

Chapter 601 Coincidental Meeting

"Too much repetition isn't a good thing." Ves eventually concluded.

Though the mech industry predominantly divided mechs into two-dozen mainstream archetypes, this did not mean that Ves had to design that many mechs to advance. In particular, designing heavy mechs was out of reach to most mech designers, yet plenty of mech designers had reached Master Mech Designer or Star Designer without ever designing a heavy mech.

This told Ves that in order to advance smoothly, the process mattered rather than the outcome. Ves could design an absolute garbage mech and still gain some progress as long as he learned something.

"Technically speaking, all of those competition mechs I've designed in a hurry are crap mechs. Even my latest New Sentinel is a travesty compared to the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord. Yet designing the New Sentinel was just as satisfying as designing the latter two."

Ves had absolutely gained a lot of insights from designing and constructing the frankenstein mech. The immense challenge in delivering a much-improved mech in just a couple of days forced him to exercise his imagination and seek for solutions to problems he had never considered before.

"That's the key to advancement. As long as I'm working on something new, I can train my problem-solving skills."

The System didn't track those skills. Ves realized that every time he looked at his Skills page, he reinforced his bias that only the Skills defined by the System mattered. In actual fact, a mech designer was far more than a moving library of science and engineering.

"It's just like Spirituality. Before, the System couldn't quantify this phenomenon, so it had to observe my development on this matter."

In other words, Ves took the System as gospel and developed a tunnel vision concerning his Attributes and Skills. It was a good thing he became aware of this shortcoming early.

That said, the benefits provided by the System could not be replaced, but Ves had to remind himself that it was just a tool at his disposal. His own development mattered the most. Something which might benefit the System may not be beneficial to himself.

It turned out his separation from the System had inadvertently been a boon to him. If he continued to slavishly devote his life to the Pavlovian reward mechanisms of the System, he would have lost the ingenuity and flexibility of thought that defined a real mech designer.

Right now, Ves believed that even without the System, he could work on his own to advance to Journeyman!

In contrast, if he continued to become addicted to the System to the point he only thought in terms of Skills, Attributes and Design Points, he would have become a hollow mech designer at some point. The only way he would have been able to advance to Journeyman was through external assistance.

Perhaps the System offered Ves the option to advance without pain by exchanging a lot of Design Points, but such an easy method doubtlessly resulted in many repercussions!

Ves formulated another goal at this time. He wanted to advance to Journeyman Mech Designer before the Mech Corps discharged him!

"Every Bright-Vesia War lasts for five years, more or less. Within this time, if I work hard and develop new designs, I should be able to make it more or less."

With this decision, he directly rejected Morgan's theory that a mech designer who hoped to advance to Star Designer should spend decades on designing mechs.

There was a risk that Ves made the wrong decision, but he shouldn't believe every theory spouted by a random mech designer. In any case, he felt better about this decision than the alternatives.

"If pure volume is king, then all of those worked-to-death mech designers working like bots for design studios should have become Star Designers by now."

During his time on Harkensen I, he mentally constructed a plan for his future. His first objective should be to advance to Journeyman within five years. It didn't do him any harm if he failed, but becoming a Journeyman was enormously helpful to his subsequent goals.

Once he returned to civilian life, Ves planned to develop a reasonably rounded catalog of mech models. He didn't need to develop over two-dozen separate mech models. Making do with just enough to allow the Avatars of Myth to become a comprehensive fighting unit should be sufficient.

"By the time I'm finished with that, the next mech generation will arrive. I'll definitely have to reach Journeyman Mech Designer by then, or it will be hard to join the first wave of new generation mech model releases."

As long as he joined the race at the start, his company would doubtlessly grow like a rocket.

However, he shouldn't be complacent at that time. The extremely stiff competition meant that Ves had to design an exceptional mech that stood out from the market.

If Ves intended to sell a lot of mechs by relying solely on the new generation's wave of innovations, then the mech market would definitely tear him apart.

"Leeching off those innovations that are in the hands of every major mech manufacturer won't improve the competitive advantage of my designs. It

merely allows me to start at the same level as the other premier mech companies."

Such behavior was akin to drifting downstream. If Ves wanted to dazzle the mech industry with a best-selling mech model, then he would certainly have to swim upstream. That would be the time when the Avatars of Myth provided a return on his investment.

Funding five mech companies was not a trivial matter. However, once he covered the start-up costs, Ves was confident he could maintain the running costs with the help of his earnings from the LMC.

Every mech designer was a money making machine as long as they possessed some ability. If Ves broke through to Journeyman as planned, money became more of a number than a scarce resource.

At that level, mech designers valued other assets over money, such as access to exclusive knowledge, gene elixirs, life-prolonging treatments or strategic exotics. Many of these assets couldn't be bought with money in the open market. Ves would inevitably have to deepen his engagement with the Clifford Society and Master Olsen's influence network in order to obtain access.

As their holiday on Harkensen I soon came to an end, his group longed at a bar. Ves had been absent-minded throughout the trip. Fortunately, the planet offered many sites for relaxation, so he simply pretended to take a nap while spending most of his attention on putting his plans together.

Just as Ves thought this day would end on a leisurely note, the group suddenly stopped their chatting as a number of strangers walked to their table. None of their group members recognized them. They were unlikely to be Vandals since only five people approached.

"Do we know you?" Nolsen asked with a wary look in his eyes.

"You ought not to." The lead woman spoke. "You might not have heard of us, but you people are famous across this entire star system. After all, haven't you pulled our reputation through the wringer recently?"

Every Vandal became tense at her words. Though she might have sounded restrained, the implications of her last sentence hinted that she definitely didn't come as a friend.

More than that, several of the Vandals recognized her accent. The people who spoke like her only came from one place in the Komodo Star Sector.

"You're Vesians!" Tiss exclaimed.

The group of ten put up their guard and put their half-empty drinks on the table. All thoughts of relaxing and unwinding was gone from their heads.

"My name is Calabast Arnlend. As you've just declared, we are Vesians." The woman responded with a coy smirk. "Do you mind if we sit next to you?"

"Actually, we do mind." Nolsen said.

"Oh, come on, don't be a spoilsport. This is a neutral star system. Even if our brothers and sisters are locked in a harrowing war at the frontlines, in Reinald space we are all friends with each other!"

Nolsen pressed his lips into a thin line. "Whatever you say, Miss Arnlend."

"Call me Calabast, like you Brighters always do. It's not as if we are in uniform right now."

Ves quietly turned to Trian Earls. "Are they mech pilots?"

"Not sure." The Vandal mech pilot whispered back. "Some of them have the build for it, but I don't feel any sense of aggression in their eyes. They're more like Nolsen than me. They are definitely trained and aren't afraid to show it off."

If Trian was right, these Vesians underwent combat training. Ves probably guessed that Calabast and her ilk were deadly at the infantry level.

One question kept nagging Nolsen. "How did you recognize us?"

This was a very good question. The entire planet was under the control of the Reinaldians. Tracking the Vandals on this planet wasn't impossible, but it definitely wasn't something a random group of Vesians could do in a snap.

"The Harkensen System is a supremely important point of interest to my state. As their neighbor, how could we not keep an eye on what is going on here?"

This shouldn't have come as a surprise. The Vesia Kingdom possessed a very strained relationship with the Reinald Republic. Though the Harkensen System wasn't the most important star system in Reinald, it attracted the most foreigners by far. This was Reinald's main interface to the rest of the star sector.

Calabast and her ilk outright ignored Nolsen's declaration and rudely sat next to their table. Each of them ordered a drink from the list projected by the table. In a short instant, a floating bot arrived to deliver their drinks.

"Ah, that hits the spot!" The woman pepped up. "I have to hand it to the Reinaldians. If there's one thing they're good at, it's collecting an enormous amount of imported drinks."

"Why are you here, Miss Calabast?" Nolsen asked with a persistent tone.

The Vesians all grinned back. "We're just curious, that's all."

"Curious about what?"

"Why you bunch of losers managed to flounder your way out of the Kingdom without getting annihilated." Calabast spoke with the most poisonous grin of them all. "You're not the first collection of Vandals I've met. So far, I've seen

nothing different. You Vandals are the louts and brutes of the Bright Republic. It's no wonder your mech regiment is treated so poorly by your own military."

Her words touched on a nerve of the Vandals. Everyone looked angry, but Nolsen quickly gestured them to calm. Starting trouble on Harkensen I was a sure trip to jail.

"We don't appreciate your provocative words. We have no interest in conversing with you. Would you kindly leave, please?"

"What's the hurry! Can't we get to know each other better?" The woman responded.

As Nolsen and Calabast verbally sparred with each other, the rest of the Vesians and Vandals watched on in silence.

Ves had the feeling some kind of hidden battle was taking place. By now, Ves surmised that Calabast was likely some kind of Vesian spy. Her gorgeous face might not even be her true facade. In fact, he was ninety percent sure it was wholly faked.

In any case, the Vandals had always been aware that some people followed them throughout their holiday. Knowing that they were being stared at by observers didn't impact their lives that much. It wasn't much different from being subjected by the omnipresent surveillance system keeping watch in the interior of every Vandal starship.

While the Vandals could tolerate someone staring at them at a distance, it was a very different matter when the watchers walked up to their face.

Ves tried to figure out the motives of Calabast and her goons. Why make their presence known to them? Why did they reveal their identity as Vesians? Was that faked as well? Were they talking to Reinaldan intelligence agents masquerading as Vesian intelligence agents?

It was too bad that Ves was not into spy games. Nolsen appeared to be more aware than the rest of them, which was no surprise since he served as a security officer. One of their major responsibilities in a mech regiment was thwarting spies.

Chapter 602 Geopolitical Tragedy

"If there is one person among you Vandals who looks brighter than the rest, it's you." Calabast suddenly gestured to Ves while holding a bubbling cocktail. "Mr. Larkinson. Ves. I've met several mech designers, and I do say you're a cut above the others."

"Thank you, Miss Calabast." Ves replied stoically. "I do wonder why I've caught your attention. I'm just a mech designer, you know."

Calabast smirked at him. "Don't put yourself down. Compared to those spineless nerds who will never amount to anything in their lives, you've got the air of a leader. I see that your current posting as temporary head designer has done you good."

"An outsider like you shouldn't know stuff like that." Ves replied with sharp eyes.

"You Vandals are lousy at keeping secrets, especially when you are all running around the Harkensen System. It's like you are telling Vesians like me to watch you all. Well, we're here now. If you have something to say to us, speak your words."

"We're at war. The only dialogue that matters is whose fist hits the hardest." He said. His fellow Vandals all agreed. "Outside of that, we don't welcome you."

"Don't be so harsh, Ves. We can't help but pay extra attention to the young head designer who is responsible for managing the thousand mechs of your

task force. Ah, excuse me, that figure is already out of date. If I'm correct, your task force is only capable of fielding five-hundred mechs. Is that accurate?"

"Don't answer that, Ves." Nolsen said to him before turning to the Vesian.

"Miss Calabast, it's no use trying to show off what you presume to know of us. While we aren't allowed to come to blows under Reinald's auspices, I doubt the Planetary Guard will be pleased when we call them over."

"There's no need for you to go that far, lieutenant." Calabast said. Her smirk dropped a bit after hearing that. "We are friends, are we not?"

"There's no friendship between Vesians and Brighters."

Calabast shook her head. "I very much doubt that. To me, we are peas from the same pod. Think about what the rest of the Komodo Star Sector thinks whenever the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom are mentioned. Aren't we the dysfunctional twins of the star sector? Constantly at war, yet never winning. Some believe we love each other too much to destroy each other."

"What a joke!" Another Vandal erupted. "It's you Vesians who are constantly starting the war by invading our space! If you'd just leave us alone, billions of mech pilots wouldn't have met an early grave!"

Another Vandal joined in as well. "Yeah, don't pretend you Vesians have the high ground. We never asked to be your punching bags."

"If we never started our preemptive invasions, you Brighters would have come to us, I'm very sure of that. Our rivalry can't be melted with a single friendly gesture. Many innocent Vesians will suffer if we ever soften our stance against your state."

Some Vandals laughed at that. "What a hypocritical way of looking at the wars. You're like the butcher asking the pig why it wants to attack you. The entire wars are your fault! Bleating about suffering Vesians, what about our

citizens?! I'm glad our mech regiment whalloped the Detemen System. You warmongers needed a reminder that the suffering can go both ways!"

