select other companies to substitute for his initial selections that didn't pan out.

His persistence eventually paid off. He came to a preliminary agreement with five companies that looked good to Ves. Once he determined there was a basis of cooperation with his final selection, he passed the details over to the logistics department to hash out the details.

"My work is done. Lieutenant Commander Soapstone should be able to negotiate some good deals with the parameters I've provided."

His job as a mech designer only extended to mechs. Issues concerning contracts, purchasing, financing and the like fell under the purview of the bean counters of the Vandals. At the very least, Ves expected them to be glad that his careful market research resulted in substantial savings.

"If the bean counters don't drop the ball, they should achieve cost savings up to sixty percent."

This would bring the final cost of repairs down to a competitive sum. Ves leaned back against his chair and mentally patted himself on the back. Only a mech designer who entered the mech industry and engaged in many transactions in the private market could be so astute. The careerist mech designers in the Mech Corps were practically dummies in comparison.

"Careerists have their own strengths, but when it comes to the private market, even a Journeyman like Alloc doesn't know any better."

His good mood evaporated after Alloc's name popped up in his mind. The Journeyman Mech Designer still hadn't showed up on any lists. Two months since the Detemen Operation, the Vesians hadn't sent any indications that he was a prisoner of war.

After so much time without any news, Ves had to assume the worst. Though he held onto lots of impractical beliefs, he could be highly practical in other matters. He wasn't the type to hope in vain.

Alloc's status as missing in action appeared feebler and feebler as time went on. In his mind, Ves had already replaced his status with deceased.

Though the Vandals lost a lot of mech pilots recently, none of their deaths really mattered to Ves. Yet the loss of a single mech designer impacted him a

lot. Though mech designers were technically noncombatants, the battlefield was far too cruel. It reminded him of the danger of serving with the Vandals. Harkensen System looked peaceful at first glance. Yet Ves felt as if he had entered into another battlefield.

### Chapter 575 Smoke Screen

The repair businesses the Flagrant Vandals went to bed with all operated out of large workshops. As the Vandals started transporting their damaged mechs to the workshops, Ves constantly had to rotate in between the workshops to prevent the people there from screwing things up.

"Don't let this mech lay on its back!"

"Where's the weapons on this mech? It came here with a sword and shield, what do you mean they never arrived?!"

"Goddammit, we contracted you to fix these mechs up, not damage them even further due to rough handling!"

The level of service that each of the five repair businesses provided was worse than Ves had thought. Over the past several days, he realized he had still been a little too naive about the types of characters that operated these joints.

Ves had thought that the repair businesses would operate akin to the maintenance departments of the Flagrant Vandals or another regular mech regiment. At worst, the owners ran their businesses like the workshop of a mercenary corps.

In actual fact, sometimes Ves felt as if he returned among the ranks of Walter's Whalers. The sheer level of idiocy and sloppiness truly astounded him. How could these repair businesses even stay afloat with this level of service?

"No wonder why most of them charge so much. It's not just to rip off their customers, but also to compensate for the incredible amount of inefficiencies in their operations."

It wasn't as if the owners liked to run a tighter ship, but the problem was that they didn't know how. As head designer, Ves threw his weight around whenever he visited their workshops, and he often got to meet with them in person.

All of them appeared to be exactly as he expected, mech designers or chief technicians who lacked the competence to work for more prestigious organizations.

The most loathsome of the bunch was a former chief technician called Lester Tobruk. He bought up a bankrupt repair business on the cheap and somehow hadn't managed to ruin it yet, though it hadn't grown any further either.

The mech technicians that Mr. Tobruk employed all followed after their boss. They lacked the skills, discipline or temperament to get hired by the military or a private outfit. Even the worst gangs rejected these abject failures.

"The repair industry is the trash heap of the mech industry." He concluded. "This is where all the losers go when they can't get any lower."

Hounding the incompetent employees whenever they misstepped was extremely frustrating and tiring for Ves. Eventually, he shifted over this responsibility to the other mech designers. Though they weren't as eagle-eyed as Ves, they at least possessed the skills to spot something wrong in time.

Mech designers who used to work in the private sector caught on quickly enough. People like Pierce only needed a few guidelines to do an adequate job in supervising the repairmen and direct the Vandal mech technicians to lend a hand as well.

"This is kind of a sad thing to see." Pierce shook his head as he watched a repairman clean up after spilling over a barrel of liquid coolant. "In the Friday Coalition, the lowest standard of mech technicians is the same as a mech technician from the Mech Corps. This is only the starting level, and it's barely enough to work for a small-time gang in Coalition space."

Ves sighed. "Your Friday Coalition is larger and more prosperous than dozens of third-rate states. You guys have the luxury of training aspiring mech technicians to a higher standard. We don't have the population and training methods to match your standards."

"The Coalition isn't my home anymore. It's wrong for you to call it my state."

"You still enjoy Coalition citizenship, do you not?"

"I'm only an average citizen of the Gauge Dynasty. If not for my father, my citizenship would have been revoked. The Gauge Dynasty is extremely strict on these kinds of matters. As the most powerful partner in the Coalition, too many people wish to be a part of them. An exile like me doesn't deserve to be counted among the strong."

Hearing Pierce put himself down all the time really exasperated Ves. Unfortunately, he couldn't think of a way to cheer up his colleague. This was because they measured their self-worth according to their capabilities. Even after he borrowed a couple of books from the central database, Pierce had only improved by a snail's pace despite receiving a couple of free tutoring sessions.

From what Ves had observed, Pierce's potential might not have been exceptional, but his learning ability was still within an average range. The only problem was that he competed against his brilliant siblings ever since he was born. The shadow they cast upon his mind had affected his mentality.

At least Pierce could perform his latest duty without problems. The same could not be said for some of the other mech designers. The careerists in particular had a tendency to overestimate the competency of the repairmen. They were too used to somewhat disciplined mech technicians that had gone through basic military training.

"Why are you bothering me with this duty? It's pure babysitting, sir!" Mercator yelled at Ves. He didn't even hold back his overall contempt at Ves and his current locale.

"You either do your job, or take responsibility if you don't. The lives of our mech pilots depend on the condition of these mechs."

"These grease monkeys already signed a contract with us, sir. I don't see the need to spend so much effort on supervising them. It's redundant!"

"Well, the Vandals won't be able to ask for refunds from the repair companies once our mechs start to blow up all of a sudden on the battlefield. Look, if you don't care about the welfare of our mech pilots, then think about who will be held responsible."

This shut the other fellow up. Mercator couldn't afford to have too many stains on his record if he wanted to climb up the ladder.

After sorting out the careerists, Ves took a step back and let the other mech designers be the main people on point. Though a lot of mistakes still occurred, everything went according to schedule. Planning everything out took a lot of effort from him. He meticulously distributed Vandal men and mechs to each of the repair businesses according to their specialities and shipped in the appropriate materials from the cargo holds of the Vandal ships or from the local market.

It was a good thing that Peace for Hafner rewarded the Vandals with a lot of Reinaldan marks. The Vandal logistics officers must have anticipated their

need. Everything became easier in the Harkensen System once you threw some hard currency around.

The only thing that money couldn't buy was an honest Reinaldan. Ves sighed. Negotiating for the first batches of materials had been especially arduous.

"What's troubling your mind?" Chief Haine asked as she overlooked a large hall where up to half-a-dozen Vandal mechs were being stripped.

"I'm thinking about how much time and effort we've wasted on negotiating with the Reinaldans. If you don't make a stand, they'll walk right over you."