"Calm down, everyone!" Nolsen barked in an authoritative tone. That shut down the belligerent tones. "I'm sorry, Calabast, but we aren't in a mood to discuss high politics with you. We're simple grunts, you see."

"As you say." The woman shook her head as if she found his response to be disappointing. "Despite our disagreements, we are very much alike. Don't forget our brotherhood in the coming days. Whatever we may think of each other, the rest of the galaxy is a very dangerous place."

With that, Calabast and her escorts slid from their chairs while bringing their drinks elsewhere. Once they walked out of sight, every Vandal sighed in relief.

Tiss rubbed her head. "That's weird. Why did that Vesian spook decide to approach us out of the blue?"

"Their motives are unfathomable." Nolsen said. "Don't read too much into their actions. That's exactly what they want. Just remember that nobody can do anything to us while we are out in public on Harkensen I."

Someone else agreed with the security officer. "Aren't we supposed to enjoy a holiday? They just tried to screw with our heads. I say don't let them win! Let's end our shore leave on a good note!"

Everyone tried to put the strange encounter on the backburner, but not everyone succeeded. When Nolsen contacted some other Vandal groups, they all mentioned an encounter with suspicious Vesian individuals. Their group was not the only one visited by spooks!

"How many Vesians are assigned to stare at us?" Ves asked with dismay in his voice.

No one knew the answer, but evidently their numbers was much higher than everyone had thought. It had to be mentioned that hundreds of groups split up in Harkensen I and Harkensen III. Any Vesian intelligence operation needed to invest in a lot of manpower to stare at them all, let alone approach them in person for some inscrutable reason.

Ves didn't have a good feeling about this. "You know, I think we should be more careful from now on. Let's not visit anywhere remote or isolated."

"I've always taken that into account in our planning." Nolsen said. "But I can see why we need to be more prudent. Even if this is exactly what the Vesians want, we shouldn't play with fire."

The group resolved to remain in highly trafficked places on Harkensen I from now on. Visiting an exobeast safari or renting a boat to sail out into the sea had to be crossed off their list.

"The night is stretching on. Let's go back to the hotel."

The group left the bar and took an aircar to the hotel on Harkensen I which the Vandals had rented out. Though the place was less secure than the temporary compound on Harkensen III, it saved them an unnecessary commute between planets. There were also a number of Vandal security officers on patrol, which reassured the Vandals who slept overnight.

"Good night, Ves!" Tiss waved as everyone returned to their suites.

As Ves entered his hotel room, he walked over to the wide open windows and stared out into the city they were in at night. Lots of lights flashed as many tourists still sought out entertainment in the night. Beyond, boats and ships sailed across the waters in an endless merry of partying.

It was easy to forget that a war was taking place. The Reinald Republic sat at the other side of the Vesia Kingdom, so any repercussions of the war only affected them indirectly.

Having spent some time in this star system, Ves envied the Reinald Republic. Despite being small enough for the Vesians to devour in a single bite, the Frozen Leaf Alliance was like a timely umbrella against the rain. Under the auspices of this ironclad defensive alliance, the Reinald Republic possessed much more security than it ought to. This was the blessing they enjoyed from their geopolitical situation.

Unlike the Reinald Republic, the Bright Republic doesn't have any good neighbors to ally with. One of their tragedies was that the Bright Republic was surrounded by belligerents or nutbags.

To their galactic east sat the Vesia Kingdom. It went without saying that their conflict was irreconcilable. Over three-hundred years of wars interspersed with temporary peace periods created an enormous amount of enmity between the two rivalling states.

To the galactic west of the Bright Republic sat the Ylvain Protectorate. The Bright Republic attempted to draw them into an alliance many times, but the Ylvainans repulsed every overture with the same isolationist stance.

The Protectorate didn't get along well with everyone because every Ylvainan was a religious fanatic. To a state like the Bright Republic whose only religion was rationality, such fervor clashed directly against their values.

Though the Brighters and the Ylvainans were like ice and fire to each other, neither side wanted to go to war against each other. The Bright Republic already had their hands full with the Vesians, and they weren't snobby enough to think they needed to impose their values on the Ylvainans.

The Protectorate on the other hand had their own concerns. To their galactic south existed a state called the Star Faith Collective. The Collective was made up of religious fanatics who believed in an entirely different faith.

Compared to the Protectorate dislike to faithless dogs like Brighters, their animosity against the Collective was much more extreme. Discussions on religious dogma was a surefire way to spark a fight between citizens of both states.

Strangely enough, the Ylvain Protectorate and the Star Faith Collective never came to blows for some reason. Unlike the many wars between the Vesians and the Brighters, the two religious states largely kept their conflict contained.

"In any case, the Ylvain Protectorate can't help us at all."

To the galactic north of the Bright Republic sat a state called the Coman Federation. If there was one thing that defined a Coman, it was their fervor for transhumanism. Their deviance on this matter bordered on heresy, though their beliefs wasn't strictly illegal in the eyes of the CFA and MTA.

Nevertheless, they attracted quite a lot of dirty looks. The Coman pursuit for transhumanism led them to blend their physical appearances with aliens or amputate their limbs and replace them with cybernetic equivalents. Their preoccupation with their fetishes practically repelled the entire Komodo Star Sector.

Detesting the outside galaxy became ingrained in every Coman. Every baseline human was a primitive in their eyes. Though they were known to field a strong mech military, they spent most of their efforts on holding back their regional rivals and exploring the frontier for more alien marvels. Comans were known to be the best treasure hunters in the Komodo Star Sector.

"It's too bad our differences can't make us into allies."

Brighter diplomats attempted to draw the Comans into an alliance many times, yet their conceit against baseline humans prevented them from taking their neighbors seriously. If not for being surrounded by rival states, their elitist attitude would have pushed them into a war against the Bright Republic.

As what lay at the galactic south of the Bright Republic, the Independent State of Pillis was an oddball of its own. Smaller than the Bright Republic, the Pillis was a state as crazy as the Coman Federation.

The best way to put it was that they were radical independents. They violently rejected any notions of alliances and other entanglements. If not for the overwhelming strength of the CFA and MTA, they would have rejected their rules as well. As it was, the Pillisers barely tolerated the Big Two, believing it was only a matter of time before those hegemonic organizations fell.

"Every Pilliser is a doomsday fanatic."

For some reason, the Pillisers believed that the human race had reached their peak in the galaxy. Their gains at the end of the Age of Conquest represented the apex of their achievements. Every Age that followed marked the decline and end of the human race in the epoch of galactic history.

Their beliefs essentially turned them into giant jerks whenever they interacted with foreigners. The relationship between the Bright Republic and the Independent State of Pillis was very poor as a result.

In truth, the Bright Republic could have conquered Pillis if they really wanted to. As long as the Vesians were held in check, the military strength of Pillis wasn't enough to hold back the Mech Corps.

"Pillis has a lot of big brothers though."

The Independent State was only a branch of a larger organization that spanned many star sectors in the galactic rim. Their doomsday predictions held them all together, and they were known to transfer their strength between star sectors whenever their branches faced a pinch.

The only reason why Pillis hadn't borrowed the strength of their big brothers was because the other enemies of the doomsday cultists wouldn't stand by.

North, south, east and west, the Bright Republic was surrounded by hostiles and crazies. This was because most entities that initially settled in the Komodo Star Sector consisted of exiles. In fact, the Bright Republic counted among the crazies as well in some people's eyes!

Chapter 603 Unsettling

Ves woke up all of a sudden. He'd never been a heavy sleeper after he returned from Groening IV. His physical body's need for sleep seemingly lessened, but to sleep was to be human, so Ves still adhered to a strictly human biorhythm.

"Why did I wake up?" He scratched his dark hair while garbed in pajamas.

An unsettling sensation came over him. Ves shrugged out of bed and wiped his hand towards the window, causing it to turn from solid black to fully transparent.

He blinked at the night scape and checked the time. At three o'clock local time, the city was doused in the depths of sleep. Only the most hardcore partiers and revelers still roamed the streets. Drunken tourists crawled from bar to bar while the nightclubs lit up their surroundings with light and noise.

Beyond the stretch of beaches, half-a-dozen yachts had congregated and formed a makeshift floating club where over a hundred privileged young men and women pretended to be nocturnal party beasts.

To all intents and purposes, the city appeared to be completely normal. Yet Ves couldn't dismiss the nagging feeling of something wrong.

His instincts might not be as good as an oracle, but Ves had learned to trust his gut feeling. Right now, Ves felt as apprehensive as standing in close proximity to a mech battle.

"There can't be any danger here, right?"

He currently resided on Harkensen I, the tourist paradise of the Reinald Republic. The Planetary Guard and the Honored Ones that kept the peace on this planet enjoyed a very good reputation here. They foiled thousands of plots every year and never failed to squash instances of violence before they spilled over to innocent bystanders.

After several minutes of staring out of the window, Ves decided it was best to be safe than sorry. He raised his comm which had never left his wrist and opened a channel to security.

His comm projected the bust of a bored-looking Vandal security officer. "Mr. Larkinson, what can I do for you?"

Ves couldn't straight up tell the security officer that his gut warned him of an approaching threat. Still, he could couch his words in a way that may bring the Vandals to a heightened level of alert. "I have reason to believe that there may be security threats on the horizon. Can you please scan my hotel room and double-check the perimeter and such?"

The security officer narrowed his eyes. "Mr. Larkinson, what evidence can you provide to support your statement?"

"I'm sorry, officer, but I can't tell you that right now. Just trust me. If I'm wrong, then no harm is done."

This argument appeared to be persuasive enough to buy over the security officer. "Very well head designer. We shall run a full check. Please stay in your room and don't make any suspicious movements."

The channel closed, leaving Ves alone in his quiet room. He decided he might as well skip the rest of his sleep. He turned on the lights and walked over to the closet which held a number of outfits.

Ves touched a chute-like tube, causing it to beep before attracting his pajamas from his body. The chute sucked the clothes through the tube that subsequently led to some laundry area.

He then touched a clothing rack which held a generic warm-weather outfit, causing the clothes to fly from the rack and surround his body, adjusting the fit for a few seconds.

He then rummaged through the closet but failed to find anything protective. "What kind of stupid hotel is this? There's over a dozen racks of smart clothes but not a single emergency suit!"

Emergency suits basically consisted of stripped-down hazard suits. Cheaper and less bulkier than the latter, emergency suits nonetheless provided limited amount of protection against heat, explosions and toxins in the air.

"Why is my gut urging me to get in an airtight suit?"

He sniffed the air, but didn't smell anything weird. Nonetheless, his heart beat a little faster, as if he was nervous something was seriously wrong.

The front door to his hotel room beeped and slid open. A pair of Vandal security officers outfitted with serious-looking combat armor stepped inside. The sergeant at the lead gripped a handheld scanner.

"Mr. Larkinson, we've received your notification. Please let us inspect your room."

"Go ahead, gentlemen."

The sergeant first scanned over his body with the scanner. The machine threw out a bunch of warning noises, causing the sergeant to slam his palm at the device. "Not again! Get to work, you buggy machine!"

"Has the device been loaded with my unique physique? I'm different than a baseline human. Doctor Cuscar should have loaded my parameters to the database." Ves frowned.

"Oh. Let me adjust the scanner then."

Ves worked with scanners himself, so he easily guessed why the sergeant's scanner tripped up. He really missed the Vulcaneye he bought from the System. With a scanner worth 100,000 DP, he would have already been able to detect any anomalies himself.

While the sergeant loaded in the right settings, the other security officer made a cursory inspection of the hotel suite. He wasn't very diligent about it. Ves figured the other guy thought they were wasting their time.

"Alright, the scanner is loaded with the right settings. Let's see what's happening here."

The sergeant pointed the scanner at Ves. This time, the device only released a single warning noise.

"What's wrong?"

"That's strange. According to the scanner, your body is doused with sedatives."

The two stared at each other in a single moment of belated realization.

Something suddenly exploded from the ceiling above, causing strong electromagnetic interfere to blast their heads with noise while at the same time frizzling the scanner into a smoking wreck.

A minute noise spewed out as invisible projectiles punctured the exposed face of the security officer nosing in the bathroom. Just an instant later, another volley of projectiles headed towards the sergeant.