"That's the Reinald Republic for you. This isn't the first time I've been here. It's a lovely place if you can ignore the ugliness that goes around. Take advantage of your shore leave and see what the Harkensen System has to offer. I guarantee you won't be disappointed."

"I'm worried that everything will go to hell once I'm gone." Ves smiled sardonically. "Why are the higher ups insisting on granting us shore leave in a foreign state? There's nowhere we can go that is truly safe, and don't forget that the Vesia Kingdom is right next door."

The chief snorted. "Sounds kind of stupid now that you think about it, right? If you've been with the Vandals for a while, you'll learn that we don't do things so simple. Let me ask you this. How many servicemen did we bring to the Harkensen System?"

It took a lot of people to run a mech regiment. While the advantage of mechs to states was that it required a lot less logistical support to field them in battle, they still required lots of support personnel to take care of matters that mech pilots simply couldn't. When Ves added up the mech technicians and ship officers that supported the mech pilots, he came to a very substantial figure.

"The Verle Task Force comprises over ten-thousand servicemen by my count."

"Close enough. Now, the way the higher ups staggered our leave periods, there's always going to be half let out in the wild. So there's going to be at least five-thousand little Vandals running around on Harkensen I or Harkensen III."

A light went off in his head. "I see! It's actually a distraction! Just like when we split up the main fleet in the Detemen System. One element is a distraction while the other element is vital to completing the mission."

The Flagrant Vandals certainly loved to employ this strategy. Ves reminded himself about Lord Javier. Sneaking off a hot potato like a captured Vesian noble with massive secrets would be very hard to do in normal circumstances.

Ves silently narrowed his eyes as his thoughts went over the situation as he understood it. If Lord Javier was a regular prisoner, the Vandals wouldn't have gone through the bother of stuffing him in a hidden compartment aboard the Shield of Hispania.

Obviously, taking custody of Lord Javier was not a trivial matter at all. The Vandals tried their best to suppress any news of who they kept in captivity. This basically meant that others desired Lord Javier or the secrets in his mind as well, and weren't afraid to fight the Vandals if it meant they could get the valuable prisoner in their hands.

In such a dangerous circumstance, letting so many Vandals loose made a lot more sense. The collective movement of the Vandals was a giant smoke screen that obscured the real intentions of the higher ups!

"Do you think we'll be easy to keep tabs on?" Chief Haine continued. "If you rule out the Reinaldan government, every other influence needs to be discreet and only possesses a limited amount of agents to perform covert actions. Wouldn't they have a headache trying to find the right target to tackle?"

Ves mentally applauded such a devious plan. Although following around five-hundred groups of ten was a lot easier than tracking five-thousand individual Vandals, moving in groups also allowed the most critical group to bring Lord Javier to another destination in disguise. Besides, any group of ten wouldn't be easy to deal with considering that most Vandals knew how to throw a punch.

One benefit the Vandals enjoyed was that they were allowed to carry limited small arms such as pistols out in the open. This was another concession received in reward for capturing and handing over Venerable Foster. Average tourists couldn't even dream of obtaining this privilege.

Somehow, Ves suspected that the Vandals aimed for such an outcome from the start.

"The whole thing about capturing Venerable Foster is a sideshow."

They lost almost half of their landbound mech pilots to capture an expert pilot without their own expert lending a hand. This was a feat of near-legend. To outsiders, capturing an expert pilot while losing hundreds of average mech pilots was a definite win.

Yet the significance of this hard-fought victory was only a means to an end. This overly-transactional way of running things detested Ves somewhat. It was an approach that treated the lives of servicemen like chess pieces.

"Maybe that is what it takes for a leader. In order to complete the mission, you can't afford to be soft-hearted. War assets such as mechs are meant to be spent on the battlefield. As long as the fighting nets you a greater return, the sacrifices are worth it in the end."

Ves branded this lesson in his heart. It was inevitable that he would wield his own influence someday. Perhaps he would have to weigh the same kind of decision as well.

## Chapter 576 Sudden Procurement

Ves chose to take his shore leave in the final two weeks of their stopover in the Harkensen System. He wanted to spend the first two weeks into making sure the repair work stayed on track.

Dealing with slime balls like Lester Tubrok or keeping the Vandal mech designers and mech technicians alert was a lot of work. Without his intervention, the massive repair effort would have suffered massive delays. Forget about repairing six-hundred mechs on time. Fixing up just three-hundred mechs would have been a miracle.

His cognition of the repair industry grew by leaps and bounds as he shuttled through the various companies the Vandals had contracted. Once he became more familiar with their circumstances, he grew a little more understanding of their difficulties.

"Do you think it's easy for us to work with thousands of different mech models on an annual basis? We get every shape and size of machines in our hands, all of them using a billion different parts!" Tobruk snapped at Ves one day.

"The only person in the galaxy who can master so many different mechs is the Polymath! Don't expect mortals like us to match that kind of versatility!"

Ves wasn't fooled. The fat bastard simply put up an act in order to weasel his way out of another problem of their own making. "Your stance is fine if you're running a maintenance department for a mech regiment or a private outfit, but you're not. You are operating a repair business. I didn't see you whine when you signed the contract. If our mech models are baffling your men so much, then you should have thought twice before accepting our demands."

Mr. Tubrok wiped the sweat off his brow. "Hehe, Mr. Larkinson, can't you be more merciful to us? The troubles I've mentioned are truly affecting our work. Out of all the mech regiments that I've worked for, yours is one of the worst! Not only are all your mechs completely battered down to their internal frames,

you also make use of too many different mech models! There's no way for my men to learn the ins and outs of a mech model and apply a set routine on other copies!"

"We're not asking you to perform the most difficult repair jobs. That's reserved for our own mech technicians. If you can't even do the simplest repairs, then It's a wonder you're still in business!"

"We can do better! If you would just transfer some extra funds to us, I know a few friends who can lend us some senior mech technicians!"

"We are not paying a single mark more than what the contract stipulates."

Conversations like this happened every day. Half of the time Ves met with the owners, he had to reject their efforts to squeeze more money out of the Vandals. Perhaps this was a deliberate Reinaldan custom of eliciting bribes, but Ves had enough confidence in the contracts to stick to his guns.

After two weeks of close supervision, the repair businesses learned that Ves was not an affable sucker. Whenever owners such as Mr. Tubrok did business with a military mech regiment, they were used to dealing with careerists with zero business acumen or military officers with access to a virtually unlimited budget.

If he Flagrant Vandals maintained a cordial relationship with the Mech Corps, then they would have accepted an inflated price quote without blinking a single eyelid. After all, they could push all of their expenses on to headquarters back on Rittersberg and have them pay the bills.

No wonder the repair businesses attempted to levy ridiculously high surcharges at the start. For example, they attempted to bill the Vandals five-hundred-thousand marks for a single cockpit seat replacement!

What a luxurious chair! And the repair business claimed the cost was justified because it used authentic leather from an alien creature!

Ves only needed to run his finger on the seat to know that the chair was covered with synthesized leather made out of cheap waste materials.

It took a week to stomp on such attempts, and another week to teach the Vandals to watch out for these kinds of scams. The Reinaldians were truly imaginative in this area.

The worst incident by far left Ves angry for the entire day. This was because he caught the repairmen deliberately botching up a working mech! They even did so under the nose of an inattentive Vandal mech technician!

The culprits would have gotten away with it if Ves failed to recognize the deliberate marks of sabotage. The business owner had to let the repairmen involved in the incident go, and promised to be more diligent next time.