"Enemy attack!" The sergeant screamed.

Unlike his partner, he had been much more alert, so his combat armor instantly went active. His half-open helmet quickly slid shut, causing the transparent needles to shatter against the armored mask portion of the helmet.

The needles worked wonders against open skin, but wasn't any good against any form of armor!

"Tch. We go loud." An electronic voice sounded out.

The room became instantly bright with the flash of a high-powered laser beam that tore through the sergeant's armor like it was made out of cloth! The Vandal's body slowly tumbled onto its back, as if the man couldn't fathom why he was killed so quickly.

The hot laser beam instantly set off alarms in the hotel. The noise practically forced every Vandal awake. Just as Ves thought the assailants would be scared away, he glimpsed something alarming through the window at the other end of the suite.

Out of the waters, a couple of mech-like shapes emerged from the depths. The nearby party fortress lit up the contours of the mechs that had hidden themselves underwater. Some of the mechs pointed their arms in the direction of the hotel.

Twin booms sounded out as a salvo of kinetic projectiles thundered towards the tall hotel. Just as the projectiles hit the building, an energy screen came to life. The projectiles managed to punch through the energy screen, but lost a lot of their force in the process. By the time they hit the hotel, the structure only shook lightly as a couple of hotel suites became flattened.

This caused the entire city to erupt in alarms. Warning noises penetrated everywhere, causing even the heaviest sleepers to shake off their dreams.

A few seconds later, massive EMP detonations wracked the area around the hotel, causing most of the nearby alarms to sputter out! Nightclubs went silent while bars went dark. Every electronic device with insufficient shielding became completely inert!

Worse, more explosions detonated underground and elsewhere, causing the camouflaged turrets and other security measures to freeze!

Ves couldn't pay attention to those matters though, because a trio of dark-suited infiltrators dropped from the ceiling. He noticed that their suits possessed active camouflage capabilities that allowed them to blend into the background.

They might have been staring at him at sleep for hours!

"Who are you guys?! Vesians? Reinaldians?" Ves barked, but he didn't wait for their reply. He quickly turned around and dove towards the exit, only to skid to a halt when another infiltrator barred his way. "

All of the infiltrators wore the same high-tech getup. Their suits stuck close to their bodies and seemed to be layered in thin but flexible armor. The suits allowed them to walk on the ceiling or walls as if they walked on the ground. The helmets showed off a faceless visage, save for two tiny crystals that served as the main sensors of the infiltration suit.

"You're coming with us." The electronic voice commanded to Ves.

He held up his arms while keeping his senses alert. He felt vibrations approaching him from the rear. Just as they closed in on him, Ves suddenly erupted into action! He kicked out to the rear, bumping the infiltrator behind him like a ball soaring through the air! The unfortunate enemy crashed against the unbreakable window and slid down in a crumple.

The rest of the infiltrators acted quickly. The rear two remaining infiltrators fired at his back with invisible glass-like projectiles. While they hurt a lot, the force behind them hadn't been sufficient to pierce deep into his flesh!

Ves endured the pain and ran forward like a bull with red in his eyes! These infiltrators hadn't expected his strength to be so formidable and his endurance to be so high!

Why would they? He was a mech designer, not a special forces operative!

The infiltrator in front blasted Ves with a wrist-mounted electric weapon. The current running through his body exacerbated his pain, but his sense of urgency propelled him forward despite his desire to cry out.

He slammed his forearm forward in a sloppy attack. The infiltrator hadn't expected Ves to remain functioning after enduring such a massive electric attack and slammed against the corridor wall with a painful slam!

Ves didn't waste his time on making sure the attacker was down and ran into the hallway. Red emergency lights illuminated the hall in an ominous light, which only deepened his sense of crisis.

The entire planet had gone crazy!

Muffled sounds of fighting could be heard from outside. After the mechs emerged from the waters, their approach to land caused the party boats to become unsettled. One of the mechs pointed its barrel at their direction and fired an explosive shell that obliterated all of the boats and party goers.

They showed no mercy to civilians!

Once the mechs approached the beach, their feet stepped out of the water. The machines turned out to be amphibian mechs! A cross between landbound mechs and aquatic mechs, they were capable of operating in both

environments, though not as effectively as mechs dedicated to a single environment.

The amphibian mechs of unknown origin started to fight back against the defense installations that remained functioning after the initial round of sabotage. The collateral damage being thrown about by the merciless assailants hit a lot of nearby beachfront hotels and establishments, killing scores of innocent people by the second!

Meanwhile the alarms had thoroughly shaken the other Vandals awake. Some of the more alert ones emerged from the corridors with backup pistols in their hands.

"There are infiltrators inside the hotels! Be careful!" Ves screamed as loud as he could as he attempted to widen the distance between him and his hotel room.

"We need to evacuate!" A Vandal officer yelled while only clad in his underwear. "Cover each other's backs! Don't panic and don't wander off alone! We'll take the emergency exit!"

Though the sudden eruption of violence befuddled the Vandals, the officers quickly organized them into action! With mechs wreaking havoc from the beach, the Vandals were caught with their pants down!

Chapter 604 Complacen

The Vandals all possessed spunk. Though they lacked training in infantry combat, many of them could throw a punch and most of them knew their way around with pistols.

However, Ves didn't place much hope on their fighting capacity. Separated from their mechs and ships, the Vandals were worse than a bunch of Planetary Guard recruits in an infantry-level engagement. Due to the

restrictive weapon laws in the Harkensen System, none of them except for authorized security officers possessed anything heavier than handheld pistols.

"Where are the Honored Ones? Are the Planetary Guard asleep?!"

"Forget about them! They've turned lazy after decades of peace on this planet!"

"The Reinaldians rely too much on turrets and fixed defense installations." Ves quickly spoke. "The saboteurs took most of them out, and those amphibian mechs are wrecking everything that's left!"

He'd been worried about subsequent pursuit, but it appeared the infiltrators favored discretion over upfront fighting. Though the Vandals who turned up in the corridors didn't particularly look threatening, they numbered over fifty on this floor alone!

However, their only merit was that they had numbers on their side. If an enemy squad kitted out in full combat gear showed up, they would easily be able to mow everyone down!

Under the lead of the officers, the Vandals organized into their original groups of ten, many of which had slept on the same floor. Ves approached his group which Lieutenant Nolsen Feray served as their beacon.

"What happened to you?" The lieutenant asked.

"I felt something was wrong. I called security, who sent two men to check out my room. Just as scans showed that my body is doped with sedatives, several infiltrators dropped from the ceiling and killed the two without a sound!"

"How are you still walking about when you should have been sleeping like a light?" Nolsen probed with suspicion clouding his eyes. "Infiltrators never make mistakes when dosing someone with sedatives."

"I have my advantages." Ves replied simply. "In any case, I manage to run out of my suite and call for alarm. This is also just after those amphibian mechs emerged from the water and is currently bombarding every defensive fixture in sight!"

The fighting outside had never ceased, though the changing sounds indicated that the battle had entered another phase.

"The Planetary Guard finally showed up!" Someone who peeked out one of the windows yelled. "Damnit, an entire squad of amphibian mechs jumped out of the ocean! They're kicking the butts of the Planetary Guard!"

Ves risked a peek at one of the windows. He couldn't make out a lot of detail from this distance, but the overall trend became clear.

"These Planetary Guard mechs are first-response units. They're equipped for rescue and riot control! Their fluid projectors don't have the range to stop the amphibian mechs!"

The enemy mechs primarily consisted of amphibian machines armed with dual-purpose kinetic weapons. Kinetic projectiles worked great on land and decently in water, though only at very short ranges. They were accompanied by a couple of knights, who seemed like an afterthought more than anything.

Ves had seen many aquatic mechs before when he visited Moira's Paradise. He had a taste of their weapons, which had to be adapted to work in water and under pressure. This insight along with the large build of the amphibian mechs led him to believe they held missiles and torpedoes in reserve.

"Careful for missiles!" He warned the Vandals. "They're saving the best for last, I think!"

Nolsen cursed. "This hotel isn't safe at all. We need to go downstairs and go underground. If that's still not enough, we can evacuate through the

emergency tunnels. Anything is better than remaining above ground where mechs can continue to take potshots at this structure!"

The Vandals fled downstairs in an organized fashion. Ves blamed his bad luck for being situated at the upper floor. This meant that they had to wait in line for the stairway and emergency tubes to clear out the clogging.

"Hurry up!"

"Don't press against me!"

"This tube has lost power! Don't enter!"

The stairway was the most reliable exit. A faster way to go down besides taking the elevator was to slide down the emergency tubes. People got down much faster through the tubes, though they formed a bit of a risky prospect if the antigrav modules failed to modulate their sliding speeds. Their bodies might go splat at the other end!

Due to the EMP attacks, many high-tech escape methods failed to work despite their heavy shielding. In fact, besides the emergency lights, the only other devices that still remained working was their military-issued comms!

The Vandals managed to connect to their brothers and sisters on Harkensen III, rousing them to the highest level of alertness. So far, the Vandals at Harkensen III hadn't encountered any attacks, but they managed to convince the Reinaldans to send some mechs to reinforce their compound.

"I've been thinking, Ves." Nolsen said as they slowly moved down the stairway. "The timing of the attack of the beach matches the moment when the infiltrators determined they were exposed."

"What are you getting at, lieutenant?"

"Our attackers are aiming at you. At the very least, the fact that they tried to sedate you at the start means you're more useful to them alive than dead. Yet

they aren't hesitant about taking you down if they aren't able to smuggle you away."

"I don't know." He frowned. "This infiltration is a little too daring to be happening in Harkensen I. The Reinaldians must be furious right now. I think it's possible that I'm not the only target they are after."

"Even if you're not alone, you are definitely among the primary targets."

"That makes sense, considering what I know." Ves murmured. As the temporary head designer of the task force, he knew more about the Vandal mechs than any other mech designer or serviceman in this star system. "Who are our attackers anyway?"

"My money is on Calabast!" Tiss called from the side. "Don't you think it's creepy that she approached us in person right before this attack? It's definitely the Seven Stars who are responsible!"

The Vesians possessed a poor reputation in the field of intelligence. This was because each duchy pretty much maintained their own intelligence agencies. Many times, their spies and agents crossed each other's paths, to the point where lots of stories circulated where rival Vesian intelligence agents killed each other while technically being on the same side.

The only Vesian intelligence agency with a barely passable reputation was the Seven Stars Intelligence Agency, which was loyal to the Kingdom as a whole. Their funding was in regular contention since many dukes wanted to neuter them in a bid to weaken the power of the royals.

"The Seven Stars won't be stupid enough to implicate themselves in a terrorist attack on Harkesen I." Nolsen pushed back against that theory. "If anything, 'Calabast' is indicative of a false flag operation. Not that the Reinaldians will fall for this trick."

"If Calabast can't push the blame on the Vesians, why show up and suggest they're Vesians in the first place?"

"That's why we can't make any assumptions about our meeting with her group. There's an entire rabbit hole of mind games taking place in the background. For all I know, Calabast is truly a Seven Stars intelligence operative who is pretending to be a Reinaldan pirate acting as a fake Vesian spy in an attempt to deceive the Reinaldians in ruling out the Vesians as the primary suspects."

"Uhh... I don't follow." Trian said from the other side.

The mech pilot sorely missed his mech. He could have easily helped stomp out the terrorists if only he was piloting a multi-ton machine instead of controlling a weak human body.

"Don't think about it, Trian. Let the smart people do all the thinking." Nolsen said.

Even Ves couldn't figure out the depths of this conspiracy. All he knew was that this attack certainly didn't come without reason. His suspicion that the Vandals weren't resting and recuperating in the Harkensen System grew stronger. With all the shenanigans taking place behind the scenes, had the Vandals provoked a sleeping tiger?

The hotel shook from another impact, this time hitting the floors above!

"The energy screen is overloaded!"

Another volley of impacts followed suit, causing the upper floors to become dangerously unstable! The groans of overstressed alloys and sounds of falling debris made it clear the structure hadn't been built according to the strictest building standard!

The Reinaldan developers trusted so much in the competence of the Honored Ones and the Planetary Guard that they certainly cut a lot of corners when they constructed their properties!

Ves quietly cursed the greedy Reinaldians as their group finally made their way to the ground floor. Heavily-armed security officers guided every group of Vandals down the rear halls and towards an underground entrance.

"I'm sorry friends, but I have to gear up and join up with my mates." Nolsen gestured his head at the patrols of armed Vandals.

"Go ahead. We can survive without you."

They all understood Nolsen's need to help strengthen their guard presence. Once he adorned a suit of combat armor and equipped a heavy rifle, he would become a hundred times deadlier than his current state. Right now, he was still wearing his sleeping clothes while armed with only a pistol!

A string of Vandal guards guided the nearly-defenseless servicemen into an underground shelter. Dust and air revealed that the Reinaldan owners hadn't even bothered to send down some cleaning bots or maintain the ventilation system. Perhaps they had already forgotten the need for underground shelters!

Just as Ves and his group shuffled into the shelter, a couple of Vandals suddenly started dropping down the floor.

Nobody screamed or panicked. Instead, they called out for medical assistance while keeping their eyes peeled for any attacks.

More Vandals dropped. In fact, they fell onto the floor in an increasingly alarming frequency.

"There's something wrong in the air! We're being intoxicated!"

"Hurry inside the shelter! Masks should be available in the storage vaults!"

An increased sense of alarm overtook the Vandals as they all tried to press into the shelter while avoiding stepping on their unconscious comrades. Other Vandals turned around and attempted to open the gates that led into the underground tunnel complex that could take them elsewhere.

"The exit gates are locked! We can't get them to open! We're stuck here!"

"The storage vaults are sealed tight as well! We can't access the supplies stored inside!"

After a dozen seconds, half of the Vandals fell unconscious. Everyone was either wearing summer clothes or sleeping clothes. Even if they consisted of smart clothes, they were also designed to be permeable, which meant they couldn't be turned into an airtight suit!

Ves helplessly looked on as more and more Vandals collapsed on the floor or on top of each other. After thirty seconds, everyone fell unconscious except for him. Seeing thousands of Vandals in a state that was only a few steps away from death was mind boggling to him. How did the assailants manage to pervert the entire hotel to the extent they were able to intoxicate everyone?!

He took a few steps forward, trying to keep his footing away from any bodies. Ves slowly moved towards the exit to the ground floor. He could only lay his hopes on Nolsen and the other security officers garbed in airtight suits of combat armor.

Yet after he took a couple of steps, the vault-like door slammed shut on its own. Ves heard screaming from the other side. The security officers hadn't intended to shut the entrance!

Another gate creaked open at that moment. It was the exit to the underground complex! Ves turned around, expecting to meet the Planetary Guard, only to behold an entire squad of infiltrators garbed in the same black getup!

"That's quite enough, Mr. Larkinson." A monotone electronic voice sounded out from the lead infiltrator. "Follow us quietly, or else."

The man shot a couple of unconscious Vandals with his silent gun, spilling blood and killing several Vandals!

"Stop! I'll follow!" Ves raised his hands in a sign of surrender.

Chapter 605 Shattered Peace

Harkensen I, long known as a bastion of pleasure and relaxation, became anything other than a paradise. Several regions across the globe erupted in violence and war. Unknown assailants emerged from the air, water or beneath the ground and attacked inexplicable targets while dealing massive damage to the defensive infrastructure of the cities.

The Flagrant Vandals weren't the only ones targeted by the terrorists. Those with greater perspectives smelled a definite plot! One which involved multiple players and progressed at a level far above their heads.

In fact, the attackers may not even comprise of a single group, considering that every different unit utilized vastly different mechs and mech doctrines!

The deepest layer of the Harkensen System violently rose to the surface, to the horror of every vacationer on the unprepared paradise planet!

The strange thing about each of the attacking elements was that they all declared to fight under different flags! Each of their strange and never-seen-before mechs bore disturbingly familiar insignias that corresponded to the national symbols of several nearby states in the Komodo Star Sector!

"We are the Brightest Minds! You insufferable imbeciles have wallowed in ignorance for far too long! Let us liberate your minds and bring you into the fold of the Bright Republic!"

"Surrender to the Coman Vanguard and accept the inevitable! Leave behind your weak and pathetic forms and embrace the virtue of evolution!"

"Weak! You are too weak! Die in the name of Roppo! In this cruel galaxy of war and bloodshed, paradise planets such as Harkensen I should be razed to the ground! Kill them all!"

"The strength of the Reinald Republic is laid bare before all of yours eyes! Against our Kingdom, none of you can withstand our might! Pledge yourselves to the True Sons of Vesia, and ready your pathetic state for total subjugation!"

Ves grimaced as those words thundered from above. The volume of those broadcasts faintly penetrated the underground floor complex beneath the hotel.

Standing amidst a carpet of unconscious Vandal servicemen, Ves did not dare to make any sudden movements. The team of fifteen-or-so infiltrators all pointed their out of the tunnel gate. They left no angle uncovered.

As his hands remained above the air, he may have stated his surrender, but a significant amount of calculations and deliberations went on in his mind. Hundreds of thoughts flitted through his mind while only a single second passed.

He wasn't resigned to surrender to these ruthless murderers!

Whatever game they played, they undoubtedly didn't have his interests at heart. Separating himself from the protective embrace of the Vandals to accompany these merciless terrorists was the worst idea he could think of! With how professional they operated, Ves might never have the chance to escape from their clutches even with his secret weapon!

His eyes glinted in his light as he contemplated the best use of his most reliable weapon to date.

The reason why he still held some hope of turning this situation around was that he could summon his Amastendira from his Inventory at any time!

The only decision he agonized about was whether to summon it right now or wait until they took him into custody.

Ves figured the latter enabled him to spring his surprise on the infiltrators who let their guard down by then. Right now, fifteen infiltrators would immediately be able to point their weapons at him and shoot him into a sieve.

The downside to such a decision was that he had to make a leap of faith that they wouldn't restrain him in any way. If they tied his hands behind his back with some thick alloy cuffs or some other sophisticated restraints, it wouldn't matter if he could summon the Amastendira! He had no way to utilize his weapon effectively!

Choosing to spring his surprise right now was the better choice in his eyes. Not only was the situation simpler and wholly within his view, he also believed he could down the infiltrators with a single high-powered attack!

His eyes beheld the infiltrators as they stood at the mouth of the tunnel gate. None of them appeared to have stepped out as of yet, though Ves couldn't rule out any invisible enemies creeping around at other angles.

Still, the fifteen infiltrators currently stood rather close to each other due to the confines of the tunnel, which was wide enough to traverse for two or three wide aircars.

Ves made a decision in his mind and started acting on it. "Uhhhh.."

He pretended to be affected by the invisible intoxicating substance that had been released into the air. His body wobbled a bit and fell to its knees. The infiltrators tightened their grip on their weapons, but Ves had become somewhat accustomed to acting, so his performance wasn't too shabby.

As his upper body wobbled a bit, his eyes estimated the distance and the angle between him and his opponents. After a few seconds of pretending to be woozy, Ves finally stepped on the road to no return.

His hands slowly fell from above his head, with one hand blocking the view of the materializing Amastendira as much as possible. That didn't help much because the Amastendira was larger than a regular laser pistol and much more ornate besides. The master-crafted weapon was made to attract attention!

Therefore, Ves had to move quickly before the infiltrators recognized what was going on. For now, the only reason why they hadn't pulled the trigger was that they couldn't believe that someone in this remote part of the galaxy was able to materialize a weapon from out of nowhere!

He also whispered some words as quietly as possible. "Set power setting to ten. Switch firing mode to wide angle scatter mode. Set scatter angle to ten degrees. Switch laser frequency to ultraviolet."

Master gunsmith Pierre Femento's weapon could be controlled through various methods as long as the Amastendira was keyed to the user. Ves normally found it more efficient to change the settings by adjusting a couple of knobs through a control interface projected from the rear of the pistol, but the infiltrators wouldn't let him do that. The only way for him to configure the right settings at the moment was to issue verbal commands.

The pistol gently vibrated in his grip, indicating that it had read all of the instructions.

Ten was the highest power setting the Amastendira could reach. At this mode, Ves could fire only ten times before the weapon forcibly entered a lengthy cooldown cycle. This should be more than sufficient to penetrate the stealth suits of the infiltrators. Ves knew that their suits had to compromise a lot in terms of protection in order to retain their stealth capabilities.

Changing the firing mode from a standard straight beam to a wide angle scatter projection was like turning a precision weapon into a shotgun. Ten

degrees was enough to cover the entire tunnel gate with plenty of margin to spare in case they jumped out all of a sudden.

As for the issue of frequency, Ves bounced around between infrared and ultraviolet, before deciding on the latter. Infrared lasers penetrated stronger armor better, but came with a massive wash of heat which might result in an enormous amount of collateral damage. With plenty of friendly bodies lying unconscious between him and his targets, Ves did not dare spill over any excess heat.

Laser weapon users considered ultraviolet lasers to be the more surgical option, though they still packed a lot of punch if pumped with sufficient power.

With time running out, Ves did not hesitate any longer. His body erupted into action, alarming the infiltrators.

The first thing he did was to reach down his free hand and grab the body of Trian Earls, who collapsed right in front of him. Ves mentally apologised to the Vandal mech pilot, but between choosing him or Ensign Tiss, the latter's body was too petite.

His arm hauled Trian's body from the ground and lifted it in front of his kneeling form. At the same time, he revealed the gleaming Amastendira in his hands and aimed it at the middle of the open tunnel entrance as best he could.

"Amastendira!"

Ves closed his eyes as a strong cone of largely invisible energy erupted from the barrel of his weapon at the speed of light! The silent glass-like projectiles shot from the guns of the infiltrators barely left their barrels before the dreadfully powerful ultraviolet wave crashed against the infiltrators and vaporized the front of their suits!

Screams escaped from all stricken infiltrators as their molten and vaporized suits blended into their scorched, vaporized and melted flesh in a single symphony of horror! Their screams quickly faded away as their lungs turned to ash and dust.

Those further away became exposed to much less energy, so even if they suffered a severe amount of damage, they still managed to cling to life! Their horrendous forms barely distinguished these men and women from undead ghouls!

Throughout it all, Ves still kept his eyes closed. A high-powered laser beam was no joke, especially when fired in scatter mode where reflections could bounce back the light back into his own eyes!

Though blindness from laser damage could easily be fixed in any clinic, Ves could not afford to go blind right now even if his Endurance was sky-high.

"Set power setting to seven. Set scatter angle to eight degrees."

As soon as the pistol vibrated in his grip yet again, Ves immediately pulled the trigger.

The second blast caused the distant groans of pains to cease!

Ves opened his eyes at that moment. He took a careful glance at the half-melted corpses smoldering quietly at the tunnel exit. The pile of burning synthetics and human flesh released a foul odor that Ves would rather do without. He counted eighteen corpses, which meant that three of them had remained invisible.

He looked down on Trian's body, and saw that it had been riddled with various projectiles. The mech pilot's back had been facing the enemy, and now became awash with blood pouring from the holes.

He was definitely dead.

"Sorry mate."

A couple more powerful kinetic projectiles managed to pierce through the makeshift meat shield and impacted against his body. Ves cursed a bit, but the holes in his body was much less severe. His inhuman level of endurance already worked to stall the bleeding.

Ves remained on guard against other infiltrators that might have already sneaked inside the underground hall. He had no good answer against them, though. The only thing he could do was to haul his bloody shield with him as he carefully stepped towards the exit that led back up to the ground floor of the hotel. Right now, he needed the help of the security officers!

"Set power mode to five. Switch firing mode to cutting beam, continuous. Set laser frequency to standard-infrared."

He pointed towards the locked gate that barred his way upstairs and began to hold down the trigger of the Amastendira. The laser beam that erupted began to cut away at the surface of the smooth alloy gate, burning its way through the thick material.

Ves worked neither too fast nor too slow, and he barely paid attention to his progress. Instead, his eyes kept raking over the entire hall. The moment an infiltrator made a move, Ves would immediately rake their position with his continuous beam.

Fortunately, it hadn't come to that. When Ves cut out a vague man-sized rectangle out of the gate, Ves released the trigger of his weapon and let it dematerialize back into his Inventory. He also hastily threw away Trian's corpse, which landed in a messy splat that undoubtedly looked suspicious, but Ves quietly shrugged at that.