Days like this, Ves regretted getting into bed with the medium-sized repair businesses. He vastly preferred working with the larger businesses even if they charged a significant premium. At least they could be relied upon to deliver a satisfactory job.

"Is the repair industry truly so scummy or is the local business culture at fault?"

He believed that both played a part. Each reinforced the other, turning slightly scummy businesses into a scam factories.

It didn't help that many of the outfits that did business with the repair businesses on Harkensen III came from elsewhere. The foreigners that stopped over in the Harkensen System for business rather than pleasure tended to operate in the grey area at best. They mainly arrived at Harkensen to dispose of their ill-gotten goods in one of their many shady markets.

Outfits like these weren't use to high-quality service. Scummy business practices was a daily fact of life for them. This was the price they needed to pay for profiting from the shadow or the dark.

It all highlighted the fact that despite its legal veneer, the Harkensen System was actually a hive of scum and villainy.

"What a dangerously two-faced star system."

While he disliked dealing with these kinds of incidents, he couldn't help but admire Harkensen's overarching design. There was no doubt that the small and weak Reinald Republic derived a lot of revenue from both tourism and commerce involving mechs. This was probably one of the many ways in which the Harkensen System narrowed its disparity to genuine port systems such as Bentheim.

Fortunately for his sanity, besides rotating among the repair businesses, Ves also undertook other matters. The Vandals stopped over this star system for many other reasons than to repair their ships and mechs. They also appeared to be preparing for the next leg of their journey.

Inklings of a follow-up mission became clearer and clearer as Ves received assignments to help the logistics department procure more supplies. In particular, his help was needed whenever the planners wished to procure a batch of mech-specific goods.

The latest shopping run involved a set of very specific and very expensive components. The matter was of such import that Lieutenant Commander Soapstone took care of it in person this time.

"Mr. Larkinson." She greeted Ves as he stepped inside a rented Reinaldan shuttle. The vehicle quickly lifted off and sped towards one of the cities on Harkensen III. She handed over a data pad to Ves. "Please look at these parameters. We are in need of specialist mech equipment that isn't easy to obtain. I've scheduled a meeting with an equipment broker who can supply us with what we need, but I'll need your advice on what to purchase."

Ves instantly frowned when he read through the document on the data pad. "You're looking to buy... Vesian MFS gravitic backpack modules? And not the regular ones either, but the heavy-duty ones that can exert a massive amount of counter-gravity. This... this is not something you pick up from an average mech shop!"

The Reinald Republic sold plenty of backpack modules that fit the Vesian Modular Fitting Standard. A gravitic backpack module was basically a giant anti-grav generator outfitted onto the back of a landbound mech. Their anti-grav fields specifically worked to counteract strong gravity exerted onto the frames of the mechs.

In general, gravitic backpacks were rather troublesome to use because of their bulk and incredibly high energy usage. This was because the gravitic backpacks effectively lightened the weight exerted onto a mech.

This was vitally important for landbound mechs being deployed on giant terrestrial planets with massive amounts of gravities. If an ordinary mech stepped onto a super earth with two g's or up, the mech was liable to crush its vulnerable internals as it walked.

How could a mech even begin to fight when it couldn't even defeat a planet's gravity?

Of course, people didn't often fight on super earths. No state went through the trouble of terraforming them and establishing settlements on the surface. The only reason why anyone would fight on a super earth was if the place hid a lot of riches.

"A heavy-duty gravitic backpack module is not only fifty percent bulkier than the regular product, they also run out of energy extremely quickly. Going solely by their internal energy cells, they only last half an hour on a normal medium mech."

"We are aware of the drawbacks of heavy-duty gravitic backpacks, but we truly need them. They need to be rated to withstand up to five g's in atmospheric conditions. The pressure they will have to endure is very substantial."

That made it worse. A super earth with an atmosphere basically pressed a mech from all sides. Still, this request that came out of the blue practically startled Ves. Why did the Vandals seek for specialist equipment that only the most extreme treasure hunting outfits bought?

The whirlwind that the Vandals involved themselves with became murkier and murkier in his mind. He didn't dare speculate anymore because he lacked too much information to make an accurate judgement.

For now, all he needed to do was to focus on his current assignment.

"The set of criteria you've provided are hard to fulfill, but not impossible. The only problem is that it's going to cost us a lot."

"No problem. This is one of the expenses that Peace for Hafner has agreed to reimburse."

That was another strange concession. The Vandals definitely didn't decide to go to a super earth for no reason all of a sudden. Everything the Vandals planned to do appeared to be premeditated. Ves felt as if he had been caught in a very large net.

"These heavy-duty gravitic backpack modules don't look bad. However, are you sure you want them? Piloting a mech with a gravitic backpack on a super earth introduces all kinds of weirdness to the mechs affected by this technology."

"We are certain of their need, Mr. Larkinson. I'm sure you are curious exactly why we would seek this specialist equipment, but I advise you to keep your questions to yourself. Major Verle will explain the full details when needed."

"How many are we looking to procure?"

"Enough to outfit all of our landbound mechs, and some spares besides. These backpacks break easily during combat. Let's set the figure at four-hundred backpacks."

Ves widened his eyes when he heard that. The cost of a heavy-duty gravitic backpack wasn't as much as a high-quality mech component, but purchasing four-hundred of them at once was a major transaction.

"Since you're already asking for gravitic backpacks, are there any other novelties you want to get hold of? We might as well shop for other gear while we are there."

"We are going to need some high-quality transceiver towers and jammers rated for base defense."

"Those are easier to acquire, and they're cheaper to boot." Ves nodded with a little less tension. "Anything else?"

"Heavy-duty hazard suits." Soapstone added. "If the gravitic backpack fails, we don't want to see our mech pilots get crushed."

"If those backpacks fail during battle, the mech will practically become inoperative under such a terrifying amount of gravity. Cockpit ejection will likely fail as well. They won't be able to fly very far under five times the gravity of old earth."

"Our budget is limited. We will have to make do with the favors we received and the liquid funds we have left."

Ves already started to groan. This sudden spending spree came completely out of the blue.

## Chapter 577 Lieutenant Feray

After wrangling with the repair businesses all day for the last two weeks, Ves felt as tired as the Vandal mech pilots who had gone through several successive battles. The mental strain he accumulated from dealing with numerous troublesome issues wore out his patience.

So by the time he finally got to enjoy his vacation, he grabbed it with both hands.

Ves entered the common room of one of the dormitories that the Vandals had recently rented out. Hundreds of Vandals gathered in the morning as they waited for their group mates get out of bed and finish their breakfast.

"Head designer! Over here!"

He turned and saw a young woman waving at him. Ves approached the circle of Vandals and beheld the men and women.

Every group consisted of a different mix of Vandals. There would never be a case where a group consisted entirely of mech pilots or ship specialists or the like. Whoever drafted up the lists deliberately shuffled everyone's names around so that each group represented every aspect of the mech regiment.

Ves figured this must have been a method for the higher ups to increase everyone's connection to the Flagrant Vandals and intensify their camaraderie. No one in the common room wore their uniforms. Besides their military-issued comms, nothing on their bodies marked them out as Vandals.

Almost no one in the Harkensen System wore their uniforms, especially if they were off-duty. Lots of people from different states and backgrounds mingled here. If someone wearing a Vesian uniform happened to walk past someone wearing a Brighter uniform on the streets, lots of brawls would certainly ensue.

Thus, for better or worse, no visitor advertised their origins in Harkensen. At best, they would only be able to tell each other's origin through their accents when they spoke.

"Mr. Larkinson, right? I've seen you several times from afar! I can't believe I'm standing next a genius!" The woman who called earlier chattered next to him.