As Ves was bending down trying to clean the blood from his hand, the Vandals on the other side finally kicked down the rectangle that Ves had

made. Two squads of security officers entered the room in a tactical fashion, with half of them pointing their heavy assault rifles at Ves!

Unlike the light and stealthy needle guns of the infiltrators, these assault rifles would definitely be able to cut his body to ribbons despite his partially alien physique!

"Freeze!"

"Hands in the air!"

"Don't move!"

Ves threw his hands in the air for the second time this day. "It's about time you arrived!"

Chapter 606 Paradise Falls

Some time later, Ves sat with his arms crossed against his chest. The security officers worked to neutralize the chemicals that robbed the Vandals downstairs from their consciousness.

The infiltrators hadn't used anything lethal or sophisticated in order to circumvent detectors. The security officers sealed into airtight combat suits were easily able to inject the Vandals with a standard cure that woke them up over a couple of minutes.

Many of them reacted with horror and uncertainty after hearing what had happened. Looking at the aftermath of what Ves had unleashed, they all knew that they had brushed dangerously close to death. Who knew what the infiltrators had in store once they took Ves into custody.

As the hero of the hour, Ves stubbornly declined to explain how he repelled the attackers. With most systems down in the hotel, the security officers hadn't been able to retrieve any footage. This worked to his advantage. Ves simply stated that he possessed a secret weapon and that the higher-ups knew about it. This was probably close to the truth.

"You're not making my job more convenient." Nolsen said as he stood opposite to Ves. Like every other security officer, Nolsen wore a menacing-looking black-and-burgundy combat armor that was only inferior to a full-fledged exo-skeleton suit. "We've calculated the output of the directed energy weapon that is needed to vaporize eighteen enemy operatives at once, and it rivals the energy released by a mech-sized laser pistol! That kind of weapon in the hands of a mech designer untrained for combat is incredibly reckless!"

"If you want more answers, take it up with Major Verle or Professor Velten." Ves grunted. "I'm not the enemy here. Frankly, you should turn your attention to the enemy who dispatched those infiltrators and those amphibian mechs that are rampaging outside."

Ves was right and the lieutenant knew it. After a few more minutes of fruitless questioning, Nolsen walked away without any answers.

"Finally."

The main reason why Nolsen didn't push Ves any further was because in his eyes, he was a part of the higher ups. As the head designer of the task force, Ves possessed an unsurpassed amount of prestige among the Flagrant Vandals.

It should have come to no surprise that he possessed a couple of tricks to insure his safety.

A doctor had already come to remove the remains of the projectiles that passed into his body, so Ves was currently trying to recover.

"What a mess."

The noise outside had died down a bit. From what he gathered, the Planetary Guard and the Honored Ones finally got their act together and pushed the enemy amphibian mechs away from the city. Yet despite fighting on their homeground, the Reinaldan forces responded poorly to the crisis! All the

sabotage that crippled their fixed defense installations hadn't helped their situation either!

The so-called True Sons of Vesia appeared to be outnumbered by the defenders, but their mechs possessed better armament and came prepared to fight a war!

This difference in preparation had been enough to turn the tables against the numerically superior defenders!

"The Reinaldians never fought a major war after they founded their state. They never faced an invasion by a major military force. They could plan for contingencies all they want, but without experiencing true hell, how can they know how important it is to be ready to fight at any time?"

The overall level of readiness among the Reinaldians was abysmal. Their membership in the Frozen Leaf Alliance gave them false confidence that no one dared to mess with them. Ordinarily, that would be true, but what if the Reinaldians couldn't figure out the identity of their attackers?

The complacency exhibited by the Reinaldians would never fly in the Bright Republic. Though their poorest planets couldn't muster much of a defense, their more strategic planets would definitely be able to respond promptly against any threats. The attacks from the Vesia Kingdom and the Bentheim Liberation Movement had honed their defense to a razor edge.

The only questionable point about this wave of attacks was how the attackers managed to smuggle so many mechs onto Harkensen I. Had they bribed the inspectors checking the cargo of each transport that descended from orbit? Or did they smuggle bits and pieces onto the surface and assemble them into complete mechs in their hidden bases?

"Both options are possible, and both are equally terrifying."

Whatever the case, the Reinaldians had been at sleep at the helm for far too long!

Ves believed that the attackers weren't targeting specific people like the Vandals. The damage was way too exaggerated. Considering the amount of resources and manpower invested into the attacks, their primary objective definitely concerned the Reinaldians!

"This is an attack against the interests of the Reinald Republic. The mass casualties inflicted by outsiders has broken the unspoken promises made to visitors of the Harkensen System. How can the Reinaldians retain their credibility after this destructive crisis?"

The entire Komodo Star Sector had already underwent a wave of unrest last year, but the Reinald Republic had largely escaped those repercussions. Their unique status as a friendly partner to shady outfits caused most bad actors to restrain themselves against one of the rare states that was sympathetic to their presence.

It was too bad that not everyone found the Reinald Republic to their liking. Making enemies was inevitable. No matter how much Reinald wished to maintain friendly or cordial relations with everyone, plenty of enemies still wished to tear them down!

The murky identities of the attackers only complicated the repercussions of the attacks. Even now, Ves could still hear the piercing broadcasts from the True Sons of Vesia. Even though every Reinaldian leader would probably scoff at this obvious false flag, their citizens and the tourists might not be so imaginative.

The troublesome part about these ear-wailing announcements was that plenty of people probably bought into these claims. Not everyone was capable of

reading in between the lines, and regular people didn't normally think beyond their immediate status.

The dangerous games played among leaders of states and non-state powers was highly inscrutable among average folk. Ves definitely expected millions of survivors to develop an incurable animosity against the Vesia Kingdom after this attack.

With the true culprits in the shadow, where else could the aggrieved victims point their fingers at? "They're definitely going to demand compensation from the Vesians."

The attack by the True Sons of Vesia and all the other fake terrorist groups primarily served to sour the relations between the Reinald Republic and the other states. A diplomatic reputation in the toilet was a crippling blow to a state that depended heavily on tourism and trade!

After a short time had passed, Lieutenant Nolsen Feray returned to Ves. "Get up. We need you at our command center."

"So we're bunkering down after all?" Ves asked as he stood up and stretched his healing body.

They exited the small room and walked past the busy doctors, security officers and other Vandals assigned to various duties. Hundreds of Vandals piled up the whole foyer and front entrance with random furniture and anything they could grab. It wouldn't help against a determined attack from a mech, but it at least gave the trapped Vandals some sense of security.

"We've deliberated on the possibility to evacuate through the tunnels, but we eventually ruled it out." The lieutenant explained. "With all the widespread sabotage, we can't insure the tunnels won't collapse on our heads."

"Sounds logical." Ves nodded in approval. "Right now, the enemy appears to be in greater control over the city's emergency facilities than the Reinaldians."

"I don't have to explain why fleeing on open ground is a monumentally bad idea. With all the lasers, shells and missiles flying around, it only takes a single instance of bad luck to wipe half of us out. Besides, every vehicle trying to flee the city so far has been shot down."

"So the only choice that remains is to hunker down in the hotel. What's the condition of the energy screen generators?"

"Our engineers have managed to get them back online after they overloaded. They told us that the generators are outdated, so don't put too much stock in their defensive capabilities."

"As long as they work, we still have a chance to make it through the night with our lives intact. I doubt the attackers will stick long enough to local dawn."

The night made it easier for the attackers to come and go. Once night turned into day, the Reinaldians would have shrugged off their confusion by then and receive assistance from reinforcements sent from afar.

With most of the Vandals armed with nothing but pistols, it was a pipedream for them to involve themselves in a battle that involved scores of mechs on each side. Even if a thousand Vandals fired their pistols at a light mech at the same time, its armor would only have some minor scratches at worst!

This was the tyranny of mechs! As kings of the battlefield, small arms posed no threat to them at all. If the Vandals had access to their mechs, they could have stomped their assailants in a head-on collision, but the distance between Harkensen I and Harkensen III spanned several light-hours!

Without access to any of their mechs, their battle strength was at its lowest point. Besides fighting off other infiltrators or infantrymen, they really couldn't defend against any other threats!

When Ves entered the makeshift command center, he quickly apprised himself of the situation. Since the Vandals possessed no mechs, the only

assignment he received was to study the enemy mechs and figure out their motives and origins.

The live footage playing out in front of Ves didn't really give Ves a lot to go about. "Whoever the True Sons of Vesia are, they've definitely done their homework. The design of their amphibian mechs make use of Vesian design standards. They're likely designed by a genuine Vesian mech designer."

"What can you tell about the quality of their mechs, Mr. Larkinson?"

"Good. Very good. Quality work for a civilian standard. They're ideal for mercenary corps or other private outfits with money to spare. I don't think their performance reaches the level of military mech models. In short, when it comes to mechs, the defenders possess the advantage."

The quality of the amphibian mechs matched the quality of the mechs deployed by the Planetary Guard. The Honored Ones piloted better mechs, so in theory they should have gotten the upper hand.

The reality was that their readiness and training severely fell short against their hardened and prepared adversaries.

"The terrorist mechs are piloted by experienced mech pilots. Veterans, I should say, seeing how coordinated they act." A Vandal mech officer commented. "They're far better trained than my own boys."

Even though the Reinaldians possessed the advantage in both numbers and quality, they still gave ground again and against because their mech pilots fought like rusted bots!

This battle neatly showcased the importance of good training. Even if you threw a lot of money on acquiring lots of expensive mechs, without the right mech pilots in their cockpits, they could hardly deliver a performance commensurate to their cost!

The hotel rumbled once or twice as collateral damage spilled in their direction a couple of times. The only reason why the True Sons of Vesia hadn't destroyed their hotels was because incoming reinforcements kept their hands full. They couldn't spare a single second trying to overcome the energy barrier that protected the battered structure.

The Vandals kept their eye out for any other attackers, whether they came with mechs or just on foot. Security officers holding scanners kept scanning every corner of the hotel.

Fortunately, no other attack had come by the time dawn arrived. The sounds of fighting kept getting further away as the amphibian mechs slowly started to retreat into the waters. The landbound mechs of the Planetary Guard and the Honored Ones weren't able to follow suit.

Only their aquatic mechs were able to continue the hunt!

"We've survived." A Vandal sighed.

The rays of the local sun dawned upon a city of which half turned into ruins after a single battle!

The worst news was that the turmoil hadn't been confined to the surface. Up in orbit, an entirely separate battle had taken place!

Chapter 607 Orbital Blockade

Every major star system that developed into a nexus of trade, services and tourism dealt with thousands of starships a day. From small pleasure yachts to massive fleet carriers, the amount and variety of ships that dropped into the Harkensen System far surpassed the patrol fleets of the Honored Ones.

A significant portion of the visitors dropping into this star system consisted of outfits looking to resupply their ships and mechs while sending their crew on shore leave. Ordinarily, the Reinaldan inspectors never really bothered to

sweep the ships of the outfits very thoroughly. They primarily scanned for dangerous weapons. Everything else was free game.

How else would Harkensen's black and grey markets get their illicit merchandise? If the inspectors did too good of a job, all of the excitement in the underground markets would be gone!

Those who intended Reinald ill exploited the downside to this approach. The half-hearted inspections allowed cargo haulers filled with explosives to sneak into the inner system and position themselves close to other ships and space stations.

This operation had been done with great care. In order to avoid detection from remote scans, the payload consisted of a much less potent substance, but the cargo holds held many tons of the stuff. Once the signal had been given, all of the cargo haulers exploded with power that exceeded a tactical nuclear bomb!

Over two-dozen carefully placed cargo haulers erupted in unison in the orbit of both Harkensen I and Harkensen III! Only the restricted orbit of Harkensen II had been saved from the chaos!

In truth, the damage done by the explosions only hit a small number of ships, some of which perished instantly while many others survived due to their thick armor cladding. Many thousands burned up while many more suffered the fallout of secondary explosions and cascading faults!

The damage to the space stations had been a little more severe. Many compartments crumbled or depressurized in an instant, killing tens of thousands of people at once!

Though that sounded a lot, space was big. Even with thousands of ships orbiting the same planet, it was customary for ships to park in their own separate bands of space. With hundreds or thousands of kilometers of distance between each parked ship, the cargo haulers were only able to do

their damage under special circumstances, such as docking at a space station or flagging a fueling ship to refill their fuel tanks.

Nevertheless, the initial detonations only formed the spark of the panic that ensued.

"I told you that those inspectors from Reinald were no good! Look at how many ships blew up! Ours could be next! We've gotta out of here!"

"We demand compensation! We lost more than two-hundred million marks worth of cargo! We're facing double that amount in penalty fees!"

"I went to Harksensen I to get away from the war, not jump right into it! This is the worst holiday destination ever! I'm leaving right now and I'm never going back again!"

"My children are dead! My wife is dead! My entire family is dead!"

The galactic net exploded with indignant remarks. Ves casually browsed the news portals and all of them painted a picture of doom and gloom. The arrival of dawn had chased away the attackers, but that did not put an end to the suffering.

Everyone wanted to leave the planet and the star system! However, the Reinaldians wouldn't allow them to leave willy-nilly. Reinforcements arrived to maintain order on the surface and in orbit, but they could barely hold back the masses that wanted to depart!

Blockades, traffic jams, curfews and more all hindered the stranded visitors from leaving. With the unknown assailants at large, the Reinaldians could not afford to let the guilty party slip away from Harkensen I by blending in with the crowd.

After taking such an enormous hit to their credibility, the only way to salvage the pieces was to catch the people responsible and put them all on trial!

Back at the hotel, the leading Vandals gathered for an emergency meeting. Various mech and ship officers entered a conference room meant to host business gatherings. They took their seats with grim faces and murmured to each other with subdued voices.

Ves attracted a lot of attention as he sat down. Practically every Vandal in the hotel had heard how he somehow wiped away the lives of eighteen infiltrators.

The fact that their seemingly weak mech designer was capable of such slaughter earned him a lot of respect from the men. Ves didn't care too much about the opinions of others, but he changed his mind once he found out his exploits strengthened his authority among the men!

The Vandals respected the strong!

Just as the meeting was about to start, the door slid open yet again to reveal a familiar form. The mech captain sauntered in like a queen about to hold court.

"Captain Orfan!"

"Welcome, ma'am!"

"You owe me a beer, Rosa!"

Every Vandal officer saluted or greeted her with evident respect. Though no one was in a mind to revisit the glory of the honor duel, her recent achievement had pushed her prestige to new heights!

The Vandals respected the strong!

"Alright Vandals, let's get down to business." Captain Orfan declared as the gravity of the conference room seemed to center around her position. "First up, what's the numbers?"

A logistical officer stood up. "Currently, our headcount amounts to over four-thousand servicemen. Due to our shore leave policy, almost every Vandal that is present on Harkensen I is accounted for. There are a small handful of stray

Vandals that have absconded from our midst, however. They can be anywhere."

"Try and locate them and drag them back." The mech captain commanded, as if this matter didn't require any discussion.

"What if we can't?" Someone asked. "There are bound to be Vandals stuck on the other side of the planet."

Captain Orfan waved dismissively. "Then leave them behind. If they were stupid enough to wander off, then they have to pay the price. Right now, we have to fend for ourselves. What are our assets?"

"Precious little, I'm afraid." A security captain replied. "When we initially requested the Reinaldians to send down a security detail to secure this hotel, we had to fight to get this much armaments down. The strict anti-mech and anti-weapons policies have hampered our attempts to bring down heavy armaments."

Every Vandal received a spare pistol, but this weapon was only good for repelling petty thugs and rioters. Against a serious military or paramilitary force, the low caliber of their weapons wouldn't do them any good.

"How many fully-armored soldiers do we have?"

"If we use up all of our spare equipment, we can field just over a hundred security officers. I have to warn you that my men are trained for base and ship defense. They are not adept in any offensive actions."

In other words, the security officers acted more like guards or military police. Their primary duties entailed throwing drunken Vandals into the brig and repelling hostile boarders.

"Well, they better learn quickly, because I've got plans." Captain Orfan said as she adopted a confident grin. "Let's begin with the first issue. Are we safe here?"

The Vandal officers looked at each other and shook their heads. Ves spoke out his own opinion on the matter. "The Reinaldans have proven themselves to be incapable of guarding their heavily-populated cities. From what I've gathered, the True Sons of Vesia made an orderly retreat and shook off the pursuit from the Reinaldan aquatic mechs. With much of the defensive infrastructure in shambles, the shorthanded Reinaldan mechs are stretched too thin. When night falls again, who knows if the terrorists return?"

"We can't stay here." A spaceborn mech officer said. "We have mech pilots but no mechs. We have mech technicians but no supplies. We have ship crew but no ships. We're as helpless as unarmed babes in the woods. Our highest priority should be to obtain war material so we can put our training to use!"

"Hear hear!"

"First sane idea I've ever heard!"

Without someone like Major Verle to maintain order, the participants didn't restrain themselves too much. Captain Orfan listened on with a smile.

"Increasing our ability to protect ourselves is important, but I'd rather work to leave this planet." Ves interjected. "Right now, all of our assets are stuck on Harkensen III. In my opinion, we should work to rendez-vous with our brothers and sisters at the other planet and get the hell away from this star system."

"Agreed!"

"The sooner we're off, the better!"

Another ship officer shook her head. "How are we going to get off? The Reinaldans have set up a blockade and revoked every vehicle's permission to

lift off into orbit. There's been reports of hundreds of shuttles and transports attempting to escape. All of them ignored warnings before being shot to pieces. The Reinaldan patrols in orbit really aren't messing around at this moment!"

This put the Vandals in a grim mood again.

"How long will the blockade last?"

"Until the Reinaldans caught all of the perpetrators or aren't able to hold back the tourists looking to leave. Say, a week or a month."

"We can't wait that long." Ves stated. "I don't know about you, but the terrorists targeted us as well. We've attracted their ire for some reason, and the presence of the infiltrators prove that we've landed on their list. The longer we stick around, the greater the risk of calamity."

"From what I heard, the sneaky bastards primarily targeted you. Why don't we split up so you won't bring us all down?" A shifty-looking Vandal proposed.

"Ridiculous! Mr. Larkinson is one of us! Without his assistance, we would have never succeeded so well in the Detemen Operation!"

"Are you stupid or something?" Captain Orfan slowly commanded with force. "It's one thing to leave behind the dimwits who skeeted off in the middle of the night. It's another thing to kick out one of our own! Besides, from what I've heard, those pretend-Vesians are targeting all of us, so there's no point in singling our mech designer."

"I agree with our captain. This is no time to point our guns at ourselves."

Ves sighed in relief. Captain Orfan's decisive words instantly solved this matter. Though he regarded her rather poorly, her simple thought patterns happened to benefit him this time.

For the next thirty minutes, the Vandals hashed out a plan. Their primary objective was to reach orbit. From there, they would wait and see whether their fellow Vandals back on Harkensen III had managed to reconstitute the fleet and was able to pick up the Vandals stranded on Harkensen I.

If this hadn't happened, then Captain Orfan vowed to reach Harkensen III by any means possible. "Even if we have to hijack a ship, we're getting back no matter what!"

The crazy Vandals cheered her bold plan, though a couple of people such as Ves didn't join in. Driven by a lack of patience, the Flagrant Vandals lived up to their name and planned out a bold series of actions!

If Ves had to summarize the plan, it could be described by a single phrase. "Steal or scavenge what they needed!"

They had no mechs to protect themselves against other mechs? Let's just salvage the wrecks strewn about on the beaches and hammer them back into working condition!

They possessed no tools to fix up those mechs? Fine then, let's raid the nearby tool stores and miscellaneous boutiques to get our salvage operation going!

They had no shuttles or transports to flee to orbit? There are thousands of them stranded at Harkensen I's spaceport! As long as we can incite the crowd, we can overwhelm the Reinaldan guards and lift off this wartorn planet in no time!

That last step was especially tenuous. Too many conditions needed to be met. During a time of crisis, who could tell if the Reinaldians wouldn't point their weapons at the rioters itching to board the stranded craft?

Naturally, the most eager proponent of this plan happened to be Captain Orfan! In her mind, it was better to do something than to do nothing at all!

Hunkering down in the hotel and waiting for their deaths was not an attractive option to the aggressive mech captain.

Ves palmed his face when he saw that the Vandals took this suggested course of action seriously. "Am I surrounded by madmen?"

Chapter 608 Professional Troublemakers

The useless, overextended Reinaldan emergency services finally showed their presence on the streets. Countless wounded cried out for help. The True Sons of Vesia and other supposed terrorist groups exercised no trigger discipline at all. As long as something was in the way, it deserved to be shot! The more collateral damage they inflicted, the more they hurt Reinald's interests!

Foreign tourists and hardened outfit members on shore leave alike both suffered in equal measure. Over half of the city the Vandals resided in had suffered damage, and some of its long-standing structures had collapsed!

In this city alone, the latest casualty estimates had quickly surpassed five-hundred-thousand people! This was only a medium-sized city. Perhaps a million or more had already fallen in the other cities!

Allowing enemy mechs to enter within city limits was like unleashing a pack of wolves inside a henhouse! Even their most casual attacks was sufficient to reap millions of lives after only a couple of hours of combat!

Leaving the hotel and entering the broken streets filled with bodies, vehicles and debris brutally showcased the destructive force that made mechs so attractive.

The critically shorthanded Reinaldan emergency responders tackled the tragedies step by step. Their vehicles methodically swept the streets and performed triage on the most wounded souls that could still be saved. Bots

hovered back and forth. They performed much of the actual rescue and treatment.

The Vandals emerging from the scarred hotel ignored the annoying bots as they asked whether they or their relatives needed treatment. Instead, they took up scavenged or appropriated tools and started breaking into the nearest aircars. All of the vehicles long stopped working after receiving an emergency lockdown command from the city's central hub. With all the deaths and chaos, a bunch of flying vehicles over everyone's heads wouldn't make the situation better.

Nobody cared about the abandoned vehicles at this time. The hackers among the Vandals nonchalantly intruded into their operating systems and granted full jurisdiction to their side.

An hour later, the Vandals gathered a score of vehicles and a bunch of light-duty tools. Ves grimaced as he looked at the piled-up bunch of equipment. These tools had been built to service boats or aircars. Repairing mechs with these skinny, underpowered tools was going to be very challenging.

It was too bad that Harkensen I was devoid of mech workshops or other forms of heavy industry. Its economy revolved entirely around tourism and services. They imported anything they needed except for mechs, which they disallowed entirely if not in the hands of the Reinaldan military.

So much for their ability to prohibit mechs. Hundreds of machines had rampaged in the previous night. Letting so many mechs slip through their checks pretty much damned all the trust in their competence.

"Well, it's not ideal, but it will do." Ves muttered. He turned to a mech officer. "Have you located any workshops or the like where we can fix up the salvaged mechs?"

"We have found one promising location, Mr. Larkinson. This city is home to a shipyard facility that services waterbound boats and ships. While it may not be the mech workshop you are hoping for, but it should offer adequate facilities for you and your men to do your magic."

"Does it have a 3D printer? What about an assembly system?"

The mech officer looked down on his data pad. "Our investigation reports that the shipyard is home to a 3D printer and assembly system, both configured for ship-based work.

Ves let out a sigh of relief. "Good. I can work with that. The key asset that I'm looking for is an industrial-grade 3D printer. It doesn't matter if it is ordinarily being used to fabricate ship parts, we can easily load in mech parts as well. As for the assembly system, we might not be able to make use of its mounted arms and suspension systems, but we can still borrow its heavy-duty lifter bots."

He also expected the shipyard to be supplied with a ready supply of materials and heavy-duty tools. With all of these factors present, their outrageous plan to salvage fallen mechs off the battlefield and restore them for their own use became a little more viable.

"What about the current owners or employees of the shipyard? I doubt they'll mind if we barge in and squander their supplies."

The mech officer spat into the ground. "Eh? Who cares about them. If they're stupid enough to lodge a complaint, just kick them back into the streets. We'll shoot them if they become a nuisance."

That was a typical Vandal response. Ves didn't bother arguing that harming a Reinaldan in a Reinaldan star system was a very bad idea.

The hackers appropriated an increasing amount of aircars, but they still needed some time to provide transportation for all four-thousand Vandals

along with their assorted loot. In addition, they also needed a way to transport the mech wrecks from the battlefield to the shipyard.