"Just call me Ves. Right now, none of us are wearing our uniforms."

"Ah, I'm Ensign Tiss Kozik. I work as a junior engineer aboard the Antecedent."

Ves looked at Tiss with a bit more respect. The difficulty of becoming a ship engineer in this day and age was extremely high. For her to be a junior engineer at her age must mean she possessed a bit of promise. Why would someone like her be assigned to the Vandals?

"I see everyone is here." The burly voice of the biggest person in the group spoke. "Let me introduce myself. You may know me as Lieutenant Nolsen Feray. I serve aboard the Finmoth Regal in the ship security department. This means that I'm likely the most dangerous Vandal among our little gathering outside of a mech. Does anyone dispute this?"

A few mech pilot types looked liked they wanted to contest, but eventually they backed down. Though their status and combat prowess with a mech put them far ahead of Nolsen, they weren't allowed to bring any mechs.

The Honored Ones strictly limited the permits that allowed mech pilots to pilot a mech in Harksensen. Without a valid permit, even local Reinaldians could forget about unsealing a mech and piloting them out in the open. The same regime existed in most major planets and star systems such as Bentheim.

If not, chaos and confusion would be rife as mechs began to slaughter each other on the dime. Most training concerning mech pilots emphasized aggression, so they would usually be quick to anger and quicker to fight.

Letting these wild beasts fight with their fists was one thing, but when it came to mechs, an entire capital city might become ruined after a week of unrestrained dueling.

"Alright then." Nolsen let up on his ferocity and smiled. "Forget about your former ranks and positions. We are all fellow Vandals here. Besides keeping you out of danger, I don't have any interest in bossing you around. I hope we can come to an agreement on which places to visit."

The group members quickly introduced each other before they argued where they wanted to go. Ves quietly noted everyone's names and postings and noticed that besides Tiss and Nolsen, everyone else came from the enlisted ranks.

Due to the difference in ranks, this gave Ves and the other two a bit more say than the enlisted folk, though Nolsen did his best to balance each other's requests.

"Alright, we are in agreement then? Spend one week in Harkensen III before spending another week in Harkensen I."

No one disagreed too much. Some of the Vandals favored spending time in Harkensen III, while others wanted to spend all of their time in Harkensen I. Yet most of them wanted to spend a bit of time in both, so in the end the middle ground won out.

Hashing out which places they wanted to visit was a lot more complicated. The entire group had to sit down on some benches in order to come to a consensus on a schedule they could all agree upon. This was far harder to accomplish and it took Nolsen's considerable efforts to draft up a final schedule.

"Alright, on our first day, we'll be visiting the shopping district of Black Belle City, the capital city on Harkensen III. I should remind you all that we won't be able to bring back anything we purchase."

It was too easy to slip in some spy bug inside a gadget the Vandals brought back to their ships. In truth, most of the Vandals wanted to experience the varied shops in Black Belle City.

"In the morning, we'll stroll through the shopping districts. In the afternoon, we'll visit Black Belle City's other sights. In the evening, we enter the city's grey area."

Over half of the group members perked up when they thought about the grey area. This was where the questionably legal transactions took place. Though it wasn't as shady as the black areas, it served as a good introduction to the Reinaldan underground.

"Alright, before we set off, let's pick up our weapons."

All ten Vandals exited the common room from the back and entered a courtyard where a bunch of Vandal security officers distributed standard-issue pistols brought by the crateload from the armory.

Though the public security in the Harkensen System was high, so many people smuggled in weapons that the Honored Ones pretty much gave up on enforcing any small arms weapons ban. As long as people didn't bring in anything big or destructive, the Honored Ones didn't bother too much.

The only rule that armed visitors needed to take seriously was that they absolutely couldn't kill an upright Reinaldan. Certainly, outsiders had the right to defend themselves, but only up to the point of incapacitating a Reinaldan. Only the shadiest Reinaldans didn't enjoy this protection.

This also distinguished the grey areas and black areas.

"Alright Vandals, everyone pick your weapon!" A grey-haired bosun called. "You only get one and as much ammunition or batteries as you are willing to carry!"

Not every Vandal was a good shot, but they at least underwent basic training, enough not to shoot themselves with their own weapons. They confidently picked their preferred model of laser or ballistic pistols, each of which varied substantially in size, firepower, capacity and more.

Ves had never gone through much formal training in handling a gun, and despite his lengthy practice with the Amastendira, he never regarded himself as a good shot.

Someone like him typically picked a dinky little laser pistol like the one that Tiss had picked out. Their lack of recoil and straight beams made them a favorite among servicemen that didn't specialize in combat.

He picked a ballistic pistol instead, and not the lightest one either. Instead, he picked up a medium-sized hand cannon and stroked it once before receiving a couple of magazines.

"Do you even know how to handle that weapon?" Nolsen asked while he looked at Ves with a dubious eye.

"My aim isn't that great, but I won't be blown away if that's what you mean."

Ves demonstrated his confidence by stepping up to the shooting range that the Vandals had set up at the end of the courtyard. After he checked his weapon and keyed his identity to the operating system of his pistol, he took up a stance and fired at one of the targets.

"Well, looks like you're not so clueless after all. As expected of a Larkinson."

Compared to a trained soldier, his accuracy was abysmal. Yet for a mech designer, Ves could confidently hit a target ten meters away, which was sufficient to deal with imminent threats.

The only reason he opted for a ballistic pistol over a laser one was because he already possessed the Amastendira. Picking up another laser pistol did little to enhance his capabilities.

Despite the unsophisticated nature of the pistol, it came with several useful functions. One of which was to lock it in place on his body without a body. Ves opened his coat and slid the weapon in an underarm position. Most Vandals opted to hide their weapons on their person as well, though Lieutenant Feray choose to strap it to his hip in the open.

"Alright, if you're satisfied with your gear, let's set off! There are aircars waiting outside for us to board!"

The Vandals rented out a significantly-sized complex in one of the major cities of Harkensen III to accommodate more than ten-thousand servicemen. Ves saw thousands of Vandals in uniform getting onto aircars that brought them to their temporary work assignments. Those without a uniform headed to other destinations.

The aircar they boarded was like a small bus and possessed enough room to fit all ten of them. After Nolsen passed on their destination to the aircar's AI, the vehicle floated into the air and joined one of the many streams of traffic that criss-crossed the entire planet.

Tiss bounced around in her seat. "This is the first time I'll visit a foreign market. How exciting! They say that you can find anything from the Komodo Star Sector in one of Harkensen's many shopping districts."

"I would take that with a grain of salt." Ves said with a bit more calm. "The Harkensen System is far from the major shipping lines. It doesn't have a lot of

products from the second-rate states as well. You can find a greater variety of curiosities from the rest of the Komodo Star Sector in the Coalition or in places like Bentheim."

"Bentheim is boring. There's too many people there, and it's all about mechs."

Ves couldn't refute that. "That's true. Still, each trading nexus has their own charm. Treasure hunters often try to dispose their gains in Harkensen, so we may see something nice from alien space."

This was one of the reasons why Ves didn't object too much to visiting the shopping districts. Though all the truly valuable frontier loot only showed up in the grey or black markets, the legal markets had the advantage of safety. No one was liable to shoot someone there for owning something shiny.

As their aircar slowed down and descended from above, Ves looked down at the picturesque black structures that made up the more affluent part of Black Belle City.

The aircar slipped onto one of the city's many parking areas. As soon as the group members exited the vehicle, another group of tourists entered it and zipped away.

"Alright, stay together. The mech plaza is just ahead!"

The group walked to a market-like street where various street vendors showcased sealed mechs in various conditions. Though it was easier to order a mech from a specialised store or from the galactic net, the lively market atmosphere in the mech plaza fostered many impulse purchases from well-off visitors.

A loud Reinaldan-accented voice called out from the rest of the hawkers. "Mech pilots! Get the latest from the Bright Republic! Purchase the latest sensation that is stirring up the entire mech market!"

Ves touched Nolsen's shoulders and gestured his head towards the hawker. The security officer understood and detoured the group towards the section where the seller of Brighter mechs set up shop.

As the group neared the stall where the hawker kept boasting about his Brighter mechs, Ves abruptly stuttered in his pace.

"Behold the highest quality premium rifleman mech! Gaze your eyes upon the magnificent gold label Crystal Lord! Imported straight from the Bright Republic, this version is a limited edition! Look at its condition! There's hardly a scratch on this beauty! For 250 million marks, it's yours!"

A Crystal Lord. A copy of his second original design. Here in Black Belle City. Though Ves had always known that the Living Mech Corporation extended its tentacles to foreign markets, Ves did not expect to come across his own product here.

#### **Chapter 578 Second-hand Mech**

The reason why Ves put on a weird face right now was because of the presence of the supposed gold label Crystal Lord. The LMC's gold label products held a great amount of prestige that Ves had painstakingly built up step by step.

Ves sold relatively few gold label mechs ever since he went into business. He only sold around ten or twenty of them at a time because each gold label came with a guarantee of quality. Each customer who purchased a gold label mech would have absolute confidence of getting their hands on a mech that had personally been hand-crafted by the founder and lead designer of the LMC.

In other words, such a collectible luxury product shouldn't show up in some random mech plaza.

"250 million marks for this ultra-rare second-hand mech! It's an absolute steal to get a mech of this quality at this price!"

The seller was right on one thing. The mech represented a steal. The only questionable point was the customer might not be the beneficiary of the transaction.

This was because Ves immediately sensed that the mech was dead to his spiritual sense. "This is impossible."

His Crystal Lord design came with an unprecedented B-grade X-Factor. Even the stupidest third-party manufacturer would be able to fabricate one of the Crystal Lord variants with a wisp of X-Factor.

However, this only applied when the third-party manufacturer reproduced the Crystal Lord according to an authentic design.

Ves knew that the different labels of the Crystal Lord mainly distinguished themselves by the quality of their center crystal. The gold label version not only hosted a crystal that was twice as large as the lesser labels, it had also undergone an exclusive activation process from a one-of-a-kind crystal cube.

The mech in front of him happened to possess all of the right contours and dimensions of a gold label Crystal Lord. Even the oversized center crystal appeared to be cut into the right dimensions.

"This is impossible!"

The mech had been polished up until its coating gleamed in the local sun. Visually, the Crystal Lord mech looked like the real deal. That characteristic frame with a keen emphasis on mobility while benefiting from a modest amount of compressed armor gave the mech a sense of agile threat.

The alien head devoid of humanoid features that instead contained lots of mysterious starry holes made the mech look strange and exotic.

The slimmed-down rifle locked with seals and placed in its arms looked exactly like the rifles he designed in person.

The only problem was that it was all counterfeit.

"It's fake."

This mech was an unauthorized copy of the real deal. Due to the complete lack of spirituality, the mech was not only an illegal copy, it wasn't even an accurate reproduction.

Ves stared at the center crystal and noticed that it lacked the spark that signified that it had gone through the activation process. That alone signified that the mech that the seller claimed to be a gold label Crystal Lord was lying out of his teeth.

"Designed by Ves Larkinson, a genius from the Bright Republic, this is your only opportunity to get your hands on his best mech model to date! Come, take a close look at the majesty of this super scarce gold label mech! 250 million marks and it's yours!"

When the seller mentioned his name, Ves received a lot of stares by the group members. Intellectually, they knew his name and knew that he was a mech designer. However, they never came across any of his products. Even if they were curious, most Vandals lacked the permission to browse the galactic net.

"Is that yours, Ves?" Ensign Tiss asked with admiration in her eyes. "What a huge amount of money! 250 million marks is like 125 million bright credits!"

None of the Vandals remained calm when they thought about how much money the sums represented. It was as if it had never occurred to any of the Vandals that their head designer was a billionaire in civilian life.

Ves pressed his lips into a very thin smile. "That seller is a fraud."

He didn't say anything about his wealth or identity. Instead, he stepped towards the seller's stall.

"Uh, don't start any trouble here! This is Harkensen, not Bentheim!"

Ves nodded to show he understood and walked up right in front of the extravagantly dressed Reinaldan. The hefty man looked like he couldn't stuff enough gold ornaments on his body.

"Welcome, customer! Are you interested in my Hayfly?"

"Tell me about the Crystal Lord you're selling." Ves spoke calmly. "Where did you get it from?"

"Ah, the Crystal Lord! Its tale is long and winding. You see, this mech is fabricated in secret by Mr. Larkinson to his homosexual paramore..."

"...who went ill from an alien sexually transmitted disease..."

"...had to sell his precious Crystal Lord which represents his secret engagement gift to fund his treatment..."

"...some pirates intercepted the convoy that shipped the Crystal Lord..."

"...the alien sandmen ambushed the pirates that got a hold of the Crystal Lord..."

"...a small fleet of treasure hunters beat the sandmen back and coincidentally salvaged some shipping containers, one of which contains this Crystal Lord..."

Ves held up his hand. "Alright alright, enough!"

"Oh, I was only half-way in my story, dear customer! The best part had yet to come!" The seller boasted with a grin.

Some of the group members giggled and laughed behind Ves, which only lowered his mood even further.

"Do you have any proof of authenticity for this mech?"

"Ah, sadly, if you listened to the rest of my story, you would have realized that all of the documentation has been lost. Alien insects infested the ships of the treasure hunters and tragically ate the data pad that contained the certificate of authenticity! I wouldn't sell this precious mech for such a low price in the plaza if that was the case! The market price for any gold label Crystal Lord is undoubtedly than 500 million marks! I'm giving you half-price here! This is absolutely a great deal!"

"I don't know." Ves crossed his arms. "Without any proof of authenticity, how would I know I'm buying the real deal?"

"Ah, if you are doubting its performance, you can easily test it out in one of the simulators I have at hand if you are a potentate. For a small deposit of 100,000 marks, I can also let you bring my Crystal Lord to the nearest practice yard and let you or a potentate friend try out my product. You'll be able to see that it is absolutely authentic!"

Really now. Ves knew that the seller wouldn't expose any loopholes in this fashion. The simulator likely made use of the official virtual version of the Crystal Lord. As for bringing the Crystal Lord to a practice yard, such locations only allowed mechs to perform a limited amount of actions. They couldn't even move at a running pace according to the rules, let alone have another mech shoot a laser weapon at the Crystal Lord's center crystal to test out its trump card.

All in all, even if a prospective customer trailed the Crystal Lord, they would only experience the mech's performance on the surface, which likely didn't deviate very much from the real deal.

"I think I better look elsewhere, then. Thank you for answering my questions."

"Hey, if there are any problems, I can give you a discount! What about one percent off? Our prices are negotiable!"

Ves walked away while his group members gawked at him or regarded him with mixed expressions. Once Ves led them out of earshot from the Reinaldan stall owner, he slumped a bit.

"Give me a moment, please."

Ves opened up his military comm. He still retained the loosened restrictions from his field promotion to head designer. This enabled a couple of various handy functions, one of which was to record some footage of what happened around him. In addition, the block on interacting with the galactic net had temporarily been lifted.