The latter issue puzzled Ves the most right now. "Has there been any progress in finding a transport large enough to retrieve the wrecks?"

"None so far. Not even the parking space next to the shipyard hosts any transports at this moment." The officer regretfully informed him. "We would have found one by now if we had based ourselves in a major city. Sadly, our superiors opted to rent out this hotel because it agreed to our demands and offered an attractive price point."

"...What a cheap city."

Sounds of gunfire suddenly erupted a few blocks over. Ves almost ducked his head, but found out that the battle hadn't spilled over to their position.

"What's going on?" He asked.

"Let me call in for a second." The officer inputting something in his comm and waited for a reply. "It appears the rats have crawled out of their holes.

Members of a Roppongan mercenary corps have gotten the same idea as us. Since there's only so many aircars to go around, they've started fighting over us for control over the vehicles."

"That shouldn't be enough to come to blows with each other!"

"Look, Mr. Larkinson, if we don't show these gutter rats who's the boss, they'll be up our necks in no time!"

The initial exchange of fire began to ripple across the half-ruined city. All over the city, groups of armed survivors started fighting over the limited amount of vehicles that could bring them away from this hell!

Though the combatants only comprised of a small part of the inhabitants of the city, their selfish actions deteriorated the balance of peace that had emerged at dawn!

"You impulsive trigger-happy fools, look what you've done now!" Ves yelled as he gestured his hand towards the vague direction of the city. "We'll definitely get the blame for this!"

Countless sounds of weapon fire filled the streets while the Reinaldan rescue services scrambled into the air. Many wounded men and women cried out for rescue, only to see the life-saving bots return to their mother craft in the air.

With the eruption of wide-spread fighting on the streets, the city began to deteriorate again! The Reinaldan patrols couldn't turn a blind eye to the chaos. The mechs of the Honored Ones possessed extremely lethal weaponry, so they weren't suitable for peacekeeping duties. Instead, the Planetary Guard mechs all made their moves.

Armed with fluid projectors, the muzzle of the flamethrower-looking contraption started to spew large amounts of foul-smelling brown slime. Those unfortunate to get caught in the slime couldn't fight any longer as their bodies and their weapons became enmeshed with slime that quickly hardened to a degree that even mechs may find difficult to break!

If not for their breathable and soluble properties, those who had been struck would have suffocated to death!

A single Planetary Guard mech could slime over a crowd of hundreds within the span of a single minute. With almost every mech equipped with a fluid projector on the move, more and more troublemakers lost the ability to kill.

None of the peacekeeping mechs had reached the Vandals as of yet, but Ves could already hear their thundering steps coming closer.

Ves became exasperated by what the Vandals had unleashed. "Now look what you guys have done. The Planetary Guard won't turn a blind eye to our shenanigans. We'll all get slimed and taken into custody soon enough!"

"Relax, Mr. Larkinson. We've already thought about this possibility and we've already prepared a response. Where do you think half of our men have gone? Go watch this feed."

Ves received the data pad, which the officer had switched to a live feed of a Vandal that had strayed very far away from the hotel. The Vandal in question was in the middle of a random crowd.

"Are you willing to get slimed just because you wanted to survive?" The Vandal shouted to the crowd.

"No!"

"Get lost, Reinaldians!"

"Why don't they let us get away?!"

"Then fight!" The Vandal said, and incited the crowd even further. "Where was the Planetary Guard when our shelter collapsed over our heads? What had the Reinaldians done so far to save our lives? They failed to fend off the terrorists and only came back crawling once the enemy has left! They're a bunch of greedy, cowardly, lazy sacks of dung who isn't worth a thousandth of what they are earning!"

The Vandal pumped up the crowd of survivors with a bunch of nonsense. Most of them had been pushed near their breaking points. They only needed a little bump to lose all their rationality. By the time the crowd had reached the peak of their hysteria, a Planetary Guard mech came into view.

"Shoot the mech!" The Vandal shouted, and the crowd pretty much responded instantly.

A large amount of low-caliber pistol fire clattered against the armored form of the peacekeeping mech. The mech pilot inside paid no mind to the small arms fire and methodically slimed the rioters until nobody was able to fire their weapons again.

The Vandal who originally primed the crowd had long slipped away.

Once the Planetary Guard mech walked over to the next street, it encountered the same situation. After that, it had to resort to sliming the people in the way yet again.

Someone managed to obtain a smuggled rocket launcher. For one instant, time seemed to stop as the rocket flew out and impacted the front armor of the mech.

Just a couple of scrapes of coating fell off from the impact site.

The mech pilot continued dosing every person in the way with slime, but over time their machines beeped in alarm. His mech had run out of slime!

The Planetary Guard mechs may have pacified tens of thousands of rioters, but over a million more fearlessly made trouble on the streets!

It was too much for them! Last night, their mechs suffered the most when they fought against the expertly-piloted amphibian mechs. Even at full strength, they lacked the strength to pacify an entire city in an instant, let alone now when their numbers had diminished to an awful extent.

They could only wrest back order in piecemeal as they returned to their base and refilled their tanks.

"That's bought us some time. The Reinaldans won't come looking for trouble with us." The Vandal officer stated with pride as he snatched back his data pad. "We've got the situation well at hand. I've been informed that you are needed at the shipyard."

"Okay.."

Ves had thought this particular brand of madness was only confined to a couple of Vandals such as Captain Orfan. It turned out he had underestimated its scope. Madness was practically part of their martial tradition! This kind of reckless behavior had practically been baked into their DNA!

It was as if the Vandals couldn't function normally if there wasn't a riot going on!

"The Vandals are way too proficient at stirring up chaos." He frowned to himself. "Is this an essential part of their *modus operandi*? Why would a raiding regiment be so good at kicking up a hornet's nest?"

Chapter 609 Same Card

A lot of aircars had landed on the streets, but not enough to satisfy everyone's needs. The fighting for the remaining aircars became increasingly more intense. Though the combatants rarely risked their lives to obtain a vehicle, deaths became unavoidable, especially since the Planetary Guard made slow progress in pacifying the city.

The Vandals moved their men and supplies to the shipyard situated in the outskirts of the city. They hadn't manage to secure enough aircars to transport all of them in a single go, so they made several round trips to bring everyone over.

A couple of people on the streets fired potshots at the aircars. Whenever that happened, a number of Vandals opened up the window of their aircars and peppered the location with lasers and projectiles.

That quickly shut up most people looking to find trouble with the Vandals.

When the second fleet of aircars touched down, Ves stepped out of his vehicle and saw that the Vandals hadn't actually made their way inside the shipyard complex. They landed on a parking field just outside its walls.

"Why aren't we inside yet?" He frowned.

"Because it's occupied. Dunno who's inside, but they're not yielding the place to us." A waiting Vandal said as he carefully polished his hand cannon.

"Captain Orfan wants to storm the place, but the other higher ups don't want collateral damage to ruin the shipyard."

Ves grimaced at that. "Everything else is expendable, but the shipyard's 3D printer can't receive a single scratch! In fact, it's fairly sensitive to concussive shocks, so even proximity to fighting can damage the more vulnerable components within."

Having assembled the Dortmund printer by hand, Ves had become very familiar with the internal makeup of this production machine. In one way, they possessed a fair amount of resilience, as they often had to handle multiton components. If the printer malfunctioned each time a heavy component dropped all of a sudden, then no one would buy its model.

However, having witnessed the destruction of half the city, Ves became especially paranoid when it came to collateral damage. Even if the Vandals possessed no mechs as of yet, several thousand of them could easily affect the integrity of the 3D printer.

Ves walked over to the command group where all the officers heatedly discussed options to take over the shipyard.

He ignored the mech and ship officers for now and tried to find his own crowd. The mech designers and mech technicians stood a little off from the rest. Nobody was interested in their input unless their expertise was required.

Everyone wore off-duty summer clothes right now, but he recognized Mercator and Vedette from the Finmoth Regal among the circle of mech designers. From the gathering of chief technicians, he recognized Chief Leo

Keys, also from the Finmoth Regal, and Chief Keon Vasar, the most senior chief aboard the Linever Swan.

With this much mech designers and chief technicians, Ves felt very hopeful about what they could accomplish. Though borrowing the facilities of a shipyard to restore broken mechs wasn't very ideal, as long as they possessed enough ingenuity, they could manage.

"Mercator, fill me in." Ves said.

The high-ranking mech designer eyes Ves with a gloomy expression. If Ves hadn't been present here, then Mercator would have been the mech designer with the most say.

"It's just a bunch of warmongers arguing the best way to slaughter they way in the shipyard. Right now, the shipyard is occupied by a coalition of gang members and mercenaries. None of them are armed with anything fancier than a pistol or a submachine gun, but they number more than a thousand among them. Combined with their defensive advantage, it won't be easy for the Vandals to overrun their position."

Ves closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Have there been any attempts at negotiating?"

"Nah. The stupid gang members just shoot at everyone who approaches. They're irreconcilable low lives, all of them. I don't think there's a single person among them who's in charge, really. You can see how they all group up by outfit."

He looked at the shipyard and did indeed observe different clumps of defenders. The gang members often appeared sloppier and didn't particularly seem diligent. The mercenaries on the other hand all walked with their back straight and eyed the growing congregation of Vandals with growing vigilance.

Once he understood the situation, Ves patted Mercator's back. "Keep the rest of our crowd at the rear. Mech designers and mech technicians have no place on the battlefield."

Each of them possessed valuable skills that had to be preserved at all costs, not just today but in the future as well. The scarcity of competent mech technicians and mech designers almost matched the scarcity of trained mech pilots. Losing a huge chunk of both of them couldn't easily be replenished on a whim.

When Ves approached the arguing officers, he found out that a decision had already been made.

"We're going to storm the place and get this done with!" Captain Orfan argued. "We'll concentrate our forces on the weaker members of the coalition and leave the tough customers for last. If they're smart enough, they'll take the escape route we've left out for them and squirrel away."

Ves became a little alarmed at this haphazard plan. "I don't think it's a good idea to make a frontal assault. We only have a small number of armored security officers, and unlike mech armor their combat suits can be overwhelmed. More importantly, if we push the defenders too hard, they might decide to destroy the 3D printer out of spite."

"Tough luck, then." Captain Orfan crossed her arms. "We need to make a move. I don't want to wait around until the rest of you summon up your courage."

He really didn't want to leave the safety of the 3D printer to fate. He swiveled his head at the shipyard and tried to come up with an idea that might help.

"What if we can sneak into the shipyard from the water? All of their attention is certainly pointed in our direction. Why not make use of that and try to slip in

some men via water? Even if they posted some guards at the waterfront, it shouldn't be too much."

The shipyard complex encompassed a stretch of water as well that was connected to the ocean.

Some of the Vandals looked intrigued at the idea. "The idea has merit, but we don't have any specialized troops to send. Our armored security officers won't be able to function underwater, and our regular Vandals are armed with nothing but some flimsy clothes and a pistol. Even if we sneak in a hundred men through the water, they won't be able to accomplish much."

Ves shook his head. "It's not their role to defeat the coalition. The only objective they need to accomplish is to locate the 3D printer and set up a perimeter defense around it. As long as the defenders are too preoccupied with the attack from the outside, they won't easily divert their attention to the machine."

Such a move couldn't be performed so casually, especially for the Vandals. Without any special forces among their ranks, the Vandals had to ask for volunteers among the bravest and most water-adept Vandals. Most of them who stepped forward consisted of security officers that hadn't been lucky enough to receive a set of combat armor.

The Vandals quickly made their preparations. They raided a nearby diving store and robbed any equipment that seemed useful for humans diving under the water. Ves had made his way over to them as well in order to caution them how to recognize and how to handle the 3D printer.

Once the impromptu commandos finished their preparations, they lifted the commercial oxygen masks to their faces and pulled down the watertight visors over their eyes before jumping into the water.

"You know, if the coalition is scanning the water diligently, those men we just sent out will be shot into pieces before they can emerge from the water." Mercator said, as if Ves had made a grievous mistake in suggestion this course of action in the first place.

Ves pressed his lips into a line. "Successful or not, their presence will certainly alarm the coalition. When the defenders find out that the water is no safe having at all, the added pressure will tip over their courage."