After all, a communications blockade wouldn't be very useful if Ves could borrow the comm from any bystander to utilize the galactic net.

Ves selected a file and saw that it had recorded the entire conversation and more. He composed a quick message to Calsie back in Cloudy Curtain and attached the file before he sent the entire package.

"Let's go, Nolsen."

The Vandals eventually shrugged and resumed their window shopping. The only thing that changed was that some of them asked for his analysis on certain mechs.

During their stroll through the plaza, Ves encountered many different second-hand mechs. Many of them looked like they had been salvaged from the battlefield and fixed up to look better than their actual condition. He guessed that most of their internals might not be as pristine.

This was one of the areas in which the customers needed to make their own judgement. People in need of mechs might be able to pick up a good bargain if they had good eyes, but most likely they would get ripped off in the end. It all depended on their skill and luck.

"There's a thrill out of shopping for a second-hand mech." A Vandal group member remarked. "Maybe some of them used to be piloted by heroes. Maybe they killed a lot of people. Who knows. Every mech has their own story."

Ves silently agreed with that. When he brushed his spiritual senses towards the mechs that looked worse off, he tasted echoes of what the mech experienced in the past. Though the recollections he sensed was too indistinguishable for him to make sense of them, it was undeniable that some of these mechs had gone through a lot.

It was too bad that their physical condition leaned towards the lower end. This made sense, as older mechs invariably sustained a lot of damage. The mechs that looked like they only entered the battlefield once or twice felt like dummies in comparison.

Everyone enjoyed looking at the second-hand mechs and made a game out of guessing why it ended up in the mech plaza. Their former owners must have certainly met an unfortunate end for their mechs to be displayed and sold in Harkensen.

One thing that Ves took note that sales appeared to be rather slow. Maybe ninety-nine percent out of every visitor were like the Vandals, who merely wanted to see the sights. Those that looked like they might be serious buyers tended to focus their attention on the cheaper mechs priced at 10 million marks or lower.

This highlighted the low status of the second-hand market. The people or outfits that had the funds to buy a mech would almost always opt to buy a new one. There were mechs for almost every possible price segment. With all the shenanigans that went on in the second-hand market, only the most desperate customers and special cases considered them seriously.

"Alright, we've gone through the whole plaza. Let's move on to the main shopping streets."

The group left the mech plaza and its eclectic collection of second-hand mechs and moved over to the main streets which hosted various mech shops. Different from the chaotic plaza, the main streets appeared far more classier and orderly. The clean white streets and luxurious storefronts made it clear that only those with money would have a chance of spending it in one of the shops here.

Various strange but fancy looking shop brands adorned the storefront. Some of them only sold one brand of mechs, while others sold a variety of models from all over the galactic rim.

Ves looked at a storefront that sold spaceborn mechs. Projections of elegant mechs with hawk wings soared through space as they battled generic opponents in a simulated battle. He wondered if the LMC set up a franchise in one of these streets.

"Probably not. I haven't seen any plans to that end when I was still helming the LMC."

While shopping for a mech on the galactic net was convenient, the problem was that customers had too much choice. Investing in a physical storefront to profile your own brand of mechs allowed a company to stand out from the crowd. Considering that the LMC mostly spent its energies on selling premium mechs, operating a couple of physical stores in high end shopping streets might be worth the effort.

#### Chapter 579 Observed

"We're being followed." Nolsen said as the group made it to the end of one of the mech avenues. "Don't look back, you idiots! It's nothing serious yet if our watcher isn't good enough to hide his presence from me."

Ves tried really hard not to turn around. He never had a clue that someone followed their group around.

Trian Earls, one of their mech pilots, spat on the pavement. "Why aren't we doing anything? Let's go beat the fellow up!"

"Making a move in the middle of Black Belle City's shopping district will only land us in trouble. Look at how many patrolmen of the Planetary Guard are patrolling the streets. We'll be slugged and put into custody the second we throw a punch."

Everyone glanced at the uniformed law enforcement officers. They patrolled in teams of two, and wore enough gear to repel a small riot. In addition to their personal capabilities, they were also followed by a hovering bot armed with non-lethal weaponry.

The bot alone was programmed to instantly stun someone from a distance the moment they pulled out a weapon.

"Who's following us?" Ves asked. "Can you tell?"

The lieutenant furrowed his brows as they pretended to look through the windows of another upscale mech store. "He doesn't look like a pro. Likely a local gang member. Or someone who never intended to hide his presence in the first place. Right now, the fact that someone is tailing us does not mean that we're in danger. For now, we can rely on the Planetary Guards and the Honored Ones to forestall any trouble."

Half an hour passed by without a single change. The group members calmed down and resumed their window shopping. The mech avenues truly formed a snapshot of all the mech models sold in the Komodo Star Sector.

Studying the mechs the shops had to offer gave Ves a good idea of the state of the mech industry in the Reinald Republic.

Different from larger states such as the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom, the Reinald Republic was too small to foster a strong and relatively independent mech industry. Apart from supporting a couple of crown jewels, the bulk of the businesses operating in their territory consisted of foreign entities.

While the Frozen Leaf Alliance that the Reinald Republic was apart of gave them the strength to contend against the Vesians in a military fashion, it did not do too much beyond that. Each of the three member states still ran their territories as a separate entity. They refused to operate as a single market with shared borders and a unified economy.

This left the Reinald Republic without the strength to punch above its weight. Its own domestic market couldn't possibly satisfy a fully mature domestic mech industry.

It was a good thing that the Reinald Republic attracted a lot of foreign visitors. Plenty of mercenaries, gang members, treasure hunters and worse visited the small state to do business. Because each of their outfits based themselves in different states, the Reinald Republic attracted foreign mech manufacturers to set up shop in their trading systems.

After walking past numerous shops, Ves finally found a legitimate vendor for the mechs of the LMC. The group entered a store called The Brightest Mech. Both the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord occupied a prominent place in the store that obviously catered to Brighters and fans of Brighter mechs.

"Wow. Is that your work as well? This knight mech looks so light!"

"Damn! 135 million marks for a Blackbeak? And it's only a bronze label? What a ripoff!"

Ves awkwardly laughed. "These mech models are aimed at the premium market. If you look at the spec sheet, you'll know why they cost so much."

The Brightest Mech featured tasteful decoration themed around torches and stars. It played out as an exaggerated caricature of Brighter culture, and every Vandal couldn't help but be amused. Whoever operated this shop probably knew nothing about the Bright Republic.

The shop only possessed enough room to showcase half-a-dozen physical mechs that sold the most. The rest only appeared as scaled-down projections. This also applied to the mechs of the LMC. Their high price tag threw off most potential customers.

"What a shame."

If The Brightest Mech devoted some of its limited physical space to showcasing a silver label mech of the LMC, a lot of customers would likely be swayed into buying them. The charm of the X-Factor couldn't be perceived from a projection, and even a simulation wasn't able to bring out its full strength.

Ves figured that the LMC might be better off operating their own stores. This allowed the company to exert full control over how to present and sell their offerings. The only issue right now was that his company didn't have enough original models to justify such a plan.

There was another issue as well. The LMC faced various hurdles each time it tried to enter a new foreign market. Sometimes, the only way they could enter the market was if they partnered up with a native company. The mechs would then be sold through the native company's own sales channels.

If the LMC wanted to keep their cooperation with the locals going, they had to refrain from snatching meat from their partner's mouths.

"How complicated." He shook his head. Ves left the matter for later.