They all waited until the commandos had given the signal. With their military issue comms, Ves put a lot of trust in the device. "We should be able to receive their signal from here without alarming our opponents."

Half an hour went by as the shipyard complex stayed quiet. The Vandals all hid behind the nearby structures, ready to charge forward as long as the signal was given.

Suddenly, their comms beeped. It signaled that the commandos had bypassed the underwater barriers and made it into the base through the water, but not without some noise! They had been discovered!

"Attack!"

The attack plan immediately went into motion. Security officers in combat armor took the lead and boldly advanced into range of the defenders. Regular Vandals garbed with shirts and other outlandishly bright clothes followed them at a distance.

Ves watched on from a distance as the armored security officers got bogged down by a multitude of fire erupting from the defensive positions of the coalition. Scores of lasers hit each armored individual, forcing them to dive behind the nearest piece of solid cover. Though the small arms fire hadn't managed to pierce through the suits of combat armor, it wouldn't take too long for them to be able to do so!

"Their firepower is higher than we thought."

The Vandals that followed from behind had to be very careful about their positioning. Just a single hit from a weapon could take them out. They remained at a distance and aimed vaguely at the sections pointed out to them by the planners.

Perhaps being shot at by a single pistol wasn't very intimidating, but when thousands of them struck the same spots, it turned into a terrifying storm. This instantly suppressed the gang members that had been targeted and gave the armored Vandals some breathing room.

Still, it was a bit too precarious for them to advance. The defenders made full use of their defensive position. Those that had been spared of the storm began to help their comrades from the sides.

Minutes past as the battle devolve into an unsteady stalemate. The defenders turned their firepower against the unarmored Vandals firing at them from a distance. They found out they had a much easier time trying to score a lucky hit on an unarmored opponent than to wear down the hunkering armored Vandals.

Ves stood behind a wall at the very rear of the Vandal position. As he feared, despite being outnumbered by at least four-to-one, the defenders possessed enough advantages to negate the disparity in numbers. The commandos who snuck inside didn't appear to be strong enough change tide.

"Do I have to show off once again?"

He really didn't like to intervene in person, but the stalemate might go on for an hour at this rate. The more time went past, the higher the chance something awful might happen to the 3D printer.

The Vandals needed to obtain a working shipyard, not a stretch of ruins with hardly a single machine left intact.

"I guess the cat is already out of the bag, pretty much."

Nobody paid much attention to him at the very rear, but he had no doubt that plenty of recorders were active at this moment. A trump card played too often ceased to be a trump card. Those with ill intentions would certainly catch wind of his weapon and plan around it next time.

"Well, it's not like there's no point in using it once it becomes known."

The Amastendira remained a powerful weapon whether nobody had heard of it or everyone had heard of it. Ves was confident that he could obtain more trump cards over time that could replace its position as a weapon of last resort.

Ves stretched out his arm and summoned the gracefully elegant weapon into being. With deft familiarity, he inputted the right settings before aiming the weapon at a stretch of walls.

As he pulled the trigger, a thick beam emerged from the muzzle of his weapon. The entire situation changed at that moment.

Chapter 610 Waterbound Shipyard

The beam raked over the top of the wall where the defenders shot down at the Vandals. Their commanding position along with the thick slab of cover enabled them to hold back the disadvantaged Vandals without too much pressure.

In fact, the fight so far progressed fairly relaxed in their perspective. Both sides tried to preserve their lives first and foremost, so casualties among both sides piled up slowly. Still, the Vandals lost more than the defenders, so time was definitely against the attackers.

All of this consideration changed once the thick beam of energy lanced through the wall and vaporized the bodies of those who had been struck. All of

this took just an instant of time! By the time the laser fired from a distance ended its fury, over fifty gang members had lost their lives!

This instantly weakened the defensive position where they had been stationed. The remnants of the gang all lost heart in the battle.

"Why are we fighting against this mob? There's no point in holding onto the shipyard!"

"Screw this, I'm going home! This place isn't worth dying for!"

When another fifty men abandoned their defensive positions at once, a critical gap had emerged. The coalition of gang members and mercenaries roiled with fear and uncertainty. The rank and file expressed an increasing amount of discontent.

Why were they defending this shipyard in the first place?

Outside of the leaders of the various outfits, nobody could answer this question. To them, there was no need to fight to the death when the Reinaldians would eventually get a grip and organize a proper rescue. They just needed to be patient and hunker down for some days. There was no reason to battle over the shipyard!

More and more defenders became swayed by this argument. The will of the coalition unceasingly weakened.

It came to no surprise that a second gang changed their minds. They quickly stopped fighting and turned around to exit the shipyard!

Once the third outfit gave in to their cowardice, the battle was set. The defenders could no longer cover every direction, and they still had to deal with the Vandals that had snuck inside the base from the water!

Ves found to his satisfaction that he didn't need to fire his weapon yet again. Its awesome power had been seared into the minds of both sides of the battle.

As Ves fearlessly stepped forward, many Vandals of all stripes voluntarily made way for him. The stupendously powerful laser beam that erupted from his weapon had definitely surpassed the firepower of an infantry-sized laser cannon!

"What in tarnation was that?!" Captain Orfan yelled as she rose out of cover to take some potshots at the remnants who hadn't fled. "If we knew you had this laser gun from the start, we would have ordered you to carve the defensive perimeter apart!"

"Don't ask questions, please. It's something that's meant to safeguard my life."

Let the listeners make up their own stories about Ves in their minds. He didn't care what conclusions they arrived at, as long as they didn't ask him to relinquish his weapon.

Ves was pretty sure it wouldn't come to that. The Amastendira helped the Vandals out several times. The only reason why the Vandals would attempt to take it away from him was if they possessed hostile intentions against him. Considering the many secrets floating about the mech regiment, keeping one more secret to himself didn't hurt.

The most mystical thing about Ves' weapon was that it disappeared after firing once. Many Vandals that paid attention to Ves suspected that he was carrying a cloaked weapon that couldn't be detected until actually used.

Such weapons existed, but only assassins used them prominently. They could never in a million years imagine that Ves could still call upon his weapon if he was ever stripped and searched for hidden weapons.

"They're running! We won!"

"Advance! Don't let them linger inside the complex! Secure the production machines as fast as possible! Don't let them bring anything away!"

The Vandals breached the unguarded entrance and poured into the expansive complex. Though the shipyard could only be considered on the smaller end, due to the size of the craft it routinely serviced, there was more than enough space to accommodate an entire mech company's worth of mechs.

Hardly anyone had stuck around after the Vandals had made it through. The coalition had pretty much disintegrated after the first couple of gangs had abandoned their posts. Compared to the distant benefit of occupying the shipyard, they rather treasured their lives.

The Vandals refrained from attacking anyone who fled. Though it might have been satisfying to shoot the bastards in the back, the Vandals did not wish to push them into a corner. They already won, and that was what mattered the most.

As Ves stepped inside the complex along with the mech designers and mech technicians, they already started scrutinizing the state of the shipyard.

The previous occupants hadn't been in control long enough to mess too many things around. Some of the less disciplined gang members had vandalized some of the equipment while taking away the more valuable-looking stuff, but there was no way they could haul away the heavy machinery.

"Most of the bots are still intact. They're almost fully accounted for!"

"There are heavy cranes positioned over the drydocks. We can use them to lift up the frames of the mechs."

"This facility doesn't make use of an assembly system. This complex is more of a repair and servicing facility. I don't think it has ever fabricated a new ship from scratch."

"There's nothing good in the warehouses! The only thing we can find are standard composites and alloys. They're no good when it comes to taking damage!"

Ves took in the news as he walked over to the 3D printer. He met the original commandos who snuck inside the base through the water. "Mr. Larkinson, we've guarded the machine as best we could! Please inspect!"

The fighting hadn't been very intense here, but the 3D printer had definitely been exposed to some threats. He winced as he saw that the exterior of the massive machine had suffered a glancing blow from a ballistic pistol. Fortunately, its shell held up and the projectile hadn't punched into the delicate internals.

"Good job! I think it's in working condition!"

The praise flattered the commandos. Though Ves couldn't give them a ribbon or something, his words gave them one more story to brag about. Some mech designers and chief technicians approached the 3D printer.

Most of them probably didn't have a clue how the 3D printer worked. Many mech designers and mech technicians these days treated 3D printers as black boxes. They didn't need to know how it worked. They only needed to provide specific input and wait for the appropriate output to arrive.

"Something goes in, something else goes out."

Certainly, they also needed to be proficient at providing the right instructions to the machine. The more advanced operators possessed a good understanding of the limitations imposed by the 3D printer, and could get the most out of the production machine.

Ves turned to the only person besides him who probably understood 3D printers at a deeper level. "What do you think about this beast, Chief Vasar? Is it good enough to fabricate replacement parts for mechs?"

"It's an old model. Rather worn too. It's not suitable for jobs that require too much precision. The quality of processors and other microcomponents from

this printer will be very questionable. I'd rather not put all my chips on this machine."

"Is it good enough to fabricate replacement armor plating?"

"Theoretically, there shouldn't be any issues with that. In practice, a printer as old as this won't work well with harder and tougher alloys. Not that we have access to those alloys anyhow. From what I've heard so far, this shipyard only stocks materials to patch up the hulls of waterbound boats and ships."

"I was afraid of that."

He listened to Chief Vasar as he enumerated a host of issues, some of which Ves had never considered. He respected the old chief's opinion because he possessed the most eminent qualifications among the chief technicians.

Vasar served as the senior chief aboard the Linever Swan. This massive logistics ship was a sister to the Beggar's Bounty, and contained a mix of industry. There was never a moment in time when all of its processing and production facilities had fallen idle. The variety of work that needed to be done was mind-boggling in itself. Only an experienced hand with rich knowledge would be able to maintain a grip on the industrious ship.

Ves had heard something about the man's background. Chief Vasar used to work his way up in the private sector. Back then, he didn't work with mechs. Instead, he became involved with heavy industry, and eventually made a detour into working with mechs.

Compared to the other chief technicians, Vasar's mastery of mechs was rather low. However, his competence in many complicated processes that did not directly involve mech components enabled him to command an undisputable position on the Linever Swan.

"Now that we are establishing control over this complex, what do we need to start fixing mechs?"

The chief scratched his cheek. "If we don't care about quality, we can get to work immediately. This shipyard is decently stocked for a site that isn't a mech workshop. The only problem is that we don't have access to the design specifications of the mechs that had gotten wrecked last night. Without any schematics or design specifications to go on, we'll have to do all the guesswork."

"There's no way we can obtain the right materials that matches those used in the wrecks." Ves responded with resignation in his eyes. "We'll have to resort to substitution to make do. This is the only option available to us that lets us get the most mechs up and running quickly."

By now, the fate of the trapped inhabitants, tourists and visitors became clear. The Reinaldans broadcasted that the terrorists would either launch another attack or escape from the planet as fast as possible.

If the former happened, the Vandals really needed mechs to establish a basic form of defense against the threat of hostile mechs. No matter how much small arms and other inconsequential weapons they made use of, a single mech could definitely squash thousands of them flat!

If the latter happened, the necessity of mechs became no less greater. The escape attempt might be the only time where people could leave Harkensen I. After the first attempt, the Reinaldan fleet assets in orbit would be bound to tighten their watch over the planet.

"Besides, I don't think the assailants will try to run the blockade alone. They are bound to solicit others."

The Reinaldans really didn't wish anyone to leave their ruined paradise planet without going through stringent inspections. This might last up to a month, which didn't sound very long.

For some reason, the higher-ups expressed some urgency in attempting to leave this star system. They couldn't afford to delay for an entire month!

Though nobody ever told Ves the reason for all of the hurry, he surmised it must have been related to the murkiness surrounding Lord Javier.

Ves threw those guesses to the back of his mind. Right now, he needed to fulfill his responsibilities as a head designer. The mech technicians already started to dawdle after they dumped all of their supplies in the complex.

"Alright, you folk! Break time is over! Let's start salvaging some mechs from the beaches!"

He flung some common-sense orders about. He divided the technical crew into separate portions. Some would find some vehicles capable of lifting mechs and use them to recover the fallen mechs from the battlefield. Others went on to prepare the bots, tools and production facilities to work with mechs instead of ships.

They only had a day or two at most to build up their war assets! Any longer than that, and they might miss the upcoming window of opportunity!