Once the group of ten had their fill of seeing familiar mechs, they exited the store and wandered around aimlessly for a while. They eventually ate some lunch before deciding to stroll through a non-mech shopping district.

This time they looked at numerous wondrous products, from luxury comm models to mechanical pets that bore a vague resemblance to Lucky. The Als that operated the tiny puppies and kittens was very sophisticated, enabling them to speak and interact with children.

Larger pets existed as well with some forms of self-defense. Mechanical dogs proved to be the all-time popular, occupying a full third of the entire store. Customers bought many of the dogs in order to enhance the security of their households or provide some protection against random thugs.

Naturally, truly important figures wouldn't resort to mass-market mechanical pets. Any determined hacker would be able to intrude their operating systems, so these pets mostly catered to the lower-middle class.

The most impressive pet model by far was an aircar-sized dragon. Sophisticated anti-grav modules and various other creature comforts turned it into an impressive flying mount.

Few actually bought it though. In order to make it harder for it to be hacked, it ran on a very advanced processor and operating system. Subscribing to the mandatory security suite alone cost more than 100,000 marks a year. This went well above the limits of the middle class.

"I wouldn't know what to do with such an expensive pet." Ensign Tiss said as she admired the mechanical dragon's exquisite construction. The store normally sold it with a plain metallic surface, but they also offered the option of covering it with life-like dragon scales. "Could you create something like this on your own?"

"Maybe. I'd have to approach it as if I was designing a mech. Hm, if so, it might be feasible. The only area which I'm not very sure of is the operating system."

Ves realized he might have talent in creating a pet as it wouldn't be too different from designing and fabricating a miniature mech.

Though a lot of mechanical pets got sold each year, their revenue and profit margins paled in comparison to the mech market. Ves had no reason to abandon his current vocation.

As the Vandals weren't allowed to bring anything back with them, they regretfully had to leave the shop behind. Interacting with all of the friendly pets in the store really helped lift some of their moods.

As the Vandals gawked at various curiosities, Nolsen spoke up again. "Hey, sorry to spoil your moods for a moment, but our watcher has a companion on the opposite street."

"What are these fellows doing? Can't they observe us from remote?"

The security officer discreetly shook his head. "There are too many ways to spoil such things. My comm contains a security suite that can easily scramble smaller probes. In addition, the Reinaldians won't tolerate excessive use of spying equipment in their shopping districts. The only observation tools allowed belong to the Reinaldians themselves."

"So are we being watched by someone other than the government?"

"I'd say it's likely, but we can't rule out the government, you know. The spies may be there to act as failsafes if we ever try to scramble all of the sensors in the vicinity. Trust me, my comm can do that. To guard against unexpected equipment failure, some plain humans can keep us under observation while they try to get new bugs on site."

Ves scratched his head. He hated playing games like this where he ended up in a passive state. He knew more than Lieutenant Feray and the rest of the group.

It caused Ves to see shadows where none should appear. The wide streets became a prison and every casual bystander might actually harbor ill intentions to the Vandals.

A faint instinct of danger tickled his mind. It was not enough for him to suspect a concrete threat, but it might be a sign of what was in store.

Some days ago, Lieutenant Commander Soapstone brought him to help negotiate the purchase of various specialized equipment. Right now, the broker must have started shipping the goods to a warehouse under the control of the Vandals.

Those who kept their eye on the Vandals must be wondering why they sought to procure so much equipment that would only be useful in high gravity environments.

"Don't mind the watchers. We're all innocent Vandals here. We've got nothing to hide."

They took it easy in the next hours. Besides visiting various stores, they also entered a museum and visited a few monuments that originated from the founding of the Reinald Republic.

None of the states in the Komodo Star Sector was very old. The entire star sector only opened up for colonization shortly after the Age of Mechs commenced.

At the later stages of the Age of Conquest, human warfleets scoured many planets of life. Once the flames of war died down, the MTA and CFA fostered a great undertaking where it became popular to set out for the furthest reaches of the rim to form new colonies.

The Reinald Republic was one of the losers for the mad scramble for stars at the opening of the star sector. The Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom might have been bumped from the resource-rich center of the star sector, but they found adequate clusters of stars to settle upon.

The founders of the Reinald Republic fought with the larger third-rate states for a time, but eventually had to admit defeat in yet again. The star systems that encompassed Reinald wasn't promising at all. This gave the smaller state a lot of distress until they found a lifeline in tourism and trade in illicit goods.

When evening came by, the group wanted to experience some of the latter by visiting a grey market. Black Belle City happened to host a modest grey market in a vast tunnel network beneath the capital city.

It was as if they descended into a dungeon. Light was purposefully kept dim, and various invisible defense measures made the tunnels a lot more dangerous than he expected.

Nolsen looked concerned at the people that frequented the grey market. "Tuck your pistols at your side. Don't hide them. You have to show the visitors here that you won't be easy to bully."

They did what the lieutenant instructed. Once all ten of them showed off their laser or ballistic pistols, the eyes set upon them had diminished by a fair amount. No one wanted to stir up trouble in the grey market either, but the Reinaldians didn't exert a lot of influence here.

Everything that happened in the grey markets came under the purview of the cartels that set them up. Immediately upon entering a large underground hall, Ves had the misconception that he returned to the mech plaza he visited in the morning. A lot of street stalls dotted the humongous underground hall.

"Now this is what I'm talking about!" A Vandal exclaimed. "This feels just like home!"

A lot of things could be bought here so long as they could pay. Ves already widened his eyes when he spotted a lot of high-value goods brought back from the frontier.

### Chapter 580 Grey Marke

Ves ignored the uncertified mechs and the deadly weaponry the stall owners tried to peddle to the tourists and approached one of the stalls that sold frontier loot.

The stall in front of him sold nothing but pieces of ore. None of them shone in the light, but some of them possessed a subtle charm that somehow attracted his attention.

"Welcome, dear customer." The old man who manned the stall greeted. "Are you interested in my wares? They are genuine treasures of the frontier. Whether they are shaped by aliens hands or the natural forces of the galaxy, I am sure you can find what you seek here. Look at this white arcelyx stone for example!"

The man picked up an off-white piece of mesmerizing rock with a gloved hand. "A treasure hunter claimed to have picked this rock from a beast world. He claimed that the planet was filled with exobeasts, and if not for the fast-growing vegetation that kept the herbivores fed, the planet would have long collapsed its own ecosystem."

"What does that have to do with this rock?" Ves asked.

"The planet is sprinkled by this stuff! Hehe, the treasure hunter spent a lot of effort to find these anomalous rocks. At first, he didn't know their effects, but once he returned to Mancroft Independent Harbor, the effects of this stone finally came into being."

"And that is?"

The stall owner grinned at him with a mischievous expression. "The treasure hunter upended an entire entertainment establishment! Mere proximity to this amazing stone will give you the firepower of a water hose and the endurance of a long-range mech!"

Ves and a few other Vandals attracted to the curiosities offered by the stall looked incredulous.

"You don't believe me? Why don't you try it out for yourselves!" The stall owner dropped the hand-sized rock and retrieved some boxes from under the stall. Each of them came with a transparent cover that showed off the slivers of white rock contained within. "A full-sized arcelyx stone can be had for 57,000 marks! If you want to sample its effects, this nail-sized sample can be yours for 500 marks!"

"No thanks." Ves immediately turned away. When he saw that some of the other men looked tempted, he gently pulled them away. "Don't fall for his story. What exotic treasure, in my eyes the rock is plain ghoshaw ore. It's an uncommon but fairly abundant ore in the Komodo Star Sector. Its market price is around two-thousand bright credits per ton."

That convinced them all to drop any interest of the supposed 'arcelyx stone'.

"How did you recognize that it was ghoshaw ore?" One Vandal asked.

"I memorized a lot of ores and materials that are available in the Komodo Star Sector. It's necessary for my work."

Every mech designer worth a damn studied the full list of publicly available materials in their star sector. It could be said that each star sector invented their own unique brand of mechs. Maybe one star sector possessed a lot of exotics favorable to smaller mechs. This would certainly make the region focus their design efforts into developing lots of light mechs.

The group wandered over towards different stalls, making their way through the crowds as best they could. The underground halls offered as much space as the avenues above, but the Vandals barely had any space to move due to the abundance of tourists.

The difference in interest was obvious. Although the luxury shops on the surface sold a lot of good products, the same could be found on any major planet.

In contrast, the grey market offered goods that couldn't easily be found elsewhere. Many other grey markets restricted their access to known acquaintances.

For example, when Ves wanted something shady, he wouldn't know where to turn. He had to resort to contacting Dietrich to obtain what he wanted from the grey or black markets.

This highlighted the special and open nature of the Harkensen System. Their grey and black markets didn't care about connections at all. Neither the seller or the buyer required trust to perform their transactions.

Due to the popularity of this market, business was booming here. Ves saw many unregistered mechs exchanging hands, though calling them unregistered was a euphemism. They should actually be called counterfeits, because they were nothing different from the fake Crystal Lord. At least the sellers were more honest in the grey market, directly admitting that the mechs had been fabricated by a mech manufacturer that hadn't licensed their designs.

Since most licenses cost a lot of money, the true production cost of a legal mech was significantly higher than a counterfeit mech. Even if they used the exact same production standards, the counterfeit mechs wasn't burdened by a huge amount of overhead costs.

In general, this made counterfeit mechs around ten to fifty percent cheaper to buy. The discount was more extreme for expensive mechs, as the profit margin was the highest there. Cheaper mechs already cut a lot of corners, so the price couldn't get much lower even without considering overhead.

"Are you dissatisfied?" Tiss asked when she saw the glum face on Ves.  
"These counterfeit mechs are taking away your sales."

"Even if I am, what can I do about it?" Ves sighed in a tired manner. "People in need of mechs are always on the lookout for something cheaper. As long as there's demand, there's someone who is willing to meet it. Even if counterfeit mechs stop showing up here, business will only move elsewhere."

"Some of these mechs don't look very reliable either. Though I'm not a mech designer, even I can see that the workmanship on them is too rough."

Ves nodded. "Without the full design schematics, the counterfeiters can only use their own judgement to fill the gaps. A fake mech will never surpass the real deal. If any counterfeiters possess the skills to improve the original design, then they are better off becoming a legitimate mech designer. Therefore, it's virtually a rule that all counterfeit designers are failures."

Many failed mech designers that tried to operate a workshop would be saddled with debt by the time they folded their businesses. Sometimes, a bankruptcy allowed them to begin anew, but other times their creditors insisted on getting back their money.

Fabricating counterfeit mechs was a good way to earn money quickly, especially if they picked a popular mech model. The counterfeiters basically leached off the achievements of their more successful peers.

It was a dishonest but profitable way to do business.

"If you look at some of the buyers, they don't look like the sort that can make a legal transaction." Ves gestured at someone with a wild air. The man looked

like a pirate commander who was trying his best to restrain his savage urges.  
"Where do you think pirates get their mechs?"

"Ah. But pirates never pilot any good mechs, right?"

"That's because there's no form of regulation in the underground markets. Anyone could sell a mech that is supposed to last for a decade but breaks down after a single year. Buyers have to judge the seller's reputation. If they can't, they should at least have a good mech appraiser by their side."

Ves spotted several men and women guiding big spenders around. They waved at the mechs on display and presumably provided a more accurate assessment of their worth.

Still, nothing could beat the MTA in terms of reputation. Their trustworthiness and reliability trumped every other mech appraiser. Their certification process was almost flawless.

Only the most obscure features defeated their comprehensive certification and validation tests. Ves was very certain that they couldn't pick up the X-Factor.

The grey market offered more than mechs and rocks. Further ahead, they entered some kind of bestiary where a large amount of exobeasts resided inside climate-controlled cages.

Various alien beasts of all shapes and sizes could all be bought with minimal fuss, very much opposite to the strict controls that most governments set on alien creatures. After all, if specimens ever got loose, they might lead to a very troublesome cascade of failures in the local ecosystem. Remedying the problem was possible, but only at great cost.

Ves hadn't spotted anything familiar like the hexapods of Groening IV. After witnessing those majestic beasts up close, the boring and mundane exobeasts in the grey market failed to rouse his interests. Most of them

appeared to be bred and tamed by humans in some farm for generations, making them good pets for families.

"This entire grey market feels a little phony somehow." Ves remarked to Tiss.

"The stuff that's on sale here isn't as exciting as I thought."

"Oh? All of the things that are on sale here is illegal, right?"

"That's a matter for interpretation." He said. "There's no way that the government doesn't know what's going on here. By turning a very obvious blind eye, they've tacitly consented to the trade that goes on in these markets."

"So it's sort of legal, then."

Ves bet that the cartels that operated the underground markets passed some of their profits to the Reinaldan government. Everything that happened here was fully within their range of control. The giant game of pretend didn't fool anyone.

"The thing is, I can't figure out the MTA's stance. On one hand, they can be very tyrannical in enforcing their taboos. On the other hand, they aren't as diligent when it comes to smaller offenses such as selling counterfeits."

"Maybe they aren't as powerful as you think they are." Tiss ventured out a guess. "If they're short on manpower or resources for some reason, it makes sense if they don't bother with the small stuff."

Ves didn't believe this to be true. The MTA was unimaginably powerful and employed trillions of people across the galaxy. Even if they were spread a little thin in the galactic rim, they could always hire more people.

"Well, it's difficult to determine what the MTA wants. Since they left this market alone, it probably won't go away anytime soon."

After the group of Vandals had their fill of the exobeasts, they exited the bestiary and entered into an entirely different hall.

"Underground arena!"

A massive circular pit formed a single large arena space where two melee mechs went at each other with brutality unbecoming of a proper duelist. Shards of armor plating sheared away while the mechs went on the offensive with little guard for defense.

A large audience cheered and hooted at the spectacle happening in front of them. They all sat on the benches that went lower and lower until they reached the dueling ground.

The group quickly bumped into rough people that looked like cartel members. "We only sell all-day tickets here. Four-hundred marks per ticket. Ten-thousand marks if you want a VIP ticket. If you want to reserve a private theater box, I can take you up to the manager."

"Regular tickets please. We'll all pay for ourselves."

Four-hundred marks amounted to two-hundred bright credits, which was barely within the range they could withstand. A regular arena ticket cost only half as much, but the sanctioned duels were never as exciting as the underground ones.

The melee mechs currently in the arena sustained more damage every second, but neither of them gave up. Ves could tell that these mechs cost quite a bit, because their armor amazingly held up for a long time.

When he looked at the size of the crowd and how many seats the arena accommodated, he knew how the arena turned a profit despite the immense damage being dealt to the competing mechs.

"Even an underground arena can host more than a hundred-thousand people!"

While the main arenas in Bentheim could host up to half a million spectators, that was in the light. Despite its dubious legality, this underground arena still managed to draw a consistent crowd of tens of thousands of people!

Ves had never thought that the underground dueling scene was so popular!